

A muscular man with a beard, shirtless, wearing a grey and white striped baseball uniform and batting gloves, holding a wooden bat over his shoulder. The background is a blurred stadium.

Vegas Heat

THE EXPANSION TEAM  
BOOK TWO

# Fastball

LISA SUZANNE

# *Fastball*

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FASTBALL  
VEGAS HEAT: THE EXPANSION TEAM  
BOOK TWO

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# DEDICATION

As always, for Team M.



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# CHAPTER 1

## GABBY

“Oh good, you two have met,” my dad says, his voice shocking me from my frozen state of seeing Cooper standing in my kitchen. What the hell is going on? “Cooper, this is my daughter, Gabriella.”

My eyes feel like they’re going to fall out of their sockets, they’re bugged out so wide.

“Cooper’s the guy who’s staying with us for the next few weeks until his house is ready,” my dad explains. “He’s going to be playing third base for the Heat.”

He...he’s *what?*

*He’s going to be playing third base for the Heat.*

Of course he is.

I blow out a breath. “Nice to meet you,” I say, pressing my lips together and hoping he plays along. I dig my fingernails into my palms, hoping I don’t feel the pain so I can wake up from this nightmare.

But nope...the pain slices fresh.

Shit.

So that’s the new job that brought him from San Diego to Vegas.

He’s going back to the game, and my dad is going to be his *manager*.

That’s a pretty big detail to leave out of the story, but he’s *still* never told me he played baseball. Or *plays* baseball, as in present tense. And on the exact same hand, I’ve never told him I’m the daughter of a baseball legend.

My dad isn’t going to react well to Cooper and me. We need to talk. We need to touch base and figure out how to best



handle this.

Troy Bodine is a passionate man to begin with, but a flip switched in him when he met me and when the two of us started getting close. He's protective of me—maybe *more* protective than most fathers would be over their twenty-one-year-old daughters since he missed out on the first eighteen years of my life. It's like he's making up for lost time now, and there's no way he's going to take kindly to the fact that one of his players is fucking his daughter.

Particularly not one who's twelve years her senior.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Cooper says, his brows pinched together like he's trying to piece all this together, too.

Is our breakfast still on?

Where do we even go from here?

“I was just heading out to meet a friend for breakfast,” I say, going for nonchalance but epically failing as my voice comes out all high-pitched and weird.

“Have a great time, sweetheart,” my dad says, clearly missing my total internal battle, and my cheeks flame as I pass by Cooper to head upstairs and grab my purse.

I hear my dad behind me as I pass by. “She's a good kid. Great head on her shoulders.”

“She seems lovely,” Cooper says softly, and tears pinch behind my eyes as I think about what this is going to mean for us.

I never in a million years imagined he was the new player my dad invited to stay at our house. My dad's been gone so much lately that most of our communication has happened over text message. Between school starting and falling for Cooper, I haven't been around much myself.

I thought he retired. I thought he had an injury that took him out of the game.

I guess I thought a lot of things I was wrong about.

Oh God.

He told me the buddy who invited him here to play owns a sex club.

Is his *buddy* my *father*?

Is that where dear old Dad is always running off to?

I think I'm going to be sick.

I grab my keys and purse before I head out to the truck my very rich father purchased me for my birthday, where I draw in a deep breath and take a moment to regroup. This all seemed so easy yesterday, so natural, and now...it's not.

I arrive at the restaurant first, and I ask for a private table in the back. I face the door so I can watch for him to walk in and so he as the *celebrity* here can face the wall, my heart thundering in my chest as I wait.

I chug down an entire glass of water in about six seconds flat.

It feels like a lifetime passes before he finally walks in. He glances around the room, and when his eyes land on mine, they don't warm over like they have in the past.

I can't quite read what's there, but it's hard to tell anyway with the bill of his black baseball hat pulled down low over his eyes.

Nerves rattle me, but this is Cooper. This is *us*. Whatever happens, we'll make it through. What we've built in a short amount of time is solid.

Or maybe that's just my naivety showing again.

He slides into the booth across from me, his eyes down on the table.

"Hi," I begin tentatively.

His eyes finally flick up to mine, and his are positively tormented. "Hey."

"So, uh...you play baseball?"

He offers a sad, wry smile. "So, uh...you're the daughter of Troy Bodine?"

I nod. “Just found out a few years ago.”

He presses his lips together. “I played in the majors for the Dodgers for seven years and retired early after an injury.” He holds up his elbow. “Surgery pieced me back together, and then Troy—uh, your father...” he trails off and clears his throat. “He called me with an offer to come back to the game, to be the face of the new Vegas Heat expansion team.” He blows out a breath.

“I knew you played for the Dodgers. My friends looked you up the night we hooked up, but I figured you’d tell me when you were ready,” I say.

His brows draw together. “You didn’t think it was important to tell me who your father was knowing I used to play?”

“I had no idea you knew him,” I say, defensiveness jumping into my tone even though I have nothing to be defensive over. “I don’t like telling people who my dad is, particularly people who might benefit from that knowledge.” My words feel like heavy weights leaving my mouth.

He glances away from me and out the window. “I get it. I really liked how I could just be Cooper, the guy who works for a kids’ fitness organization, around you. I liked not being Cooper Noah, All-Star MVP. I liked that we built something based on the me deep down rather than the me everyone sees in the media.”

Tears continue to burn behind my eyes as he uses past tense in his speech.

“We both had our reasons for keeping things close to the vest, I guess,” I say softly.

“Can I get y’all something to drink?” a perky waitress asks as she appears at our table.

“Coffee and orange juice, please,” I say, forcing a smile for her benefit.

“Same,” Cooper says, not looking up from the spot where he’s staring at the table.

“Do y’all need more time to decide what you want to eat?” she asks.

I glance at him, and he doesn’t look up or reply. “Sure, that’d be great,” I tell her. I stare at the bill of his hat, my eyes memorizing the UA on it as I wonder whether I’ll ever get to see it in an intimate setting again or if this is all going to disappear as quickly as it began.

I don’t know what to say.

I’ve never been at a loss for words around Cooper, but right now...I’ve got nothing but a wish and a prayer.

He doesn’t say anything, either.

“Talk to me,” I finally say softly.

He blows out a breath, and when his eyes meet mine, that same torture is there, only it seems worse than before.

“This changes everything,” he says.

He’s right. He’s a megastar baseball player, and I’m his coach’s daughter.

But I don’t want it to change a thing.

“It doesn’t have to,” I protest. We can do this—we can hide it from my dad if we have to, but this can’t be the end.

It can’t be.

“It does. It’s straight up disrespecting one of my best friends—my *boss*. The man who pulled a lot of fucking strings to get me here. We can’t be together, Gabby. I’m so sorry.” His voice breaks as he says the words. “I need to get out of here.”

He gets up and strides out of the restaurant, and I’m left with the two glasses of orange juice and two cups of coffee the waitress delivers along with a whole host of questions...and worst of all, a broken heart.





## CHAPTER 2

### COOPER

I shouldn't have walked out, but what the fuck else was there to do?

All I could think about were the ways we could try to make this work, but my stupid, logical brain kept showing me all the different reasons why it can *never* work.

I can't play for a manager I'm lying to, and he'd never be okay with me dating his daughter.

It's his *daughter*.

He's a good friend of mine. One of the very few friends I feel like I can count on right now, at least in this town since he offered me a place to live along with the incredible opportunity to get back in the game.

I owe him a lot, and that has to start with my respect.

The man knows how I used to live my life before I got serious with Stacy, and for fuck's sake, I know how he lives his, too.

It's too messy, too complicated. Too ugly.

But the love I feel for her is the opposite of all that. It's beautiful and simple and easy.

It's the greatest thing I have in my life, maybe the greatest thing I've *ever* had in my life, and I'm making the decision to let it go.

I knew if I stayed in that restaurant one second longer, I'd break down in front of her, in front of the waitress, in front of every other patron in that place, and then you can bet your ass I'd end up as a fucking headline in the media with her sitting across from me. And you can bet your ass my boss would see it, and then we'd be in an even bigger mess than we are now.

We're lucky that shit hasn't happened already. We're lucky we're in Vegas where the people sitting beside us are too drunk or high or wrapped up in their vacations to realize Cooper Fucking Noah is in the house.

I want to be angry she never told me who her dad was, but it's hard to be angry when I left a pretty big puzzle piece out of the conversation myself.

I guess I just want someone to blame, but other than myself...I keep coming up empty.

And so I allow myself to break down once I'm in the privacy of my truck. It feels like a death as the loss of what could have been starts to wash over me. I think I'm still in that state of shock.

When I took the hit that took me out of the game, I didn't cry. The pain was too intense and I went into shock.

This pain feels worse.

At least with the injury, I knew what I was dealing with. I could take painkillers if I needed to, and they would help ease the pain.

I'm not sure anything could ease what I'm feeling right now.

I pull myself together, and then I take a drive. I can't go back to Troy's house like this, especially not given the fact that I'm *living* with Gabby now, so I drive up some hills and into the mountains. I find myself driving and driving, and a little under an hour later I wind up at Hoover Dam.

I pull off the road and get out of the car, staring at the magnificence of the dam, wishing she was here tucked into my side as I press a kiss to her temple and we take in the view together.

I don't know how to deal with this.

I don't know how to get through this.

I don't know how to come out on the other side and live my life without her in it.



I stare out over one of the places I always wanted to visit. While it is fascinating, it's not the magic I was expecting. How can it be after I walked out on Gabby?

I read a sign letting me know how the dam does something with the water from the Colorado River, but I can't concentrate on the details when it feels like my chest cavity is being shredded in two.

How could I not have pieced this together?

I felt like we knew each other so well, so intimately, and now it feels like we never knew each other at all.

How did I not know she was leaving something out of the story just as I was? How could she have not wondered whether her father and I knew each other given our career history? We ran in the same circles, and she had to have puzzled that out.

I guess it's easy to blame her naivety or her inexperience. From everything she's told me about her mom, she wasn't allowed to show any interest in anything that her father might've been interested in, so I guess it makes sense she wouldn't know much about baseball, particularly baseball that took place three years ago before she moved in with him, back when I was still in the game.

It would be the easier choice to give into what I want, but that would mean either disrespecting my boss in lying to him or it would mean telling him the truth...that I've been disrespecting him for weeks by wrecking his daughter.

But my brain keeps returning to the entire reason I'm here.

Troy Bodine wants to build a team that I lead.

While I believe in what Gabby and I shared in the few weeks we've known each other, there are hard and fast rules in both the game and in friendships. You don't fuck a friend's mom. You don't fuck a friend's ex. And you certainly don't fuck your friend's daughter.

Another sign tells me how the dam provides water to millions of people. What the hell am I doing here?

I shouldn't have run away from her, but I couldn't see any other option. My choice was to sit at that table and bleed out in the booth across from her, baiting somebody to get a picture of us...or fucking bolt. And so I fucking bolted.

The media paints me as the unemotional third baseman whose feathers are never ruffled. The guy who's never bothered. I'm painted that way because that's what I allow others to see, so that's what I allow others to believe.

Gabby might've been the first person I ever really let in apart from my mother—and even dear sweet Mommy doesn't know me in many of the ways Gabby does. She's the first person I ever really let see all my different sides even though it was terrifying to let her in.

I told her things I never told Stacy.

I felt different ways about her that I never felt for Stacy, too.

I can sit here trying to convince myself that it was meaningless or that we didn't know each other long enough for it to have mattered—or any one of another million lies swirling around my mind, but I know the truth.

Now that she's part of my life, I'm not sure how to exist without her. And even worse, I don't know how I'm supposed to live with her for the next month when I won't be able to touch her or kiss her or look at her or fall further in love with her.

Because one thing's for sure. I either lose a friendship that's over a decade old with the kind of guy who offered to pay me more than I'm worth and who is depending on me to start a new legacy here in Vegas...or I lose Gabby.

Which would be less destructive? To put the entire Vegas Heat organization in jeopardy after I committed to building a brotherhood? Or to take that shot for myself and bury it deep and deal with the pain?

I can't let the entire organization down. There's Troy, but there's also the entire team. The staff. The crew.

I have no choice but to take the hit this time.





## CHAPTER 3

### GABBY

Right about now I'm really regretting not scheduling any classes on Friday.

It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now it just feels a little masochistic.

I couldn't bring myself to stay at that restaurant and eat breakfast when everything is hanging in the balance, so I chugged both orange juices, left some cash on the table, and bolted for home. Cooper isn't there, of course, but my dad is.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" he asks, referring to the text message I sent him a few days ago.

I blow out a breath as I wonder whether this is a good time to bring this up or not. I think Cooper just got scared, and we both know this is worth fighting for. But obviously I need to talk to him before I bring it up to anyone else...particularly my dad.

I'm not sure asking about an internship at my dad's new baseball stadium is the best idea given the fact that it'll push me into closer proximity to Cooper.

Or maybe that's exactly what we need.

"I met with my advisor a few weeks ago and she told me I need to start looking for an internship. Do you happen to have anything at the stadium?" I ask. The question is out before I can stop it. In truth, that's always what I'd planned to ask. But it feels even more important now that I know who one of his star players is going to be.

His brows shoot up. "Really? You're interested in coming to work with me?" He sounds excited at the prospect of having me close at the stadium.

I nod. “I think it would be really neat to learn about the front office responsibilities of a professional baseball team even though I don’t know that much about the game. But I am excited to learn, and I’ve learned a good deal about marketing and social media.”

“I can put you in touch with our marketing department since they run the internship program. We will definitely find a spot for you. I’m thinking you might be a great fit as an intern since the program touches on a lot of marketing and social media as you just mentioned, but you’ll also get all kinds of experience with all different levels of office staff, the crew, and the clubhouse.”

“Clubhouse?” I ask.

“The locker room,” he clarifies.

“That sounds really interesting,” I say. “When would it start?”

“I’m heading into the stadium later today if you’d like to come with me and get a feel for things to see if you think it would be a good fit. You could start as early as Monday if you want. That would just be paperwork and training, and of course it would be a paid position,” he says.

I force a laugh even though I can’t feel much joy knowing where the hell Cooper ran off to. “I don’t need to see the stadium today to accept your generous offer, but I’d love to see it anyway.”

It’s the first time he’s invited me to go with him, but I suppose it’s also the first time I’ve shown an interest in seeing it. It’s currently closed to the public, but the clubhouse and weight room recently opened to players as the team started signing free agents. I think I hear my dad tossing around words like that but I don’t really know what any of it means. It’s a brand-new, state of the art facility, and as soon as it’s ready for the public, the crowds will swarm to check out Vegas’s newest attraction.

“Great. I’m just waiting for Coop to get back from his meeting, and then we can go,” he says.

“Cooper’s going?” I ask, and I know my voice sounds hopeful, but dammit, I need to see him. I need to talk to him.

He nods. “Yes. He texted me a little while ago and said he’d be back in an hour or so.”

I can’t help but wonder where the hell he went and why he’s going to be gone another hour, but I don’t ask questions. I’ll save them for the man himself.

“I’ll be ready,” I say, and then I head upstairs to take care of some work I was assigned yesterday.

Except I can’t focus on a damn thing, so I call up Mia.

“Hey girl hey,” she answers. “How’s it going?”

I can’t help it. I burst into tears.

“Whoa, Gabs. What’s going on?”

“Cooper’s going to be playing for my dad’s new team and I don’t know how I could have been so stupid to not piece that together but he told me this morning he can’t be with me,” I ramble and sob at the same time.

“Oh, Jesus. I knew he was too old for you, girl. Older guys, they just don’t give a fuck. They do whatever serves them. Hell...*all* men do that,” she says, and I know she’s trying to make me feel better, but I still jump to his defense. I’m not sure *why* I do that after he walked out on me at breakfast, but it’s my gut reaction.

“He’s not like that, Mia. We just need to talk, I think, but he left and I don’t know where he is,” I say.

“Have you tried calling him?”

“No,” I admit. “We met for breakfast but he told me he couldn’t do this and walked out before we even ordered, and I figured I should give him space.”

“Well go call him, girl. If you really think it’s not like that, then you two will figure it out, right?”

“I hope so,” I whisper...but after the way he reacted to this new twist, I’m not so confident in that right now.

I hang up with her and try his phone, and it makes that funny beeping sound where I can tell he's on the phone with someone else.

Eventually it goes to voicemail, and I lie on my bed staring up at the ceiling as tears leak from the sides of my eyes, dripping down my temples and onto my pillow.

He's talking to someone. Is he talking about what just happened? Did he call a friend to get advice the way I did? Or, knowing him the way I think I do...did he call his mom to get her take on it?

If I can get him to talk to me, maybe I'll learn the answers to these questions.

But if he's going to ignore my calls and refuse to talk to me...I'm not sure how we move forward.

Getting over the boy I dated for eight months was a walk in the park compared to even the thought of trying to forge ahead without Cooper Noah.







## CHAPTER 4

### COOPER

“He’s her *father*?” my mother asks, and her voice is all high and screechy and definitely judgmental.

“Yep,” I confirm as I merge back onto the highway to head toward Troy’s house.

“Oh, God, Coop. What are you going to do?”

“I told her this changes everything and we can’t be together. And then I ran like a fucking coward.”

She clears her throat, but I can’t be bothered to care that the *F* word isn’t her favorite word. “Why does it change everything?”

“It just does,” I mutter.

“But why? Are you scared of telling Troy?”

“Scared?” I say, my tone more mocking than I mean for it to be. “I’m not scared of anything.” It’s a lie. There’s plenty I’m scared of, and right now I feel like I’m living a nightmare.

“Right,” she says. “And I’m the Pope. But listen, honey, only you can decide how this is going to play out.”

“I know, and that’s the whole problem. I can’t stop thinking about how my choice here is to potentially screw over the entire Heat organization or to screw over myself. Don’t you think I need to take one for the team...literally?” I ask.

She huffs out a laugh. “Stop making yourself out to be some martyr.”

“I’m not,” I protest. “I’m just trying to do what’s right.”

My phone beeps to let me know another caller is trying to get through, but I’m driving and focusing on the road, so I ignore it, opting to continue my conversation with my mom hands-free.

“You weren’t concerned whether or not it was right before. Why do you care now?” she asks.

“Because it’s more than just her and me now,” I say. I signal a lane change to get around a semi, and I pick up the pace to get back a little faster since I promised Troy I’d be back soon to go to the stadium with him. It’s the one thing I’m holding onto right now—seeing my new home, the place where I’ll spend more time than anywhere else as a new season is on the horizon. “It’s a friendship that spans more than a decade. It’s my *boss*, Mom. It’s the entire team dynamic when I made a commitment to lead that team.”

“Where did you see it going before you found out about Troy?”

I suck in a sharp breath, and my voice is soft when it finally comes out to answer. “I saw it going all the way. I saw us in the long haul. She’s young, sure, but it just felt right between us.”

“Then why does Troy being her father have to be the end of it? Why can’t you just be honest with him?”

It’s a valid question. “I know Troy, and I know how he’ll react.”

“Maybe he’ll surprise you,” she suggests.

“Right. How kindly would you take to me telling you I had an affair with Janice Roberts?” I ask, naming her best friend.

She’s quiet a beat, and then she exhales loudly. “Okay, fine, point taken. It would be weird. But Janice Roberts is fifty-eight, which puts her at twenty-five years older than you, so it’s a little different.”

“Is it, though? Is it the age gap that makes it weird, or is it the fact that she’s your best friend?”

“I get it, honey, but I also saw you with her, and I don’t mean *with* her, with her, but I saw how you were on your own when she was part of your life the weekend after you met her. You were different. You were the Cooper you used to be before your injury, before that damn Stacy dragged you down.

You were light and free. And now everything's heavy again. I can feel it in your voice."

"It *is* heavy, Mom. I feel like my heart is breaking." My voice breaks at the end just to really drive that point home, and I'd be mortified if I was talking to anyone other than my mother.

"I'm so sorry, baby. I wish I could make it all better for you."

"Then make it better," I whisper.

"I love you," she says. "I'm here no matter what you decide, but that's the thing. Only *you* can decide."

"I know. I'm almost back and I need to call Kaylee, so I better go. I'll talk to you soon."

"Take care of yourself, okay?" she says. "Your mom worries about you."

"I will. I love you."

We hang up, and I instruct my truck to call Kaylee Olson next.

"Cooper Fucking Noah," she answers, venom in her voice.

"Shit. What did I do now?"

She giggles. "I'm teasing. What's up bestie?"

I let out a heavy sigh. "It's been a day."

"It's barely noon and you're already having a day?" she asks.

"Yeah," I mutter.

"What happened and whose ass do I need to kick?"

"I don't really want to talk about it, and I guess if there's anyone who deserves a kick in the ass, it's me," I admit.

"How can I help make it better?" she presses.

"I'm not sure. Distract me with work?"

"You got it. Is your girl still interested in coming to work with us?" she asks. Her tone is careful, as if she senses that the

girl is at the root of my issues.

I clear my throat. “I’m pulling that particular offer.”

“Oh, Coop,” she says, and the sympathy in her voice is exactly why I didn’t want to talk about it. I don’t want anyone’s sympathy. I’ll get over it. I’ll move on. “What happened?”

“Her dad is Troy Bodine.” My tone is flat, and I hear her gasp. “Can we just…” I trail off and sigh. “Can we not talk about it right now?”

“Ben will be home a little later. Do you want to talk to him about it instead of me?”

“No,” I say with a frustrated sigh. “I don’t want to talk to *anyone* about it. I just found out this morning, I told her we couldn’t move forward from it, and that’s it. End of story. On a separate note, I have an idea for SFK and a huge local sponsorship opportunity if you’re interested in setting a time to chat.”

“I’d love to. Name the time and the place, and I’ll be there,” she says.

“I’ll text over the details once I have them. Thanks, Kay.”

She pauses. “I’m here for you, you know. You don’t have to go through this alone.”

“Thanks,” I murmur, and then I say goodbye and end the call just as I pull up in front of Troy’s house. I stare at the house a beat. Her truck is in the circular driveway. It wasn’t there last night. Maybe things would be different if it had been—if I knew who she was before I even got to town.

Maybe things would’ve been different if I would’ve known before we even had our first night together. Then I wouldn’t have allowed myself to fall for her and I wouldn’t be in this situation now.

I keep trying to figure out the lesson here, and I think it’s that I should always lead with who I am, and I should expect others to do the same. I can’t escape Cooper Noah the All Star, and maybe it was wrong to ever have tried.

I put my hat back on, backwards this time since I'm not trying to hide from anybody, and I glance at my phone and discover the call I missed was from Gabby. She didn't leave a message, and she's probably wondering where the hell I ran off to.

But I have an appointment scheduled with her dad, so the big talk that I'm already dreading will have to wait a little longer.







## CHAPTER 5

### COOPER

I let myself in since Troy told me to, and the house is quiet. Everyone's surely home, but in a mansion of this size, I suppose it's easy to find a quiet corner to hide in.

I think about what that could have meant for Gabby and me if I wasn't being a martyr, as my mother suggested. Is that what I'm doing?

No.

If the situation was reversed and I had a twenty-one-year-old daughter, well, I would've been quite the young father... but I wouldn't want a teammate screwing around with her, much less a player in a position subordinate to my own. And certainly not someone I opened my house to, someone I paid big money to get to town, someone I'm building an entire team around.

It's a lot of responsibility, and rule one in any situation where a teammate or manager is concerned is respect.

It's that damn sense of responsibility rearing its ugly and unwanted head, and I'm powerless to prevent it from forcing me to do the right thing. Even if it doesn't *feel* like the right thing.

I swing by the kitchen to grab some ice water and I spot Troy at the counter tapping away on his laptop.

"Question for you," I say without preamble as I help myself to some water from the refrigerator dispenser.

"Fire away," Troy says, closing his laptop lid.

I like how he gives me his undivided attention. Everything the man does is important, but he has a knack for making whoever he's talking to feel like they're deserving of his time.

"Do you have a sponsorship for any kids' play areas yet?"

He shrugs. “That would fall under community relations and marketing. I can introduce you to Joanie, the head of marketing, at the stadium today and she can offer you more information, but from what I know, she’s still searching for the right fit for a kids’ sponsorship.”

*Joanie.* Why is that name familiar? I feel like he mentioned his better half once and that was her name. Does his girlfriend work for the Heat?

I lean against the counter. “What do you think about a play area with a circuit for kids sponsored by StrongFitKids?”

“Sponsored by StrongFitKids? Or sponsored by Cooper Noah?” he asks.

I lift a shoulder. “Does it matter?”

He presses his lips together. “Not at all. I think it’s a fantastic idea and I’m sure Joanie would love to hear more. Let me text her to let her know we’ll be stopping by.”

“Great. And I know these sponsorships are generally handled by the corporate world, but I’d love to be as involved as I can be in everything from design through launch, barring the times when I need to be down on the field, obviously. This organization has meant a lot to me in my retirement, so I want to give back as much as I can.”

“Noted, and I’ll be sure to let Joanie know you have final approval at every level,” he says.

“Thanks, man. Can I have my colleague Kaylee meet us there as well?”

He nods. “Send me her information and I’ll be sure to get credentials to security.”

I tap around on my phone and send him the details.

“Joanie is free at two o’clock,” he says as my text to him comes through with Kaylee’s information.

“Great. I’ll text Kaylee and let her know.”

“I’ll be ready to leave in about ten minutes,” he says.

I nod and bolt from the kitchen—mainly because ten minutes is plenty of time for Gabby to make an appearance and fuck more with my brain, but also because I want to change my shirt before we head out.

A heavy weight settles onto my chest as I walk the stairs up to my room. Gabby's door is open when I walk past it, and I can't help when my eyes move in her direction. Naturally she's sitting on her bed with her laptop propped on her legs, and she glances up when she sees me paused in the hallway outside her room.

“Hey,” she says softly.

“Hi.”

She closes her laptop and sets it beside her. “Can we talk?”

I blow out a breath. “Now's not a good time.” I glance down the hallway even though Troy is on the other side of the house right now.

“Well when can I make an appointment to get on your busy schedule?” she asks, her tone both full of impatience and annoyance with a side of brat.

I lean on her doorway and close my eyes for a beat, trying to keep calm. When she talks to me like that...hell, when she *looks* at me like that, I want nothing more than to turn that frown upside down, so to speak. By shoving my cock in her, of course.

But clearly that's off the table, so I think the better call here is avoidance.

I rub my palms together up and down as I try to figure out what to say.

*Up palm, down palm, time to get calm. Breathe real deep and take the leap.*

“I don't know what we have left to talk about, Gabby,” I finally say, trying my hardest to keep my tone neutral despite the waves of emotion plowing into me. I don't want to have this conversation. I don't want this to be the end. I don't want to look at her and know that I can't have her again.

“Oh, okay. So that’s how old people do this, then?” she asks, the side of brattiness taking the lead in her tone. “They just bow out at the first sign of a problem?”

I know what she’s doing. She’s forcing this conversation now even though I said it’s not a good time. And it’s not. I’m meeting Troy in a few minutes to head to the stadium. But maybe she’s right. Maybe if I just get this over with, I can focus on baseball.

And it’s not just that. She’s pitting our ages against us, and I don’t like it. But I guess it’s what I’m doing, too, in forcing this thing to end. Our ages are, after all, a big part of the reason why we can’t be together. If Troy was a little older, and she was a lot older, then maybe he’d understand. Or maybe if I was closer to her age, he’d be okay with it.

But this is different. Troy and I have a previous relationship. We’re friends. Good friends, and he’s depending on me. I can’t fuck this up.

“A, I’m not old. Don’t use our ages against me when we both agreed it didn’t matter. And B, that’s not what I’m doing. It’s complicated, and I’m just trying to do the right thing,” I say. I rub my palms up and down a little more, trying to create some sort of warmth and friction to force a calmness that isn’t coming.

“It didn’t matter.” She leaps to her feet and shoves an angry finger in my direction. “You’re the one making it matter now. You’re the one who thinks it suddenly can’t work.”

“It can’t, and it has nothing to do with our ages. It’s because your dad is a good friend of mine, and I made a commitment to him.”

“That’s harsh,” she says, hurt in her tone. “So he wins since you and me never made any sort of commitment?”

“That’s not what I meant.” I blow out a frustrated breath as I run a hand along my jaw. “Nobody wins here. I was brought in because your father trusts me to create a brotherhood. How can I do that when I’m lying to him?”

“Why do we have to lie, then? Why can’t we just be honest?” she asks.

“Because we can’t. You’ve told me how protective he is of you. You’re the one who said he’s making up for missing your entire life. You know how he is. He will not understand this no matter how we present it to him.”

She glances away from me, and I can see in her eyes that she knows exactly what I mean. “So where do we go from here?”

“I’m sorry, but I just don’t see that there’s *anywhere* we can go from here.” My voice is low and apologetic, and she closes her eyes as if I physically struck her. And it *feels* like I physically struck her even though I’d never actually hit anybody. The words coming out of my mouth feel all wrong and jacked up.

“What about the job we talked about with your San Diego company?” she finally asks, clamoring to find a final link between the two of us.

“We never had anything official set up, so I guess Kaylee will just have to find someone else.”

She presses her lips together and nods. “Fine. I need to go.” She heads toward her closet, and I take that as my signal.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper to her back, and then I head to my room, not sure how I’m going to get through the next month living in the room next door when fighting this is the very last thing I want to do.







## CHAPTER 6

### COOPER

“Ready?” I ask Troy when I walk into the kitchen. He’s waiting at the table for me, tapping away on his phone, and I try to force enthusiasm into my voice that I just don’t feel.

This should be everything I dreamed of since the day I dislocated my elbow and thought I was out of the game forever, and instead of excitement, the shock has worn off and I’m just feeling that heavy weight on my chest, like it’s too difficult to draw in a deep breath.

It was short-lived, but it was fucking *everything*.

I really thought somehow we’d end up together. I really thought that despite all odds, somehow we were destined to be together.

With the snap of a finger, it all came to a skidding halt.

And then it gets infinitely worse. Infinitely heavier.

“Just a minute. My daughter will be joining us,” he says.

Oh.

Why?

I want to ask. I want it just to be Troy and me. I don’t want her clouding this moment for me, and instead of going to the stadium for the very first time, breathing in the air that always just somehow smells different, and feeling all the old familiar feelings that come with stepping onto the diamond, but this time for the very first time as it signals a new beginning...I’ll be feeling the grief that accompanies the end.

I’m not ready for it to be the end, but since we don’t have a choice, the least I can do is stay away from her.

But I don’t have a choice there, either.

I press my lips together and offer a nod, and then I slide into the chair across from him.

“Ready, Daddy?”

I hear her voice from around the corner before I see her.

*Daddy.* I remember one time when I jokingly told her to call me daddy...

I shake it out of my head.

She stops short when she sees me. “Oh, right, you mentioned Cooper’s coming along.”

Am *I* coming along?

*Am I coming along?* Of fucking course I’m coming along. *She* is the one *coming along* on this excursion.

I’m not sure why my blood boils at her question, other than the fact that she shouldn’t be coming at all. This is a trip for a manager and his player, not for his sexy as fuck daughter.

Dammit.

I’m in real trouble here.

Nothing about what she just said should incite such anger within me, but it’s only because I have no idea how to deal with these feelings racing through me. These emotions are unfamiliar. It shouldn’t be so hard. We don’t even know each other.

Except she knows me better than anyone ever has in my entire life, and I suspect she could say the same about me...so these weak justifications are doing nothing to quiet the torrent inside me.

*Up palm, down palm, time to get calm. Breathe real deep and take the leap.*

“Right,” Troy says flippantly to her, completely unaware that the two of us have unfinished business. Unaware that we have any business at all between us, I suppose. “I’m taking Coop for a tour, so I figured this way I can kill two birds with one stone.” He glances over at me as he stands. “I offered Gabriella an internship at the stadium for part of her senior

coursework, so we'll walk around and I'll introduce you both to the staff."

"Congratulations," I mutter in Gabby's general direction without looking at her.

"Thanks," she mutters back.

Surely Troy can feel the tension in the air, but if he does, he's good at acting like he doesn't.

I was planning to ride with Troy to the stadium, but I can't sit in a car with the two of them and act like this is normal. "I'm meeting a friend a little later, so I'll just take off from the ballpark if that's okay," I say to Troy.

He nods. "Just follow me in and I'll tip off security that you're with me."

We head outside, and I slip into my truck, muttering curses to myself once I'm alone. He and Gabby get into his Bentley, and I follow at a safe distance because the thought of rearing his precious luxury vehicle makes me nervous the entire way there.

It's only an eight-minute drive. Ten from my new place.

And when we pull into the player lot, I feel an odd sense of peace. I realize Gabby's in the car in front of me. I park far away from the two of them, draw in a deep breath, and tell myself that I'll get some time alone in this stadium today. I'll get some time to soak it in away from her. It's a promise I have to make to myself.

I head toward Troy's car as they get out, and we walk together into the front offices.

Well...sort of.

I let her walk with her father, and I walk a few paces behind as I try to take it all in and enjoy it separate from them.

Troy introduces us to the receptionist in the lobby, and then he leads us through the offices, pointing out various team members on the way. Eventually I'll learn all their names. I used to pride myself on knowing every member of the grounds

crew and security all the way up to the executives by first name. I'll get there.

The first wing houses the executive offices, where Troy introduces us to the people who are in today. We meet some employees in ballpark operations, player operations, finance, community affairs, and administration.

We get to the General Manager's office, and it's more of an introduction for Gabby than for me considering I've met the man tapped as GM for this team several times.

"Mike Perry," he says by way of introduction, shaking Gabby's hand, and then he zeroes in on me. "Welcome to the team, Noah." He gives me the kind of hug where he pounds me on the back, and I slap his back, too. He's another guy in this business I'd consider an old friend, and I realize in that moment how much baseball has become a family to me.

He played for the Rockies a number of years with Troy, and while most GMs manage the roster and front office personnel while team managers manage the players, I can already tell the two of them will be making a lot of decisions as a unit. That can only mean good news for the team.

I'm introduced to the scouting director, Pete Holt, the man who will officially draft our new team members when November rolls around.

The owners' offices are empty, except for one. "The owners are a three man team. Dave Shapiro, a local businessman, owns forty percent. Actor Victor Bancroft, a good buddy of mine, owns another forty percent."

"And the final twenty?" I ask.

Troy grins broadly and pounds a fist on his chest. "You're looking at him."

I raise a brow. "Good for you, man." It's rare, but it has happened before where the team manager is also part owner of the team. I suppose that gives them an entirely different sort of stake in wanting to win.

We head back through the huge loop of wings and offices, and we take a detour into the marketing department.

“Joanie,” Troy says as he knocks on the office door.

She glances up from her computer and when she looks at Troy, I have the sneaking suspicion she is, in fact, the woman in his life.

“Mr. Bodine,” she practically purrs. “Lovely to see you again.”

“And you,” he says, his voice husky. “This is my daughter, Gabriella.” He puts his arm around Gabby and pulls her close to his side. “And this is Cooper Noah.” He nods to me, and I stride over and reach across her desk to shake her hand. “He’s our man on third.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say.

“He’s also the one who wanted to talk with you about a sponsorship, and I have a few ideas on that,” Troy says.

“Come on in,” Joanie says, motioning for the three of us to step into her office. Her phone rings, and she moves to answer it as she nods at a round table with six chairs around it. “Send her over,” she says to whoever is on the other end of the line. “And can you send up Justin Larson as well?”

Troy and Gabby sit, and I take a seat across the table from Gabby so I don’t have to worry about bumping my knee against hers or smelling her warm vanilla or in general being distracted by her at this meeting.

Joanie walks over with a pad of paper and a pen, and she sits beside Troy. “Justin is one of our interns, and he’s a really smart and creative young man. I think he’d be great on a project like this.”

“While I’m here, I’d like to chat about finding a spot for Gabriella here as an intern. I like the idea of the general internship program for her. She’s a marketing major at UNLV, and I think there are plenty of opportunities in marketing and community affairs,” Troy says, and my heart drops down into my stomach as I can fucking predict exactly where this is going. “Cooper wants to run a sponsorship for the kids’ program in conjunction with StrongFitKids, and I think Gabriella would be a great fit to work on that project. I love

the idea of having her work closely with Cooper. He's a stand-up kind of man, someone I trust to be a great mentor to her."

Jesus. This guy can really lay it on thick.

"Oh, Dad, I—" Gabby begins, her eyes as wide with horror as mine certainly must be, and a knock at the door interrupts her sputtering.

We all swing our eyes toward the knocker, and sure enough, there stands Kaylee Olson...one of my best friends in the whole world. My chest warms despite the cold breeze that's been blowing in there all morning.

I stand and stride across the room, taking her in my arms and squeezing her tight.

"Whoa, Coop," she says when I swing her around, and then she laughs when I set her down. "Chill, dude."

I chuckle along with her, and I spot Gabby at the table shooting eye daggers at Kaylee. It's only then I realize Gabby must not know Kaylee is happily married and we're nothing more than friends, but somehow my heart lifts a little knowing that she's jealous.

It's wrong to feel that way, but I can't help how I feel.

"This is Kaylee," I say by way of introduction to everyone gathered. I toss my arm around her shoulders, and it feels like a little piece of home having her here with me. "Kaylee, this is Troy Bodine, his daughter Gabriella, and Joanie, the head of marketing here at the stadium." I nod toward Kaylee. "Kaylee is local and she's been incorporating StrongFitKids into the Tight Fit fitness clubs," I explain. "She's overworked and overwhelmed, so I thought we could add a little more to her plate." That gets a rousing round of laughter out of everyone in the room barring Gabby, but I'm sure in my conversations with Gabby since we met, I've talked about what a good friend Kaylee is to me.

Another knock at the door interrupts us again, and a punk-ass twenty-something kid with his jeans sagging down too low stands there wearing a Spongebob t-shirt like he couldn't be bothered to dress up for work today. What a dick.

“Justin,” Joanie says. “Great timing.”

This is the really smart intern? He looks like a douche. He doesn't even have any facial hair. He's probably too damn young to grow any. Hasn't hit puberty yet.

Okay, fine. I'm a little cranky today.

But then his eyes fall over to Gabby. His brows arch a little in surprise that a sexy woman like Gabby is in the room with the rest of us, but he maintains his cool. Still, I saw it. I saw his interest piqued. And I want to fucking rage on the kid.

I stare at Gabby as I await her reaction, and her eyes are down on the table. They dart to mine before moving to Justin, and she offers him a warm smile.

The kind of warm smile she used to reserve for me.

Is she...is she *interested* in this guy?

Or is she trying to make me jealous?

“Everyone, this is Justin,” Joanie says, and then she moves around the table introducing us as Kaylee takes a seat beside me.

She gives me wide eyes like she's trying to communicate something with me, but I'm too distracted to pick up on her message. We'll talk later.

“So where were we?” Joanie asks.

Troy jumps in on that one. “Cooper is interested in organizing a StrongFitKids sponsored kids' section at the stadium. Coop, would you like to expand on that?”

“StrongFitKids is an organization whose focus is to provide health, fitness, and athletic information to assist kids in building active and healthy lifestyles,” I say, reciting the script I've committed to memory over the last year. “My idea in conjunction here with the Heat is to sponsor a kids' play area. I'm envisioning some sort of play structure with slides and climbing walls, a circuit with different kid-friendly exercises, some batting cages, maybe some tees or a catching station, things like that.”

Kaylee's eyes light up. "We have the program in place at Tight Fit, the fitness clubs run by Ben Olson of the Vegas Aces, and we would absolutely love to partner with the Vegas Heat to create a fun and engaging area for children who come to the games."

"Don't we want the attention on the game?" Justin asks.

God, this kid. What a fucking asshole. Yes, Justin, we want attention on the fucking game. I barely refrain from rolling my eyes.

"Well, what about those antsy kids who were dragged to the game by their parents?" Kaylee points out. "Kids can't sit through a three-hour ballgame, and trust me, anyone old enough to have children would understand that." God, I could kiss Kaylee for putting this kid in his place. She moves her gaze from Justin over to Joanie. "We could provide additional resources for parents who want to watch the game, and the focus would be there while they are assured their kids are safely having a good time in another section of the same ballpark."

"I love it," Troy says first, nodding at me before waiting for Joanie's thoughts.

"I think it's a great idea, too," Joanie says, and I can't help but wonder if she really does or if she's doing what Troy tells her to do.

It doesn't matter. Either way, punk-ass jackass has been put in his place, and I'm getting what I want out of this, too. Except for one thing...

"So here's what we'll do," Joanie says. "I'll draw up some paperwork and we'll enter negotiations. I'll arrange a meeting between Cooper and Kaylee with my team as well as ballpark operations to work on the physical design of the space, and we'll have Justin and Gabriella as our main interns on the project. Sound good?" She raises her brows at Troy, which is interesting to me given that he's the team manager.

And you know what else is interesting? The fact that Gabby automatically gets the internship. Joanie just said she'll be one



of the main interns on the project. No interview process. No paperwork. Boom. She's in.

He nods at her. "Sounds perfect. Anyone have anything else?"

Silence moves around the table.

I don't want to work with Gabby on this.

We're already too close in proximity with me living with her. Now she'll be at the one place I had planned to use as my escape, and I'm not sure how to feel about that.

But I can't think of a single reason to object that wouldn't raise about a million red flags with my boss, so I keep my mouth shut.





## CHAPTER 7

### GABBY

I can't stop picturing him leaning against my doorframe earlier.

He was tormented—that much is clear. And I wasn't making it easy on him. But why should I? He's bowing out of what could be the most important relationship of our lives because of my dad?

It's bullshit.

But I also don't know how to fix the problem. I found my dad later in life, but I didn't choose him, just as I didn't choose my mother. I was made to believe my father never wanted me only to learn it was my mother who never did. I was raised believing nothing I ever did was quite good enough.

And now I'm questioning whether *I* am good enough for someone like Cooper.

Yet...in the time we were together, he made me feel like I was. Like we were compatible. Like we were meant to be.

But the tables have turned. We're no longer Cooper the guy who works for a kids' organization and Gabby the girl who's still in college.

Now he's the bigshot baseball player and I'm nothing more than his manager's daughter.

Still, the question remains. Would I give up what I've built with my father in the last three years for someone I've barely known three weeks?

That's hard to say.

My gut leans toward no. It doesn't make sense, but God... what we have—what we *had*—was intense.

He leaned on that doorframe with his hat backwards and the scruff on his jaw and I've never seen a more beautiful man in my entire life. His blue eyes were dark and stormy, and even now as he sits across the table from me, I can't help but study his hands. He's rubbing them together like he's trying to stay calm, and then he lifts one of those hands and runs it along his jawline.

Long fingers that know every inch of my body move slowly along, and I know I'm staring, but I can't help study those fingers. Strong and lean, muscular and athletic. Skilled.

Ropes of muscle ripple along his forearm with his movement... a forearm that held me as little as a few days ago. A forearm that should be holding me again, and instead, maybe it never will.

My chest aches, but I put on the act like everything's fine. Justin slipped into the open seat beside me, and I wish it was Cooper instead. I wish I could smell that clean, woodsy scent of his. I wish our knees could bump together and we'd both leave them there, touching beneath the table where nobody could see.

Instead, I've got someone who's probably more appropriately aged for me wearing a Spongebob tee. Is it any wonder I found someone a decade out of my zone when Spongebob over here is my option?

Justin doesn't smell like fresh wood, and he's going to be my partner for the next few months as we work together on a project... with Cooper as our lead.

Complicated doesn't even begin to describe it.

When the meeting starts to wrap up, my dad offers to show me off—I mean to *introduce* me—to more people, but Joanie jumps in to save me from that particular torture.

“I can have her start filling out paperwork in here if that's okay with you.” Her gaze connects with my dad's, and I can't help but wonder if there's something more to their relationship than colleagues. In fact, the way his gaze burns at her tells me

there's *definitely* something more there, but I've never seen her before in the three years I've been living with my dad.

He nods once at her then turns to me. "Is that okay with you, honey?"

I nod. "I'd actually love to hang here for a bit." I avoid Cooper's gaze even though I feel it on me.

"Fine," my father says. He glances at Cooper. "Then let's continue our tour." He looks over at me. "We'll be in the clubhouse. Text me if you need anything."

"Thank you all so much," Kaylee says. "This has been great and I'm so excited to get started."

She seems sweet, although when Cooper tackle hugged her when she walked in, I felt my hackles rise as my claws started to emerge...until I realized I have no ownership over him. He's free to hug whomever he wants. He made that pretty damn clear.

And I also caught the way he stiffened when Justin walked into the room and sat beside me. I'm not saying I'm going to take advantage of that, but I'm not saying I'm not going to, either.

"Let me just check in with HR, and they'll send a copy of our intern contract so you can get started," Joanie says, and she heads to her desk and taps around.

I glance over at Justin, who looks a little bored. He's probably early-twenties like me, and if nothing else, maybe I can make a friend.

"Are you at UNLV?" I ask while Joanie gets my paperwork together.

He shakes his head. "I was. I graduated last year."

My brows dip. "So what are you doing interning here?"

"I took a sabbatical, and my dad told me I had to get a job when I got back." He shrugs, and I laugh.

"A sabbatical? Do you mean a gap year?"

He offers a wry smile. “Sabbatical sounds better. But very few employers are excited about hiring someone with zero experience who took a year off from the real world, so my dad hooked me up with this gig.”

“Where’d you go on your sabbatical?” I ask, suddenly full of questions.

“Europe for a while, and then I headed to Australia and worked in a bar there for a few months to make dear old Dad happy.” He rolls his eyes, and he seems like the kind of boy who gives his dad a ton of trouble but has the sort of winning smile that gets him out of it most of the time.

“And how was it?”

He shakes his head and closes his eyes. “I didn’t want to come back. It fulfilled that dream of freedom and independence and it was just the fucking best.”

“But your dad made you?”

He nods. “He’s one of the executives I’m sure your dad introduced you to up in the front office. Dean Larson, Executive Vice President and Business Manager of the Vegas Heat.” He rolls his eyes and leans in, lowering his voice to a whisper. “I don’t even *like* baseball.”

“I totally heard that,” Joanie calls from her desk. “I promise I won’t tell.” We both laugh.

“So what do you want to do for your career, then?” I ask Justin.

He shrugs. “Something that will allow me freedom, independence, creativity, and travel.”

“Sounds like you need to figure out something where you can work for yourself.”

He glances up so his eyes meet mine. “Or find something where I can partner up with pretty girls.” He raises a brow, and I feel my cheeks heat.

Joanie walks over with a tablet, and she sets it in front of me. “Fill out these forms and let me know if you have any

questions. Justin, you can head back to Caitlin's office. I think she has some graphic design work for you."

He nods, and then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. He hands it to me. "Text yourself."

My brows dip in confusion.

"Text yourself so you have my number," he clarifies. "You know...in case we need to get in touch about our project."

"Oh," I say dumbly. Is he asking me for my number? Well, no. He's demanding my number, but it seems innocent enough. "Sure." I tap in the number, send myself a text that says Gabby Grant, and hand it back.

"Nice to meet you, Gabby Grant," he says, and his fingers brush mine when he takes his phone.

"You too, Justin Larson."

He grins, and then he walks out of Joanie's office, and I'm left wondering whether the cute boy who just gave me his number is interested in friendship or something else.







## CHAPTER 8

### COOPER

Stepping into the clubhouse feels almost like an out of body experience.

I didn't think I'd be back in one of these again, certainly not as a player. My contract was up two years after I got hurt, and since it was going to take more than a year to recover, I figured my playing days were over. I figured nobody would want a recovering thirty-year-old on their team, so I bowed out early.

I like the little life I've built for myself out of the spotlight, but in hindsight, I wish I would've fought harder to stay in the game.

I took the early retirement so I could focus on giving back. I used my name to help StrongFitKids catapult to success, and I'll continue to do so. Carla and I are old friends—never in any sort of romantic capacity, but we attended the same high school. She was in my brother's class, and they kept in touch over the years. When he told me she'd started up a kids' organization in San Diego and was looking for a programming director, I jumped at the chance.

I always thought about returning to the game, but it was in a more abstract sort of way—a *what if* sort of way. Not in a realistic sort of way.

But when that call from Troy came through, it seemed like a pretty easy decision. Things are rarely handed to us in this life, but Troy was handing me the chance to play the game that saved me more than once in my life.

And here it is, saving me again.

I realize it's also *because of* the game that I can't be with the girl I love—hell, it's *because of* the game that I met her in the first place...but if I didn't have baseball to fall back on

when the inevitable end with Gabby came, I'm not sure how I'd get through it.

The logical side of my brain is trying to force me to believe that the end *was* inevitable. How could it have ever worked? Finding out her father was Troy just saved us weeks or months or even years of added pain and suffering after we fell harder and harder for one another.

I blow out a breath as Troy takes me to my locker.

My name is already listed on the plaque above it.

*Noah 21.*

A jersey hangs on the side. *Noah 21.*

This is really happening, and my breath catches in my throat as reality slams into me.

I sit on the bench that will be my new home for at least the next three years, and my chest tightens with emotion. I grab a Vegas Heat towel sitting on the bench beside me, and I study the logo for a beat. A baseball with flames coming off it, representing our team.

My eyes heat, and I grab the towel and hold it up against my face as I draw in a deep breath to try to ward off the unfamiliar threat of tears that seems to be getting more and more familiar lately.

“Congratulations, Noah,” Troy says quietly beside me. If anyone understands the sort of emotions that are plowing into me right now, it's him. I pull the towel away from my face as he talks. “I felt the same way when I first walked into this clubhouse. It's fucking magic, man. Together, we're going to be magic. We're going to obliterate history when it comes to expansion teams, and we're going to win out of the gate. We're going to be a fucking force. You and me and the rest of this team we're building. This is something special, Coop. Let's fucking go.”

“Let's fucking go,” I repeat, my voice hoarse but still full of fire.

“I’ll give you some time in here. I’ll be in the weight room when you’re ready.” He nods to a set of doors that lead directly to the weight room, and then he takes off through them.

I lean back into my locker and suck in a few deep breaths. I rub my palms up and down. It’s time to take the leap.

I look around the quiet clubhouse. Soon enough, it’ll be filled with players. We’ll all arrive around two on game days, and we’ll play video games or poker or waste time until it’s time for team stretching and batting practice. It’ll be relaxed until thirty minutes before game time, and then we’ll all move into focus mode as the inevitable nerves will start to kick in.

Will Gabby be in here then? If she’s interning for the team, she might be. Team and manager family members aren’t allowed in, but it’s different if she’s working for the team. She’s in marketing, so if she gets put on social media assignment, she might have to come into the clubhouse when I’m trying to focus on game mode.

I can’t have that.

I can’t be distracted by her in those important moments before game time.

I realize I have six months before I need to worry about it. I realize how different things may be in six months, but I can’t seem to push her out of my brain in *this* moment.

I just want to skip over the rest of this offseason and fucking *get there*. I want to play. But time’s a real steadfast bitch. When we want it to slow down, it doesn’t. When we want it to speed up, it doesn’t. It’s one of life’s most frustrating constants.

The door opens, and I recognize the man who walks through it.

“Danny Motherfuckin’ Brewer,” I say, and he grins as he walks up to me and grabs my hand in a bro shake that turns into a pound on the back.

“Cooper Motherfuckin’ Noah,” he says. “What are you doing here, man?”

“Playing third. You?”

His brows shoot up. “The elbow?”

“Surgically repaired,” I say dryly.

“They tapped me for first.” He shrugs. “Looks like we’re gonna be teammates.”

I make a face at him to indicate it’s my worst nightmare, and he laughs.

“Guess I’d rather play on the same team as you than against you,” I admit. Danny Brewer was the reason I fucking hated playing the Rockies. He’s a master of first base, and between him on first and me across the infield on third, we’re going to be a fucking force right out of the gate—just like Troy said. But the thing about Danny Brewer is that even though we were enemies on the field, we were friends off it. He’s a hell of a fun guy, and we went out more than once after a game and got fucked up together. “Troy hasn’t mentioned anything to me. How’d you end up here?”

“I wanted out of Colorado and you know Mr. Bodine. He made it happen.”

“How?” I ask, feeling a little stupid that I haven’t taken the time to research more about this team. In my defense, I’ve been preoccupied...but the team must already be filled with players considering the draft was back in July and the trade deadline was in August. We’ve got the expansion draft coming in November, too.

Jesus, I’ve really had my head in the sand.

“A few hours ahead of the trade deadline, he struck a deal with the Rockies back in August. They’re taking the first two picks from the expansion and Troy traded two picks for the regular draft next season.” He rubs his knuckles on his chest. “You know, four good players for me. No big deal.”

I laugh. “So modest. It’s good to see you, man. You still have my number?”

He nods. “I’ll use it sometime this weekend. I’m putting together a poker crew and we need a fourth.”

“Count me in,” I say. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

I head to the weight room, excitement coursing through me now that I’ve met my first teammate, and my breath is stolen by the sight in front of me. I feast my eyes on state of the art equipment, the types of machines that will get me into game mode the right way.

Troy stands talking to a man sitting at a desk near the back of the room, and I saunter over in that direction.

“Cooper, this is Nick Lynch, our head athletic trainer here at the Heat. We’ve spoken at length about you and he has some ideas,” Troy says.

I nod at Nick, a guy who appears to be around the same age as me with a much bushier beard than me. “Nice to meet you, man. I only have one request.”

Nick raises his brows, and he looks like the kind of person I could grab a drink with after he puts me through the wringer. “What’s that?”

“Be gentle.”

Nick laughs, and it’s a hearty laugh. “Have you done anything recently or are you in what we in the business like to call *active rest*?”

“A better description might be *inactive rest*.” I twist my lips, and Nick laughs again. “I’ve hit the treadmill a few times since Troy gave me the offer, and I ran on the beach back in San Diego before I moved here. I’ve started changing my diet. But I could use a program to guide me from rest back into anything at all.”

“Can I take a look at your arm?” he asks, and I nod. He stands and moves around the desk, and he bends and flexes it at the elbow for me, nodding and muttering as he works. “It looks good, man. Looks to be in working order, and I think we’ll start you off light as you come off active rest and transition into rebuilding. In six weeks or so, we’ll shift into phase one, and you’ll be season-ready by February. I’ve worked out a diet plan, too, and I just ask you do your best in sticking to it.”

“Do pizza and-or beer appear anywhere on the menu?” I ask.

He doesn't laugh this time. “There's always a spot for pizza and beer. You know how to distribute your calories, man, so do what you need to do.”

He holds up a hand, and I grab onto it as we bro-shake. I love this dude already.

I chat with Nick a few more minutes, and he tells me he'll send me everything I need. “You can call me any time if you don't feel like reading it and want me to walk you through it.”

“Thanks, Nick,” I say, and Troy flicks his head toward the door.

“Ready for the next part of the tour?” he asks.

I draw in a deep breath as I *think* I know what's coming shortly.

I follow him through the tunnel underground, and he points out the batting cages, the place where we'll warm up prior to entering the game and the place where we'll practice before games.

I follow him up a short ramp, and we're in the dugout. I stare down at the bench before I turn around and look up, and when I finally do, my breath is stolen once again.

The stadium is before me. It's empty, but I can already hear the volume of the crowd gathered to root for the home team rushing between my ears.

I look out at the seats that'll hold over forty thousand fans at one time, and my eyes shift around the place to the scoreboard that I'll look up at thousands of times in the future.

Finally, my eyes skim the green grass over to the dirt. I focus on the place where third will be once the field is ready... the place that will be my true home away from home.

A feeling of restlessness runs through my legs, and I fucking take off. I run out onto the field with my arms spread wide open, sucking in gulps of fresh air since the retractable roof is open. I run all the way to the outfield before I realize I



never asked if it was okay for me to step on the grass, but I don't care.

This is where I need to be.

This is where I'm *meant* to be.

It's where I feel most myself. It's where I feel closest to my father. It's where I feel like I'm home and accepted no matter what else is going on in my life.

I sink down into the grass, and then I lie on my back and stare up at the sky. It's cloudless, the norm for Vegas, and I pant as I try to catch my breath.

"Good form, kid," Troy says over me a few beats later.

"Kid? I'm only eight years younger than you." I chuckle, and then I sit up and draw in a deep breath.

"Everything okay with you?" he asks. He sinks down beside me, and this right here...this is what's going to make him an incredible manager. Connecting one-on-one with a player. Mental check-ins. All of it.

I huff out something resembling a laugh, though it's not very funny. "I'm all right." I stare ahead at third base. I'll *be* all right, anyway. Eventually.

This all feels so goddamn dramatic for something that barely got off the ground, and all that does is tell me how very much she came to mean to me.

"What's going on?"

I clear my throat. "The girl I told you about...it's over with her."

"The one you talked about just yesterday when you said fate caused you to crash into each other?" he asks.

I nod. "Yeah."

"Want to talk about what happened?"

*She's your daughter, Troy.* "Nah. It's complicated."

He sputters a short laugh. "Aren't they all?"

“Is Joanie...” I trail off, not sure how to finish the question, and he nods so I don’t have to.

“Yeah,” he says. “Nobody here knows, so if you could keep that quiet, I’d appreciate it.”

I hold out a fist for him to bump as a signal of my silence.

“Look, Coop. I need you at your best, and I felt like I had that for a night when you pulled in, but something’s different today.”

“A lot is different today.” I draw my knees up and wrap my arms around them. “I guess I just realized where my focus needs to be.”

“Can it be here if you’re thinking about her?” he asks.

“Isn’t it better to end it now, six months before we take this field, than to hold out for the inevitable anyway?” I shoot back.

“You do realize what you’re doing, don’t you?” His eyes are on my profile.

“What am I doing?” I ask, keeping my gaze ahead on the dugout.

“Sabotaging whatever it is before it even begins. You were always like that. It’s why you quit playing after the elbow injury. But when you said so proudly that you were off the market yesterday, I saw a new fire in you. One I hadn’t seen before, especially not with that ex of yours.”

I glance over at him, not sure what to say. I felt the fire he’s talking about, and I think he might be right about sabotaging myself. I end things before they get too complicated. The one time I didn’t, I got cheated on.

But his words in the meeting earlier only confirm my suspicions. He trusts me to be a mentor to his daughter. He sees me in an authoritative position over her. What he does *not* see is me fucking her.

Could I tell him? Could I break it to him gently?

Could Gabby and I find a way to be together?

“You know, shortly after you broke up with her, she called me,” he says quietly.

My brows dip. “Stacy did?”

He nods. “She knew we were old friends from your playing days. This was before I met Joanie, and I was single. Playing around, you know how it is. Anyway, she asked if I wanted to grab a drink, and I declined. You just don’t do that to a friend, you know? You don’t fuck around with exes or family. And I know we’re in different positions now with you playing and me coaching, and that comes first in season always. But out of season, I always saw you as a friend, and I’m glad you’re here and we’re on the same team for once. I have a good feeling about teaming up with someone I trust the way I trust you, and I think we’re going to own this fucking town.”

Yep. That’s a big fat negative on going for the truth.

It’s only been a few hours. Time will heal whatever this is.

I hope.





## CHAPTER 9

### GABBY

Cooper must've stayed at the stadium, or maybe he went out afterward. I guess it's not my right to know anymore. I texted Mia that I needed to get out, so she invited me over for dinner.

I'm not very hungry, though.

And Dylan's here, which means Mia is distracted and trying to impress him, and I'd rather be curled up in my bed by myself.

"Ugh!" I grumble as I collapse on her couch after she orders the food.

"So let me get this straight," Dylan says. "You were banging Cooper Noah and you didn't know your dad invited him to play for the Heat?"

I blow out a breath. "He knows?" I whine to Mia.

She shrugs. "We can trust him."

Right. Noted. Don't tell Mia secrets anymore unless I want Dylan to know them.

"Fine. Yes, that's the gist of it. He said he can't be with me knowing who my dad is, so it's over."

"And now he's living with you," Dylan says.

"We literally share a wall," I confirm.

He makes a low whistle noise. "That's some messed up shit."

"Thanks for the reminder," I mutter.

"How was the stadium?" Mia asks brightly. Too brightly. She's trying to change the subject, trying to take my mind off

Cooper, but nothing on God's green Earth has the actual ability to do that.

"Fine. My dad assigned me an internship working with Cooper, naturally. He trusts Coop to mentor me," I say, throwing air quotes around the end of my sentence.

Mia wrinkles her nose, and Dylan's brows knit together.

"Wait a minute. Your dad *assigned you an internship?*" he asks.

"Yeah. Why?"

"I've been in the application process for an internship with the Heat for *months* now. It's incredibly competitive and they're only taking six interns this year. I'm vying for the final spot with hundreds of other applicants, and you walk in and your dad just hands it to you?" He sounds angry, and I feel bad that he sees it that way.

"I'm sure I didn't take the final spot," I say. "I think my dad sort of created a new position for me to slide into." Shit. I'm not sure that makes it any better.

My phone dings with a new text. I pull it out just in case it's Cooper.

It isn't. Surprisingly...it's Justin.

**Justin:** *A couple of the other interns and I are heading out for beer. Want to join?*

I stare down at the text.

"What's that?" Mia asks me first.

I clear my throat. "One of the other interns asked if I want to join a group of them for a drink."

"One of the other *male* interns?" she presses, and Dylan simply huffs.

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Justin is male, but it's not like that."

"Sure it isn't," she says, a wide grin on her lips like her teasing is going to distract me from the real issue at hand here.

"It isn't," I say flatly.

Mia's brows knit together as she raises a shoulder. "Maybe it isn't, but Cooper doesn't have to know that."

I flatten my lips. "You think I should use my new friend?"

"I didn't say that, exactly," Mia says a little defensively. "But I didn't not say that, either."

"I'm not going to use someone I just met to make Cooper jealous. It's juvenile."

Dylan is surprisingly quiet during this exchange. He always seems to have an opinion.

"You're right. Sorry for mentioning it. I just know that if I saw Dylan hanging out with some other girl...I'd be jealous. I'd do something about it." She settles into Dylan's side and he draws her in a little closer.

I've been so wrapped up in Cooper that I didn't even realize Mia and Dylan had gotten as serious as they have.

I suddenly feel like a third wheel here. I decide to text Justin back—not because of what Mia is suggesting, but because it can't hurt to get to know some of the other interns.

**Me:** *Name the time and the place.*

He writes back with the details nearly immediately, and I punch in the location to maps. It's only a ten-minute drive, and it's on the way home to my dad's house, which makes sense given its proximity to the ballpark. I let him know I'll be on my way shortly.

"I'm going to meet them so you two can have your date night," I say.

"Yeah!" Mia says, punching a fist into the air. "She's going for it!"

"I'm not going for it." I purse my lips together. "I'm just making friends with the other interns so I don't feel so alone."

"You're not alone, Gabs. You always have me," Mia says, and she gives me a hug.

I appreciate her words, but she's got Dylan now, and he's commanding her attention just as Cooper commanded mine



for the few weeks I knew him. And it's fine. It's as it should be, so I'm just doing what I have to in order to find my place in this new routine.

And if making Cooper a little jealous is a byproduct of that...well, that's on him.

When I get to the bar, I spot Justin right away. He's hanging out of a booth, and he waves me over with a wide smile. I slip into the booth beside him, and he introduces me to the other interns. "This is Gabby," he says, and then he points to his left. "This is Chase." He points across the booth at the three on the other side. "Brian, Mackenzie, and Chloe."

I wave as all four names go in one ear and out the other. They all have drinks in front of them at various levels, and there are a few empty glasses in the middle of the table. I wonder how long they've been here.

A server comes over, and I order a vodka soda—a much faster route to the tipsiness I'm currently craving.

I just really hope I don't spill anything once the truth serum kicks in. I tend to be a loud and happy drunk, and that's what I need right now to help fill up the hole in my chest where my heart used to be before Cooper ripped it out and took it with him.

"You go to UNLV?" the girl across from me asks.

I nod. "You?"

She nods, too, and two of the others also go to UNLV, and they look familiar, like we've passed each other on campus or maybe had a class together at some point. We get to chatting about all the professors we have in common, and parties and events and dorm rooms and people...and laughter, so much laughter as the vodka starts to slide down faster and faster.

I love this group of people already. They're fun. They're my age. They're silly, and the boys get into a pissing match of chugging and dares while the three of us girls giggle at their antics. I find a quick bond with Chloe, though Mackenzie doesn't seem quite as friendly, and after my first couple drinks, I feel Justin's leg pressing against mine. During my third

drink, he tosses an arm around my shoulders. It's friendly, though. It's non-threatening. It's fun and light.

I stack my third empty in front of me after only an hour.

I haven't eaten anything, but the pressure on my chest has started to ease up.

The pressure in my bladder, however, has not.

"Need to pee!" I announce, and I practically fall out of the booth before I beeline for the restroom.

I pull my phone out of my pocket.

There's nothing there from Cooper.

I'm not drunk enough just yet to think texting him is a good idea, so I skip over that particular cliché.

I finish my business and head back to the table, where a fresh vodka drink awaits.

I'm slightly tipsy, and four will push me over the tipsy line, but I don't care.

I force a smile as I force Cooper out of my head. I'm here to have a good time, and I focus on that thought as I pick up my drink and get started on number four.





# CHAPTER 10

## COOPER

It's more crowded here than I'd like, but I pull my ballcap down low over my eyes and manage to score a booth in the corner facing the wall. A server takes my order, and contrary to Nick's advice, I go with a beer. As a compromise, I get a Michelob Ultra. Fewer calories and all that.

Kaylee slides into the booth across from me. "What's up, Coopster?"

I laugh. "Coopster?"

"I'm trying it out. You like it?"

I shake my head. "No, I don't."

She shrugs. "I'll keep working on it. You doing okay?"

I shake my head. "Not even a little. But good news about SFK and the sponsorship, right?"

She nods. "Great news. I take it that was your Gabby in the meeting?"

"Of course it was."

She presses her lips together. "I'm so sorry. What are you going to do?"

"What *can* I do?" I chug down the rest of my beer before the server comes over to take Kaylee's order, and I ask for a second one along with some nachos. Fuck the diet. It can start tomorrow.

"You can be honest with her father," she points out.

"Right. Her father, the guy who confessed earlier today that my ex hit on him but he declined since you don't fuck a buddy's ex or family members."

"Oh shit," she says. "He said that?"

I nod. “He said that.”

She shakes her head. “Do you *want* to stay away?”

“Fuck no,” I say. “But what choice do I have? He’s paying me ninety million over three years to build a legacy, Kay. I can’t just fuck that over because I think his daughter’s hot.”

She tilts her head and shoots me a look of disappointment. “We both know it’s more than thinking she’s hot.”

“Yeah, yeah. But it doesn’t change anything, so it doesn’t matter.”

The server drops off her drink plus mine, and she holds her glass up to mine. “To figuring this out,” she says.

I huff out a chuckle as I tap my glass to hers. I can’t figure out the un-figure-able, but I can drink beer and eat nachos with a good friend.

“So how’s mom life?” I ask as a way to get the heat off my problems.

And it works. It *always* works with new moms. Any mom, really. Ask about her kids, and she’ll launch into enough stories to fill the rest of the evening.

“Oh my gosh,” she starts, and she launches into some story about the twins. I’m only half-listening as I glance around the bar. Some loud assholes across the way are laughing noisily, and the merriment is over the top for me considering where my head’s at. I squint a little as I think how one of the loud drunk kids looks a lot like that douche intern I met earlier today, but I’m looking across a rather large, crowded bar, so it’s hard to tell if it’s him—not that it would really matter if it was.

I force my gaze to Kaylee to make it look like I’m listening, but the laughter across the way gets loud again.

And that’s when I see her.

Gabby walks to the table, a little unsteady on her feet, and she slides in beside the douchey kid.

It *is* him, and he tosses his arm around her shoulders as she picks up a drink.

Even from this distance, I can tell she's a little drunk. I can also tell by the way she moves that she's not interested in him as more than a friend. She's not leaning into him the way she'd do with me. She's not resting her head on his shoulder, and it almost seems like she's more interested in her drink and conversation with the girl across from her than she is in the Spongebob douche.

I could fuck that kid up with a fist, that's for damn sure.

"Cooper? Cooper!"

Kaylee snaps her fingers in front of my face.

"Huh? What?"

"Are you even listening to a word I'm saying?" she demands.

"I'm sorry. It's just..." I trail off and incline my head toward the other side of the bar.

She follows my gaze. "Oh," she says knowingly with a nod as she draws out the word. "Go get her, Coopsey."

"Coopsey is far worse than Coopster."

She shrugs. "It was worth a shot."

"And I'm not *getting* her. She's sitting with an intern from the Heat. She's laughing and having a good time. I can't just walk over and claim her," I say.

"But she's laughing and having a good time *without you*," she points out.

It's a clear shot to my heart, and I can't help when my hand moves up to cover it in defense. "Ouch."

"Truth hurts, right? Fucking *do something* about it, then."

"You're meaner than I remember," I say, my hand not moving from my heart.

"You're less of a fighter than I remember," she says, pursing her lips.

“Nah, you just never knew me that well,” I tease, and she laughs.

“Go get her, Coop. It’s obvious you’re in love with her.”

I shake my head and drain the rest of my second beer.  
“Doesn’t matter. It’s over.”

“Coward.”

I shrug. “Fine. If disrespecting my friend and boss makes me a coward, then I’m a coward.”

“You disappoint me, Cooper Noah.”

“Thanks, Kaylee Olson. Way to kick a guy when he’s down.”

She laughs, and she kicks me lightly under the table to drive her point home. “I’m rooting for you. If anyone can find a way to make it work, it’s you.”

I glance over at Gabby. She’s laughing. She’s having fun. She’s with people her age, not some old man who’s ready to settle down and have kids when they shouldn’t even be on her radar at this age. “Thanks,” I finally say.

And I leave it at that.

Kaylee takes off shortly after that since Ben is done with practice and she wants to soak up every minute she can with him while he’s in season, so I’m sitting alone in a corner booth sneaking glances across the bar pretending to eat the plate of nachos that has long grown cold.

She’s had at least two drinks since I spotted her, and I have no idea how many she had before that.

She’s drunk, and she’s out with people she doesn’t know.

I’m worried about her.

I’m not leaving here until I’m sure she has a way to get home safely—no matter how long that might be.

Spongebob tosses his arm around my girl and leaves it there while she drains another drink.



I can't take it anymore. I have no rights over her, no claim to her when I'm the one who told her it's over, but I can't sit here and watch her with another guy. I send her a text.

**Me:** *Are you having fun or are you looking for a way out?*

She slides her phone out of her pocket, reads my text, and glances around. She doesn't see me, but she also doesn't reply to me.

She slips her phone back into her pocket, purposely ignoring my text. She has to know I'm here. She has to know I'm looking out for her. She has to know she's safe, that I'd never let anything happen to her regardless of where we stand.

But knowing all that and ignoring my message tells me she wants to play games.

The only game I'm into playing is baseball.

My blood boils as I watch the girl across the table from her stand and pull Gabby up with her when the song changes. They start dancing and giggling with each other right there at the end of their table, and douchenozzle stands and moves in behind Gabby, grabbing her hips and swaying behind her.

That's when things take a turn. I know she's doing it because she knows I'm here somewhere watching her, but she starts sticking her ass back toward him. She's dancing with him while she dances with the girl across from her.

They're still laughing, still having a good time, and I'm sure the kid is fine—smart, according to Joanie, though I have yet to see any evidence at all of that—but the fact that she's dancing with him when she's drunk just to play games with me pisses me all the way the fuck off.

I'm seething as I sit watching her. Steam pours out of my ears as I glare across the bar at her, and I don't even realize my fists are tight balls until I glance down and force myself to unclench them.

The girl Gabby's dancing with points toward the restroom, and Gabby nods. This is my shot, and I'm not fucking missing it.

I leave some money on the table and bolt toward the hallway where the restrooms are.

It's dark here in this hallway. There are no overhead lights, and the only light comes from the flashing lights over in the bar or the occasional swinging of the restroom doors as they open and close.

I bide my time, rubbing my palms up and down as I force a calm I don't really feel. When she exits the bathroom, she's following behind the other girl. She doesn't see me, but she does stumble when she walks by me. She nearly falls before I reach out an arm to grab her, and I help her back up. The other girl doesn't notice as she skips back toward their table.

When she finally tilts her head up to get a look at her savior, the blood seems to drain from her cheeks. Her eyes are dilated, but I spot the fear in them as she must spot the anger in mine.

She's never seen me angry before. Not like this.

I can't even remember the last time I was moved by enough emotion to be quite this angry.

When Stacy cheated on me, I guess I saw it coming.

She never moved me to the sort of feeling Gabby incites in me. It's dangerous and scary and thrilling all at once.

She straightens, and I take the opportunity to pin her to the wall with my hips.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I ask, angling my head down toward hers. Our lips are inches away from each other, and my *God* do I have the strong urge to kiss her.

To fucking obliterate her with my tongue.

To hear those moans the way I was privileged enough to before we learned the truth this morning.

How was that only this morning? It feels like a fucking lifetime has passed since then.

"Having fun with my friends," she slurs, her alcohol breath hot on my jawline as she tips her chin up with a bit of

defiance.

“You’re drunk,” I accuse.

“Am not.” She purses her lips.

I raise a brow. “Prove it.”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you.” She places both hands on my chest and pushes, but I don’t budge. The door to the bathroom swings open, illuminating her face, and it’s hard to tell back here, but I think she looks a little green, like she’s seconds away from losing her lunch.

“I’m taking you home.”

“You are not!” she practically yells. “You’ve already ruined my life once today. Fuck you if you think you’re going to do it again.” She clenches her fists into balls and starts beating them against my chest, and then she freezes a beat later.

Her eyes grow wide, and she slaps a hand over her mouth, ducks under my arm, and bolts for the bathroom.

I think for a beat that I should follow her in, but it’s a women’s room in a busy bar. I head toward her friends to let them know, but the girl she was with appears in the hallway as if she just discovered her friend was missing.

“She’s in the bathroom getting sick,” I tell her, and she glances up at me in confusion. I’m not sure if she’s confused how I know or if she recognizes me and she’s confused why I’m here. I point toward the bathroom and issue a command. “She needs help.”

She nods and takes off into the bathroom. Despite the loud music in the bar, I still hear the retching when the door opens.

And then I wait.

It feels eternal as I stand in the hallway wondering whether she’s okay, but in reality only a few minutes pass before both girls emerge from the restroom.

Gabby looks exhausted, but she’s as gorgeous as always.

“Rally time!” the friend shouts with glee, and I shake my head.

“You’re coming home with me,” I say, grabbing Gabby’s elbow.

“Who the fuck are you?” the friend asks.

“Cooper Noah. I’m staying with Gabby and her father.”

Her eyes grow wide as recognition dawns. I don’t wear the low baseball cap practically covering my eyes for nothing. “Coop...Coop...Cooper Noah?”

“Thanks for helping Gabby. I’ll take it from here,” I say.

“You will not,” Gabby says, poking me in the arm. “I wanna stay.” She attempts to pull her elbow out of my grip, but it’s a weak effort since her bones are the equivalent of jelly after the amount of alcohol she’s consumed.

“Yeah, I will. Let’s go.” I grab her hand to pull her along, and she stumbles behind me—not because she’s trying to escape my grip, but because she’s so drunk.

So that’s how it’s going to be.

I lace an arm around her waist and help her walk toward the table where her friends are. I pull my wallet out and toss a hundred dollar bill on the table. “For her drinks,” I say. “I’m taking her home.” I zone in on the Spongebob jackass and lean in with a low hiss. “And if you ever treat her like this again, you’ll answer to me.”

He looks like he might be shitting himself as I straighten and help Gabby out of the bar toward my truck.





# CHAPTER 11

## COOPER

Maybe she would've been fine to rally, but I wasn't about to let her sit back down with that idiot kid. I realize they were just having a good time. It was innocent enough, and if it was any other girl aside from Gabby, I wouldn't have cared much at all.

But it wasn't.

It was *my* girl he was touching. Nobody touches my girl.

Except...she's not mine. Because of me and my decisions.

That doesn't mean I want her any less than I've always wanted her.

A stab of guilt plows into me. Did I just make her leave a good time with her friends to get her away from the douche canoe?

I keep telling myself I did it because she barfed in the bathroom of a bar. Nobody wants to get sick on a night out with friends, and once the vomit comes, that's always a sure signal the night's over.

"You're an asshole," Gabby says as I navigate toward home. Her eyes are closed and she's leaning her head on the cool glass of the front passenger window. She didn't exactly fight me when I put her in the front seat of my truck. I grabbed an old blanket I keep in the back in case she has to puke again. It's better than puking all over my leather seats, I guess.

"That's fine," I mutter. She can beat me up all she wants. It's not worse than what I'm doing to myself.

"I hate you. I hate that your truck smells just like you." She's grumbling, and she's nearly passed out.

"I love you," I whisper when I know she won't hear me.

My chest aches with regret.

It's a short drive, and she's out by the time I pull into Troy's circular drive. I walk over to the passenger side and open the door slowly since she's passed out against it. I lean in and unbuckle her seatbelt, and then I heave her into my arms and carry her into the house.

Troy is in the living room, the first room off the entry, when he sees me carrying his daughter through the house.

"What the fuck?" he demands when he spots us. He jumps to his feet and tosses the tablet he was working on to the side.

"She was out with the intern kid in the Spongebob shirt and some other kids," I explain. "I ran into her at the bar. She drank too much, so I brought her home."

"Jesus, Coop. Thanks for looking out for her. Is she okay?"

I nod and don't say anything, and then I carry her up the stairs to her room. I lay her on the bed, and Troy is right behind me. I want to stay with her, to pull off her shoes, to watch her sleep, to make sure she's okay, but her father's here now.

It's not my job anymore.

"You're a good man," Troy says as he starts pulling her shoes off. "The best. Thanks for what you did tonight. I won't forget it."

"It was nothing," I say softly, gazing down at the girl I somehow have come to love more than anything in the world. My heart squeezes. Can this really be it for us? "Just saw a girl in trouble and handled it." The words feel thick around the lump in my throat.

"Are you in for the night?" he asks.

I nod.

"I was just getting ready to leave for the club. I have some work to take care of there, and then I was planning to head to Joanie's afterward. Can you keep an eye on her, make sure she's doing okay?" he asks. "I wasn't planning to be home



until after noon tomorrow, but I can change my plans if it's asking too much of you."

"Of course," I say. "I'll be around. Don't change your plans."

"Text me if you need anything. I'll have my phone on me." I nod, and he reaches over to squeeze my shoulder. He presses his lips together. "They sure don't make them like you anymore."

"Thanks, Troy. I'll make sure she's okay."

He nods and leaves. I head to my room, take a quick shower, throw on some basketball shorts, and check in on her. She's in the exact same position we left her in.

I head downstairs and find some water and ibuprofen for both of us. The house is quiet, so Troy must be gone. I climb back up the stairs and set the pills and water on Gabby's nightstand, and I stare down at her as she sleeps peacefully. She's going to be hurting in the morning.

I shift her a little so she's resting more comfortably on her pillow, and then I glance around her bedroom.

There's a textbook open on her desk. I walk over and glance at what it is. Something about consumer behavior that looks boring as fuck.

I spot a t-shirt and pair of short shorts I've seen her sleep in, and I'm sure they'd be more comfortable than the jeans and tight shirt she's currently wearing, but I feel like I lost the right to undress her when I told her we couldn't be together.

I finally settle onto the chair at her desk and turn it so I can prop my feet up on her bed. I pull my phone out and start doing a little research on the Vegas Heat.

I learn who's already publicly signed with the team. Aside from myself and Danny, I spot former White Sox pitcher Rush Ross along with former Braves right fielder Duke Owens. Troy's building a team of superstars, and I'm not mad about it.

Her phone starts ringing—loudly, and it interrupts my research. I spot the brick outline in her jeans pocket. I slip out

her phone and glance at the screen as I click the side button to silence the call.

*Justin Larson.*

I'm pretty sure that's the Spongebob jackass.

I think about answering, but it's not my right to. I shouldn't even have looked at the screen, but the fact that they exchanged numbers already and he's calling her when she disappeared from the bar speaks volumes.

I decline the call and click the volume off so the loud ringing doesn't wake her should she get another call, and then I pace around her room a bit as I try to figure out what to do. She's fine. She could sleep in here alone. I should go back to my own room.

But I promised Troy I'd look after her.

She's already tossed up most of the alcohol, so now it's just about sleeping it off and curing an epic hangover in the morning.

And maybe when morning comes, we can have that talk we need to have...if she's up to it.





# CHAPTER 12

## GABBY

I'm hot.

Too hot.

It takes me a minute to realize it's because I'm sleeping in my jeans.

Why the hell am I sleeping in my jeans?

I'm in my bed...I think. The room is dark, so at least I was coherent enough to close the room darkening shades my dad had custom-installed, which normally I'm grateful for but today they're just confusing me. There's enough light peeking in around the sides that I know the sun's up.

What the hell time is it?

And how the hell did I get home?

I pry my eyes open and glance over at the clock, and the numbers haven't quite registered when my bed shifts beside me.

"Ahhh!" I scream, and I push the offending figure clean off the bed, using both my hands and my feet before I realize maybe I'm overreacting just a smidge.

Cooper Noah's head pops up from the floor, and his eyes are sleepy and confused. If I wasn't the most hungover I've ever been in my entire life, I might find this amusing.

Instead, I feel like I'm going to barf.

Did I barf last night?

It's a blur.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" I yell at him as I hold my head between my palms and press—like if I press hard enough, the pain will subside.

It doesn't.

"There are three ibuprofen tablets on your nightstand," he mutters as he stands, and he's not wearing a shirt.

He's not. Wearing. A. Shirt.

His abs shimmer in the darkness, and my dry mouth miraculously starts to salivate.

God, do I want him.

He rubs his hip and winces. "And a bottle of water. Take the pills and drink the bottle and maybe don't kick and push someone out of your bed for taking care of your drunk ass all night."

A tiny pang of guilt stabs into me. "You took care of me all night?"

"You got sick at the bar, and I took you home. I looked after you. I didn't want to leave you alone, so I slept beside you." He holds up both hands. "Nothing happened." His hand returns to his hip again to rub it.

"Did you hurt your hip or is that just your old age showing?"

He glares at me. "I landed on it when you literally kicked me out of bed for taking care of you."

"What about my dad?" I ask, and I realize my tone is both sassy and bratty, but I'm out of fucks to give.

"He had some business to take care of and said he wouldn't be home until after noon today. Can we talk over breakfast?"

I blow out a long, frustrated breath. "*Now* you want to talk?" I demand. "When I feel like I got hit by a truck?"

"Finding out your dad is Troy Bodine had much the same effect on me, and you wanted to talk yesterday," he says, holding up both hands.

I roll my eyes. "You weren't this big of a dick when we were together, were you?"

He chuckles and leans down, palms on my bed as he gets a little closer to me. His voice is low and husky when it comes out. “You seemed to have quite the affinity for my dick when we were together, darling.”

His words steal my breath, and I hate that I’m still this attracted to him even though he’s made it clear that what we had is over.

I can’t do this. I can’t live with him, I can’t wake up with him next to me in my bed. I can’t pretend like I’m not head over fucking heels in love with him when he’s all I’ve ever dreamed of.

But I have to.

Love and hate ride a thin line, so I guess my only choice is to opt for hate.

“Fuck you.”

He presses his lips together and raises both brows. “I’m going to turn on the coffee pot then head to the workout room for a quick workout. If you want me to make you breakfast, meet me in the kitchen in forty-five minutes for scrambled eggs and a chat.”

He stalks out of my room and disappears, and I collapse back onto my pillows as I try to ward off the emotions plowing into me.

But one feeling swoops in to trump everything else, and I run to the bathroom where I dry heave for a few minutes before giving up.

I take the pills Cooper so thoughtfully left for me, and I start to cry as I think about how fucked up all this is. We’re so damn right together, and I can’t help but wonder if it would be different if I’d told him who my dad was up front.

The only thing that might’ve changed is that he never would’ve agreed to be with me in the first place.

I head to the shower where I let the water mingle with my tears, and I feel marginally better once I’m clean. I brush my teeth and check the time. I still have another fifteen minutes

before Cooper told me to meet him, but I head down to the kitchen anyway and grab a cup of coffee. I check my phone as I slide into a chair at the table, and I see a missed call from Justin. He left a voicemail.

“Hey girl. Just wanted to check on you to make sure you got home all right. Call me.”

I decide to ring him back even though he left the voicemail nearly ten hours ago.

“Hey,” he answers. “You’re alive.”

“I’m alive,” I say, my voice a little hoarse. “Barely.”

He laughs. “I figured you were fine with Noah since he was in our meeting yesterday.”

“Yeah,” I say. “He’s a good friend of my father’s.” I leave it at that since apparently it’s nothing more than that. Not anymore.

“I had fun with you last night.” His tone has a hint of suggestion to it, and I know where he’s going with it. “I’d like to see you again. Maybe grab another drink but just the two of us this time.”

“It’s a nice offer, Justin, but I’m, uh...it’s complicated.” I’m fumbling for an excuse when the truth is that I can’t tell him the truth. I think about what Mia suggested yesterday—that I go out with Justin to make Cooper jealous. It’s a terrible idea. Right?

“I didn’t ask you to marry me, Gab. I asked you out for a drink. Just friends if that’s all you want. We have to work together for the next few months, and I like to be friends with my coworkers,” he says lightly. He’s not offended that I basically declined his invitation, and I like that about him. He’s confident. Maybe more than he should be...but he’s right. I want to have fun at work, too, and I’ve got enough heaviness surrounding me. I need something light. Maybe Justin can be a friend to help combat the darkness.

“Okay,” I say. “Sure. I can do the friends thing. But just coffee this time. I can’t even think about alcohol without dry heaving right now.”



He laughs. “Coffee it is. Today at three, Starbucks near the bar last night?”

Cooper walks in as we end our conversation.

“That works,” I say. “I’ll see you then. And Justin?” My eyes are on Cooper’s as I say another man’s name.

I’m not doing what Mia said.

*I’m not.*

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for a fun time last night. I’m excited to hang out with you again.”

I see the physical change on Cooper’s face when I say the words to another man. Cooper doesn’t know that I just told Justin that I’m not looking for anything other than friendship, so it’s not *quite* Mia’s plan, but it still has the same effect.

His brows are pinched and his nostrils are flared. His cheeks are an angry red and a vein makes itself visible in his neck, and I’m pretty sure it’s from what I just said to Justin but it’s possible it’s from his workout.

“You too, girl,” Justin says. “See you at three.”

We hang up, and Cooper draws in a deep breath as he walks past me.

He’s a little sweaty from whatever he just did in the workout room, and he runs a hand through his hair before grabbing a coffee mug and filling it to the brim with hot, black coffee.

“Black coffee?” I ask.

“The trainer gave me a plan to get ready for the season,” he mutters. “I’m making cuts where I can.” He grabs a Slim Jim out of the pantry and starts to peel open the packaging.

“What were you doing at the bar last night?” I demand.

“I met Kaylee for a drink. I saw that Spongebob douche putting his arm around you and I didn’t like it. You were drinking a lot and I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

My heart clenches and my chest tightens. “I was fine,” I grit out.

“How were you planning to get home?”

“It’s not your business. You gave up that right when you decided this was over.” I wave a hand between the two of us.

“Do you want scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon?” he asks as he chews his beef stick.

I blow out a breath. “God, you’re frustrating.”

“Right back at you. Answer the question.”

“Yes,” I say, my tone full of petulance. I slide into the chair without bothering to offer to help. I don’t want to help. I want to sulk and feel sorry for myself first for the hangover and second for the broken heart.

“So you’re meeting him again today?” he asks casually as he starts grabbing what he needs to make breakfast.

“It’s none of your business.”

He presses his lips together and nods, and then he drops the loaf of bread and a pound of bacon onto the counter before turning around to lock eyes with me.

“Look, Gabby. Last night when I walked in with you passed out in my arms, your father told me what a good guy I was for taking care of you. He trusts me to treat you a certain way, and wrecking your tight little pussy with my nine-inch cock while I suck on your tits is not that way.”

Butterflies take flight in my stomach at his words. God, could he wreck me good.

But that’s not what I’m upset about.

Sure, I’ll miss the sex. But it’s so much more than that.

“We have no choice but to live beside one another for the next month, and I can’t lose focus now,” he continues. “Your father is trusting me not just to treat you right, but to mentor you. To honor the commitment I made to the Vegas Heat. I can’t fuck this up. It’s my one shot after being out of the game for three fucking years.”

I suck my bottom lip between my teeth and bite hard to try to ward off the tears heating behind my eyes. I should be all cried out by now, but apparently I am not.

I nod a little. “It’s not about the sex, Cooper. We had something that’s once in a lifetime, and I know you felt it, too. I know you did. I may be young, but I know what love is, and I know I’ve never felt even an ounce of what we shared with anybody else. If you’re choosing to put an end to this even though it’s not what I want, then you have to let me all the way go. You can’t steal me away from my friends to protect me. If you’re out, you’re out, and you have to let me live my life. You have to let me dance on tables and fuck up and learn from my mistakes on my own, or else you’re just acting like another parent and I’ve already got enough of those.”

He clenches his jaw at my rant, and he looks like he’s about to go one way with his words, but then he pauses, rubs his hands up and down, and blows out a breath. “You’re right. I’m sorry. If you like that jackass, it’s your right to go for it.”

He turns back to his work at the counter, pulling two slices of bread out of the bag and setting them in the toaster, cracking eggs, sprinkling salt and a little bit of garlic powder.

I watch him work, thinking about how to respond to his words. He’s plating our food when I finally offer a reply, my voice quiet and full of regret. “For the record, it’ll be a long, long time before I’m ready to *go for it* with anybody.”

He sets a plate in front of me, and I quietly thank him. He sets the other plate in front of the seat beside me, and he slides into the chair. I dig into my eggs, and they’re delicious.

I glance up when my plate’s almost empty, and I see him watching me. He hasn’t even started his food yet, and my tummy does a little flip at the realization.

He leans his elbows on the table and closes his eyes, resting his head in his palms for a beat. “I love you, Gabby. So fucking much. This is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do.”

I run my tongue over my back teeth and point my fork in his direction. “Then why are you doing it?”

The front door opens on cue, and he blows out a heavy breath. “You know why,” he mutters.

“There’s my girl!” my father says, striding into the room. He’s wearing a suit, which seems odd for ten forty-five in the morning, but who am I to judge? “How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

“I’m fine. Cooper made me some breakfast and it’s really helping cure the old hangover,” I say.

“Good man, that Cooper Noah. Good, good man,” he says. He strides over and claps Cooper on the shoulder. “Thanks for taking care of her.”

“Not a problem,” Cooper says flippantly. “You’re back early.”

“I was worried about Gabriella, so I cut my endeavors short,” my dad says.

“Was Joanie your endeavor?” I tease.

His eyes widen a little as if he’s been caught, and he turns accusatory eyes onto Cooper, who holds up his hands innocently.

“Wait a minute. Is there something I don’t know?” I ask.

“Joanie and I have been seeing each other a while now,” my dad admits. “I confessed it to Coop yesterday, but I wasn’t ready for people to find out.”

Cooper holds up both hands in defense. “I didn’t say a word.”

I raise a brow at him, noting that he’s apparently good at keeping secrets, and then I turn toward my father. “The way you two looked at each other when we stepped into her office yesterday sort of gave you away.”

He chuckles. “Did it, now? We’ll have to work on that.” He shoots me a wink. “Glad to see you’re feeling better. Do you have plans for the day?”

“I’m meeting Justin the intern for coffee a little later.” I finish what’s left in my cup of coffee, and I glance at Cooper,

who has finally started eating.

My dad slips into the chair beside me. “Isn’t he the boy who got you drunk last night?”

I roll my eyes. “I made my own decisions last night. Admittedly they weren’t the brightest, but I felt safe knowing both he and his father work for the Heat. I was out with an entire group of interns, so it’s not like I was ever in danger. And Justin’s nice.”

“Nobody’s nice enough for my little girl,” he growls, narrowing his eyes at me.

I glance at Cooper again, who gives me a pointed look as if my dad’s words are proving his point that this is the right decision for us.

I pick up my plate and rinse it in the sink before setting it in the dishwasher. “I have an essay to write and a few chapters to read for my Global Consumer Behavior class, so I’ll be upstairs.”

Cooper presses his lips together and offers a friendly nod, and my dad stands and pulls me into a hug before he lets me go. I hear his voice behind me piling on the compliments as I trail up the stairs.

“She’s such a good kid. Hard worker, smart as a whip.”

I’m not as smart as he thinks I am.

I did, after all, fall for a man twelve years older than me... and then I allowed him to break my heart.





# CHAPTER 13

## COOPER

One week from today I turn thirty-three and I'm feeling all sorts of ways about that.

The life I imagined for myself at thirty-three is nothing like the life I'm living.

I thought I'd be in my tenth year playing ball, for one thing. I figured I'd be cresting toward the end of my career, deciding what comes next...not getting back into the game after a three-year hiatus and feeling like a freshman all over again. But I won't have the chance to *act* like a freshman since I've been tapped to lead this team. Fake it 'til I make it, I guess.

I thought I'd be married by now. Instead, I'm grieving the loss of something that might have been the most powerful thing I've ever come across.

I thought I'd have two or three kids, and I'd be torn between wanting to be on that ballfield and wanting to be home with my family. Family would be edging out the game because you only get one life. None of that matters now since I made a three-year commitment.

My dad was forty-one when he died. Us Noah men, we don't get long lives to spend with our kids, and the longer I put off having them, the shorter that window gets. I've always felt the ticking of the clock, but lately it's started to sound more like a timer for a bomb that's getting ready to detonate.

I realize I already did a run this morning and I'm supposed to be slowly moving out of active rest into pre-season training, but I'm restless. I need to move.

I grab my keys and head toward the stadium. Troy worked out my credentials yesterday, so I breeze past security and head toward the weight room.



Nick's in there, and so are a few other players—including Danny and Rush, and two other guys as well.

“Rush Ross,” I say, and I always thought he was a cool dude. Plus, it's fun to say his name since it sounds like one word.

He's younger than me—in his mid-twenties, and I wonder if Troy would be receptive to a younger player dating his daughter as opposed to someone like me.

I hate myself for the thought.

“Noah!” he says genially, and he claps me on the back. “How's the elbow?”

It's amazing to me what a community this game is. Everyone knows Cooper Noah retired early from an elbow injury. Everyone knows Rush Ross came close to breaking Randy Johnson's thirteen strikeout record last season when he had eleven in a single game. Everyone knows that Danny Brewer is a triple threat since he can run, field, and hit.

And now the three of us are in the same room together.

“Cooper Noah,” one of the men across the room says. He looks vaguely familiar, and as he approaches, I place him. He was an assistant coach for the Rockies a few years ago. “Joe Buchanan, the third base coach.”

“Great to see you, man,” I say, slapping him on the back. I glance over at the other coach standing near him. “And Chris Jarrett.” I reach out a hand to shake his. “Former first baseman for the Astros and now...”

“First base coach,” he announces proudly.

“Great to have you here,” I say.

“Likewise.” He nods, and I get another excited feeling that Troy and the brass upstairs have assembled a kickass team here.

Nick saunters up behind us. “The big three,” he says to Danny, Rush, and me, and he nods toward the treadmills. “You want me to put you through it today?”

“I already went for a run this morning,” I admit. I glance at Danny and Rush, who are looking at me with challenge in their eyes. I’m not one to back down from a challenge. “But I’m in for a second one.”

And then Nick hands us our asses.

Danny emerges the victor, Rush comes in second, and my slow ass learns real quick what it’s going to mean to get back into season shape. More black coffee, less nachos. And my hip hurts...not because I’m old as fuck, but because I was literally kicked out of someone’s bed this morning.

“Anyone want to head out to the field and toss some balls?” I ask.

“I need to shower and head to a meeting,” Rush says, wiping his face with a towel.

“I’m in,” Danny says with a nod. “Does this foursome work for poker?” he asks, nodding around to the three of us. He’s met with three enthusiastic confirmations. I know Danny fairly well already, but I’m interested in getting to know both Rush and Nick moving forward.

I need a brotherhood. I need the bond. I need the distraction from the constant ache in my chest knowing that Gabby is so close yet so far. Knowing that she’s meeting that jackass for coffee today. Knowing that I can’t have her.

I blow out a breath.

*Focus, Noah, I tell myself.*

It’s not like I can unload my woes on any of these guys. They’re too close to the picture—too close to Troy.

But at least I’ve got a group of guys I can play poker with. That’s something, anyway.

“Are you all free tonight around eight?” Danny asks before Rush leaves.

“I can’t,” Rush says. “Sorry. Next weekend maybe.”

“I can’t, either,” Nick says.

“I guess I’m the only loser without plans,” I admit to Danny, who laughs.

“Then let’s fuck up this town together. Or let it fuck us up.” He shrugs, and I nod with a laugh, glad to have plans for the night to distract me from Gabby and her new *friend*.

Nick tosses me a glove since I don’t have mine here, and it’ll do. Danny grabs a bag of balls, and we head out to the infield.

I draw in a deep breath as I walk over toward third base. There’s no bag here, just the dirt, but it still feels like home.

Danny moves into position at first, and it feels like a long fucking way away considering I haven’t done this in three years.

We both do a few warm-ups to get the muscles moving, but I’m still pretty warm from what Nick just did to us in the weight room.

I pull a ball out of the bag, and I grip it in my palm for a beat as I stare down at the cowhide stitched together by the red laces.

How many thousands of baseballs have I held in my hands over the years?

And how have I gone this long without holding one?

God, I love this game.

“You gonna make out with it or are you gonna toss it?” Danny yells from first, and I brush off the feeling as I pull my arm into position and launch it toward first base.

It falls right into Danny’s glove.

Like riding a fucking bike, and goddamn does it feel good.

We play catch for maybe a half hour before we call it good, and I know my arm will be sore tomorrow, but my elbow feels fine—good, even, and I have plenty of recovery time to build the muscles back up to where they need to be.

It felt right being back out on the field, and I shower and spend a little time fucking around at the stadium before I leave

with a renewed sense of hope.

I stop to pick up an early dinner, and I call my mom on the way home.

“Hey, it’s my favorite baseball player,” she answers, her voice filling my truck.

I chuckle. “Hello Mother.”

“What are you up to? Feeling any better?”

“It’s only been like a day, and no, I’m not. But I did go to the stadium twice now, and I worked out. I picked up a baseball, Mom.”

“You did? How’d it feel?”

“Like I had my purpose back,” I admit.

“I’m so happy for you, honey. The diamond always seemed to be the place where you felt most at home.”

“It always was, and I’m glad to be back on it. Have you looked anything up on the Heat?” I ask.

“Nope. I wanted to hear it all from the source,” she says.

“Rush Ross and Danny Brewer are the first two I’ve met. I guess Duke Owens is joining us, too. Danny and I tossed a ball around and he invited me to be part of their poker group.” I stop at a red light.

“That’s great! Building that team atmosphere already. I’m happy you’re finding people. I worry about you, you know.”

“I know you do. But you don’t have to. I’ve got this,” I lie. I don’t *got this* at all, and my heart starts to hammer loudly in my chest as I turn into Troy’s subdivision.

Her truck is in the circular drive. A Jeep is parked behind her truck, and it’s got one of those bumper stickers with Calvin peeing on the Ford logo.

Fuck this kid.

Is he purposely doing this shit just to piss me off?

I park as close as I can to his bumper so he’ll have a hell of a time getting out of his spot. A little dent in my bumper is

worth it if it comes to that.

The house is quiet when I let myself in, but I know they're around here somewhere.

I head to the kitchen, where I set my food on the table and start eating. I hear some loud laughter as it carries through the house, and my chest tightens a little at the sound. She's having a good time with another guy.

Good. She should. She should move on from me and laugh and smile since those are things I can no longer give her.

But not with a douchebag like that kid.

I hear footsteps and voices approaching as I finish the meal that meets Nick's calorie guidelines, and I think about running out of the room, but intimidation tactics might be more fun.

They're laughing again when they turn the corner, and Gabby freezes when she spots me sitting at the table.

Her eyes connect with mine, and I swear I spot some guilt there before she glances away. "Oh, didn't know you were here," she mutters.

"Feeling better after that epic hangover?" I ask.

She offers a glare at me, and the douche is silent beside her. He's wearing a hat today, and it's backwards, and it just makes him look like he's trying too hard. Guys like me, we can wear our ballcaps backwards because we actually play the game. This skinny bitch looks like he's never even picked up a baseball, let alone learned how to throw one.

But whatever. To each his own.

"I feel fine," she says.

"I'm sure the afternoon coffee helped," I say, a little more suggestiveness in my voice than I'd planned for.

She clears her throat and moves toward the fridge, where she grabs a couple cans of soda, and then she turns to her little friend.

"You ready for a ping pong tournament?" she asks him, her tone taunting. "I'm gonna kick your ass."

Some mocking sound escapes my chest, and she shoots me a dirty look before he puts his hand on the small of her back.

All the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention when he touches her.

I nearly leap out of my seat to physically pull him off her when I realize...it's not my right to.

He can touch her if he wants.

I've chosen not to. Instead, I've chosen to mock her hangover when she walks into the room like an immature child.

They walk out of the room together without a backwards glance, and I toss the plastic fork down into my salad, suddenly not very hungry.

What the fuck am I doing?

I don't want it to be like this. I don't want to fight with her, or to nitpick or argue every time we see each other. I don't want it to be awkward.

But if I can't have her, I don't know how else to be around her.







# CHAPTER 14

## COOPER

I've already had too much to drink.

I've already thrown Nick's dietary advice in the trash.

Maybe it's not that I've drank too much, but it's that I didn't have enough food as a base in my stomach after checking his caloric suggestions.

I opted for whiskey tonight instead of beer, which is a faster train to Drunktown, and we're at a strip club. It's not my usual choice in entertainment, but fuck it. I'm a sad and lonely old man at this point, so I may as well play into all the cliches.

Apparently Danny has buddied up with Ben Olson, who highly recommended Honeys for top-notch Vegas dancing entertainment, and so here we are.

"You been to Bodine's club yet?" Danny asks.

"It's where he brought me to schmooze the deal," I admit. "But I avoided the third floor."

"Yeah, I haven't been up there, either. I feel like he's riding a line there, and I'm not sure it's one I want to cross." He takes a swig of his whiskey.

Yeah, I don't want to cross it, either. Particularly not now that I've been intimate with his daughter.

"You wanna get out of here and blow some money on blackjack?" he asks after we've been drinking an hour or so.

I nod, and we both chug what's left in our glasses and head out. He grabs us a ride share, and we head toward a casino nearby.

"Heard you're single," he says. "Any prospects?"

I think about telling Danny about Gabby, but ultimately I keep my mouth shut. Enough people know. I don't need to

widen that circle, and I don't need Troy finding out now that it's over.

I shake my head. "After Stacy I sort of played the field a while. Met a girl and fell for her fast, but it didn't work out." I leave it at that. "You?"

He makes a *ppft* sound. "Fuck no. Take a look in the mirror if you want to know why."

My brows dip. "What does that mean?"

"The sagging shoulders. The general cynical demeanor. The Cooper Noah I knew a few years ago wasn't like that, and I'd put up a pretty hefty sum on the fact that it was a woman who did this to you."

I press my lips together. He's not wrong.

He nods. "That's what I thought. You know the best way to get over someone, don't you?"

I raise my brows.

"Get on top of someone else, dude."

Is that what she's doing? Is she getting on top of Spongebob? The thought of it makes me want to throw up. It makes me want to put my fist through something, probably not the smartest move given my future at the Heat.

Still, though, the thought of her with someone else fills me with rage. I think back to those headlines about Cooper Noah, the guy who never loses his cool—except that time when I clearly tagged Pete Mitchell out and the ump called him safe...the one time I was ejected from a game for unloading on the asshole who clearly got it wrong.

All the replays were on my side, but I may have gotten a little mouthy with the umpire.

"Yeah," I finally admit on a deep sigh. "A girl fucked me up and I get it. I get why you wouldn't want to subject yourself to that. I don't really want to subject myself to it anymore, either."

"Stacy?" he asks. "Wasn't that her name?"

I'm about to reply in the negative—that it wasn't Stacy this time, even though she fucked me up pretty good herself, but then the car arrives at the casino and we both stumble out of the backseat.

I start to think this was probably a bad idea. I have a nagging suspicion this is going to be an expensive evening out with a friend.

We head toward the high limit area in the back, mostly because it tends to offer privacy than the main tables. Plus the fact that we're two fairly well-known professional baseball players wearing hats. They help protect our identity, but they don't make us invisible, and it's mere moments after entering that Danny is noticed by a group of women. He grins over at me, and they follow his gaze to his friend. I'm recognized pretty quickly by association after that since apparently our names have been paired in the local media as fans anticipate the new expansion team.

“Now this is what I was just talking about,” he says, and I can't help but laugh.

Maybe he's right. Maybe the best way to get over Gabby is to get on top of somebody else. But I'm not sure I have it in me to just pick up a random girl and spend the night with her, not when what I shared with Gabby was so unique, not knowing a woman has it in her to make me feel the way she did. Nobody here tonight is even going to come close to that. Maybe no woman ever will again.

We head toward the tables, where I blow way too much money, drink way too much whiskey, and laugh until my stomach hurts with my buddy, and I'm hurting on Sunday when I wake up.

Nobody's in bed with me to make sure I didn't choke on my own vomit while I slept...though I'm old enough to know my limits and to stop before it gets to that point.

That fact doesn't dull the headache or help with the loud rumbling of my stomach. A shower doesn't really help much, either, and I get back in bed after my shower hoping to catch a little more sleep.

And that's when I hear it.

My bed is up against the same wall as hers, and I hear voices.

I can't make out what they're saying, but she's not alone in her room.

And the other voice?

It's decidedly male.

If that little fucker spent the night, I might just lose my shit.





## CHAPTER 15

### GABBY

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## CHAPTER 16

### COOPER

I'm seething as I pour a cup of coffee, and fuck this. I'm not hanging around the house all day watching her get closer and closer with some other guy as she flaunts it in my face.

Close the goddamn door. At least have some respect and close the door so people walking by don't have to see.

But no, she's lying there on his chest all cozy, and it should be *me* holding her in my arms, and I'm completely out of sorts after the shit I witnessed.

I can't do this.

I can't live here, I can't watch her move on, I can't fucking even enjoy this new adventure in my life because she's right fucking there marring all of it.

I text Kaylee.

**Me:** *Are you going to the game today or are you watching at home?*

It's Ben's last preseason game before the regular season begins, and last I checked, the Aces were going to Los Angeles for the game.

She writes back nearly immediately.

**Kaylee:** *Home with the girls. Come hang out, everyone else went to California but I wanted to get a jump start on the SFK ideas. We can watch the game and talk ahead of your meetings tomorrow.*

She texts her address, and I chug my cup of coffee before racing out the door to get away from Gabby and her new lover before they come down for breakfast.

Did she really move on so quickly? Did I ever mean anything at all to her?

Those are the questions that plague me on the drive over to Kaylee's house.

Two baby girls are crawling around on the floor when I arrive. One is using the coffee table to help her stand, and the other is attempting to pull herself up onto the couch.

"Holly, no!" she says, and clearly the rambunctious one trying to climb the couch is Holly. Holly jumps at her mother's tone, and she falls to the floor in a heap of tears. "God, I'm really dreading the teenage years with the dramatics of nine months."

I laugh. "May I?" I ask, and Kaylee nods while she picks up Hailey. I reach down to quiet the now screaming Holly. "Hey, baby girl," I say quietly, soothingly. "You're okay. Take a deep breath with me." I suck in a dramatic breath of air and let it go, breathing my dragon coffee breath right in her face.

Tears turn to giggles.

"Jesus, how are you still single?" Kaylee mutters.

I shoot her a look. "You really want to get into that right now?"

"If I wasn't married to the hottest tight end in the universe, I swear to God my ovaries would've just exploded. That whole *baby girl* line in that sexy gravel tone? Good Lord, Coopsey."

"I thought we nixed Coopsey."

She shakes her head. "You thought wrong."

We play with the babies as a twinge of something pulls at my chest.

This is what I want. Maybe not with Kay—definitely not with Kay—but with the right woman. Kaylee and I were a non-starter. I found her attractive, and it was mutual, but she was pregnant when we met, and I was still reeling from my break-up with Stacy. We fell into a brother-sister type relationship, and over the last few months, we've gotten closer and closer.

It never would've worked between us, anyway. She's from a football family. They never would've let her get with a

ballplayer like me.

Although athletes are athletes, and while our games are different, our dedication is not.

Somehow Kaylee tamed the wild Ben Olson, and they're living their happily ever after. He went on record hundreds of times spouting how he never wanted kids...and now he's blessed with not one but two perfect girls, and he's gone on record twice as many times proving what a family man he's turned into.

I'm happy for Kaylee. I'm glad they worked it out. I'm not jealous, exactly. I'm just wondering when my time will come.

We watch the game, and we chat about SFK during commercials while the girls nap. It isn't until the fourth quarter when the starters are benched and the Aces are ahead by three touchdowns when Kaylee mutes the television and turns toward me.

"The girls will be up soon, and we need to talk."

My brows dip. "About what?"

"About *you*, Cooper Noah. You're acting like your best friend just died, but I'm right here."

I laugh. "While you *are* my best friend, Kaylee Olson, you're wrong. I'm fine."

"You are not, you big dumb idiot. You're clearly broken up over Gabby, and I need to know what you're going to do about it," she says.

I blow out a breath and keep my eyes on the screen. "My hands are tied. What choice do I have?"

"You choose love. You *always* choose love," she says, reaching over and squeezing my forearm.

"Like you did when you ran away from Ben?" I mutter petulantly.

"Hey," she says sharply enough that my head whips in her direction. "That was different." Her tone gentles.

“It’s fine, Kay. I don’t need the distraction right now anyway. It’s just...that dopey intern kid that walked in, he’s been hanging around her. He spent the night last night.”

“Oh, God. You don’t think...”

“I don’t know what to think. I think she’s playing games. I think she’s flaunting something in my face but I know her, and I know she’s not the type to just jump into something new when she’s hurting over the end of us. I fucking hate it, but what can I do?”

“You can fight, Cooper. You fight for her. You fight for what you know is right.”

“But what if it isn’t right? What if it was exciting and thrilling and steamy for a few weeks, and it was going to sputter out anyway? What if there’s too wide a gap and the fact that I want kids yesterday scares her off because she’s not even out of college? What if she doesn’t want to be with a ballplayer who just signed a three-year contract and will be gone half the year when he was the one who wanted to start a family in the first place?” I blow out a breath at the end of my rant, collapsing back on the couch as the confession drains me of everything I have left in me.

“Hey, Coop,” Kaylee says gently. “It’s all going to be okay. It’s all going to work out.”

I press my lips together and nod as I keep my eyes trained on the television and push down the emotions welling up. I won’t let them spill over, but I’m also not sure I can trust what Kaylee’s telling me.

I want to believe her, but I just don’t know how it *can* work out...unless I allow feelings to overrule logic, something I’ve never done before in my life.







# CHAPTER 17

## COOPER

“These are great ideas,” Joanie says in our Monday afternoon meeting. Gabby’s here—we waited to hold this meeting until she was done with class for the day, and I spent the morning working out with Danny and Nick. “I’ll get my team on it to start drafting some models, and we’ll get your approval before moving it to the ballpark operations department.”

“Thanks, Joanie.” I nod my thanks. “I’m going to walk the Spade Level again and see if it sparks up any other ideas.” The first floor everyone enters the stadium on is the Heart Level, the second level is the Diamond Level with the Club Boxes, and the third level is the Spade Level, all catchy little titles that reflect the city we’re in. They picked hearts for the first level since we’re playing with our fans’ *hearts* or some silly jingle that makes me want to roll my eyes every time I hear it, but the Spade Level is where the kids’ area is planned.

“Great,” Troy says. “Gabriella, why don’t you go with him? I think if the two of you put your heads together, you’ll be unstoppable.”

Gabby clears her throat uncomfortably as a vision of us putting our *heads* together pops uninvited into my mind. Or, you know, not so much *heads* as her pussy and my cock.

I purse my lips and offer a short nod. “Sure.”

“You know, Mr. Bodine,” Joanie says. “I was thinking it would be a good idea for Gabby to shadow Cooper for all things SFK to take a deeper look at the marketing angle, and maybe Justin could shadow me to get a look at the business operations side of things. Thoughts on that?”

“Perfect,” Troy says with a sharp nod. “I think it’s an excellent idea. When Cooper isn’t working on SFK, what

would you like Gabby working on that's still related to marketing?"

"We need social footage. This TikTok thing is all the rage, but to be honest I'm lost. I'm seeing all sorts of insiders post things at ballparks and they're going viral. Imagine the clout we'd get with this brand-new stadium," Joanie says.

"Can you handle that?" Troy asks Gabby.

She nods a little weakly. "Socials are part of my area of study."

"Great. Then shadow Coop everywhere when you aren't working on anything else for Joanie," Troy says, and my heart drops somewhere near my nuts. "He can introduce you to the other players, show you the clubhouse, the weight room. Just run everything by Joanie before you post anything anywhere."

Fuck. My. Life.

Is he fucking serious right now? *Shadow Coop everywhere.* Not your best idea, Mr. Bodine.

As if she wasn't already ruining this experience for me, now I can't even come here to the stadium to avoid her.

"Right. And I'll be sure to check the clubhouse for any nudity before I allow your young daughter in there," I say a little more snidely than I mean to.

Troy misses my tone, and I'm pretty sure it's because he's been playing footsie with *Sapphire* under the table for the last forty-five minutes. More and more I'm getting the image of him being a dominant over her on the third floor over at his nightclub that decidedly *isn't* a sex club. "Excellent," he says, and I scrape my chair against the floor more aggressively than is necessary, stand, and thank everyone for their time before stalking out, my shadow following close behind me.

"I don't like this any more than you do," she grits out once we're out of earshot of anyone in there.

"Really?" I ask snidely. "Because it sure as fuck feels like you put him up to this."

“Are you kidding me right now?” she practically screeches as we enter the Heart Level concourse.

“I’m not kidding you. Did you ask him to shadow me?” I hiss.

She’s so taken aback by my accusation that she sputters out a laugh. “Hell no! I haven’t said a damn word to him about any of this! I can’t believe you think so little of me.”

I blow out a breath. “Sorry,” I mutter. “I don’t think little of you.” And that’s the whole goddamn problem, isn’t it?

We walk silently side-by-side toward the escalator that will take us up to the third level, and the entire way, I fight every natural instinct to grab her hand in mine.

I also fight every natural instinct telling me to ask her what the hell is going on with that punk-ass kid she’s seeing.

Once we get up to the empty area that will soon be filled with structures and kids and their parents, I walk around a few beats while Gabby watches me carefully.

“What are you thinking?” she finally asks.

I don’t know how to answer that. I’m sure as fuck not focused on my purpose for being here, but telling her that feels out of left field.

“I think a large contained structure over here,” I say, pointing. “One of the ones where kids climb up all the levels and there are huge slides up at the top. Maybe a ball pit they can slide down into and play.”

She follows my finger to where I’m pointing. “Are ball pits a good idea? Won’t someone just have to constantly pick them up? And if they’re at the bottom of the slide, won’t kids just stay there and not move and then the next kid coming down the slide will crash into them?”

I refuse to admit I hadn’t thought about that. “They’ll be fine. Over here I was thinking a batting cage kids can play in, one of the kinds with an automatic pitch. And over there, a catching station.” I walk around the area until I’m standing near the wall, and she follows me, standing far enough away

that I can't reach out and touch her. A safe distance. "Then a circuit with different stations for activity around it. Jumping jacks at one, squats at another, you get the idea. And in between each exercise platform will be a spot to march in place."

"What about trampolines instead of marching?" she asks.

I lean back against the wall and harden my gaze at her.

I don't want her to be so goddamn beautiful and smart on top of it.

My nephews go bananas for those trampoline parks, and in my thoughts about the circuit, I was thinking about how adults would navigate it, not how *kids* would. But this is for kids. Kids don't want to fucking march in place. They want to bounce. They want to get their energy out.

They want trampolines.

I blow out a breath. "Yeah. Trampolines might work."

She flattens her lips. "It's not against the rules to tell me it's a good idea, you know. A compliment wouldn't hurt you."

"You don't think so?" I ask. I shake my head, and then I mutter a curse under my breath as I stare down at the floor.

"It would hurt me more than you, but that's sort of the theme of our relationship, isn't it?"

I lift my gaze to hers, and she's studying me. The way she's staring so intently at me, like she can see right through me... it's unnerving.

"You think it's hurting you more than it's hurting me?" I ask quietly.

She lifts a shoulder and gives me a pointed gaze.

I harden my gaze on her, and then I push off the wall and stalk toward her. She backs up until she hits the wall behind her, and I pin her there with my hips. I grab her wrists between my hands, and I yank them up above her head, locking them in one of my hands while I use my other arm to haul her closer to me.

I have to lock her hands up there.

I can't allow her to touch me. I won't be able to resist her if she does.

Our bodies are pressed close, and I can feel the pounding of her heart against my chest, hers hammering as loudly and as rapidly as mine.

I drop my lips to her neck because I can't go another second without tasting her skin. I breathe her in, memorizing every scent that's not mine to have any longer.

It sure as fuck doesn't belong to Spongebob, either, but that's her choice to make.

"I don't want to fight against this, Gabby. Believe me. But I have to," I murmur against her skin.

She lets out a soft cry, and then she twists out of my hold. I let her go even though I have the strength to easily hold her there if I wanted to.

"I can't do this," she rasps, looking wildly around before she bolts away from me.







## CHAPTER 18

### GABBY

I don't know what the hell that was, but it can't happen again.

It can't.

I happen to run into Justin as I get off the escalator at the second level and turn into the concourse.

Literally.

"Oof," he grunts when I spin around the corner. He pulls back and grabs my biceps to steady me. "Whoa, girl. Are you okay?"

I shake my head, and he links his arm through mine and walks me through the concourse and over to one of the Club Level suites.

We collapse into two of the chairs there.

"What's going on?" he asks quietly.

"I lied," I say as I stare down at the field. I study the place where Cooper will stand for all the home games, all the practices, all the events. Third base.

Maybe telling Justin the truth is a mistake, or maybe I can finally unload some of this and have someone to lean on when I'm here at the ballpark.

I wonder if Cooper has told anyone.

"About what?" he finally asks after waiting for me to go on.

I draw in a deep breath and exhale it loudly before I answer. "Cooper."

He presses his lips together. "What about him?"

"My friends took me out for my twenty-first birthday." It feels like ages ago even though it was literally less than a

month ago. “I sat at a blackjack table next to a hot guy who offered to teach me how to play. I spent the whole weekend with him, and we decided to start seeing each other despite the almost twelve-year age gap between us.”

“You spent the *weekend* with Cooper Noah?” he asks, his tone absolutely incredulous.

“That I did. And then he invited me to his place in San Diego, so I went there for the weekend,” I admit.

“You went to his place in San Diego? Wait a minute...and you didn’t know who he was?”

I shake my head, my eyes still focused on third base. “My friends looked him up, but he’d been long retired and I never paid attention to baseball anyway. How am I supposed to know every player who ever retired? And how was I supposed to know he was planning to *un-retire*?”

“Because he’s Cooper Fucking Noah, Gabriella. He’s one of the most gorgeous men who has ever played the game. *That* is how you know,” he says, and I roll my eyes.

“Right. Anyway, we spent some blissful time together, I fell in love with him, and then he showed up as my dad’s houseguest and told me he couldn’t be with me because he’s friends with my dad and blah blah blah.”

“Oh, sweet baby Jesus,” he mutters. “And now Joanie’s making you shadow him.”

“He broke my heart,” I admit quietly.

“I’m so sorry, Gabs.” He reaches over and grabs my hand in his, and he squeezes tightly. “All the more reason to fake it until we make it, right?”

I share some more details about the time Cooper and I spent together. We talk quietly in case someone was to walk up behind us.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” I beg.

“You have my word,” he says. He reaches around my shoulder and draws me in a little closer, and I rest my head on his shoulder, glad I seem to have found a new friend.

He leans down and presses a soft kiss to my temple. It's nothing more than a friendly gesture—one friend comforting another—but to the man clearing his throat behind us, it must have looked like more.

“I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm going to walk the one hundred level to see if there are any places where mini centers might fit in to try to get people up to the Spade Level.” Cooper's voice is flat, emotionless, and if I didn't know him better, I'd even venture to say it's a little uncaring. But I know him, and I know that's not the case.

He just admitted to me when he had me tied up, when his lips were on my throat, that he's hurting, too. That this is hard on him, too. I've been so wrapped up in my own broken heart that I haven't really stopped to consider that this might be painful for him, too.

And the reason why?

Because he's the one doing this to us.

If it were up to me, we'd sneak around a while and we'd figure out how to handle my father. I'd find some way to make this work. Instead, he'd rather give up at the first sign of trouble.

I lean over toward Justin and plant a kiss right on his cheek. He gives me a little bit of a warning look that goes undetected by Cooper behind us.

“I'll talk to you later,” I say to Justin, and then I stand and turn around to face Cooper.

His clenched jaw works back and forth as anger vibrates off him.

“Ready?” I ask as sweetly as I possibly can.

He spins and takes off, and I practically have to run to keep up with him.

“Will you slow down?” I ask, but he ignores my plea as he keeps going, maybe even picking up speed a little.

We make it down to the one hundred level, and since I'm his shadow, I trail a little bit behind him. He doesn't talk to me

at all, doesn't indicate what he's thinking or what ideas he has as we walk the entire loop of the Heart Level.

I look around to try to see what he's seeing. I spot the Vegas Heat logo everywhere. I spot restaurants that have already started building out their booths with their own logos and customizations. I see some empty booths not yet filled by sponsors, and I see other areas where I could imagine a mini circuit or even just one or two of the platforms we were talking about upstairs—a trampoline, maybe, with an attendant or a sign letting people know there's more stuff like this up on the third floor.

We head down to the field and walk through to the weight room, and I pull my phone out of my pocket to film some footage for the social channels as requested by Joanie. Cooper stops to chat with some guy sitting at a desk in the weight room, still completely ignoring my presence until the guy nods at me and asks who I am.

If not for the question, Cooper would have been completely silent, his jaw still clenched, still working back and forth the whole time. Clearly whatever has gone down between the two of us has struck a nerve with him, and you know what? It struck a nerve with me, too.

Now if I could just get him to talk about it instead of running around ignoring me, maybe we could actually get somewhere.





# CHAPTER 19

## COOPER

I'm seething as I chat with Nick. I'm trying to steady my emotions, but it's impossible.

I can't seem to keep my goddamn hands off her, and then I see her run right to the other kid.

She shouldn't be with him.

But she can't be with me.

And that's the crux of the problem, isn't it? I offer a breadcrumb, and she runs with it toward Spongebob Dickface.

This situation is impossible, and it's only made worse when Troy walks into the weight room. I glance around and see Gabby over by some equipment taking video footage on her phone. At least that's what I think she's doing.

"I have a surprise for you, Noah," Troy says when he sees me, interrupting my conversation with Nick. His grin is wide and honestly it makes me a little nervous.

"What is it?"

"We're heading to the media suite on the Heart Level. News of your contract broke last night and they were knocking down the door this morning to be the first to get an interview."

An interview?

Right now?

My heart is still pumping from seeing another dude wrapped around my girl, and now I'm supposed to just walk into the media room with a fucking smile while they film me and my answers to all the questions they're going to fire at me?

"Let's go," I say.



I follow Troy there, practicing breathing exercises as I focus on my palms. *Up palm, down palm, time to get calm. Breathe real deep and take the leap.*

I can do this.

We walk into the room from the back so we're entering on a small platform holding a table and two chairs. The Vegas Heat logo repeats to infinity on a backdrop behind us as I slide into one of the chairs in front of a huge group of microphones perched on the other side of the table. I can hardly see over them to the crowd of reporters gathered here.

"I'm pleased to introduce you to our third baseman, Cooper Noah," Troy begins.

"Good morning, everyone," I say with a wave and a smile.

It's like riding a bike, that old skill of acting in front of reporters, and I climb on and grip the handlebars for dear life.

"Jerry Garner, Vegas Times. How did Troy manage to lure you out of retirement?" the first reporter asks.

Images of my mouth on Gabby's pussy as I wrestled with the idea of moving to Vegas seem to flash before my eyes. I clear my throat as I force them away. Now is not the time, and certainly not when I'm sitting next to her father. "He gave me an offer I couldn't refuse."

"So it was all about the money?"

"The money's nice, but the love of the game is ultimately what brought me back. The chance to play for Mr. Bodine after we've been friends for years, the chance to build a team, the chance to go for the Commissioner's trophy with a new expansion team...it all appealed to me."

"When did you know you were coming to Vegas?"

The moment I slid my cock into Gabriella Grant.

*Fuck.*

That's not true. I had a feeling I was going to say yes when I took that ride from Troy's club back to Caesars Palace, and that was before I met Gabby.

But my weekend with her solidified my feelings that Vegas was the place I wanted to be. I was hopeful it would be with her, but things don't always work out the way we hope.

I glance over at Troy, who's showing no emotion on his face. I had to sign a nondisclosure agreement when I stepped foot into his club, so I can't exactly mention that he proposed this idea there.

"He presented the idea to me, and it was in the car on the way home when I knew I couldn't pass it up," I say.

Troy pushes my shoulder teasingly. "You made me wait over two weeks for my answer and you knew five minutes after you left?"

I laugh. "I knew three minutes after I left."

The reporters gathered crack up at that, and the rest of the conference goes as well as it can. They ask me about what I did in my retirement, and I plug SFK. They ask me about my elbow, and I mention my surgeon by name.

But when they ask me about my personal life...that's when I trip.

"Mr. Noah, is there a special woman in your life making the move to Vegas with you?"

The sports reporters here don't give a fuck about my personal life, but this is Vegas. I'm not surprised an entertainment reporter is in the mix. Between the Vegas Aces football team and the different rock bands based out of this city plus the fact that it's Las Vegas, this is a city ripe with entertainment.

No. There's not a special woman making the move to Vegas with me.

But there *is* a special woman, and she happens to be the daughter of the man sitting next to me, and I can't have her and it's fucking with me so badly that I'm nearly reconsidering the move here at all.

I wouldn't do that.

I wouldn't pull out, and I wouldn't say those things to the reporters.

But imagine if I did. Imagine if I just let the truth out.

It's not just the nature of the question throwing me for a loop, though.

It's the fact that less than a minute before this reporter asked this particular question, the door to the media suite swung open, and Gabriella Grant walked in. She took a seat in the back of the room, and despite the spotlights on me and the microphones blocking my view, I still saw her walk in with an angelic glow surrounding her, and I haven't been able to tear my eyes off her since.

And now I have to answer a question about a special woman when I can't have the only woman I want.

We're all keeping secrets, and there are even more we need to keep from the people interviewing me today.

I keep my eyes trained on Gabby, and I can feel their heat on me even from across the room.

After a pause that's far too long, I finally say, "No. No special woman."

Gabby closes her eyes as if the words physically plow into her, and I feel it, too.

The wind is knocked out of me at my bald-faced lie to the media, and I watch as she gets up and walks out of the room, taking what's left of my broken heart with her.





## CHAPTER 20

### COOPER

I should have chosen a different bar. Any other bar in the entire universe, really.

But no. I chose the same place where I have the pleasure of sitting across the bar watching Gabby get shitfaced for the second time in less than a week.

I have the absolute privilege of watching what's-his-nuts pull her in close with his arm around her shoulder.

I don't know if they know I'm here. I was here before they got here, sitting in a corner booth across the way with Danny, who's already on his fourth glass of whiskey and chatting up some woman who just slid into the booth with him.

I've been spending a lot of time with him outside of my time at the stadium, mostly as a distraction to get out of Troy's house, but I'm not sure I can keep up with him. The guy has a different woman on his arm every night, and that's not my style anymore.

I wonder for a beat if I should go back to the club. Troy gave me an open invitation, and my attendance would help me bond with Troy. Maybe it would help me see whether I'm making the right choice or the wrong one.

But I already know the truth. I'm doing what's best for my career.

It's why I'm sitting in a booth with Danny Brewer when I'd rather be the one slinging my arm around Gabby's shoulder across the bar as she laughs with the other interns.

I signal to the waitress that I'd like another whiskey, and when she brings it over, she slides onto the booth beside me. She nods over at Danny and the blonde.

"Feeling like a third wheel?" she asks.

I laugh. “Yeah, a little. He told me it was going to be a fun night out, and then he ditched me for her.” I glance down at her nametag, talking softly enough so just Kelly can hear me.

She rolls her eyes dramatically. “Men.”

“Right?”

She giggles, and this is the moment when she’s waiting for me to ask her what time she gets off so I can take her somewhere to ravage her.

But I don’t want to ravage her.

She’s not Gabby.

“Well, uh,” she says a little awkwardly. “I guess I better get back to it.”

I press my lips together and nod. “Thanks for the laugh.”

She gives me a sympathetic look, and if it were another time and my chest wasn’t hollow right now, maybe I’d find it in me to at least get her number.

But that’s not where I’m at.

A reminder comes through on my phone.

*Stay at Caesars Palace on Saturday.*

Right.

Two days from now is my thirty-third birthday, and sometime back when Gabby and I were together and we weren’t sure where we were going to be able to meet up for sex, I reserved a room for the night for us.

I figured she celebrated her birthday there, so I should, too.

It was going to be a romantic night just for the two of us—where I didn’t have to worry about my boss overhearing my antics and she didn’t have to worry about her father overhearing hers.

Little did we know the man was one and the same.

I move my finger to cancel the reservation, but I pause over it.

Surely I could round up a few buddies to hang with me this weekend, and I could collapse onto a bed at Caesars rather than running back to Troy's place drunk.

I can take the night away from both Gabby and her father to try to get my head on straight.

I move my finger away from the cancelation button, and I suck down my whiskey, pulling an ice cube into my mouth to suck on it.

The girl Danny's been chatting with gets up, and he wiggles his eyebrows at me across the table. I laugh.

"She has a friend that's meeting her here in a bit," he says suggestively.

"I'm not in the place," I say around the ice cube, and then I chew it.

"So what place are you in?" he asks.

I can't help it. My eyes move across the bar toward Gabby, and when they flick back to Danny as I realize my mistake, his eyes widen a little as he's looking where I just was.

"Wait a minute. Aren't those the interns?" he asks.

I flatten my lips and nod.

"You've got a thing for an intern?" he practically roars.

"A, shut the fuck up, and B, no. It's not a *thing for an intern*." I stare down at a spot on the table. If there's anyone I could trust with this secret, it's Danny Brewer. He's a good guy who'll take it to the grave, and it might help to have someone on the field who understands what I'm going through.

When I finally glance up at him, he's staring at me with concern.

"Then...what is it?"

"I met Troy's daughter before I knew she was Troy's daughter," I admit, and his jaw drops open a little. "We had a thing, and now it's over."



“Ah, so that’s the girl who fucked you up. I thought it was your ex,” he says.

“I know. I let you think that because I can’t have this getting back to Troy.” I offer a pointed look, and he nods.

“It won’t.” He pretends to zip his lips, but then he downs half a glass of whiskey, so I’m not sure how trustworthy the promise is.

The girl he was talking to slides back in beside him.

“Did you ask him about Leila?” she asks him, pointing toward me.

“I mentioned you had a friend, but Coop’s going through some things,” he says.

“I bet Leila could make you forget,” she offers.

“I’m sure she could. I’m so sorry, but I’m going to have to politely decline,” I say.

I glance over at Gabby just like I’ve been doing all night, and see the two of them with their bodies basically all over each other.

I shouldn’t decline Leila before I’ve even met her. I should take the offer on the table.

But I won’t stoop to her level. I won’t flaunt some new thing in front of her on purpose.

Though at the stadium today, when I found her in the Club Level...it didn’t seem like she was doing it on purpose.

I can’t help but wonder whether what we had was so meaningless to her that she could just move on so easily. I’m not like that.

I need some time. Time to heal. Time to move on. Time to focus on baseball.

Fuck it, maybe I’ll just play my three years before I even look at another woman.

That thought is confirmed as I hear Gabby’s loud laughter carry all the way across the bar.

“I’m going to head out,” I announce once I finish my whiskey. I’ve had four, which means I shouldn’t drive.

I decide to head out front and call up a car because I just need to get the fuck out of the bar where I can hear her having fun and laughing while I feel like a constant weight is pressing against my chest.

I bid goodbye to Danny and the girl whose name I never learned. I don’t know where to go besides home, so I open the Lyft app and order up a car back to Troy’s place.

One week down, three more to go until I have my own place and won’t have to head back to the same house where Gabby lives. Although from the way things look between her and her new boyfriend, maybe she’ll start spending more time at his place.

I’m leaning against the building, head down as I try to remain incognito, when the door of the bar bursts open and I spot Gabby rushing out. She looks wildly around, and I get the sense she’s drunk.

I am a little bit, too.

She spins on her heel then spots me standing against the wall. “Did you follow me here?” she hisses at me. “Watching me, making sure I’m not drinking too much? Or were you going to force me to go home again?”

I clear my throat. “I could ask you the same considering I was there with my buddy before you even showed up.” I force all emotion from my tone.

She points a finger at me. “I want you to leave me alone.”

“I’m trying. Believe me, I’m trying.”

“Justin and I are very happy together.” She juts her chin out, and I get the sense she’s lying.

“Great. Happy for you.” I avert my gaze to the ground at my own lie.

“Good. Now leave.” She glares at me.

“I’m waiting for a Lyft. Why did you come out here, exactly?” I glare back.

She huffs out a sigh, but the way her eyes widen just slightly, the way they flick down to my chest like she’s thinking about rushing into me so I can wrap my arms around her...the actions speak louder than the words. *Justin and I are very happy together.*

Sure you are, Gabby. Sure you are.

She spins on her heel and heads back inside without answering me, and she just made one thing very clear.

Whatever is going on between her and Justin doesn’t matter. Because when it comes to the two of us...it’s not over.





## CHAPTER 21

### GABBY

I can't focus on having fun after that exchange. When I saw him walking through the bar toward the doors, it set my blood on fire.

This thing between us...it's passionate, that's for damn sure. Whether it's love or hate remains to be seen. It started as love, but now I think I hate him. The fact that he's dangling himself in front of me constantly when I can't have him just solidifies that feeling.

He passed right by my table like I wouldn't see him. Everyone else at the table was laughing at the chugging contest between Brian and Chase, but I glanced away long enough to spot him.

Under Armour hat pulled down low. Tanned, strong arms. The chest I could lose myself in. The long legs covered in jeans. The firm torso covered by a black shirt with abs of marble underneath.

I didn't need to see his face to know it was him, and I was propelled by a vodka-induced rage to confront him.

And that confrontation didn't go so well. I wasn't sure why I was even out there other than the fact that I was a little drunk and I wanted to see him.

He's still so beautiful.

Too beautiful.

It's not fair.

He was mine for such a short time, and I just want to go back to the way things were. I just want a weekend at a hotel where we're two strangers who are falling in love.

I just want him back.

Is that too much to ask for?

I guess it is.

“You okay?” Justin asks when I get back to the table.

I close my eyes real tight as I try to ward off the tears, but it’s futile.

“Let’s get you home,” he says.

I blow out a breath and shake my head. “That’s where *he* will be,” I whisper to him. I catch Chloe looking at us from across the table, and I’m sure she’s wondering what we’re whispering about as I look to be on the verge of tears. She’s nice enough not to ask, but I’m getting to know everyone here at this table.

It won’t be long before our friendship forces me to either confess or lie, and I don’t want to lie to these people. But I can’t exactly confess the truth, either.

“All the more reason for me to take you there,” he says.

“Okay,” I murmur. He picked me up and drove me here, and he’s only had one drink the entire time we’ve been here. “Let’s head out then.”

“I’m gonna take Gabs home,” he tells the rest of the group.

“You two are getting awfully cozy,” Mackenzie says, and there’s a clear accusation in her tone.

They don’t know he’s not into me.

Justin tosses an arm around me and pulls me in close. “Yeah we are.” He gives an exaggerated wink to everyone at the table, and uproarious laughter follows us out the door toward his car.

I glance at the spot where Cooper stood a few minutes ago, and he’s gone. I grab Justin’s arm and squeeze it as we head toward his Jeep. “You don’t have to lie to them for me.”

“I didn’t lie. We *are* cozy. They can interpret that however they want.” He shrugs as he unlocks the doors and walks me to the passenger side. I hop in, and then he moves around to the driver’s side and slides in behind the wheel.

“You’re a good friend to me,” I say softly.

“I feel like we have a lot in common. We’re both lying to our parents. We’re both unhappy. We’re both at a crossroads. It’s natural we’d gravitate toward each other.” He pulls up some rap song for the ride home, and I wrinkle my nose.

“What is this?” I ask.

“Bad Bunny,” he says.

“I’ve never heard of him.”

“He’s a Puerto Rican rapper.”

“I’m not into rap music,” I admit.

His hand flies to his chest. “What?” he asks, clearly horrified by my admission. “I’m not sure we can still be friends. What do you listen to?”

“Taylor Swift.” I shrug.

“Like...exclusively?” he asks, surprised.

I nod.

He laughs, and then he changes the song to something off her newest album. “Me too. I just put the rap on to make myself seem cool since it’s the thing.”

“Taylor makes you way cooler.” I lean over to bump his shoulder with mine, and we head toward home.

I let us in through the front door once we’re home, and it’s quiet. Dad’s car wasn’t out front, so he might not be home, and neither was Cooper’s—but he was waiting for a ride from the bar. I’m not sure where he was headed.

We collapse together on the couch and put on some Netflix, and I must fall asleep on Justin’s shoulder because some loud banging in the kitchen startles me awake.

“What the hell is that?” I ask.

“I think it’s Cooper,” Justin whispers. “He passed by a few minutes ago. Didn’t say a word to me when he walked by but I’m thinking he’s making something for dinner.”



I listen a little more closely and recognize the sound of pots and pans banging together—the kind of noise like he’s trying to get to the pan on the bottom of the drawer and everything else is stacked on top of it. And then the loud clatter of a plate being set onto the counter with a bit of aggression, along with some silverware.

The fridge door slamming shut.

The pantry door opening and closing.

The icemaker dispensing ice. And more ice. And still more—one of the loudest sounds in the entire kitchen.

The sound of liquid being poured into a glass and a glass bottle slamming down beside it onto the countertop.

He’s stomping around the kitchen in a huff, and I feel a little guilty that he’s probably extra huffy because he spotted me with my head on Justin’s shoulder as I lay sleeping and my friend watched a movie.

It’s complicated, this whole thing. I don’t want him to feel hurt, and yet...he’s the one causing the hurt. I guess I don’t need to mislead him where Justin is concerned, but part of me feels good, like I’m getting revenge for him ending it when it’s not what I want at all.

The other part of me feels like I should be honest with him, but every time we try to talk we just start yelling. Or he grabs me and pulls me into his arms, and I think he might change his mind, and then he doesn’t.

The movie ends, and Justin heads out. I stand by the door for a beat as I debate going into the kitchen where I know he is or going upstairs to my room.

Upstairs is safer. Besides, I don’t know if my dad’s somewhere here at home, and I don’t want him walking into the kitchen when we’re inevitably yelling at each other.

I’m about to walk into my bedroom when I feel a hand on my arm pulling me back out into the hallway. I’m slammed up against the wall, pinned there by his hips, and a thrill rushes up my spine.

Adrenaline courses through me. I want this. I want *him*. I want him in a way I don't quite understand...in a way I've never wanted anyone before him, in a way I'll never want anyone after him.

His eyes lock onto mine, and the stormy blue depths is all I see. I stare into them, his full of anger and fear and hopelessness, and I'm frozen to the spot as I take a breath.

I smell him. I'm close enough to breathe in that woodsy scent, the smell that became so comforting to me so quickly. I'm close enough to see the hitch of his breath, the flapping of his pulse in his neck.

"What the fuck are you doing with that jackass?" he demands.

"It's not your business," I grit out thickly.

"You can do better."

I jut my chin upward a beat. "You mean like you?"

"You know it can't work between us."

"Why are you pushing so hard against it?" I ask him for the millionth time. There's a begging desperation to my tone, but he stands firm for a beat.

And then his mouth crashes down to mine.

Now this...*this* is a kiss.

It's hot and angsty and dramatic as his mouth opens and the urgency kicks in. His tongue moves against mine, one of his arms slinging around my waist as he hauls me closer to him, the other hand still perched on my arm. I kiss back with everything I have, wrapping my arms around his body, my fingertips reaching under his shirt so I can feel the warm, smooth skin of his back. I moan into him as he kisses me, pressing my body to him as closely as I can.

It's messy and wet, hot and sultry.

No space separates our bodies, and he shifts his hips so I can feel how hard he is for me, how ready he is. His mouth brutalizes mine with his kiss, teeth clashing together and

tongues battering in some sort of epic battle that we're both winning.

Except we can't. Neither of us will win, not when he keeps building a stronger, taller wall between us.

And that's when we both hear it. The front door opens and closes. My father's voice rings loud and clear through the house as Cooper kisses me. "Gabriella?"

He pulls back, his eyes hazy as he drops his hand from my arm and unlaces his other arm from around me.

He takes a large step back, nearly bumping into the wall behind him. "I...I can't. I can't do this."

He's stuttering—unusually for the always cool and poised Cooper Noah, and I take a little pride in the fact that I'm the one who caused him to lose his cool.

"I can't resist you, but I have to fight this. I *have* to. Too many people are depending on me. I can't fuck it up." His voice is low and resigned. He doesn't want to walk away from me, from this, from *us*, but he has to. He's convinced himself of that, and even though he's having a hard time fighting against it, he's trying to make good on the commitments he made, and I'm throwing something that's nothing more than a friendship with a boy who's more interested in *him* than he is in *me* right in his face.

He steps away, down the hall, down the stairs, back to whatever food he was making in the kitchen, back to start a conversation with my father, and I stare after him until he's long gone, the scent of him still in my nostrils and the feel of his lips imprinted firmly on mine forever.





## CHAPTER 22

### COOPER

Maybe I should just live in a hotel until my house is ready.

Or maybe I could stay with Kaylee.

But moving out now would just look suspicious, and that's the opposite of what I'm trying to do here.

I've never felt more stuck in my life.

I could stay away—could hang out somewhere else, but I'm new to town. There's always action in Vegas, but the people I trust around these parts consist of Kaylee and Ben, who are busy with babies and the start of a football season; Danny, who I spend most of my time with except when he's busy banging somebody; and Troy, who I can't exactly confess my most recent heartbreak to given the fact that he's the one person I'm trying to hide it from.

I could go out, sure. I could meet people. I could make new friends pretty easily.

But it's hard when you're almost thirty-three and you own a status as a celebrity. I guess I could head to Troy's club to meet people in situations similar to mine, but I don't really want to. There's a stigma with a place like that, and even if I want to stay on the first floor, that doesn't mean everyone else will want to.

The season will start soon enough, and since Troy has unofficially named me team captain, I've started spending time sketching out details for building brotherhood through teamwork. He gave me an office near his where I can work, and I've gone in early every morning this week to work out and then to sit in my office watching film, strategizing, and getting to know the strengths of the players already assembled on the team as I do some research onto the short list of players

Troy thinks we'll be acquiring in the expansion draft in a couple months.

Gabby doesn't have classes Thursday or Friday, so she's at the stadium bright and early, and I just finished my workout and a quick shower on Friday morning when Troy told me to pay a visit to Joanie's office.

The interns are all sitting at the round table, and Gabby is talking. I watch for a beat while she finishes what she says.

"I think StrongFitKids would best fit under Fan Experience if you'd like me to focus on that department next week." Her eyes drift to me at the conclusion of her sentence. Joanie turns around to see who Gabby is looking at, too.

"Sorry to interrupt," I say, stepping into the office, "but Troy said your team got back to you with the blueprints?"

"Right," she says. She turns to the interns. "I love that idea, Gabby. I'd like to put you and Chloe on that for next week along with Corporate Sponsorships because I think SFK really fits both. Justin and Brian in Broadcast, Chase and Mackenzie in..." She pauses as she runs down a list. "How about Game Operations? Excuse me for one minute." She turns back to me as I wonder what other departments the interns work in, but then I realize it doesn't matter. The fact is that she'll be working with Chloe on something and not Spongebob, so that's something.

Joanie pats Gabby's shoulder as she stands, and I see a bond between the two. Troy has confirmed that he's dating Joanie, and from over here, it looks like Gabby approves and accepts that relationship.

I'm happy for her. I know how her relationship is with her mother based on the things she confessed to me, so to see her have a positive female authority in her life can only be a good thing. I think of my own mother and what an impact she's had on my life, and I can't imagine not talking to her nearly every day. But Gabby seemed almost happy not to be talking to her mom—like the very thought of it stresses her out.

There's still a lot of mystery where all that is concerned, I guess.

"Come on over," Joanie says to me, and I meet her at her desk. She hands me a portfolio, and I take a look at the preliminary sketches of the kids' play area. "No ball pit, as requested, and an entire trampoline area with bouncy platforms between each station of the circuit."

I'm sure Gabby is gloating from her chair over at the round table with the other interns, but I force my focus on the paper in Joanie's hands. "This is incredible, Joanie. Thank you." I study it for a few beats.

"Can I see?" Gabby asks, standing from her chair.

Joanie nods. "I think it's important to get your feedback, too."

Gabby moves in beside me, and I can smell the vanilla in her hair.

My dick wakes up this close to her. He strains against my zipper.

Goddamn, I miss her.

"Looks good to me," she says softly. "I love the trampolines."

She walks away and sits beside that jackass once again, and I suck in a breath and snap a photo of the blueprints. "I'll send these to Kaylee and Carla for any last-minute feedback but I think it's going to be a green light from SFK."

"Excellent," she says with a nod. "I'll wait to hear from you before sending it up to the next level. Is there anything else?"

I glance over at Gabby, and she's got her head bent toward Spongebob in conversation.

I clear my throat. "No, that's all. Thanks again." I'm not sure if Gabby is supposed to shadow me for the rest of the day, but I take the opportunity while she's busy in a meeting to head back to my office to get a little more work done.



And then I bolt the fuck out of the stadium before she gets the chance to come find me.

Troy was still at the stadium when I left, working away at all things baseball management, and I'm sure he would've liked me to stop in and touch base regarding teambuilding, but we have time.

It may be a big stadium, but today it felt like it wasn't quite big enough for both Gabby and me.

Troy wasn't home this morning when I woke up, and I've started to notice he rarely spends the night at the house. He's around here and there, but he must either be sleeping at Joanie's place or at the club—either that or he's out late, comes home for a few hours, and leaves again before the rest of the house is awake.

I talk to my mom once I'm back in the car. I keep it quick and leave out the details about how I'm feeling, but it always helps to hear her voice even if it's just for a quick check in.

I call Kaylee next.

“Did you look at the blueprints?” I ask when she answers. My ulterior motive is to get her to invite me over. I'd invite myself, but that's not really my style.

“I glanced real quick but Ellie's nanny is sick today so we're all just winging it and Hailey won't stop climbing the goddamn couch and I just got them down for naps and I'm about to take one myself.”

“Sorry for bothering you,” I say.

“Why would this be different than any other time? You're always bothering me,” she teases, and I laugh.

“Right back at you, kid.”

“You doing okay, Coopster?” she asks.

“I'm okay,” I lie. She's got enough going on. She doesn't need me droning on about how heartsick I am over Gabby.

“You call me if you need anything,” she says.

“I will,” I assure her, but the truth is I *did* call her because I needed something but she’s busy with twin babies and caught up in her own shit and I’m not going to burden her with my shit, too.

I swing by my house to check the progress, and there are two trucks in the street in front of the place, signaling that somebody’s there working. I hang out in my car for a while as I dream up all the things I can do once I’m not fighting against myself every goddamn day.

I feel like I don’t have anywhere else to go, so eventually I head back to Troy’s place.

And when I pull into the driveway, I spot a car I haven’t seen before...but the woman leaning up against it sure looks familiar.

“Stacy,” I mutter as I pull in behind the white Lexus and put my car in park.

What the fuck is she doing here?





## CHAPTER 23

### GABBY

Joanie had interviews today for the final intern position, which means my spot was added in thanks to my father. I'm not sure how to feel about that.

She said she felt like she needed better organization with the intern program, so I suggested a focus department each week for us. This broadens our knowledge and it gives the different departments access to our skills, and apparently the idea never occurred to her. She's smart and great at what she does, but the interns were sort of thrust in her lap last-minute, so she's been struggling with where to place us.

The way she praised my idea felt wonderful.

My father has barely acknowledged that he's been seeing her, and I've certainly never seen them *together*, but the fact that someone in a semi-maternal position over me had something nice to say to me felt surprisingly good.

Any time I did something worthy of praise before, my narcissistic mother would either claim responsibility for it or she'd find something about it to nitpick.

This wasn't like that. It was a simple *I love that idea* followed by a hand on my shoulder.

Admittedly my normally sunny disposition has had a bit of a cloud over it since Cooper Noah broke up with me, but her words helped lighten those clouds just a little.

I felt something good pull at me again—a feeling I haven't felt since I turned around after digging around in the refrigerator and Cooper was standing in my dad's kitchen.

He was there to witness the moment, though, and that seemed to steal something from it. The clouds darkened a little

again, and when he left, they seemed to settle in for the long haul.

“I’ve made a short list of all our departments here,” she says, handing out slips of paper with all the departments listed. “Write your name on the top and rank the top five you think would most benefit you. I can’t guarantee you’ll get all of them, and this is still a general internship program, so you’ll deal with every department at some point, but I’d like to place you a little better based on your strengths.”

I’m not sure if this applies to me, too, or not since I’ve already been tapped to shadow Cooper and work on social media. Still, I glance over the list. Business development and analytics, baseball operations, marketing and social media, broadcasting, fan experience, guest services, community relations, corporate sponsorships, public relations, ticket operations, finance, planning and development, HR, IT and video...the list goes on. There are way more departments than I ever realized that are involved with a baseball team, and I look over my options.

I have no idea what I want out of my future. Working at a ballpark would be fun, sure, but I’m not sure how good a fit it is if it means I’m going to be around Cooper more often. I like the idea of working with my dad, but he’ll be busy on the game side, not on the front office side.

And I don’t really know all that much about baseball. I’m learning, and I’m a fairly quick study, but that doesn’t mean this is a good fit for me.

I mark marketing and social media as my top choice, followed by community relations and business analytics. I like the fan experience and corporate sponsorships, too, so I add those on as my fourth and fifth choices, though most of the options listed sound interesting to me in some capacity.

I glance over at Justin’s list. He has numbers listed next to business, marketing, corporate sponsorships, finance, and IT. I almost erase my choices and choose the same as him so we can work together, but I don’t. I want to learn from this internship, and picking the same things as my friend doesn’t

seem like the best way to do that. Besides, finance and IT sound boring.

I guess I'm just finding myself clinging onto him, and it's as I stare down at my paper that I realize that. My entire life, I've had difficulty choosing direction. I defer to other people when I don't want to make a decision, and I become clingy when someone shows me positive attention.

Maybe that's what I'm doing with Cooper. Maybe it was never about love at all between the two of us, but someone stepped in, made me feel good, and I clung to that.

Maybe it's time for me to let him go.

It's what he wants, and I've been stuck in neutral the past week as I've tried to deal with the loss.

I've also spent my whole life believing that in order to matter, you need to be the best. It's why I'm a perfectionist, and it means a lot to me to be recognized for the things I work hard at.

It's why I found my father. I wanted him to be proud of me since I never felt like I was good enough for my mother.

It was terrifying when I started the search. My mother convinced me he abandoned me, and I spent my life believing that. I spent my life nurturing huge abandonment issues all because of my mother's lies.

Instead of giving me that praise I always craved, my mother was the best at finding something wrong. At prom, the night I felt most beautiful in my entire life...she didn't like the way I did my hair.

When I was named salutatorian at my high school graduation, she asked who valedictorian was instead of congratulating me. I'd never felt like more of a failure even though salutatorian was something that should have been celebrated.

That's how it went my entire life.

Is it any wonder I wanted to get away from her the moment I found my father?

Is it any wonder I fell so hard and so fast for the wrong person? And now that I think about it, does the fact that Cooper is twelve years older than me play into it, too? I never *looked* at him as a father figure. He wasn't...but the fact that someone older in an authoritative position made me feel so damn good about myself might speak to my issues.

Or maybe it speaks more loudly to how I should *face* those issues. Maybe my relationships will *always* fail until I can resolve the problems that I cover with a sunny disposition.

But I have no idea how to resolve any of it. The fear of rejection and abandonment. The fear of trusting the wrong person or being taken advantage of. The fear of being punished for my mistakes. The fear of falling short, or of coming in second, or of being a failure.

Maybe it starts with choosing a path instead of being indecisive about what I want out of my future.

I like marketing, and I like social media. I put a big circle around that department on the list, and I write a little note beside it. *Very interested in pursuing this in my future.*

I realize that will force Joanie and me to spend more time together since she's the head of the marketing department... but maybe that's not such a bad thing. We've started to bond even though neither of us has acknowledged her relationship with my father, and maybe we can sit down and have a good, honest talk.

Or not. The thought of doing that and being rejected creeps in. The thought of growing close to Joanie only to see my father end things with her makes me nearly physically feel the abandonment before it even happens.

Maybe I should start with an honest talk with my father first. He's been busy, and I've been busy, and we haven't connected as much lately as we did the first couple years I lived with him.

I send him a text while the others finish filling out their preferences.

**Me:** *Can we do dinner soon? I miss seeing you.*



His reply comes quick.

**Dad:** *Of course. Tonight, five o'clock, Desmonds?*

**Me:** *It's a date.*





## CHAPTER 24

### COOPER

I step down from my truck, and I can't help but wonder what I ever saw in Stacy aside from a pretty face.

Now all I see is the ugliness. I know what she did while we were together, and it was enough to make me want to leave Los Angeles and never look back.

And it's with that realization that something connects in my brain.

*She* is the reason why I didn't want to keep playing.

I found out she was cheating on me a few months after my injury. Rather than being there to help me through it, she bolted into someone else's arms.

Los Angeles felt too small for the two of us, so I trekked down to San Diego to rehab my arm after the surgery, and I stayed there.

I didn't want to go back even if it meant I wouldn't get to play any longer, and the woman standing in Troy's driveway was the cause of that.

I blow out a breath as I walk up beside her. "What are you doing here?"

Our eyes meet as she slides her phone into the back pocket of her leggings. "I came to win you back."

I let out a grunt that I can't even bother to fill with any sort of merriment. "Fat chance, Stace. You lost that game when you slept with Hamilton."

She sighs, her eyes turned down to the ground and a forlorn look across her face. I keep my distance because I will *not* get wrapped up in her tangled web ever again.

“You just...you wanted all these things I wasn’t ready for back then,” she says. Her tone has an edge of begging to it, but she can beg all she wants. It’ll never happen. “You were talking kids, and back then, I was scared to be a mom. I didn’t think I could do it. But I’ve changed, baby. I want those things, too. And I want them with you.”

It strikes me as I listen to her beg that she’s the polar opposite of Gabby when it comes to certain physical attributes. She has short blonde hair and brown eyes to Gabby’s nearly black hair and green eyes, but she’s tall and thin like Gabby. She doesn’t walk in like a ray of sunshine the way Gabby does. Instead, it feels like the skies opened and a cloud settled over her white Lexus the way Olaf’s snow flurries follow him around in the second *Frozen* movie.

Yeah, so I watched it with my nephews a few years ago.

And I liked it.

I got a little choked up at the end, and I will fight anybody who has a goddamn word to say to me about it.

“That’s nice, but I no longer want them with you, and the more time we’ve spent apart, the more I’ve come to realize that I *never* wanted them with you.” I shrug.

She looks momentarily shocked at my words, but she takes a step forward toward me rather than my words having the effect of pushing her back.

“You don’t mean that, Cooper. You’re just upset, but we can get through it.” She runs her fingertips along my chest, and in my periphery, I hear a vehicle moving along the street behind me. It stops for a second, and I’m tempted to turn around. I’m tempted to start screaming for help.

But I don’t. Instead, I fist her wrist in my hand. The vehicle behind me peels off, and I keep my eyes trained on my ex-girlfriend’s face.

I shake my head. “No, that’s not it.” I let out a heavy sigh as I drop her wrist. “You hurt me, Stacy, but I’m not sure it mattered. There’s a reason we were together five years and I never once actually considered proposing to you. It was a

waste of time, and I actually think I should be *thanking* you for cheating on me. It helped drive us to the end, and I'm much happier here on the other side."

"The bags under your eyes tell a different story," she retorts.

"I'm sure they do, but they have nothing to do with you. They're not your business anymore. Now if you'll excuse me, I have shit to do that doesn't involve you."

"I drove all the way from LA and you won't even invite me in?" she whines.

God, what did I ever see in her?

I nod and twist my lips. "Yep. That pretty much sums it up." I move to walk past her, and she grabs onto my arm.

"Coop, wait."

I turn and look at her. "For what, Stace? You stole five years of my life, cheated on me, and now you come crawling back because you heard I'm back in the game?" I shake my head. "I see right through you. It's over. I've moved on. I fell in love with someone who made me feel valued."

"I always made you feel valued," she says, her tone suggestive.

I shake my head and offer her a sad smile. "You valued what I did for a living. You never valued *me*. If you did, you wouldn't have run to Alex Hamilton's bed right after we broke up, and you wouldn't have snuck into it before we did, either." I turn to head back inside, and her voice halts me.

She sighs. "I'm pregnant."

I stand for a beat and stare at the door in front of me. So close. So goddamn close to getting inside without her confession.

She says the words as if they'll be the thing that changes my mind.

"Congratulations," I say, turning back toward her. "Whose is it?"

She presses her lips together, and that tells me a whole lot. She used to do that every time she didn't want to tell me something, and in this case...I think she doesn't want to admit she doesn't know who the baby belongs to.

But it's not my circus, not my monkeys, and no longer my problem. "I hope you figure it out," I say gently. "I do wish you all the best, but a future with me is absolutely out of the question. Go back to LA. Go back to Alex. Take care of yourself, but please, Stacy...leave me alone."

With those words, I head into Troy's house without inviting her in and close the door behind me.







## CHAPTER 25

### GABBY

Cooper was holding that woman's hands when I drove by. I went slowly and blinked a few times as if it would clear the image out of my vision, but it didn't go away. It didn't change. He was holding her hands, and they were talking, and I idled for a beat as I debated whether to step in and blow that up as I claimed Cooper as mine or if I should just stay out of it.

Tears burned behind my eyes as I opted to stay out of it.

I can't claim Cooper as mine because *he isn't mine* to claim.

I peeled off to meet my dad rather than stopping home first for a quick change of clothes before dinner like I'd planned.

Once I was off my dad's street, I pulled off to the side of the road and cried.

I get it. I'm throwing another man in his face, making him think Justin and I are a thing, and he's taking that as his signal to move on.

But I don't *want* him to move on. I want him to be with me.

He didn't throw this woman in my face. Instead, he's meeting her when he thinks I won't be around. I ducked out of the office a little early to stop home, and I caught them when I wasn't meant to.

My chest feels heavy as I drive toward the restaurant, but what can I do?

He's made it clear we can't be together. How do I keep fighting for him and playing these games when I'm just going to lose? It takes two people to *want* a relationship, and I'm flying solo here. I can't force him to be with me.

I arrive a little early, and I don't see my dad's car just yet.

I take the opportunity to finally run a search on Cooper Noah.

And sure enough, a few pictures in, I spot her. The woman he was talking to just now was his ex.

Did he invite her here to get back together with her? He said he never would, but he also made me feel like he'd never break my heart, so clearly he's a man who changes his tune on a whim.

I nearly drop my phone when I hear a knock at the window, and I spot my dad standing on the other side.

I cut the engine and open the door, praying he didn't see what I was just looking at. "You scared me!" I say, clutching my heart not because of the fear but because it hurts from seeing Cooper with another woman.

He chuckles a little. "Sorry. That wasn't my intent." He wraps an arm around my shoulders and squeezes me in a side hug, and we walk together into the restaurant.

It's not crowded yet at this early hour, but my dad is a busy man, and if an early dinner is when I can have his undivided attention, then so be it.

We're seated, and he orders a tumbler of gin. I make a face as I order a glass of wine, and he chuckles.

We glance through the menu and place our orders before he cuts to the chase. "What's been going on with you, Gabriella?" he asks by way of starting the conversation.

As I'd rather not discuss my current heartbreak with his star player, I throw the question back to him. "Not much. How about you, Father?"

He chuckles. "Just running businesses and assembling an all-star baseball team."

Running businesses.

Does he mean that sex club?

Is now the time to ask? Or does that fall under the category of *things we don't want to know about our parents?*

“And spending time with your girlfriend?” I ask.

His lips thin into a flat line. “Not my best kept secret, is it?”

I laugh as I shake my head, and then I reach over and squeeze his forearm. “I’m happy for you, Dad. I want you to be happy. I want you to find love, and if it’s Joanie, then that’s great. I love her, and I love her for you. But I’m finding myself growing closer to her because of this job, and I don’t want to get caught in the middle if it isn’t what I think it is. Do you know what I mean?”

He nods and blinks, his eyes moving down to the table. “It’s going to last.” His eyes move back to mine. “We have an unusual relationship, but one thing is for certain. It will last. We’re not ready to take it public in large part because of our work situation, but there are other factors at play.”

“What are they?” I press.

He glances around. “I’d rather not discuss them here.”

I can’t help but wonder if it has to do with the club Cooper insinuated he owns. I don’t know how to research that since it seems like the kind of place that would be off the grid, and I also don’t really want to ask him about it.

I let him leave it at that.

“So this thing between you and Joanie...it’s pretty serious?” I ask.

He nods. “We’ve been together almost a year, and I’ve never met anyone like her. She’s a hard worker, the kind that goes above and beyond for her job, and so she gets that I need to be that way, too. We just have an understanding between us that I’ve never found with another woman.”

“Are you going to marry her?”

He presses his lips together again. “I plan to someday,” he answers honestly. “But it’s complicated.”

“All relationships are,” I murmur.

“Ain’t that the damn truth?”

I laugh, and we clink our glasses together in a toast of understanding.

While I feel like I got some answers about my dad's love life, I'm left with even more questions after his vague responses. At least he confirmed they're together, and he loves her, and it's long-term. Beyond that, I'm not sure if it's necessary for me to know more.

But that doesn't mean I'm not as curious as a cat to find out the answers.

He clears his throat. "What's complicated about yours?"

My cheeks flush, and he smirks.

"You think you can get away with asking about me and not get the same sort of grilling?"

I wrinkle my nose. "I was kind of hoping I could."

He shakes his head. "No such luck, my girl. Is it Justin?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "What if it was? How would you feel about me dating someone I'm working with?" It's my way of fishing for whether he'd be okay with a Gabriella-Cooper connection...because if he *is* okay with it and green lights it, then maybe we actually could be together. Maybe we wouldn't have to lie about it the way Cooper seems convinced we would.

He lifts a shoulder. "It'd be a little hypocritical of me to say you couldn't when I just admitted I'm doing that very thing, don't you think?"

"Good point. But we're both interns. What if I wanted to date a player?"

His eyes dart to mine, and there's a little something close to anger there. "Terrible idea. Ballplayers are assholes, and they're gone eight months out of the year. You deserve better."

My face must fall because he adds more.

"Why? You got a crush on Danny Brewer or something?"

I grunt out a laugh. Not exactly.

“What if I did?” I tinker with the stem on my wineglass.

He shakes his head as he palms his tumbler of gin. “That would be a hard no. I’ve seen the way Brewer gets around. Besides, he’s way too old for you.”

“How old is he?” It’s a test that has way more to do with Cooper than with Danny Brewer.

“Twenty-six.”

Noted. Twenty-six is *way too old* for me.

I wonder how he’d feel about almost thirty-three.

Which reminds me...Cooper’s birthday is tomorrow. And that’s when it hits me.

That’s why his ex is here. She’s giving him a birthday treat—the kind I was planning to give him for his birthday.

“You look positively despondent I said no to Brewer.”

I obviously can’t say it has nothing to do with Danny Brewer and everything to do with whatever Cooper is doing with his ex, so I just shrug.

This entire conversation gave me plenty of insight about how my father really feels about me potentially dating one of his players. It’s a hard no from him, which means maybe Cooper was right all along.

With the combination of this conversation with my dad and what I saw in front of the house earlier, what little hope I was holding onto that somehow we’d fix this evaporates. The hope we’d figure it out and make it right and end up together is blown to bits all in a matter of a half hour.

I don’t really know where to go after dinner, but I know I can’t go back home. Not with this new realization. Not with knowing he’s in the room right beside me...maybe with another woman.

It’s too much to bear.

I get in the truck and call Mia.

“What’s up girl?” she answers, and I very nearly burst into tears but somehow manage to hold them off.

“Can we have a girls’ night?” I beg.

“I’m getting ready for a night out with Dylan,” she says. “I’m so sorry. Tomorrow night?”

And that’s when *very nearly* turns into the ugly cries I’ve managed to keep at bay all night.

“Oh shit,” she murmurs. “Come over right now.”

I heave in a few deep breaths before I make my way over to Mia’s apartment.

She pulls me into a hug the minute I’m in her doorway, and I notice immediately that she’s definitely date night ready.

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry,” I say as I look her up and down. “You look gorgeous. I’ll just go. I’m okay.”

“Don’t be silly. Hoes before bros, right?” She slings an arm around my neck and forces me into her apartment.

I let out a soft giggle.

“What happened?”

“A variety of events crashed together in a way that forced me to realize it’s really over with Cooper. I was holding out hope this whole time that there was still a chance for us, and then I saw him with another woman. Right after that, I met my dad for dinner, and he made it clear he’d never be okay with me dating a baseball player, and add those two things together and it just feels like a shitty night.” I’m rambling, and she sets a hand on my arm.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “How can I make it better?”

“Alcohol?” I pad over to her couch and collapse. “I don’t really know. I don’t think I’ll *ever* feel better about losing the best thing that ever happened to me. We came so close, and we had a good run. My only option now is to move on, but I don’t know how to do that.”

“Alcohol,” she says.

“I might be able to help,” Dylan says, appearing as if from out of nowhere.

I glance over at him then cover my eyes in mortification. “I didn’t know you were here. Sorry for ruining your date night.”

“You didn’t. You just made it a double date instead.”

I move my hands from my eyes, which I narrow at Dylan. “What are you talking about?”

Mia laughs. “He invited Hansen over.”

I let out a sound that sort of resembles a strangled grunt. “Hansen? Are you serious? Is this because of the internship? Are you punishing me?”

Dylan chuckles. “No. It has nothing to do with that, but by the way, I’m a finalist for the final spot. Hansen has always had a thing for you.” His words are flippant, as if we all already knew this fact.

“He has not!” I practically screech.

“Oh yes, he has,” Mia says.

Dylan sits on the loveseat and Mia perches on his lap as if there’s nowhere else to sit in the room. Mia and Dylan met when she went to a party at his off-campus house. One of his roommates is Greg Hansen, and while he’s nice enough and decidedly cute, he’s not my type. For one thing, he’s a year younger than me, and I think I’ve established pretty clearly that I prefer older guys.

Aside from that, though...since age supposedly doesn’t matter to me, he’s super into gaming and wants to find a girl who will game with him twenty-four-seven.

That girl is not me.

“I’m happy to inform you he’s on his way over right now,” Dylan says with a little too much triumph in his tone.

“He’s gonna make me play Minecraft, isn’t he?”

Dylan laughs. “No, he’s not gonna do that. At least I told him not to.”



“I’m going to need some tequila for this,” I tell Mia.

She gets up and moves over toward the kitchen, returning a moment later with my wish granted.

Shortly thereafter, the rest of the night gets a little blurry.





## CHAPTER 26

### COOPER

I can't help when my eyes automatically turn to her bedroom as I pass by it. The room is empty and the bed is made.

I glance at my watch. It's early, and I know Gabby. She wouldn't be up this early on a Saturday.

I don't even know why *I* am up. I'm guessing it has something to do with the fact that I listened all night for her to come home. I fell asleep at some point, but I never did hear her come in when I was awake.

Her truck isn't in the driveway, another signal that she never came home.

Did she spend the night with Spongebob?

The thought fills me with rage. I head toward Troy's workout room and attempt to get some of the anger out on the punching bag. It doesn't help.

I work my ass off until I'm an exhausted, sweaty mess, and I guess this is thirty-three.

It feels empty and cold.

I have a few messages from friends and women and family. My brother sent me a video text of his entire family singing "Happy Birthday" to their favorite uncle. They're the perfect fucking family, and he has the perfect fucking life, and it's just another reminder that I'm now officially edging toward my mid-thirties and I'm still alone.

I'm a little worried I'm turning into a cranky old man. I take a quick shower and make myself a screwdriver for breakfast.

It's my birthday. I can do what I want.

I shouldn't feel broken over the fact that she moved on when I'm the idiot who pushed her to do it, but seeing Stacy yesterday was a real wake-up call.

You sort of expect feelings to come rushing back when you run into your ex, whether they're feelings of love or hate or something in between. But when I saw Stacy, I just felt... resigned. I didn't care. I didn't have the fire to stand there and fight with her. I just wanted her to leave. She's caused me enough pain and enough trouble, including giving up the future I wanted for myself while I wasted so much time with her.

When I think of Gabby, though, I don't feel resigned. I feel fire. I feel heat. I feel need. I feel *love*, and every time I see her, those feelings only get stronger.

I don't know what to do.

I need to stay away, but I don't know if I can.

And now...knowing that maybe she has moved on, maybe she's spending the night in another man's bed—and I use the term *man* loosely for someone who's barely out of his teen years—the thought causes a pain in my chest the likes of which I've never felt before.

I didn't feel it when I found out Stacy was cheating on me, and I'm starting to think maybe it's because I knew the end with Stacy was inevitable.

But I never truly saw the end coming with Gabby.

I've only been in Vegas a week. It feels like a fucking decade.

I just want time to pass so I can get back on the field and get over all this and get my mind right again.

But time is a cruel bitch that steals so much from us, and my only choice is to wait it out.

The doorbell rings as I'm finishing up breakfast, and I set my dishes in the sink before I head over to answer. I peek through the peephole in case it's a salesman, though in this gated neighborhood that would be fairly unusual.

And when I peek through that peephole, I spot someone I'm utterly shocked to see standing there.

Maybe even more shocked than seeing Stacy standing in Troy's driveway yesterday.

I open the door, and I glance at his shirt. I force myself not to roll my eyes. "Spongebob," I say in greeting. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey, uh, I'm here to see Gabby. Is she around?"

My brows shoot up in confusion as a pulse of relief seems to shoot through my spine. "She didn't spend the night with you?"

His brows dip and a shock of something seems to flash in his eyes, like he's supposed to play the part and he's not...but then he glances away from me as he shakes his head. "Uh, no. I guess I'll just talk to her later."

He scampers away, and I'll admit I'm just the tiniest bit worried about her since she didn't come home last night and she wasn't with the number one suspect. But I also know she has a lot of friends here. Hell, the night I met her, she was out with friends. My best guess is she spent the night at one of their places, and she'll be back soon.

I'm not wrong.

I do the dishes and set them in the dishwasher, and then I make a plan for my day. I grab my laptop to study some more film, but first I send out a few texts to friends seeing if anyone wants to meet for some high stakes gambling tonight at Caesars. I get hits back from a few friends.

And it's as I'm texting with Danny on the couch in the family room when I hear her truck pull up.

Troy isn't home, and my best guess is that he spent the night at the club with Joanie again.

It'll be just the two of us, and I'm not sure what to do with that.

The door opens, and she walks in. She's wearing the same clothes she wore yesterday, and she looks exhausted...like she

drank way too much last night and is suffering the consequences this morning because of it. The usual sunshine that surrounds her seems to be missing today.

“Good morning,” I mutter, unable to muster up any sort of sunshine myself.

“Hey,” she grunts.

“You need some ibuprofen?” I ask, a little teasing in my tone.

“I can get them.” She pads over to the cabinet where Troy keeps medicine in the kitchen and helps herself to a few pills. She disappears up the stairs, and I hear the shower running.

I open my laptop and watch some footage from games with Rush Ross as I figure out where we’d want him in our line-up. He’s not a closer, but depending who we pick up from the draft, he’ll probably fill either our number one or number two spot with his fastball.

I’m pausing and zooming in on one of his pitches when Gabby walks back into the room over an hour later.

“Feeling better?” I ask, closing my laptop lid and setting it beside me.

“A little,” she says absently. “I laid down for a bit after my shower, and now I’m just hungry.”

“Want me to make you something?” I ask, getting up from the couch and walking toward the kitchen behind her.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” she asks, narrowing her eyes at me.

I shrug. “You seem like you might’ve had a rough night.”

“Yeah, lots of drinking with Justin.”

I raise a brow. “Yeah?”

She nods. “We had a really fun night.”

“You stayed over there with him?” I press.

She presses her lips together and nods, her eyes defiant as they move toward mine.

I move in a little closer to her, and she backs up until her backside bumps into the counter. I keep moving closer until I've got her boxed in. I set my arms on the counter and lean down, getting in her face as I smell her fresh vanilla after her shower.

I breathe her in deeply for a beat, and then I say, "Oh did you? Then why did he come by here asking for you this morning?"

Her eyes widen as she looks caught, but before she can come up with any sort of defense, I plow forward.

"Don't fucking play games with me, Gabby. Where were you last night?" I move so my face is right in front of hers.

"None of your business."

"Where were you?" I demand again.

"At Mia's." Her voice has an edge of fear in it, and something about her showing vulnerability pushes me to take her and make her mine, to mark her and protect her. To hell with the commitments and what Troy might think. I fucking need her like I need to breathe, and I will not stop until I get the truth out of her.

"Are you sleeping with Justin?" I demand, my lips centimeters from hers.

"No," she says softly.

"What's going on with the two of you?"

Her eyes flick to my lips. "We're just friends."

My lips crash down to hers, and she moans as she gives in, her lips parting to mine and our tongues languidly brushing against each other's.

We both hear a key slide into the front door. We don't have much time, and I don't know what to do. I told her not to play games, and two seconds later I kissed her after I told her time and again that I couldn't do this.

She pulls back first, resting her palms gently on my chest for a beat before she pushes me away. "I never meant anything

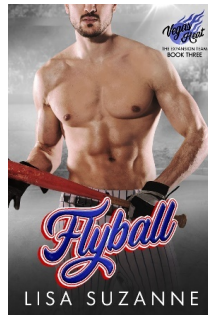


to you, so why do you care who I'm sleeping with?"

"Goddammit, Gabby, you know that's a lie," I say, frustration stabbing into me like a million tiny knives all at once. I hear the door open, and I lower my voice to a whisper as I fight to finish this conversation. "I don't know what to do. I fucking love you so much, but we can't be together."

"I don't think we have a choice," she says, and her eyes are still hot on mine when her father walks into the kitchen.

*TO BE CONTINUED IN BOOK 3, FLYBALL*



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Fighting against our relationship turns into keeping it a secret...most importantly from her father.

At first it's fun sneaking around, but then it feels like every time we're close to coming clean, something happens to stop us.

And then life takes another detour as the reminder that life is short plows into me.

It's moments like these that make me think long and hard about the future. For the first time, the twelve years between us start to have some meaning as I wonder whether I'm robbing her of the future she deserves.

Just like all flyballs, all this is going to come crashing down to the ground.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'll save my acknowledgments for the final book since I know you're ready to get to the next one in this series... and I can't wait for you to see what's coming.

*xoxo,  
Lisa Suzanne*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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