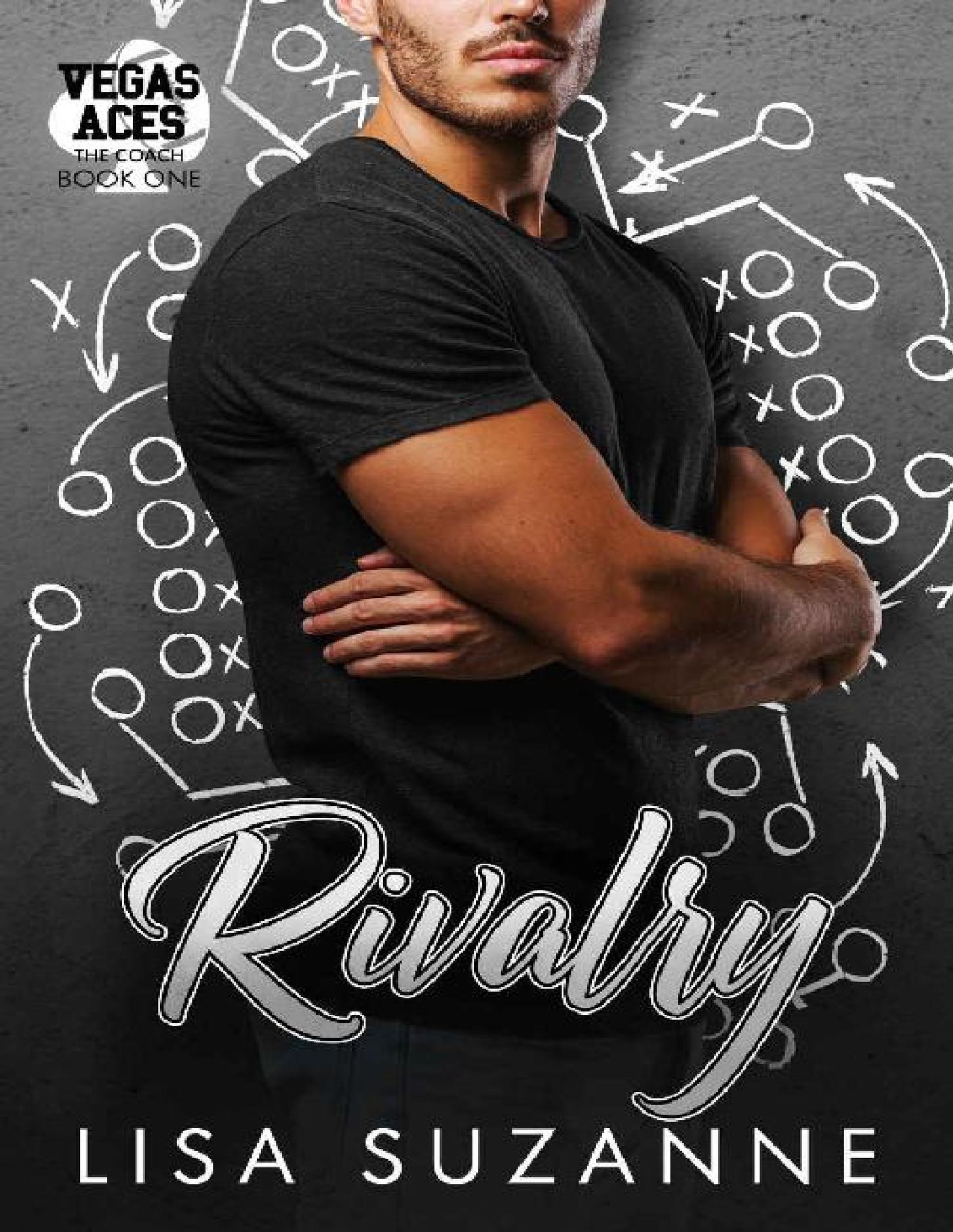


**VEGAS
ACES**

THE COACH
BOOK ONE

A man with a beard and short hair, wearing a black t-shirt, stands with his arms crossed. He is positioned in front of a chalkboard that has a white chalk drawing of a football play diagram. The diagram includes various symbols like 'X' and 'O' representing players, and arrows indicating their movements. The man's face is partially visible at the top of the frame.

Rivalry

LISA SUZANNE

Rivalry

LISA SUZANNE

RIVALRY
VEGAS ACES: THE COACH
BOOK ONE
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DEDICATION

To my 3Ms.

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CHAPTER 1: LINCOLN

Before I was even old enough to walk, my parents stuck a football in my hands.

I haven't let it go since.

I wasn't given the choice of what I wanted to play. Instead, I grew up fulfilling a destiny. I was meant to play football. I was meant to live this life.

And now, I have a shot to make my father proud. I have a chance to do something no one else in my family ever has.

A head coaching position for a professional football team.

It's the dream. Well, it's *my* dream, anyway.

When I was forced to quit playing after I blew out my knee, my father only looked at me with something resembling sympathy mixed with a bit of disapproval. He played for the Giants for a decade. His brother played for the Titans for just as long. My three younger brothers are all still in the game at ages twenty-seven, twenty-nine, and thirty-two.

And then there's me, the failure who got hurt and never could quite get that knee back into playing shape.

He expected me to play for a decade like the rest of my family. Instead, I've been coaching a decade now. It doesn't matter to him that I've been professionally involved in the game longer than he was. All that matters in his eyes is that I was too weak to play.

Somehow in my own mind, I feel like getting this head coaching position will make me strong again.

I suppose I haven't exactly been a *failure* over the course of my football career. I finished my high school career with a state championship. I was a tight end at Ohio State, and I was drafted right out of college to the Saints, where I played for three years before the injury that took me out of the game.

And now it's my time. I've wanted to be a head coach for as long as I can remember, but it just takes time to move up the ranks. And I put in my time. I've been with the Falcons, the Bengals, and the Rams in various offensive coaching positions for the last decade, most recently as an offensive coordinator. I know what I'm doing, and I have a lot to bring to this table. I know my shit, and I'm ready for this.

I wasn't even nervous coming in. Talk about my career? Easy. How to win games? I've got a plan. My strengths? Solid. Weaknesses? None, so I'll make

up some shit about how I tend to neglect my personal life in favor of the game or how I'm my own biggest critic even though it's a lie since my father owns that title. Regardless, I'll turn whatever weakness I make up into an actual positive.

So when Jack Dalton, All-Pro quarterback and the new owner of the Vegas Aces, asks me what my coaching philosophy is, I know my answer is solid.

"I believe my job as a coach is to get the most out of my players by putting them in the best position. I'm here to motivate my players to realize the full potential of their talents. They made it this far, and my job is to continue to push them to their greatest heights. I believe in a powerful offense who will attack defense and make big plays. I enjoy creative play calling and I think catching a defense off-guard is one of the greatest pleasures of the game. Finally, we're here to have fun and win games, and I believe I'm the right fit for this organization to do just that." My voice is confident as I look around the room at the group interviewing me.

The rest of the interview is much the same. Jack leads the questions and keeps a blank expression on his face as I answer them, but the rest of the stakeholders, including the general manager, a few players, and a handful of different directors and vice presidents, are all nodding as they listen to what I have to say.

By the time I'm given a tour of the facility before I'm dismissed from the interview, I truly feel like I've got it in the bag. I'm a confident guy by nature, but the feeling racing through my chest as I leave the conference room is next level.

This place, these hallways...they already feel like home.

It's called the Complex because it's a sprawling place built for the Vegas Aces. It houses their front office staff as well as the practice fields, and it's a place where the head coach will essentially live during the season.

But the inside joke is that it's called that because it's a complex maze of hallways. I glance out the window I'm walking by to try to orient myself, and I spot the rental car I picked up yesterday.

That's when I see *her* walking into the building.

I haven't seen her in...hell, probably around twenty years, but I'd recognize her anywhere. She looks the same as she did all those years ago when we were teenagers, from her round tits to her sweet little ass, and she tosses her long, blonde curls over her shoulder as she walks into the building

chatting on her phone.

Jolene Bailey.

I snarl a little as I look out the window and wonder what the fuck she's doing here.

I heard she was a reporter somewhere in Vegas, and when I got the call to interview with the Aces, that was my first thought.

I was hesitant to take the interview because I didn't want to move to the same town where I knew she'd be—where her whole *family* is located now after they left New York.

But I'm not about to allow some woman who's meaningless to me keep me from my dream job.

All I can say is that she better not fuck with my chances to snag this position. If she does, well, I've got the Nash family name behind me.

I will win.

CHAPTER 2: JOLENE

My phone rings as I pull into my parking spot at the Complex.

I raced over here to cover the story. I've been a sports beat reporter for the last seven years with VG03, the local news channel, and my goal is to get the Aces correspondent position that recently opened up.

When a bunch of players retired after winning the championship at the end of last season, our station's sports reporter who had been covering the Aces for the last twelve years decided he was done, too.

Which is a good thing, to be honest. He was aging out, not a fan of social media, and he didn't have the ability to connect with fans the way I could.

In other words, he's a nice guy and a solid correspondent, but he's old school.

But I'm not the only one after this position. I have two colleagues who want it as much as I do. They're both men. Only fifteen percent of sports reporters are women, and it's time to change that.

There are other things aside from my vagina and estrogen that make me the right fit for the position, though. I know the game probably better than my male counterparts. I'm aggressive and have the ability to get inside information out of coaches, players, and the front office staff. I'm adept at social media and connecting with fans.

So when I heard the Aces had an interview today, I ran over there to get a glimpse at who it might be.

I see it's Sam calling, and I cut the engine and grab my bag before I open my door. I need to vent on this before I head inside the building.

Occasionally my temper gets the best of me, and my best friend usually knows how to calm me right down.

I pick up the call as I lock my doors. "Hey, Sam."

"What's the big news today?" she asks with a goofy laugh. She *always* asks me that since usually I have *some* sort of gossip.

"I just got to the Complex," I say, and I sigh as anger pulses in my chest again.

I hope the rumor I just heard is a lie, but rumors in this line of work rarely are.

"I'm told they're going to announce who they just interviewed," I say. I keep my voice down when I admit, "Rumor has it it's Lincoln Nash, and if it

is, by God, I'll put a stop to it however I can." Travis Woods walks by me as I say the words, and I immediately regret that they came out of my mouth.

If I'm going to get this gig, I need players to respect me. And now he knows I hate Lincoln and the entire Nash family with a bright, burning passion.

"Ew." I can picture her scrunching up her nose as she says it. "I hate him for you. But he is hot. Would it really be the worst thing for the Aces?"

"Yes," I say. "I need to go. Playdate after school still on?"

"Playdate still on, and I'll pick up the boys so you can get your breaking news story."

"You're a lifesaver, Sam. Love you."

"Love you more, JoJo." She cuts the call, and I head into the press room just as Jack Dalton slides into a chair to field some questions.

Perfect timing.

I take it all in, drawing in a deep breath as I glance around the room. This could be my beat, and the thought of snagging the Aces sends a bolt of excitement through me.

I glance around at the other reporters. I spot colleagues from all the major news channels and a few familiar faces from the newspapers, and sitting on the other side in the front row is Ryan Rivera...one of the two other reporters vying for the same position I am.

I sink down into my chair in the back of the room, hoping to make myself invisible. Ryan is just cocky enough that if he thinks he's the only one here, he'll take his time writing up his report. Meanwhile, I'll slide mine into the sports editor's inbox and voila, I'll get the position first.

Or something along those lines.

I start the voice recorder on my phone in case I miss anything, and I take out a pen and paper to jot down some notes.

Jack opens up the impromptu press conference with a few words about how the team is optimistic they'll have a solid announcement soon, and then he opens it up for a few questions. I like that he wants to keep the press in the loop of what's happening at the Complex. The old owner wasn't like that, but Jack has a good relationship with the press after playing for many years.

"Can you tell us who you interviewed today?" someone up in front asks first.

"We just had a great conversation with Lincoln Nash."

Lincoln Fucking Nash.

I knew it. That rumor was true after all.

“How did it go?” I yell out from the back, forgetting my pledge to sink down quietly in the back so Ryan didn’t spot me.

Oops.

See? My temper sometimes gets the best of me. At least I didn’t ask what I *really* wanted to ask, which was something along the lines of *how terrible of an asshole was he* or *how quickly did you kick him out of the interview*.

“Jolene, good to see you again,” Jack says, and I nod politely, keeping my face schooled that he actually knows my name. I spot a few of the male reporters glance over at me, and I know what they’re thinking.

He knows my name because I’m a woman.

He probably doesn’t know the names of most of the men in here, but he knows me.

They’ll assume I’m sleeping with him, and if I get the job, it’ll be because I used my pussy to get there. I hate that assumption with everything inside me. I will prove them wrong.

He knows who I am because I covered a big event for him a couple years ago, and the fact that he knows who I am—the fact that he already *trusts* me—could bode well for me snagging the open correspondent position.

“It was a great conversation, but we have more interviews to conduct over the next few days,” he says.

Other people ask more questions, and I scribble my notes as I go.

There’s not much to say here. Jack isn’t giving anything away, but he’s had to become an expert at dodging questions over the years.

Rivera already knows I’m here. I may as well try to dig in for more since the others in the room aren’t asking the right questions and I need to know if they’re leaning toward Lincoln or someone else.

“How will you decide who you’re going to hire?”

I hear a few laughs and jeers at my question, but I don’t care. There are *always* laughs and jeers from the male reporters aimed at the females in the room.

“We’ll use a number of factors to determine the final candidate,” Jack says. “How well he knows the game, strategy, motivational techniques. But above all that, I think you just get a feel for a person when you meet them, you know? His presence. How he’ll fit into the culture we’ve established here. How he plans to rebuild a team that’s coming off such a successful season.”

“Do you think you’ve already found him?” I press.

He draws in a breath at the question then purses his lips a little as he crafts the right answer rather than the real answer I’m looking for.

But the way his eyes dart around the room tells me that yes, they’ve found him.

And my gut tells me...it’s Lincoln Nash.

I need to do something to stop this.

“I think we’ve met with a number of potentials, and we still have a few more interviews to conduct before we’re able to announce anything further.”

Someone else asks another question, but I’m still sitting here trying to figure out how to get to Jack Dalton to tell him the truth about Lincoln and his family.

He doesn’t deserve the position. The whole Nash family is untrustworthy. They’re manipulators and liars, and because they’re so slick with what they do, everybody worships the ground they walk on.

Except the Bailey family.

And I will do what I have to do to expose the truth. After all, I’m a reporter.

That’s my job.

CHAPTER 3: JOLENE

I dart out of the press conference as he starts wrapping it up and I run toward the exit behind the media room—the one I know he’ll use to get back to the team owner’s office. I get there just as I see his figure retreating toward a back set of elevators.

Normally the press isn’t allowed back here, but when Jack was a player, he gave me a keycard so I could talk to him about his real estate development. I never gave it back.

“Mr. Dalton, may I have a private word with you?” I yell as the elevator doors open so he can step on. He glances over at Steve Shanahan, the general manager, before his eyes move back toward me.

“What’s this about?”

I clear my throat. “One of your potential head coaches.”

He gives me a long look before he finally nods, inclining his neck toward the elevator as if to tell me to hurry up before the doors close. I race over and hop on.

“Which potential candidate?” he asks.

I glance a little nervously at Steve.

“Anything you say in here stays between us. Full disclosure, whatever you tell me is likely going to be shared with Steve anyway,” Jack says, correctly reading the situation.

“This is off the record.” My voice is clear despite the nervousness I feel. I’ve gotten good at faking it over the years.

“Agreed,” Jack says. We get to the floor where his office is, and I follow him down the hallway.

Steve accompanies us, but Jack holds up a hand to him just before we walk into the office. “Can you give us a minute?”

Steve nods, and I’m thankful it’ll just be the two of us.

I find I can’t sit when Jack closes the door behind me, though, sealing the two of us into privacy in this rather large, foreboding office.

He slides into the executive chair behind the executive desk, and he studies me while I pace.

I finally stop and square my shoulders as I face Jack Dalton. “Don’t hire Lincoln Nash.”

His brows rise. “Would you like to tell me why?”

I clear my throat. “He’s football royalty, Jack. Hiring him would clearly be nepotism, and how will that look as your first year owning the team?”

He chuckles a little even though there’s really nothing funny about what I’m saying. “But listening to you would look better? I asked you why I shouldn’t hire him, and nepotism isn’t an answer, Ms. Bailey.”

“You’ve heard of the well-publicized feud between the Nash family and the Baileys, right?”

He nods. “Couldn’t someone make the claim that you reporting on football is also nepotism?”

My eyes flash with anger. “They could. They’d be wrong.”

“The same might be said for Lincoln. He was a strong candidate, and I’m sorry you don’t like him, but your reasoning sounds like a family dispute, not a legitimate reason not to hire him.”

“So you’re hiring him?” I press.

“You’re with the media. I can’t confirm that.”

I press my lips together.

“Look, I’m sorry if hiring him will make you uncomfortable, but you don’t have to report on the Aces. I do, however, have the obligation to choose the very best candidate to lead our team to victory, whether that’s Lincoln Nash or someone else. If I only brought in candidates everybody loved, I wouldn’t have a very big pool to pick from, would I?”

“I suppose not,” I mutter. The only coach everyone seemed to love—Coach Mitch Thompson—has retired, which is why there’s an opening for a new head coach in the first place. “Thank you for your time.”

He nods, and I turn to leave.

“Ms. Bailey?” he asks before I open the door. “Thank you for sharing your concerns with me. Between you and me, I hope you get the position over both Rivera and Sanders.”

“If you’d be willing to share that with Marcus Dean, I’d appreciate it.”

“I’ll put in a good word,” he promises. “We don’t have enough women with the balls to do what you do, and I love to see it.”

The irony that he used a male body part isn’t lost on me. “Thanks, Jack.”

He nods, and I head straight to my own office, just a three-mile drive from the Complex. A little traffic slows me down, and I use the time to dictate the breaking news story from the press conference for Marcus.

I fix it up on my tablet then email it off to him, and I stop by his office as soon as I return.

“I saw your copy already,” he says when I knock on the door frame.

“I snagged a meeting with Jack after the conference,” I say. “He wouldn’t confirm anything but it sounded to me like Nash is the leading candidate right now.”

“Really? Wow. Meetings with him are hard to come by. How’d you manage that?” he asks, clearly impressed.

“He trusts me from covering the grand opening of one of his real estate developments. I guess the entire subdivision sold out immediately after the story broke, and he’s been in my debt ever since.” I shrug, and that’s the difference between guys like Rivera and Sanders versus me. I’m willing to get to know the people behind the athletes. Most sports reporters leave out that important element. They’re players, yes, but they are people with interests and lives outside of that, and part of my niche is learning more about who they are off the field while analyzing what they’re doing on it.

“Good work, Bailey. If I was keeping score, I’d say today ticks another point in your column.”

I nod and keep my face stoic even though I’m brimming with excitement over the compliment. Because that’s the thing...he *is* keeping score. Another point for me means I’m all that much closer to scoring my dream job.

I wrap things up then head over to Sam’s. I knock on the door and Sam appears a minute later to answer and let me in. I hear the boys in Cade’s bedroom yelling about zombies, so I assume they’re playing Minecraft again...as usual. Those boys are straight obsessed with that game.

“What are you making?” I ask as I follow her into the kitchen.

“Spaghetti. You two want to stay?”

I nod. “If you don’t mind. I can get you back tomorrow night.”

“Nonsense,” she says, patting her short, dark pixie cut. “Tomorrow night is pizza night.”

I laugh. “Then I’ll treat for pizza since it’s my day to pick up the boys.”

“I will take you up on that.”

“I’m just going to go say hi to Jonah,” I say. “Be right back.” I head down the hallway to Cade’s room and find the boys in there laughing. I stand in the doorway for a beat and watch them.

It’s clear which boy is mine. Jonah has my light hair, hazel eyes, and golden skin while Cade is all his mom with nearly jet-black hair, blue eyes, and pale skin, though he has his dad’s mass of curly hair instead of his mom’s straight hair.

I chose the name Jonah for two reasons. For one, I liked that it continued the tradition of Jo names in my family: my parents are Joseph and Joanna, and they named me Jolene. But for another, the name means *dove* and as I was going through my pregnancy largely alone, I loved the symbolism of peace and tranquility.

They're as close as two seven-year-olds can be, and I will forever be grateful that I found Sam in a random working mom's play group back when I was a single new mom and had no idea what I was doing.

She's become a sister to me over the last seven years, and our boys are like brothers. Or cousins, I guess, if we're sisters.

I walk in and plant a kiss on the top of my son's head. He says a quick *hi* back without taking his eyes off the game.

I give him another kiss, and he playfully bats me away, but I will never, ever stop kissing my boy.

I head back to the kitchen.

"So how was your day?" Sam asks carefully.

"It was..." I trail off, and then I grunt. "Ugh."

"That good?"

I take a slice of French bread Sam already cut off the cutting board and take a bite. "I think they're going to hire him."

She wrinkles her nose. "Freaking nepotism at its finest."

"That's what I told Jack Dalton!"

She sighs dreamily. "You have the *best* job. You talked to Jack Dalton today. And I'm over here like, Lord, bless me with a football player..."

"Well, yeah, it's great, but it was just a quick word, not a romp or anything since he's happily married, and Jack had the nerve to tell me that the job I'm going for is essentially nepotism, too!" I set the bread down and lean on the counter, pissed about that conversation and unwilling to admit that, well, he's right.

"Well...it sort of *is*, isn't it?" she points out.

"Ugh!" Frustrated tears fill my eyes. "I mean, I guess, sort of. It just sucks that if I get this job, everyone will either say it's because of my family or because I'm a woman. It'll never be because I'm the best candidate for it."

"Couldn't the same be said for Lincoln?" she asks.

The tears tip over. I'm so, so good at schooling this shit except when it comes to Sam. I let it all out in front of her. Poor woman. "But he's an asshole! I'm not! I'm nice!"

She laughs and narrows her eyes at me. “You? Nice?”

I laugh.

“Being nice doesn’t mean anything, especially not in the cutthroat business you’re in,” she says.

“I know. I’m just so frustrated.”

“I get it. And maybe he won’t get the job.” She shrugs with a bit of hope.

“Maybe,” I allow, but I don’t have much hope she’s right. “But maybe he will.”

“You know what I think?” she asks, and she grabs the pot of boiling noodles and dumps them into the colander sitting in the sink.

“What?”

She shakes the colander and lets it sit to drain the pasta, and then she turns and looks at me. “I think deep down, you’ve got a thing for ol’ Linc, and *that* is why you’re so opposed to him coaching the Aces.” Before I get a chance to respond, she yells, “Boys! Two minutes until dinner!”

I glare at her. That is *not* why I’m opposed to it.

I’m opposed to him coaching my favorite team because he’s a dick straight out of a family that’s an entire bag of dicks.

Whether or not I find him attractive has absolutely nothing to do with it.

And whether or not I still have feelings for him is also irrelevant.

Completely.

CHAPTER 4: LINCOLN

I rub my eyes with the heels of my palms then glance at the clock. It's a little after eleven, and I should probably go to bed since I'll be up early tomorrow to head into the office and meet with the other coaches.

Players get an offseason, but coaches really don't. We work year-round, and just because I interviewed with the Aces doesn't mean I'll get the position. I'm still the offensive coordinator for the Rams until I sign a contract elsewhere, so I still have work to do here in California. If the job goes to one of the other ten or so candidates the team has interviewed, then my title doesn't change.

But I want my title to change.

I enjoy being the OC for a great team. Members of the coaching staff have become some of my closest friends. But relationships change, and that's part of this career. It's part of this life. It's a business, and those close friends are my business associates. We'll have secrets to keep once one of us moves on from the team, and friendships will transition to something else.

Maybe it's a small part of why I want this head coaching position. I've moved around a lot over the last few years as I've worked my way up, and I want to settle somewhere. I want a home base. There's nowhere to go once I hit this goal except the front office, and I've never wanted a position there.

A head coaching position will be my *last* position in football. I hope it lasts for the rest of my career. I hope I get to retire with a few championship rings on my fingers at a ripe old age like Mitch Thompson from the Aces just did.

And Vegas seems like the perfect place to do it. It's a city full of entertainment. Football. Lights. Women. Lust. Sin.

I want it all.

I rewind the film as I watch the most recent game between the Rams and the Aces from last season. I've watched it dozens of times, but each time I study it for something different, and each time I see something new.

My phone dings with a new text. I pick it up from the couch cushion beside me and glance at the screen.

Jess: *You busy?*

I sigh. It's our code for *hey, do you want to come over and fuck my brains out?* It's a standing invitation between friends, and the benefits have been

outstanding for the last year or so since we met. But it's another friendship that'll end whenever I leave this place.

She's a research assistant at a corporate law firm, and she typically works long hours. As I do, too, we're a good match. Neither of us is looking for anything more than what we have because neither of us has the time to put into nurturing a relationship.

I don't answer. A non-answer means yeah, I'm busy, and while I'm really not, I'm also not in the mood to head over to Jess's place right now.

I finish my notes on the game and set my tablet on the coffee table. I pick up my tumbler of whiskey and wander around the house a bit, looking at the cold white walls as I sip the amber liquid. I stop at the patio sliders and stare out into the darkness.

How much longer will I call this home?

The market is hot now. I could put in a call to my buddy who's a real estate agent and he'd have a buyer for me before we'd even need to formally list it.

I'm not attached to this place. I didn't hang shit on the walls or do much of anything to make it mine. A white coffee table and a gray couch sit in my family room. White floors are cleaned weekly by a cleaning crew.

I've been here four years now. It's sort of unbelievable it's been that long, and my mother chides me for not having anything on the walls when she's visiting. She's even sent me artwork to hang.

It's sitting in a closet somewhere.

It's a big place—too big for just one man, but the resort-style backyard sold me. I'm walking distance to the beach, a great selling point I've never actually taken advantage of, and the house has five bedrooms and eight bathrooms.

I'm one single man. I don't need all that, yet it's mine.

I did a quick search of homes in Vegas just as insurance. Do I want a big place like this? I'm not sure. It's sort of lonely having six thousand square feet all to myself.

And then there's the issue of buying versus renting. I have an image to maintain, and renting will make it seem like I'm not confident I'll be there long term.

Sometimes I hate having to be strategic about every decision I make. Sometimes I just want to be a little reckless.

But that's not me.

On the field, I'm not afraid to take risks. But personally, I don't do it. I don't do anything that might fuck with my career goals. I'm a competitor driven to win. I'm a leader and motivator compelled to find ways to improve my team, my players, my coaching staff to make every single person on that field do their very best every single time.

I don't have time to be reckless.

I take another sip of whiskey, that text from Jess the furthest thing from my mind.

Instead, a woman with long, blonde waves swirling chaotically around her shoulders as she talks angrily on the phone comes to mind.

The gold flecks in those mesmerizing light brown eyes I studied back when we were teenagers still haunt me to this day.

I shake my head to try to get the gold flecks out of my mind.

But just because the gold flecks are gone doesn't mean she's out of my head. Her tits are still there.

The last thing I need to be thinking about right now is Jolene Fucking Bailey...and yet, I can't seem to get her out of my head.

If I get this job, if I'm close to her again, if if if...

There's an awful lot on the line.

I toss back the rest of the liquid in my glass.

Maybe it's time to be a little reckless.

CHAPTER 5: LINCOLN

I keep busy in the days after the interview.

I'm always busy, but dwelling on what I said in the interview—or what I didn't say—is enough to drive a man to a breakdown, so I bury myself in work, but not in Jess, for the record. She's been working until nearly midnight every night on a huge case, anyway, but she's hit me up a few times.

I haven't responded.

I'm not ghosting her, exactly. She knows that's our arrangement. We've gone weeks without talking to each other before when I'm in season, and that's all this is.

Every time my phone notifies me of a new text, every time it starts to ring, my heart jumps into my throat as I wonder whether this is it...the call I've been waiting for.

And it's no different just after the coach's meeting at the Rams office on Tuesday morning nearly a full week after my interview when my phone starts to ring.

I'm sitting in my own private office going over my notes when I glance at the screen, my heart racing that it might be the job offer I've been waiting for.

Instead, I see it's Jess calling.

Again.

I blow out a breath as I pick up the call. "Good morning." I lean back in my chair.

"Hey, Coach," she says—mostly because she knows I like it when she calls me that.

"Shouldn't you be researching?" I tease.

She laughs. "I worked all weekend and my boss gave me today off. What are you up to?"

Nothing, really. And honestly, a few minutes with her would probably alleviate some of the nerves that keep pulling at me concerning the job interview.

But for some reason, I can't bring myself to say that.

"I'm at the office. Just got out of a meeting and I have a lot to do today."

"Heard from the Aces?" she asks.

“Not yet.”

“I’m pulling for you, Coach. I heard the partners want to open a second firm in Vegas. Maybe it’s fate.”

“Maybe,” I murmur, but the truth is when I move to Vegas, I’m leaving Jess behind. The thought of keeping our friendship alive when one of us moves away from California never even crossed my mind until she just said it.

Her words leave me feeling a little uncomfortable. Does she think this is more than I think it is?

If she does, that’s probably something I need to nip in the bud. While it’s true I haven’t really been seeing anybody besides her, it’s because I have neither the time nor the inclination to meet someone new.

There’s a solid reason I’m thirty-six and single.

I’ve tried the game. It wasn’t for me. It’s not for everybody.

There was only one girl I ever thought I loved. But when push came to shove, I ended up alone. And it was for the best. She and her entire family showed their true colors, and we were better off apart than we ever were together.

As I’m talking to Jess, another call comes through.

It’s a Vegas number.

“I’ll call you back,” I say, and I end the call rather abruptly.

I draw in a fortifying breath as I click over to the Vegas call.

“Lincoln Nash,” I answer, my voice calm and confident despite the rising nerves sparking up my spine.

“Good morning Mr. Nash,” a woman’s voice says, and my heart sinks that it’s not Jack Dalton calling me to welcome me to the team. “This is Lily Park calling on behalf of Jack Dalton with the Vegas Aces. Are you available to come back to our offices this evening at five o’clock? Mr. Dalton would like to meet with you in person.”

My chest tightens.

This is it.

You don’t call a guy and tell him to come to your office if you’re not offering him a position.

It’s a quick flight or a slightly longer trip by car from Los Angeles to Vegas, but I will figure out how to get there by five o’clock. “Yes.”

“We’ll see you then, Coach.” The way she calls me *coach* at the end confirms it, but I force myself not to get my hopes up too high.

Nothing is final. I haven't signed any paperwork, and I've been in this business long enough to know that until the ink is dry, it's nothing more than lip service.

I don't call my parents just yet. I don't call my brothers, either. I don't tell anybody at the office why I'm leaving early.

I keep it to myself. I keep *most* things to myself, anyway. That way when inevitable disappointment comes, I'm the only one who has to deal with the fallout.

I learned that one the hard way, too.

Until it's official, nobody knows I'm going to Vegas.

I pack a bag, grab a quick lunch, and hop on a flight. I'm landing in Vegas by three, and something magical seems to fill my chest at the prospect. I'm here in this city that's likely to become my new home, and as I watch the hotels of Las Vegas Boulevard rush by as the plane turns toward a gate, I can't help but think there's something special about Las Vegas.

Hope rushes through my chest. This is it. The dream. Everything I've worked for. It all comes to a head here in the next two hours, and something tells me this position is going to be mine.

I'll walk out of Jack's office as the new head coach, or I'll walk out as the OC at the Rams. Either way, I'm lucky I get to do what I love.

Time seems to slow to a crawl as I make my way to a hotel, where I check in and drop my bag. I take a car toward the Aces offices, and I find a restaurant across the street. It's as I slide into a chair after ordering a glass of whiskey at the bar that I realize I never called Jess back.

In an effort not to burn bridges, I text her.

Me: *Sorry about hanging up earlier. I've got some work issues I'm tackling.*

She once called me out for using football terminology in my everyday life, so I make sure to do it even more often when I'm texting her.

And then I stare out the window at the building across the street.

It already feels like home.

It's not. I've still been offered nothing, but I'm a mere thirty minutes away from getting the answer I'm searching for.

Time seems to tick backwards as I sit in this barbecue joint. Some movement over by the door catches my eye, and I glance over in that direction.

And wouldn't you know it?

Long blonde hair swirling around shoulders comes storming in with all the chaos of a thunderstorm.

She marches right up to the bar and orders something. She doesn't see me sitting in the corner watching her every move, but she does glance around as if she can feel someone's eyes on her.

Two times I've been in this town over the last week. Two times I've seen Jolene Bailey.

It's two times too many.

This town isn't big enough for the two of us.

CHAPTER 6: LINCOLN

She slides onto a stool at the bar, and she sits by herself chatting up the bartender. I remember that about her—her ability to be able to talk to just about anyone. It's probably only a small part of what led her into reporting.

It was something we shared in common. We could go to a gathering together and chat up anybody in the room even as teenagers. Between her way of captivating people and my charm, others were drawn to us.

But we didn't want to talk to anybody else. We only wanted to talk to each other.

Until we didn't. Until we *couldn't*. Until everything changed and we were both forced to choose sides.

We were teenagers. She was fifteen. I was seventeen. The choice wasn't really ours to make at all, not at those ripe young ages. But sometimes I wonder what would've happened if we'd been just a few years older.

I keep my head down as I finish my drink, but my eyes are drawn to her as memories seem to wash over me.

It was only one time.

But it was *the* time. Her first. My first.

Have I had better sex than that first time over the course of the last two decades? Sure. Of course.

But nothing has ever compared to the way I felt.

That's something that doesn't go away with time. That's something you can't compare. I was in love with her—or at least I thought I was as a teenager. I thought she was my future. She knew I was on track to play in college, and she understood the game from a perspective my other friends and classmates just didn't.

None of them had fathers still playing in the league. A handful of kids we knew had fathers who were retired, but our fathers both had us when they were young.

We were the exception, and it pushed us even closer together.

My dad married my mom the summer before he went to college because she was pregnant. They were high school sweethearts, and she gave up her dreams and aspirations of a career to stay home with me.

The Baileys had a similar story. Joseph and Joanna met in a communications class in college, and one drunken night after celebrating a big win where Joseph scored a pick six his sophomore year, he knocked her

up. The two ended up getting married the day after their college graduation.

I stop ruminating on the past when the attractive woman who has been bringing my drinks over hands me the check. I sign it while she waits, and before I slide it over to her, she asks, “So did they offer you the job?”

Considering the location of this joint, I’m not surprised by the question. Surely those who frequent this place are big fans, and I would imagine the staff is, too.

“Still waiting,” I admit, and I flash her the smile that’s easily bedded women just like her in the past.

She blushes, and I can tell by the way she’s gazing at me that if I was in the mood for a quick fuck, she’d be game.

But today, that’s not on the agenda. It’s time to get over to Jack’s office and see what fate has in store for me.

I walk right past Jolene on my way out the door, but she’s facing the bar and none the wiser that I was even here.

I think about glancing back at her—more out of curiosity than anything else, to see how kind time has been to her versus the filtered and photoshopped images of her online, not that I’ve looked—but I don’t.

I have to keep my focus about me.

I can’t let a girl like her distract me from what I’m doing here.

Or her tits.

If there’s anything my father ingrained in me over the years, it’s that drive. That focus.

He let a woman distract him. Sure, she’s my mother, but he didn’t hold back from telling me not to make the same mistakes he did...namely, to have a kid right out of high school when the NFL is calling.

When your father says that to you and he’s talking specifically about *you*, you take it to heart.

I know he meant well. He said those things because he felt like he didn’t have the time to give to his wife and kid.

Yet along came Grayson a few years later, and then Spencer and Asher.

I guess feeling like you don’t have enough time for your kids doesn’t put condoms in the cabinet.

I walk across the street to the Complex, and I head inside. I tell the woman at reception who I am, and she tells me where to go.

I don’t feel nervous as I ride the elevator. Instead, an odd tranquility seems to wash over me. I’ve felt it before in this building, that sense of being home,

as if this is where the next segment of my life is going to take place.

That's sort of how I view my life—in segments. There was my childhood, the Jolene segment, the aftermath, college, and then my various positions—the Falcons, the Bengals, and the Rams. Of them all, the worst was the one I dubbed *the aftermath*. There is nothing about that segment I'd want to relive, yet if this next segment is going to be the Aces, then pieces of her will certainly enter the equation.

I realize she's in my head, threatening the peace I'm feeling as the elevator doors open. I shake her out and head toward the secretary's desk.

"Mr. Nash, lovely to see you again. You can take a seat. Mr. Dalton will be right with you."

"Thank you, Lily," I say, correctly remembering her name and her voice from her introduction when she called me earlier but also because there's a nameplate on the desk giving away that detail.

The door opens before I even get the chance to take a seat, and Jack is standing there waiting for me.

"Lincoln, thanks for coming in on short notice," he says, and he holds out a hand for me to shake as I approach him. I study him for any sort of hint, but his face is blank.

Steve is sitting in the office, and I get the feeling there will be a lot more of these types of meetings in this very place with the same three men in attendance over the next few years.

Before either of us sits, Steve stands, too, and he nods at Jack.

Jack nods before he begins his speech. "Coach Nash, I've been following your career for years, and I believe you have the passion, the leadership, and the knowledge to take our team into the next generation. I'm thrilled to offer you the head coaching position for the Vegas Aces. I realize it's a big decision, and I'd like to persuade you with some of the attractive contract details Mr. Shanahan and I have devised. Have a seat." He nods toward the chair, and both Steve and I sit while Jack moves behind his desk.

He pushes a contract across the desk with a Vegas Aces pen sitting on top, and the top page is a summary of what's inside the contract.

"You'll see our base salary offer, which is ten million a year over the next three years. You can take a look through the guaranteed money and the bonus structure as well as additional incentives," he says, and I pick up the pile of papers and start reading through the contract.

The average base salary for head coaches is closer to six and a half

million, so ten is a nice jump.

I would've taken far less, though I don't say that aloud. In fact, I ban the thought entirely from my brain. This is what I'm worth.

There's a clause in there for a buyout in the event I'm fired, but I won't be fired.

I will give this everything I have, and I will build a successful franchise.

Of course I'm taking the offer. But this is a business, and I still need to be smart about how I handle it.

"Thank you for this generous offer," I say. I set the papers down. I know I need to read through the contract. I know I need to share it with my lawyer. I also know I need to discuss this with the Rams. But I'm excited about this opportunity, and I want to express that to Jack and Steve. "I'm honored you chose me as the best fit to lead this team, and I promise I will not let you down. I'd like some time to review the contract, and I need to talk to my current team, but I would like to verbally accept your offer today."

Jack stands, so I do, too. He reaches out a hand to shake mine again.

"Fantastic, Coach, and of course I understand. We are just so thrilled to bring you on board, and we're ready to see what you can do out there. Welcome to the Aces."

Steve stands, too, and shakes my hand. "Welcome home," he says.

Welcome home.

I can't wait to get started on this next segment.

CHAPTER 7: JOLENE

My blood is *boiling* but I'm not budging.

I saw him the moment I walked in. It took everything in my being, and I mean *everything*, not to march over there and tell him to fuck off out of my town.

This is *my* town. *My* bar. He does not belong here.

He should stay in Los Angeles, or go back to New York, or Cincinnati or Atlanta or wherever the fuck he came from.

He should stay out of Vegas.

And yet, here he is, and there is no other reason he'd be here at the Gridiron—*my* home territory—staring out the window at the Complex than because he's waiting for a meeting with the head honchos.

I said I would do what it took to stop him from getting the position, but Jack is right.

It's a personal issue. Yes, I believe the Aces could do better than Lincoln Nash for a head coach. Yes, I believe he is a liar and a manipulator. Yes, I think he's an asshole.

But those are opinions, not facts. Well, mostly.

And I'm not leaving this bar until I see him walk out of the Complex.

I'm not leaving until I know if it was an offer or a rejection.

I watched him as he walked across the street, and as soon as he disappeared inside the building, I called Sam.

"Hey lady!" she answers.

"Can you keep Jonah a little late tonight?" I ask.

"Of course. Why?"

I keep my voice low so nobody overhears my insider information. "I got a tip that Lincoln was back in town, and I raced to the Gridiron and sure enough, he was here having a drink by his lonesome. I think they're offering him the position and I can't leave until I see him leave."

"Are you going to confront him?"

I think about it.

I'm not ready for that.

"No, but I figure I can stay here and watch his body language to know whether or not he got the offer." My other line beeps with an incoming call. "Shit, Marcus is calling me on the other line. I'll call you back, okay?"

“Bye!”

I flip the call to Marcus. “Hey, Marcus, what’s going on?”

“Can you swing by the office? I have some breaking news to share.”

I glance out the window. He’s been in that building approximately thirty seconds. I have no idea how long a head coaching position job offer might take, but a rejection would probably be pretty quick. I know *some* rejections are handled in person depending on the circumstances, and it’s not like LA is all that far from Vegas.

Is it wrong to cross my fingers and hope he doesn’t get the job? Because I am.

“I’m sitting outside the Complex right now and Nash is inside the building. Might be for the offer,” I say.

He pauses a beat, and then he says, “Damn, you’re good. How’d you know?”

“I have my sources.”

He chuckles. “What I have is big, so unless you’re planning to attack Nash as he exits, we can sideline that until the ink is dry.”

I sigh. “I’ll be there in ten.” I signal the bartender that I’m leaving, and then I head over to the office.

I knock on Marcus’s doorframe, and he waves me in. “Have a seat.”

I do, and nerves suddenly flit through my chest. Marcus doesn’t call me in for a breaking news story, and that’s all I could think about on my way over here. This is something else, and I have a feeling he’s about to let me down gently.

“Listen, I wanted to do this in person instead of over email or whatever,” he begins, and those nerves climb up my spine, leaving a chill in their wake.

Not Sanders. Not Rivera.

God, please, not Rivera.

There’s always just been such a heated rivalry between the two of us. Some say it must be because we’re attracted to one another, and that couldn’t be further from the truth.

He’s cocky and annoying, and in simple terms, I can do better.

But it isn’t just that.

He’s also good friends with my ex...another strike against him.

“You are such a valuable asset to the team, and I know you’ve been working hard on the sports beat to make a name for yourself.”

“Please don’t say Rivera,” I whisper.

Marcus chuckles. "It's not Rivera," he assures me.

"Sanders, then?" I guess.

"Wrong again." He shakes his head again. "Ms. Bailey, I'm pleased to let you know you've been assigned as the new Aces correspondent for VG-oh-three. We could not be more excited to see what you can do with this opportunity. Ratings are down, and we're confident that putting you in that position will help boost us to where we want to be."

I gasp as my heart races. "Really?"

"Really. It's about damn time we put a woman in as correspondent, and with your background and knowledge of the team, you deserve it."

With my background.

Wait a minute.

Is this...is this because of my father?

I'm about to ask when I clamp my mouth shut tight.

This is what I wanted.

I won't blow it by asking...even though it will remain in my head until the end of time.

And that's where it'll stay.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I squeal, my hands covering my mouth in excitement.

"As our correspondent, you'll be responsible for covering all aspects of the team. You'll be expected to broadcast from every game this season. You'll travel with the team, which will give you a chance to get closer to the players and coaches to form those relationships to give us the high-quality content we all want. You'll conduct interviews, write stories, shoot videos. You'll cover the players, the coaching staff, and the front office. You'll attend practices and camps and press conferences. Your new best friend is whoever the team hires as their new head coach. You'll produce content for social media, the web, and, of course, our television broadcasts, and you'll need to work closely with our sports beat reporters to do that. You're a talented reporter and I'm confident you'll knock this out of the park, Jolene."

Your new best friend is whoever the team hires as their new head coach.

His words stick in my brain.

It better not be Lincoln Nash.

I am so, so fucked if it is.

But I can't worry about that right now. It's time to celebrate.

"Oh, wow. I just...I'm without words, Marcus." I stand and reach my

hand across the desk to shake his. “Thank you for this opportunity. I won’t let you down.”

“Congratulations. I’m here to support you in any way that I can.” He grips my hand firmly, and I thank him before I run from his office squealing.

I hear his laugh follow behind me, but I’m just so damn excited.

This is the dream. It’s the job I’ve been working toward since I first started my career in journalism.

And if we can just keep Lincoln Nash out of the equation, it will remain a dream. But if he gets the job and I have to travel with the team and get close to the players and *coaches*...well, that dream job might just turn into a nightmare.

CHAPTER 8: LINCOLN

The next few days are an absolute whirlwind, and I find myself in the general manager's office at my current position giving him the news before I head to the airport to officially accept my new position.

"We're sad to see you go but excited for the opportunities that await you," Les says, and he shakes my hand. I clear out my desk and say my goodbyes and that's it.

The next segment of this life begins.

It's always hard leaving a position behind. You're leaving friends that have become family, but people come and go all the time. After the number of years I've been in this business, I'm well aware of how this works.

It's quick. There's no time for a goodbye party, so I bid my farewells to whoever's at the practice facility today, of which there are few given that we're in the off-season, and I head home.

I pack the essentials and some clothes, and I take a car to the airport. I've hired a moving company to transport everything in my house plus my car to my new place, and they'll arrive later this evening. I'm taking a car to the Complex first, where I'll turn in my contract, and then I'll head to my new house, where my realtor buddy is meeting me with the title company to close on this bitch today.

I chose a spec home in one of Jack Dalton's developments, and it was move-in ready. With the backyard oasis that's even sweeter than my current setup combined with the view overlooking Las Vegas Boulevard, how could I resist?

It's still too damn big. Five thousand square feet, five bedrooms, six and a half baths, a luxurious backyard with a pool...it's far more than I need, and I don't exactly have plans to fill all the bedrooms with a family. Instead, I'll have space for my players if they need somewhere to go. I'll knock out a wall or two and create a killer home gym. I'll turn this place into the bachelor pad of my dreams.

Someday.

But for now, I need to get to work. The place comes equipped with an office, and Jack's wife does some shit with interior design and they were using this place as a model, so I took it with all the furniture, taking the guesswork out of filling up the place since it already looked good to me.

I still haven't told my dad. I'll do it after I turn in my contract...after it's official.

The receptionist calls up to Jack's office, and Lily buzzes me through. He's waiting for me with a smile on his face.

Jack and I go way back, and we even played against each other in the final season of my career. He's an incredible man—one of the greatest of all time quarterbacks, a shrewd businessman, and now a team owner along with the titles of husband and father. Beyond all that, he's got this quality about him that's so untouchable, so out of this world, yet he's got this charm to make you feel like you belong in the same room as him even though you probably don't.

And yet...here I sit. He's offering something to me.

And we're going to be working together. He'll be my boss since he's at the top of the chain here, but together we're going to accomplish incredible things for this organization.

I hand him the paperwork, and he shakes my hand.

"I'd like to officially welcome you to your new home," he says. "Congratulations."

"Thank you. I won't let you down."

He nods. "I know you won't."

It's a lot of pressure to put on a guy, but I'm up to the task.

"Let me show you to your new office."

I've already toured the facility, but it'll take some time to get to know the maze of hallways that make up this place. He takes me down to the head coach's office, and sitting just outside of it is a woman in her early thirties with blonde hair and blue eyes.

"This is Megan Cramer," Jack says. "She was hired as Mitch's assistant, and she'd happily retain her position here with the Aces if you're so inclined to need someone to answer your phone calls and emails or schedule appointments and travel arrangements."

"Nice to meet you, Megan," I say. "I'm Lincoln Nash."

"Oh, I know who you are," she says, and I can't tell if she's flirting or just being nice. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"And you," I say with a polite nod. "And since you're familiar with the structure here, I'd love to keep you on."

"Thank you, Coach. You won't regret it."

I offer her a tight smile that's all business because even I'm not dumb

enough to get caught up with my assistant, and I'm glad to have someone on my side who knows what it's like dealing with someone in this position.

I may need her more than I realize.

Jack and I enter the rather large office that looks empty and ready for me since it was recently evacuated by someone who had been in here a long time. It's been freshly scrubbed and the walls have been painted, and all that remains in here from the previous coach is the furniture. A desk for me to sit at and two chairs pointed at it—presumably for a player and his agent. Behind the desk, rows and rows of empty bookcases ready for me to fill with a credenza in the middle. A round table in the corner with five chairs for larger meetings or working lunches. A whiteboard to draft plays on, and a large television mounted to the wall across from the desk to watch film. A couch for visitors—or for sleeping since I'll probably spend more time here than home during the season.

“We'll get you all set up in the next couple days, Coach,” Jack says. “I have a meeting in my office in a few minutes, but you've got my number if you need anything. We'll break the news tomorrow evening, but you can swing by tomorrow morning at nine to meet with human resources, and I'll have your laptop and tablet ready for you then.”

“Thanks, Jack,” I say.

He leaves me alone to take it all in, and I slide into the executive chair behind my new desk.

It all feels a bit surreal.

I draw in a deep breath, and it's like I'm breathing new air.

I'm the head fucking coach of the Vegas Aces.

I can't believe it.

I take a moment to myself. The news will break tomorrow, which means I should call my family today so they hear it from me and not the media.

To that end, I dial up my father.

“Hello,” he answers gruffly.

“Hey Pops. What's going on?”

“You called me,” he points out. “What's going on with you?”

“Nothing much. Just calling you from my new office.” I can't hide the merriment in my tone.

“Your new office?” he repeats.

“The office of the head coach of the Vegas Aces.”

“Well I'll be damned. You're serious?” he asks.

“I am.” I can’t help my grin.

“Congratulations, son. That’s incredible news. Missy!” he yells to my mother, and I hear him say, “It’s Lincoln and he has something to tell you.”

“Linc?” my mom asks, her voice loud and clear on the line.

“Hey, Mom. I just accepted the head coaching position for the Vegas Aces.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s incredible! I’m so proud of you, honey. Congratulations!”

I’m so proud of you.

It’s what I wanted to hear from my dad.

Instead, I got *that’s incredible news*.

My father has *never* told me he’s proud of me no matter how hard I’ve worked for it. I heard him say it to Spencer when he earned his Master’s degree while playing pro football. I heard him say it to Grayson when he was a first-round draft pick chosen a few spots earlier than I was in my own draft. I heard him say it to Asher when he flipped in the air over a defender to score a winning touchdown.

But I’ve never heard the words directed at me.

And honestly...I don’t know if he ever will.

CHAPTER 9: JOLENE

Don't fidget, Bailey.

I repeat the mantra in my head, but when you're sitting outside the owner's office of the Vegas Aces, it's hard *not* to fidget.

Especially when the owner is someone as hot as Jack Dalton.

I draw in a sharp breath as he turns the corner. He's wearing black pants and a red Vegas Aces shirt and damn, he's fine.

Pull it together, Bailey. He's a happily married man.

I remind myself of that mantra a few times, too.

He grins at me. "Jolene Bailey, here in my office again. Is this visit on or off the record this time?"

I smile back as I stand. "It can be whatever you want it to be. I just need a few minutes of your time."

"Come on in," he says, and he walks by first to lead the way into his office. He sits behind his desk and settles back casually into his chair as if he was born to play the role of businessman when he's always been known as such a force on the field.

"What can I do for you today, Ms. Bailey?"

"Word has it you've made a decision."

He presses his lips together and nods. "That I have, and we'll be releasing it publicly tomorrow evening. You're here for the inside scoop, I take it? I knew we should've confiscated your badge."

I laugh and shake my head. "No, not for the inside scoop, though you know I'll happily take any scoops you're dishing out. I'm here today to let you know that I'm the new VG-oh-three Vegas Aces correspondent. So I'll just go ahead and hold onto that badge, thank you very much."

He chuckles. "Well congratulations. What an accomplishment."

"Thanks, Jack. I appreciate it."

"I mean it. My wife is going to be thrilled. She was pulling for you all along."

"That's very kind of you to say."

"It's not lip service. She's lowkey obsessed with watching your news stories."

I force away the blush that fills my cheeks. "Well tell her I'll be around a lot more. Marcus filled me in on my duties as the correspondent, and he'd

like me to be at every camp, practice, and press event along with every home and away game. He told me I need to become best friends with whoever you hire as your new head coach.”

“And what if the head coach we decide to hire already has a best friend?” he asks.

“Then that person is about to be replaced.” I lift my shoulders with exactly zero modesty, but Jack knows me enough to know it’s all in good fun. I narrow my eyes as I stare down Jack and look for any clues as to who he hired. “Why, does he?”

“Guess you’ll find out tomorrow.”

I laugh. “I guess so. Is it Lincoln? Tell me it’s not Lincoln.”

He sighs. “You know I can’t tell you. But what *exactly* is the history between you two?”

Oh, you mean like the fact that he took my virginity one weekend and broke my heart the next?

I decide not to voice that one to Jack.

“It’s complicated. We were once close, and now it’s been nearly twenty years since the last time we spoke. Our families were as close as two families could be, and then we weren’t.” I shrug. “But I’m not here to talk about *me*.”

“Actually you are since you scheduled a meeting to let me know you’re our newest VG-oh-three correspondent,” he points out dryly.

I twist my lips, conceding. “Okay, true. So is it Nash?”

He laughs. “I like you, Bailey. I think this is going to be a great fit for the Aces, and to that end, I’d like to offer you the first exclusive interview with our new head coach. We’re scheduling the press conference for tomorrow at four, so swing by around two to meet our guy and ask a few questions ahead of the rest of the media. That should give you a little time to produce it for a segment on the six o’clock news, right?”

“Are you serious?” I breathe. He’s giving me the first exclusive with the new coach?

“I am. And you’re welcome. Now clear on out of here. I have a lot of work to do since I just hired a new head coach.” He winks at me, clearly signaling that he’s not going to give me any more than that, and I laugh as I stand.

“Thanks for everything, Jack,” I say, rising to a stand. “For the exclusive, for taking the time today...I know you’re a very busy man and I appreciate your willingness to include the media in all aspects of the team. I look

forward to working closely with you to share the very best of the greatest team in the league.”

He stands and reaches out a hand to shake mine. “Thanks, Jolene. I look forward to working with you, too.”

I head out after that, and I think about wandering the halls toward the head coach’s office, but I also know there are cameras in here and the worst thing I could do right now is break the trust Jack has in me.

And so I force myself in the direction of my car. The boys are at school and Sam is at work today, so I head into the office and start doing some research.

Just as I arrive, a text comes through.

Jeremy: *Can’t take Jonah this weekend. Sorry.*

I blow out a breath.

I hate him.

I wish with all my heart it wasn’t *him* who knocked me up, but I can’t change it, and if it was someone else, then I wouldn’t have my sweet boy who means the entire world to me.

He’s letting his son down again, and maybe my claws wouldn’t come out so much if he was actually a good dad, but it seems like all he does is let the two of us down.

I wish I could cut Jeremy out of the picture completely, and I’ve been trying. He’s basically useless given that the court ordered he takes Jonah every other weekend and it’s hit or miss whether he’ll actually take him. When he does, I usually spend the entire weekend either worrying about or missing my son while I’m eating ice cream with Sam since Cade goes to his dad’s house every other weekend, too. I wait by the door for him to get back home. My house is too quiet without him, and I hate it. He doesn’t like going over there because Jeremy is married with two little girls who scream all weekend and hang on their half-brother. He can’t wait to escape and get back home, and Jeremy uses him to entertain the girls even though Jonah is only seven.

I was planning to celebrate my job promotion this weekend. I don’t drink very often, but a night out with Sam at the local bars sounded like a whole lot of fun. And maybe we can still do that if my parents will take Jonah for a sleepover, but I hate the mom guilt of feeling like I’m using a sleepover as a way to pawn him off so I can get a night to myself once in a while. I have those nights every other weekend—or, at least, theoretically I do.

Parenting is no joke. It's the hardest job I've ever had, and having to do it alone makes it even harder given that Jeremy is such a waste of space. But it's worth it when I look my little boy in the eyes that match mine. I love him more than I've ever loved anybody before.

Aside from the Jeremy bullshit, my life is good. I have the sweetest little boy, incredible parents, and the best friend in the whole world, plus I just snagged my dream job.

Now if I could just find a guy who isn't a complete asshole, I'll really have it all.

CHAPTER 10: LINCOLN

The first order of business will be meeting with the current players. Since it's the offseason and the first day back is still nearly a full month away, Jack puts out the call that a new coach has been hired, and tomorrow before the press conference I'll be meeting with the players to introduce myself.

He offered me a lecture room. I'm more of a locker room kind of coach. The locker room is the place where I'll spend the most time talking to my team. A conference room or lecture room or meeting room feels too formal.

The next order of business will be assembling my coaching staff.

I already have some key names picked out, but I'm not demolishing the group that's been here. This team is coming off a Super Bowl win, after all.

We've lost some big talent. Our star quarterback, tight end, and wide receiver all retired with the former head coach, but the coaching staff is pretty solid.

A new offensive coordinator that was brought in last year proved his playbook on the field last year, so I'll be keeping him around even though I don't agree with all of his plays nor his conservative style.

Defense is solid, so I won't mess with our defensive coordinator, either. Position coaches come and go, and I have a few in mind.

I've also got my eye on filling the holes the retiring players left behind.

Brandon Fletcher is a solid back-up quarterback, but he's no Jack Dalton. I saw some great prospects coming out of the Combine, but our draft position probably won't allow us to score the best prospects unless we can trade up for one.

We've got options, and Jack hired me to manage the best team in the league. Together with Steve, we will select the best players to fill those positions.

I start with the first person I think of when I think of wide receivers. The one man I'd want to bring in on my staff that knows these players and knows this team, a man who played the game a long time and still has ties to this organization since his brother owns the team. And like his brother, I played against him many years ago. We're old acquaintances and I'd love to rekindle that friendship now that we're in the same town.

"Luke Dalton," he answers.

"Luke, hello, it's Lincoln Nash. I've just been hired as the new head coach

of the Vegas Aces, and my first order of business is getting you on my coaching staff.”

He laughs. “Congratulations, Nash. It’s good to hear from you.”

“Nice talking to you, too. How’ve you been?”

“Oh, you know, living the dream. Two small kids, a beautiful wife, and a job I love.” He emphasizes the last part.

“What’s the job?”

“I opened an agency. Mostly I represent rookies, and my wife runs their publicity. It’s a great partnership.”

I hear it in his voice. He doesn’t want to give that up to come back to the grueling schedule we have as coaches.

“I hear you’ve been working as a consultant with the team. What do I have to do to get you here full time?” I ask.

“I appreciate the offer, man, and I’d be honored to continue with the consulting side gig, but I can’t give up what I have going on here,” he says. “It’s too big a commitment and between my age and my family, I don’t have it in me.”

I hide my disappointment. I guess I felt like I was on top of the world there for a minute, like rejections just would no longer find me since I got the job, but apparently I’m still human. “I get it, and I’d love to keep you on as a consultant.”

We say our goodbyes and hang up, and I cross Luke’s name off my short list of additions to my staff.

I make a few more calls and get a few more ideas lined up, and then an incoming call from my brother interrupts me from what I’m doing.

“Hell must’ve frozen over. Grayson Nash is actually calling me?” I answer.

“Mom just called with the news. Congrats, man. Now when I show up in Vegas I can kick your ass at poker *and* football.”

“You’re an asshole,” I jab.

He dishes it right back. “Takes one to know one. Listen, we decided sort of last minute to throw Grandma and Grandpa an anniversary party at end of the month back home and I’m supposed to put the word out now since you’re so busy.”

“The end of the month is literally two weeks away,” I say dryly. “Thanks for the notice.”

“Can you make it?” He’s pleading, which means he wants me there so he

doesn't get in trouble with Mom. It'll be nice to see the whole family, anyway. I'm sure Spencer and Asher will be there. My parents will be there. And it's always a pleasure to see my grandparents—my mom's mom and dad. My grandparents on my dad's side both died before I hit my teen years.

I don't have much choice but to show up. Plus it'll give me the chance to share the news with everybody in person even though my mother seems to have already taken care of that for me.

I sigh. "You know I'd do anything for Gram and Gramps. I'll be there."

"I'll text you the details. The party is Saturday but we'll do dinner Friday and—"

"Brunch Sunday," I finish. It's family tradition on the rare occasion when we get together for a weekend.

There's a knock at my door, and when I glance up, Jack is standing there.

"I need to run. Talk to you later," I say, and I cut the call and set my phone on my desk.

"Don't hang up on my account," Jack says, stepping into my office.

I chuckle, and I think about standing, but then he sits, so I don't move.

"Listen, I've got the press conference lined up for four tomorrow. Steve and I will say some shit, you'll say a few words, and we'll take a few questions. Do you have a publicist you're working with?"

I shake my head. Most offensive coordinators don't really require publicity.

"Might I recommend my sister-in-law? Luke's wife. She's incredible and works with many of our players."

I chuckle. "I just spoke with your brother regarding a coaching position."

"I assume he declined?"

I nod, and I get the sense that he and his brother are close. Sometimes I wish I was a little closer with my own brothers, but somehow sibling rivalries tend to get in the way of that.

This whole new position thing is starting to make me feel like a bit of a loner. I don't have a woman in my life. I'm leaving my friends behind in Los Angeles as I figure I'm starting the next chapter of my life.

And none of that really makes me feel all that sad...though it probably should.

Or maybe that's just social conventions telling me it should. I have a right to live my life the way I want it, and I've been fine on my own for nearly twenty years.

I don't need anybody else. I didn't get this position by being tied down. I got it all on my fucking own, and that's the way I plan to stay.

But Jack Dalton *owns* the Aces now, and he's tied down.

Luke gets to make his own path, and he's got a wife and kids to think about, too.

It's food for thought, but it's not about to change the way I live my life.

So Jack is close with his brother. Good for him.

Now if I could just get that swirling blonde hair of chaos out of my head, I'd be all set.

"I have an exclusive set up for you before the press conference," he says. "I'm giving our newest Aces correspondent with the local news channel the first shot at you. Can you handle it?"

I think back to what I said in my interview when Jack asked me how I'd handle the media.

I'm prepared to handle the media with transparency, and I know that being criticized is part of the position, so I'll build relationships with reporters so I can use them to our organization's advantage.

"My interview answer regarding the media was good enough to score me the position, so yeah. I can handle it."

"You think so?" He chuckles. "We'll see," he says ominously, though there's a certain gleam in his eye that tells me he's kidding around.

Still...I'm suddenly a little anxious about what exactly Jack Dalton has in store for me.

CHAPTER 11: LINCOLN

I have until the afternoon to prepare for the press conference, and Jack let me know he put out a call to several players that the new coach was hired. I'm on my way to the locker room to introduce myself.

This first meeting is important.

First impressions are important, too, and that goes both ways.

I spent last evening trying to come up with what, exactly, I want their impression of me to be, and then I worked backwards from there to devise a speech that encompasses everything.

But I'm speaking from the heart with those talking points in mind instead of giving a speech from memory.

I'm not nervous to talk to my players. Instead, I'm excited to meet them.

When I arrived at the Complex, the parking lot was much more filled than it had been the other times I've been here.

This is it. It's the start of something new, and I could not be more excited about what's in store for this team this season. *My team.*

Jack and Steve walk me down to the locker room to introduce me before I talk.

"I'd like to introduce you to your new head coach, Lincoln Nash," Jack says, and he holds out a hand to indicate me while the men gathered in here clap.

I look around at the group, ensuring I make eye contact with each person gathered here. I want them to know I see them as individuals even though this is a team effort. "Good morning, and thanks for coming in today. It's an honor to be part of an organization with so much talent, and I can't wait to see what we can accomplish together this season. The Vegas Aces have built a legacy, and it's our job to hold onto that legacy and continue building it with the same determination that led to a championship season last year. We will face challenges, particularly as we fill a lot of big positions." I nod toward Jack. "But each of you in here brings something unique to this team, and my job as your head coach is to sharpen those skills through motivation and hard work so we can see through to the goal we all share. We will step onto that field with confidence, determination, and grit. We will show the world that we're here to fight for our title. It's Aces Wild Vegas Style, so let's fucking go."

Aces Wild Vegas Style is a slogan that came to me the second I agreed to the interview for the position. Aces Wild tells the world we're aggressive and ready to take risks. We're not afraid to go for the win. And Vegas Style tells the world we're proud as fuck of our home and fan base and we're committed to playing with style and excitement.

"Let's fucking go!" the men gathered all chant back at me, and I move toward the center of the room and hold out a hand. The men huddle around me, everyone placing a hand in the center, and I yell, "Aces Wild!"

"Vegas Style!" They yell back at me.

"Let's fucking go!" I yell, and they yell it back at me.

And just like that, our huddle before games is established in our very first meeting.

It sure as fuck feels like home already.

Everyone in the locker room stays for a personal introduction with me, and I can already tell these guys are a classy group of players. They're here because they fucking love this game, and they want to win.

I'm here to help guide them to do that.

They welcome me with open arms, and while I know their former head coach was very well loved by this group, I still get the sense that they're ready for this change and whatever challenges lie ahead of us.

It's a business. It's how it works, and I'm sure some guys on the team will like me and others will hate me. Still, it feels like Coach Thompson left me a great group of men who are united in our goals.

After I talk one-on-one with everyone in the room, I grab lunch from the cafeteria, where I sit with Steve and he fills me in on some of the front office staff. After lunch, I head up to my office, and Jack pokes his head in just before my interview is scheduled.

"That went well," he says, and I nod.

"It's an incredible group of men, and I can't wait to fill out the rest of the roster."

He nods and slides into the chair across from me. "I've got some ideas on that, and so does Steve. He's been working hard, watching Combine footage, looking at potential trade deals. We'll need to focus on those holes first and then we can tackle everything else. Around here, the three of us will make decisions as a united team. We'll talk about every player ahead of time."

"I appreciate that," I say, because I know how not every head coach gets to be a part of those decisions. The owner is usually responsible for

operations, the general manager is responsible for the team, and the coach is responsible for performance. But I can't do my job well without a cohesive relationship with both the GM and the owner.

He nods. "Different topic, but fair warning for you."

My brows dip as I wait for him to hit me with it.

He glances at the clock and we both see my exclusive interview is set to begin in another ten minutes.

He clears his throat. "Your interview today is with our newest local Vegas Aces team correspondent. Over the years I've found this person's talents to be incredible in helping promote the positive image of players in particular but also in the organization. I imagine you'll form a close relationship since she will be present at virtually every Aces event both during the season and outside of it. OTAs, press conferences, practices, games, post-game...you name it, she'll be part of it."

"She?" I echo as a sinking feeling hits me right in the stomach.

"She's been with VG-oh-three for years but when half the team retired, so did our old correspondent. The sports editor and I talked a bit and agreed it was time to get a woman in there."

"A woman?" I echo, unable to form longer sentences since I have a gut feeling I already know who it is.

Of course it's her.

It would *have* to be her.

"I believe you have a history with her. Jolene Bailey?"

Her name is a punch to the gut.

Ah fuck.

Yeah...a history.

I guess you could call it that.

CHAPTER 12: JOLENE

I feel like I'm going to throw up.

I've done exclusive interviews before. I interviewed Coach Thompson dozens of times, and I've interviewed players and other coaches, too.

But that's when I was a sports beat reporter. This is my first interview as correspondent.

And on top of that, I have this sinking feeling that the new head coach is Lincoln Nash, and the fear of seeing him again after nearly twenty years is knotting my stomach.

When fear takes over, I jump into fight mode. Not fight-or-flight...no no, right to fight. I'm not just terrified of seeing him again.

I'm terrified I'll fuck up this brand-new job because of him. Of all the people in the world to be hired the same time I get my dream job, it had to be him.

And my hunch it's him has only been confirmed by the fact that his house in Los Angeles just sold in under twenty-four hours a few days ago.

I'm pacing the small conference room where we're holding this interview while Dave, my camera operator, gets set up. I review my questions—the same list of questions I'll ask no matter who it is, and I draw in a deep breath.

“What's going on with you?” Dave asks, breaking into my thoughts.

I like Dave. We've worked together lots of times, and the station assigned him to work with me this season—a promotion for both of us, but he won't be traveling with the team or making besties with the new coach like I will.

Dave is in his late twenties and single, and he loves to regale me with all his tales from the clubs. I live vicariously through him since that's not really my scene so much anymore—not with a seven-year-old at home, though I do take advantage of the occasional night out with Sam when the boys are at their dads' houses and she's not pulling a late shift.

“Nothing's going on with me. Why do you ask?” I halt in my pacing at his question.

“You're walking back and forth like you're caged in here. It's like you're nervous, and I have never seen you nervous to do an exclusive. Ever. And it's making *me* nervous.”

“I'm not nervous,” I snap at him.

He raises his brows as if to tell me I'm proving his point, which I probably

am. I take a drink of water. I look out the window. I force myself to recenter, to focus on the task at hand. Maybe it's not Lincoln and I have nothing to worry about.

And then the door opens.

Jack Dalton is standing there, a force to be reckoned with...and he's blocking my view of the new coach. I force a smile.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Dalton," I say, and he nods politely with a smile.

"I'm pleased to introduce you to our new head coach," he says, and he moves into the room so the new coach can stand in the doorway next. "Mr. Lincoln Nash."

My heart drops into my stomach when I see him in person for the first time in nearly twenty years.

Time stands still as we face off across the small room.

Memories plow into me.

It wasn't just his dad hurting my dad and taking him out of the game forever. It wasn't just the friendships between our families torn apart from one event. It wasn't just the hatred and animosity my father spewed at the Nashes.

It was the fact that in the midst of all that uncertainty, the person I loved more than anyone or anything in the entire world shattered my heart.

And now he's standing in front of me again, a smug smirk on the handsome face that time has been very, very kind to, and I have to interview him. According to my boss, I have to become his best friend. I have to act professional when I can't stop staring at him.

When I can't stop feeling the feelings that rushed over me every time he walked in any room back when we were together.

He's twenty years older now than the last time I saw him in person, and my God is he attractive.

A scruff lines his jaw that wasn't there in his younger years, and his dark eyes seem to pin me to my place as they land on me. His dark hair looks freshly cut, a longish, spiky crew cut with a tapered fade, and he wears a suit ahead of the press conference.

Lincoln Nash in a suit is a fucking sight to behold.

If I didn't hate him so much, I'd have the urge to let him toss me on top of the conference table and have his way with me.

I push those thoughts out even though my mind dwells on that first time for a beat.

I was only fifteen. He was only seventeen.

And despite our youth and inexperience, I can't say it was *bad*. And I imagine that like a fine wine, he's only gotten better over time.

Not that I'll ever find out.

All I associate with him is the explosive ending to what was the best thing in my life. We can't go back and change that.

No matter how hot for him I feel just from seeing him walk into the room.

If he's surprised to see me here, he hides it well. In fact, he seems wholly unaffected by me while I'm trying my hardest to pull it together. Maybe he doesn't remember me. Maybe he's bedded so many women now that I'm just a face from his past, and that thought makes me even angrier.

Or maybe Jack forewarned him. Maybe he knew he'd be seeing me in here today and he had time to prepare. My only preparations came in hunches and speculations.

Heat climbs up my back, but I have to keep my temper in check. I'm just not sure how when all I want to do is scream at him for the way he treated me back then.

He may have been my first...but he wasn't my last.

I shouldn't hold so much anger over what happened. Maybe that's his deal...he simply *moved on* while I've been stuck holding onto this giant suitcase filled with a grudge that sometimes feels so heavy it's going to knock me clean off my feet.

I can't help a tiny glare at Jack for the blindside, but he's smirking, too, so I feel like he knew what he was doing. It all feels like a setup, as if I'm the butt of their joke. Ha-ha, she's a girl trying to fit into this man's world. Let's show her that women are just emotional creatures and see how she runs with it.

I let these errant thoughts take over. I let them wander down to the heat climbing my spine, and the flames ignite.

I won't prove them right.

"Mr. Nash, what a surprise. Congratulations," I say, and this would be the time where I should walk over and shake his hand, but hell if I'm allowing any part of my body to touch any part of his.

"Thank you, Ms. Bailey," he says, his voice the same voice I remember murmuring to me while he made love to me but somehow...raspier. His eyes don't leave mine for a beat, and I try to read what's there, but it's like a book in a language I no longer know the words to.

Still. He knows my name. He didn't forget who I am.

I don't know why I thought he would. What we shared was once in a lifetime. What we shared was supposed to be forever.

Somehow that snuffs one of the thousands of flames now leaping toward my neck.

Dave clears his throat, and I glance over at him. He raises his brows as if to say *let's get this show on the road*.

Oh, right. We're here for an interview. Lincoln is the new head coach of the Vegas Aces. I have a whole list of questions to ask.

And I pray I don't ask the one that's just on the tip of my tongue.

The only one I *really* want to ask.

CHAPTER 13: LINCOLN

Jack gave me the warning, but it was a mere five minutes ahead of time. Five minutes to prepare for a moment nearly twenty years in the making. I figured our paths would cross at some point. I didn't think it would be moments before I walked into my first interview as head coach.

And when I first spotted her in the conference room for this interview, it was like time stopped.

I was transported back in time to when things were good...*better* than good for us.

She was my forever. At seventeen, I knew that. I might've been young and dumb, but I suppose an argument could be made that now I'm old and dumb.

I'm thirty-six, and I've been unable to replicate what I had when I was seventeen...over half my life ago. I haven't been able to find someone who understood me the way Jolene did. Someone who loved me the way she did.

But all that passion was what led to a fiery end for us, and it's best kept in the past.

Especially now. Especially as I'm starting this new position. The last thing I need is the media making a field day out of my personal life.

But, Jesus, time has been good to her. She's even more beautiful now than she was back then. The gold flecks in her eyes glitter and glow at me even from a safe distance of ten or so feet apart.

I can't get closer.

If I get too close, if I smell her, if I feel her soft skin, if her heat radiates toward me and pulls me back into her orbit...it'll be too hard to come back from that.

Jack sits at the conference table, clearly intent on sitting in on this interview. "We've got a press conference in two hours to prepare for, so if you could get this rolling that would be great," he says.

The camera guy hands me a mic pack, and I clip the tiny microphone onto my suit jacket and slide the box into my pocket.

I take a seat in the chair clearly set up for me in here, and Jolene sits across from me.

Getting over what happened between us was the hardest thing I've ever done.

I can't subject myself to that again.

But in all honesty, as I look at her sitting across from me, all professional in a black dress with a belt across the middle and black heels that would look nice perched up on my shoulders as I grind into her, one gorgeous leg crossed over the other as she draws in a breath to start the interview, I'm not totally sure I ever *did* fully get over what happened between us.

She clears her throat. "Congratulations again on your new position as head coach of the Vegas Aces," she begins, and it's clear she's pulled on her professional hat as tightly over her head as she possibly can. "How do you plan to lead the team to victory this season?"

I've done plenty of interviews before. I can get through this.

I just have to pretend she's someone else. This isn't Jolene Bailey, the love of my life who got away and now our families hate one another in a feud as fiery and angry as that of Montagues and the Capulets. This is a local sports correspondent interviewing me and allowing me to get my message out to the fans.

Even though a huge part of me wants to just cut to the chase and get this over with, I know I can't. I need to capitalize on this opportunity, and Jolene is my vehicle to do it. This is the first impression I'll be making on this town and on this fan base, and I need to tread carefully while showcasing my strengths and the reason Jack believed in me enough to give me the job over everyone else.

I lean back in the chair, casual and confident as I consider her question. "I've been gifted a team with a lot of talent here, and I will capitalize on those strengths and the winning culture we already have in this building while instilling my own style of coaching."

"And what is that style?" she presses.

"I'm tough but fair. I'm not the kind of guy who just stands on the sidelines barking orders. I'm out on that field showing them how to lead and how to take calculated risks, finding ways to get my players to trust me with a strong team culture so we can work together to win games. Each player is valued and their contributions matter. I will push them to be the best they can be both on the field and off." It's a generic answer, but it's also the truth.

"What about younger players?" she asks. "Do you have any strategies for working with rookies and players new to the team?" She's scribbling notes as I talk even though the camera guy is recording me, and I imagine it's so she doesn't have to look at me. I wonder if she's as affected by me as I am by her.

“I believe in hard work and respect, and that goes for young players and veterans alike. I treat everyone like a starter because you never know if they will be. My job is to make sure every player on this team knows they’re valued and might be called upon at any time.” I feel like I’m going to be saying the same damn thing over and over and over at these interviews.

She glances up at me, but her eyes immediately return to her notebook. She seems...flustered. “What do you think sets this team apart?”

“This team has a whole lot of heart,” I say slowly as I think back to why I took the interview with the Aces in the first place. “There’s so much natural talent here, and these guys play because they love the game. I want to cultivate that passion and dedication this season as we take on a new era of Vegas Aces football, and most importantly, I think the fans here in Vegas set this team apart. They’re passionate and dedicated, too, and they’re exactly what we need to win games.”

We talk for a solid forty-five minutes as she asks about my football experience and history, my leadership style, my coaching strengths, how I’ll handle the stress of the position, and my goals.

“Who will fill the holes in the roster, specifically the quarterback?” she asks as we’re nearing the end of the interview.

I’m a little caught off guard by the question even though I should’ve expected it. I exercise my right not to answer to get my way out of that one. “We have a lot of work to do to prepare for the season, but it’s only March. We have time.”

“One more question,” Jack says, and frankly I’m surprised he stayed for the entire interview.

Jolene looks up at him as if she’s surprised by his intrusive words, and she glances back down at her papers. She clears her throat, flustered again as she tries to figure out which question to ask.

She takes a deep breath and glances up at me, and I spot the hurt in her eyes. “Is your father proud of you?”

Her question has its intended effect.

An ache pierces through my chest and I feel a bit like I’ve been punched right in the gut.

On the outside, it seems like a simple enough question. The Nash family is an elite part of this league.

But on the inside, there’s a lot more depth to it. The night I ended things with her, the last thing she asked me was whether my father purposely hurt

her father in some effort to break the two of us up.

I couldn't admit to her that she was right...not when my father was adamant that the private conversation between us where he admitted he took her father out of the game would forever stay between the two of us.

But then she told me I was letting him win if that was what happened, and she left me with a final question: was that what was going to make him proud of me?

That question remained heavy in my mind around the days and weeks following our break-up.

We never spoke again—a difficult feat given the fact that we were next door neighbors and attended the same high school, but the Bailey family moved away, which made it easier to pretend she'd just been some crazy dream.

I put in a hell of a lot of extra hours on the field. I worked hard, stayed late, and made it through to graduation. Workouts started a week later, so I headed off to college to get started on the next segment of my life.

And somehow it's been two decades and the last words spoken between us were whether what I was doing was making my father proud.

I have no idea how to answer her question.

I'm not sure anything will ever be enough for him to respect me and my choices. Maybe he blames me for losing his best friend since he apparently did what he did to protect me...who knows. I know I blame him for losing mine.

It should be ancient history at this point, but there's more to it. It's not that simple.

It wasn't just her dad sustaining a career-ending injury caused by my dad.

They were best friends, and they had a shared dream.

They dreamed of opening a sports bar together. They had a vision that it would be a place for players to hang out in the off-season and for fans to hang out during it. When their vision became a reality, they named it Rivalry.

But when Joseph got hurt, my father wanted to buy him out. Since the Baileys were moving to Arizona for Joseph's rehab and would no longer be around to help with the decision-making, my father felt he had to go. He had a different vision for the place than Joseph did. Joseph wanted to make it into a barbecue joint while my father had visions of making it into a sports bar.

Little did we know that the name of the bar would end up becoming the truth between our families.

Joseph felt like my father even asking him to sell was a betrayal that caused the final rift between our families. Joseph held onto his stake as a way to get back at my father. He dragged his feet on every business decision, making it all the more difficult given his distance from the actual location of the bar.

My father did what he could to keep the place afloat, sinking his life savings into it, but Joseph's stubbornness made it an uphill battle that eventually turned into an ugly legal battle with both sides slinging mud at each other in court. After years of struggling to keep the place running, my dad had no choice but to throw in the towel. The bar was bankrupt, and my father has always looked at it as one of his life's greatest failures.

It's another source of contention between our families. Her father's stubbornness over the bar is what eventually sank it, and it left my father essentially in financial ruin. It was his dream to run that bar after he retired, and I'm the only person in the entire world who knows that it was karma coming back for him after what he did to Joseph.

"That's a question for my father," I finally say with a clipped tone in response to her question. "Thank you for your time today."

Jack stands. "Great interview, Bailey," he says to Jolene. "I can't wait to see what you do to paint our new coach in the best possible light."

"Of course, Mr. Dalton. Thank you again for this opportunity."

Her voice fades away behind me as I walk out of the room.

Most exclusives end with some off the record pleasantries, but I don't have it in me to do that with her right now. Not after the last question she asked.

Not now that I have to prepare for my press conference with her on my mind.

CHAPTER 14: JOLENE

I rewind the film as I listen to my own question.

“Is your father proud of you?”

I zoom in on his face as I listen to the blank space that spans the distance between the two of us, my question hanging in the air like an accusation.

There’s an unmistakable falter when I ask the question. He tenses. I watch his sharp intake of breath and flared nostrils while he considers the right way to answer, and his eyes shift away from the camera for a beat as I recall them landing on me when he finally gives his answer.

They were cold as they landed on me, and clearly the rivalry between our families still affects him deeply.

“That’s a question for my father.”

At quick glance, he looked wholly affected by my question, but upon closer inspection, I see the way his mouth moves into a tight line, the way his eyes dilate a bit as he forms the measured answer.

To anyone else, he looks calm and collected.

To the person who once knew him better than anyone else did...I can tell even now how the question threw him off guard.

Maybe Marcus wants me to befriend the new coach, but maybe I can use our history to my advantage. It might be more fun pressing Lincoln Nash’s buttons than being his friend.

God, he’s hot—even hotter when he’s just a tad unhinged the way he became with that final question. Tension simmered between the two of us for the duration of the interview, and I watch him smolder at the camera all thanks to the woman sitting across from him.

I wonder if he’ll smolder like that during the press conference. Doubt it.

In any event, the women of Vegas are going to fall head over heels for him when I air this interview, and the men are all going to want to slide in line to become his new best friend.

He has this charm about him, this air that makes him seem like he belongs to all of us, like he’s already your best friend when the truth is he’s maybe more untouchable than anybody in this building.

How I wish we could’ve had a different ending than we did.

How I wish we could bury the past behind us.

The truth is...we can’t.

Befriending him now would be a huge stab in the back to my own father—just as it would to his father if he befriended me.

No, the days of the two of us are long over, a realization that came to me back when his father took my father to court over Rivalry.

It was an ugly battle, but I was mid-college by the time the court battles began. I was focused on studying and figuring out how I'd be launching my career, but my mom filled me in on every little detail when we talked.

My rage at the entire Nash family only grew, and I still have my suspicions that what Lincoln's dad did to mine was on purpose.

It doesn't matter now. We should bury it in the past.

But I still want to stay far, far away from the Nash family. They will lie and manipulate to get what they want. They will hurt others to protect themselves and their family dynasty, and it makes me sick.

My dad opened a bar here in Vegas that does very well. He named it the Gridiron and he happened to open it right across the street from the Complex. Just like he and Eddie wanted, it's a place where the players hang out during the off-season and where fans hang out to watch the games during the season.

But it's the barbecue joint my dad always envisioned combined with the sports bar feel that I guess Eddie wanted. The Gridiron is known for having the best wings in town, but to me, it's like a second home.

It's my family's bar. It's my father's legacy.

I wrap up my story and send it to Marcus, and I glance at the clock as I close my laptop and stretch.

I have fifteen minutes to kill before I need to head down to the press conference, and I'm still sitting in the same conference room where I interviewed Lincoln.

I glance over at the chair where he sat, and then I turn my gaze out the window. Dave left after he sent me the film, so I'm by myself in here.

I decide to call my dad. I feel like I need his voice of reason to clear out the haziness my interview with Lincoln left behind.

"Hey, pumpkin," he answers. "What's the scoop?" He's answered that way ever since I declared journalism as my college major.

I chuckle. "I've got a big story brewing."

"Good news or bad?" he asks.

"Depends which side you're on."

"Usually does, but your tone tells me you're on the wrong side of it. Good news first?"

I'm a daddy's girl through and through, and the fact that he can tell just from my tone reminds me why I chose to stick by my family.

"Well, the good news is I got the Aces correspondent position."

"Whoa! Congratulations!" He sounds truly excited, and I almost don't want to tell him the next part.

"Thank you. It'll be quite an adventure this season, that's for sure. Marcus told me I need to become best friends with the new coach."

"Any word on who it is?" he asks. Given his former career and his current one, he gets a lot of insider information about the Aces. But I guess I got this particular scoop first.

"I just interviewed him in an exclusive. The press conference announcing him is starting soon, but I guess I just wanted to talk to you first."

He's quiet as he waits for me to give him the name.

"It's Lincoln Nash, Dad."

He makes some grunting sound that's sort of a cross between a hum and a snarl.

It pretty much sums up how I feel about it myself.

"And you had an exclusive with him?" he asks. "How'd that go?"

"We both kept it professional, but it took everything in me to get through it without landing an uppercut on his jaw."

"That's my girl. But what about Marcus's request to become his new best friend?"

"You see my dilemma. I'm not sure how I'm going to be in close proximity with him and not clock him in the jaw." That handsome jaw with the scruff that I want to feel between my legs.

Scratch that. I don't want to feel it anywhere except when I land a punch on it and it scratches my knuckles. Maybe even an open palm slap where it tickles against my palm.

He hurt me. I'd never known heartbreak until I met him, and he walloped a doozy on me.

He changed me.

He made me question every man—every *person*—I got close to after him. Would they find some reason to leave me, too?

It was a lot for a fifteen-year-old girl to deal with, and I had literally no one to lean on. We moved clear across the country.

My mother didn't get it. She thought it was teenage heartbreak. I'd get over it. I didn't know what real love was.

She threw every cliché about young love at me, but it didn't help. If anything, it made me feel even worse. I knew what we had was special, and then just like that—*poof*—it was gone.

I couldn't lean on my dad since he was going through his own recovery. He was frustrated he wouldn't get to play again, and he didn't have anyone to lean on, either, as we were new to town.

So we spent a lot of quiet time watching movies together. We bonded over *Jurassic Park* and *Indiana Jones*. We played cards while my mother tried her hardest to find us a place to fit in. We were new to Arizona, and my mom had a sister in Vegas. Once my dad was done with his rehab, we moved here and we've been here ever since.

We didn't want to go back to New York. There were too many painful memories, but Vegas felt like a fresh start.

What Lincoln did to me made me scared to get close to anybody for a long, long time. And when I finally let someone else in, well, he cheated on me, and he's proven to pretty much be a deadbeat where our child is concerned. If the court didn't order me to allow my child to go over to his place every other weekend, I'd just as soon cut off all contact with him.

I've learned through experience the only man I could really trust is my dad, and apart from Sam, he's the first person I turn to when I have news.

"I don't blame you, pumpkin," he says quietly. "That whole family is evil. Nobody knows that better than we do. But you're strong, Jo. You're fierce. You earned that position on your own merit, and I'm so damn proud of you. Nobody can take that away, and you do what you have to do to keep that position, you hear me?"

I swipe at an errant tear that escapes at his words. "Yeah, Dad. Thank you. I need to get down to the press conference."

"Good luck," he says.

"Thanks. Love you."

"Love you more." He cuts the call, and my eyes move back to the chair.

My dad's words linger in my mind. *Do what you have to do to keep that position.*

He's right.

I'm just not sure what exactly I'll need to do to keep it...or how I can use it to run Lincoln Nash out of my town.

CHAPTER 15: LINCOLN

I can't pretend like I wasn't affected by seeing her again.

I can't pretend like I'm not curious what her life is like now.

Is she married? Does she have kids? Is she happy?

Those are all questions I lost the right to know the answer to back when I was forced to end things with her.

I've avoided following her life story even though curiosity has pulsed in me on more than one occasion.

I've thought about looking her up on social media, but I didn't have the heart to type in her name. Because what if she *is* happy? What if she's married with kids and enjoying life...without me?

So what if we were young? We still made plans. We still believed our future was one.

Instead, our families tore that future into two totally separate paths that were so painful I couldn't bear knowing whatever became of her.

I knew certain things—that she was in Vegas, that her father opened a restaurant, that she was in journalism. But the Bailey name didn't cross the Nashes tongues once the court case was settled, and eventually we got to a point where it was history buried in the past. Nobody on the Falcons knew about my former relationship with her once I got into my coaching position there, and all the details sort of just faded away with time. Nobody brought her name up to me anymore because nobody really knew there was a history to bring up.

I sit in my office in silence for a few beats, regrouping and focusing on the press conference ahead.

There's a knock at my door, and when I glance up, a woman I've never seen before stands there.

"Lincoln Nash?" she asks.

My brows knit together as I stand. "Yes?"

She stumbles a little as she walks into the office, and she glares back at the spot of the offense as if there was someone standing there that leapt from the floor specifically to make her trip.

"That dang snag gets me *every* time," she huffs a little as she walks toward me.

I can't help a little chuckle. I have no idea who she is, but I already find

her to be charming, and clearly she's been in this office before.

"I'm Ellie Dalton. Luke's wife, Jack's sister-in-law. I believe he mentioned to you that I'm a publicist?" She stops at the backside of my desk and reaches across it to offer a hand to me, and I shake it.

"He did, and it's nice to meet you."

"You too. Are you looking for representation?" she asks, cutting right to the chase.

"I don't currently have publicity. I didn't really need it as an offensive coordinator. Do I need it as a head coach?" I sit, and she does, too.

I realize asking that question to a publicist is probably dumb, but I want to hear her spiel and figure out if she's a good fit for the job.

"Look, I know you have a press conference to get to, so I'll be quick. My job is to present my clients in a positive light to the general public whether that's in managing socials, coaching prior to press conferences, bridging relationships with the media, smoothing over any potential blunders, and assisting with marketing and sponsorships. There are really so many advantages to having someone on your side who knows the field, and I've been doing this for a few years now exclusively with the Aces, so I'm privy to some insider tips that could help manage team relations, too, if you'd be so inclined as to want that." She offers a grin, and I can't help but smile back.

That about covers everything I could possibly need, and it'll take some other items off my plate so I can focus on what my team needs.

"You know, I haven't interviewed anyone else for the position, but if Jack recommends you, then my guess is you're a great person to have on my side. You're hired."

Her jaw slackens a bit. "Really?"

I laugh. "Really. I assume there's an NDA involved and I can tell you anything?"

She nods. "Absolutely."

"Great. As you know, my first press conference starts in a few minutes. What you don't know is that I just had an exclusive interview with someone who happens to be both an ex and an enemy to my entire family, so I need to get my head on straight. Send me a contract and I'll sign off on it, and you mentioned coaching prior to press conferences, so let's get to it."

"Oh we've got this," she says, and then she starts rapid firing questions at me to help me prepare to face the press.

And, oddly enough, it seems to work.

“I need to get downstairs,” I say, and she stands to walk with me.

As we head toward the back set of elevators that keep us from entering the media room through the lobby, she says, “I’m going to give you my four Cs to ace this press conference.”

“I thought the four Cs were for diamonds. Color, cut, clarity, carat.” I press the button to call the elevator up.

Her brows dip as she narrows her eyes at me. “Have you been shopping for rings?”

I laugh. “Oh, fuck no. My buddy is married with a kid, though, and I helped him pick out the ring.”

She nods as the elevator doors open and we step on. “Right. Well, these are different. Confident, Calm, Clear, and Courageous. Hit them with those four Cs and you’ll win them over. Leave even one out and they’ll see it as a sign of weakness.”

“I thought you were supposed to hype me up before a press conference, not make me nervous,” I say dryly as I hit the button for the first floor.

“Oh God, did I just make you nervous?” Her eyes grow wide like she messed something up already and we haven’t even signed a contract to work together yet.

I laugh. “No. I’ve done plenty of press conferences before. I’m not nervous.”

“But none as head coach,” she points out.

“Are you *trying* to make me nervous?”

“I’ll just stop talking now.”

I laugh. “No, really. This has been great. You even managed to get my mind off my ex for a minute.” Except now that I mention her, she’s back on my mind again.

And what’s worse, as Jack Dalton says a few words to introduce me, I look out over the group of reporters gathered in the room, and I see her sitting there, her eyes trained on me rather than on Jack.

Is your father proud of you?

No. I don’t think he is.

I don’t think there is anything I can do that will ever make him say those words to me despite how goddamn hard I’ve tried my entire life.

Giving her up was one of the hardest things I ever had to do, and I did it for him. It still didn’t make him proud.

Playing in college and dominating records didn’t make him proud.

A first round draft pick to the Saints didn't make him proud.

I really believed working my way up through the system until I landed a head coaching position would be the thing that finally pushed those words out of his mouth.

Hell, even working back in time, I can't remember hearing those words. When I learned to ride a bike, or when I aced a hard test, or when I saved a bird with a broken wing, or when I mowed Mrs. Paulson's front lawn without pay after her husband passed away.

And sometimes, even though I'm a thirty-six-year-old man now, I still feel like that little boy teetering without training wheels for the first time waiting for his dad's approval.

But maybe it's time to come to terms with the fact that I just may never get it.

"Your new head coach, Mr. Lincoln Nash!" Jack says, and I snap out of it as I head toward the microphone.

"Good evening," I say once the applause in the room dies down.

I think about the speech I prepared as I stare out over the sea of reporters staring back at me. I have a carefully constructed statement to be sure the message I'm delivering is uniform across the board. It's similar to what I said earlier to my players, but now in a different context for the media, and suddenly the entire thing is wiped clean from my brain.

Confident, Calm, Clear, and Courageous. Ellie's four Cs race through my brain, and my statement comes back to me as I draw in a deep breath. "Thank you for your warm welcome, and thank you for being here today. I'm so excited to be here to work with all the talent on this team. We have challenges ahead of us, but I'm confident that with hard work and determination, we can see another winning season. We're committed to winning games, and I'm ready to get moving to build on the legacy I've inherited. My job is to get the most out of the players on this team, and I look forward to building my relationship with this community and continuing the winning culture that's here in Vegas."

"Thank you, Coach Nash," Jack says. "We have time for a few questions." He calls on the first reporter as I mentally prepare to be raked over the coals.

"James Williams, CBS," the man says. "How do you plan on rebuilding the team to be on par with last season when so many of your key players retired?"

I study the crowd, and I suppose I've made a name for myself with the

media because of my charm. I'm good at handling questions, but I've never done it in this role before.

And something about that sets me on edge.

My eyes fall on Jolene. She's staring back at me, a sour look on her face like she can't believe I was the one chosen out of all the potential candidates for this position, and I nearly laugh.

I hold it together, but something about seeing a familiar face out there—even a sour one—helps calm the rising anxiety.

Or maybe it's not because it's a familiar face at all. Maybe it has more to do with the fact that it's *her* sitting there.

And in the middle of this press conference as James Williams waits for me to answer his question, an old memory that faded from my mind years and years ago filters back in.

I was seventeen and angry about something stupid, something I can't even remember now—maybe getting in trouble in a class or something, but I clearly remember storming down the hallway between classes at school. And there she stood, leaning against her locker with that same sour look on her face.

"What?" I growled at her.

"Nothing," she said, shrugging. "It's just...when you're angry, I feel it. I get angry too, like your anger affects mine. Your happiness causes mine. Like we're so in tune I feel what you're feeling. Your mood affects mine, and I just want you to be okay."

Maybe I didn't get it back then, but I do now.

Jolene always saw through me. She saw past the tough guy exterior I tried to project back when I was a teenager right to the vulnerable boy inside.

It's why she asked me if my father was proud of me when I ended things with her. She knew me better than anyone else. Maybe she still does.

I've never let anyone else in the way I let her in.

I felt it, too—the mood thing. When she was sad, I was sad. When she was happy, I felt a little lighter. It felt like it was what set us apart. We were so connected emotionally that when that divide eventually came, I shut off those emotions to the best of my ability.

It doesn't mean I'm not affected. It doesn't mean I'm cold all the time.

But it does mean that I don't let anyone else see it, and that's the calm and cool man the reporters at this press conference are getting.

Still, I have a feeling she can see past it, even now. Even all these years

later.

I brush away the memory and focus.

“That’s a great question, James, and I appreciate you asking it. We have many challenges ahead of us, but I know we can rise to each of them. Mr. Dalton, Mr. Shanahan, and I are committed to developing our rookies and utilizing our existing talent while bringing in some new players with the skillset we’re looking for along with the drive and determination that fits with our current culture.”

Jack nods to another reporter.

“Kyle Broderick, *Vegas Sun*. Coach, what would you say to fans who are worried about the team’s chances this season?”

I smile as a surge of confidence rushes through me. “I say we’re going to give it everything we’ve got. I have no doubt that we will rise above the challenges we’re facing to win games, and we’re committed to working hard every day to prove that the Vegas Aces are the best team in the league.”

“Jolene,” Jack says, and my chest tightens.

“Jolene Bailey, VG-oh-three. Will you be trading for one of your brothers to play for the Aces?”

Of course she’d jump in like a shark. She didn’t ask that question during our exclusive, which only makes me think she held onto it to ask it in a more public setting.

My eyes hold onto hers as the anger pulses through me.

Confident, Calm, Clear, and Courageous.

I can’t let her see she’s affecting me. “We haven’t made any decisions on new player acquisitions just yet.” I leave it at that. The other reporters got a much more courteous response, but I can’t give her more than that. The truth is that yes, I want one of my brothers on my team, and we have an open position that needs to be filled by one of the greatest tight ends who ever played the game.

But I haven’t even spoken to my brother about it yet. I haven’t spoken to *Jack* about it yet, either.

I’ll talk to him today or tomorrow about it, and then I’ll talk to my brother in person when I head to New York for the weekend.

Still, her question bothers me.

It has to be because *she* is the one asking it when she already had her chance to ask questions.

But I have a feeling she’s going to use this season to annoy the fuck out of

me with her questions. I refuse to admit that it's kind of a turn on.

Jack takes a few more questions, but my mind lingers on her.

I need a drink. I need to get her out of my head.

Ellie meets me behind the press room afterward. "You did great, Coach." She offers a wide smile. "Our contract is in your inbox whenever you're ready to sign."

Jack laughs as he slings an arm around his sister-in-law. "You made quick work of that one."

She giggles and waves. "I need to get home to the kids. Jack, we'll see you tomorrow?"

He nods, and she scampers off.

"Steve and I would love to take you for a celebratory drink with Mike and Andy," he says, naming the offensive and defensive coordinators who I've yet to have a real conversation with. "We'll wait for the media to clear out then head to the place across the street in an hour or so. Work for you?"

I nod.

I don't have any other plans, and I can't think of four men I'd like to befriend more than the four he just mentioned...and besides, after that press conference, I sure as hell could use a drink.

Preferably a strong one.

CHAPTER 16: JOLENE

I catch up with some reporters I'm friendly with after the press conference, and I sit in my car as I text Sam afterward.

Me: *Want to bring the boys to the Gridiron for dinner? My treat and I'm right across the street.*

She writes back right away.

Sam: *They both said yes. We'll be there in ten.*

I leave my white Volvo SUV where it is and walk across the street to my dad's barbecue joint.

It always sort of feels like home when I step into the place, and it's because in a lot of ways, it is. My mom's personal touches are everywhere, but it's my dad's pride and joy. Aside from my son and me, of course.

They don't come in as often as they used to, maybe once a week now just to check on things, but when we first moved to Vegas, my parents practically lived here. I attended UNLV, so I came by frequently since it's not too far away, and it always felt like a place to get a good meal and a strong drink.

It's a little after five on a Friday, so the crowd is starting to pick up. The bartenders all know me by name, and I slide onto a stool across from Alex, one of my favorites mostly because of his entertaining storytelling abilities.

"The usual?" he asks, and I nod with a grin.

"You know it. And Sam and the boys will be here any minute, so I need a table."

He nods and pours me a nice, steep glass of my favorite pinot noir, and I'm halfway through it and listening to Alex's latest roommate debacle when the door opens and I spot Sam with the boys.

I abandon my wine and beeline for my kiddo.

I feel like I've hardly seen him lately, and he's the very best part of every single day. I grab him into a hug, and he laughs even as he struggles out of my hold.

"Are you being good for Sam?" I demand.

"Always," he says innocently, and I somehow doubt that.

I laugh. "Right, right. Who wants cheeseburgers?"

"Me!" both boys yell at the same time, and we head toward the booth Alex reserved for us. I detour to the bar to grab my glass of wine, and then I slide onto the end of the booth beside Jonah.

“How was school today?” I ask the boys.

“Fine,” they say together, and I laugh since that’s pretty much the standard response.

“What did you do in PE?” I ask, going the more specific route to glean any insight into what happened in the hours I was away from him.

“I don’t remember,” Jonah says, and I narrow my eyes at him.

“Cop out,” I mutter, and then Debbie comes by to take our order.

Sam eyeballs me from across the table and does some weird thing with her brows after we order. I know she’s trying to have some sort of private conversation with me but I can’t for the life of me figure out what it is.

“Cade, switch with me,” I say to Sam’s boy, and I hand Jonah my phone so the boys can watch whatever YouTuber they’re into this week.

“What was the look for?” I ask her quietly. There’s enough noise in the bar that the boys won’t overhear us, and besides, they’re focused on their video now.

“How’d it go with L?”

I blow out a breath and shake my head. “It was...” I search for the right word. As a journalist, words are sort of my thing. And yet...I can’t quite come up with the word to encompass how it went.

Frustrating, overwhelming, infuriating, comforting, and somehow...sexy? All at the same time.

There isn’t a word for that. Frust-whelm-infur-comf-sex-iating?

“Dangerous,” I finally finish. I pick up my glass of wine and ignore her intent gaze at me while she studies me for more.

“Dangerous? What the hell does that mean?”

“Can we just talk about it later?” I hiss.

She holds up both hands. “Fine, fine,” she says, and she lets a few beats of quiet pass between us because she *knows* I’ll just have to fill the silence with words to expand on that.

But I don’t want to talk about him.

It’s painful, and seeing him today was like ripping open an old wound and scrubbing the exposed nerves there with a Brillo pad.

“Did you hear about Nancy Claiborne?” she finally asks.

I turn toward her as I brace for the gossip. “No! What happened?”

One of our favorite pastimes is catching each other up on all the latest gossip about the moms from the group where we first met.

“She’s having an affair with Steve Tucker and she’s pregnant. Doesn’t

know if it's his or her husband's."

My jaw drops. "Nancy Claiborne? The pearl-clutcher?" She balked at the erotic romance book Sam and I were discussing at mom group one day, officially dubbing herself the "pearl-clutcher" to Sam and me henceforth.

"One and the same. Can you even imagine her sexy times with her own husband, let alone with Tucker?"

I giggle, finally letting that interview roll off me as I shift my focus elsewhere. "To be a fly on the wall. How does something like that even start? Who approaches who in that situation?"

"I can just see Tucker in that sweater vest walking up to ol' Nance and offering to maim her on the slide at the park."

"Maim?" I ask, a look of horror crossing my face. "Do you mean..." I shrug, censoring my words the same way she is.

"Sex," she whispers. "Not actual maiming."

"Either way, I literally will never look at the slide at the park the same way ever again for the rest of my life," I mutter, pulling a face at her.

Debbie comes by with everyone's drinks, and as the boys start sipping their Sprite and Sam sips her wine, she glances toward the door.

"Oh shit. Speak of the devil."

I follow her gaze, and I spot Jack Dalton as he talks to the hostess to find a table. With him are the general manager, the offensive coordinator, the defensive coordinator...and the new head coach.

"Shit," I whisper. My head whips back to hers immediately as my eyes widen. "What are they doing here?"

"Um, they work across the street, my dear. Today was the first press conference for the new HC. This place is known for having the best wings in town and they pour a nice, tall glass of wine. That's sort of a dumb question, don't you think?"

"Shut up," I hiss at her, and I refuse to turn my head even though I feel eyes on me.

I glance over at Jonah, expecting him to be engrossed in his video, but instead he's staring at the men who just walked in.

"That's Jack Dalton," he breathes, clearly in awe seeing one of his heroes in the flesh. Again. They've actually met on a few different occasions given both my position and my father's history with the league. Cade, however, hasn't had the chance just yet and I know, I just *know*, I'm not escaping this place without making the introductions.

“Mom, you have to introduce Cade!” he says.

“And Cade’s mother,” Sam interjects as she pokes me in the ribs, and I bat her hand away.

“Let’s just let them enjoy their meal,” I suggest, still not turning to look at the men who just walked in.

I watch my son, though, and I see his eyes growing wider, which means they’re walking in this direction.

“Hi!” Jonah says, and I feel a presence stop at the head of our table.

I force my head over to Jack, ignoring the rest of the men with him.

“Jonah, so great to see you again,” Jack says to him, and Jonah is positively *glowing* that *the* JD5 remembers who he is. “And Jolene, always a pleasure, though I feel like we’ve spent most of the day together.”

I laugh a high-pitched laugh that sounds wholly unnatural and a little feral, and Sam is patiently waiting for her introduction.

“This is my friend Sam and her son Cade,” I say to Jack, still carefully keeping my gaze on his face even though it takes literally *every ounce* of my own self-control not to glance over at Lincoln.

I feel his eyes on me. I feel him willing me to look at him.

I won’t. I can’t.

I can nearly smell him from here, a comforting wood and spicy bergamot cologne that always smelled so fresh and invigorating to me, and it dredges up too many memories.

Way too many.

“Everyone, you know Jolene. This is her son Jonah and their friends, Sam and Cade,” Jack says, and there we have it.

Lincoln knows I have a son now.

Maybe he already knew. I wonder if he’s followed anything at all about me. I wanted to stay far, far away from him, but given my choice of careers, I didn’t have much choice. I’ve run across news about him over the years, always trying to be objective and always failing, but I didn’t actually have to report *on* him until now.

“And this is Mike, Steve, Lincoln, and Andy,” Jack says, pointing out each of the five big names in the Aces organization. “Nice meeting you.” He offers a small wave, and I smile at Mike, the offensive coordinator, before they all turn toward their table.

That was a close call.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Sam says quietly to me as the boys howl over

seeing one of their heroes in the flesh. “That Lincoln Nash is one gorgeous son of a gun.”

“Too bad he’s a monster dick,” I mutter back to her, and then Debbie comes with our food.

But I can’t eat.

Not when Lincoln Nash is in the same restaurant as me.

CHAPTER 17: JOLENE

They've been here the entire time, and I've avoided looking in that direction.

I've barely touched my salad, but Jonah is chowing his burger and fries. I push around tomatoes and cucumbers and bacon bits and sunflower seeds. It's my favorite salad, and the ranch dressing here is second to none.

But I can't eat. I try to focus on Jonah and his enjoyment of his burger, but I can't.

All I can focus on is keeping my eyes from wandering over to Lincoln Nash.

I need a minute. I need a breather. He's too close. He's here at *my* bar and it's just not okay.

And since it's *my* bar, I'm not taking my breather in the bathroom. I excuse myself and head toward the break room where I used to sit and write college essays when I wasn't sitting in one of the booths and working to the din of the restaurant.

I lean against the wall back there and stare up at the exposed ceiling and the network of pipes and beams and structural elements up there.

Focus, Bailey. Focus.

It's day-fucking-one and I'm already having a panic attack over having Lincoln Nash in the same town as me. How the hell am I going to get through this entire season unscathed?

Maybe that's my answer. I won't.

Not unscathed, anyway.

The door directly to my left swings open, and I don't have to remove my gaze from the ceiling to know who it is.

I smell him the second he walks in.

"You can't be back here," I snap.

"Then how come you are?" His voice is a rich, deep, raspy challenge.

I move my eyes from the ceiling to him, but I don't move from where I lean on the wall. "Because this is my fucking bar."

His brows rise. "You own it?"

I shake my head as I straighten my posture, squaring off against him. "My father does."

He draws in a sharp breath.

“Now get the fuck out,” I demand.

Instead of listening to my demand, though, he does the opposite. He takes a step toward me, and the woodsy bergamot is overpowering.

It smells like him.

It smells like our history.

It smells like the pain and heartache I endured at his hands.

It smells addictive.

I try to breathe out of my mouth so I don't smell him, but it's useless when it has already infiltrated my senses.

My body betrays me and my thighs clench together as an ache throbs between them.

My body wants him, but my heart can't take it.

He's already too close, and he takes another step closer to me. “God damn, Jolene.” He winces a little as my name rolls out of his mouth. “How are we going to do this?” He closes the gap between us, and fire races up my spine at his proximity.

His hips press to mine, and suddenly I'm shoved up against the wall again. My pulse races as every sense is taken over by him. He's all I can see, hear, smell, and feel, and I want more than anything to have one more taste. One more kiss.

Just one.

Just to get it out of my system.

In this moment, I feel like I need it like I need to breathe.

But that's not something I'll ever admit to him.

“We're going to be professionals,” I whisper, and the words come out more like a question than a confident answer. I can't have confidence when I'm this close to him. I can't even think straight over the rushing in my ears and the thundering beat of my heart.

His hips shift against mine, and I know he's affected. I can feel just *how* affected by the way his erection shoves against me, and that ache between my legs pulses again.

What I wouldn't give to feel him one more time...to see just exactly how good time has been to him.

He takes my left hand in his and links his fingers through mine, his eyes falling down onto our joined hands before he lifts my arm up and braces his arm still holding my hand on the wall above me.

His free hand grips onto my hip, and my arm comes up to hold onto his

bicep. His thick, muscular, sexy bicep.

Oh dear Lord.

He leans down so his nose brushes against mine, and my chest lights with butterflies as I think he might kiss me.

He doesn't. Instead, he grits out more words. "I don't know if I can do that with you, and I can't let you fuck this up for me." Frustration is evident in his tone, and I just don't know if he's frustrated with *me* or with this entire situation we find ourselves in.

"I can't let you fuck up my job for me, either," I say, running my nose along his, too, as I shift my lips mere millimeters from his.

His breath mingles with mine. We're so close.

Kiss me. Kiss me. Kiss me.

So close.

I nearly catch his lips with mine, but I can't. I find myself needing him to make the first move—a total contradiction to the aggressive, career-minded woman I've grown into. But because he was two years older than me back then, I always let him take the lead. I liked when he took the lead.

And when he was no longer there to take it, I stepped up and learned how much I could do myself.

It's strange to see myself reverting back to the girl I always was with him, but what's even stranger is how easy falling back into that old role feels right now.

I rock my hips against his.

It's been too long—too long without him, too long without *any* man as my focus has shifted from my personal life to my son and my career.

Anybody but him. The Aces could have hired *anybody*. But it had to be him.

And now we have to face our history, or maybe we just let it explode right here in the break room on top of that old table where I used to write essays.

God, I'm a puddle of need right now. I think this might be the single hottest, most erotic moment of my life.

He leans down, and his lips graze my neck. He takes just the tiniest nibble there that's like a bolt of electricity directly to my vagina before he straightens and stares down at me, our eyes saying something to each other in a language I'm no longer familiar with.

I wish I was.

I wish I could decode what he's thinking right now.

But the moment passes. His eyes cloud over, and he drops his hand from my hip and pushes himself away from the wall.

“I didn’t know you had a kid,” he says softly, his eyes averted to the ground.

And he takes those words with him as he walks out of the break room, leaving me a hot mess that needs to pull myself the fuck together before I head back to said kid at the table out there waiting for me.

I’m not sure why that matters. I’m not sure why that changes things. We’re already enemies. We already hate each other. It’s not like me having a kid has anything to do with that, but eventually it clicks that he doesn’t know I’m not with my kid’s dad.

He might think I’m in a relationship.

It’s almost...chivalrous?

Did he just do the right thing?

Not that I’d give him credit, but still.

I wait a beat to walk out of the break room, smoothing down my dress and fluffing my hair a little as I do my best to pull it together.

But...what the actual fuck was that?

Was he going to kiss me? Is he as affected as me, or is this all in my mind?

Did it really even happen?

It did. The scent of wood and bergamot is still in the air. He was here. His body was pressed to mine, and I think I can smell him on my clothes.

I want to smell him on my clothes, but it’s wrong.

Especially here. This is my dad’s bar. Merely interacting with someone from the Nash family is a slap in the face to my own family, and just because there’s a history between us and clearly still heat between us doesn’t mean I’m going to give in.

Lincoln wants his new job to go off without a hitch, and I really think that’s all this strange encounter was about. Does he want me? Does he hate me?

Or is it a little of each...sort of exactly how I’m feeling?

There are intense and deep feelings there between us. That’s about the extent of how I can categorize this right now.

I need to get back to Jonah.

I draw in a deep breath as I brush that feeling of whiplash off, and I open the door Lincoln walked through less than thirty seconds ago, still flustered

as I smooth my hands down the front of my dress again even though nothing happened back here to have wrinkled my clothes. Nervous habit, I guess.

But sitting at the table closest to the break room is none other than Ryan Rivera.

He definitely misinterprets that nervous habit to have meant something else entirely.

He looks at me, his eyes widening a bit as he puts two and two together even though four is not what just happened. Or fore...play. Or whatever. Nothing happened except his nose brushing mine and ancient history being dredged up to the surface and sparks flying between us. I'm just not sure if they were the sexy, hot sparks or the sort that are capable of igniting a raging wildfire.

Ryan glances back at Lincoln, and then his head whips back to mine before a sly smile forms on his lips.

Shit. I don't like that one bit.

CHAPTER 18: LINCOLN

She has a kid.

And...

What the fuck was that?

What did I just do?

I saw her walk back toward a room with a door marked *employees only*.

Does she work here? I'm not sure, but something compelled me to my feet to find out. Or to confront her...or to ask her about her kid.

Who's the father?

Is she with him?

Is she married? She wasn't wearing a ring. I checked her hand when I threaded my fingers through hers. Her fingers tightened in mine when I shoved my hard cock against her just the way they did when I shoved into her tight pussy all those years ago.

Touching her was a mistake.

A fucking huge one.

But I had to. God dammit, I fucking *had to*.

And once I was close enough, I had to taste her. My lips grazed her neck and it took everything in my power not to kiss her.

It was one hit, and it wasn't enough.

But I can't touch her. I can't be close to her.

I can't smell her. She still wears the same perfume, and the scent transported me back twenty years to when I fell in love with her.

It was love.

Of that I am confident.

And there's definitely still something there, but too much has happened. Touching her was a betrayal to my entire family, and I can't do it again.

But how am I supposed to avoid it?

I've never been so tempted by anyone in my entire life.

But I know what her dad did to mine. And it wasn't just our fathers. It feels very much like my family banded together as we all watched my father try to save the bar. We helped where we could, and we watched as our parents very nearly got divorced over it. We watched as Joseph Bailey very slowly drained the money from my father's account and somehow managed to take everything else from him—not just his financial freedom, but his

happiness. His patience. His excitement.

The Baileys tried to break us. They didn't succeed. Our family drew closer together over the loss of his dream, and when Grayson got his first big money contract, we offered to go in together to help him rebuild his dream.

But he didn't want it. He's never been the same, and somehow I think it has more to do with the loss of their friendship than the loss of the bar. But that's not something my stubborn father would ever admit.

I can't keep running into her, but I'm also well aware that I can't avoid her. The relationship between a head coach and the media is a delicate one, and I've seen my head coaches over the years befriend reporters. I've seen them kick back and have a drink or two—off the record, of course. In fact, one previous head coach I worked with was the godfather of a local reporter's kid.

Other coaches take a different stance on reporters, to be sure. But that's never how I wanted to coach, and besides, Jack wants me to form relationships here. I *need* to form relationships here, and who better to do that with than the people I'll be around the most?

I just can't do it with *her*.

I keep my eyes on Steve as he chatters on and on about the draft. It's still six weeks away, so we have time to prepare, and it's not like we're going to throw out any specific names here in public.

I'm sure I'm not making the best impression on Mike or Andy, who I've not had the chance to talk to apart from tonight. I get the distinct impression Mike doesn't like me. He's only been with the Aces for a year, but surely he was vying for the head coaching position. He didn't get it, though, and now he has to work under me—the guy who *did* get it.

Maybe I'm wrong. She's distracting me, and we keep getting interrupted as the legions of Aces fans who frequent this bar swing by to welcome me to town. Maybe this wasn't the *best* choice for a celebratory drink, or maybe Jack had an ulterior motive in bringing me here.

Today was a big day, but the first day back to the offices isn't for a few more weeks. We'll have some time off now, so at least I'll get to avoid *her* for a bit as I settle into this new position, this new home, this new life.

And I'll have a little bit of time to prepare for my trip back home where I'll have to face my entire family after nearly kissing our mortal enemy today at her father's bar.

Can't wait.

I see her get up with her friend and their boys out of the corner of my eye. I stared at the kid when I walked over to the table. It's not hard to tell who he belongs to. He looks exactly like his mother.

But what did he get from his father? Who *is* his father?

Jesus, that weight is going to press heavy on my chest until I have some answers.

Staring at him helped me avoid looking at her.

Would we have kids together by now if we would've had the chance to stay together?

It's something I think about often.

None of my brothers are married. None of us have kids.

I'm the oldest at thirty-six, and my brothers are thirty-two, twenty-nine, and twenty-seven. All four of us have played football professionally since we graduated college. I'm the only one who isn't still playing. Grayson is a defensive back for the Chargers. Spencer is a wide receiver for the Vikings. Asher is a tight end for the Colts. We're all single, eligible bachelors, and there's no shortage of women vying for our attention.

But nobody has caught it.

Or, at least, nobody since Jolene has caught mine.

What the fuck did our parents do to us?

I've said the words before to Grayson, the brother I'm probably closest to simply because of our ages. We both laughed it off, but maybe it's true. Maybe they ingrained hard work into the four of us from such a young age that we went too far the wrong way, putting our focus into the game instead of into our personal lives.

Am I personally fulfilled?

I'm not sure.

It's another puzzle I think about often.

Am I happy?

Sure. I enjoy coaching, and I'm excited to be here in Vegas.

But the older I get, the more I realize there has to be more to life than just football.

It's a game. It's my life. It's how I was raised.

I didn't care about anything beyond that when I was in my twenties. But my thirties hit me, and I'm more than halfway to forty now.

And where does that leave me?

If I *do* want kids someday, the clock is ticking. It's never really been a

priority. My dad instilled that one in the four of us for sure—that having kids too young can fuck up your entire life.

He had four anyway.

But what about having them too old? Or not having them at all?

Would things be different if we had a sister? Maybe. My mom wanted a girl so bad she tried four times before she gave up, and then she was forced into raising four assholes who accidentally put holes in her walls and broke her furniture and had her taking weekly trips to the ER.

It's no different when we get together now. We may be adults, but we still wrestle and fight like we're teenagers. The recovery is just different now, and we can ease the ache with legal alcohol rather than sneaking it from the cabinet in the basement.

Alcohol to ease the ache. Now there's a novel idea.

It feels like the night is coming to a close, so I refrain from ordering another whiskey as I try to push her out of my head.

I'll have another one at home to banish her all the way out.

But I'm not sure how I'm going to get through an entire weekend with my family without Jolene Bailey coming up, and I'm really not sure how I'm going to field those questions.

CHAPTER 19: LINCOLN

Over the next two weeks, I have meeting upon meeting with Jack and Steve as well as the coaching staff members I decided to keep around.

I'm certain many of them don't like me.

I'm not Mitch Thompson, or I got the position over them, or I take too many risks...there's a plethora of reasons not to like me, but I didn't come here to be liked. I came here to win.

We've got a plan for filling the vacancies on our roster as well as the complete itinerary for the season—most of which was already done before I got here, but together we tweaked practice schedules and smaller items to fit with my vision.

I spend the entire plane ride on a Thursday morning from Vegas to New York thinking about how to lay the groundwork to bring up a trade idea with one of my brothers.

Or, at least, I try to. In reality, I spend nearly the entire flight thinking about what I've learned about Jolene Bailey over the last two weeks.

I haven't seen her since our encounter at the bar, and I haven't been able to get her out of my mind. Just the slightest breeze of an orange blossom brings it all back again.

The way her body felt beneath mine as I pinned her to the wall in the back room of her father's bar. The way her porcelain skin tasted. The way her breath hitched when I ran my nose along hers and teased her for a kiss. The way her fingers tightened in mine when she felt how hard I was for her.

It was illicit and forbidden, and every time I think about it, I get hard all over again.

Every time I think about *her*, I get hard.

I need this weekend with my family to push her out of my mind.

Maybe I just need a quick hook-up to get her out of my head. I have a list of phone numbers I can ring...but as I think them over, not a single one stands out.

The only one that comes to mind is the woman in Vegas I can't seem to get out of my head.

I've learned she's a single mother. It wasn't easy digging up the info since her social media doesn't have the kid anywhere, but what I've pieced together is that she was with the father before the kid was born and then she

wasn't any longer afterward.

I don't know what happened, and I'm not sure how to find out without drawing attention to the fact that I'm digging around on her.

I have to let it go.

It's not my business to know anymore.

I scroll through my contacts as I try to come up with a name I could call while I'm in New York. That must be the answer—get one woman out of my head by sticking it in another woman.

But even seeing the names rather than just trying to think of one doesn't conjure up any desire at all to call a single one of them, never mind the fact that they're all located nearly five hours away from where my parents live now.

I blow out a breath as the plane lands. I still have no answers, and what's worse is that I still don't have a plan to tell my brother we want to figure out a trade deal.

I rent a car and drive two hours out to the middle of nowhere where the farmhouse is located. Grayson and I bought it for our parents after the bar took their life savings and we had enough money to take care of them the way they took care of us.

My mom always dreamed of living on a farm with goats, and so we bought her a goat farm and built her dream house on the lot. Spencer pays the employees who run it, and I really know very little about anything to do with the farm other than the fact that my mom has gotten into making soaps out of their milk and every time I visit, I remember to bring my own soap since sometimes she adds fucking orange blossom scent to the soap.

Grayson and I paid for the house and the land. Spencer runs the farm. Asher sends my parents on vacation at least once a year. We all try to do our part.

They raised good kids, and we try to meet back here a few times a year despite our hectic schedules. At least we all have time off at the same time, so usually our get togethers are limited to the off-season.

The house is big enough for the six of us to stay in when we visit, and we all get our own rooms. Grayson and I made sure of that when we helped design the house, and it's usually a fairly relaxing place to visit—minus the family drama, of course.

I think about my three brothers on the drive. It's been about eleven months since the last gathering where all four of the siblings made it in, and I wonder

what's changed in the last year.

I don't keep in touch with my brothers the way I should, but we're all busy.

I'm the first of the Nash brothers to arrive, and guilt starts to creep over me as I think about what my dad would think of my new relationship with Jolene.

Touching her in that break room...it was wrong.

I should've resisted temptation. Usually I'm better at that.

I park off to the side for an easy getaway if I need one, though usually just a walk on a path through a dense forest of trees or a canoe ride on the small lake provides the sort of quiet I'm looking for when I visit this place.

It's tranquil and peaceful but for the occasional bleating of a goat, but usually they're kept inside a shed. I've come to appreciate the sounds of this place over the years, and a small morbid part of me even wonders what'll happen to it one day when my parents aren't here to live in this house any longer.

I sit in the driveway for a beat staring up at the house when another car skids to a stop right beside me, too close for me to even get out of the car.

I know it's Grayson before I even see who's in the driver's seat. Spencer would *never* fuck around with cars, and it's not Asher's style.

I shoot him the finger and yell, "Move!"

He just shrugs, cuts the engine, and skips out of the driver's seat toward the front door.

Meanwhile, I have to climb across the console and out the passenger door to get out of my car.

"You're such a fucking idiot," I yell at him just as my mother opens the front door.

She sees how her son parked directly beside me paired with my words, and she just shakes her head with a laugh.

So that's how this weekend is going to go.

CHAPTER 20: JOLENE

His nose brushing mine.

His fingers digging into my hip.

That fresh bergamot smell.

I looked up what bergamot even is because I didn't know. It's basically an orange rind, which sounds gross, but when it's mixed with apple and birch...

I clutch my sheets at the mere memory.

I've been tossing and turning all night, and maybe I just need to give myself a quick treat beneath the sheets, but I don't want to while I'm thinking of *him*.

And believe me...over the last couple weeks, *he* is what I've been thinking about pretty much exclusively.

Why would he come at me in the break room the way he did?

I can't figure it out. It's like he wants me, but he doesn't. He must be as confused as me with these conflicting feelings. And then he dropped off the radar completely. Which is a good thing.

It's the healthy thing.

It's the smart thing.

But my brain isn't very smart, especially not first thing on a Friday morning. I need to head into the Complex today since the general manager is going to go over the upcoming schedule with certain members of the media, and I'm dreading the possibility of seeing *him* there.

Or maybe it's not dread at all. I'm not really sure what the hell it is, but I do know I need to get Jonah out of bed since the bus will pick him up in about an hour, and I need to jump in the shower before that.

I rush over to his room, and this boy who used to wake up at five in the morning to play with Lego sets now won't budge when I try to wake him up.

I try to get him in bed earlier at night, but he keeps pushing and pushing for a later bedtime.

So I do the mean mom thing. I pull open his curtains and let light stream into the room while I grab him a pair of shorts and a t-shirt from his drawer. I toss them on his bed. "Get dressed! I'm getting in the shower!"

We have an hour, but it's never enough time. Every morning feels like the same rush, and I wish I knew some magical solution to fix that, but it is what it is. And Fridays when he's going to Jeremy's house are even worse since I

need to pack his overnight essentials in his backpack.

We plow through breakfast and rush out to the bus stop, and he bats me away when I give him a million kisses since I won't see him until Monday after school. Jeremy will pick him up from school and drop him there on Monday. Or, more than likely, his wife Alyssa will be doing the pickup since he'll probably still be at work, but either way, it means my heart will be in another place for the next eighty or so hours.

I hate it.

Every single time, I hate it.

But as much as I want to, I can't wallow.

Cade is at his dad's house this weekend, too, and Sam is off work, so we've already planned a night out together to get our minds off...well, everything.

I work for a few minutes at home—checking the news, reviewing the scripts for a few different off-season story ideas, and emailing Marcus. And then I head to the Complex for the media meeting with the general manager.

The closer I get, the more my heart thunders at the thought of running into him. This is Steve's meeting, but certainly Lincoln will be here somewhere in this building.

It feels like I can't take a deep enough breath at the thought. He's already suffocating me and we've barely had any interactions at all.

I go straight to the press room, where I find a very small group of familiar reporter faces. A team assistant standing at the entry hands me a notebook, and inside is a listing of every team-related activity this season.

I glance through it.

It's lengthy.

It's not just the game schedule that's typically issued publicly. This is a comprehensive breakdown of everything, from practices to charity events to camps to flights and accommodations for every away game.

It's my life for the next year.

The problem? It's also Lincoln Nash's life for the next year.

Steve steps up to the podium and says a few words welcoming us and taking us through the schedule. "Any questions?" he asks.

"How much input did Nash have on this, and where is he today?" James from CBS asks. "Coach Thompson was always here to talk that through with the media."

I perk up at the question as my eyes move from my notebook up to Steve.

I wasn't here at the previous media itinerary days since my predecessor was, so I wouldn't know to even ask that.

"I'll start by reminding you that our new head coach will have his own way of doing things separate from that of Thompson," Steve says, and I hear a few grunts around the room.

They don't like Lincoln? I thought I was the only one. He seemed to show up and win everyone over immediately, but it's hard to step into the shoes of such a legendary coach as Mitch Thompson.

"With that said, Coach Nash is with his family this weekend," Steve finishes.

With his family.

The Nash family.

I wonder if he's going to tell them he shoved me up against a wall and his lips were centimeters from mine.

I shake out the image.

A few others ask questions, and that's it.

I rush over to James before he leaves. "What do you have against Nash?" I ask.

"Probably something different than what you hold against him," he says, and his tone is suggestive.

It takes everything in me not to slap him.

"I don't care for what you're implying," I warn, but he dismisses my complaint.

"Listen, Bailey. You're a reporter. If you're getting the impression people aren't receptive to the new coach, do your due diligence. Don't hit up your competition for information."

I blow out a breath. If it was Rivera asking, I bet he'd hand the details right over.

Still, the fact that maybe not everybody in Vegas is on board with this new hire is on the table for the first time.

I make a mental note to do a little more digging into Coach Nash. Maybe James is right—maybe it's simply due diligence and I've avoided it for personal reasons.

But I won't let my vagina get in the way of this job.

Instead, I head into the office and I start researching.

I don't get Saturdays off anymore, but I do get the flexibility to fit in my work when I can, so I read articles and make notes and dig, dig, dig. By the

time I set myself up for a big day of work tomorrow and I see it's nearly seven already, I'm ready for a stiff drink with my best friend.

I told her I didn't want to go to my dad's bar, but I'm so close now, and besides, Lincoln is out of town. It's not like we'll run into him at the Gridiron. I text her the change of plans.

Me: *Change of plans. Can you meet me at the Gridiron? I'm on my way now.*

Sam: *Be there in ten min.*

She loves the Gridiron—mostly because she loves fantasizing that she'll meet a hot football player in here and he'll sweep her off her feet and she'll have the sort of life she always dreamed she'd have.

"How was work?" I ask.

She's a nurse practitioner working in an emergency room, and she pretty much makes her own schedule, so usually she does three ten-hour days a week.

"Fine." She shrugs. She doesn't usually like talking about the things she has seen in the ER unless they're entertaining stories, which do happen upon occasion—particularly here in Vegas where people truly live by that old cliché about what happens here stays here.

It's not true. Medical bills follow you back home, even when it's because you stuck a potato in your ass during a bachelor party dare gone wrong.

I reach over and squeeze her hand.

"Yours?" she asks.

"Fine."

"We're a pair, aren't we?" she asks.

I chuckle, and Debbie comes over. "The usual, ladies?"

I shake my head. "I need something strong, Deb. What do you have for me?"

She twists her lips as she thinks it over. "Long Island?"

I wince a little as I think about the last time I had a Long Island. It wasn't pretty.

"Margarita?"

I wrinkle my nose. "No tequila tonight. I don't need a headache all day tomorrow."

"Hm." She taps her chin. "What about vodka cranberry?"

I nod. "Bingo. Light cranberry, though. Heavy vodka. And a lime."

Debbie nods at Sam, who shrugs.

“Make it two. And nachos.”

“Definitely nachos,” I agree, and Sam and I high-five.

“What was just fine about your work today?” she asks as Debbie scampers off to get our order going, and she lowers her voice. “Is it that damn fine as fuck asshole getting in your way again?”

I lift a shoulder. “Sort of. James Williams seemed disenchanted by him at a press event today, and I confronted him to ask why and he basically inferred I was already sleeping with Nash and then told me to do my own research.”

“Disenchanted?” she presses.

I lower my voice since we’re in public, but the music is loud enough combined with the din of the place that nobody would overhear us. “He asked why Lincoln wasn’t at the event today since Thompson would’ve been there. When Steve reminded us that it’s a new regime, I heard definite scoffs around the room.”

She narrows her eyes as she studies me. “Scoffs? Why scoffs?”

“Well, I wasn’t sure, so I spent the rest of the day at the office doing my *due diligence*, as James directed me to do.”

“What did you come up with?”

Debbie swings by with our drinks, and we clink glasses before we each take a long, healthy chug.

“He’s aggressive. He’s not afraid to take risks on the field or off it. He’s incredibly driven and very talented, and he puts the game first above everything else. It’s why he’s thirty-six and single.”

She raises a brow. “You sure that’s why?”

I narrow my eyes at her. “What are you implying?”

She shrugs innocently. “Nothing, nothing. I just...” She blows out a breath. “When are you going to tell me what happened in the break room?”

My brows dip. “What?”

“I saw you go in the break room two weeks ago when we were here. I saw him get up and follow you in there thirty seconds later. He left first, and then you came out looking flushed and flustered as fuck. I’ve been waiting two goddamn weeks to get you alone to have this conversation. Now spill it.”

I suck in a breath at her words. She saw me. Rivera saw me.

Who else saw me?

“Can I finish what I dug up on him first?” I ask.

In all honesty, I want to get her professional opinion on an article I saw

about him earlier so I can figure out if there's any truth to the claim. But I also want to tell her more about why people don't love his coaching style—how he's not afraid to make enemies, how he's more worried about his team's success than anything else, how he likes to shake things up in the locker room and push boundaries.

She shakes her head. "No."

"Come on. I need your professional opinion on something."

"First the details of the break room. Then the professional opinion."

I roll my eyes. "Fine. But let me start by saying nothing happened and it wasn't a big deal."

"Okay, start noted. Now get on with the details, friend." She gives me a pointed gaze before she drinks some more vodka.

"I needed a breather from him. He followed me in. I told him to get out of my bar, we argued. He pinned me up against the wall and it was hot and we almost kissed but didn't, and then he said he didn't know I had a kid and he left. That's it. The end."

I leave out some of the finer details, but really just the ones I think about late at night when I'm having a *ménage à moi*.

"Oh, no, no, no. That is *not* the end. That's merely the beginning, sweet Jolene." She's all smiling and happy as she teases me, but I am not sharing that sentiment with her.

"It is not!" I squeal, and then I force my voice back to a normal decibel. "It's not. It was a one-time thing, nothing happened, and we move forward. I have to keep this professional, Sam. My entire career depends on it."

"Right," she says, her tone full of sarcasm as she makes a circle with her finger and thumb as if to say *okay*. She winks at me.

I roll my eyes as Debbie delivers our nachos.

We move onto talking about our boys, which is where the conversation inevitably goes, but my mind is stuck back on Lincoln.

If my own best friend doesn't believe me where he's concerned, how am I ever going to get the entire Vegas Aces fan base to believe me?

"You needed my professional opinion about something?" she asks.

I nod, and I grab my phone to pull up the article I saved. It's from a tiny newspaper local to New Orleans and didn't gain any traction at all, surprising given the content of it.

I push my phone across the table toward her. "Read it."

She picks up my phone and scans the article and she looks up at me when

she finishes.

“Well?” I ask.

She sets my phone back down as she contemplates what she just read. “I’d need to see his records to back up the claim, but yeah...it’s possible.”

“Would footage of his injury help since I don’t have his medical records?” I ask.

She nods, and I pull up the footage I found online from when the injury occurred.

“God damn, he’s hot,” she says when I slide the phone back over.

“Clearly beside the point, friend.” I shoot her a glare, and she giggles as she watches the video.

She nods, and she winces. “Yeah, that looks painful, but I don’t think it would be career-ending. The article mentioned a post-op infection, and that’s a little trickier. I’d need more details about that to say for sure, but if the surgery went well and the infection was controlled quickly, he could’ve come back. Lots of players do. Like Alex Smith—he almost died and had to have multiple surgeries for an infection, and he still came back. This article says he was released the standard time after his surgery. Have you looked up whether there were additional surgeries?”

I nod. “I couldn’t find anything.”

“I’d imagine it would’ve been pretty well publicized if there were.” She taps her chin with her finger while she thinks. “But if he was healthy enough to return to the game, why would he have lied and said he couldn’t?”

Why indeed.

That’s the same question that’s been on my mind since I found this little article, and I am determined to dig deeper until I get to the bottom of it.

CHAPTER 21: LINCOLN

My mom attacks me with a hug the second I walk through the door. My dad hangs back and offers a firm handshake.

That's their personalities to a T. My mom is warm and kind. My dad is cold and standoffish. I fall somewhere in between them, I think, though I like to believe I'm more like Mom than Dad.

Maybe because I don't *want* to be anything like my father.

Grayson is more laid-back and charming like my mom, the tallest of the four of us and second oldest at thirty-two. He can make anyone laugh, but he's all business when it comes to the game. He will do whatever it takes to win, and he's a huge asset to the Chargers in his position as defensive back.

And then there's me. A natural leader with charisma and ambition. Competitive and obsessed with winning, which often isolates me from others, including my own brothers. As a coach, I have to be careful what I share with them, and if we can't bond over football...what can we bond over? What else even is there?

To the Nash family...nothing.

What would it be like to bring a woman with me to one of these family get togethers? How would my brothers treat her?

Why am I even thinking about it?

It's not like I could bring Jolene here.

The thought nearly makes me laugh out loud.

Hell, Asher was only seven or eight years old when I broke it off with her. He doesn't even really understand what went down between the two of us.

I guess the only one who has any inkling about it is Grayson. Maybe that's why I'm closer to him than I am to the other two. He was thirteen, and even though there was a huge age span there, he was the one I relied on most during the darkest days. He always tried to cheer me up even when it seemed like an impossible feat.

But he still doesn't know about the conversation that took place between my dad and me the day Joseph Bailey was hurt during practice.

He still doesn't know the secret my father told me. It's been speculation for years, but most people have swept it away at this point.

Not me.

I remember it like it was yesterday.

And part of me is glad my parents lost the house when they were trying to save the bar. I couldn't bear to stand in my childhood bedroom today and relive that awful conversation.

I do enough of that outside of those bedroom walls. Inside them would be pure suffocation.

Mom ushers Grayson and me toward the snacks she has in the kitchen, jabbering on and on about how excited she is for the anniversary party tomorrow night, and Grayson walks right over to the fridge and grabs us each a beer.

I raise my brows in thanks as I can't help but think I'm going to need a few of these to help me through the next few hours.

We get settled, hauling our suitcases up to our respective bedrooms, and Spencer, the responsible one, arrives next, about a half hour—or two beers—after Grayson and me. He's the smartest out of the four of us, the second youngest at twenty-nine, and he's a wide receiver for the Vikings. He's quiet, but it's usually because he's thinking and strategizing—like my father would do. Of the four of us, I see him as the most likely to get married first.

Grayson offers him a beer after the greetings, and to my surprise, Spencer takes it and cracks it open. If we were in season, he wouldn't touch it, but I guess over time he's decided he can partake in some fun in the off-season.

“When is Asher getting in?” Spencer asks Mom.

Asher, the baby, is just twenty-seven. He's a tight end for the Colts, and he's our wild card. He's an adventurous risk-taker, most likely to jump out of a plane if the league allowed such risky activities. He's the fastest of the four of us, and while all four of us have been rumored to be playboys, he fits the stereotype better than the rest of us with his impulsive attitude. He's not like my mom *or* my dad. He's not like any of us, really, and that riskiness and adventurous spirit is exactly what we need on the team to take the spot of Ben Olson.

She glances at the clock.

“His flight landed about an hour ago, so he said he'd just meet us at the restaurant.”

And he does. A couple hours later, I'm starting to feel a little beer buzz as we all catch up.

We bring up every game where one Nash brother played another one last season, and we analyze each game at length as we drink more beer, trash talk, and laugh like hell.

I've gone too long without this, and it's a clear reminder *why* family comes first.

The six of us banded together in some of our toughest times. We were all we had to rely on when things got bad—when accusations were flying at us and when paparazzi was waiting outside and when Dad lost the bar.

Were a lot of the hard times directly related to my father? Hell yes they were. But my younger brothers still see him as a hero, and for their sake, I'll hold onto his secret. I won't be the reason this family implodes.

And that's why I have to keep my distance from Jolene Bailey.

No matter how hard that might get.

Mom and Dad head to bed when we get back, leaving the four of us to our own devices. And that device just happens to be poker.

We get into a rousing match of *Dealer Names the Game* once Grayson finds the poker chips in the game closet. We agree to each put up a hundred bucks, but this game isn't about the money.

It's about the competition. All four of us are competitive by nature, and none of us takes losing well. We wouldn't have made it to the place we are in our careers if we did.

Still, Grayson is a cheater, and we all know that. He steals looks at cards when he shouldn't and he snags an extra chip off the top that doesn't belong to him. True to each of their individual styles, Spencer is careful to strategize, and Asher plays with risk. As for me...well, I will stop at nothing to win, whether that's charming my way through a bluff or raising the stakes aggressively.

We knock Grayson out first, and then Spencer, so it's down to just Asher and me. We play a few rounds until Grayson decides to call it a night, and Spencer heads up shortly after.

And that's when I decide to let Asher win. If I'm going to try to lure him over to the Aces, I need to tread carefully.

"Dude, you could've had that!" he says when he sees my cards.

I shrug. "You win some, you lose some. Want to go for a hike with me tomorrow morning?"

He nods. "I need to stretch my legs, so yeah. Six AM?"

"Sounds good." It's a little earlier than I would prefer given that I'm still on Vegas time, but if it gets me a minute with my brother alone and away from the rest of the family, I can talk to him about the trade.

I think about how to approach it as I get ready for bed, but when I slip into

bed, the thoughts fade away.

This is the same bed where, nearly twenty years ago, I lost my virginity to Jolene Bailey. It may not be the same bedroom, but it's the same bed.

This bed is where I knew I was destined to end up with her until our entire world came crashing down just a few days later.

It was tender and sweet. It was full of love and passion.

I've heard plenty of horror stories about everything from first times to hundredth times in the locker rooms over the years, but what we shared was intimate.

I've never allowed that sort of intimacy anywhere else.

I was too afraid it would all be ripped away the same way she was. I was afraid I'd be forced into another choice I didn't get to make—a choice that was already laid out for me because *father knows best*.

I'm not sure how the fuck I'm supposed to sleep here with those memories plowing into me. I get up and pace around the bedroom, and it feels too small.

I need sleep—especially if I'm going for a hike in five hours with Asher—nine years my junior and definitely more agile than this old man.

Yet...I need to move. I need to get out of here.

I head downstairs to clear my head, and I find Grayson leaning on the kitchen counter, the light of his phone the only light in the room and making his face glow. A bottle of beer sits next to him on the counter.

"Whatcha doin'?" I ask casually, and he jumps about ten feet into the air. I laugh as he catches his breath.

"Fuck, dude. I'm getting too old for jump scares."

"Too old? You're thirty-fucking-two, man," I point out.

He nods and twists his lips as he reaches up to his shoulder to massage it a little. "Yeah. I guess I just..."

My brows dip as I watch him grapple for words. It's unlike him. "What's going on, Gray?"

"I just got word Kendrick Barber is heading to the 'Fins. Another reminder we're commodities, not people."

"Do you really feel that way?" I ask, perching on the countertop across from him.

He holds up his beer. "Want one?"

I nod, and he grabs one from the fridge, the room lit from the light there for a minute before we're back in darkness again. He hands it to me then lifts

himself up to sit on the counter where he was just leaning. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, the moon is lighting up the kitchen enough that I can see Grayson.

He draws in a breath. “Sometimes. I guess sometimes I feel like I might be ready to hang it up, you know? I’m tired. I’m beat up. I’m cupping and taking Toradol and trying to ease the aches rather than giving anything time to heal. The off-season isn’t enough time. I guess...it just gets old.”

“I know,” I murmur. Oh, I know that feeling all too well. It only took three seasons to take me out. He’s survived nine.

“But then I remember how many years Dad played and I know he’d be disappointed in me if I gave it up earlier than he did.” He shrugs.

“The game has changed,” I point out. In a lot of ways, it was easier back in the day. The paychecks were a little smaller, but the talent pool was also shallow and the physicality wasn’t quite as brutal as it is today. “You’ve accomplished a lot in your career and you’re still helping your team win games, but you’re smart and you know your body better than anyone else.”

He nods, and we’re both quiet for a beat before I have to ask the question on my mind.

“Is Dad the only thing keeping you in the game?”

“Sometimes I think he is.”

“Why do we give him so much power?” My voice is a low rumble as I ask the question. It’s his house—granted, the house Grayson and I bought for him, but still. I shouldn’t be badmouthing the man in his own kitchen, but I can’t help when the words fall from my lips anyway.

“It’s how we were raised, man. Family and football first. Blood is thicker than anything else. How many times was that beat into us as kids? If I give up football, it’s giving up my family.”

“You’re not *giving it up* if you retire, dude. You put in a lot of good years.”

“You’re just saying that so you don’t have to face me this season,” he says, but he really does sound sort of tired.

“Or maybe I care about you because you’re my little brother and I don’t want to see you miserable.” It feels like a good time to bring up my own little issue, too, since we’re having this nighttime confessional, but I don’t know how to broach the topic.

He does it for me. “Thanks. I appreciate that. How’s Vegas treating you?”

I clear my throat. “The Aces are incredible so far. It feels like home

already. But there's this one thing..."

"You need a defensive coordinator and you're offering me the position?" he supplies.

I laugh, but I turn serious a moment later. Could Grayson come coach with me? I never really considered it, but I can do whatever I want with my coaching staff. "Not a DC, but potentially a position coach or an analyst. Is coaching something you'd want to do?"

He shrugs. "It's something I've thought about. I've watched you do it for years, and you're really good at it. It'd be kind of cool to learn under you and work my way up."

"I'm going to talk to Asher about a trade tomorrow," I admit. "You think he'll take it?"

He chuckles as if I just asked a stupid question. "Fuck yeah I think he'll take it. It's Asher. He's not an Indiana dude. He's a Vegas dude all the way."

He's got a point.

"There's something else," I add before I lose my nerve.

"What?" he asks.

I clear my throat. "Jolene Bailey." I say the name quietly. "She just scored the Aces correspondent position for a local news channel in Vegas, and she's going to be at every Aces event this season. And I..." I suck in a breath.

"You're still in love with her?" he correctly guesses.

"Fuck no," I say. I shake my head. "I can't be. Even if I was, it wouldn't matter. For the same reason you can't hang it up yet."

"Dad?"

I nod.

"Fuck," he mutters. "I get it, though. It's a delicate balance. We have such a great family dynamic here. These family gatherings...you can't exactly walk in with a Bailey on your arm to Gram and Gramps's anniversary party. Has anything happened?"

I shake my head, the thought of pinning her up against the wall in that break room fresh in my mind again. Nothing happened...but that doesn't mean I don't *want* something to happen.

"She has a kid," I say softly.

"And the dad?"

I shrug. "I don't think she's with him."

"Huh," he grunts softly. "What are you going to do?"

"I have no idea," I admit.

“The man with a plan has no idea...” he mutters, and he shakes his head.
“Never thought I’d see the day.”

“And wouldn’t you know it’s a woman fucking up the balance.”

He laughs. “You know my stance on that.”

Yeah, I do. It’s the same stance all four of us have. It’s why our ages range from twenty-seven to thirty-six and none of us are married. None of us have kids. All of us are committed to football first.

All of us are a little lonely but none of us will admit it.

And I’m starting to wonder what life would be like if I could be a little more like Asher and take the damn risk.

CHAPTER 22: LINCOLN

My alarm wakes me way too early, but I have to take my chance where I have it. It's the life of a football coach, I guess.

I pull on my joggers and a long-sleeve t-shirt and grab my favorite Nikes before I head down to the kitchen, where Asher is already waiting for me. He's chowing on a granola bar, and I find one in the pantry for myself, too. We fill some water bottles and head out the back door.

It's a brisk forty-eight degrees this early in the morning in late March, but it's beautiful. The skies are clear as we head through the fields to the trail through the forest.

"What's new with you?" I ask once we wade through the tall grass and hit the dirt path.

He shrugs. "Nothing much. I've been spending most of my offseason in Nashville."

"Doing what?"

"Hanging with buddies. Going to bars. Listening to live music every night."

"Keeping up with workouts..."

He laughs. "Nah. I'm young enough the off-season pounds still shed pretty easily. I take a month or two to fuck around and then once we're back at mandatory OTAs, I get back on track."

"That's the time to do it." I think about his words. He's dedicated to having fun, but he knows when to get serious. That's the kind of attitude I want on my team. That's the kind of guy I want playing for me.

"How's Vegas?" he asks.

"So far, so good. I haven't been there long, but it already feels like the best organization I've ever worked for."

His brows rise as if he's impressed by that. "Even with new ownership?"

"You know Jack Dalton. He's got everything under control, and the players in that building respect the hell out of him."

"Yeah, you walked into a pretty sweet deal there."

I chuckle. "I wouldn't say I walked into it."

He's quiet a beat. "You ever think we get all this shit so easily because there's four of us playing? With a dad who used to play, an uncle who used to play..."

“It’s a legacy, for sure, but I still think we all earned it in our own right. Maybe we were predisposed to some advantages because we grew up around the game. How’s Indianapolis treating you?”

“It’s good. Fine.” He shrugs. “I guess sometimes I feel like my talents are wasted there. Hillman starts more games than I do despite the evidence that I have more talent. And as you know, we need a quarterback.”

He’s not happy there.

This is my chance.

“You’ll get a good pick in the draft,” I point out.

“Yeah. But that’s the thing. I don’t know that I want to play on a team that has a good draft pick every season...you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” The good thing about a good draft position is that a team will score a talented player with a lot of potential to build a better team. The bad thing about it is that the team with the worst record in the league gets the first pick. “What would you think about coming to play for a team that has the last pick this season?”

His head whips over in my direction. “In Vegas? With you?”

“In Vegas,” I confirm. “With me.” I’m not sure that the *with me* part will sell him as much as the Vegas part. I’ve always just been his older brother, but I could see the two of us getting closer. What would the dynamic be like, though, for me to be his head coach? What would that look like in the locker room? Would other players be afraid to say certain things to him for fear it’d get back to me?

Somehow I don’t think it would matter. Asher is a smart kid and he can handle himself. He’ll fit in anywhere he lands, with or without me.

The sound of dirt, rocks, and branches crunching beneath our feet as we walk fills the silence between us for a beat, and the anticipation of his answer is killing me.

“I’m in. Work out a deal with my agent, but I think it would be a great fit.”

Heavy relief filters through me. “So do I, man.” I clap him on the shoulder as excitement filters through me.

“You think Mom and Dad will move to Vegas?” he asks, wrinkling his nose as he turns toward me.

I laugh. “Mom has always said if she could get two boys in the same city, they’d move there, or at least rent a place for the season. So, yeah, I think they probably would.” The thought of my parents in Vegas where the Bailey family has made not just their home but a name for themselves crosses my

mind. I picture my father opening up a place across the street from the Gridiron to try to steal Bailey's business.

I shake off the thought. It's silly, and he wouldn't do that. Would he?

By the time we get home from our hike, almost everyone is awake and my dad is flipping pancakes while my mom scrambles eggs. I don't know what she does to the eggs, but they're light and fluffy and full of flavor.

Grayson is still asleep, and Spencer is helping my parents by pouring glasses of orange juice while they work. We sit down to a family meal after Mom heads upstairs to get Grayson, and once again, we throw jabs and laugh as a family.

But still, I feel a strange sense of a divide in here.

Asher doesn't bring up the conversation we had outside.

Grayson doesn't bring up the fact that he's contemplating retirement.

I don't bring up the fact that I crossed paths with Jolene Bailey.

I wonder what secrets Spencer is harboring. I wonder what our parents are keeping from us.

I wonder when I got so cynical.

After breakfast, the four kids clean up the kitchen while the parents sit back and drink coffee, and I can't help but wonder what else there is to this family dynamic. Shouldn't one of us have a wife and some kids by this point?

We get out the soccer ball and run around the backyard for a bit, which ends in a wrestling match between Grayson and I where I come to terms with the fact that I'm not in my teens anymore.

I walk away with a bruised arm and an aching hip that a hot shower doesn't do much to help, and then we're off to the anniversary party.

It's an hour drive back in the direction of the city. My mom and dad take Asher and Grayson in their car, and I volunteer to drive Spencer since he's the one brother I haven't really caught up with yet. He's quiet on the drive, but he's always been on the introspective side.

"How's your off-season treating you?" I ask.

He glances sideways at me then returns his gaze out the window. "If I tell you something, you promise to keep it between us?"

"Of course." I say it like it's not something he even has to ask—because he doesn't. His news isn't mine to share, regardless of what it is.

"I've been seeing someone. I'm thinking about proposing."

So all those thoughts about what it would be like to change the family dynamic by introducing someone else into the framework might actually

come to fruition here.

“Congratulations, Spence. Who is it?”

“Her name is Amelia. I met her through some mutual friends at a party.” He’s being vague, which makes me think there’s more to the story than he’s letting on. Or maybe it’s just Spencer. Sometimes it’s hard to tell with him.

“That’s great, man. I’m happy for you. Tell me about her.”

“She’s a fourth-grade teacher just outside Minneapolis. Cousins with a teammate.” He shrugs and leaves it at that.

“What makes her the one you want to propose to?”

“I don’t know. And that’s the reason why I think I should do it.”

I laugh. “I guess that’s one reason.”

“Everything has always made sense to me, you know? I do a little analysis, strategize a little, and boom, problem solved. But there’s something about her that tosses everything off balance, and it’s what made me fall for her. She’s a little quirky. A little wild. Spontaneous. Basically my opposite in every way, and it makes no sense, yet...” He trails off, clearly confused with how to proceed, and I kind of love seeing my brother like this.

“It sounds like love, dude.”

“Thanks for listening, man. And for not saying anything yet. I haven’t decided where or when or the rest of it.”

“You will,” I say with confidence. It’s Spencer. He’ll have it figured out by the time his plane touches back down in Minnesota. “Why didn’t you bring her this weekend?”

He shrugs. “None of us ever do. I wasn’t ready to—”

“Have the family judging her?” I guess.

He shakes his head. “Expose her to you idiots.”

I laugh. He’s not wrong.

And I can’t help but think maybe he’s got the right idea.

We’re celebrating Gram and Gramps’s sixty-fifth wedding anniversary.

If I got married *today*—and there’s literally nobody in the picture right now I could even offer that to—I’d be a hundred and one the day I celebrated my sixty-fifth wedding anniversary.

I could’ve been on track for that with the girl I loved when I was eighteen. We could’ve gotten married young. We could have kids together now, kids that are in their teens who might have interests different from ours.

Instead, we’re bitter enemies whose families hate one another and she has a kid with some other man.

I guess that's what was meant to be.
And we just...weren't.

CHAPTER 23: LINCOLN

The anniversary party is like a mini-family reunion. My mom has an older sister and an older brother, and they each have a few kids who are married with a few kids of their own, so we all meet at a restaurant in a suburb of New York City. There are a little over twenty of us here, give or take, and the hostess leads us to a private room with two long tables set up and a smaller table at the center of the room in the middle of what will be a dance floor if we're so inclined, and that's where my grandparents sit together. The six Nashes head right for them to issue hugs and many congratulations, but I can't get that thought from the car out of my head.

And as I glance over at my father, whose eyes are on me, I can't help but feel like he's to blame.

The odds of me ever celebrating sixty-five years married to another person are pretty much slim to none.

It's a morbid thought to have, but the chances of me making it to one-oh-one are not great. Especially not considering the life of a football coach. It's a terribly unhealthy lifestyle given the stress, irregular schedule, and eating habits of life on the road.

What would've happened with Jolene if my father hadn't intervened?

I'll never know the answer to that.

But knowing she and I are in the same town...I'm torn between lust and hate.

And if I spend too much time around her, I'm afraid lust will start to win out. And if lust wins, feelings won't be too far behind.

I push her out of my head. I have to. I'm here with my family, and if my father knew what sort of thoughts I was having, I can't imagine his response today if he took out his best friend all those years ago over it.

I hold his gaze for a few beats before Grayson punches me in the arm—right over the bruise he gave me earlier—and drags me over toward the bar.

I have a feeling my dad's going to corner me at some point. I'm frankly shocked he hasn't done it yet and I've been here for a whole twenty-four hours. I've caught up with everyone except him and my mom, but my time is coming.

And I'm not wrong.

It's as I'm heading toward the table, beer in hand, when he stops me in my pursuit of a chair and pulls me aside.

He glances around and sees nobody is in hearing distance. “When were you going to tell me Jolene Bailey is the new team correspondent?”

“I wasn’t. It’s irrelevant both to this weekend and to me.”

He clears his throat. “I’d be remiss not to remind you what that family did to ours.”

“I’m well aware, Dad.” My tone comes out a little dry.

“Don’t get tangled up again with her, son. Don’t even think about it.”

What would be so bad if I did? I mean...really. So he lost the bar.

It’s ancient history at this point, but this man can hold a grudge like no other.

He’s in a better place now, working with the Giants as a scout during college season to watch potential draft picks. He makes decent money doing that, and he has four successful kids who still offer to take care of him and his wife.

But he reminds me quickly *why* getting tangled up with her would be such a mess. “Listen, Lincoln. Getting involved with *any* reporter would be a huge mistake. It’s a distraction for the team, and any scandal that eventually emerges involving you could potentially hurt both your reputation and the team’s. You don’t want that. It’s unprofessional, and it’s a conflict of interest, never mind the fact that she’s a Bailey.”

I hate to admit it...but he’s right.

I’m brand new to this team, to this town. Banging a reporter less than a month after I arrive isn’t exactly the way to keep my nose clean. “I hear you.” I drain the rest of my beer, and he waits for me to finish before he takes his final shot.

“They already took enough from us,” he says quietly. “I need your promise that you won’t allow them to take more. I risked my entire career for you because of her, son. It doesn’t matter how much time has passed. Getting anywhere near her would be a colossal mistake.”

I blow out a breath.

He’s assuming I’d tell her what he confessed to me all those years ago in the privacy of my bedroom just days after I took her virginity.

And if I told her that he intentionally injured her father so badly that it took him out of the game for good, she’d most certainly tell her father. And if she told her father, he’d run to the press—of which his daughter is a member. And if it got out, even now, my father wouldn’t just lose his position as a scout. Joseph could sue him. He’d also lose the respect of his colleagues, his

former teammates, his fans—he'd lose his entire reputation that he's worked hard to rebuild.

It's a lot for *him* to lose, never mind what *I* would be putting at risk personally by getting involved with her. And the way he sees it, all of it hinges on me staying away from Jolene.

It's been enough years that choosing between my family and her is *my* choice now. And the way I've bonded with my brothers this weekend, the possibility of bringing Grayson in to coach with me and of bringing Asher to the Aces...it's a lot to fuck up over feelings I had two decades ago.

But they're strong, intense, powerful feelings that have never left, and they resurfaced the moment I saw her in the flesh for the first time.

I'm not quite sure how I'm supposed to fight against that.

It was easy when she was out of sight for the last twenty years.

She won't be out of sight anymore.

The tension hovering between my father and me feels unbearable, but I say the words I know he wants to hear anyway. "I promise, Dad. Okay? I'll keep my distance."

"Thanks, son," he says.

I'm proud of you.

Nope. Promising to stay away from the only girl I've ever loved for a second time *still* isn't enough to force those words to drop from his mouth.

And I'm afraid nothing ever will be.

Maybe it's time to rebel. If he's not going to be proud of me no matter what I do, why am I trying so goddamn hard even in my late thirties?

I just made a promise to him that I'd keep my distance from her...but when push comes to shove, we'll see if I hold onto that promise.

Maybe that old cliché is true and this promise is meant to be broken.

CHAPTER 24: JOLENE

Knowing Lincoln is out of town makes me feel safe in heading to the Gridiron for a late lunch on Sunday.

I know the Aces brass likes to frequent this place, but it won't be him if he's with his family. Thank goodness for that.

Plus my mom texted me to let me know my parents are having lunch at two there today, and since Jonah is still at his dad's, it feels like a better offer than chilling around the house by myself worrying about my kid.

They're sitting at the bar when I walk in, a diet Coke in front of my mom and a mimosa in front of my dad.

"It's five o'clock somewhere," my dad says defensively when I walk in and eye his drink, and I giggle.

"Then I'll take one of those, too," I tell the bartender, and she gets to work on it while I give each of my parents a hug. "It's five o'clock on the east coast, right?"

My parents laugh, and my dad scoots over a stool so I can sit in the middle.

We catch up and chat for a bit, and I order my favorite salad once the bartender drops my drink off in front of me.

"How's the new job going?" my dad asks.

"It's been fairly quiet so far," I admit. "The offices across the street officially open back up for the season in about two weeks, and then I'll be much busier. I've been doing some player profiles and getting ideas down for stories to use this season."

"Good for you," he murmurs, and we all enjoy our food before my parents call it an afternoon.

I, on the other hand, order another mimosa and retire to a corner booth with my laptop. The Wi-Fi here is strong, and I still don't really feel like going home and being alone. I text Sam, but she's working today, so I'm on my own.

I bury myself in work. I'm pounding out a good story, totally immersed in it when the door opens and a beam of light falls across my table from outside. I glance at the clock on my screen. It's nearly seven already, and my eyes lift to the offending beam of light as the door closes behind the woman who just walked in.

I've never seen her before around here—not that that means anything. Lots of people come and go from this place, and I don't know everyone who has ever eaten here—but something about her catches my attention.

She's beautiful—long blonde waves fall to the middle of her back, and she glances around with big doe eyes as if she's looking for somebody. She looks at me in her sweep of the room, but I'm just another face she doesn't recognize.

She must not see her companion because she takes a seat at the bar and says something to Alex. He nods and gets to work on her order, and I force my eyes back to my screen so I can finish up what I'm working on before I call it a night and head home.

But the door opens again a few minutes later, another beam of light pulling me from my task, and I glance distractedly in that direction again.

Only this time, my eyes stay trained on the man as he glances around the bar.

His eyes land on me much like the last woman who walked through the door, but he doesn't move on once he spots me like she did. Instead, he freezes in place for a beat, as if he's surprised to see me in my own damn bar. And frankly, I'm surprised to see him here, too. I thought he was out of town. I thought he was with the rest of the horrible members of the Nash family.

I guess he's back.

A tremor of something travels up my spine, and I feel like it's going to push me into action to confront that jerk when I see the blonde woman approach him.

His eyes don't leave mine for an extra beat, and I can't stop watching them as he greets her with a smile.

She links her arms around his neck, and he sets a hand on her waist as he leans down and presses a quick kiss to her mouth.

I draw in a sharp breath as my eyes stay trained on them.

When he pulls apart from her, he glances over her shoulder back toward me again. He catches me watching them, but I can't seem to make my eyes move away from the trainwreck.

“Can I get you anything else?”

A voice says something to me, but I'm in a fog as I stare at Lincoln and his... girlfriend? Wife? Escort? Ex? Baby mama? It's a mystery. As far as I'm aware, he doesn't have a girlfriend or wife. But I also don't know anything about him anymore. She appears to be more than just an acquaintance, but

that's all I know.

For now.

He leans down to murmur something in her ear, his eyes still on me across the bar, and it's...unsettling.

The woman tosses her head back and laughs, a sweet tinkling laugh I can hear all the way over here, and I force myself to look away when I hear my name.

"Jolene?"

"Huh? What?" I finally turn my attention to Debbie.

"Can I get you anything else, honey?" She glances back to where I was looking.

"Yeah. You can kick that ass out of my bar." I nod toward Lincoln, and she chuckles.

"Wish I could, but he's been very good for business given that everyone in town wants to meet him and he keeps showing up here."

I wonder if he purposely told this girl to meet him here so he could flaunt her in front of me.

He had no idea I'd be here. He probably thinks I should be home with my kid, and I would be if he wasn't at his father's house this weekend.

Still, I have no idea who this mystery woman is...but I will find out later tonight when I stalk his social media to see if he's ever been pictured with her before.

CHAPTER 25: LINCOLN

It's incredible how one second of a day can be the thing that throws everything out of balance.

I'm just a guy minding my own goddamn business, flying home after an incredible weekend with my family where I feel closer to my brothers than I have in years—maybe *ever*—despite the awkward conversation I had with my father, and I'm ready to get back to work. I'm ready to work out the trade deal to get Asher on the Aces. I'm ready to find a place for Grayson and make a proposal to him if he's really ready to hang it up.

I'm ready to put my focus on my new team.

My dad was right, as much as it pains me to admit that. I need to keep my distance from the female reporters. It's not just my dad's reputation at stake...it's mine, too. The last thing I want to do is cause any drama at all. Feelings two decades old might've resurfaced, but that doesn't mean I have to act on them. I'm a grown man with plenty of self-control.

Except when it comes to Jolene Bailey.

Fuck.

When the plane lands, I spot a text from Jess.

Jess: *I'm in Vegas! Can I see you?*

After a weekend away, I have shit to catch up on, but I can probably squeeze in a drink. To that end, I text Jack first to see if he has time for a meeting this evening, and when he responds in the affirmative, I text Jess to let her know I can meet her across the street from my office around seven.

And wouldn't you know it?

When I walk in the place, there sits Jolene, watching me greet an old friend with something akin to jealousy on her face.

Okay, so Jess is more than an *old friend*, I guess. She's not old, and she certainly wants to be more than a *friend*.

I've got a season to focus on. A new job to focus on.

But on the other hand, I like the idea of distraction, and I know Jess can give me that. She's not a local reporter who will only stir up drama.

I know I shouldn't use Jess. And so that's why I'm honest with her.

"An ex is sitting across the way from us if you'd like to put on a show with me." My eyes are on said ex as I say the words, and she's definitely watching us.

The rage on Jolene's face is nearly comical. She's good at playing straight-faced when it matters, but clearly right now is not one of those times.

I lead Jess over to the bar, where we each order a drink.

"So what are you doing in town?" I ask.

"Remember I told you the partners are thinking about opening a division here? They sent me to do some research." She shrugs. "I figured who better to show me around town than a local."

I laugh. "I wouldn't classify myself as a local. Yet."

"Well this little hole in the wall is just the kind of joint I'd figure locals hang all the time." She indicates the barbecue joint where we find ourselves by gesturing with her glass around the place.

Hole in the wall?

I'd hardly call it that.

I realize I'm getting defensive over it before I speak the words. And this place of all places...I have exactly zero business feeling defensive over it.

Particularly given my father's words at the anniversary party on Saturday night.

I can't imagine what he'd think of me hanging out at Joseph's bar...of paying my money into his pocket.

He'd hate it.

But it's the closest place to the Complex, so it makes the most sense regardless of who owns it.

I shake off the thought, but the single conversation I had alone with my father has replayed over and over since the night it happened.

"It's close to work," I say with a nonchalant shrug, but the truth is...I sort of like this place. I can see the vision Joseph had for Rivalry when I'm here, and something about it feels a little bit like home—like how the bar was back when our fathers first opened it instead of what my dad tried to turn it into.

I hate having negative thoughts about my father. He worked hard to give the four of us advantages. He placed calls to the right people at the right time. I wouldn't be where I am today without him, and my allegiance will always lie with him because of that.

Still, when I sneak a glance across the bar and see Jolene is no longer sitting in her corner booth but a different couple is there, I can't help when a sense of disappointment filters through me.

"Speaking of work, how's it going? What's it like being head coach for a team? I feel like you're so much busier now than when you were OC in LA. I

hardly hear from you at all.” She’s jabbering on and I’m hardly listening as I think about where Jolene might’ve gone.

“It’s been great,” I say, and I offer a tight smile. “It’s all still pretty new, really.”

She’s quiet a beat as she studies me. “Is everything okay, Coach?” she asks, and her tone is a little more sultry than I’m looking for tonight.

“Yeah. I just have a few things I need to take care of tonight at the office.” It’s a clear brush-off.

“Oh. I was hoping we could...you know.” She looks truly disappointed, but I can’t find it in me to feel bad about it.

Not when I’m contemplating running out to the parking lot to see if Jolene is still somewhere around.

And to that end, I let her down gently. “I wish I could, but I really need to focus on work.”

“Maybe some other time?” she asks hopefully.

“I don’t know, Jess,” I say quietly. “I think it’s probably better if you stay in California.” My eyes meet hers, and she looks disappointed as she nods her understanding.

It’s not a break-up, exactly, and it actually feels like a bit of a load off for me, but it’s still not easy saying goodbye to someone—especially to someone who might think this is more of a break-up than it is to me.

“It’s been fun, Coach,” she says, and she clinks her glass to mine.

“To memories,” I say, clinking mine back to hers as I wonder whether Jolene left or if she’s still around here somewhere.

I shake out the thought.

Football. I replace those thoughts with football as I finish my drink, bid Jess goodbye, and walk back across the street to the Complex...where I find Jolene Bailey sitting outside the media room.

CHAPTER 26: JOLENE

I'm not sure why I go to the Complex.

The parking lot was completely empty when I parked my car in the lot, which means everyone has gone home for the night. The lobby is dark except for the one emergency light still illuminated, but I'm over in the shadows, sitting on a chair outside the media room.

Maybe I came here because the media room is home now, a place I'll be spending a lot of time this season in my new position.

Or perhaps it's because I assume he'll show up, and I have this pressing need to talk to him. I'm ready to confront him with what Sam and I talked about the other night.

I hope he shows up.

It probably has more to do with the fact that I saw him kiss some woman at *my* bar than anything else, and it's total bullshit that he chose the Gridiron of all places on Earth to meet her.

He did it to shove her in my face. He didn't know I'd be there, but he certainly had to think there'd be a chance. Or maybe he didn't and my ego is just overinflated.

Either way, I'm right. He shows up and uses his keycard to enter the front door, and he freezes when he spots a figure sitting by the media room.

"What are you doing here?" he demands, his hand moving to his chest like I startled him.

I push to my feet and take a few steps over toward him. "Hoping to run into you."

I can't help but study him for a beat. His dark eyes follow my every move as I close the gap between us until we're within arm's reach. It's too close. I shouldn't be this close to temptation, especially not when that familiar smell hits me.

I can't help it. I draw in a breath, and when I open my eyes, they flick to his lips for just a beat. Scruff outlines his mouth and jaw, as if he couldn't be bothered to shave for the last few days, and I hate that someone else's lips were on his.

I hate that other women have been beneath him.

That was supposed to be reserved for me...and now, it's not. It can't be.

And I'm not innocent. I have a son. Clearly I didn't save myself for some

reunion when it's been very clear to me for a number of years that any reunion between the two of us would not be a happy one.

He glances back at the door he just unlocked to get in before his eyes return to me. "How'd you get in here?"

"I have a keycard." I hold it up to show him.

"But...how?"

"It doesn't matter."

He grunts a little, conceding. "I guess you're right. Why were you hoping to run into me?"

He cuts right to the chase, and I should, too.

Instead, my stupid mouth takes over. "Who was that woman?"

His brow quirks. He seems surprised by my direct question, but he masks it quickly. "At the bar?"

"At my father's restaurant," I grit out.

"None of your business. Is that why you're here? To ask me about my personal life? Because that doesn't seem very professional, Ms. Bailey."

"Neither did cornering me in the break room and bringing up my child, Mr. Nash."

He sighs, glancing away from me. "I shouldn't have done that. You're right, and I'm sorry."

My brows shoot up. "Whoa. Did you just admit...you were wrong?"

He offers a wry chuckle. "I suppose I did."

Silence spans between us, and I'm not sure how to bridge the gap that lies there.

He clears his throat and says, "Listen—" at the same time I say, "Lincoln —"

We share a bit of an awkward silence, and I hold up a hand indicating he should go first.

"She's an old friend who was in town and wanted to get together for a drink," he finally says. "I assume that's not for a story?"

"I'll keep it off the record unless there's something else about your personal life you'd like me to highlight."

He shakes his head. "No. I'm good."

"How are we going to do this?" I ask quietly.

"We fight whatever's going on inside and we act professional." His voice is low, nearly a confession as he speaks his words.

"What are you fighting?" My stomach flips as I ask the question.

His eyes flick to my mouth before moving back to my eyes. “The same thing you are.” His voice is low and raspy, and my thighs clench together.

“Spell it out for me, Mr. Nash.”

He clears his throat. “Why don’t you tell me what you’re fighting first?”

I shake my head, and I force my eyes away from his. “It’s too dangerous.”

“You think I don’t know that? I just came from a weekend with my family where my father took the time to remind me how I need to stay away from you.”

I reel back a little like he struck me even though he didn’t. It wasn’t a physical blow, anyway. “Twenty years later and you’re still doing what he tells you,” I murmur.

“What do you want me to do, Jolene?” he roars at me, his voice thundering through the lobby.

I don’t have an answer to that.

“I didn’t have a choice back then, and I don’t have a choice now!” He’s still yelling, and seeing him get all fired up is somehow...sexy as fuck.

I want him. It’s forbidden. It’s wrong. It’s the worst thing I can do. We’d be putting both our careers in jeopardy, and our families would never understand the absolute and total betrayal.

But I can’t help how I feel.

I never stopped loving him, and I’m so goddamn tired of pretending like I have, particularly when my new job requires me to be in close proximity to him.

He turns to walk away, and I stop him with my words as my own temper grabs hold.

“Does it matter what I want, then? You’ve already made up your mind!”

He freezes in place and turns slowly around, his eyes finally landing on me. But now they’re hard and fierce, nearly black in the dark lighting in here. “What either of us wanted back then—what we want now...no.” He shakes his head, his voice low again but filled with despondency as his eyes shift down to the ground. “It’s never mattered.”

“What do you want, Lincoln?” I whisper as heat pinches behind my eyes.

His eyes lift to mine again, and he takes a step toward me. “You.” He closes the gap until he’s standing right in front of me, close enough that I can feel the heat coming off him. I think he’s going to take advantage of the opportunity he missed in that break room when he didn’t kiss me when he says, “It’s always been you. But it can’t be. There’s too much at stake now.”

We face off in the dimly lit lobby, and I'm shocked when he reaches out a hand and grips onto my bicep. He yanks me toward him until I nearly fall into his chest, and I tilt my head up as I stop myself with my hands on his chest.

His rock-hard, solid chest.

Holy hell.

Was he that solid back in high school?

He certainly is now.

His hand moves from my arm to my hip, and the other one moves up into my hair.

"What are you doing?" I murmur.

"What I should have done in the break room. What I've wanted to do since I saw you out the window when I was here for my interview." With those words, his mouth comes crashing down to mine.

A rush of heat tears up my spine as his mouth opens. His kiss is rough and desperate as we both give into this need we've had for two decades. I grip onto his shirt as I kiss him back, and eventually my hands move up toward his neck and then into his hair, where I grip onto the silky strands there. I find myself lost in this new world that feels so familiar as our tongues dance viciously together, our bodies pressed together as all the pent-up emotions rise to the surface.

But reality is quick to kick in.

As much as I want to give into this kiss and into him, there's just too much at stake.

He was right when he said that.

Our jobs, our families...it's a lot to risk on something we've been fine without over the last twenty years.

Except...

Have I really been fine?

Or is the piece of me that was missing all this time right in front of me again, held in the hands of the man who is kissing me?

It's the conflicting thoughts that finally force me to push him away.

He wipes the corner of his mouth with his thumb, his mouth red and raw from our kiss, and he looks nearly insulted that I pulled away first.

"I'm sorry," he finally says. "I shouldn't have—"

I cut him off. "No. I wanted you to. It's just—"

He shakes his head. "You don't have to say anything more. It's out of our

systems now, and we can move on. Goodnight, Jolene.” He turns to walk up to his office, effectively dismissing me, but my big, dumb mouth opens up again.

Mostly because I’m offended that he said it’s out of our systems when I know Lincoln Nash will *never* be out of my system.

“Why’d you stop playing?” I ask, and he freezes at my question before he turns to face me again. He looks a little out of sorts—as if he’s getting whiplash from this back and forth, and frankly, I am, too.

“I injured my knee.” His voice is firm and direct, as if he’s recalling the same old tired excuse from memory.

“Bullshit. Why’d you stop playing?” I repeat.

His eyes move away from mine. I could always see through him, and this is no different.

“I injured my knee, and a post-op infection kept me from being able to play again.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “How many surgeries did you have on that infection?”

“A few. Why are you asking me this?”

“Because I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t care if you don’t believe me. Facts are facts, Jolene.” He folds his arms across his chest, and I wish I hadn’t gone this direction with the conversation right after he kissed me, but here we are.

I snag my bottom lip between my teeth for a beat. “I just can’t quite figure out why Lincoln Nash, part of the Nash family football dynasty, would *choose* to quit playing and move into coaching instead.”

“It’s ancient history. Nobody cares why. I’ve built a great career out of coaching, and I will not let some reporter fuck it all up for me.”

I ignore the *some reporter* line. For now.

“So you’re saying there’s a story there, then.” I realize I’m being aggressive, but maybe that’s how I need to work it with him.

“I’m not saying anything. I’m saying get the fuck out of my building before I have you arrested for trespassing.”

There is *definitely* a story here. He’s lying, and the entire world believes it.

Whether it’s for *some reporter* like me to uncover remains to be seen, but breaking a story like this could be *huge* for my career. It could catapult me from local news team correspondent to a major news channel, which has always been my end goal.

I just have to figure out whether it's worth it to break it at Lincoln's expense.

"I'm sure your boss would *love* to come bail me out of jail since he's the one who gave me this key." I hold it up and shrug.

He presses his lips together. "Look, I have a lot of work to do. Is there anything else?"

Yeah. Another kiss would be great. Perhaps a quick fuck over on the lobby counter so I can see what skills you've picked up over the last twenty years.

I don't say any of that.

Instead, I shake my head. "There's a lot more, Lincoln. But I guess we'll have to save it for another time."

"Fine." He turns to leave, and this time I let him.

I gather my laptop bag over on the chair where I was sitting before he came in, and I head out the front door. It's late, and while it's a relatively safe area, I still don't like being a woman alone at night in a dimly lit parking lot.

And that's why a voice just outside the door scares the hell out of me.

"Looking awfully cozy with Coach Nash," the voice says, and when he emerges from the shadows, I see Ryan Rivera standing there.

"Jesus, Ryan. You scared the shit out of me." My hand flies up to my chest as he pulls his phone out of his pocket.

He flashes me a photo of the two of us kissing in the lobby from a few moments ago.

"I'm sure Marcus would *love* to know just how you're going about getting those exclusives with the new coach," he says, and there's a threatening element to his tone that I don't like at all.

"It was nothing more than a mistake." I grab the strap of my laptop bag and turn to leave.

"Nothing, huh?" he asks, taking a step toward me, his eyes glinting in the light. It feels...threatening, and it scares me. "So interesting because I did a little digging and found out pretty easily you two have a history together. You think you can make out with the coach and it won't have any consequences?" He shakes his head as he sneers at me.

I take a step back as I try to come up with something, *anything*, to say, but I'm at a loss.

"I'll do whatever it takes to make sure Marcus knows what's really going on around here," he says. "You never deserved this job, and we both know the only reason you got it."

His words make my stomach twist violently. I know Rivera is an aggressive reporter, but I have no idea what he's capable of when push comes to shove.

As I slip into my car and start the engine to drive away, I know that my life has just become a whole lot more complicated.

But one thing is clear: I need to stay far away from Lincoln Nash.

I'm just not sure how to do that when I'm desperately in love with him.

TO BE CONTINUED IN BOOK 2, PLAY CALL



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A trip across the country to cover an event plus one failed hotel room reservation means there's only one bed for me to share with the new Vegas Aces head coach. We've been fighting each other nonstop as we push against the past, but it only takes one weekend for feelings two decades old to come rushing back.

We can't be together. The reasons keep stacking up, from our bitter family rivalry to the fact that he can't get involved with a member of the media to the accusations regarding the way I scored this job.

And so my best friend and roommate proposes a fake relationship. He'll date her in public and come home to me, where we can get to know each other again and figure out whether there's a future for us.

I'm shocked when Lincoln agrees to the plan, but a scorned colleague of

mine is watching our every move. We have to be careful or it'll become the kind of play call the coach will forever regret.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'll save my acknowledgments for the final book! I can't wait for you to see what's coming next...

*xoxo,
Lisa Suzanne*

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Lisa Suzanne is a romance author who resides in Arizona with her husband and two kids. She's a former high school English teacher and college composition instructor. When she's not chasing or cuddling her kids, she can be found working on her latest book or watching reruns of *Friends*.

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