

Don't worry.  
It won't *bite*.

# ANACONDA

A SEXY ROMANTIC COMEDY FROM  
LAUREN LANDISH

# ANACONDA

A SEXY ROMANTIC COMEDY

LAUREN LANDISH

Edited by VALORIE CLIFTON

Edited by JOHN HUDSPITH

Photography by ALEX WIGHTMAN

Edited by DONNA HOKANSON

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

All characters are 18+ years of age and non-blood related, and all sexual acts are consensual.

# ANACONDA

A SEXY ROMANTIC COMEDY

**They say size doesn't matter...**

Football star and internet sensation Gavin “Anaconda” Adams is the *biggest* celebrity our little town has ever seen.

But I had *no* idea who he was when I accidentally walked in on him naked.

I was shocked, seeing *all* of him, a cocky grin on his face. I didn't know what to do.

So I *ran*.

Now I'm in a world of trouble. No matter what I do, I can't get *that* image out of my head. **His strong muscular thighs. His washboard abs. His big, throbbing, toe-curling... Jesus!**

To make matters worse, Gavin wants a date with me. He's seen the lust in my eyes, and he's not taking no for an answer. I should tell him to get lost. He's nothing but trouble, and he's only here for a week.

But with one look, I go weak in the knees. And whenever I hear his deep, rich voice, I feel my defenses crumbling.

It's only one night. What could it hurt?



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## CHAPTER 1

BRIANNA

“*T*his is fucking disgusting,” I mutter with revulsion, looking around the hotel room and barely able to hold back the nausea twisting my stomach from the foul stench. I clamp a hand over my nose, trying not to breathe the acrid air in through my mouth and shaking my head at the horror before me.

Actually, disgusting is an understatement. The room looks like a frat house after a night of binge drinking and wild orgies. There are pizza boxes, crushed beer cans, and dark stains everywhere.

Jesus Christ.

No wonder the smell is so bad. These guys are pigs. My eyes continue to roam and I spot at least one smashed bottle of vodka before...

“Oh, hell no!” I croak, almost dry heaving and turning away from the revolting sight of several used condoms. I can even see something white and sticky nearby. I grab the top of my uniform and pull it up over my nose, no longer able to bear the stench. “They don’t pay me enough for this shit!” Holding my breath, I beeline for the door. I gasp as I exit the room and enter the hallway, letting go of my shirt and sucking down a lungful of air. I normally can’t stand the air in the smoking section of the guest rooms, but right now, this air is sweeter than a double-fudge chocolate chip sundae.

After a few grateful breaths, I pull out my walkie talkie from my side pocket and shake my head as I press the microphone button. “Maintenance,

this is Housecleaning.”

“*Whatcha need, Bri?*” asks a familiar scratchy voice, and I sigh, relaxing. It’s Jimmy, an older man who still wears corduroy and thinks he’s in the 70s. But besides his penchant for living in the past, he’s pretty cool and will empathize with my pain. This isn’t the first wrecked room that I’ve walked in on, and it certainly won’t be my last.

“We have a problem,” I tell him, letting the direness I feel seep into my voice. “A *big, big* problem.”

“Is it that bad?” Jimmy asks. There’s a slight note of hope in his voice. I know what he’s thinking. He’s hoping that maybe it’s nothing a little bleach and elbow grease won’t fix.

I feel sorry for him. And to think I didn’t even step foot into the bathroom.

I shudder at the gross images that flash in my mind as I reply, “Yes! Your boys will have their hands full. Room 333. Bring steam cleaners, a sandblaster . . . and maybe a hazmat suit.”

Jimmy groans over the radio. I hear him inhale as if he wants to say something, but the transmission cuts. He knows that he can’t say much about it. Our radios aren’t monitored like the police scanners, but they can still be listened to. And with what’s going on, we can’t take chances. A crackling sound pops my ears.

“If you guys get it done, I’ll worry about the towels and sheets,” I add.

“*Grand Waterways Hotel . . .*” Jimmy says forlornly. “*Grand Water Sewer Way would be a more apt name.*”

I huff out a chuckle at that. Jimmy shouldn’t have said that over the line, but it’s the damn truth. “Can’t argue with that,” I say wholeheartedly. To the hotel’s credit, though, it can’t help what guests like a team of pro and collegiate ballers do to its rooms when they’re hosting drunken parties. I’ve heard that they stay here instead of in the city to keep the players ‘out of trouble’. But they still have their parties.

“*I’ll handle it, Bri. We’ll be up in a half hour. Maybe you can catch the rest on the back half of your shift?*”

A feeling of relief washes over me. The man is a lifesaver. There's no way I could handle these types of situations without him.

"Thanks, Jimmy."

*"No worries. Maintenance out."*

"Poor man," I mutter, tucking my walkie talkie back into my pocket.

Grateful to be free of that disaster, I make my way to the elevator, press the down button, and wait for the doors to open. Once inside, I mull over which floor I should go to, but my watch beeps, reminding me that I need a break.

I jam the button for the basement, leaning against the wall as the carriage starts to go down. My back aches, my feet ache, and I'm pretty sure that my skin needs to be scrubbed with something stronger than soap and water after just walking into that filthy room. The image of the used condoms on the floor flashes in my mind and my skin crawls.

*I can't wait until I finish my degree and never have to step foot into this place again,* I think with disgust.

I definitely don't feel like working the rest of my shift after that. I'm aching and sore all over. I'm seriously overworked, and I don't think I can take any more surprises.

But at least I'm mostly finished, and I've got the next thirty minutes to chill out, try to get myself back together, and maybe pop a Tylenol or two before I do the last set of regular rooms, the suites, and then the floor that I normally hate most because I never know what to expect, the penthouse suites. They can range from sparkly clean to a pigsty as bad as the room I just left... depending on who's been staying there. Sometimes, the ballers are too damn cheap and just trash a regular room.

The ding sound and opening doors pull me out of my reverie. I walk out of the elevator and head to the maintenance room. I wash my hands using rubbing alcohol and some germicidal stuff from the medicine cabinet in the staffroom before I apply two coats of lotion, praying that maybe this time I won't be bleeding from between my fingers like the last time I had to do this.

I look up in the mirror and sigh, shaking my head at the reflection that looks back at me. Bra-length, dark brown hair, tired eyes, and a grumpy countenance. I look like I haven't had a decent night's sleep in over a week.

*I don't need this shit, I say to myself. I can't wait to get out of this place. Hell, I'll take just about any job with benefits over this.*

But more than benefits, I need money. Doing twenty-nine hours of maid work in a hotel just doesn't cut it when you're like me—Master's degree student with no family, no credit cards, and about two thousand dollars left from a student loan. Somehow, I have to stretch this small amount of money to cover the gap in my living expenses for the rest of the year.

I shake my head again as I think about how close I'd been to that internship.

One computer error. That's all that kept me from landing a paid internship. One idiot at school who typed in my GPA wrong, saying I had a 1.8 instead of a 3.8. By the time I got it all sorted out, it was too late. All of the internships were already snatched up.

"Face it, girly," I grumble to myself, "if this keeps up, you'll be going down to the food bank for canned goods by Christmas." I rub the last of the lotion into my hands. The sound of heels clicking against the tiled floor causes me to turn around, and I see my best friend, Mindy, holding a mocha latte in one hand and a cup of green tea in the other. She wiggles the latte at me.

I take it from her, feeling grateful for her thoughtfulness. "Tell me you put cinnamon in it," I say.

Mindy steps back to survey me, shaking her head, her dark brown hair that's cut into a side bob glinting under the lights and her large brown eyes flashing with a mischievousness that almost makes me smile. I have to say, she looks hot as hell in her uniform—a white dress shirt, open at the front, a short black skirt, an apron, and stockings, her feet adorned with black glossy heels.

"You bet your sweet ass I did," Mindy chirps before going over to the free table in the staff break room and kicking out a chair with her foot before sitting down. "Double cream, double sugar, double cinnamon, basically

double everything I could get my hands on. Come on, I know your schedule as well as you do. It's the least I can do."

"You're a lifesaver," I tell her, raising the cup to my lips and taking a sip. I close my eyes as the warm liquid hits my tastebuds and I let out a groan. It really is sweet.

"You know, you keep moaning like that, and people are going to think you're up to no good during your coffee breaks," Mindy jokes, sipping her green tea. "I mean, I get it. You skipped breakfast like you always do, but damn, girl, should I leave you and the latte alone with a necktie hanging on the door?"

"You keep making drinks like this and bringing me scones, and you may just have to," I joke. "But how'd you know?"

"What? That you'd be tired?" Mindy asks, laughing. "Uh, in case you forgot, for the past two weeks, we've all been wiped out. I'm sure that V-man loves the money, but he's not the one busting his ass" —Mindy glances down at her thighs critically— "or in this case, big ass."

"Oh, come on, you're a size two!" I protest.

Mindy scowls. "A *big* size two."

"There's no such thing!" I scoff.

"Want to see my ass?" she offers.

"I'll pass." I chuckle. Mindy always does this, complaining about her weight when there's nothing to complain about. I just argue with her to get kicks. I take another sip of my heavenly latte before adding, "And if Mr. Vandenburg hears you call him V-man again, you know he's going to blow his stack."

Mindy laughs and screws up her face, looking remarkably like John Cleese as she pitches her voice perfectly to match the hotel manager's. "Ahh . . . yes, Miss Sayles, we've noticed that you're taking your job far too seriously, and I'm going to need to make sure you don't have a broom handle lost inside your buttocks. Please bend over and spread your cheeks for me."

I laugh, barely holding onto the coffee in my mouth as I set my cup down, trying not to cough. I can't help it. Mr. Vandenburg does look a lot like a very short but chubby John Cleese, and Mindy's got the voice down to a tee. Mindy lets up, and I swallow before sitting back, wiping at my eyes. "Girl, thank you. I so needed that. You don't even want to know what I had to deal with today."

"What, the production monkeys aren't appreciative of the fine rooms we've made available to them?" Mindy asks. For the past two weeks, The Grand Waterways has been rented out by a Hollywood studio that's producing a film in town. While the production team staying at the hotel haven't exactly been the cleanest guests, they've been a hell of a lot better than the sports team that just trashed that room.

"No, actually, it was that rowdy ball team." I shake my head. "And you don't even want to know what I saw in their room," I say, pinching my face into a disgusted scowl.

"Sure I do," Mindy says, her eyes flashing.

"No. You don't," I say firmly. "Trust me."

"Tell me!"

"No."

"You suck."

"Let me just put it this way. I had to call Jimmy and his team to handle it."

Mindy makes a face. "Oh, it was one of those, huh?"

"Yeah. One of *those*."

"I bet it smelled like toe jam and ass crack." Mindy grins.

"Actually, it was worse." I laugh, remembering the acrid stench that made my eyes water. "There were like stains . . . everywhere. It was so gross!" I don't even think about bringing up the used condoms.

Mindy grimaces. "Good lord, what the hell were they doing in there? Having a golden showers competition?"

I snort, nearly gagging on my coffee, and then I start coughing so hard I nearly choke.

Mindy stares at me with concern, half-rising out of her seat. “Jesus, you okay, Bri?”

I motion her to sit back down. “Don’t do that!” I gasp when I’m able to recover.

“Do what?” Mindy asks innocently.

I wipe at my eyes. “Make me laugh when I’m drinking coffee. I nearly gagged to death.”

Mindy grins impishly. “Wouldn’t be the first thing you gagged on.”

I scowl at her. “You’re disgusting, you know that?”

“Oh c’mon, Bri, don’t be such a prude.” She pauses, nodding at the supply room. “So, what’s left on your schedule?”

“Too much,” I reply. “But at least the penthouses should be easy. One of the suites is being used by some film crew, so they don’t want us in there. One is empty until a guest arrives tonight. So, that leaves just one.”

“Then perhaps, Miss Sayles,” a stern voice says from behind me, “you should look at making sure you have that room prepared for our VIP guest.” I turn to see Mr. Vandenburg, all five foot four inches and about two hundred plus pounds of him, standing in the doorway. He’s in his tailored suit, of course, looking like a thousand bucks from the neck down while looking like a grumpy ass disorderly from the neck up. “That is, unless you want to pay for that coffee you’re holding.”

*Oh, God, please save me.*

I shake my head. “No, you’re right, Mr. Vandenburg.” I glance over at Mindy, who is barely hiding a smirk.

“Well then, get on with your duties,” he says acidly, his scowl hard enough to curdle milk.

*Please let me find another job so I don’t have to deal with this shit anymore.*

Seriously, after that bullshit upstairs, I'd almost be ready to tender my resignation if I were offered a job at McDonald's sweeping the floors. I'm just so over this.

Vandenburgh opens his mouth as if to scold me further, but I hold up a finger as I drain the rest of my coffee.

"I'm going!"

I give Mindy a thankful nod as I pitch my empty cup into the trash. She flashes me a sympathetic look as I turn and walk out, making my way to the service elevators. I really can't stand Mr. Vandenburgh's presence for more than a minute, and I just want to knock out the rest of my shift and go home.

As I head up the hall, I can hear Mr. Van start in on Mindy.

"What the hell did you do to the machines, young lady? I got complaints about the coffee this morning . . ."

I crack a smile as I imagine the look of consternation on Mindy's face.

By the time I finish the regular rooms, I'm nearly about to pass out as I push my supply cart toward the service elevator.

"Just a little while longer," I tell myself, "and I'm free."

By some miracle, a lot of the rooms on the next floor aren't that bad. In fact, I'm feeling like salvation is near when I make it to the penthouse suites. My first stop is room 601. It's reserved so I skip it.

Room 602 is occupied, with the 'do not disturb' sign on the doorknob.

So, that leaves Room 603, which should also be empty. The guest isn't checking in until this evening. Before I step inside, I check the guest list. It just has '**ANACONDA**' scribbled on the sheet. I frown at the name as I stare at the big bold letters. What the hell kind of name is Anaconda?

Shaking my head, I open the door and hold back a jealous grumble at the sight before me. Seriously, the living room of this penthouse is bigger than my entire apartment. Two thousand square feet, a master bedroom and a



smaller bedroom-slash-office, and a sitting room. The damn thing even has a chef's kitchen.

My grumble turns into a hiss of anger when I see that someone's been up here, and it sure as shit wasn't Goldilocks.

"None of this should be here," I mutter as I take in the mess, frowning at a jacket that's been thrown over the Italian leather sofa and a bag that looks like it was carelessly tossed into a chair and knocked it over.

Puzzled, I check my sheet again. Nope. No one's supposed to be here. I step into the room, leaving my cart outside.

"Housekeeping?" I call tentatively. "Anyone here?"

Silence is my only answer.

"Hello?" I dare again. When I get no response, I walk over to pick up the chair that's been knocked over. I figure that maybe someone has checked in ahead of the guest and left in a hurry. I'll straighten things up and just leave.

A sound behind me causes me to spin around, and my breath stills in my lungs.

Holy fuck!

My heart skips a beat as my eyes take in the naked . . . *god* standing before me. Well, ok, he's not totally naked. He's got a towel over his head and he's drying his hair.

But the way he's built . . . sweet Jesus. He looks like he's chiseled out of granite, with big muscular arms, breathtaking broad shoulders, a proud chest, an eight pack, and . . .

"Anaconda . . ." I whisper as I see what's hanging between his legs, my pulse pounding in my ears. He's got to be at least seven inches long already and he's not even hard. My skin prickles as I gaze at his thick cock, my nipples hardening, my breath coming out in short pants.

The man freezes when his eyes fall on me, and I feel like I'm going to melt into a puddle on the floor. I have no words for how hot this man is. He's not just hung like a horse. He's *fucking gorgeous* too. Shaggy blond hair hangs

down over his forehead, with startling blue eyes that seem to glow from the inside and a face that would make artists drool. He's staring at me, his mouth, with full, sexy lips, hanging slack, the towel dropping from his hand to the floor.

Neither of us says anything for what seems like an eternity but has to be just a few seconds before he recovers and grins, his eyes boring into me with an intensity that makes me weak at the knees. "Hi, I'm Gavin," he says easily, as if he's not standing in front of me with a monster-sized dick dangling between his legs.

He's not doing anything to cover it up either. Given what he's packing, I understand why. It's like he's proud of it as he stares at me with a confidence that borders on gross arrogance.

Heat rises in my chest as he steps forward, a cocky smirk turning the corner of his lips, and I take a half-step back, my pussy clenching around nothing. It's an effort to keep my eyes on his face as my heart hammers in my chest and my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

"You all right?" he asks. Even his *voice* is sexy, a low baritone that causes my pussy to clench again.

I open my mouth to reply, but my eyes stray back to *it*, and my heart skips another beat. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* I can't deal with this right now. I tear my gaze away from it, my eyes darting this way and that, looking for a way out as he closes in on me.

I want to run away. But I can't move. It's like my legs have filled with stone. Against my will, my eyes flicker back to *it*.

*Sweet Jesus!* It's swaying with each step, swinging back and forth like a giant pendulum, almost putting me into a hypnotic trance.

When he gets close enough to touch me, I'm suddenly free of my paralysis. Heart pounding, I spring forward, nearly tripping on my way to the door. I'm only able to mumble, "Sorry," as I run from the room with a flaming red face, trying my damndest to not glance back for one last look.

## CHAPTER 2

GAVIN - 2 YEARS AGO...

“*A*naconda! Anaconda!” the reporters yell in my face after a particularly rough game, jamming microphones and cameras at me. “Do you have anything to say about what happened?”

*God, I hate that fucking nickname.*

I blink several times as rapid flashes of lights go off in my eyes, fighting down the exasperation that flares inside me. They’re herding me like a fucking zoo animal, each one of them fighting one another to stick a mic in my face.

A fraudulent smile spreads across my chiseled jawline as I wink into the cameras and prepare to formulate an answer. I’m trying to appear unruffled by the question, though I want nothing more than to tell them all to get the fuck out of my way. I know how they’ll spin it if I do. And I can already see the headlines now.

*Gavin Adams Flies into a Rage after a Bad Game Because of Scandal.*

I know I should ignore the trolls, who are only looking for a rise out of me or a soundbite to try and get another five minutes of story out of what was a total mistake. But after dealing with the team, the league, and all the drama that ensued, I’m pissed off. Losing 20-0 against our biggest rival isn’t helping much either.

“Mr. Adams has nothing to say,” Miranda, my agent who doubles as my PR rep, says loudly over the ungodly clamor of shouting voices and clicking cameras, beating me to the punch. My eyes are drawn to her. She’s dressed sharply, as usual, in her red designer dress that fits her shapely frame like a glove, the epitome of a middle-aged professional woman who’s still getting some mileage out of her body as well as her brains. “So, if you all would just excuse us. He has more important things to attend to.”

“Hold up, Miranda,” I interrupt her, maintaining my fake smile. I figure I can use my charm to defuse this situation and be on my merry way. I raise my voice and politely say, “I’m sure everyone’s heard about my little incident, but I want to let you all know it was just an accident. And that’s it.”

“There was nothing *little* about it!” a female reporter shouts, and then giggles ensue. I ignore her and the rest.

“So, you don’t have anything to say about the footage of you circulating on the internet?” asks one of the other reporters.

I scowl at him. *That will teach you to stop for a photo op and try to smooth things over.* “What footage?” I ask flatly, knowing exactly what he’s talking about.

He smiles, his freckles spreading across the bridge of his nose. “The one of you dropping your towel in front of Sara Jameson on live TV.”

I hold in a groan, irritation flaring. These people are acting like I whipped it out and gave Ms. Jameson a lap dance. All I did was bump into her in the men’s locker room after a game. It wasn’t ‘live TV’, and she shouldn’t have been back there in first damn place. It wasn’t my fault the fucking towel fell off. But as soon as it did, I apologized to the wide-eyed Sara and put it back on.

I thought we were cool after that. She even told me the cameras hadn’t caught my mistake and I had nothing to worry about. Until the cameraman with her, or someone at the network, decided to leak the unedited video dubbed *Anaconda* out to the internet. It’s spreading like wildfire now along with my new nickname.

This whole thing has been a goddamn PR nightmare too. Miranda has spent a week of sleepless nights sending DMCA's to various websites to get the footage taken down. It's been an endless battle. When one goes down, another one pops up. Still, it's fewer of them than when this all started.

I just wish I hadn't been so careless.

"It's unfortunate," I say, keeping the smile on my face with massive effort, "but really, it was an accident. Now if you guys would please move out of our way, I have to get to—"

"What does your mother think about you flashing millions of people?" the same guy cuts in again, taking delight in my irritation.

Miranda winces next to me as I grit my teeth, no longer able to control my anger.

"Are you fucking deaf? I just said it was an accident!" I snap. Miranda is going to be pissed I lost my cool, but I can't stand any more of this shit. "Now, if none of you have a question that's actually related to my game, don't waste my fucking time!"

"Okay, that's enough! No more questions!" Miranda shouts, taking me by the arm and dragging me toward the exit. Miranda hisses out of the side of her mouth, "Dammit, Gavin, you know better than that! Now that little soundbite is gonna be all over the evening news."

She's right. I knew the second it left my lips. But I'm not going to admit that to her. I'm too fucking pissed right now.

We reach the door at the end of the hall and I practically kick it open, muttering, "Whatever. You try stepping in my shoes and tell me you wouldn't have reacted the same way."

Miranda wisely chooses not to answer.



Present Day

“WHAT A SHITHOLE,” I MUTTER AS I GAZE OUT THE WINDOW. WE’RE PASSING BY rows of shops that look like they belong in some backwater town of a Midwest state. Fields, fields, a John Deere tractor, some barn that looks like it should be torn down, and a place called Stuckey’s. The town’s still up ahead, but for fuck’s sake, I can see the water tower with the town name on the side. It looks like it came out of an old music video.

Then again, the place is clean. I can see kids playing in the front yards, and there isn’t a hint of smog in the sky. And the streets aren’t jammed with traffic.

Still . . . “They really want us to film here?” I ask.

Miranda nods. “It’s the ideal location.”

I would argue against that, but I decide not to. I just came from yet another press event teeming with hungry reporters and I’m drained from all the bullshit. “As long as I don’t have to deal with any more paparazzi, I’ll consider myself lucky.”

“You shouldn’t,” Miranda says. “I’ve called ahead and made arrangements. No one should know that you’re checking in.”

“Good,” I growl, rubbing at my eyes. “Because they bring up that fucking video every time.” It’s been two years. And still, this shit is all anyone ever wants to talk about. It takes everything inside me to not go off on them.

That’s why I’m trying my hand at acting during the off season. Miranda thought it might go a long way in helping my image and getting people’s minds off my . . .

“Please don’t,” Miranda begs. She’s been through the wire these past couple of seasons, doing her best to temper my edge whenever I’m close to exploding. I have to admire her tenacity. If I were her, I would’ve quit on me ages ago. “I don’t want any more surprises. We’ll get you to the hotel and you can put your feet up until shooting starts tomorrow.”

I relax back in my seat at her words. A shower and a soft bed sound nice. And maybe a kitten to share my bed with. I shift in my seat, not feeling the excitement that usually comes with such a thought. Normally, I’d be turned on by the thought of hooking up with a local honey, but now...

“Earth to Gavin,” Miranda says, shaking me from my thoughts. “You all there?”

I turn back, tugging at my Italian designer t-shirt and blazer, nodding. “Yeah, just wishing I could wear something comfortable. What is it with Italians and skinny sleeves?”

“Makes your biceps look bigger,” Miranda says with a cheeky smile, pulling her phone out of her purse. “Even with the blazer.”

I shake my head as she gets on the line with the hotel. There’s always an angle with her.

“Yes, this is Miranda Price, personal assistant for Gavin Adams. You don’t . . . oh, for fuck’s sake, check under Anaconda!” she snaps, a scowl that can shatter glass spreading across her face. “Yes, Mr. Adams will be coming in this afternoon, and I want to make sure that the room is perfect for him. Huh? What do you mean, why? He’s the second-highest ranked star in the movie, that’s why!”

I sigh, wishing that Miranda wouldn’t play it up so much. I get it, she thinks that my going a little more ‘High Roller’ will get me more endorsements, more media attention, more of everything. I mean, I don’t play in New York or Los Angeles, so I’m not near the media centers. Then again, considering how terrible LA is football-wise, I think I’m glad I don’t play for them.

But Miranda’s taken that idea and run way over the top with it. “Yes, he’s supposed to have the Egyptian cotton sheets on his bed that I sent ahead, the minibar is only to be stocked with the glacial water and the exact liquor list that I emailed you . . .?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, I drink tap water,” I mutter.

Miranda reaches over, slapping my knee. I let her get away with it, though she’s testing me with her antics. After all, she’s been in the publicity game for athletes for a long time. She got me some of the endorsement TV spots I’ve done, so she knows her job. I just think she’s taking my plunge into Hollywood a bit too seriously.

“Fine, fine, that’ll be acceptable in the short-term,” Miranda says into her phone, grinning. She’s getting off on this, I swear. “And yes, there are to be

two Toblerone chocolates on the kitchen counter. No, not those, one's supposed to be fruit and nut, the other crunchy salted almond. Well, I suppose you'll just have to find one, won't you?"

"Cut them a break, Miranda," I growl, but she's going with it. I mean, I get it. Ever since I showed that I'm in that upper one half of a percent of football players, things have been thrown at me. Money. Cars. Contracts. And women? Hell, I've never had to ask for one. They always ask for me.

But there's a difference between being a cocky football player and being a dickhead. Miranda's pushing that line, and finally, I reach over, taking the phone from her. "This is Gavin Adams. The room's clean?"

"Why yes, of course it is, Mr. Adams," says a snobby voice that grates my teeth. "This is Mr. Vandenburg. I was just telling Ms. Price that while we have the confectionaries you requested, we were unable to find the specific Toblerone that you—"

"I don't care about that," I say, cutting him off. "Just make sure the room's nice, and we can worry about the rest later. See you soon."

I hang up the phone and toss it back to Miranda, who's glaring at me now. "There," I say. "Problem dealt with."

Miranda shakes her head as she slips her phone back in her purse. "You know, you're not letting me do my job, *Anaconda*," she says half-jokingly.

"Your job is to make sure I look good in the press, not to bully hotel managers," I growl. She knows I hate the name Anaconda. Sure, she's tried to spin it as if it's a good thing, that I always find a way to 'snake through the defenses'. But everyone and their fucking grandmother knows why it's my nickname. It's been on the internet in 1080p for two years now.

"My job is to make sure you look the part," Miranda says pointedly. She reaches into her bag, pulling out her iPad and turning it on. "By the way, you made the press again." She tosses the iPad over into my lap.

I try not to groan as I look at the webpage she's pulled up, another of those half tabloid, half sports page sites that she likes to track for mentions about me in the offseason.



*Anaconda Snakes Another One!* the headline blares, showing me walking with a girl. She's got her knees splayed out and a **pained** look on her face, the caption reading, *Anaconda Adams earns his nickname again with yet another young lady as the star running back and soon-to-be actor leaves a hotel in New York the night after appearing on a radio show.*

I read a few more lines and sigh in disgust and turn the tablet off, throwing it back over to Miranda instead of chucking it out the window like I want to. "That site is a fucking disgrace. They're saying I barebacked her with no lube."

"You didn't?" Miranda asks, her smile disappearing when I glare at her. "What, Gavin? You know your reputation says that you've got a groupie in all thirty-two cities you've played in. And it's funny. I thought you'd laugh after the rest of the problems you've been dealing with."

"Maybe that had a little truth to it in my rookie year, but that was then," I grumble, shaking my head. Sure, I went out with the girl, but I didn't fuck her. I just wasn't feeling it. I have no fucking clue why she looks in pain in the photo. They probably snapped until they finally got one with a weird-looking expression on her face. Fucking scoundrels is what they are.

"Whatever the case may be, any press is good press," Miranda says, putting her tablet away. "Just relax."

"Relax, she says," I mutter sullenly, watching as the limo hangs a right and a hotel that actually looks like it belongs in a ritzy section of Vegas comes into view down the street. Grand Waterways Hotel. "Relax for what?"

"Because you need to be calm, cool, and collected for your upcoming interviews," Miranda says as the limo starts to slow down. "You can't start getting annoyed and chewing out the reporters on camera just because they ask you about your anacon . . . umm, romance life."

"The hell I can't," I growl. "My personal life is no one's business."

"These are different times, Gavin," Miranda says softly. "The days where people only want to hear about your talent are over. They want to hear about what you're wearing, who you're dating, who you're thinking about

sleeping with. And considering that there's a . . ." her words trail off, but I catch her meaning.

*The video.* It always comes back to that goddamn video.

"It's bullshit."

Miranda shrugs. "It's just what it is."

I sigh, leaning back and unbuttoning the blazer. "The next time a reporter asks me about my sex life or my dick, I'm walking off. I don't care if it's on the red carpet of the fucking Oscars. It'll be better than giving them another sound bite. At least during football season, they ask about the game first sometimes."

"You'd better not," Miranda warns.

I clench my jaw, wanting to reprimand her for scolding me like a child, but I resist the urge.

"Tell me again why they picked this place?" I ask, changing the subject.

"Because it's a little podunk city," Miranda says. "Remember, you're supposed to be this badass who plays around with the main heroine for some of the movie. You two have known each other since you were kids, and they've got to get some background scenes."

"Oh yeah. The big dying scene," I say with a grunt, remembering the script. At least my character goes out with a bang—literally. A hit squad rattling my car with machinegun fire before they blow it up with a rocket? Guess I'm tough to kill. Too bad I won't do much for it. It's all stuntmen. "When are they filming that?"

"Umm, I'm not exactly sure," Miranda says. "But you'll have time to practice and get your lines down at least."

I grunt noncommittally and then ask, "How detailed are these love scenes supposed to be?" I know I'm supposed to have at least one bedroom scene with the leading lady of the movie, Leslie Hart.

"It'll be shot in darkness with blue light, according to what I saw from the studio," Miranda says. "Don't worry, the Anaconda isn't going to be

making his big screen debut. Who knows? They might use body doubles for a lot of it.”

I shake my head in disgust as we come up on the hotel. “Fuck,” I mutter, seeing the paparazzi parked outside, irritation causing me to clench my jaw. “Figures. I can’t go anywhere without these vultures showing up.”

“Pull around the side!” I yell to the limo driver, who’s kept his mouth shut the whole time we’ve been bickering. The guy’s a pro. I’d have jumped out several stop lights ago if I had to sit there and listen to us.

He just nods and waves, pulling around the corner and driving a bit farther before pulling over. I grab a hooded coat, pull it on, and throw the hood over my head. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Miranda,” I tell her, flashing a wink.

I slam the limo door and slap the roof before Miranda can reply, and I walk away, ignoring the people on the sidewalk. I’m through a side entrance within two minutes, easily evading the vultures with cameras waiting at the entrance.

I head up to the front desk, keeping my sunglasses and hat on. Thankfully, the manager’s on duty, and while he trips over his tongue a few times, probably still worried about the chocolates, I slip off to the elevators and up to the top floor. Room 603.

I unlock the door and head inside, yanking my coat off before throwing it at the sofa. I don’t even pause to take in the opulence of the room or the breathtaking view of the skyline through the floor to ceiling windows. It’s nice and all, but I’ve stayed in plenty of five-star penthouse suites and I’m used to luxury.

There are several bags waiting for me on the floor. Miranda must have sent them ahead.

I pick up one of them to see what’s so important inside, and when I do, I see a dress and some stilettos. Someone sent up the wrong bag.

Annoyed, I sling the bag at the table and into one of the chairs, not caring when the chair falls over onto the floor.

I check one of the other bags. This one has my clothes. I set an outfit out on the bed, dark slacks and a white dress shirt. I'm supposed to be having dinner in a few hours with Miranda and a big movie exec to go over a few things before shooting. And I can't go to the meeting if I smell like cigarettes and musk.

After I've made sure I've picked my most dapper attire, I walk into the bathroom, slide out of my clothes, and enter the shower stall for a quick rinse. As the cool water hits me, my mind wanders to the possibility of picking up some ass tonight. I could see myself easily picking up some chick from the event I'm heading to. Hell, maybe even someone from the hotel lobby. But once again, I'm unable to get excited at the prospect of sharing my bed.

I shake my head as water runs down my forehead and into my eyes. What the fuck is wrong with me? There was a time where I'd been happy to share my bed with one or even two. But the thought just doesn't excite me anymore.

*I guess I'm getting tired of sex that doesn't mean a damn thing.*

My mood sour, I finish rinsing off and step out of the stall. I'm in the middle of drying off when I realize I left my pants on the bed. I walk into the room while rubbing the towel against my head.

"Anaconda," I swear I hear a sweet voice say as I'm about to pull the towel from my eyes.

*Goddamn*, I think, seeing the sight in front of me, then my inner voice groans. *Oh, no. Not again.*

The towel slips from my fingers as I see a woman dressed in a maid uniform, her eyes as wide as a doe's as she gazes at me. Fuck. She's beautiful. Rich brown hair frames big, brown, soulful eyes, a slightly upturned button nose, and ruby pink lips that are soft and plump. The sort of lips that I'd love to have wrapped around my cock.

My dick twitches as I look over the rest of her. Her uniform has a French maid vibe to it, showcasing her figure and legs that stretch on for days.

I'm used to seeing beautiful women, but there's something about this girl that makes my blood heat in a way it hasn't in a long time.

"Hi, I'm Gavin," I say, stepping forward and then stopping. I feel stupid as fuck introducing myself while I'm butt naked. But it can't be helped. The snake is already out of the bag. There's no use covering him up now.

The girl doesn't reply, her eyes as wide as saucers, her legs trembling. Jesus, she looks like she'll need a respirator, her chest heaving as her eyes flit to my face, back between my legs, and then back to my face again.

Her mouth works for a moment as her eyes play ping pong, and I can't help but grin at the effect I'm having on her. I don't know why I'm enjoying this, but I am.

I boldly take a step forward, though I know I shouldn't. She's fucking petrified. "You all right?"

Her cheeks burning red, I hear her mumble, "I'm sorry," before she turns and runs from the room without looking back.

For a moment, I'm tempted to go after her, but I don't. After all, I *am* naked, and I don't know where the fucking bathrobe is. But I'm pissed I didn't get her name. She was gorgeous. And I could see the way she looked at me. I know *that* look.

And the image of her looking up at me with those eyes while I push into her body is going to be in my dreams until I make it a reality.

But she ran from me. I clench my jaw as I think about her plump, pouty lips and her wide eyes as she took in my naked body. My cock twitches again as I remember the lust that flashed in her eyes.

I decide right then and there that I'm gonna find her. And when I do, I'll have those sweet lips wrapped around my cock in no time.

If it's the last thing I do.

## CHAPTER 3

BRIANNA

“Girl, you’re not gonna believe this,” I hiss, dragging Mindy into the back of the coffee shop after fleeing Anaconda’s room. She was in the middle of cleaning a coffee machine when I practically ran up, but I can’t wait to speak with her. I have to tell what I just saw.

*Hell, I can’t believe it still, and I saw him . . . I saw it from less than ten feet away. Even now, my heart pounds when I think about, my pussy clenching at thin air.*

“Won’t believe what?” Mindy asks, her eyes burning with curiosity as she notices my breathlessness. I’m literally hyperventilating. “You walk in on an old couple 69ing or something?”

“Hell no!” I say, grimacing at the thought. Leave it to Mindy to come up with something like that at the drop of a dime.

“Then what was it?” she demands impatiently, glancing back to the front of the shop. “I’ve got coffee to make!”

“You know that penthouse, the one I said was supposed to be empty?” I ask. “Well—”

“Yeah, the one V-man busted your tush about,” Mindy says, nodding. “Why, was it *occupado*? Walked in on two guys doing the pile-driver?”

“Will you cut it out and let me finish a sentence!” I growl.

“Sorry,” Mindy mutters, even though I know she’s not.

I shake my head at her silliness, then give her a serious look. “What’s the biggest dick you’ve ever seen?”

Mindy pauses, staring at me before catching my meaning. “No way!” she blurts.

I nod. “Way.”

“How big?” she asks, her eyes wide.

“Big, big.” I shake my head, my blood heating as the image of what was hanging between those incredibly muscular thighs flashes before my eyes.

Mindy stares at me. “We talking ruler big or Louisville Slugger big?”

“I’m talking this guy could knock it out of Fenway big,” I joke, my cheeks burning.

Mindy whistles, impressed, and blushing a little herself. “And you got to see him naked?”

“The whole nine yards,” I say, still not able to believe what happened. *Or twelve yards might be more accurate.*

“And why aren’t you up there right now then?” Mindy asks, leaning in and playfully nudging me with her shoulder. “You wouldn’t be the first maid to have a little fun on the clock.”

“Come on, Mindy, you know I’m not like that!” I protest, trying my best to hide my desire. “I’m not going to just screw a guy ‘cause he looks good and is some sort of VIP prick.” I pause and shake my head in wonder, the image emblazoned on my mind. “Still, no wonder they wrote *Anaconda* on the room sheet.”

“No. Fucking. Way!” Mindy half squeals suddenly, causing me to jump. Grabbing my hand, she says, “You really met Anaconda Adams?”

“Who?” I ask, shaking my head. Mindy is practically shaking, she’s so excited. “Who’s Anaconda Adams?”

Mindy slaps her forehead dramatically, shaking it back and forth as if she's looking for heavenly guidance to cure my stupidity. "Gavin Adams, you bimbo! You know, the whole reason there's a production in town filming a movie?"

"What movies has he been in?" I ask, thinking where I could've seen this guy before but drawing a blank.

*I can't believe this. I actually walked in on a naked movie star.*

Fuck me. I'm so fired.

Mindy gapes at me like maybe I grew a third eye or a second head or something. "Movies? He's a sports star, but he's more known for a viral video that hit the web a couple of years back." She shakes her head as if embarrassed for me. "Jesus, Bri, you've really got to get out of the hotel or the classroom more often," she says, grabbing her phone out of her pocket. She quickly taps the screen and then shoves it in my face. "You saw this guy?"

My heart skips a beat at the instant recognition. The hair's different. It's styled and gelled perfectly, but those blue eyes are the same and the face with the powerful, sexy jawline is the same.

I read the information underneath. It's from some football website. "Gavin 'Anaconda' Adams, running back. Six foot one, playing weight of two hundred and twenty-nine pounds, says his birthday's in November. Yeah, this is him."

"You lucky bitch!" Mindy says a little too loudly, tugging me up front as a customer dings the bell. I follow her and she begins filling a guy's order. "Take my phone and check him out. The video will probably pop up when you type in just a few letters of his name." She chuckles and mutters under her breath to me. "It's funny because he's trying to be like a real actor now, too. Though he'd probably be better off performing for porn fetish websites."

I ignore Mindy's giggles and begin typing in Gavin's name on the phone. Sure enough, a video pops up on Google before I can even finish typing. When I click on it, it takes a second for the hi-def video to load.



I see Gavin standing in a locker room and a female reporter talking animatedly to one of his teammates when he suddenly turns around and bumps into her . . .

*Ohhhh.* My heart skips a beat as I watch the towel fall away from his chiseled hips, revealing huge, muscular thighs and that same huge cock I saw several minutes ago. The reporter in the video jumps back, her hand flying to her mouth, her eyes going wide with shock as she stares at Gavin's monster. A blush comes to Gavin's cheeks as his cock sways from left to right.

Mindy finishes the guy's order just as the video ends. It's short. Less than ten seconds. Gavin was quick to pick up his towel at the end, but it was too late.

"Crazy, ain't it?" Mindy asks, winking at me.

"Yeah," I whisper, a flood of arousal going through me, my eyes on the last frame of the video.

"I'm so jealous you got to see that in person!" Mindy pauses and then nods at the phone. "But that's not the only thing he's known for. Go look at the other stories they have on him."

I flip back on the phone and look through other search results. Some of them are just a mix of sports stories. Apparently, Gavin's pretty good. He's been All-Pro four out of the past five years, but there's also a lot of gossip sites that have nothing to do with the sports or the video. There's a picture of him at a rock concert with a Victoria's Secret model and one in Cancun with some other hottie. No matter what picture I see of him, there's always a beautiful woman on his arm.

Money. Fame. Big cock. He has it all. My heart sinks as I realize this dude must be a major player. I guess it's not surprising, given his profession. The stories about his sex life are absolutely salacious. Headline after headline talks about either the Anaconda video or his sexual escapades.

I shake my head, whispering, "This dude must get more ass . . ."

"Than a Burger King toilet seat," Mindy cracks, finishing my sentence for me.

I roll my eyes and continue scrolling through the photos. Anger twists my stomach at all the photos of him with smiling women. I don't know why I'm getting upset. Gavin's not my boyfriend and I'm sure as fuck not his girl. But still . . . there's just something about it all that pisses me off. Maybe it's just the fact that there's a video of his junk on the internet with probably millions of lusty women watching it.

"I bet he heard me come in and was just waiting to pull the whole surprise naked man gig again," I fume, handing her the phone back.

For some reason, I'm convinced Gavin thought I would just fall to my knees and service his big cock because he was some famous celebrity. Arrogant prick. Heat infuses my throat, and I bring my hand to my neck unconsciously and swallow back a mix of anger and . . . "Seriously, I—"

I freeze as Gavin strolls into the coffee shop, moving with a swag that steals the breath from my lungs. He's dressed in black pants and a white dress shirt that's opened at the front, showcasing the tanned skin underneath. And he looks *damn* good. Not as good as he did standing in front of me naked. But still good.

For a moment I freeze, unsure of what to do, but then I quickly duck down behind the counter before he can see me.

"What the hell are you doing?" I hear Mindy demand in a whisper from above me. I give her a shushing gesture as I hear the sound of footsteps approaching.

"Hi, welcome to the Beangal's Den," I hear her say pleasantly. "How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for someone," I hear Gavin say. I close my eyes and hold in a groan at his deep tone. God, that voice. I feel like I'm lying on a bed of velvet whenever he speaks.

"Sure, sir . . ."

*Mindy Parker, you bitch, you'd better not give me away.*

"Gavin Adams."

“It’s a pleasure, Mr. Adams. I’m Mindy, the assistant manager here at the shop,” Mindy says flirtatiously. “We here at Grand Waterways are happy to host D-town’s *biggest* celebrity.” I have to roll my eyes at her audacity of putting emphasis on *biggest*, and if I weren’t hiding, I’d give her a good smack to boot.

“Nice to meet you too, Mindy,” Gavin says, seemingly ignoring her play on words. “I’m looking for one of your co-workers, one of the maids. She’s about my age, maybe a little younger?”

“Gonna need a little more than that,” Mindy says, and I bite my lower lip, hoping she’s not about to play a prank and betray me. “There’s a lot of part timers here. The hotel has a work assistance deal with the university. Do you have a name?”

“No,” Gavin says. “She ran out on me before I could get it.”

Thank God he didn’t get a good look at my name tag.

“Ran out on you?” Mindy says, a note of humor entering her voice.

My heart pounds in my chest as I wait for his response. If he’s here to find out my identity so he can report me to my asshole boss, I’m screwed.

I hold in a groan as hear Gavin clear his throat. “Um, yeah, I bumped into her in a vending machine room on the top floor,” he lies.

Relief sweeps through me and I close my eyes in gratitude. Good, he’s not here to find out who I am so he can report me and make a big deal out of it. My eyes pop back open and go wide a second later as what he’s really here for hits me.

*No way.*

“Oh really?” Mindy hums innocently, making me want to smack her upside the head. She’s enjoying this a little too much. “How about you tell me what she looks like?”

“Well, she’s about five eight or so, with rich brown hair and big, beautiful brown eyes,” Gavin says, a slight catch in his voice. “And a face that’s just . . . perfect.”

My breath stills in my lungs as I listen to his description of me, and I have to wonder if he's talking about someone else. I've got plain brown hair and there's nothing special about my eyes.

"Damn, I'm jealous. You're making me wish I were this chick with the way you're talking about her," Mindy jokes. "She sounds absolutely gorgeous."

"She *is* gorgeous," Gavin says, his voice heavy.

I nearly choke, I'm so flattered. I *wish* I looked like the girl he's describing. I almost feel like he's lying, but it's obvious he's not. He came all the way down here just to find me. I bite my lower lip, my heart racing. It's just so hard to believe.

Mindy taps a finger to her lips. "Hmm . . . now that I think about it, I might know who you're talking—" Mindy begins to say, but before she can complete her sentence, I pinch her leg as hard as I can. "OW!" Mindy squeals.

"What's wrong?" Gavin asks as Mindy glances down at me, rubbing her thigh while I shake my head, mouthing *no, no, no!*

"A sudden sharp pain," Mindy says smoothly as if nothing happened. "You know, one of those *annoying*, pesky things that just seems to stab you out of nowhere?"

Gavin chuckles. "You kidding? I play football. I'm used to—" A pounding on the window interrupts Gavin and he lets out a loud groan. "Fuck. Sorry. I didn't realize they followed me here."

"Anaconda, Anaconda!" someone yells, and then the door to the coffee shop bursts open, a crowd of people rushing inside. "How about some pictures!"

"Yeah!" someone else shouts. "Show us what you're packing!"

Mindy lets out a disbelieving laugh as the cameras begin to flash. "They can't be serious!"

"Sadly, they are," Gavin growls, letting out a loud groan, the cameras flashing so hard I can see flashes on the walls in front of me. "I have to deal

with shit like this all the time.”

“That’s gotta be a pain in the ass,” Mindy mutters in sympathy, raising her hand to shield her eyes before yelling over the tumult, “All right, people, if you’re not ordering anything, please leave! Hotel policy!”

“I’ll take care of them,” I hear Gavin say, his voice laced with embarrassment. Then he raises his voice, a note of anger entering it. “All right, you vultures want your pictures? Let’s go.”

“Hey, I want an autograph the next time you come in here!” Mindy yells after Gavin. And then she lowers her voice and mutters, “preferably next to Anaconda.”

I wait a minute until I hear the crowd exit the room before I stand up, brushing off my skirt.

Mindy is scowling at me.

“What?” I ask.

“What?” Mindy growls in disbelief. “Why the hell did you pinch me? You damn near broke the skin!”

“You were going to give me away!” I growl, half ignoring her as I look through the big plate glass windows of the coffee shop as Gavin talks with the media. My heart flutters as I watch him talking animatedly to the press, and I cross my arms across my chest.

“I wasn’t! I was just messing with both of you!” Mindy shakes her head, her gaze going out the window to the crowd of clamoring reporters. “Did you hear the way he talked about you? God, you should be on your way to his room right now!”

“Please. He doesn’t really want me,” I say, my eyes still glued on Gavin as several people rush up to ask for his autograph.

Mindy shakes her head. “You should have seen the look on his face while he was describing you.” She turns back to me with a wide grin. “He wants to pin your legs behind your ears, girl.”

I scowl. “That’s not happening and you know it.” I try to sound as convincing as I can, despite the desire I feel inside.

Mindy returns my scowl, rolling her eyes. “What’s wrong with you, Bri? I mean, I get it, you don’t want to be easy, but he’s a freaking legend! And hot as fuck!” And then she adds under her breath, “With a big cock to boot,” but I hear it anyway. “You know what I’d do!”

She has a point. But I’m too stubborn to concede. Besides, so what if he thought I was cute? After reading those articles about him, I’m not even sure if I care that he’s a celebrity or that he’s hot as hell with a big dick. The man is just one big manwhore. “So?”

“So? When’s the last time you got laid?”

I make a face, wishing I could pinch Mindy again. “Six months maybe?”

“More like a year, I’m betting,” Mindy says, chuckling. “I’m not saying you need to whore yourself out to every hot guy who comes in here, but what’s wrong with dusting the cobwebs off the muffin?”

“How long is he supposed to be here?” I ask, ignoring her crudeness.

“How should I know?” Mindy says. “But from what I’ve been hearing, they’ve got major shoots going for a week. He should be here for at least that long.”

I bite my lower lip as my gaze wanders back out the window and I see Gavin putting on a fake, pearly-white smile as his picture is taken with a group of rowdy fans. A week? I have to try to avoid this incredibly sexy man for a week?

*Lord help me.*

“I’m in *big* trouble,” I mutter.

## CHAPTER 4

GAVIN

“*I*’ll suck yo dick, man,” the toothless bum mumbles as he stumbles up to me, scratching himself all over his arms. Moments before, he’d asked me for some spare change, which I declined. Now he looks at me with his desperate, rheumy blue eyes, faded from being in the sun for far too long.

“What?” I ask with a scowl and an arched eyebrow.

The bum grins, displaying stained gums and broken teeth, then repeats more urgently through his mush mouth while flailing his arms at my crotch, “Man, I’ll suck yo DICK!”

I grab his hands, shoving them away from my waist, and then push the bum slightly to the side. He turns back to me, reaching for what looks like a box cutter on his belt. I lash out instinctively with my work boot, catching him straight in that sunken hole of a mouth, and he goes flying back onto the pile of boxes behind him.

“CUT!” someone yells behind me, shocking me out of the scene.

I turn to see a flurry of activity from the stage crew as the director, Jim Thompson, gives me an enthusiastic thumbs-up with a goofy grin on his face. “That was great, Anaconda! You nailed him good!”

I grit my teeth at the hated nickname. I’ve told everyone on set not to call me it, and they still persist on doing it. I swear I’m going to blow a gasket

by the time filming is over with.

“No fucking shit!” Lance, the bum and stuntman doubling as an actor whines, holding his mouth as he crawls out of the pile of boxes with the help of a young stagehand. Blood is seeping between his fingers as he scowls at me angrily, “Fucking amateur, you’re supposed to pull the kick!”

“Dude, I’m sorry,” I apologize, stepping forward to offer him help.

Lance waves me off as he shoves the stagehand away and climbs to his feet. “You fucking suck, Anaconda.” He removes the fake gum caps from his teeth, showing the crew of onlookers a blood-stained chipped tooth. “Look at this shit.”

“Hey, Lance,” Jim cuts in. “Cut Gavin some slack. It was a mistake. Let’s get you fixed up and redo the scene.”

Jim’s words only seem to make Lance even angrier as he scowls at me with hatred, grabbing a towel from the stagehand he just shoved and pressing it to his lips. “Fuck that! How about getting a real actor in here? This dude needs to go back to being an overhyped and overpaid football star.”

I was sorry before, but now I’m irritated. I didn’t mean to kick the guy, but honestly, this whole scene is fucking stupid. When I read the script, I was under the impression I would be taking down a bad guy and establishing myself as a hero, not beating down a toothless crackhead who was desperate for a hit. The whole movie seems like it’s going to be one of those low-budget, shitty D-rate, straight-to-DVD movies instead of the blockbuster Miranda promised me.

Lance continues his rant, spitting blood-tinged saliva at my feet. “Arrogant prick!”

Keeping my expression neutral, I turn away from Lance and walk off before I do something I end up regretting. The guy is testing my patience with his ranting. I didn’t mean to kick him, but I did feel a little off during the stunt sequence, finding it hard to focus.

*It’s her*, I think to myself, the image of the hot maid flashing in front of my eyes. The way she bounded from the room, her hair flying like a banner behind her like . . . *Bunny. My little Bunny.* I don’t know her name, so that’s



what I'll call her. Desire runs through my blood as I clench my jaw and make my way off the set. *She's in my head, fucking up my game.*

I'm still smarting from the way she ran from me. No woman has ever done that to me. Not when they knew who I am. And she has to know who I am. Doesn't she? And that sassy friend of hers, Mindy, knew damn well where she was when I walked into the coffee shop. I could see it in her eyes.

As I walk away, I hear Miranda yell from the agent seat, "Goddammit, Gavin, get back here! We have three more scenes to shoot!"

"They'll be lucky if I come back at all," I mutter, ignoring her, not really watching where I'm going.

I hear a short gasp as I bump into someone. Leslie Hart, the vixen who's supposed to be my leading lady, stumbles back a step before catching herself. Dressed in jeans and a red halter top that showcases her cleavage, she's pretty enough, with long blonde hair and a sultry smile, but she doesn't interest me at all. Not after *Bunny*. I'm already dreading the romantic scenes that I'm sure are loaded throughout the script. Nothing else seems interesting so far. They're going to have to fill it with *something*.

"Sorry about that," I tell her.

Leslie waves my apology off with manicured fingers, the scent of her woody fragrance filling my nostrils. "I'm fine." She frowns, glancing over at the raging Lance. "But do you think he'll be all right?"

"I'm sure he will," I say politely, walking past her and continuing on to my trailer. I need a moment to reset. To try to get Bunny off my mind. Or the rest of the day will be a disaster. "But I really don't care," I add under my breath.



I SIT BACK IN THE LEATHER TUFTED CHAIR NEAR THE WINDOW OF MY SUITE, A cognac glass sitting on the small arm table beside me. I roll my neck until I hear a pop and let out a satisfied grunt, feeling the ache in the soles of my feet.

Filming was a bitch today. After the fuckup with the ‘bum’, I had to shoot an action scene with Leslie. I’d been hoping that we could be professional, and so far, so good.

Everything after that was a complete mess when it came time to act. Whenever I had to recite my lines, I stumbled over them, fucked them up somehow, or even forgot them altogether.

It’s that damn maid. *Bunny*. No matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to get her out of my head.

But I know exactly what I need to cure this problem. I need to be balls deep inside her. Shit, we both need it. I saw it in her eyes. She might’ve run away, but you can’t hide lust like that.

I shift in my seat and take a sip of the fine brandy, relishing the burn as it goes down. I’ve been unable to focus even off set. Rehearsing my lines seems a waste of time. Doing anything seems a waste of time. Unless it involves . . .

“Get yourself together, man,” I mutter. “There’s nothing at all special about her.” I recognize the lie as soon as it leaves my lips. I’ve never had this type of reaction to a girl before. *Ever*. But at the same time, I have no fucking clue why I’m so worked up over it.

I need to find out if this is just some sort of fluke. Some sort of anomaly causing me to act this way.

And the only way to do that is to get her in my bed.

I grip my glass tightly, trying to push the sexy maid from my thoughts. I’m still frustrated by how much I fucked up this morning. I want to be good at this. Not just because Miranda is hyping this for me, putting her reputation on the line, but simply because I want to be good at whatever I do.

And right now, I’m fucking it up.

My cell buzzes against the wood of the end table. I set down the cognac glass and check it. A slight grin plays across my lips. It’s my best friend, Mark Washington. He rode the bench all four years in college, but he and I

still became good friends. We call each other every chance we get. “The very best speaking,” I greet.

Mark huffs out a laugh. “How’re you doing, Anaconda?”

Mark’s about the only person I know whom I don’t get pissed at for calling me Anaconda. Mainly because he’s almost like a brother to me.

“Not too bad, man. Just got done shooting a couple of scenes today. How’s life in Florida?”

After college, Mark went on to law school. Then he became a lawyer in Florida, specializing in admiralty law. He met a girl down there, got married, and has a kid on the way.

A part of me is kind of envious. And I don’t even know why. I’ve enjoyed my freedom to do whatever the fuck I want. But I’m getting older now, and it’s starting to not have the same appeal anymore.

“I’m doing good. Wife’s good, kids are good. Little Sarah is already talking and little Mark is having a fit over it. How’s . . . where the hell are you again?”

“You won’t find it on most maps,” I tell him. “They’ve got a decent college football team around here, a hotel that’s way too big for this place, and that’s about it.”

Mark says jokingly, “You find yourself some fine country girl yet?”

“Nah,” I reply. *Yes. And she can’t hide from me forever.*

“Seriously?” Mark asks in disbelief. “I thought you would’ve already plowed through a cheerleader squad by now or something.”

I grit my teeth, but I realize I shouldn’t be getting pissed. He knows most of my reputation is exaggerated by the media, and I know he’s just fucking with me.

“Actually, I’ve just been busy trying to get my lines right. This acting thing is pretty new to me and it’s going to take me a bit to get the hang of it.” I grunt. “I just hope I don’t give Miranda a stroke in the process.”

“Damn. Anaconda, the action movie star.” Mark chuckles. There’s a pause before he adds, “Shit, man, why don’t you just say fuck all that, turn in your retirement for football, and just become a porn star—”

Right then, I see the production assistant for *Rundown* pull up in front of the hotel from my window, reminding me I have a fuck-ton of work to do.

“Hey, Mark, I’d love to talk more, but I gotta work,” I tell him, no longer in the mood for discussion. Besides, I’d rather not talk about who I’m *not* fucking at the moment. I need to start trying to work on my lines even if I can’t concentrate. Or it’s gonna be hell on the set tomorrow.

Trying to muffle the disappointment in his voice, Mark says, “No worries, dude, you do your thing.”

No sooner do I hang up than Miranda buzzes in. I don’t want to answer, but I know if I don’t, she’ll be at my door quicker than a bolt of lightning to hound my ass. But that’s what I pay her to do. Sometimes I don’t like it, but I *need* someone like her. Holding in a groan, I answer the phone.

I make no effort to sound pleasant. I know what this call is going to be about. “Yeah?”

And Miranda does not disappoint. “What the hell was that today?” she demands. “I didn’t exactly expect Shakespeare from you, but you performed like shit.” I can practically hear her shaking her head through the phone. “I’m just glad you didn’t knock that poor guy’s teeth out and we didn’t wind up with a lawsuit on our hands or something.”

*Judging by the anger Lance displayed, I still might.*

I grit my teeth, not wanting to deal with any of this right now. “Sorry. I just was . . . out of it.”

Miranda squawks, “Out of it? More like the studio is going to be out of a boatload of money if you don’t get your act together! Every day that we have to film over costs the studio tens of thousands of dollars.”

I almost huff out a laugh. Did she see the quality of the set? I doubt they were spending a fraction of that. “The entire production seems pretty low-

budget, if you ask me.” Miranda pitched it to me like it was supposed to be an A-list film.

“Hey,” Miranda protests. “They probably had to cut back on the budget since they had to pay you more. But I still think it’s going to be a hit.”

I shift in my seat. It makes me uncomfortable thinking Miranda negotiated a seven-figure contract on my behalf, especially if it meant the cast and crew took a pay cut. I know it’s just business, but I’m not going to be starving anytime soon. Not to mention, I don’t really deserve it. I need to prove myself, but Miranda thought it was important for appearance’s sake.

“And I think it’s going to be good for your career, regardless of whether it’s a blockbuster or not,” Miranda continues. “Remember, you’re just starting out and your acting talent is almost nonexistent. We’re operating on your looks, your popularity as a football player, and . . .” her words trail off, but I know she was about to say.

*That fucking video.*

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, Miranda,” I say dryly.

“I’m just doing what you pay me to do, tell you like it is,” Miranda says. “But I need you to start being on your game after today, Gavin. There’s a lot on the line.”

I hang up my cell, frustrated, toying with my cognac glass. Miranda’s right. I need to do something, anything, to get my thoughts back on track. I can’t go on like this for another week. I have scenes to shoot, even if I do think this movie fucking sucks.

My eyes stray to the dark brandy in the glass.

*Drinking certainly isn’t going to help.*

I get up from my seat, walking over to the mini-bar. There’s nothing inside. Not even a bottle of water. I frown. I don’t even remember drinking anything last night. I try calling the front desk, but after ten rings, nobody picks up. “What sort of nickel and dime operation is this?” I grumble, irritated. I’ve always been used to the very best service, and so far, this hotel is failing to match up to what I’m used to.

*Screw it. I'll just go to the fucking vending machine.*

I grab my room key and head out the door. As I'm making my way down the hallway, I pass a maid wagon outside Leslie's suite. And I run into something. *Hard.*

*There she is.*

The towels fall from Bunny's fingers at my feet, her luminous eyes going wide with shock. Her hair's a little messed up and she's obviously been working hard. But fuck, she looks beautiful.

I bend down to pick up her towels before she can react and offer them to her. "So we meet again," I say, cracking a grin.

*Bunny* gazes at me for a moment, still looking like a wide-eyed doe lost in the woods, a slight blush flushing her cheeks. "I-I-I'm sorry," she stutters, her full, plump lips quivering. Lips that I can't wait to taste.

She reaches out and takes the towels from my hands, causing little sparks to shoot up my arm where our flesh touches.

*Fuck.*

Blood rushes down below, and my cock twitches inside my jeans as I hold in a groan. "No need to be sorry," I say, holding my voice steady. "It was my fault."

She doesn't reply right away, her eyes dropping to the floor. In the silence that follows, I swear I can hear her heartbeat.

I clear my throat. "Listen, about yesterday . . ."

"I'm sorry about that too," she says, bringing her eyes back to my face. "If I'd known you were in there, I wouldn't have . . ." her voice trails off and her cheeks flush even more. I imagine she's thinking about seeing my cock right now. And it only further turns me on.

"That was my fault too," I reassure her. It's getting hard to keep the strain out of my voice. "I shouldn't have walked out on you like that without calling out first."

“Thank you,” she says quietly, seeming totally relieved.

I arch an eyebrow. “For . . .?”

“For not reporting me to my boss. He would’ve” —she swallows— “fired me.”

I wave away her worry, though I don’t doubt her statement. The hotel manager did seem like an ass from the little conversation we’ve had. “There’s nothing to report. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“Thank goodness,” she mutters to herself. “Because I frickin’ need this job.”

The thought of needing a job as horrid as this one is a scary thought. The fact that she feels she *has* to work at a place like this fills me with concern. Although it shouldn’t. My only concern should be bending her to my will.

I look at the chest of her uniform. No name tag. She probably didn’t wear it in case she ran into me again. “What’s your name?” I ask her.

“Bri-Brianna,” she replies shyly.

I extend my hand. I love her name. And what a coincidence. It starts with a B—like Bunny. “Nice to meet you, Brianna. Mine’s Gavin.”

She looks at my hand like she’s scared of it before taking it. I marvel at how soft and supple her skin is as I shake hers and then let go. I regret letting go instantly, lust burning through my body like an inferno.

She’s blushing furiously as I take a step closer and a pleasant woodsy scent fills my nostrils.

“Well listen, Brianna,” I growl in a slightly menacing but playful tone. “You actually did do something wrong yesterday.”

I almost grin at her reaction, her lips suddenly quivering and her hand flying to her chest. “What? You said I didn’t—”

I move in closer, backing her up against the wall and placing both of my hands to either side of her head. “You ran from me,” I tell her, my voice dropping low. This close up, she looks so vulnerable. So innocent. Blood

pumps furiously down below. She's making my cock so hard it fucking hurts. "And *no one* runs from me."

Her breathing is coming out in short, ragged pants, her soft body nearly pressed up against mine. She obviously wants me, and I want her too. Her lips beg me to kiss her.

We're so close, I can almost feel the heat emanating from her core.

Brianna stares at me, not sure what to think, her mouth opening and then closing. "I—" she begins, before she's interrupted by a crackle at her waist.

*"Hey, Brianna?" says a man's voice.*

Brianna tears her terrified eyes away from mine and glances down at her hip.

I clench my jaw at the interruption. Fuck whoever this dude is. Seriously. I'm tempted to take her walkie talkie from her and silence it so we can continue our conversation. There's nothing stopping me. But I step away, letting her free, placing my hands behind my back.

Brianna is breathless as she grabs her transceiver. "Y-y-yes?" she asks, her voice unsteady. "I'm here."

*"Hey, it's Jimmy. You all right? You sound out of breath."*

"I'm fine," Brianna says quickly, her eyes nervously darting to me and then away.

*"Oh, okay. I got that issue resolved in room 333. It's clear for you when you want. You read me?"*

"Yes, Jimmy, thanks. I'll be there as soon as I finish up here on six," Brianna says, her voice tinged with relief. She continues to avoid my gaze as she speaks. "Thanks."

Whoever Jimmy is, I'm kicking his ass if I ever meet him. I was one second away from feeling those sweet pouty lips crashing into mine.

Brianna puts away her walkie talkie and grabs ahold of the cart, her eyes finding my face. "I'm sorry, Mr. Adams . . ." There's a flush to her cheeks



that extends down her neck. A neck that I want to devour.

“Gavin,” I correct her. I’m expecting her to chew me out for being so bold and pressing up on her like that. Or to call me a cocky asshole. But she doesn’t.

“Gavin,” she says. Fuck, I love hearing her say my name. I want to hear her screaming it, though. “Sorry to disappoint, but I have duties to attend to. It was nice meeting you.” Before I can reply, she practically runs away like a bat out of hell, pushing her cart up the hall.

I watch her until she disappears around a corner, enjoying the sway of her luscious hips as she moves, fire burning in my blood and one thought on my mind. *This is starting to be a problem.* She got away from me again.

*I’ll get her eventually,* I tell myself confidently as I turn away and start making my way to the vending machine room, feeling a dull ache forming in my pelvis. On top of a drink, I’m going to need a bag of ice to numb my aching balls.

*And when I do, she’s fucking mine.*

## CHAPTER 5

BRIANNA

The next morning, my fingers are shaking as I check my uniform in the mirror, my heart pounding like a war drum. He was so close to me. I could practically feel the heat radiating from him. As I stood there, sandwiched between his hard body and the wall, every bone in me screamed for me to run away.

But I didn't.

It's only by chance that Jimmy interrupted at that exact moment. He *saved* me.

I would have let Gavin do anything he wanted to me had Jimmy not interrupted.

*And I'd be out of a job as soon as someone found out.*

I shiver as I remember the intensity in Gavin's eyes, his warm breath on my face. It scares me how much I wanted him in that moment, how I almost lost control. No guy has ever been so aggressive, and normally, I would have slapped anyone who was. But I found myself frozen, unable to even say a word, much less move.

My fingers clutch my neck as I suck in a deep breath. I'm mad at myself for not standing up to him. The guy is nothing but a player, and I should've let him have it. I don't care if he's a celebrity with a huge cock. He definitely deserved to be called out on his bullshit, brazenly pushing up on me like

that. But I just choked up, caught up in his good looks that I'm sure he's used to getting him whatever he wants.

*Ugh.* Anxiety squeezes my stomach as I gaze at my reflection. It's time to start my shift. And I'm worried that *he* is going to be up there. And I don't think I can handle him coming up to me again. Not after *that*.

And certainly not after spending half the night tossing and turning in bed with a burning need I haven't felt in a long time.

I want to believe that I can tell him no, to fucking get lost. But I know it won't be easy.

*I'm not easy,* I tell myself, trying to build my self-confidence in the face of my desire, *and I don't want to give in to temptation just to become some cocky jerk's one-night fling. Even if Mindy says there's nothing wrong with it. I say there is, especially with someone like him.*

Vowing that I'll be strong if I encounter Gavin again, I close my locker and make my way to the lobby. It's the first on my list today, and I want to get it out of the way so I can hopefully avoid Vandenburg.

I'm just getting the vacuum out of the janitorial closet when I'm interrupted by an officious cough behind me.

"Miss Sayles," says the voice that always sets my teeth on edge.

*Speak of the damn devil.*

I turn and see Mr. Vandenburg standing there, glaring at me with his perpetual scowl. "You're out of uniform," he growls. He looks up at me, puffing out his stomach. "Where's your name tag?"

I glance down at my blouse, cursing my luck. My name tag has been missing since yesterday, and I've been so engrossed in my thoughts with Gavin, I forgot all about it. "I'm sorry, Mr. Vandenburg. I guess I lost it yesterday on shift. I'll put in for a replacement immediately."

"I see," Vandenburg says disdainfully. "Well, you can fill out the paperwork for that at the same time you sign your write-up form. Follow me to my office." He begins to turn away.

“Write-up?” I ask, barely keeping my voice down, causing him to perform a dramatic spin about and fix a nasty scowl on his face. “You’re writing me up over a name tag?”

“The employee conduct guide is very clear on this. Nobody is to be out of uniform when in a guest area,” Vandenburg says through gritted teeth. “Your name tag is an important part of your uniform.”

*Not as important as that uppity stick up your ass,* I think angrily. I want so badly to tell him that he could go to hell with the high horse he rode in on, but I need this job.

When it’s clear he’s won, Vandenburg turns with his nose raised high, and I follow him into his office. Inside, it’s antiseptically clean, his cherry wood desk so polished it practically gleams. “Mr. Vandenburg, I understand that I lost my name tag, but please . . .” I close my mouth when I see him arch his eyebrows. Well screw him. I’m not going to beg. It’s actually what he wants to hear.

He pushes a sheet of paper across the table to me along with a pen. “If you’ll fill this one out, Miss Sayles, for your new name tag. It’ll be ready by your next shift, and you’ll, of course, be docked the ten dollars for the cost of the tag. After that, you can sign your write-up form.”

Anger burns my chest as I grip the pen and fill out the form. A write-up. For my name tag. How stupid.

*It’s just his way of getting one step closer to firing me,* I think angrily. *He knows I already have one write-up, and now he only needs one more to get rid of me for good.*

The hotel runs a three-strike system. If you get three write-ups within a rolling twelve-month period, you’re fired. It doesn’t matter what they’re for. This is my second strike, having been written up several months ago due to being late during a thunderstorm.

I finish the form, making sure my name is spelled correctly before I slide it over to Vandenburg.

He smiles icily, taking the form, and I get up to leave, barely hiding the anger I feel.

“Oh, and Miss Sayles,” he says, causing me to pause in the doorway.

“Yes?” I say cautiously.

“The marble floors in the lobby have been looking quite dull lately. I believe they could use a good coat of polish.”

I almost lose my shit right then and there. Waxing floors? This has got to be a joke. Though I know it might cost me, I say through gritted teeth, “Mr. Vandenburg, that’s a job for Maintenance. They use the big motorized buffer.”

“Yes, and the buffer is far too noisy and disruptive for me this time of day,” Vandenburg counters, clearly enjoying the frustration I’m displaying. “You’ll need to do it by hand.”

This man has got to be out of his mind. Never mind, I know he’s out of his fucking mind. But as I look into his smiling face, I know he’s just waiting for me to unleash. He gets off on this shit.

*I swear to God, as soon as I get home, I’m gonna look online for another job. I don’t have to put up with this.*

I turn to leave again, but I’m stopped once more when Vandenburg adds, “A hint, Miss Sayles. Go in small sections, or else you’ll leave streaks and have to do it all over again.” I swear he’s about to burst into gales of maniacal laughter.

I don’t know how I manage to leave his office without cussing him out to the moon and back, but I do it.

I even manage not to slam the door.

## CHAPTER 6

GAVIN

*B*leep. Bleep. Bleep.

I groan as I wake up, the sound of an annoying alarm going off in my ears. Grabbing my pillow, I place it around my ears to muffle the sound. But after several moments, I toss the pillow to the side and mutter in annoyance, “Shut the fuck up,” while grabbing my cell off the nightstand and silencing it.

I glance at the time. It’s early still, 8:45. Rehearsals are supposed to start at 10:00. But I hardly got any practice in last night, my mind filled with thoughts of Brianna. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get her out of my head and focus on my lines for more than a minute.

As if summoned by thinking Brianna’s name, my cock swells, straining against my boxers, stretching to its limits. *Fuck.*

*Just another problem I have to deal with.*

Groaning, I roll onto my back and stare up at the ceiling, my cock throbbing painfully, begging me to take care of it. I clench my jaw, trying to ignore the urge. I don’t need this shit right now. I’ve got to be able to perform today.

It should be easy. I’ve always been good under pressure. I’m used to being the best at what I do. But I feel off my game.

It pisses me off. I’ve always been about control, dominating situations and those around me. But Bunny is resisting my charm, taunting me with her

sweet pouty lips. She can't keep it up for long, though. She wants me. I can see it in her gorgeous eyes.

A soft groan escapes my lips as I slip my hand down my abs and under the elastic band of my boxers. With a surge of discipline, I stop myself before I grab my dick, and I scowl up at the ceiling.

*Fuck that.*

I'm not doing this. If anyone's going to make me blow a load, it's going to be *her*. She's playing hard to get, but it's only a matter of time. What's that saying, *good things come to those who wait*? I can hold out a little while longer. I grit my teeth, ignoring another pulsing throb. *Nope*. My hand just won't do.

I roll out of bed, ignoring the dull ache in my balls, and make my way to the shower stall inside the bathroom. I make sure the water is as cold as I can bear, shivering as the dual showerheads pound into my chest and water cascades down my washboard abs.

I stay in the cold stream until my erection finally subsides and then I jump out, quickly drying off.

*Chime*. My eyes are drawn to my cell when I step out of the bathroom. *Voicemail*. I hold in a groan, already knowing who it is. But I know I have to listen to it anyway.

*Gavin, it's Miranda. Just a quick reminder, you'd better be on your game today. I saw the sheet for today, and there's a ton of work to be done. See you on set.*

My excitement dims somewhat as I grab some black dress pants, pulling them on. I'm not looking forward to living up to Miranda's expectations when I know I haven't been giving my lines—or any of the script, for that matter—my undivided attention.

*You've got to get yourself together, man*, I tell myself as I slip into a white dress shirt and polished shoes. *You can't let this girl ruin your acting career before it even gets started. She's not worth it.*

I'm lying to myself. I know it as soon as it enters my mind.

The truth is, Brianna has awakened a fire that I haven't felt in a long time by running from me. More than that, there's something about her, something I can't put my finger on, that draws me to her like a moth to the flame.

Brianna's not like the other women I've been with. She doesn't seem to care that I'm a sports star with all the trappings money, fame, and good looks can buy. Or that I have a huge cock that would have her coming so hard she'd forget what her name was.

And that makes me want her all the more.



## CHAPTER 7

BRIANNA

I'm grumbling to myself by the time I make it down to the maintenance room. Inside, I quickly change out of my uniform to a jumpsuit, grab some wax and scrubbing pads, and then head back up to the lobby.

Before I can get to work, I'm spotted by Mindy as she's walking out of the coffee shop. She rushes over to see what's going on.

"What the hell is this?" she demands quietly, eyeing my getup.

"My *punishment*," I reply out of the side of my mouth, my face a dark scowl. "For a missing name tag."

"That humpty dumpty ass sonofabitch," Mindy hisses, casting an angry glare toward Vandenburg's office. I know she'd love nothing more than to let him have a piece of her mind, but she's coasting on two strikes herself, courtesy of yours truly. If she weren't so popular with the coffee shop patrons, Vandenburg would've found a reason to fire her long ago. "What a fuck-face!"

"You're telling me," I mutter.

She shakes her head sadly before her frown morphs into a playful grin. Can't ever keep her down long. "Hey, guess what?"

"What?" I ask cautiously. She's giving me that snarky half-smirk so I know it's going to be silly.

Mindy giggles as she gestures at the coffee shop. “V-man decided the coffee shop needs some more decoration, so we’ve got ourselves a brand-new fish. Girl, you’ve got to see this thing! It’s got lips so big, it looks like it’s giving head.” She starts bobbing her head forward, her mouth open wide.

Normally, I’d be laughing my ass off at her antics, but I can barely manage to crack a smile. I know Mindy’s just trying to lift my mood though, bless her heart.

Mindy stops and rubs my shoulder when she sees her crack failed, her smile rapidly fading. “I’ll have a sandwich ready for you on break,” she promises, walking back to the coffee shop.

“Thanks,” I say with a graciousness I don’t feel. “See you then.”

I get to work, getting on my hands and knees near the elevators. My plan is to do this area until Vandenburg leaves for lunch. Then I’ll just call Jimmy to take care of the entire lobby really fast with the buffer. I might need my job, but there’s no way I’m going to subject myself to hours of torture. Screw Vandenburg.

My hands are red from scrubbing and irritated by the solution by the time I’m on the last area, my back aching and sore. I don’t even notice when the elevator in front of me opens and polished dress shoes stop in front of my face.

I freeze when I hear that deep voice.

“Well, well, look who we have here.”

*Oh, no. Not again.*

I look up slowly and my breath stills in my lungs. Gavin is standing above me. The scent of his cologne, a heavy masculine fragrance, wafts down to my nose, causing my skin to prickle.

“Good morning,” I say, blushing. I cringe. I must look and sound so weak, like a love-struck schoolgirl. Instead of being polite, I should be telling him off about yesterday, but I feel like now’s not the time. Especially with Vandenburg nearby.

“Good morning to you too,” Gavin says, stepping off the elevator. He pauses, looking down at me and frowning. “Are you waxing the floor?” he asks, his deep voice suddenly on edge.

“I am,” I reply, surprised by his intensity.

Gavin inquires, “Isn’t your job to clean the rooms?”

I nod.

He glances toward the lobby, a scowl on his face. “Then why are you waxing the floor? Don’t they have a janitor?”

*Yeah, but that doesn’t matter when you work for a creep like Vandenburg.*

The words are on my lips. I almost tell him about Vandenburg being a major douche, but I don’t.

*Gavin can’t help me. And I don’t know why he cares anyway. He has a movie to shoot.*

“Someone spilled something,” I lie instead, looking away. “And I just have to clean it up.”

“I know bullshit when I hear it,” Gavin growls, looking around, practically fuming.

I’m at a loss for words. Why the hell does he care?

I’m about to tell Gavin he shouldn’t worry about me and continue on his way when Vandenburg appears from behind. “Miss Sayles, your job was to polish the marble, not gossip with hotel guests,” he says. He stares down his nose at me in a condescending manner. “First you lose your name tag, and now this. If you’re not going to take your job seriously—”

“She was doing her job just fine,” Gavin interrupts, a note of anger entering his tone. “I was asking her for help. You said she’s missing her name tag?”

Vandenburg nods, suddenly very docile.

Gavin shakes his head and takes a small metal tag out of his pocket, handing it to me. “It’s my fault, Brianna. I bumped into you in the hallway and it got caught on my sleeve. Sorry about that.”

I reach out and take it, unsure of what to say. “Th—thank you.”

“You see?” Gavin asks, looking at Mr. Vandenburg. “All my fault.”

Suddenly, Vandenburg’s trying hard to kiss Gavin’s ass. “Of course it was just a misunderstanding, Mr. Adams. Miss Sayles has just proven to be a bit of a problem in the past.”

“She’s been very helpful. And my room is in perfect order,” Gavin says, cutting off Vandenburg and crossing his arms over his chest. “In fact, I’d like to speak with her. I need her help with something. Mind if I borrow Brianna here for an hour or so?”

I gape in disbelief. This isn’t going how I expected it to.

Vandenburg glances over at me. It’s clear he doesn’t want to let me out of his sight and wants me to continue scrubbing the floor. But Gavin is a celebrity. Vandenburg might despise me, but he can’t afford to not kiss Gavin’s ass.

Still, I know it irks him when he forces the next words from his lips. “Of course not, Mr. Adams. I’ll just make some adjustments.”

“Thank you,” Gavin says with a smirk.

Vandenburg looks like he’s been bitch slapped when he rushes off, muttering to himself under his breath. I would laugh my ass off at him if I weren’t so shocked and if I knew it wouldn’t get my ass fired.

Gavin watches for a moment before he turns back, holding his hand out to me.

I stare at his hand for a moment before taking it. A spark of electricity shoots up my arm as he pulls me to my feet with ease, his grip strong and firm. I’m disappointed when he lets go, but I don’t let it show.

“There,” he says, flashing me a charming grin. “I just had to do something. You’re too pretty to be scrubbing floors.”

Warmth flows through my chest at his words and I almost forget that I’m supposed to be on guard.

*He's only trying to be nice cause he wants something*, a voice in the back of my head warns.

"Thank you," I tell him. "But you didn't have to do that for me."

Gavin waves me away. "Sure I did." He nods toward the coffee shop, glancing at his watch. "Come on, let's get some coffee and a bagel. I have a few minutes to kill before I head off to the set, and you look like you could use a break."

I glance with uncertainty toward Vandenburg's office. While I appreciate Gavin's standing up for me, I don't know if I should be going *anywhere* with him. Especially when I know what he's *really* after.

Gavin doesn't give me a chance to say no. "Come on," he says, taking my hand in his and leading me toward the cafe. "My treat."

Dumbstruck, I let him lead me halfway to the door, my heart pounding every step of the way, before I stop and pull my hand out of his.

"Wait," I say, looking down at my jumpsuit. "I can't." I know we're not going anywhere special, but I look like shit. And I don't want to be seen with Gavin with this outfit on. Who knows if paparazzi are lurking around, waiting to take an embarrassing picture? "Vandenburg will kill me. And I look awful," I add.

Gavin scowls. "Don't worry about shorty. I'll take care of him, trust me." He gives me a smoldering look that makes my heart do a backflip. "And you'd look beautiful even if you were wearing rags."

A furious blush comes to my cheeks and I lower my head as a warm, fuzzy feeling flows through my chest. I shouldn't be listening to anything he says. Knowing what I know about him, it should go in one ear and out the other. But I can't help but be flattered.

"Thank you," I say softly.

He winks at me, taking my hand in his again. I don't even bother objecting this time. And I allow him to lead me across the lobby, where he opens the cafe door for me.

Mindy's eyes practically pop out of her head when we walk in, like she can't believe what she's seeing. After she recovers, she walks over, looking as if she's going through great pains to keep a straight face, and hands Gavin a menu. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Adams. Is this the girl you've been looking for all this time?"

*Careful, Mindy*, I warn her with my eyes. Hers are sparkling with mischief, and I know she's just itching for a chance to say or do something silly that will embarrass me.

"The very one," Gavin says easily, leading me to a corner table. Mindy follows us over as he helps me slide into my seat before sinking into his.

Mindy smacks herself against her head, playing dumb. "Damn! I wish I would have known you were talking about Brianna when you came into the coffee shop. I would have gone and gotten her out of the back."

Amusement sparkles in Gavin's eyes as he waves away her faux concern. "It's not a big deal. I'm just glad I found her." His eyes turn on me, and I feel my cheeks heating all over again. "We have a lot to talk about."

Mindy tosses me a playful wink, her eyes screaming, *Girl, you'd better let him have his way with you. Or else!*

"That's so sweet," Mindy says, grinning. "It's not every day a big sports star comes waltzing into our hotel. On a date with one of my co-workers, no less. I must say, I'm a little jealous."

"We're not on a date," I say so quickly I almost don't understand myself. "We're just having coffee."

Gavin agrees. "Just having coffee." But his eyes, which are burning into mine with fire, seem to say otherwise.

"Oh, okay," Mindy says. "Well, excuse me. Didn't mean to rouse the *snake*."

I shoot her a murderous scowl, but Gavin only laughs.

Grinning, Mindy asks, "So what can I get the two of you?"

“Let’s see.” Gavin flips through the menu for a moment before looking up at Mindy. “Any suggestions?”

Mindy screws up her face, thinking. “We’ve got a pretty good patty melt if you’re looking for something real to eat. If not, we’ve got some awesome pecan cinnamon rolls.”

“I’ll take two of those and two lattes,” Gavin says before pausing to look at me. “Unless you want something different?”

Of course not. Mindy recommended my favorite. At least she did one good thing.

I shake my head, although a part of me thinks he’s arrogant for ordering for me. But the other part of me likes it. “That’s fine.”

Mindy nods after scribbling on her notepad. “Okay, your order will be coming right up.” Tossing me another playful grin, she walks over behind the counter and starts messing with the machine.

Gavin watches her for a moment and then turns his piercing gaze on me, a slight smile playing across his lips. “A friend of yours?”

I nod, trying to relax but failing. I’m trembling with anxiety. And I’m not sure if it’s because Gavin is a celebrity or if it’s because I know I shouldn’t be here with him. Or both. “My bestie. Though she gets on my last nerve sometimes.”

Gavin chuckles, a knowing look on his face. “I kind of figured that when I came in here to ask about you the other day.”

It takes a moment for what he says to register. “You knew?” I accuse.

Gavin nods. “I didn’t know if you were best friends, but I know she knew exactly where you were.”

“She was just covering for me,” I try to explain. “Didn’t want me to get into trouble.”

Gavin waves away my worry. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. I understand. You were worried about your job after what happened. And I don’t hold it against you. Now . . . you running away from me though . . .”

His voice trails off as his eyes bore into me and I literally squirm in my seat.

I avert my gaze, my blush now furious.

Thankfully, Mindy rescues the awkward moment by coming back with our rolls and lattes, setting them down in front of us. “Do you guys need anything else?” she asks, looking back and forth between us, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “A *super-size* banana split for dessert, perhaps?”

I almost roll my eyes at her emphasis on super-size. “No, I think we’re good,” I say almost stonily, wanting to smack her upside her head.

Mindy nods, seeing my growing irritation. “Okie dokie. Holler if you need me. It’s my absolute *pleasure* to serve.” She walks away with a wink and a twirl of her skirt, her heels clicking across the floor.

Gavin chuckles when Mindy’s gone, shaking his head at her antics. “She must be a trip to hang out with.”

I roll my eyes. “Trust me, you’d get tired of her within five minutes. And that’s only if she didn’t talk for the first two.”

Gavin laughs. “You crack me up.”

I shrug, picking up a roll and taking a bite. The sweet cinnamon and icing melt in my mouth like butter and I’m forced to hold in a groan. At least Mindy can do one thing right. Her rolls are always slammin’. “Just kidding. I love her.”

Gavin takes a sip of his latte. “So how long have you been working here?”

I freeze for a moment, suddenly wary. I’m finding it hard to believe that Gavin is really interested in my boring ass life. He’s a huge sports star who can have any woman he wants, for God’s sake.

*This is why he’s here, a voice in the back of my head says. Because I ran from him and his ego can’t handle it. He doesn’t really care about getting to know me. He just wants to pretend to be nice so he can get my guard down along with my panties.*



I almost get up and leave, but when I see the way Gavin is staring at me with such intense interest, I stay in my seat.

*Just answer, I reason. What harm can it do anyway? It's not like he can do anything with the information. And maybe after he sees how boring I am, he'll leave me alone.*

"A couple of years part-time," I finally reply, washing some of my roll down with a sip of latte. "I'm hoping to quit soon, though. After I finish school."

*With how crazy Vandenburg gets, it can't happen soon enough.*

Gavin toys with the rim of his cup, his gorgeous eyes never leaving my face. "I see." He slowly takes another sip. "You grow up in this area?"

"Born and raised," I reply proudly. "Always been a small-town girl."

Gavin chuckles. "Can't say that I'd love living in a place like this, but I admire your hometown spirit."

"What about you?" I ask. "How'd you get into football?"

Gavin sits back in his seat. "Well, I've had a knack for playing ball for as long as I can remember," he says, his eyes growing distant. "I remember I used to play so much when I was little I got blisters from throwing and catching the ball. Eventually, it paid off. I got drafted, left school pretty early . . . and the rest is history."

I take a sip of latte. "What position do you play?" I can't remember what I'd read about Gavin when I looked him up. The only thing that stuck in my mind was the size of his . . .

Gavin arches an eyebrow.

I blush yet again, shaking my head. "I honestly didn't know who you were until Mindy told me."

Gavin doesn't get angry at my admission like I expect him to. I figure he has an ego bigger than his dick and gets mad when people don't recognize him. "Well, I'm just a running back. Some say the best in the league."

His cockiness is not lost on me as I ask, “So why are you doing this movie, if you’re so good?”

A slight smirk plays across Gavin’s lips as he replies, “Miranda, my agent, thought it would be good for my image. With all the rumors about me going around . . .” his voice trails off and he clenches his jaw, suddenly irritated.

He doesn’t have to say what those rumors are for me to catch his meaning.

Suddenly, a ringtone of *All I do is win* goes off at Gavin’s hip.

Holding a finger up to me, he fishes his cell out of his pocket. “Speak of the devil,” he mutters before answering.

“Yeah? I’m having coffee. What do you mean I have five minutes before you crack my nuts? Ok. Fine. On my way.” He hangs up his cell, sticking it back in his pocket while shaking his head and muttering under his breath. “Terrible timing.”

“Trouble?” I ask lightly.

“Yeah,” he groans. “That was Miranda, threatening to bust my ass to get to rehearsals.” He gets up from his seat. “Sorry, but I’m going to have to cut our little date short.”

My breath catches in my throat. *Did he just call this a date?*

“But I’d like to continue this. What about tonight after filming?” he asks.

My lips open and close like a fish for a few moments before I can find my voice. “I-I-I don’t know—”

Gavin cuts me off. “You know my room number. I’ll see you there at eight.” He walks off, leaving me speechless.

He’s not even out the door well before Mindy comes scurrying over, nearly tripping and falling flat on her face in the process.

“Did I hear Gavin invite you to his room tonight?” she asks breathlessly, her eyes wide.

*Why Mindy, you eavesdropping bitch!*

I cross my arms over my chest, scowling at her. “You were spying on us,” I accuse.

“What? No I wasn’t,” Mindy protests. She pauses and then adds, “I couldn’t help but hear. You were talking so loud!”

I growl, “Get the fuck out of here!”

Mindy tries to keep a straight face. “You were.”

I shake my head. “You’re hopeless.”

Mindy laughs. “You should know that by now.” She stops to stare at me. “But you are going, right?”

## CHAPTER 8

GAVIN

“*W*hat is it about your past that keeps coming between us?” I ask flatly, looking Leslie in the eyes. “Every time we start to get close, something gets in the way.”

“CUT!” the director, Jim, yells, and I lean away from Leslie, holding back a groan of frustration. This is the tenth take on this mini-scene, and I’m getting pissed.

Jim is too. “What the fuck was that, Gavin?” he snarls, moving in front of the cameras as he stomps over. We’re shooting in a borrowed house on the outskirts of town and I’m completely boning it. Two days in a row, I’ve been fucking up. “You delivered your lines with the emotion of a goddamned robot!”

*I’d be able to deliver if I didn’t have you shouting CUT! all the fucking time.* I bite back the words that will earn me an even bigger headache. Instead, I scowl at him. “I’m trying my best, Jim. Do have any useful advice for me rather than blowing up every other take?”

“Yeah. I’d like you to say the lines like you actually cared about Leslie, and not like some high school kid doing *Romeo & Juliet*. That’d be a good place to fucking start!” Jim snaps.

He’s right, of course. I’m delivering my lines with the emotion of a cardboard box. But I can’t help it. When I look at Leslie, there’s no

connection. She's pretty, but I just can't bring myself to say my words with the conviction the script demands.

Jim looks like he wants to continue his rant, but he stops and takes a deep breath, waving his hands at the crew. "Okay, okay, everyone . . . take ten." He turns to me and shakes his head, sighing. "I'm sorry for losing my temper, Gavin. I just didn't expect for us to still be stuck on this scene several hours later. Go get yourself a drink or something, get your head right, and then we can continue."

Giving Leslie an apology, I walk off the set, heading into the catering area and grabbing a bottle of Perrier. I down half of it in one swig, resisting the urge to throw the rest of it across the yard as I make my way to my trailer.

*I fucking suck. Reading my lines shouldn't be this hard.*

I know exactly what the problem is—Brianna. *I've been waiting long enough. It's going to end tonight.*

Seeing her this morning made things worse. My pulse speeds up as I remember walking in on her scrubbing the floors on her hands and knees, her ass sticking out behind her seductively. She's gotten under my skin like no girl has done in years. Without even trying. And now, I'm going to make things worse by having her in my bed.

I sit down in the chair, relaxing and undoing my belt and fly to relieve the pressure on my balls from the tight jeans they're having me wear when the door flies open.

"You just keep getting worse," Miranda says, storming into the room like a tornado, dressed in her red jumpsuit. Scowling, she stops right in front of me, slapping her hand down on the granite countertop and leaning on it. "I don't exactly expect Leonardo DiCaprio from you, but could you at least *try*? Or are you just hungover from drinking too much?"

"You know I don't drink like that," I growl, opening my eyes and leaving my fly open. "I'm just having a rough afternoon."

"It seems to be becoming a habit," Miranda says, jabbing a long, manicured fingernail at me. "Jim just told me that the shooting is behind schedule!"

I know I pay her to do this, but I'm fed up with her badgering. "I'm doing my best, Miranda. Maybe you should be her love interest if you think you could do better. They can start calling this shit Rug Munch Wars."

I shouldn't have said that. But shit, I'm not making myself look like a fool on purpose here. I *am* trying.

Miranda's lip quivers and I can see she wants to say more, but she also can see the look on my face. This isn't funny Gavin, or the Gavin who likes to flirt, or the Gavin who can get grumpy. She sees that I'm serious. Instead, she just shakes her head. "Well, try to get it together and nail your next scenes."

"I'll do that!" I yell after her, leaning back and letting my nuts relax again. I gotta talk to the wardrobe guys. This country boy wearing tight jeans stuff has to go. My character's supposed to be an auto mechanic. Maybe they can get me a set of dirty coveralls.

I sigh, looking at the ceiling. *Brianna. Just a few hours, and you'll be mine. And it can't come fast enough.*

I chuckle at the double meaning then frown as another thought goes through my head. She looked so innocent, and inside, I feel bad about maybe taking that innocence.

Just fucking her to clear my head would be like spray painting the Mona Lisa.

But I'm Gavin Adams, and there's no way I could be thinking of . . .

It's just a fling, something to get my head right.

Isn't it?

## CHAPTER 9

BRIANNA

*O*h, my God. I hardly recognize myself.

I gaze at my reflection in the mirror as I run my hands over the sleek red dress, turning myself to the side to see how it hugs my curves. The dress seems to bring out the best in my figure and I wouldn't have worn it had Mindy not talked me into it. Or talked me into going up to Gavin's room tonight.

*I still can't believe I'm doing this.*

Gavin invited me to his room as if he knew I would just come running to him because he's a celebrity.

It annoys me.

I'm not easy. I don't do hookups. And I don't do one-night stands.

So why did I let Mindy talk me into this again?

Deep down, I know why, even if I don't want to admit it. Since seeing him, I've felt this pull to him, and the size of his dick is just part of the issues at hand. The way he looks at me, even some subtle undertone to his voice pulls at me, and I can't get him off my mind.

One way or another, yes or no, I have to know.

The door to the break room opens and in strolls Mindy, her eyes widening in shock when she sees me. "Holy shit, baby got back! I do damn good

work!”

“More like baby got fat,” I mutter as I rub my hands over my hips and ass. I’ve been here for nearly thirty minutes, trying to work up the nerve to wear this thing. I’ve even added a gold necklace, sparkling fake diamond earrings, and a bracelet that Mindy brought me along with the dress for good measure. I’m nervous that it might be a bit too much, though. She had gotten it for me on break, gleefully getting my ‘supplies’ while I did the rest of my work. I hope she didn’t go buy the dress. There’s no way I could fit her clothes. I have to admit, though—she outdid herself, but I feel like I’m playing dress-up. I’m just not used to dressing like this. “You think I’ve overdone it?”

“Overdone what?” Mindy asks, coming closer to inspect my curves. She’s still dressed in heels, white shirt, black apron and skirt, and she looks unusually fresh-faced for this time of day. She’s loving this. “You look smokin’, girl!”

I roll my eyes. “Please. This makes my ass look huge! I barely fit this!” I complain.

Mindy places her hands on her hips and gives me *the look* while saying, “Are you serious? Big is in! He’s gonna love it.”

I huff out a laugh, feeling butterflies in my stomach. “Yeah, love it right up until it starts jiggling like Jell-O.”

“Just look at Kim Kardashian and what it’s done for her,” Mindy points out.

I groan. “Oh, Jesus, and that’s supposed to make me feel better about myself?”

Mindy laughs, slapping me on the arm. “Oh, shut up. You know what I mean.”

“It’s the truth,” I say.

Mindy waves away my anxiety. “Well, you need to stop worrying. If I were a guy, I’d bone you.”

I laugh incredulously. Mindy seriously has no limits. “Will you stop?”



She chuckles evilly. “Seriously. I would.” She shakes her head. “You look hot as hell, Bri.”

I want to deny her compliment, but I have to admit I look better than I have in a long time. I don’t normally get this made up, just a little for work. I don’t have the time or the reason to.

The sound of footsteps in the hallway pulls my eyes away from the mirror and my stomach tightens with panic. Nobody should be down here. The evening shift went on at least an hour ago, and the afternoon shift’s all gone home.

Mindy pokes her head out, and then she looks back at me with wide eyes. “Shit! It’s Vandenburg! Hide!”

“Where?” I ask, panicking. I really don’t want to explain that I’m about to go up to a guest’s room all dolled up, even if it is none of his damn business. I wouldn’t even have time to catch my breath before I’d get my pink slip.

Thinking quickly, Mindy rushes over and opens the broom closet, motioning for me to jump in.

I arch an eyebrow, knowing it’s dusty as hell in there, along with a few slimy surprises. And knowing the stuff I’ve seen swept up off the floors, I’m not anxious to get in there with this dress.

“Get your badonkadonk ass in there!” she growls, grabbing me by the arm, shoving me inside, and closing the door. It doesn’t close all the way, leaving a small crack I can peek through.

A moment later, the break room door opens and I hear Vandenburg’s voice. “What are you still doing here, Miss Parker? You should’ve been home by now.”

“Forgot my phone here in the break room. Came back to pick it up,” Mindy lies, patting her pocket. Through the crack in the door, I can see her trying very hard to maintain her neutral expression. “Luckily, it was still here!” she adds for good measure.

“Yeah, sure. I’d better not find out you were milking overtime like your lazy friend Brianna,” Vandenburg grumbles. “If either of you think that your student status means I’ll continue to tolerate your attitudes or performance, you’re sorely mistaken.”

I can see the frustration play across Mindy’s face. “Mr. Vandenburg, Brianna is a good worker—”

He cuts her off, making me clench my teeth. He’s such an officious prick. “Miss Sayles is holding onto her position purely by my goodwill. If you don’t want to join her on the unemployment line soon, I suggest you stop talking and go home.”

He turns and leaves, and a moment later, Mindy opens the door to the closet, her eyes sparkling in anger. “Can you believe that son of a hoe?”

“Whatever,” I reply, touched that she tried to defend me but not wanting to get into a bitchfest about our jerk of a boss. If I started in about Vandenburg and all his stupid bullshit, I’d be here all night. And right now, I have other things to worry about. “Mindy, I don’t—”

I’m interrupted by a beep from my cell, and I glance at the clock. *Shit*. “It’s eight o’clock.”

Mindy makes a face, gesturing toward the doorway. She seems almost as anxious as I am, practically trembling with excitement. “Then why aren’t you hauling ass for the elevator?”

*Because I’m not sure I want to do this.*

Anxiety twists my stomach. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

Mindy plants her hands firmly on my shoulders and starts pulling me toward the door. “Oh no, missy. You’re not pulling this wishy-washy mess with me.”

“Hey!” I protest. “I didn’t even get to make sure that my breath smelled good!”

“It smells like roses!” Mindy says with a laugh before growing serious. “Seriously, just go. You need this, and who knows what might happen?”

You're selling yourself short if you don't learn to have fun every now and then. Live a little."

Before I can offer more protests, she shoves me out the door with an enigmatic smile, and I make my way slowly to the employee elevator. Inside, I push the button for the sixth floor, my heart pounding so hard I feel it in my neck.

I try to combat my anxiety by holding onto Mindy's words of encouragement. *Everything is going to be okay*, I tell myself. *Mindy thought I looked good. There's no reason to worry.*

It does little to help.

*Ding.*

I step out on the top floor, feeling dizzy with anxiety. I almost stop and turn around, but I eventually make it to Gavin's door.

My breathing ragged, I raise my hand to knock and then freeze, looking down at my dress.

*Jesus, look at me. Gavin's going to think I'm literally here just to sleep with him.*

But aren't I? I mean, I might as well have written *Fuck me, Gavin* on my panties, I'm so dolled up. What sort of schoolgirl fantasy am I having to even think that Gavin could want me for more than a hard *schtupping* and that I'm here for the same reason.

Is this the sort of person I want to be?

"I can't do this," I mutter, feeling weak in the knees as my self-confidence plunges to near-zero.

I begin to turn away, but before I can take a step, the door to Gavin's suite swings open.

*Fuck me.*

My breath stills in my lungs at the sight of him. Hair slicked and parted to the side, he's got on black pants and a white dress shirt that's unbuttoned

halfway down, his normal attire, it seems. I can see the smooth, hard skin of his chest and a hint of his rock-hard abs.

Desire courses through my stomach as the smell of his masculine cologne hits my nose and he grins at me. A cocky grin that says, *I knew you were coming*. I should slap him, tell him that he's an arrogant prick and I've changed my mind.

I should, but I don't.

I can't.

Still grinning, Gavin holds out a hand to me and says in a deep voice that makes me want to drop to my knees, "I've been expecting you."

## CHAPTER 10

GAVIN

I'm having a hard time keeping myself under control as Brianna walks into the room ahead of me, her hips swaying with each seductive step. My eyes on her ass, my dick hardens in my pants to the point of being strangled as it screams to be let out. *Fuck*. I don't even think she knows what she does to me.

I bite my lower lip, lust gripping my loins.

Those legs.

That ass.

"Sorry about my outfit," Brianna says softly, pulling my gaze away from her voluptuous body. "I didn't know if you'd like it or not."

If I didn't know better, I'd swear she's lying. She has to know how much she turns me on in that thing. But her voice sounds sincere, and I remind myself Brianna's innocence is one of the things I love.

"I think I like it just as much as your maid uniform, and about a thousand times better than the jumpsuit," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

Brianna blushes fiercely, causing my cock to strain against my pants even more. I swear it's going to bust out if this keeps up. "Thank you," she says sweetly. "Mindy is the one who forced me to wear it, actually."

*Thank you, Mindy.*

I lead her over to the white couch in the living area of the suite, sensing her nervousness that only serves to enhance my desire. She seems so sweet. So *innocent* in her mannerisms. But dressed up in that sexy red dress . . . there's nothing innocent about what it makes me want to do to her.

I struggle to put a lid on my desire as I help her settle onto the couch and she looks around the room, her lips parting in surprise.

"Wow," she breathes. She takes in the candles that I've lit around the room and the other little touches I've done, like the smooth classical music I have playing in the background. Nothing loud, just enough to ease the mood. "I've cleaned this room a hundred times. I don't think I've ever imagined it like this. Thank you."

"You're welcome," I tell her, grinning, pleased by her reaction. I've taken great pains to set things up perfectly, giving us a breathtaking view of the surrounding area.

"Wine?" I ask, gesturing to the two glasses and the red wine bottle I've set out, along with the thick white candles. "It's supposed to be the best in town."

At my offer, she bites her lower lip, her eyes wide and dark. I know what she's thinking. That she shouldn't be here. That I'm just some player who's going to fuck her raw and then leave. But it doesn't have to be that way. We both can have a good time, even if it's only for one night.

*But what if it's not?* A voice in my head asks.

For some reason, having Brianna for one night doesn't seem like it's going to be enough. Though it should. I'm only here for a week and then I'm gone. She knows that, and you can't have a meaningful relationship in that amount of time.

I push my troubled thoughts away, deciding the best thing I can do right now is make her comfortable.

"Come on," I urge. "Have a glass. You've earned it. You work hard and need to relax."

She nervously fidgets with her fingers for a moment before letting out a soft sigh. “Okay,” she breathes. “You’re right. I do deserve some relaxation with all the crap I have to put up with.”

*You’d deserve it just for how gorgeous you are.*

I grin at her. “I promise, you’ll enjoy this.”

I pour the wine, the dark red nearly the same tone as her dress as it gurgles into the glasses before I pass it to her, raising a toast. “To relaxation and less *crap* to deal with.”

She smiles, and I feel my desire and the troubling little other thing in my head both react to it. “To less crap.”

We clink glasses, and I take a sip, savoring the rich tones and dark flavors. I’m going to have to get a few bottles of this for home. It’s pretty damn good. But that’s probably because of whom I’m sharing it with. Brianna looks enraptured as she sips her wine before sighing deeply. “Thank you. I didn’t know if I would have the time to make it up here, so I’m glad I came now.”

The two candles give her face a warm glow as she takes a sip, and I’m once again impressed with how incredibly beautiful she is.

“I’m glad you found the time too,” I tell her with an easy smile, sitting next to her but giving her enough space where she doesn’t feel crowded. I could tell she liked it when I pushed up on her before, but this is different. The couch is just right. There’s enough space that we could touch, but we don’t have to.

“And your dress . . . you’re truly stunning,” I add. I love that she made the effort to dress up for me. It shows that she cares about what I think, if nothing else.

A blush shading her cheeks, Brianna sets her glass down, fiddling with the bracelet on her wrist. “Are you just playing with me?”

I shake my head. “No, ma’am.” *My cock most certainly doesn’t think so.* “You’re gorgeous.”

She drops her head to hide her furious blushing, her eyelashes fluttering. Judging by her reaction, she obviously isn't aware of how gorgeous she is, which is a shame.

*But when I'm done with her tonight, she's going to know that she's beautiful in every way.*

"Thank you." She raises her eyes to gaze at me. "You look handsome, too."

I flash her a boyish grin. "I try."

An awkward silence settles over our conversation, as if she's embarrassed and can't think of anything to say until she asks, "So . . . um, how is the movie coming along?"

She won't think so, but I'm pleased by her question. A lot of women, after the glow of my celebrity fades away, only want to talk about how soon I'll fuck them and how much money I have in my bank account. I barely know her, but I just *know* Brianna isn't like that. She's quality. I search for the words. "It's a learning experience. I feel like I'm all over the place, forgetting my lines here and there."

*Because of you*, I want to say, but that's pushing it too fast. She's not relaxed yet.

Her eyes go wide at my admission. I don't think she expected me to be that honest. After all, she thinks I'm a cocky prick who thinks he's the best. My reputation on the internet certainly says I am. "Really?"

I nod, shrugging. "I've been having problems connecting to my character since I first set foot on the set. It's harder to pretend than it is to focus on the reality of some linebacker trying to tear my head off." I chuckle. "It's crazy, because when I first heard I'd be in the movie, I was like, I can do this shit. It's easy. But nope. First day, I nearly kicked a dude's teeth in."

Brianna's pouty lips part in horror. "Seriously?"

I nod, huffing out another laugh. "Yeah. Chipped his tooth. He's probably somewhere right now sticking needles into my balls with his voodoo doll."



Brianna lets out a laugh, a sweet sound that reminds me of honey. “That’s terrible!”

I nod. “Yeah, it was. I almost gave my agent a stroke when it happened.”

Brianna’s smile slowly fades after a short pause. “You have a co-star, though, right? A woman?”

I hesitate for a moment, sensing her nervousness. “Yeah, I do. Her name’s Leslie Hart. The studio wanted a blonde.”

“Is she hot?” Brianna asks, then rolls her eyes a half-second later and snorts. “Stupid me, of course she is.”

*She doesn’t even come close to you, darling.*

Brianna has no idea how easily I’ve been replacing Leslie’s face with hers during the lines I’ve actually been able to pull off. “She’s not my type,” I say to put her at ease while giving her a direct, intense look.

*You are.*

Brianna ducks her head to hide her embarrassment. But when she looks back up, she’s chewing her lip thoughtfully. “Will there be love scenes?” she asks.

I freeze, taken off guard. Is my Brianna jealous? I’m not totally sure, but I think Miranda said there would be at least one. At the time I accepted the script, I didn’t give a fuck. I didn’t care one way or another.

“I haven’t read that far in the script,” I say. “But I don’t think it will be anything that’d push the movie too far. Someone said they’re aiming for PG-13 with this.”

The corner of Brianna’s lips draw down and I know she’s disappointed. I don’t want her to feel that way, so I decide to change the subject.

“So, how was your day?” I ask smoothly, as if she never asked the question. “Vandenburgh finally cut you some slack after I stepped in for you?”

Bri seems to relax. Maybe just talking about the daily grind is reassuring to her. “He didn’t bother me much. But the rest of my day was awful. I had a

guest walk in on me cleaning a room and claimed that he had a DND sign on the door when he didn't. He yelled at me to get out . . . kind of put a damper on my mood."

Anger clenches my stomach. I'm pissed. No one yells at my Bunny. "What a douche."

Brianna nods, scowling. "Just another irate asshole. He's not the first and he won't be the last."

I tightly clench my wine glass. "You catch his name?"

Brianna screws up her pretty face for a moment. "Lance something. I think he's part of your movie crew."

Lance. Funny how we were just talking about the shithead.

*Okay, now I don't feel so bad about kicking you in the mouth.*

I make a mental note to have a word with him and maybe reinforce it a little. "I'll check later and see if he's part of the crew," I assure her.

Brianna shakes her head vigorously. "Don't do that. It's okay. Worse things have happened, trust me."

I set my jaw, letting it drop for now. I pause, gesturing across the room to the small dinner table, which is set with candles, two plates, and covers to keep the contents warm. "Shall we?"

Brianna nods softly as I get up and help her out of her seat. I lead her over to the table, holding the chair out for her. When she's seated, I refill her wine glass before revealing the lamb chops. "A little coffee shop manager happened to mention you like these."

Brianna tries to scowl, but then she chuckles softly, shaking her head. "I swear, that girl..."

"If it helps, she didn't volunteer it. I asked," I tell her as I sit down.

We start eating, and while the lamb isn't Michelin Star quality, I've had a lot worse. "So tell me more about yourself," I ask her. "Where do you live? What do you like to do when you're not here at the hotel?"

Brianna chews slowly, thinking about how she wants to answer, and I can see she's got something she wants to hide. It's probably because she doesn't have much, but I don't care about any of that. "I've got an apartment close to the university," she finally says. "It's convenient, I guess. As for free time, I don't really have a lot of it. I'm either working here or in school. In the time I do have free, I'm either with Mindy or just trying to rest. You know, normal boring things."

"Boring?" I ask wistfully. "With all the paparazzi I have to deal with, I'd love boring every once in a while. It would be nice, just for once, to be able to go somewhere without someone bringing up that damn video."

"About that . . ." she says slowly. "How does it feel to know that everyone . . ." She pauses, struggling to find the words.

"Has seen my junk?" I finish for her.

She blushes, but she doesn't hide her face. "Yeah," she says.

I shrug. "I admit, it did bother me at first. But then I just said the hell with it. I have nothing to be ashamed of. I still hate that's all people talk about, though."

"Nothing at all," Brianna mutters under her breath, but I hear it anyway.

I bring the wine glass to my lips, hiding my smile and pretending like I didn't notice.

She asks a moment later, "I've been wondering. How long will you be in town? I think people will miss it when production shuts down."

"Just the rest of the week, maybe a day or two more if they need reshoots," I tell her. The disappointment that reflects in her eyes stings, though I don't know why. We both know I'm here for a short time and it's not like we really know each other. "I have to report to offseason workouts. It's part of my contract. If I don't show up to at least eighty percent of them, I get docked a million dollars."

I don't usually tell strangers about my financial details, but I feel at ease with Brianna.

She nods in understanding, and part of me starts doing the math on just how many days I could skip to have a few more boring days in this town, when she starts blushing furiously.

“What is it?”

“I’ve been thinking . . .” she says, her voice trailing off as she bites her lower lip. Her eyes are sparkling with a burning need that makes me want to groan and causes blood to rush into my cock.

I gesture at her, feeling like this is finally going somewhere. “Go on.”

“It must be so awful!” she says quickly.

I arch an eyebrow. “What is?”

She gestures at me. “You know, being known for . . .” I think it’s cute that she can’t come right out and say it.

“For the size of my dick?” I ask. I have to hold back a grin. She can barely keep her mind off it, even as she’s trying to be a good girl.

She nods, her face as red as her dress. “Sorry for bringing it up again. I just couldn’t . . .”

*Help yourself.*

It’s hard to hide my grin as I shake my head. It’s refreshing that she’s worried about how I feel rather than assume it’s all fun and games being *Anaconda Adams*. It lets me know she’s empathetic, which has always been an absent trait in the girls I’ve met.

I finish my bite, then set my fork down, my voice sounding surprisingly harsher than I’d like. “It’s annoying as fuck. No one cares about my talent. Just about my looks and who I’m fucking and which side my dick is hanging in my pants. I’ve gotten used to it by now, but I still would like to be taken seriously and treated like a man, not some hypersexual manwhore that the media makes me out to be. They tend to exaggerate.”

Her blush fades as she studies me, and there’s a hint of a sadness in her eyes. “Sympathy must be difficult,” she surmises softly. “Everyone must think you’ve got it all.”

I nod. She's hit the nail right on the fucking head. "It was at first, but now I've adjusted. I have my own reasons for doing this film, but Miranda thinks doing a movie will get people's mind off it. I'm not so sure."

"So how long have you known Miranda?" Brianna asks. "You seem close."

I shrug. "Few years. She's been a help, but don't doubt it—she's in it for the money."

Silence falls over the table and Brianna becomes pensive. I let her get lost in thought, my eyes never leaving her pretty face. I could learn to like this, having dinner and spending the rest of the time here with Brianna.

She looks at me out of her reverie, her eyes inquisitive. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"Is this all a game to you?" Brianna asks.

Her question makes me pause. I would be lying if I said there isn't a part of me that wants to take her just because I've had to work for it, to prove my dominance over her. But then there's the other little voice that's been bugging me, saying that she's different. And I want to find out more.

Finally, I sit back in my seat and reply, "I'm not gonna lie. I'm a bastard with a huge ego who doesn't like being denied anything." I pause, shaking my head. "But there's something about you."

She's almost breathless, her skin paling as she gazes at me, hanging onto my every word. "Like what?"

"I can't explain it . . . but I can tell you that you make me feel like I'm more than just a big dick and a bank account."

Brianna bites her lip again and fingers her butter knife. Her nail seems to run up and down the length of it, and when she speaks again, her voice is so soft that I barely hear it. "I have to admit." She flushes deeply. "I've spent the past few nights wondering what something like that would feel like."

At her words, my cock grows so hard I nearly wince. Seeing her sitting there, so vulnerable, her defenses lowering, turns me on more than I thought

possible. I clench my fists at my sides as my cock stretches the material of my dress pants to the limit.

“It’s been said that it’s the best damn thing in the world,” I reply.

Her breathing is ragged, and I’m surprised she’s actually able to come back at me. “Is that by the same *media* that you say exaggerates?”

I grin. She’s saucy when she wants to be. “Maybe. Only one way to find out. But some girls . . . just can’t handle it.”

She bites her lip again, her face scrunching in thought, her chest heaving. “I think I’m ready,” she breathes suddenly.

“For what?” I ask. Though I know where this is going, I still want to hear it from those sweet lips of hers. It’ll make it all the better.

She folds her hands in front of her on the table and looks me in the eye with more confidence than I thought she was capable of.

I nearly groan at her direct, challenging gaze, turned on by the hunger she’s now displaying.

But her next words send me over the edge.

“For you to fuck me.”

## CHAPTER 11

BRIANNA

*What the hell did I just do?*

As soon as the words escape my lips, I suck in a sharp breath, my mind racing with panic, my heart pounding like a jackhammer. I didn't mean to say that. It was like my lips moved of their own volition and I had absolutely no control.

I'm frozen in my seat, unable to move. Where the hell did that confidence come from? It's like I channeled my inner Mindy. Gavin has melted me into a puddle on the floor every time I've been in his presence. I've sealed my fate with my words. And now it's time for reckoning.

He's out of his chair and over to my side in an instant, pulling me in for a kiss. His lips smash against mine, demanding and unrelenting. I moan into his mouth as he pulls me up out of my seat, wrapping me in a fierce embrace. My knees go weak as I melt into his arms, his tongue searching around in my mouth.

Below, his cock presses against my stomach, throbbing and pulsating as his hands move down to squeeze my ass, pressing me against his hard body. I kiss him back just as passionately, digging my nails into his back, rubbing my pussy up against the bulge in his pants.

I'm rewarded with a soft groan from Gavin, and he pulls away from our kiss, leaving me breathless, my chest heaving as I suck in ragged breaths.

“Gavin,” I gasp, my pussy clenching with uncontrollable need. “Please—” My words are torn away as he abruptly picks me up and carries me into the bedroom. He crosses the room in three quick strides, setting me down on the bed gently, his eyes gleaming with desire.

He climbs on next to me, his hands immediately going to my dress, sliding the zipper down and peeling it to the side, exposing my breasts. My nipples pebble as the cool air hits them, and he smiles down at me, his eyes burning with desire.

He lowers his head, covering my throat with passionate kisses before sucking on my right nipple, making me tilt my head back and moan. His hungry tongue sends electricity jolting through me, a soft cry escaping my lips when he bites down softly.

“Gavin!” I moan, running my hands up and down his muscular back.

“Mmm,” he groans, his breathing heavy with lust as he pulls away and rains kisses down my body. When he makes it to my hips, I lift up, and he eases off the rest of my dress and my panties, tossing them to the bedroom floor.

I groan, knowing what’s to come. I grip the bedding in preparation, needing it. *Wanting it.*

His eyes burning with intensity, Gavin locks his gaze with mine, sliding two fingers inside me, making me cry out and grab at his shoulders. “Fuck!”

He starts pumping his fingers in and out of me. Each thrust stretches me wider, sending waves of pleasure through my body. Bucking wildly, I claw at the bedding, overwhelmed by the intense sensations.

“You’re so wet for me,” he says, a thirst in his eyes.

“Fuck yeah!” I moan, my hips taking on a life of their own to meet his thrusts, the bed rocking softly back and forth.

Grinning, his thumb finds my clit and begins to rub in a firm circular motion. I cry out, my limbs blasted by shockwaves of pleasure, a fire igniting in my core. Several thrusts later, I’m forced to let go, my stomach curling as I’m brought closer to the edge.



“Yes,” Gavin hisses as he feels my pussy clenching tightly around his fingers, his eyes burning into my face.

His intense gaze sends me over the edge. I toss my head from side to side as his fingers curl inside me, driving me mad. “Gavin . . . I’m going . . .” my words split into a loud cry as a fiery explosion goes off inside my stomach, the room spinning around me like a merry-go-round.

“Not yet!” he commands, pulling me back from the edge. He lowers his head and his tongue replaces his thumb. My body shivers as he licks me.

Gavin is relentless, his mouth clamping down on my throbbing pussy while I’m rocked by wave after wave of pleasure. My back arches, my fingers grabbing the bedding as stars shoot across my vision.

“Oh, fuck!” I cry breathlessly as he pulls his fingers out and his tongue slithers inside me, stroking my pussy and slipping between my lips, nibbling and sucking me deeply. I lose all sense of time and my hips jerk and buck as Gavin holds me in place and devours me.

“Gavin . . .” I gasp when I can breathe again, lowering my back to the bed. I’m soaked in sweat, my body literally spasming from coming so hard.

My eyes are drawn to him as he slides off the bed, standing up to unbutton his shirt. Breathless, I watch as he pulls it off and tosses it to the side, exposing his ripped, chiseled torso. Then he drops his pants and my breath stills in my lungs as his enormous cock swings free.

It’s so big, thick and full. Fuck. I want to taste it.

I watch as he picks up his pants and pulls a small packet out of the pocket. He rips it open and pulls out a condom, slipping it on. He moves back over to the bed, his cock swaying with each step.

Unconsciously, I start to reach for it, wanting to stroke him, but Gavin waves my hand away.

“No,” he says gently, climbing back onto the bed. “I’m in control.”

I want to protest, my mouth watering with need. But I can’t refuse him.

“Okay,” I breathe.

He positions himself between my legs, his huge cock swaying with each movement. Anxiety twists my stomach and I tense. I've never had anything that big inside me before. And I don't know what it's going to feel like.

Gavin places a comforting hand on my thigh. "Relax," he tells me softly. "I'll be gentle." I hear what's unsaid. *At first.*

The unspoken words excite and frighten me all at once.

I nod gently at him, trying to relax against the bedding, my thighs trembling from anxiety and excitement.

He lines his cock up with my entrance and then slowly, he pushes in. I let out a soft whimper as he penetrates me, several inches of him dipping inside and spreading me wide.

Gavin pauses for a moment when he sees my face tighten. He must know what he's doing to me.

"It's okay," I say, still wanting more of him. "Keep going."

Reassured, he starts with tiny thrusts, each one going a fraction of an inch deeper than the last. I reach up and place my hands on his back, digging my nails in deep to bear the sensation.

It's almost unbearable, the desire and the intensity, but I let him go as far as he can go until . . .

Gavin groans as I squeeze my pussy around his entire shaft. *Balls deep.* "Fuck," he breathes. "You feel so fucking good." He gently seesaws his cock along the length of my canal for several moments, letting me adjust to his size.

I quiver in submission as he pins my knees to the bed and starts thrusting, long, hard, deep thrusts that pound into me like a sledgehammer, his flesh smacking up against mine.

*Smack. Smack. Smack.*

I dig my nails deep into Gavin's back, holding on for dear life as he pounds me with unrestrained power. Fire blazes within my core as my cries come out in ragged gasps, my body feeling like it's being swept away by a tidal

wave of ecstasy. I can hardly take it, overwhelmed by the incredible force plowing into me, screaming out as the headboard bounces against the wall in time to his thrusts.

“Oh, God!” I yell as his balls slap up against my ass.

“You’re about to meet him,” Gavin promises me, somehow speeding up. He lifts my hips off the bed, giving him total control. Our hips crash into each other over and over again as Gavin’s breath quickens and the burning in my core becomes unbearable.

*Smack.*

*Smack.*

*One. Two. Three.* I can take no more.

Faintly, I hear Gavin cry out as I scream, stars shooting across my vision as he throws his head back. He pulls out, ripping his condom off and firing streams of seed on my chest and stomach, moaning and groaning with each squirt.

When it’s over, I lie there breathless, my mind blown, my limbs still shuddering from my second intense orgasm. I don’t think I’ll ever be the same again.

With his breathing labored and covered in sweat, Gavin slides from the bed and grabs a towel, cleaning me up. Then he collapses next to me, drawing me into his arms.

I lie there in his grasp, recovering. A silence settles over the room, and for a time, the only sounds are our pounding heartbeats and deep breaths.

But I’m beginning to feel uneasy. The fact that he’s not saying anything is starting to make me self-conscious, right when I’d let go of all that.

He looks down at me, droplets of sweat running down his face, and smiles.

It’s all I needed. I let out a relieved sigh, resting my head on his chest. Nothing else matters right now.

## CHAPTER 12

GAVIN

*She's so fucking beautiful.*

Brianna's soft snores fill the room as I hold her in my arms, a soft breast pressed against my side and her head on my chest. I've been up since dawn, unable to sleep, transfixed by the thing of beauty beside me.

I run my hand along her arm, enjoying the feel of her soft flesh as a ray of sunlight illuminates her features. She looks so sweet. So *innocent*. Innocent and vulnerable in a way that makes me want to protect her. I inhale deeply, taking in her feminine scent, and almost groan at the need that flows through me.

It's not what I expected the morning after, even though I did have that lingering feeling this wouldn't be the end. Now, I want her even *more*.

*I need to get out of here, I tell myself. Clear my head so I can process. I'm sure I'll be fine in a few hours.*

I glance at the bedside clock and feel dismayed. I've got about an hour before I need to be on set.

I gently slide out of bed, carefully tucking a pillow under Bri's head. She lets out a soft sigh as I let go, clenching the bedding and mumbling something softly. I freeze, waiting for her eyes to pop open, but they don't.

Being as quiet as possible, I go about getting ready, taking a quick shower and shaving before getting dressed. My mind is on the previous night as I

fix my cufflinks, gazing at my reflection in the mirror.

I can still feel her nails digging into my back, her lips parted, moaning and crying out my name with need as I plowed into her body with an unrelenting force. She was coming so hard on my dick that I thought it was about to be crushed by the powerful clenches of her pussy. But it only made me come just as hard.

My cock hardens in my pants as I remember those powerful sensations. Every touch, every moment was electric for us both. I could see it in her eyes. It was perfect, the way her body reacted to me, taking me in, holding me. Caressing me. It was so intense that I wanted to try for round two, but I knew she wouldn't be able to handle it. Not after that onslaught.

When I'm done fixing my shirt, I wipe down my face and return to the bedroom.

I stand there for a moment, gazing at Brianna, watching her chest rise and fall with each breath. She's rolled onto her back, the blanket half-covering her stomach. Once again, I'm impressed by how beautiful she is under the morning sun. Like some angel crafted by divine hands.

She snorts once and I tense, but her peaceful snoring resumes and I relax.

If she hasn't woken up by now, she isn't going to. But that's a good thing. It makes it easier for me.

I walk over to the chair and gather my blazer and put it on with a smooth flourish. Then I make my way to the door, but I stop before I place my hand on the doorknob, turning back to gaze at her slumbering form.

I don't know why it's so fucking hard to just leave without waking her up and telling her where I'm going. I don't owe her anything. I'll be gone in a week. And there's no reason to pretend that this will be anything other than what it was. *A one-night stand*. That's all it will ever be. Two weeks from now, I'm going to be doing wind sprints and squats and downing protein shakes all day. By then, I'll just be a faded memory in her mind, although hopefully, a pleasurable one.

Besides, she deserves better than an asshole like me. She needs to find a good man, someone who'll be able to devote his life to her. Not a celebrity

who will disrupt her way of living and cause her to live out her life in the public eye. It would be cruel to subject her to that kind of scrutiny.

But when I think about her being with another man, anger forms inside me.

I'm surprised at the possessiveness I feel. At how much I care about not leaving her without telling her where I'm going. I've never felt this way with anyone.

*She's going to hate me when she wakes up*, I think as I gaze at the gentle rise and fall of her breasts, wanting nothing more than to go over and slide back into bed with her.

What she'll think of me shouldn't bother me. We both knew what we were getting into. We both knew that this wouldn't last.

Instinctively, I grab a pen off the desk and scribble a note on a piece of paper.

*Brianna,*

*I'm sorry I had to leave. You were sleeping so peacefully and I didn't want to disturb you. I'll be shooting late today. Things are behind schedule, so I don't know if I'll be able to see you today before you go home.*

*Last night was amazing. Let's get together again. This evening, meet me in the coffee shop around 7:30. Dress casual.*

*I'll be in touch.*

*-G*

I hold the paper in my hand when I'm done, debating on whether to bunch it up and throw it in the trash. There's a high chance this will make her hate me even more, assuming that she'd want to get together again.

But a part of me doesn't want things to end this way—her waking up to my phantom and hating my guts. Leaving the note at least lets her know that I'm open for more . . . if she's willing.

*I hope I don't regret this.*

Setting my jaw, I set the note down on the desk and walk out the door.



“CUT!” THE DIRECTOR YELLS. A BELL RINGS, AND I STEP BACK, BLINKING AS THE lights flood the room. I turn to see Jim grinning at me while flashing a thumbs-up. “Damn, you did good, Anaconda. That’s the first time this week that you delivered your lines like you meant them!”

In front of me, Leslie’s smiling, biting her lip and pressing her hand to her chest. She’s flushed a little. I can tell she was buying every word that was coming out of my mouth. “Wow, Gavin, I felt the passion in your words,” she says, breathless, her chest heaving. “It almost felt like you really cared for me.”

*But you mean nothing to me,* I think, shrugging. She stares at me as if expecting me to say something. But I don’t know what to say.

What am I supposed to say? The whole time she was looking at me, I didn’t see Leslie Hart, the beautiful model and actress, but an unknown brunette whom I’d left sleeping in my bed this morning.

“Thanks. I’m working on it,” I finally offer, hoping she’ll be satisfied with the simple response.

Jim claps his hands. “Good. We’re done for the day.”

I nod gratefully and head toward my trailer, ready to get my clothes off. As I pass Jim, he reaches out and grabs my arm. “Seriously, Gavin, that was good shit. I’m looking forward to tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?” I ask, and Jim gives me an incredulous look. “No, really. What’s tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s the love scene,” Jim says, grinning with excitement. “Don’t tell me you’re not looking forward to it. Hell, I’m looking forward to it with the way you pulled today’s scenes off.”

*Fuck.*

I hold in a groan as the image of Brianna's angelic face sleeping peacefully flashes before my eyes. I know I signed a contract when I agreed to do this movie, but there's no way I'm performing a fucking love scene with Leslie.

*My relationship with Brianna is just starting. I can't fuck it up already.*

Relationship? What relationship? I've only known her for a couple of days, and I'm already making business decisions based on this girl. I need to get my head back on straight.

"There's going to be a double for that though, right?" I ask, suddenly annoyed.

"No . . . no stunt double," Jim says, shaking his head while giving me a raised eyebrow. "Why?"

I clench my jaw, tight-lipped. A feeling of dread grips my stomach. After a moment, I clear my throat and declare firmly, "You're going to need to get a double."

Jim laughs at me like a fool until he realizes that I'm actually serious, and his grin slowly fades into an angry scowl. "Are you kidding me? You've slept with more women than I could dream of, and now you want a double to push up on Leslie and show your ass? Please tell me you're joking."

I turn when I hear the sound of footsteps. Drawn by our heated exchange, Leslie's wandered over, hurt reflecting in her eyes. "Did I do something wrong, Gavin?" she asks softly, her brow drawn into a frown. "Is that why this is a problem?"

I gently shake my head, trying to hold back the irritation I feel. "Of course not, Leslie. You're great. It's just . . ." My voice trails off as I get lost in thought. How can I possibly explain to them what's really going on? That after being with Brianna, I can't even think about touching another woman, let alone dry humping her like a dog in heat? Hell, the only reason the last scene came off so well was because I was seeing her face on Leslie's body the whole time. "I need a stunt double." I turn to Jim and repeat.

Fuck explaining anything. I don't owe either of them. It's none of their business, as far as I'm concerned.



“A stunt double?” Jim repeats, shaking his head again. “And just where are we going to get one of those on short notice?”

“I don’t know,” I say, feeling frustrated. “Make one of the other stunt actors or get one of the extras to do it.” I feel like an asshole. I mean, if I want a career in acting, I’m not going to always be able to rely on a double for this shit. But I’m not doing it right now.

Jim glares, looking like he wants to attack me with his bare hands. “Why? You signed a contract that stated it wasn’t a problem.”

“I just don’t think I’ll be able to give the passion that the scene needs!” I snap, not meaning to be so testy.

“What passion?” Jim growls, incredulous. “You don’t need passion to dry hump her for a few minutes! I mean look at you, for crying out loud. Give the female fans a few frames of that famous ass of yours, so at least someone gets something out of this godforsaken movie! Heaven knows, they’re not going to be getting much out of your acting ability.”

I clench my jaw, fighting back the anger surging through me. “Look,” I say through gritted teeth. “Find a double or find someone to replace me.”

I stalk off set to my trailer, slamming the door shut behind me. Miranda barges in a second later.

She gestures angrily, flicking a manicured fingernail at my face. “What the hell was that about?”

“He’s a prick!” I growl as I clench my fists. I’m proud of myself for maintaining control and not cursing Jim out. He was testing me with that last bit. “None of these people know shit about me.”

“Never mind that,” Miranda says, lowering her voice a little. “Whatever it is that’s making you act this way, it’s not worth it.”

*Oh, but she is.*

Miranda continues, “Keep a barrier between you if that will help you feel any better. They make special skin-colored thongs that she can wear.”

“It’s not about that,” I say, turning away. “I don’t care if they shove a giant tube sock on my dick. That’s not what this is about.”

Miranda tries to stare me down, scowling, but then softens after a moment. “I really don’t get you right now, Gavin Adams. Are you really not doing this because you don’t want people to see your ass? They’ve seen a lot more than that!”

My jaw clenches at the thought of that fucking video, and it takes extreme effort not to unleash on Miranda. “Look, just remember who you work for. Make sure there’s a double tomorrow.”

I can feel her eyes burning holes into my back, but I don’t care. Finally, she speaks, her voice both confused and angry. “You know, you’ve been acting strange ever since we got here. This isn’t like you at all.”

I want to let her have it. She needs to realize I’m the boss here. But she’s just doing her job. I hired her in the first place because she’d stand up to me. She’s just looking out for my best interest. And hers, of course.

Instead of going off on her, I turn and shake my head. “Just been something on my mind.”

She starts to come forward. “What—”

I cut her off, flatly saying, “It doesn’t matter. Just get my back on this.”

Miranda stares at me for a long moment before unleashing a sigh that I almost feel across the trailer. “Fine,” she agrees. “I’ll handle it. But you have got to get it together, Gavin. We can’t afford to fuck up on your first movie. If this goes badly, you can expect some major repercussions . . . for the both of us.”

*No shit. I fuck this up, I won’t be working in movies beyond doing cameos and maybe a run-in at WrestleMania.* I don’t say the words that are on my mind.

Instead, I watch Miranda walk over to the door and pause with her hand on the doorknob, turning back to study me with compassionate eyes.

“You’ve got charisma, Gavin. You’ve got talent. But it’s like football, you gotta be willing to go the extra yard. Let that sit and marinate.”

I nod. “I will.”

Miranda shakes her head, probably thinking I’m a lost cause, and swings the door open. “You have an interview in a few hours. Be prepared.” She walks out, closing the door behind her.

Outside, I hear her heels clicking across the pavement and then fading into the distance. I let out a groan a moment later, taking a seat at the table and placing my head in my hands.

I don't know why I’m letting this bother me so much. I’m so close to screwing up a great opportunity that could set me up for my life after football.

But all I can think about right now is about how I left Brianna all alone back in my room.

## CHAPTER 13

BRIANNA

My body aches and my thighs are two bags of vanilla pudding as I totter into the back of the coffee shop, feeling like I've been through the CrossFit Games. Mindy's behind the counter, whistling to herself as she preps everything for opening. Dressed in her usual work uniform, her hair looking shiny and glossy, she turns when she hears me approach.

"You look good this morning . . ." Mindy pauses, a devious grin spreading across her face. "Besides walking like you have a stick up your ass." She squints at me as if recognizing an old acquaintance. "Ol' grand daddy one ball, is that you? You've really improved your walk since I last saw you."

"You need to be killed for what you did," I growl, trying to maintain my scowl and not chuckle at her stupid joke. Mindy knows damn well why I'm walking funny.

She laughs at my empty threat and pours me a cup of coffee, passing it to me as she watches me make my way to the counter.

"Don't," I say dangerously, seeing the joke that forms on her lips.

Since waking up, everything from my knees to my chest aches. Even my toes hurt. Even though I loved every moment of last night with Gavin, my body totally hates me right now.

“It couldn’t have been that bad,” Mindy says with another giggle. “You can still walk at least. Well . . . kind of.”

“Bitch,” I hiss. I’ve only got a few minutes before I need to get my ass downstairs, grab my cart, and get to work, but I needed the caffeine more than I needed to make sure my bleach supply is good. I just pray that Vandenburg doesn’t see me and give me some shit. “This is half your fault, Mindy. I’d have never gone up there if you hadn’t made it sound like it would be the best time of my life!”

I really shouldn’t be blaming Mindy. In the end, it was my decision to go up there. But I’m pissed at myself for doing it. It ended up just like I thought it would—heartache. Even now, my blood boils thinking about waking up in an empty bed with Gavin nowhere to be found.

I knew and it expected it. Still, I can’t get over the fact that he couldn’t be bothered to rouse me before he left. All because I couldn’t resist his handsome face, gorgeous body, and enormous dick.

*Ugh.*

“Well it was, wasn’t it?” Mindy asks, seeing me lost in thought. I don’t readily have an answer. I’m feeling so many emotions right now.

Finally, I sip my coffee before ruefully smiling, trying to find the words.

“It was.” I swallow. I hate admitting it because I feel like shit now. But I’ve never experienced a night like that. And the worst part about it is . . . I’d do it all again tonight. “He shook me from my toes to my ears, but this morning, I woke up with him gone and the bed empty. All I had was the smell of him on the pillows and sheets and a twisted up blanket that at least covered my ass, if not my dignity.”

Mindy stops, her smile disappearing as she sees how distressed I am. “Fuck Vandenburg for a few minutes. The coffee shop can handle itself.”

She leads me to the back, where she pulls me in for a hug. “Talk to me, babe.”

I take a deep breath, wiping away a single tear that’s escaped my eye. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I went up there knowing this would be

all there was to it. It's just that . . . I feel cheap. And now that he's gotten what he wanted . . ." I shake my head.

Mindy lets out a soft sigh of empathy. "I'm so sorry, honey. I wouldn't have encouraged you to go up there if I knew you were going to end up feeling this way. I just wanted you to have a good time." She pauses, chewing on her lower lip in thought. "But I think you might be rushing to judgment, 'cause girl." She gives me a look, rolling her eyes to the ceiling. "I know a douchebag when I see one, and Gavin doesn't seem that bad at all. He seems down to earth for someone who has all that money and fame."

"That's probably part of his charm. I bet he's nice to all the girls," I growl, getting more pissed off as I think about it. I wasn't even that mad before I came in the coffee shop. But just talking about it is getting me worked up. "I guess it would have been nice to at least have gotten... something from him. I know he's got priorities, but maybe leaving me a text or a note or something would have made me feel better instead of waking up to an empty room."

Mindy gives me another hug, then she steps back, grinning mischievously. "I'm sorry if this seems insensitive right now, but I gotta know! How was it playing with the giant snake?"

I cross my arms, scowling. "Mindy!"

"Whaaa?" she asks, smirking. "Come on!"

"I just . . . can't with you," I say, shaking my head.

Mindy makes a face and sniffs. "You can't with me, but you can with that big ass monster dick? I see how it is."

I try to scowl, but I can't help but laugh. "Bitch! You're the one who wanted me to go swinging from it like Jane from Tarzan."

Mindy laughs, knowing she's getting through. "Bri, you know I'm just trying to cheer you up."

I let out a sigh. "I know. I've just never felt . . ."

*So sexy. So vulnerable. So moved but so . . . cheap.* I shake my head, trying to shake the feeling. “I just haven’t done this kind of thing before. I feel like a whore.”

“Girl, please,” Mindy says dismissively. “Don’t even start with that. You are both consenting adults. And I’m here to tell you, there’s nothing wrong with getting your freak on once in awhile.”

I laugh. “I know. It’s just that—”

“With all the hard work you put in dealing with Vandenburg, you deserve it,” Mindy cuts in.

I know what she’s saying. And I must’ve told myself the same thing a hundred times already.

Mindy continues, her voice laced with irritation, “And you know what? if Vandenburg actually got laid himself every once in a while, maybe he wouldn’t act like such an ass all the time.”

The mere mention of Vandenburg having sex makes my stomach lurch. “Next time, can you wait until after breakfast to bring up something like that?”

Mindy frowns and lifts her chin, her voice dropping into the same haughty tones Mr. Vandenburg likes to use. “Miss Sayles, I have spent the past year making you my slave because I’m mad my man pussy isn’t getting fucked. Last time I seen some action is when my finger slipped through the toilet paper.”

I try to fight it, but I can’t help it. I burst into gales of laughter, having to grab ahold of the counter to keep from falling over. Seeing me overcome, Mindy starts laughing too until we’re both holding onto each other, chortling like a pair of schoolgirls.

We’ve almost recovered from our giggling fit when Vandenburg walks into the coffee shop. Mindy goes still immediately, her mirth fleeing like a bank robber on the run. “Jesus, does he have a tracer on us or something?” she hisses angrily. “He always comes in at the wrong time.”

Wiping the tears of laughter from my eyes and putting on a solemn face, I have to agree. This is getting old.

Vandenburgh walks around the counter and into the back room. “Miss Sayles,” he says in almost an exact copy of Mindy’s imitation from moments before, “the coffee storage room doesn’t need your attention. I suggest you get off your backside and get to work.”

I resist the urge to tell him exactly what he can shove up his backside and nod respectfully. Beside me, Mindy tenses. I think she’s about to speak up for me, bless her heart. But she needn’t bother.

Vandenburgh turns his nasty scowl on her as if sensing her words before she can speak. “Isn’t there a coffee machine that needs cleaning?”

Mindy’s lip curls, and for a moment, I fear she’s going to go off the rails. But after several blinks, she slinks off. She stops once, behind Vandenburgh, flipping him off so that I see it. To hide my smile, I quickly scurry off, saying, “Have a nice afternoon, Mr. Vandenburgh.”

I leave the coffee shop and go about starting my shift.

As I go from room to room, floor to floor, dusting, cleaning, wiping, and vacuuming, my mind wanders to my future. If I can stay on track, and that’s a big if, I’ve got just under one year before I’m done with school and I can tell Vandenburgh exactly what I think of his wannabe British-accented ass. In some ways, it’s the only thing that keeps me coming in every shift, wanting to outlast him and then having the privilege of being able to tell him to kiss my ass just once.

When I get up to the penthouses, I see the suite that’s being used by the movie crew bustling with people coming in and out. And Leslie Hart still has the ‘do not disturb’ sign on her door. That leaves Gavin’s suite.

I go over and let myself in. A part of me is anxious when I step inside, but I relax when I see he isn’t there. I figured he’d be gone, but a part of me was worried that he’d show up out of the blue. With all the emotions churning inside me, I really don’t want to face him right now.

As I go about cleaning up the room, I have the sudden urge to snoop. I do my best to keep the impulse at bay, stripping the bed of the sweaty sheets—



sheets that held my sweat—and placing new ones on it. But by the time I'm done making the bed and vacuuming, I find myself unconsciously going over to his things.

I start looking through his wardrobe, but I stop myself.

*What the hell am I doing?*

It was a one-night stand. There's no reason for me to be looking through his things. I'm not his girlfriend. And even if I were, this isn't right.

I close the wardrobe and turn around, leaning against the closet and sucking in a deep breath. It's crazy how out of control I am after just one night. Maybe I should switch places with another maid so she can do this floor in my place. It'd probably be for the best if I didn't see Gavin for the rest of the time he's here.

But even thinking about not seeing him again makes me sick to my stomach.

I'm about to pack up and leave when my eyes fall on a single piece of paper on the desk near the TV console. I walk over and pick it up. There's a note scribbled on it. I frown, wondering how I hadn't seen it this morning before I left.

*Probably because I was pissed like hell,* I tell myself as I start reading.

*Brianna,*

*I'm sorry I had to leave. You were sleeping so peacefully and I didn't want to disturb you. I'll be shooting late today. Things are behind schedule, so I don't know if I'll be able to see you today before you go home.*

*Last night was amazing. Let's get together again. This evening, meet me in the coffee shop around 7:30. Dress casual.*

*I'll be in touch.*

*-G*

Underneath, he leaves his phone number.

I re-read it, then read it again. He wants to actually see me again. I shake my head as I stare at his words. I don't know what to feel about them. On one hand, I'm relieved that he wants to see me again. Me, a simple small-town girl. But on the other hand, I can't get over his tone that seems to say 'you're going whether you like it or not'.

I have the sudden urge to ball up the note and throw it in the trash. With all the emotions I'm feeling from just one night with this man, what's going to happen if we continue this and he just up and leaves in a week?

I suck in a deep breath, my skin pricking. I should just be done with Gavin Adams and his huge, throbbing, toe-curling . . . Jesus.

*There's plenty of need left, a devilish voice whispers to me. You've never felt anything like him before and will never feel anything like him again. You can't deny it.*

Shit. That evil fucking voice is right.

With my heart pounding furiously, I look around the desk and see the notepad and pen he used to write the note. With shaking hands, I pick up the pen and write my response.

*Seven thirty tonight. Jeans, t-shirt, and regular shoes. I'll see you downstairs.*

Damn me and my needs.

I'm going.

## CHAPTER 14

GAVIN

“*So how is preparing for a movie like getting ready for football?*” the reporter asks.

*“Uh, it’s not,” I mumble. “They both take prep work, but it’s not really the same.”*

*“Is there anything you can tell us about your character?” asks another reporter, a woman with blonde shoulder-length hair and an eager smirk. “Is he anything at all like you are in real life?”*

*I barely hear her words, my eyes unfocused.*

*“Mr. Adams?” the blonde woman says after several moments.*

Watching the video of the press conference with Miranda at my side, I swear I look like an idiot, albeit a good-looking one. Part of it I blame on all the flashing cameras, but the other . . . I just look plain stupid.

I turn the TV off in disgust, resisting the urge to throw the remote control across the room. “I look like a moron!” I growl, unable to believe how embarrassing I’d acted.

Miranda, who’s sitting across from me, looking sharp and crisp in her white business suit and heels, her hair pulled up into an elegant bun with dramatic makeup painted on her face, just shakes her head in pity.

She's probably wanting to kick my ass, but I'm already suffering as it is. The interview has spread like wildfire to several major news stations, even though it was filmed as a local piece. And I'm sure I'll be the butt of everyone's jokes come morning. I'll probably end up as water cooler talk among the production crew.

"I should've nailed it," I lament, "but I couldn't focus." And the sad thing is, I didn't even get asked about the video and I still couldn't get it together for more than a few moments.

*Good God, what the fuck is wrong with me?*

But deep down, I know exactly what's wrong.

I want *more*. More than one night. I want to be able to ask Brianna about her day. I want to be able to share boring ass meals with her in this podunk little town. I even want to know simple shit like what her favorite brand of shampoo is and if she has to use conditioner on a daily basis.

*Jesus, Gavin, did you seriously just think that?* A very real fear begins to creep up from the depths of my stomach along with a feeling of alarm. *I'm so fucked.*

Miranda waves her hands to get my attention. "Earth to Gavin."

My eyes refocus on her face and I clear my throat. "Yeah?"

She points a manicured fingernail at my head. "What was going on with you today? And why does it seem I have to keep asking you this same question lately?"

"I wasn't feeling the questions." I lie for about the tenth time. The lie is a lot easier to say than the truth. Miranda wouldn't understand anyway, especially if I told her Brianna and I have basically only shared one night.

But she's not buying it, an irritated scowl spreading across her face. "Are you serious? What's there to feel? Those had to be the easiest questions you've gotten in a long time."

Miranda stares at me expectantly, waiting for a response. But I have nothing to say. Quite frankly, I'm tired of my excuses. And I know she is too.

“Are you on drugs?” Miranda asks suddenly when I don’t answer. “Is there something I don’t know that you’re not telling me?” she adds.

I huff out a disbelieving laugh. “What?”

Miranda glares at me. “Don’t play stupid, Gavin, something’s going on. It’s like you’re on another planet this week. And don’t try to blame it on the nerves. You should be used to the spotlight by now.” She leans forward, giving me a direct look. “So what are you on?”

Irritation flares in my chest. “I’m not *on* anything,” I growl. “It disappoints me that you would even think that. You know I don’t mess with that shit. The league would be on my ass in a second if I did.”

“Well, something’s going on!” Miranda hisses. “Because what I saw today”—she shakes her head, at a loss for words— “I’ve *never* seen one of my clients behave this way. If it’s not drugs, I’m worried about your health.”

“I’m fine,” I answer tersely, fed up with this whole conversation. I could tell her what’s going on, but somehow, I know it will make things worse. Besides, I have a reputation I need to maintain, and admitting that I’m getting lovesick will make me look weak.

Miranda’s scowl morphs into a compassionate frown. “Can I arrange to have a psychologist stop in and give you a checkup?”

I shake my head. “Miranda, I—”

She speaks over me. “We all have tough times in our lives, Gavin. It was before you and I met professionally, but I went through a divorce when I was thirty-five. I had some tough times then, too. Talking to a psychologist really helped.”

The revelation from Miranda makes my anger dissipate like clouds on a wind gust and I relax in my seat. “I know you’re worried about me, Miranda,” I say gently but firmly. “But trust me, you don’t need to bring in a shrink. I’m going to get my shit together. Promise.”

For a moment, Miranda looks like she wants to keep pressing the issue. But then she rises to her feet. “I hope so, Gavin,” she says as she makes her way

over to the door. “I really do,” she adds before she walks out, “Because I’m not sure how much more of this I can take.”

When she’s gone, I look out the window, putting my head against the cool glass and hoping that I’ll stay true to my word.



I STARE DOWN AT THE NOTE IN THE PALM OF MY HAND. IT’S STRANGE. I’VE GOTTEN plenty of fan letters in the course of my playing career, and more than a few of them have been from women who’ve offered me everything from their hearts to their bodies to . . . well, damn near everything.

But this sweet little note, scribbled by a woman I barely even know, is more valuable to me than any of those.

I grin as I read Brianna’s neat handwriting several times.

*Seven thirty tonight. Jeans, t-shirts, and regular shoes. I’ll see you downstairs.*

*-B*

I fold the note and stuff it in my pocket, heading down to the elevators and making my way to the coffee shop. I recognize Mindy behind the counter as soon as I open the door. She must be pulling a double shift. “Hello.”

Mindy looks up and flashes me a smile, but my eyes are only looking for one thing.

I suck in a sharp breath when I see *her*. Seated at the end of the counter, she’s dressed casually like we agreed, only she’s wearing a sundress instead of jeans. But she could be wearing a potato sack and I’d still be smitten.

“Gavin.” Brianna greets me shyly. Her hair looks glossy and is curled at the ends, and she has a hint of light makeup on. Fuck, she’s so gorgeous. “It’s nice to see you.”

I flash her an easy smile. She looks so nervous sitting there, so vulnerable. “You look beautiful—” is all I get out before Mindy marches over and

shoves a bag into my hands.

“You owe me twenty dollars,” she declares, placing her hands on her hips.

“What’s this?” I ask, reaching into my pocket and handing her a hundred by habit. I notice I don’t get change, the little wiseass.

Mindy nods at the bag, her eyes sparkling. “It’s cinnamon rolls, sandwiches, and a little blanket in the bottom. Oh, and don’t forget your lattes. I heard about your little thing.” She clamps a hand over her mouth. “Whoops? I meant to say I heard about your *big* thing.”

Brianna rolls her eyes and snaps, “Mindy!”

Mindy laughs, drawing a chuckle from me. “I just wanted to make sure the two of you were prepared.”

Brianna rises to her feet and comes around to my side. “Thank you.”

“Okay!” Mindy says abruptly, suddenly shoving me and Brianna out the front door. “Y’all have fun now, ya hear?”

I chuckle as I walk Brianna outside the hotel, my hand splayed across her lower back. “She really is a trip,” I remark, enjoying the feel of her soft body. It feels good to touch her, to pretend that she’s mine. “But I’m surprised you haven’t strangled her by now.”

“She’s my best friend. What am I supposed to do?” she asks.

I laugh. “With a friend like her? Not a damn thing.”

Brianna sucks in a sharp breath when we reach my ride waiting for us at valet parking. “Wow,” she breathes when she sees the red Lotus. It’s not what I’m used to. The British styling is a bit too small for my frame, but it’s the best that Miranda could get. “This yours?”

“Just for the week,” I admit, walking over to open the door for her. She hesitates for a moment, her soft lips parted in awe, before sitting down into the seat.

Grinning, I shut the door, go around to the driver’s side, and get behind the wheel. Gripping the smooth leather, I toss her a wink while she’s checking

out the inside of the cabin.

“This is really nice,” she says softly. “I’ve never been inside something so sporty or . . . luxurious before.”

A part of me wants to promise her the world—luxury cars, expensive jewelry, and the best money can buy. She deserves it all. But when her eyes lock with mine, I’m nearly paralyzed by fear. Never have I been this out of control over my emotions. And it scares the shit out of me that I feel this way when I hardly know her.

Swallowing back a lump in my throat, I start the engine, not letting on to the inner turmoil roiling inside. “So where are we going?” I ask Brianna casually.

She looks at me like I’m crazy, and I grin.. “You said you were taking me to a park and you don’t know where we’re going?” she asks incredulously.

I shrug. “Nope. I just wanted to take you *somewhere*. You’re the one who’s lived here all your life. Tell me where we should go.” I grin and add, “Preferably, somewhere we’ll be alone.”

Brianna bites her lower lip, a light blush shading her cheeks. She’s probably thinking the same thing I am—secluded is private, and private means . . .

Finally, she looks at me through long eyelashes and smiles, snapping her fingers. “Oh, I know. Go to Bear Lake Park.”

“Okay, and where’s that?” I ask. I nod at the vehicle’s console. “This thing doesn’t have a GPS.”

Brianna laughs. “You mean to tell me that superstar Gavin Adams doesn’t know how to find his way around a little ol’ town like this?”

I snort. “I’m a football player, not a Rand McNally Atlas.” I chuckle. “I don’t even know my way out of a paper bag except at home. I spend most of my time being chauffeured around.”

Brianna chortles. “At least you’re honest.” She points off to the side. “But to answer your question, it’s on the other side of town. Turn left out of the lot, and I’ll get you there.”



I pull out of the parking lot, impressed by the smooth ride. At the first stop sign, I drop the top, letting the wind ruffle through our hair.

“After a long day, that feels great.” Brianna sighs with pleasure.

I grin at her. “I’m glad you like it.” I look around, noticing the shops outlined in the fading glow of the sun and the lack of traffic on the roads. “You know, this place isn’t too bad. It feels much less hectic here, unlike life in the city.”

“It definitely has appeal,” Brianna agrees softly, looking at me through lowered lashes.

“I never thought I’d say this,” I say as the light turns green and I continue up the street, “but I feel like I could learn to love a place like this.”

Brianna’s lips part in surprise, a wind gust flowing through the cabin and blowing her hair around her seat as she laughs. “I’m shocked to hear you say that.”

I shrug, turning left at a sign I see for Bear Lake Park. “Yeah, I didn’t care for it when I got here, but like you said. It’s got a certain charm.”

Brianna purses her lips for a moment before saying, “That’s good.”

“What is?” I ask curiously.

Brianna smiles. “That even someone like you can change your mind on a place like this.”

I go silent, lost in thought. Honestly, if someone would’ve told me before today that I’d be doing this, I’d have said they were out of their fucking minds.

But now . . .

“Over there.” She points. “That’s Shera’s Bakery,” Brianna says as I drive by a bright pink clapboard building.

“Who is Shera?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

Brianna replies, her eyes on the building as we pass, “She’s a nice old lady who loves to help people.” She shakes her head, pushing her hair out of her

eyes. “When I was eight, I crashed my bike and twisted my ankle near her shop. When Shera saw me sobbing in pain, she didn’t bat an eye. She brought me inside, gave me a donut, and called her son to escort me home because my bike was busted up from my fall.”

“That was nice of her,” I remark. Brianna nods. “Yeah. She’s just like that. She’d give you the clothes off her back if you asked her to.”

“I’d like to meet her one day,” I say without even thinking.

*Shit, Gavin, what are you doing?*

Brianna’s eyes widen with surprise.

*Can’t go back now.*

Brianna is touched, gently patting my leg. “She would love that! She’s never met a celebrity before.”

Before I can say anything, Brianna snaps her finger. She points as we come up to an intersection. “Turn right there.”

I turn down a road lined with beautiful trees and sunlight filtering through the branches. It’s beautiful, unlike any view you get in the city.

“There.” Brianna points as we come up on a small sign just behind a tiny parking area.

“Bear Lake Park?” I ask, rolling the car to a slow stop.

Brianna smiles, a dreamy expression coming over her face. “Yeah. We’re here.”

## CHAPTER 15

BRIANNA

The birds sing and the insects buzz as Gavin shuts off the engine of the sports car. Inside me, though, my engine is still running hot. I seem to be in overdrive anytime I'm in his presence.

"So, where should we eat?" Gavin asks. "After all, you know this park better than I do."

I'm not sure if he's meaning to do this, but it's powerful. My head is swirling in confusion after the fact that I just accepted a second date with him. But by giving me the choice of where we go on the date, I feel like I have more confidence, more *control* over what's happening. If I take him to one of the open spaces, there's no way we'll get into anything naughty.

But on the other hand . . . "There's a small clearing up ahead, along the trail," I say softly.

Gavin gets out of his side of the car and then helps me out. The low-slung sports car makes me have to stretch out my leg, and I notice the way he looks at my thighs as I get out of the seat, but I don't care. His wandering eyes make me feel hot. *Wanted*.

"Get the food," I order, "and I'll show you where to go."

Gavin chuckles at the audacity of my commanding tone, but his sexy smirk tells me that he'll play this game for a little while longer. "As you wish,

gorgeous,” he says in a deep voice, bowing his head.

A flush comes to my cheeks and my nipples tighten at his tone. Nothing has happened and my heart is already bouncing around in my chest.

Gavin comes around the car and holds his arm out to me in a gentlemanly fashion. I shake my head and reach out and take his hand. “Here, let me show you where,” I say softly.

Gavin looks surprised that I took his hand, but then he smiles and shakes his head. “You know, it’s funny. I can’t remember the last time I let a girl lead me anywhere.”

*How many girls have you been with?* I hate that it popped into my head, but I ignore it.

“Well, you won’t have trouble remembering after this, will you?” I ask.

Gavin arches a mysterious eyebrow and replies in a low voice, “That depends.”

I shiver at his words, a flush spreading across my cheeks.

Lowering my head to hide my embarrassment, I lead him through the park, turning at the spot where the trail leads away from the lake and deeper into the woods that surround the area. I’m grateful for the shade. It’s hot as hell, one of those days where the humidity makes you feel like you’re taking a shower even with your t-shirt on.

As we move through the trees, a cool breeze gusts through the area, kissing my skin and making me feel refreshed.

Finally, we reach the clearing I had in mind from the moment I decided to come here. It’s not very big, only about fifteen feet across, and it’s semi-famous in the town for its location as a make-out spot.

Gavin lets out a low whistle, surveying the area. “This looks like something out of a storybook.”

I can see what he means. The grass in this area is a brighter green and softer than the normal bluegrass that dominates the surrounding land. On one side

is a brook, a burbling little rivulet that adds a touch of coolness and pleasant background noise. “I’m glad you like it.”

Gavin spreads out the blanket in the shaded area and then looks around. “This place seems so peaceful and serene.”

“Yeah,” I say, sinking down onto the blanket and taking off my sandals. “I used to come up here all the time with Mindy to play hide and seek when we were little. This was one of our secret play areas. Later, I started jogging, and I found this a great place to relax after a jog around the lake since it’s always cool here. It’s too bad. When I started school and working at the hotel, all that stopped.”

“That sucks,” Gavin says, relaxing with his hands on his splayed-out knees. I feel a need growing in me as I see the bulge of his cock inside his black jeans. *Fuck*. Is he hard for me?

I tear my eyes away from the mouth-watering image. “Yeah, but thank God cleaning all those rooms and going up and down the floors keeps me from gaining too much weight.”

“I can see that,” Gavin says as he looks at me with appreciation, causing my skin to prickle. I nearly squirm under the heat of his gaze, a flush shading my cheeks. He might be that hard, but I’m burning up and wet too. “Whatever it is that you’re doing, keep doing it.”

“Thank you,” I say softly through lowered lashes, feeling more at ease. This feels different from before. Then, we both knew as soon as I stepped into the room that there was only one purpose for my being there—for him to fuck me senseless.

This time, Gavin is being a gentleman. And I’m not complaining. I love the idea of being courted. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever been treated this way before by a man. The last guys I dated were more or less local boys who would take me to the local theater and then try to take me to the back of their car or truck for some inelegant fumbling inside my shirt.

“So how was your day?” I ask, taking a bite of one of Mindy’s cinnamon rolls. I can’t help it. I have to close my eyes. It’s so damn good. I have to thank her for these.

“I actually did a pretty good job, for the most part. At least the director thought so.”

The good news makes me smile. “Really? That’s wonderful!” I gush. “So I guess being an actor is something you can do after all.”

For some reason, Gavin’s expression remains neutral at my praise. He doesn’t look happy, as if something is weighing on his mind. But before I can ask him what’s wrong, the look is gone, replaced by a wide smile that doesn’t seem altogether genuine.

“Yeah, I just need to keep it up,” Gavin agrees, his voice lacking conviction.

I reach out, concerned, placing my hand on his forearm. “Are you all right?”

Gavin grins at me, still looking a little artificial. “Yeah, why?”

“It’s just . . .” I stare at him. “You don’t seem too happy. Is everything okay?”

Gavin doesn’t reply right away, instead looking away. When he looks back at me, his grin has faded, but he looks more genuine too. “Just thinking about all the work I have left to do.”

His words pierce the little fantasy that we’ve been weaving around ourselves in the grove, and I start to feel ill. I *know* he won’t be here long, but I wish he could stay longer. I feel like I’m just getting to know him. “Gavin . . .”

“Was your day okay?” he asks, cutting me off with a smile. “I mean, you know . . .”

“It was fine,” I say, smoothing over the rough parts. “I only had to see Vandenburg once. That’s always a good day.”

Gavin grunts. “Once is more than enough for me. I can’t imagine working for him.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I grumble, then laugh. “But never mind him. You don’t need to listen to me bitch about my boss. I’m sure you’ve got a laundry list of your own complaints.”

Gavin chuckles and nods. "Yeah, guess so." He peers at me with interest. "So what are you planning to do with your degree once you graduate?"

I pick at my half-eaten cinnamon roll before setting it down. "I'm going to see what's out there. I still don't know if I want to stay local or go to a big city."

Gavin nods. "What do your parents say?"

I bite my lower lip, feeling nervous. "Honestly, I don't talk to them much. After they got divorced, they both left town. It was a nasty time, and there were a lot of hurt feelings and torn up relationships on both sides. Mom wanted me to come live in St. Louis, while Dad moved west and wanted me to follow him to Pueblo, Colorado. In the end, I decided to stay here. I was already in high school and I'd already been accepted to the local college. It caused a lot of bad blood all around. So we hardly see each other."

"I see," Gavin says, looking uncomfortable that he asked. "Sorry."

"Nothing you could have known," I say, waving it off. I really don't want to talk about them right now. I'm having a half-decent time, and I don't need to spoil the moment by bringing up my past and current heartaches. "So what about you?"

Gavin shakes his head. "Mine are about as supportive as they can be. But then again, I bought them both new BMWs for Christmas last year." He huffs out a chuckle. "They really can't complain about that."

I nod my head. "Yeah, that's gotta be gratifying for them. They must love having a son who's achieved so much."

Gavin snorts. "I haven't achieved anything in my mom's eyes. She wants grandbabies like yesterday. It's the only thing on her mind every time we talk. She wants to know right away whether I've found somebody to have children with. And when I say I haven't, she's disappointed."

Babies. Hmm. Until now, the thought was alien to me. Mainly because I hadn't met a man I wanted to settle down and start a family with.

*Maybe you could with him,* a voice whispers in the back my head.

*Get the fuck out of here, I tell the voice. That'll never happen.*

“And you don’t think you can give her what she wants?”

“I’m sure I’m capable,” Gavin says, grinning. “I just don’t expect it to happen as soon as she’d like.”

His answer disappoints me, although it shouldn't. If he'd have said, ‘have my babies, now!’ it would have been awkward as hell. Still, his answer bothers me in a way I can’t quite put my finger on.

“Thankfully, my parents don’t bother me about that. Yet.” I shake my head. “I really don’t think I could handle any more pressure. Between school and working for a man like Vandenburg, I’d go crazy and need to be put in a straitjacket if I had to take care of a baby too.”

Gavin nods, giving me a mysterious little smile as he says in agreement, “You definitely don’t need any more pressure.”

I grab my cinnamon roll and take the last delicious morsel into my mouth.

Suddenly, Gavin surprises me, leaning in until his lips are just a fraction of an inch from my ear. His breath tickles my skin, and his hot body is so close that I can’t help but react. “You don’t need any more pressure,” he growls throatily, “but what you definitely need is more pleasure.”

He’s so close, and his intense gaze is so hypnotic that it takes me a moment to register what he’s saying.

“What?” I breathe.

Gavin reaches up with his right hand and strokes my hair, sending shivers down my spine. I’ve always loved when a man plays with my hair. “You need more pleasure. Something to release all the pressure that’s inside you.”

My skin pricks and my nipples are hard in my light bra as I look into Gavin’s eyes, seeing him look at me with fiery desire. “Oh.”

He closes the rest of the distance between our bodies, and his lips are warm and thrilling. The first feather-like kiss quickly deepens, and he’s kissing my throat, sending waves of desire through my body. Burning fire builds in my chest, and I pull his head up, kissing him hard. His tongue explores my



mouth as his hands roam over my body, stroking and massaging every inch until I'm moaning against his tongue.

I raise my arms over my head, and Gavin pulls my dress up and off before kissing down my body. His tongue traces around my right nipple before he sucks, nibbling and biting the stiff nub until my eyes aren't able to focus. It feels so damn good.

"Gavin," I moan, running my hands through his thick hair. How can a man have me on the verge of coming with only his lips on my breast?

But it's not just his lips. It's the way his hands are stroking my thighs, cupping and massaging my ass and making my pussy clench with need.

Gavin starts kissing down my body, his tongue tracing over my belly button to reach my panties. I lift my hips and he slides them off, chuckling softly. "What?"

"Your panties. They're so innocent. So . . . boring." I blush, but Gavin stops me with a kiss right at the panty line. "Right now, the sexiest word in the world to me is *boring*."

He lowers his mouth, and I clench at the blanket as he slides his tongue over my pussy, stroking and making me gasp as he licks me all the way from bottom to top, quickly kissing my clit before lowering his tongue and starting again. His tongue is a devilish snake, squirming and stroking, working its way inside me and never stopping. Pleasure jolts through my body as he tastes me, sucking and nibbling on my lips until I'm gasping, barely able to breathe.

"Gavin . . . fuck . . ." I groan as he takes his tongue from between my lips, but he doesn't give me a chance to even breathe before he's sucking my clit, his tongue flickering over the tip. I scream breathlessly as pure white pleasure assaults my body, my chest growing tight and my heart forgetting to beat as he assaults my clit with his tongue and lips.

My toes curl, and I can feel the inferno building, ready to unleash. I'm quivering, a violin string that's this close to breaking if he strokes me one more time. And then he does. I cry out, my body uncurling as I come hard, my pussy juice gushing into his hungry mouth as I thrash. His powerful

hands hold me against him, his hands clamped on my ass and not letting me move as he takes every drop until I'm limp on the blanket.

When I can breathe again, Gavin's looking at me with gleaming eyes, his grinning face literally dripping with my juices. "So fucking sweet."

His words re-energize my body, and I squirm around to my belly, crawling toward him. "My turn. You didn't let me last time."

I cup his pants, feeling the thick bulge running down his right pants leg, and for a moment, I'm shocked at what I'm thinking of doing, but that same voice that told me I need him tells me that I need to do this now. Gavin looks at me with lust in his eyes as I undo his belt and unzip his jeans, pulling his underpants down enough to free his massive cock.

He's huge. Even the head looks like a mouthful, and I look up at Gavin. He smiles and reaches down, stroking my hair again and reassuring me. "Open wide."

I start slowly, licking just the velvety soft tip, and he moans. His moans continue as I lick and kiss his shaft, tonguing his balls before licking all the way up to the tip and opening my mouth, sliding his tip into my mouth and sucking it like a lollipop with quick, slurping sucks that have him moaning deeply. I let him in deeper, swallowing him until my jaw aches and I can barely breathe. Gavin's eyes go wide as I start bobbing my head up and down his shaft, licking and sucking him hungrily. His cock tastes so manly, and I'm drooling as I take him as deep as I can.

With each stroke of his cock into my mouth, I try to swallow just a little bit more. It's going to be difficult, but I'm determined to make sure Gavin Adams never forgets me or this town.

Gavin's hands don't force me, but he brushes my hair out of my face as I plunge my mouth down on his cock, feeling him push past my gag reflex and into my throat. I swallow him, massaging him until he groans deeply and black fireworks explode in front of my eyes. I pull back, sweet oxygen flooding my lungs as I look up at him in triumph.

Gavin nods, and his hands tighten around my head as he holds me still and starts fucking my face. He groans as he thrusts, his balls slapping up against

my chin. He speeds up, and I'm starting to gag, but I force myself to relax more, feeling my throat and tongue massage his cock.

I reach around, my fingers digging into his ass cheeks as he thrusts into my mouth, and he groans. "Fuck, Bri . . . I'm going to come . . ."

The first blast of his release is so deep that I just feel it rocket down my throat. He starts to pull back, my mouth clamped around his shaft while he fills my mouth with his cream.

When he's done, I tuck his cock back into his underpants before looking up and swallowing the last of his come, wiping the last bit off my chin and sucking my finger clean for him.

He smiles at me as I finally manage to gulp it down, asking jokingly, "did you enjoy your snack?"

I nod, making a face at the aftertaste. Sweet and tangy. "I sure did."

## CHAPTER 16

GAVIN

*I*plop down in my chair, sighing to myself as I look at the glass of brandy in my hand. I really shouldn't be drinking, but I can't help it. I feel like shit.

*What the fuck are you doing?* I think to myself as I brood over my date with Brianna. *You're leaving in just a few more days. You know that after this, you're going to be so exhausted for the next eight months that you'll barely be able to email, let alone come see her.*

*But you're screwing her again.*

*Worse, the way you talked to her . . . you're only going to hurt her.*

That's why I'm holding the brandy in my hand. It was after we'd had sex and she'd gotten dressed. I offered to take her back to her apartment, figuring that after what we've been through, she would like to have a shower and get her things from the hotel later.

Instead, she insisted that she had to get some things from her locker and that it would be more convenient for her if I just took her there. Normally, I wouldn't have batted an eye, but there was something in the way she said it, like she wasn't really telling me the truth.

The fact is, I've been more honest with Brianna than I have been with almost any woman. Nobody else has heard about the way my mother is pressuring me, and I know for damn sure that I've told no one else that I

sometimes feel like a failure. There's something about her that makes me open like a book.

But for her to be holding back from me, it bothers me.

I sigh and take a sip. This needs to stop. I know it's going to hurt, but the longer I let this go, the more problems there are going to be. I need to tell her that this has to stop.

*You can't do that. Admit it, you're starting to need her.*

I take another swig, wincing as the fiery alcohol burns its way down my throat. Sadly, my inner voice might be right. Just thinking about telling her that I won't see her again feels like a knife in my gut. It's all my fault though. I'm the one who let it get this far. I should've stuck to my plan of just one night.

Instead, I let her get inside. I feel weak.

Thoughts of her soft body, the way she kissed me, and the way her juices tasted flood my mind, making my cock hard as a rock.

It's not something I can easily forget. Nor do I want to.

But she's hiding something from me. Frustrated, I throw back the rest of my glass and look at the bottle. It's half-full, but I shouldn't drink any more. I'm feeling tipsy as fuck, and now that I can't think straight, maybe I can finally get some sleep.



THE BLARING OF THE ROOM PHONE STARTLES ME AWAKE, SUNLIGHT STABBING daggers into my eyes and making me wince. I groan, grabbing my pounding head, the blood vessels in my temple feeling like they're going to burst. Fuck, I feel like shit. Drinking normally isn't my forte, so it's my fault I have a brutal hangover. I knew I shouldn't have drunk that much, but I did it anyway.

I'm tempted to just knock the phone to the floor and tell whoever is on the other end to go to hell, but I don't. Instead, I pick up the handset, wishing I

had about a two-pound aspirin to take care of this headache. “Hello?”

“Hey.” It’s Miranda.

“Yeah?” I ask, my voice sounding slurred and groggy.

“What’s going on?” she asks, sounding alarmed. “You sound like shit.”

I clear my throat and try not to sound like a frog. “I just woke up.”

“Hmm,” she says, obviously not convinced. “Well, I’ve got some good news, but it’s gonna cost you. The love scene has been delayed, but that means that you have to be down here in front of the fire station in town in thirty minutes.”

“Huh? What for?” I ask, gritting my teeth at the pounding in my temple.

“It’s part of the deal,” Miranda says. “We need to do some publicity for the movie. Jim said he needs a few frames for the trailer and some stuff for the movie poster.”

I hold back a groan, trying to process what she’s saying.

There’s a long pause on the other end of the line. I bet Miranda is nervous as fuck right now. “Can I count on you, Gavin?”

I rub my eyes and glance at the clock. I don’t want to go. But what other choice do I have? “Okay, I’ll be there,” I grudgingly tell her, hanging up the phone.

I get up, get a quick rinse in the shower, and get dressed, my head pounding the entire time. I grab a pair of sunglasses and head down to the center of town, driving as fast as the speed limit will allow. Nineteen minutes later, I pull in front of the fire station, dry chewing a couple of Excedrin.

As I head to the front of the fire station, I see Miranda standing there with a photographer and a couple of women.

“What’s this?” I ask. “I thought you said he needed stuff for the trailer.”

“Thank goodness you’re here!” Miranda says. She’s smiling, and I swear she’s got a look in her eyes that’s already beginning to worry me. “You couldn’t have come at a better time. The camera man just finished setting

up. Kay, come over here.” She motions one of the chicks over to me, a pretty blonde with big tits.

“Wait, hold up,” I say, backing up, barely sparing the girl a glance. “What am I doing?”

Miranda’s scowl could kill. “What do you mean? I already told you over the phone. A photo op for the movie. You know, the movie you signed a contract to act in?”

I cross my arms over my chest. I hate it, but I just need to get it over with. “Okay,” I say flatly. “What do you want me to do?”

Miranda looks at me like I’m an imbecile. “Take off your shirt and just stand there.”

Holding back a terse reply, I do as she asks, my head pounding like a war drum. One of the cameramen scrambles over to get my shirt when I have it off.

“Take the glasses off, please,” Miranda commands next.

Another sharp stab between my eyes. “Really?”

Miranda shrugs. “Just in case.”

I sigh and take my glasses off, stuffing them in my back pocket. It’s right then that my headache increases almost one hundred-fold, and I wince at the blistering sunlight.

“Good, now Kay, Alana, get on either side of him,” she orders the two models.

For the next half hour, I’m forced to pose in various poses with the models. It’s all professional, and I make sure to keep my eyes in safe places and to avoid intimate contact.

By the time it’s over, my head feels like it’s filled with shards of glass whirling around in my brain and I can hardly stand.

“Thank you so much, Gavin,” Miranda says as I’m putting my shirt back on, patting me on the back. “I know you really didn't want to do this, so I

appreciate it.”

I open my mouth to say something smart, but then I realize this is one of the few times she’s actually being nice. “You owe me,” is all I say, nodding goodbye to the models and walking to my car.

“Can you believe this guy?” I hear Miranda complain behind me to one of the girls, “I get him a movie deal, he can’t even say his lines right, and I owe *him*?”

I take that back. She wasn’t being nice. More like she hadn’t gotten to mean yet.



FINALLY, AFTER THE DAY OF SHOOTING, MY MIND IS ONLY ON ONE THING AS I return to the hotel. *Brianna*. I want to go see her. Do something. But I feel like she’s only going to deepen my problems.

Back in my room, I lie on my bed, staring up at the ceiling. It doesn’t feel right, lying here. Not when I want her beside me.

I roll out of bed and head to the kitchen area, where I see the half-full bottle of brandy that I had last night. I’m about to grab it and pour it out when I hear a knock at the door.

*Brianna. Must be.*

I put the bottle back down on the counter and walk over to the door.

“Hello . . .” I start to say as I swing the door open wide with a large grin on my face. But instead of my innocent little bunny, it’s Leslie Hart standing there with an answering grin.

“Leslie, what are you doing here?” I ask. I don’t want to be a dick, but I feel like slamming the door in her face. There’s only one person I want to see right now, and it sure as fuck isn’t Leslie Hart.

Instead of answering me, Leslie steps into my room, that smile that’s lit up dozens of magazine covers still on her face.



“Hello, Gavin,” she greets sweetly.

I try to keep a polite tone of voice since I’ve pissed off enough people lately. “I’m not really looking for visitors right now.”

“Don’t worry, I only came here for a minute,” she says. “It’s kind of important.”

Keeping a lid on my frustration, I close the door and gesture at the couch. “Go ahead.”

Leslie crosses the room and sits down. She’s dressed more casually than I expect her to be, like a normal person and not a Hollywood starlet. I don’t want her to get the wrong idea, so I sit across from her in the leather chair, leaning back, my legs splayed out wide as if I own the room. “So what’s on your mind?”

She looks at me with eyes that are a lot more perceptive than what she uses on set. It’s like she’s studying me, trying to get me to reveal something. But I don’t have the time or the patience right now to figure it out. “Well?”

Leslie’s smile comes back, but it’s more real and less forced. For a second, I wonder if I’m seeing the real Leslie Hart for the first time. “I’m worried about you,” she admits finally.

*You and everyone else.*

“And I don’t want whatever this is to continue. This problem you’re having. It affects all of us,” she says, her face morphing into a mask of concern.

“I don’t have a *problem*.” The lie sounds hollow on my lips even as it leaves my mouth.

Leslie purses her lips thoughtfully before asking, “You sure about that? Everyone’s noticed, and everyone’s talking about it.” She leans forward in her chair, her eyes flashing. “Is it personal?”

“My personal life is just that,” I say flatly. “I haven’t asked about yours, and I expect the same courtesy.”

Leslie slowly sits back in her seat and nods. “I accept that. But here’s the thing. Whatever you’ve got going on in your personal life is affecting

business.” She fiddles nervously with her shirt before letting out a sigh. “What I’m trying to say is that I want this movie to succeed. And that can’t happen with you being distracted like this. There’s already a shitload of negative press about another cookie-cutter female lead action movie.” Leslie rolls her eyes. “And I want to be able to prove them wrong. But with the way things are headed, we’re looking at a path that’s straight to the DVD bargain bin.”

I open my lips to say a sharp retort, but then I close them. She does have a point. I’m fucking things up for her and everybody else. And as much as I want to be able to say otherwise, there’s no denying it.

Finally, I give her a grudging nod. “Fine. I’ll admit it. I’ve been having a personal issue. But I’m gonna deal with it. We’re going to shoot this movie and it’s going to do great,” I say firmly, making sure she knows that this matter is settled.

Leslie’s frown splits into a grin and she relaxes. “That’s all I wanted to hear.”

I put on a fraudulent grin and rise to my feet, signaling that our meeting is over. It’s not that seeing this real Leslie isn’t interesting, but my mind is on one person only.

“Point taken,” she says as she rises to her feet. I lead her to the door.

“See you at filming,” I say in parting, holding open the door for her.

She nods, but before I can close the door, she stops and turns. “Gavin?”

I arch an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

The mask of concern returns and Leslie asks, “Listen, are you sure that you’re okay? Anything you need?”

I shake my head. “I’ll be fine. It’s one of those problems you sort of have to work out on your own.”

Relief spreads across her face as she says in a soft, warm voice, “Thank you.”

“For what?” I ask, surprised.

She gestures between us. “For being a gentleman. This conversation was a lot easier than I thought it would be. Honestly, I thought you’d be an asshole. Glad I’m not the only one who’s misunderstood.”

I shake my head, knowing what she means. Being a celebrity is one thing we share in common. “And thanks for being a sport and dealing with my bullshit. Don’t worry. I’ll get it sorted.”

Leslie smiles and gives me a quick, friendly hug and a peck on the cheek before she turns and walks off down the corridor.

## CHAPTER 17

BRIANNA

*I*t's late. Afternoon shift. One of the most tiring simply because of the time of day that I start work.

Sighing with relief, I clock out and head toward the elevators, glad that the day's over. My body is practically screaming with anticipation. I *need* to see him. I've been waiting anxiously all day.

I don't know if he's going to be there, with his shooting schedule so out of whack, but my heart is pounding like a drum. And I can barely stand still as I wait for the elevator doors to open.

I can't count how many times I resisted the urge to send him a flirty little text. The only thing that kept me from doing it was that I didn't want to interrupt him on set. And I don't want to be perceived as a nuisance.

It was hard, keeping a lid on my urges. The only thing I could think about was his big dick in my mouth and the powerful sensation of blood pumping through it. He enjoyed taking me to my limits. I could see it in his eyes. There's something about the whole experience, though, that felt like it was more than sex.

*Ding.* I enter the elevator and begin straightening my clothes when the door closes. I hope Gavin doesn't mind that I'm not in my uniform. I have on a raggedy outfit that I brought to change into after my shift.

Of course, he may not even be there, in which case I'll leave him a note. A naughty grin plays across my face. I think I might leave him a little surprise as well.

Well, fuck. He's turning me into a bad girl already.

I'm still wearing my grin when I step out of the elevator and turn right toward his room. But it quickly fades when I see what's up ahead in Gavin's doorway.

Long, sexy legs. Beautiful blonde tresses, *all over* Gavin, giving him a kiss on the cheek as if he just showed her a great time. My blood is boiling so hot, it takes a moment to recognize Leslie Hart. I'm so shocked I'm frozen like a statue. I'm not even sure I'm breathing.

But before Leslie can spot me, I dart around the corner, my heart pounding like a hammer.

I lean against the wall, my chest heaving as I suck in deep, ragged breaths.

*I knew it!* a voice screams in my head. It's a battle to keep the tears at bay. I clench my hands into fists and bite my lower lip hard enough to draw blood. *That asshole was just playing me from the beginning.*

The sting of his betrayal hurts worse than a thousand hornet stings. And to think, I was coming up here to be with him.

Dizzy, weak, and feeling sick to my stomach, I pull away from my hiding place when I'm sure Leslie is gone.

I feel crushed as I make my way down to the coffee shop. When the staff elevator opens up on the lobby level, I expect Vandenburg to appear just because my day can't get any shittier.

Thank fuck he doesn't.

I make it across the lobby and head for the coffee shop. It's after closing time, but I see Mindy. She looks up when I walk through the doorway. She must sense that I'm upset because she comes flying around the counter running as soon as the door's closed.

"Bri!" Mindy gasps, peering at me in concern. "What's wrong?"

*I'm not gonna cry, I tell myself, looking into Mindy's worried face. I won't fucking do it.*

"Gavin was with another girl . . ." I almost get it out, but then I burst into tears.

Mindy places a hand over her mouth in horror, and she pulls me in for a hug. "Oh, Bri, I'm so sorry."

She holds me for a few seconds while I try to compose myself.

Finally, I'm able to get out, "I was just going up there to see him." I pull away from her embrace and sniff several times, wiping my cheeks with the back of my hand.

"What did you see, exactly?" she asks, searching my tear-stained face.

Anger grips my stomach thinking about it. "She was leaving his room and was all over him. I saw her plant a kiss on him. That's all I needed to see."

"Damn," Mindy says, not really knowing what else to say. "Bri . . ."

"He's probably been doing the same thing with her!" I half-cry. I don't know why I'm so upset. I should've expected this. The man is a player, and he's not going to stop just because he got a piece of small-town girl tail.

Mindy gives me another hug. "I'm so sorry, Bri. I feel like this is my fault." She pulls back and looks at me.

"Maybe you should put some distance between you two. Can you maybe swap floors with someone so you don't have to clean his room while he's here? That way, you don't have to see him anymore."

I grow quiet, thinking. Mindy's right. Our relationship, or whatever the word you call this thing between Gavin and me, is over. I'm putting in for someone else to clean his room. I won't even fucking say goodbye. Fuck him.

"You're right," I say, straightening up and heading toward the counter. I need a shot of something to help me deal with the stress I'm feeling. "Fuck Gavin 'Anaconda' Adams. Got anything strong back there?"

## CHAPTER 18

GAVIN

The next morning, my hands tremble as I button my shirt. But they're not trembling because of nervousness. They're trembling because of what I'm about to do.

After Leslie left, I sat there, thinking about what to do. It was a struggle, debating with myself. My heart was on one side and my brain on the other.

In the end, my brain won.

*I have to tell Brianna that we should stop now.*

It'll be the hardest thing I've ever done. I like her. She's real. Genuine. The opposite of the fake gold diggers who usually throw themselves at me.

It's hard though. I'd rather tell her that I want to take her out to dinner tonight when this filming is over, that maybe it'd be possible for me to see her during the weekends or during some of my off time during the season.

But that's not fair to her. I'm just being selfish.

This is for the best.

I tell myself this over and over while I'm getting dressed. But I just feel horribly conflicted. My heart is refusing to give up without a fight.

I pull my pants on and buckle my belt. And then I make sure the knots on my shoes are perfect. I retie them twice before I realize what I'm doing. *Wasting time.* I'm trying to do everything but what I *need* to do. I scowl at

myself in the mirror, clenching my fists. “You’re a bastard,” I growl at my reflection. *For what you’re about to do.*

I quell the urge to slug the mirror with my fist. Instead, I slowly make my way to the coffee shop, dreading every moment and hoping that Brianna won’t be there.

Opening the door to the coffee shop, my heart skips a beat when I see Brianna standing there with Mindy. A part of me wants to turn back now before it’s too late. There is still time for me to just grab a coffee and walk out and pretend I’m here on a little social visit.

But that’s not what I do.

“Hey,” I say, getting their attention. I stop as soon as they both look up at me, their eyes burning with aggression and anger. Brianna’s eyes, in particular, are as cold as ice.

“Hey,” I repeat, forcing myself to take a step forward. “You look good today.”

Brianna is tight-lipped, looking like she wants to choke the shit out of me.

I frown, not sure what’s going on. The last time we were together, she was happy. “Brianna?” I ask. “What’s wrong?”

When she doesn’t answer, I look to Mindy, who’s strangely quiet. Very unusual. She’s standing behind the counter, cleaning a mug and avoiding my gaze. There’s no smile. There’s none of the normal wisecracks or smirking that are what I’ve come to associate with Mindy. She’s not her usual self. Something is *definitely* up.

“Seriously. What’s going on?” I repeat.

Brianna slams her coffee cup down so hard it almost breaks and causes me to take an involuntary step back. “Don’t you have a movie to film?” she asks with venom in her voice.

She’s so mad she’s practically trembling. All of my thoughts of trying to end it with her flee. The only thing I care about now is finding out why



she's so angry. "I was just stopping by for a coffee before I start filming," I lie. I can't tell her I was here to break it off now. "Can we talk?"

She scowls at me. For a moment, I'm not sure if she wants to say yes or take the fork on the countertop and stab me in my balls. "Just for a second. Please."

Brianna continues to scowl at me before finally letting out a defeated sigh. Mindy jerks her head toward the back, and I go around the counter, allowing Brianna to lead me into the storage room. It feels weird to be back here, but whatever's going on, I want it to be in private.

"Listen—" I begin to say, but Brianna cuts me off with a shot right in the middle of my chest.

"I saw you!" she hisses in rage. "I should've known better!"

"Huh?" I ask, confused now.

"I saw Leslie Hart leaving your room. I saw her kiss you. You know, your co-star you tried to act like you were nonplussed about. I saw . . ." Brianna says, punching me right in the chest again. Maybe it's a country girl thing or maybe she's that damn angry with me, but Brianna's got some pop to those punches. If she weren't so upset, I'd be turned on.

"Wait a minute," I protest, trying to defend myself without having to grab her. "It wasn't like that." I shake my head in confusion, trying to get my words right. Why the hell does she think I was getting it on with Leslie? The little peck on the cheek at the door? "Listen to me, Brianna, this is all just one big misunderstanding."

She ignores me, convinced in what she saw. "I don't want to ever see you again. I should've listened to myself. You're just one big player . . ."

Brianna turns away, but I can see her shoulders shaking and I know she's crying.

Seeing her cry tears at my heart. Even though I came down with the intention of breaking things off, I can't let it end like this.

“Brianna, don't,” I say, placing a hand on her shoulder. I want to turn her around, to pull her into my arms and admit that I was stupid. That I’m scared. I’m scared that I’m starting to *need* her.

Brianna spins, slapping me across the face and making my head rock back. “Don’t fucking touch me!”

Mindy barges into the room at the sound of the commotion. Seeing Brianna’s frazzled state, she rushes to her side and pulls her into a fierce, protective hug. Brianna starts to sob as Mindy holds her and strokes her hair.

“I think it’s best if you just leave,” Mindy says, shaking her head.

“I just need a chance to explain,” I say, still confused. “But I will . . . for now.”

“Go away,” cries Brianna, her voice muffled by Mindy’s chest. “Go break somebody else’s heart.”

Setting my jaw, I walk out of the coffee shop feeling like shit. I don’t have the time to wait till Brianna calms down. I’ve got to be on set in the next few minutes. I barely make it to my car before a small group of paparazzi runs up, their cameras flashing in my face.

“Anaconda, have you shown Leslie Hart the snake yet?” one of them asks, grinning like a perverted high school boy.

I’m enraged, and it’s only by a small miracle that I don’t punch him right in the face. Instead, I shove them out of the way and get in my rental, speeding off like a bat out of hell.



MY MOOD HASN’T IMPROVED BY THE TIME I’M ON SET. AND AT THIS POINT, THE entire production team is avoiding me like the plague, only talking to me if they have to. I don’t blame them.

I’m royally pissed. Somewhat at Leslie, who just came to talk professionally, but given my reputation and what Brianna saw, I can see

how she misinterpreted it. I'm trying not to take it out on Leslie, but it's hard not to.

I should have just told Brianna right then it wasn't what it looked like. Leslie wasn't in my room for a booty call. And the hug and kiss were nothing.

A part of me wonders if I should just let her hate my guts. After all, five seconds before I opened the coffee shop door, I was ready to break it off with Brianna. This should be for the best.

But I can't end it this way. For the first time in my life, if I'm going to end it, I want to end it with letting her understand that I don't want to. That I'm ending it because she deserves better, even if I'm not the douchebag the media makes me out to be. I won't end it with her thinking I treated her like she didn't matter.

"Cut!" Jim yells, throwing his pen across the room and against the wall. "What the hell is going on, Gavin? I thought you were getting the hang of this!"

"Ow!" Leslie yells, getting my attention. I look down, realizing that my fingers are digging into her arm so deeply that she might develop a bruise.

Shit. I might be pissed at her, but that's no reason to hurt her. I let go, watching as the marks on her arm go from pale white to an angry pink. "I'm sorry," I mumble. "My mind was somewhere else."

"You were supposed to be taking her hand to put the engagement ring on it, not ripping her arm off and chewing on it like this is a zombie movie!" Jim snarls.

I give him a look, but I turn to Leslie. I need her help. "I need a moment with Leslie," I tell him, looking her in the eyes and ignoring Jim. "Just a couple of minutes."

"But . . ." Jim starts to object, but I'm already moving Leslie off the set and toward my trailer.

I yell over my shoulder, "Five minutes!"

There's a general rumble, but nobody makes too much fuss as I lead Leslie inside my trailer. As soon as the door closes, I step away, giving her space. I need to talk to her, not scare the shit out of her after what I just did to her arm.

"Okay, Gavin, I didn't scream bloody murder," she says as soon as we're alone. "So what's this all about?"

"About last night," I say. "And your visit to my suite."

"What about it?" she asks, rubbing her arm. "It obviously did you no good. You absolutely suck today. I thought you said you were going to work out your problem?"

I suck in a calming breath. She has no idea what's going on, and I know she didn't mean to cause any trouble. "You caused someone to get upset with me with that little visit."

"What?" Leslie gawks at me for a moment, then laughs in disbelief. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Someone I care about got the wrong idea," I explain. "She saw when you left my room and thought . . . well, do I need to spell it out?"

Leslie scoffs. "Seriously?" She makes a face and then does a little laugh. "Well, I can certainly see how she'd think that, considering your reputation."

I let out a groan. "Please don't start with that. I hear enough about it already."

Leslie coughs, still grinning. "Sorry."

I'm silent for a moment, thinking. "Leslie, have you ever felt like you cared about someone? I mean, really cared about someone . . . but you know that it's stupid? That it probably won't work out, but deep inside, you wanted to say fuck it all? That no matter how stupid it might be, you want to be with them anyway?"

Leslie looks at me in shocked silence. "Yeah . . ." she says softly after a moment, looking up at me with distant eyes that are sad and yearning for

something beyond the trailer. “I have.” Her eyes refocus on my face. “What’s this all about, Gavin?”

I take a deep breath, knowing I’m about to break one of the cardinal rules for a single guy. Simply put, never, ever talk with another woman about a girl that I’m dating, or seeing, or whatever it is I want to think of Brianna as. “Well, there’s this girl that I’ve been seeing since I got to town—”

Leslie snaps her fingers, her face immediately lighting up in a huge smile. “I knew it! The way you’ve been acting was like a lovesick puppy. I saw it in my brother, about three years ago. He was stupid for days.” She shakes her head sadly. “Too bad, too. He was totally taken by that damn gold digger.”

I half chuckle. “Yeah, I guess. But she’s not like that.”

Leslie’s smile dims somewhat after a moment. “Does Miranda know?”

“Hell, no. And I’d like to keep it that way,” I tell her. Miranda’s always looking for an angle on how to turn something into a publicity stunt. I don’t want Brianna’s picture plastered all over the tabloids.

“Oh, boy,” Leslie says, reading my face and sighing. “That’s not good. Keeping things from your agent.”

“I’ll worry about Miranda later. In the meantime, I need you to help me smooth things over with Brianna.”

Leslie gives me a look, and I can tell what she’s thinking. She wants to stay out of it. “I don’t know . . .”

I look down, my cheeks red. “I know it sounds like some high school drama shit, but I just want to put her mind at ease.”

Leslie stares at me for a long time before finally letting out a resigned sigh. “Okay. But she’s not gonna grow claws and rip my face off as I walk through the door with you, is she?”

I chuckle. “No.”

“You sure? You’re Gavin ‘Anaconda’ Adams, and this girl sounds like she jumps to conclusions. I’m sure you’ve had some psychos before.”

I shake my head. Sure, I've had some creepy fans before, but Brianna's not creepy. In fact, I think I understand what she's feeling. "Nah. You'll be fine."

"Okay," Leslie says, shaking her head. "If something happens, I'm going to hold you for the damages. My career's done if I end up with three-inch-deep nail marks on my face."

I laugh at the sour look on her face and wave away her concern. "Totally won't be necessary. I promise, you'll like her. Once you get to know her, you'll see she's the sweetest girl in the world."

## CHAPTER 19

BRIANNA

I groan, trying to stretch a little. Damn, my back is killing me. I try to ignore the pulsing pain as I walk into the coffee shop after my shift. I feel like hell, and I know I should change clothes out of my maid uniform, but right now . . . I just don't give a shit.

"Rough day?" Mindy asks when she sees me. She looks so pretty in her black skirt, tan apron, and light blue blouse, her hair so glossy and her makeup still looking flawless. Meanwhile, I feel like I'm a poster child for frumpy.

I'm envious that she gets the easy work. She gets to stay in one place and make coffee all day, chatting with customers, getting tips, and flirting with whoever she wants to flirt with while my ass has to break my back changing mystery-stained sheets and vacuuming up coochie hair balls out of the fucking carpets.

I take a deep breath, lean against the counter, and let go of my envy. It's not like Mindy lords her job over me. And I know she'd love it if I could work here too. "Rough? How about . . . I'm just so fucking sick of this shit!"

Mindy gasps a little. She's not used to my being so blunt in uniform, especially in the shop. "Babe . . ."

I shrug. In reality, today wasn't any worse than my typical day. What made it so hard was the invisible weight that I had dragging on my neck all day.

Gavin.

I nearly told him I hated him, and I would have if he'd stayed any longer.

It hurts, and I don't want to admit it.

Somehow, even though I told myself not to get worked up, I'm heartbroken over his betrayal. I was opening up to him. I really thought we could maybe work something out. How could I be so foolish to think I could be anything but some plaything?

To see him with that tall, gorgeous blonde . . .

"Are you okay?" Mindy asks, drawing my eyes to her. I look down and see that my knuckles are turning white from how hard I'm making a fist.

"Yeah," I lie. "I'm fine."

"I don't know about that," Mindy argues, biting her lower lip. "For a second there, you looked like you wanted to murder me!"

*I want to murder someone*, I think inwardly. But Mindy is my best friend, and I know she cares about me.

"I'm just tired, that's all."

Mindy leans in, her eyes soft and concerned. "It's Gavin, right?"

Just hearing his name is like a stab to the heart, but still, I shake my head, staring at my balled-up napkin. "No."

Mindy arches an eyebrow and lifts my chin with her finger. "We've been friends for years, Bri. Don't lie to me. You don't have the skills for it."

She scowls at me for a long time, and I try to scowl back, denying everything before I nod and sigh.

"Yes, he's been on my mind all day. But I'm trying to—"

"What the fuck," Mindy mutters, cutting me off as she stares straight past me. "The nerve of that son of a—"



I turn around, and my heart freezes in my chest as red pulses of rage start to fill my vision.

How dare he!

Gavin, looking as sexy as always, walks in with the same blonde bimbo at his side. She's dressed in a super-sexy, clingy red dress, black heels, and a black belt at her waist. Leslie Hart might as well have *You Know You Want This* written on her the way she's dressed.

I'm too shocked to move or do anything. He must be coming to torment me and make fun of me for being stupid. He's just here to flaunt his A-list whore in front of my eyes.

"Coffee shop's closed," Mindy tries to say, her voice dripping acid, before she adds under her breath, "especially to cheap dyed blondes."

"No, it's not," Gavin says. He has a determined look in his eyes, but when he looks at me, I'm not sure what's going on behind his baby blues. "It says open until eight."

"Well then, I'm on break," Mindy says, not backing down in front of the man who's twice her size. "Come back in an hour. Preferably when we're not here."

Gavin's voice is firm, unmoved by Mindy's frigid tone. "Good thing I'm not here to see you then."

Ignoring Mindy, Gavin turns to me. "Brianna—"

"Don't even try it," I tell him, poking him in the chest. "You have some nerve coming in here with her!"

"Listen, Leslie and I aren't together."

I scoff. "Please. Let me guess, you guys are just *friends*?"

"Gavin is telling the truth," Leslie cuts in, placing a hand on his arm. "We're not together. We're just professional acquaintances. That's it."

I glare at her hand on his arm, my nostrils flaring. Seeing my fury, Leslie jerks it away as if she's touching a hot stove.

Gavin and Leslie exchange glances, and she mutters something under her breath that I don't quite hear. I'm sure she's insulting me, and whatever she's saying, it makes me even madder.

I'm about to go off on her, but before I can reply, a gruff but falsely-accented voice comes from the back room. "What on earth is going on here?"

Vandenburgh. Great, just what I need right now. He waddles out, his face pinched and his glasses pushed halfway down his nose. "Miss Sayles, what are you doing in uniform? And why is it that you're spending all this time talking to guests anyway? You're a maid, not a concierge."

I really am not in the mood. In fact, Vandenburgh can kiss my ass. I turn to him, about to open my lips to tell him what he can go do with himself, when Leslie suddenly lets out a surprised gasp.

"Oh, my goodness, Montclair, it's you!" Leslie suddenly exclaims with an overly dramatic, stuffy British accent. I think she might have gotten it from Masterpiece Theater or something. She stares at Vandenburgh with wide eyes, leaning over just enough to give him a glance at the valley between her huge tits.

"Huh?" Vandenburgh asks, thrown off guard. "Miss Hart, what are you . . ."

Leslie walks over to Vandenburgh, a huge smile on her face. "Oh, don't act like you don't know it's me, my dear. We've been trading correspondence for months. I just didn't realize I'd finally get to meet you. Why didn't you say something? We've been voice chatting for a long time now."

"We have?" Vandenburgh says with confusion, flushing bright pink as Leslie pushes her boobs up against his shoulder and rubs his cheek.

Leslie smacks her forehead, raising her eyes to the ceiling. "Yes, darling! Don't you remember?" She smiles sweetly and looks down at Vandenburgh's nether regions. "You said you needed a beard so that your peers wouldn't know your little secret."

Leslie's act is so smooth, I almost believe her. Behind me, Mindy giggles a little. If there's a man who deserves to be humiliated, it's Vandenburgh.

Vandenburgh still looks stunned. “I did . . .?” he says, before scowling. “No, I didn’t! What are you on, Miss Hart?”

Leslie laughs, squeezing Vandenburgh’s cheek. “Oh, Vandypoo! It’s me, Morticia, my love. And yes, you did. I think you’re just delirious and it’s time to take the medicine you told me about.”

She wraps her arm around Vandenburgh, turning him toward the front door of the coffee shop. “Now, let’s go get you a bath and get you in a diaper, just like you like.”

She leads Vandenburgh from the room while he sputters, still off guard.

“You’re totally insane!”

Leslie leans over and kisses him on the top of his head, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen a man turn that red that quickly in my life. “No, that’s just you hallucinating, darling. Come along now, I have your powder and pacifier ready.”

The two disappear from view, Vandenburgh still not sure what to do. The glass door closes, and Gavin grins at me while Mindy laughs so hard I think she’ll crack a rib. “Now do you believe me?”

I cross my arms across my chest. “That doesn’t mean anything,” I say stubbornly, but my defenses are crumbling. I highly doubt Leslie would’ve done that if they were here to be spiteful. She just saved me from getting fired.

“I don’t know, Bri,” Mindy says, still gasping. “To get that close to Vandenburgh with that little act? She’s *got* to be telling the truth.”

Gavin mouths a *thank you* to Mindy as my expression softens. “Now will you listen to me?”

I stare at him long and hard. It’s hard to just drop my anger in an instant. But finally, I nod my head. “Two minutes.”

Gavin takes a deep breath, and what comes out is a bit of a rush of words, as if he’s really being timed. “What you saw that night wasn’t what you

think. Leslie was just there to find out what was going on with me because I couldn't deliver my lines."

I stare at him, letting it process, seeing the sincerity in his eyes.

"It was because of you," he confesses.

I gape. "Me?"

Gavin nods and reaches for my hands, and I find myself holding his fingers as he looks at me, his eyes burning with intensity as he speaks. "I can't even think without you near. The only way I can seem to get a halfway convincing line out is to imagine I'm talking to you and not Leslie."

I'm breathless at the conviction in his words, my heart racing like a track horse. I would've never known.

"And lately," he says, swallowing, "I don't even think I can breathe without you." By now, sweat has formed on his forehead, and as prideful as he is, I know it's taken a lot for him to admit something like this. Especially in front of Mindy.

All the doubts I feel fall away like leaves in the wind as I stare into the sincerity in his eyes, my heart feeling like it's bathing in warmth.

"Well isn't that sweet," Mindy mutters in awe, shaking her head. "Bri's pussy must be slammin'."

I'm so enthralled with Gavin's gaze that I can't even rebuke Mindy for her crassness.

Gavin takes me in his arms, pulling me close and putting his hands around my waist. "Can you forgive me?"

This close up, I can feel the warmth radiating from his hard body. I know I should tell him that I need time to think this over. But we don't have time. He'll be gone in a few days. And I don't want to waste another second being mad at him.

If I only have a few days with Gavin, then I'm going to use every second of them.

I put my arms around his neck and stand on my tiptoes, pulling him down into a soft kiss that is electric, not because it's arousing, but because there's emotion behind it that I never thought I'd feel.

"There's nothing to forgive," I breathe softly, looking into his eyes. "Let me change clothes, and then I want you to come with me."

"Where?" he asks, smiling. His beautiful eyes seem to pierce right through to my heart.

"To see the rest of me," I reply softly.

## CHAPTER 20

GAVIN

“Turn right,” Brianna says.

I do as she says, turning the Lotus at a corner and glancing over at her, my heart pounding in my chest.

She’s changed out of her hotel uniform, and while it’s nowhere near as exposing as the simple sundress she wore on our park date, I’m still enthralled by the simple t-shirt and jeans that she’s wearing. “Up there by the gas station.”

After we made up in the coffee shop, I was a little surprised when Brianna explained what she meant by seeing the rest of her. I almost expected her to ask me to take her back up to my suite. I guess my mind was in the gutter.

Going to her apartment probably would’ve scared me twenty-four hours ago. But now I’m excited to see this side of her, the real woman behind the eyes. “Okay, now what?”

“It’s the brown apartment building up there on the right,” Brianna says, pointing. I take a look at the building, and my first thought—it’s a dump. Even back in my college days when I would visit friends or teammates who had apartments off campus, none of them lived in a place like this. It looks like the sort of place where you carry a BB gun to shoot the rats on a daily basis.

I glance over at Brianna. “So this is where you live?”

Her cheeks burn, and I realize that I may have hurt her feelings a little even if I didn't mean to. "Sad, isn't it?" she says in a melancholy tone, looking down in her lap. "I'm sure it's totally beneath anything that you've lived in, and that's why I didn't want to have you drop me off here after our date."

I shake my head and reach over to put a comforting hand on her thigh. "I'm not going to judge. I'm glad that you feel comfortable enough to show me where you live."

"You know, Gavin, you can say all the nice things you want to try and make me feel better, but the fact is . . . this place is a dump. And I don't know if you'll understand."

I rub her knee, partly to reassure her and partly because it's one hell of a knee. "I might be spoiled, but I'm not irredeemable. I want to genuinely get to know you, every part of you."

She blushes, and I get out of the car before her nervousness makes her ask me to take her someplace else. I help her out, realizing that this apartment has probably never seen a red Lotus sports car in front. I make sure I lock it before I gesture toward the building. "Lead on, please."

It's hard for me to keep from staring at her ass as she walks up the stairs in front of me, but when she stops halfway up and glances back, she smiles. "See anything you like?"

I nod, flashing her a boyish grin, my cock twitching in my pants. "Maybe."

Brianna laughs, blushing a little. "You're good at giving a hell of an ego boost, that's for sure."

We make our way up the rest of the stairs, and she leads me down the concrete walkway which has lines of laundry strung up on one side all the way to the end of the building. Brianna looks back at me nervously as she takes out her keys and puts one of them in the lock. "Last chance. If you want, we can go back to the suite instead of putting you through a night of torture."

I shake my head and put my hand over hers on the key and doorknob. "No. I want to see you."

She stares at me long and hard, biting her lip nervously. Finally, she shakes her head and then turns the key in the lock. “All right. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

There’s a muted click, but instead of opening, Brianna has to lower her shoulder, shoving her way into the apartment. I help a little, and after a small fight, the door springs free and we step inside.

The first thing that hits me when I walk in is the smell. It’s wet, like the place hasn’t been aired out in a while, and it’s musty, almost dank. If I didn’t know better, I’d almost say it smells moldy.

It’s dark and I can hardly see. I hear footsteps cross the room, and a single lightbulb comes on, casting faint illumination around the place.

Brianna spreads her arms out wide to either side, a grimace on her face. “Welcome to my home.”

I suck in a deep breath. *What a shit hole.* It kills me that she lives like this.

The paint is peeling off the walls in places and the drywall is water-spotted in others, saggy and soft looking. The carpet is ragged, so threadbare that I can see the base material in spots. The furniture is all secondhand, and her table is being held up by a chunk of scrap wood on one side. Her couch looks like it’ll collapse if I sit on it, and in the corner . . . shit, I don’t want to even know what that is.

“See?” Bri says, her voice shaky as she sees the shock on my face. “I told you. Better than the White House.”

I grin. At least she’s keeping her sense of humor. “I had no idea.”

Anger courses through my stomach. Whoever runs this place is a true slumlord.

“This is why I spend so much time at the hotel,” Bri admits. “I hate being here. And I’m ashamed to have anyone over. I think you’ve joined a group of five people I’ve actually let inside.”

Her voice firms, and I see the strength that is deep inside her come out. “But it won’t be for long. I’m determined to make my way out of here. I’ve



already picked out a nice little apartment on the west side. One with two bedrooms. I'm just waiting until I graduate and get something more long-term than working for Vandenburg."

I walk over and sit down on the couch, my fears of collapse forgotten, and gesture Bri over. She bites her lower lip as she comes and sits beside me. As soon as her ass settles into the seat, my nose is tickled by a plume of dust.

I try to hold it in, but I sneeze, twice, my head rocketing forward to spray hard as I try to hold it back. "Sorry."

"Bless you," she says softly. She grabs a box of tissues off her rickety coffee table and hands it to me. "I haven't been able to dust in a while. I'm only part time, but I've been picking up extra shifts where I can while school is on break. You would think being a maid, I would keep it cleaner, but it's hard. I swear, the dust just grows in this place."

I sniff as another sneeze threatens. I gain control, shaking my head. "God damn."

"Yeah," Bri says. "Exactly."

My eyes are watery, and I have to wipe them with a tissue before I can focus on her. "How long have you lived here?"

"Since my parents left. When they split and I chose not to go with either of them, I had to find a place to live since they sold our home. At the time, I had a little savings from the odd jobs I worked in high school, and my Dad, as a sign of his generosity, gave me a thousand bucks and said he'd cosign since I was under eighteen at the time."

"Why put yourself through that?" I ask, still not understanding. Sure, she has college, but she's smart enough to get into anywhere, I'm sure of it. "Why stay here when you could have gone with them and lived a better life?"

Brianna's given me quite a few looks in our short time together, but for the first time, she gives me a look that makes me feel dumb. "A better life? Ha, I could argue that point. Mom gets on my last nerve, Gavin. I was never good enough for her. Daddy wasn't either. It would only be a day at our new place before we'd be at each other's throats."

“What about your father? Why not move with him then?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Bless his heart, he has tried his best. He’s rebuilt his life a lot too. But I wouldn’t be able to deal with having a stepmother younger than me. I don’t blame him. I’ve Skyped with them both, and she does seem to love him, but still . . . no. It’s just too weird for me.”

I shake my head, shocked. “But it seems like you would have just gone there for a little while, gotten yourself together, and left when the opportunity presented itself. Why stay here away from them?”

Brianna sucks in a deep breath and looks around the shitty apartment. “I’ve thought about that, and I guess the truth is that I love this place. It’s the only place I’ve ever known. And it’s mine. It’s shit, but it’s shit that I’ve paid for with my own hard work. And the community is small and caring. I like being a part of it. Maybe someday, I can give back.”

My heart tugs in my chest at her words and I stare at the earnest look on her face. She seems so pure. I hardly deserve someone like this. It makes it even worse that in a few days . . .

My throat is tight as I say, “That is admirable. I respect that. I really do.”

A blush comes to her cheeks and she looks away. “Thanks.”

“You could’ve easily just gone with one of your parents and had a better life. Softer, at least.”

She shakes her head. “My goals and ambitions must be boring and stupid to you. I’m sure you’re used to the big city life and have everything. The cars, the houses, any woman you want . . .”

*Not everything*, my inner voice says. *Not yet. She’s not yours yet.*

I clear my throat and shake my head. “Speaking from experience, none of that stuff means much. You can have all the money in the world, but it definitely doesn’t bring happiness. Brings a lot of leeches, but not happiness.”

I sit back against the couch, fighting back another sneeze. “You know, when I came here, I never thought it, but a part of me thinks that I would be

happier living in a place like this. Well, like this town, not like this apartment.”

Brianna stares at me like I’m a two-headed dragon. “Really? That’s hard to believe.”

I nod. “Really. Maybe I’ve had my fill. I don’t know. Sure, staying in the best hotels and having luxury homes and cars is nice, but there is a downside to it.”

My voice drops, becoming grimmer than I’d like as I realize I’m fully exposing myself to Brianna, something I haven’t done with anyone before. Not to mention, I probably sound like an asshole who takes things for granted. “When I signed my rookie contract, I gave up any chance of having a private life. Every detail about me, flaws and all, is out there for the public to scrutinize. You’re dissected and judged, oftentimes before you even know what you’ve done wrong.”

I shake my head. “And the paparazzi are relentless, always coming at you when you least expect them, trying to get another embarrassing shot to sell to the papers.”

“That does sound like it sucks,” Brianna says. “And it’s partly why I’d never want to be a celebrity. I couldn’t handle all that scrutiny.”

I nod. “Good. You’d hate it. I have to admit, at first, I loved the fame and fortune. The money’s nice for sure. I have a big ego.”

“And a big . . .” Brianna says with a soft laugh, wiggling her eyebrows at me.

I laugh, glad to feel a bit of humor in all of this, and continue. “But after a while, it gets old. A part of me wants my old life back. Just plain old Gavin.”

Brianna gives me an inquisitive look. “What’s stopping you from giving it up then? Retire from football, do this movie, and walk away.”

I scratch at the stubble on my jaw, the stubble that I’m supposed to keep for my role, and think. “I guess I just don’t want to disappoint anyone. My

teammates, my coach, my family—all of them, in some way or another, depend on me. And I don't want them to think of me as a quitter."

Brianna places a soft, gentle hand on my thigh and fixes me with a deep look. "I can understand that."

Warmth heats my stomach and my cock hardens in my pants. It doesn't care about the emotions I'm showing. It just loves the touch of her hand on me. "So yeah, when you mention the money and the fame . . . it doesn't mean much to me. It can't replace a real person or the emptiness inside."

"Are you?" she asks softly.

My breath is heavy, and I turn to her, feeling exposed but liking it. "Am I what?"

Brianna stares into my eyes and leans close, her natural perfume overcoming the smell of the apartment. "Are you empty inside?"

Her words hit me hard. I've been the way I have been because I've been looking for something for so long, and now I think I've . . .

I begin to shake my head. "I don't think so anymore—"

"AH-CHOO!" Brianna sneezes violently, spraying my face with a gentle mist. I rear back, surprised, and she covers her mouth and nose, shocked and embarrassed.

"Oh, my God!" She gasps in embarrassment, her face flaming red as she tries to lift her shirt to wipe at my face. "I'm so fucking sorry. It's just that this goddamn dusty ass old couch—"

I hook my hand beneath her chin, bringing her eyes to mine. "Don't worry about it. I want you, Brianna. Every bit of you. Snot and all."

"You're really weird!" Brianna gets out before she has to laugh, and after a second, I can't help it and join in. Somewhere in that laughter, I draw her to me and our lips smash together.

My hands move on their own, running over her lush curves, hungry to feel her as she groans into my mouth. The couch creaks as she falls back and I

get on top of her, greedily kissing her, my lips all over her body. I'm starving, and I'm going to have my fill.

My hands find her breast. Her nipples are hard, and I pinch them lightly through her shirt, making her moan and push my head down. "Gavin, I need you."

I look up, my heart pounding in my chest as I admit the truth. "I need you, too."

Brianna strokes my hair and smiles, swallowing. "Then not on the couch . . . or my bed." She chuckles. She looks at me with lust. "The floor?"

I look at the suspect carpet, and she laughs, getting off the couch and pulling her t-shirt off. "I'll go get a sheet. Trust me, those I get from the hotel. Don't tell Vandenburg."

I chuckle and shake my head, kissing her hungrily as we get to our feet and her hands roam over my back, lightly scratching me through my shirt. "Your secrets are safe with me."

Brianna walks down the dim hallway, tossing me a smoldering look over her shoulder as she disappears into the next room. "And you're wearing too many clothes!"

I laugh and start stripping, listening as I hear a closet open before a quiet minute passes. When Brianna comes out of what I guess is her bedroom, she's fully stripped, wearing the sheet around her body like a toga, and my cock surges, standing straight out from my body as she smiles.

I pull her close and kiss her deeply, the sheet between us adding to the whole feeling. I can feel her hard nipples against my chest and the warmth of her skin as my cock presses against her hip, my hand going down to cup her ass and squeezing.

She moans as I kiss down her neck to suck at her throat, half squatting. I sink to my knees as I kiss over the cotton, sucking at her nipples and making her gasp as I tug on the fold of the sheet, working my way inside. "What are you doing?"

“Keep the toga on and I’ll give you a special treat,” I say before kissing the soft skin of her hip. She moans, and her hand pushes on my head through the sheet. I know what she wants, and it’s the only thing on my mind too.

I ease Brianna’s thighs apart with soft butterfly kisses until I can see the pink wetness of her pussy, and I lick, relishing her tangy sweet essence. It’s sexy and erotic. I can’t even see her breasts with the way she’s holding the sheet as I suck and nibble on her pussy lips before lapping at her clit.

“Gavin,” she gasps breathlessly as I torture her clit with the tip of my tongue, circling it over and over before flicking it quickly. I slide a hand up the inside of her thigh, and slide two fingers inside, pumping them in and out in time to my tongue.

“Mmm,” I moan into her pussy as she clenches at my fingers, her body wanting more. I slide in a third finger, knowing that if I’m going to have her, I still need to warm her up.

“Fuck!” Brianna says, half stumbling back. I hold her up with one hand on her ass as I suck her clit, my other hand pumping my three fingers in and out of her fast and deep. As I feel her rise up in the wave of her impending orgasm, my cock is hard and throbbing in front of me.

“Come for me,” I say, pulling my head back just long enough to say it before I bury my mouth in her pussy again, sucking her clit hard before biting it lightly. Brianna screams in lust, and I feel her ass shake in my hand as she starts to come, the wetness soaking my chin before I can pull myself down and drink the rest of what she releases.

I stand up, kissing my way up her tummy as I pull the sheet away to kiss her breasts before reaching her lips, kissing them gently before my own passion rises up and my own needs take over.

“I didn’t think I could keep standing,” Brianna says breathlessly, laughing gently as she kisses me back. Her soft hand wraps around my cock as our tongues swirl, and she smiles as she pulls back. “You have no idea how good you are at that.”

I laugh, stroking her hair. “Better than I am at acting, that’s for sure.”

Brianna laughs and kisses me again, kissing down to my chest. I suck in a deep breath as she runs her hands down my chest, sliding her fingers along the ridges of my abs before grabbing my ass and squeezing.

She sinks to get down on her knees, and she holds my cock in both hands, looking up at me with the innocent wanton look that makes me so fucking horny. She pumps me with both hands as she licks her lips. "And how good am I at this?"

I don't have a chance to reply before she opens her mouth and runs her tongue over the head of my cock, teasing around the flare before gently sucking my head.

"Fuck," I groan, throwing my head back. Her sweet little lips feel so good around my cock.

Brianna hums sweetly as she begins slurping and sucking my cock, reaching down to rub her pussy. She wants more, and I want to give her more.

She takes as much of my cock as she can in this position, stroking it and bobbing her head in tandem, slightly gagging on it, but I don't want to force her. She holds my shaft in one hand and slowly massages my balls with the other, pulling to control the fire in my cock and helping draw it out. I groan again as they tighten and become full in her grasp, and I know that I'm going to come if she keeps this up.

"Fuck," I gasp, pulling back carefully and watching as she slurps the last bit of my cock, a line of spit dripping from the tip as she looks at me with questioning eyes. "You keep that up, and this'll be over too fast."

My balls are aching. I want to come so badly, and Brianna gasps, her chest heaving as she catches her breath. But as good as her mouth is, I want more.

"Why?" she asks, looking disappointed, wiping her lips with the back of her hand. "I don't mind."

"Are you ready?" I ask her, ignoring her question to pull her to her feet and kiss her, stroking her back and cupping her ass again.

“For what?” she asks breathlessly, her thighs trembling slightly. She was probably close to getting off again. But she needn't worry. I'm about to blow her mind. If she lets me.

I hesitate. I don't know if she's into it or not, but I have this burning need. The only problem is, I don't know if she'll curse me and kick me out.

But looking at her, I have the feeling that if I don't take the opportunity to at least find out, I'll be sorry. You only live once.

Fuck it. Just say it.

“Anal,” I reply.



## CHAPTER 21

BRIANNA

*H*is words hang in the air, and the first thought that goes through my mind is *Holy. Fuck.*

My eyes widen in surprise, and I can't help but stare at that gigantic hard cock that's still slick with my saliva. He wants to put that big thing in my ass? My thighs tremble, either from anxiety or anticipation.

"I . . . I've never done that before," I whisper, afraid. My heart is pounding like a war drum. I've never given much thought to anal beyond a few casual thoughts and loving the feel of Gavin's hands kneading my ass. But if I was sore before . . .

"I'll be gentle," Gavin says, sensing my thoughts.

I place a hand to my throat, sucking in a deep breath. A part of me wants to tell him no, but another is turned on by the idea. I didn't think I could take him in my pussy, and he blew my mind. I for damn sure didn't think I could deep throat him, but when I did . . .

"There's some lube in the cabinet, above the right counter," I hear myself say.

Oh, my God, what am I doing?

Gavin arches an eyebrow. "Done this before?"

I chuckle. "No. There are other uses for it, you know."

He laughs and turns, his ass flexing and making my thighs quiver as he walks away. I shiver again as I see his cock ready for me, and with each step, my eyes are glued to it as he walks over and comes back with the small bottle.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asks, setting it down on the raggedy end table. “I’m not gonna lie, I want to. But I don’t want you to do something you’re uncomfortable with.”

I swallow thickly and nod. I’m scared but excited. “Yes,” I whisper, spreading out my sheet on the carpet. “I trust you.”

He sighs in relief, then he looks at me, a little nervous. “So, how do you wanna do this? Missionary or doggy? I suppose it doesn't matter.”

I think about it for a minute, thinking how I want it. Finally, I know what I want. I want to see him. “Missionary.”

“Missionary it is,” he says, grinning and pulling me close. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Putting my hands on my hips, I step back and sink to the sheet, looking up at him nervously.

Gavin grins, and I lie back, spreading my legs and pulling my knees up. He walks over to the couch, getting my cleanest cushion, lifting my hips a little, and tucking it under me. I can feel the difference immediately—my ass is more exposed to him, and I feel open, vulnerable, but thrilled at the same time.

“Pull your knees up a little more,” he says, his voice soft and commanding. “And relax. I’m going to rub it in.”

My heart begins to pound and race as I do as he says. Oh, my God, I can’t believe I’m doing this. “Like this?”

“Fucking beautiful,” I hear him mutter. “Perfect.”

I shiver, my limbs coursing with anxiety and excitement. I watch him coat his finger in the lube before he blinks and looks at me. “Rub yourself slowly. It’s supposed to help.”

The cool sensation of the substance causes me to let out a little gasp, and I groan, my right hand going to my pussy to rub as he massages my virgin asshole. My eyes roll back, and I gasp in a little bit of pain as he slips inside, my ass immediately feeling filled as he rubs his finger inside me. "Fuuuu . . ."

"Easy, easy," Gavin says. "Don't start tensing up on me already. The key is to relax. If anything, push out."

I try as he says, and I feel him work into me, my fear easing as he slides his finger in and out of my asshole, opening me up slowly until he adds a second finger, and I feel sexy. Filled. Vulnerable. His. He pulls out and wipes his fingers on the sheet before taking a condom out of his wallet and rolling it on before applying a fresh layer of lube on his cock. He gets up, rising above me and starting to bend down.

I look at him with excitement and also some hesitation. "Gavin?"

"Yes, Bri?" he asks, his eyes filled with concern and tenderness as he presses the big head of his cock against my asshole, pausing. He's worried that I'm going to change my mind, but that's the last thing on my mind.

"I trust you," I repeat to him again.

He smiles and starts to push. There's a moment of pain at first as my already stretched asshole is stretched even further, and I hiss, nodding when Gavin gives me a look. "Do it."

The pain grows to agony for a second, but then he slips inside, my ass tightening around his cock, and I feel him slide into my deepest, most taboo place. He's huge, but he takes his time, slowly opening me up. It's strange, but my body seems to want to keep pushing him back out, and once he starts in past where his fingers reached, the pain starts again, but the look in his eyes as he mounts me drives me to keep going.

He groans as he slips in and out. "You okay?"

"Give it to me," I gasp, the need to feel him take me overcoming the pain. Also, my ass is loosening. He's taking me, and it's starting to feel good as he starts to rub against my ass, my fingers rubbing my pussy and adding to it all.

Gavin goes in slow strokes so that I'm slowly opened up, the pain and pleasure mixing into a heady mixture that's addictive. Gavin takes my hand off my pussy and replaces it with his own as he gets all the way in, stroking slowly and matching it with his thumb, making me feel a fire in my core that slowly spreads all over my body as he speeds up, his thick cock driving me wilder than ever.

His balls slap against my ass cheeks as he starts to fuck me harder. The sound of our flesh bounces off the walls, making me grunt with him. I reach down, grabbing my knees and hissing.

It hits me hard, different, like a lightning bolt with almost no warning. I'm screaming, coming as I feel him cry out, coming deep in my ass, the condom catching it. Part of me wishes it wasn't there. I want to feel his come inside me.

I collapse, Gavin beside me as he holds me, his cock still in my ass as he rolls me, pulling me on top as we both breathe deeply, trying to recover. Finally, I smile, putting my head on his shoulder. "That was amazing."

He grins, stroking my hair. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. I was worried you'd throw me out when I asked."

I laugh and turn to kiss his lips gently. "No, I don't think I have any limits with you. Everything you do, you wake me up. You make me feel sexier and hotter than I've ever felt before."

Gavin smiles and kisses my nose. "Thank you."

I frown and purse my lips as I feel him slip out of my ass. "But I'm pretty sure I'm not walking straight for at least a week."

Gavin laughs. "You definitely earned it. Just think how Mindy's gonna react when you waddle into the coffee shop tomorrow."

I punch him in the side, laughing. "Hey, how would you like if I put a damn log up your ass right before a game and then joked about it?"

Gavin winces a little from my punch but still laughs. "Not very much, but you've gotta admit it felt good."

“It did,” I say, my fingers trembling as I trace his lips. “Thank you.”

“No,” he says, pulling me into his arms. “Thank you.”

## CHAPTER 22

GAVIN

*M*y eyes flutter open at a knocking sound. Beside me, Brianna is snoring softly, her head on my chest. It's dark in the room, and the smell of dust hits my nostrils. I wiggle my toes, which are halfway hanging off her twin-sized bed. We'd come here after using her tiny little shower to clean up, both of us so exhausted. I can barely fit on this thing with her, even with her using me as her body pillow. The mattress sucks too. My back would be fucked up for days if I had to sleep on this thing all the time.

*Bump.*

What the fuck was that? I'm immediately on edge, my heart racing. It's just my fucking luck if someone is trying to break in the first night that I have her this way. But I guess that's a good thing. She won't be taken advantage of. I can protect her. I look around for an object I can use as a weapon, anything, when I see it.

Moonlight is shining through the window and onto the wall, right on the ugly creature's face. It stares back at me with beady little eyes, defiant. This is his house, he's saying. The humans are just sort of bringing in the food. When he sees me move, he scurries off into a tiny hole in the wall and I hear bumping noises and squealing.

There must be a whole family of those fuckers in there. Sounds like there are more rats than people in this building, and Brianna's apartment is their Grand Central Station.

Now that I know there's no intruder, I relax, but I can't help but feel anger tightening my stomach. Brianna shouldn't be in a place like this. Here I am, living in the best of places. Everything is handed to me on a silver platter. And she's living here in this hell hole with a family of rats.

And to think when I came into the town, I hated it because it was just a place that didn't have a busy nightlife and luxury homes. To think that Brianna would sacrifice herself to stay in a place like this so she could one day help contribute to the community she loves.

The whole time, though, she doesn't have anything for herself. A shitty apartment that probably isn't up to building code, a job where the hotel manager is a fucking tinpot Napoleon with a fake British accent, and a single friend.

Actually, she does have that going for her.

Mindy's pretty fucking awesome as a bestie.

I don't have any idea how she does it. I look at her sleeping on my chest, and my eyes feel hot and heavy. She's like an angel, and she's in my arms . . . even if I don't deserve it.

My whole adult life, I've been obsessed with my image and my career. I've taken. I took contracts, I took money, and I took gifts. I took, and other than handing out a few toe-curling orgasms, what have I actually given?

Not a damn thing.

What good have I done with my money besides spend it on myself and pamper my spoiled parents? I give the bare minimum in time and money to charity to keep the team off my ass, and that's it.

*I've been so self-centered*, I think to myself.

I look down at Brianna, snoring softly against my chest. I feel a tightness in my stomach, a sort of heavy ball that's slowly building. Being with her makes me want to be a better person, a better man. The only thing is, I'm not sure if I could give it all up to be that way. I'm not sure, but I worry that the money and the fame have started to claim me too. I might be addicted to the fame. And she's better than that trap.

“Oh, my little Bunny,” I softly whisper, squeezing her arm and placing my chin on her head. “What am I gonna do with you?”



I WAKE UP TO THE SOUND OF RUNNING WATER. I LET OUT A GROAN, EARLY MORNING sunlight streaming through the window. Yeah, now I know for sure that I'd have back problems in two seconds sleeping on this shitty bed. I look around groggily, hearing a faint hum from the tiny bathroom. Brianna must be in the shower, and I'm tempted to join her.

I yawn and stretch, scratching my stomach as I look down at my cock, which is more than happy at the idea of a morning shower with her. I'm about to get up and give Brianna a surprise when my cell goes off on the nightstand. I have the urge to ignore it, but I know better.

“Yeah?” I say when I pick up, not caring who's on the other end.

“Gavin, where are you?” Miranda growls. Well, good fucking morning to you too, Miranda.

“I'm right where I want to be,” I say before I can stop myself. At least I don't tell her who I'm with.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Jim is going nuts over here!” In the background, I can hear yelling, and someone else goes running by, obviously trying to do something in the middle of the chaos to calm Jim down. “You knew this was the last day of filming! Today's the big scene!”

Oh, shit. I just remembered. They might have delayed it, but I'm supposed to film my bedroom scene with Leslie today, and there's another action scene.

“Fuck, forgot. I'm sorry.”

“I need you here. Like, ten minutes ago!”

The line goes dead, and I stare at my phone for a second. “Damn.”

She hung up on me. That's never happened to me before. Running my hand through my hair, I set my phone aside and get out of bed. I can hear Brianna



humming cheerfully in the bathroom, some little pop tune that's been popular recently. Today was supposed to be her day off. We could've spent a lot of time together. We'd even said something about it when we went out to get some drive-through burgers. She's gonna be pissed. I completely forgot about everything else.

I hurry and get dressed. I'm gonna go there smelling like dust in day-old clothes that are slightly wrinkled, but it can't be helped.

I go over to the bathroom door to tell Brianna I'm going, but it's locked. I don't get why she locked it, but maybe it was out of habit.

I look around and find a pen on her nightstand, and inside the pocket of my pants is a piece of paper. I smooth it out and scribble down a note.

*Brianna,*

*Thanks for the night of fun. I haven't had that much fun in a long time. I've gotta run. I completely forgot that it's my last day of filming. Miranda's up my ass and Jim's apparently going nuts over there.*

*I've left a little surprise for you so you can enjoy your day off. Have some fun. You deserve it.*

*-G*

I reach into my pocket and pull out a clip of cash I keep with me and place it on top of the note. I don't know how much it is. I don't even count it, but I want to spoil her.

After I put the money under the note, I go over to the bathroom. Brianna's still humming softly to herself, barely audible over the shower, and I kiss my hand, putting it on the rickety wood before I quietly walk out.

## CHAPTER 23

BRIANNA

The warm water rolls over me as I hum gently in the shower. This is my second shower since last night. I took one right after we had sex to help clean up, but I need another one now.

I can't stop thinking about last night.

I'm aching all over, but it's a good kind of hurt. A hurt that makes me want more. Even now, sitting in the shower with the water running over me, I wonder if he'll come in and take me again in the shower. Any hole he wants. Even now, my body is heating up and my nipples tighten as I think of the way the water would look running over his chiseled body.

My pussy pulses at the image as I turn and let the water hit me. I lower my head, panting, trying to resist the urge to reach down and rub myself.

Simply put, Gavin was amazing. He was everything that I could have ever imagined. He made this shitty apartment feel like a palace, and I was a princess with a naughty streak that he brings out. He was gentle, but then when I was ready, rough enough to make me feel wanton, ridden . . . taken and claimed.

I use up all of my hot water, rinsing myself before I step out. I dry myself off using another one of the luxuries I got from the hotel, a room towel that's been frayed on one corner and was ready for the garbage bin before I saved it, rubbing my skin until I'm pink and dry. Humming softly, my heart

starts racing in anticipation. I imagine Gavin is awake now, waiting for me in my bed with a dreamy smile on his face. And maybe he has a way to help me with my still aching body and the voracious need that seems to be inside me when he's around.

I have a glow about myself when I step out into my bedroom, my towel wrapped around my chest loosely to see if I can entice him into one more round.

"Good morning, Mr. Movie Star . . ."

I freeze. The bed is empty. Gavin is gone.

My heart skips a beat and I take a breath. It's not like I have to search. I can turn around and see the entire bedroom. "Gavin?" I call, making sure he hasn't gotten up and gone to the kitchen. "Gavin, are you here?"

There's no response, and a crushing weight settles on my chest. If he were here, he'd answer me. My apartment is tiny as fuck. You can probably throw a paper airplane from one side to the other.

"Why the hell didn't he tell me he was leaving?" I mutter. He was asleep when I got in the shower, or at least he appeared to be. If he had to get up, why not knock on the door and tell me he was leaving?

The thought unsettles me. We'd talked about spending the day together, and now he's gone. Again. I'm not going to make the same mistake, so I look around for a note, confused when I see a stack of money sitting on a piece of paper on my nightstand.

I walk over and pick up the stack of bills. It must be a thousand dollars here. My heart racing, I pick up the note and read it. Anger twists my stomach as I read it. Enjoy my day off? "What the fuck?"

Leaving money with a woman after a night of sex is what men do with prostitutes. And while I feel like Gavin may have tapped into my inner slut, there's a world of difference between being a slut and being a whore. I wrap my arm across my chest, squeezing myself tight. Is that what Gavin thought this was? That by taking my ass cherry, he owed me something? To assuage his guilty conscience, he thinks giving me money will make things better?

I don't want his pity or his sympathy. I've stood on my own long before I even knew who Gavin Adams was. And yeah, I slept with him, but that doesn't mean he owes me anything. A part of me feels like he's just paying this because he knows that he'll be leaving tomorrow and this is his peace offering money.

I sink down onto the bed, barely able to breathe. Seeing the note and the money clip has jolted me out of my trance. I feel like I've deluded myself. He's going to be gone tomorrow. Can I really try to have a long-distance thing with a man who's going to have women throw themselves at him like Gavin Adams? And if I can't, why make my heartache that much worse?

Still, it angers me that he snuck out this morning and cheapened our experience by leaving money.

The more I think about everything, the more upset I get, regardless of his attempt at a nice note.

Eventually, I can take no more. I get up and start getting dressed. My second-best pants, a decent blouse, and just a touch of makeup. Although Vandenburg is the last fucking person I want to have a chance to run into on my day off, I'm going in to work.

I need someone to talk to. And I know just the girl.

## CHAPTER 24

GAVIN

“*Y*ou’re not taking her anywhere,” I growl to the man, Kevin, in black leather holding Kara’s arm. “If you try it, I’ll fucking kill you, you fucking fuck face.”

*Someone was paid to write this? How many times can I say fuck in a sentence?*

“Jack!” Kara cries weakly. She’s bruised, bleeding from a cut on her cheek where Kevin’s already smacked her around, and she knows what I’m doing is stupid. “Please don’t do this. Go and save yourself!”

“No, Kara. I’m not letting him take you anywhere. He doesn’t own you. Not anymore.” I scowl angrily, stepping forward. My eyes dart around, but Kevin’s alone. He looks like he’s in decent shape, but I also know that he intends to hurt the woman I love, and come hell or high water, I’m not going to let her get taken away from me again.

Kevin laughs. “Would you listen to this shit? Kara, this prick doesn’t even know you more than a few days, and now he thinks he can tell me that your puss isn’t mine.” He scowls at me. “Fuck off, dipshit. Kara’s coming with me.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” I say, balling my fists. A few days? I’ve known her for years, almost since we were kids, and I’ve loved her nearly as long. Now that I finally have her, he’s not going to take her from me. “Run, Kara, run!”

I rush forward, a roar of anger tearing from my chest while Kara lets out a scream. She tries to pull away from Kevin as I lower my shoulder and hit him in the stomach, lifting him high into the air to try and tear him away from her. When I feel his grip loosen, I turn, slamming him into the floor as we get into an epic struggle.

I began pounding away at him, letting loose with all of the rage that's been building inside me ever since Kara told me the truth about her past. But all of my strength and anger aren't helpful as my fist hits nothing but the wooden floorboards as Kevin deflects my punch. "Asshole!"

Kevin lets out a growl of rage and with a giant heave, throws me off him. I land on my back and scramble to my feet, barely avoiding the boot that goes slamming into the space my head had been seconds before. "You think you can just waltz up in here and take my shit?" Kevin growls, reaching for me. "You're a fucking dead man."

I slam my fist into the side of his face. I've had a few throw downs in my time, and all of the strength and muscle I've built in the auto shop are put behind it. He staggers, whining like a whipped dog as he grabs his face, and I smile. I grab him by his arm and pull him into me, wrapping my hands around him, ready to see if I can dribble his head like a basketball.

"I think you got that wrong, buddy," I growl in his ear. "I just proposed to 'your girl' right before you showed up, and after I'm done whipping the shit out of you, I'm going to take her back to my house and we're going to fuck all night long."

I begin choking Kevin as he struggles against me, raining blows against my abdomen, but I barely feel them. I've taken worse before. His struggles go weaker and weaker, and I think I have him. Suddenly, his knee comes up, hitting me in the balls, and my arms relax, letting him slam his head into my nose hard. Shocked and in pain, I lose my balance and fall backward, hitting my head on the pavement.

All sound goes fuzzy as if I'm underwater, and my vision immediately blurs. Somewhere in the background, I hear several startled screams and the director screaming, "CUT!" as I fade off into the darkness.

Shit.

I guess I fucked up again.



*OH, MY FUCKING HEAD.* I GROAN, BRINGING MY HAND TO MY FOREHEAD. I FEEL LIKE my head's splitting in two. I open my eyes, immediately regretting it as I can feel the light pulse with my heartbeat. My vision is blurred. Not much is really that sharp, but I see a figure in white standing over me.

"Mr. Adams, I'm so glad you're awake," says a male voice. I'm trying hard to focus on his face but it's still blurry. "I'm Doctor Harmon."

"What happened?" I moan, having trouble remembering what went on. I remember starting the fight sequence for the final scene and everything going smoothly. I'd slammed the bad guy, we'd done the point where I was starting to choke him . . . and then just blackness.

"You had a little accident. Fell and hit your head on set," Dr. Harmon says. "Split your head open pretty badly, but nothing that a few stitches couldn't take care of."

No wonder it feels like it's about to explode.

"Am I all right? Any major bleeding?" I ask. Fear clutches me for a moment. The league is super strict on the concussion protocol nowadays, and if I've gotten a bad concussion, I could be sitting on the sidelines doing nothing but holding a clipboard and picking my nose for quite a while.

"You're fine," Dr. Harmon assures me. His face comes in clearer now. He's a short, bald man with patrician features and wide goggle-like glasses. He's looking at me with a faint smile on his face. "The bleeding was just on the surface. The stitches can come out in a week. The rest is just a small concussion. Grade one."

"Fuck," I mutter. A grade one concussion isn't the worst. At least I can feel my damn toes, but it'll still put me on the league's concussion protocol. The team's not going to like that, and there may be a chance I can't get cleared to do the workouts. I'll probably get docked pay. Fuck.

Dr. Harmon chuckles. "It'll be fine, Mr. Adams. I'm sure you'll be on the mend in no time. Just get a lot of rest and take your medication to treat the residual swelling, and I'm sure you'll be able to play. I read your medical history. You don't have a history of them."

"I fucking hope so," I mutter. I know I should be more graceful, but I feel like shit. Still, I try to make a joke. "At least the cut's on my bad side."

Dr. Harmon laughs again. "If you can sign this for me, I'd really appreciate it."

He grabs something from the inside of his white coat. It's a small, folded up girl's t-shirt with my jersey number on it.

I stare at him like he's a two-headed dragon. Is he fucking kidding me? I have stitches in my head, I'm now, for sure, on a concussion protocol, and this guy wants an autograph? "Are you serious?"

He cringes but doesn't relent, holding out a pen to me. "My daughter is a huge fan of yours. And she'd kill me if I didn't at least try. Please?"

I'm about to refuse, but then suddenly, the image of Brianna comes to me. She'd say that pink doughnut lady would do it without a problem. Hell, if he were a guest in the hotel asking for extra towels, Bri would do it with a smile on her face, even if she didn't want to on the inside. The man patched me together. I shouldn't be rude. "Sure. You're right, Doc. Who do I make it out to?"

"Tiffany," Harmon says, and I nod. Before I can scribble a word, he adds, "Could you sign it *Anaconda*?"

I stop for a second, about ready to change my mind. He's violating the laws of his job, and for some reason, I doubt 'Tiffany' is his daughter, but I'm able to stay calm and quickly scribble my signature. "Here. Hope she likes it."

"Thanks so much," Harmon says when I'm done, taking the pen and shirt back from me. "By the way, there's someone waiting outside to see you. I'm going to let her in and then start working on your discharge papers."

"I can go back today?" I ask, surprised but happy.



“You sure can. But like I said, you’ll have to take it easy. My nurse, Missy, will be in here to explain the protocol you’re supposed to follow before you’re released. Just lie back, and we’ll have you out of here ASAP.”

He extends a hand to me. “It’s a pleasure, Mr. Adams. It’s not everyday we get someone like you in here.”

I shake it. It’s a habit, and while the t-shirt was bullshit, I try to be at least a little grateful. “Thank you.”

When Harmon walks out, my heart thuds in my chest. He said a woman was waiting to see me. Having heard the news, it’s got to be Brianna, right? I try to sit up straighter and look stronger. I don’t want her worried about me. When the door opens, in walks . . .

Miranda. Of course, it would be her. I don’t know what I was thinking as my heart sinks anyway. “Oh, thank God! You’re all right!”

“Hey, Miranda,” I say, trying to keep the disappointment out of my voice. I’m happy to see her, but I would prefer Bri here instead. I know news had to have gotten back to the hotel by now, and Mindy would have called her. She has to know.

But she’s not here.

The breath tightens in my throat.

Miranda rushes over to my side, trying to peer back behind my head. “You’re okay, right? The doctor said you were fine, but they lie all the time. You haven’t suffered brain damage, have you—”

“I’m fine, Miranda,” I say mildly. “Just a small concussion is all. The doc said that I should be fine, and I’ll talk with the team, I guess. Can’t hide it, but I think I’ll be cleared by the time first practices start.”

She breathes, and I’m touched to see the concern on her face. “Thank God . . .” she gets out before she pauses and frowns. “Although one could say you’ve suffered some kind of brain damage this trip. Maybe a smack in the head will get you back to normal.”

“Very funny,” I say, laughing. “I know it’s been a hard week, but this time it wasn’t me!”

Miranda chuckles and finds my stitches, tugging at my hair but not poking them directly. “Seriously, Gavin, I’m so glad you are all right. When I saw you hit your head, I thought for sure it would be something terrible. The sound of your head hitting the ground . . . well, once, I saw a watermelon fall out of a container in a semi truck and hit the pavement. It was kinda like that.”

Mmm . . . watermelon. Sounds good right about now. I shake my head. “I’ll be fine. Have I gotten any calls?”

“Oh, hell yeah, so many that I had to turn my phone off,” Miranda says. “TMZ, ESPN, oh, and the team called too. There was Coach . . .”

I wave them all off. I don’t care about them right now. “No one else? Brianna?”

Miranda arches her eyebrow. “No, no Brianna. Who’s that?”

I should tell her. It would explain so many things about why I’ve been acting the way I have been, and the words are on my lips. But why bother? Tomorrow, I’ll be gone, and obviously, she doesn’t care that I’m injured. She knows as well as I do that she’s wasting her time and doesn’t want to be hurt.

“Nobody,” I say quietly. “I guess.”

Miranda peers at me suspiciously. She’s known me too long. “You sure?”

“Yes,” I say. I let out a groan as a spike of pain pulses through my head. “So I’m going to have to re-shoot that whole scene, I take it? That sucks. I was looking forward to being done with this shit.”

Miranda lights up like a light bulb. “Actually, no.”

“Huh?”

“Jim decided he would use the footage of you falling and hitting your head and made it so that ‘Kara’ picks up a gun and shoots that dude, killing him. He said the fight was very realistic.”

“What the hell? That will make her look like the hero and me like a pussy. I thought that wasn’t supposed to happen until I die.”

Miranda shrugs her hands out to the side. “Just roll with it. We’re constrained with time and he wasn’t sure if you were going to be out for weeks. It would have cost a fortune to extend the filming license. The town jacked up the price when they found out that you were injured—some bullshit line about insurance—so they have to get everything done in just a few hours. There are secondary crews out right now, rushing around town trying to get the rest of the backing shots.”

“Damn it,” I grumble, but it’s halfhearted. A part of me is elated, and another is upset about how I’m going to be portrayed. While I knew I wasn’t going to be the star, I was supposed to be pretty badass.

*You should be used to it by now,* a cruel voice says in my head. *All image, no substance.*

Miranda nods, not knowing my inner dialogue. “Yep. I think he said something like, ‘I can’t bear another day of Gavin’s wooden, cardboard acting, so this is the best thing that could happen to me.’”

Instead of getting mad, I can’t help but laugh. The truth hurts, but not in this case. I know my performance has been hindered by a certain someone. The thought of Brianna brings me back down again and my smile quickly fades to a slight frown. “You know what? Fuck that guy.”

“But look on the bright side,” Miranda says, mistaking my frown as hurt over Jim’s insult. “He also decided to go with your idea. They’re cancelling the bedroom shoot and using a body double back in Hollywood. And at least this will make all the feminist fans happy with Leslie turning out to be the hero from minute one and you being her boy toy.”

I give her a look, one that she reads loud and clear. I’m nobody’s boy toy.

“Hey, I’m just trying to put a positive spin on this. You know me. You can now act like you’re pro-women’s movement in the interviews and be a spokesperson for women’s rights!”

I groan, rolling my eyes. Miranda is out of her fucking mind.

“And the best thing of all, kiddo,” Miranda says, gently slapping me on the arm. “We can get the fuck out of here by tomorrow evening. Already got the private plane booked for us.”

The words should send me into a euphoric state. I can finally be done with all the stress and bullshit I’ve had to deal with since arriving. But it only causes a feeling of dread to settle onto my chest. Is that all I’ve got left?

“Gavin,” Miranda asks, seeing my expression, a worried look on her face. “Are you all right? Is it your head?”

The dark feelings that I feel threaten to overwhelm me. I know that I’m anything but. I’m in fucking pain. One in my head. One in my heart. And I know which one hurts the most. With massive effort, I’m able to shove down my feelings and put on a fake smile. “I’m fine.”

## CHAPTER 25

BRIANNA

I arrive at the hotel feeling shitty and down. Gavin leaving me with that clip of money shouldn't have made me feel this way. His note did seem sincere, but it bothers me. I don't like handouts, never have. Add in sex the night before, and I can't shake this feeling.

"Bri!" Mindy cries when she sees me walking into the coffee shop, a surprised look on her face. She's helping what looks like a disgruntled middle-aged woman who is put together quite well. She's wearing some nice slacks and a good blouse to go with the stuck-up look on her face.

I'd like to talk with Mindy immediately, but she has a long line of customers. "I'll be right with you in a minute."

I nod my head to her and take a seat in one of the booths, figuring it'll be ten minutes or more before she can get to me. I place my head on the table feeling like crap, waiting to talk to Mindy. As I sit there, I start smelling the cleaner that's used to scrub the tables and nausea begins to creep up from my stomach and through the rest of me. It seems half my life is soaked in this shit, and the other half . . .

I get up from my seat after a few minutes and begin to walk out. One of the reasons I came here is to talk to Mindy, but I'll be a skeleton by the time she gets through serving the slew of people streaming through the doors. I picked a wrong time. The lunch hour is coming in, and she's going to be slammed for a while.

“Bri, wait!” I hear her call behind me. “I have something to tell—”

Her voice is lost as I move through the doors and out into the lobby. There’s a crowd here as well, people talking in a babble of voices that roll over each other, impossible to keep track of. It looks like most of the production crew for Gavin’s movie. As I pass by, I hear people speaking his name, but I tune them out, intent on doing only one thing.

Near the elevators, I see Vandenburg standing with a crew of camera people, smiling his face off while somebody interviews him for what I guess is a behind the scenes clip for the DVD home version of the movie. He’s got his best suit on, and his chest is so puffed up today that he’s nearly straining the buttons as he blathers on to the camera crew.

I stop in my tracks. He seems busy, but I’m not about to walk by him just in case. If he says anything to me, I’m going to be out of a job with the emotions whirling inside me.

That leaves only one option, and I let out a groan at the thought. *The stairs.*

I make it to the stairwell, pausing to look up at the six flights of hell in front of me before I laboriously begin my climb. Each step is a flex of muscles that don’t want to be flexed right now. I could take the elevator at the next floor, but I’m actually relishing the pain right now. It gives me something else to focus on.

By the time I reach the sixth floor and Gavin’s room, my ass and side are on fire. I’m completely out of breath too, a sheen of sweat on my skin.

I take my pass card out, looking at it in the dim light, and then I pause, thinking. I can get in trouble for this. I’m not on duty. Forget a write-up. Knowing Vandenburg, he’d probably call the police.

But I have to do this. Gavin is leaving tomorrow. And this will be my last message to him.

I stick the card in the door and hear the click, glancing up and down the hallway once before pushing the door open, making as little sound as possible. The room is still unmade, and the faint aroma of his cologne hits me, making me slightly dizzy. It’s so . . . *Gavin.*

Walking in further, I see things that bring back memories of my first night with him. There, on the kitchen counter, are two wine glasses. I see the candles, still in their holders on the table. I sway, nearly overcome with emotion.

I walk over and sit on the bed, thinking about how things could be. What could be. What, in the idle moments afterward, I daydreamed about.

But I know the truth. And I've known it since the moment I met him. My daydreams are just that. Nothing more. The foolish musings of a girl who should have known the difference between a relationship and just getting a good deep fucking.

Mindy's right. I did need it. Not for the orgasms, but to learn that hard lesson.

Taking a deep breath, I walk over to the desk and sit down. I grab the pen and paper and begin writing, but after a moment, I see water drip onto the paper and I wipe at my eyes.

"No," I whisper, tearing the sheet off and balling it up. "No. I'm the one in control. I'm the one in charge."

I start over, and it takes me two more tries to get the words just right and to make sure my hand doesn't shake as I write it. The tears are back as I write the last words. There is really no point in stringing this along further.

A single tear escapes my cheek and rolls down onto the piece of paper. I go to crumple it up and re-write it for a fourth time, but I need to get out of here. I just don't want him to think I was crying.

Sighing, I get up from my seat and leave the room—and my heart—behind me.

## CHAPTER 26

GAVIN

“We have a few more press junkets to do tomorrow, you know,” Miranda says as she pulls her rented Escalade in front of the Grand Waterways Hotel, “and then you can be free of this place.”

I’ve been discharged after a few hours. In fact, the sun is still up even though it’s late afternoon. I feel kind of like a mummy with the white bandage wrapped tightly around my forehead, a present from an over-enthusiastic nurse who wanted to make sure I didn’t bleed any more. They gave me a few pills, some of them green and a couple that are pink, and told me everything would be all right and to have the stitches taken out at home in ten days.

I look out the window, a wistful feeling coming over me as I look around the town. “I don’t know,” I say. “I think I’m starting to like it here. It’s been quite charming.”

Miranda gapes in shock. “Gavin Adams, you sure that head wound isn’t worse than they say? You were practically seething in rage when we first arrived here. I never would’ve imagined you enjoying a place like this. What’s next, ready to go horseback riding?”

*Because I’ve been pampered and spoiled my whole life, I think to myself, I didn’t see the real beauty of such a simple place.*



“You’re being overly dramatic,” I say, trying to remain calm. Maybe they gave me a shot or something, but I’m not too bad, actually. “You know, the people around here are nice. They care about one another.”

Miranda’s looking at me like I’m crazy. “Gavin, you’re the one who practically took my head off for coming here!”

“Feelings change,” I tell her.

Miranda shakes her head. “I guess I should be used to this by now. You’ve been acting strange ever since we got here, and now with that head wound, you’ll be speaking another language soon. You’ll be calling me ma’am and using y’all before you know it.” She mutters the last bit under her breath.

I chuckle. “You might be onto something . . . ma’am.”

Miranda gives me a startled look, then she sees me grinning and laughs slightly. “Okay, I deserve that one. I’ll see you in the morning, kiddo.”

“See ya, Miranda.”

I get out of the car, stretching a little. I’m in pretty good shape, overall, and the paparazzi actually gives me a little bit of space. The worst is just a slight pounding when I finish standing up, but I’ve had worse from football and not even come out of the game.

Excitement courses through me as I walk through the doors. I was upset about Bri not calling or showing up at the hospital, but after giving it some thought, I figure maybe she hasn’t heard the news. She did have the day off, and maybe she got mad and just sat in her apartment, fuming. In some ways, it’s kind of cute, the image putting a little pep in my step as I wave to the doorman.

My plan is simple. I’ll go upstairs and take a long, hot shower to clean up. I smell like dust, sweat, iodine, and ass. I’ll drive over to her place and offer her a fitting apology for having to leave. And then I’ll take her out for a date. Anywhere she wants to go.

On my way through the front door, I’m accosted by several crew members on their way out, their bags in their hands. For the most part, people are glad to see I’m okay, but I know some of their enthusiasm is from being

relieved they won't have to work with me again. I don't blame them. I totally screwed up.

I'm passing the coffee shop when I see Mindy waving goodbye to a customer, and I feel like I could get information out of her. Maybe she's swapped a few texts or calls with Brianna, and I can get a gauge on how to apologize better.

I walk in, giving her a wave. "Hey."

"Hey!" Mindy says, perking up. She comes around, reaching for my bandage, and I chuckle, letting her touch it. "I heard about what happened on set. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. It looks a lot worse than it is," I say, reassuring her. I gesture around, seeing the shop. "How's things going here?"

"It's been hectic. Camera people in and out. The whole crew seems to have stopped in at some point today."

"Yeah, a lot of them are leaving. They had flights scheduled out after the last scenes, and I heard they cancelled my bedroom scene, thank God."

"So the movie is done? Even with you having the accident?" Mindy asks, and I nod.

"Yeah. Apparently, Leslie Hart is one big bad ass." I tell Mindy all about the change of plans with the director, and she smirks.

"Seriously?" Mindy laughs, playfully punching me in the chest. "That's crazy. Gonna make you look like . . . well . . ."

"Tell me about it," I say, chuckling. I can't be down with Mindy. Her smile says she knows it's bullshit too. "Hey," I say after a moment. "Have you seen Brianna, by any chance?"

Mindy's face darkens. "I did, actually. She came in here looking sullen and out of it. I told her I'd be right with her in a minute, but she seemed to get fed up and walked out. I tried to tell her to wait but I was slammed, four customers on my docket."

“Do you think she heard about what happened?” I ask, concerned. Did I really piss her off that much?

Mindy purses her lips. “Everyone here was talking about it. You know, you’re kinda famous, and the hotel was buzzing with the news.”

Her words feel like a lance in my chest. She had to have known and she didn’t call to check in. “Okay.”

“You all right?” Mindy says, concerned.

“Just a little pounding from my headache.” I wave it off. “Look, I’m going to . . .”

Mindy sucks in a breath, biting her lip and changing the subject. “So, you’re really leaving tomorrow?”

It’s hard to say the words, but I’m beginning to feel this was inevitable. “Yeah. Kinda have to.”

Mindy’s eyes are sad as she crosses her arms over her breasts and sighs. “Bri is going to hate that. Absolutely hate it.”

*Coulda fooled me.*

“She’ll get over it,” I say. “We both will.”

Mindy shakes her head sadly, giving me a look that says she knows I’m full of shit. “Well, you still owe me an autograph before you leave. If things are gonna fall to pieces, I’ll be damned if I don’t get at least a piece of the pie.”

I chuckle. Bri’s right—it’s almost impossible to get mad at Mindy. “I’ll make sure to bring it in personally tomorrow morning before I leave. I think I have something I can sign better than just a piece of paper for you.”

Mindy beams. “Thanks.”

I give her a quick handshake of thanks. “You take care, you hear?”

I’m trying to be funny, but it just feels slightly sad. I’m going to miss her. She firmly shakes back. “I will.”

“And . . .” I stop, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Take care of Bri for me, will ya?”

Mindy nods, trying to smile, but I can see the glitter in her eyes. “Sure thing. I’ve been taking care of that rascal since before she could walk.”

I smile back. It’s better than the other option. “Aren’t you two the same age?”

Mindy laughs and wipes at her eye. “Yeah, and?”

“You’re impossible,” I finally say with a laugh.

Mindy beams, smiling even as the first tear falls. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I leave the coffee shop, my heart heavy. In the lobby, I’m swarmed by camera men, some crew, and fans. I do my best to engage them all, but I get fed up quickly, pushing my way through at the limits of my patience. When I see Vandenburg, though, talking animatedly to a crowd, I have to pull him to the side.

“Yes, Mr. Adams?” Vandenburg says in his uppity faux accent. “I heard about your accident. I’m glad you’re all right.”

“About Brianna,” I say, ignoring his bullshit concern. “When I leave here, I want you to start treating your employees with respect. Brianna especially. No more making her get on her knees and clean floors, insulting her, and threatening her job. You got it?”

The pompous little prick sputters, knocked on his heels momentarily. “Mr. Adams, there are things that—”

“I know an asshole when I see one,” I hiss in his ear. “And I am tired of assholes. So, I want you to promise me not to fire her until she quits on you. You got it?”

Anger spreads across his face. But I use my height to my advantage, staring him down. I don’t even know what I’m doing or why he would listen to me, but I can’t help myself.

“Yes, Mr. Adams,” he says finally. “I’ll leave Miss Sayles alone.”

“Good. Because I don't want to have to start making phone calls.” My words sound stupid to my ears, but I need to do something. If I have to end up leaving without talking to Brianna, I want to have at least done something meaningful for her.

I leave Vandenburg before he can reply and go up to my room on the sixth floor. As I step off, I see Leslie directing a bellhop with her luggage. “Hey, I’m glad you’re okay,” she says. “I thought for sure that you were really injured.”

“Yeah, just a little bump. I’ll be fine, and you can see me on Sunday TV.”

“It’s crazy how things turned out with the movie,” she says. “I hope you’re not mad about it.”

I shrug. I really don’t care anymore. “Nah, it’s okay. I’m glad you get the chance to shine. My acting was shit anyway.”

“Yeah, but I understand.” She leans in. “You really should see what you can do about that. I know you really care for her.”

“I don't know. We come from two different worlds.”

“And that’s where the most explosive things happen, when two different worlds collide.”

I chuckle at the aptness of her remark. “Like football and Hollywood?”

Leslie shakes her head. “Just . . . don't be like me and lose something you'll regret for the rest of your life.”

Her words are heavy on me. I don't know what to say.

“Listen, handsome,” Leslie says as she sees me lost in thought, chucking me on the arm. “I’ll catch you later at the press promotions for the movies. And I’ll make sure not to stay on your arm just in case. And maybe if you have a good story for me, I’ll have a good story for you.”

She winks and I give her a wave. “Thanks. See you around.”

My mind is running when I step into the room. I’m conflicted, not sure what to do. I can get cleaned up and go over to Bri’s apartment, but then

what? Tell her, 'Yeah, I don't want to leave you, but now I have to.' Talk about an asshole move.

I sigh and shrug off my blazer. I head through the room toward the bathroom when I notice a stack of money on the desk. Arching an eyebrow, I walk over to see that it's my money clip sitting on top of a note. My heart pounds in my chest as I pick it up to read it.

*Dear Gavin,*

*Leaving me with the money this morning did not sit well with me. I didn't sleep with you so I could get paid. And when I showed you my place, it wasn't for you to have sympathy for me.*

*I know you're a big star with everything in the world and I should be falling all over myself with gratitude.*

*But the truth is, I know this thing we have can never be. You're leaving. You get to go back to your big fancy house and your cars and return to being the cocky sports star and celebrity you're known for, with a slew of women on your arm.*

*And if this was your way for apologizing for all of that—I don't want it. I don't need your sympathy or your money.*

*So I'm leaving this here for you to give to someone else, perhaps someone who needs it more than me. And I wish you all the best with your sports and movie career.*

*Lastly, please don't try to contact me. There's no point and it's not worth the heartache. I don't want to ever see you again.*

*Bri*

I stand there reading the words over and over, my head feeling like it's going to explode. It hurts reading this. And what hurts most of all is that it's true. I can't stay, and starting a long-distance relationship with a football star would be hell on her.

The only way I can have something meaningful with Bri is if I stay or she comes with me. And she's made it clear that she loves this place. It would be selfish of me to expect her to pack her bags and enter my crazy world of flashing cameras and salacious headlines after knowing me for just a week.

But now that she hates me, I guess the decision has been made for me.

I'm leaving.

## CHAPTER 27

BRIANNA

“*I*’m sorry, Miss Sayles,” says the interviewer over the phone. I didn’t want to take the call, but I had to. “While your qualifications are excellent, we’ve decided on another candidate at this time. We’ll keep your application on file if there is another opening.”

“Okay, thank you for your time,” I whisper, trying to be polite as I hang up the phone.

I was hoping to get that job at Petersen and Associates so I could just quit and tell Vandenburg to go fuck himself. I thought I had it in the bag. I knew the manager I’d be working for. I took a class with him. But now, that’s no good.

Jesus. I don’t know if I can deal with this anymore.

What does it matter anyway? I only have so much time before school is over and I’m gone.

At least Gavin is gone tomorrow so I don’t have to worry about running into his ass again. Still, just thinking his name makes me clutch my hand to my chest. It hurts. I hate to admit it, but I don’t want him to go. Deep down in my gut, I want him to stay.

But there is no other way. The man couldn’t give up his entire career for me. That was a fool’s dream anyway. I don’t know why I ever deluded



myself into thinking that. This is real life, not some Disney movie where the knight and the princess end up in a Happily Ever After with a talking cat.

The dark cloud on my chest has me wanting to talk to someone. Anyone. I know Mindy is out of the question right now. She's still at work. So I dial the only person I think I might be able to trust with my problems.

"Hello?" asks the familiar, high-pitched voice on the other end of the line. It's been months, but the voice hasn't changed at all. It still sounds like a woman who's on the edge of freaking out.

"Mom," I breathe. My mother, Cindy Sayles, is a woman who has aged well, and I'm surprised she hasn't remarried. She's a serial dater since the divorce. I guess most men aren't willing to put up with her nagging personality once they get past the still tight 48-year-old body.

"Bri! Where have you been, girl? It's been months since you last called me!"

"I know," I say. "I've been very busy."

"Doing what? Tipping cows? We all know that little town is boring as all get out."

I stiffen. This is why I don't like talking to my mother. She has about as much empathy as a brick, and it's obvious she thinks she's better now than the place she grew up in, and that bothers me.

"Tipping cows is a lot more fun than being stuck in traffic," I say, trying to keep a lid on my temper.

"Oh, Bri, you always have to be so passive-aggressive. I was just worried about you," Mom says. "I miss you, sweetheart."

"I know," I say softly, my anger evaporating. "How are things out there in the city?"

"I'm loving it. I still wish you'd come and be here with me. Was it really worth staying there?"

Before, I would have answered yes in a heartbeat. But now . . . now, I don't know what to think about my decision to stay here with the heartache that I

feel. "I think so."

"You don't sound like you believe what you're saying," Mom says. There's a long pause where I think she wants me to reply before she continues. "Everything all right over there? Do you need me to have your father send you money?"

I suck in a breath. My mom is forever thinking problems can be solved by money. Preferably, someone else's money. Sure, money is nice, but I'm too prideful to take handouts. I would've accepted Gavin's money if I wasn't, even if it hurts that I gave it back. There was so much I could've done with that money.

"No, I'm fine," I finally reply. "Plus, I wouldn't want you to worry Dad on my behalf."

Mom sighs in relief. "Heaven knows I didn't want to, trust me. If he can ever stop long enough to dig his little winkie out of his little homewrecking whore—"

"Mom, please don't!" I interrupt, knowing she's about to go into a rant about my dad and his mistress. I can't right now.

"You know, sometimes, I feel like you take your daddy's side over me. Even after all he did to us."

Ugh. I hate how she always twists things. "Mom, you know how I feel about what happened. And you know I don't like how things turned out between you guys. I just . . ."

"You just what?"

"I just can't deal with any of this right now."

"And you're sure you're okay?" Mom asks.

*Of course I'm not good, I think to myself. That's why I called.* But I'm not gonna get any help from this quarter. "As good as I'll ever be."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?" Mom asks, confused.

I don't have the energy to explain now. At least I got to hear a familiar voice. "I'm gonna go, Mom. I'll make sure to keep in touch. Love you."

"Bri, wait!"

I hang up the phone and let out a deep breath. I knew I shouldn't have called her. I always end up feeling bad. I just feel so vulnerable and in need of . . .

*Gavin.*

But Gavin is leaving tomorrow. I'll never see him again. That letter I wrote to him made sure of that. The thought hurts, but I need to get used to it.

My phone rings, and I almost hit the hang up button to ignore Mom when my finger freezes. It's Mindy. Talk about an angel.

"Hey," I answer.

"Hey, chica, why'd you run off like that today?" Mindy asks, her voice concerned. "I was almost free."

*Please, girl, that line was as long as Gavin's dick,* I think inwardly.

"I got tired of waiting," I lie through my teeth. "Plus, Vandenburg was around tooting his horn. I didn't want to see him."

"Well, I'm on break now so I have time to talk. What was on your mind?"

I'm tight-lipped. "Nothing."

"Yes, there was," Mindy says, her lie detector at full strength even though it's the phone. *Damn.* "You looked all sad and sullen."

I sigh. "I've just been filling out these damn applications. I'm tired and stressed, that's all."

There's a pause on the other end of the line. "I know it's something more than that. Come on, Bri."

I can't bring myself to reply. It hurts too much.

"Gavin came lookin' for you," Mindy says suddenly.

The mention of his name catches my breath. “And?” I’m sitting on pins and needles waiting for her response.

“He was all banged up,” Mindy says, “and seemed pretty worried about you.”

My heart skips a beat. “All banged up? What’s that mean?”

I can almost hear her nod through the phone. “Yeah. He had a bandage wrapped around his head. Told me he fell and hit his head on set, but I already knew that before he told me. I was trying to tell you about it before you ran out on me.”

Pain pierces my chest. Now I feel terrible for not stopping and listening to Mindy. At the time, I was too wrapped up in my emotions and annoyed by all the people.

*Gavin must feel terrible that I didn’t check on him. I know I would.*

“But he seemed all right though?” I ask worriedly.

Mindy laughs. “Yeah, girl. I can tell you’re freaking out over it, but he’s fine.” Mindy pauses. “He was more concerned with seeing you, actually.”

A feeling of relief washes over me. At least it was nothing serious. I’m not sure what I would’ve done if it were. “Worried about me?”

I wonder if he found the note I left him before or after he talked to Mindy.

“Yeah,” Mindy replies. “I can tell he was really hurt. Probably because you hadn’t called to see how he was doing.” She pauses for a moment and I hear her suck in a deep breath. “Don’t bite my head off, but will you please tell me what happened between you two? You both have been acting like lost puppies. Is it just because he’s leaving tomorrow?”

*That’s a major part of it.*

I part my lips to reply but pause, a heavy feeling weighing down my chest. I want to tell her everything, but it’s hard because of the feelings it brings up.

Taking a deep breath, I tell her everything—about the sex, the dates, all of it.

Mindy pauses, processing it all. “I really think you should talk to him, Bri,” Mindy says. “I don’t think he meant anything by leaving you that money. And if he’s leaving, don’t let him go like this. You’ll both regret it.”

“What’s there to say?” I ask. “It’s just going to make everything harder. This was all a waste of time.”

“I don’t think it was,” Mindy argues. “You both had an experience and enjoyed each other. That counts for something.”

“Maybe he would come visit from time to time?” Mindy offers when I don’t reply. “Or maybe even stay?”

I snort in disbelief. “I won’t be some small-town booty call that he can stop in for. And he can’t stay. He has obligations.”

“Well, with how he was acting the other day and the way he looked today when he came in to ask about you . . . I wouldn’t be so quick to judge.”

I huff out a mirthless chuckle. “You’re more delusional than I was when I first started having feelings for him.”

“You don’t have to believe it,” Mindy tells me. “I just know what I saw.”

I go silent, biting my lower lip in thought.

“I just want you to be happy, Bri,” Mindy continues, her voice filled with concern.

*That’s gonna be really fucking hard with Gavin gone.*

I sigh. “I know, and I thank you, Mindy. But I need to go. I’m emotionally exhausted.”

Mindy’s voice is aching with emotion. “Okay. Please, just take care of yourself. I know you really liked Gavin, but you can’t let this wind up ruining your life.”

I hang up the phone feeling even worse than I felt getting off the phone with Mom.

## CHAPTER 28

GAVIN

“*M*r. Adams, what would you say about your first filming experience?” asks the reporter. He’s a tall, balding man dressed in a grey suit with a slight lisp. After five nonstop questions from him, it’s becoming irritating.

I put on a tight smile, doing my best to stay cool as repeated flashes go off in my face, the room filled with sounds of *clicking* cameras. “It was amazing,” I say with a cheer I don’t feel. “It was a great experience.”

“We heard about your injury,” says another reporter, a chubby man in jeans and a t-shirt, his Cowboys hat on backward. “Are you okay?”

A stab of pain lances between my eyes, and it’s an effort to maintain my smile. “I’m fine,” I reply, wiggling my eyebrows. “Just a little bump. Nothing a little Tylenol won’t fix.”

“Mr. Adams,” the first reporter says, “there are rumors that you started up an off-screen romance with your co-star, Leslie Hart. Is there anything you want to say to that?”

Now I have no problem faking my smile. The rumor is so absurd that I wonder what sort of Internet troll even tried to come up with it. “There’s nothing to say,” I say easily. “Leslie and I are co-workers, and she has always been professional with me. Whoever started that rumor is wrong.”

“Mr. Adams,” the same reporter asks, his voice causing me to grit my teeth. “Do you think doing this movie will make people forget about the Anaconda video?”

Always, always, always. Everything always comes back to that damn video. This time, though, I don’t get angry. I don’t feel capable. I just feel . . . dead inside.

“I certainly hope so,” I say finally, flashing a wink and nodding my head at the crowd of reporters. “Thank you, but I’ve gotta get to offseason workouts.”

“Okay, that will be all,” Miranda says at my side as I rise to my feet. “Gavin is done taking questions now. He’ll be signing a few autographs in the lobby for a few minutes and then we have to catch our flight. Thank you.”

The crowd rushes forward, taking pictures, each flashbulb stinging my eyes and making my head throb a little bit more. I keep the smile on my face, ignoring the flashes even though I feel like shit. Security holds back most of the crowd as we make it into the hallway of the press venue.

“I think that’s the best I’ve seen you do while we’ve been here,” Miranda says out of the side of her mouth. “What’s changed?”

*I did my best at faking it*, I think to myself. Truth be told, I’m in a nasty fucking mood. Nothing they said mattered. It was just a couple of minutes and it all seems like a blur to me. I don’t even know what I said.

“Just glad to be done with all of this,” I finally say. “Football time.”

“I’m glad too,” Miranda says as we reach the lobby where a small crowd waits. “I’m not sure I could’ve taken much more of airhead Gavin.”

Before I can reply, I’m swarmed by a wall of clamoring fans. It’s hard to keep the smile on my face, but I do it, signing a few t-shirts, books, and posters. I politely answer questions and pose for pictures, wanting it to end as fast as possible. The line of people seems endless, and after a while, I begin to get dizzy from all the stimuli surrounding me.

Suddenly, I’m caught off guard when one girl presses herself against my side, causing a hiss of warning from Miranda.

“Is your anaconda as big as they say it is?” she asks. Obviously a bimbo groupie, she has big tits and a low skirt. Her t-shirt is hand-cut in a V to show even more of her surgically enhanced cleavage.

I grit my teeth. I hate when fans invade my personal space and then ask me rude questions. “It’s about as big as those fake tits of yours—”

“Sorry, folks, we’re going to be moving along now,” Miranda cuts in, doing quick damage control and shoving the girl and others out of the way. “Got a flight to catch!”

I press the opening, shouldering my way through the crowd as Miranda scrambles to catch up. “You just couldn’t make it to the end without screwing up, could you?”

“Are you fucking serious?” I demand.

“You know better than that,” Miranda says reproachfully. “It’s not worth letting someone get under your skin.”

She’s right. But I’m not perfect and I’m tired of being expected to be. I turn to her as we walk out of the building and come up on our waiting limo.

“You know what, Miranda? I’m sorry I can’t be a fucking robot twenty-four seven. Go here, say this, let this person grope you, never mind that everyone only wants to talk about my fucking cock! I’m sorry that I’ve got feelings and that I’m not always able to control them. You know, instead of ranting at me about it, how about from time to time, you actually remember that I’m a human being?”

Miranda grows silent, her face going stony.

Our driver gets out and opens the door for us, and I climb inside, taking a seat near the window. Miranda is in moments later, sitting as far away from me as she can. As we pull off, the cabin is plunged into tense silence.

I ignore it and stare out the window, my stomach in my throat. It’s hard seeing the shops as we pass by, all the ones I’ve gotten used to seeing. I would’ve liked to visit them, but there’s no time. I’m leaving this all behind. Leaving *her*.



I quell the sudden urge to command the driver to stop. What would I do anyway? I can't stay here. I have a contract with the league.

But man, it fucking *hurts*.

When we reach the airport, I literally feel like I'm short of breath.

"Are you all right?" Miranda asks. They're her first words since our little spat, and they're delivered in a tone that says she doesn't really give a shit. "You look kind of pale."

"Yeah," I lie, keeping my tone even. "Just ready to get back home."

Miranda grunts her agreement as the car rolls to a stop in front of our departure terminal. "Boy, I'm telling you, so am I."

Hustled by terminal security, we quickly get out and unload our luggage. Even though I'm pissed, I carry my and Miranda's luggage to the baggage area and get it checked in within ten minutes. Next, we get through the checkpoints with ease, and by the time we're boarding the plane, I'm convinced I'll need something to relax me to get through the flight.

"You sure do look pale," Miranda remarks again as we settle into our seats. It's a charter flight. The team wants my ass back in town ASAP, and they sent the owner's private jet to take care of it.

I wave away her concern. "Just feeling a little sick, that's all."

She peers at me. "You sure? I don't want to get up to thirty-five thousand feet in the air and we wind up with an emergency on our hands."

I set my jaw. "I'm good." *No, I'm not.*

Miranda continues to study me for a moment but then gives up and relaxes back in her seat.

The pre-flights are done within the next half hour, and the whole time, I stare out the windows, wishing that I could change things. When the plane jolts, signifying that it's moving, I grip the armrest as it begins to taxi.

Just as the plane turns onto the runway, I'm hit by a surge of adrenaline, my entire trip flashing before my eyes. Image after image coalesces before me,

all of my special moments with Brianna. Her smile. Her touch. Her sweet, innocent laughter.

And in that moment, Leslie's words come back to haunt me.

*Don't be like me and miss out on the best thing in your life.*

Suddenly, my career as a sports star doesn't seem as important anymore.

"Stop the plane!" I yell, drawing the attention of the flight attendant.

"What the fuck?" Miranda cries in alarm as I rise out of my seat. "Gavin?"

I ignore her and yell again. "Turn the plane around. I have to get off!"

"Stop it!" Miranda commands, trying to grab at me. I swat her hand away.

"Sir," the flight attendant says, coming up to me. "We're about to take off. We can't just stop the plane on a whim."

"You can," I growl. "This is an emergency!"

The attendant frowns at me, disturbed by my frantic state. "What kind of emergency?"

I grab my carry-on and begin moving toward the exit. I don't give a fuck what this flight attendant, Miranda, the pilot, or what anyone else says. I don't even give a damn if I have to parachute out of this motherfucker. I'm getting off this fucking plane one way or the other.

"Love," I throw over my shoulder.

## CHAPTER 29

BRIANNA

I draw a line of lip gloss on as I look at myself in the mirror, but I don't really care that much. Once again, it's time to go to fucking work. I really wanted to take the day off, but at least it'll keep my body and my mind busy.

My heart skips a beat as a pain lances my chest. It hurts to think about it.

Gavin's gone. *Forever.*

A deep sigh escapes my lips as I stare at my reflection. My eyes are puffy and bloodshot from crying all night. I suspect I'll go through many more days like this until I'm all cried out. But right now, I need to be strong and go to work.

I get my things, leave my apartment, and get in my car. As I start the engine, the radio comes on, but I quickly turn it off. I know the news will just be gossiping about Gavin and his departure. And I don't want to hear that right now.

As I traverse block after block, I find it difficult to concentrate, tears threatening to spill from my eyes. I told myself I wouldn't do this this morning. But it's damn near impossible. I grip the steering wheel tightly, trying to focus on the road, taking deep, calming breaths.

*Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry,* I chant.

I get a couple of blocks from the hotel when my car begins making a *chugging* noise, stuttering violently before finally dying and rolling to a stop in the middle of the street. “The hell?”

Trying to remain calm, I put my foot hard on the gas and turn the key. I get the motor to turn over, but it keeps sputtering, and I’m only barely able to pull over to the side of the road.

I hear someone honk their horn several times, and a lady yells out her window as she passes by, “Learn how to drive!”

I ignore the bitch and the surge of anger that goes through my chest, giving the gas everything I have with violent kicks.

*Click. Click. Click.*

Only dead silence now.

I shake my head, panic gripping me as I glance at the time. I only have ten minutes to clock in or I’m going to be late. Grabbing my cell, I dial the office but then stop. I can’t exactly call in sick at this point. No matter what I say, Vandenburg isn’t going to care.

I imagine he has my slip written up already.

“God damn it!” I yell, hitting the steering wheel with my fists, blaring the horn. The sound causes a lady stepping out in front of my car to jump in alarm and look my way. When she sees me, she averts her gaze and scurries off. Yes, I know I must look like a mad, pissed off bitch. Because I am. I’m hurt and fucking fed up.

I get out of the car and take in my surroundings, not sure what I should do. There are several shops nearby, but I know no one is gonna be able to help me get my car up and running in time.

A heavy feeling settles on my chest as I consider my dwindling options. I can either call for help or just not go into work. For help, Mindy immediately pops in mind, but I quickly discard the idea. There’s no way I’m making her leave her shift on my behalf. It will only end up getting us both in trouble.

And if I don't go into work, I'm as good as fired.

Shading my eyes, I peer down the street. I can see the hotel in the distance, just maybe a mile away. In my car, it would have taken me fewer than two minutes. But now . . .

I sigh, my body already aching as I realize there's only one thing left to do.

*Run.*



MY RIBS ACHE, MY LUNGS BURN, AND MY ASS FEELS LIKE IT WAS DIPPED IN gasoline and set on fire when I stagger through the front door of the Waterway twelve minutes later, covered in sweat. My heart pounding, I'm praying that my watch is slow, but when I clock in, I see that I'm two minutes late. Thankfully, there's no sign of Vandenburg and I hope he doesn't take notice.

I'm walking through the lobby, still catching my breath, when I hear Mindy cry out, "Bri!"

She's standing in the doorway of the coffee shop, staring at me with wide eyes, waving me over. She looks cute as a button in her usual outfit, her hair pinned up with wispy bangs, a pale splash of rouge on her cheeks and shiny gloss on her lips.

"What's going on?" she asks me when I walk over, ushering me into the back room of the coffee shop.

"My car broke down," I rasp, trying to fill my lungs with air. I know I must look like hell, my hair in disarray and sweat dotting my forehead, but I don't care. I made it, and that's all that matters. "I had to half-jog, half-run all the way here."

"Oh, my God, why didn't you just call me?" Mindy demands, helping me into the back room and grabbing me a stool that I lean on gratefully.

I suck in gulps of oxygen, wanting to lean on Mindy for support, but I fight the urge, remaining against the stool. I need to stand on my own two feet. "I

didn't want you to leave your shift. It was my fault.”

Mindy scowls at me, placing her hands on her hips. “No, it wasn't. You could have called me. It’s not a big deal.”

I wave her away, coughing and shaking my head. “Well, it’s okay now. I just need to get to work.”

Mindy gives me a hug. And then she pulls back and appraises me with concern in her eyes. “Are you okay?”

I know what she's asking about, but I really don’t wanna talk about it. “I’ll live,” I admit. “I’ve been through worse.”

She shakes her head, sorrow reflecting in her eyes. “I’m so sorry. His plane left this morning, they said. They got into the limo just as I was opening up.”

Tears sting my eyes. *Ugh*. I feel like shit. Lost the man I’d developed feelings for. Car broke down. And now I’m about to possibly lose my job.

How much more can a girl possibly take?

A huge lump forms in my throat and I clench my fists. I refuse to be brought to my knees by all of this. I was fine before Gavin came along, and I’ll be fine again.

“Have you seen Vandenburg?” I ask thickly. I don't bother replying to her statement. I don’t want to talk about Gavin. “I didn’t see him when I signed in, thank God.”

Mindy shakes her head. “No, I haven’t seen his uppity ass.” She pauses and taps her cheek. “Haven’t seen him since yesterday, in fact.”

Relief flows through me. Maybe he took the day off and I won’t have to worry about him today. “Good,” I say. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all morning.”

“Damn sure is.” Mindy hugs me again and then gives me a perceptive look. “I can see that you’re trying to avoid talking about Gavin, but if there is anything—anything—I can do for you, please don't hesitate to ask.”

“I will.” I begin to turn away but then stop, my side aching from my run.  
“Tylenol?”

Mindy nods at me, quick to scurry off. “Let me go check!”

She runs back behind the counter and digs in her purse. “I don't have Tylenol, but will Midol help?”

“It'll have to do,” I say. “At this point, I'm willing to take anything.”

She pours me a cup of water, which I use to take a double dose of the pills.

“Thanks, Mindy,” I say when I'm done. “You're a lifesaver.”

“Anything for you, Miss Sayles,” Mindy says, perfectly imitating Vandenburg's accent.

We both share a laugh. I know the darkness isn't gonna recede soon, but Mindy will at least be the sunshine that helps push it away.

“Okay,” I say, dreading having to work but knowing I have to. “Let me get to my shift.”

“See you at break.” I give Mindy a quick hug and start on my way.

I'm almost out the door when Mindy calls out, “Bri!”

I stop and turn around. “Yeah?”

She flashes an optimistic smile. “Everything's going to be all right. You'll see.”

My aching heart says otherwise, but I manage to answer softly, “I hope so.”

I leave the coffee shop, collect my cart and cleaning supplies, and then start my shift.

I spend the next few hours doing everything I can to focus on my job, trying to keep my mind off Gavin. He's gone. Abracadabra. Poof. Not coming back. I need to let that sink in.

*And in a few weeks' time, I won't even remember his name,* I tell myself as I drive on like a plow horse.

By the time I reach the sixth floor, I'm beyond exhausted. With all the movie production guests checking out on the same day, all the rooms were messy as fuck. It was a fucking nightmare. The little relief Midol had given has worn off, and I need a break. But I don't take one. I just want to get through this day without breaking down.

When I'm finally done vacuuming, scrubbing, and changing beds, my feet are killing me and my sides and head are pounding with a vengeance.

But I still have one room left. A room I've saved for last and have been avoiding. Room 603.

*Gavin's.*

I walk over to it, groaning with each step, and pause at the door.

A part of me wants to just walk off and leave because I don't want to be reminded of our time together. But I can't take the chance that it isn't messy inside, not when all the other rooms were that way. I must go in and do my job.

Sucking in a deep breath, I put the key in the door and turn it. *Click.* With a gentle tap of my foot, the door swings open.

My breath catches in my throat when I walk in. The room is spotless. Everything is in order, totally immaculate. It's the only room today that I've walked in on in this condition. Gavin had to have cleaned it or gotten someone to do it. His last gift to me.

"Oh," I whisper.

I bring a hand to my chest, choked by the simple sight of a clean room, as tears burn in my eyes. It's too late now, but I wish I hadn't been so prideful and stubborn. I should've just talked to him before he left.

Would it have been so bad to get a last goodbye from him?

I suck in another breath, inhaling deeply. The leftover scent of Gavin's cologne is on the air, causing my skin to prick. I sit down on the sofa, wrapping my arms around my chest as a torrent of emotions build inside. I



wish my arms were his, holding me, hugging me, enveloping me in his warmth.

Tears roll down my cheeks as I get up and make my way over to the bed and lie down on it. Broken, I press my face softly to the covers. I can smell his scent stronger here, the pillowcases heavy with him. I sigh, wishing that he were lying here with me. Making love to me. “Gavin,” I moan.

I jump with surprise when suddenly, the door bangs open. I’m on my feet in an instant, wiping the tears from my eyes. But it’s too late.

Vandenburgh waddles into the room, a look of glee on his face.

“There you are, Miss Sayles,” he says, out of breath. “I’ve been looking all over for you. But something told me I’d find you here.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” I say, flashing an easy, fake smile. “I was just finishing cleaning—”

Vandenburgh laughs, silencing me with a sharp gesture. “Save your lies, Miss Sayles. I saw you clocked in late this morning.” His malicious grin is so wide I swear it’s about to split his face.

I’m quick to defend myself. “I’m sorry about that. My car broke down and I had to run—”

Vandenburgh cuts in again. “That was your third strike. And do you know what that means, Miss Sayles?” He pauses, waiting for me to say something, and when I part my lips to reply, he snarls over me, “You’re fired!”

Of course I am. And I bet this asshole has been salivating this entire time, waiting for me to clean all of my rooms before he fired me. Now the last thing I was clinging to is gone. But there is one thing I have left. My dignity. And since now I have nothing to lose, I’m not gonna take Vandenburgh’s shit anymore.

Vandenburgh looks surprised when instead of slouching off, I get right in his face, towering over him even in his stacked-heel dress shoes.

“Well, you know what, you humpty dumpty ass son of a bitch?” I snarl, stealing Mindy’s favorite insult she uses behind Vandenburg’s back. “I’m glad to be fired! I was so fucking sick of hearing your fake ass voice and seeing you sit on your ass while I busted mine anyway.”

Vandenburg is shocked by my reaction, his mouth dropping open.

My hands on my hips, I smile sweetly at him. I’m sure he thought I was gonna get down on my knees and beg him for my job. But as Mindy once said after one of her write-ups, fuck this, fuck that, fuck him, and fuck this place. I’ll get through this somehow. I always have. With my parents being gone, I learned the best person to depend on is myself.

Vandenburg finally seems to recover from his shock, snarling with spittle flying from his mouth. “How dare you, you trollop!”

I raise my head to the ceiling and let out a mocking laugh. “Trollop? This is the twenty-first century! How about getting with the times instead of sitting on your ass all day reading Playgirl magazine?”

Vandenburg turns deep red, his anger overcoming his shock. I have a feeling he wishes he could choke the life out of me right now. Maybe I should keep pushing him to see if he’ll do it. “Why, you little . . . if you are not off the premises within five minutes, I’m going to have security escort you out!”

I part my lips to deliver another biting insult when . . .

“That won’t be necessary,” says a deep voice behind us.

I spin around and my heart nearly stops. Gavin is standing in the doorway, glaring at Vandenburg, his eyes burning with wrath.

“M–Mr. Adams,” Vandenburg stutters, his face turning as white as a sheet. “I thought you were gone on your flight.”

“Change of plans. I forgot something very important here,” Gavin replies, walking up to Vandenburg. He looks at me, his eyes full of burning intensity.

I blink several times, wanting to pinch myself. Is this real? It can’t be.

“I thought we had an agreement,” Gavin growls, turning his gaze back to Vandenburg. “I asked you to cut Brianna some slack.”

“I—I . . .” Vandenburg goes silent, then puffs out his chest. “I’m the general manager of this establishment. And while you might be famous, you don’t have any say over how I do my job. Miss Sayles is fired because she’s a horrible employee. And if you don’t take your little pet and be gone from here, I’m going to have you *both* escorted out in handcuffs.”

Gavin laughs. “I’m afraid you don’t have that power anymore.”

“You will get out *now*—” Vandenburg stops, confused. “What do you mean?”

Gavin’s grin is just as malicious as Vandenburg’s was a few minutes ago. “I made a few phone calls. Spoke with a few shareholders. Did you know that one of them happens to be a very big Gavin Adams fan? So he did me a little favor.” Gavin smiles. “You’re fired. The hotel’s looking for a new general manager as we speak.”

Vandenburg’s mouth opens and closes, and I swear he looks like Mindy’s fish down in the coffee shop. “What? Impossible! You’re lying!”

Gavin shakes his head. “Call Mr. Layman himself.” Gavin raises his nose and speaks in his best Vandenburg impression, “You are hereby relieved of duties . . . forthwith.”

“You’re a liar!” Vandenburg howls. He digs his phone out of his pocket and dials, his face sweating as he talks to the person on the other end of the line. “Yes, Mr. Layman . . . yes. But sir, I . . . yes. Yes . . . sir! Sir, please! Yes—yes sir.”

Vandenburg turns off the phone, face white as a sheet, and he turns his rage-filled eyes on me. “You,” he snarls, stabbing a pudgy finger at my face. “It was all because of *you* that this happened!”

Vandenburg starts to step toward me, but in a swift move, Gavin steps in front of me and Vandenburg suddenly changes his mind. Huffing angrily, he turns and storms from the room, yelling, “You haven’t heard the last from me!”

“Indeed.” Gavin chuckles, tossing him a little wave as he goes and slamming the door on his way out. When he’s gone, Gavin turns to me, smiling a little and jamming his hands in his pockets. “Well.”

I’m shaking, I’m so anxious and shocked. “Well what?”

Gavin laughs, rubbing his head and wincing as he hits his stitches. “Is that how you greet a man who just turned around a private plane and pissed off his team’s owner so he could come back to you?”

I gape in astonishment.

Gavin moves in close, placing his arms around my waist. What he said hits me, and I start to tremble. In a heartbeat, everything I’ve been holding against him—the money, him being an egotistical lady slayer, the cockiness—it all slips away. “You said you came back for something very important,” I breathe, biting my lip. “Did you find it?”

“Yes,” Gavin says. “I did. The love of my life.”

His words are like a freight train, nearly knocking me off my feet. I can’t believe this. Tears form in my eyes as I look up at him. “You can’t mean that. You’ve only known me for a week.”

“I do,” he says, pulling me closer. “Sometimes, you just know.”

I can no longer hold them back. The droplets start rolling down my cheeks. “But what about the team? Your workouts, all the—”

“Shh,” he murmurs, putting a finger to my lips. “I’ll get it worked out. None of those things matters to me right now.”

“But . . .” I protest weakly, my heart pounding so hard my vision blurs.

“I love you, Brianna Sayles, and I think I’ve loved you from the moment I set eyes on you,” Gavin declares.

The breath stills in my lungs, the weight of his words pressing down on me. There is nothing but sincerity in his eyes. He truly *means* it. He's going to do whatever it takes to make it work. *Oh, my God.*

“I love you too,” I reply, barely able to get the words out as I cup his face, my chest swirling with a maelstrom of emotion. “But I need your help with something,” I plead.

“What?” he asks, and I smile, standing on my tiptoes to softly kiss him on the lips.

“Take me,” I whisper, my body burning with need, my legs trembling with anticipation. “Now.”

Gavin picks me up, carrying me over to the bed. “You don't have to tell me twice.”

## CHAPTER 30

GAVIN

*I*t must be a medical miracle.

At the first touch of her lips on mine and when she says she loves me, all the pain in my head disappears and fresh strength fills my body. She's like a feather as I pick her up in my arms and carry her over to the bed, laying her down like she's the most precious diamond on earth.

I lie down next to her, kissing her lips softly again, wanting this time to be different from any other time we've been together. We've fucked. We've had sex. Now, it's time for something special.

"Brianna," I whisper in her ear, kissing along the pink shell curve and nibbling. She responds with a breathy moan and her fingers dig into my neck, scratching lightly.

"Gavin," she moans, her other hand trying to get the buttons on my shirt undone. "Gavin, I want to feel you inside me."

"You will," I reassure her, kissing down her neck to the collar of her polyester maid uniform. I chuckle, thinking how sexy Brianna is that she can make this cheap rag look seductive. I find the zipper and pull it down, kissing lower as her creamy pale skin is exposed to my lips. "You will."

"No," she says, her voice desperate with a need that makes me lift my head from the hollow between her breasts, wondering. Brianna strokes my hair, biting her lower lip before she makes her decision. "No condom this time."

I nod, my heart swelling as we both know the trust involved. I lower my head again, kissing and sucking on her breasts until I reach the edge of her bra before I sit up, easing the uniform off her shoulders. Brianna sits up, helping me shrug the one-piece outfit off before she takes off her bra and panties, stretching out beautifully nude again for me, her nipples already hard and her cheeks flushed with desire.

“You are the most beautiful woman in the world,” I say, stepping off the bed only long enough to take off my clothes before I join her, laughing when my shin bumps against something hard and cool. “You forgot your shoes.”

Brianna looks down and laughs lightly. “Sort of distracted.”

“Let me,” I answer, kissing her fingertips before covering her body in soft kisses, working my way down to her feet and unknitting the black sneakers and taking them off.

I caress her foot, kissing my way up the inside of her thigh, spreading her legs as I work my way toward the pink petals of her wet, glistening pussy. “My sweet little Bunny.”

Brianna chuckles at my nickname, blushing deeper. “If you mean I want to go at you like a rabbit, you’re right.”

“Well, let’s find out,” I reply, reaching out with my tongue to trace the soft lips of her pussy. She’s tangy and sweet, that amazing Brianna flavor that I love, and as I nibble and suck on her pussy, her soft moans and cries of pleasure guide my tongue. I stroke her inner folds with the tip of my tongue, gathering her honey before I suck harder. I greedily drink her juices as her back arches and she grabs my head, grinding her pussy against my eager tongue and lips.

“Gavin, yes,” Brianna moans as I find the hard clit and flick my tongue over it, stroking it in just the way that she likes best. Circling, I find her special spot and start sucking while with my right hand, I slide a finger inside her to rub at her inner button.

“Mmm,” I moan against her clit as her pussy grips my finger and I start to rub, my finger and tongue stroking in tandem to bring her higher and

higher. Her body starts to shake, and she pulls my hair harder, causing a little bit of pain from my stitches, but I don't care.

"Gavin . . . Gavin, I'm . . . oh," she groans before her hips lift, her thighs squeezing my head tightly as she comes, her voice rising into a breathless cry of ecstasy. I stay still, not wanting to torture her as she rides it out, my finger clamped deep inside her.

When she comes down, she's gasping, trembling, but the look in her eyes tells me that she wants more. "Better?"

I kiss my way up her body, sucking her left nipple and biting down a little. She hums happily as she strokes my shoulders and back, cooing. "Gavin, you can do that to me any time you want."

"I plan on it," I answer, working my way back up to her lips and tasting them. She sucks on my tongue, my passion rising when she wraps her legs around my waist and I can feel the warm wetness of her pussy sliding against the base of my cock. "Brianna . . ."

"You were soft and tender, and I thank you," she says, stroking my face before grinning. "But now . . . give it to me. All of it."

I line up with Brianna's entrance and push in, watching her face for the first sign of pain. I'm shocked as I sink deeper and deeper, half my cock, three quarters . . . all of my cock in one smooth, tight stroke that leaves us both trembling again.

She's still tight, her body gripping my cock perfectly as I push her knees up, opening her up more before I pull back, stroking in and out slowly, taking my time. My body is on fire as my cock is caressed and squeezed in a way that it's never felt before.

"Brianna," I growl, my eyes opening wide when she grabs my arms and digs her fingers in, a sliver of pain driving me to my animal point. "Get ready."

She doesn't say anything, but the sexy, feral grin on her face as I thrust my cock in hard tells me that she loves it too, and in seconds, the only sounds in the room are our harsh breathing and the sexy smack of our hips as I pound Brianna's body.



“Yes . . . yes . . . yes!” She grunts each time my balls slap against her ass, and I hear a creak as the headboard of the bed starts to hit the wall. My cock throbs, feeling fuller and harder than ever before in my life as I speed up, grinding my hips against her clit with each hammering thrust, driving into her with everything I have.

Brianna brings her hands up to my shoulders, clinging tightly as I speed up more and more, giving her everything I have, and she takes it, returning it to me with passion and desire. Sweat trickles down my face as I look into her beautiful eyes and she looks into mine, soulmates who have finally found each other, and in her eyes, I see a future. Not one of failure, but of love and acceptance, of success.

“Harder,” she gasps, and somehow, I find the strength to up my efforts even more, pounding her so hard it sounds like she’s getting spanked each time and my hips start to ache from the pounding action. I groan, my cock swelling inside her, and Brianna’s fingers dig harder into my shoulders, her eyes going wide. “Yes . . . come in me . . . yes!”

My balls grow tight and hard against my body, and I shudder on the edge when Brianna’s fingernails pierce my skin and I’m pushed over. I cry out, throwing my head back to scream my ecstasy as I fill her, fill my angel with what she wants, my cock seeming to be a never-ending stream of come and passion.

Brianna moans, her own cries joining mine as she comes again, her pussy squeezing my cock and sending me on another wave of intense feeling, my arms trembling and my heart skipping beats in my chest so often that I think I’m going to pass out.

When the moment passes, I look into her eyes, resting my forehead against hers, sharing her breath. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Brianna says, gently stroking my neck.

We stay there for a long time until I slip out and lie next to her, letting her pillow her head on my chest. We both hum with the glow of what we just did, and Brianna smiles after a moment, running her fingers over the ridges of my abs.

“I don’t need to ask anymore,” she says with a chuckle before sighing happily. “I know you liked it.”

I laugh softly, stroking her hair and kissing her head. “You have no idea how perfect you are for me.”

Brianna nuzzles my chest, humming happily. “I think I fell in love with it the first time I saw it.”

“It?” I ask, and Brianna nods, reaching down to wrap her fingers around my half-soft cock and stroking it.

“The Anaconda.”

“Oh, Jesus,” I groan, rolling my eyes as her soft hand strokes me, my cock certainly liking the attention again.

“It was a joke,” she says with a laugh, kissing my chin as her hand keeps pumping my cock. Fresh tingles of desire course through me, and I moan softly even as I laugh.

“Between you and me, I’ll be fine if I don’t hear another cock joke for another hundred years.”

Brianna smiles, shifting her body to look up at me. “But you love me.”

I nod, my cock growing hard again from her attentions, and I know we’re both thinking the same thing. “Of course, I love you now and forever.”

Brianna smiles and swings her leg up and over my now fully hard cock, sinking down onto it and moaning deeply as I fill her again, my hands resting on her hips before she leans forward and kisses me. “And I love you, Gavin Adams.”

## EPILOGUE

GAVIN

The plane is the same one as last time, although the team is making me pay for the flight time myself as punishment for the mess that happened two days ago, but I don't care. What's important is the person sitting next to me as I reach across the small divider and take Brianna's hand. "First plane ride?"

She shakes her head, turning her head away from the rapidly shrinking town below us to look in my eyes. "I once flew to Pueblo to see my Dad, but I ended up driving back when the visit went weird and I cut it short. It's actually where I bought my car."

I laugh, leaning back as we rise to our cruising altitude and the flight attendant comes around with the beverage cart. "I guess it's something I've gotten used to. I probably have enough frequent flier miles to fly around the world."

Bri leans her seat back and sips her drink. "So, what now?"

I shrug, glad that Miranda decided to take a commercial flight back. I like the privacy with Brianna. "I've got offseason workouts starting tomorrow, but that's only a couple of hours in the mornings mostly. Summer camp starts next month, but you'll be going back to school then."

"On a much heavier schedule," she mentions, and I look over questioningly. "I decided, Gavin, that if you want to help me, I'm going to talk to the

university. If I bust my ass, I can finish up my Master's for a January graduation."

"Do it," I reassure her. "You've got the brains and the talent to be whatever you want."

Brianna smiles, looking at me carefully. "Gavin, I love you, but I have to ask . . . can you do the long-distance relationship thing? I mean—"

"I promise you, Brianna. I'm going to commit to this."

She smiles at me and says, "That's all I wanted to hear."



## January

THE PLANE RIDE IS SHORT, JUST NINETY MINUTES FROM TAKEOFF TO LANDING, AND the car's waiting for me as I drive through town to the university, walking up to the gates to see Mindy waiting for me, just like she said she would, bundled up but still looking Mindy-cute in a skirt with thick leggings. "You made good time."

I give her a hug—after all, she's Brianna's best friend—squeezing tightly. "Sorry about the attire. Jumped on the plane directly after the game."

"Bah, you're more comfortable than I am," she says with her normal sarcasm. "Sorry about the season."

"This is more important," I reply as we head through the gates and stand on the edge of the field. The graduates are seated by degree, and I watch as the Dean speaks again.

"Brianna Sayles, Business Management."

Mindy and I both explode in cheers, Mindy's piercing whistle shrilling across the entire stadium, making Brianna turn from the stage a hundred yards away, waving. We quiet down as the others are announced and Bri goes back to her seat, talking quietly.

“So, how’s the coffee shop?”

Mindy chuckles. “You asking as my bestie’s man, or as part-owner of the place?”

After getting Vandenburg fired, I made an investment, purchasing the hotel coffee shop and making Mindy the manager. She’s doing a good job. The place is turning a tidy profit, a bit more than before, and I think it’s money well-spent. Best of all, Bri’s been able to work on a part-time schedule when she wants. “Both.”

“We’re doing fine. Having Gavin Adams stuff on the walls has certainly helped with the tourist trade. Although I still get more tips.”

“Oh, why’s that?”

Mindy laughs. “On jersey days, I pull mine tighter to show more cleavage. Bri wears hers with a total ‘my boyfriend’s hot as hell’ vibe.”

When the ceremony finishes and the hats are tossed, I find Brianna right in the middle of the field like we’d planned, sweeping her into a hug and kissing her deeply. “I’m so proud of you, babe!”

“Thanks,” Brianna says, giggling as I spin her around. “Hey, I saw it on my phone—sorry about the playoffs.”

I shrug, setting her down. “Four touchdowns though, a hell of a game to go out on.”

“What do you mean, go out on?” she asks, and I grin, springing my first surprise.

“I decided—I told the team I’m not coming back next year. They weren’t too upset. They’ll save a ton on salary cap. I’m retiring from football, babe. It’s been coming for a long time now. I’m done with being a celebrity and living in the limelight.”

Brianna looks stunned, smiling. “So you mean . . .?”

“I’m coming to live here permanently,” I agree, kissing her again. She pulls me close, but I step back, shocking her when I go to my knee. “And I was

thinking, I want to start my new life right here. Brianna, will you marry me?”

I pull out the engagement ring from the pocket of my warmups, opening it to show her the half-carat Cartier diamond, nervous for only an instant before Brianna nods, tears in her eyes. “Yes!”

“Damn, I thought Bri’s pussy was slammin’ before, but if Gavin Adams is putting a ring on it, it must be out of this world!” Mindy jokes from beside us, but I ignore her as Brianna wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me again deeply, my cock stirring in my pants even though I’m beaten up and exhausted. “Congratulations, Bri!”

“I’m glad you asked,” Brianna whispers in my ear, ignoring Mindy too after I put the ring on her finger. “I have some news for you, too. Remember when you came and visited at Thanksgiving?”

“How could I forget?” I ask, grinning. A win on Thanksgiving Day followed by three days of wonderful bliss with Brianna at her new apartment? I don’t know which was sorer, my body from the game or my body from the number of times we made love that weekend.

“Well, I can’t be sure . . . but I’d say that was the weekend that you left me with a little surprise,” she says with a smile.

The news nearly brings me to my knees, a surge of elation washing over me. “You’re fucking with me!”

Brianna shakes her head, her eyes filled with tears and pride. “Congratulations, Gavin Adams. You’re going to be a father.”

Tears come to my eyes as I pull Brianna close, kissing her again, my heart exploding with absolute joy.

Meanwhile, Mindy grins as she looks on, wiping tears from her eyes. Apparently, she’s been in on it the whole time. “Guess the Anaconda is gonna be busy tonight!” she cracks, her voice filled with emotion.

I grin, a chuckle escaping my lips as I pull my sweet Bunny in for another kiss, growling, “You’re damn right it will.”



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BLITZED: A SECRET BABY SPORTS  
ROMANCE

BY LAUREN LANDISH

**“I brought Laurie back to meet her father. I brought her back to meet you.”**

I’m normally not into jocks, but when Troy Wood asks me out, I feel like I’m the Chosen One. After all, he’s hot as hell and Silver Lake’s best athlete, practically the King of Campus.

God’s gift to women—that’s what *they* call him, but I’ll make a gentleman out of him.

Everything is perfect, and he already practically has his ticket to the Big Leagues.

There’s just one *little* problem . . . I’m hiding a secret that could destroy him and his future. I can’t tell him . . . I can’t tell him that ***I’m pregnant with his baby.***

**\*\*Blitzed is a full-length romance with an HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger!**



PART I  
HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

## CHAPTER 1

WHITNEY

*T*hank God the bad part of summer is over, I think to myself, adjusting my newly bought burgundy skirt around my hips as I step out of my 2005 Honda Civic— which had long ago worn out its welcome, along with its air conditioner. It gets me around town, though, so that works. *The heat is so unbearable.*

The summer had been blistering, the hottest on record, with days that reached temperatures of 105 degrees, and I spent most of the summer simply fighting to stay cool. Now, I'm happy to finally get some relief as summer lets go of its stranglehold on the Pacific Northwest a bit. Right now, it's seventy degrees, and the cooler air feels great on my skin.

My limbs tremble slightly while I stand in front of my car door. My heart starts to race. It's my first day back at school, so I'm more than a little anxious, though I'm not sure why, since I've done this enough by now.

*Get it together, girl, I tell myself. This is your last year here. You won't have to see most of these people ever again after you graduate. And the one or two you want to see, you'll stay in touch with. You know that.*

Taking a deep, calming breath, I check my appearance in the side view mirror before moving on. My hair and makeup look all right—light foundation, blush and a hint of eye shadow, and my locks are long and wavy, the way that I think it looks best. When I'm satisfied, I gather my books, shut the door of my Honda, lock it, and then make my way through the parking lot and onto the Silver Lake High campus.

A feeling of nostalgia rolls through me as I set foot on the grounds and I'm greeted by the familiar layout. It looks just like I remember, with beautiful paved walkways, meticulously groomed lawns, and exquisitely built structures. Deep red brick and glass lend a weight to the buildings, while the high-reaching steel and glass make it not too stuffy.

*It's probably one of the best maintained High Schools in the state, I think, but too bad it's filled with a bunch of douches.*

Despite my fondness for my high school, I'm glad it's my last year. My four years of tenure have been filled with nothing but drama, and hopefully, I'll be moving on to bigger and better things once I sail off to college.

I will miss Silver Lake Falls, though. Silver Lake is a small, bustling town in the northwestern part of the country that has a booming economy, mainly due to the abundance of growth in its IT sector. Once a rich bedroom community, it is now becoming a place of economic power. In fewer than three years, the town's population had grown from ten thousand to well over twenty thousand before stabilizing and slowing down before growth exploded too much to take away the small town charm.

It's an amazing town.

I like to think that after I graduate with a good degree, I'll come back home to Silver Lake Falls and live out my life here well into old age. After all, I love it here. Nothing can beat a small town community where everyone knows each other and everyone comes together, even if there is the small town gossip and pettiness to deal with. But I won't settle down until I see what the world has to offer. I've never been anywhere else, and I need at least a taste of the real world before deciding what I want.

I'm a bit early, as usual, and I see the other early birds milling about, some gathered around their favorite hangout spots, talking and goofing around. I see mostly familiar faces and a few new ones, but I'm surprised to see how much people are staring at me. Mainly guys. Hot guys. The type of guys that would never look at me twice.

*Is there something wrong with my outfit?* I wonder, pausing to look down at my skirt. I'd chosen the outfit before I left home because, one, it was new, and two, I thought I looked good in it. Not too slutty, but not too chaste. It

makes my legs look long by riding the line on SLHS's dress code on skirt length, and the flare makes my waist look smaller than it is. I also have on a white blouse with a few pearl highlights, but it's nothing to get excited about.

After a moment, I continue on. I can't find anything wrong with my outfit, and I have no idea why I'm all of a sudden getting so much heat, but I swear one guy's head almost turns like the exorcist to keep his eyes on me as I walk by. If he'd snapped around any harder, I think he would have broken his neck. Actually, I remember him, and I think the world might be a better place if he does break his neck.

I ignore him and continue on my way through campus. I've almost made it to the building that contains my locker when I cross by The Fountain, a beautiful construction made of marble with an exquisitely crafted owl at the top that is surrounded by two of the main academic buildings and the cafeteria, completing a quad. The Fountain is Silver Lake High's most popular hangout spot and a place I often like to avoid because of the annoyance factor. I don't know why I'd walked right into it, but I suppose I hadn't been looking.

Not surprisingly, a group of jocks are crowded around The Fountain, laughing and telling stupid jokes. They're practically a pack of wolves, and more than once, I've compared them to what Mr. Cashion showed us in tenth grade science when he'd pulled out National Geographic videos. I try to sneak past them with my head down, hoping no one will notice me. Fat chance. All they have the mental capacity to do is crack jokes and notice people.

"God damn, Whitney!" A popular athlete named Cory Dunham exclaims as I walk by. Cory is one of the more competent ballers on the school's football team and is also one of the biggest manwhores on the planet. If you have a pulse and a vagina, he would come sniffing around at some point, I'm sure. "What have you been eating? You got thick as hell!"

"Fuck yeah," says Gabe Hackman, another douche jock who was just as much of a manwhore, biting his lip as if he's looking at a quarter pounder with cheese. "She's got an ass fatter than Kim Kardashian now. The good type, too."

I blush furiously, not sure how to respond. In a way, I feel insulted to be compared to a Kardashian, and in another, I'm flattered. But I can't figure out the sudden interest in me. None of these guys ever noticed me before, outside of insulting my appearance, and now, they're practically drooling over me? Something must be in the air.

Instead of engaging them, I continue on, ignoring their catcalls.

"Hey!" Cory yells, waving with his arms. "Get your sexy ass back here!"

Sexy ass? What is that guy smoking? I've never been accused of being sexy in my life. I'm the girl who disappears, remember, guys?

I make it inside the school building and find my way to the locker hallways when what they were saying about me registers, and realization washes over me in a wave of awesomeness. *It's the weight.* I'd often been told by guys and girls alike that I was too skinny, so over the summer, I'd been a little more liberal when it came to eating. It's not like I went all out, but I also let go of my stupid fear of anything with carbs in it. I think my absolute favorite discovery, though, was pasta. Mom could make some mean spaghetti, especially when she paired it with a tomato and Italian sausage sauce.

Who knew that stuffing my face with food would have resulted in my becoming more desirable?

Walking through the hallways, I receive more stares and guys ogling me, but I ignore them and make it to my locker. It's new and a bit unsettling to get this much attention, and I'm not sure if this is all just some sort of fluke.

I'm fumbling with my locker combination when I hear the sound of footsteps to my right, but I put my head down, hoping they'll not make another wisecrack. I've hit my limit this morning.

"Hey, Chica," a familiar, cheery voice chirps instead, and my mood lifts immediately. "Long time no see."

I look up into the smiling face of my childhood best friend, Danielle Vaughn, and crack a huge grin. She looks cute today with her two blonde side ponytails and red skirt topped by a white blouse. Her legs are long and

sexy, and the red heels she's wearing only further accent them. I'm happy to see her since I haven't seen her all summer due to her family vacation.

Before I can respond, her eyes widen, her mouth dropping open in surprised admiration. "Good God, did you inflate those things or something?" she demands, staring at my chest. "Stuffed your bra with golf balls?"

I glance down at my breasts and then let out a laugh. "No," I say. "Besides, golf balls? I'd hoped for at least oranges."

"Then what the hell happened to you?"

"I don't know. I just filled out a bit I guess. That, and I ate what I wanted for once."

Danielle bites her lower lip, looking my body up and down. "Well shit, girl, put me on that diet then. You're smokin'!"

I giggle again at Dani's exaggeration. The girl can always crack me up.

"And I'll take that ripe ass while you're at it," she adds, smacking me on the butt. "Damn, it even wiggles now."

I laugh harder and smooth out my skirt where Dani has rumped it. "Girl, please."

"Seriously. You've gotten so curvy, you could give Kate Upton a run for her money."

"Okay, now you need to stop."

Dani whips her tails, and I swear if the idiots in Hollywood ever want to make a young Harley Quinn movie, I know exactly who they should cast. Dani even knows who that character is—she introduced her to me. "I'm not lying to you."

I stop fiddling with my locker and glance around. I see several guys looking our way. One of them even grins at me. "Well, you know what? Ever since I walked on campus, I've received non-stop stares from all the guys," I tell her. "Isn't that just weird? I couldn't even get one to look at me, then I go away for the summer, and now the whole athletic department wants me? I walked by the Fountain coming in, and I thought I was going to start a riot."

Dani shakes her head again. "Girl, I'm telling you. You were a stick figure when I last saw you, and now, you actually have some curves. And they're in all the right places."

"Thanks," I say. "I think."

Dani grins at me. "Trust me, this year . . . you'll get laid, that's for sure."

"So how was your trip to Italy?" I say, quick to change the subject. The last thing I want to think about is having pre-marital sex. Mom is overly religious, and that's one of the things she never shuts the hell up about. When my boobs started to get bigger, she even made a comment that she could 'see my dirty pillows' before half-smiling at the joke. I hadn't laughed.

Dani's grin twists into a sour expression. "It was alright . . . I guess."

"What do you mean, you guess? You've been wanting to go to Italy since our sweet sixteen birthday parties. You talked so much about Michelangelo's David last year that I thought you were gonna hump the thing when you finally saw it in person."

"Well, I had fun and all, but our parents made me room with Joseph."

Joseph is Dani's brother and is actually pretty cute and sweet. He's a sophomore this year and is probably hanging out in the quad with his buddies. Like I say, he's nice. He just isn't my type.

"So what was so bad about that?" I ask. "I thought you loved your brother."

"I do! But I don't love his farts."

"Dani!" I protest, trying not to laugh too hard.

Dani scowls, her mouth drawing down into a little point. "Sorry. I can't help it. He was cutting those stinky things like he was slicing Swiss cheese. Or maybe aged Parmesan, considering where we were."

I gag. I can't help it. "Okay. Stop. Now."

Dani lets out a laugh. "It's so frickin' easy to gross you out."

"Which is why you should show some restraint and not do it."

Dani grins. “Never.” She starts to finger her blond locks then stops. “So I've been thinking, Whit.”

*Oh boy.* It was never good when Dani thought about anything. Did I mention she'd make a good young Harley Quinn? Brilliant and crazy—that's Dani Vaughn.

“About?” I ask wearily.

“I got an idea while I was in Italy.”

*Even worse.*

“Huh?”

“You know how you made that offhand comment about wanting to join the cheerleading squad last semester?”

“Uh . . . yeah?” I remember. I said it mainly because I'd been so hard up for a date that I'd been desperate to try anything, including flipping around in a short skirt in order to catch some attention from the type of guys I like. I can't help it. While their attitudes and behavior are disgusting, the image of a strong jock sends tingles through my skin.

“And have you been practicing the moves I showed you, like you promised?”

I nod. I don't say it, but I suspect that all those tumbling moves had been part of the reason my new weight has gone on in a good way and not a bad one. “I didn't have much else to do besides eat and look up the colleges I want to apply to.”

Dani looks pleased and says, “Well, I wanted to officially invite you to try out.”

I drop my jaw. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, why not? You're my best friend and this is our last school year together. Why not experience something you haven't done before and make the most of it?”



It's hard to close my mouth. I can't believe Dani is asking me to join the cheerleading squad since she always calls me clumsy as hell—and with good reason. I've spent years being all errant elbows and hip bones, and now she's asking me to do cheerleading?

“When are tryouts?” I finally manage. Dani can't be denied.

“Today after school, between the football field and the band practice area. And don't you dare think about saying no.”

I pause for a moment, thinking it over. Besides going out there and doing something clumsy and embarrassing Dani in front of the squad, I can't think of one good reason not to go and at least give it a try.

*What do I have to lose? I think to myself. The worst that can happen is I do awfully and they reject me.*

Usually, rejection terrifies me, but all the positive reaction I've gotten this morning has me feeling cheery and willing to try anything. I'd been practicing the moves Dani had taught me all summer, so I wouldn't exactly be going in as a total noob. Heck, I might even go out there and show up Dani once or twice, and I think she's an awesome cheerleader.

“Don't make me have to drag your new bubble butt ass out on the field,” jokes Dani, mistaking my silence as resistance. “And if you say you don't have any clothes to wear, I will stuff you in one of those nasty ass PE uniforms Coach Roberts lends out to the kids who forget to bring theirs from home. Don't worry about the t-shirt. You can use a team one, but you'd better have some exercise clothes.”

I chuckle and reply, “I'll drag it out there myself, thank you very much. And I've got something to wear. I think.”

## CHAPTER 2

TROY

“Gawd . . . *damn!* Who is that?” exclaims Russ Bowden, pushing his rust colored hair out of his eyes and doing a double take. “Did we get a new transfer student from the Playboy Mansion or something?”

I was sitting in the bleachers texting on my cell while my friends and teammates drooled over Silver Lake's cheerleading squad practice. It was a customary tradition for the guys to come sit around whenever there were new tryouts and bet money on which cheerleader would be having sex with them before the season was out.

Usually, I'd partake in the betting right along with them. In my junior year, I'd gotten a cool two hundred dollars from my haul, but I'm just not in the mood today. I'd gotten into a nasty argument with my drunk of a father before I left home, and I was ready to smash faces . . . not pussy. Besides, I'm a senior now. Chasing freshman and sophomore ass is supposed to be beneath me, and I know all the upper-class girls. At least I think I do.

“That's Whitney Nelson,” Cory, who is sitting to my right, says. Cory's the biggest player on the team, and I don't mean size-wise. The man has a list of conquests that would make Leo DiCaprio jealous, although personally, I thought Cory's focus on quantity took off points due to lack of quality. But to give the man credit, he has a great eye for the female figure.

Russ makes a face, his eyes going wide as saucers. “*That's* Whitney Nelson? Pancake Nelson? Bullshit.”

Cory nods. “Yup.”

“No fucking way!”

“Crazy, ain't it? She's a knockout now,” Cory added.

Russ snorts, shaking his head. “Knockout is an understatement. That bitch stacked.”

I look up from texting on my cell to see what all the fuss is about. My heart skips a beat and my mouth goes dry when I see her. I remind myself not to drop my fucking phone. I don't have the money to replace it if I crack the screen.

*Oh my fucking God.*

A girl with long, wavy auburn hair, a heart-shaped face and a voluptuous body is doing tryout exercises with the cheerleading squad. Her whole body moves with a sensuality that I've yet to see. I'm instantly turned on by the sight. Seriously, she's going to make me pop wood in front of all my friends. It's crazy. I've seen a lot of hot girls, but this one takes the crown.

To say she's beautiful is like saying the sky is blue. You don't argue that shit. You just accept it.

What I can't understand, though, is why I haven't ever seen her before? The other guys are all talking like they know who this girl is, but I'm racking my brains, and I'm drawing a blank.

“Ten bucks says I'll have her sucking my dick by the end of tonight,” boasts Cory.

Russ lets out a rowdy laugh. “Ten bucks? Fuck, dude, a hundred says she'll be riding me after practice!” Russ does a little dance in his seat, moving his arms all around like he's riding a pony. “Gangnam Style!”

All my teammates howl with laughter, but I'm not amused, and a dark, violent anger surges through my chest, surprising me.

“Shut the fuck up!” I seethe, barely holding back from it becoming a bellow. The words leave my lips before I can stop them. I'm not sure what's gotten into me. I never cared before who they laid claim to. It's all just a

game, anyway. But right now, I'm about three seconds from taking the football team's starting tailback and safety and seeing if I can throw them out of the stands off the back side. "None of you dickwads are getting shit!"

My teammates are momentarily stunned into silence by the venom in my voice. They're used to me being aggressive on the field, but never angry. In fact, some of them have never seen me angry, to all of our benefit. I prefer to get my high school diploma through school and not a jailhouse correspondence course.

"Shit, Troy, what crawled up your hairy ass and died?" Cory gets the courage to ask a second later. "Not into K-pop or somethin'?"

"Nothin," I say, calmer now. "Just that I know none of you have a chance with her is all. Girl like that, she ain't gonna be going home with any of you jackoffs."

Cory snorts. "Says who?"

"Says me," I snarl, causing Cory to draw back as if he fears I'm going to punch him in the face. Honestly, I don't know why I'm acting this way. I don't own this chick, don't even know her. And Cory's right. The guys weren't saying anything different from what I'd seen the past four years on the first day of school, and again in April when the track team did the same act.

Russ eyes me suspiciously. He's always been one of the smarter guys on the team, even if he's got a strange sense of humor. He usually makes me laugh, unless he's fucked off on deep coverage again and gotten beaten deep. "You want her, don't you?"

"No," I reply nonchalantly. "Just sayin', you two ain't got no chance. I can see it in her face. She's no easy lay."

"Fucking liar. You want her bad, man. Admit it."

"So what if I do?" I growl menacingly. "What are you going to do about it?"

Russ holds my gaze for a moment and then looks away. "Nothing," he mutters. "You get all the girls anyway. All I get are the fucking skanks."

*That's what I thought.*

I nod my head. “You're right. But I'm also the one who carries this fucking team.” As Silver Lake's prized quarterback on offense and inside linebacker on defense, I'm literally the lynchpin of the best chance Silver Lake has had to go to the state championships since Jimmy Carter was President. I'm one of the most popular kids in the school and usually get my way with everything. Girls, grades, preferential treatment by teachers— you name it, I get it.

It goes without saying that I'm an egotistical, conceited bastard. But I'm that way because I earned it, every fucking bit of it.

But while I can't ask for more of the sweet perks I get at school, it's a total 180 when it comes to my living situation at home. The moment I step off school grounds, I go back into the real world. I'm no longer Troy Wood, Silver Lake High's most prized athlete and biggest campus celebrity.

I'm just some ungrateful shit that should be happy that my dad chose to bang a random chick when he was eighteen and not use a condom. And according to my drunken dad, I wouldn't be shit without him. I owed him for everything—giving me life and for being a star ball player, though he'd done nothing to help me hone my skills. Shit, I owed him just for breathing. In fact, I owed him so much that I had to work an after-school job at a shitty pizza parlor just to help support his sorry ass drinking habit. So I take those easy grades from the teachers, mainly because after practicing until seven four nights a week, I spend another three to four hours slicing vegetables, sausage, and stirring five gallon pots of tomato sauce just to put food in my stomach.

*I don't know what he's going to do when I go off to college, I think to myself. Probably become a bum under the bridge. And it'll be all **my** fucking fault.*

I have big plans for myself after I graduate high school, none of which involve my drunkard father. First, I hope to go to college on a scholarship, because I certainly don't want to be chained to a student loan debt, and then I want to be drafted by the NFL, starting off with a multimillion-dollar contract.

I figure once I get on the college team and start showing off my exceptional abilities, the talent scouts will go crazy and start the bidding wars. First round draft pick, working a couple of endorsement contracts coming right out of school, and I'll be on easy street riding out my rookie contract on that bullshit scaled system the NFL is putting in place. When I hit free agency though, that's when it all goes bananas. Naturally, I'll settle with the highest bidder and make my way to the Hall of Fame and retire with a big mansion, a trophy wife and a quad of kids, set for life.

Ah, the easy life. I just have to get there first.

*And I **will** get there. I have total confidence in my ability to do so.*

As cocksure as I am, I always have to give myself an internal pep talk to keep my confidence level up. You have to when you're the brightest star on an otherwise shit team and your father tells you you're a worthless piece of shit. Coach tells us a positive mental mindset is essential, and I believe it. Coach has a lot of good sayings like that.

One thing is for sure. I know I'm not going to reach my goals if I get involved in a relationship with a needy girlfriend. That's one promise I've made to myself. No girlfriends. No relationship. No drama. No bullshit.

If I want to make it to the NFL, my motto has gotta be fuck 'em and leave 'em. It's harsh, but I have to protect myself. I don't want to become too attached. And I know what could happen if I fuck up by falling in love and getting a chick pregnant. It already happened to one of my best friends who now had to put his entire life on hold because he'd knocked up a chick he had feelings for. He was 'the guy' before I showed up on varsity, and we formed the core of a good one-two threat before he got the bitch pregnant. He quit the team, saying he wanted to man up, and that was when the shit hit the fan. He's been forced to work two shitty jobs to support the baby, and his grades fell because of it. With no football and no grades, he couldn't qualify for college and was stuck in those same two jobs, a miserable bastard. The worst part of it all? His lady love cheated on him shortly after giving birth. Hell, she asked if I wanted a piece of her ass when I stopped by once to see how my buddy and the baby were doing.

I vow that I'm not going to be that sucker.

The cheerleading squad takes a rest and I watch as Whitney pauses to dig the tights she's wearing out of the crack of her ass. She glances around as if worried someone is watching, and our eyes meet. She stares at me, her cheeks turning a light shade of pink, and I give her my most charming smile. Her lips part, as if in surprise, and then she looks away. Bending over, she grabs a water bottle before realizing she's giving us a pretty good view of what she was just digging out, and I can't help it. Mr. Disco Stick is ready to say hel-fucking-lo, and I'm not all that disinclined to stop him.

I can't keep the grin off my face, but I'm worried about how much I want to meet this girl. Usually, I let them come to me, yet I want to go to her. It's like she's a magnet and I'm a big hunk of metal. I mean, I'm a big hunk of something, and it can get hard as steel, but that doesn't mean I'm made of it.

"You are totally checking her out for yourself," Russ accuses, catching the exchange. "Or is that bulge in your pants because of Cory's Gangnam style dance?"

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"Don't play stupid. You're not in AP English, but you aren't an idiot either."

I think desperately and come up with the first idea that pops into my head besides Whitney's ass. "I was just thinking about the new plays I want to try at practice tomorrow. In case you didn't notice, we've got Blueridge on Friday, and their fullback isn't a pussy like you."

"Right."

"I was." I run my gaze over my gathered teammates. "And I want you all to be ready to try them out. No questions asked. I think it will help us when we play against Blueridge. I'm not starting my senior year with a loss."

"And have you run these plays by Coach Jackson?" asks Cory. "Usually he wants to look them over and approve them before trying them out."

I shake my head. "Nope. But I'm sure he won't mind. He knows all my strategies are good."

"Cocky bastard," Cory grumbles.

“He can afford to be cocky when he practically has a scholarship to any school he wants,” says Russ enviously. “Ain't that right, Troy? So which are you going with? Notre Dame? Stanford? Nah, you ain't got the grades for Stanford, but I bet the SEC would hook you up really good—football, easy grades, and Southern girls. Fuck, you wanna stay out here West Side, just go down to Clement, right?”

“I don't have one yet,” I say. “You all know that.”

Russ drops his jaw in mock astonishment, giving me a melodramatic gasp. “You mean to tell me the King of Campus doesn't have a scholarship?”

“Cut it out, jackass, before I deck you. I said I don't have one *yet*, not that I'll never get one. School has only just started back.” Russ is showing his jealousy by bringing up my scholarship, but I'm not going to sweat it. I know that most times, athletes are awarded scholarships in their senior year. Russ needs to stop talking shit and worry about himself. He'd be lucky to get one to a D-II school in North Dakota, let alone a major conference school like I'm in line for.

“What school you hoping for most?” Cory asks curiously.

“I dunno. Maybe State,” I say with a shrug. State has one of the best football programs in the Northwest, and best of all, they get on TV a lot so I'd get a good chance to be noticed by pro scouts, so it's a natural choice. But honestly, I don't think it matters where I wind up.

“Wherever he goes, they'd better have a field that can contain his ego,” says Russ. “Goddamn Rose Bowl isn't big enough for it from what I've seen.”

“Shit, they'd better have a cup size that can contain my dick,” I joke. “Do they make cups in foot-long size? I play soft, not hard like Cory does with his two-incher.”

The guys erupt with laughter around me, but I can only keep cutting glances at Whitney.



## CHAPTER 3

WHITNEY

*E*rap, this is hard.

I sigh and wipe the sweat off my brow and readjust my cheerleading uniform, grateful for the momentary break in exercises so I can catch my breath. Dani has had me do almost every cheer and dance routine known to man for tryouts so far, and I am aching. She even had me do splits. It wouldn't have been so bad if my practice uniform weren't extremely uncomfortable. Seriously, my tights are riding my ass crack hard, and every now and then, I have to pull it out and hope no one catches me doing it. What sort of crazy person does yoga in these things anyway? I packed them this morning because I wanted to go for a walk, and they are supposed to wick away sweat.

At least the uniform top is pretty, silver and blue. The school's colors, which are a lot better than some of the other schools around the area. And despite it being extremely tight, I think I look good in it. It compliments my new curves very nicely. The two silver stripes sort of curve out and around my newfound boobs, with the middle dark blue with "Silver Foxes" written across it in script.

The good thing so far is that I've been able to keep up with all the other girls, and Dani has yet to call me out for a single mistake. I've performed most of the cheers flawlessly and am actually having fun. I'd gone three years saying I would never do this sort of thing because it was so cliché,

and now I'm finding that, fuck it all, I'm enjoying being exactly what I said I would never be, one of the in-crowd girls.

I pull at my tights again, cursing under my breath, and then look around to make sure no one is watching. My gaze catches the eyes of Troy Wood, the most popular jock and athlete on campus. He's seated on the bleachers with a group of other jocks who have been staring and hooting like monkeys for the past half-hour . . . and he's staring directly at me.

My heart skips a beat. This guy has never looked at me before. Hell, I don't think he even knew I existed. Yet he's looking at me like I'm a side of beef, and it's actually sexy. I've never seen a guy look at me like that before, and certainly not one as hot as Troy.

My cheeks burn under his intense gaze, and I'm lost in a momentary fantasy.

"Hello?" Dani demands. "Earth to Whitney!"

I tear my eyes away from the hot hunk in the stands, doing my best to refocus. "Huh?"

Dani is scowling at me with her hands on her hips. "I asked you if you were ready?"

"Ready for what?"

Dani nods at the other cheerleaders. "To try the Pyramid."

I'm horrified. "You can't be serious."

Dani grins and nods. She's enjoying this a bit too much. I wonder if Coach picked the right girl to be Captain of the squad this year, because Dani's showing a serious sadist streak. "You wanted to be a cheerleader. Now let's see if you have what it takes."

She motions at the other cheerleaders, and they quickly take formation. First are the thicker girls, those who are on the team so they can be there for the lifts and stunts like this, then the next level, and then the third, rising up high into the air . . .

I stare with trepidation. Was Dani's plan to come back and offer me a spot on the cheerleading team, just to watch me fall and break my neck? “Uh . . .”

“Come on, Whit,” Dani says impatiently. “We don't have all day. The guys start their football games Friday night, and the coach is going to want us to have our routine in order.”

I debate on just walking off and telling her that I'm not fit for this, but I don't want to disappoint my best friend, and all the other girls are staring at me while they hold their positions, waiting for me to act. I understand the physics of it. Even with my new curves, I'm nearly the most petite girl out there, but that doesn't mean I like the idea of being twelve feet in the air on one foot. That is just insane.

“I hope I don't fall,” I mutter, making my way over to the wall of flesh. One of the girls, maybe Janet or maybe Dasha, grumbles under her breath, telling me to hurry the fuck up.

“Oh, you'll be all right.” Dani waves away my worry. “They won't let you fall.”

“I'm sure.”

“Hey, remember, Spirit Fingers!” she exclaims cheerily, quoting one of my favorite movies, *Bring It On*, while wiggling her fingers and doing a high split kick. She throws her arms out in a big V before tucking and doing a back round off, earning a few hoots and some applause from the stands. Dani's eating this shit up— she's always been a natural performer.

“Oh, God,” I groan in exasperation. Didn't she get it? This isn't *Bring It On*. This is real life. And I can die a horrible death. Or does she not notice that this pyramid is just a sidewalk's width away from the student parking lot and a lot of very hard, very black asphalt?

I know I'm being a little melodramatic, but I can't help myself. You get that way when your life is in the hands of a bunch of ditzy bitches who never gave you the time of day except that you are friends with one of the alpha girls on campus.

Dani comes over and leans in, her smile disappearing. My friend that is buried inside pokes through. "You can do this, Whit. You know I love you."

"If you loved me, you wouldn't be putting me through this," I say under my breath. Nonetheless, I do what she asks anyway. It's only after I get halfway up does my fear evaporate. The girls underneath me are all pros and are making it as easy as it can possibly be. There isn't a single wobble or tremble as I get on the back of the girl on top, ready for the last little bit. I reach the top and carefully climb to my feet. Taking my left foot in my hand, I do a quick gripped K-split, then lower my leg, trembling with excitement.

"I did it!" I cry triumphantly, pumping my fist in the air. "Fuck yeah!"

And then something awful happens. I slip. I start to go over to the left and I throw my arms out, trying something, but instead of regaining my balance or maybe having me tumble forward where Dani's there to act as safety, I feel my weight shift the wrong way, sending me backward and toward the black death of the asphalt. I hear the girls underneath me let out surprised gasps as I tumble. I'm sure I'll hit the ground and break my neck, but the very next second, I land right into strong, powerful arms.

I look up into hard blue eyes and a chiseled face. Troy Wood. He's holding me, cradling me as if I'm a baby.

"Careful there," he says to me, starting to set me on my feet on the asphalt. How the hell did he get from the stands to down here so fast? Is this an episode of *Heroes* and he has some kind of superpower? His voice is deep and rich and sends a tingle down my spine. "You could've really hurt yourself."

My cheeks burn with fire, and a little voice in my head tells me that I'm supposed to say something. You know, it's polite to say something when a guy saves your life and then talks to you. I think even Miss Manners wrote about that one time.

"Yeah. I'm clumsy. My bad. Thanks." It's all I can manage. I sound stupid, and the cheerleaders are all staring at Troy as if he's a piece of bacon and they're coming off a three-day juice fast, whispering amongst themselves. They don't even care that I almost suffered a horrible accident.

“He's so hot,” I hear one say, followed by a girly giggle. She composes herself a little and flashes him a thumbs-up and a *fuck me, please* set of eyes, speaking up again. “Nice job, Troy! I think it's my turn on top next time!”

Troy completely ignores them, his eyes burning into my face. It's like it's just the two of us as his eyes bore into mine, and I feel myself swimming in their blue depths.

Dani is immediately at our side. “Are you okay?” She glances at Troy. “You can put her the rest of the way down now, Superman.”

I look down and see that I actually hadn't been put all the way down, and that Troy still held me an inch or two off the ground, his hands at my waist and his arms barely straining holding me up. I expect him to go off on Dani for ordering him around. After all, he has a reputation of being an asshole who doesn't like to be told what to do by anyone except Coach Jackson, but he respectfully puts me down, then steps back, watching, as if waiting for me to say something.

“I'm okay,” I declare in embarrassment, smoothing my shirt. I have to avoid looking at Troy, and turn instead to look at Dani. He's almost too handsome to take in, and his burning gaze keeps making my heart flip in my chest. Not only that, but he cuts an imposing figure, towering over me, his chiseled biceps on display in the sleeveless undershirt that the football team wears under their shoulder pads and for practices. He has an incredible physique, and I can see why he's the most prized athlete in the city. Confidence and power radiates from him like a burning star, and he looks like he could hold up the entire pyramid himself across those massive shoulders of his.

“You scared the shit out of me,” Dani says to me. “I thought we were about to have a paraplegic on our hands.”

*Well gee, Dani, that wouldn't have happened had you not forced me to take part,* I think, but I say nothing. I know that sometimes Dani's mouth runs away from her head, and that she's just letting loose a bunch of stress and fright. If we'd been alone, she'd probably be crying right now, but she has to

be Dani the Alpha Girl, and that means she has to play it off with a wisecrack or a harsh tone. We'll sort it out later.

"Then it's a good thing I came along when I did, huh?" asks Troy. His piercing blue eyes stay glued to my face, and I swear I'm going to melt like the Wicked Witch of the West. "Honestly, though, you girls should move the tryouts deeper into the grass. It's a lot softer than concrete."

"It sure is, but the concrete's more stable," Dani says before I can reply. "What are you doing over here anyway? Aren't you guys supposed to be getting ready for practice?"

"No. Coach gave us just a tape session today, first day of school and all. In reality, I came over here to ask Whitney a question." His eyes are still on me, and I'm floored. Me? He actually knows my name? I open my mouth to ask him what it is he wants, but I'm interrupted.

"Really?" Dani says, not letting me get a word in. She's in full-on protective mode now, the Alpha Female squaring off with SLHS's Alpha Male. "And what would that be?"

Dani trips me out. Troy just possibly saved my life and she's interrogating him like he's a criminal. It's the main reason I know that Dani is really my friend. We look out for each other—I tutor her, and she buffers me in the social world. It's been that way for years now.

Troy doesn't seem bothered by Dani's bitchiness though, and he gives her an even look that actually shuts Dani down. "I wanted to know if she'll go out with me."

I swear, I almost faint right then and there and Dani goes pale in the face. Troy Wood has just asked me out in front of the whole damn cheerleading squad. Is the whole world on drugs or something today, and I just didn't get the memo?

After momentary shock, the cheerleaders go into a frenzy of gossipy chatter, sounding like a flock of crows all cawing at each other. I know what they are thinking. How can Troy want to go out with me over one of them?

Troy stares at me, waiting for an answer, but I'm frozen like a Madame Tussauds wax statue. I can't move or speak. This has to be some sort of

dream. Troy Wood wants to go out with *me*? As Dani sometimes says, *wha-fa?*

Dani inches closer to me and whispers out of the side of her mouth. “What are you waiting for, fool? Accept, before I say my name is Whitney!”

“Yes!” I cry, my voice coming out in a high-pitched squeal. Coughing like I have something stuck in my throat, I roll my neck and try one more time.

“Yes,” I say again, more level this time. Better, much better. I don't sound like I'm still going through puberty. “I'll go out with you.”

Troy cracks a grin and my heart soars. “How about after you get done with cheerleading tomorrow then? I'll pick you up at your place after I go home, change and grab a shower. We do have practice tomorrow.”

“Sure,” I say, hoping I don't sound too desperate. We quickly exchange phone numbers and I give him my address, my body shaking nearly the whole time. I stare at the little slip of paper for a moment before Dani takes it, folds it in half, and tucks it into the waistband of my tights, only a tiny ear of it sticking out so I can know where it is.

When we're done, Troy grabs my hand and gives it a soft kiss, and I swear I'm not going to wash it for a week. “See you at seven thirty, then, beautiful. Till then, though . . . gotta go.”

With one last grin that melts my heart, he walks back over to his buddies, who are all shaking their heads, and they immediately swarm him like he's a king, asking him questions and pounding him on the back.

I stare at his back as he walks away—even his walk is sexy and full of confident swagger—my mouth agape. *He called me beautiful!*

“Oh my God!” Dani exclaims when he's gone. “Troy Wood just asked you out! How do you feel?”

She comes forward and links her arm with mine, leading me away from the asphalt as I still feel like I'm about to pass out face first onto the ground. When the other girls start to approach, Dani waves them off. She leads me over to the fence that borders the little area where we're practicing and lets me lean on the fence for a bit to get my bearings. She lowers her voice

again, concerned. "Seriously, Whit, how do you feel? You look like you just got kicked in the gut."

"I can't believe it," I mutter, shaking my head. For a moment, I wonder if I've made a mistake. Troy Wood is a popular athlete and an all-around manwhore, according to the rumors. The only place he scored more than on the football field was between the sheets, if you believed the rumors. I'm sure a lot of it was inflated by all the guys to make themselves feel better, but still. Why should I go out with him? After all, he's probably just after one thing, and once he gets it, he'll be gone like the wind. "Did I really just say yes?"

But then I push those thoughts away. It's not like I have to have sex with him, even if that is what he's after. I figure I can just play hard to get and have a little fun. I may not be experienced at that game, but I know the basic rules. Hell, Dani schooled me on those even more than she'd schooled me on cheerleading, and I did pretty good with that for my first time.

*It'll be just like playing football, I think to myself. I'll show him I can have a mean defense when he tries something with me. What's that they say sometimes—stuff the ball carrier?*

"You did, and if you don't believe it yet, well you'd better, and you'd better start thinking about what you're going to wear tomorrow night. I won't have you dressing in those ugly mom jeans you like to put on," Dani says with a grin and a soft squeeze of my arm. She seems genuinely happy for me, which surprises me, because Troy is one of the most desirable guys at Silver Lake. I thought for sure she'd be pissed off that he hadn't asked *her* out. "You're gonna look hot enough to melt those steely muscles of his and make him silly putty in your hands."

She seems to be the only one happy for me, though. All the other girls seem pissed, and several of them have walked off to the side and are standing in a group, talking to each other and casting glances my way.

Dani waves away my concern, noticing me looking at them. "Don't worry about those jealous bitches. They get mad over the littlest thing, like whose butt looks bigger on a given day or who gave the best head to the latest jock. So don't let a few glares bother you—let the haters hate."



“That's easy for you to say. You're friends with most of them. In case you haven't noticed, I've been the perpetual third wheel in your group of friends since . . . well, forever. It's easy for you.”

“You're right. It is.” Dani gives me a devilish grin and I know she's planning something. “But you still shouldn't worry about any of them. Besides, they're about to be madder anyway.”

I stare at her suspiciously. “Why's that?”

“Because I'm looking at Silver Lake's newest cheerleader. Congrats.”

“You're kidding me!”

Dani shakes her head. “You earned it. Besides that little tumble, you did great. Shit, I even got a little jealous. I was never that good when I first started.”

I pull Dani into a tight embrace.

“Jesus, Whit, break my ribs, why don't you! You get superpowers along with those new tits?”

I quickly let her go. “Sorry.”

I can't believe my luck. A hot guy has just asked me out, and I've earned a spot on the cheerleading squad. Not bad for the first day of my senior year. And I have a feeling there will be more good things to come.

*They always say the last year is the best year, I think with giddy excitement. I know it isn't always true . . . but damn if I ain't getting off to a great start!*

“Don't be,” Dani says, nodding at the petulant cheerleaders who are still gossiping about me. She claps her hands and raises her voice, back in cheer captain mode. “All right, let's try that pyramid one more time before calling it a day . . . but try not to fall this time.”

## CHAPTER 4

### TROY

*T*hose hips. That ass. That smile. Most of all, the way she felt in my arms.

I shake my head, getting my shit together. I may have a date with an uber-hot girl at seven thirty, but at four thirty, I have the scout team defense all staring at me, ready to prove to Coach Jackson that they deserve playing time with the varsity instead of dressing Thursday night with the JV squad.

"All right, boys," I say, looking around the huddle. "Split left, motion 37 option flip boogie on two. Ready? BREAK!"

I go up to the line, making sure my mouthpiece is in. I may be Superman on the football field, but even Superman's gotta have some receivers, and ours are . . . well, they suck. There's a reason that Coach Jackson decided to go with a single-wing option offense since I took over as starting QB back in my sophomore year. Silver Lake may produce track teams that go to region and state on a yearly basis, but that doesn't mean they can catch a football. In fact, the only time they can catch anything is on play-action passes like this, where I can use the running backs to sucker in the defensive backs and either take it myself or flip it to Charlie Watkins, who is playing that left side split end.

"Ready! Down . . . Red fifty-eight, red fifty-eight . . ." I lift my right leg, expecting the wing back who lined up on the right side to come behind me on his motion, "HUT! Hut-hut!"

Pete Barkovich, my center, snaps me the ball, and I pivot to my right, too late realizing that not only had I not given the wing back enough time to get across the line, but I'd turned the wrong direction to boot. I run straight into the him, stumbling and getting smacked by some freshman try-hard nose tackle who gets lucky, driving me into the ground. *Shit.*

Coach Jackson's whistle pierces the afternoon, and the freshman realizes he just signed his own death warrant. Even if we run a single-wing, and even if I'm the fucking starting strong side inside linebacker, you don't tackle the QB in practice. The freshman's face goes pasty, pimplly white, and he gets off me, looking like he's waiting for someone to lop off his head.

Instead, it's me who earns the wrath of Coach Jackson. "What in the name of Franklin Delano Roosevelt were you doing, Troy?"

Coach always starts yelling out famous dead men's names when he's ticked off. Part of it is because the school district passed a zero tolerance policy on teachers using supposedly abusive or demeaning language toward students two years ago, putting old school coaches like him who grew up on Mike Ditka and Bill Parcells in a bind. The other part of it is that Coach is a history teacher during school hours, and the man knows more about old dead guys than I think is really healthy for him.

Coming closer, Coach waits for me to get off the ground and leans in, where just he and I can hear each other. "Seriously, Troy, what the hell are you doing?"

I shake my head, owning it. If Coach has taught me anything, it's to man up and take responsibility for my actions on the field. "You know what happened, Coach. I fucked up the play. I didn't mean to. I'll get it right."

He gets in my face, his face turning a little red. "Dammit, boy, you tell me you want to run these plays but then you do piss-poor execution. In case you didn't realize, that little love tap from what's his name over there is nothing compared to what's gonna hit you Friday night if you don't unscrew your head from your ass."

Damn, Coach is pretty pissed. Even with me—and he'd taken me under his wing for the past three years—he rarely cursed, even though he knew I'd

never complain to the school about it. I feel like I've been slapped across the face, and I take a deep breath. "Sorry, Coach. I'll get it right."

"Son," Coach says, sighing before putting his hand on my shoulder pads and leading me away. "Troy, you're one hell of a football player, maybe the best I've seen in fifteen years of being the head coach at this school. But you're not God. And despite the act you put on for the other boys, you're not Jesus Christ either. You need to put your head in the game and focus, or else those scouts from State that I hear might be coming by are going to cross you off their prospect list by the end of the first quarter. Tell me what's going on."

I pull my helmet off, looking over his shoulder at the guys. Coach reads my eyes and turns around. "Coach Reed, take over. Roberts, run the first team offense for a few plays. You might as well get some reps in."

We walk to the edge of the practice field behind the school, and I take a knee, picking up the hose that serves as our water fountain and take a gulp. "I don't know, Coach. Really. I was fine Sunday drawing them up at home, and walking through them in my mind, I was good, but now . . . all I can think about is this girl . . ."

"A girl?" Coach Jackson says, surprised. "Troy, are you telling me that the past forty-five minutes of near-constant screw-ups I'm seeing today is because your mind is on a girl? What the hell?"

"I know, I know," I reply, standing up. "You should've seen me in Spanish class. Mrs. Days tore into me. Like I said, I'm sorry."

He shakes his head. "Sorry is right. Your QB play right now is sorry and tired. Maybe you should take a rest. Sit out the rest of the offensive first team work, and get your damn head right. If you think Blueridge has got a decent defense, their right guard on offense has got a hard on for you. You stole his girlfriend from him last year at the track finals. Or so I've heard."

I shake my head, pissed off at myself. I never get benched, and here I am, being talked to like I'm some sort of scrub. "Fine. I'll get my head right."

Coach Jackson studies me, then nods. "Alright then. Stay here until I call for first team D."

He turns back to the field and walks away, already hollering for Roberts, the backup QB who expects to get nothing but mop-up duty playing time. I stand and watch, trying with my entire will to get Whitney off my mind. At least I don't have any classes with her. I don't think I could have focused at all if I did. It was bad enough fucking off in Spanish and getting yelled at after just seeing her in the hallway.

"Obviously I have a bunch of . . . boys, water break!" Coach yells, jerking me out of my memory. "You keep going like this, and I'm playing the scout team Friday, because at least they'll play Blueridge HARD!"

The guys grumble as they come over, giving me dirty looks, and I give them right back. I hadn't been the only one to fuck up. I'd just been the most noticeable. "Get your head off your dick," Russ whispers after he grabs some water. "I can't deal with this shit much longer."

"First team D! Scout team O! Let's get fired up, gentlemen! Get those war bonnets on!"

Coach Jordan, the linebacker coach and our school's defensive coordinator, looks around the huddle as we gather together. "All right, Troy, lead your men. I want thirty-four reads."

He steps away and I look at the defense, seeing doubt in some of their eyes. *Shit. I'm the fucking boss, I don't get doubts.* "It's cool, guys. Thirty-four Fireman Sam slant."

Russ, who as the free safety is to call the defensive backs, gives me a hopeful smile and nods. "Cover three tight."

"Break!"

I settle in, reading the lineup of the scout team. As I half-squat, getting ready, my mind suddenly goes into left fucking field again, and all I can see in my mind is Whitney's legs in those jeans this morning, and I'm caught off guard again as the scout team snaps the ball.

I'm a half-step slow and I know it, so I just say fuck it, running straight in to jam the line for a running play. Too late, I see that it's a pass, and in fact, I just blew my assignment, as the scout team tight end catches the little dump pass over the middle, right where I was supposed to cover if I'd stuck to the

cover three I was supposed to. I should have lit that kid up like a damn firework. Instead, he catches and gets an eight-yard gain, just what I'm supposed to not let happen.

Coach Jackson blows his whistle, shooting me a dirty look. "All right, let's try again."

It's the end of practice now, and Coach is pissed. My piss-poor play has led to even more issues, and he finally blows his whistle in the three long blasts that signify the end of practice at only five thirty, a good forty-five minutes before he normally calls practice early in the season. "I'm done. Maybe tomorrow we can get some work done, when you sorry sacks of shit figure out if you want to play or not."

Coach storms off, leaving all of us shocked, when some jokester speaks up. "Hey, you can get reprimanded for talking to us like that!"

Coach turns back, and I take a deep breath. Now I've got more issues on my plate, as now I need to ride herd on a smart mouth as well as get my own head right. I expect Coach to go on an epic rant, but he just shakes his head.

He walks off, his shoulders slumping, and Cory yanks his helmet off, looking around. "The fuck is his problem? Just because Golden Boy here didn't perform, he gets pissy. He usually kisses his ass over everything."

"We all did terrible," I say, taking off my helmet. I stand up and raise my voice. "Foxes! To me!"

As team captain, it's my privilege to do this, and I gather the team. I want to go off on the rant that Coach should have. I want to blame them, but it doesn't come out of my mouth. Instead, Coach's lessons flash through my mind, and I decide to do something else. Time to own it.

"I fucked up today," I start, looking around at my teammates and friends. "But dammit, that doesn't mean the rest of you get to fuck off too! You know, I hear your complaining, and for three years I've heard it. I put up with it, and yeah, I'm a glory-hounding asshole, or as Cory here just said, Golden Boy. But you and I all know that we need eleven out there to play the game. What happens if I snap my leg in the first quarter Friday, and

Roberts ends up having to lead the team this season? What, you're all going to roll over and let everyone ass fuck you?"

"You should know about ass fucking," someone gripes, and I understand why Coach just walked off. I sigh and run my hand through my hair. My anger evaporates, and instead, I feel something else.

"Guys, like I said, I'm sorry. I . . . I fucked up today. Listen, let's just go in, get changed, and tomorrow . . . we do it right. Me included, okay?"

I'm surprised by the reaction of my teammates. I expected bitching and grumbling. Instead, Russ comes over and slaps me on the shoulder pads. "You're right. All right, let's get changed. Tomorrow though, scout team . . . I'm coming for your heads. You boys had better be ready."

A grumbling cheer greets Russ's words, and he and I watch as the rest of the Foxes go into the locker room. Russ turns to me and looks me in the eyes. "She ain't worth it, Holmes. Epic tits and ass or not, she ain't worth you fucking up out here. You got your date tonight, right?"

"Yeah," I say, realizing Russ had been reading my mind all practice. "Seven thirty."

"Get your rocks off, and get her out of your head—I'll see you tomorrow." Russ turns and jogs inside, and I walk in, following him. Maybe that's all I need, to get my rocks off. Maybe.



I WALK INTO THE HOUSE AND SHUT THE DOOR. I'M EARLY STILL, BUT ALL I PLAN ON doing is taking a shower and leaving. The less I'm inside before my date, the better. If I'd had my damn head together, I could've taken care of everything this morning and gone straight from the locker room to pick up Whitney, but of course, I was halfway to school before I realized I didn't have any money on me. I'm good at cheap dates, but free firsties is pushing it, even for me.

"Where you been, boy?" a slurred voice calls from the living room, and I roll my eyes. *A little fucking early, isn't it?*

"Coming home from practice. Where does it look like I've been?"

I go into the living room and see my father already half wasted on the couch, Fox News on the TV and Bill O'Reilly ranting about something with the sound off. Dad loves his Fox News. "Don't get smart with me, boy, or else I'm going to come off this couch and teach you some fucking manners."

Dad belches, and I wave my hand in front of my face as the grain alcohol smell fills the room like a toxic cloud. "Jesus Christ, it's only six in the evening and you're already drinking hard. What is it this time, the Seagram's or the Popov?"

"You little bastard, it's my house and I can do whatever the fuck I want!" Dad yells at me. "I pay the bills. I take care of you! You're nothing, Mr. Big Shot High School boy! Your mother left because of you!"

It's a longstanding line he uses, and even though it's about as correct as wearing your underpants on your head, it still stings. I hit back with what I know hurts most, the truth. "Mom left because you were a raggedy piece of shit that wouldn't stop drinking and beating her, you alcoholic asshole! You don't even have a job, just your welfare and unemployment in between those jobs you keep getting fired from! By the way, Dad, you'd better clean up enough to go down to Day Labor, because we're coming up on the end of your unemployment again, and my pay won't cover the rent this month."

He surges from the seat but drops back before he can get all the way up. He waves at me, disgusted. "You know what, you ungrateful shit? Get the fuck out of my house. Go, get out!"

I turn to leave the living room and toss words back over my shoulder. "I'll be glad to. After I take a shower."

There's no way I'm going to show up smelling like I do. Even after a light practice, I still smell like ten pounds of wet leather, foam padding, and plastic football armor . . . and that does not work for dates. I strip down and grab the bar of Irish Spring off the soap dish, glad that it's both cheap and works super-quick at covering up football smells. I can shower in three minutes if I want, and I do, walking naked down the hallway to my room, where I pull on a fresh set of khakis and a button down shirt. Yeah, I can get



dressed up, too. I make sure my pits are sublime and grab twenty dollars out of the little cigar box that I use. I should keep all my cash on me. I know Dad steals from me, but if I do that, he'll just shake me down. If I keep some of it in the box, he filches from me, but I actually end up keeping more of it.

I'm distracted as I tuck the twenty bucks into my front pocket, surprised I still have that much. Dad must have gotten a sale on his cheap booze this week. I'm so distracted that I don't notice that Dad has gotten himself to his feet, only to catch me with a sucker punch to my left eye as I come back past the living room. "That's what you get, you little bastard."

I grab at my eye, not so much hurt as surprised. Dad's half drunk, and I've got fifteen pounds on him, and a lot of my body is muscle while his is . . . sloppy shit. Still, it hurts, and I'm shocked, an involuntary tear coming to my eye because his alcohol-covered knuckle nailed me literally directly in my eye, and that shit burns! I push him back into the living room, where by some miracle of luck, he falls back onto the couch instead of onto his ass in the middle of the room. "You . . ."

Fuck it. I don't need a fight with the old man tonight. I walk out, ignoring his half-understood screams, and go out to my car, rubbing at my eye the entire way as I drive. I stop a little bit up the block from Whitney's house, knowing I'm way early but not knowing what else to do. Getting out of my car, I wonder how to break the ice, and what I know about her. Not a damn thing, really, except that she's hot as hell, and there is something about her . . .

"Flowers, maybe?" I say to myself, then look around. I see one of those planters that people use by a mailbox a few houses away, and inside are some flowers that remind me of the way her hair gleamed in the sun when she was trying out yesterday. They're almost the same dark, nearly blackish brown red. I run over and grab them. What the hell.

Holding my fistful of flowers and still rubbing at my eye, I walk the short distance to Whitney's house and ring the doorbell. There's some rustling inside, and Whitney opens the door, surprised that I'm here. "Troy!"

I nod, trying my best smile. "Hi, Whitney. I know I'm mad early, but Coach cut practice short, and I was thinking . . . well, tonight's a school night, and I figured your parents would want you home early. You know, class tomorrow and all."

Whitney looks uncertain, but still nods. "Okay, one minute. Let me tell my mom that I'm leaving early."

## CHAPTER 5

WHITNEY

I don't really know what to make of Troy when I open my door and see him standing outside my house. Sure, my heart's in my throat and my pulse shoots through the roof, but he looks different than he did yesterday. First of all, he's got either the beginnings of a black eye, or something got in there, because his left eye is puffy and red, and hanging from his hands are red flowers that look suspiciously like the geraniums that the Tuckers have planted around their mailbox down the street. There are even little bits of dirt still hanging from one of the flowers, which was pulled up by the roots.

Still, despite his strange appearance, it's Troy, and even with the eye, he's so handsome it's disturbing. Besides, there is something about the way he's looking at me, with an intensity and a power that is just irresistible, and I nod. "Okay, one minute. Let me tell my mom that I'm leaving early."

I only half-close the door and run into the living room, where Mom is sitting on the couch. "Your date?"

"Yes, Mom. He says that he got out of practice early, and that he thought it'd be better this way. You know, with school tomorrow and all."

She smiles politely and sips at her after dinner tea. Mom's really into the church, and never even touches alcohol unless she's taking communion. "All right, honey. Be careful, and remember to be a lady."

I roll my eyes. Like I'm going to repeat the mistake she made. She's only thirty-five, having me when she was eighteen because she'd gotten caught up with some guy and gotten pregnant. I'm not going to be that dumb, and even if Mom wouldn't approve, I have a condom in my purse, one handed out by some safe sex advocates at the mall last year when I went shopping with Dani. Better safe than sorry, you know. "I'll be fine, Mom. Besides, Troy's too tired from football practice to get up to anything, you know."

"I know football players, honey. Let's just say I'm glad you're wearing jeans. Have a good time."

I run over and give her a kiss on the cheek and leave the house. I find Troy waiting on the front walk, still looking angry, his eye puffier than ever, with the flowers in his hand. "Here, I picked these for you."

"Mrs. Tucker's going to kick your ass if she sees you with those," I say, taking them and giving them a smell before setting them in a pot on my porch. "Thank you, though. I'll make sure we don't get in trouble for them."

"Well, come on then," Troy says, reaching out and taking my hand. "I hope you like fish."

"Why?" I ask, but Troy doesn't answer, and I let it slide. Instead, we walk back to his car, which I see is older and more beaten up than mine. It has to be from the nineties or earlier. "Nice car."

"Piece of shit is more like it," Troy says, opening the door for me. "Not for long, though."

"Oh? You're getting a new one?" I ask as Troy goes around. He glowers, and I start to feel bad. I mean, I don't know anything about him except that he's built like a Greek god, he's a superstar athlete, and he's tagged every piece of ass from here to California. That's not exactly what I want to talk about on a first date. I try a new tactic. "So what classes do you have this year?"

Troy shrugs and hangs a left toward downtown. "Spanish, Geometry, English . . . normal stuff. Doesn't really matter. I'm on cruise control at Silver Lake. I know what I've gotta do for my next step."

"Which is?" I ask. He sounds more confident, and I admit, sexy. I like a man who knows where he's going in life.

"The NCAA. I tear it up on the field, and I've got my ticket punched. My GPA is fine—I can cram in an SAT course or something to get that up enough, and then I'm getting the fuck outta this two-horse town. NCAA, then NFL. Don't really care where there . . . except for Cleveland. I ain't going to Cleveland."

"Why not?" I ask. "Too cold?"

Troy laughs, then he looks over, realizing I'm being serious. "Sorry. No, it's that Cleveland has just about the worst football team in existence. Shit, Detroit's better than they are. You . . . you don't know much about football, do you?"

"Just what I've seen at a few games I've been to for school," I say, kinda blushing. "Dani got me to go a few times. I didn't really get it except that you were trying to get the ball into the end zone."

"Well, that's better than some girls," Troy says, shaking his head. "Why'd you go out for cheerleading then?"

"Kind of a Dani Vaughn redemption project," I reply, and I'm actually enjoying talking about myself a little for once. "You know, I've been the invisible girl for most of school, and I wanted to do something this year. So, Dani had me start practicing on my own over the summer, and with my new diet, I kinda filled out. Speaking of diet, you said something about fish. Why?"

"The Crab Shack has a good special on baskets," Troy says, all confident again. "I was thinking we could grab two baskets to go and then just go hang out over on Slater's Point. You know, watching the river?"

I frown, and Troy looks over. "What?"

"Uh, my bad. I guess I should have told you. I have a bad shellfish allergy. Like, we go to the Crab Shack, and the next place we go isn't the Point, but County General. Sorry."

"Well, why the hell . . ." Troy starts to yell, then he takes a deep breath. He pulls over and slams his car into park, shutting off the engine. We're in the parking lot of a laundromat, and he gets out, walking around before slamming his fists on the hood of his car and yelling to the sky.

I should be scared. Troy is looking and acting like some sort of caricature from an abusive boyfriend movie, and we're still on our first date. But I'm not. There's something about the way his eyes look that tells me he's not angry at me, and in fact, he's got a lot of rage inside him, but there's something about the fact that he actually pulled over and didn't keep yelling at me that tells me to approach him.

"Sorry," he gruffly grumps as I come out of the car. "I shouldn't have yelled."

"No . . . but I'd like to know why you did," I say softly, taking his hand. "Yesterday, you were Superman, as Dani called you. Today, I can tell you're not having the best of days. What's up?"

Troy shakes his head, and I respond by not letting go of his hand, but instead squeezing it. "Come on, Troy. You didn't make me spend six periods today debating in my head whether to call you up and cancel this date based on your rep, rip up my neighbor's flower pot, come to my house with what looks like a shiner nearly a half-hour early, and then go screaming to the sky like you're challenging Thor to strike you with a thunderbolt, and not get to at least talk to me. Tell you what. Change that Crab Shack plan to Mickey-Dees, and we can still go hang out at the Point. But if you think you're getting in these jeans tonight, buster . . . well, you might as well keep on yelling."

Troy stops trying to pull away and instead tilts his head, looking at me differently than he had yesterday or even a few minutes ago. Yesterday, I'd been a piece of meat, a hot piece of meat, I could tell, but just meat nonetheless. He'd still had that look when he picked me up. But now . . . Troy looks at me like he's seeing me for the very first time. "Okay. Uh, I only got twenty bucks though, so are you cool with just a Big Mac meal? I might be able to spring a McFlurry if I can scrape some change from between the car seats."

"Or," I say, patting my pocket, "you can let me give you the five bucks that I have in my pocket, and the two of us can both eat what we want. But I don't think we'll need it—I mean I'm pretty sure we can both eat McDonald's for less than twenty bucks."

Troy smiles a little, and I like this smile. It still makes my body do little pulses of strange feeling, but it's a warmer, more honest smile than before. I smile back. "Deal. But only if our total goes over twenty dollars."

We drive to McDonald's and get our meals, the smell of the fries filling the car as we drive the few miles out to the Point. It's the local Lover's Lane and is situated on a small rise, not really a point in the river, but close enough to have earned it the name Slater's Point. Shutting off his engine, Troy opens the bag then closes it. "Do you want to eat in the car or outside?"

I think about it and look out at the sunset. We're still in late summer, after all, and the sun doesn't go down for another half-hour at least. "That rock over there looks kinda nice. What do you think?"

Troy sees where I'm looking, and a little smirk comes to his face. He's obviously been up here before, and I'm betting he's done more than just have a picnic on that rock. However, his smirk falters, and that haunted look comes back to his face. "Okay. It's a good spot, I think."

We take our paper bags of food over to the rock and sit down, unpacking. Troy's a bit surprised when I fold my hands and bow my head, and when I look up, it's my turn to be embarrassed. "Sorry. Habit from my Mom."

"Your Mom's one of those, huh? Not my scene, but I respect it," Troy replies, taking a bite of his cheeseburger. "From what I've seen, if there is a God up there, he isn't interested in my life."

"What do you mean? Your life seems pretty perfect in my opinion. Big man on campus, easy path to college, tons of friends . . ."

Troy sets his burger down and looks at me like I'm crazy. "You're serious, aren't you? Jesus, Whitney, you really don't know me very well, do you?"

It's my turn to be angry, as if somehow I'm supposed to know Troy Wood's life story. "Excuse me, Mister Five-Star QB, but they don't issue out your

biography along with the Social Studies textbook. Admit it—until yesterday, you didn't even know who I was! You're not the one who's spent three years being called Pancake Nelson, or do you think I didn't know about that?"

I realize I'm raising my voice and standing up, and I've not even taken a single bite of my food. Troy stares at me, his powerful jaw muscles working, and he sets his burger down, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "You're right. I was wrong. I'm sorry, Whit . . . just, today's been one of those days that I'd like to forget, you know what I mean?"

"What happened?" I ask, sitting back down on the warm rock. "And I'm not going to crack any jokes, I promise."

"What do you mean?" Troy asks, confused. "What's wrong with jokes?"

I shrug and pick up a fry, sticking it in my mouth. "I guess I've gotten tired of being teased, that's all. It's hard to talk to people when you know that if you tell them how you really see things or how you feel, you're going to get teased. But . . . that's for another time, maybe. Tell me about your day."

"Well, football went like shit today," Troy starts, closing his eyes. He kind of half turns away from me and looks out over the river, his elbows resting on his knees and his head hanging. "If I keep playing like practice today, that idea of an easy scholarship isn't going to be coming my way. Hell, if I keep going like today, I won't even be starting by Homecoming."

"Everyone has bad practices," I say, scooting over next to him. For some reason, I put my hand on his leg, then kind of wrap my arm through his and take his hand. "I mean, I don't know football, you know, but nobody can be perfect all the time, right?"

Troy nods and opens his eyes, looking out at the river. "I have to be. At least on the field—I need to be. If I'm going to get out of this town, away from . . ."

"Away from what?" I ask. "Because I know this town isn't all that bad. We're not San Francisco or Seattle or anything, but it could be a lot worse."

Troy swallows and looks down again. "Just . . . home life's tough, you know? The eye . . . that isn't from football."



I gasp, moved. I mean, Mom's strict on the church side of things, and sometimes it's strange having a mom who is younger than all of your teachers and gets confused for your older sister when she goes shopping with me, but Mom loves me. When she has gotten boyfriends, she's always put me first, which has cost her a few of the guys, but we both agree that we're a package deal, at least until I head off to college. Most of all, Mom never lays a hand on me. "Troy . . . why don't you tell someone?"

"Like what? 'Hey, I'm a total worthless shit who has a drunk for a father and no mother, since she abandoned me to that asshole when I was three, and the only hope I've got of not going down the same path is to get into the NFL.' I'd get laughed right out of school."

I'm shocked to see Troy, who I'd never even imagined would be insecure, at least based on what Dani told me at lunch today. He hangs his head, then laughs bitterly once before looking at me again. "Hell of a first date, isn't it?"

I smile and lean my head on his shoulder and give his hand a squeeze. "I could think of worse. All day, I figured you'd bring me here or to some other place, where you'd try and talk your way into my pants. In case you don't know, the girls on the cheer squad know about what you and your buddies were doing in the stands yesterday. Dani filled me in on it. I guess I've been more innocent than I knew."

Troy chuckles and we relax, just watching the river roll by. "Can I be honest? When I asked you out yesterday, I had the same idea as the other guys. The way they reacted when you started practice . . . you damn near caused a scene, and a fight between the guys—me included. A lot of them saw you as something like that McFlurry that we've got melting here. A little bite of dessert."

"And you?" I ask, not offended, but for some reason, I just want to know.

"I think . . . well, let me put it this way, and sorry if it takes a while. After fucking up at practice so much today, I apologized to the guys for screwing up. I've never done that before, and like you said, I thought I'd get jeered for it. Instead, a couple of the guys really stuck up for me, and I thought a lot about what Coach keeps telling us. Own it. Own your fuckups and your

victories both. So I'm not going to lie. You're hot as hell, and you can't teach that. But talking with you now, I'd be lying if I said that all I wanted was to, as you said, get into your pants."

I laugh and put my hand on the side of his face, turning him to look at me. "Well, at least you're partially honest."

I kiss Troy, surprised by my forwardness, but I relish the feeling of his lips on mine, and even though I've only kissed a few boys before, I can't compare any of them to Troy. We don't rush, and there's nothing forced about the way we get closer and closer, his lips so amazing on my skin. He kisses to my neck, and I feel electricity in parts of my body that I'd never felt before with a guy, my whole body feeling tingly and almost humming. I realize now why Mom keeps warning me about guys. If Troy pushed right now, I'm not sure I'd be able or even willing to stop him, but he doesn't. Instead, he kisses back to my lips and I reach out with my tongue. Troy responds, and it's even more amazing than I'd ever imagined.

Troy breaks our kiss, and I know I've got a stupid, dreamy look on my face. I blink a few times, then smile. "Why'd you stop?"

Troy smiles back and strokes my hair with his hand. "Because if I keep going right this second, I'm worried that I won't hold back . . . and to be honest, Whitney, I want to hold back. You're . . . you're pretty special for some reason. I'd like to get to know why, or at least have a chance to know why."

"So you don't want to just pop my cherry and then run off?" I tease, and Troy's face drops in shock. "What? Yes, a girl can get to a month shy of her eighteenth birthday and still be a virgin, you know. Especially one who spent all of high school until the past two days overlooked."

"I shouldn't have overlooked you," Troy says, then laughs. "I guess I'm not as good a guy as I thought."

"You're a guy," I reply, leaning my head on his shoulder again. "Ruled by your penis, and just barely more evolved than your average chimp. I get it. Girls, we're not much better. You should have seen the nasty looks I've gotten over the past few days from some of the other girls on the cheer squad. As Dani puts it, bitches be hatin'."

Troy laughs and shifts his arm around so that he can hold me with his left arm. He reaches behind us and comes back with the box that my chicken sandwich is in. "Yeah, well, you can tell them that I'm not interested right now. Here, you don't want that to get cold."

We talk for another hour, occasionally turning or shift around on the rock to grab our food or just reposition ourselves until the sun goes all the way down. As I drink the last of the McFlurry—the rest of it had melted—I can't help but laugh. "You know, Troy, this isn't how I imagined our date would go."

"Neither did I," he says, running his fingers through my hair. "I know this might be a bit fast, but I was wondering if you'd like to go out again sometime?"

"What about Saturday?" I ask. "I'd say Friday, but Mom already told me she's taking me out for a celebration dinner for my making the cheer squad."

Troy laughs and nods. "But it has to be Saturday early afternoon. I uh, well, I've got a part-time job that takes up Saturday from four thirty until midnight. All day Sunday too."

"Oh? Where?"

"A pizza joint just outside town. Don't tell anyone that, please? State law says that I'm not supposed to be working that late while I'm in school. The owner doesn't know anything about football, and he thinks I graduated last year. I'm just glad I don't need to lie about my age anymore now that I'm eighteen."

I see the tremble in his jawline, and I nod. "That's fine, Troy. So I guess this means that we're not going to be going on a lot of typical dates during football season?"

Troy shakes his head, then shrugs. "Sorry. No Friday or Saturday nights at the movies. Best I can do is the occasional *matinée*."

I smile and lean in closer. "I think I can deal with that. On one condition."

His cocky little grin is back, playful and, if I can use that word, arousing. "What's that?"

"Another few of those amazing kisses?"

Troy keeps to my condition and is actually a gentleman, cleaning up our mess and walking with me back to the car. When he opens the door, I turn to him and take his hand. "Just a moment," I say, tugging on his arm.

Troy turns and give me a quizzical look. "What?"

In a move that I can't even believe I'm doing as I do it, I take his hand and lift it, putting it on my right breast, where by instinct, he cups it, sending shivers down my body and heat between my legs. I let him stroke with his thumb for a few seconds, then reluctantly, I lift his hand off, and it's my turn to kiss his knuckles. "There. You can tell your buddies you at least got to second base. I know they're going to bug you about it."

Troy shifts, and I smile when I see that his pants are fitting him, well, a little more snugly around the crotch than they were a minute ago. Troy shakes his head and takes my fingers in his again, kissing my knuckles. "No, I don't think the guys need to know what happened here tonight. Some things are too good to share, and you want to keep them all to yourself. Come on, let's get you home before your Mom wants to kill me, and that would totally ruin our plans for Saturday."

## CHAPTER 6

### TROY

*I* sit in the stands of Fox Stadium, wearing my number 12 jersey, hanging out with the rest of the guys. We just completed our final walkthroughs for tomorrow's game, and Coach Jackson handed out our game jerseys. Some of us, me included, put them on before we head home. We're ready.

"You looking forward to the pep rally tomorrow?" Cory asks. He's really stepped up over the past two days, and he's feeling good about things. I understand, because Wednesday's practice, and then today's walkthroughs, went like fucking clockwork. "You know, I'm kinda looking forward to it."

"You're just looking forward to seeing the cheerleaders in those skirts and tops," Russ shoots back, laughing. "You're trying to see if Dasha is going to wear that thong like you've been trying to talk her into."

"Fuck that, man, that was just a side joke," Cory says, "but yeah, I'd tap that ass if I had a chance. Nah, to be honest, I'm looking forward to seeing Whitney's ti . . . sorry, her figure in the uniform."

I raise my eyebrow, and Cory clears his throat. Russ, however, doesn't get the clue. "Those *are* some bodacious ta-tas. You got to sample them yet, T-man?"

"She's not that type of girl," I reply, leaning back. I know the guys, and they're still not convinced that I'm really serious about Whitney. Not that

we've exactly been seeing each other long, I mean, it's only been three days. "I'm going to take this one slow."

"Holy shit," Russ replies, his eyes wide with wonder. "Is that Troy Wood, or am I seeing a fucking unicorn? Three days and she's got you pussy whipped? She *must* be magical. Unicorn Nelson!"

"Call her that again, and you're going to be watching tomorrow's game from the sidelines in a cast," I growl, looking into Russ's eyes. "I don't care if you're the free safety or not. Say something again about Whitney, and I end you."

The guys fall silent, and there's some nervous shuffling. Russ and I have been buds since freshman year, and of everyone on the team, he's the one who is closest to standing up to me. Coach Jackson says that if Russ hits the weights hard and gets serious, he'll also have a chance to play college ball, but Russ is normally too laid back, a party kind of guy. Russ stares at me for a second, then gets up, brushing off his jersey. "Whatever. I'm gonna go sit down there, see what Watkins is up to. He doesn't have a bug up his ass."

Most of the guys kind of drift off after that, until it's just me and Cory. He's got a look on his face, and I give it back. "What?"

"Nothin'," Cory says. "Just . . . you're changing. Last year, you were *the* guy, on and off the field. I figured this year would be more of the same."

Out on the field, the marching band is doing a review of their halftime show, minus the ridiculous uniforms they wear. I never have figured out how a team from a town named Silver Lake Falls, and whose high school colors are Silver and Blue, calls themselves the Scarlet Regiment and wears red as their main uniform color. Damn near treasonous, if you ask me. I shrug, "Things can't always be the same."

Cory leans back and shakes his head. One of the drummers, a girl with a cute face, drops her stick, causing Cory to cup his hands over his mouth and holler, "If you need a bigger stick, I've got one for ya!"

The girl turns bright red, and Cory laughs while a few of the guys, who've gathered around Watkins, laugh as well. Cory shakes his head and looks

back up at me. "Where was I? Oh yeah, you and your changing. I noticed it during summer workouts first. You got more serious about the football. I just chalked it up to you pushing for the scholarship. I know you've got verbal feelers from some schools, but nothing's set in stone until you get something on paper."

"Which you know I can't get for another month at least," I say. "Signing day's a long way off, Cory. But I feel like you've got more to say."

"I do. Past week, man, since Monday, you've really gotten, I don't know . . . serious? I won't go as far as Russ and sign my death warrant by saying something about Whitney, but you two looked pretty damn chummy at lunch today, ignoring the rest of us. Even her girlfriend—what's her name?"

"Danielle Vaughn," I remind Cory, who nods. I know Cory hadn't forgotten. He's had Dani on his 'to bang' list ever since Dani joined varsity cheerleading. He's got a thing for dangerous looking blondes, and Dani's the epitome of that. "But your point?"

"I'm just saying—you stepped up Tuesday after screwing up. I'm not saying it's a bad thing."

"But?"

"But you're showing a softer side too, and that includes Tuesday. I guess what I'm asking you is, which Troy Wood is going to show up tomorrow night? The one who smashes heads on the field, or the softheaded fuckup? I know which one I'd prefer . . ."

I look out on the field and pat my friend on the shoulder. "Don't sweat it. First time I put my face mask in the Blueridge QB's chest, you'll see."



"BOYS . . . NO, I GUESS THE TIME HAS COME TO STOP CALLING MOST OF YOU BOYS," Coach Jackson says as we gather around in the locker room. My blue and silver jersey is tied back, and on my left hand is the lineman's glove that I wear. It's a strange thing for a QB to wear, but with a tacky palm and a lightly padded back, it's great for me when I play linebacker as well. My other glove is tucked in my belt, in case we go on defense first. I can't wear

the glove when I'm on offense. It screws up my grip on the ball for throwing.

"The time has come for you upperclassmen, you seniors and juniors, to step up and be men," Coach continues, and I glance over at Cory, who gives me a nod. He's painted up like he does for every home game, the eye black taken to ridiculous extremes until both of his eye sockets are completely black, with a single line drawing down his cheeks. He says that he's copying the look of the ancient Spartans, and I have no idea if he's correct or not, but I do know that when he pulls his helmet on, it's pretty terrifying. "You know what to do. This is your season now, gentlemen. I can only send in plays or give guidance. It's up to you now to make a difference."

After we go out of the locker room, I look down in my helmet, a little smile on my face as I see the folded up square of paper that I've wedged in between the air pocket and the outer shell. Even though it's folded up, I know what's on it.

*Dear Troy.*

*I know this may be weird. After all, I'm planning on giving this to you in about twenty minutes when we have lunch together. But I wanted to say good luck tonight. Just know that I wish I were out on the field with you, instead of on the sidelines just cheering. Actually, I take that back. There's no way I could do what you do, but know that I'm going to be cheering loudest for you.*

*Whitney*

"You ready, Troy?" Coach Jackson asks, coming by. "Like I said, son, the future's in your hands."

I grin and pull my helmet on. With my teammates, we line up behind the big paper banner that the cheerleaders painted up for us, and I see Whitney out of the corner of my eye, standing on one of the other girls' shoulders, holding the paper tight for us, and she gives me a smile, even if it is a bit scared from being up in the air like that. I smile back and wink.



I hear the band that's lined up on the other side of the banner start up the fight song, and I turn. "All right, it's SHOWTIME!"

We charge through the banner, and I lead my team onto the field. We win the toss, and as I watch Watkins take the opening kickoff, everything drops away. It's a comfortable feeling, one I've felt before. The rest of the world can be fucked up. But this field, this space that's a hundred and twenty yards long and fifty-three yards wide, this is pure and right, and I know I own this spot.

"Split left, forty-four blast," I say in the huddle, looking around. "That's you, Gabe. You got this?"

"See you in the end zone," Gabe replies, ready. I look around and grin. This is going to be fun.

The game goes by in a blur, and it isn't until the next day that I read my final stats. Seven of thirteen passing for eighty-seven yards and one touchdown, which isn't really all that great, but with our offense, it works. Fifteen carries for a hundred and eight yards rushing, and another two touchdowns . . . much better. But I'm proudest of the seventeen tackles, including three sacks, a tipped pass, and a forced fumble as we blow out Blueridge 35-7, their only points coming in garbage time of the fourth quarter after Coach had put in the second stringers to get them some game time.

I shake hands with the other team, then turn, looking for something more important than the newspaper guy who I see is hunting for a quote for the local paper. Fuck it, let Coach give him his quote. I'll let my play do my talking. Instead, I'm looking for Whitney, and I see her, still looking fabulous in her uniform, even if she's nearly as sweaty as I am after two hours of bouncing around, doing dances, and yelling her head off in the heat of the last week of August. I'm out on the field too much to pay attention to the cheerleaders during the game, but a couple of times, when Coach would pull me out to get water or during special teams downs, I caught a glimpse, and once, she returned my look, sending little quivers down my back and to my stomach.

"Whitney!" I call, jogging over. She's picking up her gear, and I see that she's struggling with the two pom-poms, megaphone, and her bag all at the same time. I grab her bag before it can fall on the ground and sling it over my shoulder. "Hey. Here, let me carry a little bit."

"Thanks," Whitney says, smiling. We're both flushed from exertion, and to me, she looks so hot I can barely believe it. Whitney blushes with the way I'm looking at her, and she brushes her hair back over her ear. "You did great out there."

"Thanks," I say, and it's my turn to feel warm, which gets even warmer when I hear some of the girls laughing.

"Whoa, she tamed him quick," Andrea Bissonette, one of the other seniors and a girl I'd fooled around with for a hot minute when we were juniors, says. "Damn, Whitney, you must be giving him something special."

Whitney looks mortified, which pisses me off. "Unlike you, Andrea, Whitney doesn't need to offer up a blowjob on the first date in order to make a good impression."

The laughs that greet that comment increase as Dani comes over, raising an eyebrow. "Troy. Good game. Do we have a problem?"

"Nope," I reply. Dani and I are pretty much the king and queen of campus, but we'd never hooked up. Not that she isn't hot, but I never really had the urge with her. Maybe I just respect her too much. "But you might want to have a talk with your cheerleaders about appropriate inter-team comments before I need to say something again."

"That may be, but I'll handle that," Dani replies. "And while I appreciate your willingness to help Whitney with her things, cheerleading rules—no outside help. We haul our own shit on and off the field. Unless, of course, you want me carrying your balls for you?"

I smirk, letting Dani know I'd caught her pretty smooth comment and how it could be taken a lot of ways. I don't know if Whitney understands, but her friend has just taken some heat off her. "Nah, I'm good. All right, I gotta go anyway. *Hasta luego*."

"You're paying attention in Spanish now? I'm impressed," Dani says and turns back to the other cheerleaders. "Come on, girls, let's get this cleaned up. Some of us have dates tonight!"

In the moment when Whitney and I are alone, she gives me a shy little smile. "Thanks. You tried."

"No problem. See you tomorrow afternoon."



UNFORTUNATELY FOR ME, I'M SPORTING A BRAND NEW BRUISE ON MY SHOULDER when I pick up Whitney from her house. Her mother greets me this time, and as she looks me over, I feel like I'm being split in two, the guy I was as a junior fighting against the person I'm not even sure I am now.

*Damn. If that's what Whitney's going to look like in twenty years . . .*

*Shut up, you idiot. I'm here to see Whitney, not horndog on her mom.*

"Troy?"

I blink and realize that Mrs. Nelson is talking to me. "Sorry, Mrs. Nelson. Just daydreaming I guess. What did you say?"

"I said Whitney's getting dressed now. Why don't you come inside? And it's Ms. Nelson. There is no Mr. Nelson."

I nod, understanding and following Ms. Nelson inside. I'm shocked at their house, which is like the complete opposite of mine. It's picked up, with no dirty laundry, liquor bottles, or other crap lying around. There are even little curtains in the window of the kitchen, and the sink is totally empty, cleaned out. "This is a great place, Ms. Nelson. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she says, and my eyes catch the big cross on the wall next to the fridge. Whitney did tell me her mom is big on the church at lunch on Friday. I remember. "Troy, since you and I have a minute, I'm going to take this time to ask you a few questions."

"Uh, okay. I guess." *Shit. The interrogation.* Not what I want. I've called off dates for less, but there is something about Whitney that says I should put

up with it.

"You have a reputation, to put it nicely," Ms. Nelson says, giving me the hairy eyeball. "What are your intentions with my daughter?"

"Mom," Whitney interrupts us, like an angel saving me from certain destruction. "I told you, Troy's been a total gentleman. Aren't you the one telling me that I should give people second chances and believe in redemption?"

Ms. Nelson looks pissed, but she nods and gives me a glance that is very clear. I got lucky. "All right. Well, Whitney tells me you'll have her back before three thirty, so I guess you two can't get up to too much trouble. Just know, Troy—I won't hesitate to protect my daughter."

"I understand, Ms. Nelson. I'll be on my best behavior. I promise."

Whitney and I drive over to the park, where she surprises me by taking off her sandals and splashing through the kids' wading pool. "Come on, it's fun!"

I feel silly, but what the hell? I take off my shoes and wade in next to her, only to be met with a splash of water and a sparkling grin that warms me more than the sun. "Gotcha."

"Oh, you're so going to get it," I say, and we're splashing and engaging in a water fight like the little kids around us, much to their surprise and delight. I get Whitney once, but she gets me right back with a double handful that totally soaks my shirt and gets me right in the face, and I'm left sputtering and laughing. "Okay, okay, I'm whipped!"

Whitney stops her splashing, and I wiped the water out of my eyes. "What does that mean?"

I look at her, and I realize a few things. Her t-shirt is wet in all the right places, and the bra she's wearing underneath, while modest, is still very visible. She isn't talking about our water fight. Also, if she doesn't know, she's even more innocent than I thought she was. "Uhm, well, maybe we should talk about this where a bunch of little kids can't overhear," I say. "You know, sensitive ears and all."

Whitney looks around and sees the kids I'm talking about, who are still smiling at us for a minute before they go back to their playing. We make our way out of the wading pool, and I gather up our shoes off the grass. There's a picnic table nearby, and I follow Whitney over there, where she sits down on top of the table, which is nice and warm from the sun.

Whitney looks at me innocently. "I mean, I know what the word is supposed to mean—pussy whipped—but the way you guys use it and the ways the other girls use it . . . it's just weird."

"It is," I say, and suddenly, I feel like the mature one again. It's weird and wonderful with Whitney that way. She sometimes makes me feel like I'm the one learning from her, like when we talk at lunch, but then there are conversations like this, where I feel like I'm the one who knows everything. "I think it comes down to the fact that guys want to feel in charge, and it looks bad for us to be running around all the time like a puppy dog on a leash."

"But you don't do that," Whitney says, and I look at her. "I mean, you came over to try and help last night, but it wasn't like I asked for it."

"No, but some girls, well, they get to expect it. I think that's what Andrea was talking about, saying you'd tamed me. That's not exactly my thing."

"Like I don't know that?" Whitney says with a smirk. "Remember, Dani's best friend? Troy, I may not know all the intimate details, but I do know the general gist of your social life. You're not a manwhore like your buddy, Cory, but you're no saint either."

I laugh at the term. "Manwhore? I'm certainly no manwhore. I guess you could call me a man-slut maybe—I don't charge for my services, after all."

Whitney laughs, then grows serious. "I'm not going to say who said what to whom, but I heard about your little blow up at Russ Thursday night. That sort of stuff gets around."

"I've lived the past three years in a kind of social microscope, and only my home life has been exempt, although I bet there are jackasses who talk about that, too."

Whitney's quiet for a moment, then she touches my shoulder. I hiss and pull back, and Whitney's face goes into immediate concern mode. "What did I do?"

"Nothing." I hiss, rolling my left shoulder. "Just . . . bumped my shoulder."

"Show me," Whitney says, her hand hovering over my arm. "Come on, please?"

I feel ashamed as I roll up my left sleeve, showing her the now dark purple bar that crosses my arm. "Is that from last night's game? I thought shoulder pads were supposed to, you know, pad your shoulder?"

"That didn't come from the game," I say, not wanting to explain. "I . . . I ran into a door."

Whitney studies me for a bit, then she shakes her head. "I should be angry about that. So far, you haven't lied to me until just now. But I'm not angry. I bet you say that sort of lie so often that it's second nature by now."

I don't know what to say, so I decide to change the subject. "How about we just go back to talking about my being whipped?"

Whitney studies me intently for another moment, then grins. "What are we going to do? Because I'll be honest, Troy. I kinda like this sort of setup."

"I was thinking . . . homecoming's not far off. And as a senior, and team captain, and overall man about campus, I've got the very important job of nominating a girl to be homecoming queen. Whoever I choose, well, she's going to have some heavy social expectations."

"Such as?" Whitney asks, a smile growing on her face. "I mean, these must be *very* heavy social expectations."

"They are. She's going to be expected to do a video for the homecoming committee, she's going to be expected to participate in the halftime ceremony, and if she wins, she and I are expected to dance together at the homecoming dance that Saturday night. That's a lot to expect."

Whitney hums and taps her lips with her index finger, like she's thinking hard. "Well you know, Dani would make a great homecoming queen. But

she'll probably be asked by someone else, and pairing the school's top man and top girl . . . that's just not fair for anyone else."

"Besides the fact that until last week, I wasn't really thinking of asking anyone," I say, causing Whitney to arch an eyebrow. "I wasn't going to just nominate some girl just because. I told myself last year, if I nominate anyone, it's going to be someone special."

"You mean someone with special talents, or someone special to you?" Whitney asks, playfully intense. "Because such a girl, if she existed, would have to be your girlfriend. And most of the girls I know are jealous and possessive. They don't share very well. They'd want you all to themselves."

"You mean, they'd want me tamed, or dare I say it, whipped?"

Whitney grins and nods. "I could hear that said about you."

"So what do you think? Think you'd like to be my homecoming queen?" I ask. "More importantly, though, Whitney, I guess I'm asking if you'd like to be my girlfriend."

"On one condition," she says, and I roll my eyes. Her and her conditions. "Do you mind if we are public about it? I mean, I don't want to be some girl you keep on the down low because she's not popular enough for your crowd."

I grab Whitney in a hug and laugh, kissing her forehead. "I'm proud to have a girl so beautiful and cool as my girlfriend."



WHITNEY'S ACCEPTANCE FUELS ME ALL THROUGH WORK THAT DAY, WHICH IS OKAY. I mean, to avoid getting seen, I'm in the back the whole time, which is hot as hell because of the brick pizza oven and the fact I have to keep chucking wood into the fucker in between chopping ingredients and washing dishes, but I get free pizza out of it, and the owner lets me take home two pies at the end of the night, orders that had been screwed up by the cooking crew, and that was on top of eating half a pizza for my dinner for free. Getting home, I feel great about my day until I open the door to my house.

Dad's not passed out drunk like I thought he'd be. I mean, it's after midnight, and he's usually passed out by nine at the latest. I close the door and can immediately tell why. Dad's out of booze. "Run short on Popov?"

"Landlord came by while you were gone," Dad rumbles. "Had to give him the last of the money to get him to leave. What did you do with the rest, you piece of shit?"

I blink, too tired, confused, and pissed off in general to really answer with any sort of restraint. "Me? In case you haven't noticed, I've been at work for the past seven hours, you hungover fuck! What have *you* done with the money? Oh yeah, you drank it all! I'm getting by on leftover pizza and school lunch, and you're asking me about money? Fuck you! Fuck you and your fucking blame. I'm tired of it!"

"Get out!" Dad screams back at me, coming off the couch and raising his hand. "Get out until you learn some respect for your father!"

Any other day, I'd apologize, if only to get to sleep in my bed. Instead, I turn on my heel, but I turn back and drop one of the pizzas on the table. "Here, you fucking bum. So you don't starve."

I go out to my car, get behind the wheel and drive off, trying to figure out where to go. I want to go to Whitney. I figure she might actually take me in, but I also remember the way her mother looked at me. If I showed up at their place after midnight looking the way I do, I'd never get a date with her again. I can tell that Whitney's the sort of girl who listens to her mother.

So I go to the one place that makes sense to me, the stadium. The gate's locked, but I jump the fence easily, but not before grabbing some stuff out of my trunk. A letterman jacket from the local boosters may not be a Tempur-Pedic bed, but it's a lot better than raw aluminum. Folding up my jacket into a makeshift pillow, I tuck myself into the little gap that is formed by the press box and fall asleep.

"Wake up, son."

I groan and stretch, and I think I'm back home and that I'd just had a bad dream. Then my hand scrapes on the concrete base of the stands, and I remember. I slept at the stadium last night.



"Troy. Wake up, son. It's nearly eight o'clock."

I open my eyes and see Coach Jackson standing in the row in front of me, looking at me, concerned. "You're lucky, Troy. When Hank, the groundskeeper, saw someone sleeping in the stands, he should have called the cops. He checked you out first, though, and called me instead. What in the devil are you doing here?"

"Sleeping," I answer. "Couldn't stay at home last night."

Coach sighs and sits down, looking out at the field. "Want to talk about it?"

"About what, Coach?" I reply, playing dumb.

He strokes his chin and looks back at me. "Troy, did you know that your father and I went to Silver Lake High together? He probably doesn't remember me. I was just a freshman when he was a senior, but I remember Randy Wood. God, anyone who played football against Silver Lake remembers him. Fast? Troy, Randy made you look slow out there. Had a cannon for an arm, and he had the looks too. The guys called him Iceman, because he looked so much like Val Kilmer in that old movie, *Top Gun*. I so wanted to be him when I was a freshman, especially when he got a football scholarship to Texas."

"Whoever you're talking about, that doesn't sound like my dad," I say, trying to imagine the potbellied, jowly wreck that spends most of his days taking up the couch as a football player. "Sure you've got the right Randall Wood?"

"Sure am. You know, back when I played, we had a sort of initiation . . . oh, the school board would call it hazing nowadays, but we saw it as what it was, a rite of passage. We'd get what we called 'ripped,' where one of the varsity players would give you the atomic wedgie from hell, right up until your waistband literally ripped out of your underpants. The seniors would do it to the JV guys right before homecoming, kind of a passing of the torch. Woe to the poor schmuck who wore fresh boxers that week."

I laugh, not admitting that despite what the school administration may say, that tradition still existed. We just knew that certain guys, the pussies who'd

go bitching to their parents or something, we didn't touch. "What, did Dad get you?"

"He did. I was proud as shit to have been ripped by Randy Wood. It was like getting a rub from a superstar, if you can dig it. So of course, I watched Randy's career as he left Silver Lake Falls to go play college ball. I even wore his number when I went up to varsity, although by then, he'd already started to fizzle out."

"What happened?" I ask, caught up despite myself. "What happened to him?"

"First, Nebraska happened in his freshman year. This was back in the Tom Osborne days, when those corn-fed boys were some of the baddest defenders in the entire country. Your Dad got beaten harder than I've ever seen a quarterback get beat down. Randy should have been taken out in the second quarter after taking a blindside sack, but he came out to start the third quarter after the second- and third-string QBs got sent to the hospital in the time he was down."

I shake my head, not believing it. "Is this the part where you tell me that Dad led a comeback for the ages and they beat Nebraska? Then tell me it was all a bunch of bullshit?"

"Beat Nebraska?" Coach says, barking a laugh. "That year, Nebraska went twelve and one. No, Randy took a beating so hard that even the refs were trying to help him by the end, letting the Texas guys hold the fuck outta Nebraska just to slow them down. He didn't complete a pass the entire second half, and the rest of the season, he was a shattered shell of what he could have been. It was during the offseason that he started hitting the bottle, I heard, and by the time I was ready to graduate high school, he'd been kicked out of Texas and was back in town, a fading king already, trying to live off the last vestiges of his glory."

"Then he knocked up Mom," I groan, "and I ruin it the rest of the way for him."

"Don't you ever say that about yourself, Troy," Coach seethes, and I see real fire in his eyes. "You, despite all the flaws you've got—I know about almost all of them. We teachers aren't quite as stupid as you students seem to think

we are. You're a better man at your age than Randy Wood ever was. I'd like to think I've had a hand with that, even if you aren't as good a quarterback as he was."

I nod, looking out on the field. "So what now?"

Coach stands up and brushes off his pants. "Well, first you're going to follow me to my house. My wife had plans for a pancake brunch, and that's probably going to be a lot better for you than that old pizza you've got sitting in your backseat. Not a good idea, by the way, unless you're trying to get yourself a case of food poisoning. And I'm going to overlook the fact that the polo you're wearing right now and the pizza in your seat are from the same restaurant, and if I poked around more, I'd find a paystub from that place in your pocket most likely. How long's that been going on, Troy?"

"Three years," I admit. "But until this year, I only did it in the offseason. Honest, Coach. The owner thinks I'm older. I kinda need the money."

He nods. "If it were up to me, I'd . . . well, I'd do things that would get me fired and you declared ineligible for the NCAA, so I'd better not. But I can have a student over for a meal and tutoring, so that's what I'm doing. As for Randy, if he lays a hand on you again—and don't tell me that black eye you sported earlier this week was because of that new girl you're seeing—I'm stepping in. I won't have you risk your future being hijacked by his past and his inner demons."

We leave the stands, and in the parking lot, Coach turns to look at me. "When we get to my house, take about twenty minutes to take a shower, too. You smell like football stadium and old pizza. Not good, especially if you've got yourself a new girl. What's her name? Whitney?"

"Yeah," I admit. "Whitney Nelson."

"I taught her in American history last year," Coach tells me, smiling. "Nice girl. You could do a lot worse. But we'll talk about that later."

## CHAPTER 7

### WHITNEY

"*A*nd in second place . . . Whitney Nelson!"

The crowd in the stands claps hard, and I raise my hand, acknowledging the announcement while the crowd goes nuts. It's okay that I'm in second, since that means that Dani gets to be homecoming queen, and really, she deserves it more than me. She's the one who has been the social queen for all of high school. At least I get to be on stage with her tomorrow night, and besides, if I'd won, I'm sure I would have gotten some smart ass comments that I just don't need.

Dani looks cute and kind of embarrassed as she accepts the crown, still in her cheerleading uniform, and then the sash. The band plays the school alma mater and a pretty terrible version of the Miss America theme, and at least that part of the night is over. We head back to the sidelines, ready for the second half of the game.

"I'm sorry you didn't win," Dani says when she comes back after getting another photo taken by the local paper. "Really."

"Babe, don't sweat it," I say, picking up my pompoms. "You deserve it, and besides, I got the birthday gift I really wanted."

Dani smiles as I look down at the silver and blue number 12 jersey that I'm wearing for the game. Each of the senior players had the right to nominate a girl for homecoming, and that girl got to wear that player's away jersey for the entire week. I'd been rocking the silver jersey with the royal blue 12 on

it for five days. To say I'm proud of it is an understatement. I don't want to give the damn thing back Monday so that Silver Lake can wear their away jerseys next Friday night. "It looks good on you."

"Looks better on him," I say. Dani's wearing the number 54 of Pete Barkovich, a nice guy who is Troy's starting center. I'd have never expected Dani to accept Pete's request. He's nowhere near the level on the social ladder of some of the other seniors, but then I remembered that Dani is my best friend. Maybe she just specializes in finding diamonds in the rough. "Pete's going to be over the moon, getting to dance with you tomorrow."

"Maybe," Dani says in a way that makes me wonder if she'd just accepted Pete's offer out of purely charitable purposes. "Come on, the second half is starting."

The game is another win for Silver Lake, but the hardest fought one we've had so far. The Round Rock Mountaineers are usually one of the pushovers of our conference, but this year, they've got a couple of studs on the team as well, and Troy and the boys have their hands full until Troy intercepts a pass over the middle about halfway through the fourth quarter and returns it for a touchdown. It's no surprise at the end of the game that Troy is announced as the game ball player, even though he told me that Coach Jackson likes to spread the MVP balls around.

But even I can't miss the results Troy puts for in the homecoming game. Two passing touchdowns, another two rushing, a sack, and of course, the interception for a touchdown. Silver Lake scored thirty-five points for homecoming, and Troy has a hand in all of them.

After the game, I'm waiting outside the locker room for Troy. Mom has gotten used to us being together, and even the school, which burned for two weeks with scandal until it became less scandalous for us to be seen together, has accepted us. Troy comes out near the end of the line of players, and I smile to see that he's showered before coming out, something not all the players do. "You know, I know I asked you for a win for my birthday in my note, but you didn't have to take it so seriously."

"For my girl's eighteenth birthday?" Troy says, picking me up and swinging me around before setting me down. "You could have said tonight's game

was against last year's Super Bowl winners and I would have still figured out a way to win. You deserve it."

"You say the cutest things," I giggle, pulling him in for a kiss. "So what about the rest of my birthday?"

"Your Mom's not going to kill me?" Troy asks, and I shake my head.

"Mom thinks that I'm hanging out with Dani, and she's agreed to cover for us," I say, warmth spreading through my body as I think of our evening's plans. "If anyone asks, Dani and I went camping, and you're just dropping me off since she's taking care of the cheerleading stuff. I'm not seeing you until tomorrow for the dance, got it?"

Troy nods, and there's a certain tremble in his hands as we let go of each other and walk to his car. We get in and drive for thirty minutes, far out into the woods outside town, to a place that Dani told me about when she saw what I'm planning in my eyes. It's quiet, with absolutely no light from town to pollute the view of the night sky above us. The air is just a little bit chilly, and I'm glad that Troy packed two blankets that he pulls from the trunk of his car. I grab the cooler and help him spread out the blanket on the soft grass, sitting down after we're done. "It's beautiful out here."

"It is," Troy says, and suddenly, I realize *he's* the one who's nervous. He's sitting kind of hunched up, his arms wrapped around his knees and his back to me. I smile and put a hand on his shoulders, rubbing the big muscles around his neck.

"What's wrong, Troy?"

Troy turns and shakes his head. "I'm just . . . I'm worried, that's all."

I laugh lightly and stroke his arm, the muscles so hard even after the exhaustion of playing a whole game of football. "Think you're too tired for this? I can understand if you are. You kicked ass tonight."

Troy looks at me intensely. "I guess, well, this is the first time I've been . . . oh, you know! Emotionally involved, that's all. Before, it was just fun, a little whatever you want to call it."

"And you are this time," I finish for him. "Why do you think I asked you to bring me out here tonight? I wouldn't have if I wasn't one hundred percent sure that you cared about me."

Troy's hesitation fades away with me in his lap, and he brings his arms around my body, pulling me closer to him. My t-shirt and jersey that I'm wearing rub against his t-shirt, and the pressure sends warm tingles through my breasts, which feel heavy and sensitive inside my bra. I feel a hard bulge rise in his pants between my legs, and liquid fire is added to the sensation.

Our tongues wrap around each other, and I can feel Troy's desire, but he holds himself back, which reassures me. Instead, he kisses me softly, finding the pulse points along my neck and stroking my back.

In the darkness, we keep kissing, Troy in no rush except to bring me pleasure, and I smile, looking down at him. "It's okay, Troy. I know this first time, it's going to hurt some, isn't it?"

"That's what they tell me," Troy replies. "Are you . . . you know?"

"Intact?" I ask, chuckling. "Last time I had a checkup a month ago, yes, I am. I'm not totally ignorant, though. I have touched myself from time to time. Especially after watching the sexy stud I've got as a boyfriend tear things up on Friday nights."

Troy laughs, and we roll until I'm on my back. I spread my legs, feeling the warm dampness soaking into my panties and bloomers that I'm wearing under my skirt, and I want nothing more than to get them off, to feel Troy's skin against mine. "Troy."

"Yes, Whitney?" he asks, and I scoot back, half sitting up. I reach down and untie the little knot I put in Troy's jersey, pulling it and my t-shirt up and over my head, exposing my bra to him.

"Take off your pants," I say, reaching for the closure on my skirt. "I'm ready for the next step."

As patient and tender as Troy's been so far, he gets his jeans and underpants off at something close to warp speed, his shirt following close behind. I get to see him naked for the first time, and it's intimidating. I've seen more

muscular men in magazines before, but there aren't too many, and the cock that's jutting from between his legs looks bigger than the porn star ones I'd seen on the video I surreptitiously watched last night in preparation.

I reach out with my hand and run my fingers over his stomach, his six pack trembling as he reasserts his self control, his eyes looking into mine. "It's . . . wait."

I get off the blanket and run over to the car, reaching in for my backpack and rummaging inside before my desire overwhelms my brain, and I find the little foil packet that I was sure Mom was going to find since I put it in the bag. I go back to the blanket and kneel back down, showing Troy the packet. "We're going to be safe."

Troy takes me in his arms and kisses me, reassuring all my fears, and we stay there, kneeling in front of each other, our lips exploring each other. Troy's hand comes up to slide underneath my bra and I gasp, the sensation of his fingers on the skin of my breast driving me wild. "Troy . . ."

"Shh," he whispers, kissing down. "I promised myself something, Whitney. I'm going to do my best to make sure that you enjoy this. I don't want your first time to be a bad memory."

"With you? That's impossible," I groan as his lips find my nipple and he kisses, sucking and licking and driving me crazy. It's impossible, it can't feel this good, I've never felt something so amazing. I feel his hand reach under my skirt, and suddenly he's cupping my mound, his hand rubbing my slick bloomers and leaving me unable to breathe. I'm falling back, unable to control myself any longer but safe in Troy's arms and he lays me back, until we're laying on the blanket again, the rich smell of the grass and the woods filling my nose while my mind convulses under his caress.

My body clenches, and suddenly warm ripples of pleasure roll through me, and I'm rubbing up against his hand, thrusting and gasping, unable to breathe or even see. The stars spin overhead, and I'm not sure what the hell is going on, except that I want more, forever more. "Holy . . ."

"I hope it gets better even," Troy whispers, helping me the rest of the way off with my clothes. I look and see that his cock has softened just slightly, and I reach out, wrapping my hand around the thick warm flesh, pausing.



There's no turning back now, but I don't want to. I stroke him slowly, marveling as he comes back to steely hardness, his breath catching slightly when I run my thumb over the top of his head. "Whitney . . ."

"I know," I say, reaching for the foil packet. I don't want to let go of him, so I stick the edge of the packet in my teeth, ripping it open with my free hand. It's a little dry, and I wonder momentarily if the lubrication had dried out after sitting in my room inside my hiding space for a couple of years. Ah well, the latex feels fine in between my fingers, and I roll it onto him, pausing when he hisses. "What's wrong?"

"It's a little tight," Troy says, then sighs. "It's okay now."

"That's what she said," I joke, and our tension disappears. Troy lays me back, and lifts my hips so that my butt kind of sits in his thighs, a little gap under my lower back. I'm not nervous at all though, and intertwine my fingers with Troy's, nodding. "I trust you."

He swallows and nods, reaching down and stroking the tip of his cock between my pussy lips, gathering my moisture until I'm mewling again, wanting him inside me, to get it over with. I want to be a woman with him, and I can't wait any longer.

Still, Troy is taking his time, slipping just a little ways inside me, teasing me I'm fucking sure, but he's opening me up so gently that there's no pain at all until suddenly he stops. I squeeze his hand and nod. "Do it."

"All the way, one thrust," Troy says, pulling back before driving himself forward, piercing me and making me his woman. The pain is sharp but gone in an instant, and I'm sighing in pleasure as he pulls back and thrusts again, the pain transforming into sweet, sweet pleasure.

Troy keeps his fingers wrapped with mine as he leans in until he's directly over me, pinning me to the ground while his cock sends wave after wave of electric blue pleasure up and down my body. I can just make out his face in the moonlight, and he's so intent, capturing me with his eyes, capturing my soul forever.

His hips speed up, and we're climbing higher, toward the inevitable finale, and I draw him in more and more, wanting every bit of this man, wanting it

to never end. I want him forever, as silly as that sounds, and I want him as mine. "Troy . . ."

Suddenly, I'm coming again, and it's different than the first time. It's deeper, more soul shaking, and I see everything, feel every nerve in my body cry out in happiness as Troy shudders, and we collapse onto the blanket.



WE LAY IN EACH OTHER'S ARMS, AND I FEEL A LITTLE REGRET THAT IT'S NOW OVER. I didn't want it to ever end. "You're amazing," I whisper, stroking his face. "I love you, Troy Wood." It came out so easy, like I'd already said it a thousand times, and I loved the sound of it coming out of my mouth.

"I love you, Whitney Nelson," Troy says back, and I grab him tight, never wanting to let go. We don't say anything else, but just hold each other until the two of us drift off to sleep, waking only long enough to pull the second blanket on top and to readjust for the night.

*Best birthday ever.*

## CHAPTER 8

TROY

There's nothing in the cabinets, yet again. I'm losing weight, I know it, and I can't keep going like this. Practice is too tough, and I'm burning too many calories each day. I can barely stay awake in class. I have so little energy, and even Whitney is starting to notice. Coach is right. I can't survive on pizza and school lunch.

"I'm going out," I say, reaching for my keys. I've only got a quarter tank of gas, but it's all I've got. Fuck it, maybe I can scam Russ's mom into letting me stay for dinner.

"Get in here, boy," Dad says, and I try to ignore him, but I sigh and turn around. Who knows, he doesn't sound all that drunk yet. Maybe he has something useful to say.

"What do you need, Dad?" I ask, surprised to see him off the couch. He's still wearing the same dirty t-shirt from yesterday, though, and the funk that drifts off him tells me it's been longer since he had a shower.

"Gimme the money you stole," Dad says, his voice quavering. "I know you stole twenty bucks from my wallet. Give it back!"

"I didn't take any money from you. You used it a week ago, remember? That stuff you brought home in the box, whatever it was? Smelled like turpentine and paint thinner?"

Dad gets in my face, his eyes bloodshot, and I wonder if maybe he's got the DTs. He's certainly been forced to pull back on the booze this month. We're going fucking broke. The only reason I still drive my car to school every day is because I'm worried if I leave it at home, I'm going to come back from practice one day and find that Dad's hawked it for booze money. "You're getting a smart mouth, you son of a bitch. You ain't cursing much anymore, and you've been acting uppity more and more. That little twat that I hear you talking to on the phone making you think you're more than a shit stain on the planet? Or are you stealing money from me to pay for some pussy?"

"You leave her out of it!" I yell, pushing him away. Dad can say what he wants about me, but there is nobody who's allowed to denigrate Whitney. Maybe he's right. Maybe since getting together with her, I've started to try and study when I can stay awake, and maybe my language is cleaning up a little bit, but that's not a bad thing. After we made love the week before and then had the homecoming dance, I feel like I could become a better person. "She's better than you!"

Dad comes back with something in his hand, and just before it catches me in the face, I recognize it as the old cordless phone that we still have on the wall. I never use the damn thing anymore. I have my cell, and I'm not even sure if it works. I think the service was shut off a few weeks ago after we got a bunch of notifications in the mail.

The handset cracks when it smashes against the side of my head, and I'm down, blood dripping from my temple. I've been hit harder in football, but before I can recover, Dad kicks me in the ribs, and even if he's just a shell of the man he used to be, he's still got almost two hundred pounds to drive into the kick. Pain explodes in my stomach, and I roll over into a ball while he stomps the shit outta me.

I know I should fight back. I know that I can. I could kick his ass if I wanted. But it's Dad, and even if Whitney makes me feel like I might actually be a good person, inside the four walls of my house, the truth is different, and the beatings have been going on too long. I promise myself that I won't cry though, and at least I hold onto that while he kicks me over and over until he's gasping and out of breath. "Stupid lying little shit," he gasps, spitting on me. "I should just kill you and save the state the trouble

later on. You're going to end up in jail, Troy. I know it. You're just going to be some prison bitch who takes it up the ass for protection. That's what you want, isn't it? A big cock up your ass on a nightly basis. You make me sick!"

Dad stops screaming and holds his chest. I hope he's having a heart attack—maybe then the nightmare can stop—but instead, he turns and staggers back toward the living room. "You're eighteen," Dad says as he walks away. "Find your own house to live in. I'm done with you."

I crawl out of the house, drops of blood staining the walkway as I do, and I see our neighbors gather outside as I somehow get into the driver's seat of my car. Well, take a fucking picture, people. It'll last you longer. Come see the truth, that the big man on campus, Silver Lake Falls boy hero, is nothing but a cowardly little punk who runs away from his father. I start up my car and drive off, not caring anymore. I wipe the blood out of my eye every once in a while when it stings, but I make my way to the school, not really knowing why, since my original plan had been to try and find some food. The world swims, and I lean my head back, closing my eyes for just a bit to catch my breath.

There's a knock on my window, and I open my eyes to see Coach Jackson standing outside, a cop car parked behind his Toyota. Great. Dad called the cops on me, and now I'm going to get arrested. I open my door and try to get out, falling to my hands and knees when I try. Just perfect. Now I'm the one who looks like a drunk. "No statement."

Coach bends down and helps me to my feet, and I see his eyes are filled with tears. "Oh, Troy," he whispers, blinking. "Oh, dear God, son, what did he do to you?"

"Nothing I don't deserve," I mumble, trying to focus. "Don't you know, Coach? I'm a piece of shit, just like him. At least you might get a State Championship out of it before I fuck up my life. You know it's going to happen. It's fate. It's a family tradition."

Coach Jackson shakes his head, and the cop comes over. I see that it's George Walters, a crusty old coot who is one of the four cops in town, and he's got a camera. George lifts it up and snaps a few photos of my face, then

turns to Coach. "Don't worry, Steve. This combined with what the neighbors said when they called in will keep Randy out of the house for a while. The rest depends on Troy here."

I don't understand, but Coach nods, waving George away. "All right, George. Let's get Troy cleaned up and looked to first. I'll take him to Dr. Burrows's clinic, if that's okay."

"That's fine, Steve. Want an escort?"

Coach shakes his head and leads me to his car. I collapse into the passenger seat, and he buckles me in before going around and getting behind the wheel. "I want you to know, Troy, the next few days are going to be tough, but I'll be with you the whole time. First, we're going to go to the clinic, get you patched up and checked out before you come home with me. In the meantime, don't close your eyes even if you want to. You may have a concussion, and I want Doc Burrows to give me a heads up if you're okay."

"Can't have a concussion, Coach," I mutter, leaning my forehead in my hand as he drives away. It's the only way I can keep my chin off my chest. I feel so weak. "If I have a concussion, Roberts is going to have to play QB Friday against Hartsville. No way we get by them with him under center."

"Some things are more important than football, son."

I spend the next two hours at Dr. Burrows's clinic, where it takes five stitches to close up the gash above my left eye, and the doctor tells me that I'm lucky I have a skull that's thicker than your average rhino's. After that, Coach takes me home, where the horror show continues as his wife helps me into some fresh clothes.

"All I've got in your size, Troy, is a team shirt, if you don't mind," Mrs. Jackson says. She's a few years older than Coach, and she has an accent that says she's not from Silver Lake Falls, but I've never been able to peg exactly what it is, even after knowing her for four years. It's kind of Southern, kind of New England. "Sorry, but our boy's nowhere near your age, you know."

The Jacksons have a little boy of their own, Gregory, who's in first grade and cute as hell. He and I have played together before, and usually, he's all

up in my face, bugging me to mess around with him whenever I come to Coach's house. This time, though, he's not around, and I gather that they sent him to stay the weekend at his grandparents' house. "It's fine, Mrs. Jackson. Thanks. I'm sorry to be any trouble."

"Oh, Troy, you've never been trouble," Mrs. Jackson says, wiping away the little bit of crusted blood that escaped Dr. Burrows' cleaning. "Difficult, of course. But I've been doing this for nearly twenty years now, and I've come to know that high school boys are often difficult. But you've never been trouble, Troy."

She leaves me alone to change, and I pull on the shirt and a pair of team shorts, hissing as I have to bend my knees to get my feet through the holes. I'm going to be stiff, and there's practice tomorrow. Shit.

I get out to the living room, where Coach and his wife watch with careful eyes as I walk across to the kitchen table and sit down. "Thank you. I guess I screwed up, didn't I?"

Coach shakes his head, and Mrs. Jackson leaves to go into the kitchen, opening the fridge. "Troy, you're not going to blame yourself, got it?" He says, his eyes burning with intensity. "What Randy did . . . there's bad parenting, and then there's damn evil. What he did to you this morning . . . that was evil. You have nothing to be ashamed of or to blame yourself for."

His words fall on my ears like lightning bolts, and I'm trying not to cry as Mrs. Jackson brings me a glass of milk. "But it's not all bad, Troy. Actually, Steve was looking for you at your house. You'd just left a little early. He's got some wonderful news for you."

"What's that?" I ask, sipping the milk. It's cold and delicious, and it helps. I chug the rest, and I realize it's been days since I had milk, since school lunch on Friday had unsweetened tea instead. "Hartsville's running back broke his leg?"

"No, but you don't need to worry about that for now," Coach said. "I got a call from Los Angeles today. I don't know if you knew it, but there were some scouts from the Pacific Conference at Homecoming last week."

"I met one, but I didn't think much of it. I was, well, distracted by other things."

He nods, and Mrs. Jackson takes my glass, going back to the fridge before coming back with it and the rest of the half-gallon container. "Here. We can buy all you want later."

"Thank you. So what was the call, Coach?"

"Well, they can't offer it officially until Friday afternoon, you know, but the head coach of Clement University wants to offer you a full-ride scholarship to play for them next year."

I'm floored, and I have to set the milk glass down on the table before I drop it. "What? What about State?"

He sobers and shakes his head. "Nothing yet from State, but if you want my opinion, I think Clement's a better fit for you anyway. I was meaning to have this conversation with you after the season, but this is as good a time as any, and with the scholarship offers coming in soon, we need to talk. Troy, you're a hell of a high school quarterback, but you're a runner. You can pass, but our lack of passing isn't all on the receivers. You don't have that natural ability to drop back and accept that the defensive linemen are coming to try and hit you like a great QB should. A QB like Manning, Brady, guys like that, they don't engage the linemen. They avoid them with tiny little steps and get the ball off even if it means they take a lick right afterward. It's part of their nature, and coupled with their arm strength, it makes them great QBs. You're a naturally combative guy, and despite four years of coaching from me, you're still naturally combative."

"I like the contact," I admit, "but that's a good thing, right?"

"For a linebacker, yes. For a quarterback, not so much," Coach says. "Did you know that about a third of all the guys in the NFL, almost all of the skill players, they played quarterback in high school? You know why? Because coaches like me know the best chance they have to win is to put the ball in the hands of their best athlete as often as possible. I'm both cursed and lucky in that our school is small enough I can play you both ways without getting a ton of flack from the boosters. You're a good enough natural athlete that even when you're tired or a little beat up, you're better



than ninety-nine percent of the kids we face. But at the college level, everyone is like that, and the pros are the best of the best of the college players."

"So what are you saying? That I shouldn't play quarterback?"

Coach nods. "That's exactly what I'm saying. If you go to State, they'll play you at QB. They've got an option offense, and that produces a ton of great linemen and running backs for the NFL, but it doesn't produce good QBs. It produces QBs who've taken a pounding so massive, they're no good in the NFL. They don't know how to read defenses, they don't know how to sit in the pocket, all the things that a good NFL QB can do. Clement runs a pro-style offense."

"But they're stacked at QB. Last I checked, they're three deep with a returning senior, a junior, and two sophomores, and that's not including whoever else they recruit. So what do I do?"

"You be who you are," he says, giving me a tight smile. "You're a smart player, Troy. And depending on how you finish growing, you'd make one hell of a pro-level linebacker. Clement needs good linebackers, and they run a 3-4, just like we do. And face it, you like smashing people out there."

I nod, admitting it before I think of a problem. "Contracts for linebackers aren't as big as they are for quarterbacks though."

Coach nods. "But salaries for star linebackers are a lot bigger than salaries for guys who get cut from the scout team. Think about it."

I do, and I shake my head. "It's a lot to think about. Can I just chill on it for a few days?"

"Of course. In the meantime, you're having dinner with my family tonight, and if you want a bed, it's yours as well."

"What about Dad?" I ask.

"Randy's going to be spending at least a few days in jail for assault, maybe more. Why?"

"It's my house," I say, looking out the window. "All my stuff is there. And it wouldn't be right to mooch off you or someone else."

Coach studies me for a moment, then comes over and lays a strong hand on my shoulder. It's hard to believe that this hand belongs to a history teacher. "That, more than anything, is the reason I believe that you can make it to the pros. We'll help you out as we can, though."



"ARE YOU OKAY?"

It's the first thing Whitney asks me Monday morning, and I know there's no hiding what happened at this point. My face feels like it's puffy, and my entire back and legs feel wooden, and despite my best efforts, I'm limping when I walk into school. I'd timed my entrance to try and minimize the gawking, but it didn't matter. Come one, come all and see the walking wounded!

"I'll make it," I say. "I . . . I'll make it."

Whitney nods, and she looks a bit emotional, like she's about to cry. "Why didn't you call me? I had to find out from Dani via the grapevine!"

I swallow and take Whitney's hand, trying to take a deep breath. "I don't exactly know how to talk about this, you know? It's not the sort of thing I ever expected to call someone about. I'm sorry."

Whitney blinks and cups my face, looking me in the eye. "Okay. I'm sorry too. You don't need my drama on top of everything else." The bell rings, and we've got five minutes till our first class. "See you at lunch?"

I nod, and we share a quick kiss before Whitney takes off down the hall before turning right toward the math wing. She's gotta run. I know how far it is to her classroom. Silver Lake High is pretty stretched out that way. I watch her for a second before walking painfully toward my locker, trying not to meet eyes with anyone else. I'm spinning the dial on my lock when I feel a presence behind me, and I turn to see that all motion in the hallway has stopped and that I'm surrounded by my teammates. Cory and Gabe are

in the lead, their home jerseys on, and I see that Cory's got his wrists taped up like he does before he plays.

"Game's not until Friday, fellas. You're a bit early."

"We're a team," Cory says, stepping forward and handing me my jersey. "That's on and off the field. Our brother's in trouble. We protect him."

"Fucking right," Pete Barkovich says. Pete's a big guy, maybe too short to play college ball, but built like a tank, and he's solemn. "Nobody touches my QB. We talked—all of us. You don't have to worry about a single comment or a damn thing from anyone. Or else they answer to us."

I gulp as I pull my jersey on, and then the clapping starts. My team—my brothers—surround me, and I'm nearly kept in a bubble as I make my way to first period English class, where Mrs. Penman looks at us just as the bell rings. She nods one time, then goes to her desk. "Next time, boys, tell me so that I can have your hall passes ready before you get here."

The morning goes well, and for once, I'm actually awake through most of class. Coach insisted on me going to bed at what he called a *reasonable hour*, and I got a full eight hours of sleep along with a full stomach the night before. When I get to lunch, I'm still wearing my jersey, and it's helpful to see the speckles of blue in the sea of students in the cafeteria.

"I heard about the stunt," Whitney says, and I'm touched again when I see that she's changed shirts as well, putting on her cheerleading practice top instead of the blouse she'd worn earlier. "Tomorrow I'll be more coordinated."

"You look beautiful to me still," I say, taking her hand. We can't kiss in the cafeteria. The teachers on duty can't overlook that level of PDA, but we are able to keep holding hands as we sit down and start eating. "I can't believe all this."

"Wait until tomorrow," Whitney says, spearing her hamburger steak with a fork and cutting through. "Dani told me during third period that half the school's going to be wearing blue."

"They don't need to do that," I say, shaking my head but still smiling. "Hey, the weekend wasn't all bad. Work on Saturday was good, and Sunday, I got

some good news to go with the rest."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Clement's going to offer me a football scholarship," I say, smiling. "Full ride."

Whitney's fork pauses, and her face goes kind of pinched. "Clement. That's in California, right?"

"Just north of Los Angeles," I say. "It's a great school, and Coach thinks I have a good chance to start my freshman year for them as a linebacker."

"But . . ." Whitney says, then swallows. "What about State? You were all gung ho for them, and they're only an hour away."

"They are, but State's not going to be a good school for me. Besides, while I appreciate what everyone's doing for me right now, after this past weekend, there isn't much that I want to remember about Silver Lake Falls. Too many bad memories, and maybe some distance would be helpful. I've got to build a life without all this damn baggage."

Whitney goes quiet and finishes her lunch without saying another word. I eat my food, but when she goes to stand up, she waves me back when I try to follow. "Maybe some distance would be helpful," she says and backs away. "I've got a meeting with Dani for game prep. See you later."

As I sit there, I realize what I said, and I shake my head. I'm not saying that I don't want a relationship with Whitney. I love her. Regardless of where I choose to go to school, I plan on continuing that relationship, even if it means calling every night. After all, this isn't the old days anymore, like in the eighties, when people had to pay by the minute for long distance. Email, Skype, all of it means that I can talk with Whitney as much in Los Angeles as if I'd gone to State, or if I just say fuck it and go to Tokyo for college.

I'm still puzzled as the bell signifying lunch ends, and I try to get my mind back on track. I'll talk with Whitney later. I'm sure she just misunderstood me. She knows I love her, and I just need to explain to her that when I said baggage and distance, I meant so many things other than her. The idea of being without her is more painful than my left leg, which is purple-black all

the way from my hip to my calf right now. It hurts on the inside, being without her.

## CHAPTER 9

WHITNEY

*T*he bathroom door is barely closed before I'm over the toilet yet again. I heave one more time, and here comes the rest of lunch.

*Oh, God. It can't be, can it?*

For two weeks now, my stomach's been churning, and I can barely look at food without wanting to go running to the toilet. I'm losing weight again, enough that even Dani's noticed, and yesterday, she pulled me aside after cheerleading practice. "Hey, is everything okay?"

"I'm fine," I told her, faking it. "Just . . . lunch didn't settle well with me."

"Yeah, well, that's been going on for a week now, honey. You're retreating from badonkadonk to just donk again."

I laughed then at her joke, but fighting my way to my feet now, I'm worried.

We took precautions, right? I mean, I put the condom on him myself, didn't I? Sure, it was a bit old, but the latex wasn't crumbly or anything, and later on, when we fooled around again, we were careful not to let him put his cock inside me. Instead, he taught me how amazing a tongue can feel, and I'd shown him that all those hours practicing on a banana weren't wasted.

*Don't think of bananas. Don't think of any food at all.*

Shit. I can't handle this on my own, so I rinse my mouth out and leave the bathroom. I'm pissed at Troy for even considering Clement, not so much because of the football reasons. I kind of understand those. His goal is to get to the pros. I get that. But can't he play at State still? And why does he want to leave Silver Lake Falls so much? Doesn't he realize that this a town that I love?

I'm nearly crying now, and I turn the corner to go to the cheerleading room. I wasn't lying to Troy. Dani did ask me to come by to help out with making part of the big poster for the game, but that's next period when we both have study hall. I just want to be alone for a bit.

I get to the room and open the door, surprised to find Dani and Pete Barkovich making out on the sofa. "Ahem."

Pete turns beet red while Dani adjusts her top, fixing a button and giving me a shrug. "Shoulda locked it, I guess. Sorry about that. We cool?"

I want to scream, but instead, I sigh and nod. "Yeah, it's cool. But Pete, do you mind? I need to chill out a bit."

Pete nods, and he nearly runs out of the room. I close the door and sit down on the sofa. Dani gives me a look.

"What happened?"

"Just . . . I stormed off on Troy, and for the stupidest reason."

"If you're going to cut the guy any slack, I'd say this is the day," Dani says, sitting next to me. "Rumor going around is that he was beaten like a dog when he left his house on Sunday morning."

"I know, you told me last night. Remember? I'm the one dating him?" I nearly yell, then take a deep breath. "Sorry, Dani. I'm just . . . emotional today. Must be my time of the month or something."

"No, that was last week," Dani says, chuckling. "You and I are on almost identical cycles. So what did you blow up about?"

Last week? That doesn't reassure my fears in the least. I could be a week late already. "Just . . . keep it quiet, please, Dani, but Troy's got a verbal

offer of a scholarship."

"That's great!" Dani says, then sobers. "Where?"

"Clement University. In Los Angeles."

"And you're not going to Clement," Dani says, frowning. "That's a private school. The price tag for it is like mega-huge. You gotta be a trust funder or a super talent like Troy to afford that place. But it's not that bad. You guys can do the long distance thing, you know."

"I don't want to do the long distance thing!" I shout, and now I'm nearly crying. "I want Troy in my arms, or him holding me like we did at Homecoming! Not a thousand fucking miles away, surrounded by hot Hollywood starlets who'd fuck a guy like him at the drop of a hat!"

Dani sits quietly for a moment, then clears her throat. "You and I never talked about it, after Homecoming and all, but I assumed that you and Troy . . . you know?"

"We did," I say, and I feel like we're gossiping, although this time, the shoe is on the other foot. Dani's told me plenty about her adventures. "It was . . . magical."

"Yeah, I saw that the next night," Dani says. "Kinda a rule. If the first time is great with a guy, the girl's walking on cloud nine. If it sucks, she's not into him for a while afterward. And if it's really bad, she breaks up with him. You weren't just on cloud nine. You were looking like you were still in the middle of it."

"I felt that way," I agreed. "So why do I feel like such shit now, and I snap at him?"

Dani doesn't say anything, but instead reaches over to her backpack and unzips it. "Here. The clinic can give you tests and even counseling if you want. They're anonymous, too. They don't take any information down at all unless you go in for birth control pills or a Plan B pill."

I take the card she's holding out, looking down at the address and phone number with no other information. "Dani . . ."



"Better to know than to keep yourself in doubt. Because I can read it in your eyes, Whit. You're scared and you need to know."

I can't hold it back anymore and start crying. I've been doing that a lot recently too, I noticed, and Dani holds me, patting my hair. "Shh, it's okay. I'm here, and I love ya."

We stay that way for a while until my crying jag passes and I let go of her. "Thanks, Dani."

"It's what friends are for. Besides, you got leverage on me now."

"What, you and Pete Barkovich?" I say, laughing. "Dani, he may not be your type, but he's a nice guy. And to let you in on a secret, he's had a crush on you since freshman year. I knew that when he and I shared a few classes."

"Oh, I knew that. Actually, I was talking about hooking up with him back here. Major no-no, and I could lose my spot on the team for it."

I shake my head and give Dani a hug. "Are you nuts? Lose the captain of the cheerleading squad? I'd have to be all sorts of stupid to do that to my best friend."



I STARE AT THE BOX, WHICH IS PLAIN WHITE AND ABOUT THE SIZE OF A GLASSES case, afraid to do what I know I need to do. Since Dani and I finished our conversation, I'd been unable to think about anything else, and even during cheerleading practice, I couldn't focus. Dani cut me a lot of slack, though, and the other girls too. Dani did it because she knew what I was really thinking, and the other girls did it because they thought I was focused on Troy.

Well, I guess I am focused on Troy, just in a different way. I couldn't deal with trying to see him as the rest of the team went out to practice, Troy not dressed except in a t-shirt and team shorts. Coach Jackson had Troy just watch, do some laps and stretch, trying to relieve the bruising and beating he'd taken. Even in my state of disarray, I gasp seeing him from a distance, the way his legs and his back are bruised up.

Now I'm standing here in the bathroom, looking at the little box, and I'm more scared than I've been at any time in my life. I close my eyes and take the plunge, tearing open the box. There's a little thing that looks like a whiteboard marker with a window in the side, and a single instruction sheet.

"Uncap device, hold in urine stream or in cup of fresh urine until testing device is fully wet. Cap and wait one minute. Plus sign confirms pregnancy, minus means no pregnancy. If there is no indication at all in the window, the device may be faulty, or you are too hydrated. Wait and try again with a new device and when your urine stream is not as clear."

*Well, you had some water at practice, but you're not exactly swimming. I guess if it's yellow, you're good to go. Might as well get to work.*

I squat over the toilet and do what I need to do, capping the test and counting to one hundred, just to be sure. I'm just turning the device over when Mom opens the door of the bathroom. "Oh, sorry, Whitney. I thought that . . ."

Mom goes silent, seeing what's in my hand. She looks at me, then at my hands again, and takes a deep breath. "Well?"

I turn the test over, and my heart drops into my feet. A plus sign. "It's a plus."

"I thought . . . Whitney, after all I've told you about what I had to go through . . . what were you thinking?" Mom says, her voice rising into a yell. "It's that Troy Wood, isn't it? That playboy bastard!"

I'm nodding and crying at the same time, and I push past her to go into my bedroom, where I throw myself on the bed, sobbing. I don't need this shit right now. It's my senior year, I've got a great social life going and an awesome boyfriend, and it's not even Thanksgiving yet!

I'm still sobbing when there's a quiet knock on my door. "Go away, Mom! You made your point clear!"

"Actually, honey, I came to apologize," Mom says, coming in and sitting next to me. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry I yelled at you. I know you must be an emotional mess right now."

"We were careful, Mom," I sob, half blubbering, I know, but not able to do more. "We were careful. He wore a condom, and we never . . . ah, gah!" I can't make any more sense, and I just bury my face in my pillow. Maybe I can suffocate myself that way. I think I've seen it in a movie once.

Mom sits quietly, stroking my hair, saying nothing while I sob. When it passes, I feel a little bit better. Life still is unfair and sucks, but I'm not going to die, am I? I mean, look at Mom. She got pregnant in high school too, and she made a great life for me. Well, until I went and fucked it up, but she did a lot for me. I turned over and sniffled, wiping at my nose. "Mom . . ."

"No, honey, you don't need to apologize," Mom says, leaning down and kissing my forehead. "We do need to have a serious discussion though. Actually, you and Troy need to have a serious discussion."

"I can't, Mom!" I say, suddenly afraid. "Mom, if I tell him, it ruins his life!"

"Whitney Nicole Nelson, you'd better start talking sense. Or else I'm going to go over to the Wood house and get some answers from Troy and his parents."

"Mom, that's the thing, though. Troy . . . he's been getting beaten by his dad for years, and yesterday, he nearly got put in the hospital. His mom left . . . years ago, I don't know when. But he's got a bright future, Mom. He wants to get out of Silver Lake Falls, and he's got a scholarship to college. He's on his way to his dream of going to the NFL. If he knows I'm pregnant, it'll ruin his whole life."

Mom swallows and looks at me. "He got you pregnant, Whitney. He needs to take responsibility for his actions. And if he's a half-decent human being, he'll want to know."

"Mom, it's my body. Isn't that what you keep telling me?" I plead, begging. "If I tell Troy, he's going to quit football and not go to college. He'll get a job trying to take care of the baby, and that'll ruin him—it'll kill him. Worst of all, Mom, it'll ruin the love we have, because he'll come to resent me. I know it, Mom. I . . . I love him too much to ruin him like that."

Mom sits quietly, then sighs. "So what do you want to do? Whitney, you're only a few weeks pregnant, and I still want to talk to Dani Vaughn. I suspect I can even put a date of conception based off the now obvious lie you two cooked up . . . but that's for another time. It's only October. Graduation in June is a long way off, and no matter what, you're going to be showing by Spring Break at the latest. If you're like me, you're going to show a lot earlier than that. You can't hide a pregnancy from Troy until June."

I nod, then swallow. "I need to leave, then."

"That'll hurt Troy too, you know," Mom says, not unkindly. "If he loves you the way that you're saying you love him, you're going to break his heart."

"I'd rather break his heart than break his future," I whisper, looking out. "Besides, who says that, maybe after the baby is born, I couldn't come back, you know?"

"That's a lot to talk about, Whitney," Mom says, stroking my hair. "I disagree with your thinking, but you're eighteen and an adult. I'll support you on whatever you decide."

"Thanks, Mom. I . . . I'm sorry."

Mom shakes her head and kisses me on the forehead, like she did when I was little and she was comforting me after a boo-boo. "You don't have to apologize for anything, honey. I love you with all my heart."

## CHAPTER 10

### TROY

*I* thought the days before my first date with Whitney were hard, but they're nothing compared to the past week and a half. Coach not only kept me on the bench for the game against Hartsville, but he didn't even let me dress. I had to sit in my jeans and jersey watching as Roberts tried his best at QB, and Gabe pulled double duty, trying to fill in as linebacker, but it didn't matter. Hartsville's the sort of town that breeds one thing: nasty, tough as nails country boys who scrap and fight. They mauled the team and sent us to our first loss of the season. With only two weeks left in the season, we're now tied for first place.

The season comes down to this next game. The Sounders are the biggest school in our conference, only kept in our level of play because of geography. They routinely field teams that had ten or even twenty more players than the rest of our conference, and we haven't beaten them in years. Now, with one conference loss to our record, it comes down to the the Silver Lake Foxes against the Northern Sounders. If we win, we have the edge in the head-to-head matchup, and win the conference championship, and gain the home field advantage up through the entire playoffs until the state championship. If we lose, we're third, because Hartsville's going to have the edge on us, and we're totally out of the playoffs. Sure, we could blow it in the last week against Carlisle, but so far this year, they haven't won a single game.

So I have stress on me from that. Then there's Dad. The cops booked him on an assault charge, and he's being kept without bail in the county jail. He's

not fighting it so far. I think he wants the free food and lodging, but that means I'm on my own. I'm eighteen, so child welfare doesn't concern itself with me, and with all the attention on me, I can't work my after school job either. The owner gave me a call and explained himself, but basically, he said until the season is over, I'm out of work. At least the landlord of the house came by, and he said not to worry about rent. Still, I don't know what's going to happen there.

Then there's Whitney. After my comments the week of the Hartsville game, I've tried over and over to make it up to her, but things are strained. It's painful, even more painful than my slowly healing legs, to be barely speaking to each other. We still eat lunch together, but there's a tension there that we didn't have before, and I don't know why. I try to talk to her, but it's just a series of short questions and answers until the lunch period ends, and then we're off on our different schedules.

Now, it's Thursday night, and I'm back where I am every Thursday before a home game, sitting in the stands and looking over my sanctuary. Cory's sitting with me after everyone else has gone for the night. The air's chilly, and it won't be long before we start wearing tights under our uniforms for these night games.

"You're pretty quiet, bro."

I nod and pick at the concrete under my bleacher. "Yeah. Just getting my head right. It's harder this week, with all that's going on."

"Yeah, I guess it would be," Cory says, leaning back. "The guys are worried about it. I mean, we know why you've been a step slow in practice—you still look pretty ugly. Not that you didn't before, you know, just it's a more multicolored ugly now."

I laugh lightly, not because I'm actually amused but because I know Cory expects something. Still, he can hear it, and he falls quiet too. "Just . . . I don't know, man, maybe I am whipped. It hurts, that's all."

Cory nods. "You wanna know a secret? I've spent the past seven weeks jealous of you, actually. I mean, it's fun getting more ass than a toilet seat, but to see what you and Whitney have . . . it gets a guy to start thinking that maybe I need to look at changing."

“Really? I guess I should call you full of shit, but then again, I would’ve said the same thing about me not too long ago.”

"Now, I'm not saying that I'm going to stop enjoying myself," Cory says with a laugh, "but I'm saying that if a girl I really like comes my way, well, I can see why you've changed, that's all. But tomorrow night, I hope that the Troy I saw at Homecoming shows up. Hey, change of subject—you hear from any schools yet? Rumor going around is Clement's interested in you."

"That's what they said, but they didn't call last week like they said they would. Maybe because of me being hurt, maybe because they had a tough game with late TV, I don't know. I've just gotta step up tomorrow."

Cory slaps the stands powerfully, happy. "That's the Troy I know. I remember what my dad told me one time, right after my grandfather died. He put in a DVD of Bruce Lee's old movie, *Enter The Dragon*. You seen it?"

I roll my eyes. "I think everyone's seen it," I say, knowing where Cory is going.

"Then you know what I'm talking about, right? We need emotional content. So when you step on the field tomorrow, you put everything out there. Your pain, the bad feelings because of your dad, and yeah, I'm gonna go there, your love of Whitney. And don't bullshit me, I know you do. Take it all, and leave it out there tomorrow. You do that, and we'll be fine."

"Is that what you do?"

Cory laughs and shakes his head. "Me? You need to check who you're talking to. I don't have enough emotionally going on in my life to last me through the first quarter. I play for the same reason I always have. To crack some heads and to get the girls."

"You're never going to change, Cory. You know that?"

Cory laughs again and slaps my knee. "I know that, bro. I know that."



I'M NERVOUS, AS FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, I DON'T FEEL SETTLED AS I WALK through my individual warmups and stretches before the game. The sun's nearly down already, the lights are on, and my uniform fits right. But there's still something wrong, and I know what it is. My heart's not in the game.

Suddenly, I hear Whitney behind me. "Troy."

I turn around, and I see her. She's in her uniform, like the other girls, but there's still something different about her. She's still so beautiful, though, that I want to pull her close, but I'm afraid. I don't want to screw up again, like last time. "Whitney. I . . . I thought you wouldn't talk to me before the game. I missed your note."

Whitney gives me a ghost of a smile and reaches into the waistband of her uniform, pulling out a square of folded up notebook paper. "Never. I know things aren't perfect between us, and I'm sorry. It's been mostly my fault."

"No it hasn't," I say, stepping closer. "When I said I want to forget Silver Lake Falls, that doesn't mean you. I know it sounds stupid, but when I've been studying at home, all I can see is *us*. You're too special to lose."

Whitney blinks and looks up to the night sky, and I think she's about to cry. Instead, she steps forward and wraps her arms around my waist, hugging me tightly. "I love you so much, Troy, and I'm so sorry I screwed the past few weeks up."

"We'll fix it, Whitney," I reply, stroking her hair. "We have plenty of time to fix things. I know it."

She looks like she's about to say something else, but I hear someone holler from the locker room. "Hey, Troy! Coach wants us in for something!"

"Just a minute!" I yell back and look down to Whitney. "Thanks. I promise you, we'll get through this. I love you."

Whitney stands on her tiptoes and grabs my head, kissing me sweetly. Her lips are soft, but there's still something strange about her kiss. It feels like she's saying *goodbye*, not *I love you*. "Go," she says after the kiss. "Go and grab your future, and never let go. Don't forget . . . I love you."



I go back to the locker room, feeling partially better, while Coach gives us a pep talk. It's a bit longer than normal. I think Coach is worried about as much as the guys are. After he rambles on a little, I stand up from my locker and take over. "Excuse me, Coach? I'd like to say something."

Coach nods, and I look around at the guys who are my team, my brothers.

"You all know what I've been going through, maybe even more than Coach here. I don't know. What I do know is that when I was hurt, when I was down and vulnerable, you all stood up and carried me on your shoulders. You gave me the strength to keep going, to not fall apart. Well, I'm promising you tonight, I swear on my blood and on my life that I'm going to return that to you. There is a debt, a bond between us that can never really be broken, isn't there? We made it in the July and August sun, running two-a-days until we were nearly puking. We made it against Blueridge, and East Valley, and everyone we've faced. Even against Hartsville, and you don't know how much it hurt me to be sitting watching that, wanting to be out there. Well, now we've got Northern. Fine.

They've been playing together since they were in preschool. Fine.

They ain't lost to us in a decade! Fine.

Tonight, I'm laying it all on the line. Tonight, we lay it all on the line. And tonight, we teach Northern what it means to come to the Fox Den against hungry Foxes. You ready?"

The guys don't cheer. There's none of that false bravado bullshit that fades away before the opening kickoff's done. I just look around and see a set to their eyes, a tightness to their hands, and I nod. "Good. Helmets up. Cory, take 'em out."

It's our final home game of the regular season, so I'm sent out to do the coin flip, and I choose to go by myself, already helmeted. As I walk by the trainer's table, I stop and grab the white athletic tape. "Hey, Tim, you got a Sharpie on you?"

"Yeah," our medic says. "Why?"

"Just need to borrow it for a second," I say. He hands it over, and on the two-inch wide tape I write a big 'WN' on it. I wrap it around my left bicep,

closest to my heart, and head out to do the coin flip.

I see it in the Northern captains' eyes as we stare at each other across the gap between us. Northern tried to intimidate us by sending out the entire group of seniors on the offense, including their big fullback. But one look at me, and their swagger dims. "Call the flip, Sounders."

"Heads."

"The coin is tails. Silver Lake, you have the call. What do you want?"

"Defer to the second half. Let them choose their way of defeat."

My words rattle them, I can tell, and after we're done, I turn to go back, giving the Sounders my back first, and go to the sidelines. The band starts up the fight song, and it's show time.

I've never played harder in my life, and we need every bit of my effort. It's not just me, though, as Gabe blasts the line for hard chunks of yardage, and Russ is a Grim Reaper over the deep middle, taking heads off every receiver Northern sends after him. We fight, dig, and claw for every thing we can, and the Silver Lake Foxes respond.

The first quarter ends with both teams knotted at zero, but I can feel it, and looking around at the guys, they feel it too. The Sounders didn't expect to fight this hard. They're ready to buckle. "Thirty-four fire SAM slant," I call in the defensive huddle. There's only a minute left in the second half, and the Sounders are just trying to hang on until halftime. "Let's take it to them."

"Cover two," Russ calls, and we break the huddle. We line up, and I can see it in the Northern QB's eyes. He's afraid. He's 'hearing footsteps'.

"Black forty-three! Black forty-three! Set! Hut!"

The ball snaps on one, and I charge. A 'fire SAM slant' is a blitz, where I go on one side of the center, while our nose tackle slants to the other side. If it's done right, the center doesn't know who to block, and the guards are also caught off guard too. My going right up the middle means that if I'm quick and powerful enough, I can be past the line and into the backfield before

anyone can do a damn thing about it. If the running backs are going out on passes, it's lights out for the quarterback.

This time, I go to my left, the Sounders' right, and while the guard is at least half ready for me, he's not ready for the power I bring. We collide shoulder to shoulder, and he's goes flying backward, blown off his feet. The Northern quarterback sees me coming, though and runs like a scared rabbit, scrambling in the half-second head start the guard gave him.

Right into the arms of our defensive end. Bill strips the ball, and suddenly, it's on the ground. I scoop it up and run for the end zone, with only the big Northern fullback between me and the goal line. He'd been sent out on a swing pass, and he's got depth and pursuit angle on me. Squaring down, I lower my shoulder and nail him, both of us careening, but I refuse to go down, twisting and putting one hand on the ground for balance, my knees never touching the ground. When I reach the end zone, the dam is broken, and we're up, six to nothing.

After that, everything is a stat grab. My hit on the fullback took him out of the game with a dislocated shoulder, but more importantly, the Sounders had their hearts taken away from them and came out in the second half a shell of what they were. Final score: Silver Lake 42, Northern 6.

I'm shaking hands with the Sounders when a man approaches me, wearing the crimson and black of Clement University. "Troy Wood?"

"Yes, sir. Can I help you?"

"Yeah," he says, offering his hand. "Zach Peterson, I'm the assistant head coach for Clement University."

"I've read your name before, Coach. It's a pleasure. Hope you enjoyed the game."

"Enjoyed it? That was one of the finest displays of football I've ever seen at the high school level. Now, I know we were supposed to deliver this to you last week, but it kinda got lost in the paperwork shuffle around the office. Here you are," he says, handing me an envelope. "Your hands are sweaty, but it's an offer. Full ride. You play for Clement next year. I know you've

got a few weeks until signing day, but we thought you might like to consider us as an option."

There's a TV crew in our face suddenly, and some reporter is getting his bit for the news. "Coach, I don't need to think. You say Clement has an offer for me. I know I've gotta wait for the actual signing, but you have my word. I'm going to Clement."

"And there you have it, folks. Local sports star, Troy Wood, has just verbally committed to Clement University after leading the Silver Foxes to a massive forty-two to six thrashing of the Sounders. Troy, do you have anything you'd like to say?"

I nod, knowing there's only one thing I want to say. I hold up the strip of tape with the 'WN' on it, smiling. "That one's for you."

I go to look for Whitney, and I hope that maybe, finally, we can put everything behind us. I look everywhere, but the crowd is huge, and I can't see anything beyond the pounding slaps of all the fans cheering our performance. Some of my teammates are coming up for hugs and high-fives, but it's Cory who really sees me. "What's wrong?"

"Where's Whitney?" I yell, looking around. "I can't find her!"

Cory nods, and slaps Pete Barkovitch. "Find Dani! She'll know where Whitney is."

Pete disappears, and Cory grins. "Chill, Golden Boy. You earned a bit of glorification. We'll find your girl."

Cory disappears, and I wait. The crowd lessens, and soon, there's only a few left, kids reenacting stuff they just saw, a few guys with their parents or their girlfriends, and me. I look around, desperate. "Whitney? WHITNEY!"

"Troy," a tearful voice says behind me, and I spin to see Danielle, her face streaked with tears as she stands there. "She . . . she's gone."

"What do you mean, *gone*?" I ask, not understanding. "Gone home? Why?"

Dani shakes her head and takes out an envelope. "I promised her I'd give this to you after the game. I . . . I'm sorry, Troy."

I open the envelope, not caring about the nearly identical sized one from Clement in my helmet, and unfold a single sheet of thick paper, no mere notebook paper like Whitney's note in my helmet liner, but high-quality stationary. The writing is the same, however, in Whitney's clear, fine script.

*Dear Troy,*

*I've tried to write this four times so far, and each time, there's too many tears on the paper to make it readable, so I'm praying that I can get through it this time. It's about three in the afternoon, and right about now, you're leaving your last class to head over to the stadium to get ready for Northern.*

*Troy, I have to leave. I've always had a desire to study abroad, and a few weeks ago, an offer dropped into my lap that I can't refuse. I thought about it long and hard, which is why for the past few weeks, I've been so off.*

*You see, Troy, the problem is, when I started this year, I knew about the chance for the program, but I didn't worry about it. I only had Dani as a true friend, and I was willing to give that up for this program, have just a long distance friendship for a while. I never expected to date you, and then more importantly, to fall in love with you. And yes, I love you with all my heart.*

*Which is why I have to let you go. I can't do the program and be your girlfriend. The time difference is too much, and the miles are too many. I can't rob you of your future, and I know where that is. I wish there were another way. I wish I could dance with you at the prom, or kiss you on Valentine's Day, or yes, make love with you again. I wish we could do all those things, but we can't. It's not fair to me, but more importantly, it's not fair to you.*

*I'm leaving this note with Dani because I know she'll deliver it to you. Please, don't try to follow up, don't try to figure out where I went. Let's just chop it off clean here before I ruin your life. If fate should bring us together again . . . I don't know. I just know one thing.*

*I will always love you, Troy. Please believe that.*

*Whitney*

I read the letter twice, not believing the words, and I drop to my knees, the paper tumbling from my numb fingers. "But . . . why?"

Dani shakes her head, and now both of us are crying, sobbing in a heap in the middle of the SLHS logo painted on the grass. "She handed it to me before the game, right after she talked to you," Dani sobs, holding my head to hers. "She gave me a copy, and told me that she was leaving right then. I tried to get her to stay, but she shook her head. 'I don't need to see the game,' she said. 'Troy's going to win, I know it.' And then she was gone."

"How long?" I ask, desperation in my heart. "How long?"

"Troy . . . it's been three hours," Dani says, sobbing again. "I kept hoping she'd come back, that it was all some joke or something, but . . . she's gone."

I stood there, in a state of shock for a minute.

"NO!" I yell, pushing Dani away and getting to my feet. Leaving my helmet behind, I sprint to the locker room, ripping my shoulder pads off to get my wallet and keys. Fuck the pants and cleats. There has to be a chance. I drive like a madman, running a red light to get to Whitney's house. Screeching to a halt outside, I run up to the door and begin pounding on the door. "Whitney! Whitney! Open the door! Tell me it was a prank!"

The door opens, and Ms. Nelson stands there, ice cold and uninviting. "She left on the bus an hour ago, Troy. She's not coming back."

"Please, Ms. Nelson. I need to talk to her again—tell me where she went. Tell me how to get in contact with her."

Ms. Nelson shakes her head, still cold. "I promised her I wouldn't. Goodbye, Troy. Please leave before you cause any further hurt."

She closes the door in my face, and I step back, dropping to my knees in the grass again and sobbing. I won my dream and lost my heart, all in the same night.

## CHAPTER 11

WHITNEY

*November 27*

*Dear Dani,*

*Thank you for your email. I'm sorry to hear that Silver Lake lost in the semi-finals. I know that it was something the whole school was fired up for. Thank you also for not telling me specifically about what Troy did. That wound is still too painful for me.*

*Most of all, though, thank you for keeping your questions about my leaving to yourself. I'm sure you have your suspicions—you're too smart not to—but let's just leave it at that, okay?*

*Life here in Europe is, well, different. I'm staying with a couple of family friends who are in the military, and no, I won't say where. No offense, Dani, but you've got a big heart, and even though you promised, I also know that if Troy is still heartbroken enough about it, you'd tell him where I am. It's enough of a danger just sending you this email.*

*There I go, saying I'm not going to talk about Troy, but doing it anyway. Fine. Yes, I'm still crying myself to sleep about half the time. I dream about him a lot, and no, it's not the hot dreams either. They're the sweet kind, like when the two of us went down to the River not to do what I'm sure you thought we were going to do, but*

*instead, he taught me how to fish. Or the time he explained football to me so that I could follow the action on the field better.*

*Maybe some day in the future, I'll be able to get through an email without crying. I don't know.*

*All my love,*

*Whitney*

*PS- Thank you for telling me that you rescued the letter. It hurts to know he kept it, but thank you anyway. And also, Happy Thanksgiving.*

*W*



*December 25*

*Dear Dani,*

*Merry Christmas! Okay, okay, yes, the cat's out of the bag with that last photo I sent you, not that you didn't figure it out already. I'm about three and a half or so months along now, and I'm starting to swell. Not so much that I'm going to look like a blimp, but I'm bigger. I couldn't have hidden it from you for long anyway.*

*I looked over the photos of the Winter Formal, just like you asked. So you and Pete are still together, huh? I'm glad for that. Like I said, he's a sweet guy, but you know that by now. And no, that doesn't mean that you can give me details on what you guys do when you're alone, thank you very much!*

*It hurt, of course, seeing Troy at the formal. He looked so lonely, going stag. I know there had to have been at least a hundred girls who wanted to have him take them, but still . . .*

*Anyway, it was nice that you said you danced with him. I know six months ago, you'd have rocked his world, but I guess childhood's*



*over for all of us, kind of. That makes me kind of sad, but maybe just because I feel like for me, childhood ended just when I was making some of the best memories. Don't ever think that the silly little things that everyone's doing aren't important. It's all important, and I wish I could still be there with you all . . . and him.*

*I'm getting along well here, learning the local language. The friends I'm with have already gotten me placed under their military health care, so I'm getting excellent care here. I'm keeping up in school, and who knows? I may be in college before you at this rate. The Europeans have really awesome university systems, if worse comes to worse.*

*Take care over the rest of winter, and know that I love you.*

*Whitney*



*March 12*

*Dear Dani,*

*So you've decided that you're going to go to State, huh? That's awesome! I know they've gotta have something that'll pique your interest, and let's face it, you're going to raise some hell there too, I just know it.*

*Yes, you guessed right, I'm in Italy. I guess the picture of me in front of the Colosseum was too much of a hint, huh? I'm not upset that you figured it out. I wanted to let you know, and you're my best friend. I realize I can trust you. No matter what happens, Dani, I want us to be friends.*

*The guy? That's Lorenzo. He works on the base, and his parents are friends with the people I'm staying with. He's teaching me Italian, and before you ask, no, he's not teaching me any French techniques! Actually, most of the time, he ends up escorting my rapidly swelling ass around to the various sites and art galleries. I think I'm going to*

*go into the art business, actually, once the baby comes. It's so beautiful, and it moves me in ways that very few other things have.*

*So Troy's hitting the weights hard, huh? I guess his telling me that he's going to leave behind playing QB to go for linebacker in college is true. I hope it turns out well for him. I wish I could see it, honestly.*

*I suppose you know why I left, and I suppose you probably don't agree with it. But thank you for not saying it. I know it's trite, and I know that we're in a world where a woman, even an eighteen-year-old with her GED, can make something of herself. It's not like in my mother's day.*

*Still, I know Troy, and that's why I stay in Italy. Dani, I told my Mom, and I'll tell you now. If Troy knows that I'm pregnant, that he's a father, he won't ever be able to reach the pros. He won't be able to reach the potential he has. I'm sure of it.*

*I'll keep you up to date, and I hope to hear from you soon. Of course, we can set up a Skype call some time. I'd love to do that. Just make sure you have privacy when we do.*

*All my love,*

*Whitney*



*May 29*

*Dear Dani,*

*You'll find attached the first photos of Laurie Patricia Nelson. She was born yesterday at 3:53 PM, weighing eight pounds, two ounces. Isn't she beautiful? She's in perfect health, and that's all I could ask for.*

*It both hurts and helps for me that Laurie looks so much like her father. Lorenzo's a bit jealous, but he says he can get over it. He*

*already says he loves her, but—and hold your horses—he says he loves me, too.*

*I'm not saying I love him, and I've told him as much—I'm not ready, and I don't know when I will be. But you said it yourself, graduation has already come and gone. Hell, you and Pete broke up, although I understand why with him joining the Navy and you going to State. At least that one was mutual and with as little rancor, I guess, as you can get when a couple breaks up after dating for as long as you two did.*

*But Lorenzo's a good guy. He's a little older than me at twenty-one, but I swear, that has nothing to do with it. It's just that, holding Laurie yesterday, the nurse going off in Italian, I realized something.*

*I never told you this before, and Mom and I only discussed it once, but I was seriously considering giving Laurie up for adoption after she was born. I mean, I'm sure a couple of times you wondered why I didn't terminate, and well, that option went through my mind too. But I just don't believe in it. So I thought, at least back in October, that I'd give the baby up. Then, who knew? Maybe I could come back and go to State, and when Troy comes back for summer break .*

*..*

*I've got to stop torturing myself like this. I saw Laurie's tiny little face yesterday, and the way she tugged on my finger and her tiny, tiny little blue eyes stared at me, like she knew that she didn't have a father and that it was just me and her in this world, and I knew I would've regretted that decision for the rest of my life if I did it.*

*Because of that, I think my stay over here in Europe might take a little longer than I thought. Lorenzo's already said that he's willing to help out with the baby, and like I said, the Europeans have such a different system for university. Even as an American, I can go for super-cheap, and there are so many ways to make sure that I can go while Laurie gets what she needs. If Mom can do it, so can I, right?*

*I don't know if you'll really understand me with this. I just know it's what I have to do. I have to make my heart go on—I can't stay on*

*the sidelines wearing that number 12 jersey forever, you know? I . . . I just can't.*

*I love you, Dani. For all that you've done, for all the support you've given me. I was never granted a sister, but if I had my choice, I'd pick you. Tell me about your summer vacation plans and how you're getting ready for life at State. I'm looking forward to it.*

*Love Always,*

*Whitney*



*May 25 - Four years later*

*Dear Dani,*

*Wow, has it really been that long since I last wrote you an email? I know we chat on instant messenger, but sometimes a good old email is good to make sure you get out all your thoughts.*

*I can't believe you and Pete got back together. That's awesome! I loved the pictures you sent of your engagement party. He certainly doesn't look at all like the squat brickhouse he was back in high school! The Navy was good for him, but more importantly, you two look so happy together. It's going to be strange, though, thinking of you as Danielle Barkovich instead of Dani Vaughn.*

*Strike that, I left some stuff out. Danielle Barkovich, MS, going for her PhD in psychology! How'd you turn into such a bookworm, huh? Personally, I think you took all those Harley Quinn jokes that we made for you back in high school too seriously. You didn't have to go into psychology because of that, you know. Now, if you tell me that you've started thinking about a guy named Mr. J, then I'm so going to freak out.*

*I'm glad to hear that your little brother is also getting along well in college. Still, choosing to go to university in Alaska, of all places?*

*What was he thinking? I saw your last family photo you sent along, and he has grown up handsome, especially since he dropped that eyeliner stuff that he was going through. He's got your hair, obviously, and kinda reminds me a little of that old English rocker, Sting. The music I get exposed to in Europe gives me different perspectives. But yeah, losing the eyeliner is a big step up for him.*

*Yep, that was Laurie with me in the last photo I sent. Isn't it amazing how fast she's grown? Her Italian almost outstrips mine now, and I can keep up with the crap they put on TV without a problem! Give the Italians all the credit in the world for cuisine, music, culture . . . but damn, their TV sucks! Thank God for Netflix and YouTube!*

*Yeah, you overheard Laurie right when we Skyped. Lorenzo and I, we're kind of broken up now. We tried, Dani, we really tried to make it work. I can't fault him for that. He's a good man, but after all that time, even he could see that, despite our best efforts, there was a place in my heart that he was never going to get to. I don't need to be a psych expert like you to know why.*

*Yes, I keep up with him on the Net. Second round draft pick to Seattle. I'm surprised he didn't try to get a trade, considering his bad feelings for Silver Lake Falls. Then when you told me he actually bought a house in town, that old one that he and his father used to live in . . . amazing. And he's a teetotaler, which I can totally understand. He had a really good rookie year, got some quality games in, and I'm looking forward to seeing what he can do this year.*

*Well then, I guess I need to come out and say it. I need to know, Dani. For five years now, Troy Wood's been a ghost on my shoulder. He's been at every art gallery, every sale. Every time I closed a deal to send something to the States or bring it here from the States, I wondered if he'd have been proud of my hard work. When Laurie took her first steps, or said her first word, the first person I wanted to tell wasn't Lorenzo, or Mom, or even you . . . it was him.*

*Lorenzo knows it, and he says he can live with it, if I have some closure. He's my business partner anyway, so it's not like it's that*

strange. So, we're going to do something totally crazy. I'm going to come back home, and bring Lorenzo and Laurie with me. Lorenzo is so in love with Laurie that I couldn't deny him the way I denied myself and Troy, and I need his support right now. We're just **friends** and business partners, and he's okay with that.

Dani, I need to know. I need to see him, at least **one** more time. I don't know if I can talk to him, and who knows? After five years, maybe he won't even recognize me. But I need to know. I need to see him up close, and if I can, look him in the eye. I need to know if I can move on from him.

I'll call you next week with our flight details. I'll probably stay at a hotel in Seattle, at least for a while, until I know how long I'm staying in town. Maybe Mom won't mind if we crash with her for a couple of days. We can get together then, for sure. I know I want you to meet Laurie.

I love you, Sis.

Whitney

PART II  
ADULthood

## CHAPTER 12

TROY

"Foxes! To me!

I don't care, I may not be a Silver Fox any more, and looking around at the assembled group, I don't recognize any faces, but there are a few whose names I know, kids who are the little brothers and cousins of my Foxes. Still, it feels great to call out those words again, and as the fifty-odd players in junior high school and the high school gather around, I feel like I'm the one who should be paying for the experience, and not them. Not that I'm making any money off this. The camp fee is for their t-shirts, and any overage goes to the booster club.

It's the feeling of being home again that helps, and yes, taking the two days out of my own training camp in order to do what the team thinks is a purely PR event for a little bit of rest and recovery physically as well. For someone on the line of being cut, something like this could be dangerous, since it's the last weekend before the first pre-season game, but I'm sure of a slot on the fifty-three-man roster, so I'm happy with things.

"All right, Foxes, good work these past two days. First, I'd like to thank Coach Jackson and the rest of the SLHS staff for letting me come in and work with you guys."

There's a round of polite applause, but I don't expect much more. I run through the rest of my little wrap-up talk, then dismiss the camp, turning it over to Coach Jackson. Walking away, I feel a presence behind me, and I turn to see one of the campers, an intense kid who made an impression as



much for his seriousness as he did for the fact that he's totally undersized for his position.

"Excuse me, Mr. Wood?"

I shake my head and smile, chuckling. "Nobody calls me Mr. Wood. Call me Troy—didn't I tell you guys that yesterday?"

"Sorry," the kid says, and I remember the kid's name now. Charlie, Charlie Pride. "I just had a question. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure. What's on your mind?"

"Well," Charlie says, and I can read his mind as he's thinking. He knows the truth, that at five eleven and one ninety, even if he's bulking, Charlie's football career is going to end at Silver Lake High unless he goes on a massive growth spurt sometime during his senior year. He's too short and too small to play offensive or defensive line like he camped for, and he's just a step too slow to play linebacker or defensive back. He might have an outside shot at making a minor school or maybe someone's scout team, but he knows the grim reality—the last ten to twelve games of his playing career are coming up fast.

"Well, I was kind of wondering . . . what's it like with your teammates and such in the pros?"

It's not a question I expect, and I nod my head, needing a moment to form my answer. "It's a lot different," I say, thinking. "First of all, the whole facility is a lot nicer than here, of course. I mean, we've got carpet and everything. But I don't think that's what you're talking about, is it?"

"No," Charlie says, and I'm reminded of some of my former teammates, the ones that I overlooked for too long. Guys like Pete Barkovich, who I found out is getting married to Dani Vaughn when she called me up and invited me to the wedding. "But what's it like between the teammates?"

"Each team's different, or so I've heard," I answer. "Sure, there's a bond, but it's not the same as what you've got here. Some of those guys, the long-term guys, have been with the team for ten years, and we've got one dude who's been with the team for twelve. He started with the team when you were in preschool, and that means he's formed deep bonds with some of those other

long-term players. But also, it means that he's seen hundreds of young guys like me come and go. Players get cut, players get traded, players retire. It's strange that in the pros, you could be buddies with a guy one year, and then the very next season, you're lining up across the line from him at the Super Bowl. So there's that. And of course, the money."

"It's a lot, isn't it?" Charlie asks, and I shrug. I haven't really thought about it that much. Contracts are contracts, and I make more than enough money to do what I want to do. It takes me a moment to recall some of the numbers and formulate an answer.

"I guess. If you're worried just about the money, my best advice to you is to hit the books harder than you hit the weights, unlike what I did. I mean, look at it this way. My rookie contract, with signing bonus and before taxes and such, is going to be worth roughly six million dollars if I play it all out and don't re-up at some point. And yeah, that's a lot of money, I won't play you. But there's a classmate of mine, Cory. He's got a job with an investment bank already, and I've kept up with him on the side. He's the same age I am, and he's already making a hundred twenty-five thousand a year."

"Yeah, but you're making ten times as much," he says, confused.

"For the next few years, sure. In ten years, I'll probably be out of the NFL, and having to make it on my savings, investments, stuff like that. Cory's still going to be growing, and with his brains, he might even retire with more money than me. But anyway, what you were saying about the locker room, that plays a part. It's a job, is what I'm saying. You've gotta love it, just to put yourself through the pounding and effort that the game demands at the professional level. But it's still a job. You won't have a tighter team bond than you get with these guys you'll play with this year. Even at Clement, I didn't have it. Anything else?"

"No, thanks. And good luck next week. First pre-season game of the year, right?"

"Right. Good luck to you too, Charlie. See you around."

He jogs off, and Coach Jackson comes up, a little grayer than he was last year, but still the same guy. "You didn't blow smoke up his butt. I appreciate

it."

"You know how it is. I want them to be successful, not like . . ."

"Like Russ?" Coach asks quietly. Russ died over the New Year's holidays in a car accident coming back from college. He'd been drunk and lost control of his car on an icy patch of road. I was in the playoffs at the time, so I couldn't come to the funeral, but I visited his grave right afterward. It hurt.

"Yeah," I finally say, then force a smile. "But it's not all bad. Pete and Dani . . . that's pretty cool. Did you get an invitation?"

"Sure did," Coach says, kind of embarrassed. "Seems strange though. I didn't think I made that big an impression on you guys."

"You did," I reply. "But then again, since you're getting the checks as my official agent, I guess you know that, don't you?"

He laughs and shakes his head again. "You know my wife is still just about ready to adopt you because of that? You're paying for my son's college, and a big chunk of my retirement fund."

"You were there when I needed it. It's the least I could do. You saved my life, Coach."

"It was my pleasure, Troy," Coach says, then looks at the backs of the retreating players, all of them seeming so young, and it wasn't even that long ago that I was one of them. "So you're going back to practice tomorrow?"

"Yeah. You know how it is. This first pre-season game is the chance for guys like me to prove we belong in the starting lineup. It's tough on the team. They've got four really good linebackers already, and that crew, they've been together for a few years. I'm not going to be given a spot. I'm going to have to take a spot."

He laughs and pats me on the shoulder. "With an attitude like that, I don't doubt you will. In any case, I'll be watching. I think we all will be."

"Thanks, Coach."



I'M FEELING THE WARMTH ON MY SHOULDERS, EVEN THROUGH MY JERSEY AND PADS, and I feel good as I stretch out before the game. There are butterflies in my stomach, but I know they'll go away as soon as the fans really start filing in and the game gets closer.

"Hey, mister!" a kid calls behind me, and I ignore it, figuring that the kid is trying to get the attention of one of the stars on the team. With a team like ours, you've got a few to choose from. I'm still officially a second stringer, although if I do well this game, maybe I can move up a slot for the next game. Still, the first string defense is taking it easy, and today's my first official start as a pro, even if it is pre-season.

"Hey mister! Number fifty-one!"

I turn, surprised as I see a little blonde girl in the stands, waving to me. I've got time. It's still a half-hour until game time, so I take a moment and walk over. "Hey, what's up?"

"Can I get your autograph?" she asks, thrusting a blue Hawks hat and Sharpie at me. "Mama says you're her favorite player."

"Really?" I reply, touched. "How old are you?"

"I'm five," the little girl says, and there's something about her face, the way she looks, that just seems familiar. It's like I'm looking at a Photoshop of two people that I know, one of those mashups you can see on the Net from time to time, just for some reason, I can't put a name to the faces. "I just turned five, but in a few months, I'm going to be five and a half."

"Really? Congratulations," I say. "You want me to just sign this, or do you want this made out to your mom?"

"Would you? Wow, that'd be great!" the little girl says, and I can start to pick out an accent in her voice, something faint and maybe European. "Mama would love that!"

"Okay, then what's your mama's name?" I ask, switching to the way the little girl talks. "I'll sign it to her, then. And if you have anything else,

maybe something for you too?"

"Wow . . ." the little girl breathes, but before she can answer, a man calls out.

"Laurie! Let the man prepare for his match in peace!" The man, who clearly has an Italian accent, says, coming up. He's about my age, maybe a little older, and the way he puts his hand on the girl's shoulder, I'm sure he's her father. Laurie starts to protest when I interrupt, smiling up at the man and waving.

"Oh, it's no problem, it's still warmups," I reply quickly. The man doesn't look convinced, so I know I need to work fast. Seriously, it's a pre-season game. What's he all upset about? I'm the guy playing, and I'm not even this uptight about it. I uncap the Sharpie and get ready to sign for the girl, or her mama, I guess. I don't want to turn her away. She's just too cute. "Laurie here was just going to tell me who to make the hat out to. So, Laurie, what's your mama's name?"

"Whitney," Laurie says, and my pen falters, pausing just before making contact. "Mama's name is Whitney, but I call her Mama."

"I see," I say, forcing my pen to move again. "Well, here you are. 'To Whitney, who has the cutest little girl in the world. Thanks for the support, Troy Wood.' How's that?"

"What's going on?" a voice behind the man says, and my heart stops. Looking up, I see her come down the stairs behind the girl and the man, and it's like I've been caught in a time warp. The face—it's the same beautiful heart shape, with the same gentle bow-like curve to the upper lip. She's got the same little scar on her chin, where she told me that she'd fallen off her bike when she was a little girl and took seven stitches. Her hair's shorter, but still shoulder length and that amazing, lustrous shade of auburn that haunts my dreams, and I can't stop staring.

"Whitney . . ."

Whitney stops and sees me, her own eyes going wide as she looks down on me. Five and a half years, and I feel like I'm back at Silver Lake again, back to the first time we met, except ironically, this time I'm the one on the grass

and she's the one in the stands. "Troy. My God, it's good to see you. It's been a long time."

"Very long," I choke out in reply as the man leads Laurie away. Whitney stays behind, and I look up at her, the rest of the stadium forgotten for a moment. "It's . . . it's good to see you."

She's got something in her eyes, and I don't know what, but it's hard to think with so much emotion flowing through me. I feel like the past and the present are crashing together, and I'm having trouble containing myself. "It's good to see you too, Troy. I'm glad you made it . . . the Hawks even. Wow."

"Yeah . . . wow. And you're a mother now. She's a cute kid."

"She's the most important thing in the world to me," Whitney says, glancing back over her shoulder. "She's amazing."

"Amazing," I repeat, and I feel like the breath's been knocked out of me. A mother. Whitney's a mom. "Whitney . . ."

"I need to get to our seats," Whitney says, turning back to me. "It's good to see you, Troy."

She turns to walk up the steps, and I find my voice. "Wait! Whitney, wait!"

She pauses and looks back. I take my chance. "Please, Whitney, I want to talk. Just . . . I really would like to talk."

She considers me for a moment, then nods. "We're having dinner at the Cafe Italiano in town tonight, maybe around seven. Can you make it?"

I know the place. It's not great Italian food, but it works for a town the size of Silver Lake Falls. Screw the post-game press conferences. I can make it. "I may be a little late, but I'll be there."

"All right. Good luck today, Troy. Laurie's really been looking forward to seeing you play."

Whitney walks away, and the public address announce system plays the music that signifies that warm-up time is over. I retreat to the locker room, getting ready for the game. As I finish suiting up, pulling my helmet on and

making sure my gloves and shoulder pads are right, the numbers run through my head.

Five years old. Laurie's five years old. Which means . . . she's half Italian.

At least I understand now why the little girl was so familiar when I first saw her. She's got the same shape to her face as Whitney, that perfect little heart shape, and a twinkle in her eye that I still remember from when Whitney was up to precocious tricks, ones that I usually enjoyed when we were together.

Couldn't she have waited even a few months? Were all her words to me, saying she loved me . . . were they just lies? How long did it take for her, after she left Silver Lake Falls, to hook up with that guy?

I'm trembling in rage now, and as the team goes out to start the game, I'm seeing red. We end up kicking off, which is just what I need as I'm about to explode. In the huddle, I look around at the defense, a mix of first and second team players who are getting their work in before the borderline players start the second half.

"Storm Rip Slant," I call, taking over the huddle leader duties. Richard, the leader of the backfield, calls the coverage, and I line up. I've adapted to the rigors of pro football, adding a lot of muscle from my high school days, and I now tip the scales at an even two hundred and thirty-two pounds. Every pound of it is trembling, and as the wide receiver on the other side goes into motion, I snap into a steely focus.

"Slide, slide! Cowboy!" I holler, adjusting the play. It's on my shoulders now, and I call off the slant, instead adjusting to a slide to the other side, knowing what's coming. The ball snaps, and the quarterback rolls out toward my side. Our outside linebacker fades out, covering the tight end that's going out into the flat, while I read the QB's eyes. They flick left, then right, and I know where he's going. I pounce on the read, and I step in front, just in time as the ball is released. It smacks hard into my gloves, but I've still got the soft hands that let me throw a pretty good ball myself back in high school, and I intercept the pass, barely breaking stride as I streak toward the end zone, the offense chasing me. The other team's got no chance, and I go in standing up for a touchdown.

During halftime, some of my teammates look at me in a bit of awe. The starting linebackers, especially Tim, who I'm slotted behind, look a bit worried, and I understand. One half, against at least partially another team's starting offense, and I have seven tackles, a sack, one forced fumble and the interception returned for a touchdown. It's the sort of performance that turns heads and gets attention.

"Don't blow your load in the pre-season," someone jokes as I stare at the carpet of the locker room, still trembling. I haven't stopped trembling since Whitney walked up the steps in the stadium, and I can't get my mind off her. "You know, premature ejaculation ain't good for anyone."

I ignore the taunt, my mind still locked in battle mode, and it takes our linebackers coach two tries to get my attention. "Wood. Wood! Coach wants to see you."

I nod and go into Coach's office, taking deep breaths to calm down. Our head coach doesn't like players angry. He wants us calm. I'm trying. "Yeah, Coach?"

"What the heck was that out there?" Coach asks, smiling. "Damn, Troy, you were a solid rookie last year, and in camp, I thought you'd made strides, but that? The league's going to piss test the hell outta you after that one. Only thing that could have stopped you was kryptonite."

I shrug, taking another deep breath. "Just . . . I had content."

"What?" Coach asks, confused, and it's my turn to smile.

"I had emotional content." Ever since Cory and I talked about it, it's been my guiding philosophy. Play with emotional content.

Coach nods, not quite getting the reference, I can tell, but understanding enough of what I'm saying. "Whatever it was that you used to get that content, I want you ready to rock in the second half too. I'm putting you in for the first series before putting in the other players. You keep playing like that, and you're going to have a strong case for a starting slot."

"Still have one more series to go, Coach. Let's see what happens."



We get the ball to start the second half, so I'm chilling on the sidelines and waiting for our chance. Our defensive coordinator is going over some pictures and stuff on his tablet with the guys who will be taking my place after this series, nobody talking to me. I'm so locked in the zone.

*We need emotional content. Not anger.*

That's true, but anger is part of emotion, and right now, I'm running on high octane anger and rage. Five years, and not a word, then suddenly, I find out why. Five years ago, Whitney tore my heart out and left nothing but a black hole that still hasn't filled.

"Defense!"

I look up, and realize we punted, going three and out. I run out on the field and form the huddle. "Hawk Triple Blast," I call, looking around at the circle of faces that are mostly totally different from the guys I was playing with in the first half. These are the scrubs, the guys who are praying for a slot on the team and hoping a good performance might get them a roster slot, or at least a spot on the practice squad. "Let's run this shit."

We break, and I roll my jaw, making sure my mouthpiece is in. The other team sent out their starting offense to start the second half, wanting to put up something that looks good for their fans back home, and I can see they're licking their chops, knowing that other than me, it should be easy pickings.

"Fire, fire!" I scream, adjusting. "Blast twelve papa! Blast twelve papa!"

Some of what I yell is bullshit, meant to draw off the other team. The only part that matters are the words 'fire' and 'twelve,' which resets the linemen back from their zone stuff scheme to basic smash mouth football, and that I'm going in right behind them. We need to punch these guys in the mouth, get them on their heels before they can settle into a comfortable pattern, and grind down the newbies I'm surrounded by.

The ball snaps, and I blitz, ripping through the guard's grip before he can get pressure on me. The quarterback is mobile, but he called a straight drop back pass, and my helmet catches him in the middle of his back before he can do much more than roll and try and protect the football. We crunch to the ground, and the quarterback collapses underneath my weight, groaning

in pain as he does. I roll off, walking back toward the huddle while our home crowd roars and the other guys look on. I look back and see that the quarterback is still down, holding his right wrist in pain.

My part of the game is over, and Coach pulls me out, looking at me in a bit of wonder before sending in my replacement. The game's in hand, and now it's time to try and unload before seeing Whitney.

After five years . . . Whitney.

## CHAPTER 13

WHITNEY

"So what did you think of your first live football game, Lorenzo?"

Laurie's only five, but she talks like someone a lot older than you'd think. She still *eats* like a five-year-old. The remnants of her spaghetti and meatballs stain her face on both sides of her mouth, and I think that's a speck of Parmesan in her hair, although it's hard to tell.

"It was quite different from what I'd expected," Lorenzo replies, sipping at his wine. "The crowd was smaller than I thought there would be."

"Pre-season games are almost always light sellers," I explain, sitting back and watching my daughter finish her spaghetti before our desserts arrive. "The fans kind of know that for most of the game, the players won't be trying their fullest, especially the starters. They're there to get live practice in, and since the game doesn't count for the standings, they relax. It's a long eighteen weeks of real games they've got ahead of them before the playoffs start, and they only get two weeks off during that time."

"I see. Still, it was entertaining. Too much pausing for my taste, but I expected that after you two made me sit through the videos."

"Troy kicked ass, Mama!"

"Laurie Nelson, who taught you to talk like that?" I ask in semi-outrage.

"It was in that movie we watched," Laurie says, giving me her most angelic smile. She's so like Troy that it's hard to deny her anything, especially after

seeing him today, and she knows that she can use her good looks to her advantage, and not just with me. She's hard to control that way. "You know, the one with the aliens who sucked the people's faces?"

"Yeah . . . I thought we said we weren't going to copy what they said in that movie too?" I remind her, and I can't help but smile. My daughter's got a mind like a steel trap, and very few things escape the sponge than is her brain unless she wants to ignore them. "Remember, I said that it's not polite to talk that way?"

"Okay, Mama," Laurie half-pouts, but then brightens. "He was awesome! Why can't he do that every game?"

"Because there are a lot of big, mean men who are trying to stop me," a voice behind me says, and my head whips around. It's hard to breathe again as Troy comes up, his hair a little shorter than he wore it in high school, and his shoulders a little wider, his chest a little more muscular, but still . . . that smile, those intense blue eyes . . . it's hard to breathe. "I take it you enjoyed the game?"

"Uh-huh!" Laurie nods, yelling in her excitement. She doesn't know it, but it's the first time she's really met her father, and already, I can see she's entranced with him. It's easy to see why as Troy squats down next to her chair, pulling his left hand from behind his back, where he'd been holding a football. "What's that?"

"I remember that when I talked to you in the stands, I promised you something for you too, and not just your mama," Troy says, handing the football to her. "The team lets me keep footballs that I return for touchdowns, and I thought there's nobody I'd like to give it to more than the cute little girl who helped me on the field by cheering so loudly for me."

"Wow . . ." Laurie says, entranced as her tiny hands try to hold the pro-sized ball. "You wrote on it?"

"Uh-huh," Troy says, staying squatting. "It says 'To Laurie, thanks for the big help, Troy Wood.' Sorry if my handwriting is a bit messy. It's hard to write on leather with a pen."

"Can I play with it?" Laurie asks, and I have to hide my chuckle. A normal fan would probably have immediately socked the ball away as a keepsake, hoping to maybe sell it on EBay some day. Laurie's a five-year-old kid. She sees a new ball she can try and play with.

"If you want," Troy says with a laugh, "but it's a little big for you right now. Maybe start with a smaller one first, one that you can hold easier."

"Would you join us, Troy?" I ask, nodding at the fourth chair. "After all, when you give away things like that, the least we can do is offer you coffee."

"I'd appreciate that," Troy says, and his eyes are burning with intensity again. "It's been a long time, Whitney. So what's brought you back to Silver Lake Falls?"

"Family vacation," I say, still not letting on that Lorenzo and I aren't together. I can't trust myself around Troy. His pull is like gravity, and I need to hold out, if only for Laurie's sake. "I wanted to bring Laurie to meet her grandmother. Mom's ecstatic, of course. And, I got an invitation to Dani Vaughn's wedding."

"Really? That's good," Troy says, hiding the hurt my words cause pretty well. It doesn't make it to his face, but I can see it in his eyes. Now he knows I've been in contact with Dani and not him. "I'm sorry. I wasn't introduced to you, sir. Troy Wood."

"Lorenzo Galvani," Lorenzo replies, and the two men shake hands. I can tell Lorenzo is jealous, and maybe he should be. I'm having a hard time seeing him at all now that Troy has joined us. "Whitney tells me that you and her used to . . . go to high school together?"

"We did," Troy replies, sitting back. The waitress comes over, clearly star struck but handling it well, Troy's obviously known around town, and he takes his order, a tiramisu, after Laurie tells him what she's having. "I think I earned the treat tonight, don't you, Laurie?"

"Uh-huh," Laurie says, grinning. "It's *good*."

"That it is," Troy agrees, smiling at my daughter fondly. He turns his smile to me, and I feel fresh heat inside me, a heat that's been gone for a very long

time. "So you're in town for a while. That's great. If I can ask, what have you been up to the past few years? I mean, I figure you've been in Europe, but you know . . . lots of time between high school and now."

*Lots of time, and none at all*, I think, looking into Troy's face and fighting back the memories. *Did I fall into a time machine or something?*

"We're expanding our business," Lorenzo interjects, his neck stiff and his body taking on that posture that I'd learned so long ago means he's pissed off. Not every man is ruled by their passions, but Lorenzo is certainly one of them. "We are thinking of opening a new gallery in the area."

"A gallery? Impressive," Troy says, taking a sip of water. "What sort of gallery?"

"I studied art when I was in Europe," I reply, nervous about Lorenzo's tone of voice. I don't want a fight, not here, not now. He's supposed to be okay with us not being *together*, but this is tough, I'm sure. "I've picked up a good eye for art, it seems, and I've cultivated a good list of clients here in the States. It's gotten big enough that we're thinking of maybe making a go of it full time here, instead of our clients having to come to us in Italy."

"Ambitious," Troy says. "I am glad you've found success. It was hard not knowing for so long."

"She is taken care of," Lorenzo nearly spits, and I glance at Troy, worried. I remember how protective of me he was when we were younger, but I'm not an innocent eighteen-year-old girl any more. I shake my head just a little bit, hoping he sees me.

Troy notices and gives me a tiny little nod, and sits back, taking a big breath. "That's good. So, Laurie, I guess you speak Italian too?"

"Uh-huh. And English too. My teachers at pre-school said I was one of the best," Laurie says with more than a touch of pride. "You want me to teach you?"

Troy laughs at her unexpected offer, but nods. "I think that would be great. But, you should probably ask your mama first. I mean, it takes a long time to learn a foreign language, and I'm a guy who spends most of his time getting hit in the head."

"What's that mean?" Laurie asks innocently, and I try not to groan as Lorenzo interrupts Troy before he can answer.

"It means that Mr. Wood may not have the most functional brain, Laurie," Lorenzo says with more than a hint of malice. "It might make him slow at learning."

Troy looks up, his mouth tight, and he lowers his eyes to look directly at Lorenzo. "I may not be fluently bilingual. I may not even have my degree yet. I know that. But I'm not an idiot, and I don't exactly appreciate being called stupid."

"*Bruta selvaggia*," Lorenzo shoots back, and now it's my turn to be angry. Taunting Troy is bad manners, but to do it in a language that Laurie fully understands and knows that Troy's being taunted in is over the line.

"Lorenzo!" I snap, pissed off. "There is no need for that. Troy has been polite and is a friend."

"*Si, si . . . un amico. Un amico speciale*," Lorenzo spits back sarcastically before getting to his feet. "*Scusi*. I must make the toilet."

Lorenzo storms off, and I can tell by looking at Troy that he understood enough of Lorenzo's words that he grasped the meaning. I wait a bit while we calm down. "Guess you remember more Spanish from school than most people."

"Some," Troy says, obviously still pissed. He looks at Laurie, then at me, and shakes his head. "Maybe this was a bad idea. I don't want to give you a hard time. Maybe I should go."

"Don't, please, Troy?" Laurie says, and she's nearly in tears, seeing her new hero so upset. "Lorenzo didn't mean it."

Troy blinks at Laurie's words, as surprised as I am, and he sits back, nodding. "Okay, Laurie, just for you."

Laurie nods and smiles, and I'm nearly in tears now, watching Troy father his daughter without even knowing it. Lorenzo comes back and sits down, saying nothing as the waitress brings out the desserts. Troy makes the best of the situation, talking with Laurie and me while eating the tiramisu, even

clowning around a little by 'forgetting' a giant glob of cream on his nose, which makes Laurie descend into a gale of giggles. We finish dinner, and Troy is restrained enough to not offer to pay our check, seeing the way Lorenzo is still seething. As we get up to leave, Lorenzo takes Laurie to the car while I get my purse.

"Whitney," Troy says, leaning in close enough that it feels again like old times. "This was . . . this was nice. I'd like to see you guys again, if that's okay."

"I'm not sure, Troy," I reply, trying to control myself. "It may not be . . . safe."

"What is safe?" Troy asks, and slips a piece of paper into my hand. "Please. It's just my phone number. Just a call maybe. At least so I can ask the questions I need to ask."

I slip the paper into my purse and leave. Outside, I see Lorenzo stewing next to the car. Laurie's inside, but Lorenzo's still pissed, staring at me over the car. "What?"

"Are you happy now?" he nearly yells, gesturing at the restaurant. "First the game, and now this? Are you happy that you saw Mr. Football Hero? Can we go now? Or do you want some more private time?"

"Lorenzo, what I do is my own business," I say evenly, trying to keep my voice level. "We've discussed that, and you agreed to it as well. I know your feelings, but I won't be ordered what to do!"

"So you can go running back to him? He's an imbecile, a brute who gets paid to beat up people in front of a crowd! You might as well call him a *gladiatore*!"

I nod, and open the door of the car. "Maybe, but he was polite and kind to all three of us tonight," I say. "That's better than I can say for you. Now, are you driving, or are you going to stand there?"

Lorenzo thumps down into the driver's seat and jams the keys into the ignition. He sits there for a moment, then shakes his head. "No. I'm sorry, Whitney, but I can't do this anymore."



He gets out of the car, leaving the keys in the ignition, and now Laurie's crying in her booster seat in the back of the car, watching the two adults who have so far raised her yell and argue. I get out and watch Lorenzo go around to the sidewalk. "Where are you going?"

"Back to the hotel," Lorenzo replies. "If you choose me, well, we can discuss that on the way back to Italy. But if not . . . I can't fight this ghost of yours any longer. I've been a good man to you, Whitney, and I love you with all my heart. But you don't love me. I can see that. I can see something else, too, and I can't fight that anymore. So I'm not going to. I have too much of my life left to waste it fighting with some ghost that is now flesh. *Arrivederci*, Whitney."

Lorenzo walks off, and it's my turn to start crying as he leaves. I wipe at my eyes, though, and go around to the driver's seat, sitting behind the wheel. Laurie's still crying, not understanding except that Lorenzo's walked away. "Mama, what happened? Where's Lorenzo?"

"Away," I reply, looking back. "He's . . . well, baby, he may have to go back to Italy. We'll talk about it at Grandma's house. There's a lot to talk about, I think."

"Lorenzo's going? But why? Why is he leaving?" Laurie cries, tears rolling down her face, and I don't have an answer for her. Instead, I drive, hoping that my own tears don't lead to me getting in a wreck before I get to Mom's house.

## CHAPTER 14

### TROY

"*T*roy! Holy shit, man, it's good to see you!"

I'm smiling as I give my old center a hug. Pete blocked for me for two years, and despite the fact that I'm now bigger than him, it certainly doesn't feel like it. The morning sun drifts through the trees that shade the entrance to Pete's house, and I let go of him, shaking hands instead. "Hey, bro, congratulations. Who'd have guessed that you'd get back with Dani after the Navy?"

"It is pretty freaky," he agrees, laughing. "But I guess that's just love, you know? When I got out of the Navy, I came back here just to chill for a bit and consider my options, and bam! I literally ran into her in the supermarket. Knocked her down coming around the corner to the frozen food aisle."

"So what are you doing now?" I ask, following Pete inside his house. It's a nice little place, not very big, but for a young couple just starting out, it's good. "I mean, besides getting married."

"I'm working for the city now," he says. "The Navy taught me to take care of all the pipes and water systems for a nuclear aircraft carrier, and now I get to do it for the city, minus the nuclear reactor, of course. Oh, the smart asses might call me just a plumber, but I prefer the term hydrology engineer. At least it sounds better on my business card."

I laugh and take a seat in the offered chair. "That's good, man. The city's a good place to work, and you two can build a good family here, you know?"

Pete nods, grinning. "We know. We already have it mapped out. I'm going to work while Dani finishes her doctorate, and after that, Dani's going to support me while I take night classes, turn that associate's I was able to get in the Navy into a four-year degree. Unless, of course, kids come, then we might have to adjust timelines."

"Dani's going to get her doctorate?" I ask, shocked. Dani and I have kept in touch over the years, but it's never been about academics, but instead about other things. She mentioned something about her study, but I thought she was going into social work, not something that requires a doctorate. "Harley Quinn's getting an MD?"

The door to the kitchen opens, and Dani, still tiny and wearing her hair in twin blonde ponytails, comes out. "Psychologists get PhDs, actually, Troy. Psychiatrists get MDs. And by the way, you are about the only person left in town who is allowed to call me Harley. How're you doing, big guy?"

We exchange hugs, and I have to admit, Dani looks beautiful, mainly because she looks so happy. I sit back down and watch as she gives Pete a kiss before taking a seat on the sofa next to him. I feel the little twinge inside, and I know it, I'm jealous. They look so happy together. "So the honeymoon's set too?"

Pete nods. "We're not exactly rich, you know, but we figured it out. We're going to go up to this lake in Canada, just north of Vancouver for a week. They rent out cabins, and we're going to enjoy the time before fall session starts for Dani. I already got the time off with the city, and things are going well."

I shake my head, amazed. "Good for you guys. I mean that."

"So what's up, Troy?" Pete asks. "When you called and said you wanted to come over, you sounded like you had something you wanted to talk about."

I nodded, my smile fading. "Actually, Pete, if you don't mind, I'd like to talk with Dani alone, please. Just for a few minutes. I promise, I won't tell her

about that time we went out in the woods with just a jar of peanut butter and no spare underpants."

Pete laughs at the old joke and gets up. "Sure. You guys want the living room?"

I shake my head, getting up as well. "Actually, if you don't mind, Dani, can we talk in the back yard?"

Dani gives me a nod, and I can see she's slightly nervous. We go into the back yard while Pete settles back on the couch, and I close the glass door behind us, leaving the curtains open so that he can see that I am behaving. After all, I am in the backyard with his fiancée.

"What's up, Troy? You know, if it's about a wedding gift, the register is not the only thing that . . ."

"How long have you known?" I ask quietly, standing in the grass a few yards out from the end of the concrete patio. "About Whitney?"

Dani stops, then sighs. "That she's been back in town? About a week now. She got in with Laurie and Lorenzo on Monday."

"You knew for a week, and you didn't think to mention it to me?" I ask, trying to control my temper. "You, who knows more than any other person in the world how much I've hurt for the past five years? You knew, and you didn't tell me? Why?"

Dani's struggling with her emotions now, and she walks further out into the backyard, probably to prevent Pete from overhearing. "This hurts for me too, you know!" she finally says, turning on me when we reach the fence. "How do you think it felt to have my best friend of fourteen years just up and leave the country? How do you think it feels to watch you, the guy that I consider my best guy friend in the world, tear himself apart in his personal life even as he tears apart every asshole who crosses his path on the football field? How do you think that feels, huh? So yeah, I knew. And yeah, maybe I played it a little selfish not telling you. But, I'm getting married next Saturday! I was hoping, praying, that I wouldn't have to face this situation until after I got married. Is that too much to ask?"

I turn and lean on the back fence and look into their neighbor's yard, trying to control my feelings. "She came to the game with her daughter and that man," I said, my weight causing the fence to groan. They've got a dog, a little dachshund, but it's tied up at the moment, yapping away on its long lead. "Laurie asked me for an autograph, and I had no idea who she was, until he comes up and takes her by the hand, and then out of the fucking blue, Whitney's there next to them. She invited me to see them at the Cafe Italiano, and things didn't go well. I nearly lost my temper with Laurie's father."

"Laurie's . . .?" Dani asks, not understanding I mean Lorenzo. "What happened then?"

"I gave Whitney my phone number, hoping she'd call. I'm not saying I have to have her back. Yes, it hurts, and that moment on the sidelines, it felt like time slipped back, except it didn't. All the want was there, but all of the pain and anger too. I feel bad for RJ on the other team. I didn't mean to break his wrist."

"I bet," Dani says. It was in the news—the quarterback I sacked broke his wrist on that last play. He's going to be out another six to eight weeks, and for a quarterback to hurt his throwing wrist like that, it could be even worse. At least it happened in the first week of the pre-season, and he'll have some time to heal. If the Hawks beat his team in the regular season, I want it to be straight up, not because they're playing at less than full strength. "You were a beast out there. Reminded me of your game against Northern."

"Yeah . . . Northern," I reflect. "Where my heart was torn out right afterward. Dani, do you know? Do you know why? I'm guessing from something in the way Whitney said your name at the cafe, you two have been in contact. She didn't just look you up on Facebook, I bet."

Dani nods but doesn't say anything for a while. "Troy, bear with me. Remember, I'm a psychologist now, and we tend to ramble. I'm sure you know that. The Hawks have a sports psychologist on staff. I took a class from the guy my junior year at State."

"You're trying to distract me. It won't work. But go ahead."

"Okay. Hypothetically. Imagine you're me. Your best friend leaves suddenly, and a few weeks later, you get an email from her, swearing you to secrecy. You know that if you tell anyone—including the guy on the football team she's been seeing—about it, that you'll never hear from her again. Now, what would you do?"

"I don't know," I say, thinking. "I guess I'd keep the secret."

"Yep, and I did," Dani says. "It tore me apart. I did what I could, being a friend to her and to you, even as I knew the truth on both sides."

"And what's the truth, Dani?" I ask.

"I can't tell you! It's not my place!" Dani yells, and I see movement inside. Pete's up, his eyes concerned as he sees her yelling at me. Dani notices too, and waves him back down before turning back to me. "I can't tell you. Only Whitney can do that."

"Great," I whisper. "But she isn't calling me. I only have today off. Then we're in full-on camp mode again through the start of the regular season. Last game's an away game, so the day off is our travel day, and I talked with the team. They've given me your wedding off, but what if she leaves again?"

Dani looks at me and sets a hand on my back. "All right. I shouldn't tell you, but you deserve it, if only to talk with Whitney. She's at her Mom's place—she's staying there until things get settled for her and Laurie."

I nod, too overcome with emotion to form words for a few seconds. "Thank you, Dani. I guess I have been a burden on you."

She shakes her head and her arm slides around my waist. "If you were a burden, I'd never have told you anything, you know. You've been a good friend, and you deserve closure at least. I'd prefer if you find happiness, though."

Now calm again, we go back inside, and I say my goodbyes to Pete and Dani and promise again that I will be at their wedding. Getting in my car, I immediately head over to Ms. Nelson's house. It's funny, really. I call teammates and coaches who are nearly the same age as Ms. Nelson by their

first name all the time, but to me, Patricia Nelson is always going to be Ms. Nelson.

Her house is nearly identical to what it was five years ago, although the brown paint on the trim looks fresher than it had been. I realize, sitting there, that of all the time I've been back in Silver Lake Falls, I've never driven down this street. It's like I've been avoiding it, even going out of my way to avoid the neighborhood. Swallowing, I park, and getting out, I feel a sense of déjà vu. It's then that I realize I didn't park in front of the Nelson house, but instead a few doors down, and a very familiar set of planters is right there next to me. At least the red flowers have been replaced.

I walk on nearly numb legs to the door, hoping against hope that Whitney is there. Lorenzo, Laurie, Ms. Nelson . . . I don't care about them. Well, Laurie is cute, and she's a nice little girl, and I'd like to apologize to her about the crappy dinner she had last time, but it's Whitney I need to see.

My finger is shaking as I reach out and touch the button, and inside the house, the bell rings.

Please, let it be Whitney.

## CHAPTER 15

WHITNEY

"No, Lorenzo, I don't think that's a good idea."

I'm talking on the phone, a conversation that I should have had with Lorenzo weeks, if not months earlier, but I was too moved by his care for Laurie to be more firm with him. It's my fault, really. I ended up stringing him along when I shouldn't have. "Yes, I understand that it puts the business at risk. Lorenzo, when I proposed this idea months ago, I thought about that. Of course not! You and I both know that I was always honest with you. I always told you after we broke up that I just don't love you. I've tried to be as kind as I can about it, and I care for you, but only as a friend. I'm not going to be held hostage by that any longer."

Lorenzo unleashes a long string of liquid Italian in my ear, and I can tell he's either crying or half-drunk, or possibly both. "That doesn't matter. Yes, you care for Laurie, and she cares for you too. But I've made my decision. Laurie and I are permanently relocating to the United States, regardless of how you feel or how it effects our business. I hope you and I can continue to operate as business partners. You're a smart man, and I think you and I can make good money this way. But if your feelings are going to get in the way of that . . . then it's best we make a clean break before either of us gets more financially invested in what would be a doomed project."

Lorenzo's clearly crying now, and I feel a twinge of regret. I do care for him, even if it's not as he needs, and I don't want to hurt him. He goes off



again in Italian, and I listen as peacefully as I can. "If that is your decision, Lorenzo, then so be it. I'll adjust my plans accordingly. Goodbye."

I hang up the phone as Lorenzo keeps yelling, putting the phone on silent before he can call back. I'm not going to be emotionally hijacked by a man, even if he does care for Laurie, especially after the way he went off outside the Cafe Italiano. I'm glad that Mom had taken her to the preschool at her church, which offers full daycare or partial daycare, at least until Laurie is ready to start elementary school next year.

Someone rings the doorbell, and I wonder who it is. Mom doesn't get deliveries often, she says, and it's just after eleven. Mom said she was going to go to work after dropping Laurie off, so it couldn't be her. She isn't supposed to be home until six or seven.

I get up from the couch and walk toward the front door, and when I'm about three feet from the painted white wood of the inside, I feel it, a tingle that starts at the base of my neck before becoming a hum that seems to wash through my entire body. Maybe I'm psychic, or maybe I just feel the magnetism, but I'm not surprised at all when I see Troy standing there, a nervous look on his face. "Whitney."

"Troy. I didn't think you knew I was staying here. I suppose I have Dani to thank for this?" I should be pissed that he's here uninvited, but I'm not.

"Please don't blame her," Troy says, and I can't be mad at Dani either. I knew that after Troy gave me his phone number I was avoiding calling him, even though I shouldn't have. I just kept putting it off, hoping the problem would solve itself. I should have called him, but I didn't. Now, he's standing outside my door, and the magnetism is back, and I feel like fate is taking control again. "I damn near begged her in her backyard while their neighbor's dog yapped at a thousand barks an hour."

I can't help it. I smile. "All right, I won't blame her. She just did the right thing anyway. I should have called you. Would you like to come inside?"

Troy nods, and I turn, leading him into the living room. "Have a seat on the sofa. We can talk there. You want something to drink? Water, some Gatorade or something? I'm not sure what a professional athlete like you drinks."

"Careful which player you ask that to," Troy replies with a chuckle. "A lot of my teammates would hit you up for a beer."

"Dani told me you're totally dry. I'll be the first to say I support you in that, but I do sometimes have a glass of red wine with dinner. You can't spend five years in Europe without becoming used to that."

"That's okay, I don't worry about what other people do there. Just . . . I won't let myself down that road, even in the littlest step," Troy says, pausing while I disappear into the kitchen. I come back with a couple of glasses of apple juice. It's Laurie's favorite and it's cold. "Thanks. I guess you know why I came by."

"I do," I reply, and I take a sip of my juice to settle my nerves. "We've got a lot to talk about."

Troy nods. "I'll be honest with you, Whitney. When I saw you last week at the stadium . . . it scraped a scab that I thought was a scar."

I nod in understanding. "I'm sorry about that. If it means anything, it reopened a lot of closets that I thought I'd locked closed a long time ago too. No, that's not true. The doors might have been closed, but there were still things stirring inside, even after five years."

Troy nods and sighs. "So where do we begin? I don't want to sound like a melodramatic hysteric, but all I have inside me are hysterical questions. Maybe it's better . . . safer if I just let you tell me what you want to tell, and then we can go from there."

I laugh softly and take another sip of juice. "You've become a bit of a nerd in the past few years. I don't think the Troy I knew would have even used words like melodramatic hysteric. Clement was good for you."

"Coach Jackson was good for me. After the season, he took me in and made sure I had a roof over my head and clothes on my back. More importantly, though, he personally guided every step of my college prep. He was the one who cracked the books, who made sure in the dark days that I didn't give up, and made sure I was ready come May for graduation and to go to college."

"When I left Silver Lake Falls, I wasn't sure what I was doing. I just knew I had to do it. I'll get to the why later. I had Laurie in late May, and afterward, I went to university in Europe. I'd already gotten into art and art history by then, and so when Lorenzo offered to go into business with me—his family has some money—I went all-in. For the past two years or so, he and I worked with clients to find art to bring to the States."

"You told me," Troy says, and sips his juice again. "What changed?"

"Laurie," I say honestly. "She's so smart for her age, and maybe I dote on her too much, but she's also precocious, which I guess is another word to say willful, stubborn, and some would say spoiled. Oh, she's charming enough that she gets away with it a lot, but I couldn't have that in her life any longer. In Europe, a pretty little girl like her would be spoiled irretrievably rotten. So, that combined with those rattlings in the closet I mentioned earlier led me to decide that I had to move us back to the United States."

"And Lorenzo's fine with that?" Troy asks. "I mean, he seemed a bit uncomfortable at the cafe, and to be honest, as Laurie's father, he should have a say in it."

I move my foot and wince when I step on one of Laurie's Legos. She loves the things, but she leaves them all over the place and never quite gets them all picked up. "Ouch. Troy . . . Lorenzo isn't Laurie's father."

"What? But you two . . . and the way he seems to care about her . . . I don't understand."

The air is heavy, and I can barely breathe, but I decide to just charge through. "Troy, Lorenzo and I—we dated for a while, but it never worked out because I never loved him. Or to put it a better way, I loved him, but I was never *in* love with him. He's going back to Italy because of it, because of what was between us all the time. Do you understand?"

"I can understand that. Go on, because I feel like you have something important to say."

Troy is bigger, but he's just as patient as he was years ago, that certain sense of self-composure that is part of his raw magnetism. Maybe on the football

field, he lets his fury and anger go, but right now, sitting next to me is a gentle, kind man, matured from the slightly cocky man-boy he was before. "Troy . . . I brought Laurie back to America to meet her father. I brought her back to meet you."

Troy blinks, stunned. "Okay, Marshawn must have hit me in the head too hard yesterday, because I swear you . . ."

"Yes, Troy. You're Laurie's father."

## CHAPTER 16

### TROY

I've had one concussion in my football career, a blindsided shot during my freshman year at Clement when a guy blindsided me on a kickoff. I'd gone flying through the air, landing in a crunch on the turf, my helmet smacking the ground hard, and everything went fuzzy. I didn't lose consciousness, but for the next few minutes, everything was sort of hazy, like people were moving in herky-jerky slow motion, and when they talked, I could see the lips moving, and words were hitting my ears, but nothing was quite making sense.

That's how I feel now, sitting next to Whitney as she tells me that I'm Laurie's father. I see her stop, her mouth closing, and I see what is in her eyes. It's fear, fear that I'll reject her and reject her daughter. But, how could I?

Instead of answering verbally, I stand up and take Whitney by the hand, pulling her to her feet to wrap her in a hug. Five years of pain and doubt drop away from me in an instant as her body presses against mine, and I'm crying again, this time not tears of hurt or sadness, but tears of joy.

"She's my daughter?" I whisper through my tears, and now Whitney's crying too, holding me close and nodding, her own tears blurring her words, or maybe it's my shirt, I'm not sure.

"She is. Didn't you see the resemblance?"

I set Whitney down, shocked as it all falls into place. The hair color, the eyes . . . "I saw your face when I realized who her mother was," I said in wonder, still holding Whitney's hand. "When she came to me at the stadium, I said to myself that she looked like a combination of people I know, like a merging of two other people . . . then when you came up, I realized what I saw in part of her face, but I never . . . oh, Whitney! Thank you."

I grab her again in a big hug and spin her around in the living room, both of us now laughing. "Why thank you?" she asks. "I should be the one thanking you. You're the one who gave Laurie to me."

I stop, my mind whirling. That happened after my concussion too. "Whitney . . . so many questions, so much to say . . . wait, first things first. Let me be a part of Laurie's life? I mean, right off the bat, I'll take care of you both, don't worry about that. I'll go to the Hawks tomorrow if you want, and they can take a cut of every paycheck and send it wherever you want, but please, I want more. I want to get to know Laurie. I want to be part of her life, not just a child support payment."

"She's a handful," Whitney says cautiously. "I'm happy to accept the money, not for me but for her. But if you want to be a father, a real father to her, you have a lot on your hands. You're going to have to spend time with her."

"I can do that. Whitney, I play pro football. Most of the guys, except on tape days, we don't even get to work until noon. Hell, I'll walk her to school every day, and spend every Monday that we're not on MNF with her. I like living here in Silver Lake Falls. Most of the people give me peace, and I can still drive to the stadium for practice. I mean, Sundays suck, and travel days, but there's the offseason, and . . ."

Whitney stops me with a finger on my lips, and I see she's smiling. "Don't let your enthusiasm run away with things. I'm telling you she's a handful because she needs more than a playmate—she needs a father. Can you be that?"

I calm, and nod, but there is a red thread of anger in my mind, and I promise myself that I'm not going to give in to that anger. "I'll be the best

father I can be. I'm going to need your help, though. I missed so much already. My God, why didn't you tell me?"

I sit back down on the couch while Whitney remains standing, hugging herself, trying to find the answer that she can put words to. "Troy . . . it was hard. I mean, after that night in the woods, about two weeks later, I started feeling all emotional and loopy. You were there though, so I figured I was just head over heels for you. I started getting sick, and doubts started twisting in my mind. I mean, we'd been careful, right?"

"We were," I agree. "I remember it well. You put the condom on me yourself."

Whitney nods. "I mean, in the past five years, I've thought about it a lot, and you know the conclusion I came to? At this point, it doesn't really matter. What happened, happened."

"You have had a lot of time to think about this. But Whitney, that still doesn't answer the main question. Why didn't you tell me?"

"The day I got the test, it was the same day that . . . well, it was the day you came into school after your father beat you so badly. You were so ready to get out of Silver Lake at the time, and I was so chemically screwed up I wasn't thinking straight. Then I took the test, and it was positive, and well . . ."

"Did you think I was going to be like my father?" I ask, trying to keep the fury out of my voice and obviously failing based on the way she flinches. "Did you think I was going to be a worthless piece of shit like he was?"

"No!" Whitney says, and she's not crying but close to it. "I did it because I didn't want you to be forced into a future that you would have been miserable in! We were eighteen, and I knew how honorable you were even then! You'd have given up your future in football to take care of Laurie. Hell, you'd have followed Pete Barkovich into the Navy or the Army or some damn thing and wasted the talent that you've been blessed with! I did it because I wanted to see you become the man you are right now, right here! To become that demon that I saw on the football field a week ago, that I watched in clips and games on the Net for the past five years! I did it because I still love you!"

Whitney stops, covering her mouth as the words hang in the air between us. She looks like she didn't expect to say what she said, and I stand up, coming over and taking her hands again. "Excuse me?"

"Remember when I said that there was something stopping me and Lorenzo? It was you, or more precisely, the memory of you," Whitney says, shy again, like she was when we were first dating. "It's true. I've never stopped loving you. Seeing you in that Hawks uniform, it just brought it all back to me, stronger and more intense than ever."

I smile and nod, pulling her in for another hug. "Whitney, I have something to tell you too," I whisper in her ear, brushing a lock of hair behind that perfect shell of pink that has been in my dreams for five years. "I never stopped loving you either. I always have."

She draws her head back, and the pain in my soul flares for a moment before she pulls my head down, and we're kissing, the pain disappearing forever as her lips caress mine, soft and tender. My heart sings, but more importantly, my soul cries out, and I pull her closer. We stay there like that for long, beautiful minutes, my Whitney in my arms once again, and I never want them to end.

When she pulls back, there's a look in her eye that I remember, and she takes my hand, biting her lower lip just like she used to. "Come with me," she says, leading me toward the back of the house. "Mom's gone, and Laurie's at preschool. Come with me."

I stop in the hallway, tugging on her fingers. "Are you sure?"

She stops and nods, smiling that smile that captured my heart long ago. "We've only made love once in our lives, Troy. We've only made love once, and look what we created. I wonder what happens if we make love again? And no, I don't mean another baby."

"I'm carrying protection." I chuckle, patting my back pocket where my wallet resides. "Team policy. The trainers hand them out to every player once a week. The owners don't like scandals. They're fresh and fully tested, too."



Whitney laughs, and comes closer, kissing me tenderly. "Then let's do what we need. Then afterward . . . would you like to go pick up your daughter from school?"

"First, I want her mother," I reply, growling as five years of desire and passion build beyond the breaking point. I scoop Whitney up in my arms and carry her to the room that is obviously hers, both of us tearing at the clothes separating us. "I want you."

## CHAPTER 17

WHITNEY

We tumble onto my bed, and I'm glad that Mom had bought me a queen-sized mattress back when I was in high school. It's still not large enough for Troy, but it's better than a narrow twin-sized mattress, that's for sure.

Troy twists while we fall, making sure he doesn't crush me under his weight. I'd read his player stats carefully when we watched the game, and I know that he's at two hundred and thirty-two pounds, and under his shirt, I swear every bit of it is muscle. We're kissing, our lips bruising each other with so much intensity, and I bite on his neck, desperate to taste more. He groans and yanks at my t-shirt, which parts with a purr like a zipper, and suddenly, his hands are on my back, our skin touching again after too many years.

Troy stops, gasping and staring at me with hunger in his eyes, but there's still that self-control that I knew from last time. This time, though, I'm having none of it. "You want me?"

"You know I do," Troy growls. "I've wanted you every day for five years."

"Then take what you want," I challenge him. I may have been an innocent virgin when we first made love, but no longer. I know what I want, and I know what turns me on. And what turns me on about Troy is his strength, which even when he's restrained, is massive and undeniable. But I want to see more, I want to feel at least a taste of the . . . what was it Lorenzo called

him? Oh yeah, the gladiator. I want to feel the strength of the gladiator inside Troy. "I can take it."

He grins and reaches for his shirt, unbuttoning it quickly before pulling it off, although I hear a seam give way even as he does, not that it matters at this second. Instead, my breath is taken away as I look at his torso. If he'd been strong and muscular before, he was heavy with thick muscle now, but still just as lean, his arms corded with thick knots of powerful flesh. His shoulders look like mountains and his chest muscles... hot wetness fills the space between my thighs, like my body knows that I'm giving it what it needs after a too-long starvation.

Troy pulls me up to my knees, and we're face to face, kissing as he unhooks my bra and peels away the rest of my t-shirt, my nipples already hard and aching as we pull into another embrace, unwilling or perhaps unable, after so long, to stop the kisses.

We're both gasping for air as we break apart again, and I tremble. Troy looks down and grins, a flash of his old cockiness coming up. "Well, that's going to be convenient."

"What?" I ask, reaching forward and grabbing the waistband of his pants. "That you're wearing a pair of beltless pants with an elastic waist?"

"Actually, I was referring to the fact that you're wearing a pair of shorts," Troy says, reaching forward and running his hands under the waistband, cupping my ass and massaging it. "And a thong? You have matured."

"I wouldn't say mature," I tease, cupping his cock through his pants as I lean forward and kiss his chest. "More open in celebrating my sexuality, for sure."

I kiss my way down his body, relishing the light tang to his skin, the sweetness of his sweat. Troy's hands never stop and I reach his waistband, pausing to look up at him. "Last time, did we do this?"

"I have faint memories of it, but to be honest, it's all one gigantic, perfect blur," Troy says, his hand busy. I tense as I feel his fingers slide over me, and I've still got my shorts on, the waistband pushed halfway down my ass

as his forearm emerges from it like a new limb. "This though . . . I could never forget this."

I pull Troy's pants down, and his cock slaps me in the face, bouncing off my cheek while I moan. Troy's fingers slip inside me so easily, our kisses have turned me on so much, and I grasp his cock, pumping it while I lean down and lick his heavy, perfect balls. Troy's fingers stop when I suck one of them into my mouth, rolling it around with my tongue as I drive him crazy. He's twitching, and the drop of clear precum that emerges is a tasty treat that I feast on before letting him pop out of my mouth.

"Whitney, it's been... it's been a long time for me."

"Oh?" I ask teasingly, sitting back and pushing my shorts down. "So you think you're too short-triggered to deal with this?"

I turn around, presenting myself to him in a way we'd never done before. I remember that much for sure. Not that it hasn't been in my dreams ever since though. "Think you can fulfill a fantasy?"

I lower my head and breathe carefully through my nose while I hear him pull his shorts down, then the ripping sound of a piece of plastic, and the sound of him rolling the condom down his cock. I'm desperate when he comes back on the bed, his fingers slipping inside me and leaving me moaning with need. "Don't tease me, Troy. Not this time."

"I'm not teasing, my love," Troy says, and his last words unleash another wave of desire in me. Troy lines himself up, and in one thrust, he's buried inside me, the place that I've needed him for five years, my heart, soul and body finally complete. He grunts as his hips slap into mine, my ass quivering at the power in his hips.

"Oh, shit," I gasp, driven face-first into the pillow at the head of my bed. "Oh, fuck yes."

Troy doesn't respond, pulling out before driving in again, not pausing at all before he's hammering me harder and harder, driving my body into the mattress and taking the breath out of my body. Pure pleasure explodes over and over inside me. I'm crying out, my body clenching as I feel an orgasm

rushing on me, but before I can, Troy's hand smacks my ass sharply, not hard enough to really hurt, but enough to cut through the red haze of desire.

"You come when I come," he grunts, pausing inside me. "Promise me that."

"I . . . I promise," I hoarsely whisper, my throat raw from the moans and crying out. "I swear."

Troy runs a tender hand down my spine, and my heart melts again as he pulls himself halfway out before starting again, slower and more sensuously. I thought I was in the throes of pleasure before, but this new speed builds me higher and higher, never enough to push me over the edge, but keeping me trembling, my nipples brushing against the blanket underneath my sweat covered body, Troy's hands holding my waist not too tightly, just enough that I am fully under his control, where I want to be and where I belong.

"When you're ready," Troy says shakily, and he speeds up again, rapid-fire thrusts that pound into me, both of us unable to hold back any longer. Blackness threatens the edge of my vision, and I can't feel my fingers or toes as Troy's cock sends lightning shooting from my toes to my brain, a loop of erotic electricity that builds on itself, higher and higher until I can't think, but can only feel and react. My pussy clenches, and I shatter, crashing from the mountaintop that Troy has built for me, screaming into the pillow as the largest orgasm of my life rips through me. My breath runs out, but still the moment never ends, my brain going to static, but before I surrender to the darkness, I feel Troy's fingers grip my waist tightly, and he shudders, his orgasm pushing me the last little bit into blissful, wonderful unconsciousness.

I don't know how long we're out, but when I come to, he has me nestled in his arms, just like we did our first time.

"Thank you. For forgiving me. For understanding. But most of all, for loving me."

"Without you, there is no love in my life," Troy whispers in reply, kissing my neck again. "With you, there is sunshine and happiness."

I kiss him back, stroking his cheek. "I know this might hurt, but can you wait a bit before we tell Laurie who you are? I want you to get to know her first, and her to know you. I don't want to just drop this bomb into her life. She's already going to have enough to deal with since Lorenzo's going back to Italy."

Troy nods and smiles. "Of course. I love you. And I bet if you give me a few hours, I'm going to love Laurie, too."

I nestle into his chest again and hum contentedly. "You know that it's going to be kind of difficult, but I can live with it."

"What's that?"

"Away games. Not having you in my arms every night like I've dreamed of for years. Now that I have you back, I'm going to be greedy about that."

Troy laughs and kisses my head. "First, I have something else to worry about."

"What's that?"

"Your mother's going to kill me when she finds out we messed around in her house."

"She'll deal with it. Especially when she understands why. I don't ever want to be apart from you again."

"I'm not going anywhere."

## CHAPTER 18

TROY

"*Y*ou're what?"

I'm sitting in General Manager Larry Kardarelli's office, a place that I don't really like as it looks too corporate, and not enough like something connected with a football team. I'm a football player, not an executive, and I've done pretty well in playing so far, leaving the details of money and that to other people. I'm focused on the field and on making sure that if I play right, the money will come.

"Troy, here are the facts. The third pre-season game was a nightmare for us. We lost a wide receiver and our starting right tackle to season ending injuries. I'll be honest. I don't know if Mark's ever going to come back, and if he does, we might need to look at moving him. After that knee injury of his, a lot of guys lose a step."

"I've got that. I fully understand. But why are you looking at trading me? I've been kicking ass in the pre-season. Or did you forget the game Saturday night? Three sacks against a starting offense is the sort of stuff that gets guys selected to the Pro Bowl if they repeat it often enough."

"You're having a great pre-season, but you also know that our linebacker corps is already the strongest in the league," Kardi says. "You add something, but right now, we need a right tackle and a wideout more than we need a fifth good linebacker."

"And if one of the guys goes down? What do you do then? Whistle for hope from the Lone Ranger?"

The man shrugs. "You're good, no doubt about it, but we can adapt. Besides, I thought you'd be happy about this. You stay here, and the best you can look forward to is splitting reps with the starters for at least another year. You go somewhere else, and you get a starting slot pretty much straightaway. No team is going to give us what we want without having a need for a damn good young linebacker. And if I can, I will get you to a team with a 3-4. I know you've played that since high school, and you're more cut out for it anyway. But we'll get you to a team with a need."

"Yeah, the guys sitting in the cellar come December always need linebackers," I reply, and yeah, I'm a little pissed off. "The Hawks have been one of the premier teams in the conference for a while now. And it's not just because we've got some stars. We've got a good team."

"Who do you think put that team together?" Kardi asks, sitting forward. "Let me clue you in. That man was me, and it's been that way for the past decade. I'm the one who makes the final personnel decisions about this team, and yes, I do take the coaches' opinions into consideration, but if I need to, I'll cut, trade or sign a contract for anyone that I think can help this team. Now, if you think I'm a bastard about this, you should count yourself lucky that you're not playing for someone else. A lot of times, you wouldn't know until you actually got traded. Some teams have a fucking real estate agent on retainer whose whole job is to help guys clear out their houses and sell whatever they need to get sold."

"So why are you being so generous, then? I mean, you don't even have a destination in mind, you said. You just said you're shopping me around. What gives?"

The officious prick shrugged. "I figure it differently. I figure, if you know you're on the trade block, you're going to play pissed off. You're going to want to look good, because you know if you don't, we'll just cut you come next pre-season, and you can take your chances on the last year of a rookie contract and a reputation as a crybaby. You play your heart out until you get traded, though, and you go to a new team with a good rep, a starting slot, and go into the last year of your rookie contract in a strong position to



negotiate a fat new contract, or at least get franchise tagged for a year and make good money. Now, what's it going to be?"

I nod and get up. "You know your answer already. You want to give me a reason to play hard? I already had that. Now you're just giving me more emotional content."

Kardi nods, then scribbles something on a sheet of paper next to him.

I shake my head. "Thanks for the heads up. Does the team mind if I still take tomorrow off to go to that wedding I asked about a month ago?"

Kardarelli waves dismissively. Football players with strange ideas are pretty much par for the course. I mean, one of my best buddies on the team currently has a collection of UFO 'inside information' DVDs that covers an entire *wall* of his living room. Another's into some wacky religion that lets him eat all the pork he can get his hands on, but he can only eat rabbit on Mondays. You try fueling a three-hundred-pound body on rabbit right before a Monday night game.

Either way, I'm small potatoes. "No problem. It's a garbage game, anyway. Hell, you want the time off, I'll ask the Coach to keep you off the dress list for the game. We've got enough guys who need to earn a spot on the roster still that you're just going to be standing around anyway."

I consider it for a moment, then nod. Might as well take what I can get from the team while I can. "You know what? I'd appreciate it. I guess I should wait until I tell her, but it seems I have a daughter. I'd like to get to know her, if it's all the same to you."

Kardarelli taps his pencil on his desk blotter, then nods. "Fine. Take the game day off. But come week one of the regular season, I don't give a fuck if you're getting married and you've got Elton John coming in to sing a revue of *The Lion King* for the reception. You're suiting up against the Phantoms."

"Deal. See you."



"PUSH ME HIGHER! HIGHER!"

"All right, Laurie, hold tight!"

We're in the park, and Laurie and I are playing on the swing set. This little girl loves to swing, I know that for sure, and even though she can pump her legs like a champ, she adores it most when I push her. Whitney, who got tired after whirling her around for a couple of minutes on the merry-go round, is sitting on the edge of the sand pit that surrounds the swings, watching us.

"Don't go too high, honey! You could fall off!"

"Troy will catch me!"

"I'm glad you think I'm Superman, but I'm just a normal person."

"I don't like Superman!" Laurie calls back as she giggles. "You're Thor with short hair."

"Fits better under the helmet. I'd love to carry that hammer of his during the game. Make my job a lot easier," I laugh, pushing one last time. "Okay, baby girl, you pump on your own for a few minutes. I'm going to sit down with your mama."

"Okay, but we have to go to the monkey bars soon!" Laurie orders, and I shake my head, sitting down next to Whitney. She's laughing silently, giving me a knowing look.

"I wonder where she gets her bossy side from," I tease, nudging Whitney with my elbow.

"Her Aunt Dani, for sure," Whitney replies. "Who do you think taught her all the comic book characters she knows about? They don't have Marvel Comics in Italy—well, at least they're not easy to find."

I nod, at peace with the idea that Dani knew about Whitney and about Laurie long before I did. We'd talked on the phone the day before, in between a team lifting session and my evening video review for the week one Phantoms game, and we worked it out. I don't know if she has figured

out that Whitney and I are back together, or seem to be headed that way. "Hey, speaking of Dani, have you told her?"

"In general or in detail?" Whitney says in a low voice. "Because you don't want to know what she's told me in detail."

"Oh, I know," I say. "That woman was a regular *Penthouse Forum* when she was an undergrad. At least until she met Pete again, from what I know. I don't want details of what they do. I've had my hands in between Pete's legs too much for comfort in that area."

Whitney laughs and slaps me on the thigh. "And you say Dani's bad? Troy Wood, I never!"

"Yes you have," I tease back, and lean in. "In fact, maybe some time soon, we can."

Whitney purrs and gives me a sexy little smile. "Maybe after we tell Laurie that you and I are seeing each other. I was thinking after the wedding reception, that way Laurie won't spoil the surprise for Dani and Pete."

"Monkey bars!" Laurie calls, dragging up a huge cloud of dust and sand as she drags her feet to slow down. "Mama, are you coming too?"

"Of course," Whitney says as I heave myself to my feet. "Think you can give me a hand up?"

I pull Whitney up easily, and for a moment, she's in my arms again, her palms on my chest, and we're looking into each other's eyes before I let her go, both of us smiling to chase after our little girl.

*My daughter*, I think as Whitney scrambles up the jungle gym that leads to a slide with Laurie and follows her down. *My daughter*. The words still clang around in my head as I think of them, and I'm laughing as Whitney thumps down in the sand, a cloud rising from her butt as her feet lose grip on the ground from the low slide. Laurie laughs along with us, and we're soon all playing on the monkey bars until Laurie's gasping for air and waving off. "I'm done! I need water!"

We go to the water fountain, where she soaks her face along with taking deep drinks. We're near the duck pond, and I see some ducks on the water,

so I walk over to the vending machine the town keeps for the ducks and buy a cupful of food. "Hey, Laurie, want to take a rest and feed the ducks?"

"Cool!" Laurie yells, and she runs over, eagerly taking a seat next to me. The food floats, so we can toss it out onto the water where the ducks swim after it. "Hey?"

I look at her while Whitney takes a seat on the other side of her . . . our daughter. I exchange looks with her over top of Laurie's head, and she smiles. This has been a great day.

"What's it like being a pro football player?"

"There are a lot of good things, and a lot of bad things," I say. "On the good side, I make a lot of money, and I love playing football. It helps a lot with my inner demons."

"You have demons inside you?" Laurie asks, her voice dropping in fright.

I shake my head, remembering the she has spent most of her life in a Catholic country. "What I mean is, when I was younger, I had a lot of bad things happen to me. I could have become a very bad person if I let those things take control of my life. But football was one of those things that let me control the feelings that came from what happened to me."

"What else?" Laurie asks innocently, and I look over her head at Whitney, whose eyes are dark and full of meaning.

"A very special person," I say softly before looking down at Laurie and smiling. "But yeah, football helps too."



AFTER I DROP LAURIE AND WHITNEY AT THEIR HOME, I DRIVE BACK TO MY HOUSE, troubled. Today was such a perfect day, and I'm worried. If the team trades me soon, I'm going to have to leave Silver Lake Falls, at least for the season, and I'm just starting to re-establish my relationship with Whitney, and I'm making the beginnings of a relationship with Laurie. How could I ask them to uproot and move to some other part of the country when they're just getting settled in again?

Maybe after some time has passed, I think. I mean, first of all, while we've got injuries, you never know who might become available after the last round of cuts to the fifty-three-man roster. Maybe a good right tackle or wideout could fall through the waiver wire, and then the Hawks could sign them without having to trade me.

I decide to hold my tongue on the potential trade until I know more about it. There's no reason to stress out Whitney or Laurie—not right now. Instead, I check out my suit, already looking forward to tomorrow. After all, it's not every day that two friends get married, and if what Whitney told me is true, then we can go public then too.

I'm just wiping down my shoes, putting a fresh coat of Kiwi wax on them, when my phone rings. Picking it up, I see it's Whitney. "Hey, it's good to hear from you. Is everything okay? Did you leave something in the car?"

"Not at all, and everything was nearly perfect today," Whitney says, her voice warm and loving. "Laurie's taking a bath right now before dinner, and I just wanted you to know she hasn't stopped talking about you since getting out of the car. She thinks you're the best. And so do I."

"Thanks, I happen to know that you're the most beautiful, special woman in the world, and Laurie's the best kid. I'm not joking when I say I love her already."

"I know you're not," Whitney replies. "There was only one thing that would have made this day better."

"What's that?" I ask, shifting around as I hear the desire in her voice. Even over the phone line, her voice sends shivers down my spine and tingles through my body.

"If I could have gotten a kiss before you drove off," Whitney says, "and maybe a little more?"

"Tomorrow you'll have all you want," I reassure her. "I love you, Whitney."

"I love you too, Troy. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

## CHAPTER 19

WHITNEY

The church is crowded, but thankfully, someone made the decision before everyone even started showing up to turn on the air conditioning. It's a hot late summer day, easily ninety-five or so, and the idea of trying to sit through a wedding without air conditioning makes my legs quiver at just the thought.

Or maybe my legs are quivering because of Troy. We are standing on opposite sides of the altar, him as one of Pete's groomsmen while I get to be a bridesmaid. He's absolutely ravishing in his black suit and silver tie, and more than once during the ceremony so far, I've lost track of what's going on as I just stare at him. Troy's noticed and returned my look with the burning intensity of his own passion. I can't wait until the reception, when we get to make it public.

We aren't serving as best man or maid of honor, mainly because he's too busy with the Hawks and I, well, I'm a bit of a surprise to a lot of people. Some of the people in the church didn't know that I was back in town, and even fewer knew that I had a daughter, even though I've never hidden the fact. Laurie is sitting with Mom in the third row on the bride's side, shifting around a little bit as the adults go through their boring ceremony, and she has to wear the Easter dress that she hates, the one with the lace and frills on her socks. Mom's discovered that she's a natural as a grandmother, even if she is the same age as some of the other moms in town. I think she's enjoying the experience again, now that time and financial security are on her side.

Dani is resplendent in her white, sleek bridal gown, all silk and satin. She'd decided against a veil, finding the idea a little silly, but the gown itself hugs her body well, and her hair is pinned back with pearl and diamond studded combs. She's been smiling and crying most of the ceremony, but they've been just a trickle, adding two little gleaming trails that glisten in the sunlight coming through the stained glass windows that light up her face.

"And so do you, Peter Vasily Barkovich, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife? To have and to hold, in good times and in bad, to love, honor, and cherish, for as long as you both shall live?"

I can hear almost everyone hold their breath as Pete swallows a lump in his throat, I guess the product of too many Lifetime movies or something, but Pete's just trying to lubricate his vocal cords, and he nods before speaking. "I do."

The priest smiles and turns his attention to Dani, who's beaming now, barely able to wait to reply. "And do you, Danielle Carlotta Vaughn, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold—"

"I do, I do!" Dani nearly yells, cutting the priest off. She blushes, and everyone in the crowd has a little relieved and warm laughter at her enthusiasm. "Sorry. Go on."

"Oh, I don't think I need to," the priest ad-libs. "I'm pretty sure the answer is going to be the same. Okay then, the rings."

The exchange of the rings goes without a hitch, and as the new couple retreats down the aisle, I can't help it. Looking at Dani in her dress, her hair golden in the sun and Pete looking so handsome and happy in his tuxedo, I want it to be me there. My mind wavers, and I see me, my own dark hair instead of Dani's blonde, and instead of Pete . . .

"Hey, it's our turn," Rita, Dani's friend from State who is serving as bridesmaid, whispers, jogging my elbow. "Come on."

I follow Rita while Pete's brother leads the groomsmen down the aisle, Troy to my left. "You were daydreaming," Troy whispers as we head into the foyer of the church. "What's up?"

"Oh, you know . . . just a girl being a girl," I reply, not quite ready to say to him what I was really thinking. It's too fast, and I don't want to frighten him. I mean, I already dropped a bomb on him with Laurie, even if he is head over heels about her.

The way he and Laurie played in the park together yesterday, and the way he looked at me . . . maybe there is hope that things can turn out right this time. Getting changed out of my bridesmaid dress and into my burgundy cocktail dress that I'm wearing for the reception, I can't help it. I'm looking forward to the future.

Laurie is glad to be out of her Easter dress, and Mom surprises me when she says she is skipping the reception to take Laurie home. "There's going to be drinking, and while I'm glad that Danielle is getting married, this is a party for you and her. Besides, I've got work tomorrow, and a certain little girl should go to bed early. Have fun."

"Mom . . ." I say, trying to find the words. "But—"

"I know," Mom says simply, smiling. "You think Laurie chewing my ear off for two hours about her time in the park yesterday didn't give me all the clues I needed? It's okay, we'll talk about it later. Just know that I . . . I'm okay with it."

"I love you, Mom," I say, and give her a hug. "Oh, and one more thing. No Froot Loops before bed, no matter how much Laurie begs this time. She can't have all that sugar."

"You did okay on Froot Loops," Mom grumbles good-naturedly, then leaves, Laurie in hand, the two of them talking and getting along. I'd been worried, but five minutes together, and Laurie was ecstatic to be hanging out with her grandmother.

I drive to the reception, which is being held at a house along the river. Apparently, the Barkovich family knows some people who can afford houses in the best parts of Silver Lake Falls. The house overlooks the actual Silver Lake itself, just a little way up the Silver River close to Slater's Point, and it's big enough for the entire party.



Troy's still wearing his suit, I notice, as he gets out of his car. When I first saw him in town, I figured him for a sports car or maybe a gaudy SUV, like so many other professional athletes, but Troy's the complete opposite, driving a two-year-old Nissan Altima that looks like any other four-door sedan. Still, as he makes his way across the grass of the parking area, he cuts a path just by his natural charisma and presence. Well, that and being six foot two, two hundred and thirty-two beautiful pounds of athletic manhood. I am sooooo lucky.

"You look beautiful," Troy says to me as we come closer. "Then again, even in that horrible dress, you looked beautiful."

"Flattery is much appreciated," I say, patting his shoulder and barely holding back the urge to do more. "And you should charge whoever made this suit. A picture of you in it should double their sales with the way you look."

Troy actually blushes slightly and smirks. "Okay, well, let's hold off on the rest until the big reveal. Deal?"

"Deal. Come on."

For the first half of the reception, Troy and I consciously stay on nearly opposite sides of the party, and in some ways, I feel like I'm back not in high school, but junior high school as the girls tend to stick to one side, the boys to the other. Eventually, Cory, who came in town from his new job down in San Francisco, comes over to greet us. He's looking pretty debonair, although there's still that air of being a party boy to him, like he hasn't quite figured out if he wants to settle down yet or if he's still looking for the next club to hit up. "Whitney Nelson. I just had to come over and say it's so good to see you again."

"How're you doing, Cory?" I ask, giving him a quick hug. "My, my, you've gained weight."

"Hey, hey, it's just five pounds!" Cory laughs, and we both know I'm kidding. He's nowhere near the athlete that Troy is, but Cory's got a slim build now, kind of executive-ish. "You, on the other hand, look absolutely amazing. And can I ask, that little girl with your Mom at the ceremony?"

"Yes, she's my daughter," I confirm. "Laurie."

"I see," Cory says. "You know, she looks a lot like you. She's got the same cute smile."

"Thanks. What about you? Have you found someone yet?"

Cory laughs and sips at his mixed drink, shaking his head. "There's no way I'm ready to settle down yet."

I laugh and shake my head. "So how are you enjoying the party?"

"This is awesome," Cory says, becoming a little more serious. "I just got done talking to Troy. We've kept up a little since high school, email and phone calls and such, and I saw him play once last season when the Hawks played the Dons, but this is the first time since after our freshmen year in college that I got to sit down and talk with him in person—he's gotten huge."

"You're telling me," I reply, and Cory gives me a knowing look. "Don't go there, Cory."

He nods, then smirks. "Well, no matter what, Troy just made my quarter. He asked me about how work's going, and when I told him that so far I'm doing well, beating the market, at least, he nods and asks for a business card. That crazy SOB tells me he wants to take half . . . *half* of his salary and have me invest it for him. Now, I know that still leaves him stupid levels of money, but Jesus, Whitney. I just got handed what, a million dollars a year to invest?"

"And how do you feel about it?" I ask. "Because if I remember you right, Cory, when you start talking like this, that's the time you're getting worried."

"Oh, I am," Cory says, smiling. "But a good kind of worried. Trust me, Whitney, even if Troy just plays out his rookie contract and doesn't give me a dime after that, I'm going to make him rich for life by the time he's twenty-seven. One funny thing, though."

"What's that?"

"He told me to give him options about setting up a blind trust fund. Apparently, he has someone he wants to save for. Wonder who that might be?"

"All right, Cory, you never were an idiot. Keep it under your hat for a while at least? Please? It's important to me."

Cory nods, and I give him another hug.

He leaves, and we start the food portion of the reception. The tables are smaller than I thought they'd be, small circles meant for only four or five, so I'm sitting with my old cheer teammate, Colette, and her boyfriend, some guy originally from Portland who honestly is not all that interesting.

What is interesting is when they bring out the big wedding cake, a four-tier monstrosity that towers nearly three feet in the air with all of the decorations, and Dani and Pete get up to speak.

They're finishing up their little speech, and Dani laughs as her eyes meet mine over the crowd. "Thank you. To my friends, to my family . . . thank you. And I hope that every one of you . . ." her eyes blink and she looks me in the eyes directly. "I hope you find love like ours."

The applause starts again, growing to thunderous levels as Dani and Pete slice open the cake, serving out slices to the front table, where Pete and Dani's parents are sitting. The DJ starts the music, and it's time to dance. Pete takes Dani out to the center of the huge patio that the tables ring and brings her into his arms, dancing beautifully as they sway to the music. The first song is about halfway finished when they split to dance with their parents, and the crowd applauds when the song is finished.

I'm clapping along with everyone else when Troy stands up from his chair, which is on the other side of the patio from where I'm sitting, crossing the dance floor. There is a noticeable hum in the assembled group, about a hundred or so people in total, and even the DJ falters as Troy first stops at Dani and Pete, giving both of them a hug before he whispers in Dani's ear. She nods and goes over to the DJ to say something to him. My eyes are fixed on Troy, though, as he crosses the rest of the patio to stop in front of me, his sapphire blue eyes full of emotion. "Whitney, may I have this dance?"

"I'd love to," I say, taking his hand. The majority of the crowd knows our history, and they are nearly silent as Troy and I walk hand in hand to the center of the patio, his left hand lifting my arm while his right hand rests on my waist. The music starts, and as John Legend sings about love, we move together, closer and closer until I put my arms around his neck and both of his hands rest on my waist. The music fades away, and I'm not caring about the crowd anymore as I pull Troy's head down. Only one thing is important in the world. When our lips meet, I'm temporarily startled when I realize that not only has nobody else joined us for this dance, but now we're getting nearly as much applause as what greeted Dani and Pete.

We're suddenly being swarmed, Dani hugging me closely. "I'm glad," she whispers, smiling. "This was the best gift you could have ever given me. I love you, Whitney."

"I love you too, Sis. So does that mean I get to keep the German food processor I bought you guys?"

"Oh no, I'm still keeping that," Dani says, and the music interrupts us as another song comes on, a faster tune that brings even the parents out of their seats as we shift into full party mode. The music spans generations, as you'd expect a wedding party to do, but Troy and I are inseparable the whole time, dancing and going off to get drinks and some cake before dancing again. When the sun goes all the way down, the DJ slows it down one last time, and as Elvis sings about how he can't help falling in love, Troy and I move slowly on the dance floor together, our foreheads touching and our arms around each other.

"Did you have fun?" he asks, his eyes so bright and happy. I don't ever want those blue eyes to look sad again. Passionate, intense, happy, yes. Never sad.

"This has been one of the best nights of my life," I say honestly. "Tomorrow, though, I have a favor to ask of you. Can you stay in town a while?"

"The team's letting me miss this game. I talked with the GM about it. I have until Monday afternoon off," Troy says, pulling me closer. "I know it's only two days, but I want to spend them with you."

"Actually, I was thinking tomorrow we can take Laurie to the zoo," I say. "I want her to meet her father—for real this time."

Troy nods, and we kiss again, only to be interrupted by a polite cough. "Excuse me, isn't this supposed to be our night?"

I turn to see Pete and Dani, their arms around each other, and we stop dancing, both Troy and me laughing in embarrassment. "Sorry. I know we kind of stole your thunder," Troy says. "I'll make it up to you."

"Damn right, you will. When it's your turn, you two had better make Dani here the maid of honor," Pete says with a smile. "And don't say I don't know what I'm talking about."

"Still, we're not in a rush," Troy says. "We missed five years, and we have a lot of catching up to do."

"Sounds good. Besides, you need to at least wait until after we get back from our honeymoon," Pete jokes before growing serious. "Troy, Whitney . . . whatever you guys need, we'll be there for you."

"What we need is for you two to go get changed and go on your honeymoon!" I say with a laugh, smacking Dani on the butt. "Now go!"



"SO WHAT DID YOU THINK OF THE LIONS?"

Troy is smiling and holding a box of popcorn as we walk through the Seattle Zoo, handing her a kernel. Laurie is still big-eyed, especially when she realized that Troy really is somewhat famous when someone came up to us in the zoo and asked him for an autograph. Troy happily signed the t-shirt the guy had, and from that moment on, Laurie's been nearly strutting, realizing that she's with the—at least locally—famous Troy Wood. She doesn't quite realize that Troy's famous as much for his good looks as he is for his football abilities, the two working hand in hand to ensure that if his playing ability grows, he could become a poster boy for the team, and a lot of endorsements too.

"They were kind of cool, but a little sad too," Laurie says as we reach the monkey enclosure. "I wish I could really see them, not all this concrete."

I'm amazed again at the intelligence of my daughter, who despite her willful obstinacy is also very mature and perceptive for her age. "Well, honey, there are other parks that have bigger spaces and more natural settings for the animals. I've heard that San Diego has a good wild animal park."

"Really? Can we go?" Laurie asks, and I have to smile at her innocence.

"I'm sorry, honey, but San Diego is pretty far away. We'd have to fly, and well, Mama's money is a little tight right now." Lorenzo contacted me by email yesterday, telling me that he had decided to end our business arrangement. While I do have my half of our business investment funds, I'm going to need to find a job, and Silver Lake Falls isn't exactly a hotbed for art aficionados.

"Later then," Laurie says contentedly, and she's soon entranced by the monkeys, whose play area is a lot more natural looking than what the lions had. As they play, Troy pulls me back and leans in.

"You didn't say anything about being short on money."

"It's okay," I say, patting his chest. "Really. I have enough until I can get a job. I'm talking with Colette's mother this week. She owns a gallery in town that caters to the IT nouveau riche. Besides, I'm an art dealer. It's kind of part of the trade. I'll be getting in contact with some of my clients this week too. I just have to work out the last of how to divide the client list up with Lorenzo. That won't take long."

"Still . . ." Troy says, looking at Laurie. "You know, we play San Diego in week eleven. Maybe a trip is in order?"

"We'll talk about that later. First, let's enjoy today. Remember, after we sit down for lunch, we can talk with her about other things, okay?"

Troy nods, and I nod in reply and take Laurie's hand. "Sweetie, Mama's getting a bit hungry. How about we grab some corn dogs?"

"What are corn dogs?"

"What are corn dogs?" Troy asks in mock horror. "You horribly denied young child from the savage lands!"

Laurie laughs again at Troy's antics and squeezes my hand. "I'm glad you play football, Troy."

Troy stops and squats down so he can look Laurie in the eye. "Why's that?"

"Because you're no good at acting."

Troy laughs and looks up at me, raising his eyebrow. "You are your mother's daughter. Come on, let's teach you what corn dogs are. My treat."

We go to the snack shack area and find a table that isn't too dirty for us to sit down, Troy clearing away the left-behind papers and tray while I bring over the corn dogs and big sodas. The three of us sit down, and Troy pauses when Laurie folds her hands and says grace. "Sorry, I forgot you've lived in Italy most of your life."

"Actually, Grandma taught me," Laurie says. "She says it's good to thank God for what he gives us."

"I can agree with that," Troy says, looking over at me. "I'm thankful every day for what has been brought into my life."

I blink, smiling and reaching out to take his hand, while Laurie takes her first bite. "Mmm, this is good!"

"Try it with the ketchup and mustard on it. Some people think it makes it even better," I say, dipping mine in. "So, Laurie, can Troy and I talk to you about something?"

"You are dating, right?" Laurie asks, and I'm taken aback at how smart she is. "I saw some of the old photos Grandma keeps at home."

"Yeah, Whitney and I dated back in high school, and we've decided that we'd like to start seeing each other again. Is that okay with you?"

"Uh-huh," Laurie says. "You're fun—I like you."

Relief washes over me. "Laurie, you know that Troy and I saw each other in high school. But I had you in Italy. Do you know why?"

"Not really."

"Well, at the time, I was doing it because I thought it would be good for your father," I say, and Laurie's head perks up. I rarely use the word *father* around her—I've wanted to prevent her developing any problems. "The reasons aren't important right now, but just let me say that I made a mistake, not letting you get to know your father."

She's silent for a moment, not sure what to say, then innocently picks up her corn dog. "I know when I meet my Daddy, he's gonna love me like you do."

"He does," I say, and Laurie turns her head to look at me inquisitively. "I left Silver Lake Falls after you were already in my belly. Laurie. Troy is your daddy."

Laurie drops her corn dog, looking at me, then at Troy. "He . . . is Daddy?"

"Yes, baby girl. And you're right, I love you very much," Troy says. He opens his arms, and Laurie's in his arms, the two of them laughing together, and I can't help but join in, all three of us having a family hug for the very first time.

Maybe there is a chance for happily ever after, after all.



## CHAPTER 20

### TROY

Nearly the whole way back to Silver Lake Falls, Laurie is almost worshiping me as she rides in her car seat, and I feel slightly embarrassed. Twice after telling her, she stopped patrons at the zoo to tell them that Troy Wood of the Hawks is her daddy. I ended up signing more autographs than I'd done on a trip out in my entire pro career, and in the end, I had to beg off, explaining that I was having a day out with my family.

"No wonder you enjoy living in Silver Lake Falls," Whitney says as we glance back to see that Laurie has fallen asleep in her car seat. "That has to drive you nuts."

"It's not that bad, usually," I reply, setting the cruise control on my car. "I'm not one of the big superstars . . . yet."

"So next year you're going to get mobbed?" Whitney teases, and I look over, smiling.

"Maybe. Now that I have you two in my life, I've got enough emotional content to power me to the Pro Bowl and more."

"Don't forget the looks that'll make you a poster boy, too," Whitney says. "And the best part is, they're all mine."

"Hmmm, maybe we can do Sports Illustrated then?" I tease back. "You know, they did a swimsuit edition of famous athletes with their significant

others."

"You want me in a bikini for a photo shoot?" Whitney asks, and I grin. "You are crazy."

"No, just confident that I have the most beautiful woman in the world next to me," I say. "I guess we should talk about that a little now that Laurie's out too. Whitney, I'm not sure if there's a word to describe our relationship."

"I know," she says quietly. "Everything inside me is telling me conflicting things. When I look at you, when we danced at the party, or at the wedding . . . but if you had dropped to your knees and asked me to marry you last night, I'd have been hard pressed not to say yes."

"I know," I say, glancing over. "It crossed my mind. Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt."

"It's just that . . . Laurie's been through so much in the past year or so. Lorenzo and me splitting, the plans to move to America, coming here, meeting you, Lorenzo leaving her totally . . . it's a lot for a kid her age to deal with."

"You can say that again. So I guess this means that at least formally, you'd like to take things slow?"

Whitney nods, her eyes full of worry. "Is that okay? I know how we're feeling, and I know that I denied you five years with Laurie, but can you wait a while on this? On me?"

I nod and look over at her. "I don't care if you want to call me your boyfriend, your man, your baby's daddy, or your fiancée. Or maybe even husband, if it comes to that. It's not going to change how I feel. Five years of you in Europe, not even knowing a thing about you, couldn't change my heart. Telling me let's wait until the offseason or next year is small potatoes."

"Off season? Why the off season?" Whitney asks, and I smile.

"If you want to have a honeymoon, the best idea is to do that during the off season. The Hawks may have given me this pre-season game off since it

was, as the GM called it, a garbage game, but the regular season . . . well, I can't exactly take a week off to go to the Bahamas."

"The Bahamas? I like the sound of that," Whitney says. We're quiet for a while before she speaks again. "By the way, Cory told me you asked him about a trust fund? I guess that was for Laurie?"

"Yep. Regardless of what you just told me, or if Laurie accepted me or not, I'm going to take care of my daughter. I won't spoil her. I know you want my help in fixing that, but she's going to have a nice sum when she turns twenty."

"Why twenty?" Whitney asks.

"Just a good, round number," I reply. "You know, I don't want to rush it, but sometime, maybe in the *off season*," I add with a laugh, "I'm going to ask you guys to move in with me."

"I know," Whitney says. "And when you do, I will say yes. But until then, Mom loves having us, and Laurie loves her grandmother. Let's give it some time for her to develop that relationship with her father, too."

"Sounds like paradise to me."



"AT LEAST WE'RE A LITTLE BIT LUCKY," COACH CLAXON, OUR LINEBACKERS coach, says as the six rostered and four practice squad members of the Hawks linebacker corps meets around a conference table for our Monday positional meetings before starting practice at four thirty. "It's the Sunday night TV game, which means that the sun will at least be partially down when we step on the field. Kickoff's at six local time."

"Don't they have a roof on that thing?" Shawn, one of outside linebackers, asks. "Seriously, it's fucking Arizona."

"They do, and it's currently being repaired after an electrical problem with a rock concert last week blew out both of the motors that control the movement of the roof," Coach says, causing us all to groan. "So it's going to be hydro fans and electrolyte loading all game, gentlemen. If you pee your

pants, just think of it as another way to cool off your legs. Hey, at least you aren't going to be the poor schmucks in the stands. The folks on the east side and catching the sun are going to roast before the second half starts."

"Now, moving on from that, Arizona's got a new look to their offense this year. You guys know they brought in a new offensive coordinator, and while we know what he liked to call at his old job, he's not revealed a lot to us so far in the pre-season. We're expecting that he's going to play a lot of spread—"

There's a knock at the door, and one of the coaching assistants—rookie coaches who are so far down the ladder in the coaching echelon that they don't even have job titles, just a lot of gofer and fill-in work—sticks his head in. "Coach Claxon? Sorry to interrupt, but there's someone here to see Troy Wood."

"If it's not Whitney or my daughter, tell them to wait or take a message," I answer before Coach can blow up at the poor assistant, who is obviously nervous. "Rules are rules, and we've got work to do."

"I understand that, but the facility staff is having a hard time with him."

"Then call the damn cops on him. Have security escort him out of the building!" Coach Claxon says. "Unless you want to tell Head Coach why my linebackers got out of our meeting late?"

The assistant is nearly stammering now, and I feel for the guy. He's just graduated college, and most of the players are older than he is. In fact, I'm the only player in the room that's younger than he is, if only by a year or so. "Coach, I get that but . . . well, he says he is Troy's father."

My pen clatters on the table as it tumbles from my fingers, and I sit there, stunned. My father?

Coach Claxon looks over then considers it. "Troy, you've got ten minutes. Get him off the property before he gets arrested, okay? You know HC won't hesitate. We'll go over the nickel packages while you're out."

"Thanks, Coach. Sorry, guys," I say, getting up and following the assistant out of the room. Coach Claxon cut me some slack, but since I'm not slotted in any of the nickel packages unless both of the outside linebackers get hurt,

it's not too bad. I follow the assistant, who's noticeably relieved, and he leads me toward the practice field. "How long has he been here?"

"I was helping the kickers with their stretch work when he showed up," he says. "I'll be honest with you Troy. If he is your father, he looks like hell."

"I'm not surprised."

We don't say anything else until we reach the outer offices, where I see Dad surrounded by two security guards, one of them with his hand on his Taser.

"It's all right, guys, I'll walk him out," I say to the two guards. "Thanks for your patience."

"Whatever you say, Troy," one guard says, sticking to the protocol that they're supposed to. Mr. Wood was the worthless bastard sitting in the chair, not me. "Coach is supposed to be here in five minutes though."

"We'll be out of here by then," I say. I look down at Dad, trying not to sneer. "Come on. We can talk on the way. That is what you wanted, isn't it?"

He gets to his feet, and I can see for the first time how different he looks. He's dropped at least twenty pounds, and his skin hangs in laps and wattles, with a rough, sandpapery texture that reveals a ton of exploded capillaries in a gnarly map of red lines. "What're you doing here, Dad? After getting out of jail, you didn't come back, and I figured you were out of my life."

After beating me, he caught himself a misdemeanor assault charge since I wasn't going to push the issue. They sent him to county for three hundred and sixty-four days, exactly one day short of a year, the most that is allowed under a normal misdemeanor charge, and after he got out, I was at Clement. Nobody had seen him in Silver Lake Falls in at least three years.

"You're looking good, Troy," Dad says, his voice hoarse. "Added some muscle."

"It wasn't that hard when I wasn't starving half the time," I say, and I'm surprised at the amount of rancor that is still in my heart. I thought I'd burned away the hurt a long time ago. "After Coach Jackson took me in, I put on weight easy. Hell, I had to be careful I wasn't putting it on too fast, actually."

"I've heard," Dad says. We reach the outside of the facility. "Troy, after I went to jail, I had a lot of time to think about things. Son—"

"Don't call me that," I growl in warning. "You lost the right to that term five years ago."

He swallows and nods, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Troy . . . I'm sorry. I screwed up my life, and I nearly screwed up yours as well."

"That you did. Is that all you came here for, to apologize? If it is, I need to get going. I've got a meeting."

He shook his head, wiping at his mouth. "I was going to stay away, I swear. When I saw how good you were doing at Clement, and then you signed here, I was so damn proud, even if that means nothing to you. But, all those years of me ruining my life . . . I'm paying the piper now, Troy. The alcohol, it tore me up something bad inside."

"Outside too," I noted. "Can you even feel that nose with all those exploded veins? You look like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Or just another alky on the streets."

"No, I got me a job," Dad says, and I see that he at least has a little bit of self-respect left. "But it's not a good one. It's here in town, cleaning up at a senior center, actually. But . . . the booze is biting back now. I need your help."

"What is it?" I ask, and despite myself, I feel concerned. Maybe Dad has changed. Maybe if fate, or God, as Laurie puts it, brought Whitney back into my life with my beautiful daughter as well, then maybe fate is bringing my father back into my life.

"The liver," Dad sighs, rubbing at his side. "I need treatment, but the cost . . . my insurance won't cover it all."

I nod, suspicious but still concerned. "What do you need?"

"Anything you can help me with . . . it'd be appreciated. They say the cost is ten thousand, but I don't know what that means after insurance covers their portion, and the time off work—"

"Stop," I say. Sighing, I put my hand on his chest. "You stay right here. I'll go talk to the secretary, see what I can do."

I rush inside, finding Tiffany, the receptionist, still in the front office. "Hey, Tiff, can you help me out?"

"What do you need, Troy?"

"That guy was my Dad. I know the team does it sometimes, so is there maybe a way I can draw on Sunday's game check? He's got an issue I'd like to help him out with."

Tiffany bites her lip, then nods. "All right. But I have to report this to the GM, you know that, right?"

The League has gotten a lot better at not letting players blow through their money like some of the eighties and nineties spectacular flameouts did. So as part of the agreement with the owners, players no longer get paid in yearly lump sums, but in game by game checks, and players get a certain percentage of each check set aside in a retirement account, although I already talked with Cory about taking that and more of my retirement planning over. Some teams still allow a player to draw on a future check on an occasional basis, and on the Hawks, that policy is three times a season, up to one full paycheck. Anything more than that and you had to approach the team with a business plan or a damn good reason and go through financial counseling. In any case, the GM would find out.

"I know. Thanks. Cut it for ten thousand, made out to Randall Wood. He can put it away in his account, and he can't use it right away, you know?"

Tiffany cuts the check quickly. Her printer can create the checks against the account, and I take it out to Dad, who is still shuffling side to side, his hands jammed into the pockets of his baggy pants. "Here," I say, handing it to him and hoping that I won't regret it later. "I'm going to ask the team to put a tracer on this check. You cash it or sign it over to some check-writing place, and I'll find out."

He nods and tries to find the words. Finally, he rasps a reply. "Thank you, Troy. Um, I don't know if I'm overstepping my bounds, but would it be

okay if sometime . . . well, if we can maybe get together? Just for a hamburger or something."

"We'll see. Next time you want to come by, make it a Thursday morning around eleven. I have some open time then. But I have work to do. Goodbye."



## CHAPTER 21

### WHITNEY

*"And so, it looks like the Hawks have a potential new star on their hands," the analyst on the television says as I watch the post-game wrap up. "After appearing in two pre-season games where he delivered dominant performances against mostly second string squads, there were still questions remaining about the real ability of Troy Wood, the second year linebacker for Seattle out of Clement. Those who know Troy . . ."*

"Oh, I know him," I laugh softly to myself as I reach over and stroke Laurie's hair. She tried so hard to stay awake to watch her daddy play, but she nodded off during the third quarter. With all of the ads and play stoppages, even a late afternoon start is too late for a child her age. "I know him very well."

I turn my attention back to the television as the analysts continue to sing Troy's praises. *"Yeah, Tom, it was right about this point that he just took over," the one guy, a former player himself, said. "I mean, right here when . . . BOOM! He just rocks the running back here, driving him down for a loss and setting the tone that he'd keep up for the rest of the game. I tell you, guys, he put the fear of God in that man's heart with that hit."*

*"It's too bad that the Hawks couldn't have cloned Troy Wood," the lead talking head says, segueing into the bad. "Because with the loss of their best receiver and right tackle in the third pre-season game, their own offense was nearly as inept as the Cardinals were when Wood was in the game. The Arizona defense picked off the Hawks three times, returning one of those for*

*a touchdown, which proved to be the difference in the game, as the Cardinals go on to win the first game of the season fourteen to ten."*

The analysts go on to review the other games of the weekend, and I turn off the TV, picking up Laurie and carrying her to the bedroom. "You're getting heavy, little girl," I grunt as I carry her. "You take after your father. You're going to be six feet tall at this rate."

"Want some help?" Mom asks as she comes out of her room, and I stop, only slightly startled. "Sorry, I heard the TV switch off and thought you could use it."

"Thanks, Mom, but I've got her," I say, carrying her the rest of the way to the bedroom and putting her on the bed. I tuck Laurie in and give her a kiss goodnight, then Mom follows. "I thought you'd have gone to sleep. Don't you start work early in the morning?"

"I do, but I'm not sleepy yet," Mom says. "Share a bowl of ice cream with me, maybe?"

I consider it, then smile. "Sure. Just remind me to go for a jog in the morning or something."

Mom snorts and we go into the kitchen, where she pulls out the carton of vanilla ice cream, scoops out two scoops and puts them in the same clear glass bowl that we shared when I was a little girl. "You still use chocolate sauce?"

"Sorry, kinda outgrew the Hershey's," I say.

Mom smiles and brings the bowl over before going and getting two spoons and setting them in the bowl. "Dig in. It's been a long time since we did this."

"Five years," I agree. "I'll be honest—these past six weeks have been pretty awesome. It's good to be home."

"It's good to have you home, sweetie. Actually, it's those five years I'd like to talk to you about."

"What about? I thought you and I cleared the air about that long ago. I don't hold any ill will toward you, and I thought you didn't toward me about going to Europe."

Mom shakes her head and takes a bite of ice cream. "Actually, I was thinking more along the lines that I need to clear the air with Troy. If it wasn't clear enough already, your little public announcement at Dani Barkovich's wedding reception made it clear you two are back together."

"It wasn't an announcement. It was a dance. And yes, a kiss. I'm twenty-three now. I think I can kiss my man in public, can't I?"

"Of course," Mom says, defensive until she takes a breath. "It's just . . . well, I would have liked to have been let in that you were going to tell Laurie about her father. It caught me by surprise when she came in going on about meeting her daddy after you two went to the zoo."

"I'm sorry about that. Troy and I discussed it, but the exact time was a bit sudden, and when I got back from the reception, you were already asleep with her, and you had early work the next day."

"It's okay, just it was surprising. But what I've been thinking about is that you and Troy . . . is it serious? Like permanent, maybe?"

"Maybe. We're taking our time on making that formal, but I know what my heart says."

Mom nods and takes another bite of ice cream. "Okay then. Maybe we should have him over one night for dinner. After you left, I was pretty cold to him. And I don't want a bad relationship with him if he's going to be your . . . man, and Laurie's father. Do you think you can set that up?"

"I'm sure we can find a time."



AS IT WAS, BECAUSE OF TRAVEL SCHEDULES, WORK SCHEDULES, AND JUST GENERAL life, it was six days before Mom, Troy and I were able to sit down for a family, clear-the-air dinner. Laurie, who had gotten the vibe that tonight's dinner is going to be very important, got showered and dressed without me

having to remind her too many times that she needed to dry off fully or to put her socks on and not just wear her shoes barefooted. Instead, it's now exactly six fifty-eight in the evening, and Laurie is sitting on the bed in her best pair of jeans and new, most favorite Hawks t-shirt, waiting for Troy.

"Mama?"

"Yes, Laurie?" I ask as I carefully apply the last bit of my lip gloss. I'm not going overboard. After all, this is a family dinner and not a romantic date, but I do want to look good for Troy, putting on an emerald brocade blouse and a black skirt that I sometimes have used for business, but is loose enough that I can relax and move around in if I'm in the mood, sexy but not too sexy with my casual flats. I have news for him as well, after all.

"When Troy gave me the football, did he know that he is my Daddy?" Laurie asks. "I asked Grandma to read me what he wrote again, and I'm not sure."

"No, sweetie, I didn't tell him that you were his baby girl until a couple of days later. You guys actually played together first before I told him, but as soon as I did, he was so happy that he nearly broke my ribs, he hugged me so hard."

The doorbell rings, and Laurie's on her feet in a flash, running for the door. I hear the door open, and the delighted squeal as Laurie throws herself into her father's arms. "Daddy!"

I leave the bedroom and see that Mom, who has been busy in the kitchen for the past hour, has also come out to greet Troy. He's wearing charcoal dress slacks and an open-throated, checked dress shirt, his muscles still bulging against the cotton of his shirt. Maybe it's because the door is open, but I swear it just jumped five degrees inside the house.

Laurie, who's hanging from Troy's neck and refusing to let go, gives Troy a big, smacking kiss on the cheek. "Kissy-kissy!"

"And a kissy-kissy for you too," Troy replies, kissing Laurie on the cheek and neck loudly, giving her a hug. "How was school today?"

"Great! I got to tell everyone about what my daddy's going to be doing this weekend, and I drew a picture, too."

"Oh really? And what did you tell them?"

"That my Daddy's going to beat Pittsburgh."

"Well, the entire city of Pittsburgh is a little difficult, but I'll try to start with the Warriors." Troy laughs. "Just remember, I need all my teammates to get the job done."

Laurie allows herself to be set down, and Troy does the right thing by instead of coming over to hug me, he turns to Mom and offers his hand. "Ms. Nelson. Thank you for having me."

Mom stops moving and then sighs, shaking her head. "Come here, you big oaf. And for God's sake, call me Patricia or Patty."

Mom gives Troy a quick hug, then steps back. "So I hope you're hungry, and the team didn't fill you up already."

"Nope, that's tomorrow." Troy laughs. "Saturday night, we get to eat and live on our own, as long as I'm at the stadium by nine tomorrow morning."

"Why so early?" Mom asks, leading Troy over to the table. "Don't you have a four o'clock kickoff?"

"No, that's four Eastern time," Troy says. "The network bumped us back because of some stuff that happened around the league in the pre-season, so we've got a one o'clock kickoff. If it was still at four, I'd have to be there by eleven. But nine is a good time. It gives everyone a chance to eat, relax, get warmed up and get ready to go come game time."

Mom nods and goes back to the kitchen, and I hear the sound of pots and pans moving around. "Can I help you, Mom?"

"No, honey," she calls, "but if I could get a little help from a certain granddaughter of mine, I think we can get these plates out on the table in under three minutes. What do you say, Laurie?"

"Coming!" Laurie calls, going into the kitchen area. It's not totally cut off. I can see over the kitchen island as Mom scoops up plates of spaghetti, but only from her shoulders up.

"Whatever it is, it smells great, Ms.—sorry, Patricia," Troy says, sitting down next to me. "What am I in line for anyway?"

"Whitney's favorite when she was in high school, linguini with a tomato and Italian sausage sauce. Laurie here has helped me tweak it to make it more authentic, but still American enough for our taste buds. You don't mind having a lot of carbs before a game, right?"

Troy shakes his head and gives me a look, and the warmth inside me is definitely not due to the ambient air. We both want each other, but we know we need to get the air cleared with Mom first. "No, Patricia, that sounds great. Do me a favor, though. If you have any plans for dessert, hold off, please? I can handle the pasta, but if I load up on ice cream or cake or something like that, I tend to crash down from the sugar high and then I'm sluggish in the morning."

"What do you eat on game days?" Laurie asks as she emerges with the first plate, which she carefully sets in her place next to me before going back into the kitchen area. "You know, to play so well."

"No secret formula," Troy says, and he reaches over to take my hand, the touch of just our fingers thrilling me. "I like to eat a lot of vegetables, some beans for the slow energy, and a few eggs with breakfast. Nothing too heavy or fatty for an early game. Do you like eggs, Laurie?"

"I do, Daddy," Laurie says, and I see Mom look up before snorting and shaking her head, smiling as she hears Troy being called *Daddy* again. "But beans? Ewww."

"I just need to introduce you to the team catering staff," Troy says, giving Laurie a kiss on the forehead when she comes out with his plate. "They make a black bean salad that is so delicious I bet even you'd like it."

"I don't know," Laurie says, and Mom comes out with the other two plates, setting one in front of me before sitting down. As soon as she sits down, Laurie folds her hands, and Troy follows suit, while Laurie says grace in her sweet little voice. "Okay, let's eat!"



WE HAD A GREAT DINNER, MOM AND TROY SEEMING TO BOND AFTER APOLOGIZING to one another. Now, Mom and Laurie are in the living room having dessert and watching a Disney movie.

We sneak our way to my bedroom, and as soon as we're inside, our passion and desire give way. "You were kind, insightful . . . there's a reason I love you," I say in between kisses. "And a reason you're the perfect man for me."

Troy smiles and brings his hand up to cup my breast, stroking my nipple through my bra with his thumb. Sparks cascade through my body with every rotation of his thumb, and I'm soon breathless, desperate with need. "Troy."

"I want you so badly, but we don't have time," Troy says, still not moving as his hand keeps up its amazing ministrations. "And I'm sorry, I didn't plan for this. I don't have a condom on me."

"Then I get to engage in a fantasy," I say with a smile, getting down on my knees. "Think you can reciprocate if I go first?"

Troy smiles and strokes my hair while I undo his zipper and ease his cock out of his pants. He's already mostly hard, and the feeling as I suck him in and feel him expand is sexy and powerful. I pull him all the way into my mouth and swallow his cock, licking and sucking along the shaft until I reach the flared mushroom tip, so soft and velvety on my lips. Flicking my tongue over the tip, I'm once again treated to the tangy sweetness of his precum, which I let savor in my mouth while I pump him with my fist. "How many times did you dream about this?"

"You don't know how many times," Troy whispers while I make love to his cock with my lips and tongue. I swallow him again, all the way until my nose is buried at the base of his cock, the tip gagging me, but I don't care. I swallow it anyway until I can take no more, pulling out and bobbing my head back and forth, swallowing him over and over. Troy puts his hand on my head and I pull him out, looking up lovingly.

"Fuck my mouth."

Troy nods and guides himself into my mouth again, his hips thrusting his cock in and out, over and over as I lick and suck as best I can. I feel so at his mercy, but still safe and secure, and I'm so aroused I can't believe it. Troy's trembling, and I reach up to massage his balls, feeling them grow tight and ready against his body. Troy pulls back, leaving the head of his cock in my mouth as he explodes, and I seal my mouth around his cockhead, making sure not a precious drop is spilled. After I'm sure I got every last drop, I reach for a Kleenex to spit it out.

"Time for my dessert," Troy says, nudging me over to the bed.

Pushing my skirt up over my hips to expose my panties, he licks his lips. "I love you in these," he murmurs, his lips now fastening on the flesh of my ass and kissing. "You don't know how sexy your backside is."

"Careful, or you may get to take another virginity of mine," I half-moan, and Troy stops. I look back and nod. "Yeah. And yes, it's yours too . . . but some other night."

Troy smiles and kisses my ass again, nudging my feet apart enough that I give him full access to my ass and pussy. His right hand reaches between my legs, rubbing in soft little circles as his lips move over my ass and I bend over the bed.

My breath catches when Troy pulls my panties to the side, and suddenly, his long, strong finger is stroking between my pussy lips, gathering moisture before sliding in deep, my groan barely held behind my lips as he curls his finger inside me. His mouth descends again, and I feel his breath warm and enticing over my skin, a hunger filling me. Troy lets his tongue come out, flicking over me the same way that I had done to his cock.

Troy seems to read my mind as he begins to pump his finger in and out of me while his tongue does its magic, and I have to just clutch at the bedsheets to not scream out, it feels so fucking good. I'm finally starting to relax, and suddenly, I feel the snake of Troy's tongue inside me, his finger rubbing my clit.

I'm assaulted with pleasure, and I'm lost in a haze of passion, my body unable to comprehend what I'm feeling other than amazing waves of pleasure. My body convulses, and I'm coming, clenching and drawing him



in more, Troy burying his face as deep as he can while his finger massages me. I ride the wave, the orgasm rolling and building as he alternates his tongue, his finger, and his thumb on me until I'm sobbing quietly, unable to take more.

"I love you," I reply as soon as I'm able to catch my breath. "By the way, I meant to say it at dinner, but I have some good news."

"Oh?"

"I got that job with Colette's mom I was telling you about. And a few of my clients have agreed to stay with me, and not with Lorenzo. We're going to be doing well."

"Good," Troy says, wiping at his face. "So would it be out of place for me to drop off a few tickets for next week's game? You know, for the three of you."

"That would be great."

Troy and I wash up, then go into the living room, holding hands, flushed from our quick tryst and still smiling. Laurie smiles from her position in Mom's lap while Woody and Buzz run onscreen. "See, Grandma? I told you they were being kissy."

Troy can't help it, and neither can I as we start laughing, and even Mom joins in while I sit in Troy's lap for the rest of the movie, just bonding as a family.

## CHAPTER 22

### TROY

*"I'll be honest with you, Tom, perhaps the brightest point so far in the Hawks dismal start to the season is the play of Troy Wood."*

I wish Laurie would shut off the morning sports programs. I'm aching from the collisions last night, but lying on the couch in my sweat shorts and a t-shirt, I'm too happy and pleased to care. After all, I'm on my couch in the living room, and for the first time in my life, my daughter is eating breakfast in my living room with me.

I was shocked and elated the night before when, getting home from the stadium, I found Whitney and Laurie both waiting outside. "Daddy!"

"Baby girl, what are you doing here?" I ask, surprised. "I mean, I'm happy, but . . . Whitney?"

"Laurie asked, and I agreed that if you were okay with it, maybe the two of us could have a sleepover at her daddy's house," Whitney said, and so we did. Whitney even joined me in bed, although she knew that I was too sore and exhausted to do much more than curl up, hold her in her pale mint silk pajamas, and go to sleep. Now, lying on the couch, I'm slowly trying to recover enough to get up and do something.

*"Wood's play on any other team would be considered inspirational, and certainly leadership material,"* the talking head on the TV rattles on, Laurie eating up the replays of the highlights of the game. *"I mean, nine tackles, a sack and enough punishing hits to any receiver who entered his zone that*

*the only time the Bolts threw over the middle was when he was out of the game. Frankly, if it wasn't for the fact that Troy Wood only played about half of the defensive downs for the Hawks, he would've reached Madden-like numbers. So let me ask you, if Troy Wood keeps this up, are we looking at a potential defensive player of the year?"*

Even I raise my head at that, blinking in surprise. I know I'm having a great start to my season, but player of the year? *"It's hard to tell. We've been around the League for a long time. I mean, I was retired before Troy was even born. We both know it's a little early to be talking about that, but he's certainly well on his way if he keeps it up."*

*"True. And of course, if the offense can start to string together some series and keep the defense off the field, it'll give them the ability to not spend nearly forty minutes on the field on a weekly basis."*

Forty minutes, nearly two-thirds of the game. Jesus, no wonder I feel like I've been in a series of car accidents. "Laurie, I know you like the replays, but can you turn it down, baby girl? It makes me embarrassed to listen to these guys make me sound so awesome."

"But you are awesome, Daddy," Laurie says, still turning down the television and watching every second of it as if she knows everything they're saying. "Mama says so too."

I hear the shower in the back turn off, and I smile, knowing that if it weren't for the pain in my body, I'd be back there with Whitney if only to look at her. Still, the idea of her luscious body under the warm spray of my shower sends a little twitch down below, and I find the energy to at least push myself up to a sitting position on the couch. "That may be, but do you know what having a big head means?"

"It means you need a bigger helmet?"

I can't help it. Her innocence makes me smile. The point of view when you are five. "Not quite. No, having a big head means when you start thinking you're more awesome than you really are. You start to forget there are always things you can do better."

"What's—" Laurie starts, but before she can finish her next question— she seems to have a million of them every time we're together, and I find that I'm more patient with them than I thought I'd be—there's a knock at the door, and she pops to her feet, already running to the door. "I got it!"

I get up while Laurie opens the door, stopping halfway up when I hear Laurie's voice. "Wood residence, can I—"

"So you're the little parasite," a slurry, drunken voice says, and suddenly, Laurie is running back to me, her eyes wide with fright, and she leaps into my arms, yelling in fear. In the back of the house, I hear Whitney drop her comb and her bare feet running on the carpet, emerging from the back still only half-dressed, stopping when my father staggers his way down the hall. "Hey, sugar tits."

"What—who?"

I cross the living room, putting myself between Dad and Whitney, and hand Laurie to her. "Go to the bedroom and call the cops. It's my father."

I'm surprisingly calm saying this, and Whitney nods, her eyes full of concern and fright, but holding our daughter, she finds the courage and strength to retreat at least semi-calmly while Laurie cries on her shoulder. I turn around, not saying anything until the door closes. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I came for some more help," Dad slurs, and at this distance, I can smell it. He reeks, and his clothes are filthy, encrusted with what looks like puke and maybe some blood. "For my medicine."

"You need to get the hell out of here before the cops show up," I say, trying to maintain my calm. "Get out, and don't you ever come back."

"This is my fucking house, and you are my fucking son, you worthless piece of shit!" Dad yells, trying to bully me. Maybe it worked when I was in high school, but this is now, and I have a woman and a daughter whom I have to protect. "You bring them in, give them the good life because she gives you some anchor baby, and leave me in the cold? Fuck you, you worthless piece of shit!" Now that he's back drunk again, he's back to his favorite line—*you worthless piece of shit*.

"Randall. Leave. Now," I say again, my voice going hard. "You and me? We're done. You may have contributed some DNA and a last name to me, but you aren't my father. You never have been. I should have known better. Now get out."

Dad swings drunkenly, and I catch his arm, twisting it behind him in a little self-defense move I remember from a freshman PE class I took at Clement, and grab him by the scruff of the neck and the wrist. Lifting him up to his tiptoes, I escort him to the door, which is still standing open. Reaching the front lawn, I literally throw him out of the house, where he lands in a heap on the lawn.

"For eighteen years, you made me feel like I wasn't worthy of love or affection. You made me feel like *shit*!" I yell, and I notice on the periphery of my vision that the neighbors have come out again, and behind me, I can feel Whitney standing in the doorway, Laurie still holding onto her mother's leg. "You beat me—you nearly killed me! And now you come trying to mooch off me again, scaring my daughter and the woman I love? Get lost!"

The cops pull up while he's still holding his arm and sobbing on the lawn, drunkenly screaming curses at me and claiming that I'd crippled him. Maybe he does have a broken wrist or a dislocated shoulder. I don't know, nor do I care. It's with a certain sense of ironic satisfaction that I see that the cop who gets out is George Walters, and he already has his handcuffs ready. "We got a call of a disturbance, Troy. What's going on?"

"He frightened my daughter and verbally assaulted Whitney before taking a swing at me. I threw this piece of . . . this person out of my house," I say, correcting myself. "This time, I'm pressing charges."

George nods and rolls Dad over, ignoring his cries of protest as he hooks him up and yanks him to his feet, hauling him over to his cruiser before pushing him into the back. George closes the door, then comes back over. "It's not that I don't believe you, but if Randy claims otherwise, I'm going to have to arrest you too. This is technically a domestic violence case."

"No, George," Whitney speaks up, and I turn my head to see Whitney holding up her phone. "I got the swing and part of it on video."

George nods, and Whitney pops out a data card that she passes over. "The selfie generation sometimes has benefits," George says with a smile. "All right then. Troy, I would like you to come down to the station still, to make a statement. Miss Nelson, you don't have to, but you can if you want."

"What I'd like most is to calm my daughter down," Whitney says, stroking Laurie's hair. She's stopped crying, and when I kneel, she lets go of her mother's leg to come to me, and I hold her tightly, tenderly kissing her forehead.

"Shh, it's okay, Laurie. I'll always protect you."

"That man scared me." Laurie is looking at me, her blue eyes so large and still shimmering in tears. "I thought he'd hurt me or hurt you."

"Never again," I promise her, kissing her again. "Besides, if all of the Bolts can't hurt me, what chance does one old man like that have against me?"

Laurie smiles at my little joke and hugs me again, and I hold her close, closing my eyes to let myself just feel her close and safe. When she lets go, I get to my feet and pull Whitney in for a hug. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Whitney says, kissing my cheek. "But I think I'll take Laurie back to Mom's place. You've got a statement to make, and I have work this afternoon."

I nod and stroke my hand through her beautiful auburn hair. "Okay. I need to call the Hawks too—team policy. Maybe afterward, we can have dinner as a family?"

"I'd like that. Give me a call later."

"I will. I love you."

"I love you too."



IT DIDN'T TAKE AS LONG AS I THOUGHT IT WOULD TO WRAP THINGS UP AT THE station. Being a celebrity, apparently, I was interviewed by the Chief of Police, who showed me the video after I gave my verbal statement, and one

of the other cops was quickly transcribing it for us. "So why didn't you just kick his ass?"

"Come on, Chief, I'm a professional athlete. If I threw a punch at him, I'd be here for possibly killing him. Second, the League frowns on players getting into fights, regardless of whether we're provoked. And most important, my daughter and Whitney were in the house. I'll be a better father than Randall was to me."

The Chief nods and reaches over, switching off the tape. "Okay. Well, hang out here for a moment while Bert finishes up the transcribed statement. I've already had the Hawks contact me—I'll give them a call back and tell them that you're totally blameless for this. You were at home, and we've got you on video trying to de-escalate, and you acted with more restraint than I think I would have."

"Oh, I'll still need to talk with Coach tomorrow, but thanks. It'll smooth things over a lot."

I sign the transcribed statement and leave the station, which is co-located with City Hall. Silver Lake Falls is still one of those towns that is small enough that such things are common. I'm surprised when I see Coach Jackson standing outside, apparently waiting for me when I walk out. "Don't you have practice this afternoon, Coach?"

"I can get back for that," he replies, his hands in his pockets. He's dressed as a history teacher right now, and I can't help but smile at the little stain of yellow chalk dust on his sleeve. Coach is one of the only teachers who still has a real chalkboard in his room and still likes to use it. "I've got Mrs. Gibbs covering my last period class. They've just got a video today anyway."

"Thanks for coming down then," I say, and the two of us start to walk through the park that is located next to the City Hall complex, the grass and old oak trees providing a peaceful respite from the stress of the morning. "How'd you find out?"

"I'm technically your agent, remember?" Coach says with a chuckle. "I'm in third period with a bunch of freshmen who I'm trying to explain the real reasons Columbus takes off to the west instead of going around Africa like

everyone else does back in 1492, and my phone rings. My wife knows that I don't take personal calls at work, so it has to be an emergency, and next thing I know, I'm talking to the General Manager of the Hawks, who tells me that you're here, Randy's been arrested, and could I please stop by the station to find out what's going on. What else could I do?"

"Finish out freshman World History?" I reply, and Coach laughs. "I know you pretty well by now."

"Okay, I did do that once. But here I am."

"Again, thanks," I say. We sit down on a bench, and I take a deep breath. "Not the start I wanted."

"To the day or to the season?" Coach asks, and I laugh softly. "I know you, Troy. The kid I had on the Foxes, he'd have been over the moon about his stats. The man you are, you'd rather have the team be 2-0 instead of 0-2."

"Some of that, but mostly with Dad," I say, leaning forward and putting my elbows on my knees. "I was scared, Coach. He frightened Laurie, he's an arm's length from Whitney, who's mostly naked coming from the shower, and all I had was me, and to be honest, I feel like shit today."

"You did the right thing. Your daughter is safe, Whitney is safe, and you acted like a man."

"Thanks to you," I whisper, turning my head to look at him. "You know that?"

"I'm just a history teacher who happens to like coaching football on the side," he says, but I can tell he's moved. He nods, and we sit quietly, watching the birds flitter overhead. When we talk again, his voice is raspy, and he talks about the things he feels safest with. "So . . . you think you're going to do well against the Dons?"

"We have to," I reply with a smile. "They're in our division, and if we go 0-3 and 0-2 in divisional play, life is going to get very ugly on the team for a while."



## CHAPTER 23

WHITNEY

"*T*his is so *cool*!"

"Dani, come on. We're supposed to be acting debonair and slightly bored, like we've been in luxury boxes before," I admonish her, still unable to keep from smiling. Laurie is sitting with her nose nearly pressed against the glass, her brand-new Troy Wood jersey nearly swallowing her body, since she insisted on getting one. "Remember?"

"You can act all aloof. You have a future of doing this as often as you want," Dani replies with a chuckle. "I'm just going to sit back and enjoy this. Seriously, Troy can do this for every home game?"

"Just twice a year up here," a voice from the side says, and a man in his mid-forties wearing a Hawks polo and slacks comes over, offering his hand. "Every player has the right to four tickets per home game, but the box seats are only used twice a year. The rest of the games have to be in the regular seats in the lower level. Hi, I'm Timothy Hauser, assistant General Manager of the team. You must be Whitney Nelson?"

"I am," I say, shaking his hand. "This is my close friend, Dani Barkovich, and that is—"

"Your daughter, Laurie," Hauser says with a smile. "Trust me, everyone on the team has heard about this little girl. Except for game prep, you two are about all that Troy talks about since the season started. And if I can say,

your daughter is even cuter than he let on. Dani Barkovich . . . you're the friend of Troy's who just got married, right?"

Dani nods, smiling. "You have a good memory, Mr. Hauser."

"Not really. I'm just the guy who approved Troy's initial request for time off to attend the wedding," Hauser says. "Enjoy the game. We'll try and keep the commentary family friendly, but you know how football people get."

"Don't worry, Mr. Hauser. It's probably me who should be apologizing," I reply with a laugh. "Laurie's picked up some language when the two of us lived in Europe, and her main source of American culture and language was Netflix that, well, I'm still sometimes having problems getting her to stop."

"You lived in Europe? How entrancing," Hauser says. "Does she speak any foreign languages?"

"We both speak Italian," I say with a touch of pride. "If I need to, I'll just tell her to start yelling in Italian. She's able to curse like a sailor in Italian, but at least you won't understand it."

Hauser laughs and shakes his head. "No, actually, I should be asking your daughter for help. My daughter is in junior high school and hates foreign language. Getting tutored by a kindergartener might give her the kick in the pants she needs to actually study. Enjoy the game."

The food is a lot different than I expected, and a lot higher quality than the typical stadium fare that we ate last time, and Laurie's eyes get big when I set the meatball sandwich in front of her. "Really?"

"Really, sweetheart. So what's our time looking like?"

"Five minutes to kickoff. Daddy's already gone back inside. This is even better than last time, Mama!"

Dani and I take seats in the cushioned chairs that make up the seating area of the box, and Dani leans over. "Kinda like a good movie theater seat. Would you mind if I taught Laurie some of our old cheers?"

"Only if you promise not to be a drill sergeant like you used to be," I tease back, and Dani slaps my leg in mock outrage.

"Is that the thanks I get for getting you to try out and meeting the love of your life? Being called a drill sergeant? I'm no mere drill sergeant, Sis. I'm a domina!"

I laugh and take Dani's hand. "What you and Pete do is none of my business."

The game starts, and we cheer as the defense takes the field. I notice that Troy runs out this time with the starting players, and there's a small cheer as his presence is noticed. Watching him line up, I realize that this is only the second game where I've been able to really watch him play. In high school, I was busy half the time with cheers, and watching on television, the cameraman normally focuses on the offense and the ball in particular. In the pre-season game, I got to watch some, but with the higher vantage, it feels amazing.

"Go, Daddy! Kick their ass!"

"Laurie."

"Sorry, Mama. Get them, Daddy!"

In the first quarter, Troy's play is as dominant as ever as he quickly picks up another sack and tips away a pass. The quarter ends still scoreless, but I'm on the edge of my seat as the game pauses for a TV break during the changeover between the first and second quarter.

Dani turns to me and gives me a high five. "He's having a great game!"

"Too bad it's going to be his last," someone says behind us, and I turn around to see a black woman sitting behind us, giving us a commiserating but perhaps still sad smile. "Didn't you know?"

"Know what?" I ask, confused. "And you are?"

"Kim Winslow. I'm married to number 67, Gerald Winslow," she says, offering her hand. "Sorry, I guess you and Troy are still new together. We didn't have a chance to meet at the team social during training camp. The wire's been full of the news."

"What news?" I ask. "Why is it Troy's last game?"

"The Hawks are trading him to Jacksonville," Kim says. "They're sending Troy and their first and third round draft picks in next year's draft for the 'Cats' starting right tackle, and two of their backup wide receivers and some other picks."

The news hits me like a punch in the gut, and I stare at Kim blankly. "They can do that?"

"Trade deadline is November third. Actually, in some ways, it's not that bad a trade. My best girlfriend's man plays for the 'Cats, and they're in a rebuilding mode this year. They've got the offense, but they need a defense. So they need a young stud to build it around. Your man just got tabbed for the job. Best of all, he's not going to miss any playing time. The 'Cats got a bye next week so he'll have a week and a half to learn their schemes. When Gerald got traded here from New York, he had to miss a game in order to learn his blocking assignments. That hurt him come contract negotiations."

"How . . . how many teams has he been on?" I ask, stunned.

"Gerald's been playing six years now. There was that camp spot with the Fire where he barely had a chance to get his feet wet before they sent him to Miami. Five teams. I think he's finally settled in here, though. He might be able to stay another two or three years before he retires. But with the salary cap, you never know."

Six years, five cities? What sort of life is that for my daughter? I turn back and blankly watch a few minutes of the game but can't focus. "Dani, can you watch Laurie for a minute? I need to get some answers."

Dani, who's been giving me concerned looks, pats my knee and nods. "Don't stress, Whitney. I can see you stressing already, the little gears are turning and the smoke is starting to creep out. Don't stress. Think."

I nod and get up, looking for Timothy Hauser. I find him in his seat, watching the game and laughing along with some other people. "Mr. Hauser?"

"Oh, Miss Nelson! Enjoying the game?" Hauser asks, taking a sip from a beer in his hand. "The team's really fighting hard today."

"Yes . . . and I bet next game's going to be even better with your new right tackle and wideout," I reply, cutting off conversation with the group. One of the other people, a man in his fifties, it looked like, who had a sort of smarmy, lawyer-like look to him, turned around and considered me levelly. I returned his gaze, not backing down. I'd been through too much in the past two months to worry about some suit. "Who are you?"

"Larry Kardarelli, General Manager," he says. "I suppose you're asking about the reports of Troy being traded?"

"Are they true?"

Kardarelli nods and gets up. "The official report hits the networks right after the game. Officially, it doesn't happen until midnight, so that Troy can finish the game for us."

"You're trading him, but still want him out there busting his ass for you?" I ask, shocked. "What the hell gives you the right?"

"The Collective Bargaining Agreement," Kardarelli replies. He waves with his hand, and we leave the seats to go toward the back of the box. "You must understand, Miss Nelson, my job is to make the Hawks the best team they can be."

"So you trade a man who's becoming the best linebacker on the team? Maybe in the league?" I ask, furious and hurt. "Why?"

"You sound like Troy did when he heard the news," Kardarelli says, then shrugs. "I have good linebackers. But I also have a gaping hole on my offensive line, zero depth at receiver, and a quarterback that's making ten million dollars a year. The Hawks can survive losing Troy Wood. We can't win with the offense we've got right now."

Almost in response to Kardarelli's words, a roar and a collective groan goes through the crowd as a Hawks punt is returned all the way to the two-yard line before the San Francisco returner stumbles and is taken down by a shoestring tackle.

Kardarelli sighs, looks over at the big screen replaying the play, then looks back at me. "All right. I actually like Troy, so I'll give you a promise. If the Hawks are losing at half time, I'll call down to the locker room. He won't

dress for the second half. It'll give him a chance to avoid injury. It's not all bad, Miss Nelson. Jacksonville has beautiful weather this time of year, and he's going to be a superstar in Florida. And when we play the 'Cats in week sixteen back here, he's going to get a hero's welcome. I'll probably be burned in effigy, but I've gotten used to that."

Another groan goes through the crowd as a San Francisco runner blasts his way into the end zone, and the Hawks are down six to nothing. "See? Even with only two yards to score, the Dons are scared of him. They ran that ball as far away from Troy as they could."



TROY COMES OUT OF THE LOCKER ROOM, AND I FEEL MY HEART TWINGE SEEING THE hurt and defeat in his shoulders. He's not wearing his normal clothes, having ditched the typical Hawks clothes he'd worn the other times he came back home for a pair of jeans and an obviously borrowed Tommy Hilfiger polo. Seeing me, his head sags and he comes over. "I guess you heard."

"Yeah," I reply. "I sent Laurie home with Dani. She doesn't need to see you like this. Besides, we need to talk."

"About what?" Troy asks, suddenly curious and suspicious. "About the trade?"

"About the trade, about keeping information from me, and about Laurie's future," I say, trying to control my emotions. I can see that Troy's hurt, which makes this all the more difficult. I'm only a little angry, but it's the other emotions that are swirling inside me that make me want to hurl right now. "When were you going to tell me that the team was shopping you around? Kardarelli told me you knew about it weeks ago."

Troy takes a deep breath. "I was hoping it was just a threat. It was still the pre-season, you and I had just gotten back together, and we'd already been through so much. We hadn't even told Laurie about me yet. I just . . . I kept hoping that maybe someone would shake free in the waiver wire from another team, or that the line would gel. Worse came to worst, I thought that maybe if I played my heart out, I'd make myself too damn valuable to the team for them to consider trading me."

I think about it, and Troy's words make sense. I can't help but frown, though, and shake my head. "You realize this performance you've been putting on for two months has actually probably made you even more attractive to other teams? They know that they've got a superstar on their hands. But you're not the type of man who'd intentionally tank a game."

Troy shakes his head, then steps closer. "No, I'm not. But it's not all bad, right? I mean, Jacksonville's got good weather, and the home prices are lower. We can—"

"There isn't going to be a we," I say, trying not to cry. "Laurie and I . . . we can't go with you, Troy. I can't put her through it."

"Through what?" Troy asks in obvious pain. I've broken his heart once before, and I can see in his eyes the fear that I'm doing it again. But I can't let myself be swayed. As much as I love him, I *must* protect my daughter.

"Through being a football player's family, having to up and move cities all the time. Never mind the fact that I know the reality—every time you step on that field, you are risking career-ending injury. And while you might not be injured now, that doesn't mean it can't happen. What happens if some bad ass tight end catches you from behind, or your foot is planted just wrong when you go to tackle some running back? What if you end up like Gerald, five teams in six years?"

"That's the life of a football player," Troy says softly. "But that doesn't mean that I can't provide a good life for you and for Laurie. Please, Whitney. I know it means asking you to leave a job you just started, but we're a family now, aren't we?"

It's my turn to feel my heart breaking, and I force myself to shake my head. "Troy, as much as I love you . . . I can't do that to Laurie. She needs a stable home, the knowledge that she's going to be going to the same school, a chance to make friends. I can't uproot her again. I've already had to do it once. With the idea that I might need to do that again and again over the course of her elementary school years, never mind if you play long enough for her to get to junior high school—"

"So what are you saying? You want me to come back to Silver Lake Falls in the offseason? I can do that," Troy says, desperate now, and I know he's

grasping at straws, trying to find some way to avoid what I'm trying to say. "I love you and Laurie both. Don't do this."

"I have to," I whisper. "I won't ask you to quit being who you are. You're the best damn football player in the league, and you are born for that field and this sport. But I can't follow you around. Laurie is young. Her feelings will heal. Maybe she'll forget some of it. But I can't have her dragged around the country like a piece of luggage. It's not fair to her."

"I—I can't just let you two go," Troy says, his voice quavering. "I need you. Don't you realize the difference between last season and this season? It's you. You are the reason I'm doing so well. You are the heart of me, and I can't give up my heart any more than I could ask you to give up Laurie. Don't do this. Not again."

I try to answer, and I can't. Instead, I turn and run like a coward, leaving Troy behind. Getting to the car, I have to take a minute to clear my eyes before I can drive home, and I'm thankful that the players' parking lot is in a different area.

It's perhaps fitting, then, that as I drive, the skies cloud up, and when I get back to Silver Lake Falls, the rain is falling like my tears. Because if Troy had asked me just one more time, I might have said yes, and I can't do that. It's not about me, after all. It's about Laurie.



## CHAPTER 24

### TROY

I feel like I'm caught in a time loop, parked outside Whitney's house, knocking on the door. Patricia opens up, but this time, at least, there is warmth and regret in her eyes. "Troy."

"Patricia, I need your help."

"I know," she says, stepping outside and closing the door behind her. "But Whitney's made her decision."

"She's made the wrong decision!" I fume, turning in the front lawn to face her. "She's thinking with her fear instead of her mind and her heart! I know all the things Whit said to me were true, but that doesn't mean she and I can't be together. It doesn't mean I don't love her, or that . . . dammit, Patricia, I want to marry her! It doesn't mean that there's a flip side to everything she said—Laurie needs a father."

Patricia nods and puts a comforting hand on my shoulders. "Five years ago, I let my hurt and fear keep you from contacting Whitney when you should have been able to. And, I'll admit, maybe a few old-fashioned ideas about a small town scandal flavored my thinking too. I made the wrong decision then, and in my opinion, Whitney's making the wrong decision now. But I also know my daughter. She's as stubborn and hard headed as her mother. I can't change her mind, but I will see what I can do. It's all I can offer."

I nod. "I guess that'll have to do, then. Is she at home?"

Patricia shakes her head. "She took Laurie to Vancouver for the day. She heard through Dani that today is your last day in town, and she thought you might stop by. Troy, she loves you, I know that. She's running because she's hurt and scared. Give her time. Your love survived five years and the Atlantic Ocean. I think it can survive the Southern Division."

I nod again. "All right. Listen, if I send you some packages, stuff for Laurie, can you hold onto them until Whitney's ready to let Laurie have them?"

Patricia nods. "I will. I don't want to be a jerk, or to be a moocher like your father was, but what about, you know?"

"It's just some financial help. Whitney is, like you said, hard headed, and I know she'll probably try not to accept it, even though she finally agreed that she would."

Patricia nods, then gives me a hug. "You take care of yourself, Troy. Oh, and one more thing. Don't sell the Silver Lake Falls house. Who knows, maybe you three can live in it sometime in the future?"

I return the hug. "Thanks, Patricia. I guess I should go though. I gotta catch a United flight to Jacksonville. Movers already came by and packed up the basics I need. I'll still be living out of a hotel room for a few days though."

"You'll do fine, Troy. Just remember what's important, and play with your heart. It'll lead them back to you."



"TROY, IT'S GOOD TO MEET YOU. I'M ERIC MORGAN, YOUR NEW HEAD COACH."

Coach Morgan is younger than my head coach on the Hawks, and while we've never met before, he's got a youthful, energetic vibe to him that at least partially lifts the cloud that's been over my feelings for the past three days.

"It's good to meet you too, Coach. Thanks for coming to the airport."

"Don't mention it," he said. "By the way, I also double as the defensive coordinator, so you and I are going to be working together a lot for the rest

of the year. Did you watch any tape of us so far this season?"

"Just a little bit—your pre-season game against the Dons. But it was the first pre-season game, so you know how that is. Everyone looks pretty rough."

"Well, I'm not going to lie to you. We're still looking pretty rough on the defensive side of the ball. We've got a playmaker or two, and a scheme that I think you'll like. But what I'm looking for is a leader and someone to energize my defense. I think you're that sort of guy. Now, if you've had the chance to listen to the media, they say we're in a rebuilding mode. I say that they're full of shit. We're going to turn things around starting in a week and a half. You're going to be leading that turn around on the defensive side of the ball."

Well, it could be worse. I'm being handed an opportunity, and Coach is enthusiastic about me playing for him. "All right, let's see what we can do."

"Great!" he says. We reach his Jeep, and he helps me put my bags in the back of the SUV, closing the gate before I go around and get into the shotgun seat. He starts up the engine, and we pull out and get on the freeway toward Jacksonville. "By the way, I know you're on a super-short timeline, so when we get to the stadium, I'm going to introduce you to your relocation assistance team."

"My what?"

Coach gives me a smile and a nod, knowing it sounds ridiculous. "Relocation assistance team, and please don't call them the RATs—they hate that. Until your first home game, you'll have a personal assistant, along with a real estate agent, et cetera to make sure that when you step on the field for us next Sunday, you're as settled in personally as you want to be. Are you thinking of renting or buying?"

"I was thinking of renting at first . . . nothing too fancy but not in a bad neighborhood either. Think there are options?"

"You're going to like it here in Jacksonville," Coach replies. "By the way, what do you want your hot name to be?"

"My what?"

"Sorry, my own term. Each of my signal calling linebackers has his own 'hot' name for when he calls stunts and audibles. I ask each guy to come up with two, so we can keep the other teams off guard. Of course, there's a bunch of other stuff you need to learn, but the hot name, that's all yours."

I nod, my decision easy. "Two, you say?"

"Yeah. Know what you want already?"

Two names come to mind immediately. "Yeah. Whitney and Laurie."

"Whitney and Laurie? Fine by me. Come on, let's get your paperwork squared away, let you meet the relocation team, and then we're having a team meeting and video session. You can meet your new teammates."

My personal assistant is a nice guy, and while I think the real estate agent might be a bit of a bitch, she's also got a good reputation, according to my assistant. I send him off to get the first thing I need, a rental car until I can sign a lease or buy something else, along with a personal request for a child's size 'Cats jersey with my number. I find out that I get to keep number 51, which I'm glad for.

Going into the video room, there's a little bit of stiffness and a faint air of hostility as I'm introduced to the guys. This defense knows what the media's been saying about them, and they know that I'm supposed to be brought in to turn around an underperforming unit. Hell, I'm the youngest starter on the defense, too, I find out. Shit, just what I need.

"Okay, let's keep this short, guys. I know we're on a bye week and most of you would like to spend some time with family," Coach says, and I wince, trying to put my feelings aside for a little while. "You okay, Troy?"

"Indigestion," I reply. "Sorry."

Coach nods, and the video session starts. I'm lucky. The 'Cats defense is already a 3-4, so I don't have to adjust, and from looking through the play book, the schemes aren't all that different, just a few wrinkles that I can adjust to pretty easily. As we wrap up around seven, I pick up my playbook and go looking for my assistant to get a ride to the hotel for the night.

As I sit outside waiting, I take out my phone. "Silver Lake Flowers, can I help you?"

"Hi, I'd like to order a dozen roses to be delivered to an art gallery in town," I say, running with it. "Do you think you can do that today?"

"Sure, we've got roses in stock," the florist says. "Where are you looking at the delivery?"

"I think the place is called Lakeside Gallery. You know the place?"

"Oh yes, I know where you're talking about. One dozen roses to Lakeside Gallery. Can I get the name of who the roses are for please?"

"Whitney Nelson. Hand deliver only to her."

"And who are they from?"

"Troy Wood."

"No fucking way."

I get that sometimes. This time, though, I don't smile at the recognition. "Yes, Troy Wood. How much will that be?"

The shop owner hums and bit, typing in his computer, then comes back on the line. "Nothing. Total charge, including tax, is zero dollars and zero cents."

"Come on," I say, not wanting to play the fame game. "I'm serious. How much?"

"Tell you what. Next time you're in town, you sign a Silver Foxes jersey for me, and we'll call it even. If you don't agree, I'm just going to hang up and deliver the flowers anyway. So you should say yes, and then you can give me a message to give to your lady."

I know when to give up, and sigh. "All right, fine. The message is simple. Please call. That's all."

"Please call, from Troy to Whitney. Okay, I think I can handle that. I'll try and have them over there in an hour. If she's not there, do you have an alternate delivery spot or do you want me to try again later?"

"Try again later. Thanks."

"No problem. By the way, I don't know if it helps you, but that little stunt by the Hawks cost them six season ticket holders in town so far. Guess I'm going to be a 'Cats fan now. Kick ass down there, Troy."

I hang up just as my assistant pulls up in a rental car. "Here you are. Also, I talked with the agent at the car rental place, and they said they do long-term leases and even sales if you're interested. I told them I'd ask."

I look over the car, a Cadillac sedan, then nod. "That's fine. Let me try this for a few days, and I can make a decision. In the meantime, let's get me to the hotel. I've got a playbook to learn."



I FEEL A LITTLE STRANGE IN THE NEW GEAR, AND AS I FINISH MY STRETCHES, I realize that for only the fourth time in my life, I'm wearing a new helmet and logo. From elementary school until junior high, I was part of the Silver Lake Hawks, my town's local Pop Warner team that of course modeled themselves off the nearby Seattle team. But the team was still a feeder system for the high school team, and starting in ninth grade, I wore the silver and blue SLHS on my helmet. Then I wore the green and gold of Clement University before going back to the real Hawk logo. Now, for the first time in nearly seventeen years of playing football, I was wearing black, without even a logo on the side yet that the team wears on their game uniforms.

I look around at the ten sets of eyes looking toward me, their eyes full of doubt and questions as we line up for our first set of downs in practice. "All right, lets see what I remember from last night's study and today's meeting. Slant Fade Cowboy."

The huddle breaks, and I look over at the scout team, a combination of third stringers and scout team players who are getting reps in. Still, they're pros, and I'm in the middle of a defense that doesn't know me or trust me yet. I need to make an impression and fast. When the quarterback gets under center, I call an audible.

I see the line readjust. At least they remember one of my *hot* words, and as soon as the ball snaps, I loop around, me and the outside linebacker coming on an X-pattern stunt. He cuts in to blitz inside while I fade to the flat he was covering, where I see the running back drifting over for the swing pass. Our opponents this week love this so-called 'West Coast' offense, and I nail the guy just as his hands pull in the pass, dropping him for a four-yard loss. "Glad to be here."

Practice continues, and by the end, I see confidence and wary acceptance by my new teammates as Coach cuts practice a little early. We're still on a bye week, after all, and we have plenty of time to start preparing for our next game.

I'm back in the locker room when my cellphone rings, and I look, my heart stopping when I see Whitney's caller ID. "Hello. Whitney?"

"Troy. Please don't send flowers. In fact, don't send anything. Please don't make this more painful than it is already."

I sag onto the seat in front of my locker, trying to contain myself. "Whitney, don't cut me off. I lo—"

The phone goes dead in my ear, and I'm tempted to try and see if my phone can break via hurling it into the concrete wall at the back of my locker, but I restrain myself when Coach comes by my locker. "Great practice out there, Troy. Defensive meeting in twenty minutes."

"Yeah . . . thanks, Coach," I rasp, trying not to lose my composure. "I'll be there."

He gives me a questioning look, and I wave it off. "Personal stuff, that's all. I'll be there."

Coach nods. "Okay. If you need to talk to anyone, my door's open. Twenty minutes."

He leaves, and I think. I need to talk to someone, and I turn to an old friend. Hitting my speed dial, I hope she's available. "Hello?"

"Dani, it's Troy. Got a minute?"

"For my second favorite guy in the world? Yes, I do," Dani says, and my mood lifts just slightly. "How's J-ville?"

"Warm and sunny," I reply. "You'd love it here."

"Well, you get me tickets sometime, and me and Pete will be there. How's things on the professional front?"

"Good, but that's not why I'm calling. You're like a shrink, right?"

"Not quite, but I have been accused of being a decent listener," Dani says. "Things not going well?"

"Whit just hung up on me. I sent her some flowers, and I guess the florist just got them delivered. She—she sounded so cold. I need some advice."

Dani's silent on the other end for nearly a minute, then she sighs. "You two . . . I swear, the only reason you two have had any chance at all in your relationship is because I've been around to play buffer between all of your screw-ups. First, her worries about you playing her before you two even date, then covering for that trip to the woods that ends up producing Laurie, being a friend to you both . . . I should be getting paid for this!"

"You want my paycheck, just ask," I miserably reply, resting my head in my free hand. "Take it all. It's nothing compared to Whitney and Laurie."

"And I don't have five years to bring you guys slowly back together," Dani says. "There's a little girl who needs her daddy. Okay, Troy, I'm not going to make any promises to you, but I'll talk to her. But you have to be able to accept that the answer might not be what you want."

"I can't do that. I *won't* do that."

"You may have to. In the short term, however, harness your feelings. I remember the game when Whitney left us. You put it on that field, and even if she didn't see it, you wrote a love song in sweat, blood and touchdowns. It helped you survive the darkest days right afterward too. Do it again. Do it again, and I'll see what I can do."

"Emotional content," I sigh, and I hear Dani chuckle. We've talked. She knows what I'm talking about and doesn't think I'm losing my mind.



"Emotional content. Keep your head up, Troy. I'm looking forward to seeing you play next Sunday. Pete's even bought Sunday tickets for it, so you better do good or else we just pissed away a hundred bucks."

"Send me the bill."

"Nah," Dani says, forcing a smile in her voice. "You pay me back by being the Troy Wood that I love and call my friend."

"Five minutes, defense!" a voice behind me calls, and I run my hand through my hair.

"Sorry, that's my signal. Gotta go back to work. Dani, thanks."

## CHAPTER 25

### WHITNEY

*I*t feels strange, I think, as I pull into my parking slot in front of the gallery. It's been a month since Troy left, but every day, I wake up and the first thing on my mind is wondering if he's doing well. I've lost count of the number of times I've had to pull my hand back from calling him, and I've even thought of getting a new phone and number, one that doesn't have his number programmed into it. I just can't muster the courage to do that or to press the delete button.

It's not that Troy has reached out again since I cut him off so viciously after he sent the roses. Troy is a man of honor, and not at all like his father. I told him to stop, and he did. His father, meanwhile, was arraigned and is awaiting trial in county jail, and I figure this time, he'll go down for a multi-year stretch. He's a two-time loser at least, and when the District Attorney approached me about it, he said that he was so confident in the case that he didn't even need Troy's testimony. The statement, combined with my testimony and the video, would be more than enough. I'm not sure if I'm ready to go to a trial, and I hope Randall Wood pleads guilty, if for no other reason than to spare Troy a trip back home.

Not that he's totally left Silver Lake Falls behind—far from it. Everyone I see, all my old friends seem to treat it as if Troy is like a sailor in the Navy, off on a temporary cruise before coming back home. Maybe there is more truth to that than I'd like to admit, I know. I know that inside, I'm falling apart, and this time, I don't know who I can turn to in order to gain strength.

I sigh and shut off the engine, going inside the gallery. Colette is there by herself, helping out her mother in the family business while her mother goes on a shopping trip for more art. "Good morning."

Colette, who is also single now after having broken up with her boyfriend, looks up with pity in her eyes, which is just too much. Cheery false optimism, I can take. Outright delusion, I can take. But pity? That's just too damn much. "What?"

"Nothing," she says, turning away. Her turned back makes me even angrier, and I jerk my jacket off.

"No, it's not nothing. If you've got something to say, say it. I'm not made of porcelain, you know."

"Maybe, but I'm getting a little tired of you moping around or going off in highly pissed off levels of anger," Colette says, turning back to me. "You're not the only one who's had breakups before, you know. Yeah, maybe Troy left you, but—"

"He didn't leave me!" I yell, losing my temper. "I left him. I don't want Laurie raised like some sort of football gypsy."

"Whatever," she says, turning back to her computer. "Just get your act together, all right? There's a new order in, and they want to come in and take a look at those woodcuts we've got in stock for a new bed and breakfast they want to open. Think you can do that without going off on them?"

"Fine," I say, my anger deflating as quickly as it swelled. "Sorry."

"I know. You'll get through it."

I'm about to reply when my phone rings, and I pull it out, seeing that it's Laurie's school. "Just a second, it's the school. She must have forgotten her snack again. Hello?"

"Hello, Miss Nelson? It's Candace Lippincourt, Laurie's teacher."

"Of course, Candace, how can I help you?" I ask, putting on my best friendly mother voice. "Is everything all right?"

"Unfortunately, no," Candace says. "We've had a biting incident. As you know, this is a serious violation of school rules, and since blood was drawn —"

*A biting accident?* "Laurie's been bitten?" I ask, shocked. "By whom?"

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Miss Nelson. Laurie was the biter. She's stopped now, but she's in the school office. The other child we've sent for medical care, but we need you to come down as soon as you can for a parent conference."

"I'll be right there," I say, numb with shock. "Thank you."

I hang up the phone and look over at Colette, who's obviously concerned. "Laurie, um, *bit* someone. I need to go."

"I'll handle it. Take care of her," she says, and I'm grateful that my friend is here to help me.

I drive to Laurie's school, where I find her in the office, her arms crossed over her chest and a look of rage on her face. The school staffer in the room with her looks to be at her wit's end, and I soon understand why. "Laurie, what happened?"

Liquid, gutter-level Italian streams from her mouth as she yells out. "Ho morso la cagna! *I bit the bitch!* She called me a name."

"Laurie!" I take a deep breath to calm myself and squat down in front of her. "What did she call you, Laurie?"

"She said that I was a puppy that was abandoned!"

It's my turn to feel anger, and I turn to look at the woman. "What does the teacher say?"

"Let me get Principal Dean," the lady says, disappearing into the office. The Principal comes out, and I'm reminded that his name is Billy Dean, which I'm sure has caused him plenty of grief over the years. "Miss Nelson has some questions."

"As do we all," Principal Dean says. "Miss Nelson, perhaps we can talk in my office?"

I look at Laurie, who's still sitting with her arms crossed over her chest, now with tears trickling from the corners of her eyes. I kneel in front of her again and take her hands. "All right, Laurie, I'm going to go talk with Mr. Dean here. Can you sit here quietly for a few minutes? Then you and I can talk about this. I promise you, I'm not angry. We just need to talk, okay?"

"Okay, Mama," Laurie says in a tiny voice, and I kiss her fingers, giving her a reassuring smile and a pat on the cheek before standing and following Mr. Dean into his office.

"Thank you, Miss Nelson. Obviously, this is a very serious situation."

"Of course. Can you tell me what was seen or heard?"

The story that emerges is totally different from what Laurie told me, and I can understand why she reverted to just Italian. According to Mr. Dean, Laurie and a classmate were playing on the swing set before school when suddenly, Laurie tackled the girl, biting her forearm hard enough to draw blood.

"What caused it?" I ask, trying to restrain my frustration.

"According to the injured girl, nothing. She says that she was just playing when Laurie threw her down and bit her. A few of her friends corroborate the claim, but we didn't have staff or teachers at the swings at the time. Laurie hasn't been responsive to questions."

"She was responsive to me," I said icily. "She just is so angry that she's refusing to speak in English to you right now. She admits to biting the girl, saying that the little girl called her an 'abandoned puppy'. I'm not condoning what she did, but those are some hurtful words."

Mr. Dean nods, sitting back. "They are. And, based on what I know of the little girl who got bitten, that is probably what happened. The girl is a bit of a bully with her little group of friends. However, Miss Nelson, my hands are tied."

"In what way?"

"District policy mandates that any incidence of biting that draws blood results in an automatic one-week suspension from school for a first offense.

If it happens again, Laurie could be required to attend anger management therapy or even potentially be expelled. I'll talk with the parents of the little girl."

"Okay. So I guess I need to take Laurie with me?"

Mr. Dean nods and stands up. "I understand this may be difficult for you, Miss Nelson. You're a single working mother, I'm sure that must be hard on you. But more importantly, it's hard on Laurie. May I offer some advice?"

"Please."

Mr. Dean looks out his office window at Laurie, who is still sitting rock still in the plastic chair in the reception area. "Your daughter is bright, very intelligent, and until today, a normally happy go lucky little girl who was blossoming in her time here. It's only in the past few weeks that things have started to go south, and she's obviously very unhappy. If you can, talk to her and find out what's wrong. Maybe it's something that can be dealt with before she becomes more withdrawn or possibly violent. Best of luck, Miss Nelson."

I shake his offered hand and leave the office, taking Laurie by the hand. "Come on, Laurie, we need to go now. Think you can hang out at work with me for the day?"

"Yeah," Laurie grumps, and she follows along, nowhere near like her normal self. At the Gallery, she plays quietly in the back, drawing pictures for most of the time with a set of colored pencils I buy from the small selection of art supplies the shop sells, as well as an extra ream of printer paper that Colette lets me use. At the end of the night, she puts the papers in her bag and we leave, going home for dinner with Mom.

"I heard about what happened at school," Mom says after dinner. Laurie's gone into the living room to watch some cartoons before bedtime, and Mom and I are cleaning up. "How do you feel about it?"

"Angry . . . frustrated . . . a little helpless," I say, setting down the glass I am washing. "How could someone call Laurie an abandoned puppy? I'd be tempted to bite them too!"

Mom nods, a ghost of a smile on her face. "You know, when I was pregnant with you, I had a lot of taunts and stuff thrown my way. I know it was a different time, but the words hurt just as much. In fact, I remember you coming home one day from school yourself, a black eye rising and your knuckles scraped after someone called you *illegitimate*, or a word that basically meant that."

"How'd you deal with it?" I ask, not remembering the incident at all. I must have been very young.

"The same way you are, stewing, crying when I had privacy, racking my brain about it. But I didn't have any other options. You do, you know."

"What?"

"He is her father, Whitney. And he loves her."

My mother's words ring in my head, and I turn to her, hurt and shocked. She's trying to tell me to go back to Troy? What happened to supporting me? "You're taking his side in this? How could you?"

"I'm taking no sides, Whitney, except Laurie's. I want what's best for her. It's what's best for you too. You just don't see it."

I set my glass down and reach for my keys. "I know you mean well, but I'm very angry at you right now. I'm going out for a drive."

I give Laurie a quick kiss on the cheek and promise her I'll be back before bedtime. I need to go get some things. It sucks to lie to my daughter, but I can't deal with this shit right this second. I get in my car and drive, knowing if anyone is going to listen to my side of things, it'll be Dani.

I'm so confused, I get lost twice getting to her house, pulling up in front of it just as the moon rises in the east, pale and glittering in the night sky. I walk up and ring the doorbell before smacking myself in the head. Why did I drive when I could have just called? What if Dani isn't home? What if she and Pete . . .

The door opens, and she's there, a surprised but happy smile on her face. "Whitney! Come in, come in! How's your day been?"

"Not good," I admit, exchanging hugs with her. "I could use a little advice, Harley."

Dani immediately reaches back and pulls her long blonde hair into twin high ponytails, securing them with rubber bands that she had looped around her wrist. "Well then, sweetie, come on in," she says in a horrible New Jersey accent that still makes me smile. Dani has always known how to make me smile. "What's up, puddin'?"

"Do you keep those rubber bands on your wrist all the time just in case someone gives you a chance to break out that accent?" I ask as I follow her into the house. Pete's in the living room and gives me a wave before he sees the look on Dani's face and the hair, and he grabs his book, getting up to leave. "Thanks, Pete."

"Don't mention it!"

"He's a sweetheart," I tell Dani as I sit down. "You've got him trained well already."

"Nah, we just have that psychic link that old couples get—we just got it early," Dani jokes, going back to her normal voice but leaving her hair up in the ponytails. "So talk to me."

"Well, let's see. I wake up late because I slept like crap last night, rush Laurie to school and get to work only to snap at Colette for giving me a pitying look, and as soon as that's over, I get a call from the preschool."

"Oh? What happened?"

I feel my emotions start to waver, but before I can cry, Dani pulls me in for a hug and holds me for a moment. "Wait right here. I have the secret medicine to help with the blues. Just a sec."

She disappears for two minutes, actually, reappearing with twin steaming hot mugs of cocoa, the type with the little marshmallows that float on top. "Here. Nothing better for calming nerves and making a bad day look good."

"Is this what you give your patients?" I ask, still smiling. She's heated it up to the perfect temperature, warm enough to soothe but not too hot as to burn



the roof of your mouth. I relish the flavor and find myself calming. "Seriously, it's good stuff."

"Thanks. As for your question, no, but then again, I can't prescribe drugs anyway. Gotta have an MD for that, and I'm still working on the PhD, you know. But it does work well, doesn't it?"

"It does. But you were asking what happened. To put it simply, Laurie bit another little girl and got suspended for a week."

"Damn. Any root cause?"

"Bullying, but I've never seen Laurie react violently like that before. Especially not biting. I thought I did a good job so far of raising a little girl, not Cujo."

Dani takes a sip of her cocoa and sets her cup down. "Sounds like she's angry."

"I know. Bullying always sucks."

Dani shakes her head and picks up her cup again, drinking half of it in one long draw. "She got bullied?"

"The other girl called her abandoned, a left behind puppy," I said, shaking my head. "Then when I tell Mom, she says that it's because I left Troy! Like it's all my fault somehow!"

"So you came here in order to get, what? A second opinion? A sounding board? A friend who will tell you the truth of things?"

"I could use the truth," I say, and Dani nods again. "You don't look happy about that."

"Sometimes, Whit, the truth isn't easy to say. We've been friends for how long now?"

"Eighteen, nineteen years," I say, thinking back.

"Exactly. And in all those years, I have stood by your side, and sometimes, pushed you in directions that you weren't exactly ready for."

"Like cheerleading."

"And good comic book characters, remember that too," Dani says before her smile disappears. "But no matter what, I've stood by you, Whitney. You're my best friend and sister, and I love you. But this isn't an easy truth to say, and you're probably going to be angry at me."

"Then say it," I reply, knowing what is coming but still loving her enough to keep my cool. "Say what you need to say."

"Your daughter is angry at *you*, Whitney, not the bullies. She is angry at her mama and she doesn't know how to deal with that. You're her mother, the woman who has raised her and always been there for her, and you hurt her when you cut Troy out of your lives."

"I did it for her own good," I say woodenly, and Dani gives me a frustrated look.

"Her own good? Fighting and biting is her own good? And what about you? You've lost what, ten pounds since he left? And it's not a good weight loss either, it's a stress and heartbreak weight loss. Never mind what it's doing to Troy as well."

"What do you mean?" I ask, despite myself. "I . . . I've intentionally avoided keeping up on the football news."

"Hold on, let me show you," Dani says. "It's all over the Football Network."

Dani reaches out and snags the remote control for her TV, turning it on and punching in a number. The channel changes to the Football Network, which is pretty busy as it is a Monday night, although the game is on a regular cable station and not a premium one like FN. In its place are the normal pundit shows and highlights of Sunday's games. "Just a minute, I see it coming up."

I see it on the sidebar of the program too: 'T. Wood Troubles?' I blink, feeling a stab in my heart at just seeing his name. "What is going on?"

"Hold on a minute, like I said. Honestly, have you been happy this past month?"

I want to protest, but shake my head, my chin dropping. "You know I'm not."

"I do. You've been miserable all month, and I'm not the only friend of yours who's—wait, here it is."

I look up as the title bar on the bottom of the screen changes over. The announcer launches into the story. "And in further developments out of Jacksonville, newly acquired linebacker, Troy Wood, who is in the middle of a season that some are calling one of the best second year rises in recent history, is making news for something else—his fines from the league. Specifically, his violation of the League's uniform policy, which states that players are not allowed to display any personal messages on their bodies."

The video cut over to a shot of Troy getting ready for his most recent game, his white uniform blazing in the bright early autumn sunlight. "Wood, however, since being traded to Jacksonville, has worn a piece of tape around his left bicep. While that isn't a problem, according to the league, what he has *on* the tape is."

On the screen, Troy looks at the camera, and I see in his eyes not a hint of happiness or of the man who loved playing football. Instead, I see the cold eyes of a man who's getting ready to unleash violence without a hint of remorse or care for his own well-being. Suddenly, Troy smiles, and shows the camera his left arm, where two strips of white athletic tape have been wrapped. Side by side, in huge letters that nearly stretch from the top of one tape to the bottom of the other, are the letters, WN-LN.

"While a seemingly minor infraction of what many people say is an overly strict rule, the League office is cutting Wood no slack. His first infraction brought a six thousand dollar fine, and for the past two games, he's been fined twelve thousand dollars each. In order to avoid penalties themselves, the Jacksonville Wildcats have also fined Wood five thousand dollars for each of the past two weeks. So far, the four letters on his bicep have cost Wood ten thousand dollars for each, but when told by the league to remove the tape, he has so far refused."

The video cut over to a shot of Troy in the locker room, surrounded by reporters and microphones. "I told my coaches and the League that while I understand and respect their position, the tape doesn't come off until our next bye week, when they will be replaced by a similar tattoo."

The announcer's voiceover obliterates the rest of what Troy is saying, and the video cuts to highlights of his performance so far for Jacksonville. "When asked for clarification on the meaning of the letters, Wood has so far refused all requests except from head coach Eric Morgan, who will only state that Wood's statement is a personal one, and that it is his prerogative. To quote Coach Morgan, 'Troy's a grown man. He has said he understands the consequences, and he's willing to deal with them.' The League is still . . ."

Dani mutes the sound and looks at me. "Forty thousand dollars. Now I don't know about you, Whitney, but that's a lot of money. Pete might clear that this year after taxes, but I'm not sure. I know for damn sure that you aren't seeing anything close to that working at the Gallery until you get your private clients ordering stuff again. And yeah, Troy's probably making forty thousand dollars a week, but I don't care about the money. What scared me more was that look in his eyes."

"Yeah," I admit as the story changes to another highlight reel. "But I can't take responsibility for it."

"Bullshit."

I don't think I've ever heard Dani speak in such a dismissive term to something I've ever said before. "Excuse me? Is that your *professional* opinion?"

"It is," Dani says, only a touch of heat in her voice. "I love you, and like I said, it hurts for me to say this, but pull your head out of your ass. You're miserable, Troy's down there in Florida tearing people apart and collecting fines like some people collect Slurpee cups, and your daughter is on the borderline of rage. And it's because of *your* decision, not his. He asked you to go to Florida. Hell, he begged you to at least let the two of you try the long distance thing, and you cut him off at the knees. Tell me, did you at least tell him in person this time, or did you write him a letter or maybe send a text message?"

I stop, gawping at her. "That's low, Dani. That one was real low."

Dani nods, her eyes reflections of my own pain and hurt. "Maybe. But I won't stand idly by as my sister and the second best man I know in the

entire world tear themselves apart. Not *again*. I love you, but you're wrong in this, and all three of you are paying the price."

I get up, setting my cup down. "You might be right. I need to go. I . . . I need to think."

There's no rancor in Dani's voice as she walks me to the door and opens it for me. "I'll still be here, if you ever want to talk with me again."

I nod and squeeze her hand. She maybe has pissed me off, but I still love her. "I know. I love you, Sis."

"I love you too. Go think."

When I get home after driving the long way back in order to spend more time thinking, I see that Mom has already had Laurie change into her pajamas, and the two of them are sitting on the couch, snuggled up and reading one of Laurie's Little Golden Books. "I'm back. Mom, I need to apologize to you. I know you're just trying to be helpful."

"Thank you, sweetheart. Would you like to take over? I need to use the bathroom."

"Actually, I'd like to talk to Laurie. You spent a lot of time today coloring at the Gallery. Think you can you show me your pictures?"

She moves off Mom's lap so that Mom can leave the living room, but she doesn't say anything. I go over and sit down next to her, taking her hand. "Laurie? Can I ask you something? Are you angry with me?"

She barely moves her head, but the tiny nod she gives me nearly breaks my heart. "Mama wants to understand. Please help me understand. I know that sometimes, kids don't always say things that are troubling them, and I was hoping that you might be able to show me. I thought your pictures could help. Could they?"

Laurie nods again, and I slide off the couch, getting on my knees in front of her. "I promise, no matter what you drew, I won't get mad, and I won't raise my voice or yell or anything like that. I want us to not be angry, to be good together again."

Laurie nods and gets off the couch, going over to the chair where she'd put her little school bag and bringing it back. "Don't be mad, Mama," she said in the tiniest voice I've ever heard her use as she unzips the bag and takes out the sheaf of papers inside. She hands them to me, and I see the top one, a man in a black shirt and white pants, wearing a black helmet and a number 51 on the front. The second is another giant 51, and the third brings tears to my eyes as the three stick figures that make up the family—the man and little girl with blond hair, the woman with auburn—are separated, frowns and tears rolling down their faces.

"Oh, Laurie," I moan, putting the papers aside. "Mama has been so foolish."

I pull her close, hugging her. "I want Daddy back."

"I want him too, Laurie. I need him too."

## CHAPTER 26

### TROY

"*T*roy Wood! We love you!"

I look up as I leave the practice facility to see the group of fans that have assembled around the gates. We've won two of our last three games, and the way the team is rolling, we've got a chance at maybe making the playoffs. With the success comes the fans again, and apparently, I'm becoming a sex symbol in Jacksonville, because for the past two weeks, I can barely leave the stadium without having women almost throwing themselves at me. Actually, one woman did throw herself at me, hurling herself into my arms after the team got back from a road win at New York.

The guy I used to be would've been loving it. They are Florida girls, after all, sun tanned and bikini toned, and they are lined up when I occasionally pause to sign autographs. It's part of my tradeoff with the team. They keep the league off my ass other than the fines for my arm tape, and in return, I sign more autographs and do some more photo ops.

The problem is, the last thing I want to do is a photo op. I know when I've looked at them in the paper later, the look in my eyes is that the last place I want to be in the world is taking the photo, which isn't fair to the groups. It's not that I don't appreciate fire fighters, or the Make-A-Wish foundation and what they do, but other than learning the Jacksonville system, I don't want to be anywhere but home. The rest of the world just seems . . . not worth the trouble or the effort, and it's too painful to boot.

"You're turning into a recluse," I mutter to myself as I get into my now-leased Caddy and drive home. In probably the only move that in hindsight surprises me, I went all in on my house, buying a four-bedroom house on the outskirts of Jacksonville, one with a pool, a garage, and plenty of space, all on a full acre of land, which, while not huge compared to what some of the guys have, sets me back a pretty penny. Even if the price of land isn't all that over the top in the Jacksonville area, especially when compared to the current land rush in the Seattle area, a restricted access subdivision and a lakeside lot are pretty expensive.

I know why I did it, though. I had been thinking of Whitney and Laurie when I went with the agent to see the property. I had seen a room for Laurie, and space where I could put up a play set for her. I saw another room that we could use as a home office, and even a spare for a nursery, and a master bedroom that I would be able to share with Whitney. I saw a fantasy, and I let my fantasy guide my decision.

Ah well, at least the price isn't unmanageable. Ironically, my play for the team has led to me making even more money than I was making in Seattle, even after the fines, because I've picked up a few bonuses that the team has in place for good performance. Two interceptions, a touchdown, and once getting League Defensive Player of the Week have more than covered the fines from the front office.

I turn onto the Interstate, leaving the stadium area behind to make the twenty-minute drive to my house. While I'm driving, I get a call on my phone, so I drop it into the slot on the dash of my car to connect it to the in-car system. "Hello?"

"Troy? It's Cory. How are you doing in Florida?"

"I'm okay, Cory. How's San Fran?"

"Much better since the Hawks still suck ass," Cory says with a laugh. "One win. One fucking win, and it's only going to get worse. Now we just have to worry about Arizona."

"Maybe, but don't gloat too much. I still have a lot of friends on that team, remember?"



Cory sobers and clears his throat. "You're right, sorry. Anyway, I wanted to call because there was an actual withdrawal on that account you asked me to set up for Laurie. The fifteen hundred dollars a week account?"

"Yeah, I know which one you're talking about." After Whitney cut me out, I had to go to other means to get the accounts for Laurie set up, so I went through Cory. The account was set up in Laurie's name, but Patricia Nelson was given signatory access to the account. I would've told Cory to add Whitney, but she never returned his calls to get the information.

"There was a withdrawal of ten thousand dollars. I wanted to double check the numbers, and it's legit. Anything you want me to do?"

"Is there any sign that the money is being stolen?"

"No, totally legit withdrawal. Whitney herself is on the ATM video taking the money out. Now I know that's technically a violation. I mean the card's in her Mom's name, but you know what I mean."

I nod before I remember that I'm on a phone. My car does have good sound quality. "Okay. Well, keep the money going in, and if the balance drops below five hundred, give me a call. Keep monitoring it. I'm sure Whitney's using it for the right reasons. Patricia wouldn't have passed over the card otherwise."

"All right. Hey, did I tell you? Your patronage has gotten me a promotion. I actually have my own office instead of just a desk now."

"Congrats. How many secretaries have you tried to seduce on that desk so far?"

"Give me time, Troy. Give me time. Hey, personal note, and then I'll let you go. I can hear the car engine and I know cops can be a bitch about talking while driving. I don't know what the law is there. You're doing okay with everything, like personal wise and stuff?"

"I will be—I'm making it, at least."

"Okay then, I'll let you go. Keep your head up, and keep your eye on the ball. Helps on the tackles, you know."

Cory laughs and hangs up the phone. I think about what he said about the money, and part of me is at least grateful that Whitney is using it. Hell, maybe she's using it to get Laurie a trip to Disneyland or something. I have faith in her. She's going to use it for the right thing.

I get off the Interstate and onto the smaller streets that lead to my subdivision, my mind tired after a long day of practice. I'm just glad that tomorrow is a day off and that I'll be able to sleep in before getting ready for the next game.

When I get close to my house, I see something that makes me stop short, slamming my brakes. There's a car parked in front of the house, and in the late afternoon shadows by the front door, I swear I see two people sitting. I must be seeing things, though, and as I pull closer, I realize I'm not. I barely even notice when I half run over the curb pulling into my driveway, knocking over my mailbox, and slam the car into park, the little blonde girl already up and running toward me. "Daddy!"

"Laurie!" I call out, scooping her up and swinging her around in a huge circle, hugging her tight. "Oh, baby girl, I've missed you so much. I love you so much, Laurie."

"I love you too, Daddy," Laurie says, and I hold her tight until she squirms a little, I'm holding so tightly. "Daddy, I need to breathe!"

"Sorry," I say, setting her down. I'm so enchanted by her that I barely notice Whitney coming up until she's only a few feet from me. I look up and can see that she's nervous, afraid that I will reject her. But I can never do that. "Laurie, take the keys and run inside. How long have you been sitting out here?"

"Only a little while. What's inside?"

"Cold water," I say, looking down. "Keep yourself safe in Florida, and drink a lot of cold water, okay? Besides, I need to talk to Mama."

"Okay. When you come inside, I have something to show you. I drew pictures!"

"And I want to see them," I promise sincerely. "Give me a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay."

Laurie takes off like a jackrabbit up the lawn, and I'm face to face with Whitney, silence between us. I look into her beautiful face, and I can't be angry. I can't do anything but tell her the truth. "I missed you."

Whitney nods and reaches out, taking my hand. "I missed you."

"I'm so glad you're here."

Whitney nods again, then trembles, starting to fall to her knees. I catch her and hold her as she sobs, begging me in a choked voice for forgiveness that doesn't have to be given. Instead, I hold her, kissing her temples and telling her it's okay. "Whitney, it doesn't matter. I love you."

"Troy, I was so foolish. I'm sorry."

"No, you don't need to be sorry. I should have told you about the trade. I'm sorry. Whitney . . . if you don't want me to be a football player, to live the League life, I won't. I'll retire after this season if you want me to."

Whitney shakes her head and hugs me tight. "No. No matter where you go, no matter if it's Jacksonville, New York, Los Angeles, or even Cleveland, I want to be with you."

I know what to do, and without hesitating, I get down on my knees. "Then let's do it the right way. Whitney . . . will you marry me?"

Whitney is so surprised that she doesn't even move except to make a tiny little squeak that catches us both off guard. She clears her throat and tries again. "You really want to marry me after all I've put you through?"

I nod, taking her hand. "I want us to be a family more than anything else in the world. Be my wife, and let's not deny that we are meant to be together. No matter what."

"No matter what," Whitney echoes, then smiles. "Oh yes, yes, I'll marry you, Troy. On one condition."

"What's that?" Her and her conditions.

"We do it *after* you play in the Pro Bowl."

I grin and pick Whitney up, carrying her toward the door to the house. "Well, that'll be in February . . . sure. March or April is a great time to get married. Although maybe June is best."

"Why June?"

"I know exactly who I want to be my best man, and he's busy until then."

I set Whitney down on the edge of the slate porch that leads indoors and see Laurie looking at us with hope in her eyes. "Mama?"

"Yes, honey, we're staying," Whitney says. "We're going to stay together."

"Come on," I say, taking Laurie's hand on one side and Whitney's on the other. "This place has four bedrooms, and I want you to pick out which of the three empty ones is going to be yours. And tomorrow, maybe we can look at taking you furniture shopping."

"Really? My own bedroom?"

"Uh-huh. Welcome home, baby girl. Welcome home."

## EPILOGUE

WHITNEY

“*I*’ve been informed that the couple has written their own vows. Troy, if you would go first?”

It's an extravagant wedding—at least part of me says so—but after getting to the Pro Bowl and signing a new contract with Jacksonville that makes Troy one of the highest paid linebackers in the game, I'm not all that averse to splurging on this momentous occasion. I'm wearing a white Vera Wang knee-length dress, and the sand is warm between my toes on the beach in the Bahamas that Troy rented for our wedding and reception. Behind me are Dani and Mom, who are acting as my bridesmaids, wearing blue Wang dresses of their own, bought and not rented, a gift to them from Troy. I'd been tempted as a joke to put Dani in the same horrible taffeta-style monstrosity that she had for her wedding, but I know the choice hadn't been hers, but Pete's mother's.

Speaking of Pete, he and Cory have been gawking the whole time as they find themselves surrounded by professional football players, their wives and girlfriends. Troy didn't invite the whole team, but at least six members of the starting defense and a few other players he's formed friendships with made the trip, and I think the caterer finally understands why our wedding party of forty-six ordered a sixty-person buffet. Even I'm still shocked at the massive size of some of Troy's teammates, who have accepted me and Laurie with generally open arms, especially the ones here today.

I actually feel bad for Cory. He's still a manwhore, at least in his mind, but he works too much to actually be one. He's not too sure who he can approach around the wedding without possibly incurring the wrath of very large, athletic men who could inflict serious harm on him. Troy told me last night that he would make sure that Cory was introduced to some of the single ladies at the reception, just to be on the safe side. Cory's trying to calm down, and I think if he can find the right lady, he'll be a good man someday.

Cory and Pete are not the best man, though, as next to Troy is the man who had, through his own love of Troy, brought us back together. When I'd gone to his house, in tears and begging, Coach Steve Jackson had not only immediately agreed, but booked our reservations right away, and he even promised to not tell Troy about it. Thankfully, Troy's diligence on financial matters didn't ruin the surprise.

So it's only appropriate, I guess, to have 'Coach' as Troy's best man while Dani is my maid of honor. After all, who else has done more to bring the two of us together? The man who is Troy's *de facto* father and the woman who is my soul sister could have no other place in our wedding than as the people who stand by our side during this important moment.

Troy clears his throat, and I have to restrain myself from reaching up to kiss him already—he looks so handsome, and yes, a little nervous in his tuxedo. "There are some couples, some situations that are just fated. Whitney, we've been through a lot, but at each step of the way, my heart has belonged to you. I know that with you by my side, life is going to be a wonderful adventure, and I love you for that. I can't promise you that every day is going to be easy, but I do promise you, forever and always, that I'll love you, respect you, and honor you. This I vow."

The minister turns his head to me and nods. "Whitney?"

"I've so many times in our relationship been just about the stupidest, most hard-headed, self-destructive woman that I can think of. But each time, there have been three things that have saved me. First," I say, turning my head to glance at Dani and Mom before returning my gaze to Troy, "some very good people whom I love and who love me enough to have helped me, even if it meant being firm with me. Second, a good dose of luck. But third,

and most importantly, your unfailing, never wavering, infinite love. Troy, you've told me so many times in our relationship that I saved you from going down a dark path, but what you never realize is that you saved me too. It's because of this that I promise you my love, my heart and soul, my everything . . . forever. This I vow."

When it's time for the rings, Laurie is nearly so nervous as the ring bearer that she has to get a gentle nudge from Mom to come up with her little pillow with the rings, earning a chuckle from the crowd. Still, she's fascinated to be right there as her mama and daddy slide the rings on each other's finger, and she's cheering louder than even the adults when we exchange our kiss.

The reception takes place at the same resort as the ceremony, where we dance and feast as the June sun descends into the Caribbean. Troy and I share a laugh when Cory comes over to our table, red-faced. "What's up, Cory?"

"Uhm, Whitney . . . would you be too upset if I asked your Mom to dance with me?"

It takes me a second to realize what he's saying, and when I realize what he's asking, I laugh so hard and give him a kiss on the cheek. "With my blessing. Just be careful."

"I know. I don't want Troy mad at me."

Troy shakes his head and points at Mom, who's currently chatting with Coach Jackson's wife, while Laurie and Gregory Jackson, Coach's son, both share some cake. Greg is just about ready to go to junior high school, and I can tell he's torn between wanting to hang out with Laurie, where he can at least feel safe and have fun, and wanting to hang out with the adults, especially the women who are suddenly becoming more enticing to him. Still, Laurie's fun to hang out with, and they're content for now.

Troy looks at Cory. "I won't sugarcoat it, Cory. She might be more woman than you can handle. And don't let the fact that she's forty-two fool you. She's got more energy than half the guys I play with."

"I'll keep that in mind. Thanks," Cory says, turning and walking away. Troy and I follow him with our eyes, and Troy leans over, whispering in my ear and putting on a horrible accent—trying to mimic one of those national geographic voices, probably something he picked up from Dani.

"The young buck, not at all aware of the possibilities and potential danger before him, goes into the territory of the cougar, who eyes the buck with interest. It'll be interesting if—yes, the cougar has decided to toy with the young buck, to see if it's as delicious a meal as it appears."

"You're terrible," I say with a smile, giving Troy a kiss on the lips, one of a thousand it feels like so far today, and still, I'm not satiated. "My Mom is hardly a cougar."

"You're right, but she is beautiful, much like her daughter," Troy replies, kissing me again. "And as for the rest, well, Cory could do a lot worse."

"Hmm, Mom could do a lot worse. Say, how about you and I get out of here? There's a beachside bungalow that's calling our names."

"And Laurie?"

I point to Dani and Pete, who are dancing together and still looking like they're on their own honeymoon after a year of marriage. It's cute and heartwarming. After our honeymoon, we're going to go back to Silver Lake Falls for a month before Troy starts offseason workouts, and it'll be nice to spend some time back home. "Dani already agreed to take Laurie with her. She says she and Pete need the practice anyway. They're planning, now that she's on track for her PhD and has a good job lined up too, that maybe they can look at becoming parents."

Troy smiles and leans in, whispering in my ear. "I was thinking the same thing."

I shiver as Troy runs his hand up my thigh, his hand so warm and reaching higher, higher . . . "You want another baby?"

Troy nods and his eyes are deep blue with desire. "Don't you?"

I nod, smiling. "Why do you think I stopped the pills a month ago?"



Troy takes my hand and pulls me to my feet, but before we can fully escape, Dani intervenes, getting on the mike and announcing a couple's dance. She's laughing as I give her a dirty look, and I know that she's already anticipated Troy and me making an early exit. "One dance, that's all," she says, holding up a finger. "Please?"

The music starts, and I notice that it's a song I hadn't heard before, at least one I hadn't danced to before. "What's this?"

Troy smiles and takes me in his arms. "When I went to the Winter Formal stag, Dani danced with me one time. She knew she was standing in for you, though, as I had your letter in my jacket pocket."

We're moving in time with the music, a few other couples joining us, and Troy kisses my forehead and continues. "This song was what we danced to. I guess Dani remembered it after all these years and felt it was time to right that wrong."

The music continues, and when it is over, nobody stops us as Troy takes my hand and we disappear into the darkness, heading back to our private bungalow, where our future as man and wife awaits.

**Don't forget to check out the other books in this series (series is complete)!**

**Book 1: Blitzed (Whitney & Troy)**

**Book 2: Over the Middle (Carrie & Duncan)**

**Book 3: Rushed (April & Tyler)**

**Book 4: Fourth Down Baby (Patricia & Cory)**

ADDICTED: A BAD BOY STEPBROTHER  
ROMANCE

BY LAUREN LANDISH



**“Your lips would look great wrapped around my...”**

Who in the world tells a girl that on their first meeting? Tyler Locklin, that's who. He's filthy rich and arrogant with a set of abs that is the envy of all young men everywhere, and did I forget to mention devilishly handsome? He's a bastard of the first order. I can't stand to be in the same room with him.

But with one wink or a flash of his mischievous grin, I go weak in the knees. It pisses me off. I'm supposed to hate him. He's an asshole. Yet, I can't help but be drawn to him because I'm . . . **ADDICTED.**

## PROLOGUE

VICTORIA

*I* squirmed beneath the silken sheets, the last vestiges of an earth-shattering orgasm coursing through my sweat-covered limbs. My breasts rose and fell below the sheets as I tried to catch my breath and regain control. After a while, my racing pulse slowly started to calm down as the tremors slowly receded. At last, a sigh escaped my lips as my body was flooded by a rush of hormones.

It was always this way.

He takes me, ravaging my body for everything that it's worth . . . and then leaves. It's a game he plays. He wants to leave me in a state of desperation, aching for more of his touch. Aching to feel his lips all over my body. He leaves, knowing that I'll still be there when he comes back, wanting every piece of him.

Bastard.

I should've left him. I had every right to. But whenever I think I've finally had enough, I make up reasons why I can't. Maybe it's because he's one of the richest men in the country. Maybe it's that incredible swagger or that cocky grin that says he can fuck any woman he wants. Or maybe it's because I like feeling his eight-inch cock plowing through me like no tomorrow.

The truth is, being with him is a huge ego boost for a girl like me. He's handsome, powerful and mysterious, and I'm a small town girl with dreams

of becoming big in the fashion world. Being with him is downright intoxicating. Addicting. And I can never get enough.

There's just one problem . . . he's my stepbrother.

## CHAPTER 1

### VICTORIA

*A* fool. That's what my mother has always called me for choosing a career in the fashion industry. Why can't I aspire to work in a real industry with more stability? She'd ask.

"Because that's always been my dream, Mother," I'd say.

"Well, sorry to tell you, sweetheart, but dreams don't pay the bills."

Then she'd go on to berate me, telling me how much of a mistake I was making with my life. It got so bad that after I graduated from college and got a job as a personal assistant for one of the most popular designers in the city, Christine Finnerman, we had a huge falling out. I don't know what it was with her and my pursuing my dream of fashion.

Every day, she would call me to tell me that it wasn't too late to turn around and do something else with my life. She would offer alternatives to my career choice—all of which I hated with a passion. For a while I put up with her not-so-subtle suggestions, but I was infuriated every second that I had to listen to her complaining, and it took great effort to hold it all in. I mean, isn't it a parent's duty to encourage their child's hopes, dreams and aspirations? Not so for my mother. She seemed to take a special kind of glee in telling me I was doing it all wrong.

Finally, I could take no more. The feelings that I'd been holding back had boiled over and I soon started getting into shouting matches with my mother, saying things better left unsaid. Of course, none of these arguments

ever ended well, and we ended up not speaking to each other for weeks at a time.

It was so bad that when her wedding came about, I didn't go. She was marrying some filthy rich guy that she'd callously divorced my father for.

I figured if she thought I was such a failure, then she wouldn't want me showing up at her wedding, embarrassing her in front of her high-class guests.

In truth, I also didn't go because I was still angry about the divorce. My mother had up and left my dad without so much as an explanation, simply stating that she wasn't happy in her marriage and hadn't been for a very long time. I thought it had more to do with the new man she was seeing, who had a far, far larger bank account.

After all, my mom has always had a taste for the finer things in life, you understand.

It didn't seem to hurt my father, however, since he had a new girlfriend half his age within a week of the divorce. My father, it seemed, had already been dipping his toes in the younger pool way before things turned south in his marriage. Perhaps it was the real reason why Mother left him. Whatever the case, despite being angry about the divorce, I didn't approve of my father's behavior either. The girl he was with was around my age and dumb as a sack of potatoes. To make matters worse, he had plans to marry her and start a family. Out of distaste, I started shunning my father's company as well, because when it came down to it, I couldn't tolerate a girl that was basically the same age as me being my stepmother.

So here I am, in a big city, parentless, with only my dreams and aspirations to guide me.



A SHARP VOICE SNAPPED ME TO ATTENTION.

“Where is my coffee?”

I froze, a stack of papers filled with clothing designs, measurements and fashion models bundled in my arms. Slowly, I turned around to see Christine Finnerman, my boss, leaning against her desk, her palm resting against the polished wood. She impatiently tapped on her desk with her immaculate nails, making a clack, clack, clack sound.

As usual, she was dressed as sharp as a tack. A white dress wrapped around her matronly frame, fitting her like a glove, and a shiny black belt circled her waist, giving her shapely figure a va-voom appearance. She was wearing black glossy heels I'd contemplate killing my mother for, and not one bit of her shoulder-length hair, which is a striking pepper gray, was out of place.

"I'm sorry, Christine," I said when I could finally manage, trying to push down the anxiety that was suddenly rushing up my throat. "I was just about to get it. I didn't expect you to arrive ten minutes early."

Christine eyed me with contempt reserved for a dog. "One should always be prepared for the unexpected, especially in this industry." She paused for dramatic effect. *Hurry up*. I swear she spoke the last words with her mouth closed.

"Right away."

Scrambling in my three-inch Christian Dior heels—a job perk that I particularly enjoyed—I made my way to my desk that's in the adjoining room to Christine's office. I threw the stack down on it, breathing in and out, trying to catch my breath. I was wearing a tight black dress that makes it difficult for me to breathe as well as move because it's a size too small. Christine told me that at a size eight, I'm fat by industry standards, so I'd started trying to squeeze into smaller dress sizes, hoping that the discomfort would encourage me to lose weight.

Once I thought I could breathe again, I scurried over to the professional Keurig machine that sat in the hallway leading up to Christine's office. A few seconds later, I'm setting down a steaming mug on her desk.

I stepped back and beamed proudly as if I'd just won a nationwide competition. "Will that be all?" I asked her, my tone respectful.

Christine didn't even bother to look up at me as she flipped through the pages of a fashion book. "You may go," she said, motioning her hands as if she was shoos a fly.

I turned away, feeling dejected. I hated how Christine treated me, but I was used to it. I saw my tenure as her indentured slave as a necessary sacrifice. As one of the most powerful women in the fashion world, working for Christine would open up many doors for me.

*And once that door opens, I'm going to run through it, slam it, and never look back.*

I made it to the door before Christine spoke again. "Oh, and Victoria, I need you to call Adam Pierre to tell him I won't be attending his show next week."

I turned back around, my mouth agape like a frog. "But . . . Adam throws one of the biggest shows in the industry," I dared to protest. "You can't just not show up."

Christine looked up from her book, her expression sharp enough to cut glass.

It was the only answer I needed.

"I'll get right on it," I squeaked.

I scurried back to my desk and flopped down in my seat. Blowing strands of hair out of my eyes in frustration, I took a deep breath and picked up the phone. Did I mention that I really hated working for Christine? I consider myself a pretty headstrong girl who can speak up for myself whenever I feel like I'm being mistreated, but in the face of Christine Finnerman's wrath, I became a doormat—mainly because I so desperately needed my job.

I quickly dialed Pierre's number.

"Bonjour?"

I was surprised when Pierre himself answered. Usually he had some lackey to handle his affairs, but when Christine Finnerman was calling, I guess even if you're the busiest honcho in town, you have time.



“Mr. Pierre?” I asked nervously. “This is Victoria Young, Christine Finnerman’s assistant.”

“Ah yes, Victoria,” Pierre said in his heavy French accent. “Christy has told me a lot about you.”

*None of it good, I’m sure.*

Sweat beaded my palms. “I’m sorry to tell you this, sir, but Christine has informed me that she must cancel for your upcoming show.”

Pierre let out a gasp, sounding like he was choking on a hot dog. “What? Impossible! If she doesn’t show up, it’ll be a disaster.” I could hear frantic movement through the phone and a rustling of papers. “Where is Christine?” he demanded a moment later. “I must speak to her.”

I glanced up from my desk. Christine had made it absolutely clear that she wanted to cancel. If I went inside of her office and tried to convince her otherwise, I might be out of a job. She doesn't have patience for employees questioning her decisions.

“I am very sorry, Pierre,” I insisted, “but Christine must respectfully decline. Perhaps I can call around for a replacement for you?” Of course I’m just blowing hot air. As one of the biggest names in the fashion world, one couldn’t simply replace Christine Finnerman.

Pierre’s breathing was erratic. “What will it take?” he rasps. “What will it take for Christine to show up?” The sounds of tears in his voice tugged at my heart strings. “My reputation is riding on this.”

I took a deep breath, feeling bad for the man. But what could I do for him?

“Please, Victoria,” he begged me. “Get her to speak with me.”

It wasn't lost on me that here was a powerful man himself, begging me to get my boss to listen to him.

*And that’s why I’m working for her. Because in the eyes of the fashion world, Christine Finnerman is God.*

I sat there listening to Pierre’s pathetic begging, not sure what to do. Finally, I could take no more. “Hold on,” I told him. I got up from my desk

and took the phone with me.

I made it to Christine's office doorway when the telephone line went taut. I couldn't move any further. Normally I'd have just put him on hold. I don't know what had come over me.

*What am I doing?*

I placed the phone against my hip to block out sound.

"Christine?" I dared.

She looked up at me and my heart jumped in my chest. "What is it, Victoria? Have you told Pierre that I'm not coming?"

"Uh," I mumbled. Then I took a deep breath and gathered my courage. "I'm sorry, Christine, but he's adamant that he speaks with you—"

"Since when does telling a client that I will not be attending mean that you must listen to his pathetic whining and feel honor-bound to go against my orders, hmm?"

Blood rushed to my cheeks as I fumbled for an answer.

"But," Christine continued, "Since you're fairly new here and quite easy to influence, I'll forgive you—just this once." She sat back in her seat and appraised me with her frost-blue eyes. "Now tell me, what does Mr. Pierre want?"

I pushed down the anger that rose in my throat at her insult. "He wants to know what it will take for you to attend."

Christine stared at me for a long moment. "There is a designer by the name of Amanda Kersey. Heard of her? Terrible designer with clothing that looks like a blind woman designed it and models that look like they're meth addicts straight off the streets. Anyway, a trusted advisor told me she used choice words in speaking about me . . ."

Christine's words trailed off, but her meaning was clear. She gave me a direct look to drive her point home, and I shook involuntarily at what she wanted me to do. Much like me, Amanda Kersey is young and starry-eyed. She's a popular upcoming designer, who I'm sure has a lot riding on this.

*And with one word, Christine destroys her.*

My immediate urge was to hang up the phone, tell Christine to kiss my ass, and then walk out of her office for good. But as a newly-graduated twenty-two-year-old who was estranged from both parents and alone in a big city with a lease to pay, I couldn't afford to piss off such a powerful woman.

"Is there a problem?" Christine asked me.

Numbly, I shook my head and raised the phone to my lips.

"Pierre?" I ask weakly.

He was still there after all this time.

"Yes?"

Despite the grave situation, I almost laughed at the desperation in his voice.

"There is a fashion designer by the name of Amanda Kersey—"

"She's done," Pierre cut in. "I'll be calling her immediately to tell her that something came up and someone else will be taking her place."

The line went dead and I stood there, feeling numb all over.

"Victoria?" Christine said to me. I looked over at her, noting the wicked curl to her lips. She'd won her little power play and now could privately gloat. "Stop standing there like an imbecile and get to work."

*She's really testing me.*

Holding back an acidic reply, I turned away and numbly walked back to my desk, slamming the phone down. I grasped my head in my palms and blew out a stressful breath. After a moment, I straightened up and began going through Christine's schedule, marking the calendar for Pierre's show.

As much as I wanted to quit my job, I knew if I stuck it out for a little while longer, big things would happen for me. At least that's what I hoped.

"That door just can't open quick enough," I muttered to myself.

## CHAPTER 2

TYLER

“*Y*ou’ve got to get your shit together, man,” Jeff growled at me. Sitting back in my chair, I winced as a sharp pain sliced through my brain. As usual, I’d stayed up late after a night of drinking and wild sex. It would’ve been worth it, but the girl I’d gone home with last night, a blonde with big tits and a nice round ass, had been too eager to suck my dick.

I like a challenge, a girl who likes to play hard to get, and lately, all of them have given it up without any effort from me.

*Too easy.*

It probably had something to do with the fact that I was a man of wealth, co-founder of Armex Corp with my father, James Locklin. Or maybe it was just my confident swagger. I was, after all, six-foot-three, tall, blonde and cut like exquisitely carved stone thanks to my workout regimen.

Jeff hissed with exasperation and leaned across the table. “Are you listening to me?”

The pain in my skull pounded relentlessly. I didn't want to listen to this shit. How many times had I heard it before? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? Who gives a fuck? I don't.

“You can’t keep sleeping around with these groupie sluts,” Jeff continued. “As one of the top executives, you're making Armex look bad.”

I settled my gaze on Jeff. With dark brown hair and hazel eyes, he was a few years my senior. He was dressed in a business suit that made him look older than what he really was. I think he needed to lighten up and go out and get some pussy, then maybe he wouldn't be so uptight all the time. I could fix him up in one night.

"I don't see how the girls I fuck are any business of the company," I responded in a cavalier tone that I knew would piss Jeff off. I enjoyed getting under people's skin, for no other reason than I knew I could without consequence.

It worked.

"Well, it is when it's affecting our public image and our bottom line," Jeff growled back at me, his face twisting into an angry scowl. "If you made sure no one saw you publicly consorting with those skanks, then it would be different. Since you don't, the board members are getting tired of it. They're tired of your making us look unprofessional."

Anger boiled up from my rock-hard abs. How dare my peers complain about my private business? I was the co-founder of the fucking company. They wouldn't be shit without me.

"That's bullshit, Jeff, and you know it. Since when is it a crime to have a life outside of your place of business? Shit, half these guys cheat on their wives behind their backs and have the fucking nerve to tell me that I can't live the way I want to on my own time? Fuck off."

I didn't miss the poorly-hidden smile flash across Jeff's face. "All I know is, if you don't start behaving soon, you might be out of a job. There's talk of a vote. Co-founder or not . . ."

Enraged, I jumped out of my chair and regretted it a second later. The pain stabbed my brain like a hammer pounding a nail into wood. "A vote?" I snorted, fighting back the momentary dizziness that overcame me. "The fuck for? Are they going to demote me? Fire me? They can't do that. My dad will—"

Jeff gave me his infamous *gotcha* smirk. "Your dad is in agreement."

I froze momentarily, shocked. I couldn't believe that my dad, the biggest womanizer I know, could be party to something as asinine as this.

"Your dad thinks if you're to become CEO one day, you have to drop the bad boy image. Instead of rolling around with the local sluts, maybe it's time you start looking for a suitable partner. Settle down."

"Fuck that." The idea appalled me. I'd been in a serious relationship before and it didn't turn out well. I'd worn my heart on my sleeve only to get fucked royally in the end when I caught her cheating on me. On *me*.

After that, I'd decided that no girl was worthy of my love, and my new motto was to fuck 'em and then leave 'em.

Jeff stared at me. "This isn't a game, Tyler. You need to seriously get it together or face losing your position in the company." He paused, smirking once again. "Charles Whitmore is looking to take your spot if you don't shape up."

I stared at him incredulously. "Is this a fucking joke?" It had to be. I couldn't imagine my father listening to such bullshit. Charles Whitmore, my nemesis at Armex, had swiftly risen through the ranks of the corporate world. Although pretty douche, he was only a few years older and a pretty shrewd businessman—as much as I hated to admit it.

Still, there was no way he could fill my shoes. No fucking way. This had to be one huge conspiracy by my lesser peers to fuck with me.

Jeff shook his head. "Nope. Not at all."

"I don't believe this," I growled. "I'm going to talk to my father about it. I don't believe for one second that he'd ever go against me."

Jeff leaned back in his chair and continued to grin at me, making me want to smash his face in. "You do that."



"YOU HAVE BECOME A LIABILITY TO THE COMPANY," MY FATHER SAID TO ME. I WAS standing at his desk in his swanky office within his three-story mansion,

and I needed a strong drink to take in what I was hearing.

I studied him with disbelief. My father's a big man, barrel-chested with greying hair, and a complete egomaniac. He was dressed in a business suit, his tie loosened and his blazer draped over the back of his chair.

I thought Jeff was blowing hot air when he told me that my father was in compliance with this nonsense. To hear it from the horse's mouth enraged me.

"Word of your . . ." my father paused, searching for the right word to describe my antics that had riled everyone up, "*play* has gotten around and is traveling around the corporate circles."

I began to protest, but my father raised a stern finger to quiet me. "Ordinarily your behavior wouldn't be a problem. You're a grown man who's free to do whatever you choose when it comes to your personal life. But, a large demographic of Armex customers hold family values in high regard. If you continue to . . . misbehave in public, then the board will vote to replace you."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"I founded this fucking company with you," I growled as I stabbed a finger at the ground, anger burning my throat. "You can't replace me."

My dad stared at me calmly. "Yes, you did. And despite your bad habits that you've developed over the years, you are a wonderful businessman—shrewd as they come. But in order for our company to survive, concessions must be made. Clean up your act—or else."

"Are you fucking serious?" I shouted, unable to control my anger any longer.

He didn't answer, but he didn't have to. He was dead serious. He wanted to out me. His son. Me, who'd helped him build the company from the ground up. And for what? All because I scorned relationships and liked to get pussy whenever and however I wanted?

"Listen to yourself!" I continued. "If you had any balls, you would tell them to go fuck themselves. I'm your son, for Christ's sake! Armex wouldn't be

shit without me.”

His jaw bulged and he gripped the edge of his desk, a sign that my words had gotten to him.

“Charles Whitmore?” I demanded. “Charles fucking Whitmore?”

“He’s shown himself to be an exemplary employee, and he wants to see this company to the next level . . .”

*Unlike you.*

His words trailed off, but I heard the unspoken meaning behind them.

Clearing his throat, Dad stood up and grabbed his coat from the back of his chair. “I’m sorry that you’re angry, son. But this really shouldn’t be a problem. The solution is simple. Stop with the public womanizing and keep your job.”

“You let those assholes vote against me, and I’ll make sure you regret it.” The words left my lips before I could stop them.

He paused for a moment, considering my words. Finally, he said, “Choose your battles carefully, son.” He shrugged on his coat. “I’m going to pick up Martha from the Bolingers’. They’re planning a dinner party for an event later this month. If you haven’t dug yourself into a hole by then, I expect you to attend.” He walked from the room, leaving me standing there simmering with anger.

Martha was his newlywed wife. I’d only met her twice, once at the wedding and another time at a family function. She was nice enough, I guess, but a woman who had no real assets to speak of. It was a mystery why my dad chose to marry her.

“Oh, trust me, Dad,” I said to myself as I walked over to the cabinet behind his desk and pulled out a bottle of brandy along with a glass. I needed something to drink to calm the frustration that I felt. “I have every intention of fighting this battle.”



## CHAPTER 3

TYLER

"*Y*our life is over," I said, smacking down a glass on the bar counter.

Brad, my childhood best friend, peered over at me, his eyes bloodshot. He was dressed casually in blue jeans and a black t-shirt, while I was still dressed in my work clothes, black silk slacks and a white dress shirt. I usually dressed well when I went to clubs, flaunting the fact that I had money. "Why do you say that?"

We were sitting in a popular bar, you know, one of the trash dens that the company doesn't want to see me in. After my explosive blowout with Dad, Brad called me, saying that he was having relationship problems in the form of his fiancée practically forcing him to give her an official wedding date. To make matters worse, the wedding she wanted was going to cost a fortune and would temporarily bankrupt him.

I'd told Brad that I would meet him and we could both talk about our problems.

"If she's already calling the shots now," I told him, "then what do you think it's going to be like when you're married?"

Brad let out a groan and stared down into his glass with a forlorn expression. "Don't remind me, man. I'm already fucking stressed the hell out. I've only been working at the law firm for less than a year. How the fuck does she expect me to afford the kind of wedding that she wants?"

"What does she want?"

Brad made a sour face. "Everything. I mean, like, her family is huge. She has like ten sisters who must have a hundred little girls, and she wants every last one to be flower girls. She wants to rent out the Promade and have the wedding out on the lawn, complete with an orchestra, band and entertainment. Not to mention, she wants me to provide the clothing for all her immediate family."

I let out a low whistle.

"Tell me about it," Brad continued. "I don't know how Katie thinks we can afford it. I know I have a pretty good job, but damn, at least give on something. If it wasn't for all our student loan debt, we could probably swing it."

I signaled the bartender for another drink—a slender girl dressed in a cut-off top that bared her midriff. She smiled at me and scurried off to the mixer. She wanted my dick, I was sure of it, but I wasn't interested. I usually didn't go for girls who had tattoos, even though I had a couple myself. It was just one of my hypocrisies.

"Where does Katie work again?"

"She's a groomer. She loves animals." Brad laughed. "Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if she'd want me to dress the damn dogs in tuxes too."

"I feel your pain, brother," I said. I really didn't. Brad, I think, had fallen into a trap. After my one true relationship had failed, I'd lost belief in true love. Brad would wind up regretting getting married and getting stuck with kids, mark my words.

Of course, I didn't want to tell him what I really felt, because I thought it would only piss him off. He had too much invested in this Katie chick at this point, and I've learned it's better to let people make their own mistakes rather than try to dissuade them.

The bartender chick walked over and placed my drink down before me. I reached into my pocket to pay for it when she stopped me.

"It's on the house, handsome," she purred at me with a wink and strutted away to serve some other drunk patron.

Brad shook his head and eyed me with disbelief. "Un-fucking believable. She all but bent over and asked you to fuck her."

"I'm glad she didn't," I said, grabbing the drink and turning it up. "She's not my type."

Brad stared at me. "You're an asshole, you know that?"

I didn't respond. Instead, I roved my eyes over the crowded bar. I saw plenty of girls, all dressed up with tons of makeup, and a few in fuck-me pumps, but none that interested me.

"So what's up with you?" Brad asked, making me turn my attention back to him. "I've never seen you turn up so many so quickly before. What's got you so bent outta' shape?"

"My dad's thinking about replacing me at the company."

Brad's jaw dropped. "You're shitting me."

I shook my head and proceeded to tell Brad everything. "They said I need to stop frequenting clubs, present one included, and picking up random chicks," I said as I got to the end of my tale. "And I should focus on cleaning up my image."

"I don't know, man. Maybe they're right," Brad said after a moment of thought. I should have known better than to try to get sympathy from him. "A man in your position should be held to a higher standard. Fucking a new slut every weekend doesn't exactly scream professionalism."

"That's the thing," I said. "What I do on my own time is none of anyone else's business."

"True," Brad agreed. "But it is when it affects the business's image. I don't know how you can't see that. I mean, get a grip already, Tyler. You're not fucking nineteen anymore. You should be thinking about settling down and starting a family in a couple of years."

I swallowed back my anger. Brad should've had my back, but deep down, I knew he was right. "That will never happen. The family part, that is. And there's no way I'm going to stop fucking who I want, when I want."

Brad shook his head at me.

"In fact, just out of spite, I'm going to continue to do what I've been doing. Let them come for me. Fuck 'em."

"Seriously?"

"I just need you to represent me when they do." I rolled my shoulders. "Things are about to get ugly."

Brad went slack-jawed. "You want me to represent you against Armex?"

"Yeah. I'm going to call my dad's bluff. There's no fucking way I'm going to let him replace me without a fight. If the board votes on me, I'm going to sue their fucking pants off to take my half of the company."

I gave Brad a direct look. "And I'm going to need your help when I do." Truthfully, Brad was a newbie lawyer and didn't have much experience under his belt, but he was absolutely brilliant, and I knew he'd fight for me harder than anyone else. If I was going to go toe-to-toe with my father, I wanted him on my side.

Brad stared at me a long time before letting out an explosive breath. "Alright, man," he said finally, "but I want to make sure you know what you're getting yourself into if it comes down to that."

"Of course." I smiled at him and clasped his shoulder. "I knew you'd have my back."

Brad still looked sour. "It's just one more stressful situation to add on top of this God damn wedding."

"Let me handle it," I offered suddenly. Brad had agreed to represent me, which was no small thing, since Armex was armed to the teeth with high-powered lawyers. I wanted to reward his loyalty.

Brad immediately held his hands up in protest. "C'mon, man, you don't have to do that."

"It's no problem," I insisted. "In fact, my position at the company affords me a lot of connections. I can get a designer to handle everything. Katie will love it."

Brad was in awe. "You'd do that?"

"Hell yeah, man. It's supposed to be the most special moment of your life. You deserve it."

Brad would never admit it, but I think he was getting slightly emotional on me because his eyes became watery. "Thanks, man, I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

I casually signaled the girl for another drink, and she practically abandoned a patron mid-order in her haste to serve me.

As I watched her sashay over to the mixer, I thought, *maybe it's time to try something new.*

She was over with my drink in a few seconds, setting it down before me. I gave her *the look*. The look I gave to all the girls before I'm ready to fuck them, and her body trembled slightly.

I threw back my drink and replied to Brad, "Don't sweat it."

## CHAPTER 4

### VICTORIA

"I have a client that needs a wedding gown designed," Christine said to me as I sat down her steaming mug of coffee on her desk. She was nosing through the latest catalogue. "He also needs fittings and measurements for about one hundred wedding guests."

*That sounds like an awful amount of work.*

I stepped back and folded my hands before me respectfully. "What client is this?" Steam from the coffee reached my nostrils and I felt slightly nauseated. I'd made coffee so much for Christine that I'd come to hate the smell of it.

*I thought to myself, or maybe it's just her that I can't stand.*

Christine glanced up at me as if annoyed by my daring to ask a question. "A young man by the name of Tyler Locklin, co-founder of a company called Armex. From what I hear, he's quite a scoundrel. And if the rumors are true, he'll be out of a job soon." Christine glanced down into her coffee. "However, that won't stop me from working with him. I happen to know his father, James, a very cold, calculating man with deep pockets. His son will be paying dearly for my talents."

I'd never heard of this guy, his father, or their company, and I was surprised Christine kept up with gossip outside of fashion. After all, she lived and breathed it. "Will I be working with him?" I ask.

Christine stared at me for a moment with surprise, and then burst out laughing in a way that made me clench my teeth together. "Oh no, you silly little girl. You'll be helping a small army of fitters and designers get the measurements right for the wedding guests. I've already called and have April and Gabe assembling the team. You'll go along and do everything April tells you to since . . ." Christine paused to look my red dress up and down critically. "she actually has fashion sense."

I clenched my fists. Christine really rubbed me the wrong way. Every day.

*Just a little while longer, I told myself. And that door is going to open up.*

"When do we start?"

Christine picked up her coffee and took a sip before replying. "Today."



"HOLY SHIT," APRIL SWORE AS WE STOOD OUTSIDE THE BACK OF FINNERMAN'S headquarters, a large corporate building in the middle of downtown. "This is going to be a nightmare."

Despite Christine's annoying penchant for comparing me to her, I liked April. Unlike Christine, she was surprisingly level-headed and treated people like human beings. As Christine's head assistant, she was in charge of the more labor-intensive duties like the one we were about to embark on.

"No shit," Gabe, April's assistant, said. Isn't that funny? Even the head assistant to Christine has an assistant. Blonde, good-looking and armed with dimples, Gabe happened to be gay, which I'm sure had given more than a few girls heartache over his lifetime. He was dressed in simple jeans, dress shirt and a tie, his blonde hair gelled and spiky.

April shook her head. "I don't know what the hell she was thinking when she took on this client. We'll be swamped for days." April turned to me, biting her lower lip. "Vicky, I'm going to need more help from you than usual."

I eyed her with apprehension. "What kind of help?"

"Help keep track of the measurements, who's been fitted, all that kind of stuff."

"And who's the hottest guy packing the most heat," Gabe added in, brandishing a twelve-inch ruler that he randomly pulled out of his pocket. "After all, aren't we going there to do measurements?"

April and I cracked up and Gabe winked at us mischievously.

"So can I count on you?" April asked when we stopped laughing.

I sobered quickly. Despite knowing that I wouldn't be mistreated by April, somehow I knew this undertaking was going to leave me exhausted, overworked and under-appreciated. But what other choice did I have?

"Of course," I replied.



## CHAPTER 5

TYLER

"*I*'ll be along to help you in just a minute, Mr. Locklin," said a girl who introduced herself as April. She was obviously in charge of the fitting operation. She was a small, mousey thing.

She was dressed in a flowing, flowery dress that reminded me of summer, her hair pulled back into a business-like ponytail. She was cute, in a wholesome, girl next door way, but she wasn't my type.

Usually, if I can't imagine a girl's lips wrapped around my dick, I know she's not for me.

Crossing my arms across my chest, I casually leaned against a column in the large reception hall with private dressing rooms I'd rented out for Brad's wedding and for him and his fiancée's family to use for the fittings. Both families would be stopping in and out all day to get measurements. "No problem," I told her. "Take your time."

She beamed at me for a moment before leaving off, shouting orders. I watched her in boredom, my thoughts wandering.

*This is all so unnecessary*, I thought to myself as I stared at all the hubbub of activity.

The sad thing is, what Katie wanted cost a fortune, even without hiring a top designer to design it all. Luckily for Brad, I was footing the bill. For me it was just a drop in the bucket. It was the least I could do.

Brad's fiancée had been very particular about what she wanted each and every person to wear, including me, Brad's best man.

Normally, I'd have told Brad to tell his fiancée to fuck off. My closet back at my penthouse was lined with top of the line tuxedos that would beat anything worn by men from either side of their families. I didn't have to wear something else just because Brad's prissy fiancée had control issues.

But it would be the best best day of his life, or the worst day, depending on which way you looked at it, so I felt I'd swallow my pride just this once just to make them both happy. I was doing this because I knew that if Katie was happy, Brad was happy, and life would be much easier for him.

There was also another reason why I decided to entertain Katie's power play. Charles Whitmore was supposed to be delivering a presentation in the boardroom today. To keep from losing my cool, I'd taken the day off and decided to come check out how my investment in Brad's wedding was coming along. I wouldn't be able to tolerate looking into the faces of the men who wanted to replace me and listen to Charles without wanting to smash their faces in.

As I continued to observe members of Brad and Katie's family filing through the hall, I noticed a girl with long, dirty-blond hair that made my mouth go dry. With a clipboard clutched in her hands while she motioned someone over to the dressing room, she was wearing a tight red dress that emphasized her curvy frame and white heels. She had a pretty face, proportionate breasts and a nice ass.

After a moment, I couldn't help it and I found myself inching across the room to get closer. She was just finishing pointing someone over to a group of workers when I walked up.

"Busy directing the troops?" I asked.

She looked up at me as I towered over her, and her lips parted in surprise and then a blush brought color to her cheeks. I hid my grin.

She peered at her clipboard she was holding, probably to conceal her embarrassment, and then looked back at me. "Are you one of the wedding guests?" she asked. I liked her voice, soft but firm at the same time, really

pleasant to the ears. Her eyes, which were a bright green color, captivated me with their vivaciousness.

"Yeah, the best man," I replied.

Surprise etched across her face. "Oh, oh," she said breathlessly. "April is going to want to do your measurements." She scribbled something down on her clipboard and then looked back at me. "What is your name?"

"Tyler Locklin."

A small gasp escaped her lips and I wondered what was wrong.

"Tyler Locklin?" she asked as if unsure of what she'd just heard.

"Yeah. Is that some sort of a crime?" I joked.

"No, not at all," she said quickly. "I just didn't expect for you to be here."

*And I wouldn't be if it weren't for Brad's neurotic fiancée,* I thought to myself.

"Someone's got to make sure everything is going to plan," I said. I really liked the girl's lips. They were sassy and sensual, and I knew I had to have her.

At that moment, April chose to walk over. "I can help you now, Mr. Locklin. If you would just come right this way—"

"Actually," I interrupted. I looked over the blonde girl and quickly caught her name tag. *Victoria*. "Victoria here was going to help me with my measurements."

*I even like her name.*

A shocked expression marred Victoria's pretty face. "I was?"

I nodded. "That's what we were just talking about, remember?"

Victoria opened her mouth to protest further, but I gave her a look that made her pause.

"That was supposed to be my job," said April. She looked disappointed as she eyed me.

"I know, but Victoria and I go way back. I think I'll be most comfortable taking my pants off in front of her." It was hard not to laugh as Victoria's eyes grew as wide as saucers.

"Wow, I didn't know you knew Mr. Locklin, Victoria." April chewed on her bottom lip, debating with herself. "Fine," she said finally. "If that's what you prefer, Mr. Locklin, I'm sure Victoria will be more than happy to accommodate."

"It is . . . and she will," I replied with confidence. I turned to Victoria and offered her my arm, unable to keep myself from smirking. "If you'd just lead the way, Miss Victoria."

Victoria was flustered, her cheeks a dark shade of red as she glanced back and forth between April and me. After a moment, she finally took my arm and began to lead me toward the dressing rooms.

April tried to mutter under her breath to Victoria as we walked off, but I still managed to catch what she said. "You'd better not screw this up, Vicky."

"Why did you lie to her?" Victoria demanded as soon as we were out of earshot. She let go of my arm and put distance between us. I wasn't worried. She'd be begging for it before I was done with her.

"Because you look like the girl for the job."

She scowled at me, her cheeks turning crimson. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Just that it looks like you can handle big things."

Victoria appeared speechless and it was hard not to laugh.

"My size," I clarified. "I'm a pretty tall guy."

I wondered if her face would remain permanently red as she simply said, "Oh."

We made it to a vacant dressing room and stepped inside. Victoria closed the door behind us. There were a bench, a mirror and a hanger rack in the room. She walked over and sat her clipboard down on the bench and then turned to face me with measuring tape.

"Do you do this often?" I asked before we got down to business. I was intrigued by Victoria and wanted to know more about her.

Victoria shook her head. "Only when I'm called to, which is rarely. This wedding demanded a lot of fittings, so Christine sent a small army to help out." She shook her head. "But I didn't expect that I'd end up fitting you."

"Why are you so surprised?"

"Well, for one, I hear that you're some big shot."

I nodded. I'm not very humble, so I wasn't going to act like I was. "I'm the co-founder, along with my father."

Victoria fingered the measuring tape. "That's amazing. You look young. How old are—"

"Twenty-five," I replied.

She shook her head. "I'm just twenty-two. I couldn't fathom accomplishing what you have at that age."

"I did have a lot of help from my father," I admitted. "From a young age, he's groomed me in business and economics. But I've grown into my own man now."

"I see." After a moment of awkward silence, Victoria cleared her throat and said, "I'm going to need you to take your shirt off."

I was happy to oblige. I slowly unbuttoned my dress shirt, staring at Victoria all the while. I slipped it off my shoulders and tossed it on the bench, my washboard abs proudly on display.

Victoria stared at the muscles etched across my stomach for a moment, and I didn't miss the flash of admiration in her eyes before she stepped forward with the measuring tape. I tried not to smile as I noted her trembling hands.

"Can you raise your arms above your head?" she asked. Even her voice had a slight tremor in it.

I did as she asked and she moved in close, wrapping the tape around my torso. I peered down as she worked, noting the fullness of her hair. Up close, I could smell the fragrance she had on, a pleasant peach-like scent that reminded me of a fresh summer day.

"You have a nice, slim waist," she said quietly with admiration as she worked. I liked when her hands brushed across my skin. They felt soft and pleasant. "But broad shoulders. Are you a swimmer?"

"I work out a lot and jog," I replied. "At least five times a week."

"I can see that," she said after she'd moved up and down my torso three times. She moved back over to the bench and picked up her clipboard, scribbling something down. Then she turned back around to face me, biting her lower lip.

"What?" I ask when she just stood there looking nervous.

"Uh, I could get a more accurate measurement if you take off your pants," she finally blurted out. "But it's totally up to you . . . and leave your underwear on," she amended quickly when I begin to tug at my dress pants.

I grinned at her and dropped my trousers to the floor. Now I was in nothing but my boxers with a cute girl staring at my junk.

"T-T-This will only take a moment," she stammered, her eyes flitting away from my crotch area. I had to grin. I was so enjoying this.

She approached me slowly and then bent over slightly to wrap the measuring tape around my inner thigh. Her hands were inches away from my junk and it was an effort not to pop wood right in her face.

"Even your thighs are muscular," she muttered in awe.

"Wouldn't it be better if you got on your knees?" I asked her when she appeared to be having trouble getting her measurement.

She paused as if shocked by my suggestion. "I'm good," she replied shortly.

"Then why are your hands shaking?"

"I'm just a little nervous, that's all."

I shifted on my feet, my cock and balls coming dangerously close to touching her hand. "I know what will help you relax."

She peered up at me. "What?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you have nice, dick-sucking lips?" I asked. I had no idea where the hell that came from. Of course I was thinking it, but I didn't exactly mean to blurt it out.

Victoria straightened all the way. "Excuse me?" Her voice, which had been soft, was now hard and filled with hostility.

I stood there for a moment, not sure if I should try to lie my way out of my flub. Fuck it. Might as well roll with it.

"You have nice lips," I compliment. "They'd look good wrapped around my dick."

"Fuck you!"

The smack of flesh was loud, but I barely felt it as my head snapped slightly to the side.

Victoria didn't wait around for my response. Scrambling quickly, she gathered her stuff and then ran out of the dressing room.

Victoria

*HE'S A PIG. A FREAKING HANDSOME PIG, BUT A PIG NONETHELESS. WHAT'S WORSE is that I couldn't stop thinking about him or his amazing body. I could still see his chiseled frame in front of my eyes.*

And I didn't want to think about how good looking he was, with his strong jawline that looked sharp enough to cut glass and his incredible, deep-set blue eyes that made me want to swim in them. And the way his lips curled up into that playful grin that said he was a mischievous bastard? *Shit.*

And I can't forget his scent. My God, what it did to me. When I was up close on him, all I could smell was pure masculinity. The scent had been like a powerful aphrodisiac. It made me dizzy with lust.

What made me even more mad at myself is that I'd wanted, more than anything, to see what lay underneath his boxers. If the bulge that he sported had been any indication, then Mr. Tyler Locklin was carrying around a monster.

I was pissed at myself for being attracted to him. I'd never had a guy talk so boldly like that to me before, and by default, I shouldn't be having sinful thoughts about him. But being enclosed with him inside that small dressing room made me weak in the knees.

Inside, he'd radiated a cool confidence and power that overwhelmed my senses. And when I saw him drop his dress pants . . .

I angrily pushed the lustful thoughts away and tried to get as far away from the dressing room as possible.

It was only after I was in the middle of the hall that I realized what I'd done. I slapped Tyler Locklin. It wouldn't be so bad—he'd definitely been asking for it—if he wasn't some powerful executive that happened to be paying my boss an obscene amount of money to outfit an entire wedding!

*There's no way I'm going back to apologize,* I told myself. *He totally deserved it.*

I suddenly jumped at April's voice. "Did you get Mr. Locklin's measurements?"

I turned around and saw April holding a pile of things in her arms. "For the most part," I said.

April gawked at me. "What the hell do you mean?"



"Look, I couldn't help it. The guy is a total asshole!"

April glanced at the dressing room Tyler and I were in. "What are you talking about? It seemed like you two were friends?"

I scowled. "I don't know him. It's just some crap he made up. He's just some arrogant, rich prick." I shook my head angrily. "I can totally see why Christine said he was going to lose his job."

"Hey Ladies," Tyler broke in. He'd snuck up on us. I would never admit it, but I loved the deep, rich timbre of his voice. It was so sexy . . .

"How's everything going?" His eyes sparkled with mischief as he looked at me as if the dressing room fiasco had never happened. He didn't appear to be mad that I'd slapped him, which was a relief, because I feared that he'd go back and tell Christine.

"It's going well. We almost have everyone's measurements and are just waiting for the last few stragglers to show up." April looked at me uncertainly, then back at Tyler, unsure what to think. "Everything went well with your measuring, I hope?"

Tyler nodded, his eyes still on me. I had to look away. His gaze was so hot that it made me feel like I'd catch fire. "Victoria is very good with her hands."

I was speechless at Tyler's audacity.

April beamed. "That's wonderful!"

"Yep. We had so much fun catching up on our past that she's meeting me at Roxy's at eight tomorrow night."

This time I nearly choked on my surprise, and Tyler only smiled wider at my reaction.

"Wow." April tossed me an envious gaze, seemingly not noticing that my mouth was open so wide that an elephant could jump through it. Then she gestured at a group of workers nearby. "Can I show you what Christine has planned before we leave?"

"Certainly." Tyler turned to me and tossed me a playful wink. "Catch you later, Victoria." He walked off with April, leaving me standing there in disbelief.

Did he really think I was going to show up at Roxy's tomorrow?

"Who the hell was that!" I heard Gabe exclaim behind me.

I swirled around to see him staring in Tyler's direction.

"That," I said, "Is Tyler Locklin. A rich, misogynistic pig." Gabe stared at me. "Why do you say that?"

I proceeded to tell Gabe what happened in the dressing room, making sure to leave out my extreme attraction to him.

"That's all he said?" Gabe asked. "And you're pissed off about that? Girl, you should've told him to whip it out!"

I rolled my eyes. I should've known better than to expect sympathy from Gabe. "Not a chance."

Gabe turned his eyes back on Tyler. "I wish he'd say that to me. Damn, he's hot AND rich; doesn't get any better."

"Gabe!" I protested.

"What? It's the truth!"

"He asked me out," I said a second later.

Gabe turned on me, wide-eyed. "He did?"

I nodded. "But I don't think I'm going to go. Not after how he treated me."

Gabe scowled at me. "Are you crazy? You'd better go. He's a wealthy man. Think about it for a second."

*It will never be serious anyway, I thought to myself. Because he's obviously a womanizing pig.*

I decided that I was wasting my time. Gabe would never see from my point of view. "I've got to finish up my tasks before we pack up," I said.

I walked off before he could offer a protest, and tried to push images of Tyler's chiseled torso and large bulge from my mind.



Tyler

I STEPPED INTO MY DAD'S OFFICE AND GENTLY SHUT THE DOOR BEHIND ME. "YOU rang?"

Dressed in one of his tailor made business suits, my dad was standing before his office window with a glass in his hand and the other stuffed in his pocket. He turned around, and I didn't miss the spark of rage that flashed in his eyes.

This would be a good meeting.

"Where were you today?" He asked quietly. I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was super fucking pissed. Exactly what I wanted.

I eased into the office, stopping near his desk. "I was at the Promade, getting fitted."

Dad frowned. "Getting fitted? What the hell for?"

"You know Brad? Well, he's getting married to the love of his life, except he couldn't afford to pay for the wedding his fiancée wanted. So I offered to fund all of it, including tailor made suits and dresses made by Christine Finnerman."

My father's lips curled up in contempt. "You took off an important day for something that could be done at any time?"

"Not any time. I'd scheduled fittings for two days. It was either today or tomorrow. I chose today." I shrugged my shoulders.

The veins stood out on his neck. He was boiling. "We had a meeting today. Charles Whitmore spoke."

I nodded. "I'm aware of that. In fact, it was the reason I took off. I can't tolerate two seconds of that blowhard."

My father gripped his glass so hard I thought it might break. "His presentation involved some important revelations about our company!"

"And your point is?"

"That you're being a difficult son of a bitch." My dad stopped himself and closed his eyes. He sucked in a deep breath and then slowly let it out. When he reopened his eyes, they were more focused. "Tyler, there's going to be a vote," he said quietly.

"On?" I asked, though I knew the answer.

"Your removal."

I knew the words were coming, but it hit me like a punch in the gut. It was my turn to get pissed. "Do you really want to do this, Dad?" I asked. "Because this can get really messy."

He stared at me unblinking, unperturbed by my threat. "I'm sorry, son . . . but you leave me no other choice. Your cavalier attitude about the company and your contempt for the rules have shown that you're unfit."

I snorted with disgust. "And Charles Whitmore is?" He opened his mouth to reply, but I interrupted. "You know what? Don't even bother. If you try to remove me, I'll make sure to make your life a living hell."

My words didn't produce a visible reaction, but I knew he was simmering with anger.

"See you in the boardroom," I said.

Then I turned and walked out.

## CHAPTER 6

### VICTORIA

*I*t was an hour until eight. I was at home in my small apartment, which cost an overpriced arm and a leg. I was standing in front of my bedroom mirror, arguing with myself. I couldn't decide if I was going to go to meet Tyler or not. I'd had a particularly stressful day at work with Christine sending me all over the building for menial tasks.

I'd pissed her off because I spilled her morning coffee all over her cashmere sweater. I thought for sure I was fired in that moment, and I'm sure she was tempted, but she probably figured it would be more fun to continue torturing and humiliating me.

With the stress of the day still weighing on my shoulders, I felt like I needed a release.

But that wasn't the real reason why I was so conflicted. Images of Tyler's rippling abs and muscular body continued to torment me, filling me with a burning lust that was both startling and exciting.

During my high school and college years, I'd had a couple of boyfriends, but nothing that ever amounted to anything. Most of the relationships had ended in heartache.

And none of my boyfriends had the ridiculous confidence—and overpowering arrogance—that Tyler did. Arrogance that should have repelled me from him, but instead drew me to him like a moth to a flame.

*He's rich, powerful and handsome, I told myself. And he wants me to go on a date with him. What harm can come from it? It's not like he's asking me to marry him, and it's likely he's just looking to have a little fun. After all the stress I've been going through working for Christine, shouldn't I have a little playtime for myself?*

Images of his chiseled features, playful grin and incredibly sexy blue eyes flashed before me.

"Screw it," I said finally, making my decision. I pulled open the closet and began searching for something sexy to wear. "I'm going."

Tyler

WHEN VICTORIA CAME STRUTTING INTO ROXY'S IN A TIGHT BLACK DRESS AND heels, I felt a grin form on my face. I knew she couldn't resist.

Roxy's was a happening little bar in the middle of downtown. Bumping music, undulating bodies, swirling, colored lights and hazy smoke made the atmosphere intoxicating.

I was sitting in the V.I.P section that overlooked most of the place with the rest of the high-rollers, dressed in expensive silk slacks and a white shirt that was unbuttoned at the top.

I watched as Victoria glided through the crowd of twisting bodies, obviously searching for me. I walked over to the edge of the section and waved. After a moment, she noticed me and began to make her way over.

"I'm glad you could make it," I yelled over the music when she reached me. I gave her a disarming smile, and surprisingly, she smiled back. Still, her eyes seemed to say, *I don't trust you as far as I can throw you.*

It was hard not to ogle her body. Her tits and that ass, Mmm. I wanted to take her in the back and fuck the stubbornness out of her.

"I almost didn't come," she shouted. I noticed her makeup and found that I liked it. Smokey eye shadow decorated her lids, a faint blush on her cheeks and shiny lip gloss.

*If only they were wrapped around my dick.*

The image of her bent over me in the dressing room flashed before my eyes. I pushed the image away from my mind and gestured at our table.

"Come have a seat."

I walked her over to our booth and pulled out a chair. She mouthed thank you to me and sat down. I took my seat and then signaled for service.

"What will you two have?" the girl asked loudly when she stepped over. With long blonde hair and holding a serving tray in her right hand, she was dressed in a tight black skirt and a white blouse open at the front that displayed her big, and obviously fake, tits. I didn't bother looking at the bait, only having eyes for Victoria. Besides, a bimbo like her came a dime a dozen and I could fuck her anytime if I wanted.

"Johnnie Walker Blue," I said.

"Apple Martini."

"So what made you decide to come?" I asked, making sure to keep my voice loud enough so she could hear me. "I thought I'd really pissed you off back at the Promade."

Victoria brushed a stray strand of hair out of her eyes. "I thought I'd come to give you a chance to apologize."

I hid a grin. "Well, you won't get one. Because I meant what I said."

She scowled at me and shook her head. "I should have known."

"What? I gave you a compliment."

"It was crude," she objected. "And distasteful."

The girl walked over and set down our drinks. She made sure to bend low, putting her tits in my face. I ignored them and tossed her a tip.

Her eyes widened with surprise. "Thanks, handsome."

Victoria rolled her eyes as the waitress blew a seductive kiss my way and strutted away. The bass from the music moved our glasses across the table. In unison, we grabbed our drinks to keep them from toppling over.

"Did you really have to tip her so much?" She was irritated, though she tried to hide it. I found it cute.

"I always tip big wherever I go," I told her. "It's a matter of style."

"She looked like she wanted to sleep with you after."

I nodded. "That's because she did."

Victoria snorted and rolled her eyes. "You're impossible."

I couldn't hold back my grin. "I'm addictive, that's what I am. I'm like a chocolate craving. You're not getting rid of me until you've had your fill."

She rolled her eyes again. "Don't flatter yourself."

I settled back in my chair and took a sip of my drink, keeping my eyes focused on Victoria. "So, tell me, what brings you to the big city to work for the one and only Christine Finnerman?"

Victoria toyed with her drink. "I've always dreamed of working in fashion since I was a little girl. When I was younger, I would make outfits and wear them, pretending I was on the runway. My mom doesn't much approve. She thinks I'm making a huge mistake for whatever reason."

"That sucks," I remarked. I was surprised she was being open with me about it, but I liked it.

Victoria nodded. "Yeah. But then she goes on to divorce my father to marry some rich douchebag." She made an angry face. "I'm still pissed off at her about that."

"Who did she marry?"

Victoria shrugged and took a sip of her drink. I tried not to look at her lips wrapped around her straw. "Beats me. I no longer talk to her. We had a huge falling out."



“Sounds like me.”

Victoria was intrigued. "How's that?"

For a moment, I debated on whether to tell her the truth. I'm usually not one to open up so easily.

*Screw it*, I said to myself.

"My father is a man of voracious appetite. As in, he's never been satisfied being with one woman. He claims he's done with all of that now, but we'll see. Anyway, to make a long story short, my mom found out about one of his flings, and she decided to divorce him. Naturally, since we were close, my mother thought I would pressure my dad to hand over his share of the business to her when they split. Instead, I helped my dad buy my mom's cooperation. This infuriated my mother and we grew apart, but I couldn't help it. I'd put too much of myself in the business, and I couldn't see it growing without the both of us. Now . . . I'm having second thoughts about that."

Victoria raised an eyebrow and I proceeded to tell her all about the growing rift between my father and me.

"And the funny thing is," I said when I was finished telling her my story, "he wants me to get my act together when he's been the worst offender of all." I shook my head. "I feel sorry for the woman he married . . . but then again, she probably didn't marry him for his personality."

Victoria stared at me. "What's so bad about it, though? Settling down. I mean, how can it be fun to sleep around all the time?"

Anger twisted my stomach. "I've had a bad relationship in the past that taught me that love is just a made-up notion that's more trouble than it's worth."

*Damn it. I shouldn't be telling her this.*

"I see."

We both stopped speaking and the bass of the music filled in the silence.

"I just don't see why you would continue doing what you do if you know it effects your company," she said a moment later.

I leaned across the table and looked her straight in the eye. "Because no one tells me what to do."

Victoria stared at me for a long time before saying, "I shouldn't have come."

"Then why did you?"

"I'm not sure. But I wish I hadn't told you anything. You probably have a line of skanks lined up after this."

I shook my head and then downed my drink in one gulp. I let out a satisfied sigh as my throat burned and stood up. I offered my hand to Victoria. "Come, I want to show you something."

She looked at me like I was crazy. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Yeah you are, or you wouldn't have come. Now get up."

A tremble went through her at the authority in my voice and I knew she liked it. Finally, she gave up the act and took my hand, but before she stood up, she asked, "Where are we going?"

I grinned at her and pulled her to her feet. "Some place where you can finish measuring me."

## CHAPTER 7

### VICTORIA

“*I*t’s breathtaking!” I exclaimed as I stepped inside.

I was in Tyler’s ritzy loft overlooking the city, and I was immediately captivated by what was before me. The right side of the apartment had a wall made out of glass that looked out into the shimmering skyline. You could see for what seemed like forever. The view took my breath away.

I turned about, taking in the rest of the apartment.

It had a spacious floor plan that gave a warm, inviting feeling. The floor was made of polished wood that looked like it’d been freshly mopped. He probably had maids that kept the place spotless. The sofa and lounge seats were all cream-colored and looked lush and comfortable. Near the window, there was a white grand piano.

*This, I said to myself as I took everything in, is what I want. This is how I want to live. Except I’ll never get here working for Christine.*

"Is it?" Tyler asked as he walked over to the kitchen's bar and began tinkering with some glasses. "I paid enough for it, so it had better be."

I knew better than to ask how much. I probably didn’t want to know. I walked over to the window and stared out while Tyler busied himself. "I could learn to love this," I whispered, my heart soaring at the incredible

view. Tyler's place made my tiny downtown apartment look like a hovel. Now I'd never view it the same again.

"Would you like something to drink?" Tyler asked me.

I half-turned, debating. I was already feeling a little tipsy from my martini and I didn't want to do something stupid.

"No thanks," I declined. "I'm good."

Tyler peered at me. "You sure?"

"Positive."

He finished making a drink and walked over to me with a glass of clear liquid, his shoes making a hard tapping sound against the floor.

I turned back to the view and shook my head. "This place really is incredible. I've set some goals for myself, but I can't imagine ever being in a place like this. I can barely afford a one-bedroom apartment on the salary Christine pays me."

Tyler reached my side and I could smell the alcohol in his glass. The smell was so strong it made my nostrils burn. I wondered what was in it.

"Why do you work for her?" He stared out the window with me while taking a sip from his glass.

I sighed. "I'm hoping that doors will open for me. There's a lot you can do with Christine Finnerman's name on your resume. If you're interested in fashion, there's no better place to start."

He turned to study me. "Do you really believe it'll pay off?"

I thought for a moment. The fact is, I really didn't know. It's just what I hoped for. "I have to believe that it will."

"Sometimes believing isn't enough. Sometimes you gotta know."

"Well, sometimes you can't know, so believing is all that you can do."

Tyler's gaze became so intense that I could feel my skin crawl. "That's not good enough for me."

I shivered underneath his gaze, but I couldn't help thinking about all the women he must bring to this place. "Is anything ever good enough for you?"

"You."

My heart skipped a beat and my mouth went dry. Tyler moved in and I hesitantly backed up against the window. The glass slipped from his hand and shattered against the floor, but I hardly noticed it.

He reached over and ran his hand down my arm, caressing my skin softly. I trembled at his touch. It felt amazing.

"What are you doing?" I managed.

Tyler paused, his hand on my wrist. "What do you think?"

"I didn't come here to let you take me to bed," I said.

"You didn't?" He had that playful grin on his face that I found so damn irresistible. "What did you think I was bringing you back here for? To bake s'mores?" He ran a finger up my arm, all the way up my shoulder and then my neck. He stopped at my neck as if he was counting my heartbeat.

"I-I-I'm not one of your whores," I stammered, my heart hammering within my chest.

"I never said you were," Tyler said, coming in close. The heat from his body was enough to send me up into flames. The next thing I knew, his burning lips were on my neck and I threw my head back against the window, letting out a giant sigh.

*I shouldn't be doing this, I told myself frantically. I don't know this man.*

But I couldn't move. Tyler had claimed me, and my body was his playground. His hands roamed down to my breasts and he squeezed them slightly before moving down to the hem of my dress.

He moved his lips to mine and slipped his tongue into my mouth. We kissed with passion as he grabbed my legs and hoisted me onto his waist, pressing my ass cheeks up against the window. It felt incredible, and any resistance I felt was washed away from the powerful lust coursing through my body.

If there was anyone who could see us in the surrounding hi-rise buildings, they had a wonderful view of my ass.

I was surprised when Tyler let me go, dropping me back to my feet, and knelt down before me. Looking up at me with that intense gaze, he raised my dress up to my abdomen, revealing my panties. He sniffed once, as if inhaling my scent, then he pulled them down, tossing them onto the wooden floor.

He placed his hands on my moist mound and I groaned. He slid a single finger inside and I gasped as he probed the inside of my canal for a moment before taking it back out. Even I could see the juices covering his finger. I was already soaking wet.

Looking up at me, he stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked on it.

"Sweet," he growled.

He took two of his fingers and spread my lips wide open like a butterfly, and began licking forcefully, sending me to cloud nine. While he licked, he stuck a finger back inside, sliding it in and out. Slowly, he added another.

The sensation was incredible. I could hardly take it as he thrust in and out, now with three fingers. Wet, *plop* sounds filled the loft as he wiggled his fingers inside of me, scattering my juices all over my thighs. A force was building inside my stomach. I reached down and held onto his shoulders, weak in the knees, almost collapsing against the window.

He looked at me with a feral scowl. I felt like he was a wild animal, claiming me as his property as he pumped deep inside of me.

Finally, I could take no more. A raw scream escaped my throat. It was so loud that I thought his neighbors could hear me. Too bad. My limbs rippled from the powerful sensation coursing through my body.

Slowly, Tyler pulled his fingers out. They were covered by my juices and he licked at his fingers like an animal.

He rose to his feet and grabbed onto me. I was still weak from my mind-blowing orgasm, but he didn't care. He walked me over to the couch and bent me over. I could hear the sound of him unzipping his pants, and then I

thought I heard the sound of him ripping open a package. I'm sure he was well-stocked.

He entered me and I gasped as he felt incredibly large. My juices quickly lubricated him, and he began to pound into me as I dug my fingernails into the couch, barely able to take him.

While he hammered into me, he pulled my dress all the way above my breasts and snatched off my bra, grabbing onto my nipples and twisting them. I gasped in pain, and all I could hear was the sound of smacking flesh filling the room as his chiseled thighs smacked into my ass.

A fire was building in my stomach again. I was on the brink of an incredible orgasm, more crazy than the last. Before I could come, Tyler pulled out. I tried to turn around, but he held me against the couch.

"Beg for it," he commanded me.

I needed his magnificent tool, which I still hadn't seen, back inside me. My body craved it. But my pride was getting in the way.

"No," I said angrily.

He pulled me up against his body and placed his hand around my throat from behind me. I could feel his hard cock throbbing against my back. The pulses were strong and powerful.

"Beg for it," he repeated, his breath hot on my neck. He took his other hand and grabbed my breast, squeezing it firmly.

I leaned my head back into him and moaned. His touch felt incredible.

"Do it," he insisted. When I didn't immediately comply, he pushed me forward over the couch and took his dick and smacked my ass with it. Then he teased his head around my entry, rubbing me with the tip.

"Oh God. Give it to me please!" I cried.

"Louder."

"Fuck me!" I yelled.

My eyes went wide and I gasped when he thrust himself balls deep inside of me. This time, he pounded me with incredible force while holding onto my waist. I knew that I was going to be sore, but I didn't care. My body was on fire and it felt so fucking good.

His grip on my waist tightened, so hard that it was painful. Inside, I could feel his cock grow even harder. I knew he was going to come soon, and so was I.

His breathing became labored and heavy, his thrusts slower and deliberate. Before he could climax, I came first, screaming like a psycho, digging my fingernails into the couch.

Tyler was next. One powerful thrust, and he collapsed against my back with a grunt, his sweat melding with mine, his cock contracting powerfully inside of me. He held me there for a few moments in a seductive silence.

I couldn't believe what I'd done. I was only supposed to be going to Roxy's to have a little fun, not end up back at his place becoming one of his new conquests.

*You made a big mistake, Vicky, I told myself.*

But didn't I deserve it? The sex had been incredible. Mind-blowing. *Addicting.*

Tyler apparently wasn't done with me just yet. He pulled out of me and straightened. I stood up, my insides feeling sore, and I turned around. Tyler still had his shirt on, though unbuttoned, showing off his incredible abs that were slick with his sweat, and his pants pooled at the bottom of his legs. His cock, semi-flaccid, was as big as I thought it would be, with a huge, luscious head. The condom he was wearing hung half off his shaft, almost filled to the brim with fluid.

He stepped out of his pants, took me by the hand, and led me up the winding stairs. The top of the stairs let out into a large room that was black and grey. A king-size bed stood before us, welcoming and inviting.

*This is my time to say that I need to go, I said to myself, and forget that this ever happened.*



"Maybe I should go," I said.

Tyler pushed me toward the bed. "I can't allow that." Slowly, he peeled off the condom and then walked over to the wastebasket and tossed it inside.

"I can run out of here if I want to," I threatened.

He walked back over in front of me and grinned. "Try it."

I didn't move. I was such a wimp.

"On your knees," he commanded.

I hesitated. Who did he think he was? And how the hell could he possibly be recovered in five minutes?

"Now!" he roared.

Despite his tone, I giggled until I was laughing so hard my sides hurt. He stalked forward and grabbed me. "You think it's funny?" he growled at me. I was ashamed to admit it, but I was turned on to the max. "Get on your fucking knees."

"Make me," I said fearlessly to his face.

He pushed me down so fast I had no time to react. On my knees, I was level with his dick. Up close, oh my, it seemed even bigger than before, and my mouth was watering for it. I stared at it longingly, even noting his chiseled thighs surrounding it. I ran my hand up his thigh, marveling at the power in them.

I had to admit, Tyler was the epitome of male masculinity. Powerful and magnificent.

"Now show me what you can do with those lips."

Before I knew it, he was inside of my mouth and I was close to gagging. Above me, he let out a groan. I pulled back on his shaft to gain respite, sucking gently on his huge head. It didn't take long before he was back rock hard again.

Eager for more, Tyler placed a hand behind my head and guided me along his shaft. It was hard for me to take all of him, but I did the best I could. I

used my right hand to fondle his balls. They felt huge and full—surprising after the load he'd just emptied.

His head felt like it hit the back of my throat and I almost gagged. I pulled away and gasped for breath. This whole time I'm thinking, *I can't believe I'm doing this.*

Tyler only let me get a couple of breaths in before he was back inside of my mouth, thrusting and pumping. His powerful thigh muscles flexed in front of my face as he forcefully pushed inside.

Before long, he was bucking inside of my mouth, testing my gag reflex to the limits, using my mouth like his personal fuck box. I struggled to breathe and to not gag as he held me in place to keep me from gaining a respite.

He let out a feral groan and I felt him growing harder and firmer in my mouth. I knew he was about to come. I couldn't allow him to empty himself down my throat. I wasn't going to let him win.

I could feel his cock pulsating as it rubbed along my tongue, ready to burst. At the last possible second, I jerked away and Tyler gasped.

He was forced to finish himself off and he blew his load all over the floor. Rising to my feet, I watched in fascination as he threw his head back, his muscles rippling, his washboard stomach contracting in and out while he stroked every last drop out of his huge balls.

When he was done, he let out a sigh and straightened before looking at me. I tried not to glance at the mess on the floor, and I wondered who'd clean it up.

"You pulled away," he said in an accusatory tone. "You weren't supposed to."

"Yeah," I replied. "I wasn't going to let you come in my mouth. What do you think I am?"

He walked over to me and grabbed me by the hair. "You have a tart little mouth on you, you know that?"



I CAME AWAKE WITH A GASP. I WAS STILL IN TYLER'S BED, NAKED AS THE DAY I was born. I ran my hand through the soft, rumpled covers, searching. Tyler was gone. I didn't know if he was in the bathroom or what. I just knew my body felt sore all over.

"I see he's brought another one home," said a deep voice.

Startled, I looked up.

Dressed in fancy clothing, there was an older, grey-haired man standing at the edge of the stairs, staring at me.

I stared back at him, mouth wide, when I suddenly realized that I was naked. I quickly snatched the covers and held them to my breasts.

"Who are you?" I demanded, frightened.

"Jonathan, Mr. Locklin's butler." Jonathan nodded his head back down the stairs. "I saw you two when you came in."

My throat was suddenly dry. "Did you see us . . ." my words trailed off.

"Having sex?" Jonathan let out a chuckle. "Heavens, no. I'd never do that."

I looked around, wondering why the hell Tyler's butler was in his room staring at me. I decided that it didn't matter. It was probably time for me to get my shit and leave, but the problem was, my car was still at Roxy's. Tyler drove us here.

"You're wondering why I'm here," he says at the confusion on my face.

Slowly, I nodded, watching him closely.

"I'm here to offer you a ride back home or to your car . . . whichever you may prefer." He chuckled. "Tyler refers to the custom as *the Drop Off*."

Anger swirled within me and I clutched the covers with fury. Tyler had sex with me and now was disposing of me like everyone else. I should've known better.

*I knew I shouldn't have come here!* I raged at myself.

No matter how pissed I got at myself and Tyler, it was no less than I deserved. I mean, who goes on a date with someone who insults them on the very first day they meet, and then goes and has sex with them after?

*A desperate one.*

*Or a really deprived girl,* I thought to myself.

Ever since working for Christine, I never got to go out and enjoy anything for myself, nor had I had any real dates in ages. I suppose a momentary lapse of judgment could be excused if I hadn't lain down with the womanizer from hell.

But the sex had been good—mind-blowingly good—and I had enjoyed every moment of it.

*It was just sex,* I told myself. *Nothing more, nothing less. I need to walk out of here and forget about it and forget about him.*

“You’re angry,” Jonathan noted, pulling me out of my reverie. “Don’t be.”

I knew I shouldn’t reveal my feelings to a stranger, but I couldn’t help myself. “I just can’t believe how he can just . . .”

“Use you and then just leave?” Jonathan offered.

I nodded my head.

He walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed. Normally I’d be jumping away, but he seemed sincere. “Honey, he does it to every girl that walks through that door.” Jonathan pauses as if debating on whether he should continue speaking. “But walking through that door and never coming back is the best thing that will ever happen to you.”

His words chilled me. “Why do you say that?”

He looked at me and I could see sadness in his eyes. “You look like a nice girl, nicer than the ones that usually come through here, and I’m sure you have a bright future ahead of you.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” I say firmly.

Jonathan stared at me and then let out a sigh. “Mr. Locklin has a past.”

My heart skipped a beat. “What kind of past?”

Jonathan took a long time to reply. “I don’t know if I should be saying this, but Tyler’s a scarred young man. Nothing a lot of men don’t go through at some point in their lives, but he took it hard, and because of this, he never stays with any woman for long. Most of them only get one night, two or three at most, but never much longer than that.”

Knowing that Tyler is a womanizer, I should have understood this. But then why am I getting so mad about it? It didn’t help matters that his butler was acting so mysteriously about him.

When I got right down to it, I didn't really know who Tyler Locklin was and had no business in his place.

“I think I’ve heard enough,” I said finally, looking around for my dress. “I’m ready to go now.”

## CHAPTER 8

TYLER

I couldn't stop thinking about her. It wasn't like me at all, my thoughts being consumed by a woman after a night with one. I don't know what it was about Victoria, but she put a spell on me and it frustrated the hell out of me.

For the longest time, I'd been able to sleep with girls and leave them without a second thought. Now, it was hard to get through the day without thinking about her—her smile, her curvy figure, and most of all, her headstrong personality. Not only that, but hearing her story about her being estranged from both parents and struggling to make ends' meet while working for a bitchy egomaniac made me feel for her. She made me want to be a better person, a better man. To provide for her.

It frightened the shit out of me, because for the first time in my life, I felt like I was losing control.

"The board is preparing," Jeff told me.

We were sitting in the boardroom after a long day of work. My peers acted no differently with me than normal, laughing and joking and carrying on, giving no indication that they were about to vote on my removal.

But they were fools, all of them.

I'd make sure I knew everyone who was planning to vote against me. When I came out of this mess triumphant and with a smile on my face, every last

one of them would pay dearly.

"They are?" I asked nonchalantly. "How convenient."

Jeff stared at me. "Aren't you a little bit worried?"

"No," I replied as I kicked my feet up onto the marble table to infuriate Jeff. "Why should I be?"

"Because Charles Whitmore is about to have your job."

He was obviously trying to piss me off by mentioning Charles, but it didn't work. After long, hard thinking, I'd come up with a plan that would make everyone happy and resolve my dilemma.

I'd made a decision.

"That's not going to happen," I said with all confidence.

Jeff raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

It was hard for me to say my next words, but I managed it. "Because I'm ready . . . to behave."

## Victoria

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS, TYLER HAD TAKEN ME ON A WHIRLWIND OF A romance. From upscale night clubs to expensive restaurants, Tyler took me everywhere. We were inseparable.

I had no idea why I'd accepted his offer to start dating, especially considering the warning given to me by practically everyone, but I guess I couldn't help myself.

All it had taken was a bouquet of roses, a bottle of expensive wine and Tyler's playful grin to convince me to go against what my brain was telling me.

In a way, I suppose I felt special. After all, it was rumored that Tyler didn't give a girl more than a day or two of his time, and here he was giving me weeks.

Despite the warning signs going off in the back of my mind, I was thrilled beyond belief. Here was this incredibly handsome and rich guy who could literally have any woman he wanted—and he wanted me.

And the wild, crazy sex that involved a bit of domination? I lived for it. Rough and exciting, each time was like a dangerous adventure where I never knew where I'd wind up.

I was so caught up in my new arrangement that Christine's mistreatment of me at work ceased to bother me. The only thing that mattered in my world was Tyler.



I WAS WORKING WITH APRIL AND GABE IN THE FACTORY ROOM, HELPING WITH THE finishing touches on the wedding gown for Tyler's best friend's wedding, when a young man came walking in.

Tall, blonde and handsome, he was dressed in a business suit, and it looked as if he was looking for something, or someone.

April and Gabe were busy talking to a group of workers while they complained about a problem with a gown, and I was the only one who seemed to notice the guy, so I walked over.

"May I help you?" I asked politely.

The man looked at me for a moment and then smiled. I noticed that he had straight, white teeth. "I'm looking for Victoria Young."

*What the hell could he want with me?* I wondered.

"You're speaking to her."

He was surprised. "Oh." He held out his hand. "I'm Charles Whitmore, an executive from Armex."



For some reason, his name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. But I did recognize the name of Tyler's company.

After a moment, I took his hand and gently shook it. He firmly had my attention now. I wondered what this was going to be about. "Nice to meet you," I said. "So what brings you here?"

*And why the hell are you looking for me?*

Charles shifted on his feet and then glanced over at April and Gabe. "Can we talk?"

"I'm kinda busy," I said. "If you can just tell me what this is about."

Charles gave me a look that brought me up short. "It's about Tyler."



"YOU'RE MAKING A BIG MISTAKE," CHARLES SAID TO ME.

We were sitting in a high-class coffee shop down the street from the corporate fashion building. He ordered me a latte that was topped by a mound of whip cream.

I played with it a little. "How's that?"

"Tyler . . . he's no good." He gestured at me. "This relationship he has going with you? It won't last."

I scowled. "I fail to see how our relationship is any of your business." Honestly, I didn't know why I agreed to talk with this Charles guy.

Jonathan's words came back to me in that moment, filling me with anxiety.

*Walking through that door and never coming back is the best thing that will ever happen to you*

Charles pressed his fingertips together and gave me a direct gaze. "It does when it affects my position at my company."

"What are you talking about?"

“Before you came around, Tyler was on the verge of losing his position due to his . . . uncouth behavior. He’d slept with so many women that I’m sure he lost count. His dalliances were costing us, and when confronted about it, he refused to stop—which is why we were going to vote to remove him. Then you show up, and suddenly he says he’ll clean up his act.”

I glared. “So what are you saying? He’s just playing me?”

Charlie nodded. “Like a fiddle.”

“I think I’ve heard about enough of this,” I hissed. “I’ve let you waste enough of my time.” I rose from my seat, my latte still untouched.

“A word of caution, Miss Young,” Charles said, giving me pause. “Keep messing with Tyler, and you’ll likely find yourself without a job.” He looked me up and down critically. “And after everyone finds out you were Tyler’s little whore, you’ll only find work on the street corner with the looks you have.”

His words were more than I could take. Without thinking, I grabbed the latte and splashed it all over his suit.

“Fuck you, asshole!” I growled.

Cutting my eyes, I turned and walked out, leaving him sputtering.

Charles

I WIPE THE WHIPPED CREAM OFF WITH A NAPKIN AND CRACKED A SMILE. THERE was fire in that one. I could see why Tyler was intrigued with her.

My intuition told me this one wasn't quite the same; she seemed more high class. Maybe that's why Tyler was seeing her long-term—she represented a challenge.

Whatever the case, my mission was accomplished. I'd planted the seed in her mind, and her fears and insecurities would do the rest.

“Is everything alright, sir?” a light voice asked. I turned to see a waitress staring at me.

“I’m fine.” I give her a smile and she smiled back.

“Why did that lady throw her latte on you?” she had to ask.

“Her boyfriend left her and she’s having a mental breakdown.”

“Oh that sucks. She didn’t have to take it out on you, though.”

I shook my head. “Nope, she didn’t. So . . . what’s your name?”

## CHAPTER 9

### VICTORIA

“We’re going to meet my father,” Tyler said to me.

We were riding in his limo, because Tyler had begun giving me rides to and from work in the lap of luxury. I was looking forward to going back to Tyler’s place and relaxing. That dream was shattered, however, once I got in the car.

He informed me that his father wanted to meet me. Since Tyler had agreed to clean up his act, his father wanted to meet me.

I was fine with it, but I now had doubts. Warnings from Tyler’s butler—and now, Charles Whitmore—had me on edge. I hadn’t spoken to Tyler about either one of them . . . yet.

“Do we have to?” I asked. “I’m kinda tired.”

Tyler shook his head. “It’ll only take a minute. He just wants to meet you and find out a little about you.”

I groaned.

Tyler placed a hand on my leg and I felt sparks through his fingertips. “Please, baby?” he asked me. “For me?”

I was shocked. I’d never heard him say please to anyone. And he topped it off with *baby*. I had to admit, I liked it.

“Say that again,” I urged him.

“What?”

“Baby.”

He leaned forward and kissed me softly on the lips. “Please, baby.”

I decided then that I’d do anything he asked. “All right,” I said. “Whatever you want.”



WHEN TYLER AND I WALKED INTO THE LOCKLIN MANSION, MY JAW DROPPED . . . and it wasn’t because of the opulence of the place.

There, standing in the foyer with who I assumed was Tyler’s father, was my mother, decked in expensive jewelry and an evening gown that probably cost a fortune, a wine glass in her hand.

“Victoria?” my mother exclaimed with some surprise.

“Mom?” I asked in disbelief.

The man at her side grinned. He was dressed in a suit that looked even more expensive than the one Tyler wore. “Who is this pretty young lady?”

My mother regained her composure. “James, this is Victoria, my daughter.”

James walked forward and grabbed my hand. “You have your mother’s beauty,” he said to me.

I glanced at Tyler as a strange feeling washed over me. Something about this was all wrong. I knew this was too good to be true.

“Thank you,” I replied, a slight blush coming to my cheeks. “You’re too kind.”

Tyler was the first to figure it out. “Wait a minute,” he said. He looked at my mother, then back at me, his eyes going wide. “If this is your daughter, then that means I’m Victoria’s . . .”

“Stepbrother,” I whispered in horror.

## CHAPTER 10

### VICTORIA

Tyler walked back into his bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, his rippling abs moist from a recent shower. I laid in his bed, breathing in and out, recovering from a powerful orgasm.

“So what happens now?” I asked him. “We can’t continue on like this.”

Tyler looked at me, and I found it hard to keep my eyes from straying down to his waist. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“You’re my stepbrother,” I said. “Neither your dad nor my mother will approve of our relationship. They don’t believe it’s proper.”

Tyler scowled. “Fuck what’s proper. I’ve never obeyed the rules before, and I’m not about to now.”

“But not when it comes to something like this.”

Tyler walked over and sat on the bed next to me, and his towel slipped down several notches. “I’ll make them get a divorce.”

I sat up in the bed, shocked. “What?”

Tyler grabbed my hand and placed it on his chest. Beneath it, I could feel his heart beat. “If it’ll make you feel better about being with me, and if it will take away the taboo aspect, I’ll do it.”

I stared at him, horrified. “You can’t do that!”

“Why not? From what you say, your mother hasn’t been very kind to you, and shit, my dad hasn’t been anything but an asshole to me. So what’s the big deal? They’ve screwed us over, and they’re both standing in the way of what we want.”

“I just can’t do that,” I said. “I’d never forgive myself.”

Tyler became quiet. “Do you want to be with me or not?” he asked finally.

“Yes.”

“Okay then.” His lips found my neck, and I could only resist for one second before I gave in to his advance. “Either they’re going to accept us, or I’m going to destroy them.”

## CHAPTER 11

VICTORIA - TWO WEEKS LATER

“Either they’re going to accept us, or I’m going to destroy them . . .”

I let out an explosive breath, my limbs wracked by powerful tremors, and clenched the bed sheets tightly beneath my nails. Wave after wave of pleasure hit me and I arched my back to the ceiling as Tyler’s relentless mouth sucked on my overflowing mound.

“That was explosive.” I sighed when it was over, relaxing back onto the bed. A droplet of sweat dropped from my forehead onto my exposed breasts, and I shivered at the goosebumps that covered my flesh.

With a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, Tyler looked up at me from in between my legs, an impish smile on his face, his lips wet from his meal. Oh, that smile. A smile that could break a million hearts. A smile that had stolen mine.

“There’s more where that came from,” Tyler assured me with confidence.

His deep baritone caused a stirring below, despite what he’d just done to me. But a deep ache warned me that I couldn’t handle much more of what he could dish out.

“Oh no,” I moaned weakly, “I don’t think I can take anymore. Not yet.”

Tyler’s grin grew wider as he reared up from between my legs, displaying his chiseled torso that glistened with sweat, and wiped my juices from his



chin in one smooth motion. “Seriously? I went easy on you, babe.”

Despite my trepidation at a second round with Tyler, I was filled with overwhelming excitement over his lust for me. I’d never had a man want me so fully and utterly. *Never.*

It was still hard to believe that Tyler, an incredibly handsome, rich and eligible bachelor, would want plain old me. Me, a simple girl struggling to make ends meet, working for a ruthless, power-hungry fashion designer who would discard me as soon as I was no longer of any use to her.

What was even more unbelievable was the fact that he was my stepbrother. *My stepbrother.* The words sounded alien to me. The events that had led to this startling revelation were almost too much to process.

In the week since we’d been discovered by our parents, Tyler had gotten into several vicious arguments with his father over our relationship. In the meantime, I avoided my mother, who I’m sure had it out for me as well. I still couldn’t figure out how my mom got a billionaire to marry her, but I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised. She was always good at swindling.

Either way, I wasn’t going to listen to her views on my relationship with Tyler, just like I never let her dissuade me from fashion. The fact that he happened to be my stepbrother really didn’t matter to me. I mean, it’s not like we’d grown up together. Besides, I was angry with her for abandoning me in my time of need.

There was just one problem with my defiance—being with Tyler would most definitely cause disruption in his company. If he’d had trouble before, I could only imagine what he would be up against now.

Tyler had told me that he wasn’t going down without a fight, assuring me that everything would work out in the end.

Still, I had my doubts. Related by marriage aside, maybe our relationship really wasn’t for the best. Tyler was a known womanizer. I could be the flavor of the week. Was it really worth being involved in a scandal for someone who would discard me when they’d had their fill of me?

Better yet, was the drama worth the damage that our relationship was sure to cause to my career?

Tyler straddled me, bending forward to plant a steamy kiss on my lips. I would've protested—after all, he still had my juices all over his lips—but I couldn't deny the intensity of his advance.

“Come on,” he urged after he pulled back, leaving me breathless. “I’m sporting some serious wood here.”

I stared into his pleading eyes, my heart flipping within my chest. God, he was so handsome. So fucking sexy.

*And a fucking heartbreaker,* a little voice said in the back of my head. *Sure to break mine.*

It wasn't the first time that annoying little voice had reared its head. But it was hard to listen to the warnings of that voice when every molecule in my body screamed in need for this man. This sexy beast. My body refused to resist him.

*“A word of caution, Miss Young. Keep messing with Tyler and you’ll likely find yourself without a job. And after everyone finds out you were Tyler’s whore, you’ll only find work on the street corner with the looks you have.”*

For some reason, Charles Whitmore's smug face and insulting words popped in my mind right then, giving me the strength to push Tyler away.

“Good God! The time,” I breathed, scrambling out from under a visibly disappointed Tyler and gathering my clothing scattered on the floor. “Christine is going to kill me. I’m going to be late.”

Tyler sat up in the bed. “Just don't show up.”

I paused, my bra in my hands, staring at Tyler with disbelief. “What?”

His eyes roved over the curves of my body, making me feel like a piece of meat.

“I’ve been thinking. How would you like to work for me?”

My jaw dropped. “Me?” I gasped incredulously a second later.

Tyler gave me that boyish grin that seemed to make me want to follow him to hell and back and enjoy every moment of it. “It would be the perfect

opportunity for the both of us. You get to leave that demanding diva who treats you like shit, and I get to piss everyone off at the same time.” He grinned wider, flashing his perfect, white teeth. “A win-win.”

I should’ve flat out said no. “I-I don’t know,” I stuttered.

“Come on. I could use a smart-mouthed, hot babe like you to keep me in line.”

“Is that what you really think of me? A smart-mouth?”

Tyler grinned. “Among other things, but yes.”

He could insult me and make me love him for it. “Jerk.”

“Seriously, though. I don’t make offers like these lightly.” By the tone in Tyler’s voice, I could tell he was dead serious. He really was offering me a job. “In fact, I’ve never offered anyone a job without going through the proper channels.”

I paused, pondering the gravity of the situation. Though I’d love nothing more than to march into Christine’s office and tell her off, quitting my job with her would mean the end of my career in fashion. She would see to it. One didn’t simply up and quit on Christine Finnerman.

“But my career . . .” I began to protest.

“I could help you with that.”

I placed a hand on my hip and raised my brow skeptically. “How? What could you possibly know about fashion?”

“Not much.”

“Okay then.”

“But I don’t need to. That’s what you’re for. I have the money to fund any projects you might want to work on to get your name out there.”

The breath left my lungs. “You’d do that?” I asked in disbelief. “For me?”

Tyler nodded. “If you do as I ask.” He scratched absently at his abs. “The way I see it, with my resources and your brains and knowledge of the

industry,” he shrugged, his voice gaining excitement as he continued speaking, “who knows? Maybe we can start a new company and I wouldn’t need my father’s approval. I could leave Armex and let it collapse in on itself.”

I nearly swooned as the endless possibilities rolled through my mind. *I can’t believe it*, I thought. *This seems too good to be true*. And you know what they say about that.

“We’ll obviously have to work out the details,” Tyler said, watching me intently while I stood there involved with my thoughts. “But I think we can make it work.”

“So in the meantime, let’s say I do come work for you. How much will you pay me?”

“Double whatever you’re making now.” Tyler paused to glance down mischievously, “and there are benefits.”

My heart began pounding inside my chest. *This has to be some sort of a dream*, I thought, ready to pinch myself to see if I was truly awake. Tyler was offering me everything I could ever hope, or dream of . . . my own career and the man of my dreams.

“What about our parents?” I managed to ask through the turmoil rolling through my mind. “Won’t my coming to work for you complicate matters even further?”

“Don’t worry that pretty little head of yours. I’ll take care of it,” Tyler said with utmost confidence. He got up from the bed, rising like Poseidon from the sea, his magnificent body robbing me of breath. He walked over to me, wrapping his powerful arms around me. “Trust me on this,” he breathed as he delivered a peck on my neck, causing the internal heat in my body to shoot up, his breath hot on my neck. “I’ve got it covered.”

*Walking through that door and never coming back is the best thing that will ever happen to you.*

Jonathan’s unbidden warning screamed at me to run out and never look back.

The next kiss nearly made me melt into his body, making me want to beg right then and there for him to take me again.

*Run! Run far, far, far away,* an errant thought cried.

And I almost did. I almost gathered the strength to push away and run. But another seductive nibble and a deft caress of my side melted any rational thought of defiance away, and I swooned as I allowed him to dip me backward and he covered my neck with passionate kisses.

*Who do I think I'm fooling? He's a god. My God.*

Tyler had me, hook, line and sinker.

"I'm in," I breathed.

## CHAPTER 12

### VICTORIA

*A*fter leaving Tyler's, I practically burned rubber to make it to work. One, because I couldn't wait to see the expression on Christine's face when I told her to eat shit and die, and two, I was thrumming with excitement over Tyler's proposal.

*I can't believe it. That door that I've been waiting for has swung open! Not quite the way I'd planned, but I'll finally be free to live out my dreams!*

I quickly found my usual parking space and rushed on my way. Jubilation swirled through me as I strutted inside Christine's swanky building, a giant smile on my face, my heels clicking against the floor.

"What's got you so chipper today?" a familiar voice behind me demanded as I reached the elevator. "Don't you realize you're late?"

I swirled around, only to see April peering at me suspiciously with a stack of dresses in her hand. She looked extra cute today with her hair swept up into a side pony tail, a pale blush to her cheeks and her eyelids covered in colorful shadow. Besides that, she looked practically stuffed inside the black pants that were a size too small for her. The sad thing was that she was already a size two. That's the kind of messed up crap girls did working in this industry and for Christine, who was notorious for making the girls around here feel terrible about their weight, myself included.

A smile spread across my face. "Who cares?"

April raised an eyebrow, staring at me like I'd lost my mind. "Excuse me? Christine is going to have your ass for breakfast."

"Fuck Christine."

April reared back. "Whoa. What the hell has gotten into you?"

Staring at April's shocked expression, it became too much. I burst out laughing hysterically.

"What is going on?" April demanded in concern when I doubled over, choking with laughter. "Are you on something?"

"I can't breathe," I choked, gasping for breath.

April repositioned the dresses she was holding in one arm and then pounded me on the back. After several rib aching moments, I was finally able to get myself under control.

"What the hell?" April persisted, peering me up and down as if the *real* me had vanished and had been replaced with some nut from the psych ward. "Do I need to call for help or something?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Well it doesn't seem like it," April muttered, unconvinced. "I've never seen you act like this before."

"That's because I've never been this happy in my entire life!"

"What do you mean? What's going on?"

"I'm quitting!"

April gaped. "What?"

I grinned. "It's my last day working for the unbearable witch. The only thing I'll miss is you and Gabe, but I'm sure we'll still talk from time to time."

April frowned. "Vicky . . . are you sure about this? You're basically giving up your career if you walk out on Christine."

“No, I’m not.”

“You’re not? You must have really lost your mind then. Christine will make sure you never work in fashion again. You know as well as I do that she has a penchant for being vindictive.”

“I won’t need Christine’s referrals. I’ll be able to make my own work.”

April peered at me warily. “Oh yeah? How’s that? You’re just starting out in this business with virtually no contacts. How in the world do you expect to get the resources to become successful?”

I smiled sweetly as the elevator door opened. “Tyler Locklin.”

“What? Tyler Locklin—Vicky, what have you gotten yourself into?”

“Sorry, April. Gotta’ go. I’m itching to tell the witch what I’ve been wanting to say for months. I’ll be sure to stop by and tell you and Gabe bye before I leave.”

“Vicky, wait! You’re making a very big mistake!”

The elevator doors slid closed on April before she could finish her protest. I really didn’t know why she was bothering. I was done with Christine for good.

On the top floor, ready to kick ass and take names, I marched purposefully to Christine’s office and kicked her door open.

Seated at her desk with a man who looked vaguely familiar standing behind her, Christine jumped, startled by my brazen entry.

*What the hell am I doing?* I thought in a moment of panic.

“Victoria!” Christine barked with surprise. “What on earth do you think you’re doing marching in here like that?”

“Shut up!” I snapped.

*I can’t believe I just said that,* I thought, my heart pounding wildly within my chest.



Deafening silence descended upon the room, and the man standing behind Christine turned white with shock.

*He probably thinks I'm crazy, talking to the queen of fashion like that, I thought, trying to quell my trembling limbs.*

"Pierre, will you please allow me to deal with this . . . problem," Christine said quietly after a stunned moment.

"Certainly." He bowed his head with respect to Christine and walked out of the room, shaking his head as he passed me.

Christine centered her burning eyes on me like a hawk. "What did you just say to me, young lady?"

"I said shut up," I repeated.

"Do you realize who you're talking to?"

I giggled, fighting the tremors of anxiety rolling through my legs. Despite my anxiousness, I felt powerful. I was finally going to be free, and it felt good to be able to tell the witch what I'd been wanting to say since my first day on the job. "Sure I do. An unbearable, miserable, narcissistic, old hag who is so unhappy with her dull life that she makes a career out of giving young girls poor self-esteem issues."

"How dare you!" Christine raged, jumping to her feet and gripping the edges of her desk with rage, her eyes blazing.

"How dare I?" I demanded, my body shaking from head to toe now. "How dare you! You've treated me like shit since I first started working for you and made my life a total hell. You know, at first I thought it was worth it. I thought that, hmmm, maybe working for this vile, evil woman would open doors for me one day, and I'll only have to suffer for a little while before I can find my own way. But you know what? Eat shit! Because it's not worth putting up with it anymore. I quit!"

The look of utter shock on Christine's face made my day and I let out a burst of maniacal laughter that I'm sure made Christine think I'd gone stark-raving mad.

This time, I didn't laugh as long as I had with April, and when I was done, I turned to leave but stopped to add, "Oh and by the way, you can save your little threats about how you will ruin me and how I will never work in this city again."

I flashed one last triumphant smile the witch's way and swirled around and began to leave the office. But the sound of Christine's voice brought me up short a second later.

"Victoria."

I should've ignored her and kept going. After all, I'd gotten the last word in, and there was no reason to engage her further and listen to her empty threats about how she would ruin me, but for some reason, the tone in her voice made me freeze. I *had* to hear what she was going to say.

Slowly, I turned around to see Christine regarding me with amusement in her eyes.

*Why is she smiling?* I wondered. *I just told her off. She should be steaming mad and wanting to kick my ass out of her office.*

"Do you recall when you first came to work for me?"

"Yeah? It was on a day that—"

She interrupted me, obviously not looking for me to actually answer her question. "You signed a contract."

Her words were like a sucker punch to the stomach.

I licked my lips that had suddenly gone as dry as a desert. "So? What does that matter?"

Now it looked like Christine was the one holding back maniacal laughter. "Do you recall what was in the contract, Miss Young?"

The room began to spin around me as panic began to seep in.

I'd been so desperate to get the job working for Christine, I hadn't thought to go read through it all, eager to sign my soul away for the chance at a

future career in fashion. A chance at reaching that first step in achieving my dreams.

"No," I admitted.

Christine grinned. "The terms and conditions were that you cannot terminate your job with me without at least a sixty-day notice for any reason outside of a medical or family emergency without opening yourself to legal ramifications."

It took a lot to steady myself. Any second and I was going to faint.

Christine looked me over while speaking with glee. "And since the only emergency it looks like you're in is a dire need to lose another twenty pounds off your enormous rear end . . ." Christine's smile took over her entire face. "I could sue your fat ass off."

It was all I could do to stay standing. "Y-y-you can't do that," I stammered.

Christine crossed her arms across her chest. "Watch me."

"That's not legal. Besides, it's not like I actually *have* anything to sue for."

Christine uncrossed her arms and leaned forward across her desk, boring into me with suddenly cold, calculating eyes. "Do you really want to take that chance with me, Victoria?"

When I didn't reply, Christine let out a chuckle, a heartless, evil sound that felt like a knife was being jabbed in my side. "I didn't think so." She snapped her fingers and did her customary 'shoo the fly' gesture. "Now go make my coffee."



"SHE'S JUST DOING THIS TO KEEP ME CHAINED HERE!" I SOBBED INTO MY HANDS. "She's too sadistic to let me out of my contract and pursue my own career elsewhere."

"I'm sorry, Vick," April cooed, "but you should've known better than to try Christine. In fact, I'm in shock that you're still here. Telling Christine to shut up and calling her a miserable hag?" April shook her head and let loose a

chuckle of disbelief. "No one has ever dared to say anything like that to her before . . . at least no one who has lived to tell the story, that is."

I sniffed, taking the back of my hand and wiping at my tears.

April and I were sitting at a small table. I had an untouched bagel with cream cheese on it while April had one celery stick. I don't know why she bothered. She might as well have had a plate of cotton balls in front of her for all the calories it contained.

News of my insubordination had spread like wildfire. I'd had people casting furtive glances my way and whispering to each other. I knew what they were probably saying. Something along the lines of, *Did you hear about what Victoria said to Christine? She must have been born with a set of balls.*

"I know, right? I should be gone. If anyone else had said what I said, they'd have been fired in a New York minute. But me? She threatens to sue me to keep me working for her. It just goes to show how much she delights in my misery." I shook my head angrily. "She hates the fact that I'll be able to make a career for myself without her help."

"Will you though?" asked April skeptically.

I sniffed and then stared at her. "Will I what?"

"Be able to make a career for yourself? You still have a lot to learn, Vicky."

"Yeah." I paused. "Tyler said that he would help me in any way he can." I quickly outlined Tyler's offer to help me fund my career and maybe start a business together.

April studied me for a long moment before speaking. "You know I love you, Vick, but I'm sorry. Do you honestly believe this guy? You seriously can't be that naïve, Vick. The dude's a major player. He probably tells girls stuff like that all the time just to get them in bed."

"No, it's not like that, April," I hissed irritably, surprised at the anger dripping in my voice. I paused for a moment, sucking in a deep breath to calm myself before continuing. "At first I was like you, thinking he was a

big time player, but I've since found out that he's not like that at all. He's got another side to him."

*Who am I trying to convince? April or myself?*

"I hope you're right, Vicky." April really didn't believe me, and a small part of me wondered if I didn't believe it myself. "But wait . . . didn't you find out that the guy is like your stepbrother or something?"

I shrugged. "Yeah? So?"

"So? Isn't that like kind of . . ."

I rolled my eyes at her insinuation. "Oh please, we're not related. Heck, we were total strangers until not so long ago."

"I guess you're right on that," April conceded after a moment of thought. "But either way, it's still going to make everything even more difficult. Besides, Vick, Christine owns your soul." Her eyes seemed to say to me what she wouldn't say, *maybe it's for the best*.

"But that's the thing . . . maybe I can get out of my contract."

April shook her head, taking a quick nibble on her celery stick. "Are you kidding me? Christine has like an army of lawyers. You'd never get out of it. I don't care what Tyler is telling you. Once he knows you're that much of liability, he'd drop you like a hot potato."

"You think so?"

April nodded. "I know so."

"Hey bitches!" chirped a familiar voice. Gabe came walking up to our table with a tray of food. Unlike April, he actually had food on his plate, a big fat hot dog and a side of fries. Gabe was as skinny as a rail, but he could eat as much as he wanted without getting fat. It was so unfair. So, so unfair.

Animated as a cartoon, Gabe sat his tray down on the table and then took his seat. "Hey Vick, you're like my fucking bitch of the hour! I hear you totally told Christine off."

I held in a groan. I really didn't feel like talking about anything right then, least of all my confrontation with Christine. "You heard right."

"Hell yeah!" Gabe picked up his hot dog and took a huge bite out of it before asking me his next question with a mouthful of food. "Tell me exactly how it went down. I want all the details!"

I shook my head and picked up my bagel, only to find my stomach turning. I had absolutely no appetite.

"You don't wanna know."

## CHAPTER 13

TYLER

*A*fter Victoria had left, I'd taken a hot shower and started getting ready for work. I was buttoning my last cuff when Jonathan appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Is there something wrong, Master Locklin?"

I turned away from the mirror to regard the older man with irritation, who was peering at me with a look of concern. "What did I tell you about calling me Master, Jonathan?" I demanded. "It makes me sound like a damn slave owner."

I turned back to the mirror and rolled my shoulders, examining my appearance. There was a sparkle in my eye and a glowing flush to my skin. I knew I was handsome, but there was something more going on here. I looked . . . alive. More alive than I could ever remember.

*It's Victoria*, a voice in the back of my mind said. *She's done this to me*. It was scary, the way she made me feel. Even scarier, the way she made me lose control of rational thought.

*What was I thinking, offering her something like that?*

What the hell did I know about fashion? Better yet, I don't even really know what *she* knows. How could I offer to fund such a thing? I was supposed to be a damned businessman.

*I'll just explain to her later that I didn't really mean what I said, I thought. Much later.*

"I'm sorry Mast-, umm, Tyler," Jonathan replied, breaking me out of my reverie. "It's a terrible habit, I suppose. Call me old-fashioned."

"Well get with the times. This isn't the 1800s anymore."

"You're right, sir. I'll try to be more thoughtful of that in the future." He paused. "Will we be taking the customary drive to Armex headquarters?"

I shook my head, turning away from the mirror and walking over to the bed to shoulder on my business coat. "No. I want to head by the Locklin estate. I'd like to pay my father a little visit."



"I TRUST YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH VICTORIA IS OVER," MY DAD SAID AS I STOOD before his desk in his study. A steaming coffee mug was before him, right beside the morning newspaper he routinely read before being chauffeured off to his office at Armex.

I did my best to hide my grin. "No. As a matter of fact, it's not."

Dad's head snapped up sharply. "What did you say?"

"Our relationship, it's not over. It's only just begun."

He pushed the paper across his desk and narrowed his eyes at me. I could tell he was pissed off, though he was doing his best to hide it.

"I warned you what would happen if you didn't break this thing off, Tyler," he growled.

"I know," I said in an offhand manner that I knew would make him want to jump my shit.

His jaw bulged, a sign that I'd indeed gotten to him this time. "So why are you still with her? She's your stepsister." He continued, his voice raising a few octaves. "Do you have any idea what kind of image problems this relationship will cause for Armex?"



I chuckled. "You know what? You're hilarious. First you badger the fuck out of me about settling down. Then, when I finally do find a girl to settle down with, she's not good enough for you."

"That's not true and you know it, Tyler," Dad growled. "You know very well why I don't approve of this relationship." He snorted with contempt. "If you can even call it that. And by the way, you haven't fooled me one bit. I still don't believe that you're willing to settle down. You want to know what I think?"

I crossed my arms. "You're going to tell me anyway, so go ahead."

"I think you got scared shitless when I threatened to replace you with Charles Whitmore, so you hastily latched onto the first girl you could find to put up with your bullshit to show me you'd changed." He scowled. "Well, you can drop the act now, Tyler. As long as you end this farce of a relationship and continue to behave, you're in no danger of losing your position with our company."

I hated to admit it, but for the first time since entering the room, I was pissed. My father was implying that I was scared of him and his threats when the truth was, I wasn't afraid of any fucking body. "Is that what you honestly think? You think that my relationship with Victoria is a farce?"

Dad gave me a puzzled expression. "It is, isn't it?"

"No!" I said sternly with my most convincing voice.

My dad stared at me for a few moments before a surprised look took over his face as it dawned on him. "You're telling the truth, aren't you? There really is something between you two. I must admit, Tyler, I'm shocked."

I swallowed, feeling a heavy sensation pressing against my chest. I hated it. I hated how Victoria made me feel . . . like I was in . . .

*I can hardly even think those words. I even promised her help with her career, I thought, when I don't even know if I'd be able to keep my word.*

Hiring her was one thing; that I *could* do. But promising that I'd help her start a fashion business? What the fuck was I thinking?

*I wasn't thinking, that's the problem, I thought. My mind was mush. I'd have said anything if it meant I'd be able to fuck her again.*

There was something about being with Victoria that fucked with me.

*She's dangerous*, a voice in the back of my mind warned. *She could ruin you*. Not that I wasn't well on my way to doing that myself.

My dad's voice broke me out of my reverie as I pushed the unwanted voice out of my thoughts.

"Well, Tyler?"

"Look," I growled. "We aren't related. I really don't see the big deal here."

Dad stared. "You're not stupid Tyler, but let me spell it out for you. It's not that big of a deal, you're right. But you know how the media spins things."

"Who cares what these people think, Dad? Maybe they shouldn't live their lives judging others and mind their own damn business."

He took a deep breath, gathering himself. "Maybe in another time and place I'd agree with you, Ty, but these people that you need to please are not just regular old people. They're our customers, or potential customers. The very people that allow you to live the lifestyle that you do. You do care about that, don't you?" He shook his head. "I don't even see why I have to point this out to you. You know better. You know that our competitors will have a field day with this."

"Well it's too late now, Dad. What's done is done, and this isn't just any old relationship that I can just end . . ."

"Well, son, I think you're going to have to make a decision. Victoria or your position at Armex."

"That's such bullshit! I'm not breaking up with her," I declared defiantly.

"Tyler-"

"In fact," I said loudly, speaking over him, "I'm going to hire her, even if it is short-lived. So not only will you be firing your son, but your stepdaughter too!"



“THAT’S JUST FIVE,” JEFF SAID AS HE LEANED BACK IN HIS SEAT ACROSS FROM ME. I’d summoned my fellow colleague to my office for a little a private chat about what to do about the soon-to-come vote for my removal. He was enjoying a cheeseburger with bacon and fries from Wendy’s while I dined on a grilled chicken sandwich. “You need at least six.”

“Damn,” I muttered.

“It’s that God damn Charles Whitmore,” Jeff growled, grabbing his Coke and taking a sip before setting it back down. “If it weren’t for him, you’d be in the clear.”

“Fuck that dude.”

“Yeah.” Jeff swallowed and then stared at me. “But why go through all this trouble anyway? Why not just do what your father asked? Your stepsister can’t be worth all this trouble, can she?”

“She’s worth every bit of it, Jeff,” I said firmly.

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this. A few months ago, there was no chick on planet Earth that was worthy of your affection.” Jeff finished off the rest of his cheeseburger and then shook. “I can’t imagine it, though.”

“Imagine what?”

“Banging my own stepsister.”

I grinned. He caught me off guard on that one.

“Anyway,” I said, abruptly changing the subject, “Who’s on the fence in all this? All we have to do is get one of them to side with me.”

Jeff picked up a napkin and wiped his hands before dropping it in the Wendy’s bag. Grabbing a fry and then dipping it in ketchup, he sat back in his seat and leveled a serious gaze on me. “Well, there’s Ritchie and Kevin.”

“What about them?”

Jeff waved his red-tipped fry at my face. “Well, Rich wants an apology and he might consider voting in your favor. He doesn’t like you, but if he had a chance to stick it to Charles, he’d take it.”

I snorted. “An apology? For what?”

Jeff popped the French fry in his mouth and chewed. “For sleeping with his ex.”

“Seriously?”

Jeff nodded. “Her name is Mandy Lane, remember her?”

I racked my brain for the girl’s face, but I couldn’t come up with an image. “No,” I said finally. “I don’t.”

Jeff grabbed another fry and waved it theatrically. “That’s unfortunate. Very unfortunate.”

“Yeah, even more unfortunate because I’m not apologizing. From what you said, he wasn’t even with her anymore. Why does he even care?”

“Oh come on, Ty. You know how it is, he was hoping to rekindle things.”

“Look, just forget all this scheming. Whatever happens, will happen. If my dad wants to help remove me, then so be it.”

The truth was that my pride would never let me grovel, even if it meant keeping my job. It was just one of my pitfalls as a man. My pride always got in the way.

Shaking his head, Jeff popped his fry into his mouth, smacked his hands together several times to rid himself of salt and then stood up. “Well, it’s your decision, buddy. I’d hate to be in your position,” he warned as he grabbed his leftover fries and dumped them into his Wendy’s bag as he prepared to leave my office. “It’s your future on the line, after all.”

## CHAPTER 14

### VICTORIA

"*I* can't come work for you," I said, holding back tears. I was sitting beside Tyler, who'd shown up at the end of my shift in his limo after a long, arduous day at work.

Tyler looked at me, making my heart flip.

*My God, I can't get enough of him*, I thought. It never ceased to amaze me how the man could just turn me into mush with one simple look.

"Why not?"

*He seems to be taking this news well*, I thought, searching his face for disappointment. I saw none. For some reason, that bothered me.

Holding back my crocodile tears, I explained what happened when I'd confronted Christine. "She doesn't want me to work for anyone else," I said as I finished my tale. "She revels in my misery."

"What a sadistic cunt," growled Tyler.

He still wasn't breaking down in tears. Not that I'd expected that, but I was hoping for a little more disappointment at least.

"Tell me about it," I muttered. "I felt like such an idiot when I remembered my contract. I should've known I'd forgotten something."

"Don't beat yourself up over it," Tyler soothed. "You were in the heat of the moment. You couldn't have known."

*But you should be more upset about this*, I thought. *You seemed so excited this morning, but now you seem . . . subdued.* It pissed me off that I didn't have the courage to come right out and tell him that.

The cabin fell silent as our driver, Jonathan, rolled to a stop at a stoplight.

"So what are we going to do?" I asked a moment later. "I must admit, I was totally looking forward to working with you." I flashed a nervous smile at him. "And then later on, maybe be your partner."

Tyler hesitated, and for a second I saw indecision flicker in his eyes.

*Is he having second thoughts?* I wondered. I hated that about myself. I'm a pretty headstrong girl most of the time, but I do have my insecurity issues too. The thought bothered me more than I wanted to admit. It meant that I'd been a fool all along.

When Tyler didn't respond right away, I shifted in my seat, feeling an almost overwhelming panic take control of my limbs. "Are you okay?" I asked, trying my hardest to keep my voice level and firm.

Tyler coughed and shook his head. "Uh, yeah. I was just thinking."

"About what?" my voice cracked.

*Damnit.* Another moment longer and I was sure I'd burst into tears. *If that happens*, I thought, *I'm jumping out at the next stop light and never looking back.*

Tyler finally seemed to sense my anxiety and wrapped a consoling arm over my shoulder. "Don't worry, babe. I think I know who can help."

"Who?" I wondered, trying not to cry.

"Brad, a lawyer friend of mine," Tyler replied confidently. "I had a meeting planned with him at Bixby's diner tomorrow during lunch."

"Bixby's," I muttered. I thought I'd heard of that one, a trendy restaurant near Christine's. It was a little upscale and out of my league.

"Yeah. Anyway, we were going to go over the legal options I have if I'm removed. How about you stop by on your lunch break tomorrow? We'll talk

to him about it, see if there's anything you can do to get out of it. If not, we'll just have to wait."

"He'd do that?" I asked, swallowing back the lump in my throat. Just Tyler having his arm around me was doing a lot to calm my nerves. The man was out of this world. He could make me suspicious of him, doubt myself, and love him all at once.

Tyler chuckled. "Yeah. He owes me big time."

"For what?"

Tyler grinned. "You remember where we first met?"

I rolled my eyes. "How could I forget?" Images of Tyler's chiseled thighs and enormous bulge flashed in front of my eyes, making the heat rise within my body.

*Your lips would look good wrapped around my . . .*

"Well those guests you guys were fitting were for Brad's wedding, and guess who's footing the bill?"

"Okay," I said, smiling. It was nice to know that Tyler would do that for someone, even if it was a drop in the bucket for him.

Tyler planted a kiss on my cheek. "Everything will be all right, baby."

My breath quickened at his words and his hand that was now on my thigh.

"What are you doing?" I demanded

Tyler's beautiful eyes sparkled with mischief. "You left me hanging this morning. I'm just getting what I've been waiting for all day."

I glanced uneasily up at the front of the limo. There was a glass window separating us and Jonathan, but I wasn't sure if he could see through it.

"In here? While he's driving?"

My breath quickened as Tyler's eyes bore into me with an intensity that made my thighs quiver like Jell-O.

Tyler pushed my legs open wide and winked at me, giving me a grin that said, *I'm about to fuck you and you're going to love it*. Who could resist?



THE NEXT DAY, AFTER A GRUELING MORNING WITH CHRISTINE, WHO'D SENT ME around the building like a chicken with my head cut off, running errand after impossible errand, I stopped by Bixby's to meet up with Tyler and his friend, Brad, to have lunch.

After the hot session I'd been treated to in the back of Tyler's limo, I was anxious to see my beautiful boyfriend again and to meet his childhood best friend. Tyler seemed to limit those he called friends, and I was curious to see what he was like.

"Looks like you're in a bit of a pickle," Brad announced, closing the last page of the form and sliding it across the smooth, marble table to me. "She's right. I'd recommend going ahead and giving your notice."

Though not as handsome as Tyler, Brad was a very attractive guy. When I'd arrived at the restaurant, he greeted me like the utmost gentleman, pulling out my seat and giving my hand a kiss, which had prompted a jealous warning from Tyler. The two began bickering back and forth over it, and I thought for a minute that they'd come to blows when I finally realized that they were just playing.

After that playful introduction, we sat down to figure out our orders. It wasn't long after our food came that we got down to business and I'd given Brad my contract to look over.

My heart fell into my chest as I took the form and slid it back into my purse.

*So much for that*, I thought with disappointment.

Despite knowing how badly I wanted out of my contract, Tyler didn't seem too bothered by it. *Here I go again*, I thought as the familiar feelings of suspicion began to creep back in. I did my best to dismiss the feelings.



“That’s pretty much your only option,” Brad said, picking up his knife and slicing into the premium steak he’d ordered.

“I guess I’ll go ahead and give her notice then,” I said slowly.

Beside me, Tyler became quiet, arousing my suspicions further.

My heart pounded within my chest as I was overcome with a volley of emotions. The worse part of it all was the look in Tyler’s eyes. It was one of indecision.

*It’s not all in my head, after all.*

I wanted to accuse him of going back on his word, and I almost did, but I didn’t want to start an argument in front of Brad, who’d been nothing but polite to me.

Right then, the waitress came up, a blonde with a bad dye job.

“Is everything going alright?” she purred, moving closer to Tyler than I was comfortable with.

“Fine, thanks,” Brad said shortly, flashing her a boyish grin.

“I’d like another glass, please,” Tyler asked politely.

The waitress grinned as if he’d offered her a night of hot sex. “Coming right up, handsome,” she giggled, playfully clapping him on the shoulder.

Tyler grinned back at her, his eyes sparkling.

That was more than I could take. The only thing that kept me from jumping up from my seat and dragging Miss-Bad-Dye-Job across the restaurant was the fact that I didn’t want to embarrass myself in front of Tyler’s friend.

“I have to go,” I announced suddenly as soon as the waitress sashayed off. I jumped up from my seat, trying unsuccessfully to keep my limbs from trembling.

Tyler started to get up from his seat, but I quickly motioned him back down. “Already?”

*I have to go to keep from going into a rage and embarrassing us both in front of your best friend.*

“Yeah. Christine needed me to schedule a very important upcoming show for her as soon as I got back from lunch.” I flashed a fraudulent smile at Brad. “It was nice meeting you, Brad. Thank you so much for your counsel, and I hope your wedding is one to remember.”

Brad smiled back and nodded his head at me. “It was no problem, and it was nice meeting you too. You have a nice day.”

“I will.” I tossed a quick glance at Tyler, trying to keep a straight face. “Thanks for the meal.” I turned and began walking away from the table.

“What? I don’t get a kiss?” I heard Tyler call behind me.

I ignored his question and kept walking out of the restaurant, grateful that he couldn’t see the tears of frustration rolling down my face. My emotions were on a roller coaster, and I needed to get out of the situation before I did something I’d regret.

Tyler

I IMMEDIATELY RESISTED THE URGE TO JUMP UP AND FOLLOW VICTORIA OUT OF THE restaurant.

*I’ll just end up making things worse if I go after her,* I thought, angry that I hadn’t been able to hide the fact that I was having second thoughts about our future business venture.

Telling her how I felt after her jealous reaction would only result in her feeling like she’d been right all along: I was a manwhore who’d say or do anything to get into the next girl’s pants.

“Geez,” Brad said over a mouthful of steak. “She seemed extra pissed when the waitress flirted with you.”

“She was,” I muttered, glancing down at my food. My stomach turned at the sight and I put down my fork. I’d lost my appetite.

“Damn, this steak is as tough as a donkey’s ass. With what this place charges, you would think you’d get better.” Brad gave me a look as he chewed. “How are you two going to last if she gets mad at that? Chicks hitting on you is an everyday occurrence.”

“Her confidence is a little shook up with all the stuff that’s been going down, that’s all. She’s normally pretty feisty. Anyway, I don’t think that’s what she was really upset at, though it didn’t help.”

Brad raised an eyebrow. “What else then?”

I didn’t respond, because Miss Flirty Pants came over to see if we needed anything.

“No thanks,” I said. “We’re fine.” I avoided eye contact with her.

“So tell me what’s going on. You’re not getting away that easily.” Brad pressed.

“I really don’t want to talk about it. I’m pissed enough at myself about it already.”

Brad paused for a moment and wiped around his mouth with a napkin. “Come on, man. Maybe I can help.”

I knew if I didn’t tell him, he’d just keep bugging the shit out of me. “Okay, fine.” I sighed. I quickly outlined to him what I’d promised Victoria.

Brad let out a low whistle when I was finished. “Man, I can’t believe it.”

“Believe what?” I asked, knowing that I was falling into a trap.

“This chick has got you whipped.”

“Oh shut the fuck up. And hey, I’m not the one getting married.”

“Yeah, but I never swore off serious relationships either. I mean, after Candice—”

“Can you not mention her name?” I snapped.

Brad managed to look guilty “Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring her up. I know that one’s a tough subject.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” I said sarcastically. “But really, I know what you mean. I didn’t think I’d ever get back into a real relationship either. But Victoria . . .” I shook my head, looking for the words. “She’s just different. She’s beautiful, smart, headstrong, knows what she wants and—”

“She’s your stepsister.”

“Exactly.”

“I guess that does add a little excitement to it.”

Brad took a swig from his wineglass and shook his head. “This is some crazy shit. The one girl that you finally decide that you actually want to be with winds up being your stepsister. I can’t believe your luck.”

I shrugged. “Stranger things have happened.”

“Ain’t that the fucking truth.” Brad set his wine down and his expression turned serious. “But . . . I gotta ask, and don’t get pissed . . . is she really worth it? I mean, is it worth losing your job over her?”

My immediate impulse was to snap at Brad’s suggestion, but I resisted. The truth was, I didn’t know what anything was anymore. I wasn’t used to dealing with this kind of emotion, and it was messing with my head.

*I don’t know how to feel or to think, I thought. I swore I would never be in this position again, worrying about another female and fulfilling her wants, needs and desires, only to be betrayed by her in the end. Yet, here I am, trying to figure out how I can keep my job and keep her all at the same time. And for what?*

It was scary, the feelings that Victoria evoked in me. She made me want to be a better man. She made me want to treat her with the respect that she deserved, made me want to be her knight in shining armor. For anyone else, it would have been a godsend. But for me, it was all new, and it both scared me and pissed me off at the same time.

*I've got to do something about this, I thought. I can't keep on like this—wanting her but too afraid of being with her.*

“Anyway,” I said, changing the subject because I didn’t want to talk about it anymore until I actually had it sorted in my head. “I’m calling my dad’s bluff. I still have my doubts he’ll go through with it, but if he does call a vote to remove me, I want to know my options.”

Brad sat back in his chair and pushed his half-eaten steak away from him. “Well you have a couple of options, but only two make sense.”

“You can fight it in court, but . . .” Brad scratched at the stubble on his jaw, reluctant to continue. After a moment, he sighed and said, “The fact is, to be completely honest with you, Ty, I’m not looking forward to that. It’s just a lose-lose scenario all around. Not to mention with the wedding coming up and Katie’s constant demands to make everything as perfect as possible, the stress of a drawn-out court case will probably put me in an early grave. So that basically leaves you with two options.”

“And what are those?” I asked, curious.

“The first, and I’m just putting it out there, is to end your relationship with Victoria. I know it’s not what you wanted to hear, but that’s option one.”

I couldn’t help myself. “Well aren’t you just fucking useless.”

“I know, I know, I said it’s not what you wanted to hear, but it had to be said. Look, you’re not going to like option two either, but if your feelings for Victoria are real, it has to be done.”

I gave him one of those *Did I just smell a fart?* puzzled looks.

“You need to have a heart-to-heart with your father.”

## CHAPTER 15

### VICTORIA

The following day on lunch hour, I was sitting at my desk eating a donut. A big, powdered, jelly-filled donut. And I never, ever ate donuts. I was always too worried about gaining a pound. It definitely felt good now, but I'd regret it later. Damn Christine and her giving me self-esteem issues.

But today she could kiss my ass. I didn't give a damn if I gained a pound, because my relationship with Tyler was on the rocks and I was super fucking depressed.

After I left Bixby's, the image of him smiling at the waitress kept flashing in my head, filling me with rage and hurt. At least, that's what I told myself. In all honesty, I think I was just looking for another reason to be mad. He'd really let me down with his nonchalant attitude.

*I should've known he was no good. He just saw me as an interesting conquest. After he got what he wanted from me, I was no longer a priority. All that talk that he would fight our parents on my behalf? Obviously bullshit. He's just a stubborn asshole that wants to defy authority. That, and he just wanted to make a point to his father that he can do what he wants.*

The worst part of it all was that I'd totally humiliated myself and nearly destroyed my career, all on the basis of Tyler's false promises.

*I'm lucky to still be working,* I thought angrily. Thankfully, Christine's ever-present need to torture me was the only reason I still had a job. I'd come so

close to losing everything, all because I lost all rational thought when I was around Tyler. The image in my mind absolutely frightened me.

*I definitely dodged a bullet with that one.*

A ringing sound caused me to jump. My desk phone.

*It's him!* I thought angrily, nearly choking on a mouthful of jelly donut. *It's that womanizing jerk.*

Really, I had no clue if it was him calling, but I convinced myself that it was.

*Don't answer it.*

I knew I shouldn't have. I'd ignored his calls to my cell all day. But for some reason, I couldn't help myself. I wanted to let him know that I was pissed off.

I quickly swallowed the rest of my donut, and after a deep breath, I snatched the phone.

I filled my voice with the nastiest venom I could muster. "I don't want to speak to you ever again!"

"Victoria!" my mother's voice snapped.

"Mom," I breathed in shock. At this time in my life, my mother was the last person on earth I wanted to have a conversation with. "What do you want, Mother?"

Her voice rose several octaves. "What do I want? What do I want?! Do you have any idea how much shame you've put on this family or how much trouble you've caused for me?"

"Seriously, Mom? We haven't spoken in ages, and this is what you choose to call me about? Like, how was I supposed to know that you were married to Tyler's father? We don't even talk!"

She acted as if she didn't even hear me. "You've caused me so much embarrassment, Victoria."

“You’ll be happy to know that Tyler and I are finished,” I cut in, not willing to listen to any more of my mother’s crap. “He’s a womanizing asshole, so you’d better watch out for James. It probably runs in the family.”

I slammed down the phone.

“The nerve of that woman,” I muttered angrily. How she got a billionaire to ever marry her, I would never know.

“Victoria!” Christine called from her office. “Get in here. NOW.” There was no doubt about it, the witch meant business.

I held in a sigh as I quickly brushed the donut crumbs off of my desk and prepared to go face Christine and muttered, “my life is over.”

## Tyler

*I SHOULD CALL IT OFF, I THOUGHT TO MYSELF AS I WAS RIDING HOME FROM WORK. End it right now and cut my losses.*

The way Victoria left the restaurant and had been ignoring my calls said that she was probably considering the same thing.

*It’d be for the best, I tried to tell myself. I can’t even think around her. She drives me crazy with lust. I can’t have that. Since Candice, I’ve always been in control.*

The fact that I’d sacrifice my position at my own company for a girl I’d only known for a short while? It was insane. My pride was one thing. I hated being told what to do by anyone. It’d always been one of my faults and I’d learned to accept that. But knowing you were fighting a losing battle and continuing to fight anyway—that was plain stupid.

It appeared that Brad wasn’t too keen on any legal battle, and if I put my pride aside, neither was I.



I thought about Brad and the options he laid out for me. *Maybe I should just cave in to my dad's demands*, I thought. *Let Victoria go and pretend to be what my father wants me to be.*

The thought hurt as a sharp pain lanced through my chest. Even the *thought* of leaving Victoria hurt. I hated it. Fucking hated it. She made me feel weak.

I suddenly had the overpowering urge to see her, to make things right. Feeling that I was making a big mistake, I dug out my cell and speed-dialed her number.

No answer.

It had been the same thing all day.

If I wanted to get a hold of her, I was going to have to be a bit more direct.

"Jonathan," I called to the front of the limo.

"Yes, Master Locklin?"

I ignored his mistake of calling me master again, my mind on Victoria.

"Turn this thing around and take me downtown. There's someone I need to see."

## Victoria

"FINALLY THE DAY IS OVER," I MUTTERED IN RELIEF AS I GRABBED MY THINGS. I couldn't wait to go home to my rat hole of an apartment and kick back. My feet were killing me. Walking around in 3-inch heels all day will do that to you.

*Too bad I won't have Tyler to rub them for me*, I thought sourly. *Or have the luxury of relaxing in his loft.*

Though I wasn't superficial by any means, that was definitely something I'd miss . . . his beautiful loft, being chauffeured around in a limo, the wining and the dining.

*Johnathan was right. Walking out the door and never coming back again would've been the best thing I could've ever done for myself. I was just too blind to see it until now.*

The problem was that my feelings didn't quite align with what I was trying to tell myself. I felt like I was under a black cloud that was stealing all my sunshine.

"It will pass," I muttered to myself. "Before long, I'll forget a Tyler Locklin ever existed."

After making sure everything in Christine's office was in order, I made my way outside the building.

I'd only gotten two steps out of the front door when a familiar Limo pulled up.

*Oh no.*

I started to turn away and walk as fast as my sore feet could carry me, but the back door swung open and I went weak in the knees at the sight of Tyler climbing out.

He was dressed in his normal business attire, the outfit most likely costing more than my rent. He had a determined look about him. Even though I was angry as hell, I had to admit—he looked sexy. Fucking hot.

*Run*, I urged myself. *Run and don't look back*. But I couldn't move. My feet were rooted in place.

"Hey," Tyler greeted me.

I let out an explosive breath. I was so captivated by the image of him that I'd forgotten to breathe.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, trying to sound as bitchy as possible but failing. "I don't want to talk to you."

Even with it being dusk out, I could see the ever-mischievous sparkle in Tyler's eyes. "You sure about that?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Get lost," I said, but my words didn't sound convincing at all.

Tyler chuckled and then his expression became serious just as fast. He gestured at the limo. "Get in," he growled, his deep voice filling me with dread and excitement all at once.

I hesitated for a moment, my mind filled with turmoil.

*You can still walk away.*

"Now!" He added. "We need to talk." My body tingled at the sexy, guttural sound that seemed to promise retribution and pleasure all at once.

Before I knew it, I was moving past him and into the limo, thinking to myself, *I'm making a big mistake.*

## CHAPTER 16

### VICTORIA

“So this is *your* office?” I asked in disbelief.

Tyler had brought me to his office, nestled on the top floor of the Armex headquarters. The view, which had wall-long windows, was absolutely spectacular. The skyline twinkled in the background, crowded with hi-rise buildings.

In the middle of the room sat a large, cherry wood desk and a giant-sized leather chair that looked inviting. The chair almost reminded me of a throne.

*Made for a King.*

The whole room had a luxurious feel. Swanky and high class. *I could learn to love working in a place like this*, I thought.

The little office Christine had me working in was a dilapidated hovel compared to the splendor before me. Tyler stuck both hands in his pocket and grinned, amused by my awe. “You like it, don’t you?”

I walked over to the glass window and peered out at the breathtaking skyline. “How could I not? It’s stunning.”

“I’m glad you do. It’s the best view in the entire building.” His intense gaze made goosebumps rise on my skin. I averted my eyes back to the skyline.

“This is beautiful,’ I breathed.

“Not as beautiful as you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Stop it.”

“Don’t bait me then.”

That wasn’t my intention in the least. “I wasn’t baiting you.”

*God, he makes me want to kill him, I thought, and screw him at the same time.*

I turned away from the window and crossed my arms. “I bet you thought that two-bit waitress at Bixby’s was beautiful too.”

Tyler sighed. “Come on. Why are you acting so pissed about that? It was nothing.”

“So did you and Brad find a resolution to our—your problem?” I asked, changing the subject. I didn’t want to keep talking about the waitress. He was right, it was nothing.

Tyler shook his head. “No. In fact, he was pretty useless.” A shadow passed over his face. “Let’s not talk about that right now.”

“Well, I’ve decided not to put in my notice with Christine,” I announced suddenly as I watched for Tyler’s reaction.

He was silent for a moment.

“Why?” he asked finally.

I walked away from the window and circled his office, eyeing all the exquisite details before stopping at the side of his desk. “Because I realize that I’d probably be making a very big mistake. I’m lucky that Christine didn’t fire me. I still don’t quite understand that one. If she had, who knows where I’d be?”

Tyler scowled. “You’d be lucky? You said she treats you like shit, remember?”

“I’d rather be treated like shit than to fall in love with a guy, only to find out that he’ll cheat on me once he’s bored and finds another desperate chick to warm his bed.”

“Is that what you think will happen with us?”

“I *know* that’s what will happen. Your past speaks for itself, and I ignored everyone’s warning for far too long,” I said firmly. I couldn’t believe what I was saying, and it was hard to keep my legs from trembling. “In fact, I don’t even know why I agreed to come here. You’ve all but told me with your body language that you’re uncomfortable with me quitting my job and coming to work for you anyway.”

Silence filled the room as we gazed at each other. Tyler made the first move, walking over to his chair and sitting down. He pushed himself back away from his desk, spreading his legs out wide.

The way he looked in that chair, so masculine and inviting, almost made me want to jump him right then and there. *He looks like . . . a boss. The fucking King of the World.*

He tilted his head as he studied me, his eyes glittering. “I think you need some convincing.”

My mouth was dry as I tried not to stare. He was really turning me on. “Convincing of what?”

“That I’m not what you think of me. That I’m serious when I say that I want to be with you.”

I snorted. “Please.”

“I’m fucking serious.” Tyler motioned at me. “Come here.”

“Are you crazy?” I demanded. “I’m not going anywhere near you.” It pissed me off at how unconvincing I sounded, and it was hard not to tremble beneath his gaze.

“Fuck!” Tyler cried out randomly, grabbing at his sides, his face seemingly twisting with pain. Without thinking, I rushed around his desk to his side and placed my hands on his shoulder. “Are you okay—”

Tyler suddenly straightened in his seat and smiled up at me, his eyes sparkling. “Gotcha.”

I swung my palm at his face, but he was quick to react, catching my wrist inches away from his cheek and pulling me into a hard, lingering kiss.

I broke away with a gasp, my chest heaving, my limbs trembling uncontrollably. "How dare you!"

Tyler smiled up at me, unperturbed by my faux rage. "Oh, I dare." He spread his legs out wider. "I dare you to have your way with me."

My heart pounded in my chest as I stared at the challenge in his eyes. The man was serious. He was challenging me to do whatever I wanted with him, however I wanted.

*I should slap him*, I thought, and I actually did it this time. I slapped him across the face. His head whipped to the side and he slowly turned his head back to face me, letting out a mocking chuckle.

"Is that the best you could do?"

I slapped him again, harder this time. I even managed to leave a red mark on his cheek.

Tyler was still unfazed by my efforts, laughing harder. "You hit like a bitch."

*That's it!*

I jumped into his lap, straddling him, and pulled his tie around his neck, choking him.

"Wanna' talk shit now?" I snarled in his face, choking him with his tie. "Not so funny now, huh, bad boy?"

Tyler ignored my best efforts, pulling me in for another kiss that left me dizzy and wheezing against his neck.

I smacked him for the third time, my breathing ragged. "I didn't say you could touch me!" I snapped, majorly turned on. Down below, I could feel his hard on pressing against me. It made me wet, wanton with desire.

I jumped out of his lap, my gaze furious. Tyler eyed me with amusement as I turned around and snatched open one of the drawers in his desk, looking

for something I could use on him.

I dug through a couple of drawers until I found a spare tie he had tucked away. I quickly snatched the tie out and went around to the back of Tyler's chair. I grabbed his arms and pulled them behind the chair, tying his wrists together.

"What do you think you're doing?" Tyler asked. His voice was tinged with excitement, sending a thrill through my body.

"Just shut up and sit there."

Deftly, I undid his loose tie from around his throat and wrapped it around his eyes, blindfolding him.

"There," I muttered when I was finished, surveying my work.

Here was this sexy, handsome, powerful man sitting right in front of me, bound and tied. Ready for me to have my way with him. I wanted to jump him. Right then. Right there. And have glorious, hot and steamy sex. But that just wouldn't do. I needed to vent some frustration.

*What are you doing, Victoria?*

I ignored my annoying conscience and pushed Tyler out and away from his desk and into the middle of the room.

"You've been a very, very naughty boy, Mr. Locklin," I purred, circling Tyler's chair.

Tyler tilted his head to the side, trying to get a lock on my position. "I have?"

I didn't answer, and instead, stooped to take off my heels. I took one of them, a glittering red pump, and stepped in front of him. I gently pressed the stiletto into his chest and ran it down, ripping the fabric of his shirt.

"Uh, Victoria?" Tyler's normally confident voice sounded slightly nervous. "What are you doing?"

I giggled. "Punishing you."



"Well, shit, can you do that without ripping up my clothes? That shirt was five hundred bucks."

I grinned, though I knew he couldn't see my expression, grabbing a hold of either side of his shirt. I jerked as hard as I could, and a ripping sound filled the room as the material came apart in my hands, leaving him bare-chested.

"You're going to be sorry for that," Tyler growled.

I moved forward, grabbing him roughly by the hair, and tilted his head back so that his neck was exposed. I ran my tongue up his neck, watching his body shiver with anticipation, all the way to his ear and then whispered, "Didn't I tell you to shut the fuck up?"

Running my hands down his bare chest, I pressed my lips against his neck, kissing gently, repeatedly. Tyler's lips parted to let out a deep groan, the sound causing tingling within my nether regions.

My hands continued down his chest to latch onto his bulge. He was already rock hard and throbbing, straining against the expensive slacks, screaming to be let out. I could feel a soft moistness on my fingertips. His precum.

Messaging him through the soft material, I kissed up his neck to his lips, biting gently on his lower lip, sucking on it. I sunk my teeth into his flesh, pulling it back gently and then letting go.

"Shit," Tyler moaned. "That's fucking sexy—"

I darted my tongue into his mouth, interrupting him, and swirled it all around, enjoying the taste of him. As we tongued each other, his cock seemed to swell even more in my hands. By this time, my panties were soaked.

I suddenly wanted to taste him. I broke off our passionate kiss. He moaned in disappointment, his breathing ragged and heavy. Still holding onto his cock, I rose out of his lap and lowered myself to my knees.

His bulge was huge, making my mouth water and filling me with anticipation. Slowly, teasingly, I undid the belt. A second later, I had his pants down around his ankles, staring in amazement at what had brought

me so much pleasure in days past. Precum oozed out of the tip, running down his long, thick shaft.

I moved in close, blowing on it gently. Tyler's whole body shivered. I lapped my tongue at the tip of his head like a kitten lapping at milk. He shuddered again.

"Oh God," he groaned. "That's not fucking fair." He struggled with his binding. "Untie me."

"I'll do no such thing," I growled, squeezing his cock for his disobedience and watching more precum ooze out. "You dared me to do what I wanted to do with you, didn't you?"

"I did. But—"

"Well then shut up and let me vent my frustration!" I grinned. I was totally loving this.

"You're going to pay for this," Tyler warned.

I ignored him and stuffed his cock into my mouth, taking as much of the shaft down as I could. Tyler groaned, his whole body trembling. I went up and down, slurping and sucking while massaging his balls. I started to use both hands to stroke his long cock as I moved my mouth in tandem with my stroking. Slurping sounds filled my ears as the taste of sweet, masculine meat tickled the back of my throat.

"Oh, fuck me," Tyler groaned as I gobbled his cock like I was mining for come.

After a few more furious slurps, his shaft grew impossibly hard in my hands and his balls tightened, signaling he was ready. By now, his whole body was shaking, and his breathing was coming out in short gasps.

*Payback time.*

I pulled back, releasing him, his cock snapping back against his rock-hard abs with an audible thud.

"What the hell are you doing?" Tyler demanded, his voice strained and filled with panic. "I was about to blow my balls out."

I chuckled and rose to my feet. "Paying you back."

"Fuck this."

With a roar, Tyler tore out of his bindings with brute strength and jumped to his feet. His cock swayed to and fro, and he ripped the tie from around his eyes. His eyes cut into me like daggers, filled with wrath. I knew right then that I was in serious trouble.

*Oh shit.*

I tried to scramble away as fast as I could, but I didn't make it two steps. Tyler grabbed me roughly by the arms, spinning me out in front of him. The heat from his body enveloped me as he pressed into my back. Below, I could feel his hard, throbbing cock rubbing up against my ass.

"I told you, you were going to pay," he growled into my ear, his breath hot on my neck. I nearly swooned in his grasp, my body temperature rising to unbelievable levels.

"But you dared me to have my way with you," I protested in ragged little breaths.

"Fuck that," Tyler snarled. "You played dirty. Now it's my turn."

I had to admit, I wanted it badly. My whole body was burning, trembling with anticipation.

I couldn't believe how badly I wanted to feel Tyler's cock inside of me. More than ever before. I'd turned into a hungry cock whore, eager to please. It's true what they say, make up sex was the best sex.

"I was innocent before I met you," I whispered, wishing I had the strength to pull away, but I didn't. "You've completely corrupted me."

Tyler grinned. He knew he had me right where he wanted me. "I guess that makes me the devil."

Keeping my arms pinned together, he picked up one of the ties off the floor and quickly bound my hands behind my back. Then he shoved me forward, bending me over his desk.

I let out a gasp as his powerful hands gripped my waist and then latched on to my skirt. In one powerful jerk, Tyler ripped it off, along with my panties. Next followed my shirt and bra. In an instant, cool air enveloped my naked body, sending goosebumps all over my ass and thighs, hardening my nipples.

I shivered in anticipation. Here I was, naked at the top of one of the most prominent corporate buildings in the city, being ogled by a gorgeous, rich stud.

*Smack!*

A sharp gasp escaped my lips and I winced.

*Bastard!*

“You like that?” I heard him growl behind me.

“Shit. You smack worse than I do,” I hissed.

I regretted my words a moment later.

The next smack on my ass made me cry out, and I dug my nails into the hard wood of his desk to bear the pain. This one *hurt*, but it felt so *good* at the same time. I was sure Tyler had left a red print on my ass cheek.

Tyler laughed mockingly. “What’d I tell you? I don’t hear you running that pretty little mouth of yours now.”

Before I could reply, Tyler plunged two fingers inside me, causing me to gasp out again.

“You’re going to learn that there will always be consequences,” Tyler lectured as he probed my insides.

“I . . .” I gasped, pleasure rolling up through my stomach. “You’re such a fucking bastard!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!” I cried, knowing I was asking for more trouble but wanting it. I needed it. Suddenly, his tongue was lapping at me while his fingers still probed me.

"Oh," I moaned, digging my nails harder into the wood. I'm sure there would be scratch marks on it, but I didn't care.

His mouth enveloped my entire clit, sucking and slurping, still relentlessly thrusting into me with his two fingers. My ass jiggled on his face, and wet, wiggly noises filled the room as he scattered my juices everywhere.

"Oh fuck!" I cried.

There was only so much I could take. Fire raged through my stomach like molten lava, and I cried out as I came so hard, my thighs trembled like an earthquake.

The room spun around me as spasms of pleasure took over my body, and it was a moment before I regained consciousness of my surroundings. I came out of it, shaking and shivering, gasping and trying to recover. But oh no, Tyler wasn't having it. The bastard wasn't through with me.

He kept me bent over his desk as he rose to his feet. He waited for a few moments, teasing me with his cock, allowing me a couple of minutes to recover.

He entered me. Ruthlessly. I cried out as he penetrated me to what seemed like the entire length of my canal, and he began seesawing his giant cock in and out of me. As he pounded away, he grabbed me by the hair, pulling with enough force to make me wince. Garbled, unintelligible cries escaped my lips as I was viciously fucked.

It felt like a giant pole penetrating me. A fucking monster. His thrusts were *hard. Deep. Powerful.* And the smack of his powerful thighs hitting up against my ass filled the room.

Tyler made low, guttural growls of pleasure as he continued, taking my body for his own pleasure, owning every single particle of me. I dug into the desk, holding on for dear life. I'd never experienced sex this rough and intense, but it was absolutely amazing.

A couple of thrusts later, I could feel his cock stiffening inside me and his grip on my hair loosened as his breathing became heavy and labored, his thrusts slower but more full.

*Oh shit. He doesn't have a condom on,* I thought suddenly with alarm, remembering he hadn't put on protection, but being so caught up in the moment that I hadn't stopped him.

"Pull out," I gasped hoarsely. My words sounded garbled to my ears. "Tyler!" I tried to pull away, but I was firmly in his grasp, his hands holding onto my waist with a powerful grip.

At the very last second, he pulled out, roaring like a lion, and I could feel his hot come splash on my back and my ass.

I felt sore, inside and out. He'd really given me a pounding. I was sure I wouldn't be walking straight for a couple of days. "You could've come inside of me!"

It scared me how quickly our little power-play game had nearly spun out of control into something that we both could've possibly regretted.

"Relax," Tyler exhaled, sweat running down his jawline from his exertions. Though I was upset, I had to admit—Tyler was a glory to behold. His chest and abs glistened with sweat, his cock half-limp. He was the perfect male specimen. "I had it covered."

"Yeah, okay," I hissed sarcastically.

"What are you so worried about, aren't you on the pill?"

"Yeah, but still. That was fucking rude."

The feel of hot stickiness dripping down my backside left me looking around for something to wipe myself with. I grabbed his tie and put it to good use.

"Hey," Tyler protested as I wiped at my backside with his tie. "That tie is one of my favorites."

I casually tossed it onto his desk and bent down to retrieve my skirt off the floor. Tyler bent down to pick up his boxers, quickly slipping them on along with his slacks.

He grinned at me as he picked up his shirt, but his expression turned serious as he pulled it on, leaving it unbuttoned. "I've never done that before," he

said quietly, gazing at me strangely.

I paused in pulling my half-ripped skirt up over my thighs to regard him.  
"Done what?"

"Been so reckless. "

I pulled my skirt all the way on and grabbed my bra, putting it on and snapping it back in place. "Then why'd you do it?" I asked softly.

"Because you make me so . . ." His voice trailed off, his eyes distant.

I stood there, hanging upon his every word. "I make you so what?"

Suddenly, his jaw hardened. "Never mind."

"Come on, tell me."

He shook his head, walking over to the door of his office while simultaneously buttoning up his shirt. "Get the rest of your clothes on and meet me outside. I'm taking you to my place to get cleaned up."

I opened my mouth to protest. After all, he didn't *ask* if I wanted to go back to his place, but he interrupted me.

"And make sure you grab that tie on your way out, will you? I don't want it anymore, and I certainly don't want the cleaning lady to find it tomorrow. That's the last thing I need getting out around here." He winked at me. "You can keep it as a souvenir." Then he walked out and gently shut the door behind him.

"Asshole," I muttered.

## CHAPTER 17

TYLER

*P*unishing Victoria for her super-hot cock tease was one of the most satisfying things I'd ever done. And being inside of her? It was out of this world. It felt so good and so natural, it was no wonder that I'd almost lost control. I'd come so close to . . .

It was fucking scary.

I was losing my touch. My *edge*. And Victoria, with her body and dirty mouth, was to blame. I didn't want to believe it. I'd convinced myself I'd never have real feelings for a girl again. But if I went down the list of my feelings toward Victoria, it only further confirmed the truth of my addiction.

*Can't stop thinking about her. Check.*

*Drives me crazy over the smallest things. Check.*

*Want to fuck her day and night. Check.*

*Do the stupidest shit around her. Check.*

Yep, I was addicted alright. Addicted to the way she made me feel.

"There was no hot water," Victoria said, breaking me out of my reverie and appearing in the doorway of the bathroom connected to my room.

My heart thumped in my chest at the sight of her—her hair wet and wavy, her cheeks flushed with pink. She wore one of my black silk robes that was



way oversized on her, but to me she looked like the hottest thing since sliced bread.

"You gotta' be shitting me," I said as I dug out some fresh boxers from my dresser and tossed them on my bed. I'd intended to jump in the shower right after. I was sticky down below after our session, but now I'd have to wait.

*Or maybe I should take a cold shower to cool down my boiling blood,* I thought.

"You would think things like that wouldn't happen in a place like this. That's ridiculous," she said, walking over to the dresser where her clothes were.

"It does that from time to time when they do maintenance," I explained. I picked up my boxers, preparing to go into the bathroom to get cleaned up. "In the meantime, take a load off. Stay for a bit."

"I'm not staying."

I froze, shocked. "Huh?"

Victoria grabbed her clothes and clutched them against her chest, hiding her stiff nipples. "I'm going home."

"Why the hell did you come all the way here if you were just going to go home?" I demanded. I hated how upset I sounded.

Victoria bit her lower lip. "I don't know. Maybe it was the way you ordered me to come, as if I didn't have a choice."

"Don't give me that." I growled. "You came because you wanted to."

"Either way, I'm leaving," Victoria said firmly. I could see the steel in her eyes. She was serious. I wasn't even sure if I could use my charm to get her to stay, but I wasn't about to beg. It pissed me off that I was even upset. Usually, I didn't even show them the door . . . that was Jonathan's job.

"Are you sure?" I hated even asking that much.

Victoria nodded and then tilted her head at the bathroom. "I'm going to go change into my clothes and then I'll be ready to go."

"I'll have Jonathan ready take you home."

On her way to the bathroom, Victoria paused to regard me. "You're not coming?"

"Nah. I think I'll take a shower and just relax."

She was a moment in replying. "Okay then."

While she went and changed, I told Jonathan to get the car ready to drop her off.

Victoria looked a rumpled mess when she appeared out of the bathroom, her skirt looking like it had a few holes in it from where I'd been rough. I made a mental note to buy her a new one.

"I hung your bath robe on the rack in there," she informed, doing her best to smooth her skirt.

"Alright," I said shortly. "Jonathan is waiting for you outside."

"Okay."

She walked over to the staircase leading down to the first floor of my loft. I hated myself for it, but I had to blurt, "Not even going to say bye?"

"Bye."

Then she was gone. I stood there for a long moment, varied emotions rolling through me, wondering why she'd suddenly decided she couldn't get away from me fast enough.

*I know she enjoyed the sex, I thought. What the fuck is going on?*

And that's what impressed me about Victoria. She made me work for it, something I'd never had to do before.

Victoria

*I SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SO COLD TO HIM*, I THOUGHT AS JONATHAN PULLED THE limo up closer. A pink corvette came swerving into the parking lot like a bat out of hell at the same time we were exiting, but I was too embroiled in my thoughts to notice.

It'd taken a lot to get the strength to leave, and I still wasn't exactly sure what it was that made me do so.

While I'd been taking a shower, all of my doubts and worries about Tyler's honesty came back to me and I suddenly found myself angry again. The strong emotion had made it easy for me to give him the cold shoulder and leave him with a bruised ego.

The image of the hurt in his eyes as I left flashed in my mind, making me feel a little sympathy, followed by a surge of anger.

Still, I had to admit the make-up sex in his office was off the charts. The whole thing had been exhilarating.

*He only did it to show off his power over me. I bet he thought he could just smooth everything over with his charm and I would just forgive him because he fucked me good. Bastard.*

I dug my fingers into my palm and angrily bit my lower lip, engaged in my thoughts. His cockiness pissed me off to no end. My skin burned as anger flared through my stomach . . . along with feelings of lust.

*Fuck.*

It pissed me off even more that even though I was mad at him, I still wanted him and couldn't stop fantasizing about him. I couldn't deny that the sex had been hot. Almost too hot. I didn't think I would ever experience something that sexy again. But did it matter if I did? In the end, I was just a fad, someone he could use against his dad to show his defiance. He still hadn't proven that I was anything to the contrary.

For most girls, the thought of being with Tyler Locklin would be a dream come true. For me, it was horrifying. That is, as long as I wasn't thinking about the sex.

I was the first girl who'd ever shown resistance to him, and he wanted to prove to himself that he could conquer me. And the whole thing with helping me start my own business? It upset me that I'd fallen for such an offer.

The limo rolling to a halt at a stop light brought me out of my thoughts. I reached for my purse to grab my cell, I needed to text April about an assignment at work . . . only to find it not there.

"God damn it," I muttered. "It took everything I had to leave. I won't be able to do that again. . ."

I mulled for a moment. We weren't that far away from the swanky apartment, but I wasn't sure I wanted to go back there. Showing back up after the cold front I gave Tyler would show that I was weak and needy.

*But I need my phone.*

*Screw it, I thought finally. I'll just run in, grab my purse and leave. I won't even look at him.*

"Jonathan," I called. "Can you go back to Tyler's apartment? I forgot something."

Tyler

I'D JUST GOTTEN OUT OF THE SHOWER, MY HAIR WET, AND DRESSED ONLY IN MY boxers when I heard a noise that sounded like someone entering my apartment.

*It's her.*

I grinned, confident Victoria had changed her mind and decided to come back. My ego soaring, I stepped out of the bathroom, careful to keep my expression neutral and not too eager.

I couldn't keep the exultation out of my voice, though. "Back so soon—"

“Hey, Tyler!” chirped a familiar voice I hadn’t heard in years.

My jaw dropped at the sight of the person standing at the doorway to my bedroom.

*No. Fucking. Way. This bitch has balls.*

I blinked, trying to will the image away.

Candice.

*Am I hallucinating? I’m dreaming. I must be dreaming.*

Candice, my old back-stabbing girlfriend, was standing there before me. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, short bangs framed her forehead, her makeup was soft and girly, and she was wearing a tight red dress that showed off her curvaceous figure that I once loved to handle.

I stood there, speechless, staring at her like she was a banshee that had come to haunt me.

It was she that had ruined my faith in relationships. Her, who I’d done everything for. Her, who I made sure wanted for nothing. I gave her everything.

All of me.

In the end, I found out she was just using me. Using me for my money and to get ahead. She had me fooled from the very beginning. I thought she was the love of my life, when all she ever was, was a fucking gold-digging skank.

“Still working out that incredible body, I see,” she murmured with appreciation, eyeing my abs and appearing unperturbed by my shock.

Breath finally found my lungs. “What the hell are you doing here? And what makes you think you can waltz up in here like you own the place?”

Candice’s eyes stayed on my abs. “You, or someone, left the door open,” she replied softly, ignoring my question. “I knocked a few times. No one answered. I was going to leave, but I heard noises. I came in to check on

you, to make sure you were alright. I called your name, but no one answered.”

I cleared my throat, trying to regain my composure. “I was in the shower . . .”

Candice tore her eyes away from my stomach and nodded. “I realized that when I came up the stairs.” She looked around the room. “Not much has changed, I see.”

“Nope,” I said easily, finally able to regain my swag. “But I have.”

Candice stepped forward, reaching out. “Ty—”

“Don’t even start!” I yelled.

Candice froze.

“Why are you here? You know how our relationship ended. I told you that I never wanted to speak to you or see you again. And I meant every word of it.”

Candice’s arms dropped to her side and she dipped her head. Seeing her look so vulnerable caused old emotions to roll through me. “I wanted to see you,” she said quietly. “I’ve missed you.”

“That boat has sailed,” I said firmly, pushing away any feelings of sympathy. “Long ago. And it’s not coming back.”

Candice looked up. Tears were streaming down her face.

*Oh God. Not this bullshit.*

“I’m so sorry, Ty,” she sobbed. “I didn’t mean to do it. I’ve been trying to work up the courage for so long. It was just that I felt so lonely and so vulnerable and he—”

I set my jaw, unimpressed by her act. “Do you really think I want to listen to this bullshit? Good God, listen to yourself! We will never be anything ever again, Candice. Ever!”

Candice pressed her hands against her face and sobbed, her whole body shuddering.

*Damn, am I gonna have to drag her ass out of here or what?* It was obvious that my ex-girlfriend wasn't going to make this easy for me.

"I'm not falling for it, Candice. You fooled me once with that shit, but you won't fool me again."

She stopped for a second. "It was the biggest mistake of my life! And I regret it more than anything in the world."

*Ditto*, I thought

"Can you quit with the act?" I demanded, after a half-second of listening to her ridiculous sobs. "It's pathetic."

Wiping her eyes, Candice grew quiet and stopped the melodramatic sobbing. It was crazy how she could cry her eyes out one minute and be totally tranquil the next. "I saw Jonathan help a girl inside of your limo as I was coming up. New girlfriend of yours?"

"That's none of your business."

"Really, Tyler? You could do so much better."

"Better than a cheating skank? I sure can."

Determined, Candice walked over to me, her intentional seductive strut seeming to taunt me. I averted my eyes, refusing to give her the satisfaction.

"What are you doing, Candice?" I growled, looking at the wall, even though I knew damn well what she was doing.

"It's been so long, Tyler," Candice purred, reaching me. She placed a hand against my stomach and then began dragging her fingers softly along my happy trail.

I grabbed her wrist firmly, stopping her before she could reach my junk. I turned my gaze on her, scowling fiercely. "I don't know why you suddenly decided to show up, Candice, or what you hope to accomplish, but I'm going to ask you one time to leave. If you don't, I'm going to drag your ass out of here. And trust me, you don't want me to do that."

*Shit, I better be careful, I thought when something suddenly occurred to me. Becoming forceful with her could be a lawsuit waiting to happen, maybe it's even exactly what she wants. She knows I'm loaded. If I get rough with her, she could claim anything, and being a female and with my bad boy reputation, who wouldn't believe her? I won't even have to worry about mine and Victoria's relationship ruining things at work. Candice will ruin everything herself.*

Worrying about whether Candice's intentions had malice in them caused me to become momentarily distracted and my grip on her wrist became lax, allowing her freedom.

"I bet whoever she is can't suck your dick like I can," Candice purred up at me, my cock suddenly in her grasp. "Remember? I'm the only one who could take all of you."

Before I could reply and shove the cock-hungry whore away, I heard a shocked gasp.



## CHAPTER 18

### VICTORIA

*I*'ll just go up there, grab my purse, and leave. I'd repeated the litany about twenty times since getting out of the limo and making my way up to Tyler's door.

*Don't show any emotion or give him a chance to get you in his bed.*

All I had to do was keep telling myself that I was strong and that I could do it. The problem was, I could feel my resolve weakening.

There were too many conflicting emotions going through me.

On one hand, I wanted to believe Tyler. I wanted to believe he would be faithful with me and that we could somehow make our relationship work, even with our disapproving parents. If it wasn't for his past, I'd probably believe him. He hadn't given me much reason to doubt him, after all.

But, he *did* have his past. And our parents *did* want us apart. And I felt like he was just a rich, eligible bachelor who was looking for a challenge and a reason to defy his father.

After I exited the elevator at the top floor, I walked down the hallway. After a moment of gathering my resolve, I knocked on the door.

The door creaked open.

*That's funny, I thought. I thought I locked it.*

I stepped in and closed the door behind me. I was about to call out Tyler's name, when I heard talking up in the loft area where his bedroom was.

*He must have company.*

I walked over to the stairs and paused, listening. Then I heard it. A female's voice.

My heart began pounding in my chest erratically.

*Calm down, I tried to tell myself. It could be anyone.*

Despite trying to reason with myself and keep cool, I was overcome by a sudden, overpowering urge. I rushed up the stairs as fast as I could and let out a sharp gasp when I reached the top.

*I knew it!*

My wildly-beating heart skipped a beat at the sight before me.

There, standing before his bed with nothing on but boxers, was Tyler with some pretty blonde girl, dressed in a tight red dress, who was holding his cock in her hands.

*You fool! How could you be so stupid?*

The room began to spin around me and my breathing became shallow.

*I should've known. I should've known. I should've known.*

Tyler's expression was one of shock and he was quick to shove the girl away from him. "Victoria, I can explain!"

"Don't bother!" I croaked. I don't even know how I managed to get the words out. I had a lump in my throat the size of a basketball.

Fighting to keep the tears at bay, I rushed over to the night stand and grabbed my purse.

"Victoria!" Tyler reached out to grab my arm, but I swatted him away, rushing toward the exit.

"Don't fucking touch me!"

"Please—"

I stopped at the top of the stairs, digging in my purse, turning around to confront him.

"I knew from the beginning you were a sack of shit," I snarled. "I don't know how I could've been so stupid to ever believe that you actually cared about me or that you would stop your manwhore ways!"

Tyler reached out imploringly. "It's not what you think."

*How cliché. Isn't that what they all say? It's not what you think. Everything I need to know is right in front of me.*

In the background, the girl in the red dress watched our exchange with her hands on her hips and an impish smile on her face.

"He does this to all the girls, honey," she purred. "You shouldn't be surprised."

"Shut up, Candice!" Tyler shouted, his face red with rage. He turned to me. "Victoria—"

"Fuck off!" I reached into my purse to make sure my phone was there. I still had his tie . . . *that* tie. I pulled it out and threw it at his feet. "And you can keep your fucking nasty tie!"

Sobbing uncontrollably, I turned and rushed down the stairs, nearly tripping in the process.

Tyler

I STARED AT THE SPOT VICTORIA HAD VACATED LONG AFTER SHE LEFT, WANTING TO go after her but knowing it would be futile.

She'd walked in at the worst possible moment, just as Candice grabbed my junk. I'd never be able to convince her that nothing was going on.

Candice raised an eyebrow in question while eyeing the tie on the floor. "Do I even want to know what the deal with the tie is?" she asked, breaking the silence. "What kind of kinky shit have you been up to, Tyler?"

I turned baleful eyes on her, my chest heaving with anger. "Nothing that concerns you."

*Bitch.*

Rage blurred my vision. I wanted to wrap my hands around her neck and choke her within inches of her life. I'd never, ever put my hands on a woman in a violent way, but she was pushing me to my limits.

Looking at Candice, I could tell it's something that she probably wanted. She'd love it, in fact. In some sick way, she was feeding off my emotions, getting off on them.

"You need to leave," I said flatly. "Now. Or I'm going to call the cops."

I saw no use in trying to figure out why she was here or talking to her any further. It didn't matter anymore, and I should have thrown her out the second I saw her. But now, the damage was already done.

"Come on, Tyler," she crooned softly. "You're just mad right now. That girl . . . she was no good for you—"

"Get the fuck out!" I roared.

Candice grew silent in the face of my wrath. For a moment, I feared she was going to stay, forcing me to have to take matters into my own hands.

"Fine," she said finally. "I'll leave . . . for now. I'll be back after I give you some time to calm down. You'll come around, you'll see. We have much to catch up on."

She walked over to me and attempted to give me peck on the cheek, but I stepped away from her. "I'm going to make things better. I promise." She turned and strutted her way out of the room, trying her best to tease me with her swaying hips.

*She failed.* "And don't fucking come back!" I yelled.

I walked over to the bed and slumped down on it, resting my elbows on my knees and clutching either side of my head in my palms.

"I'm fucked," I muttered.

## CHAPTER 19

### VICTORIA

“*I* hate to say it, but I told you so,” April said the next day while we were preparing some of Christine's pristine spring designs for a show.

I groaned, eyeing a design, a particular ugly brown number that even a size one model would have to diet to fit in. “Please don’t, April. I really don’t need to hear this right now. On top of it all, I have a splitting headache.”

*I shouldn't have told her anything, I thought in regret. Now I will never hear the end of it.*

As soon as I’d come into work, April accosted me. One look at my disheveled appearance, and she knew something was up. In fact, she knew *exactly* what was up.

Maybe it was my bloodshot eyes that were red from bawling my eyes out all night, or my perpetual scowl that I’d adopted when I woke up and realized I had to go to work when it felt like my soul was being crushed by an iron fist.

At first I’d deflected April’s questions to find out what was wrong, but eventually I broke down and told her.

*Everything.*

I wasn't sure why I did. I mean, I knew what was coming afterward. I suppose it was because I needed a shoulder to cry on. Since I was estranged

from my mom, April was the only real female friend that I was close enough to confide in.

I'd lost contact with all my previous friends when I moved to the city to start my career, and I couldn't just call them up to dump this in their lap after having not spoken for ages. Since coming to work for Christine, I'd discovered that friends were in short supply. It was hard maintaining friendships while being worked to death.

On top of that, I'd learned the hard way that there weren't many people you could trust in the fashion world, with all the back-stabbing and gossiping that went on.

But April, and to an extent, Gabe, were cool. So far, she hadn't shown me the cattiness that most females that worked under Christine were known for. She had her quirks, of course, but who didn't?

"What?" April protested. Today, April was dressed in a purple dress with a white belt encircling her waist. Matching white pumps adorned her feet. She looked cute, but then again, she always looked cute. Christine expected all of us to look great coming in to work. "But I was right, wasn't I? He was a manwhore all along. I mean come on, Vicky, how could you ever think he wasn't? The guy is filthy rich with movie star looks. Why would he want to settle down at his age? Besides, doesn't he normally go for the A-list starlets?"

I scowled at April. "I didn't think money or fame mattered when it came to love. Besides, he claimed to be attracted to me because of *me*, not my bank account, or lack thereof."

April shook her head, eying a flashy green number. "You're right. In some situations, money doesn't matter. As far as looks go, you could've looked like Kate Upton and he'd still have cheated on you. Guys like that just don't respect women. You should know that."

I bit my lower lip. Everything April was saying was true. I knew it, and she knew that I knew it. "You're right," I said grudgingly.

April stopped fingering the green number and slipped it onto a hanger before hanging it on one of the clothing racks lining the room. She turned to

face me, crossing her arms. "Next time you should listen to me."

I snorted. "You're not Nostradamus, April. His past was no secret. But he seemed so sincere. So intense. But trust me, if I learned anything, it's that I'll always heed that annoying little voice inside my head from here on out."

April beamed at me. "Good. I'm just relieved that it happened now and not later. I certainly didn't want to see you more hurt than you already are."

A lump was forming in my throat. I wished she would just change the subject. "Gee, thanks, April."

"No problem. Trust me, you're so much better off without him."

"I think I'm done with relationships for now," I muttered.

*And the distant future, I thought.*

"Don't let him ruin your faith in men, though," April warned. "There are plenty of good ones out there. You just need to find the right one."

"For now, my career will be my man — or my pursuit of a career," I said, grabbing a red dress that had yellow flowers emblazoned on it. Now this was one I could see myself wearing.

"Fair enough—"

"Hey bitches!" chirped a cheery voice. Gabe came walking up and elbowed his way in between us. The always-handsome young man was dressed in skinny jeans and a preppy pink sweater, his hair gelled and slicked to the side. The smell of a fruity cologne wafted to my nose.

"Gabe," we both greeted in unison.

Gabe reared back when he looked at me, his face twisting in horror. "Sweet Jesus! What happened to you? You look like you were hit by a bus."

Before I could reply, April supplied, "Her big shot boyfriend cheated on her."

Gabe let out a gasp and clamped a hand over his mouth, his eyes going wide.



“April!” I protested.

“What? He would’ve found out anyway. You know he was going to hound you like hell to find out what was wrong.”

“More like you would just tell him as soon as you saw him, like now,” I accused.

April shrugged. “Same difference.”

“Don’t worry about me, Vicky,” Gabe assured me, looking extra eager to hear the sensational gossip. “You know your business is safe with me, girl.”

*Right, I thought wryly. You’ll have my whole story all over the Channel Seven Evening News.*

“So tell me what happened,” Gabe urged eagerly. “I want all the juicy details.”

I groaned inwardly. *He’s never going to give up. Thanks, April.*

I didn’t want to keep rehashing the experience. It was almost too painful. Luckily for me, or maybe not so lucky, April obliged me.

Gabe clamped a hand on my shoulder, shaking his head with sympathy when April was done with her slightly exaggerated tale of Tyler’s cheating. “I am so sorry, girl. You must feel terrible. That man was sex on legs. Too bad he couldn’t keep it in his pants.”

“Can’t we just change the subject already?” I demanded, tossing aside the red flower dress with exasperation. “I’m never going to get through the day if we don’t.”

Gabe frowned. “Okay. But can I ask a question?”

I sighed. “What?”

“How big is he?”

“Gabe!”

“What? We’re talking about important information here!”

I scowled, wishing he'd just go away.

"Please, Gabe, I'm pretty sure he doesn't go for men. In fact, I know he doesn't."

Gabe raised a stern eyebrow at me. "I'll have you know, Miss Thing, that I've turned a few men in my day." Gabe crossed his arms. "But really, I do have a serious question."

I ignored him for as long as I could before I sighed and gave in. "What is it?"

"How is he in the sack?"

I tossed a dress right into Gabe's face, walking off and refusing to admit to him or anyone else that the sex was *amazing*.

## CHAPTER 20

### CHARLES

"*I*'m ready to take Tyler's place when you feel the time is right," I proudly announced to the CEO of Armex, hardly concealing my excitement. "Just say the word."

I'd stopped by Mr. James Locklin's office to have a talk about my soon-to-be promotion. Rumors were that Tyler's days were numbered and that I'd be his replacement. I hadn't been given the official word from Mr. Locklin about it yet, but I had to come across as confident and willing to do the job.

Pride swelled through me as James, who was sitting at a large desk in the center of room, leaned back in his chair to regard me.

"Ah, Mr. Whitmore. As one of my best employees, I've always admired your enthusiasm for this company and your willingness to do what's best for our bottom line."

A feeling of dread pressed down upon my chest. The tone in his voice told me something was afoot. There was a *BUT* coming . . .

I smiled nervously and nodded my head. "Thank you, sir. It's my pleasure. Working for Armex has been a dream come true for me."

I was laying it on pretty thick, hoping that my feeling was wrong. James shifted in his seat, and by his expression, I knew he was about to hit me with something. "That being said, I have no intention of removing my son as CFO."

*Well fuck me gently with a chainsaw . . .*

It felt like I'd been hit by a bolt of lightning. "What?" I asked in disbelief. I'd all but been assured by everyone else that Tyler's position was mine. "I was told that this was a done deal!"

"I'm sorry, Charles, but this whole thing got started because I reacted out of anger."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I was usually a composed individual, but it was hard to keep a lid on my frustration. My dreams and aspirations were crashing down around me. "You said yourself that I understood the intricacies of running this company better than anyone you'd ever met!"

James scowled. "No, what I in fact told you, was that you take your job very seriously, and I appreciated that. But Tyler is my son, and as much as I want him to get his life together, I can't aid in taking this from him. My conscience just won't allow it. I'm willing to accept whatever consequences come from it."

*You've got to be shitting me.*

I clenched my fists, anger swelling in my throat. "I can't believe you're saying this, sir," I said hotly. "You're going to let Tyler continue to be the downfall of Armex? *Your* company?"

James sat silent.

"Why?" I continued. "Why would you want to keep someone like that on board, even if he is your son, when you have someone more capable and far more willing to take this company to the next level?" I shook my head. "I just don't get it."

"You are both alike," James remarked, his eyes scrutinizing me.

"Never!" I raged. "I'm nothing like him."

"Yet, in some ways you are. You're so blinded by your dislike and jealousy of my son that you fail to see it. In my opinion, you both are hard-headed and have a problem with authority."

I sucked in a breath, readying a hot retort, but then gained control of myself. “Are you alright, sir? You sure you haven’t drunk anything, taken any medication?” It was unlike James to be so direct with me. Maybe he was speaking under the influence.

“I’m perfectly sober.”

“I—”

James stood up from his chair, interrupting me, looking tall and imposing. I could definitely see where Tyler got his impressive frame from. James was the type of old man you didn’t want to mess with you. “I want what’s best for my son, Charles. He’s my only heir. This company is just as much his as it is mine. I have to believe that he’ll turn things around, however unlikely that may be.”

“But you’re making a business decision based on emotion, sir,” I protested. “That’s like the number one no-no in business. You know that even more than I do.”

“Even so, you have my decision. I can only hope Tyler straightens up and becomes the man that I know him to be.” He looked at me with sympathy. “I’m sorry, Charles. I know you were looking forward to this.”

“Weak,” I snarled. I knew I was insulting my boss, a very powerful man, but I couldn’t help myself, and my emotions were getting the better of me. “This decision makes you look weak and unfit.”

“I know very well how it makes me look,” James said tightly, “and if you value your place here at Armex, I suggest you watch what you say right now. I know you’re upset and speaking out of emotion right now, so I’ll forgive you this once, but make no mistake, I will not tolerate any more disrespect.” His eyes bore into me. “Do I make myself clear?”

I stood there for a long time, overwhelmed by helpless rage.

“Charles?”

“Yes,” I grated. “Yes sir, I understand you completely.”

James nodded his head. “Good. Now go finish that report that you said you would have on my desk by Monday.” He sat down at his desk and began looking over a stack of papers, letting me know our meeting was over.

Swallowing my pride, I turned and walked out of the office, closing his door a little louder than I should have behind me, vowing that it was time to take matters into my own hands. This wasn’t over, not by a long shot.

## CHAPTER 21

TYLER - THREE MONTHS LATER

*A*n irritating beeping sound awoke me with a start. I laid there for a while, trying to ignore it before I went searching for the annoying offender.

“Shut the fuck up,” I growled. The sounds literally felt like they were skull-fucking me, sending sharp slashes of pain through my temples.

Rolling over in bed, moaning and groaning, I blindly ran my fingers over my night stand until I hit the alarm clock button, narrowly missing knocking over a half empty bottle of vodka.

“Fuck, my head hurts,” I groaned, clutching at my temples.

I felt like complete shit, but that was to be expected.

I’d spent another night out, drinking and partying at the hottest clubs the city’s night life had to offer, attempting to drown away my unhappiness. I hadn’t been in this much of a slump since Candice . . .

Speaking of Candice, since leaving my apartment the night she unceremoniously showed up, Victoria had refused to return any of my calls.

*For three months straight.*

I’d left her more messages than I could count, messages that I’d be ashamed of under ordinary circumstances. Messages where I’d poured my heart out and tried to explain my situation and what actually happened.

It didn't work. She was as stubborn as me sometimes, and maybe that's why I liked her so much.

I'd even tried to track her down at work, but I never seemed to be able to catch her. She either wasn't there or someone would tell me she was too busy running errands for Christine. I figured it was probably bullshit, but I wasn't going to push it and get her in trouble, making everything worse.

Her coworker, April, appeared to take a special glee in turning me away. She always had this huge smile on her face, pissing me off even more. She knew it too. I could tell.

Finally, I'd given up on making myself look pathetic. I got very angry at Victoria, even told myself that I didn't need her. That I was better than her. After all, I was a rich CFO with my whole life ahead of me, standing to be the sole beneficiary to an empire. There wasn't a girl on the planet that wouldn't want to be with me.

Except *one*. The one I wanted.

She needed *me*. I didn't need her, I told myself. She'd regret her decision for the rest of her life. I just knew it.

Distraught, I turned to alcohol to numb the pain of our break up. I felt weak for doing it, but I could find no other respite.

Sure, I could've gone out and had revenge sex with every willing slut that I could find. After all, isn't that what Victoria thought of me? A manwhore who couldn't keep his big dick in his pants?

Maybe I was once that man, but strangely enough, those things no longer interested me. I wanted one thing and one thing only.

*Victoria.*

My phone beeped, drawing me out of my reverie.

Wiping the sleep out of my eyes, I grabbed it off the night stand, this time knocking over the bottle of Vodka.

*I'll just have Jonathan clean it up*, I thought as the smell of alcohol hit my nostrils.



It took several seconds for my fuzzy mind to read the reminder I'd set on my phone.

*ARMEX meeting today.*

"Shit," I muttered.



"YOU LOOKED LIKE SHIT TODAY IN THE MEETING," JEFF HISSED. "WHAT IS WRONG with you?"

Me and my fellow colleague were sitting in my office after a nearly disastrous meeting where I'd been unable to read my report without stumbling over my words. It'd gotten so bad that my dad had to step in to save me from further embarrassing myself.

He hadn't looked too happy about that. In fact, he looked like he wanted to choke me with his bare hands. I knew that we were going to have words later, and I wasn't looking forward to it.

I was barely holding it together as it was.

I lowered my head to my desk and groaned. "Don't you have something better to do? I don't want to hear this shit."

"Well, you're going to hear it, because I've never seen you act so disgusting inside that room before. And the only reason why you're still sitting in that chair and not out looking for a job is because of your father."

I looked up, then winced a second later as my temples pounded. The four Tylenol I'd taken before the meeting had done little to alleviate my misery. "That's not true," I croaked. "I'm here because I'm valuable."

Jeff snorted. "Listen to yourself, Tyler! Get a grip and come back to planet Earth. It's time to stop disrespecting your father and this company!"

Anger surged through me. "Who the fuck are you to judge me, huh?" I snarled, immediately regretting it as a sharp pain sliced through my skull. Seriously, it felt like someone took an axe and brought it down on the top of

my head with all the force they could muster. "You have no fucking idea what I'm going through."

Jeff let out a peal of derisive laughter. "Oh, poor little baby and his first world problems. Did the latest slut decline letting you bang her brains out and your little ego is bruised?"

Seriously, the only thing keeping Jeff from being thrown through my window and falling sixty stories was the lancing pain in my skull.

"Get over it," Jeff continued, unaware how lucky he was to be alive. He stood, straightening his tie at his neck. "You're a disgrace."

He turned and walked out of my office, slamming the door behind him. The sound of it made my head hurt even worse.

*Asshole.*

Despite my anger at Jeff, deep down I knew he was speaking the truth. I had to get my shit together.

*Fast.*

## CHAPTER 22

TYLER

"Victoria is busy," April said to me. She gave me that *ha-ha asshole, you'll never talk to her again* smirk. "But I can give her a message if you'd like?"

After a couple of days of torment, I'd stopped the drinking, cleaned myself up, and decided on a new course of action.

I'd driven myself—something I almost never do—over to Victoria's workplace. When I asked the receptionist on the first floor to ring me in to Victoria's work phone, April had appeared instead to take a message.

I swear the girl had become Victoria's bodyguard, appearing out of the woodwork whenever I showed up, intent on making sure that I didn't get anywhere near her.

I eyed her with a cool grin on my face, not letting her think she was getting to me. Not even that long ago, I'd have been eager to wipe that smirk off of the little tart's face . . . and I'm not talking about with my hand or with violence.

"She needs to hear something directly from me, not from a message. If she doesn't want to speak to me again after that, I'll never bother her again."

April stared at me suspiciously and I adopted my most serious expression. "Really. She's going to want to hear this, trust me."

April stood there for the longest time, looking like a battle was going on inside of her head. Finally, she let out a huge sigh. "I'll go find her and see what she says." She turned away, but stopped to add, "On one condition."

"Anything."

"You never come here again."

*If I get to talk to her, I won't need to come here again, I thought.*

"Scout's honor," I assured, putting up the little hand signal.

April scowled at me, looking as if she was going to change her mind. I kept my expression straight and serious.

"Okay," she finally said. "Don't make me regret this or you'll be sorry."

"I won't," I promised.

She still looked skeptical. "Wait here and I'll be right back."

I spent the better of twenty minutes standing around at the receptionist's desk, looking like a dumbass waiting for April to come back. The receptionist, Kathy, a middle-aged woman with graying hair, kept me entertained, telling me all about her daughter and her recent engagement. She seemed to be that type of person who'd talk to just about anyone and tell them her life story.

"She's so happy," Kathy was saying to me after just showing me her daughter, a little blonde with a humble next-door type appearance. "She got herself a good fella—handsome too, just like yourself." She beamed at me.

"Oh you're so kind," I said, trying to sound at least a little interested in the conversation. "Truth be told, there's nothing special about my looks."

"Handsome and modest, a good combination," Kathy said, placing the back of her hand to the side of her mouth and lowering her voice to a conspirator whisper, "You'd be quite the catch."

"Modest, huh?" I chuckled. "Now that's something I haven't heard before."

At that moment, April reappeared, walking up the hallway toward me. The look on her face told me everything.

"Sorry, I have to go," I said, not sparing Kathy another glance. "It was nice meeting you, Kathy." I walked off briskly before she could reply, making it to April in several quick strides.

"Well?" I demanded, trying to keep myself calm and collected.

April stared at me for what seemed like an eternity, purposefully drawing the moment out.

Finally, she said, "Against my better judgment, Victoria's willing to talk to you."



I TAPPED MY FINGERS IMPATIENTLY AGAINST THE WOODEN ARMREST OF MY CHAIR. This was so not me, being forced to wait to be seen. Usually it was the other way around. April had led me to a waiting room on the top floor of the building. It had a pretty nice view, but nothing like what I enjoyed at my office.

The problem was that, while nice and all, Christine's building wasn't high enough to see over all the other surrounding buildings, so all you saw were other buildings blocking out the view.

I turned my eyes away from the outside, my thoughts going inward. I wondered what had been going on with Victoria all this time. Had she thought about me? Would she forgive me? I didn't know the answers to these questions, but that's what I intended to find out.

I was going to do my best to win her back. I already knew how I was going to prove to her that what she saw with Candice wasn't what it looked like.

All I needed was the chance . . . and I could set things right.

After what seemed like an eternity, the door cracked open and I quickly sprang to my feet like a jack-in-the-box. My heart began to pound in my chest in an annoying fashion as I waited for the door to open fully. I waited, holding my breath, preparing myself for what I had to say.

*Don't screw this up, Ty.*

The door open and in walked . . . *What the fuck?*

Christine Finnerman.

She was dressed like the frigid ice queen that she was, in a form-fitting white dress with a matching white belt at her waist, frosted pumps, her silver hair done up into an elegant style. A sparkling necklace adorned her neck, which was tight and firm for a woman of her age.

Though I'd never met Victoria's boss, I knew how she looked because of the billboards that had her evil mug plastered on them all over city.

All in all, I'd say she was one of the state's most powerful women. Her name commanded respect.

"What's going on here?" I asked in confusion as Christine slowly closed the door behind her. I looked over her shoulder, somehow hoping Victoria had followed in behind her. "Where's Victoria?"

Christine's gaze centered on me like a hawk, her eyes blazing with hatred.

I'm usually a guy that can't be ruffled, but this woman made me hot under the collar . . . and not in a good way. I swore if she kept looking at me like that, I'd catch on fire.

"She's not coming," she said crisply, her voice as cold and frigid as she looked. "You'd do well to forget all about her."

I stood my ground. "What do you mean she's not coming? She's a grown woman and can make her own decisions. You're not her mother. Is this another one of your attempts to make her life a living hell?"

"I'm just her employer, something you forgot when you filled her little head with that startup nonsense." She grinned tightly. "Fortunately for her, I saw right through what was happening and chose to give her mercy by keeping her employed here."

"Please," I scoffed. "Being tortured working under you is what you call mercy? Give me a break!"

I expected a hot retort. Instead, Christine began to circle me. "In a way, I'm the only mother she's got."

I laughed in disbelief. "You're unbelievable. And I thought I was full of myself."

Christine looked at me as if waiting for me to say something else. When I didn't, she spoke up.

"You know, when I saw Victoria standing in front of me that first day, interviewing for a position as one of my assistants, I saw a girl who was vulnerable, lost. I saw a girl who needed guidance. I thought, *she reminds me of me when I was younger*. I took her under my wing, Mr. Locklin, because I had a gut feeling that Victoria had a future ahead of her, a career that will never be allowed to flourish with you underfoot."

"Nice story," I said sarcastically, "but what a load of bullshit! Victoria has told everyone who will listen about how horrible and awful you treat her. And now you want to act like you're her fairy godmother?!"

"Ah, yes," Christine said, "big, bad, evil Christine, treating her girls like they're red-headed stepchildren." She clasped a hand to her cheek. "Whatever shall they do?" She circled me again, stopping directly in front of me. This time, her gaze softened as she looked me in the eyes. "We live in a cruel world, Mr. Locklin, as I'm sure you know, working in the corporate world and all, and there is nothing crueler than to work in the cut-throat world of fashion. What these girls think is mean, is actually me preparing them for the viciousness that awaits them. I do it and I make no apologies about it either, because if Victoria doesn't crack under the pressure, she'll appreciate it later. If she does, then this business just wasn't for her."

"That was a nice little speech," I growled, doing a quick golf clap that was meant to annoy her. "You almost convinced me with that one. Now let me see Victoria."

Christine's face hardened into stone. "Victoria is busy, Mr. Locklin. Besides, you'd be better off focusing on helping your father's company maintain its portfolio rather than wasting your time on Victoria. Now please, I'm going to need you to leave my building."

Ignoring the last bit, I said "You're not accomplishing anything. You can't keep me from seeing her."

Christine produced a cellphone out of the side of her dress in one quick, elegant flourish, brandishing it in front of my face as if it were a weapon. "Of course I can't. But I can have you escorted out of the building. Which I'll be forced to do if you don't leave within ten seconds." She stared at me with challenge. I could see in her eyes that she wanted me to defy her.

I stood there for a second, wondering if I should call her bluff.

"Fine," I said, hating myself for giving up, but not wanting to give the condescending woman the pleasure of having me removed from her building. "I'm leaving."

## Victoria

I LET OUT A SIGH, SWEAT BEADING MY FOREHEAD. WHEN I'D GOTTEN THE MESSAGE from April that Tyler was here, I almost lost my will, tempted to go down to talk to him. Right when I was about to go down, Christine intervened, saying that she'd handle it and if I wanted to see him, I'd have to do it on my own time.

While there was the normal *bossiness* in her voice, it almost sounded like she said it as *I got your back*. I was shocked, but at the same time, I was probably just imagining it. Christine never did anything for anyone, though she had seemed to lighten up a little over the last couple of months.

"What did he say?" I asked with trepidation, not sure if I wanted to know the answer.

Ignoring him was the hardest thing I'd ever done, but I'd managed. All I had to do was think of what I'd seen, and it gave me the will and the resolve to hold steady.

Today was the first time that the image didn't produce the strength needed to resist the urge to give him a chance to explain.



"He was determined to see you," Christine replied. "I told him that you were busy, which you are. Victoria, I don't need this kind of thing happening here. I know you can't control him, but I need you to try to ensure this doesn't happen again."

I was taken back, almost speechless. "Um, thank you, Mrs. Finnerman," I told her, unsure exactly what to say. "And it won't happen again. I promise."

Christine walked over. "Good. Now get back to work. You're a good assistant with a bright future ahead of you, but trust me with this one: there's a thousand girls out there who'd kill for your job, and I won't tolerate disruptions."

My jaw almost needed to be picked up from my desk. Did Christine just compliment me? What was the world coming to?

"Close your mouth, Victoria, or you might catch a fly," Christine advised, knowing that she'd just rendered me speechless.

I snapped my mouth shut as my boss walked away. "And don't let my praise go to that silly little head of yours, Victoria. You have a long way to go before you can walk a step in my shoes."

And then she was gone.

## CHAPTER 23

TYLER

"*You* don't have to worry about me embarrassing you anymore," I said to my father as I sat directly across from him in his office. "My relationship with Victoria is over."

My father regarded me wearily. "Is that why you suddenly started drinking?"

I nodded. Normally I didn't reveal private things that involved emotion with him, but I felt like I needed to, so that we'd be able to at least function on speaking terms for the betterment of Armex.

"Yes. We haven't seen each other for a few months now, actually."

"I suppose that explains a lot," Dad muttered. He stared at me. "I'm sorry, son. How are you doing?"

I shrugged. "I'm over it."

"Don't try to act all nonchalant with me, Tyler." Dad sat back in his seat. "For a while I didn't believe you cared about Victoria one way or the other. I believed you were just using her to get back at me because I wanted you to have a perfect relationship. In reality, I should have been happy you finally found someone who could rein you in. Lord knows you've picked some real keepers. Like . . ."

"Don't even mention her name," I growled.

He cleared his throat. "Anyway, after I thought about it, I realized standing in your way was just going to make matters worse."

*Gee, Dad, I thought wryly. **Now** you want to come to this conclusion when our relationship is over. How convenient.*

I saw no use in arguing about it. What was done, was done.

I held in a groan. I really didn't want to hear all this now after all I'd gone through. After all, what good did it do me? I was dead to Victoria.

"All of that doesn't matter anymore," I said flatly. "It's over, so you can stop worrying about me ruining the company's image, making a fool of myself or going around screwing anything that moves. I'm done with all that. For good."

"That's music to my ears. But I just want you to be happy, son," Dad said empathically. "That's all I've ever wanted from the beginning."

I snorted. "You sure have a hell of a way of showing it. You threatened to replace me with Charles Whitmore. I mean, I would've been pissed either way, but Charles Whitmore? I can't stand that guy and you know it!" I'd intended to keep my cool during our little talk, but I was shocked at the anger that came through my voice.

Dad made a 'calm down' motion with his hand. "Relax, Ty. I never had any intention of replacing you with Charles. Well, maybe for a minute out of anger. Of course I knew you were rivals. I hoped that telling you he would take your spot would light a fire under your ass."

"Well how'd that work out?" I muttered sourly.

Dad ignored me. "And there's another thing, Ty." He paused and I knew whatever he was about to say was difficult for him. "I'm sorry . . . for pressuring you to break up with Victoria. Sometimes, I feel like we're more alike than you know. When someone tells us not to do something, it makes us want to do it that much more."

I grew silent. For my dad to apologize . . . well, it was unheard of. I can't remember him ever saying those words to me before for *anything*. He wasn't as prideful as me, but he was damn near close.

“Um, thanks, Dad,” I said awkwardly. “I know that must’ve been tough.”

Dad wiped at sweat that was suddenly beading his forehead. “You can say that again.”

I stood up out of my chair and stretched out my arms, suddenly eager to get away. “Alright, I’m going to go. Got a report I need to finish. See you tomorrow.” I turned to leave.

“Wait.”

I paused. “Huh?”

“One last thing.” He fiddled with one of his favorite pens, a gift I’d gotten him one Christmas that was emblazoned with gold and personalized with his name. “If you should somehow get back with Victoria . . . you have my blessing.”

## CHAPTER 24

TYLER

"Shit, I feel like the world is crashing down on my head," Brad groaned, downing a shot. He let out a heavy sigh and smacked the glass back down on the bar, rattling my glass of Sprite. "The wedding is two weeks from now."

Brad had called me to meet up with him to discuss his upcoming wedding and the anxiety he had over it. Not having anything particularly important happening, I was quick to oblige. I seem to have a lot more free time on my hands these days.

"Everything is going to work out fine," I assured him. "I got everything covered. Stop worrying, stop stressing. It's not worth it."

Brad regarded me with bloodshot eyes. "Well, just look at Positive Suzy over here. Everything is just flowers and rainbows for you, isn't it?"

I fingered my cold glass of Sprite, wishing it was something stronger. "You called me here to give you support. I'm giving it, but if you want, I can tell you how stupid you are and how your life is over instead."

Brad shook his head. "Nah, nah. You're right. I should stop being such a little bitch. It's just that . . ." He groaned. "Katie won't stop talking about babies! I mean, what's wrong with her? I'm just getting going with my career, and she literally wants to conceive on our honeymoon." Brad signaled the waitress to bring him another glass and promptly turned it up as soon as it arrived. "Fuck, man."

*Babies.* Just even thinking about the concept felt alien to me. I'd never really given much thought to the idea, never really wanted a kid except for maybe when my youth was gone and I was too old to do all the things I loved to do.

For some reason, the thought of babies brought Victoria to my mind. Her pretty smile. Her stubborn personality. I could totally see us having . . .

In panic, I pushed the troublesome thoughts away. *I must be getting old*, I thought.

"You need to put your foot down," I told him. "Now instead of later. Have a talk before the wedding. Come to an understanding."

"Ugh," Brad groaned. "I don't know."

I placed a hand on Brad's shoulder. "Look, a healthy relationship is based on equal partnership, not a dictatorship. A considerate and loving partner will listen to your wants and needs and take them into consideration when they come into conflict with their own. You should be able to tell Katie yours, and then you guys should be able to discuss things and find a happy medium. I mean, come on. If you guys can't see eye to eye now, how do you expect to remain married? Why get married in the first place?"

*Look at me sounding like I'm some sort of therapist*, I thought. For some reason, being without Victoria had made me become all preachy.

Brad stared at me for an entire minute before he spoke. I wondered if he could even comprehend what I was saying. "Who the fuck are you? I mean, you look like Tyler. At least I think you do. I'm pretty drunk, after all. But you know what?" he asked. "Whoever you are, you're right. I should have a talk with her, let her know who's boss."

"There you go," I said. "Grow some balls."

Brad snorted. "I've always had balls. Katie's just had a grip on them for the longest time. A sharp, nail-filled grip."

I winced at the image his words summoned.

"But now she's talking about buying a house as soon as we're back from the honeymoon—you know—a place to put said babies in," he moaned, looking like he was about to fall apart.

I tightened my grip on his shoulder. "Remember what I said," I reasoned. "Talk it out like two adults. Everything will be fine."

*Or run now while you still can, I thought. Run far, far, away. Save your sanity.*

I didn't bother saying what I was thinking. I knew that Brad was dead set on marrying her, despite all of his complaining. He loved Katie more than life itself.

"I hope so."

"Trust me, it will."

*I'll be surprised if he even attempts to talk to her, I thought. And if he does, the conversation probably won't last but a minute before he just caves into whatever she wants.*

"Enough of me; have you heard anything from Victoria?" Brad asked.

A sharp pain stabbed through my chest. "We haven't seen each other for a while now."

"I'm sorry, man," Brad slurred. "She was a pretty girl."

*Pretty wasn't the start of it.*

"It's alright," I lied. "I've had worse happen to me."

Our conversation drifted to more mundane matters, Brad talking about his law firm and the raise he was looking forward to, while I talked about how much better Armex was doing now that I had my shit together.

"You're still on to be my best man, right?" Brad slurred as his head seemed to be bouncing around like a bobblehead.

To be honest, I really didn't want to go to the wedding. I was just getting over my depression, and a cheery celebration would only make it worse. I felt like it would remind me of what I lost . . .

"You *are* coming, right?" Brad persisted. "After you spent all that money on those high-fashion outfits, it would be a shame if you didn't."

A jolt of lightning went through me.

*Fashion! That's it!*

"Fuck, Brad," I said, clapping him hard on the back. "You're a genius."

Brad peered at me stupidly. "Tell me something I don't know, will ya?"

I gulped down my entire glass of Sprite and grinned. "Never mind."

"Shit. You're acting more hammered than I am and you haven't taken one sip."

"Must be the those flowers you were talking about earlier."

Brad groaned, grabbing at his temples. "Whatever, man. My fucking head hurts. I know I'm going to wake up to a disgusting hangover tomorrow." He paused to stare at me. "You are coming to the wedding, though, right?"

Adopting an assuring smile, I draped an arm over Brad and signaled the waitress. Maybe I'd have a drink after all.

"I'll be there, buddy."



## CHAPTER 25

### VICTORIA

"*I*'m sorry, Christine isn't available right now, can I take a message?" I asked.

"No, you can't," said the frigid woman's voice on the other end of the line. "Just tell her that I, or my models, won't be attending since she doesn't have the decency to be available when I need her most."

*Click.*

*What the hell was that about?*

Setting down the phone, I let out a frustrated sigh, blowing my bangs out of my eyes. I was having a stressful day. Christine had chosen to take the day off for some unknown reason, leaving me to take a million messages. I'd taken up residence in her office, and I would've been flattered by sitting in her seat if not for all the stress that came along with it.

*Now she's going to blame me for Mrs. White canceling, I thought. Even though I have no idea why.*

Patty White was a popular fashion designer that was supposed to be Christine's friend, and she usually supported all of Christine's events.

Apparently something must've happened between the two. Whatever it was, it must have been pretty bad for her to pull something like that. Christine's summer events were all the talk in the business.

"Just great," I muttered as I fingered through Christine's event planner, found Patty's name, and put a note to the side. "Just one more thing for her to bitch about when she comes back."

A knock at the doorway caused me to jump.

"Hey new boss lady!" April chirped cheerfully, popping her head through the doorway. "When did the wicked witch die and make you the new queen?" She stepped fully into the room, a stack of papers in her hands.

As usual, I thought she looked adorable. Her hair was pulled into two little girl ponytails on either side of her head, and she wore a white tank top and a white skirt embroidered with some kind of sparkly studs. Spiked boots adorned her feet.

If there was one thing I could say about April—she knew how to dress.

I groaned. "Please don't. I'm already nauseous and the day isn't half over yet."

"Oh please, I would kill to be in that chair," said April.

I stood up and motioned to Christine's seat, which we all had dubbed 'The Throne'. "Be my guest."

April clutched her papers to her chest and shook her head, her tails shaking about. "Nope. She put you in charge, not me. Though why she did that boggles my mind."

Actually, Christine had eased up quite a bit since Tyler had shown up. She hadn't been Mother Theresa by any standards—she was Christine Finnerman, after all. But she'd started to give me a little more responsibility, like today, for example. All of the useless errands she used to put me on, she made the newer girls do. I appreciated it and welcomed the experience.

"I'm basically here to take messages, not much else. But I agree, she has been a little different."

"Must be something in the water," April muttered. Then she shook her head. "But you might want to sit back down, because you might not like

what I'm about to tell you."

"What?" I demanded, gripping the edge of Christine's desk, my heart beginning to pound. I eyed the papers April held with a sneaking suspicion.

"Christine was supposed to be a panelist for a modeling audition today."

"Huh?" I asked in confusion. I was relieved and confused at the same time, and I had no idea what April was talking about. I usually handled Christine's schedule, and I knew nothing about this.

"The male modeling auditions for Christine's underwear line. It's today. From time to time, Christine sits in. I thought you knew that?"

Before I could reply, April continued talking. "Anyway, me, Gabe and a couple of our co-workers are sitting in." She beamed at me, shaking her pony tails with glee. "And guess who is filling in for Christine?"

"Me?" I squeaked in disbelief.

April nodded, jumping up and down with excitement.

"But she didn't even tell me this!" I protested. I'm all for the extra responsibility, but I didn't know the first thing about judging models, especially male models. Not only that, Christine hadn't told me a thing about it, robbing me of the chance to prepare.

*If I held them to the standards to Tyler, they'd probably all come up short anyway.*

I had no idea why I thought of that right then.

"It's Christine. I don't question anything she does," April said. "I learned that a long time ago."

"Oh God," I groaned. This is going to be a nightmare.

"Don't worry," April soothed. "Look at the bright side, at least you get to look at some hot guys modeling underwear. There's going to be so much eye candy you'll get sick! Heck, maybe you can even find you a cute guy to have some fun with."

"Please," I muttered, rolling my eyes.

April laughed and glanced down at her watch. "Come, let's go. The models are going to start pouring in here in the next fifteen minutes. We need to have our butts glued to our chairs ten minutes before."

"Alright, alright!" I conceded, grabbing one of Christine's notebooks off her desk. "I'm coming."



BY THE TIME WE GOT TO THE AUDITIONING ROOM, I WAS AT LEAST SOMEWHAT versed on how to judge the models.

Of course I can pick who I think has the best body, but I was told to give preference to those that were in a particular age bracket and had an *edgy* look. They had to be fit, but not overly muscular.

The auditioning room was large, with brick walls and clothing racks lining the perimeters. A table, where the judges were sitting, was at the back of the room, and a large platform where the models would be standing was erected in front of it.

April and I made our way to the table. I quickly greeted Gabe and my co-workers and then sat down beside April in the middle seat. After a moment of discussion, the auditions began.

"Bring them on in," April called, clapping her hands together.

"Oh, I so can't wait for this," Gabe said excitedly, wiggling in his seat.

*Oh god*, I thought. Gabe was going to have a fucking field day with this.

On April's command, one of the waiting interns opened the doors and a line of men wearing just white underwear flowed into the room.

Though I'd seen men in their underwear before, I couldn't keep from blushing at all the bared flesh before me. And bulges. So. Many. Bulges.

*Just keep repeating to yourself they're all gay*, I told myself. *So you don't get any ideas to procreate.*

It was hard, though, with so much temptation in front of me. This type of job definitely was *not* for me. And if I was having trouble focusing, Gabe definitely shouldn't be here.

Chiseled jaws, chiseled thighs, chiseled abs everywhere. Perfect, white smiles. Almost too perfect.

April smiled at the first round of men that lined the platform. "Thank you all for coming. The wonderful Mrs. Christine Finnerman couldn't be here today, so her right hand assistant, Victoria, will be sitting in her place helping us judge. You all will be judged by certain criteria that Christine is looking for right now. If you're a good fit, you'll be called back in. If you don't hear back from us . . . well, you can always try again next time. Christine is always changing what she's looking for, so don't get discouraged if you're not chosen." April looked around at all the young, half-naked men. "Any questions?"

Most of the them shook their heads.

April smiled wider. "Alright, let's begin. First man up! Please state your name before walking down the runway."

"Aubrey."

Aubrey was a skinny blonde guy, with high cheekbones, blue eyes, and an average package . . . though we weren't supposed to be judging bulge sizes. Besides that, he certainly fit the bill, but I wasn't too impressed by him.

Aubrey walked down the platform onto the runway with an awkward gait, his expression stoic and lifeless. He posed for a moment and then walked toward the judges, turned, and then made his way back onto the platform.

April scribbled something on her notebook and I wondered if I should be doing the same.

"He's too skinny," Gabe whispered. "Even by industry standards."

"Well?" April pressed me. "We don't have all day, Vicky. You gotta be quick."

"I wasn't impressed," I admitted finally, feeling sick to my stomach.

April nodded and then turned to beam happily at the young man. "Thank you for coming, Aubrey. You'll hear back from us if you're selected." I watched her cross the young man's name off the list as he walked off.

"Don't worry about it, honey," Gabe whispered to me, seeing the trepidation on my face. "That guy will find work with one designer or the other. And stop worrying about judging these dudes. They got into modeling to be judged on their looks and bodies, and if they can't handle it, they don't need to be in this business."

Gabe's words did little to ease me of my anxiety as the next guy stepped up.

"Jake."

Jake was tall and auburn-haired with a masculine jawline and a toned body. I had to admit that I liked what I saw.

He walked down the walkway with a smile, winking at the judge table before walking back. Even his butt was cute.

"He's a keeper," Gabe whispered immediately.

In thought, April chewed her pen for a second and turned to me. "What do you think?"

"I'm with Gabe, but are we supposed to sit here and discuss them all or can we just scribble down our thoughts and move this along?"

April stared at me for a moment before shaking her head. "Just trying to get you used to it all, honey." She turned her head to Jake. "Thank you, Jake." She smiled at the handsome man. "Next!"

I sat through the next wave of models, trying to be the best judge I could be. I hated every time I had to be truthful and vote against a candidate, but over time my anxiety waned just a bit. I realized that I had a long way to go before I could even aspire to be in a position similar to Christine.

An hour later, and we'd dwindled the room down to just a dozen or so remaining. The eye candy was nice and all, but I'd had enough. I was ready to go.

After another contestant left, I took a sip of the bottled water I had in front of me and lowered my head to check my notes while the next guy stepped up and announced his name.

"Tyler."

My head snapped up fast at the deep, familiar baritone. I *knew* that voice. But it can't be, can it?

*What in the hell?*

There, standing on the platform like he owned it and making the other men around him look like little boys, was Tyler in all of his masculine glory, a cocky grin on his face and that mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

*How the hell did I miss him?*

I froze, staring at Tyler, who was looking at me with that grin that I'd found so hard to resist. My whole body was trembling.

April seemed to still have her wits about her. "What are you doing here, Mr. Locklin?" she demanded.

Tyler kept his eyes on me. "What do you mean? I'm here to model underwear . . . like everyone else."

April scowled. "Really? All you're doing is disrespecting the judges and all the models here, wasting everyone's time."

Tyler shrugged. "I had to do what I had to do."

April glanced at me, noting that I was frozen in place but trembling. "Well, it's obvious that she doesn't want to talk to you. I think you've done enough."

"Speak for yourself, honey," Gabe interjected. "He can disrespect me all he wants, whenever he wants," Gabe said, admiring Tyler's incredible body.

"Shut up, Gabe!" April snapped. She turned her eyes back on Tyler, her expression stony. "Please leave, Tyler." April said coldly. "We need to finish this up."

Tyler didn't respond, and instead made his way toward the judges' table. By this time, my heart was pounding and I could hardly breathe.

"Victoria," Tyler pleaded. "Please talk to me. I can explain what happened that night you walked in on me and Candice. If you let me." He reached out his hand to me when I didn't respond. "Come on," he urged, nodding toward the exit. "We can go out into the waiting room and talk."

I stared at his hand like it was poisonous, dueling emotions roiling through my body like a tidal wave.

"Tyler, don't make me have to call security," April commanded.

Tyler ignored her, pleading with those beautiful eyes of his. "Please, Victoria. All I'm asking for is a chance to tell you the truth."

"Oh, to hell with this," Gabe chipped in. "Vicky, you best take your cute little ass out there and hear him out! The man is making a fool of himself just to talk to you."

Gabe's words had a slight effect on me as I stared into Tyler's handsome face.

*Maybe I should hear him out. I mean, Gabe might be right. Why would Tyler go through all this trouble to see me after all this time unless he cares for me?*

I almost did it. I almost reached out and took his hand.

"I'm calling security," April growled, taking my silence as proof that I was mortified and didn't want to talk to him.

"Don't!" I jumped to my feet, grabbed my water bottle and dashed the rest of the contents into Tyler's face. "Go fuck yourself!" I yelled.

Then I turned and ran from the room sobbing.

Tyler



*SHIT. THAT DIDN'T GO SO WELL.*

I wiped the water out of my eyes, feeling some of it drip down my neck, down my chest and beyond as the judges whispered amongst each other, casting glances my way.

April looked taken aback by Victoria's sudden burst of anger, frozen for several moments. Then she stood up and rose on her tip toes to look over my shoulder. "Thank you all for coming," she said loudly. "I'm very sorry about the unexpected disruption. For those of you who are interested, we will resume at noon tomorrow. Ashley will show you out."

The last remaining models were quickly ushered out by a young woman who looked like a model herself.

"You guys can leave as well," April said to her fellow judges. "I'll keep the votes and notes and hand them over to Christine when she comes back."

After several furtive whispers, the other judges, except for Gabe, got up and began walking out.

April turned on me when they were gone, her eyes furious. "What the hell was that?" she demanded. "All you're going to do is get Vicky into trouble with a stunt like that."

I shrugged. "That wasn't my intention. I just need five minutes with her. Five minutes."

April scowled. "And that makes it right?" she growled. "You need to go and never come—" She paused and stared at me suspiciously. "Wait a minute. How did you know that Victoria would even be here? She doesn't usually work the judging panel."

I gave her a crooked grin. "I have my ways."

"Ugh!" April snarled. "You are so infuriating! I see why Victoria would get so pissed off when talking about you." April placed her hands on her hips. "Look, it's obvious your little stunt didn't work. So you'd better just head on out. I don't know what Christine will do about this, but I hope she puts your nuts in a vice. You need to be taught a lesson."

I shook my head. "I'm not leaving until I talk to her. At this point, I don't care what happens."

"I was hoping I wouldn't have to do this," April sighed. She made a flipping motion with her hand. "Gabe, please get security."

Gabe looked reluctant. "Why don't we just . . ."

"Gabe!" April cracked. "Now!"

"Alright!" whined Gabe, slowly getting up. "Don't get your panties all in a bunch."

He made it couple of steps before I said sternly, "Wait."

Gabe paused, turning around to regard me, his eyebrow raised.

"Hear me out," I said to April. "Just let me tell *you* my side of the story and I'll leave."

April pursed her lips, undecided.

"Five minutes," I urged. "I just want Victoria to know that I . . ." A lump appeared in my throat, making it difficult to speak. "That I love her," I finally managed. It was hard to say it. I'd been thinking it for a long time, but my words were carefully chosen. I knew it would give April pause.

Shock etched across April's face at my announcement, exactly what I was hoping for. Even I was surprised by it. It felt very strange to have those words come out of my mouth, especially after I'd sworn to never fall in love with a girl again.

"Wow," April gulped. "I was almost convinced. But not quite."

"Go on," Gabe persuaded. "That can't be all?"

"Gee, thanks for your support," I muttered.

Gabe winked.

"Promise me that if I don't like what you have to say, you'll put an end to this and never bother Victoria again."

I grinned. "Promise."

April stared at me suspiciously for a long time before letting out a huge sigh. "Fine, but make it quick."

## CHAPTER 26

### VICTORIA

*H*ow dare he show up like that? I thought, standing before the large window of Christine's office with my arms crossed and looking out at the darkening skyline.

After I'd run from the auditioning room, crying my eyes out, I made it back to the top floor, locking myself in Christine's office. There I felt safe, away from everyone. I'd gotten myself together and resumed my duties, working to try to forget what happened.

Still, there'd been a part of me that wanted to run back down and confront Tyler just as fast as I'd run out, to call him the scum of the earth, a lying bastard. It took all of my discipline, repeating an empowering litany over and over in my head, to stay put.

No, I was better off without him in my life.

A knock on the wall jolted me back from thought. "Hey Miss Boss Lady!"

April walked into the office, a concerned look on her face.

"Hey," I replied. I hadn't seen April since I ran from the auditioning room, and I wondered if she was mad at me. "How'd everything go?"

April walked over and set some papers down on Christine's desk and sighed. "Awful. I had to call off the rest of the audition. It's being rescheduled for tomorrow. I've already called Christine and confirmed. She was angry about it, but I think she has too much on her plate right now to

worry about it. That is, as long as everything gets taken care of tomorrow." April twisted one of her side ponytails around her index finger, looking thoughtful. "Something about Patty White is giving her an ulcer."

*I know all about it*, I thought.

"What about Tyler?" I asked. I hated how eager I sounded.

April stopped fooling with her hair and looked at me. "I sent him away."

"Did you have to call security?" For some reason that was important to me. I liked the idea of Tyler fighting with security guards and getting thrown out on his ass. It would show his cocky ass right.

April shook her head. "No, he left on his own."

"Oh." I sounded so disappointed.

April walked over to stand next to me and placed a hand on my shoulder, looking me directly in the eyes. "Are you okay?" she asked with concern.

For a moment, I thought about lying, but then I thought better of it. Since my ordeal with Tyler, April had been a great friend. She only wanted what was best for me.

"At first I wasn't," I replied. "I cried and cried, but then I slowly pulled it together." I sniffed. "Someone had to do the work around here."

"That's good," April said softly. "But I have a question."

"Huh?"

"Did you ever give Tyler a chance to explain why that girl was there that day?"

I scowled. "No, why should I? The skank was holding his dick while he was half-naked. What is there to explain? That she wasn't real? That I was having delusions? Please, April." I thought it was odd that April, who'd been the very one condemning Tyler, was asking if I'd given him a chance to explain his lies to me.

April studied me, understanding in her eyes. "Sometimes, Vicky, things aren't what they seem."

I glowered. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Instead of answering, April turned toward the window. "It sure is a beautiful view at dusk," she murmured appreciatively.

*Doesn't beat the view from Tyler's office,* I thought.

"It is," I admitted, wondering what April's deal was. "A beautiful view and an ugly day."

"It wasn't that bad."

*Are you kidding me?*

I turned away and walked over to Christine's desk, ready to go home. April was suddenly acting too weird for me. "It's time to get out of here." I paused, looking around the desk to make sure Christine's things were exactly how she liked them.

"Hey, April."

"What's up?"

"Can you tell Gabe to bring Christine's *White Book* before you go? He came by here a bit ago, asking to borrow it. I want everything to be where it's supposed to be when Christine gets here. She'll have a fit if it isn't here in the morning," I said.

April turned to regard me, a twinkle in her eye. "Sure. I'll send him up as soon as I track him down." She walked toward the office doorway but stopped to ask, "Do you need anything?"

*Okay, now I really know she's acting weird.*

I crossed my arms. "No. Just that book. Now," I said with my best Christine impression.

April saluted me with a laugh. "Right on it, Boss."

I gagged. "Gross."

Leaving a peal of laughter in her wake, April left the office, practically skipping out.

"Weirdo," I muttered when she was gone.

While killing time for Gabe, I went about tidying up Christine's office, making sure nothing was out of place. Christine was a neat freak, and if she came back with so much as a pen out of place, I was sure I'd never hear the end of it.

I still couldn't believe that she'd let me run her office for a day. Me, the girl she'd practically tortured since coming to work for her. Me, the girl who thought she was doomed to be a slave for Christine for most of her adult life, only to be tossed to the wayside when she wasn't needed.

But things were beginning to change. Christine started treating me with at least a hint of respect, and she obviously had enough faith in me to give me this opportunity.

All in all, I thought I did a good job if not for the disaster in the audition room, even if I was practically an answering machine.

"C'mon, Gabe, where are you?" I muttered, glancing at Christine's antique clock on the wall. I was already here later than normal. The sun had sunk behind the horizon, leaving a darkened skyline twinkling with lights.

Sighing in frustration, I sat down at Christine's desk and called Gabe's extension. I didn't know why he was taking so damn long. He worked several floors below me, but he still should've been burning wheels to get that book back to me. He was usually the first one out the door every day.

The phone rang several times before his answering machine picked up. "This is Gabriel, your fashion divanista. I'll get back to you guys whenever I feel like it . . . BITCHES!"

*Beep.*

I swear to God, he only had that message somehow specifically for me. There's no way he'd survived working for Christine that long with a voicemail like that. "Gabe, what the hell are you doing?" I demanded. "I'm ready to go home. Why aren't you here yet? You know who's going to be killed when Christine comes back in tomorrow morning looking for . . ."

"This?" asked a deep voice at the doorway.

I looked up and my heart jumped in my chest.

*Tyler.*

*Again.*

He was standing in the doorway, this time with clothes on, a tux, no less, holding Christine's *White Book* in his hands. Five o'clock shadow shaded his jaw as he grinned at me with his enigmatic eyes.

I swear on my life, he never looked more hot and sexy than in that moment. *What the hell did he do between now and the last time I saw him?* I wondered, awed that he would show up looking so formal just for me.

"What—" I began.

"Am I doing here?" Tyler finished for me.

It felt like the cat had my tongue. I nodded.

"I've come to see you, what else?" He said, as if it was plainly obvious. "And to bring you this book." Keeping his eyes on me, he swaggered over to Christine's desk and set the book down before me.

April must have known about this . . . that's why she was acting so differently.

"At your service, Madame," Tyler said dutifully, treating me to a majestic bow. His charm was powerful; it always had been.

*Don't fall for his antics and let him prey on your emotions,* that annoying voice urged. *Get him out of here.*

Gathering all the mental strength that I had at my command, I shot to my feet, stabbing a finger at the door. "Get out!" I shouted. Though I tried to sound as threatening as possible, I actually sounded frightened.

Tyler didn't budge, his eyes still twinkling, unfazed by my barely-there wrath. "You sure about that?"

"I'm positive!" I hissed, trembling all over. "You're a cheating scumbag and you don't deserve me!"



Tyler's grin evaporated and he looked at me with surprising anger. "I never cheated on you," he growled. "I swear on my life."

"You may not have, because I happened to catch you, but you were about to!"

"What you saw was one moment," Tyler said calmly. "You have no idea what happened before that."

*Why am I even listening to this?* I wondered.

"Will you calm down and let me explain without freaking out?" Tyler pleaded, a gentle tone in his voice that made me feel like mush inside. "I promise you'll understand better once I'm done. And if you still don't want to talk to me when it's over, I'll leave and you'll never have to hear from me again."

For some reason, the thought of never hearing from him again really bothered me, even though I'd spent the last several months avoiding him at all costs.

*Maybe I should just listen, I thought, if only to see how ridiculous his lie is going to be.*

I bit my lower lip, deep in thought while Tyler gazed at me with an earnestness that I found surprising.

*Screw it. Just give him a chance to explain himself and be done with it.*

"Go ahead then," I said finally, crossing my arms across my chest and sticking my nose up at the ceiling in a snobby manner. "For all the good it will do you."

Tyler let out a relieved sigh. "Thank you, Vicky."

It was the first time he'd called me *Vicky*. I had to admit, it sounded good to my ears.

Then he began telling me about what happened after I left him. How his ex-girlfriend suddenly showed up and demanded re-entry to his life and how she'd forced herself on him after he demanded that she leave.

"And you walked into the room right as she grabbed me," Tyler said as he finished his tale. "I was about to forcefully remove her, but then I thought better of it. I didn't want her to accuse me of something, she's the biggest gold digger I've ever known, after all. I was in thought about how to handle the situation, and she took advantage of it. That's the God's honest truth."

I stood there for a long while, mulling Tyler's story over in my head. For all my suspicion about his being a player, his story sure sounded genuine. His tone sounded genuine. Not one word he said sounded like a lie. But then again, that's what he was known for, a honey tongue.

"And she's the one who caused me to lose my faith in relationships to begin with," Tyler continued. "Trust me when I say that I'd never allow her in my life again. I tell you now, I've never been hurt by much of anything, even when my parents divorced. But what she did . . ." He shook his head, his eyes haunted. "It fucking destroyed me, probably because I'd allowed myself to grow such a huge ego that I never thought something like that would happen to me. I gave her everything . . . all of me . . . and still it wasn't enough. I know what it feels like to be cheated on, and I would never do that to you."

It was hardly fathomable to me. What kind of girl would cheat on Tyler Locklin? He had everything. I mean, he was young, good looking, rich.

*And he's good in bed,* said the voice in my head.

"So when you hear about me being a player, it was all because I was acting out my pain. I'm quite certain none of those girls ever had any inclination that I was interested in them beyond that first night. In a way, I was protecting myself. I'd put a barrier up, and I refused to let anyone get through it. That is, until you came along."

I could tell it was difficult for him to get the words out. I'd never seen him so conflicted by his emotions before . . . and I liked it. It was nice knowing that he was capable of it.

"What about that crap about my lips when I was getting your measurements? I started out no different than any of the other girls you've discarded," I demanded.

Tyler cleared his throat, feigning embarrassment. "That was just me being me. Besides, it was before I knew you." He chuckled at me, winking. "But I gotta' say, I was absolutely right."

"Asshole!"

"Relax, I'm just kidding. Kind of."

I scowled. "Not funny. Not funny at all."

"Yeah it is, you just don't want to admit." He turned serious. "Do you believe me?"

For once that voice in my mind was silent, a good sign.

"Maybe," I said coyly. "But what happened to your ex? Am I just supposed to believe she left and never came back?"

"She did come back," Tyler admitted.

I tensed up, feeling anger rise up in my throat.

"But she left when she got what she wanted," Tyler added quickly, seeing my dark scowl.

"Which was?"

"Money."

"Are you serious?" I demanded.

Tyler looked helpless. "It was a quick fix, I admit. I had enough shit going on, and I just wanted the problem to go away. She'll probably be back, but we can cross that bridge when we get there."

A ping of sympathy went through me, seeing the earnestness in his eyes, the pain. He really was telling the truth.

"I believe you," I said, not bothering to ask how much he'd had to pay her to go away. I suppose it really didn't matter, and I figured the number would piss me off and we'd be back at square one.

Tyler let out an audible sigh, his expression one of relief.

"But that doesn't mean I'm just ready to start right back where we left off," I was quick to add.

It would take some time to adjust to the idea that we were back on again, especially spending the last few months hating him.

*I have to make him suffer a little, I thought. I went through a lot of mental anguish during the time I was avoiding him . . . even if some of it was my fault for not giving him the time of day to explain what actually happened.*

"Of course," Tyler said diplomatically. "I wouldn't expect you to be."

*Uh huh.*

I glowered at how he was agreeing with anything I said. I thought I'd test him, see if he was even listening to what I was saying. "And I want five hundred thousand dollars."

Of course I wasn't serious about the proposition. *I just want to hear him disagree with me on **something**.*

Tyler didn't blink. "You got it."

I laughed, knowing he was lying through his teeth. "Don't push it, buddy." I glanced at the clock. It was a quarter past the hour. We needed to leave, but I still had a few things I wanted to say to him.

I shook my head. "I just can't believe that you went through all this . . . just for me."

"I can," Tyler said softly. He paused, like he was pondering if he should say his next words. "I love you."

His words hit me like a gunshot to the stomach. "What?" I asked breathlessly. I must've been imagining things. I'd hoped to hear those words, but I thought they'd never come.

Tyler walked around to my side of the desk, moved Christine's chair out of the way, and turned me to face him. "I love you," he repeated in a soft, sexy growl while cupping my right cheek in his hand and gently stroking it. "I've known it for a long time now."

Lost in the conviction of his beautiful blue eyes, I could hardly breathe. Love me? Tyler Locklin? I searched his face for deceit or some clue that he could be lying to me, but I couldn't even find a hint of it.

He loved me. Tyler Locklin loved me.

"Don't cry," Tyler soothed, taking his thumb and wiping the tear that slid down the side of my face.

"I love you too," I breathed in his face before kissing him hard on the lips.

His powerful arms wrapped around me and he bent me back into Christine's desk as our tongues found each other's.

"Stop!" I gasped a moment later, pushing him back and straightening. The fires were raging. Another moment and I would've lost myself.

Tyler grinned at me, that mischievous, boyish grin. "Stop? I was just getting started." He pulled me into him and I could feel his big, hard cock pressing up against my stomach, ready to go.

"Uh," I moaned as Tyler ran his hands up my thighs and around my hips to grab and squeeze my ass. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think?" Tyler replied, his breath scorching my cheek as he brushed his lips against it.

By this time, I was burning up from the close proximity of his body, feeling absolutely breathless, my limbs trembling all over. I could feel sweat gathering on various parts of my body.

*It's like ninety degrees in here! Damn, I'm in hell!*

"Wait!" I protested weakly. "This is Christine's office!"

Tyler laughed, uncaring. "So?" He delivered a strong kiss to my lips.

"So . . ." I gasped, "we . . . just . . . can't."

Tyler kissed me again. "We can't?"

"N . . . no," I managed. "We can't."

Tyler squeezed my right butt cheek. "Who says that we can't?"

"Me. Christine." My protests were so weak. Even I didn't believe them. "She'll kill me."

"Well, you should know by now, I'm not too big on following the rules," Tyler growled, his lips finding my neck, raising my temperature up another notch. "No reason to start obeying them now."

My defenses crumbled like a piece of paper at the intensity in his words. Who was I kidding? Every inch of Tyler Locklin was . . . addicting.

Smothering my neck, he placed his hands under my ass and lifted me up onto the desk, pushing my torso back onto it and knocking all of the items on Christine's desk to the floor.

*I'm dead*, I thought, briefly worried about the mess we were making.

My worries quickly vanished as Tyler bent down and continued kissing me, his hands roving all over my body with expert deftness. I moaned with pleasure and ran my fingers through his hair, filled with an almost giddy excitement.

My pent up sexual frustration and the risky naughtiness of it all made it that much more exciting, adding an edge to our passion.

I pulled on Tyler's hair as he bit into my blouse with his teeth, and with a feral jerk, he ripped it open, displaying my bra and quavering belly.

I looked up at him, awed at the primal lust on display. He was beautiful in all his horny glory, a beast that had come to have his way with his prey.

He practically tore off my bra, exposing my breasts, feasting on them like he was starving. I ran my hand down his back, feeling the incredible muscles beneath his suit, reveling in his hunger for my body.

I gasped when his lips wrapped around an erect nipple, his free hand reaching down beneath my skirt and rubbing me through my now soaked panties.

"Ohh," I groaned, holding onto his hair tightly, enjoying the feel of him sucking on my nipples and massaging me at the same time.

My nipples proved not enough to sate his incredible hunger, as he drifted down to my waist and quickly removed my skirt and panties in one swift motion.

I cried out once again when his mouth completely covered my pussy and he began his feast. Looking up at me with those intense eyes of his, he held onto my thighs as I squirmed all over Christine's desk.

"Fuck!" I cried, squirming, sprawling my arms out behind me, knocking the last bit of items off the desk. I was bucking like a wild animal, but I was no match for Tyler's strength. He held my lower body in place, his lips stuck to me like glue. "Oh my God!"

Two fingers slipped inside me slowly, my stomach clamping down in response to his furious assault. My breathing quickened, and a thunderstorm was brewing inside my belly, ready to unleash its fury.

My toes curled up and my eyes rolled back inside my head as Tyler continued his onslaught, flicking his tongue up and down on my clit. "Shit!" I cried, grabbing a handful of his hair and clinging on for dear life. "I'm coming!"

Emboldened, the bastard went in harder, faster, giving me all his powerful jaws could muster until I could hold on no longer.

I blacked out momentarily. My own cries were the first thing I heard a moment later as I convulsed all over his face. He continued to hold my lower body in place, his whole mouth still clamped down on me, taking all of me in.

After the last tremor ran through my thighs, he finally let me go and stood up.

"That was intense," I said weakly, sweat covering my forehead. "I'd forgotten how skilled you were with that mouth of yours."

Tyler grinned at me, wiping his face with the back of his hand. "That I am." A huge bulge was pressing against his black pants, a sign that he wasn't done with me. "But I'm only just getting started." He took off his blazer and then swiftly unbuttoned his dress shirt and flared it open, showing off his

fabulous six pack. On impulse, I ran my fingers along the hard lines of his abs, marveling at how well-defined they were.

Sometimes I thought Tyler's body had been sculpted by God himself, it was so exquisite. He grinned at me, loving every minute of my admiration of his body.

He pulled back, dropping his pants around his ankles, his big cock bouncing out and up and down. I yearned to slide down to my knees and take him in my mouth, but I knew Tyler had other plans for me.

"Are you ready?" he asked me, looking me in the eyes.

I wasn't sure why he was asking. Of course I was ready. I wanted him to fuck me like no tomorrow.

"Of course I am," I replied. "What're you waiting for?"

Grinning, Tyler bent down to plant a kiss on my cheek. "That's my girl," he whispered in my ear.

He penetrated me fully in one deep thrust, his cock going to the hilt inside my canal.

I gasped.

Grabbing my breasts and squeezing them firmly, he began to slowly thrust in and out of me.

*I can't believe this, I thought. I'm getting fucked by Tyler Locklin in Christine's office.*

The thought faded away as Tyler thrust deeply once again, the friction of our bodies against the desk filling the room with sounds of creaking wood and the clap of flesh.

He pushed my legs back almost to my head, and I was thankful that I was pretty flexible. He leaned forward into me, breathing hard in my face and delivering passionate pecks to my lips every time he thrust inward.

"Are you ready?" he asked me between thrusts, staring me deep in the eyes, his breathing labored, sweat beading down his forehead and dripping onto



me.

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded. I was suddenly overcome with a range of emotions as his cock slid in and out of me. Pleasure. Pain. Happiness. Euphoria.

"Yes!" I choked, staring directly into his eyes and seeing only love reflected there. "I'm ready. I've been ready. Show me what I've been missing."

Tyler nodded at me, and that mischievous grin I knew so well formed on his face. He released my legs, pulling me up against him, but making sure his cock didn't slip out of me. "I've longed for this feeling once again," he whispered. His thrusts became slower. Harder. Fuller. I ran my fingers up and down his back, and settled them on his firm ass, guiding him into me and encouraging him.

"Fuck me," I whispered sweetly, eager to feel him explode inside me.

That did the trick.

After one last powerful thrust, he threw back his head. "Ohh fuck!" He cried.

I dug my nails into his back at the same time, coming hard with him in that perfect moment. He collapsed down onto me, our sweat mingling with each other as our bodies shook against each other from pleasure.

A deep sigh escaped his lips after the last twitch of his cock. He pulled himself up and fell back onto the desk beside me, exhausted. The sound of our ragged breathing filled our ears and I smiled contentedly.

We'd done something so naughty, but something so beautiful at the same time.

After a few moments, Tyler raised up, pulling me in close to kiss my forehead. "I love you," he said, looking into my eyes with that same deep love that so touched my heart.

I knew then that whatever happened from here on out, Tyler would always be there for me.

No matter what.

I smiled at him, my heart soaring. “I love you too.”

Charles

I TAPPED MY FINGERS AGAINST MY DESK IMPATIENTLY, RESISTING THE URGE TO curse again. My contact told me he had something for me. Problem was, I hadn’t heard from the bastard since, and he was supposed to have been here half an hour ago.

“Where the hell is he?” I muttered, glancing at my watch. It was closing hours for Armex. Most people would be gone home by now, but not everyone was required to be out. Not if they had important work to do.

*And there’s nothing more important than what I’m doing, I thought darkly. Sealing my position within this company before it’s too late.*

Tyler Locklin was a woman-chasing, incompetent fool. And the sooner he was brought down, the better.

*He’s a disgrace, and I’m going to make sure that he’s widely recognized as the talentless scoundrel that he is.*

After sitting for another ten minutes, I grabbed my mobile phone and slid my finger over the lock screen. If my contact had lied, he’d be sorry.

Before I could begin to dial a certain number, the door to my office opened gently and in walked the man I was waiting on.

“Finally,” I growled. “You took forever. I was beginning to think you had second thoughts. Did you bring what we discussed?”

Though his hood was pulled low, even I could see the grin that touched his jaw line.

He walked over and tossed a large envelope on my desk. Eagerly, I snatched up the package and pushed another, fatter, envelope across the desk to him.

“You have my thanks,” I practically drooled. “When I hired you, I never thought you’d get something this good. You’re worth every penny.”

My contact grabbed the envelope and weighed it in his hand before sticking it into the folds his hoodie. “You know what you’re going to do with those?” he asked.

I bit back a sarcastic reply. He’s good, but I didn’t pay him to be nosy. But what did it matter? In a day or two, I would have what I want. Tyler Locklin would be ruined.

For good.

I couldn’t keep a nefarious grin off my face as I replied, “Get rid of a thorn in my side, once and for all.”

## CHAPTER 27

TYLER

“*I*’m so proud of you, son,” my father said while I was sitting in his office after a long day at work. It’d been a week after Victoria and I had gotten back together and I’d never been happier. “You made such a change in a short period of time.”

After getting back together, I’d thrown myself into my duties with renewed vigor, trying to fix all the problems that so worried my father.

If he needed me for a specific task, I was there. If he wanted something done that required my expertise, I did it instead of passing it off to a lackey.

I wasn’t sure what had me so motivated, but I had my guess.

With Victoria by my side, I was a changed man. Through and through. “Ah, thanks, Dad,” I said.

He shook his head. “That was one helluva presentation you gave this afternoon. I haven’t seen you that excited in years.”

“Did you like it? I must admit, I can’t take all the credit. Jeff helped me for hours getting prepared.”

“Even still, you have such a way with words. A charm about you that I respect. You could definitely be a public speaker.”

“Please, Dad,” I muttered. “I hate speaking in front of groups. I’m dreading this thing I have to do at Brad’s wedding as it is.”

Dad grinned. "Ah, Brad. How is that fella nowadays?"

"He's hanging in there," I replied. "Once the wedding is over I'm sure he'll be better."

Dad looked emphatic. "The poor bastard."

Suddenly, the doors to the office burst open. Startled, I jumped to my feet, as did my dad.

"Hello, gentlemen," Charles Whitmore greeted us cheerily, strolling into the room as if he owned the place.

He made a waving motion at us. "Please, please. Have a seat. Don't you both stand up on my account."

Father slowly sank back into his chair, but I remained standing. I knew by the smug sound of Charles's voice that the bastard had something up his sleeve.

"What the hell are you doing barging in here without knocking, Charles?" Father demanded. "I was having a private conversation with my son."

Charles walked over to his desk, sparing a quick glance my way. "Oh yes, your son."

My dad scowled in annoyance "Yes, my son. You do remember Tyler, don't you?"

Charles laughed. "Of course I do. Who couldn't remember the cocky asshole that's caused Armex major problems and robbed me of my rightful position?"

The only thing keeping me from turning Charles's face inside out was knowing that I'd probably spend a night in jail and would be sued for millions of dollars. Still, it'd almost be worth it.

Dad froze, staring at Charles suspiciously. "Show some respect, Charles. I'm not going tell you again."

Charles's face twisted into a mask of fury. "What I remember, Mr. Locklin, is being promised a promotion."

“So that’s what this is all about,” Dad muttered, his eyes glued to Charles’s annoying mug. “You’re still upset over all that.”

“You’re damn right I’m upset, sir!”

“I suggest you get over it. You’re an asset, so I’m going to cut you some slack, but you’re pushing it.”

Charles grew silent and stood there fuming. I watched him closely, wondering if I was going to have to drag him out of the office if he refused to leave. I’d enjoy manhandling the little prick immensely.

“Fine,” Charles snarled finally. “I didn’t want have to do this, but you leave me no choice.” Keeping his eyes on my dad, he stuck his hand inside his blazer, reaching for something.

My eyes went wide and I was gripped by panic as Charles grabbed something.

I guess I’d been watching too many movies, but my heart was suddenly in my throat, and I quickly leaped across the space separating us. A second later, I collided into Charles with a grunt, knocking him to the floor and sending the folder in his hand flying.

“What the hell? Get off of me!” Charles yelled, struggling to push me off.

Scattered across the floor, I saw pictures, scores of them. My dad was already picking one up. “What the hell is this?” he demanded.

I got a glimpse of one of the photos, and immediately a feeling of dread twisted in my stomach.

In the photo you could see Victoria and me, her legs pushed back to her head, and the back of my masculine figure as I pounded away.

Anger threatened to overwhelm me, and it was all I could do to keep from going over and choking the worthless life out of Charles.

“That,” Charles said smugly, rising to his feet and dusting himself off, a look of sick pleasure coming over his face, “is your son fucking his stepsister.”

My father looked at me with question. The look I returned him told him all he needed to know.

“Looks like Tyler” he muttered. “But I don’t see his face.”

“Keep looking, you’ll find it in there somewhere,” Charles purred. “Now that we know the situation here—let’s discuss my promotion. Or these are going straight to the media.”

“You son of a bitch!” I yelled, going for Charles. Dad grabbed me before I took a few steps and pulled me back.

Charles grinned at me with that smug look of his, pissing me off further. “So you see, James, your son is nothing but a liability to this company like everyone has known all along. I’m not asking for anything that isn’t warranted here. Tyler will forever be a thorn in Armex’s backside while he remains employed here.”

Dad looked around at all the photos scattered around his office, gathering his thoughts. “So let me get this straight. You want me to get rid of my son in exchange for your not releasing these photos to the press?”

Charles beamed. “Correct.”

“Charles, I’m not the sort of man that responds well to blackmail.” Dad snorted and turned toward me. In his eyes, I could see the anger reflected there. After all the great work I’d been doing lately, I’d now managed to upset him again.

“I’m sorry—” I began.

My dad waved me off. “Don’t be.” He turned back to Charles, who was smugly adjusting his clothing, looking as if he knew that my title, what he’d been after for so long, was finally his. “These photographs are truly unfortunate,” Dad said. “And I can’t tell you how upset I am that my son is a part of them.”

“Don’t worry,” Charles said, casting a triumphant glance my way. “No one will ever see them, and maybe Tyler will learn to have better judgement in the future—”

“But I won’t be meeting your demands,” Dad interrupted.

Charles froze. “What?”

*What the hell are you doing?* I wondered.

“You heard me,” my father growled, tossing the photograph he’d had in his hand to the floor with the rest of them.

“You’re making a very big mistake,” Charles warned.

“In fact,” my father retorted, unperturbed. “Once my lawyers are done with you, you’re going to be lucky if you avoid jail time.”

Despite the dire situation, I let out a mocking chuckle. At least he had my back.

Charles shook his head in disbelief. “You’d throw your company’s image down the drain all on the account of your son? Someone who disrespects the position he holds?”

“Our competitors will use it against us, no doubt. But we’ll recover,” Dad said, walking around to his desk and placing both hands on either side, fixing Charles with a glare that looked as if it could burn a whole right through him. “But you? You won’t recover.”

Charles was at a loss for words, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

“Now you can take your threats and shove them up your ass, because you’re fired.” He said, making Donald Trump sound like an amateur. “Get him out of here.”

“My pleasure.” I grinned.

Though I was worried about what would happen with Armex and the effect on my relationship with Victoria if the pictures were released, it was comforting to know that my dad had my back.

I walked over and grabbed Charles by the arm. “Let’s go.”

“You can’t fire me!” Charles yelled as I led him to the door. “This place will crumble without me!”



Dad laughed. “Everyone is replaceable. Someday you’ll learn that, Charles.”

Charles struggled against my grip as I dragged him, but he was no match for my strength. I dragged him, kicking and screaming like the little bitch that he was, out of the office.

I walked over and gathered all the damning photos and stuck them back in the envelope and turned to face my father. “So,” I said. “What now?”

I expected him to go off on me, yell at me and shame me for putting us into this position. Instead he grinned at me and said, “It looks like we’re hiring.”

## CHAPTER 28

### VICTORIA

“*I* heard you had quite a week,” Christine said to me as I stood before her desk. My boss was sitting there looking super sharp as usual in her leopard dress of all things, flawless makeup and an elegant updo, smiling at me as if I were the winner of some unknown prize.

Christine had continued to progressively show me more respect. She was even asking for my opinion on matters and complimenting me on what I wore, which was an absolute rarity.

All in all, I had to wonder if finally standing up to her that day I almost quit caused her to respect me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied respectfully.

She sat back in her seat, her eyes on me. “I heard that Tyler Locklin interrupted one of my auditions.”

I paused, not sure where this was going. Christine had known about this incident since the day it happened, but she was just now mentioning it. I hadn’t told her that I’d resumed my relationship with Tyler, not sure how’d she react—not that it was any of her business. “Yeah, but the audition was almost over when he did, and April got rid of him fairly quickly. I’m sorry, Christine, I know I said he wouldn’t cause any more trouble.”

Christine raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Did she?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what was he doing up here in my office after hours?”

I froze. Did she know? There’s no way she could’ve known, could she?

“One of the interns said she saw him coming up here.”

Relief flowed through me as I realized Christine didn’t know the extent of what went on in her office. I’d done my best to clean up and get everything exactly right, after all.

“He came up with some ruse to get his way up here. We had a little talk . . . and worked things out.”

“You did?” Christine asked in surprise. “Well, good for you. Don’t put up with any shit from him though.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay, enough with the chit-chatting, Victoria. Get to work,” she said. “I’m expecting a call from Pierre about scheduling a meeting.”

“Yes, Mrs. Finnerman.” I turned and began to walk from the office.

“Oh and, Victoria?” Christine called.

I paused, half-turning to regard her. “Yes?”

Christine had a serene smile on her face. “I could use some coffee.”



“OPEN YOUR EYES,” TYLER COMMANDED, REMOVING THE BLINDFOLD FROM around my head. He’d come and picked me up after work, a tradition we’d started before our little split. He told me had something to show me, but he would only take me if I agreed to put on a blindfold.

Suspicious, it took some convincing for him to get me to agree, but of course I eventually gave in. Tyler always gets what he wants. Besides, I’ve always loved surprises.

Anxious, I popped open my eyes. It was an empty building. “What is this, and why are we here?” I asked, confused.

“It’s yours. You’re standing in your new startup location,” Tyler said. “Sure, it needs some work, but we’ll have it whipped up in no time.”

“Oh my God,” I said, tears pooling in my eyes. “It’s amazing!” I managed before frowning. “But I had the impression you weren’t serious about this.”

Tyler waved me off. “Nonsense. I admit, I did suggest it a little too quickly before, but I’ve consulted with a few experts, and we’re going to make this work.” He grinned at me.

Tears came to my eyes and I felt weak in my knees. “I can’t believe this,” I said, noticing that little smirk he had on his face. “What? You have that *and that’s not all* look going on right now.”

“It’s the best part. Christine Finnerman has agreed to send over her two best lieutenants to work alongside you.”

“April and Gabe,” I breathed, feeling dizzy. This had to be some sort of dream.

“I-I-I-” I stuttered, unable to find the words.

“Love me?” Tyler finished.

“Yes, of course that, but . . . what if this business fails? What if I fail? And do I even want to know what it took to get Christine to agree to that?”

“Then it fails and at least you tried. This is your dream, and it’s right in front of you. It’s time for you to go out and seize it. But I know you three aren’t going to fail,” Tyler said firmly. “All that slaving for Christine is going to pay off, trust me.”

“You didn’t answer my last question.”

“Details, details. Does it really matter?” Tyler said with a grin.

I don’t think I loved Tyler more than I did in that moment. I stood on my tiptoes and gave him a deep kiss.

“Damn, I should give you surprises like this more often,” Tyler breathed when I finally pulled back away from him, breathless.

I giggled. “Oh shut it.”

“Seriously, I want more of where that came from.”

I playfully poked him in the stomach. “Later.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.

Tyler stared at me wearily. “All right. I’m going to hold you to that.”

I smiled, then sighed a second later.

“What’s the matter now?” Tyler asked.

“I just don’t know how I’m ever going to repay you for all of this.”

Suddenly, Tyler’s face brightened. “I know exactly how you can repay me.”

I stared at him warily. “What is it?”

“You can be my date to Brad’s wedding tomorrow.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “I don’t know. I don’t really have anything to wear.”

Tyler pulled me in close, the smell of his cologne that I so loved tickling my nose. “You’re in fashion. I’m sure you can find something. And it’s not a request,” he added. “It’s an order.”

## EPILOGUE

TYLER

There's a saying that you get what you pay for, and I got exactly that with Brad's wedding. The event was a lavish affair, being held at the Promade. It was a small fortune to rent it for the day, but it was worth it.

All the wedding guests were dressed in the high-end attire designed by Christine. I'd supplied the money for top-notch catering, a band, and best of all, relieved my best friend of tremendous stress.

Not to say that he wasn't still stressed. Even with everything I'd done to help, Brad still couldn't help being nervous. It was his wedding, after all.

"Calm down, man," I whispered to him as we waited. We were both dressed in almost identical tuxes, black and white, our shoes freshly shined and our hair nicely styled.

"You're going to stroke out before Katie even makes her way down the aisle."

"I just want everything perfect for her," Brad replied, and I could understand.

All the guests were waiting. The music was about to start and I was about to walk with Brad out to the altar.

"Get ahold of yourself," I growled. I felt like Brad was being ridiculous.

Before he could reply, a tiny dog, a Yorkshire Terrier dressed in a tuxedo, came running to me.

“What the hell is this?” I demanded with a ridiculous laugh when the dog reached me, wondering what the hell a dog was doing here.

Brad eyed the dog and groaned. “That’s Katie’s little baby, Hercules. Fitting name for a five-pound dog, huh? She doesn’t go anywhere without him. I told you she’s an animal lover. Anyway, she insisted he be a part of the wedding. Sorry I didn’t tell you, but don’t worry, he’s well-behaved.”

I shook my head. “You’ll never learn to put your foot down.”

Brad grimaced. “That’s not all. He’s supposed to walk in with us.”

I turned on him and rolled my eyes. “Hey, whatever floats your boat. It’s your wedding.”

“Let’s go,” I ordered. “It’s time.”

Brad pulled himself together, and when Katie reached the altar, he looked in total control of himself. I was proud of him.

The priest began, and I found my thoughts drifting to Victoria and what the future might hold for us. I could see her with the guests, and she looked absolutely stunning.

“And now you may kiss the bride!” The priest cried exultantly at the end.

With a smile on his face, Brad locked lips with Katie, and the crowd went wild, confetti flying everywhere. Hercules even got in on the excitement, running from person to person, looking for attention.

Victoria smiled at me while clapping, and I made my way over to her, grabbing her hand. “I’ve never seen a best dog at a wedding before,” she said as we made our way to the punch bowl.

I rolled my eyes. “He’s cute, but don’t even get me started on that one.”

“I think I might want one just like him.”

“That’s going to take some serious convincing,” I said with a grin.

Victoria laughed, her eyes sparkling. “I was just kidding. Kind of.”

It was time for my speech. At first I was nervous as I got up onto the stage, not sure what I was going to say. I’d originally prepared a speech, but then I decided against it because I was usually good at talking off the top of my head. The words seemed to flow right through me and I found myself enjoying it, making light-hearted jokes about Brad and causing the audience to laugh.

“To Brad,” I said as I came to the conclusion of my speech, raising my wine glass to toast the audience, “and his new wife.”

The crowd went wild.

“That was a great speech,” Victoria complimented, coming up and wrapping her arm around my waist. She smiled up at me, and my heart jumped in my chest at the sight of her. She looked so beautiful and so happy. I was proud that she was mine.

“Wasn’t it?” I asked.

Victoria’s eyes sparkled as she looked up at me. “So, um, I think I have a little surprise of my own.”

I arched an eyebrow curiously. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

Victoria bit her lower lip in a teasing manner. “Well, you remember that deposit you made?”

I frowned in confusion. “Huh? What deposit?”

“The one you made after pounding me into submission,” Victoria replied with a mischievous grin that I daresay rivaled one of my own.

“Oh,” I said. “*That.*” I thought for a second before I grasped her meaning. “You mean I’m going to be . . .”

“A daddy,” Victoria said in excitement.

She ran her fingers up my shoulders coyly. “Are you ready?”

Sweat beaded my forehead, and I actually felt dizzy for the first time that evening—and I hadn’t even started drinking yet. Not from nervousness, but



from the whirlwind of emotion now hitting me all at once.

“I am,” I said, smiling, picking Victoria up into an almost bear hug and planting a deep, passionate kiss on her.

# BOUGHT: HIGHEST BIDDER

## PROLOGUE

Lucian

I slowly pace the room, letting the sound of my shoes clacking against the floor startle her. My eyes are on Dahlia, watching her every movement. Her breathing picks up as she realizes I've come back for her. With her blindfold on and her wrists and ankles tied to the bed while she lies on her belly, she's at my complete mercy, and she knows it.

The sight of her bound and waiting for me is so tempting. I force my groan back.

Her pale, milky skin is on full display as she waits for me. I've left her like this deliberately, in this specific position. She knows now not to move, not to struggle. She knows to wait for me obediently, and what's more, *she enjoys it*.

The wooden paddle gently grazes along her skin, leaving goosebumps down her thigh in its wake. They trail up the curve of her ass, and her shoulders rise as she sucks in a breath. Her body tenses and her lips part, spilling a soft moan. She knows what's coming.

She's *earned* this.

She lied to me.

And she's going to be punished.

She doesn't know this is for her own good. She should, but she hasn't realized it yet.

I'm only doing this for her. She *needs* this.

She needs to heal, and I know just how to help her. The paddle whips through the air and smacks her lush ass, leaving a bright red mark as she gasps, her hands gripping the binds at her wrists. I watch as her pussy clenches around nothing, making my dick that much harder.

*Soon.*

I barely maintain my control and gently knead her ass, soothing the pulsing pain I know she's feeling. "Tell me why you lied to me, treasure," I whisper at the shell of her ear, my lips barely touching her sensitive skin.

"I'm sorry," she whimpers with lust. I don't want her apology. I want her to realize what she's done. I want to know why she hid it from me all this time. She'll learn she can't lie to me. There's no reason she should.

*Smack!* I bring the paddle down on the other cheek and her body jolts as a strangled cry leaves her lips, her pussy glistening with arousal.

"That's not what I asked, treasure." My tone is taunting. She needs to realize what I already know. She needs to admit it. To me, but mostly to herself.

I pull away from her, just for a moment, leaving her to writhe on the bed from the sting of the paddle.

I didn't anticipate our relationship reaching this point.

In the beginning, I thought this would be fun. Just a form of stress relief for me.

But things changed.

I bought her at auction, and now she can't leave. She's mine for an entire month. But the days have flown by, and the contract is almost over.

*I need more time.*

I'm going to make this right. I'm going to heal my treasure.

If it's the last thing I do, I'll give her what she needs. What we both need.

She parts those beautiful lips, and hope blooms in my chest.

*Say it, tell me what you desperately need to say.*

But her mouth closes, and she shifts slightly on the sheets before stilling and waiting patiently for more.

I pull my arm back and steady myself.

Soon, she'll realize it. My broken treasure. Soon she'll be *healed*, but that won't be enough for me anymore. I want more.

*Smack!*

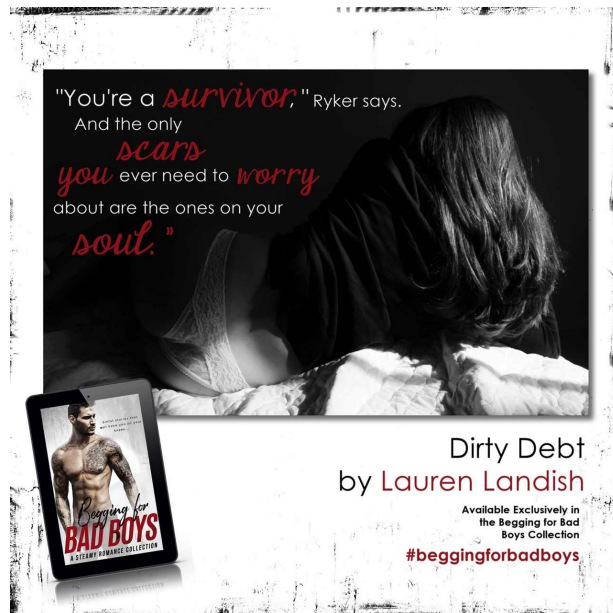
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