

TAKEN *by the*
GRUMPY
PLAYER

CLARISSA MCKAY

Taken by the Grumpy Player

Clarissa McKay

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Chapter 1

Willow

Despite telling myself that I'm ready for this, my stomach still protests as nausea threatens to take over. It feels like I've been standing still for hours even though I know, realistically, it's only been a couple of seconds. And those couple of seconds are all that I'm allowed before the production manager, Kenny, whacks me on the back of the head with his clipboard to get me moving.

I think I have a few more blissful seconds to panic until that becomes a reality, trying to wrap my head around the three words Kenny had shouted over at me just now that has me frozen in place.

"Willow, you're up!"

I can feel my heart thundering in my head as clearly as I can feel it in my chest, excitement and nerves not knowing what to do with themselves within my body. Vivian, the head sports journalist for Front Runner News and the woman I admire and have been working as an assistant journalist for, had to leave suddenly because of a family emergency. And because Vivian

is the picture of professionalism, everyone knows she wouldn't leave at the last second unless it was extremely important—hence the situation I'm in now.

Because I've been working under Vivian for the better part of a year—mostly behind the scenes in a seen-not-heard capacity—and because of my very loud and obvious desire to be a sports journalist, it makes sense that I'm the person Kenny turns to, to take over for Vivian. She had been telling me for weeks now that pretty soon, I will have an opportunity to show my skills in front of the camera and on the field, interviewing the football players for the post-game segments. I don't think she, or anyone, realized it would be under these circumstances.

But I'm ready for this. I am.

I have been waiting all of my life for this moment, to be the one holding the microphone and standing in front of the camera and chatting with athletes about their plays and the game. I have been working toward this for so long, and I'm not going to let the suddenness of it all throw me off my game.

So, snapping out of my stupor, I use the next few seconds fixing myself up, using my phone's camera to make sure I look presentable enough to be on live television. The idea of speaking in front of a camera, with millions of people watching, doesn't terrify me like one might think. If anything, it gets the blood in my veins pumping, the nerves present but dying down, and excitement and determination taking over. The rumble of the stadium adds onto the anticipation, hearing the cheers of the crowd as our home team, the Chicago Rebels,

win yet another game, setting them on the path toward the Super Bowl, the ultimate goal.

“Alright,” I whisper to myself after capping my lip gloss and shoving it in the pocket of my slacks. “I got this.”

I work almost automatically, going to find Kenny who then, amongst the chaos of the end of the game, adjusts the earpiece in my ear and then guides me to the sidelines of the field. It’s impossibly bright in the field with the stadium lights, and deafeningly loud. Audience members are cheering on the team, while some can be seen moving to leave in hopes of beating the post-game traffic. Good luck with that, folks.

Several journalists and reporters are already on the field with their cameramen, talking to the players and getting their insight on the games they have played. As I’m led to our cameraman, Michael, I run through the questions I have seen Vivian ask the players in all of the interviews of hers I have watched and taken notes from. She and I both take notes during games so we know the best questions for her to ask afterward, and she had shoved her notes in my hands before taking off. Hell, most of the questions in general are ones I came up with for her to ask, so it’s easy not to get lost in my own head as I think up a list of quick yet insightful questions based on today’s game’s notes, given that there is a time limit on how long I can chat with the players.

Kenny puts a hand on my shoulder and gestures toward a specific direction. “You’re interviewing Maxwell first, then Mackenzie and Bennett. Here comes Maxwell now.”

Unable to help myself, my mouth drops open in protest, but Kenny has already disappeared through the crowd of reporters, players, and family members alike. My grip on the microphone tightens, staring at Michael almost helplessly, and he offers me a sympathetic smile from behind the camera which, thankfully, isn't rolling yet.

Of all the players I had to talk to for my first on-camera interview, *why* did it have to be Reed Maxwell?

As professional as Vivian is at work, she has told me, behind closed doors, how insufferable the star quarterback for the Rebels is when it comes to giving interviews. Reed Maxwell hates giving interviews, but because it's in his contract, he has no choice but to do so—but that doesn't mean he's going to make it easy for the reporters. Vivian doesn't particularly enjoy interviewing him, but because he's arguably one of the best players Chicago has seen and is definitely going to carry us to the Super Bowl, interviewing him is the priority—no matter how difficult he makes it with his one-word, curt answers.

God, why couldn't I get Jaxon James? The running back is always all smiles and a riot to interview, and is endearingly referred to as JJ by everyone.

The earpiece crackles. "Cutting to you in ten, Willow," comes Kenny's voice.

Okay. Whatever reservations I have about interviewing Maxwell, I shove them aside and let the mask of professionalism slip on, one I have been waiting to wear.

Michael already has the camera propped on his shoulder and I square mine, taking a breath as I see Reed approaching.

Even from the corner of my eye, I can make out his tall, bulky figure, and the sweat that glistens on his tanned skin under the blue and white uniform. But that's all I get to glimpse at, for now, as I'm signaled that we're live.

The smile I give the camera is genuine.

“Good evening, everyone, I'm Willow Burke and we're live from Soldier Field, where the Chicago Rebels have crossed off another win.” My voice is steady, my grip on the microphone not too tight. “I have with me the Rebels' quarterback, Reed Maxwell—so tell me—” I turn to finally look at him, and there is a split second where I can feel myself falter under his dark-eyed stare. He's looking down at me with an unreadable look, although from the purse of his lips, I know he's impatient to get this over with. I don't let that—or the sight of his strong jaw, high cheekbones, and slightly crooked nose deter me. I charge on, smiling, as I inquire, “You've just won another game; what's fueled your improvement as the season has progressed?”

With the camera on us, I look up at Reed and try not to let my smile falter under his intense gaze, his face all sharp angles with nothing soft about them. There's nothing kind, nothing welcoming about his features, and it would be enough to make anyone's insides shrivel up, but I refuse to buckle under his stare. Instead, I keep my smile on my face, my microphone pointed toward him, as I drown out the ongoing and rumbling

chatter going on all around us while waiting for him to speak up.

“Winning the Super Bowl,” finally comes Reed’s unsurprisingly clipped response, his voice a deep rumble.

No shit, Sherlock.

I keep smiling, though; not only because I don’t want to let this man know that his obvious and unimpressive answer pisses me off, but because I refuse to let him ruin this incredibly big moment for me. I just have to get through this interview with Reed and show that I did try, and then I can get real substantial answers from my interviews with Leo Mackenzie and Caden Bennett.

Bringing the microphone back toward me, I ask, “Last season, the Rebels failed to advance during the conference championship.” I see the way his jaw tics at my words, and it makes my smile easier, knowing I may have flicked a nerve. Anything to get him to not be such a robot in front of the camera. “What are you and the team doing differently this year to make it further than before, and potentially win the championship?”

Reed eyes me for a moment, dark eyes locked onto my green. I keep my mask on, refusing to bristle under his gaze despite the indescribable tickle I feel in the pit of my stomach. The man is unreadable, and while my goal is to focus on the interview and do a good job, I find myself wondering what, exactly, he’s thinking.

“There’s no *potentially* about it,” Reed says, voice hard. “The mistakes made last season won’t be repeated this time around. The focus is on being a solid team, no distractions, nothing.”

I blink, a little surprise, at his answer, which is quite wordy by Reed Maxwell’s standards. I don’t even focus on his less than friendly tone, since that’s the default tone of voice he speaks in. Instead, I find myself smiling as I arch a brow and somewhat jokingly ask, to keep the air light and natural, “All work and no play?”

When Vivian interviews the players, she’s strictly professional, with no air of joking commentary around. However, I’ve seen other reporters approach interviews with a lighter air, crack one or two jokes with the players, and while Vivian is my role model, her method of interviewing doesn’t completely line up with how I would do them. So, I’m taking a little bit from her, and a little bit from other interviewers I’ve watched.

Reed, unsurprisingly, doesn’t even crack a hint of a smile. “Exactly.”

His gaze flickers—lower on my face, just for a half of a second—but I catch the movement and it tightens my grip on the microphone. That moment is also when I realize how closely Reed and I are standing, the heat of his sweat-slicked body is radiating into me, and it spreads a newfound warmth through me that I force myself not to think about.

Professional. Be professional, Willow.

I push on. I ask Reed a couple more questions, all of which are answered robotically with little to no emotion and even fewer

words. I don't let him get under my skin and keep the professional tone, smiling and engaging despite Reed's hard stare and tight jaw, his tanned skin glistening with perspiration, which he makes work annoyingly well.

When the interview ends and the camera cuts, I let my shoulders drop just a little and let out a quiet sigh of relief. Michael shoots me an encouraging smile and thumbs up, which I return, just as Reed's voice speaks up. "This your first interview?"

I'm more than a little surprised at his question, looking over to see him already looking at me. Once again, his expression is unreadable. "Oh, yes," I say after getting over my small shock. I tilt my head slightly and ask, "Why?"

Reed lets out a small scoff, the sound nearly drowned out by the noise around us. He's already turning away, but his mouth downturns as he tells me, unimpressed, "You smile too much."

I blink at him, bewildered and, frankly, offended by his remark. The way he says it, it's like *I'm* personally offending *him* simply by smiling, when really, he's the one who just decided to be a grade A jerk by making that comment in the first place. Honestly—*what* is his issue?

I *smile* too much? Said smile tightens a little as I respond, "Maybe I'm just happy to be here."

Reed Maxwell gives me a blatant once over; his perusal starts at my toes and goes all the way up to my head, coming back down to meet my gaze as he scoffs once more. I barely hear it, this time my blood rushing in my ears in response to the way

he looked at me. Did he just... Check me out? My body heats up, heart pounding at his attention—which he acts as though I’m oh-so lucky to be on the receiving end of it. I don’t know if the flush in my skin is from his stare or from indignation in the face of his audacity.

“Clearly,” comes another famous one-word response, but one that has me finally frowning, my smile slipping as Reed turns and walks off, people automatically parting to make way for him through the crowd.

And then he’s gone, most definitely ignoring the burn of my gaze on his back as he goes.

I inhale deeply, my breath rattling in my lungs as I square my shoulders once more. *Shake it off, Willow*, I tell myself, willing for the warmth in my skin to disappear. I won’t let Reed Maxwell set me off-kilter.

“You ready for the next one, Willow?” Michael asks, snagging my attention.

I shoot him a smile, tightening my grip on the microphone and nodding. My smile widens, letting my confidence return now that Reed has disappeared. “Let’s do this.”

Chapter 2

Reed

The training facility's gym is never silent, particularly during the team's workout sessions. Music blares through the training room speakers, but the beats are somehow overpowered by my teammates' constant chatter and laughter. If they're not working out, they're talking. If they're not talking, they're pulling pranks. Hell, sometimes it's all three at once, and it makes for a loud, boisterous environment. If anything, the entertainment is never ending.

The Air Pods stuffed in my ears are blasting music from my personal playlist, but it does little to drown out the noise around me. But I don't particularly care as a soft grunt escapes me while I do another rep with a set of weights. My gaze is locked with my reflection, feet planted firmly on the ground as I do my work out—until my gaze slides over and I catch sight of the TV in the corner playing an interview I recently did.

I grip the dumbbells at my sides, remaining where I stand as music blares in my ears while I watch the interview that plays. The captions are on, appearing at the bottom of the screen, but

I don't need to read them to know exactly what's being said—because, for some goddamn reason, that exact interview has been playing in my head, repeatedly, on a loop since the minute it happened.

My eyes fixate on the strawberry blonde who had taken my interview, a woman who I hadn't seen before and now that I have, I can't seem to get the image of her face out of my mind. My teeth grit together as I pause my workout, watching the way she smiles at the camera, deepening the dimples that appear on her cheeks, and the sight of me next to her. I tower over her, and she doesn't shrink back, doesn't falter under the weight of my intense, hardened stare. Now that's not a reaction I'm used to. I know I can be a real jerk sometimes, so it doesn't surprise me when people cower in my presence; it surprises me when they *don't*.

It's no secret that I hate interviews of any kind. All I want to do is play football and play it well; I couldn't give a shit about talking to reporters about how I played, how the team played, or what we could do better. That's all talk for the locker room when we debrief with Coach Scott. Being on camera, giving insights to journalists and reporters—I know all of that is part of the contract. It's one of the things you just have to do, being a part of the NFL. But it's never been a priority to me, even as I'm shoved in front of a camera and microphone. No matter how many times I give quick, short answers and ignore the camera, I'm still forced to do it. I hate everything about it.

And then this interview happened.

I look at the name that appears next to mine on the TV to go along with the segment, and my grip on the dumbbells tightens. *Willow Burke*. That's the name of the woman who did my last interview. She seems younger than most of the reporters I've spoken to, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed—and I told her as much after the interview. The look on her face read nothing but insult, and when I had walked away from her, a part of me was kicking myself in the damn head for saying that to her.

I didn't understand why until my thoughts wouldn't leave me alone, invaded by *her*.

She had smelled like apples. I fucking remember that; despite being on the field, surrounded by sweaty football players, her scent had been strong enough to be noticed. Apples and something else I couldn't figure out—and it sure as hell won't leave me alone.

Huffing in annoyance, I set the dumbbells back on the rack, just as Leo Mackenzie comes up to me. He grins, leaning back against the mirror wall with his arms crossed. His tattoos snake up his left arm, and the grin on his face has me letting out a sigh as I pause my music.

“What?” I demand, meeting his gaze.

Leo chuckles, shaking his head as his blue-eyed gaze slides back to the TV in the corner. “You really thought you could've scared off Vivian's apprentice?” he asks with an amused grin.

I purse my lips, grabbing a towel and wiping my forehead and the back of my neck. “I wasn't trying to scare her off,” I grunt,

eyebrows furrowing together.

Leo throws a disbelieving look my way, and I roll my eyes but don't bother defending myself. Everyone knows of my hatred of interviews; my attitude during them is the default way I approach them. It doesn't have to do with the reporter I'm speaking to—most of the time, at least. Every now and then, you get a sleazebag reporter who is obviously looking for a scandal rather than game insights. If they want to do that, then go be a celebrity gossip blogger, for shit's sake.

“Good,” Leo muses with a small grin. “I don't think you would've succeeded if you even tried, anyway. That girl was born for the camera.”

My gaze narrows on Leo as he slides over to the TV once more, watching as Willow interviews Caden Bennett, the team's tight end. Before I can say anything, another voice speaks up.

“You two talking about the new reporter?” Jordan Buchanan asks from where he sits on the bench press, a grin leering on his face. He nods appreciatively at the TV, where Willow is all smiles as she talks to Caden. “She's stupid hot. What I'd do to get her in my bed,” he shakes his head as he no doubt fantasizes about Willow.

Out of nowhere, I feel my blood boil, the warmth intensifying against my skin as my gaze narrows into a tight scowl toward Jordan. “Watch your mouth,” I snap, the words slipping past my lips before I can think twice about them.

Jordan blinks at me, obviously startled by my curt words, and my jaw clenches because I can feel Leo's curious and even more amused gaze on me. The back of my neck heats despite myself, feeling more gazes of my teammates' settle on me, clearly having heard me before they go back to what they're doing.

"Uh," Jordan starts, frowning briefly before giving a terse nod. "Sorry, Cap," he says before getting up and moving to the other side of the room.

When he's gone, Leo snorts out a laugh, raising his eyebrows at me. I pointedly ignore him, taking a long sip from my Gatorade, hoping the cool drink will calm me the hell down. Meanwhile, Leo hums, "Awfully defensive of her, aren't you?"

I level him with a glare. "You've got a daughter, asshole. Would you want someone talking about her that way?"

Leo's gaze darkens instantly, no doubt imagining that very scenario, his jaw tightening in anger. I fight a smirk, knowing I got him. Leo exhales sharply before saying, "Touché. But I doubt it's just basic human decency that's got you all riled up about Buchanan's comment."

My smirk disappears, teeth pressing together tightly. "Think what you want," I grumbled, gripping my bottle and taking another sip from it.

Leo eyes me for a moment but I don't bristle under his gaze, not even when realization seems to dawn on his features and a grin turns the corners of his mouth upwards. "Well, fuck me—

you're into her, aren't you?" I tense at his words, my scowl returning, and he lets out a laugh. "Oh, hell. You *are*."

I'm not that oblivious that I don't know he's right. Being unable to stop thinking about Willow, replaying our less than stellar interaction over and over again—the woman is confident, attractive, and not intimidated by me. My head won't let me forget it.

"Hell of a first impression you made, man," Leo says with a shake of his head, amusement dancing in his gaze. "You're gonna have to fix that if you're into her. I heard there's a good chance she's taking over for Vivian for the rest of the season."

If I was holding onto a pair of dumbbells, I have a faint inkling that I would have dropped them on my damn feet after hearing Leo's words. *Fuck me*.

Later, I'm the last one in the facility, the fact emphasized by the way every little sound seems to echo in the empty bathroom. The curtain is drawn to keep my privacy, despite being the only one here, as freezing cold water cascades down from the shower. But that does nothing to ease the tension in my muscles, of course. No, the cold water doesn't even do what it's meant to, and I stand beneath it with my left hand pressed to the tiled wall, head bowed, as I finally give in and wrap my right hand around my hardened length.

"*Damn*," I hiss out, eyes squeezing shut at the feel of my callused hand around my cock.

Slowly, I give it a pump, jaw clenching tightly, and I imagine that it isn't my hand, but a smaller, softer one. I imagine *her*

hand, the way it had been wrapped around the microphone, with blue painted nails and rings adorning her fingers. My throat tightens as I move my hand up and down my cock, imagining the thin metal of her rings against my sensitive flesh.

It feels wrong, almost, to think of her as I continue pumping myself, knowing how I acted around her, the way I dismissed her. But then images of her smile flicker through my head—the same one I stupidly made an idiotic comment about—and I swear I can almost fucking smell her apple scent, and I can't stop. My movements grow more frantic, panting and the sound is drowned out by the shower.

Gorgeous. She's fucking gorgeous, and I made an ass out of myself in front of her. I think of her mouth, those naturally pouting lips, pink and just begging to be kissed. I imagine they're as soft as they look, and I give my cock a jerk as I imagine biting into her plump bottom lip, tasting her. I no longer feel the water cascading over me; instead, I'm lost in imagining Willow—under me, riding me, her hands on my skin. My body burns for the real thing as images of green eyes float through my mind, and the breath in my lungs rushes out as my muscles tighten and tighten until my vision goes white, a low, guttural groan slipping from me as cum shoots out in thick spurts before it spirals down the drain. I squeeze my eyes shut, seeing fireworks exploding behind my closed lids. My hand fists against the tiled wall as my breathing grows heavy, heart thundering my body begins to slowly, *so slowly*, relax from the climax.

The sound of my breathing mixes with the shower still hitting the tiled floor, and I straighten under it, jaw tight as my shoulders relax slightly. No doubt if Willow knew what I just did, that I just got off to the thought of her, she would be less than pleased—probably disgusted—after how I spoke to her. But what she doesn't know won't hurt her, and I'm not about to apologize, or feel guilty, over a more than satisfying orgasm.

I can only imagine what it'd be like to be with her.

I suddenly purse my lips as Jordan's words from earlier echo in my mind, and I slam the shower off with a flick of my hand. Frustration pounds through me, taking away the high from the release, because, well... how am I any better than Jordan? He made a comment about Willow, and then I'm here, having just gotten off to the thought of her.

I shove the curtain open, nearly ripping it off the rod, and avoid the mirrors. If I were to look into one, a hypocrite would be staring back at me.

Chapter 3

Willow

“Holy fucking *shit!*”

My outburst startles the woman two sinks over, but I pay her no attention as I gape at my reflection in the mirror. My heart thunders wildly in a combination of excitement and disbelief over the meeting I just sat through. Head reporter. Not *assistant* or *junior*, but *head*. The thought alone dizzies me, tightening my grip on the porcelain sink as I exhale slowly in hopes of calming my racing pulse. It does little to help.

Apparently, Vivian’s family emergency is too severe for her to come back to work. Kenny didn’t give me the details, keeping Vivian’s privacy, which I completely understand, but since she isn’t coming back to work for the rest of the season, her job is now mine. The job that I’ve been working my entire life toward has just fallen into my lap, and I didn’t hesitate to accept it the second Kenny offered it to me.

“You did an incredible job with your first interviews,” he had praised during the meeting, making my cheeks flush at the compliment. “That, combined with your work experience here

and Vivian's recommendation, you're now the interim head reporter for the channel in terms of reporting on the Rebels. It's more hours, better pay, and a lot of traveling, since you'll have to be where the team is. When the season ends, we can talk about making things permanent after we review your performance, since Vivian would also be up for promotion. Are you up for it?"

Am I up for it? I could've kissed Kenny for the opportunity. But instead of screaming and dancing on the table like I wanted to, I maintained an air of professionalism, thanked him and accepted the job. This is all I have ever wanted, and now it's mine—with a chance of it being a permanent position, too. Even if it was sudden and part of me felt unprepared despite doing well my first time, I would be crazy not to accept it.

So, I did, and now I'm in the bathroom and trying not to freak out more than I already am, because the lady next to me might call security if I scream again.

When she leaves, the door falling shut behind her, and I'm the only one left in the ladies' room, I stare at my reflection and exhale slowly, loudly, the sound bouncing off the tiled walls. *Interim head reporter.* That's my official title, and just thinking of it brings an uncontrollable smile to my face. The excitement buzzes through my veins as I bounce in my spot for a moment before pulling out my phone to open up my group chat with my two best friends.

Willow: *Guess who got promoted!!*

Their replies, unsurprisingly, come instantly.

Clare: *AHH!! CONGRATS!*

Vick: *HELL YES. Guess who's going out tonight to celebrate!*

My grin widens, if that's even possible, and I send a thumbs up emoji in return. If there's anyone I want to celebrate with, it's with the two of them. I've known Clare since she moved to Chicago back in seventh grade, the two of us becoming inseparable since the moment she arrived to my second period English class. The two of us met Victoria during orientation at Chicago State University, where I studied communications, while Clare majored in psychology and Vick in business. From that day, our duo became a trio, and it's been like that ever since.

To the point where the three of us started living together since we graduated. All of us craved the independence that came with living on our own, but living together in one apartment is cheaper than doing it all on our own individually. Except earlier this year, when our lease was coming to an end, Clare moved in with her fiancé after he popped the question, and Vick and I found an adorable two-bedroom apartment for us to move into. But it's almost like Clare didn't move out, because her place is close to ours, and the three of us hang out whenever we can.

And celebrating a promotion, of course, is the perfect reason to hang out.

"I mean, I hope Vivian is okay," Vick says later that night when the three of us are sitting at a high-top chair at one of our

favorite bars. She's nursing a Moscow mule, playing with the straw as she grins at me. "But you deserve this, Willow. They made the right choice, picking you to be head reporter."

"*Interim* head reporter," I correct, though I'm grinning around my own straw, sipping a vodka cranberry with pineapple juice.

Clare snorts. "Tomato, to-mah-to." She waves her hand dismissively before raising her eyebrows at me. "Does that mean you're going to be, like, *surrounded* by hot football players?"

Before I can respond, Vick grabs my arm and says seriously, "And if you are, can you set me up with one?"

I let out a laugh at that, knowing Vick is only half serious as I shake my head. "I mean, yeah, I will be," I tell them, watching as their eyes light up with excitement. I laugh once more. To Vick, I say, "But you can probably do better than a football player."

The blonde scoffs with a roll of her eyes. "Oh, you mean better than a tall, handsome, rich professional athlete?" she muses sarcastically. "Please, point me in the direction."

I chuckle as Clare shoots me a knowing grin. "Willow's just put off by her interview with Reed Maxwell, I think."

At the mention of the Rebels' starting quarterback, a groan escapes me as I bow my head, though the girls' laughter and the music playing in the bar drown the aggravated sound out. "You guys *saw* that interview, right?" I ask once I lift my head, looking at them with wide eyes. "I mean, I knew he wasn't the

easiest person to interview, but does he have to be so rude about it? And then afterward, telling me I *smile too much*? Who the hell says that?”

Recounting the events makes my skin flush more, heating up with the annoyance that pumps through my veins. The alcohol doesn't help, yet I take another sip of the cold drink anyway hoping it will do something to calm me down.

“Yeah, that was uncalled for,” Vick agrees with a frown. She nudges her knee with mine under the table, smiling. “Feel free to set me up with anyone but him.” That gets a laugh out of me, and it widens Vick's smile, and I know that was her goal in the first place. “But seriously, don't let that asshole get under your skin. You said the other players were fun to interview, right?” I nod. I only interviewed Leo Mackenzie and Caden Bennett after talking with Reed, and those two had been pleasant and friendly. “Good. Don't let one jerk ruin your overall experience.”

My lips turn downward in an impressed smile, nodding in agreement as Clare asks Vick, “Since when are you so wise?”

Vick snorts with a roll of her eyes. “I work in business, guys. I'm surrounded by misogynistic assholes with superiority complexes.”

I suck in a breath through my teeth. “Fair enough.”

The three of us continue the conversation, flying from one topic to the next, as is the usual for us. Vick tells us about work and a new project she's co-lead on, while Clare gives us updates on how the wedding planning is going. “Let me know

a date next month when both of you are free so we can get your dresses,” she tells Vick and me.

It’s going to be a small wedding, according to Clare. The bridal party isn’t that big; she didn’t want to choose between Vick and me by picking one of us as her Maid of Honor, so the two of us are the only bridesmaids, while her fiancé, Alex, has his two brothers as his groomsmen. Vick and I are sharing all of the duties that would go to the Maid of Honor, including planning Clare’s bachelorette party.

“I refuse to attend your wedding without a date,” Vick declares, pouting at the mere idea of having to go alone.

“I’ll be your date,” I bat my eyelashes at her.

She snorts. “Please. If you don’t snag a football player as your date, then I’m going to be so disappointed in you.”

I throw a balled-up napkin at her face, but Vick catches it before it can come into contact with her. “Dude, you do realize if I got involved with one of the players, I could get *fired*? It’s extremely unprofessional and, like, forbidden.”

Clare grins a little. “*Forbidden* just adds to the allure of it all, doesn’t it?”

Vick snickers while I give them both exasperated looks. “You two are hopeless.”

Vick winks. “And you love us anyway.”

One of my new, and fun, duties as interim head reporter is to attend the events that the team does, in hopes of getting little tidbits from them to be included in articles and social media posts. The concept of attending events completely slipped my mind until Kenny informed me of a charity event that was being held at the Waldorf Astoria. He gave me the pass that would get me in, and basically instructed me to have fun and get some quotes from some of the Rebels players.

Truthfully, I already feel a little out of place as I sit in the back of the Uber on my way to the event. The dress I'm wearing is probably the most expensive piece of clothing I own, a deep emerald green that compliments both my eyes and hair, sleeveless with a sweetheart neckline, clinging to my body. I've never really had an occasion to wear it, which made the purchase seem impulsive and foolish, but this is the perfect event for it.

Still, it won't be anything compared to what others attending this event will be wearing. Politicians and members of Chicago's elite, everyone far richer and more powerful than me. The thought alone is intimidating enough, God knows what it will be like once I step into the same room as them. In an event hall of one of Chicago's most luxurious hotels, at that.

It is a whole new world I'm stepping into, and no matter how many times I tell myself—and am told—that I'm ready, I still feel like a baby deer learning to walk for the first time. I know no one is looking at me when I arrive, entering the hall after giving my coat at the coat check, flashing my pass and putting

it back in my clutch, I grab the little name card that says my name and table number, no doubt seated with other reporters.

There are many people around, tables set up, music playing, and even what looks like a dancefloor up front by the stage where the DJ is set up. Faces I recognize and don't are around, mingling around tables and at the bar—the *open* bar, which I'll be making my way over to first, for some liquid courage. I take a deep breath, clutching my purse, and walk further into the room, smiling politely at anyone who meets my gaze as I head toward the bar. Maybe it's a little unprofessional to get a drink the moment I arrive at my first event as head reporter, but a girl needs a confidence booster every now and then.

When I'm at the bar, I catch the attention of one of the bartenders, and order a whiskey sour. As I wait for my drink, someone comes up to my right, and I glance over to see a beautiful woman in a maroon colored dress, her blonde hair standing out against it. "Hi," she greets with a smile that borders on nervous and awkward, which surprises me. "I love your dress."

"Oh." I blink, caught a little off guard, before I manage to return her smile a little more easily. "Thank you. I love yours," I say sincerely.

"Thanks," she returns, her cheeks pinkening. She's a little shorter than me, though one glance at her feet and I can see she's wearing heels. "Sorry for, like, approaching you out of nowhere. You just seemed to be around my age and, uh, didn't look as uptight as some of the other people here."

Her honesty makes me smile, even if it darkens her blush, as if she thinks she's being a little too honest. She's adorably awkward. "You could tell that by just looking at me?" I ask her with a grin.

She lets out a breathy laugh. "It's like a sixth sense," she jokes. She holds a hand out, then introduces herself, "I'm Andrea Mackenzie."

I shake her hand. "Willow Burke." Her name clicks and as she lets go of my hand, I tilt my head to the side and ask, "Mackenzie? Are you—"

Andrea chuckles and nods. "I'm Leo's sister," she confirms my train of thought.

Come to think of it, she does look vaguely familiar. She's got the same deep blue eyes as Leo, and I'm sure I've seen pictures of her on his Instagram page. She's always with Leo and his daughter, Lilah.

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Andrea," I tell her as the bartender drops off my drink, takes Andrea's order, and goes off to make her drink. "Do you come to these things often?" I ask as I raise my glass while gesturing to the room with a finger I lift off it.

Andrea lets out a quiet huff. "Sometimes, yeah. My brother thinks I'm too much of a homebody, so he drags me out to these things." She shakes her head and meets my gaze, looking at me conspiringly and saying, "Honestly, I'm waiting for him to get in a relationship or something so he can bring someone else to these things and leave me alone."

I laugh along with her at her words, before my stomach twists lightly in what I recognize as guilt. I should have made it clear to Andrea that I'm a reporter; once people—especially those who may have something to lose—find out they're talking to a reporter, they change their tune and speak very carefully. They don't want to spill something they wouldn't want the media to get their hands on. And, frankly, I don't want to be that kind of reporter—I have no interest in exploiting stories about people's personal lives of any kind. My sole focus is on their careers, much like Vivian's has been.

As if reading my thoughts, Andrea asks me after taking a sip of her newly received drink, “So, what do you do, Willow?”

I take a breath and hope I don't scare her off. “I'm a reporter with Front Runner News, just starting out.”

Andrea's eyes widen, but not for the reason I think. “Oh—are you the one taking over for Vivian? Leo was telling me about that,” she says with a nod and a smile, and my shoulders relax in relief.

“I am, yeah,” I answer with a breathy laugh. “I've got some big shoes to fill, but I'm excited.”

Andrea grins, her smile sweet. “Well, if they picked you to take over, I'm sure you'll be great!”

“Thank you,” I grin. “And what do you do?”

As Andrea tells me about the café she's opening up soon with one of her cousins, I suddenly get the distinct feeling that I'm being watched intently. I listen to Andrea speak, and let my

gaze wander a little, subtly, as I try to catch sight of anyone who may be looking this way. It's too sharp of a feeling to ignore, and as I look past people chatting, my gaze slides over an all too familiar face before my eyes lock with a pair of dark brown ones halfway across the room.

The air in my throat hitches as I'm locked in a staring contest with Reed Maxwell.

He is standing by Leo and JJ, the two men chatting animatedly as Reed stands between them, staring straight ahead at me. It's nerve wracking, this weight of his stare, my skin heating up wherever his gaze seems to touch. From where I'm standing, it's difficult to make out Reed's expression, to try and read on his face what his thoughts might be. People walk around in the space of the distance between us, obscuring my view of him every few seconds, but every time he appears in my line of vision, his gaze is still fixed on me.

I do my best to keep my expression neutral, not wanting him to see the way he is managing to get under my skin. Jeez—what is his issue? It wasn't bad enough that he was trying to basically embarrass me on my first ever live interview, and now he's set on seemingly trying to make me feel uncomfortable at this event?

With that thought crossing my mind, I break my gaze with him and turn back to Andrea and set out on doing something that Reed Maxwell probably isn't used to—ignoring the shit out of him.

Chapter 4

Reed

If there had been any hope to get Willow out of my mind, it all goes out the window the moment I lay eyes on her across the room. She is standing at the bar, ironically enough chatting with Leo's sister, wearing an emerald-colored dress that hugs her body, showing off her curves in a way that would bring a grown man to his knees to worship them. What's worse: I know she knows I'm looking at her, unable to do anything else. She had met my gaze, clocked me, and then turned away like she couldn't give a shit about me.

I don't blame her one bit for that. I had been an ass, not making the best first impression, and for the first time in my life, I want to make up for it. Normally, I don't particularly care what people think of me as a person. I'm here to play football, not people please. Being a decent human to fans whenever I interact with them, especially the younger ones, is one thing. But I haven't given a single thought to journalists and holier-than-thou executives who see football as more of a business than a game. And, yeah, maybe football to them *is* a

business, but that's never been the case for me. And I let them know as much.

During my interview with Willow, I treated her like she was just like every other reporter on that field. But there is an annoying, incessant voice in the back of my head that keeps telling me that she isn't, and I find myself wanting to get to the bottom of that idea. What is it about her that I can't seem to let go of? It's no secret she's gorgeous, but I have seen many beautiful women in my life. Sure, Willow seems to stand above all of them, but that isn't enough of a reason for me to not be able to stop thinking about her.

Tuning out the conversation of the guys around me, I look toward where I last saw Willow. She's no longer talking to Andrea, but instead she's chatting with our linebacker, Greg Morgan. My eyes narrow, ever so slightly, as they talk like they're old friends. I know that she is here for work, as are all of the other journalists here tonight, but I see her laugh at something Morgan said, and when the grin lights up her face, it hits me like a bolt of lightning why I can't stop thinking of her.

That smile. I've been around and have interacted with plenty of reporters during my time in the NFL. Almost every single one of them put on a mask as they interview us, their smiles empty and their eyes simply hungry for a story of any kind. They work fast, wanting your answers before moving onto the next one. But during those few minutes that Willow interviewed me, despite my attitude, I saw the genuine interest that lit up in her green eyes. Even with the dismissive way I

spoke to her, she didn't let that spark die. I watched her interviews with Leo and Caden afterward, and while that spark of interest was the same, she had been much more at ease with them than with me, understandably. They smiled as they talked to her, engaged in her questions, gave proper answers—like they always do. I didn't ever care for any of it until she came.

And she smiled. A lot. And *damn*, it was all genuine. Her excitement for simply being there lit up her entire face, and I was an asshole to tell her she did too much of it. I made the mistake of treating her like she was like every other reporter that's out there, but all it took was the aftermath of that one interview to realize that she's not like them. That damn smile that I can't get out of my head—it's the reason for it all.

"If you're gonna stare at her all night, might as well try and talk to her," comes Leo's voice from next to me, a low murmur within the chatter of the group we're standing with. He hides his words behind his glass of Coke; the man doesn't drink much, not when he's got a daughter at home to look after.

My gaze slides over to him, arching a brow. "Because the last time I talked to her it went so well," I mutter.

My friend shoots me a small smirk. "Maybe this time, try being nicer," he quips, and I shoot him a withering look that he merely chuckles at. "Just apologize to her, man. Show some remorse and take it from there."

My lips curl downward at his suggestion. *Apologize?* Clocking the look on my face, Leo raises his eyebrows and smirks, "You are familiar with the concept, right?"

“Fuck you,” I grunt quietly, making his smirk widen.

“It won’t kill you, you know.”

“What won’t kill who?” I suppress a sigh as JJ jumps into the conversation, his curious gaze flickering between Leo and me.

I don’t answer, lips pursed, but of course Leo does. “It won’t kill Maxwell to apologize to Willow for being an ass.”

Leo ignores my scowl as JJ’s lips part and his head tilts back in realization. “Oh, yeah, no, you should apologize to her.”

My scowl darkens, but my two best friends don’t shrink under it. “I’ve never apologized for the way I am in interviews before.”

I don’t know why I’m defending myself when I know they’re right. Maybe because if I don’t apologize to her, even knowing I should, I’m trying to write Willow off as any other journalist I’ve encountered. Apologizing to her, as ridiculous as it may sound, would be putting her above all of the other ones, and that’s precisely what I’m hesitant to do.

“And that’s shitty, man,” Leo says, never one to sugar coat things. “Besides, Willow is *sweet*. And she’s going to be interviewing us a lot in the future, so you might as well make peace now.”

“And maybe smile when you do it,” JJ suggests. At my contemptuous look, he shrugs, unfazed. Then, quietly so no one overhears, he adds, “You gotta loosen up. No girl wants a guy who’s allergic to smiling.”

I stare at him, his choice of words turning around in my head. My scowl never disappears as I tell him, “What makes you think I want her to want me?”

Now JJ is the one who looks at me like I’ve grown a second head. “Because you’re debating on whether to apologize to her or not. You never give a shit about what people think. Obviously, there’s something more here.”

Obviously? My jaw clenches as I glance over at Leo, who merely shrugs and is so clearly trying to suppress a knowing grin. Pains in my asses, all of them. Caden would probably be the only one who would be on my side on this, but the fucker skipped out on the event altogether, citing some issue his neighbor was having that he was helping out with.

My gaze tears from the guys and I search the room once more, and it’s as though she is a magnet, because my eyes seem to find her almost immediately. She’s talking to some people I’m not familiar with—probably other journalists—and I run my tongue along my teeth, debating for a moment. I can feel the guys’ gazes settle on me expectantly, and I wait until Willow breaks away from the people she’s talking to before I tighten my jaw and start making my way toward her.

She wanders around, not for one second looking uncertain, but I’m able to catch up to her and catch her attention. “Willow,” I say by way of greeting. I doubt we’re on a first name basis, but calling her Miss Burke seems too much.

Besides, I can’t help the way her name rolls off my tongue, smooth and tasting sweet.

Her green eyes immediately snap toward me, and I see them widen subtly in surprise. Her full lips are painted a shining red, and the sight alone is enough to get my blood pumping. But unlike before, they are not pulled up into a smile—not a real one, at least. Instead, Willow gives me a small, close mouthed smile that doesn't reach her eyes, and it tightens my muscles in mild aggravation, even though I know it is no one's fault but my own. I made an ass of myself, and no one can try to fix that but me.

That fact that I'm even trying to speak volumes.

"Mr. Maxwell," Willow returns carefully, and my teeth press together at the way she addresses me.

"Call me Reed," I say, watching as something flashes across her eyes, but is gone before I get the chance to describe it. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Willow arches a brow as she gazes up at me. "No, you can't," she says, shooting me a pointed look. "It's an open bar."

Frustration blooms, and I do my best not to clench my fists at my sides in an attempt to hide it. "Right," I mutter. *This is going so fucking well.* "Listen," I start, running my tongue along my teeth before reluctantly pushing on, "I just wanted to apologize for my behavior during our interview."

Willow blinks at me before she raises both of her eyebrows, staring at me in a way that rouses an urge of wanting to know what's running through her mind. I definitely detect a hint of shock, but there is also a subtle look of apathy lingering. "Have you ever apologized for anything in your life?"

Her accusation takes me by surprise, the sheer honesty in the question itself like a punch to the gut. It doesn't double me over, but it does have me raising my hand to rub it along my chin and jaw, forcing down a dry chuckle. "Not recently, no," I answer, and she looks thoroughly unimpressed. I drop my hand and purse my lips. "Look, I'm trying here."

"Not really," comes her response as she tilts her head slightly. "You said you wanted to apologize like you expect me to readily accept it." She shrugs, her lips turning downward. "If anything, it sounds a little patronizing."

Jesus Christ. How did me wanting to apologize turn into *this*? Despite myself, my eyebrows tug together and I ask, "What would you like me to do? Get on my hands and knees?"

Her cheeks flush and I can't stop myself from admiring the pink hue that colors her face. "No," she says, bristling slightly, and I fight a smirk from getting that reaction out of her. Willow lifts her chin, locking her gaze with mine and saying, "We'll just see how sincere this apology truly is during our next interview."

My jaw clenches, knowing what she means. She wants to see if I'll be more approachable, *nicer* even, in our next interview. She wants to see if actions speak louder than words, and if I want her forgiveness—which I desperately find myself wanting—then I'll be as good of a sport on camera as I am on the field.

"Fine," I grit out. "If that's what it takes."

“Good,” Willow nods. I know she then takes in a deep, quiet breath the way her neck tightens, and I fight the urge to trace the slope of her neck with my gaze, to trail along her collarbones and down to her chest, which the dress hugs real fucking nicely. “If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to go have a chat with your coach.”

She doesn’t wait for me to respond, and instead turns and walks off, and I can’t stop watching her as she goes and approaches Coach Scott, who greets her with a small, polite smile. I press my tongue to the inside of my cheek, shaking my head, unsure if this conversation with Willow helped or not.

Unsurprisingly, thoughts of Willow don’t leave my head as the night goes on—especially given that she is in the same room as me. I distract myself by talking to the other attendees—which is a headache, because all anyone wants to do is talk about their donations to the charity. None of these fuckers really care about the cause, and all they want is to look good in front of their peers and out-donate the other. Any time someone asks me about my donation, I refuse to participate in such cheap conversation, and turn toward my teammates and talk to them. I know that, just like me, they’re here for the charity itself and not to make ourselves look good in front of people who we don’t really care for.

Events like these are all for show; for the big-wigs to show off their wealth, and for us athletes to show that we’re more than just about sports. As far as most people on my team and I, attending these events are a headache, but supporting the

charities they are for is not. We're more than happy to contribute to the causes that are important to us, but the media attention for it that is inevitably received cheapens it all, in my opinion. If I could do it all anonymously, I would—and I do, for many of them, but there's nothing I can do when the guys and I are forced to show our faces and attend the functions.

The night drags on, and around eleven the event comes to an end and everyone floats towards the exit to head out. One by one, the guys all drive home after receiving their cars from the valet, and as I stand outside of the hotel, the Chicago chill like needles on my face, I glance to my left and catch sight of Willow standing a few feet away, phone in hand and a black peacoat keeping her warm.

My eyes narrow on to the screen, and from a distance, I easily recognize the Uber app she has opened up. Before I can stop to think twice and reconsider what I'm doing, I'm walking toward her, catching her attention almost immediately. There's a tightness in my chest that suddenly occurs when her green eyes meet my dark ones, but I ignore it, not wanting to think too deeply about what it could mean.

“You shouldn't be taking an Uber home by yourself, this time of night,” I tell her gruffly, a sliver of annoyance creeping in at the idea that she's even thinking of doing it. “I can drive you.”

Willow blinks up at me for a few long seconds before a scoff of a laugh escapes her. She makes no move to cancel her ride as she tells me pointedly, “I'll be fine.” She shakes a lock of

strawberry blonde hair away from her face and adds, “Besides, the last thing I need is a picture taken of me in your car.”

My lips purse, turning downward in offense at her tone, like being caught with me is her worst nightmare. “I’m not that bad,” I say coolly.

“Maybe.” Willow lifts a single shoulder. “But I’m trying to make my own name in this industry, and I can’t really do that if I’m wrapped up in some scandal before my career ever starts.”

I arch a brow, unsure if I’m more annoyed or amused. Of course, she’s the one to pull this weird combination of emotions out of me. “Being seen with me is a scandal?” I ask before gesturing toward the hotel behind us. “You realize you were probably photographed with me inside, right?”

“I was here for work. It’s different,” comes Willow’s smooth reasoning. “I work in media. I know how a picture of me in your car will get spun, and we should avoid that for both of our benefits.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. “I think you’re being a little dramatic.”

Willow’s eyes narrow, and I instantly know I’ve said the wrong thing. She glances at a black Hyundai that pulls up, and I know it’s her Uber the way she checks the license plate before telling me, “Thank you, but I’m good. Have a goodnight, Reed,” before stepping down to the curb and opening the back door of the car.

She doesn't spare me another glance as she gets into the car and it drives off, leaving me staring at the car and feeling like an idiot, with no one to blame but myself.

Chapter 5

Willow

The heat in Texas is a welcome change from the familiar cold front that's flowing into Chicago, but in the men's locker room, I'm not thinking about the weather and instead am trying to not suffocate from the smell of cologne that permeates the air. Though, I guess I prefer the scent of two dozen different colognes mixed together rather than the stench of sweat that will take over once the game is over. I'm currently wrapping up the pre-game interviews with some of the players, Michael at my hip with the camera in the room that is loud and buzzing with energy.

They all are already dressed in their uniforms, big and bulky and looking ready to beat Texas in their own state. "Alright, thanks, JJ," I smile at the running back once our interview comes to an end.

"No problem," he grins, his eyes as bright as his smile. I swear, the guy might as well be sunshine incarnate; no wonder the internet goes crazy for him. Handsome, athletic, and sweet to boot. "I'll see you after the game."

I nod, chuckling. “Good luck.” When JJ walks off with a two fingered salute, I turn to Michael and say, “Alright, let’s head out.”

Just as I say those words, my gaze snags on Reed, about ten feet away in front of a locker as he gets dressed. Unable to help it, the air gets stuck in my throat at the sight of him, taking in the view of his bare upper half, his muscles on full display. *Holy hell*. I knew, of course, the guy is built and in shape, but seeing it in person is a whole other story. Clearly, he doesn’t take his time at the gym lightly, with all those tight muscles and sinewed arms, and I swear I can feel my blood pumping through my veins as my pulse quickens without warning.

He’s got his uniform bottoms on, and my throat dries at how tightly the compression shorts hug his muscled thighs, eyeing the trail of hair that starts at his belly button and disappears into the band of his pants. *Fuck*. What am I *doing*?

I look away before he can catch me staring, and I’m mortified beyond belief then follow Michael towards the locker room doors.

We don’t make it five steps when one of the players, Jordan Buchanan, steps out in front of me and asks with a grin, “Leaving so soon, Willow?”

I arch a brow at him, chuckling slightly at his obvious flirtatious tone. The guy is handsome, no doubt, but getting involved with football players is a no-go. Especially when I’m just starting out as head reporter. I need to make a good

impression on the higher ups if I want this to be a permanent thing, and that means keeping my distance from the players other than when I'm interviewing them for work.

"You guys have a game to play so, yeah, I'm heading out," I tell him with a chuckle. Michael looks at me from behind Jordan, and I know he's silently asking permission to go on, since I know he wants to store the camera until he has to use it for the post-game interviews. The guy doesn't talk much, but he's a great cameraman and companion to have during the interviews, so I like him enough to give him a nod.

When I look back at Jordan, he's still grinning. "Should I be offended that you haven't interviewed me yet?"

"Don't worry. You're on the schedule for the next pre-game interview," I say, shaking my head in amusement.

"I don't know if I can wait that long."

Just as I let out a somewhat startled laugh at his bold flirting, another voice suddenly interrupts our conversation with a sharp, "Buchanan—stop flirting and finish getting ready."

My heart stops for a brief moment at the sound of Reed's deep, rough voice. My back straightens as I look to where he is standing, and my stomach does a somersault at the sight of the scowl that darkens his handsome features. His sharp tone cuts through the air but, fortunately, it doesn't silence the constant chatter of the locker room—except, I do see a number of men glance our way for a moment.

Heat rises to my cheeks. Reed doesn't even glance my way, instead his glare is fixed on Jordan, who seems to have straightened up almost immediately upon hearing Reed's demand. Is he serious? I get that he's one of the captains of the team and he wants all of the players to be focused as they head into the game, but embarrassment still courses through my veins, as if he called *me* out.

I mean, he might as well have, the way he snapped at Jordan for *flirting*.

The back of my neck heats up, feeling some of the other players' gazes on us, and I see annoyance subtly flicker across Jordan's face. He lifts his chin and says, "Sure thing, Cap," before glancing down at me. He gives me a quick smile and quips, "Until next time."

He walks away, and I don't hesitate in continuing toward the door, refusing to stand still and let my embarrassment take over. As I go, I find myself glancing to where Reed stands, and I nearly trip on my feet when my eyes connect with his. His expression is unreadable, although I can see the tightness of his sharp jaw like he is clenching it, and his scowl from before has lightened up a little, but a furrow remains on his dark eyebrows as he watches me.

My skin burns as he looks at me, and I swallow the lump in my throat as I practically bolt out of the locker room, feeling like I can finally breathe only when I'm a good twenty feet away.

The last time I spoke to Reed, it had been a few days ago at the charity event—when he had offered to give me a ride home and I had refused. His offer had taken me by surprise—just like him trying to apologize earlier that night had taken me aback, too. I never expected someone like him—someone rich and famous with an attitude problem—to approach me and apologize for his less than friendly behavior.

The entire night at the event, I could feel his gaze on me, heavy and warm and, I hate to admit it, not really uncomfortable. I didn't feel creeped out that he was looking at me; if anything, every time I became aware of the weight of his stare, my pulse began to race, my chest warming at the attention. I would kill to know why he was looking at me, what was going through his head, but I had a feeling finding out would throw me for a loop I wasn't ready for. Hell, half the time I convinced myself he *wasn't* looking at me, that I was being foolish and getting way too ahead of myself.

But, God, almost every time I would glance his way, trying to be subtle about it, I would *see* his gaze on me, and my head would start spinning with no hopes of stopping the thoughts that it would conjure up.

Now, that little comment in the locker room has me bewildered once again. As I walk, trying to calm my heart down, I tell myself that Reed did it because I was probably being a distraction. I had no business sticking around in the locker room as the team got ready if I had already wrapped up my pre-game interviews. It's a known fact that Reed, in

particular, is not a fan of journalists and reporters. He was probably trying to get rid of me fast.

My cheeks flame up in newfound embarrassment if that's the case. I can only hope and pray that Reed keeps his word from the charity event and our post-game interview this time around goes better than the first one did.

After an intense and, frankly, anxiety-inducing game, the Rebels managed to beat the other team in their own home state after the game went into overtime. I spent the game profusely taking notes, an eye on the field as I quickly typed and typed and typed on my phone, preferring to take notes on my phone rather than on an actual notepad because it's quicker.

All eyes were glued on the field as the game went into overtime because of the tied score that happened out of nowhere, but fortunately, the Rebels came out on top, resulting in a disappointing loss for the other team. Michael and I join the dozens of other reporters and cameramen on the sidelines of the field for the post-game interviews, and my heart races with familiar excitement as I wait for Kenny to give me my cue into my active earpiece as I approach Reed through the busy crowd.

I would be lying if I said I'm not a little nervous for this interview, hoping it goes smoothly. When I make my way towards Reed, I catch sight of him smiling alongside Leo, sweat glistening his face as a bead rolls down his temple. His

helmet is in his hand and his dark hair is mussed and messy and damp, but the man manages to look unfairly attractive.

As if he can sense my approach—or maybe sense my thoughts about him—Reed looks over to me, and I watch as his smile sobers up and a blank mask slips over his face. My grip on the microphone tightens as I refuse to let his expression stir me.

When I stop in front of him, I adopt my own air of professionalism and ask him, “Are you ready?”

Reed nods, and I can’t quite get a good read on his expression. “Yeah. Let’s do it.”

He doesn’t necessarily sound enthusiastic about it, but he’s not exactly running for the hills either, yet. I’d say that’s a step in the right direction, I think.

I do my best to ignore the heat of his body when he comes to stand next to me, because acknowledging that I’m affected by his proximity would be to acknowledge my foolish attraction to him, which I refuse to do. In my earpiece I’m given my cue, and I smile towards the camera and begin my brief introduction before launching into the questions. I look at Reed, heart jumping at finding his dark eyes already set on me. “So, you’re winning 14-0, and in the span of five minutes, the Riders score two touchdowns and tie up the score.” They had lost the lead in the fourth quarter, the other team having the momentum and making the game go into overtime. “But you bring it back in overtime and win the game. What was going through your head during that time?”

A wry smile tugs at the corner of his mouth, which startles me a little and I wonder, in that moment, what a real, full-blown grin from him would look like. “Well, I’m not going to lie, at a time like that, the natural instinct is to panic a little,” Reed says, and I can feel a smile starting to pull at my lips because as stiff as he may still look, at least his answer isn’t short and clipped. “But the panic will keep you from staying focused. So, I just reminded myself to keep my head in the game, told my teammates as much, and just focused on playing well instead of looking at the time or score.”

“Looks like it paid off,” I say with a nod before drifting into another question.

I ask him about different plays he made during the game, referencing the notes I took, and much to my delight, Reed answers all of my questions easily. Not as if someone is pulling his teeth out. The weight of his gaze is constant, yet not uncomfortable. It’s warm and intense and I find myself liking the feel of it, wanting more of it, as foolish as that may be. There are people everywhere, all around us, but Reed’s presence seems to take precedence, drowning out everyone else effortlessly. He’s had an incredible season so far, on the track to winning MVP, and it shows in the way he carries himself.

Confident with a hint of cockiness, which he somehow makes work, and yet the perpetual frown on his face doesn’t take away from that.

Except right now, as I ask him questions that he answers properly and a little more thoughtfully than he's known to, his gaze never leaves mine. The eye contact is... Penetrating, to say the least.

"Alright, I'll let you get back to your team," I say to lead into the end of the interview after asking the questions I needed to. I look at Reed and smile, "Thank you for your time."

Reed's gaze is locked on mine, and there's a flutter in my chest when he returns a small smile and says, "No problem."

My grip on the microphone tightens, the air in my lungs stilling for a moment at the sight of his small smile. When the interview ends and Michael gives me a thumbs up to signal as such, I drop my hand to my side and let out a breath. When I look back at Reed, he's got an unreadable look on his face as he casually says, "Told you I wanted to apologize."

His words pull a chuckle out of me, lightly biting my lower lip as I shake my head. Him being a little more pleasant in our second interview is a step in the right direction for sure, but I want to see how much he really means his apology and see if he's going to keep up this lighter attitude for future interviews.

"You did," I agree with a nod. A small smile tugs on one corner of my mouth as I look up at him, trying to remind myself we are surrounded by people everywhere. Reed has the habit of stealing all of the attention even within a crowd. "I'm interested to see how much you mean it. Can't let you off the hook that easily."

I don't mean for my words to come out as flirtatious, but I can hear the accidental tone of voice I speak them in. Teasing, playful—*unprofessional*. It makes my cheeks flame up, especially when I see Reed's brown eyes glint in a way that sends my heart tripping over itself.

The air around us feels electric, the space between us begging to be nonexistent, but I don't allow myself to give in. Not here and, if I know what's good for me, not ever. Not when I'm at such a pivotal point of my career. I can't afford to let anything or anyone screw with that—especially someone as handsome and unattainable as Reed Maxwell.

I need to maintain space. I need to keep things professional.

My eyes lift and my gaze snags with his, and the blood in my veins turns as electric as the air, being on the receiving end of such an intense, meaningful stare that makes my heart clench.

Fuck me, I think I might be in trouble.

Chapter 6

Reed

“Loosen up, man. Have a shot,” JJ shouts over the heavy music pumping through the speakers of the club, nearly deafening in its volume. He tries to shove an overflowing shot glass of vodka toward me, but I wave him off with my free hand, the other nursing a bottle of beer.

“I’m good,” I tell him, earning a huff and a roll of his eyes from JJ. He doesn’t hesitate to take the shot himself without a flinch. The guy is well on his way to getting wasted, the alcohol is probably going down like water for him at this point.

Meanwhile I, on the other hand, have been sticking to my beers. I’m on my third one, and I’m a big guy, so beers don’t do much, but it would be a lie to say I am one hundred percent sober. The beer is doing a good job in keeping my irritation at the atmosphere at bay for the most part.

I’m not much of a fan of going out to clubs; if I don’t have to go to them, then I don’t bother. That being said, the guys from the team like having a fun weekend every now and then, and I

would be a shitty captain if I didn't come with them after they invite me out. The guys on the team—most of them—are good men, and if Leo can find a couple hours to come out with us before going back home to his daughter, then I have no excuse not to.

We've had an excellent season so far, so of course the team wants to celebrate. Many of them are here, scattered around the VIP section of the club, but I'm comfortable occupying a booth with JJ, Leo, and Caden. The music pumps throughout the club and from where we are sitting on the balcony on the second floor, we've got a view of the entire dancefloor and bar below us. The DJ yells into the microphone every now and then, pulling reactions from the drunken and dancing crowd, which pulses with the continuous movements of everyone present.

As I watch people take shots at the bar or dance mindlessly within the crowd, my thoughts start to drift. I can't remember the last time I had gotten as drunk as some of the people below—or, hell, as some of my teammates currently are. The focus had always been on football; training, working out, being the best I can be. Those things took precedence over something as trivial as getting drunk—or allowing myself to have any kind of meaningful relationships.

I didn't want them, and didn't go out of my way to find one because right now is the time to focus on my career. Sex is just a release; everyone needs it and, frankly, there's no shortage of women I can take to bed and find momentary pleasure in. Even if, sometimes, it feels more like a transaction than

anything else. But it's been working, so why fix something that isn't broken?

As soon as that thought crosses my mind, my brain involuntarily conjures up an image of strawberry blonde hair, green eyes, and a dimpled smile I haven't stopped picturing for weeks. It's not a coincidence that Willow's face flashes through my mind right as I'm thinking of relationships, of sex.

Is that what this is? Is my attraction to her just solely physical? As much as I want that to be true, because that would sure as shit be a lot less complicated, I have a feeling that that's not the case. Of course, Willow is beautiful—easily the most stunning woman I've ever laid eyes on, and the truth of that is startling. I've made an ass of myself in front of her more than once, and I hate to admit it, but I have never really experienced the consequences of being a dick to people. Or, well, if I have, then I didn't care.

But with Willow, it feels different. Like something inside me is inherently telling me I *need* to care what she thinks. She looks at me, and those green eyes that remind me of spring leaves have me caught in a trance, unable to look away. Her smile is contagious, enough to make me want to smile, and it's difficult to contain it because that would be a terrible, sure-fire way of giving myself and my traitorous thoughts away. The woman is beginning to occupy more and more space in my head, and while a small part of me is bothered by it, a bigger part welcomes it. Craves it. Craves *her*.

And as much as I want to tell myself it's just a physical attraction with nothing more to it, I have a sharp feeling deep in my chest that isn't true. And that it's only a matter of time until I accept it.

My gaze sweeps over the dancing crowd below once more as I take another pull from my beer, and my muscles tense as my eyes do a double take at a figure at the bar. Part of me thinks I'm imagining things, that the flashing colors around the club are just a trick of the light. But there's no mistaking that face, that smile, even from this distance.

Like my thoughts had summoned her presence, it's hard to miss Willow leaning against the bar on the side section, her face visible to me from where I'm sitting up above. I lean forward, just a little, unable to tear my gaze away as I watch her grin and chat with two girls she is squeezed in between, laughing, and I find myself wishing I could hear the sound of her laugh rather than the music deafening me to it.

I take another long sip of the beer, licking my lips afterwards as my gaze remains fixed on her. Fuck, I can't bring myself to look away, watching intently, and that's exactly how Caden catches me as he leans forward on the couch next to me, elbows resting on his thighs.

"You gonna keep watching her from a distance or make a move?" his gruff voice asks, almost sounding bored.

Across from us, Leo snorts. "That's all he can bring himself to do where Willow is concerned."

Next to him, JJ snickers. His eyes are glazed over from the alcohol, but amusement still dances in them. “I think she makes him nervous.”

My expression falls flat. “You’re an idiot,” I deadpan. It only makes him laugh more.

His words are meaningless. Willow doesn’t make me nervous; I just have a history of not being the most pleasant conversationalist, and that’s not something I’ve ever really thought twice about. Until now—until her. She’s got the kind of smile that does something indescribable to my chest—the same smile I told her, fucking stupidly, she does too much of.

It was a throwaway comment, said in the heat of the moment because despite the adrenaline of winning a game, the post-game interviews always dampened my mood. I’d assumed an interview with her would feel the same. It hadn’t—not completely. And that threw me in for a loop. I didn’t like it, so I made a stupid remark.

“We’re friends with plenty of reporters.” At my still flat expression, Leo amends his statement, “Okay, well, maybe you’re not.”

Caden scoffs next to me. “Maxwell looks like he wants to be more than just friends with her.” He then fixes me with a look. “Which wouldn’t be a smart idea.”

JJ frowns. “Why not?” he asks, like he’s put off on my behalf.

“She’s a fresh faced NFL reporter,” Leo explains easily. “It’d look bad for her if she was involved with an athlete she works

closely with. Maxwell wouldn't face much backlash, but she would."

My jaw tightens at his words. Isn't that exactly what Willow had told me that night at the charity function, when I had done something as simple and innocent as offer her a ride home? They were all right, I know. It frustrates me, but I *know*. But it doesn't stop me from thinking about her, fantasizing about her when I probably shouldn't. Sparkling eyes, radiant smile, and hair my fingers itch to run through—telling myself not to think about her has been damn near impossible.

I finish the last of my beer, still watching Willow down at the bar. To my friends, I ask gruffly, "So you're saying I shouldn't go down there and talk to her?"

They are silent for all of three seconds before Leo asks, "Do you want to talk to her, or fuck her?"

The thought of having her underneath me, splitting her open with my cock while I taste her mouth has my blood rushing straight to my groin. My jaw clenches for a moment before I say levelly, "Both."

Even if she's off limits. The forbidden aspect of it all doesn't make her more enticing—she does that all on her own effortlessly.

"Be charming," JJ suggests.

Caden snorts again. "As if he knows how to do that," he jests dryly.

I shoot him a glare. Talk about hypocrisy; the guy might be more emotionally stunted than I am, and that's saying something. "I was a dick to her during our first interview," I remind JJ. "I don't think being charming will get me too far with her."

"Actions speak louder than words," Leo says. The guy might be the most intuitive when it comes to a woman's feelings as he raises his daughter on his own. "You can apologize for your behavior all you want, but you might win her over by showing her a change. Being pleasant during one interview isn't going to cut it. Go down there, buy her and her friends a drink, start a conversation. You know," Leo raises an eyebrow pointedly, "*Be human.*"

My lips curl in distaste at his obvious teasing, though I can make out the truth in his words, too. I don't get a chance to think about his words for too long, because when I look toward Willow again, she isn't at the bar anymore. Her two friends are laughing, looking toward the dance floor, and I follow their line of sight until it lands on a view that leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

Willow is dancing with some guy—some nameless, insignificant man—who has his hands all over her as they move together to the beat of the fast-paced song. There isn't an inch of space between them, and the blood in my veins boils to the point of pain, stinging deep in my bones as a fire erupts in my chest that catches me off guard.

I know exactly what this sensation is, but I refuse to acknowledge it. I'm too busy watching the guy's hands slide down Willow's sides before reaching her hips, her thighs, and then touching her inner thighs as she leans her head back against his shoulder. The fucker is enjoying himself too much, and the sight of them tightens my grip on the beer bottle, threatening to shatter it right in my palm.

I fucking hate what I'm looking at. The feeling is visceral and sharp, but it's there and I can't ignore it. It only calms down somewhat when the song changes and Willow pulls away from the guy, turning to say something to him before she's pushing her way out of the crowd and the guy turns toward a group of guys. His buddies, most likely.

My gaze zeros in on Willow as she returns to her friends at the bar, her smile lazy and perhaps a little drunk as she talks to them. Is she telling them about the guy? Is she going to dance with him again? Let him take her home?

I don't sit around to think about the two of them long. With my beer finished, I get up from the couch and start heading toward the stairs to exit the VIP area. Up here, bottle girls come up to give us our drinks, but that doesn't do me any good with Willow all the way down there at the bar, with guys probably coming up to her to buy her drinks or ask her to dance.

The security guard unhooks the velvet rope for me before I trudge down the stairs, the thud of my shoes against the steps silenced by the music as I make my way down. I don't

immerse myself into the crowd just yet, walking along the edges of it, my gaze fixed on the length of the bar. A few people glance my way, but are otherwise too drunk to approach me, which is just as well. My only focus right now is the redhead at the bar, hoping she hasn't moved away—or worse, found some other asshole to dance with.

Logically, I know I have no reason to walk up to Willow and attempt to start a conversation with her. I also know she has every reason to ignore me and continue her night with her friends, except that's not reason enough to get me to turn around and head back upstairs. In fact, catching sight of her once—watching her dance with some nameless idiot—is enough to get me to throw caution and logic out the window and walk right up to where she is.

My eyes land on her as I walk along the bar, fortunately standing right where I saw her last, talking to one of her friends. The other girl she is with, the blonde, is nowhere in sight, and my gaze drops to Willow's plastic cup, seeing that her drink, conveniently for me, is running low.

She hasn't spotted me yet, turned away from me as she chats with her friend, so I lick my teeth as I stand beside her at the bar, catching her friend's attention. She stops talking and before Willow can turn around to see who her friend is looking at, I lean toward her and say, "Let me buy you a drink."

Willow, for the briefest second, tenses up before she turns around. I don't move, which pushes us closer together when she turns, and despite there being hundreds of people in this

room, I can easily smell her familiar apple scent. It's intoxicating and I have to actively stop myself from inhaling deeply like a fucking freak, and instead keep my expression cool and neutral as Willow slowly lifts her gaze to lock her green eyes with my dark brown ones.

There's a mild glaze over her eyes and a pink flush on her cheeks, telling me she's not entirely sober, looking up at me in surprise before her mouth curves up in an easygoing smile. The sight of it has an iron fist wrapping around my heart, squeezing when her dimples pop into view. She's much shorter than me, her chest just inches away from my torso, and I'm not sure if it's the drums of the song that is beating wildly in my chest, or my own heart.

"What're you doing here?" Willow asks. Her words aren't too slurred together, and she smiles through them.

I feel the corners of my mouth twitching, wanting to smile. "A friend of mine owns this club."

Willow snorts, rolling her eyes. "Of course, he does," she says with a nod, like she wouldn't expect anything less than for me to be friends with people who own places like these. She narrows her eyes, then asks, "So, would you actually be *buying* me a drink, or do you get it for free around here?"

I let a small smirk slip through. "I'd be buying it. I like to support my friend's business."

Through the deafening music, I still manage to hear Willow's acknowledging hum, as if I'm tuned into her solely, as she

nods approvingly. But then she shakes her head and says, “Thank you for the offer, but I don’t think you should buy—”

“I think what she means to say is she’d love one,” her friend interrupts with a grin, and maybe it’s a trick of the light but I swear Willow’s cheeks darken as she looks at her friend over her shoulder. The brunette just grins before introducing herself, “I’m Clare.”

My smirk widens just a little at her intervention as I dip my chin. “Reed,” I say before nodding at her, “What’re you having?”

Clare happily tells me her and Willow’s drink orders, and I flag down the bartender, who immediately comes over and begins working on the drinks after I tell him the type. Then Clare conveniently busies herself on her phone, leaning against the bar, and when Willow looks at me again, I see the way she gazes at me head to toe. She doesn’t hide her perusal, and my blood pumps, wanting to know what’s going through her mind.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you in anything other than your football uniform,” she finally comments, head tilting as her gaze meets mine.

I lean my elbow against the bar, arching an eyebrow as I gaze down at her. “You saw me in a suit at the charity event,” I remind her.

She grins and it fucking knocks the wind out of my lungs unexpectedly. “Yeah, but you looked so stiff.” She giggles at my offended expression. “Like, more stiff than usual.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t look *stiff* now?”

Her grin remains and it lights up her entire face, her features soft and her eyes bright. My pulse races the longer I stare at her, and I can’t remember the last time a woman did that to me. She smiles in a way that deepens her dimples and makes her eyes squint as she brings up her hand, bringing her thumb and index finger together. “Just a tiny bit,” Willow giggles. “Do you even know how to relax?”

“I’m relaxed right now.”

That gets another laugh out of her, and I’m filled with this primal urge to tell everyone in the room to shut the fuck up simply so I can listen to her laugh clearly and commit the sound to memory. She hasn’t laughed like that in front of me, hasn’t given me this carefree, easygoing smile before, either. And I’m well aware she’s effortlessly gifting me these smiles, these laughs, because she’s not completely sober, and maybe I don’t completely deserve them, but I’ll take them anyway. Even if they’re not mine to take.

“You most definitely are *not*,” Willow says with a shake of her head. Then she adds seriously, “You should try yoga. That’ll help.”

“Do you do yoga?” I ask casually, watching as she takes a sip of her newly received drink. It takes all my willpower not to stare at the way her lips close around the straw.

Willow nods, smiling. “I do.”

“Then you can teach me.”

Her lips part slightly, the little black straw pressed against her bottom one. Her front brushes against mine and fire explodes at the barely-there contact. With a slight tilt of her head, she asks, “Are you trying to get me alone, Reed?”

Her boldness stirs my cock, tightening against the zipper of my jeans. “And... if I am?” I ask slowly, gaze dropping to her lips, pink and begging to be kissed.

Willow’s own gaze is locked on my mouth, absently playing with her straw as she says, “I’d say you probably shouldn’t. It would just complicate things.”

Fuck. She’s right. Still, it doesn’t stop me from rumbling, “It doesn’t have to.”

“Easier said than done.”

I let out a breath, not wanting to push her, despite the urge I have to pull her in, pull her close. I don’t know what the fuck has come over me—I blame the few beers I had—but I find myself offering, “Let me give you and your friends a ride home, at least.”

Willow gives a smile, sweet and kind, and shakes her head. “Clare’s fiancé is picking us up.”

A wry chuckle escapes me, my gaze sweeping over her, taking in her tight top that hugs her chest, the slope of her neck and curve of her waist. “You’re never getting in my car, are you?” This is the second time I’ve offered to drive her, and the answer has been the same.

Her smile changes, her eyes getting a look that electrifies my blood. But not as much as her words do when she says quietly, “I have a feeling if I got in your car, we’d end up somewhere we shouldn’t.”

The blood rushes to my groin. Twice now, in the span of five minutes, Willow has teased the implication of us giving in and hooking up, and pulls such a visceral reaction from my body that it throws me off. When was the last time I was this attracted to someone? Is it just physical?

For a moment, I’ll think that it is. But then I see her eyes, her damn smile, and the voice in the back of my head taunts me that this attraction I have to Willow isn’t just because of lust. There’s a want that goes deeper than that, and I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do with it.

My voice is nothing but a low rumble, too quiet against the music playing but loud enough for Willow as I dip my head, just slightly, and ask, “Would that be such a bad thing?”

A breath shudders out of her, and I’m bombarded with images of what she would look like if I had her trembling under different circumstances—under me, my cock buried so deep inside of her that we would both forget why this is such a dangerous idea.

Willow let out a breathless laugh, her cheeks still colored a pretty pink. “I think you already know the answer to that.” She finishes off the rest of her drink. She sets the empty cup on the bar and gives me a smile that knocks the air out of my lungs

once more. Fuck. “Thanks for the drink, Reed. And the offer for a ride home.”

I shoot her a small smirk. “Maybe one day you’ll take me up on it.”

She smiles, and there’s a look in her eyes I want to explore, to analyze and find the meaning behind it as she murmurs, “Maybe.”

Chapter 7

Willow

“**Y**ou’re fucking with me,” Vick gapes, staring between Clare and I with blue eyes widened in disbelief and dismay. “Please tell me you guys are joking.”

I give her an apologetic smile and a shake of my head. “Sorry to say that we’re not, babe.”

She lets out a groan that pounds slightly in my head, and I can tell in hers, too, as she squeezes her eyes shut in pain before lowering her head until her forehead is resting on her arms, folded on top of the counter. The messy bun on top of her head bobs with the movement, and I find myself debating if I should take another Tylenol to quell the thundering in my head. The coffee isn’t doing anything to help—it might be making it worse, actually—but I find myself taking another sip, anyway.

“So, you mean to tell me,” Vick begins miserably, lifting her head to look at my own wincing expression while Clare looks all too amused. “That I was in the same room as a bunch of

sexy, rich NFL players—and I was too fucking drunk to notice?”

Clare soothes Vick’s back as she sits next to her on the stool. “There, there. It happens to the best of us,” she says, clearly trying to stifle a laugh.

“Fuck off,” Vick grumbles, shrugging off Clare’s hand. “You’re already engaged.”

“Not to an older, sexy, rich NFL player,” Clare reminds her with an exaggerated, disappointed sigh.

I arch a brow over the rim of my coffee mug. The smell is delicious, now that the nausea from last night’s drinking has disappeared for the most part. “I’m gonna tell Alex you said that,” I tease lightly.

Clare rolls her eyes with a dismissive wave of her hand, unworried. We all know she and Alex are solid—just like the blinding rock on her finger. He may not be an NFL player, but he’s the head chef at one of Chicago’s most popular and elite restaurants. “Okay, even if it does suck that Vick didn’t get her chance at a football player—” Clare’s hazel eyes sparkle dangerously, and I’m suddenly wary as her gaze swings to me. “The same can’t be said for Willow.”

Vick’s gaze snaps over to me, sitting up with renewed interest lighting up in her eyes. “Oh, my God—*yes*. What the hell did you and Reed Maxwell talk about?” she asks with an eager grin.

Fire lit up within my cheeks. “Nothing,” I mumble into the rim of my mug.

Clare scoffs, shooting me a disbelieving look. To Vick, she says, “I’m pretty sure they both said they want to fuck each other without *actually* saying the words outright.”

The mug nearly drops from my hand, ignoring Vick’s thrilled gasp as I glare at Clare. “We did not!” I deny vehemently, even if I’m sure my cheeks are probably fire engine red by now because—shit, she had a point, didn’t she?

I may have been horribly drunk last night and my tongue a lot looser thanks to the alcohol that had been coursing through my veins, but goddamn it, I mostly remember what Reed and I talked about. This morning, I woke up still wrapping my aching head around the fact that we even talked in the first place at the club, and when the topic of conversation resurfaces, embarrassment sweeps through me unforgivingly.

If my inhibitions had been just slightly more lowered than they had been, I’m sure I would have woken up in Reed’s bed this morning instead of my own.

I’m still not sure if I’m relieved or disappointed that I didn’t.

The professional answer, of course, is relieved.

The want that still pulses through me, however, disagrees.

I tamp it down as Clare tells Vick, “You should’ve seen them, V. They were all up in each other’s space and the sexual tension was *wild*.”

Vick looks more and more thrilled by the second, on my behalf, a grin splitting across her face. And while Clare's words have my heart picking up its pace, I try to tamp down my own foolish excitement by telling Vick flatly, "She's being overdramatic."

"And you're not being dramatic enough," Clare shoots back. With a huff and a shake of her head, she says to me, "I'm telling you, Willow—that man wants you *bad*. I swear, I thought he was, like, seconds away from ripping your clothes off!"

I throw her an exasperated look because *that* really is an overdramatization of last night—it *has* to be. I remember the mirth dancing in Reed's eyes, especially because I thought I was imagining the sight of it, and I remember feeling the warmth of his body seep into mine. The club had been hot, unsurprising given how many people were inside, but the warmth from that had been vastly different compared to the heat of Reed standing so close to me.

I remember being unable to look away from his mouth, drunken thoughts teasing me with fantasies of kissing him, feeling his lips and getting a taste. I had to pull myself back, push away those thoughts before I got ahead of myself. And I guess I was so focused on not giving into them, that maybe I missed just how close Reed and I had gotten. Maybe desire blinded me to the reality of the situation, which wouldn't be surprising. My own attraction to Reed isn't surprising.

What *is* surprising, however, is the idea of him feeling that way about *me*.

How does he go from acting like a complete jerk, to apparently wanting to hook up?

I'm no fool. Reed has offered, twice now, to give me a ride home. And I've rejected both offers because as tempting as getting into a car with him is, I know it's just as complicated. I will consider myself extremely lucky if photographs of last night don't surface on the Internet—specifically photos of when Reed and I were talking by the bar. The last thing I need is to see some headline about NFL star Reed Maxwell spotted chatting—flirting?—with some reporter and have my face be out there in that kind of context. It could make or break my career, most likely the latter, and I don't have any intentions of finding out which.

“It doesn't matter what happened last night,” I say over Vick and Clare's excited chatter, their voices quieting as they look at me. “Hooking up with Reed is a terrible idea, and it won't be happening.”

Vick's shoulders fall. “That is *not* what I want to hear you say.”

I blow out a long breath, setting my mug down on the counter. “I'm finally in front of the camera, you guys. I'm just starting out, and the last thing I need is for people to recognize me as Reed Maxwell's latest fling instead of a reporter in my own right, you know? A one-time hookup isn't worth risking my career.”

Even if that very hook up could silence my fantasies and see if reality lived up to the dream. As much as he scowls and grunts and barely smiles, none of that takes away from how mouth wateringly attractive the man is. How, despite his attitude during our first meeting, it hasn't stopped me from thinking of Reed's face—his arms, his hands—when I'm alone in my bed at night, my hand creeping down the length of my body before my fingers brush against where I desperately want him.

But that's all it is—a fantasy.

Clare lets out a breath, clearly disappointed for me. “I guess that's fair enough.”

Vick hums in agreement. She cracks a smile, then, and asks, “You think you can work closely with him without wanting to jump his bones?”

I snort out a laugh, despite the heat blooming in my cheeks. “I can't stop myself from *wanting*, but I can stop myself from *doing*,” I answer truthfully, earning laughter from my friends.

I mean, I doubt I'm going to give into whatever fantasies involving Reed on live television, but practicing self-control never hurt.

“You might wanna give Reed that advice, too,” Clare says with a dismissive snort, taking a sip from her coffee. “Even Alex made a comment on how Reed looks at you. If he keeps it up, people are gonna start to notice.”

I freeze, eyes widening slightly as I stare at Clare in bewilderment. “Alex?” I repeat with a shake of my head.

“What’re you talking about?”

Clare pauses, staring at me in confusion. She looks at Vick, then, and when I look at the blonde I see that she doesn’t look as surprised by Clare’s words as I do. “Um,” Clare begins, and I raise my eyebrows, silently urging her on. “I mean, it’s nothing, I think? Alex was watching your latest interview with Reed when it was on TV, and he said something about how, uh, Reed was looking at you the whole time. He didn’t look away once, not even at the camera. It was kind of intense.”

I swear, I think my heart skipped a beat or two or three. “What?” I squeaked out, my body suddenly running hot. I try to think back to my last post-game interview with Reed, but Clare’s words block my mind from being able to picture it in my head. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

It’s Vick who shakes her head. “We talked about this last night, Willow.”

If my eyes could physically pop out of my head right now, they would have. “No, the hell we didn’t!” I exclaim, though my words come out as a confused yell.

Clare whispers to Vick, “We talked about it when she was blacked out.”

“Oh, my God,” I rub a hand down my face, huffing out a heavy breath.

Maybe it’s not as big of a deal as I’m making it out to be, but I also know that if Clare’s fiancé noticed Reed apparently staring at me in a certain way during our interview, then

there's a chance other people watching may have, too. Other people who may or may not include the higher ups of the network I work at, who might think they want to save themselves a scandal and get rid of the newly appointed interim head reporter because I may start up rumors involving Reed.

All of this isn't out of the realm of possibility, and that's what worries me. How can I possibly, one day, become a head reporter if people look at me and only see me as the woman who hooked up with one of the most eligible bachelors in the NFL—regardless of whether or not it's actually true?

I can't let that happen. I can't risk my career for a silly attraction. I'll get over it. And hope that if Reed currently feels the same, he gets over it, too.

Chapter 8

Reed

There are a lot of things I am grateful for in my life that have come my way because of my career in the NFL. But at the top of that list is how I was able to move Ma out of our old, crappy apartment in Canaryville and bought her and my stepdad, Julian, a place more deserving of them in Lincoln Park. For the first fifteen years of my life, it had just been Ma and me after my biological father ditched us when I was around a month and a half old. She worked two, sometimes three, jobs at a time to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table. And when I got into football, she'd been there at every game; whether it was youth football or a game in middle school, high school, and college. My number one supporter, always.

When I was around fifteen, she met Julian, and a few years later they got married. He already had two kids of his own, twin daughters a few years younger than me, but soon came to treat me like his own son. One of my step sisters lives in London with her family, and the other in Seattle with her own.

Holly, who lives in Seattle, comes to the games whenever we're playing there, and always wears a Rebels shirt instead of one for Seattle's home team. And Jessica attends a game whenever she visits Chicago during the season. Despite being an only child for fifteen years, I got along well with my step sisters—probably because I was close with their dad.

My parents haven't been able to attend the last few weeks' worth of games because they were in London visiting Jessica after she just gave birth, and they wanted to be there to help out. I'd made sure to send a suitcase and a half worth of the best baby supplies and clothes since I couldn't be there.

"You boys are looking good this season," Dad comments as sits in the living room, the TV playing an old game from two other teams. We do this often, me and him. Sit together and watch other teams play, and talk about my performance. It was something I enjoyed in high school and college, after he and Ma got together, because for the longest time, the only male figures I had in my life who I could talk to about the game were my coaches. "Austin's got you on a tight leash, huh?"

I let out a wry chuckle as I take a sip of my beer. "He's a drill sergeant during practice," I say. Coach Scott isn't that much older than I am, probably one of the few coaches in the NFL who fall on the relatively younger side, but he's likely more of a hard ass than most coaches. I have no complaints, though; being this far into the season, being top contenders for the Super Bowl—I take his practice drills in stride, as does the rest of the team. It's the reason why we have been doing so well this season.

“What about the Miami game?” Dad asks. “Are you ready for that?”

I nod. “I think we’ve got a good chance at beating them. But they’re good, so it’s going to be an intense game either way.”

We won by the skin of our teeth in last season’s divisional round, so everyone’s head needs to be in the game when we fly to Florida to play them in a few days. Dad and I talk about the upcoming schedule, and eventually Ma joins us with a cup of green tea. “We watched your interviews while we were in London,” she tells me as she sits next to Dad. “That reporter is new, right?”

I suck in my lower lip between my teeth after taking a sip of my drink, feeling more than a little disconcerted at Ma for bringing up Willow, of all people. It’s proven to be difficult not to think about her, especially after talking to her at the bar. But ever since that night, I haven’t seen much of her; her schedule has her interviewing other members of the team, but even when we’re in the same vicinity, I’ve noticed she doesn’t look my way. In fact, she avoids doing just that.

“Yeah,” I answer, voice going gruff without meaning to. “She’s taking over for Vivian for the rest of the season.”

Ma hums in acknowledgement. “I like the questions she asks. She looks genuinely interested and excited to be there.”

Oh, the fucking irony. I snort quietly. The same thing Ma just complimented Willow on—didn’t I insult her on it during our first meeting? “She is. Except when she has to talk to me,” I grunt.

“That’s because you have an attitude problem most of the time,” Ma quips with a grin, her smile widening when I throw her a flat expression. “It won’t kill you to smile every now and then.”

Sliding my gaze to Dad, I deadpan, “Your wife’s hilarious.”

As Dad snorts out a laugh, Ma sighs dramatically and says, “It’s a shame you didn’t get my sense of humor.” Ma sips her tea and looks at me over the rim before asking, “Is she single?”

Before I can respond, Dad says, “Come on, Fi. She looks a little young for Reed.”

I purse my lips. I think Willow is around ten years younger than me, maybe a little less. I never really thought about her age before. Ma waves her hand dismissively. “Reed’s got the personality of an eighty-year-old. Someone younger would be good for him.”

The fuck? My face twists. “Ma—”

“You’re thirty-four years old, Reed,” she cuts me off. “You can talk about your love life with your own mother.”

I’d rather fucking not. “There’s no love life for us to talk about,” I say, running my tongue along my teeth. “It would be unprofessional if something happened between us.” The words taste bitter on my tongue, like they aren’t my own. And they aren’t, are they? I’m just spitting out the same excuses disguised as reasons at my parents that Willow said to me.

Still, I raise my eyebrows at my parents and force out, “So can we drop it and move on?”

The words come out harsher than I intend for them to, but my parents don’t blink twice. Instead, Ma switches gears in stride and tucks her legs beneath her and asks me, “How are your migraines?”

The topic isn’t one I want to talk about, either, but it’s better than talking about Willow and letting my mind run free with thoughts of her. “They’re fine. Haven’t had a bad one recently,” I truthfully tell them.

I have been dealing with migraines for most of my football career, and I know it worries Ma more than she lets on. I’m not the first football player to deal with migraines, and I sure as hell won’t be the last. But, unlike other athletes who have openly spoken about their issues, I tend to keep them to myself. The only people who know about them are Coach Scott, my teammates Leo, Caden, and JJ, and my close family. I don’t advertise my migraines because I’d rather people focus on my skills as a football player, not label me as one of the guys who has health issues.

There’s a huge fucking stigma around migraines in male athletes. For some ridiculous reason I can’t comprehend, it’s seen as a “female issue”, whatever the fuck that means, as if men are invulnerable to migraines. Which is bullshit—especially for football players who constantly deal with head injuries. Getting concussions aggravates migraines, something I have had to deal with a couple of times, but I have been

lucky so far. I've seen athletes having to walk off the field and stay benched because their pain is so bad that they can't play. Fortunately, it has only happened to me maybe once or twice, and when I've had to walk off the field, people are either told some other reason why I had to sit down or basically told to fuck off—which is what I prefer.

I take my medication and I go to my routine checkups with my doctor without fail. I'm not stupid enough to think I can just sleep or walk it off. If I want to make the most out of my career, then I know I need to take care of myself, which I do religiously, and I'm sure that's why Ma can breathe easier. God knows how she would be if I didn't take my migraines seriously.

“Really?” Ma asks, a little doubtful but also a little hopeful. “No flare ups?”

I finish off my beer, raising an eyebrow at her. “Don't I always tell you when I get one?”

She rolls her eyes as Dad snickers quietly. “I'm your mother. I don't expect you to tell me *everything*.”

I shoot her a look. “I wouldn't hide anything about this.”

Ma may be a worrier, but I would feel worse keeping important things from her—especially when they have to do with my health. My grandmother had died a few years back from cancer, and while to us it felt like it had come out of nowhere, it had turned out that Grandma had known about her cancer for a lot longer. She just didn't tell anyone because she didn't want to worry us, or burden us with her health

problems. It had devastated Ma, so I refuse to do what Grandma did. Putting Ma through something like that again isn't something I ever want to do.

“Good,” Ma says with a nod, satisfied. Then she smiles and starts, “Now, back to Willow...”

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Chapter 9

Willow

The highlights of the Rebels' game against Miami are playing on one of the TVs at the hotel bar. People sitting along the bar watch and discuss it amongst themselves; some compliment the Rebels, while most bemoan that their home team lost today's game. I find myself smiling with the straw in my mouth as I sip my Moscow mule, a weird kind of satisfaction rushing through me at the team's win today.

"Stop smiling like that, you creep," my cousin Nico says. He sits across from me, as he has been for the last two and a half hours, watching me with amusement dancing in his eyes. "We're mourning here."

"I'm not," I tell him with a grin. "*My* team won."

Nico sucks in a breath through his teeth, shaking his head at me in disappointment. He leans back and dramatically presses a hand to his chest. "Salt in the wound, Willow."

I chuckle, shaking my head. It had been an intense game, as per usual when the Rebels play, especially given that they had

lost to Miami last season when they were so close to the Super Bowl. I have no doubt the team is out celebrating their win tonight, so while they are out doing God knows what, I decided to stay in the hotel, going down to the bar where Nico came to meet me so we can catch up before I head back to Chicago tomorrow.

Nico and I actually got to see each other over the past summer, when my parents and I flew to Florida to stay with Nico's family for around two weeks. We got to be here when he proposed to his girlfriend, and I will be back here next year when they get married. The two of us discuss the wedding planning that's already underway for him, and as he swallows a bite of his sandwich, he asks, "How's Clare's wedding planning going?"

"It's getting there," I tell him, despite the churning in my stomach. With how busy I have become with work, I feel like I haven't contributed anything to help plan Clare's wedding. Vick helps her out, but I need to make more of an effort to be involved. My best friend is getting married, and I need to make sure she doesn't stress or freak out over anything. "We're getting our dresses in a couple of days, which will be fun."

Nico flashes a grin. "Hope it's not bad."

I roll my eyes with a laugh. "Clare wouldn't do that to us."

As I sip my drink, Nico asks, "What about you then, huh? You walkin' down the aisle any time soon?"

If I didn't have better control over myself, I would have choked on my drink upon hearing Nico's question. "Dude," I gape at him, wide eyed. "What the hell?" I ask with a startled laugh.

Nico chuckles, unperturbed. "What? It's a genuine question. When was the last time you went out with someone?"

I shoot him a flat look. "Why is that any of your business?"

He returns an innocent look, tilting his head. "Because you're my favorite cousin and I don't want you to be lonely." I roll my eyes again, snorting with a shake of my head. "You work too hard, Will. You need to get laid, blow off some steam."

Unsurprising that this is coming from Nico; my cousin used to be quite a flirt and ladies' man when he was in high school and halfway through college. But then he met his now fiancée, Liane, toward the end of his sophomore year of college and he's been wrapped around her finger ever since.

I huff out a breath, feeling my cheeks warm up. "How did this go from you asking me if I'm going to get married to telling me I need to get laid?"

He grins. "It all falls under one umbrella," he says with a shrug. "Come on—there's not one person you're interested in?"

"No," I say, already shaking my head. "There isn't." *Is there?*

As if the universe wants to play some kind of joke on me, as soon as those words escape me, movement by the bar's lobby entrance catches my attention, and my throat locks up as Reed

appears in view, Leo right by his side. But my gaze is fixed on Reed, and my pulse quickens up as I realize that his eyes are already set on me from where he's standing. Leo gives me a friendly wave accompanied by a warm smile, which I return. The young hostess hurries over to seat them, all giggles and hair flips, but Reed doesn't even seem to notice her as he keeps his eyes locked on me.

The sight of him surprises me; I for sure thought he would be out at some fancy, raving Miami club by the beach where I'm sure most of his teammates are. But he's *here*, still in the hotel where we're all staying, and at the bar? I can't tear my gaze away from him, taking in his casual outfit of jeans and a black V-neck that stretches deliciously across his chest and shows off those muscled arms. The dim lighting of the bar bathes him in a warm glow, his dark hair tousled as always, and the butterflies in my stomach come to life as his brown eyes stay locked on my green.

"Hello? Earth to Willow?" Nico says. "What're you looking at?" he asks before turning to look over his shoulder.

"Just some players I've interviewed, no big deal..." I say.

We're not sitting in a booth, but rather a table off on the side, and I watch as Nico spots Reed. And I see the moment Reed spots Nico, too—I see the way Reed's expression suddenly changes. His eyes seem to harden with a fire that ignites within them, jaw tightening as his broad shoulders straighten out. His gaze narrows in on Nico and without looking back at me, he follows Leo toward a booth in the back. My gaze

follows him as he sits down, and he is still in my line of sight as he sits on the side facing me. But Reed keeps his eyes on Leo across from him, and I'm not sure what just happened, but it only speeds up my pulse more.

“Um.” Nico turns to look back at me, eyebrows raised. “Why did Reed Maxwell just stare me down like I ran over his dog?”

Good fucking question.

“Uh, don't worry about it,” I say hastily, trying to dismiss Reed's envious behavior. But, of course, I can't just let it go. I think about it all throughout my dinner with Nico, which is annoying because I want to focus on this time with my cousin. Instead, I'm thinking of the scowling, attractive football player who is in the same room as me, who keeps looking my way. A couple women approach their booth during the meal, but Leo and Reed don't let them stay long, just taking an obligatory selfie and thanking them for their support.

I curse myself in my head. Isn't this what I wanted, though? To have Reed keep his distance from me? I've been lucky that my schedule hasn't had him on it, so I have been able to avoid him, for the most part. I interview the other athletes, but I would be lying if I said every time my eyes wouldn't wander in hopes of catching sight of him. He's the one I end up watching the most during a game, forcing myself to tear my gaze away and focus on the other players, too. I end up Googling him late into the night and reading every article I can find on him. Reed has invaded my damn thoughts, and I don't know how to make it stop.

After another hour of chatting with Nico and pretending I can't feel Reed's presence in the room, my cousin and I call it a night. But as the two of us are walking toward the bar exit that leads directly to the hotel lobby, we pass by Reed and Leo's booth, and despite how hard I try not to, my gaze wanders toward Reed anyway. My chest tightens when he meets my eyes for a split second, mid conversation with Leo—who gives me a smile in greeting—and then Reed's eyes flicker to Nico and harden once more. Geesh, what the hell is his problem?

“Great game today, guys,” I say quickly as we pass by. Maybe a bit too quickly? I'm trying to play it cool, but it sounds a bit forced.

“Thanks Willow,” Leo says, but Reed only gives me a soft grunt while scanning Nico from head to toe. Clearly, he has no idea that I'm with my cousin, and not on a date. No wonder he's burning holes into Nico with his eyes. But... why does he care?

With my cheeks pinkening from the awkward interaction, I hurry out into the lobby with Nico, who pulls me in for a hug. “Look, I don't know what that was all about, but there's a star quarterback in there who obviously has a thing for you. I'll see you soon, Will. Have a safe flight home,” he says, giving me a squeeze.

Five minutes later, I'm alone in my hotel room, toeing my shoes off and putting them to the side. My carry-on is already packed and ready to go for tomorrow's flight, and I untie my hair from its ponytail and let the strands fall loosely around my

shoulders. I run my fingers through my hair, massaging my scalp because the ponytail had been a little too tight. I'm on my way to the bathroom to do my nightly routine before bed when a few sharp knocks on my door echo through the room.

My eyebrows furrow together. It can't be Nico because I don't think I mentioned what my room number is. Approaching the door, I get on my toes to peek through the peephole, and I can't stop the surprised gasp from catching in my throat when I see Reed's unmistakable face on the other side of the door.

The mere sight of him out in the hallway has my heart racing, hands pressing flat against the door as I stare at him through the small peephole. What the hell is he doing here? How did he find my room?

Okay, well, the second question is easily answered; I'm sure he found it out through the staff or whoever else we traveled with. But what the fuck is he at my door for? My heart rattles in my chest, and I have half a mind to ignore him until he goes away. But my body has a mind of its own, and I'm reaching for the door handle before I can stop myself and pull the door open.

I hate how breathless my voice sounds as I ask, "What are you doing here?"

Reed stares at me for a few impossibly long seconds, my grip on the door handle tightening. The muscle in his jaw feathers as he stares, and I wish I knew what he's thinking. "Can I come in?"

My stomach tumbles. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

That muscle jumps again. “Okay,” he says stiffly, voice lacking any real emotion. His gaze locks with mine as he asks, “Well, it’s good to see you. You did a great job covering the game today—I watched your commentary and interviews. Uh, can I ask who you were with down at the bar?”

My eyes widen slightly at his compliments, and then his question, surprise parting my lips. “Uh,” I sound stupidly, taking a step back as a silent way of telling him to come inside because I’m suddenly realizing I don’t think it’s a good idea if someone happened to come by and saw Reed at my door. He follows me in, the door shutting behind him, and I try to ignore the poking knowledge of Reed being in my room and instead say, “I don’t see how that’s any of your business.”

“It’s not,” he says with a firm nod, standing with his hands clenched at his sides. He’s so tall, and even as I stand a few feet away from him, his body towers over mine, his presence taking up all of the space in the room. Even though my heart races, it doesn’t feel suffocating. “But instead of letting myself enjoy some celebratory drinks with Leo, I spent the entire time wondering who the hell you were sitting with because I can’t get you off my fucking mind and it’s *driving me insane*.”

My eyes are wide as I stare at him, jaw hanging open as I try not to let his words make my head spin. But that’s nearly impossible. How can I hope to do that when Reed straight up, to my face, just told me he can’t stop thinking about me? How can I calm the butterflies in my stomach or the wild pulse of my heart when I now know that just like he occupies every inch of my thoughts, I seem to be doing the same to him?

I don't think either of us noticed how Reed seemed to have gotten a lot closer to me while he spoke, but suddenly the scent of his expensive cologne invades my nose, dizzying me in a way that I don't mind. Every inhale has his scent taking over, and I don't know if I need to focus on that or his words.

"I—" My voice trails off as my gaze zeroes in on his mouth—on those perfectly shaped lips and the stubble that surrounds them and decorates his chin and jaw. I can hear my heart pounding in my head and the desire that spreads through me is warm and inviting. "He's my cousin," I find myself admitting in a whisper. "Just a cousin."

I swear I hear Reed exhale sharply before he mutters, "Thank fuck." Oddly, I find my shoulders relaxing, too.

In the next second, his large, callused hands are cupping my cheeks, tilting my head back before his mouth comes down on mine. My reaction is instant, eyes falling shut and body melting into his kiss—into Reed. His lips are as soft as they looked, and my hands clench the front of his shirt as I push myself closer to him, electricity zipping through my veins in a way I have never felt before. God, I can't be close enough to him, to the heat that radiates off his body and sinks into me.

My lips part in response to his tongue swiping against my bottom lip, and as he deepens the kiss, a moan travels up my throat at the sensation of his stubble deliciously scratching my skin and his tongue sliding against my own. He explores every crevice of my mouth, his thumb swiping over my cheekbone as he kisses me so deeply, so thoroughly, that if he wasn't

holding me, I swear my legs would have given out from beneath me. But his grip is firm yet gentle at the same time, holding me close, like he doesn't want me to disappear from his hold. I suck at his bottom lip and he nips at mine, and the butterflies in my stomach wreak havoc.

Oh, God. He kisses as well as he plays football.

I can't believe he's kissing me. Reed Maxwell is kissing *me*.

The thought of his name is, suddenly, like a bucket of ice cold water splashing over me.

I inhale sharply before using my grip on his shirt to push him away, heart pounding as I put some distance between us. I try not to breathe too heavily despite my racing heart as I stare at Reed, wide eyed, taking note of his kiss swollen lips. He doesn't *look* winded, but I can see his chest rising and falling a little quicker than usual. Reed's normally blank, stoic expression is gone and is instead replaced by one that wears his own mild shock over what just happened. Desire darkens his eyes, making my blood hot, but I can't focus on that.

"We can't—" God, I sound like I just ran five miles. "We can't do this. It's a bad idea." I'm already shaking my head, already regretting my words—not what I just did—as I break my gaze from Reed's and add, "You should go."

I swear, my lips are tingling from his kiss, but I clench my hands to my side, not allowing myself to touch my mouth the way I want to. Reed's stare burns my skin, but I can't bring myself to meet it. My face, where his hands had been, feels hot—my entire body does, actually—and my breathing isn't

steady. Shit, all I want to do is kiss him again, to feel him against me, but I *can't*. This never should have happened—no matter how good it was.

And calling it *good* is a fucking understatement.

“Okay,” Reed’s gruff voice breaks the silence, deep and sexy and panty-dropping as always. It’s a wonder I was able to resist him. *Until now*. I wonder if he was about to say something else when he repeats, “Okay,” before I hear his footsteps recede.

I look up only when I hear the door fall shut, finally allowing myself to breathe loudly, trying to catch my breath as a shaky hand reaches up and I brush my fingers along my lips. I stare after the door as I let myself sink onto the bed, gripping the comforter with my free hand. I feel like I’m in a dream, and that I will wake up any second now and realize that none of this is real.

Frankly, I’m not even sure if I want this to be a dream or reality.

I exhale another trembling breath. What the hell did I do?

So much for keeping my distance.

In the morning, I feel like I’m just going through the motions as I get ready to head back home. Sleep hadn’t come to me the whole night, and if it had, it was restless and filled with dreams of Reed. When I was awake, all I did was replay the

kiss a thousand times over. I think I screamed into my pillow a few times, too.

He'd come to my room and kissed me, and then I had told him to leave without even being able to make eye contact with the man. If my mind wasn't preoccupied with thoughts of Reed Maxwell before, it sure as hell has multiplied tenfold after that earth-shattering kiss. How could I have let it go so far?

Kissing him had only been a fantasy, nothing but a dream, because making it a reality would be an invitation for a whole lot of complications that I'm not ready to deal with. I had tried to be as steadfast as I possibly could be in my path of not giving into my desire and want for Reed. And I thought I was doing a decent job. But, geesh—he strolls into my room, gets all hot-headed, and wants to start a pissing contest because he thinks I'm on a *date* when I'm really with my cousin?

And then I think of how he kissed me because he was jealous, and it makes my stomach tumble and my heart threatens to burst out of my chest and every inch of my skin feels like it's on *fire*. The kiss clearly was driven by emotion—heated, desperate, passionate emotion—and I don't know how to wrap my head around that. Was it a heat of the moment thing? Did he regret it, after I kicked him out?

Illogically, despite my sleepless night and all of the reasons why I *should*, I *don't* regret that kiss. How can I, when it was so goddamn good and delicious?

I jam my finger into the button for the elevator a little too hard, my grip on the handle of my carry-on suitcase tight as it

whitens my knuckles. I can't seem to reconcile with the combination of emotions that run through me. There are certainly way too many feelings to keep track of, and all of them are at war with one another. Disbelief, desire, disappointment, worry, and even more desire dizzy me as the elevator doors slide open.

Only to reveal Reed standing inside.

Oh sweet Jesus, you have got to be kidding me.

I'm frozen where I stand, staring right at him, the only person in the elevator. He's got a backpack hanging off one shoulder and his hand gripping a duffel bag, dressed in jeans, a dark blue shirt, and a Rebels cap on his head with dark curls peeking out from underneath. My pulse quickens in his presence as dark brown eyes pin me where I'm standing, and I have to force myself to move to step into the elevator. Even if two voices in my head fight; one telling me how bad of an idea it is to get into an enclosed space with Reed, while another one sings about how much of a good idea it is.

My movements are stiff as I step into the elevator and turn to face the closing doors, my carry-on next to me and being the only thing standing between Reed and me. When the doors close, the tension thickens in the small space, the air electric as neither of us looks toward the other, but our presence alone is powerful enough. Every cell in my body buzzes with the need to be close to Reed; to feel his hands on my skin, his lips on mine, to be wrapped up in his warmth the way I was, for a few moments, less than eight hours ago.

My gaze is trained on our blurred reflections on the steel of the elevator doors as we slowly descend from the eighteenth floor. Every second that passes in silence feels like a chord tightening until it snaps, and we make it to the fifteenth floor in complete quiet until Reed breaks it.

“I’m sorry about last night,” he says gruffly, his voice otherwise absent of any emotion. His words are stoic and stiff, and they wrap around my heart like a vice as his voice rumbles through the small space. “It shouldn’t have happened.”

The vice squeezes painfully and I bite the inside of my cheek, trying not to let any emotion show. So, he *did* regret kissing me. The confirmation of it makes my stomach roil, my grip on my suitcase tightening as I lift my chin but say nothing. Even though the stubborn part of me wants to tell him it was no big deal when it feels like anything but. He kissed me in a way I have never been kissed before, and now he’s taking it back. It’s what I wanted him to do, partly, and yet it still stings.

Reed isn’t done yet, though. “If I made you uncomfortable, I’m sorry.” His apology has the air locking in my throat, and I resist the urge to squeeze my eyes shut. Saying the kiss was a mistake is one thing, but apologizing for it feels... defeating. “I wouldn’t—” He stops for a moment, and from the corner of my eye I can see the angry muscle in his jaw working, tension lining the fine-muscled lines of his body. Reed doesn’t look at me as he continues, “I wouldn’t blame you if you decided to file a complaint.”

My body goes rigid with disbelieving shock, my blood running cold as my lips part. There's a ringing noise in my head that has nothing to do with the mechanical buzz of the elevator. While I understand why Reed said what he did, from a professional, famous athlete's point of view, the insult that comes with his words stings me more harshly than I could anticipate it.

He believes I would report him for something we both clearly, at our cores, wanted? That me kicking him out meant I would file a sexual harassment complaint?

God. I understand why he would be cautious in that sense, but that doesn't mean his belief or understanding of it didn't hurt.

The elevator keeps descending and I don't turn to meet Reed's gaze as I calmly ask, "Is that what you think of me?" That I would be petty enough to turn the situation into something it wasn't?

Something like a scoff sounds from Reed. "You don't let me close enough to really know you," he responds tightly.

My jaw tightens, his words striking a nerve I didn't know existed. "Really?" I say, keeping my voice as calm as I can manage. "I wasn't aware you were trying to get to know me. I assumed all you wanted was a quick screw."

The words taste bitter and poisonous, even if a part of me believes them. When was the last time Reed had been in a relationship? From our first interaction, how am I meant to believe he wants something like that from me? How am I supposed to believe he wants something more than a casual,

one time hookup? The temperature in the elevator drops to the negatives following my words. We talk without looking at one another, the iciness in both of our voices, in our veins, keeping us from making eye contact. It's a stark contrast to the heat radiating off of Reed's body.

"Is that what you think of me?" he asks roughly, throwing my own words back at me.

I carefully swallow the lump that had formed low in my throat. "I don't know you well enough to know what you want from me." And because my answer sounded like I was agreeing with his statement of me not allowing him close enough to know me, I add, "And it'd be better if things stayed that way. Strictly professional."

Reed doesn't hesitate to reply, "There was nothing professional about the way you kissed me last night, Willow."

The way my name rolls off his tongue... wow, I have to physically suppress the shiver that threatens to run through me. Flashes of last night flicker through my mind; the scrape of his stubble against my smooth skin, his tongue expertly tangling with my own, his lips pressing against mine. I swear, I feel all of those sensations even now, my lips tingling with electricity, and I have to force those images out of my head to keep it on straight.

"It won't happen again," I say tersely, unable to stop the small frown from furrowing on my eyebrows as I say those words. The idea of not kissing Reed again, as reasonable as it is, also feels *wrong*.

And what the hell am I supposed to do with that?

Chapter 10

Reed

“Quit dicking around and hit the fucking ball already, JJ,” Caden grouses as I enter the game room of my house, the two of them in the middle of a game of pool.

“Hey, watch your *fudging* language,” Leo snaps from the couch where he’s busy on his phone, throwing our friends a glare. He nods toward his two-year-old daughter who sits on the ground, playing with toys Leo brought from their home and the ones that I’ve had in my own home for her and my sister Holly’s kids.

Caden grumbles out an apology, glaring at JJ who merely snickers before taking his shot. I roll my eyes at them as I head toward the L-shaped couch that faces the flat screen TV, which plays *Top Gun* at a low volume. I don’t mind nights like these, when the three of them come over—four, occasionally, when Leo brings Lilah—and we hole up in my game room just to hang out. I don’t get much use out of this room otherwise, sadly.

When I sit down on one end of the couch, Leo towards the middle, he looks up from his phone and arches an eyebrow at me. “Gotta say, I’m surprised you wanted us to come over tonight. You’ve been in a real crabby mood since Miami.”

I don’t miss how easy it is for him to replace curse words with child-friendly alternatives. It’s like second nature for him at this point. “Yeah, well,” I grunt as I kick my feet up to rest on the wooden table in front of me. “Dumb decisions were made.”

He’s not lying about my mood. Ever since that conversation with Willow in the elevator of the hotel the morning after we kissed, there’s been a storm cloud of shit looming over my head. That night—the night we kissed—I could barely fucking sleep because my mind wouldn’t quiet the hell down. All I could think of was that kiss; how soft her lips had been, how sweet she had tasted. Willow had kissed me back, full fervor, before kicking me out.

It had been risky to kiss her, I know. But I couldn’t fucking stop myself—not after seeing her spend hours with the guy who turned out to be her cousin. At the time, though, I didn’t know they had been related. All I saw was Willow having dinner and drinks with some guy and laughing and showing off her dimples, and I couldn’t think straight. She had unknowingly messed with my head, and it’s no one’s fault but my own. After she had left, I lasted only five minutes with Leo before excusing myself and finding out her room number through one of the members of the managing team that travels with us.

I hadn't planned on kissing her. But she had been standing there, her strawberry blonde hair falling around her shoulders like soft flames, green eyes bright, and the impulse took over. I had never felt such a strong desire before in my life, and I couldn't stop myself. I was lucky as hell she kissed me back—until she didn't. Until she told me to leave, and I had no choice but to comply.

But, fuck, that kiss. She had been more delicious than I could have ever imagined, and one taste isn't enough. That night, all I did was think of that kiss, then think of how she had told me to leave. I realized that she probably regretted giving into the tension that had been wrapped around us for weeks. And then that conversation in the elevator the morning after was the final blow to the gut.

“Is that what you think of me?”

I hadn't even looked at her face when she asked me that, but I could hear the emotion in her voice, even though she tried to mask it. I'm a fucking master at masking emotions, so when someone else attempts to do it, it's pretty damn easy for me to pick it apart. And I know my comment about her potentially filing a complaint against me because of that kiss had hurt her because of the insult to her character.

I screwed up. Even I can see that.

“What'd you do?” JJ asks from where he and Caden are still standing by the pool table, apparently having heard me.

I work my jaw a couple of times, my gaze going to Lilah. She's in her own world, playing with a stuffed dog, and I let

out an exhale. Growling, I confess, “I kissed Willow.”

“You *what?*” JJ’s exclamation is dramatized by him screwing up his next shot, sending the cue ball bouncing off the table and up in the air, before landing with a sharp *thud* on the carpeted floor. Caden takes a half step to the side to avoid getting hit by the ball, and JJ ignores the glare Caden directs at him.

“What happened after?” Leo asks.

Caden arches a brow. “How’d you screw it up?”

I throw him a scowl, even though his question isn’t that far off. “She told me to leave, and the next morning I—” I almost don’t want to admit it as I tilt my head and rub my jaw. “I told her if she filed a complaint, I wouldn’t blame her.”

Caden looks at me like I’m an idiot, his expression flat, while JJ is the opposite and openly gapes at me in disbelief. Leo’s eyes fall shut and he shakes his head in obvious disappointment. “It’s like one step forward, a hundred steps back with you and Willow,” he says.

I lean back on the couch, eyebrows furrowing into a frown and arms crossing tightly over my chest. “I didn’t realize it was the wrong thing to say until after it had already slipped out. I wasn’t thinking,” I reluctantly admit.

Leo scoffs and JJ splutters. “You didn’t think of how insulting it would sound for you to say to Willow’s face that she could basically come after you with a lawsuit for kissing her?” JJ walks around the table, pool stick still in hand, and stands

behind Leo as he stares at me, wide eyed. “I admit that it does sound like you’re sorry for what you did, but it also makes it sound like you’re trying to get some pity and protect your image, dude.”

My lips curl in aggravation, knowing that JJ is right. That’s the same conclusion I came to on the flight home. “Yeah, I know,” I grunt.

Leo narrows his eyes at me. “What else happened?”

I exhale sharply once more before just telling them all the conversation between Willow and I in the elevator. When I’m done, Caden leans against the pool table, arms crossed. The guy might be more emotionally closed off when it comes to romantic relationships than I am, but he surprises me next by asking, “Well Romeo, what *do* you want from her?”

My teeth press together as I mull over the question. The three of them watch me expectantly, and what I end up saying is, “I’m no good at relationships.”

I haven’t been in one in years, had no interest in them. But I know whatever this is with Willow, it’s more than the desire to hookup with her, like she claimed. I haven’t felt this way with any other woman I’ve had a passing attraction to, which always goes away after I get them in my bed. It feels different with Willow, and that’s what’s messing with my head.

“You can’t say that when you haven’t even really tried,” Leo tells me as Lilah crawls over to him. He sits up when she uses his legs to stand up, and reaches his hands out to pick her up and settle her on his lap.

JJ nods along. “If you think she has feelings for you, too, don’t you guys owe it to yourselves to give things a try?” he asks, ever the damn optimist.

I want to tell them, and myself, that there’s a good chance Willow isn’t interested in me, but something stops me. Memories of our kiss dance along in my mind, a ghost of her lips against mine lighting my skin on fire. Maybe I would believe all she felt was just physical attraction, just lust—but I’d seen the look in her green eyes before she pushed me away. I saw the acceptance of the kiss in her eyes, and the panic that sets in when you do something that feels right in the moment, but you keep telling yourself was wrong.

My gaze goes to Caden and I ask him, “What do you think, bro?”

My friend is silent for a moment before he lifts his chin. “I think you better figure out what you want. Is it just a hookup to get her out of your system, or a true relationship? Because she’s the one who would be putting her job and reputation at risk, and one reason isn’t worth it, but the other one might be.”

Leo and JJ both nod along in agreement, and my jaw begins to ache dully at how tightly I clench it after Caden’s words that ring too fucking true. A hook up is nowhere near worth Willow potentially muddling her image as a sports journalist, no matter how badly my body seems to crave hers.

But am I that much of a selfish bastard to consider a relationship—my first one in years—as a way of justifying

Willow putting her job, her reputation, at risk? *Would* she want a relationship with me?

Do *I* want a relationship? Am I ready for one?

I think of her. Of her soft hair and bright eyes and those damn dimples that deepen in her cheeks every time she smiles. I think of the sound of her laugh, I swear I can hear it echoing in my head, and my chest tightens inexplicably. Willow has an effect on me that I haven't felt before, pulling reactions from my body that are more than just the blood rushing to my cock. The fact that it's more than just a physical attraction for me says a lot, and that's what is tripping me up.

But if Willow is pushing me away, there really isn't anything else I can do, is there?

The pulsing throb on the right side of my head is mild, but the nausea and dizziness that accompanies it is enough to have me walking off the field and sitting down with the rest of my teammates. A water bottle is thrust into my hand by Coach Scott, and I down it before keeping my head bowed and eyes shut to avoid the bright stadium lights.

The cheers from the audience are sharp in my ears, but I try to drown them out and focus on my breathing. It's difficult not to clench my jaw in frustration, because the tightness of it will do nothing to ease the migraine, but my aggravation pulses along with the familiar pain. It has been a while since I have had a migraine attack in the middle of the game; while they are mild,

they're enough to make me lose my focus during a game, and the intense physical activity only further exacerbates the migraine. So, it's better if I walk off the field and let someone else take my place then risk letting the nausea or dizziness take over and cause me to either throw up or pass out on the field. Neither are ideal options.

The sweat clings to my body, and I feel a bead of it run down my temple as I sit leaning forward, resting my arms on my thighs and keeping my head low. I don't doubt people will be wondering why I'm not playing, but at this point, I have become an expert in avoiding answering questions that inquire about it. I have no interest in letting the public know about my migraines; not because I'm embarrassed about them, but because when you let them know about any kind of health problem you have, they start viewing your performance in spite of your issues, not despite them. Any fumble, any mistake you make is chalked up to whatever problem you may be facing, and while no doubt it can be a valid reason, it still feels invalidating towards your own achievements as an athlete. And I don't want to deal with that shit.

"The fuck happened to you?" I recognize Buchanan's voice from somewhere next to me. There's no concern in his voice, just nosy curiosity.

"Fuck off," I mutter. His voice sure as hell doesn't help my migraine.

"Maxwell." I look up through one squinted eye at Coach Scott standing over me, lips pursed, and eyebrows pulled into that

typical frown. His voice is low, only meant for me to hear. “Go inside. Take your meds. Rest.”

My jaw clenches momentarily, the pressure from that zinging right to my temple, and I hold back a wince. I hate having to go into the locker room, especially when we aren’t even done with the first half. I *hate* letting my team down, being unable to pull my own weight, even if it happens rarely. It’s enough to let the guilt and anger fester.

But I don’t argue with the coach. If I don’t take my meds now, the mild pain might turn severe, and that isn’t a risk I’m willing to take. So, I give a firm nod and grab my helmet, lips pursed as I head through the tunnel leading from the field and go back inside. There are a few personnel lingering in the halls leading toward the locker room, but I keep my gaze on the ground in front of me, pissed off and in pain.

The locker room is empty when I arrive, only turning on the single light toward the far end of the room so it doesn’t hurt to keep my damn eyes open, the rest of the room otherwise dim. As soon as the door slams shut behind me, I approach my cubby section and toss my helmet inside with more force than necessary. It thuds against the back of it and bounces onto the floor, and I don’t bother picking it up as I dig through my duffel and snatch up my prescription medication. After I take it, I shed off my shoulder pads before getting rid of the pads under my pants and replacing them with athletic shorts.

There’s a chance I can play in the second half, but when a migraine hits, it can last for hours to days, and if I want it to

subside, it wouldn't be smart to get back on the field for an intense game because it would only worsen it. So basically, I'm benched, and it's fucking annoying.

I hear my phone emit a ding from my duffel, and I already know who it is when I pull it out and see a text from my mother.

Ma: *Why aren't you playing? Did you get a migraine?*

I exhale sharply, knowing I can't lie to her.

Me: *Yeah. It's mild, but Coach told me to head inside.*

Ma: *Smart man. I'm sorry you can't play, honey. But take care of yourself, please.*

Me: *I will.*

I drop the phone back in the bag and grab my towel, wiping the sweat off my face and neck as I sit down on the bench opposite my locker. The medication has started to do the trick, the pulsing sensation dying down—or maybe I'm just telling myself that it is so I can fool myself into believing I can play again. I don't bother turning on the TV in the locker room to tune into the game. I can hear the muffled echo of cheers from the stadium from the tens of thousands of people in attendance.

I bow my head again, elbows resting on my thighs as I rub the side of my head with my hand, letting my eyes fall shut. I'm not sure how long I stay like that for, but I do hear the distinct sound of the door opening, and when I force myself to look up, I genuinely wonder if I'm seeing things.

Willow lingers in the front as the door falls shut behind her, fingers wringing together with green eyes trained on me. I stare at her in mild disbelief, taking in the skin-tight jeans on her toned legs and the fitted black sweater that hugs her. Pink colors her cheeks, and I feel a pulse rush through me that has nothing to do with my migraine as she gently bites down on the corner of her lip.

“I, uh...” Her throat works as she takes a few steps forward. “You walked off and, uh, I was—”

I sit up, gaze trained on her, and prod, “You were what?”

Something dances in her eyes, my chest tightening when I realize it’s *concern*, and she confirms my suspicions when she blurts, “I was worried.”

The tightness in my chest strengthens, so intense that it distracts me from the migraine as her words register. I take note of her eyebrows that are pulled together, watching me carefully as she moves further into the room toward me. Her confession has my heart doing something stupid, my blood running warm, and for a second I wonder if I misheard her. But the caution combined with hesitation on her face tells me all I need to know, and the breath gets trapped in my lungs as I get to my feet.

“Were you?” I ask, keeping my voice cool and steady.

She’s only a few feet away from me now, gaze lifted so she can keep it locked with mine. Willow raises an eyebrow and asks, “You don’t believe me?”

I fight the urge to smirk. With her in front of me, being able to smell her apple scent, I barely pay attention to the now dulled throbbing in my head. “Can you blame me?” I ask, looking down at her. Her boots have a slight heel, but they don’t do much against my six foot three height; she still has to tilt her head back a bit to meet my gaze. “Last time we talked, it wasn’t entirely pleasant.”

Willow’s lips purse, drawing my attention to her pink mouth and my teeth press together with the urge to close the distance between us. All I can think of is that she’s here and I want to kiss her, even though that didn’t go so well last time. I guess I didn’t learn my fucking lesson. “That’s true,” Willow says slowly, and when I look at her, I note the way her gaze flickers down for a moment, right to my mouth. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t be worried about you.”

I arch a brow despite her words making my heart pick up its pace. “Even if it means checking on me when you should be out there, watching the game and taking notes for the post-game interviews?”

Instead of answering my question, she asks one of her own. “Do you not want me here?”

She’s closer now. I’m not sure if she’s the one who is closing the distance, or if it’s me, or if it happens to be the both of us unknowingly. But the air is electrified, the dim lighting of the locker room doing nothing to dull the brightness of Willow’s green eyes. The heat of her body sinks into mine, a welcome sensation that swells my cock, especially as she looks up at me

through her long eyelashes with those full lips parted. This close, I could count the freckles on her cheeks and nose if I wanted to.

My voice is a low rumble as I answer, “You know the answer to that.”

Something like a soft laugh escapes her, her eyes never leaving mine. “Do I?” Willow tilts her head to the side and my fingers itch with the urge to run them through her soft, loose hair. “Because I gotta be honest, Reed—I have no idea what the hell you want from me.”

Fuck, what the hell was going on? Were we really going to do this? Did she *want* to do this?

The tension in the room is damn near suffocating, and I have a feeling if I touched her, electricity would explode, and when that happens, neither of us can ignore this.

Yet I still reach out, catching a lock of strawberry blonde hair around my index finger, my knuckle grazing against the curve of her cheek. I hear the sharp intake of her breath, green eyes darkening just a little as I lean toward her, just inches between us like she’s pulling me in like a magnet. My nose just barely grazes hers, eyes locked as I confess my truth, “I want you.”

I swear she shivers, and I’m fucking hard for her. “How?” she whispers.

“Any way you’ll let me have you.”

Her eyes widen, ever so slightly, and I watch her gaze flicker between my eyes and my mouth, her stare calculating. I can

practically see her mind working, weighing the pros and cons of giving into the cloud of lust that envelopes us, my blood rushing in my veins as I wait for her answer. All I'm focused on is Willow, the way she stares at me, the way I can hear her breathing picking up as the seconds pass by.

Green eyes meet mine once more, and then she mutters, "What the hell," before getting on her toes and closing the gap between us once and for all.

I grip onto her immediately, hands on her hips as I pull her into me, sucking her bottom lip into my mouth and savoring the needy moan that sounds through her. I trail my tongue along the seam of her lips as her hands bury themselves in my short hair, damp with sweat, but she doesn't care as she tightens her grip. It's a different kind of pain than the migraine—pleasurable, and I want more of it. When our tongues meet, she easily lets me take over, practically feeling her body melt into mine.

Fire lights up my veins as I tug her toward me, sitting down on the bench and sliding my hands down her thighs to settle her on top of me. She straddles me easily, and I tug at her bottom lip with my teeth before grunting, "Fuck," when she grinds her core against my already hardened cock beneath my shorts. "Driving me fucking insane."

I feel her smile against my lips, and when I open my eyes a bit, I see her watching me with lust-filled hooded eyes. The sight of her is sinful, paired with her kiss-swollen lips. "You

know you enjoy it,” she says breathlessly, and if I wasn’t rock hard before, I sure as hell am now.

This woman.

My hands slide up and under her sweater, feeling her warm, soft skin against my hands as she cups my face and kisses me again, slowly moving her hips against me. It’s electrifying, feeling her like this, and my hands slide down once more before finding the button and zipper of her jeans. When I finish undoing them, I growl against her lips, “Take them off.”

My girl doesn’t hesitate in listening to me. She pulls away and I already crave the taste and feel of her lips once more, my heart pounding as she gets to her feet and toes off her shoes easily before her fingers hook under the band of her jeans and she starts tugging them down. I watch her, mesmerized, as more and more skin is revealed when she pulls her jeans down, my breathing growing heavy as my gaze remains fixed on her.

“Fuck,” I hiss through clenched teeth when she’s standing in nothing but her sweater and a pair of deep green underwear that’s nothing but a small triangle covering her pussy. My eye doesn’t miss the damp spot, and another groan escapes me.

At this point, my damn migraine is all but forgotten. Willow has me fucking hypnotized.

This is risky, because anyone can walk in at any moment, but I still grab her by her thighs, fingers digging into her soft flesh as I pull her towards my seated figure. “I’m going to taste you,” I growl, and Willow’s breath hitches as I prop her right

foot on the bench next to me, opening her up as her left foot remains planted on the ground, my hand cupping the back of her knee.

My other hand runs along her right thigh, gaze flickering up as Willow watches me with flushed cheeks and a lust filled gaze, and I keep my eyes locked with hers as I lean forward and press a kiss to her pussy through the thin material of her underwear, right on that spot dampened with her arousal.

Willow's hand clutches the back of my head as she whimpers out, "Oh, fuck," and I smirk as I run a finger down her center before hooking my finger under the cloth and tugging it to the side. I groan at the sight of her glistening, bare, pink pussy, begging me to taste her, clit swollen with arousal.

"Reed, please—" she starts, but her words are cut off with a gasp when I flatten my tongue on her and lick up her lips, groaning at the taste of her.

"Such a pretty pussy," I praise against her, smirking as the vibrations of my voice pull another moan out of her.

Her fingers tighten in my hair as my hand comes up and I part the lips of her sex, thrusting my tongue into her pussy and looking up to see her head thrown back, hair falling down her back in a flaming waterfall. She looks like a fucking goddess above me as I eat her out, finally getting a taste of what I've been craving for so long—and it's better than I could have ever fantasized. I hold her to me, my other hand gripping her thigh and fingers digging into her flesh.

A guttural groan rips through me when Willow moves her hips, riding my tongue. I'm deaf to everything except for the sounds that escape Willow; needy, desperate whimpers and moans that fuel the fire in my blood. When I suck on her clit, her hips stutter as she breathes out, "*Reed*. Fuck, I-I'm close."

The sound of my name coming from her lips has my cock craving her pussy even more than before, desperate to feel her wet heat around me. But I don't stop my ministrations, devouring her and enjoying the taste and view as Willow's fingers in my hair tighten before she falls apart. A cry escapes her and her body trembles as her orgasm hits, and I groan at the taste of her coating my tongue, taking everything she's willing to give me and letting her ride out her orgasm.

When her orgasm subsides and I pull away from her, licking her taste off my lips, Willow doesn't hesitate in dropping her leg and leaning down, pressing her lips to mine and no doubt tasting herself. My hands instantly find her hips when she settles down on my lap, feeling her wet heat on my groin through my shorts and underwear.

My heart is thundering in my chest and head, overtaking the migraine that had been there before. I'm not even sure if that pulsing ache is still present—all I can focus on is the woman in my lap as Willow sucks on my bottom lip before whispering against my mouth, "Can I ride you? Please?"

Well, fuck me.

My cock swells painfully at her words, my fingers digging into her hips as I curse before muttering, "Yeah. Yeah, of course

you can, baby.”

Willow grins, the sight sexy and sinful as she reaches for the hem of her sweater and pulls it off. She drops it on the ground, revealing a lacy bralette the same green as her underwear, one that hugs her breasts and my mouth fucking *waters* at the sight of them. Willow lifts herself slightly, and I shove my shorts and briefs down, and her breathing hitches as my cock stands to attention, thick and swollen and desperate for her. Pre-cum beads at the tip, and I hiss out a breath as Willow wraps her hand around the shaft, biting her lower lip.

“Fuck, I don’t have a condom,” I grit out, the fact suddenly slapping me in the face.

Willow lifts her gaze, green eyes meeting mine under long lashes. Lust darkens her eyes, glassy from her first orgasm. She’s a fucking sight to behold, and I commit her to memory right then and there. After a moment, she says, “I’m on the pill, and I’m clean.”

My heart nearly jumps out of my chest. “I am, too,” I tell her truthfully. But I see a flicker of hesitation in her eyes, and I wouldn’t blame her for not believing me. I don’t want to do a single thing that could be mistaken as me taking advantage of her. I wrack my brain, and inspiration hits me. *Of course!* “Wait—there has got to be one in this locker room.”

I set her gently on the bench and rifle through Caden’s locker. “Eureka!” I shout triumphantly when I find a pack in his duffel, and Willow lets out a chuckle. Those dimples make an

appearance, and I take two long strides over to her, closing the distance between us.

“Allow me,” she says, taking the condom from my hands and tearing open the wrapper, then sliding it down my length. *Damn*, that’s sexy. Our eyes lock, and she gives me that smile that has electricity dancing through my veins before she straddles me again and presses her lips to mine in another deep, savoring kiss.

My tongue tangles with hers, craving her taste, and my hands grip her hips as she lifts herself slightly and, with one hand gripping my shoulder and the other hand still wrapped around my shaft, she guides it to her entrance as she sinks down on my cock. Her lips part against mine, a moan escaping her as my fingers dig into her hips, teeth gritting at the sensation of her warm, wet heat enveloping my cock, gripping me and letting me feel every inch of her.

“Fuck, baby, you’re so tight,” I mutter, sucking her bottom lip into my mouth as I feel her nails dig into my shoulder through the material of my shirt.

Her breathing quickens and I give her the time she needs to adjust to my size when she’s fully seated on my cock, and I distract myself from the urge to thrust into her by kissing down her jaw, holding her to me. Willow tilts her head to give me better access, and I wonder if her heart is pounding as hard as mine as she whispers in my ear, “God, you’re so big.”

She’s going to be the damn death of me.

Willow gives an experimental shift of her hips, her breath catching, before she starts moving up and down. She finds a pace that sends my head spinning, my hands sliding up from her hips as I watch her ride me, her eyes shut and head tilted back and for a moment, I think I'm dreaming. But she's here and warm and real, my dick buried deep inside of her, and I lean forward and press my mouth to the swell of her breast, kissing and sucking on the skin, enjoying the gasp she lets out as my stubble scratches her soft flesh. She tastes like heaven, and I'm not sure I can live without this anymore.

My hands slide down, cupping her ass as she bounces on my cock, and I'm mesmerized by the sight of my dick slipping and disappearing into her pussy, watching us where we join together. Willow easily takes over my senses; all I can see, smell, feel, and taste is her. I'm lost in the entirety of her and I don't want to be found. *This*—this is heaven. This is where I belong.

And when I feel her pussy clench around my cock, my balls tightening with the familiar need to release, I know for a fact that now that this line is crossed, there's no going back.

Chapter 11

Willow

“**T**he color is *perfect*, Clare. Freaking gorgeous!” Vick praises with an excited grin, doing a turn in front of the mirror as she admires the dress she is wearing.

It’s slightly similar to the dress I’m wearing, and I have to agree—Clare did a great job in picking out the styles and color. Since only Vick and I are her bridesmaids, it’s just the two of us with Clare at the dress shop, trying on our dresses. The one Vick wears is sage green, made of satin with a cowl draped neckline and a strappy back, with a floor length skirt that has a leg slit. It hugs her body and subtle curves perfectly, like it was made for her, and I run my hands down my own sides as I quietly admire my reflection.

While the dresses are the same color and also made of satin, mine has a sweetheart neckline and corset bodice with an open lace-up back. The floor length skirt also has a leg slit, giving it a both elegant and sexy look that makes me feel pretty, especially with my hair falling over my shoulders. Though, I’ll

probably have it pinned up for the wedding to show off the back of the dress.

I stand in front of the other mirror, Clare standing behind us with a proud grin and a flute of champagne in her hand, as I tilt my head and stare at my reflection almost absently. My mind starts to wander and my skin slowly starts heating up as I think of the inches of skin Reed had kissed, some of which are now covered by the dress.

My lips, my jaw, my neck, my breasts... my pussy.

My throat works, trying not to fist the delicate material of the dress as my body buzzes with the reminder of what it had felt like to be with Reed. It's been two days since we hooked up in the locker room—which was seriously *such* a goddamn risk because anyone could have walked in and caught us—and my body still trembles with the ghost of his touch. We fucked. I *cannot believe* we fucked.

All the reasons I had told myself I wouldn't give into my feelings for Reed went right out the window the second I walked into the locker room and saw him sitting there. I had seen him walk off the field and, damn it, I knew something had been wrong. The worry that hit me had surprised me, robbing me of my breath, especially given how our conversation in the elevator at that hotel in Miami had gone. But Reed had looked to be in pain, and my legs had a mind of their own as they carried me to the locker room.

And the tension just... snapped. I didn't even find out why he had pulled himself out of the rest of the game.

All I can think of now is how it had felt to be with him. My body is imprinted with the sensation of his lips and hands, skin burning where he had touched and kissed me. I don't know if I can move on from what happened—I don't know if I even want to. Reed and I together, well, let's just say it had been electric. All of the hard parts of him pressing into the soft parts of me, my legs trembling after we were done and lips tingling from his kisses. How am I supposed to pretend it never happened? How am I supposed to act like I don't want it to happen again and again? Like my body hasn't been craving his since I first had him?

Fuck—what was I *thinking*? I did exactly what I promised myself I wouldn't do. If it somehow got out that I slept with an NFL player—one that I work with occasionally—then that's all I will be known for. People will see me as one of the many women who slept with Reed Maxwell, not as a reporter in my own right. Another notch in his belt. Because, of course, he will be seen as the bachelor who got laid, and I will be seen as the one taking advantage of my position and getting with someone who is way out of my league. And none of it would be Reed's fault, honestly. It's just how this world works.

Yet, none of that stops me from wanting him again, even if it should. Even though I know better.

“Will? Willow!”

I snap out of my thoughts with a quiet gasp, eyes widening as my gaze swings over to Clare and Vick, both of whom are

looking at me in concern. “You good?” Vick asks, eyebrows furrowing together. “We called your name a couple of times.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine, sorry,” I assure them with a quick laugh, accepting the champagne Vick is offering me. “Sorry, I just got lost in my head.”

“What’s going on?” Clare asks. “Everything okay at work?”

I sip the champagne, choking it down through my tightened throat. “Mhm,” I hum in affirmation. “Everything’s good.”

Vick narrows her eyes at me. “You’re lying,” she states confidently, and Clare arches a brow at me, clearly not believing me either. “Spill. What’s going on?”

I know better than to hide things from them, but the thought of diving into my issues on a day that’s about Clare’s wedding doesn’t settle right with me. So, I shake my head and say, “No, nothing. I don’t wanna get into it right now. Today’s about your day,” I add to Clare.

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t use my wedding as an excuse.” When I open my mouth to protest, she cuts me off. “Fine. If today is about me, then *I want* you to tell me what’s going on.”

Vick snickers as Clare shoots me a smirk, and I down the rest of my drink with a shake of my head. “I can’t tell you here,” I tell them quietly. There are other people around us, and I very much don’t want to have this conversation in public where anyone could hear.

My words have both of my best friends looking at me with both curiosity and anticipation. Since Vick and I have tried on

our dresses and they fit perfectly, we finish up at the boutique, change, and purchase the dresses. Once the staff puts them each in covers, Vick and I carry our respective gowns out to Clare's car and carefully put them inside before I slide into the passenger seat.

My stomach is in knots as Clare begins driving and Vick pops up from the backseat in between me and Clare. "Okay. Spill. What the fuck happened?"

I stare out the window, watching the city beyond the car as I chew on my lower lip. I know my friends won't judge me for what I'm about to tell them, but uttering the words out loud would make it seem so real. Which is stupid, because it *is* real and it *did* happen, but talking about it with other people feels so... concrete.

I can feel their expectant gazes on me, the tension in the car mounting, and I finally burst out, "I hooked up with Reed."

"*What?!*" both of them screech—to the point where Clare nearly swerves the car. An expected reaction, honestly.

I sink down into my seat, squeezing my eyes shut as the two of them rapidly start talking over one another, firing one question after the other at me as I cover my face with my hands. But, of course, that isn't an easy escape.

"Okay, Will, wait—what? How the fuck did you go from not wanting to speak to him to *sleeping* with him?" Clare demands as she drives.

In between us, Vick asks, "Was it good?"

That gets a weary laugh out of me, even though I know the question is genuine. Instead of answering Clare's question, which, though it sounded simple, was far more complicated, I answer Vick's. "It was better than good," I admit, throwing my head back against the seat. "And it wasn't just sleeping together, you know? It was—"

"Pure fucking," Vick supplies with a feline grin, pride and excitement glimmering in her eyes. "My best friend fucked an NFL star. I'm so proud of you!" she exclaims, giving my shoulders a shake from behind me. It gets a smile from me; trust Vick to make things feel lighter when the weight on my shoulders feel too heavy.

Still, I say, "Don't be so encouraging. I took a big risk with my job. Anyone could've walked in on us and I would have been done."

Clare blows out a breath as she shakes her head, eyes wide. "So, what, was it a one-time thing?"

I press my lips together, not entirely sure how to answer that. When I glance at Vick, her own eyes widen as she realizes out loud, "You don't want it to be."

"That's insane, right?" I burst out, turning so I can look at both of them, my back resting against the door. "I mean, of all the men I want, why does it have to be him? If people found out about us, I would be a joke in the media, and I'd definitely get fired."

"I mean, not necessarily," Clare says with a frown as she brings us to a stop at a red light. "Hell, look at that Spanish

queen. I forget her name. But she was a news anchor for years and now she's the Queen Consort of Spain," my best friend explains helpfully.

"Yeah, and you got with someone who's basically NFL royalty. It's the same thing," Vick adds on dismissively.

I must be really desperate to justify all of this if I'm finding logic in their words. "I don't want to be known as the reporter who sleeps with the athletes she interviews."

"Okay, first of all, you only slept with one of them," Clare tells me pointedly. "And second—I doubt you're the first one to do it, Willow. I find it hard to believe that not a single other professional who interacts with players have done it, too. They probably are just good at hiding it."

I blow out a breath. "My job is more important than some football player."

"A sexy, older, single, rich, superstar football player," Vick emphasizes, like all of those traits are important. "Besides, you need to have some fun, Willow. It's not the end of the world if you get with an athlete. You don't always have to be all work and no play."

Her statement is followed by my phone buzzing, and I pull it out to see that I have a text from an unknown number.

Unknown: *Join me for dinner tonight.*

My heart drops as I read the text. Only one person could have sent it to me—I can almost hear his deep voice saying those

words, but I don't give in easily. Even as my thumbs tremble slightly as I respond.

Willow: *Who is this?*

Unknown: *The guy who made you come twice in the locker room.*

“Holy shit,” Vick guffaws, obviously reading my text as my throat dries.

“What? What’s happening?” Clare demands, wanting to be in the loop.

Vick slaps my arm. “Reply to him! Say yes!”

My eyes are wide as Clare groans. “Reply to who? Say yes to what?”

When I don't say anything, shock leaving me speechless as I reread Reed's texts over and over again, Vick bursts out, “Reed asked Willow out on a date!”

This time, Clare really did swerve the car.

“What the hell are you doing, Willow? This is such a bad idea. A stupid, terrible idea.”

I mutter those words to myself, constantly, as I walk up the front door of Reed's house—or, more accurately speaking, mansion. It's within one of Chicago's gated communities with a shit-ton of security. Reed had told his team I would be arriving and to expect me, so driving in had been no problem.

But now I'm standing in front of his sprawling home, the hood of my jacket up because not only is it cold, but I don't want anyone nosy enough to spy over to see me on Reed Maxwell's doorstep.

Talk about taking risks. I think Reed fucked most of the brain cells out of me.

Vick and Clare practically pushed me to take Reed up on his offer for dinner. As much as I wanted to see him again, I tried to do the responsible thing and not accept the dinner invitation. But the girls were incessant, not leaving me alone for a second, and now here I am. I would be lying if I said a part of me didn't want to come. Reed's invitation had both shocked me and warmed my insides up with sheer pleasure. I didn't want to say no, even though I knew all of the reasons why I shouldn't say yes. And now I'm on his doorstep with butterflies in my stomach and seconds away from getting back in my car and driving home.

But the front door swings open, and there he is, looking unfairly gorgeous and enough to make a grown woman—*me*—tremble at the knees.

A small smile tugs at the corner of Reed's mouth as he stands there in black jeans and a navy button down tucked in, sleeves rolled to the elbows to show off sinewed forearms that make my mouth water. The shirt stretches deliciously over his firm chest and broad shoulders, his dark hair stylishly messy atop his head, and brown eyes looking at me like I was the meal being served tonight.

His gaze takes in my own outfit, a deep purple jumpsuit with a V-neck that gives off ample cleavage, sleeveless under the jacket I'm wearing. My hair is straight, makeup not too heavy but enough to accentuate my eyes and lips, and underneath all of that, a new pair of lingerie that I'm not sure Reed will see, but a part of me—a big, rebellious, horny part—hopes that he does.

When his eyes meet mine, my heart jumps at the hunger that swirls in them. The want. And something else I can't put a finger on just yet.

“Wow, Willow,” Reed says lowly, his voice deep, which sends shivers down my spine as his hand finds mine. His touch is warm and electric as he pulls me into his house, his eyes never leaving me as I enter. “You look gorgeous.”

He shuts the door behind us, my cheeks aflame as I look up at him and the smile that touches my mouth is effortless. I don't even think to look around his home; my gaze is locked on him. “Thank you,” I murmur, my stomach fluttering with delight.

His smirk widens, sexy and slow, as his fingers trail up my arm and gently cup my cheek. Reed dips his head, his gaze never leaving mine as he says, “I'm going to kiss you now.”

I already feel breathless. “Let me take my jacket off first,” I tease.

“You have three seconds.”

A huff of a laugh escapes me, but I don't waste time in shrugging it off, pulling my arms through the sleeves and

draping the jacket over my arms in front of me. When I look up at Reed, he's already leaning in, and my eyes fall shut as his lips meet mine in a kiss that's softer than I anticipated. Sweeter. Like he's taking his time because he knows there will be others.

I so badly hope there will be others.

My toes curl in my heeled boots, melting into him as he sucks at my lower lip. He tastes like mint, his lips soft, and a low, satisfied hum escapes me before I can think twice. I can feel Reed smirking against my mouth, which only makes the butterflies in my stomach go into a frenzy more, and I have to pull away before I start thinking with something other than my head and decide to skip dinner and go straight to his bedroom.

Reed looks down at me, and my chest squeezes at the sight of his smile; it's small but it's real and there, and it warms my skin when he gently grips and rubs my chin with his thumb and murmurs, "Thanks for showing up."

"Thanks for inviting me," I return genuinely. His dark eyes don't carry their usual stoniness. There's something soft and warm in them, and knowing that it's for me is dizzying. I take a step back so my head stops spinning, and that's when I smell the delicious aroma wafting in the air. "It smells amazing in here."

This time, Reed does grin—full and wide and enough to bring out the crinkles on the corners of his eyes I didn't know he had—and the air rushes out of my lungs at the sight of it. "I made paella, hope that's okay. It's my dad's recipe."

My eyebrows rise as Reed leads me toward the food, looking at him in surprise. “*You* made it?” I ask.

“Yes, why?” he asks, arching an eyebrow at me in return.

“Why is that surprising?”

I can’t help but let out a laugh as I shrug. “I just expected you to have someone do the cooking for you.” Don’t most rich people have personal chefs, anyway?

Reed rolls his eyes good naturedly, his smile still present. “I’ll admit, I’ve got a chef on retainer. But I wanted to cook for you.”

My heart trips up. If I’m not careful, I will easily fall head over heels for Reed Maxwell.

Chapter 12

Willow

“That was so good—I think I may want *you* to become my personal chef,” I praise, leaning back in my chair as I shake my head in wonder.

Reed smiles, proud as triumph dances in his eyes. Instead of sitting opposite of me at the dining table, Reed gave me the end of the table and is sitting to my right, with a sprawl of food before us—mostly eaten. He had made paella and salad with a few side dishes, all of which had been delicious. The effort Reed put into dinner isn’t lost on me, and the butterflies in my stomach haven’t calmed down since I stepped foot in this house.

Dinner had been a pleasant affair, keeping the topics of conversation easy and not too deep. He told me about his family and details of him growing up playing football that aren’t found in the public, and I told him about how I grew up watching sports with my dad and brother, going to school for journalism and the internships I did that landed me the position I have. Neither of us broached the subject of whatever

the hell we're doing now, and how it could potentially affect our jobs. I didn't want to potentially spoil dinner by bringing up the topic, but I would be lying if I said it wasn't on my mind.

Though, talking to Reed while eating the food he made for us, most of the time all I could focus on was how handsome he looked, sitting next to me, and the way he would look at me. I swear, the air electrified every time our eyes met, the tension thickening with every passing minute. I wanted to touch him, and I desperately wanted him to touch me, but I quietly sipped my wine and ate my food, trying to distract myself from the desire that coursed through my veins. It was pointless, though.

Now, though, with dinner done and the two of us sitting here, staring at each other, my thoughts and questions from before resurface. We slept together, and now we're here on a date, and I don't know what any of this means. Despite everything, there is a contentment that settles in my chest warmly, like none of this feels wrong.

But I'm a journalist, and at the end of the day, asking questions is what I do best, so I don't stop myself when I feel a gentle, curious smile tug at my mouth and I ask softly, "What are we doing, Reed?"

I don't have to elaborate; I see the question register in his eyes. Right now, Reed isn't all hard lines and blank expressions. His eyes are soft, lips curled upwards slightly, showing me a side I haven't been privy to until recently. "Full disclosure?" he asks, and I nod, throat tight. He folds his arms on the table, leaning

toward me, and I try not to let my gaze fall to his forearms. With his brown eyes locked on my green, he says, “I want to be with you. I *want you*, in every sense of the word, Willow. I hope to hell that doesn’t freak you out.”

His words don’t freak me out—they shock the hell out of me. Sleeping with someone is one thing, but for Reed to confess that he wants me—as in a *relationship*—knocks the air out of my lungs. I mean, I could have figured, right, with this date? But hearing it from him makes it all the more real, and despite my nerves, excitement and relief blooms inside of me.

Because, goddammit, somewhere along the way, my attraction to Reed became so much more, and it’s a breathless sort of relief knowing he feels the same way about me.

“I want to be with you, too,” I admit softly, and my skin warms as the relief flashes across his face. I sit up, wringing my fingers in my lap. “But I—what about my job, Reed? If people find out that we’re together, it’s risky for my career. And I don’t—” My throat works as I shake my head. “I worked too hard to get to where I am for it all to blow up in my face, you know?”

“I know, baby,” he says, his hands finding mine, and his touch combined with the term of endearment has my heart swelling as he keeps his gaze locked on mine. “I know how important your job is to you, and I don’t want you to lose it, either. And you won’t. If we do this, we can keep it private. We’ll tell or won’t tell whoever you want. It’s no one else’s business, anyway.”

I let out a sigh. “That’s easier said than done, though, isn’t it? I mean, yeah, you say it now that we can keep things private, but what if you get tired of all of the sneaking around? Not being able to be seen in public together?”

He shoots me a look with a smile curling at his mouth. “Baby, *I* don’t even like being seen in public,” he tells me, and that pulls a laugh out of me because it’s true. The only time Reed is seen in public is when it’s game day or he’s at some event—or if a fan spots him grocery shopping. Otherwise, he keeps to himself from the public eye, which might be beneficial if we try this relationship thing.

I chew on my lower lip. “You realize you’re going to be dating a journalist, right? You hate journalists,” I point out, though this time I’m just teasing a little.

“I don’t hate journalists,” Reed argues, but then rolls his eyes when I shoot him a pointed look. His thumb rubs the back of my hand. “Fine, I hate some of them, but for good reasons. But you—” He shifts forward and I can’t help but lean toward him too, our gazes locked. “You’re my exception.”

Well, shoot. Way to make a girl swoon.

My heart flutters madly, and he doesn’t give me a chance to respond as he continues, “I can prove it to you. I’ll tell you why I had to walk off the field the last game. I know you’ve been wondering about it.”

I blink. “I thought you were having back issues?” I ask, because that’s what I heard, at least, from the representative of the team.

Reed's lips curl downward. "Is that the reason they gave? Jesus, way to make me sound like an old man." I stare at him in bewilderment. What does he mean, the *reason they gave*? Was it not the truth? He shakes his head and takes a breath, and my curiosity spikes because something tells me what Reed is about to tell me isn't known by many. And the fact that he's telling me... the trust that goes into that... just, wow.

"I get migraines. They're not too frequent or too severe, but sometimes they'll hit during a game, and it's better if I step aside rather than continue to play and aggravate it. Only a few people know about them, because I don't want to make it a big thing and have everyone who watches me play bring it up. And I'm not a rookie—it doesn't look good for an aging athlete to have public health issues." He shoots me a small smile, and I wonder if I'm imagining the hint of nerves that flashes through his eyes. "So, now you're one of the very few people who know about them. Because *that's* how sure I am that I want you."

My throat locks up at his words, my head spinning at the new information. I understand why Reed wouldn't want the world to know about his migraines; they are so stigmatized in the sports industry, especially when it comes to male athletes suffering through them. I don't blame him for keeping quiet about them, but it's not lost on me the amount of trust Reed must have in me to tell me about them. Which is fucking dizzying. It warms me from the inside out, and my heart squeezes.

I turn my hand in his grip so I'm holding onto his as well, a smile tilting my lips upwards as I take a breath and nod. "Thank you for telling me," I say, my voice quiet. Reed trusted me with a secret of his, and it ends up pushing me to look past my fear of my future. If people were to find out about us, it probably wouldn't be the end of my career—it would just make it a little more difficult. But why worry about something that hasn't happened, and let it prevent me from exploring this new path of happiness?

So, I look at him and smile, "You and me—I want to give us a shot."

Reed takes a breath, surprised and relieved. "Yeah?" he asks, leaning toward me.

I nod, grinning. "Yeah."

I barely can get the word out when he covers my mouth with his, kissing me so deeply and soundly that every thought flies out of my head and I'm consumed by Reed. I let him pull me out of my chair and onto his lap, straddling him as my hands cup his jaw, feeling the delicious prickle of his stubble against my palms as his tongue tangles with mine. He tastes like the red wine we had been drinking, and like him, and I melt into his touch when his hands go from my hips to my ass, cupping me and pulling me into him.

I moan at the feel of his hardening length beneath me, grinding my hips down on him and smirking at the rough groan that escapes him. "Bedroom?" he rasps against my lips.

"Bedroom."

Chapter 13

Reed

Waking up in a bedroom that isn't my own has become a normal occurrence over the last few weeks. Instead of waking up to my white walls, I wake up to a bedroom painted pastel blue, with floral curtains and a few bookshelves that cover half of one of the walls. I run a hand down my face, rubbing the sleep away as I turn my head to catch sight of the woman sleeping next to me.

A smile tugs at my mouth at the sight of Willow's beautiful sleeping face, strawberry blonde hair a mess and her head tilted towards me. The comforter just barely covers the swells of her breasts, and my smile turns into a sleepy smirk at the few discolorations on her neck, courtesy of my mouth. The sight of her stirs my cock awake, but I won't wake her up. My girl's not a morning person.

Glancing at the clock at her bedside, I know I need to get a move on to meet the guys at Leo's home gym for a workout session. We don't have practice with the team today, but Leo, Caden, JJ, and I like to meet up on our off days for some short

training sessions. Careful not to disturb Willow, I get up from the bed and put on my clothes, strewn all over the room, before pocketing my wallet, phone, and keys. I bend over the bed and press a kiss to her forehead before quietly exiting the room.

I shut the door behind me and walk out, only to spot Willow's roommate and best friend, Vick, in the kitchen, still in her pajamas as she brews some coffee. I met her for the first time last week, along with Willow's other best friend Clare, and the two women had been nothing but kind, welcoming, and teasing. Willow and I had agreed that we would tell a few people about us, which included her two friends and Leo, Caden, and JJ, because those were the people we trusted most. Later on, as time went on, we'd introduce each other to our families. I already had no doubt my folks would love her.

"Morning, QB," Vick greets with her usual nickname for me. It's kind of grown on me. "Coffee?"

I shake my head. "No, thanks. I gotta hit the gym with the guys," I tell her.

Vick nods with a hum as she pours herself a mug. "Willow's still asleep?" she asks and I nod in confirmation. She lets out a groan. "Great. Now I'm the one who's gonna have to wake her up for our nail appointment and risk a pillow to the head."

A smile curls at my mouth, chuckling quietly. "She looks pretty peaceful. Good luck," I add with a smirk.

Vick rolls her eyes, though she's smiling. She nods and puts the mug down, bracing her hands on the counter and fixing me

with a look. “Since it’s been a week since we met, I think it’s about time I give you the best friend speech.”

“The best friend speech?” I ask with an arch of my brow.

She nods once more. “Don’t hurt her,” she starts, all traces of humor gone from her eyes. My own smile flattens as I listen. “She looks really happy with you. I haven’t seen her like that in a long time. So, don’t fuck it up.”

I nod, lips pursed. “I won’t.”

Vick stares at me for another few seconds before nodding. “Good.” She grins brightly, and I blink at the sudden change in demeanor. “Just keep her happy and be her hot date to Clare’s wedding—oh, wait.” She blinks in realization. “If you guys are a secret, you wouldn’t be at the wedding, would you? Damn, bummer,” she pouts, her shoulders falling.

A corner of my mouth twitches up into a half-assed smile. “Unfortunately, yeah.”

Vick huffs out a breath, shaking her head. “Shit sucks,” she mutters.

I pull out my keys and offer a shrug. “As long as I can be with her, I don’t really mind.”

She grins. “That’s what I like to hear.”

Sneaking out of Willow’s apartment isn’t too difficult. Nobody would expect me to be at a random apartment complex, but I do exit with a beanie and the hood of my sweatshirt covering my head, and sunglasses to keep myself from being recognized. The car I drive is one of my inconspicuous SUVs

rather than one of my more recognizable vehicles, and for the few weeks I've been doing this, no one has caught on.

As I drive to Leo's, I think of Vick's words and the thoughts they conjured. I've been fully aware that I wouldn't be attending Clare's wedding with Willow, and I've been fine with it. I told Willow, when we first got together weeks ago, that I'm willing to keep this relationship a secret for as long as she wants us to. There is no solid timeline, but I know we'll be keeping things private until the season is over and she knows for a fact she has a lock on the head reporter position. The last thing I want to do is get in the way of her career.

But, still, despite myself, I find myself thinking of other events that we wouldn't be able to attend together or be seen too closely together at. With our jobs, we end up at the same events, and I wouldn't be able to hold her, touch her, kiss her at them because of our deal. I wouldn't do anything she doesn't want me to do, but fuck, there will be a new level of self-control I will need to practice whenever she shows up to those parties and I can't tell every single person in the room that she's mine and mine only.

Those thoughts stay with me even as I arrive at Leo's and the guys and I are in his home gym. For the first little while, I work on cardio, hopping on the treadmill, but my time to myself, unsurprisingly, doesn't last long as JJ gets on the treadmill next to mine and asks, "How're things going with Willow?"

“Good,” I grunt out, focusing on the inclined jog I’m in the middle of. “She’s great. I’m just thinking about some things.”

“Uh-oh,” Leo frowns, looking over at me from where he’s spotting Caden on the bench press. “What things?”

I don’t slow my pace. “Keeping things a secret in the long term,” I confess with a frown of my own. “I told her I’m fine with it—and I am—but, I don’t know. Willow’s not a woman you hide.”

“You’re not *hiding* her,” JJ says from next to me. “You both have a mutual agreement on keeping your relationship private. There’s a difference.”

I huff out a breath. “I fucking know that.”

Leo, sensing my rising aggravation, speaks up. “Okay, look—you said long term. So, be honest: do you see yourself with her a year from now? A few years from now?”

“Yes.” My answer is instant, zero hesitation, and it not only takes the guys by surprise, but me too, a little, as Caden also sits up to look at me. I’ve known that Willow is different, that what we have is different from anything I’ve ever felt before or have had with anyone. With her, I feel all of my worries disappear, the tension in my body slipping away. She’s brought a kind of calmness in my life I didn’t know I was looking for, but now that I have found it, I have no intention of letting it go. We have only known each other for a few months, and have been in a relationship for much shorter than that, but I can’t help what I feel. And it all feels *right*.

“Alright, well,” Caden’s gruff voice breaks the stunned silence that follows my words. “If you want to be with her, long term, you’ll have to accept that she wouldn’t want the relationship to be in the spotlight until she’s made a solid career for herself.”

“And I know you already promised her that,” Leo jumps in, throwing me a pointed look as I keep jogging. “And I know you believe it, but if you want this to work, you can’t start doubting it, man. That’s how resentment will grow, and I know you don’t want to hurt her. Because otherwise, you would’ve waited until the season was over and she had more solid standing in her job.”

He’s right—they both are. I let my want and feelings for Willow push me, fueled by my impatience. But I don’t regret it. Being with her is like a breath of fresh air, and I don’t want things to go back to before. Being all about football has been nice; I don’t mind being career driven. But being with Willow is what I want even more, which shocks no one else more than it does me, given my lack of relationships in recent years. But I like this. I like what I have with Willow.

I like where things are now—a lot. And my friends’ words make me realize something I already know—at the end of the day, I’m fine with waiting. My career has always come first for me, why would I expect anything different from her? She’s younger than me, fresh faced in the industry, and she’s moving forward fast. Everyone can see that. I’m proud of her for it, and I sure as hell won’t be standing in her way.

Like I told Willow, in the grand scheme of things, hiding my personal life from the public won't be difficult. I barely let them in, in the first place. At this point, they have stopped trying to speculate about my personal life unless there's hard-hitting proof about it, and even that's rare because of how tight-lipped I am, as well as everyone I'm close to.

At the end of the day, all I want is Willow and to play football. Fuck everything else.

Chapter 14

Willow

I almost crash my car when my phone rings and I see that Vivian is calling me. I haven't spoken to her since before she left for the family emergency that had me stepping into her place, and my throat suddenly dries. All of the joy and elation I had felt during Clare's wedding evaporates as I wonder why Vivian is calling me. I swear, goosebumps break out across my skin under the jacket I'm wearing, since the satin bridesmaid dress would do nothing to protect me from the cold.

With a calming breath, I answer the call via Bluetooth. "Hello?"

"Willow! It's Vivian," my old boss-slash-mentor greets, sounding far more enthusiastic than I think I've ever heard her as her voice comes through the speakers of my car. "I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time."

She's catching me driving to my NFL star boyfriend's house on my way back from my best friend's wedding, but she doesn't need to know that. "No, no, you're not. How are you? Is everything okay?"

“Yes, everything is wonderful,” she says. “I wish we could do this in person, but I haven’t been leaving my house much. But I wanted to let you know that I just got off the phone with Kenny and the show’s executives, and I wanted to be the one to tell you this news.”

I pull up at a red light, my heart pounding and eyes widening. “What news?”

Vivian chuckles. “Well, there are going to be some changes on the channel. I’ll be returning later on in the year as a producer for Front Runner, and because of how well you have been doing and the potential you have shown so far, you’re being promoted to head journalist. Effective immediately.”

Thank fucking God the car is stopped because I swear I would have crashed it upon hearing Vivian’s words. “I’m *what?*” I squeak out in disbelief, my grip on the steering wheel deathly tight as I stare, wide eyed, out the windshield.

She laughs. “I don’t know why you’re so surprised. You’ve been doing an excellent job, Willow. I’ve been watching your segments, and the way you engage with the athletes is natural and charming in a way many journalists have forgotten to be. You belong on the camera. Congratulations. I’m very proud of you.”

“Oh, wow,” I stutter out, my chest squeezing tightly as the light turns green. “Thank you so much, Vivian. That means a lot.” I blow out a breath, shaking my head in disbelief. “I’ve learned a lot from you, so thank you.”

“Please, don’t thank me. You earned it. You’re—*oh!*”

Her gasp has me sitting up. “Vivian? Are you okay?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine,” she breathes out before chuckling. “The baby’s just been kicking like crazy.”

“*Baby?*” I repeat, eyes widening. “You’re pregnant?”

She lets out a gentle laugh as my head spins at the news. Was that the family emergency that had her stepping away? Maternity leave? Why didn’t she just say so? “Yes, I am. I had some complications early on, which is why I left the game so suddenly when you stepped in. Thankfully, that’s behind us and everything’s fine. But the cat’s going to be out of the bag soon, and I wanted you to hear it from me first,” she says with a chuckle.

“If you don’t mind me asking, why the secrecy?” I ask, smiling at the security guard who waves me into Reed’s familiar neighborhood.

“Sid, my husband, and I didn’t want it to be a whole thing in the media during my pregnancy,” she informs me. “He plays for Indianapolis.”

Oh, God, this is way too much information. As I pull into Reed’s driveway, noting the few other cars parked, I slowly ask, “Your husband is Sid Walters?” He’s the goddamn running back for Indianapolis’s pro team and I’ve never heard Vivian so much as mention his name outside of a professional reference.

“Yes,” Vivian answers, and I can just hear the smile in her voice. “We met during the playoffs a few seasons ago, and got

married early last year. We've been pretty hush-hush about it, because you know how the public can be. But after the baby gets here, no more secrets. Thank God."

Once I'm parked, I lean back in the seat, her words registering. Holy shit... are Vivian and her husband potentially Reed and I in the future? The thought makes my stomach flutter, and I swallow the lump in my throat and ask, "Do you regret keeping it a secret all these years?" When I realize how intrusive and nosy that question is, a gasp sounds from me and I sit up, panicked. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry. I don't mean to be so—"

"No, no, it's alright, Willow," she says with a laugh. "I'm the one who told you, so I expect you to have questions. All good journalists do." Her compliment warms my cheeks. "To answer your question, yes, I do. I know we were doing it to protect my career, because God knows a man's career wouldn't take a hit if he was in a relationship with someone beneath him in the social hierarchy of things. But sometimes all a woman wants is to be able to go out to a nice dinner with her husband without worrying about who'd see them. Whether we had told them before or we tell them now, after the baby comes, there won't be much of a difference in the response from the public. People will always have their own opinions. It's up to us if we want to let them rule the way we live or just say a big fuck you and keep doing our thing."

Her words make me smile, easing some of the pressure in my chest. "That makes sense," I say softly. "What about work,

though? Would you have faced backlash from your bosses for dating someone in the NFL?”

“No,” Vivian scoffs, and her answer has my eyes widening. “It’s none of their business who we’re in relationships with. Especially given that we work so closely with the athletes; it wouldn’t be a surprise if feelings came out of it. It’s only natural. Besides, they can’t fire someone for that; that’s just asking for a wrongful termination lawsuit. All they care about is their channel getting the views and ratings.” In a conspiring tone, she adds, “If you ask me, if their host is dating a professional athlete of some sort, that’s more ratings for them.”

I laugh at that, knowing she’s not entirely wrong. Her words relax me in my seat, my mind running with thoughts of how, maybe, I had been scared and nervous for nothing. Maybe I don’t have to hide my relationship with Reed—now that my position has become permanent. Which is a shocking fact all on its own and I’m sure I’ll be screaming as soon as Vivian and I hang up. All that I have ever wanted, I’m finally getting. It all just seems so damn surreal.

But I sure as hell wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

I look towards Reed’s house in front of me, and let out a slow breath. We deserve to be happy, don’t we? And we deserve to be happy without worrying about other people’s opinions. I believe that. We spent months dancing around one another, all too aware of us being in the same hotel whenever we traveled

for away games, feeling his gaze on me whenever I interviewed his teammates. Now, we spent the last few weeks keeping things behind closed doors, only a few people we trust knowing what's going on.

And it's been fun, honestly. This time to ourselves is special, having our relationship grow naturally, away from the limelight, and being able to bask in the glow of it. And taking this time to see a side of Reed I hadn't before. He's different when it's just the two of us, when he's not a professional athlete and I'm not a sports journalist—just a boyfriend and a girlfriend, enjoying each other's company.

I never thought Reed Maxwell would be the kind of person who would make me laugh and feel so comfortable—and then, in the same breath, leave my head spinning when he kisses and touches me like that's all he ever wants to do. The sight of him lounging in my bed in nothing but sweats, showing off his chiseled torso and muscular arms is one I see in my goddamn dreams, even though I have the real thing.

And now, maybe, thanks to what Vivian told me, maybe I can have the real thing without hiding it much longer.

With a breath, I walk up to Reed's house, butterflies fluttering around in my stomach as I walk past the few cars parked in the driveway. When I ring the doorbell, I only have to wait a couple of seconds before the door swings open and I'm greeted by Reed and that sexy, slow grin of his that I'll never get bored of.

I see his dark eyes do a slow perusal of me, the front of my dress visible since I didn't button up my coat. Vivian's news already has me feeling warm enough, and being on this end of Reed's stare only heats my blood up more. My curls from the wedding have loosened from the fancy updo from all of the dancing, and I'm not even sure if most of my makeup is even still on, but the way Reed looks at me makes me feel like I just walked off a damn runway.

"Hi," I smile at him, a little breathlessly, as I step towards him.

Reed opens the door wider and lets me in, arm wrapping around my waist to tug me close as he shuts the door and kisses me soundly. My heart jumps at the feel of his lips against mine, parting them for me so his tongue can tease mine before he murmurs, "You look beautiful tonight."

The compliment has my cheeks firing up as we pull away, grinning. "Thank you." I can hear the sounds of people chatting and laughing in the direction of the living room, and I say, "I hope I'm not interrupting."

He shakes his head. "Not at all," he says. "It's just the guys. Come on," he adds, taking my jacket off for me and hanging it in the coat closet by the door. He presses his hand to the small of my back as we walk toward the living room and he asks, "How was the wedding?"

"Absolutely wonderful," I tell him with a wistful sigh, my heels clicking against the sleek floors of his house. "I definitely cried. And I definitely missed you."

I would've enjoyed dancing with Reed at the wedding, to see him all dressed up in a suit—because he wears those *well*—and maybe I would have if the conversation with Vivian had happened earlier.

We enter the living room, and that's where I see Leo, Caden, and JJ hanging out, lounging on the couch and watching, ironically enough, a baseball game. “Willow!” JJ grins when we enter. “How's it going? Nice dress.”

I laugh, leaning into Reed's side, enjoying the press of his warm hand against my exposed back. “It's been going well since I saw you two days ago,” I tease. “And thanks,” I add with a laugh, running a hand down the skirt of my dress.

“You joining us?” Leo asks with a smile, gesturing to the couch with the beer in his hand.

I nod. “Yeah, but I think I wanna change first,” I say, looking toward Reed.

He nods, giving the guys a *be right back* look before he pulls me in the direction of the stairs towards his bedroom. As the sounds of the TV and the guys chatting grow distant as we head upstairs, I tell Reed, “I need to talk to you about something.”

“Uh-oh,” Reed jokes lightly as we enter his bedroom. “Everything good?” he asks, pulling open his drawer. He pulls out one of his shirts—and a pair of my leggings that I had left here.

I nod, taking the clothes from him. “I just talked to Vivian and, uh—” The butterflies erupt and I can’t keep my grin from spreading across my face. “I’ve been promoted to head journalist.”

Reed stares at me for a moment, before his eyes widen—I love that he shows more emotion around me—and a grin of his own breaks across his face. “Holy shit, Willow,” he exclaims with a deep laugh, walking over to me. “Congratulations—I’m fucking proud of you,” he adds, wrapping me in a hug that lifts me off my feet.

I laugh, dropping the clothes and returning his hug. My smile is wide, cheeks already aching. “Thanks,” I say, reveling in his familiar scent wrapping around me. “There’s more.”

He sets me down, raising his eyebrows. “What?” he asks, curiosity dancing in his eyes.

I take a breath and quickly tell him about the rest of my conversation with Vivian—her family emergency that had her stepping away from work actually being maternity leave, who her husband is, and the advice she had given me about dating someone we previously considered to be *off-limits*. With each word, I see the disbelief spread across Reed’s face, an incredulous breath escaping him as he rubs his jaw, staring at me in bewilderment.

“So...” He shakes his head, watching me carefully. “What are you saying, Willow?”

My throat works, looking up at him meaningfully. “I’m saying that maybe we don’t have to keep this behind closed doors.”

Reed's jaw works. "Are you sure?" he asks, dipping his chin to keep his gaze locked on me.

I smile a little. I know he's asking only because of me—because at the end of the day, if people were going to make comments, they were mostly going to be directed towards me. Sure, Reed would get some, but I would be on the receiving end of the majority of them. And honestly... I don't care anymore. Words have power—as a journalist, I know how true that is—but as long as I have my job, my family and friends, and Reed, why do I need to worry myself over what people think of me? Their words won't affect me if I don't let them have any power over me.

"I'm sure," I nod confidently, smiling. "I don't want to hide this. Vivian told me how she regretted it, and I don't want to hide things about my life when it doesn't concern anyone else in the first place."

I mean, it's only been a few weeks, almost a month, of Reed and I sneaking around. As necessary as I thought it had been, it was also exhausting, making sure no one caught me going to his place and him making sure he wasn't recognized whenever he came over to mine. Pretending that I didn't know what it felt like to have him inside of me whenever we were at work and during the occasions I had to interview him. Keeping our relationship a secret had a thrill of its own, sure, but it's nothing compared to how it would feel like to just... *be*. To not have to hide our feelings for each other.

“So, you don’t want to hide this anymore?” Reed asks.
“You’re okay with people knowing about us?”

I grin, my hands pressing to his chest and lightly fisting his shirt to keep him close, head tilting back to keep my gaze locked on his. “I don’t care who knows about us. I just want you. Fuck what anyone else thinks.”

A rough breath escapes Reed, his large hands cupping my cheeks as he dips his head close to mine. “Have I ever told you how amazing you are?”

My smile widens. “Not nearly as often as you should,” I tease.

He lets out a deep chuckle before pressing his lips to mine. I melt into him as he murmurs against my mouth, “Let me show you, then.”

I moan as his tongue teases mine, his large hands sliding down to my shoulders and fingers skimming the spaghetti straps of my dress. Goosebumps break across my skin under his touch as he kisses me and pulls the straps down. They fall loosely and, blindly, I reach to my side to pull down the zipper on the side so the dress can just drop. I lower my arms and pull the straps down and, seconds later, my dress is pooling at my feet and I’m standing in nothing but a pair of white lacy panties and my silver heels, the subtle chill in the room hitting my skin.

Reed breaks the kiss, forehead still pressed against mine, and his hooded gaze looks down at me and he curses, “Fuck me.”

I chuckle breathlessly, my hands dropping to the hem of his shirt. “That’s the plan,” I muse before pulling the shirt up.

Reed gets rid of it and, as always, I’m mesmerized by the sight of his muscles even as I move to bend down to take off my shoes. But Reed stops me with a curt, “Keep them on, and get on the bed.”

My stomach tightens in excitement and pulse quickens as I do what he says, crawling backward on the bed, my gaze locked on his as he kneels on the mattress at the end of the bed. A squeal of surprise escapes me when Reed wraps his arms around my thighs and tugs me toward him, heart pounding as he dips his head and begins trailing kisses along my inner thigh. The touch of his lips against my skin has my breath hitching, one hand fisting the sheets beneath me and the other reaching for him, burying my fingers in his unruly hair.

Right when he gets to where I need him most, my panties already dampened with arousal, Reed switches off to my other thigh and I let out a quiet groan of frustration and want. He chuckles against me, that bastard, purposefully dragging his stubble along my flesh. “Can’t wait to show everyone you’re mine.”

And he’s mine—it’s a sentiment I want to express, but a cry escapes me when Reed, in what feels like half a second, hooks a finger under the band of my underwear, rips it off with a damn flick of his wrist, and covers my pussy with his mouth. I throw my head back as his tongue pushes into me, my fingers in his hair tightening and hips pushing into him as he licks me.

Reed's arm bands down across my hips, keeping me in place as he fucks me with his tongue, groaning against me, and the sound vibrates through my body and nearly has my eyes rolling to the back of my head. "Everyone's gonna know how fucking lucky I am to have you," he says gruffly, and a gasp rips through me as he teases my clit with his tongue. "All fucking mine."

His words are nothing but a growl as he licks and sucks and devours me with his tongue and mouth, every part of my body feeling like it's on fire as he pushes a finger in tandem with his tongue. "Oh, God, Reed—*yes*," I moan, arching my back, wanting to be as close to him as possible.

The room is filled with the sounds of my moan and the crude sounds of Reed licking me and thrusting his finger in and out of my wet pussy, and it's not long until I feel that familiar knot tighten and tighten low in my abdomen. "Reed, I'm gonna—I'm coming," I chant, and he doesn't stop what he's doing as I fall apart and come all over his tongue and finger.

He licks up everything I give him as I fall back against the mattress, trying to catch my breath as my fingers loosen their grip in his hair. I feel boneless, but I manage to open my eyes to see Reed sitting up on his knees, licking his lips as he praises, "That's my girl."

His words, combined with the sight of his messy hair thanks to my fingers and his swollen lips, has my body warming up even more, wanting more and more of him. "Reed—*please*," I breathlessly say, heart pounding.

He raises an eyebrow, looking down at me with a look that's equal parts smug and desire. "Please what?"

"Please fuck me."

His gaze darkens, lust and something deeper taking over his expression, and he's quick to shed his athletic shorts and underwear, his thick, long cock springing up with pre-cum already beading at the tip. I want to taste him, but the way he looks at me tells me there's no time for that.

Not to mention his friends are downstairs—but I doubt Reed would appreciate me bringing them up at this particular moment.

Reed comes up over me, arms resting on either side as his face hovers over mine and I so badly want to close the gap between us. His dark eyes are on me, my heart pounding as his warmth seeps into me. "You and me, baby," he rasps, his right hand reaching between us before I feel the head of his cock tease the lips of my sex. My heart jumps, needing him to push in. "No one else matters."

My arm wraps around his neck, my other hand cupping his cheek. "You and me," I murmur, and right when I pull him in for a kiss, he pushes his cock inside of me and swallows the gasp I let out.

He pushes in, inch by inch, until he bottoms out and stars are exploding behind my eyes. "Oh, fuck," I moan, gripping his hair and my other hand on his bicep, fingers digging into his skin.

“Shit,” Reed grunts, his lips against mine. “How does it feel better and better every fucking time?”

He pulls out before pushing back in, and I cling onto him as he sets a fast, steady rhythm, pounding into me and I feel my entire body responding to him; arching into his body, electricity crackling through my veins, unable to catch my breath but not caring as long as Reed keeps doing what he’s doing.

I feel every inch of him inside of me, filling me in a way I’ve never felt before, hitting me so deep that tears burn my eyes. “*Reed, Reed, Reed—yes,*” I chant, his name like a prayer as his fingers tease my clit.

I’m already close, body arching into his. “You gonna come for me again, baby?” Reed asks, like he knows my body better than I do. “Gonna come all over my cock like you did my tongue?”

“Yes, yes, please,” I cry out, head tilting back as he presses kisses to my throat.

He thrusts into me, pinching my clit, and that’s all it takes for me to fall apart a second time. I come again with a cry of his name, my heart thundering so wildly I’m half afraid it will burst out of my chest, and with a deep, guttural groan, Reed is coming apart right alongside me.

My body shakes under his, his hips still moving as we ride out our orgasms together, my arms holding onto him as his powerful body trembles above me. When our climaxes subside, my body still quakes with aftershocks of that

powerful orgasm, Reed growing semi-soft inside of me as his forehead drops to mine.

He pulls out, our breathing heavy and I whimper at the loss of him as he lays down next to me. There's not an inch of space between us, our naked bodies glistening with a thin sheen of sweat, and my cheeks flush because I'm pretty sure I can feel his come, mixed with mine, leaking down my thighs. But I don't care. I feel weightless, boneless, as Reed pulls me into his side and presses his lips to my temple.

"You sure about this?" he asks after a few seconds of silence.

I melt into his warm, solid body, a blissed-out smile on my face as I look up at him. He looks just as fucked as I do, which does wonders for my ego, but I also see the concern in his eyes, like he wants me to be a hundred percent sure about my decision. I turn so I'm on my stomach, folding my arms on top of his chest.

"I am," I tell him honestly. "I just want us to be *us* without any reservations. Are you good with that?"

His hand goes from my lower back to my rear, and my face flushes with heat as he gives one of my ass cheeks a squeeze. "I'm more than good with that, baby," he tells me in that low, sexy voice of his. "You and me, Willow."

I smile, my heart so Goddamn full. "You and me."

Epilogue

Reed

A few months later. . .

Blue and white confetti litters the ground, some of it still flying through the air as the stadium continues to roar with cheers. I can't help the grin that spreads across my face, hugging my teammates, patting their backs as we congratulate each other on a game well played. Because we fucking did it. We won.

We won the goddamn Super Bowl.

I'd seen my parents and my sisters, and given them hugs when they appeared on the field to celebrate with the rest of the team and their family members. My heart is thundering in my chest as my gaze keeps flying around, trying to catch sight of the one face I've been waiting so desperately to see since the moment I realized we won. But it's like there's a million fucking people around; my teammates, the other team, and a shit ton of friends and family that have stormed the field to commemorate this win.

Where the hell is she?

Post-game interviews don't happen right away during the Super Bowl; reporters give the winning team time to celebrate and the losing team time to come to terms with the loss. So, while Willow may be with her cameraman, waiting to get in on the action, she had told me she would do her best to find me as soon as the game was over and she was swept up in work. But it's already been a few minutes and I haven't caught sight of her anywhere.

"JJ!" I call out over the noise, catching sight of my friend. He's sweating and grinning as he talks to Leo's sister, Andrea, as I approach them. "Have you seen Willow?"

"Uh," JJ says, still grinning as his gaze searches around us. He seems to spot something to the left and says, "Right there."

I follow his gaze, and I catch sight of Willow through the dozens of people in between us. She's busy, I note, probably needing to be on the air right away because of the circumstances. She's not interviewing anyone yet, and instead talking to the camera that Michael holds, her microphone in hand.

I make my way towards her, trying not to shove everyone in my way as I walk over. My gaze is locked on her profile, unable to look away as she grins at the camera and speaks. As I approach Willow, I hear her saying over the roar of the stadium, "... and no surprise that the Rebels are taking home the trophy this year, and are our Super Bowl champions."

A grin curls at my mouth as I listen to her. It's been months since we got together and stopped hiding our relationship and, as both of us had expected, the public had a lot to say about it. At first, it seemed to bother Willow a little, which isn't surprising. I can't ever blame her for being hurt over some of the shit people say. But as time went on and she continued with her job—which she got to keep because the channel realized how good she is at her job, as they should—the comments about our relationship had died down. She focused on her job, I focused on mine, and when we were together, nothing else mattered.

Social media, though, likes to have a field day any time she interviews me. Comments about how I smile more with her, how our eyes never leave each other—I don't mind any of that. I want the world to know how much she means to me, how she's mine and I'm hers.

Noticing me from the corner of her eye, Willow looks over at me and grins, a sly glint appearing in her eyes as she says to the camera, “And it looks like we have the MVP of the game just itching to join us—Reed Maxwell.”

I roll my eyes with a grin and step into the camera shot willingly—which I only ever do for her. I give the camera a nod and Willow says, “You just won the Super Bowl—how do you plan on celebrating?”

My smile turns into a smirk, tilting my head at her as I say, “Figured I'd take you out to dinner. How does that sound?”

Willow's eyes widen and pink instantly flushes her cheeks, trying to suppress her grin by pressing her lips together. Neither of us have been this bold on camera, choosing to keep things professional, but I figured this occasion could be an exception. Judging by the light dancing in her eyes and her smile, Willow doesn't mind. And I'm sure this will do wonders for the ratings of the channel, so her bosses probably won't mind, either.

A breathless sort of laugh escapes Willow as she nods, gripping the microphone tightly. "I think that's a great way to celebrate," she says knowingly. With a shake of her head, she looks at the camera and grins, "And with that—we'll be right back."

It's a signal for Michael to cut the camera, and he does so immediately. Laughing, Willow looks up at me with a grin and bright eyes. "Hi there, champ," she greets, stepping close to me. Her free hand rests on my chest, tilting her head up. "Congratulations, baby."

I dip my head towards her, deaf and blind to my surroundings and only focused on her. "Thank you," I murmur before pressing my mouth to hers in a kiss I've been craving. The adrenaline from winning still courses through my veins, but it's only intensified when Willow returns the kiss just as eagerly.

"You were incredible out there," she mumbles against my lips. "And I *can't wait* to celebrate with you."

Fuck, it's all I want. Fuck the post-game interviews and photo ops and everything else—all I want is to take my girl home and not leave my bed until the morning. She's been my sanity throughout these last few months as the pressure of the game mounted; the more games we won, the closer we got to playing the Super Bowl, and that came with a kind of stress of its own.

But Willow was there for me, every step of the way. Relaxing me, distracting me—*loving* me. My saving fucking grace.

I pull away and cup her cheeks, eyes locking with hers. She smiles up at me with a look of pure adoration, her green eyes glistening with proud tears and her dimples showing off for me. My chest is tight with emotion—none of which have to do with winning the biggest game of my life—and with a pounding heart, I confess my truth. “I love you.”

Willow's lips part with a shaking inhale, staring up at me as tears well in her eyes. I smile, soft and true, as her grip on my jersey tightens and she chokes out, “I love you, too.”

I drop my forehead to hers, her eyes falling shut briefly, and I confess another truth. “And I'm gonna marry you someday.”

Willow's eyes fly open, shocked and disbelieving with her mouth dropping open as well. I merely grin at her as she squeaks below the noise of the stadium, “Did you just propose to me?”

My grin widens, chuckling as I hold her close. “Not yet,” I tell her. “Just telling you that I will. Because you're it for me, baby.”

A tear rolls down her cheek and I rub it away with my thumb, and a watery laugh escapes her as she says, “You’re it for me, too.” She kisses me chastely. “And when you propose to me, one day, I’ll be saying yes.”

“Good,” I grin, my heart thundering in a way that it only does for her. “You and me, Willow.”

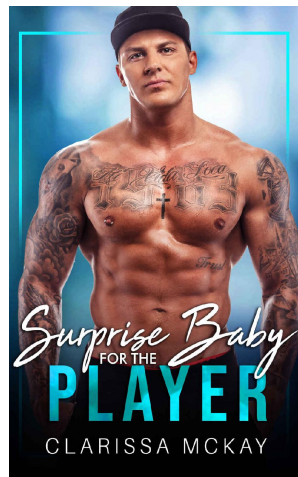
Her lips are on mine, her kiss deep and long and savoring, making my blood pump. “You and me.”

The end.

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Surprise Baby for the Player

Preview



I didn't realize I was hooking up with my student, but once I saw his hockey-player body, I couldn't help myself.

If anyone finds out, I'll be out of a job.

Unlike most college boys, he's mature in all the right ways and completely knows how to turn on a woman.

All the dedication he's shown on the ice is completely focused on me, and I gotta say... *I don't hate it.*

I could've kept our affair a secret, but these two pink lines will change everything.

Now I must find out if **the player will be up for Team Baby.**

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Chapter 1

Serena

There are way too many people inside my little house.

Which, okay, is a given when you and your housemates decide to throw a party, but it kind of feels like the entire Stonewall campus is here—even if that’s dramatic of me to claim. It’s not that bad, honestly; I’m just already in mild freak-out mode thinking of how much cleaning up and disinfecting the girls and I are going to have to do tomorrow, needing to air out the house to get rid of the stench of beer and liquor and God knows what else.

“You better *not* be stressing about tomorrow’s clean up instead of having a good time,” one of my housemates and best friends, Lily, shouts over the music as she comes up to me, red Solo cup in hand.

My hands being empty of a drink kind of give me away. “Is it that obvious?” I shout back with a laugh, prompting her to huff with a shake of her head.

“Do you need me to pour a drink down your throat?” Lily asks. “You’re supposed to be having fun!”

I stifle another laugh. “I am!”

“When was the last time you got drunk and stupid, huh?” she demands, narrowing her eyes.

“Alright, alright,” I say with a shake of my head. “I’ll go get a drink.”

I can feel her narrow-eyed gaze following me as I head to the kitchen, pushing past crowds of people as the bass of some unknown song playing throughout the house pounds in my eardrums. The party is solely because it’s the last weekend before the new semester starts, and while two of our friends are seniors, Lily and I are in graduate school, feeling like a couple of grandmas with our other two roommates still doing undergrad.

The party was my roommate’s Lily and Ashton idea, and my third roomie Claire and I just went along with it—because why not? But I know for a fact that Lily is hoping this party will give me an excuse to get, as put in her words, drunk and stupid. It’s the first party I’ve been to since breaking up with Carter, my ex-boyfriend, about two months ago. Our relationship lasted about eight months, which is the longest one for me since I’ve always been laser-focused on school and my studies.

It’s ending hurt more than I thought it would—especially because I broke up with Carter after finding out that he was only with me because of the money my family name has.

Turns out, I wasted a good eight months with a gold digger; the girls were disgusted on my behalf—even more so when I told them I was going on subpar sex throughout the entire relationship.

So, I really got nothing out of it other than some trust issues and maybe less than a handful of orgasms.

Entering the kitchen, I walk around the counter and look at the assortment of drinks, knowing there's more in the fridge. I twist my lips to the side, bracing my hands on the counter as I sweep my gaze over everything. I'm not entirely in the mood to drink more, since I've already had two White Claws, and I tap my nails on the counter.

“You look like you're thinking hard.”

I blink to get out of my own head, hearing the voice over the sound of music, I look to my right. A tall guy stands there, looking casual in a ball cap, jeans, and a maroon sweatshirt, tight against his large build. The casual outfit doesn't take away from the utter surfer boy vibe he's got going on. Tousled blonde hair, that has a bit of a shaggy look, and blue eyes that can wildly rival the ocean.

All in all, he is unbelievably gorgeous.

“Oh, uh—” I blink a couple of times and look at the drinks before chuckling kind of awkwardly. “Yeah, I guess,” I say, pushing some hair behind my ear.

He flashes me a grin and, oh Lord, he's got dimples—because of course he does. He folds his arms on top of the counter,

raising an eyebrow at me as he asks, “Penny for your thoughts?”

I roll my lips into my mouth, stifling a smile. “Honestly?” I reply with a short chuckle. “I’m thinking of how much cleaning up we’re gonna have to do in the morning.”

I almost cringe at my words, but to my surprise, the guy laughs, the sound deep and throaty enough to send shivers down my spine. “This is your place?” he asks and I nod. He clicks his tongue, sweeping his gaze around. “Yeah, you’ll probably have your work cut out for you.”

I smile a little and shrug. “It’s what I signed up for I guess.” Then I pause for a moment and add on, “I’m Serena.”

His grin remains, showing off unfairly perfect white teeth to go with his handsome features, his jaw sharp and lips full. “Isaac,” he introduces. Then he nods towards the array of bottles in front of us and asks, “You gonna get another drink?”

“Probably not,” I admit with a laugh. “You?”

“Probably not,” he repeats, grinning. “I’ve got work early in the morning.”

I raise an eyebrow, gaze flickering to the stove clock to my left. “And you’re still at a party at one in the morning?”

I swear, his eyes *sparkle*. “I can’t really say no to a good time, can I?” Isaac muses, staring up at me with a look that summons butterflies in my stomach. God, when was the last time I felt *those*? I can’t even remember, not even with Carter.

“And are you?” I ask. “Having a good time?”

Something changes as I ask that, and suddenly I'm aware of the air between us electrifying, growing thick with a kind of tension that crept up on us. And when Isaac, this handsome stranger, gives me a slow, lazy grin that sets my blood on fire, I tighten my grip on the edge of the counter. Especially when he answers, "I am now."

The door slams shut behind us, and I blindly reach behind me to lock it because in the next second, Isaac has my back pressed to the wall, his lips robbing me of all the air in my lungs. His kisses are deep and fiery, awakening every part of me as his tongue dominates mine in a battle I had already lost the moment he kissed me. My hands are in his hair, the strands surprisingly soft as I thread my fingers through them, feeling his own fingers deftly undo the button and zipper of my denim shorts.

The music from the party is muffled beyond the door and walls of my bedroom, but I don't care about it at all as I'm lost in how firm and solid Isaac's body feels against mine, how my heart is pounding, and the taste of his lips is better than anything else I've ever experienced.

I shove my shorts down, kicking them off to the side blindly as Isaac pins my hips to the door with his, his hands all over me. His touch sears into my skin and I can't get enough, a quiet moan escaping me when he teasingly digs his teeth into my bottom lip in between kisses. His hands slide to my back,

cupping my ass in callused hands and giving the flesh a squeeze that has me gripping his hair tighter.

“Fuck,” he groans, the sound rough as he pulls away from me. “Gonna need a taste,” he adds before sinking down on his knees before me.

I’m breathing heavily, watching as he goes down, and my heart trips when his teeth catch the band of my underwear that he tugs down before using his fingers to take it off all the way. I kick it to the side, and my hands remain in Isaac’s hair as he brings his face right between my legs, bright blue eyes locked on my green ones as his tongue comes out and he licks a thick strip along my wet entrance.

“*God,*” I gasp out, head leaning back against the door as his arms wind around my thighs, both keeping me open and holding me up because my knees are already threatening to give out. The warmth of his tongue pushes into me, and I squeeze my eyes shut as my jaw slackens a little, tightening my grip on his hair to keep him close.

I feel like I’m floating, flying, fucking soaring as he continues to lick and suck, another gasp getting caught in my throat when he sucks my clit into his mouth, flicking it with his tongue and already making me see stars behind closed lids. I’d say it should be a sin that he’s so freaking good at this, but I feel like I’m in heaven right now.

He laps at my pussy and teases my clit, his hands keeping me open for him as he guides my right leg over his shoulder, and I can’t stop the sounds that escape me as he devours me like I’m

his last meal. The crude sounds of him licking into me join my moans in the room, drowning out the music from the party as I feel that familiar ball of tension tighten low in my belly.

He gives another tug at my clit between his lips and, without warning, everything explodes and a sharp cry of his name escapes me as my orgasm crashes through me. White-hot and blinding, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as my body shakes from the force of it, my pussy sensitive as Isaac keeps his mouth right where it is, lapping up everything I give him.

I look down at him, heart pounding and breathing heavy, and the moment his blue eyes meet mine, the desire to have more of him burns through my blood. My hands slide down from his hair and cup his face, and I tug him up, and when he gets to his feet, I see a quick flash of his satisfied smirk on his glistening lips before I pull him in for a heated kiss. I taste myself on his tongue, moaning against his mouth, and the two of us blindly push away from the wall and toward my bed, shedding the rest of our clothes as we do.

We're naked by the time we reach it, and Isaac pushes me onto the bed. I see him fish out his wallet from the pocket of his jeans and grab a condom.

"All fours," he grunts.

Whatever you say, I think.

Heart thundering in my head, I do as he says, and hear him unwrap and slide on the condom. When I feel him kneel on the mattress behind me with his hands on my hips, I glance behind me and shudder at the sight of him: huge muscles, broad chest,

and strong arms covered in tattoos. *Damn*. My eyes travel down to a strong V-line that leads right to an impressive cock that makes my mouth water.

Everything is happening so fast that I turn around and grip my bedspread just to hold on for dear life. This whole hookup feels so, well, *unlike* me that it's as if I'm acting out the scene of a movie. Of a very adult movie, mind you.

Isaac's fingers dance over my hips and he leans over me, his front pressing against my back as his lips ghost over the shell of my ear. He whispers, "I bet you feel as good as you taste."

My pussy throbs at his words as I breathlessly reply, "Find out."

It's all he needs before he pushes into me, and my head falls forward as I let out a satisfied, pleased moan as he pushes in inch by inch, filling me up and stretching me in a way no one has before. My arms prop me up and my hands fist the bedsheets, but nothing takes away from how unbelievably *good* Isaac feels inside of me, his own groan sending shivers down my spine once he's fully seated inside of me.

"Fuck," he growls, his fingers squeezing my hips. "I fucking knew it."

I wiggle my hips after a moment, and Isaac gets the message, pulling out of me before pushing back in, setting a rhythm that has my jaw slackening every time he pushes back into me and his skin slaps against mine. He picks up the pace, hitting harder and deeper, and I can't stop the moans from falling past my lips as I see stars every time he hits that spot.

A thin sheen of sweat coats my skin, and I suddenly feel one of Isaac's arms band across my chest before he's pulling me up until my back is pressed against his front. He moves his hand so it rests at the base of my throat, and he uses his fingers on my jaw to tilt my head to the side so he can nip at my jaw. He never disturbs his rhythm, and my eyes fall shut as I lean my head back into him, utterly lost in the bliss he's giving me.

I reach one arm back, looping it around his neck and turning my head so I can kiss him, and Isaac returns the kiss just as fervently, breathing each other in and moaning into each other's mouths as he keeps up his strong pace.

Everything is spinning as I feel him *everywhere*, and the tension once again tightens in my stomach, and I know I'm seconds away from coming again. "Isaac, I—" I gasp out, unable to finish my sentence from how mindlessly good this feels.

"I know, honey," he rasps against me, and that term of endearment does something unexplainable to me, my pussy clenching around him. "Let go for me."

I do, easily, and he's right there with me, the sounds of our moans filling the room as I come so fast and hard, stars explode behind my closed lids and, I swear, my heart is about to jump right out of my chest.

We breathe heavily, trying to catch our breaths, and I feel boneless and would've fallen over if Isaac wasn't holding me up. "Knew I'd have a good time at this party," he murmurs in my ear, and a breathless laugh escapes me.

A good fucking time, indeed.

In the morning when my eyes flutter open, the weight of slumber suddenly disappears when I see the other body in my bed to go with the dull soreness between my legs. Isaac is fast asleep next to me, laying on his stomach, his arms folded under the pillow his cheek rests on, facing me. My heart thuds, and for a moment, I allow myself to admire the sight before me.

He looks just as handsome in the morning light as he did last night, and heat rushes to my cheeks, recalling what we did the night before. One night stands usually aren't my thing, but I can't bring myself to regret my night with Isaac—because, shit, I had no idea sex could be as explosive as it had been with him. And the fact that he made me come so effortlessly, *multiple* times, really speaks to his sexual prowess and how Goddamn attracted to him I am. It was, easily, the best sex I ever had.

Too bad it was only a one night thing, because the last thing I need right now is to jump into another relationship.

Instead of remaining in bed and admiring him like I still—creepily, maybe—want to, I carefully get up from the bed, the morning chill making goosebumps rise on my naked body as I quietly go over to the dresser and pull out a pair of pajama shorts and an oversized T-shirt.

As I pull on the shirt after putting on the shorts, a deep, raspy voice from behind me asks, “You’re not about to sneak out of your own room, are you?”

I spin around, throat drying at the sight of Isaac sitting up in my bed, the bedsheets pooling at his lap. I don’t look down there, and instead keep my gaze fixed on his. Shooing away any nerves, I lift my chin and say, “Of course not. I was just getting dressed before I send you on your way.”

Isaac arches a brow, but he doesn’t look the least bit offended as he smirks lazily. The sight of it is dangerous, knowing what it led to last night. “Just like that, huh?” he muses, getting up from the bed—and, again, I refuse to look past his neck as he bends down to pick up his underwear and pants. “I respect it.”

I shoot him a tight smile. “I’m nothing if not efficient,” I quip.

I have to inhale quietly, sharply, as Isaac stands there in his jeans, the sharp cut of his exposed muscles on his torso and arms a drool-worthy sight as he picks up his shirt. “And a hell of a kisser,” he adds with that smirk before pulling on his shirt.

His compliment, despite myself, colors my cheeks, my smile a little more real as I arch an eyebrow and return, “You’re not so bad yourself.” He grins, dimples in view, and I stamp down the fluttering in my chest as I nod toward the door. “But you gotta go now.”

Isaac chuckles, hands up in surrender as his muscles are disappointedly out of view now that he has all of his clothes on. “Wouldn’t wanna get in the way of your cleaning,” he says, making me huff out a laugh as he heads toward the door.

He opens it and shoots me a wink, and unlike many other men, he doesn't make it look dumb or creepy. It's just downright, unfairly sexy. "I'll see you around, Serena."

For my sake, I sure as hell hope not.

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Chapter 2

Isaac

“**A**lrigh**t**, class—Tamara had to unexpectedly leave the TA position, so we’ve got someone new filling in for her for the rest of the semester,” Dr. Rickards, my Psych 101 professor, announces to the class on Wednesday. When she gestures to the new TA who suddenly stands up from the front row towards the left, someone who I hadn’t noticed until now, I damn near slip out of my chair. “This is Serena Queens.”

Serena Queens. I blink in disbelief, a smile curving at the corner of my mouth as I stare at the attractive woman from a couple weekends ago who had made my Goddamn head spin with her kisses alone. She faces the class with a smile and a quick wave, and I don’t think she can see me amongst the sea of students in the lecture hall. There’s nearly a hundred of us in here, the Psych 101 courses being some of the largest classes since both psychology majors and those taking the classes to fill general education requirements, like myself, fill up the seats.

She sits back down in the front row, the seats shaped like a wide U so while I sit in one of the middle sections, she sits toward my left, so I have a clear view of her profile that I hadn't noticed before. How had she walked into the room without capturing my attention? Probably because I didn't expect her to be here but, still, this girl has been on my mind since our hook up that night, and now she's here after being a ghost on campus since then.

As Dr. Rickards starts today's lecture, I can barely pay attention, my gaze constantly wandering to where Serena sits. If she's the new teaching assistant, then that means she's a graduate student, making her a year or so older than me. Somehow, that only seems to add to her attractiveness.

I'd caught sight of her at her party and had been unable to look away—much like now. With her forest green eyes and dirty blonde hair that falls down her back, and a body I'd memorized that night beneath my hands and lips, Serena Queens captured my attention effortlessly—and how could she not, with a name like that alone?

I swear, even today, I can still taste her on my tongue, and the desire to be with her again runs rampant in my veins—more so now that I've seen her again. She's been haunting my dreams since that night and I haven't been able to do a damn thing about it. The only thing I knew about her was her first name and where she lives—and I couldn't damn well show up to her house like a fucking creep.

But, damn, I haven't been able to get her out of my mind. In class, during practice, and even sometimes she will wind up in my head when I really should be giving all of my attention to the ice and the play happening before me. She would die laughing if she knew how long I had been waiting to use that condom in my wallet, not that she'll ever find out. But no—instead, my mind seems to revolve around that one girl that I got one memorable as hell night with, and now she's right there. How am I meant to look away?

The entire class passes with me just staring at her from my seat, barely taking any notes until Dr. Rickards dismisses us. As soon as she does, I'm on my feet, gathering my things and shoving them in my backpack and swinging the strap of it around my shoulder. My gaze is fixed on the woman down at the bottom, and while all of the other students are heading up the side steps, I'm making my way down to get closer to Serena. She's packing up her own things once I get there, stopping in front of her seat.

She sees my feet before lifting her gaze, getting to her feet as I see the recognition flash across her face. "Isaac," she greets and, I swear my blood heats up at the sound of her saying my name. Because now, all I can hear is the way she had moaned it that night. Her gaze flickers to the students leaving the lecture hall before looking at me and asking, "You're in this class?"

"I am," I say with a flash of a smirk. "Surprised to see you here—so you're a teacher's assistant?"

“Mhm,” Serena hums with a nod. Then her eyes widen a little, giving me a once over before her gaze meets mine, my smirk remaining as she asks, “Wait, what grade are you in?” She leans back a little. “You’re not a freshman, are you?”

My eyebrows rise, looking down at her, completely unimpressed despite the amusement I also feel. “Do I *look* like a freshman?”

Her cheeks pinken and the sight is fucking adorable. This woman—she’s beautiful, sexy, and adorable all rolled in one, and I’m not quite sure how that’s possible but she makes it work. “I mean, no—” She shrugs, lifting her chin as she arches a brow. “But you never know sometimes.”

I roll my eyes, the corner of my mouth quirking up. “I’m taking this class as a gen ed requirement. I put it off until now,” I inform her with a shrug. I grip the strap of my backpack, leaning toward her, and I see the way her eyes widen ever so slightly as I murmur, “I’m most definitely a senior.”

She’s looking at my lips, and it makes my muscles tighten as she looks back into my eyes and says, “Still younger than me.”

My smirk widens. “Maybe, maybe not. I’ve had to work full-time to make my way here. Let’s just say it’s taken me a bit longer than the average student. But regardless of my age, it sure didn’t seem to matter much to you the other night.” I hold her gaze, and my smile widens.

Serena’s throat works, and I’m suddenly thinking about the way my mouth ghosted over her skin, and how soft she had

felt underneath me. “Look,” she begins quietly, taking a breath. “The other night was fun, definitely, but I’m not looking for anything, alright?”

“Never said otherwise, sweetheart,” I tell her smoothly, not at all perturbed. “But it *was* a *great* night, and it’d be a shame to not have another.”

A startled laugh escapes Serena as she shakes her head. “When I say anything, I mean *anything*, Isaac,” she says pointedly. “It was one and done. I’m sure you can find some other girl to have a good time with.”

She looks me over once again when she says that, and I swear her gaze sparks a fire everywhere she touches me with it. I wonder if she thinks of our night together, too, when she looks at me. “I’m sure I can,” I agree, not denying her statement. “But you and I had a great night, and why trade that for just a good night with someone else?”

She gapes at me, but I can see the amusement dancing in her eyes. “You’re persistent,” she comments with a slight laugh, stepping away from me. She begins to walk up the steps, throwing me a look over her shoulder as she adds, “It’s not happening.”

I grin after her, my gaze dipping to the way her jeans hug her, tongue pressing to my bottom teeth as that firm ass I’d love to get my hands on again walks away from me. If only I could let things go easily.

“Dude,” I say, leaning against the locker next to Zach’s open one as he gets changed into his regular clothes.

“What’s up?” he asks as he pulls a shirt over his head, hair damp from the shower he just took.

We just finished practice, so the locker room is filled with the sounds of lockers opening and shutting, the team talking amongst themselves, and the distant echo of the showers running over in the bathrooms.

I lean on my side, arms crossed. “Remember that girl I hooked up with a few weekends ago? In that house on Cranston Street?”

Zach squints in thought for a moment as he buttons up his jeans. “Oh, yeah. Prettiest green eyes you’ve ever seen?” he adds with a teasing grin. I roll my eyes, grinning without an argument because, yeah, I definitely did say that. “What about her?”

I blow out a breath. “Turns out, she’s my new psych TA.”

“No shit?” Zach asks with a raise of his eyebrows, intrigued. “What’s her name?”

“Serena Queens.” What a fucking name, the way it just rolls off my tongue.

Zach’s eyes widen, his head snapping towards me. “Queens? Dude, if her dad is Clark Queens—that man is a big real estate developer. Owns half the properties on the north side of town.”

I blink, surprised by this information. “Really?” I muse, tilting my head to the side. “Huh. That’s cool.” I shrug before

dismissing it and saying, “So—listen, I can’t stop thinking about her, man. Like, one night and she just—”

“Hold on,” Zach interrupts me with a laugh, holding a hand up. “I tell you her dad is one of the richest men in the city, and that doesn’t faze you at all?”

I stare at him like he’s got two heads because, at this point, he might as well. “What the hell does her family having money got to do with me? It’s not why I wanna hook up with her again.” I narrow my eyes at him, amusement upturning my lips as I ask, “You think I’m a gold digger, Zachary?”

He snorts, shutting his locker. “Of course not,” he grins good naturedly. “But, hey, if she’s your TA, I’d back off. Or try to be more discreet. Shit could go wrong if her professor finds out she’s hooking up with a student.”

I purse my lips, realizing he’s right. If she’s the teaching assistant, she grades our papers or tests, and if we were to hook up again and someone found out about it, they’d accuse us of abusing whatever power she comes with as a TA. They could accuse her of using sex in exchange for giving me good grades—she’d get fired as a TA and it would go on her record, and I’d lose my scholarship.

And as damning as all of that would be, which are reasons enough not to pursue Serena, I still can’t really find it in me to completely back off. She’s already got me hooked, and I’m not sure I can do much about it.

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Chapter 3

Serena

“**H**oney, are you okay?” Mom asks, worry creasing her eyebrows as she gazes at me from across the table. “You haven’t been eating much.”

I blink as I look away from my plate, my pasta and garlic bread still mostly covering it. Both Mom and Dad are eyeing me and the way I’m playing around with my food. “Oh, I’m fine,” I assure them with a breath. “My stomach’s been kind of weird. Don’t worry about it.”

It’s been feeling upset for a couple of days, making me a little nauseous, but nothing I can’t really handle. “Hmm,” Mom says, narrowing her eyes at me playfully before letting it drop. “How’re your classes doing? And the TA job?”

“So far so good,” I say with a nod and a smile. “Dr. Rickards is good to work with, and she’s going to let me teach a couple of classes later in the semester.”

I try not to think of that one student I’ve got in one of the psych 101 courses—of Isaac freaking Dawson. What are the

goddamn odds that the first guy I hook up since my break up with Carter is a guy who is in one of my classes—which are mostly reserved for freshman and sophomores, and he’s one of the few seniors in this class.

“I’m glad you got the position, kid,” Dad says with a proud smile. “It’ll look really good on your resume for future jobs you’ll apply for.”

I smile and nod, though my smile turns a little strained at the mention of future jobs. As far as my parents know, any future job I will be applying for is a psychologist position—to be a certified therapist with a roster of patients. But, if I’m being honest, that’s not what I want to do. Getting the teaching assistant position was my way of seeing how I would be as a professor, because *that’s* what I want to do—I want to teach.

And my parents—God, they’ve always been supportive of me and what I want to do. But they’re so excited, so proud that I want to become a psychologist that I can’t bring myself to confessing that *isn’t* what I want to do. And the longer I stall, the less time I have, because eventually I’ll get my doctorate, and the truth is going to have to come out sooner or later. The fear of disappointing them in any way keeps me silenced.

“You haven’t seen Carter around, have you?” Mom asks a few minutes later, the corner of her mouth curling up in distaste.

“No,” I chuckle a little, kind of amused by her obvious dislike over my ex.

“Good,” Dad gives in his two cents. “You deserve better than that rat.”

His eyes sharpen when he talks about Carter, not that I blame him. I told my parents the reason why I broke up with Carter—that it was because I found out the guy only wanted me because of my family's standing. Dad had been pissed and inclined to give him a beat down if Mom and I hadn't stopped him. He raved on about how Carter has no respect for hard workers, because Carter knows that my family didn't always come for money. My dad built his business from the ground up, and all that we have is because of the blood, sweat, and tears he put into his work. Carter practically using me for financial gain of any kind was basically spitting on all the work my dad spent his life doing.

Safe to say, no one is sorry to see him go—even if the truth had hurt for a while.

But thinking of Carter and thinking of my TA position has my mind drifting toward Isaac, and I feel the heat rise in my skin because thinking of him in general has me thinking of how his mouth and hands had felt all over me. The firmness of his body. The softness of his hair. The stretch of his co—

I shove a forkful of pasta into my mouth, forcing myself to chew and swallow instead of thinking about Isaac like *that* while at dinner with my parents. It doesn't stop my heart from speeding up or my skin to feel like it's on fire, though, as the memory of him haunts not just my thoughts but my body, too.

It's too fucking bad that he's a student in my class. Not that I have time to start even just a physical relationship with someone. But him being in that class puts him on the list of

people I shouldn't fuck because that could get me in a lot of trouble with the university board. Sure, I'm not a professor hooking up with a student, but I *am* a TA, and that comes with some kind of power over a regular student. I don't need to be getting into any kind of trouble, and I'm sure Isaac doesn't, either.

So, our one night will be exactly what it was—a one night thing.

The lights shining down on the field are blinding as I watch the football game unfold before me. Ashton, one of my roommate's, boyfriend is on the team, so we tag along with her to the games, even if anything related to sports goes way over my head. When my friends cheer, I cheer, and that's that.

It's chilly out, my breath fogging in front of me with every exhale, and I tug my beanie lower to cover my frozen ears and hug myself to preserve warmth even if I'm wearing three layers. As the game continues, my gaze wanders around the section I'm sitting in, and when I happen to look behind me, it feels like a magnet being called home with the way my eyes seem to almost immediately find Isaac's.

He stands a few rows above me with a couple of guys, some of which I'm pretty sure I spotted at our party the night Isaac and I met, but my attention is snagged by Isaac as I see the grin he had been sporting transform into a smirk.

And then he takes a step down from the bleacher he'd been standing on.

"Oh, boy," I mutter under my breath, spinning to face the field again.

"What?" Lily asks, having heard me.

I blow out a breath, which ices in front of me. "The guy from the party? Isaac? He's coming this way."

My best friend knows all about my night with Isaac, and I see the way her eyes widen with intrigue and an amused smile play at the corner of her lips. But before she can say anything, the presence behind me makes itself feel known, and I wonder how Isaac made it here so fast.

Without turning to look at him, I ask lightly, "Are you stalking me?"

"Either I'm stalking you, or it's just fate," comes his response.

A scoff of an amused laugh escapes me, and after a millisecond of an internal debate, I turn to face him. Isaac isn't standing on the bleacher before mine; instead, he's standing on the lower platform people use to walk on, but even if I have the higher ground, we're almost at eye level because of how freaking tall he is. Those blue eyes gaze at me with a mischievous sparkle that promise a whole lot of trouble I know I shouldn't indulge in, but has me curious anyway.

"You don't strike me as the kind of guy who believes in fate," I point out dryly, with a raise of an eyebrow.

His smile is irresistibly charming, those dimples panty dropping. Isaac also wears a beanie, black in color that it makes the blonde hair curling from beneath the rim stand out. He's only wearing a flannel jacket on top of a hoodie, and I wonder how he isn't freezing his ass off. "Maybe you got me rethinking things," he smoothly replies, and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from smiling.

He effortlessly makes it hard not to smile—or want more of him.

"If you're here to beg for another night, it's not happening," I tell him, though I can't help but smirk as I let a hint of a teasing tone slip into my voice. I don't want to sound like a total bitch, after all.

Fortunately, Isaac doesn't look the least bit offended. Instead, he grins widely, dimples deep and the light in his eyes dancing. Suddenly, the game now happening behind my back matters even less than it did before, because I can't stop admiring the way Isaac is looking at me right now. It makes my stomach flip a million times.

"Glad to know I'm not the only one thinking about our night," Isaac responds.

I roll my eyes with a huff. "Look—" I shake my head, dropping my voice a little. "I'm not getting fired from the TA position over some good dick, alright?"

If anything, the amusement in his handsome face intensifies. "You think I gave good dick?" he asks with a grin, as if that's the first time someone has said that to him. I highly doubt it.

He knew exactly what he was doing that night—hell, even my body knew that he knew. It was effortless and electric and I have to tighten my arms around myself to stop my body from heating up at the mere thought of it.

“You’re incorrigible,” I say flatly.

Isaac laughs, the sound deep and raspy and tickling down my spine. God, this guy—he was only meant to be someone I slept with to forget about and move on from the time I wasted on Carter. Yeah, Carter and I broke up a few months ago, but I hadn’t been with someone, in any capacity, until Isaac, and it was a damn good way to fully move on. But I didn’t count on this guy to be so freaking charming and sinfully good at kissing and making me feel like his only goal in life was to get me off.

But, at the end of the day, I just got out of a relationship, and I need to focus on my studies. And Isaac is a student in a class I’m a teaching assistant in—it can’t happen.

“Alright, how about this?” Isaac asks with a chuckle, pulling me out of my thoughts. “My roommate and I are throwing a party day after tomorrow after our hockey game. Why don’t you—and your friends—come?”

He’s on the hockey team—that’s the first thought that flickers through my mind. No wonder the cold doesn’t seem to bother him much. All those lean, cut muscles suddenly make sense, and then my heart trips as the image of his body paints itself in my mind.

Pushing it aside, I ask dryly, “You’re having a celebratory party even if you haven’t won yet? Isn’t that jinxing things?”

“We’re optimists,” Isaac answers with a shrug and a grin, hands shoved in the single front pocket of his hoodie. “It’ll be fun.”

The way he says that—I know he’s thinking of the last party we were at together, and I would be lying if I said I wasn’t thinking of the same thing. Part of me is wary of what could possibly come from me attending a party at Isaac’s place; will I end up in his bed, the way he ended up in mine? Even if I have to remind myself that it’s a bad idea that could possibly result in me getting fired and it going on my permanent record? How the hell would I ever get to be a professor if, on my record, it says I had a relationship with a student from one of my classes?

Everything I’ve been working toward would go up in flames.

But the way Isaac looks at me is overwhelming and dizzying, and I swear I see Lily grin from next to me when I sigh and tell Isaac, “Let me know the details.”

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About Clarissa

Clarissa McKay writes contemporary romance novels with a side of sports, and her happily-ever-after endings are what keep her sane in this crazy world.

She is a California girl at heart, and currently resides in London with her husband and two young children.

Clarissa credits contemporary romance for keeping the passion alive in her marriage, and hopes her fun and steamy love stories add more spice to your own life, too. RAWR!

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