

A romantic couple embracing on a baseball field at night. The man is wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans, and the woman is wearing a blue and white striped shirt and blue jeans. They are standing on the field, with the stadium lights and seating visible in the background.

THE OTHER HALF

ANNELISE DEVEREAUX

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TRIGGER WARNINGS

The hero of this story is unapologetically jealous, possessive, manipulative and phenomenally unreasonable. He absolutely earned the moniker “Neanderthal Nate.” This is in no way shape or form an example of a healthy relationship. The hero of this story tampers with the heroine's contraception without her consent, and deliberately takes steps to ensure she conceives as quickly as possible. Triggers include criminal acts by very young teens, birth control tampering, and the destruction of a very expensive strapless bra she only wore once.

There is no remorse in any way, shape or form from the hero at any point in this story.

This book is not for every reader. Please take all of the above into consideration before you decide to read this book.

Chapter One

NATE

Music booms far too loudly from the hidden speakers of the whole home audio system. This time it's the overly whiny voice of some nineties band grating on my last nerve. I shift my attention from where a rose gold candle is dripping wax onto my end table, and back to the unwelcome warmth on my leg.

“Thanks, beautiful. Not interested tonight,” I say as I remove the manicured hand that's resting on my upper thigh and scoot further down into my favorite leather armchair. The beautiful brunette shoots me a scarlet pout as she walks away, leaving a cloud of perfume in her wake.

I don't have the patience for company tonight. Hiding in my study for a bit sounds amazing right now.

My friend Caleb got caught up in some family issues and had put off planning his fiancé Marissa's birthday until it was too late to book a venue. They're in the middle of remodeling their home, ruling it out as a location to hold the party. He'd asked me to host tonight out of desperation, not wanting to

disappoint Marissa. I said yes because I owed Caleb a favor, and I've regretted it ever since.

Landry walks up to me with a whiskey tumbler in his hand and a paper birthday hat sideways on his head. "Hey man, been looking all over for you!"

"I was trying to hide from the noise," I say with a huff as I undo the top button of my white dress shirt with a flick of my fingers.

"It'll do you some good to socialize for once. You've been a hermit for the past year."

"I hang out with the team!" I say defensively, scowling in his direction.

"Only at our homes or when we drag you out!" he insists with raised eyebrows.

As my late twenties have slowly crept by, I've become more introverted, preferring small gatherings or hanging out with friends. I'm long over going to a club and ending the evening with a random woman.

Landry's wife Amanda walks up to him and places an arm around her husband's massive bicep. "Babe, we'd better get home to Olivia. I want to check on her since she had an earache before we left."

"Did you check in with the sitter?" he asks, worriedly raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, she's asleep, but I want to make sure she's okay," Amanda says, biting a worried lip.

“Hey man, take it easy,” he says as he waves goodbye in my direction.

“See you at practice tomorrow. Get some sleep!”

The crowd thins to a few stragglers looking for a quiet spot to talk as I pass the shimmery backdrop that serves as a selfie station. Marissa is currently posing with Caleb’s baby sister Cassie, each holding up a cardboard letter to make out the number twenty-six. Their body language is relaxed for the first time in forever, and they’re both wearing beaming smiles. Now I feel like an ass for being so grumpy about the party when they deserve a day of happiness.

I pause at the hallway entrance. Someone’s yelling. Why is anybody even in this part of the house?

As I turn the corner to my study, I hear an angry female voice demand, “Take a hint. I’m not going home with you!”

A man I’ve never seen before has his arms draped across a woman’s waist as he leans in, intending to kiss her. Her head is pulled back, seemingly repulsed, as she places her hands on his chest to try to push away. Hell fucking no.

“You don’t mean that, Babe. You don’t have to play hard to get with me.” He tightens his grip on her arms, and I see her wince.

“I never should have come here with you. I’ll make my own way home. Let go of me!” she insists furiously.

I walk towards the man, keeping my eyes fixed on him. I don’t like something I hear in the undertones of the woman’s

voice. “I believe she told you no. I think you should leave now, alone.”

He lets go of the woman and turns towards me. I keep my gaze on him, worried about what he’ll do next, but from the corner of my eye, I can see her straighten her black dress, happy to be freed.

“Look, man, I was just...” he says, lifting his hands.

“You were just touching a woman when she said no. In my house,” I say with a calm, crisp fury. “How did you get in anyway? Somehow I doubt you’re on the guest list.”

“I’m friends with Marissa’s brother,” he starts to defend.

My gaze stays laser focused on the man. “Marissa doesn’t have a brother. You should leave now. Alone. I’ll arrange for your date to make her way home safely,” I inform him. Playing professional football, I’ve encountered far too many overly entitled men who feel free to touch a woman however they want, whether it’s welcome or not. It’s not something I have ever, or will ever, tolerate in my presence.

“Whatever, man,” he mutters as he turns away and leaves me alone with his date.

I watch until he reaches the nearby door and exits, and send a quick text to the head of my security to ensure the man leaves with no further disruptions. I need to talk with my security later. How did he even get past them?

Lifting my head from my phone, my attention goes back to the woman standing in front of me. I pause, frozen, as I scan

her up and down, taking her in for the first time.

There's an unfamiliar burning sensation deep in my chest. My heart dances a quick tattoo, and I feel myself blinking rapidly at her as I release a breath of air. There's a crackle of energy between us that I can't define, and I wonder briefly if she feels it too.

She's wearing a cocktail-style dress that hugs her lush curves, with strappy heels that make her long legs look even longer. Her only jewelry is a pair of diamond studs twinkling in her ears. She pushes back an errant strand of hair, tucking it behind her ear. Large blue eyes come to mine, sparkling like the most flawless of sapphires, the dark eyelashes fluttering as she seems to take me in.

She exhales loudly, and her shoulders sag in relief. "I can't thank you enough! He wouldn't take a hint!" She smoothes down her wavy honey-blonde bob in a show of annoyance.

"First date gone wrong?" I wonder aloud as I stand with my hands in the pockets of my gray dress slacks, looking her up and down. My pulse quickens as I wait for the answer. Surely he's not a boyfriend.

"He asked me to come as friends, so he didn't have to go alone," she huffs. "That's what I get for doing someone a favor! This is why I don't date." She mutters bitterly about *wasting a perfectly good weekend night, and I could be home in my pajamas.*

"You don't think he'll try anything, do you? Because I can..." I start to offer.

She reaches down into her purse and pulls out her phone. “No, no. I’m okay. I think he finally got the hint. I’m just going to call a ride-share to get back to my apartment.”

“The guards at the entrance of the neighborhood won’t let them in.” The lie falls from my lips with ease and no remorse. Despite my annoyance with the nearby crowd of people, I’m not ready yet to let this particular woman go.

Her eyes roll heavenward. “Great. How am I going to get home? Maybe I can walk to the gate entrance...It didn’t seem too far.” She looks down at her shoes with a grimace, likely dreading the walk in heels.

“You can stay another hour or so if you want. I have a car service coming to pick up the guests who overdid it a bit. You’re welcome to take one of the cars back to your place then if you’d like.” As quickly as I offer, my mind starts to whirl, thinking of how I can ensure each car is taken before she has a chance to get into one.

She looks down at her phone and bites her glossy pink lip, shifting her weight uncomfortably. “I hate to impose. Especially since he wasn’t even invited.”

“No, it’s no trouble. I hired more than enough cars just in case....” I suddenly realize that we’re both still standing in the hallway outside my study, the hair on the back of my neck suddenly sticking up. “How did he get you into this area of the house alone?”

“He told me his friends were in a billiards room this way,” she confesses with a blush. “And that there was a restroom

that wasn't occupied."

"I don't have a billiards room, but I can help with the latter," I say, matter of fact, as I input a code into the digital keypad on the study door handle.

I hate to keep my house locked down like this, but I don't want the guests wandering into my study. For some reason, though, I don't mind sharing my sanctuary with this woman.

Motioning for her to enter in front of me, I follow and flip on the overhead light. "Bathroom's that way," I say before she enters with a slight blush.

I sit on the dark green tufted couch directly across from the unlit fireplace and reach for the whiskey decanter. This has always been my favorite room in the house and where I spend most of my time. The rest of my home was decorated by a designer, but I'd carefully selected the furniture for this room.

Once she walks back out, I gesture to the bottle in front of me. "Join me for a drink?" I ask, pouring two glasses and carefully watering them down. "I hid the good stuff in here tonight."

I watch to see if she goes to the acoustic guitar resting in a corner that everybody I allow in the room asks about, thinking it is one of Dad's. Nope, he didn't even sign it. It was mine, given to me by my father. I never learned to play it, but it's signed by all the famous musicians Dad played with when I was growing up.

She walks right past it and takes the second glass from me, carefully taking a sip before sitting next to me. “I’m Whitney. I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name?” she inquires. “Cal said it was a party at a football player’s house.”

“Nate. I’m Nate.” I wait for the spark of recognition I usually see when people put two and two together and realize who I am, but it never comes. Instead, she cocks her head at me curiously, and the beginning of a smile tips her mouth.

“Well, Nate, thank you for saving me and for the ride home. I just moved here, so I’m afraid I don’t know anyone yet.” She crosses and uncrosses her legs and sits back on the sofa before biting her lip again.

I blink away the image of her lips between my teeth and clear my throat before my eyebrow shoots up curiously. “So how did you meet that guy? You don’t think he’ll bother you again?”

“Nope, I’ll probably never see him again. I was trying to make new friends in the area, and he’s a teacher at a neighboring school...”

“You teach? You don’t seem like the type,” I confess, taking her in.

“I teach kindergarten,” she looks at me, her heart-shaped face lighting up as she speaks. “Well, I will. I just graduated in May.”

“Where from?” I ask, taking another sip of my drink. She’d just graduated, making her twenty-two. Twenty-three maybe.

She's still young. I lean back on the cushion and cross my legs at the ankles. I'm curious about my new visitor. I find something about her intriguing...something about her makes me want to unlock all of her secrets.

"I'm from the suburbs of Baton Rouge. Went to school there. What about you? I hear a slight accent of some sort." Her head is tilted to the side, and her forehead creases. It's adorable. I resist the urge to lean over and smooth her furrowed brow.

I clear my throat and take another sip of my drink. "Nashville. My whole family is still there. I went to college in Alabama, though." She really doesn't know who I am at all. I don't know how I feel about that. It's a hit to my ego, but a large part of me likes it. I'm free to just be me without worrying I'll somehow disappoint some preconceived notions she may have about me.

We continue to talk, time only measured in sips of whiskey and laughter.

She starts to nervously bite her thumbnail, stopping herself before asking, "Did you pledge when you were in college?" She slowly moistens her lips with her tongue. *She likes me.*

"Why do people always think that everyone who goes to school there...." I let out an overdramatic resigned sigh. "Yes, I was in a fraternity for a bit. So did you rush?"

Her eyes grow big. "Gosh, no. I was much too busy going to class and slinging fries for all that. I'm surprised you did with football and such!"

“I mighta missed a chapter meeting or two,” I confess slyly before angling my legs closer to hers. “It’s how I met Marissa, though. She was a freshman at my sister sorority.”

She quickly moves her body backward, increasing the distance between us. “Marissa’s your girlfriend?” she asks sharply.

Aha, so you care if I’m taken. I bite back the victorious smirk I feel brewing and answer her, making my voice sound confused. “No, she’s my friend’s fiancée. They met at a party I was hosting when Caleb and I played together in Alabama. It’s her party tonight.”

Her tense body language eases. “So you’ve played together since college?”

“Caleb was a year behind me in the draft and college, but yes,” I clarify.

Eventually, she slips her heels off and demurely tucks her legs under her body, pulling down the skirt. She turns her body, facing me. She rests her head in the cupped palm, her elbow resting on the back of the couch as we talk about anything and everything.

Whitney’s eyes grow wide with a glance at her phone. “Oh no, did I miss all the cars?”

She jumps to her feet and grabs her purse, anxious to run out of the room. *No, not yet.* Putting my hand on her arm, I gently turn her toward me. I lean in until our lips are almost

touching, and I can feel her breath warm on my lips. “I’d rather you stay.”

I lean in, my body tingles with the contact, the soft curves of her body molding against the contours of my large frame as I rest my hands against her back. Her eyes hood with desire, and she smiles, the permission I’d been waiting for. My lips slowly descend to meet hers, prodding them open with my tongue. She kisses me back, savoring every second of it, moaning low as I explore her mouth with my tongue. Something tingles deep inside of me, something that feels so right with her in my arms. I’ve been desperate to kiss her for hours. My hands palm her face as I hold her against me tightly.

There’s a loud knock at the door, followed by the deep bass of Caleb’s voice from the hallway. “Nate, man, you in there? I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Holding her chin with my thumb, I gaze down at her. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

She nods in agreement and wraps her arms around her body, a scarlet heat warming her face. Her lips are swollen from our kiss, her eyes hooded with desire.

The taste of Whitney’s fruity lip gloss lingers on my lips as I move to open the door. “Get lost,” I growl at my friend through the partially opened entryway.

“Sure, man,” Caleb says suddenly, understanding that he’s interrupted. “Just coming to say goodnight. Everybody’s gone, and the caterer is wrapping everything up. Thanks for letting us use your place again.”

“Uh-huh. Later,” I mutter as I turn and shut the door.

Whitney’s looking around my study, an unsure expression on her face as she gazes around the room, the spell between us broken. My heart suddenly feels like it’s shrinking. *What if I never see her again?*

“Umm, I hate to ask, but I do have to go. I start work tomorrow....”

“I’ll take you home myself. I’m sure all the cars I’ve hired are long gone by now. Give me a minute. Let me see if I can get the caterers to unblock the garage, and I’ll drive you.”

“Are you okay to drive? I mean, you had two glasses of whiskey yourself.”

“I had a full stomach. I’m stone-cold sober, good to drive.” The good thing about attending college— knowing your limits for liquor. I’d also watered down the alcohol, careful not to get either of us tipsy.

She nods and I slip out of my study, arranging for the vehicles to be moved so I can drive Whitney home. It took much longer than I planned since I stopped to grab a plate of catering for her to bring home. I want to make sure she’s taken care of...to make sure she’s eaten tonight.

When I return to my study, thirty minutes have passed, and I find Whitney in the restroom again. I’ve only been away from her for minutes, but I feel anxious, wanting to see her face.

I don’t want her to leave tonight. I want to bring her to my bed. To make love to her until morning. To mark her. To make

her mine in every way possible. The easiest thing would be to ask her out, to get her number, but she'd seemed bitter at dating. I doubt she'll give her number to a stranger like me. Instead, I sit back and go through my options, quickly developing a plan.

By the time the caterer texts to tell me their multiple vans have been moved out of the way, I know what I'm going to do.

When she walks out of the washroom, her face is pink, and her lips are still swollen from our kiss. "I guess I should take you home," I tell her quietly. It's against everything my soul is telling me to do, but I know I can't keep her. Not tonight. Not yet. Soon, I promise myself.

"You sure you're good to drive?" she asks again, her voice uncertain. Like I'd ever drive my angel impaired.

"I have a high alcohol tolerance. My head's clear as can be."

Grabbing the aluminum container of food, I collect my car keys off my desk and lead Whitney to the garage, putting the food on the console between us. She gives me an address that's ten minutes away, and I move my SUV through the oak-lined streets toward Whitney's home.

I don't like Whitney's neighborhood. It's poorly lit, for starters, and there's a bar two doors down from her ancient duplex. Bringing the food with me, I follow her to the door, leading with my hand at the small of her back. The porch is at least well-lit, and I can see her face illuminated in the darkness. She still needs solar lights for the walkway so she doesn't trip on the broken sidewalk in the dark.

“Thank you for walking me to the door. You didn’t need to do that,” she mutters as she starts to unlock the door.

Yes, I have to walk my angel back to her door. I despise leaving her here alone. God only knows how many inebriated coeds walk past her apartment each night. She’s getting out of here as soon as I can arrange it.

I hand her the container of food. “I want to hear you lock up before I leave.” A small dog whimpers, and I can see a tiny form behind the oval of thin glass in the door. I grit my teeth and imagine someone easily smashing the glass to unlock the deadbolt.

“Thanks again for the ride and the whiskey, Nate. And, you know, saving me from roaming hands,” she laughs.

“It was my pleasure, Whitney. Make sure you lock up.” She opens the door and walks inside, anxiously greeting whatever breed of furball is on the other side of the door. I pause, waiting until I hear the deadbolt’s click, then the chain sliding into place.

Eyeing a “for rent” sign on the other half of the duplex warily, it worries me. There’s no telling who will move in—who’s living there now. The thought makes my stomach churn. Once I reach my car, I jot the number down in the notes app on my phone. This is one thing I can take care of easily first thing in the morning.

I’ve never worried about a woman like this before. Never missed them the minute they were out of my arms, or at all for

that matter. Never felt the need to protect someone, to make their life better.

Growing up with professional bodyguards in our home, I know these measures aren't nearly enough. I want to demand she replaces the locks tomorrow and to stay with me until they're replaced. To stay with me, period. I feel the urge to linger near my angel, to look over her to make sure she's safe. Instead, I sit in the blacked-out SUV and watch her shadow move across the apartment until the last light flickers off.

Chapter Two

WHITNEY

With my hair in a messy ponytail, I grab the to-go mug of iced coffee and run out the door. I knew I'd regret not packing my car this weekend, but I was worried all the stuff would be stolen out of it. It's a small hatchback, which leaves the contents visible to anyone who walks by on the sidewalk.

Hurriedly grabbing my purse off the coffee table, I move to sling it over my shoulder and realize it feels light. Way too light. My heart sinks with realization. My planner's missing! I've spent hours writing in it, organizing for the school year! My heart pounding in my ears, I check around the apartment, then in my car, but it's nowhere to be found. Everything was in that small leather book. It's going to take a lot of work to duplicate it if I can't find it soon.

This is not how I want to start the week.

Traffic stalls at the front gates of the team's monstrously large training facility, bringing my mind back to last night. Is Nate in there even now, already working out for the upcoming season? I think of mischievous bright green eyes and the strong masculine hand that had sent a zap of electricity through my entire body with one caress; the feel of plush lips against mine in a delicious, knee-buckling kiss. I'll probably never see him again. The thought makes me surprisingly sad.

Images of him lifting weights shirtless with sweat dripping down his tanned face invade my brain for the remainder of the drive.

I park and use a collapsible wagon to bring the first load of materials into the school.

Walking down the hall to my classroom, I step inside. Flipping on the light, I look at the empty classroom and grin at my blank canvas. I've waited for this moment for four years, and it's finally here.

Hours later, a sharp knock at my classroom door jerks my attention from the bulletin board in front of me to the doorway where the school secretary is standing, looking anxious. "Whitney, you have a guest," the secretary says, looking googly eyed behind her.

I stare, startled, when I notice Nate. He casually leans his overly large frame against the door, one leg crossed over the other. He's wearing a sapphire blue t-shirt with a Hurricanes logo and a pair of gray basketball shorts. His hair's a little damp like he just showered. A printed temporary ID sticker is

on his white t-shirt identifying his full name as Nathaniel Coleman.

“Thank you, ma’am, for helping me find Whitney.” He shoots the little old lady that shit-eating grin of his, and she blushes.

“Well, I’d better get back to the desk. Whitney, make sure you walk him back to the front. Mrs. Kelley doesn’t allow anyone who isn’t a student or staff member to walk unattended on campus,” she reminds me pointedly before walking towards the door.

“Yes, of course, Ms. Mary. Thank you...” I look at Nate curiously.

He’s holding a plastic shopping bag in one hand, and with the other, he’s holding my missing planner between two fingers. “This must have fallen out of your purse in my car last night. Thought you’d need it today.”

I stare wide-eyed, my shoulders slumping with relief. “Yes, I was missing it this morning. I don’t know how it fell out of my purse into your car, though.”

He moves into the classroom and places the bag on my desk with the planner. “Yes, well, stuff happens.” he says casually as he pulls out two packages of food from the sack. “My sister, Josie, never has time to eat while setting up her classroom for the new school year. She says she lives off iced coffee and protein bars she keeps stashed around her classroom.” *Mental note to me—stash protein bars around the classroom. It’s been iced coffee and nuthin’ else for me today.*

“You didn’t have to feed me again, but it’s so thoughtful. I just...don’t you have practice or something?” I know it’s coming close to the preseason. He has to be very busy preparing.

After pulling the only other adult-size chair to the desk, he opens one container and slides it towards me, handing me a plastic fork. It’s a large salad with tons of mixed greens, chicken, and a small plastic salad dressing container. “I’m done for the day since I’m a seasoned team member. The coaching staff is working with the newer guys now.”

That must be why his hair is wet. He must have showered at the practice facility that I passed on the way to work this morning. My mind briefly wanders to the image of Nate wrapped in a white towel, with fresh droplets of water dripping down the defined biceps of his exposed torso.

He opens the other container, which contains a similar salad with salmon. “Chicken or fish?” he asks, breaking my chain of thought.

“Fish, but really, you don’t have to feed me, Nate,” I laugh awkwardly. My stomach rumbles at the delicious smell as I open the plastic around the utensils.

“You aren’t hung over, are you?” he asks, his tone low, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows. “I was worried you might be.”

I finish chewing my first bite of greens and swallow, “I had a rough start this morning, but no headache.” I didn’t need to

tell him my difficult morning was because I'd tossed and turned half the night remembering our kiss.

Nate pulls two bottles of water out of the bag and hands one to me after opening the lid. "You need to hydrate. Especially since, if I have to guess, you've drank nothing but that thermos of coffee today."

"I haven't had a chance..." I start to defend.

"You haven't had two seconds to feed yourself or grab a bottle of water from the vending machines in the teacher lounge," Nate says, bobbing his head back and forth like, "I know, I know."

"My brother-in-law, Declan, has to pack my sister's lunch for her every morning with bottles of water and such since she's always in a hurry this time of year. Well, all year really, teaching."

"You still didn't have to bring me food. I know how busy you are."

"Yes, Angel Face, but then I wouldn't have had an opportunity to see you again, especially since I didn't manage to get your number last night," he teases with a quirk of his lips that send butterflies through my stomach. "No social media either, that I can find. Very unusual in this day and age, especially for someone who's just graduated from college."

I raise an eyebrow at the endearment and his online sleuthing. Am I really that interesting?

I'll admit— I *might* have looked him up as well, but I was just being nosey. When I couldn't sleep last night, I'd finally broken down and looked him up on my phone while I was in bed. My search revealed a bunch of football statistics and the fact that he's the current quarterback for The Hurricanes. Everything, from his high school in Nashville to paparazzi shots of him, was easily accessed in my quick search last night before I'd gone to sleep. I was shocked to discover that his father was musician Ethan Coleman. I'd clicked out of my search after that, feeling guilty for some reason.

But Nate is a very handsome man and a football star. It's only normal for someone to look him up after meeting him. I'm just, well, me.

My social media handles are my first and middle name instead of using my last name. I don't want my internet-savvy students or parents to find them. Still, he doesn't need to know that.

Finally, a thought occurs to me. "Hey! How did you know my last name to look me up online?"

"It's written inside the book's cover," he explains with a shrug. "Tried to find you online to return the planner but couldn't find you."

I feel a slight pang of something close to disappointment that it wasn't curiosity about me that sent him in search of my social media.

He grabs my phone from where it's sitting on the table next to us, playfully holding it between two fingers. "How about

you give me your number so that when I bring you lunch tomorrow, Ms. Mary doesn't have to walk me all this way. She has a bad hip, ya know." He whispers the last part as if it's some sort of dark secret. I know all about Ms. Mary's bad hip because she tells anyone who lingers too long in her presence.

"I don't give my number to strange men. And I don't date. I don't have the time," I say, shaking my head and closing the lid on my half-eaten salad. His long legs accidentally brush up against mine under the shared desk, and I try to ignore the hum of electricity the contact sends through my body.

"You certainly were doing *something* last night with that look you gave me before I kissed you," he boasts low, whispering out of the side of his mouth.

"That was...I was...I was caught up in a moment. And I'd had the whiskey..." With a huff, I look at the clock on my phone. "I really do have a meeting at one today, though. I'll have to walk you to the front before I'm late."

He closes his empty salad container, tossing it in the trash can. He looks me up and down and gives me that fucking smile again. "Sure. Caught up in a moment," he replies cockily.

I purse my lips and grab my ID and the key to my classroom, locking the door behind me so that I can walk him to the front.

I walk on hurried feet, but he moves with slow lazy paces, his hands in the pockets of his shorts. The teacher in the classroom next door, a redhead a few years older than me

named Savannah, blinks rapidly behind cat eyeglasses and gasps. “Hiii...hi ummm Nate,” she says with a little wave as she stops in the middle of the hallway as if shocked to see him.

He gives her a chin lift and *that* smile, moving towards the door that I now have propped open. A prickle of jealousy climbs up my spine as I wait for him to catch up to me.

“Thank you again for the ride home and the food and everything,” I say one last time to Nate, my tone soft. “You truly didn’t have to.”

I don’t wait for an answer before I close the door behind him and walk away from him and the ebony curls I desperately want to touch.

Focus, Whitney. You’re supposed to be starting over, remember? Your attention should be on giving your first year of teaching your all and making friends here.



“Look who I found hanging around the door waiting to be let in!” Savannah’s sunshiney voice is way too perky after this long day. We had professional development all morning, so I haven’t had much time to work on my classroom today. I’m already drained. Savannah, apparently, is not.

Looking up from the laminated letters I’m cutting out, I find bright green eyes smiling back at me. I swallow down the

butterflies that started to dance in my stomach when I first saw him, and take a steadying breath.

Holding up two french bread sandwiches wrapped in deli paper, Nate raises an arched eyebrow. “I brought you a po boy,” he says, as if it explains his presence.

I’d thought his promise to come back today had been hollow. Clearly, I was wrong.

I roll my eyes heavenly. “I can feed myself, ya know,” I say again to him.

“Bet you didn’t, though,” he answers back as he occupies the same spot he ate yesterday and starts to unwrap his own sandwich. He just had to show up in the little bit of time I was in my classroom today. Any other portion of the day, he wouldn’t be able to find me on campus.

He takes a large bite of what looks to be a roast beef po boy and wipes his mouth after he chews. “You might as well eat. I know you must be starving. It’s three o’clock already.”

He has three large bottles of water tucked under his arm. Handing me one, he takes one for himself and puts a third to the side, “For tomorrow, when you inevitably forget to bring anything but coffee to eat or drink again,” he says pointedly.

Does he have to be so thoughtful? So sweet? It makes it impossible to kick him out. With a huff, I sit next to him and unwrap my meal. It’s roast beef, too, with gravy. My favorite. I want to refuse, but my stomach growls loudly at the smell of the food.

“I knew you hadn’t stopped to eat all day. It’s really not good for your body,” he chastises.

I rub my neck, sore from leaning over so long in a meeting this morning.

“Thanks for the reminder, Nate,” I reply, trying to bite back the sarcasm. I *want* to take time to eat. It’s just that it never works out so that I have the opportunity, not with back-to-back professional development.

I catch him looking at me through his dark thick eyelashes as I take my first bite, but he says nothing. Opening his bottle of water, he takes a large swig, the thickly muscled arm rippling as he lifts the bottle to his mouth.

I finish my sandwich in half the time he enjoys his. He takes slow careful bites, deliberately dragging out the meal.

We chat for a few minutes before he leaves, much more quickly than he did yesterday.

“Walk me out?” he asks lightly. “I have to be back at the training facility in a few to watch some game films.”

With a nod of my head, I throw away my trash and walk him to the front study’s double doors. “Goodbye, Nate. And thank you again. If you hadn’t brought me food, I probably wouldn’t have eaten until dinner, then been too tired to prepare anything but a bowl of cereal.”

His brow furrows with what seems like anger for a moment, then he clears his throat. “Bye, Whitney. No need to thank me.”

As I walk away, I feel a pang in my chest that it's likely the last time I'm going to see him. He didn't even ask for my number this time.



“You haven't mentioned whatever tiny ragamuffin that was barking on the porch the other night.” It's Friday, and Nate's sitting at my desk again, eating a stuffed grape leaf. He's brought kabob with tzatziki sauce for me.

“Oh, you mean Petal?” I lean back in my desk chair. “Petal's old and used to living in a house. She doesn't mean to be so loud....” I'd found Petal at a gas station ten years ago, and no one ever claimed her. I discovered very quickly that Shih Tzus were originally bred to bark and warn their owners of approaching visitors. It was never an issue when we lived in a house, but now that she's in an apartment....

Nate's come every day this week, staying for a bit. If he doesn't share a meal with me, he stays and talks for a few minutes. After Wednesday, I stopped fighting with him about visiting. He hasn't asked for my number again though, and as much as I hate to admit it, I'm disappointed.

Focus, Whitney. Focus. And not on the heavily defined biceps stretching that t-shirt he's wearing.

“The kids start school Monday, don't they?” he asks. He already knows the answer; I mentioned it earlier in the week.

“Yep, eight a.m. bright and early. It’s just preliminary testing this week. They come at appointed times with their parents for about an hour.”

He scoots closer to me and leans in as if to whisper a secret to me. “Well, it seems that if you want to keep having these little meals together, you might have to give me your number so we can still see each other.” The shifting emerald of his eyes twinkles at me like the richest of gems, and my insides turn to mush.

“I’ll take you for the best steak in three parishes. You can let me pick you up tomorrow, and we can maybe take Petal”—he says the last part as if it’s painful— “to have supper with us. She’ll probably like getting out of the house for a bit since she’s used to having more room.”

“There are homemade pralines for dessert...” he tempts, looking down as if checking his nails. “And the best chicory coffee this side of the Mississippi.”

Ugh, did he have to tempt me with pralines? It’s my weakness and goes straight to my ass. That’s it. White flag. I give up.

“*If*, and I mean *if* I give you my number, it has to be with the understanding that I don’t have much time to date right now. I’m super busy, just moving here and starting my new job....“ I nod my head and cross my arms, laying down the law.

“Uh-huh,” he says, shaking his head drolly.

“Of course, Angel Face. Whatever you say. Use your phone to call me so I can store your number, and we’ll make dinner plans.”

I’m folding like a cheap lawn chair, but with a man as charming as Nate, did I ever really stand a chance?

Chapter Three

NATE

Caleb Boudreaux looks at his ringing phone before picking it up with a huff. “Marissa again. She’s trying to book a wedding planner. Lemme take this real quick,” he says as he stands to go outside.

“I thought she was going to handle everything herself?”

He pauses by the door to the patio. “She decided to hire someone who’s local to that area to make it easier to find vendors and such. Why she wants a destination wedding I’ll never know.”

Because that’s typical Caleb and Marissa. She saw a picture in a bridal magazine, fell in love, and now Caleb won’t allow his bride-to-be to settle for anything less than what her heart desires. Not that I blame him...all I want to do is spoil and coddle Whitney.

Pausing the game footage we were watching, I reach onto the coffee table to check my own phone for messages.

Thank fuck Whitney finally gave me her number so that I don't have to keep tracking her down. It helps that I'd gotten a copy of the teacher's schedule from the little lady who works at the desk so that I know when Whitney's in a meeting. I might have implied Whitney has hypoglycemia, but the secretary handed it over eagerly enough.

After I rented the other side of her duplex, I was able to contact the maintenance man. It took a couple of prime tickets to Sunday's preseason game, but he eventually agreed to make some safety changes. I'd gone by when I knew she was at the school to make sure it was all done—her windows were locked, and new solar lights in place. It's somewhat of an improvement, but not nearly enough, especially when I'm going to be away from my angel so often.

The urge to have her where I know she's safer overwhelms me: inside the gated community I live in, in my house with a full security system.

"I don't date," Whitney had told me earlier in the week. As if what we're doing would ever be *dating*. To say that we're dating implies we're testing the waters, seeing where this leads. With Whitney, I have zero doubt precisely where this is heading. She just doesn't know it yet. I want to put things on fast forward, for her to be in my house already— in my bed. Instead, she's in that fucking rundown apartment.

I only have one choice. As much as I want to speed things up, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

Grabbing the remote, I turn on the first of the tapes that Coach sent me to prepare for our first game. I feel on edge, with Whitney creeping into my thoughts, breaking my focus as I try to concentrate on the task at hand.

Caleb finishes his phone call and comes in from the patio. He runs a hand over his short, trimmed blonde hair and turns his brown eyes my way. “Spoke to Marissa. Their seats are next to one another for Sunday’s game so she can show Whitney the ropes. She’s curious about her since you’ve never invited a woman to sit with the wives and girlfriends before. This the chick you were in your study with at the party?”

He’s fishing. Likely because his fiancée put him up to it.

I jerk my head in his direction and narrow my eyes. “Just make sure Marissa has her waiting for me outside the locker rooms.”

He snorts a laugh. “Uh-huh. Nice to know where you’ve been slipping off to.”

It’s been challenging to get away from training every day this week, but I can’t go without seeing my Angel Face. She’s my addiction now. I need to see her like I need air. I start to feel the sensation of unease that washes over me when I’ve been away from Whitney for too long. It reminds me of what it feels like something’s missing, or lost.

Pulling out my phone from my pocket, I type out my first text message to Whitney.

Nate: Why did the football coach go to the bank?

Whitney: Idk...is this some sort of corny joke, Nate??

Nate: To get his quarterback.

Whitney: Eye Roll emoji. Haha, very funny.

Whitney: What happens to football players when they go blind?

Nate: I've heard this one! They become referees.

Nate: How's setting up the classroom going? Did you finish before you left for the day?

Whitney: Yep, it's all done. Just waiting for the kids to show up on Monday.

I smile at the last message. If Whitney can handle a classroom full of five-year-olds all day, she's certainly going to be able to handle the Little League team I plan on giving her.

Putting my phone back in my pocket, I go back to the game footage I'm supposed to be watching. The first preseason

game is Sunday, and I need to get my head in the right space and off Whitney's deliciously long legs.



It takes a great deal of convincing, but eventually, my brother-in-law Sawyer, who owns a security firm back home in Tennessee, takes pity on me and sends a file on Whitney. My heart starts to palpitate opening the email, worried about what he found.

Her full name is Whitney Faith Evans, recent graduate of the local state college, just as she'd said. Employed until recently at The Grizzly Bear Café. She's the youngest daughter of Elaine and Jake Evans, younger sister to Bethany, and aunt to Toby, age 6 months. Mom is a teller at a credit union, and her father works for the post office. Our families are going to mesh together perfectly....Her nephew is even the same age as Josie's youngest child.

There's no mention of social media accounts and no current boyfriend (which I knew...not that it would stop me). The file mentions a breakup with a long-term boyfriend a while back named Preston, but no last name. My nostrils flare, and my hands squeeze tight into fists as I read the sparse details on the relationship.

Sawyer doesn't give any of the dirty details on the breakup, the fucker, even though he likely has the information. Sawyer was my family's bodyguard for many years, until he started his

own company. I've seen Sawyer use his sleuthing skills on more than a few occasions. Not only to keep my family safe but to bust me for my teenage mischief. I have zero doubt he has all the details of the relationship and just isn't giving them to me.

Picking up the phone, I scroll through my contacts and find the number of my brother-in-law.

"Hey, what's up?" Sawyer asks nonchalantly from the other end of the line.

"You know what's up, Benson. Where's the rest of the file on Whitney?" My voice is low, threatening.

"Unfortunately, that is all I can send you at this time. Maybe if you want to know more about Whitney, you could ask her?" he mocks.

"Who the fuck is this Preston guy? And where's the rest of the information on him? You only gave a first name." I feel my hand tighten around my phone and catch myself gritting my teeth.

"No can do," he laughs. "I'm not giving you a loaded gun to shoot yourself with. If Whitney feels Preston is worth mentioning, she'll tell you. Eventually." The line goes dead, and I know he's hung up on me, the fucker.

I sit at my desk, slowly tapping my fingers on the mahogany, thinking. Going back to the file, I look up her mom and sister's names, search for them on social media, and hit paydirt.

There are pictures of Whitney at her graduation in May with her family. The family is huddled together, all smiles. I keep scrolling back and back until I find a picture of Whitney taken two Thanksgivings ago. She's wearing shorts and a t-shirt from her alma mater, her hair much longer then and a lighter shade of blonde. It's the arm wrapped around her that catches my eye the most. Judging by the way he's touching what's mine, it has to be him. He's blonde, with what looks like dark brown eyes. There's something almost bookish about him. He's the opposite of me in every possible way. I look to see if he's tagged and feel a burst of frustration to discover he's not. Nor is he on Whitney's mom's friends list.

I remember that Thanksgiving. My entire family came to the game, bringing the kids to see me play. I'd frozen my ass off only to lose 27-26. Meanwhile, he was with her.

Something dark inside of my soul creeps in, and my tablet goes flying. The rubber case hits the wall with an unsatisfying thump before landing, undamaged, on the carpet.

I hope you enjoyed your holiday with her, fucker, because the rest of them are mine.



I show up at Whitney's house exactly at the appointed time. After I knock, she walks out in a cotton dress and strappy sandals carrying one of those tiny dogs...the type some

women carry around in their purses. This one is beige and white, and looks like she's been freshly groomed. She's wearing a pink rhinestone collar that's connected to a coordinating leash, and a tiny pink ribbon in a trimmed top knot. Petal's dark eyes follow my hand when I hold it out, palm down, for her to smell. The dog looks up at me, as if asking *who are you*, and then sniffs my hand. A busy tail starts to wag excitedly with approval. Ha. If only her mom was that easy to win over.

“Wanna take Petal to Magazine Street? Check out a store? We have a while before Odette has dinner ready, and I need to run an errand.”

She looks at me curiously. “Odette? Who's Odette?”

“My housekeeper. Told you I'll take you for the best steak in three parishes, and Odette is the best cook around.”

“Oh, so we're going to your house?” Her eyes are wide, and she's working her lip, thinking.

“When I try to go out, I get recognized a lot of the time and end up spending the entire evening taking selfies. I thought if we eat in, we could have a quiet meal to ourselves,” I explain. It's partially true. I also want to have her alone in my house for her to become comfortable there.

Parking on Magazine Street is a bitch, but I'm able to eventually find a spot right in front of the store I need to run into.

“Need to stop in here for something,” I explain, gesturing toward the green doorway of the store.

In an attempt to blend in, I reach for the black cap I wear in public to hide my hair. Putting it on backward, I reach in my pocket for my aviator sunglasses to partially cover my face. After picking up Petal, I grab Whitney’s hand with my free one. Her hand is so delicate and silky compared to mine.

I want to take every opportunity I can to touch her. I’m dying for a private moment to kiss her again.

“Petal can walk; she might like the exercise,” Whitney says, looking over at the dog tucked into my arm.

I look down at the small dog nervously. Compared to my siblings’ large dogs, she looks so tiny and delicate. “The cement is hot since there’s no shade over here. I’m worried she’ll burn her paw pads.”

The store clerk eyes the dog warily as we walk in the store, and she starts to say something, but stops when she seems to recognize me. “Can I help you find something?”

“Nope, it’s right here, but thanks,” I say, moving towards a rack of jerseys. Mine is the most commonly sold, so I’m sure it’s here...somewhere. Placing Petal on the ground gently, I pat her on the head. She’s a good dog, and sits in between my legs.

I rummage through the rack one-handed, not wanting to let go of the contact with Whitney. Finding what I’m looking for, I hold it up to Whitney for size.

“I have a Hurricanes t-shirt!” She tries to protest.

“Yes, Angel Face. But you don’t have *my* jersey. You can wear this to the game tomorrow,” I inform her.

“Game? What game?” She looks at me with her face scrunched up in confusion.

“First preseason game,” I tell her.

She grimaces and looks down at her feet. “I dunno, Nate. The students’ first day is Monday. Maybe I can watch it on tv?” she offers nervously.

“I want to know you’re in the stands watching with my jersey on. I arranged to have a car pick you up since I won’t be able to.” I’m not *asking* her to come. It’ll be bad enough that she can’t be at my away games. Her ass is going to be in the family seats tomorrow, in my number, if it kills me. I already ordered her a jersey from the pro shop, a much nicer one, but this will do until I receive it.

“I’ll make sure you’re back early, so you can prepare for Monday morning and get plenty of rest,” I assure her. Leaning in, I gently press our lips together for the quickest of kisses. Wrapping a possessive arms around her, I hold Whitney close to me. It feels good to have my angel in my arms. When I break the quick kiss, I pause, my lips so close to hers that I can feel her breath warm against my face.

“I can drive....” Her voice is lowered, still husky, and her eyes are glazed over with desire.

“The team sends them to all the players’ families before games.” It’s a lie and one I’m not ashamed of. The last thing I need to worry about is her driving downtown and walking the long distance to the stadium by herself. Besides, this way, I have an excuse to drive her home.

She’s working her lip, deep in thought. “I have to head home right afterward....”

Raising our now joined hands, I brush my lips over her fingers. My eyes go to hers and soften. “I promise I’ll have you home early. We can’t have you tired with the kids as wired as they’ll be now, can we?” I say playfully with a wink.

A nervous smile plays along the edges of plush pink lips, and she laughs. “It’s a bit intimidating...being on my own for the first time in a classroom.”

Turning towards her, I allow my hand to slide from hers, and my greedy palm slides over her hip. “You are going to do phenomenally; I know it,” I assure her again before kissing the tip of her nose. “Let’s go see if our dinner’s ready yet.”

Chapter Four

WHITNEY

Petal's wet nose makes contact with my arm, jerking me awake. She's on the floor on her hind legs, looking at me with her head cocked. There's a hand on my ass, and a very thick erection is digging into my belly. A large man's hand, to be precise, and I seem to be resting on his very hard, broad muscled chest. I feel relaxed, safe. Nate and I must have fallen asleep together last night. A soft throw from the back of the couch is covering our bodies, protecting me from the chill of the air conditioning. He woke up enough to toss it over us in the middle of the night.

After a lovely dinner that Odette prepared, I sat down next to him on the soft leather couch to watch a movie. His strong, defined arms pulled me closer until I was nestled against his thigh. "You fit perfectly in my arms, Angel Face, like you belong there," he'd said in a hushed tone. I love how gently he touches me when he runs his work rough fingers across my shoulders. It sends goosebumps all over my skin.

Nate's hand roams from my ass to my back, and his eyes pop open. "Morning, Angel Face," he half whispers, his baritone voice husky from sleep. That voice! If football didn't work out, he could work as a DJ or narrate books.

"We fell asleep!" I groan.

His hands go to my hair, brushing it out of my face, and he kisses my temple. "We fell asleep, yeah. You were so beautiful sleeping and felt too good in my arms to move you."

I start to move off of him to go use the restroom. My face feels hot at his words, and when my eyes meet those green eyes of his, I find them hooded with lust. He gently yanks my arm back down, so I'm lying on top of him again, and he brushes my hair from my face. "I need a kiss before I have to leave you to go to the arena," he demands, playfully wrapping his arms around my body.

Just as I'm about to protest, *hello, morning breath*, his mouth claims mine in a sinfully slow kiss, plundering it, forcing my lips to part for his tongue to explore. He breaks off the kiss with one or two tiny pecks caressed on my lips before he lets me go.

"Oh my goodness, Petal!" I gasp as I hear her tail thumping against the couch and a tiny whimper. I brought a plastic baggie of dog food, so she could have dinner when we did, but she needs to be let out.

Nate yawns and stretches. "I'll take her outside."

I feel bad for letting him do it, knowing he has to get to the arena and just woke up himself, but my bladder is screaming in protest. I breathe a sigh of relief. “Thank you,” I say to Nate’s back as he walks towards the front of the house.

Looking in the bathroom mirror, I frown at my appearance. I fell asleep with my eye makeup on, and my once cute bob is now a poofy rat’s nest. Using wipes from my purse, I try to clean up the worst damage and pull my hair back in a ponytail. This will just have to do.

Nate refilling Petal’s water bowl when I walk back into the kitchen. “You can shower if you want before you leave,” Nate offers. “Odette’s normally here in the mornings, but she’s off today. I’m just going to make myself breakfast. Hungry?”

I sit on one of the barstools at the kitchen island and watch Nate open a cabinet. “No, I’ll eat something before I get to the stadium. I can shower when I get home.”

He frowns at me as he drops a pod into the single-cup coffee maker. “Do you normally not eat breakfast?”

“I’m always in too much of a rush,” I admit.

He retrieves the stainless steel mug from under the coffee maker, and after putting another pod on to brew, he asks, “How do you take your coffee? I only have almond milk creamer, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, I’ll make it,” I say, following him as he moves around the kitchen. He hands me my steaming mug, and I add the sweetener packets from a small container in front of me.

My gaze goes to a framed picture that's hanging on the wall next to me of Nate's father with a toddler girl on each knee. "Did one of your sisters have twins?" I ask, astonished. He'd mentioned last night that his brother, Rory, was a single dad with one child, and his sisters are both happily married with large families.

"Yep, Rosalie. She tried for a third child and got four," he laughs. "It wasn't too much of a surprise since she and Rory are twins."

"Your father still looks so young," I say off the cuff.

"Yes, he does, but that picture's a few years old now," he says with a gently arched eyebrow in my direction. "You don't seem surprised as to who he is. When did you figure it out?"

My face flushes with embarrassment. I purse my lips and cross my arms around my body defensively before I answer back saucily. "After *you* cyber-sleuthed *me*. I thought it was only fair I got to do the same, don't you?"

He gave me a loud throaty laugh, "Fair enough, Angel Face." He comes up to me and casually slings one heavily defined bicep around my neck before his lips gently press against mine. He tastes like mint and coffee. He must have brushed his teeth while I was in the bathroom.

He rests an arm around the back of my neck and the other hand on my right hip. "Remember to just follow Marissa today. The fans can get very rowdy after the game. You put her number in your phone last night?"

I nod. While I hadn't met Marissa at her birthday party, Nate told me his friend would be waiting to meet me at my seat and said to me that until I learned the ropes to just follow her around.

"Yeah, I did. And I remember the drill from last night. You aren't allowed to check your phone for ninety minutes before the game, but if anything happens, text, and you'll see it right afterward. Meet you outside the locker room, and follow Marissa's lead with everything else."

"Right," he says, taking in a large breath of air as if anxious. He rubs an impatient hand around his neck and sips his coffee as he walks away.

"I don't understand why you're so nervous, Nate," I laugh. "It's just a football game."

Nate frowns at me and purses his lips. "Right, just a football game."



I make my way to the row on my ticket with anxious steps. A group of women are huddled together near the only vacant seat. At the center is a willowy blonde wearing a huge diamond ring. She's talking with her hands as if telling a story, a small group of women's undivided attention on her.

A strawberry blonde teenager in a dip-dyed Hurricanes t-shirt is in the first seat of my row. Clearly comfortable at the stadium, the Italian white leather sneakers she's wearing are

resting on the metal security bar in front of us. I clear my throat, and she looks up from her e-reader. “Umm, excuse me, may I please get by?” She smiles at me before moving her legs from the bar and standing to allow me to reach my seat.

Half a dozen heads look my way as I make my way down the aisle. I can feel their eyes scanning me up and down, sizing me up.

“Well, hell-o, you must be the infamous Whitney,” the blonde that had been talking says in an amused tone as I approach. She stands up from her seat. “I’m Marissa. Heard a lot about you. This is Caleb’s sister, Cassie,” she adds pointing to the teenager I’d passed to sit down.

Cassie gives me a slight wave in greeting before going back to her book.

I look around at the half-dozen sets of eyes on me and give them an awkward wave. Except for Cassie, the women are all very well put together: hair salon fresh with full faces of makeup, each one sporting a blue and green jersey identical to mine, except with a different number and name. I’m glad I decided to wear a dressy pair of white shorts with Nate’s jersey and took my time on my hair and makeup, despite the blistering Louisiana heat.

“Hey, I’m Shailene,” a tan blonde with a pearly white smile says as I take the seat next to her. She has a baby boy sitting upright in her lap, chewing on a teething rattle. “And this is André Junior. We call him AJ.”

“Aww, hello, AJ. Aren’t you precious? How old is he?” I coo at the infant.

“Six months. Too young still for the childcare the team provides on game day,” Shailene says with a head shake.

It’s awkward for a moment, and I catch Shailene talking to Marissa with her eyes as if saying, “well, do it.”

Marissa clears her throat. “So, Whitney, Nate says you just moved here from Baton Rouge?”

“Well, the suburbs of Baton Rouge,” I correct. “I got a job at a Collegiate Charter and made the move for the job.”

“So you really did *just* meet Nate?” Shailene remarks, seeming astonished.

“Yeah, we met at Marissa’s birthday party on Saturday,” I say with a shrug.

Shailene and Marissa look back and forth at one another and grin.

“When that boy finally fell, he fell hard,” a woman wearing a number seventy-eight jersey cackles from the seat above me.

“No, no, it’s not like that. Nate and I are just getting to know one another. I didn’t even know what position he played until Wednesday of this week.”

“So you don’t know The Hurricanes, or you don’t know football?” Marissa’s looking at me, her petite features scrunched into a frown.

“Umm, neither, to be honest,” I shrug.

Marissa's frown morphs into a bright, genuine smile and turns in her seat. "Well, we'll just have to explain as we go along today, won't we, ladies?"

Almost three hours later, we can hear padding crashing against padding as close as we are to the players. I watch Nate run with the ball, dodging and weaving around oncoming players from the opposing team. The crowd goes wild cheering, but it quickly turns to groans when a very large man comes up behind Nate, knocking him down to the ground. I draw in a sharp breath. That has to hurt. Cringing, I look at the man Marissa had explained was a lineman lying on top of Nate, with Nate's body covering the ball.

The referee blows his whistle, and after saying a bunch of jargon I don't understand, the crowd behind me boos.

Marissa stands up in her seat and joins in. "Just a few yards, Hurricanes! You've got this!"

Each woman watches the entire game, carefully studying each movement of the players, always cheering on her guy and her team with absolute devotion.

"Nate isn't hurt, right?" I inquired, trying to hide the concern in my voice. "That guy was huge."

Shailene let out a snort of laughter. "That wasn't that big a hit. He's fine, I promise. Although André always likes it when I rub it and make it better after a game," she teases with a wink.

I laugh at the innuendo. I'm sure her husband does.

I watch as the game restarts, and Nate runs with the ball, throwing it to another player. The cheering gets louder and louder as number forty-eight runs toward the goalpost. When he avoids a tackle and runs past the solid colored lines that Shailene had explained was the “end zone,” the cheering is deafening.

We all jump from our seats, cheering on the team. “Does this mean we won?” I ask excitedly, looking at the clock with only a few seconds left and the score twenty-two to eighteen.

“Shhh... You’ll jinx it,” number forty-two’s wife hisses behind me. Her jersey says Smith. I need to figure out her first name.

I give her wide eyes and sit down in my seat, admonished.

I’m not able to follow the game, but my eyes always stay on Nate, nervous that he’ll be hurt by one of the giant men eager to pull him to the ground. He hasn’t been “sacked,” as Marissa called being crushed, again, but he’s been playing most of the game and still doesn’t look tired.

A few moments later, I’m drumming my feet against the floor with anticipation as the clock slowly winds down to zero. OMG, we won! The entire wives and girlfriends section jumps to our feet cheering. Slowly, the roar of the crowd dies down, and Marissa and the other players’ wives slowly leave their seats in search of their men with excited grins on their faces.

The crowds are thick with excited fans as I follow behind Marissa to the locker rooms. She’s dissecting the game

excitedly with Cassie in minute detail as we walk through the stadium.

“Whitney?” an astonished voice yells from nearby. “Whitney?” I hear again, and turn my head to look around. I watch as an old friend from college, Carlos, runs in my direction, clearly as surprised to see me as I am to see him. Marissa stops and turns around, watching with an upturned eyebrow as Carlos and I embrace.

“It’s so good to see you!” I say excitedly as I greet him with a hug. I haven’t seen him in months.

I look at Marissa and Cassie, who seem antsy to get to the meeting point, despite the fact she said it would be at least another fifteen minutes or so before the players came out. “Oh, just go ahead without me, Marissa. I’ll catch up. The locker room is straight ahead?”

Marissa pauses for a moment and frowns. “Straight ahead past the lemonade stand,” she corrects before nodding in my direction. “See you soon, Whitney! I’ll tell Nate where to find you if he comes out before you meet us.”

I spend what feels like a minute catching up with Carlos. Just as I’m hugging him goodbye, I hear one of the few football fans lingering around cry out, “Hey, Coleman! Good game!” Looking behind me, I see Nate, fresh from the shower with damp hair. He nods at the fan before marching toward me, his face thunderous, his hands clenched into fists at his side. What on earth?

When Nate reaches me, he slings a possessive arm around my shoulders and lifts a chin up to Carlos in greeting. “What’s up?”

Carlos’ eyes grow wide in wonder. “Man, good game! That pass in the third quarter was epic!” Carlos turns to me, awe in his voice. “Whit, why didn’t you tell me you know Nate friggin’ Coleman?”

Nate’s head turns towards mine, his eyes lit with a strange fire. “Yeah, Angel Face. Why didn’t you tell him?”

Why so sarcastic, Nate?

“I guess it just didn’t come up?” I offer. Carlos and I had mostly spoken about our jobs and families, and the topic of Nate wasn’t mentioned.

Nate gives an understanding nod in my direction before looking at Carlos. His arm around my neck tightens, pulling me closer. “You’ll have to excuse us. I gotta get Whitney home.”

Nate turns, guiding us away from Carlos, who’s still standing star-struck with his hands in his pockets. “Yeah, man, good to meet you,” Carlos yells at Nate as we walk away.

I turn and give Carlos a little wave goodbye, which he returns. When I turn back, I see Nate scowling down at me.
What?

He leads me down the walkway, away from the crowds at a quick pace, and into a small room that looks like it’s used by the trainers. The room has a row of green padded tables

similar to those in a doctor's office, with the Hurricanes' blue logo displayed in the center. A mirror takes up a back wall, where several hand weights sit in a neat pyramid.

The ambient noise of the crowd leaving the stadium is silenced when Nate closes the door behind us and guides me to the side of the door, where no one can see into the room.

My back against the cool brick wall, I look up at Nate. His green eyes are flaring with emotion, his lips pressed flat with displeasure. He rests his hands on both sides of my shoulders, pinning me in between his torso and the wall. The deep creases in his forehead ease into a frown of annoyed disapproval, and his penetrating gaze probes my face. He takes a deep breath and clears his throat. "You weren't outside the locker room, Angel Face. I got worried."

"I'm sorry; Marissa said I had at least another fifteen minutes before you came out. I was talking to Carlos and must have lost track of time...." I ramble.

He moves one hand from the wall and rubs his face. "I was concerned you'd gotten lost."

"I told Marissa..." I say defensively

He moves his arm back to the wall, pinning me in again, and gives me an impatient, understanding nod. "Marissa told me you'd run into a friend. Who was that guy?"

"I introduced you," I remind him, confused. "He's an old friend from college."

Nate's forehead creases with displeasure. "Did you *date* this old friend?" His voice is biting his nostrils suddenly flaring.

I cross my arms over my body and return his glare. "No, I didn't date Carlos. I can have male friends, Nate!"

His right hand goes to the back of my head, and he tightens his fist, grabbing my hair. Leaning in, he says in a low, grumbly voice "I didn't like seeing you hug another man."

"Well, that's just too bad," I inform him. "Because..."

I'm silenced by the sudden invasion of Nate's lips claiming mine. His left hand leaves the wall and moves to my ass, pulling me tighter against him as his brutal lips deepen the kiss, his tongue exploring the depths of my mouth. My arms leave my sides and instinctively wrap around Nate's neck as I sink into him, the hard planes of his muscles enfolding me. Goosebumps pepper my bare skin, and my panties start to grow wet as his savage grip on my hair tightens and his erection thickens against his suit pants.

Those green eyes are like molten glass when his lips leave mine, with tiny flecks of gold I've never noticed before. "I love your sass," he says with a small laugh before his lips mesh with mine again.

I want to still be annoyed at him, but I feel it wash away when his lips leave mine and go to my neck, gently nipping and licking his way down. His hands roam up to my rib cage, his thumbs rubbing against my pert nipples. I rock into his now hard, thick erection, hoping for some relief, and he lets out a guttural groan of pleasure.

Nate's lips leave me, and his head turns toward the entrance when male voices start to echo down the hallway from outside. He watches the door, using his arms and torso to block my body until the voices fade into the distance. He looks upwards, mumbling to himself for a moment before huffing out a frustrated puff of air and rubbing his face with his hands again.

His eyes go to mine, exploring them. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows. I look up at him, not certain what to say.

His right hand comes to mine, and he kisses me one last time on the cheek. "Let's get something to eat so I can get you home. I don't even want to know what type of fine I'll get if we're caught together in here."

My lips feel bruised, my knees still shaky from our kiss as he leads me down the walkway to the nearly empty parking lot that's designated for the athletes. Nate doesn't seem unphased by our kiss either. He keeps squeezing my hand, as if for reassurance, and his eyes are still wild.

He walks me to the side of a shiny black luxury sedan I haven't seen before. How many cars does this guy have? After he opens the door for me, he walks around the car and sits in the driver's seat. Restless fingers thump against the steering wheel for a moment before his uncertain gaze comes back to me as I'm buckling my seat belt. I give him a curious look, and he leans in, resting his hand on the back of my head, and gives me a quick peck on the lips. "I loved having you there today, Angel Face."

He smiles with his eyes, and I return it with a genuine smile of my own. “I loved being there. The players’ wives were nice.”

“Nobody in the crowd bothered you? Or tried to take your picture when you weren’t looking?” His voice is suddenly urgent, worried, his jaw clenched.

I give him a shrug of the shoulders. “Nope, why would anybody bother?” I say with a slightly awkward laugh.

He bites the side of his lip, and concerned green eyes meet mine. “Because you were in the family section wearing my jersey, Whitney. Let me know right away if that changes.” Putting the car in reverse, he pulls out of the parking spot.

“Sure,” I say uncertainly.

Grabbing my left hand with his right, he drives one handed from the stadium into the post-game lines of cars and into the heavy New Orleans downtown traffic.

Every smart bone in my body screams at me to be angry with Nate. But another part of me slowly awakening shuts that part of me up when he brings our joined hands to his lips and gently kisses the back of my hand.

Chapter Five

WHITNEY

It starts to drizzle on my way to work the next morning. At the red light by the practice facility for the Hurricanes and can't help but smile. Nate is in there now, so close by, with his teammates. He's so controlled and focused during the games. I wonder if he takes all of the time at practice that seriously or if he occasionally jokes around with the team. Somehow, I doubt it. Based on our conversations about football, Nate seems far too goal-driven to goof off when he thinks he should be working.

The car behind me blows its horn, reminding me the light is now green. I wave away a man selling foil-wrapped breakfast sandwiches on the corner with a "no thank you" before stepping on the accelerator.

School buses already occupy the drop-off zone as I drive past the long queue of eager parents in the carline to my parking spot. Butterflies dance in my belly with excitement as I walk into the open chain link fence at a quick pace, eager to

get inside. I nod at one of the third-grade teachers on morning duty as I use my ID to swipe myself in.

Savannah greets me at the door, holding it open for me. “Ready for day one?” she asks pertly.

Walking down the hallway to the kindergarten classroom area with her, I pause to swipe us through another set of doors. I’ve waited for this day for four years and worked hard for it. “I’m just hoping to make it through the day in one piece,” I say with a bit of laughter.

“Just remember—they can smell fear,” Savannah jokes as she opens the door to her classroom and enters. She’s decorated it with colorful robots and the phrase “Gearing Up For Greatness” in school colors.

I smile and wave at the other kindergarten teacher, Alicia, as I pass by her room. “I’ve totally got this,” I say, half to Savannah, half to myself, as I open my classroom door.

This space will probably never be this tidy for the rest of the year. Everything is neatly organized and stored away, each child’s spot carefully labeled with their first and last names.

While the rest of the kids start the school year today, the kindergarteners come for an hour with a family member for testing. It’s to see where they each are, to try to catch any red flags, such as speech delays, and to slowly ease them into the classroom setting. It’s a requirement by the school system.

Just as I’m about to lock my phone and purse inside my desk, I hear an alert.

Nate: Where do football players go when they need a new uniform?

Whitney: I give up. Where?

Nate: New Jersey. I'm working late tonight, but I'd like to see you tomorrow night for dinner?

Whitney: Sounds like a plan.

Nate: Good luck today. You've got this!

He's always so positive, so encouraging.... I'd tried not to think of my green-eyed devil yesterday after he dropped me off at the front door of my apartment. He left me with another kiss that left my lips swollen, and my body tingling, and me hungry for more. After he broke off the kiss, he rested his forehead on mine before gliding his lips up to my forehead and leaving one very soft, sweet kiss.

Although I'd initially been reluctant to date, never mind end up entangled in whatever this is with Nate, I want to spend what little free time we have together....not that the man has ever once taken the word "no" as more than a suggestion. As much as I hate to admit it, I enjoy almost everything that is Nate. His kisses send goosebumps over my body, and how he looks at me makes me feel like I'm the only woman in the world.

Nate Coleman came into my life like a whirlwind, blowing my plans to smithereens. As much as I'd wanted to stay single, I find Nate impossible to resist, and honestly, I don't know that I want to anymore.

Hearing the first of the little people coming down the hall for their appointment times, I lock my desk, bringing the testing materials to the table I'm using today to work with the students.

My first student is Darius. He walks in with a large grin and his hands in his shorts pockets. He's clearly excited for his "first day," carrying a superhero book bag across his back. He's spit-shined up for the occasion. His tight curls were recently cut close to the scalp, and he's wearing his school uniform, even though it's not required until next week, his red polo neatly tucked into navy shorts with a belt.

"Hello, Darius! Do you want to play some games with me?" I ask him after greeting his mother.

"You've got *dinosaurs* on your dress!" he says excitedly, pointing to the pattern on my tunic-style frock.

"I do. I love this dress, but my favorite one has unicorns. Do you like dinosaurs?"

Darius gives me another glimpse of his huge smile and nods. "Maybe we can read a dinosaur book together?" I ask.

Darius is followed by Isla, who refuses to speak to me for the first half of testing. Then there's Hazel and Kai, who each read an entire picture book to me.

By the time four o'clock rolls around, the last student of the day has just left, and I've barely stopped all day, but I'm even more certain I'm going to love every second of my new job.



The next afternoon, I look at my phone, more than a little surprised to find Nate hasn't texted yet. He almost always texts in the morning and again in the evening, if we're not together, to check-in. Scrolling past text messages from my family, I go to his name and type out a quick message.

Whitney: Knock knock

Nate: Seriously? We're doing this?

Whitney: Hey! I play along with your corny jokes!

Nate: Okay, fine. Who's there?

Whitney: Dishes

Nate: Dishes who?

Whitney: Dishes the police. Open up! Sorry one of my students, Noah, just told me that one, and I thought it was hilarious.

*Nate: Other men are telling you jokes? Ouch, that hurts.
Going into a meeting. See you at your place at six tonight.*

After rushing home, I have just enough time to tidy up and change out of the dress I wore today when a hard knock announces that I'm out of time.

As I open the door for Nate, he steps through the entryway and wraps his arms around my body. His lips meet mine in a slow, tender kiss that makes me melt. He smells like the citrus and mint body wash I'd spotted in his bathroom Saturday. There's something I find relaxing about it.

"Went too long without your lips," he whispers into my ear, gently nuzzling before letting me go. He's barely made it through the door, and already my nipples are puckered through my shirt.

"You saw me two days ago!" I say, shutting the door behind me and turning the new lock the maintenance guy just installed.

"Uh huh, too long," he says, laying down a plastic bag of food on the coffee table.

Petal greets Nate, barking at him until he picks her up. "Demanding, much?" he asks my scruffy dog with a laugh.

"At least she didn't bark at you at the door this time. I think she's starting to like you."

Petal excitedly thumps her tail against Nate's chest, her butt wiggling while Nate scratches just the right spot.

He gently sets Petal on the ground, and she protests with a small "ruff" of disapproval before moving to her sherpa-lined bed by the window to pout.

I haven't bought a dining room table yet, so we eat at the small coffee table, both of us occupying the couch, sitting close to one another.

I grab the remote. "Wanna watch some tv while we eat? I just started a new sitcom."

Just as we're settling in, a loud whoop comes from outside, bringing my attention from the opening credits to the noise outside. Nate's head turns to the front of the apartment with a creased forehead. I turn up the volume, but it's not able to drown out the bellows of masculine voices, drunkenly calling out "BKA all the way."

"Rush week," I explain. "They've been like this for days."

Nate's eyes dart upward at me. "No one's come into the yard, have they? Or messed with your car? You're welcome to stay at my place if they're keeping you up at night."

"Nah, they're pretty harmless. Just being loud. Eighteen years old and away from their parents for the first time, ya know?" I explain as I fork a piece of chicken and take a bite.

Nate thumps his plastic fork against the takeout container before taking a bite of his steamed chicken and vegetables. "Yeah, I remember what it was like in college."

“Want wine?” I ask, getting up to go find the bottle. He brought sodas, but after work, I want something stronger. It hadn’t been a bad day, just unbelievably long.

“Nah. Training early tomorrow. Hey, you know I did a commercial for the video doorbell people last winter. They sent me a bunch of samples. If you want, I can have one installed?”

“I rent,” I laugh at Nate. “I can’t exactly drill holes in the door.”

He takes another bite of his vegetables. “Yeah..guess that’s kinda true.”

After we’re done eating, I feel his eyes following me as I go to throw away the takeout containers in the trash and refill my wine. Leaning over, I place my glass on the coffee table and move to take my seat again next to Nate. My body jerks with surprise as heavily muscled arms grab my hips, pulling me down onto his lap. “Holy smokes! You startled me!”

He’s sitting sideways on the sofa, wearing a devilish smirk, holding me against his chest. He smells like cedarwood and something earthy today, different from yesterday’s citrus and mint. Does he keep different body washes at the practice facility than he does at home?

With his arms wrapped tightly around my waist, he runs his nose down the length of my neck until he finds *that spot*. My toes instantly curl when his lips make contact, and I groan, reaching to wrap my arm around his neck. “That feels amazing,” I whisper into his neck as I lean into him.

A fire inside me builds as his lips spend long minutes gently licking and sucking their way down, before his hand slowly creeps up my top to my bra, his hand going to my nipple, gently squeezing.

I rock against his growing erection, and his other hand creeps down the elastic of my knit shorts, and into my panties to check for himself. “Soaked. Positively soaked,” he says with a self-satisfied laugh. He grinds his erection against my bottom, teasing me. I could finish from that alone.

“Yes, please, Nate,” I answer him, my voice husky with arousal even to my own ears.

Moving from behind me on the couch, he spreads my legs and moves between them. He lays on top of me, holding his weight on his arms as plump lips possess mine. He lifts my t-shirt, exposing my stomach. Calloused fingers glide down my abdomen, setting my skin aflame from his touch. “Gorgeous, so fucking gorgeous. Your skin is like silk,” he whispers into my collarbone, leaning down to pebble kisses against my chest.

Reaching for the hem of his t-shirt, I start to pull it up and over his head, exposing the heavily muscled torso I’ve only seen in pictures before now. Holy smokes, he’s ripped. Even more so than I’d thought he was.

Experienced fingers unfasten my front clasp bra. Once my breasts are exposed to him, I feel my face warm, feeling vulnerable for a second. He gauges my reaction and looks at

me with hooded lids. “You are so fucking perfect.” His large rough hands reach down to cup a heavy breast in each palm.

Leaning down, his tongue circles one nipple, licking and sucking, gently building me up until my back is bowed in pleasure. “This feels so freaking good,” I say with a moan as my fingers explore the breadth of his chest, running my fingers through the crisp dark hairs.

His hand leaves my breast when he looks at me with heated eyes. “Just wait, Angel; I’m just getting started.”

I can see his impressively long, thick bulge straining against the fabric of his athletic shorts. I want to touch it, to give him pleasure. My hand barely skates across the steely erection through his shorts when a flash of pleasurable pain crosses his face. Sucking in a deep breath, he groans low in his throat. A decisive hand captures mine, entrapping both of them above my head. “Nuh uh, not yet. This is about you, Whitney. You’re so fucking responsive to my touch. I want to watch you come apart for me.”

With his free hand, he pulls my shorts and panties off, exposing my neatly trimmed pussy to him. I want to reach up, to run my fingers across the powerful muscles of his back as they ripple, but his massive hand has mine circled, entrapped, pressing them into the sofa.

After moving my captured hands to my belly, he kisses and licks his way up my leg from the knees up. The sensation sends agonizing want spiraling through me. Nate settles

between my legs and spreads my lips, whispering huskily, “I’ve been dying to know what you taste like.”

His tongue gently licks my slit, and I hear a low groan of pleasure from him as he licks again, so slowly that every nerve ending feels electrified. Everything else falls away as all my concentration focuses on him; the soft feel of his hair brushing my legs, the faint scratch of his five o’clock shadow against the sensitized skin of my inner thighs, and the relentless licking and suction from his talented mouth. I rock my hips up, my now free hands going into his hair. “Oh God, Nate, faster, please.”

I hear him chuckle to himself, and his tongue furiously works my nub. The ecstasy builds, and my body tenses as the pleasure wells up inside of me. Right before I come, Nate inserts two fingers inside of me and curls them, hitting my G-spot. My body goes rigid, and I feel the wetness drip as I loudly come on his tongue with his name on my lips. His movements ease and gentle, bringing me down slowly.

I’m panting, trying to catch my breath, my vision slowly returning to normal as my fingers play with the hair at his nape.

He wipes his face with his hands, panting when he moves up my body, kissing me tenderly on the forehead, the cheek, my neck. He briefly buries his head in my neck, deeply breathing me in before he lifts his face up and smirks down at me. “God, you’re beautiful. All pink from coming.”

I feel myself being lifted and carried into my bedroom. “Arms up,” he commands after he sits me on the bed, and takes off my shirt.

He slips off his shoes and removes his shorts, leaving his underwear on. There’s a dark spot on the fabric. Precum. My greedy fingers reach out again to touch it, taste it, but Nate lays on top of me, bringing my hands above my head. “If you touch me, Whitney, I’m going to fuck you. And if I fuck you, I’m keeping you up all night, and we both have to work early tomorrow.”

I pout, and rock my naked pussy against the thin fabric of his underwear. He groans, “Little tease.” He grinds his cock against my pussy, soaking the fabric of his briefs. “Does my Angel need to come again? Is that what’s wrong?”

I nod yes, and he chuckles as he grinds his cock against me. He leans down to give me a slow drugging kiss, his tongue dancing with mine. I tremble with renewed arousal and sensation as he swirls his hips, taunting me. Humming low in his throat with pleasure, Nate gyrates his bulging dick in slow thrusts against my pussy. “God, I’ve dreamed of this,” he moans.

Moving to his knees, he grabs my hips, drawing me against him. His own breath is labored. Even through the fabric of his tight briefs, his dick visibly pulsates between us as it strokes me and pushes me higher. “God, yes, Nate, more, please,” I cry.

Firming his hold on my hips, he quickens his tempo until my toes curl and my fingers dig into the curves of his back. The heat from his body combined with the powerful rough drag of his cotton covered length overwhelm me as I find my release again. Just as I finish, he pulls down his briefs, exposing his massive cock to me for the first time. With three long smooth strokes of his fist against the shaft, ropes of cum hit my stomach as he stares at my exposed body. He's kneeling above me, groaning breathlessly, something in his eyes I can't quite explain in the dim lighting. After his breath slowly evens out, he reaches for the tissues on the nightstand. After cleaning me up and throwing them into the trash by the bed, he pulls off his underwear, and lays down, rolling me on top of him.

Drunk off my orgasms, I rest my head on his chest and listen to his heartbeat.

"That was.." I start to say, not able to hide the grin from my face.

"...fucking amazing. I can't wait to be inside of you, Whit," he whispers, placing a kiss on my forehead.

He runs his hand soothingly across my back as I drape my hand across his broad chest. His hands play with my hair, smoothing it down.

I hum a small satisfied sound into Nate's chest. "I'm so sleepy."

His hands wrap around me, resting on my bottom. His erection is already growing between us again, but I'm so tired.

The next thing I'm aware of, morning light is starting to peek through the shades in my bedroom when I feel Nate move off of the bed.

"I took care of Petal, so you can sleep in a bit," he says softly in the near darkness. "I took the extra key so I can lock up behind myself. Gotta be at the practice facility very early this morning. Tell that Noah kid to stop flirting with my woman."

Still half asleep, I give a small groan in answer. He leans down and kisses my shoulder blade before the bedroom door shuts behind him.

Later that morning, while sitting at my desk waiting for the first students to show up, I realize two things: First, he'd helped himself to a key to my apartment without asking. I'd been half asleep and hadn't processed the thought at that moment.

Secondly, I'd expected Nate to be very different in bed. It's not that I didn't think he would give me pleasure.... it's that Nate had made love to every inch of my body when I'd expected it to be more about his pleasure. This felt more intimate, more emotional. I feel the careful veneer I've protected myself with start to crack, and I make myself wait ten minutes before I answer his text.

But when the flowers arrive mid-morning, I check my phone to thank him and find another corny referee joke, I know I'm done for.

Chapter Six

NATE

Rolling out of bed, regretfully alone, I feel my body ache from the abuse I took the day before in practice. My bed feels empty now, devoid of the warmth I'd enjoyed sharing a bed with Whitney two nights ago. It was heaven, going to sleep with her in my arms and the taste of her on my lips.

Rubbing my bleary eyes, I look at the calendar on my phone and see I have training scheduled in two hours, plus a meeting with the team nutritionist.

After slipping on athletic shorts over my boxer briefs, I walk into the kitchen.

“Morning, Mr. Nate,” Odette says warmly in greeting. “You just want one of your smoothies for breakfast, or do you want me to make you some eggs and toast to go with it?”

Some players have quiet housekeepers in tidy uniforms. I have Odette. I'd caught her once insisting that a Friday was a religious holiday, asking for it off. Apparently, a pig roast is a religious holiday because Caleb told me he'd seen Odette at

the Cochon De Lait festival. My friend said she kept swaying to the Zydeco music with a plate of food in one hand, completely unbothered that she'd been caught. Despite her occasional antics, nothing that happens or is overheard in my home ever leaks out. After growing up as I did, I find that she is an invaluable asset, so I tolerate most of her behavior.

“Just this, thanks,” I say as she hands me a glass of the green smoothie I have in the morning. I flop my tired body into a stool and watch Odette wipe off the counter beside me.

“I have a couple of things I need you to take care of when you have a chance. I'd like my things to be moved over to one side of the closet and for you to pick up another toothbrush at the market when you go tomorrow.”

She raises a knowing eyebrow at me and turns in my direction, her hand on one generous hip. “This wouldn't have anything to do with that nice intimate dinner you had me cookin' Saturday, would it?”

I roll my eyes heavenward. Between my sisters and Odette, I seem surrounded by women who drive me insane. My sisters, my mom, Odette, and now Whitney.

But Whitney.....she drives me crazy in a totally different way. No other woman has sent me to the brink of insanity like she does without even trying.

I'd waited patiently to touch her like that for the first time. To taste her. I hadn't intended for it to happen when it did. But I'd watched her walk back into the room on those long, tan legs, and I couldn't help myself. It took everything in me not

to drive over to her house late last night once I was finally done with Coach, use my new key, and climb into bed with her. But I'd driven past, and all of the lights were off in the apartment, and I hadn't wanted to wake her, not when she's had a busy week. Besides, I have plans for Whitney. Plans that will require her to be well rested.

I turn my attention back to my mouthy housekeeper, who's still looking at me, glaring as if I'm not asking her to do her damn job. "Odette, please just do as I asked. Oh, and could you stop by the pet store next door to the market to pick up a water and food dish for a small dog and a box of whatever dog biscuits small dogs eat?"

She gives me a curt nod before she goes back to wiping off the kitchen counter, muttering something about *all this extra work*, so I turn my gaze back in her direction and give her a glare in warning. She straightens up before turning and walking into the other room, seemingly rebuked.

My peaceful drive to practice is interrupted by an incoming call that the caller ID shows as the team's publicist Annette. Clicking on the call through the Bluetooth, I answer with a crisp, "Good morning, Annette, how are you?"

"Good, good. Listen, Nate, a few things. First of all, just a reminder about the fundraiser for the Children's Hospital Friday night. Black tie, of course. I sent you all the information in an email just now."

Fuck! I've been so wrapped up in Whitney that I've totally forgotten I agreed to do this months ago.

“Do I have a plus one?” I ask Annette. I’ve spent enough time away from Whitney this week, and I’m not willing to spend another night away when I can just mail a check to the fundraiser.

“You do. The other thing is that I got a call from the principal at Collegiate Charter. She said you’d met her recently and offered to do a meet and greet. Do you want to go ahead and set it up?”

“Get Busy” is part of the team’s outreach program to the local schools. Its goal is to get children to become more active in after-school activities, such as sports. I might have offered to do the meet and greet while attempting to charm my way onto campus trying to woo Whitney.

“Yeah, go ahead and do it as soon as possible. I’ll see if I can talk any of the other players into tagging along with me.”

I do these meet-and-greets a few times a year, but seeing Whitney in her element with the kids makes it even more appealing.



That night, Whitney’s head rests against my chest in the crook of my arm, and she makes a low satisfied purr deep in her throat. “This feels so good after today.” We had dinner at my house tonight, and now we are curled up on my sofa together watching tv, something I’ve never really taken the time to do before. Usually in the evenings, I answer emails or video

conference with my father about our shared business ventures, most of which are located in Tennessee. But now that I've found my woman, I want more time to sit and enjoy quiet evenings when we both have free time.

I lean over to kiss the top of her head and breathe in the scent of her. She smells like vanilla and coffee. "Just tiring, or were the kids a lot?"

"All of the above," she yawns as she reaches for the hem of her robot print dress to cover her legs and gives Petal a gentle pat on her head. The fluffy monster, who's curled up at Whitney's feet, inches closer, resting her head against Whitney's leg from the floor. "Friday's testing schedule is much lighter, so I'll have more downtime."

"At least you have a semi-light day before the kids start Tuesday." I grab the remote to start the show again. "Oh, speaking of Friday. We've got a black-tie fundraiser. Can I pick you up at 7:30, or do you need more time to prepare?"

Whitney's head turns to face me. "Black tie. Friday? Nate, I'll never find a dress in time. I won't even have time to shop! No way can I go."

I shrug. "I'll just have them send over a dress. I'm sure Marissa will have something if you can't get one in time. I'll call her and ask."

"Nate, I can't accept a dress. It's too expensive! Plus, I'll never be able to schedule an appointment for my hair and nails," she argues.

“You’re coming,” I inform her. A dress isn’t a big deal, and I want Whitney there. I am not spending a night away from her over something as trivial as a dress. “I’ll have Marissa call you.” Picking up my phone, I text Marissa.

Nate: Whitney doesn’t have time to find a dress and make appointments for all the girl shit before the charity event on Friday. Can you help her with it all?

Marissa: I’ll have the boutique send a couple of dresses in her size. Do you know it off-hand? Any particular style or color? Never mind, I’ll text her.

Marissa: Thank God she’s coming. People are always dragging Caleb away, and I never have anybody to talk to at these things!

Nate: Blue, to bring out her blue eyes. Let me know who to call, and I’ll make sure they have my credit card information on file.

Marissa: I’m on it.

Whitney moves her body away from me and crosses her arms over her body. “Nate...” she tries to argue again.

I scowl at her and pull her back to my chest where I want her. I know what her thought process is already—the money.

There will always be an income disparity and large expenditures that come with living in my world. Those costs are, in essence, business expenses and mine to cover. I'm not setting a precedent with Whitney by allowing her to refuse to let me take care of her and the charges of attending these events. "Nope. You're going."

Her phone beeps two seconds later. "You should get that; it's Marissa," I say casually without looking up from the screen.

Whitney squirms on the sofa with her head in the crook of my arm, texting back and forth with Marissa for a few minutes before she moves away from me again. She lifts her head and moves to the other side of the sofa. "What about Petal? She's going to be alone all day and all night! I won't even have time to let her out after work!"

Rolling my eyes, I reach over and gently pull Whitney down again, this time putting her head in my lap.

"She's ten years old, Nate. She can't be alone for that many hours every day. She'll bark nonstop, and then the neighbors...." Whitney explains, the concern evident in her voice.

Leaning down, I kiss her, silencing her at last. "I'll pick up Petal when I get off practice, so she'll have someone around even earlier than normal. I'll wear her out, so she sleeps the whole time we're gone."

She opens her mouth to argue with me again. "It's better than the neighbors complaining again about her barking," I

caution, raising an eyebrow at her as I gesture toward our dog. I reach to pet Petal's soft fur and lift her onto the couch. The tiny, scruffy dog walks across Whitney's lap and comes to sit on my left leg so that she can get more scratches and pets.

Whitney scowls at Petal and rests her head on my other leg again. She squirms to get comfortable. "Make sure you bring her leash. I'll leave a baggie of her kibble on the counter," she finally says resignedly and turns back to the tv.

I know Whitney is a little annoyed at my pushiness now, but it's important to me that I not spend a night away from her if I don't have to. Now that I've found her, I want her with me every second I can.

An hour later, Whitney is determined to head home despite my every attempt at seduction.

I hold her heart-shaped face in my hands and allow my lips to claim hers in one last attempt to woo her into my bedroom. Wrapping my arm around her waist again, I pull her into my throbbingly painful erection. She purrs low in her throat at the contact and breaks off the kiss. "I *have* to head home," she reminds me again.

I stifle a growl and give a resigned sigh before dropping my hands from her waist. "Make sure you lock up and text me when you're in your place," I remind her.

"I will! See you Friday." She leans in to give me one last peck before she picks up Petal and opens the door to leave.

Watching her drive away, I mentally tally how many more times I'll have to do this before I can finally keep her.

Chapter Seven

NATE

Letting the shower warm until steam fills the large space, I open the glass door and step in. The multi-head shower hits me in each direction, relaxing my sore muscles from practice. It's been a long day and promises to be an even longer night. We have the fundraiser tonight, and then, by hook or by crook, Whitney's spending the night.

My mind goes back to Monday night when I'd had my mouth on her sweet pussy until she'd creamed for me.

Closing my eyes as the soap rinses from my hair, I think of the look on Whitney's face as she came, her pussy tight around my fingers. It's going to be amazing to slide my cock into her hot wet pussy for the first time. My cock grows hard, throbbing in angry protest at the wait.

Wrapping my hand tightly around my dick, I start to stroke slowly, remembering the sweet taste of Whitney's pussy, the way her silky soft skin felt under my lips, pink from her orgasm. I tighten my grip around my bulging erection and give it a firm tug. I picture Whitney on her knees before me, her

perfect pink lips wrapped around me. I begin to stroke harder, faster, the water sloshing around me with each rapid stroke to my dick.

My mind wanders to the feel of Whitney's breast in my mouth, the way her tight pussy clamped around my fingers, and I imagine the feeling of it around my cock, driving into her with fast, measured thrusts.

My balls tighten, and with a few more furious strokes, my cum hits the floor by the drain. I rest my head against the cool tile of the shower, trying to catch my breath.

While toweling off, I remember the rack of blue dresses waiting in the guest room for Whitney to pick, and I feel my dick start to harden again. She's already a gorgeous woman, but I have a feeling she's going to take my breath away tonight. That quick hand job took the edge off, helping me make it through the night, but I'm not nearly sated. I don't know if I ever will be with Whitney.

I slip on shorts and a t-shirt and enter the kitchen for a snack when my gaze goes out the window. Whitney's car's here. "I didn't hear the doorbell ring. When did Whit get here?" I ask Odette.

"Bout twenty minutes ago. She's in the big guest room with Ms. Marissa, getting dressed with *that dog*," Odette sneers.

I pause and look at my employee, irritated at how she'd addressed Petal as *that dog*. She's had it easy working for me. I might have grown up with a housekeeper, but I was raised to tidy up after myself and was often gone. Now with Whitney

and Petal, admittedly, it's more work, but not nearly the full-time hours I pay her generously for.

“Odette, I know it will be an adjustment with Whitney and Petal here. But I'm sure, given that I pay you to work forty hours a week, that for once, you might *actually* do that?”

She opens her mouth as if to answer back but then thinks better of it before mumbling something about needing to go vacuum and walking away. Odette needs to get on board quickly, or I'll have to find someone else.

Whitney's eventually going to be here, working full time, with Petal and a small child or two, her nearest family an hour away. I want Whitney to have all the support she can get while I'm away. If Odette won't offer that to Whitney, I'll find someone who does.

Knocking on the guest room door, I hear a crisp “come in” from Marissa. I cover my eyes with my hands and peek out of two fingers shaped in a V. Seeing the coast clear and both ladies fully dressed, I drop my hands to my side and pout at Whitney. “You didn't come to kiss me hello,” I protested. “I didn't know you were even here until I saw your car in the driveway.” I lean down to give her a small kiss in welcome.

“I figured you were getting ready yourself,” she answers with a small smile, raising a hand to tenderly touch my damp hair.

“You still could have come and said hello,” I argue. *That shower would have been a whole other experience if you'd walked in.* My brain goes back to my fantasy of fucking

Whitney in the shower, and I feel my dick start to harden in response. *I'm never going to make it through tonight.*

“No time for messing around, you two,” Marissa announces from in front of us, holding up a black garment bag she retrieved from the rolling rack. “We’re on a tight schedule.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I groan before reaching down and stealing another kiss from Whitney. She’s still in her street clothes and not excitedly rummaging through the gowns the boutique had sent over like I’d expected her to. I point to the rolling rack of dresses in different shades of blue. “You pick out your dress yet?”

She sits down in the makeup artist’s chair and crosses her arms over her body. “Yeah, about that, Nate. I thought I was going to *borrow* a dress?” she says, exasperated.

I wink at her and start to go through the dresses. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I ignore it when I see her left eye start to twitch. “If you’d given me more notice, I have formal dresses in my closet at my parents’ house.”

You’re not wearing a dress you likely wore for another man, Whitney.

“Where’s the dress you picked?” I ask, looking around the room.

“It’s hanging in the bathroom. I turned the shower on to get the wrinkles out so that Odette doesn’t have to steam it,” she mumbles.

I look up at Whitney's face, carefully taking it in. Has Odette said something to Whitney to make her think she's too much trouble or not welcome? I need to keep a close eye on that. Whitney's acting weird, more introverted than she usually is. I don't like it at all. Is she just tired from the long week?

Leaning down, I give Whitney another peck before I get out of her way so she can finish dressing. "You got everything you need?"

"And more..." she snorts as her eyes flick to the bed, where boxes of shoes and matching purses lay across the bed.

Pick a few to go with the dresses, or I will.

After I give a crisp whistle, Petal trots eagerly from under her mom's legs carrying a tiny stuffed football I bought her earlier in the week when I'd picked up her bed. "Let's go play fetch, sweet girl." I catch Whitney watching her dog prance happily behind me out of the room with a scowl directed at Petal. Right before I shut the door behind myself, I hear her muttering something about me "charming women of all species."



Marissa walks out of the bedroom first, wearing a tight-fitting purple dress. When Caleb leans down to kiss her, she bows back. "Lipstick, honey, you'll mess it up!" she says sweetly to her fiancé. Caleb rolls his eyes at Marissa and looks at his watch as we wait for Whitney.

She walks out a few seconds later wearing a royal blue dress that makes her blue eyes shine like sapphires. The dress has a low-cut bodice, exposing her generous breasts to me...and half the men of Orleans Parish.

Fuck.

She's positively stunning, the thin straps of the dress revealing her creamy shoulders and the small of her back. The floaty skirt hides her long legs, and I feel my dick stir again when I imagine flipping it over her head tonight.

Giving precisely zero shits about her lipstick, I place my palm on her neck and gently kiss her painted red lips. I lean back and whisper into her ear, "You look good enough to eat, Angel Face. As a matter of fact, I think I might just do that later." Her face reddens to a delicious shade of crimson, and she looks at me as if stunned.

Caleb clears his throat awkwardly. "We're going to be late if we don't get a move on."

I turn a scowl in his direction, hating the tiny intrusion. "Please, Annette always tells us to be there a solid half hour before we have to be." I place my hand on the small of Whitney's back and start to lead her to the entryway. The limousine is already waiting in the drive for us.

"That's because the lot of us were late to the fundraiser for the nature trail," Marissa interjects. "Coach was the only one there, and fuming."

We take a limo together to the venue, driving past brightly colored shotgun-style homes until they give way to the grand historic houses in the Garden District. Wrought iron fences topped with a fleur-de-lis border surround each gingerbread mansion, painted in soft pastels. Even after living here all these years, the city's beauty never grows old. Once we pass the streetcars on St. Charles Avenue, we pull up to a mansion painted white with soft peppermint trim.

As we exit the car, my large hand covers most of the cut-out in the back of the dress. Hopefully, it'll keep intrusive eyes from looking at what's mine. Walking past antique furniture and shining crystal light fixtures, we're greeted by a jazz band as we enter a large space that must have once served as a ballroom. Rows of round tables with white tablecloths fill the room, with space left for dancing. I feel my fingers itch to get Whitney onto the floor, her body wrapped in mine as we slowly sway together on the dance floor. But I need to see to business first.

Once we reach our table, after being stopped repeatedly by people wanting to talk football, I find my running back, Roman, stretched out in his chair, his long legs crossed in front of him at the ankles. He looks utterly bored as he scans the room. His light blue eyes dart to Whitney, then back to me.

"How'd you avoid the crowds walking in?" I inquire as he greets me with a fist bump.

Roman points to the rear of the building with a lazy finger. "Back door. Less commotion, fewer people stopping me from

reaching the good stuff,” he declares, lifting up a glass tumbler of an amber liquid.

A bald man in an ill-fitting tuxedo approaches the table with an eager smile, and Roman’s head drops down with a groan. “Sooo close.”

“We can’t hide forever,” Caleb groans. “We’re supposed to be collecting checks tonight.”

Roman sits in tight-jawed silence for a moment before knocking back the last of his drink. “Guess we’d better go then.”

Chapter Eight

WHITNEY

Within an hour, my entire body is thrumming, awakened by Nate's constant touch. No, not touch, strokes. Nate has spent the entire night oh so innocently touching my body until it came alive, sending a restrained excitement humming through my veins.

While talking to a representative from the hospital, Nate has his arm across my exposed lower back, sending a fresh charge of electrical current through my body. While in deep discussions with a member of the city council, I try to excuse myself, but Nate pulls me closer to him, wordlessly asking me to stay. He strokes my bare shoulder with his thumb, making my nipples pucker and my skin buzz with alertness at his touch.

After we finally escape the crowds, we find our way to the table to eat, just as they start to serve supper. A wandering masculine hand makes its way up my leg to my thigh and I draw my legs together in response, trying to ignore the goosebumps that are pebbling my skin. My face begins to

warm, and I reach under the table to stop his mischievous hand. “Nate, stop that,” I hiss into his ear. “We’re in public!”

He gives me a mock confused look and I scowl at him. “Nate, don’t pretend you don’t know what you were doing!”

The charming devil laughs deep in his throat and finally lets go of my leg and reaches for his glass of water.

Roman walks back to the table with a nonchalant grace. He rubs his hand over his freshly shaved jaw before taking the seat next to Nate. With his classically handsome face and dignified confidence about him, he reminds me of the dashing duke in the old movies Bethany and I used to watch together late at night.

“Hiding from the crowds again?” Nate teases.

Roman shifts his large body awkwardly in the chair. “Someone grabbed my ass.” The smile he’d been trying to stifle breaks free and they both start to laugh. Nate boisterously, Roman hiding his behind a sunkissed fist.

My eyes grow big. “Just some random person?”

“It was the keister heister!” Nate announces, throwing his head back with delighted laughter.

Marissa and Caleb walk back to the table, claiming their seats across from us. “What’s so funny?” Marissa asks as she straightens her dress to sit down.

“The keister heister again!” Nate laughs.

“It is *not* that funny!” Roman protests with mock indignation, his shoulders vibrating with stifled laughter.

“That’s because it finally happened to you!” Caleb snorts.

“Wait, this is something that’s been happening?” I ask uncertainly.

“Oh yes. She, or maybe he, has struck quite a few times during these types of events. It always happens when the crowd is really thick, and bodies smooshed together a bit so we can’t be sure whodunnit. They even got poor Coach once. We can’t for the life of us figure out who it is,” Nate explains

“It’s the Mayor’s sister,” Marissa insists, as if she’s argued this before.

“It can’t be the Mayor’s sister. She was across the room tonight when it happened,” Roman explains.

“Then who else could it possibly be?” Nate asks. “The only person that’s been to each event has been some of the team, Coach, the Mayor’s sister and....”

Roman raises a knowing finger at Nate. “The Mayor,” he finishes discerningly, sitting back in his chair.

“No way. He was too far away when he got Nate!” Caleb insists before lowering his voice to a whisper. “I think it’s Mrs. Richert.”

“The team owner’s wife?” I whisper back, mouth fully agape in shock. “No, no way.” The team’s owner is literally their boss’s boss. Which means the dignified matron would be

walking around grabbing the behinds of all of her husband's employees...

Waiters in black vests carry their heavy trays to the table, and start to serve each of us, interrupting the conversation we definitely don't want overheard as the band starts to play softly in the background.

We eat duck in a rich sauce, and a delicious crawfish bisqué. Just as I'm taking a bite of my fruit tart, I see Nate bring his fork to my plate and steal a sugar glazed strawberry with a wink.

"You chose the chocolate cake!" I remind him.

He leans down low, where only I can hear, and whispers, "I just want a taste."

My mind instantly goes to the last time he'd said those words to me in that same voice, deliberate on his part I'm sure, and I clench my legs together tightly. My face turns scarlet and I give him a wide eyed look that says "*Really?*"

He chuckles throatily as he brings the fork with his pilfered strawberry to his mouth. He whispers in my ear, "Tastes almost as sweet as you do," before he places a kiss on my almost bare shoulder and gives me a wink. My face warms as I roll my eyes heavenward.

Shameless Flirt.

The band switches to a bluesy tune and a male singer joins the quartet, singing a slow romantic tune.

Nate holds out his hand invitingly, palm up towards me, and lets a beautiful smile swing free. He looks dashing in his well fitted tux. It's carefully tailored around his broad shoulders, the white of the dress shirt bringing out the tan of his skin. "Wanna go dance, Angel Face, or are your feet too sore?"

I smile and nod in answer before pulling my chiffon skirt to the side and stepping out of my chair after Nate pulls it back for me. Walking with my hand in Nate's, he guides me to the dance floor, placing his hand on the exposed skin of my back. He pulls me closer to him, sending another surge of static through my body, and laces the fingers of his hand in mine as we swing slowly to the song the band is playing.

My free hand is on his waist, and through the soft fabric of his tuxedo jacket and crisp white dress shirt, I can feel his tight muscles flex as we move together across the floor. I breathe in the now so familiar scent of his body wash on his skin. My heart stutters and seemingly stops when I look up to see Nate's face soft, his eyes searching mine.

Wrapping his hand tighter around my waist, Nate draws me closer to him. I can feel his erection up against my belly and my own thin lace panties start to grow damp. My nipples pucker against his chest, and my breath catches when he starts to stroke the small of my back tenderly. Wantingly. Adoringly.

There's just something about Nate. Every time he walks through the door, my pulse quickens, sending a rush of adrenaline through my core. Maybe it's his weird jock pheromones; maybe it's his roguish allure.

I know he's far from a saint— one glimpse of that grin of his and you just know he's up to some kind of mischief. The dress I'm wearing tonight is proof enough of that.

But still, I'm completely lost in this man, and I don't know if I ever want to find my way out.

When the song ends, Nate kisses me gently, right behind my ear. "Let's get out of here. The car can come back for Marissa and Caleb."



Nate stands restlessly tapping his fingers against his side as we wait for the limo to pull up. He opens the door for me before the driver can get out, offering me a hand to sit in the low seat.

The moment he closes the door, he rolls up the privacy partition and quickly pulls off his jacket, smirking at me, mischief written in his eyes. Knowing what he's about to do, I swallow hard and reach a hand up to touch the starched fabric of his shirt. His lips brush against mine softly before capturing them in a hungry kiss. His hands go to my hair, gently pulling it between his fingers. He deepens our kiss, making me pant with want. His lips finally leave mine and confident fingers wander to the spaghetti strap of my dress, pulling it down, exposing my shoulder to him. He sighs deeply, and unzips my dress, exposing my naked breasts to him. He hums low in his throat with satisfaction before capturing one nipple in his

mouth. He gently circles it with his tongue before moving to the other. I stifle a groan. “Nate, the driver will hear me!”

“He’s wearing earbuds. I saw them when he pulled up.” Nate lays me back against the leather seat as he leans over me, panting breathlessly, with his weight balanced on his thick arms. His right arm reaches down, lifting up the chiffon skirt, and pushing it so that all of me is exposed. He chuckles deep in his throat and strokes my pussy through my underwear. “Positively soaked, Angel. Just the way I want you.”

He leans down over me, supporting his weight on his arms on either side of me with ease. With a hungry groan low in his throat, he slides off my black lace thong and places it in his pocket. Nate’s calloused hands are rough on my skin as they wander up my legs, parting me wide for him. His lips go to my belly as he licks with tantalizing strokes to my pussy. I buck upward, “God, Nate, that feels amazing.”

He takes a long slow lick of my slit. “Just as sweet as I remember. God, I can’t get enough of this.”

He devours me lazily with licks of his tongue against my core. When I get close, he starts to gently suck my clit. My toes curl as my head starts to swim in ecstasy and I skyrocket into an orgasm. I bite my lip, trying to stifle my scream of pleasure as I arch up against Nate’s face. I run my fingers through his hair as he slowly laps at me, bringing me back down from my orgasm. Slowly, my breath returns to normal, and I open my eyes to find Nate looking at me, his own eyes shuttered with lust.

He lifts my spaghetti strap back up and softly kisses my shoulder again before he reaches back and carefully zips my dress. I look at him confused when he pulls down my skirt. “Buckle your seatbelt, Whitney. If you touch me I’m going to fuck you here and now,” he warns. I look at his erection tenting his black pants and he closes his eyes when I look back up at him. “We’re almost home,” he says in explanation, the frustration evident in his voice. “No time.” He puts his tuxedo jacket back on, mostly covering his erection from my curious eyes, and runs an impatient hand across his mussed hair.

A telltale twitchy hand reaches for the door as soon as the driver parks in Nate’s circular driveway, and he gets out first, offering me his upturned hand. Leading me to the door, he unlocks it with a numeric code before grasping my hand with his own.

We pause in the marble floored foyer while Nate punches another code into the security system and starts to flick off the lights Odette’s left on for us as we walk into the house.

He guides me towards the hallway I know leads to his bedroom.

“Petal...” I start to remind Nate.

“Petal has a doggie door that I taught her to use today. She’s in hog heaven and spent most of the afternoon sun bathing and coming in and out as she wants to.”

I pause for a moment. There had for sure not been a doggie door when I was here last...right? “When did you get a doggie door?”

Nate clears his throat. “Always had one. Never replaced it when I bought the house. The removable cover is the same shade as the back door so you probably just didn’t notice it.”

I shrug, assuming I must have just overlooked it, and start to move towards the bedroom, anticipation running through my body.

I want this. More than I could ever have known.

Chapter Nine

WHITNEY

Nate's bedroom is painted a soft shade of blue. In the middle of the room sits an oversized bed covered in a gray comforter with an antique looking four poster bed. Did he have to special order it to accommodate his large size? I've never been in here before, having only ever seen the guest room and living areas.

Taking in a large breath of air for bravery, I slip off my heels, leaving them neatly by the door to the closet. I'm really going to do this. I'm going to sleep with Nate.

"Sit on the bed, Whit," he commands as he shuts the door behind himself. We watch one another as he slowly unknots his bow tie and removes his jacket, leaving it on top of a dresser neatly folded in half. He untucks his dress shirt and removes the black onyx cufflinks, depositing them into a small box he must use to store them.

"Are you still wet, or do I need to start all over?" he asks in a commanding tone as he pulls off one dress shoe, then the other, leaving them next to mine.

I feel my face flush, and I close my eyes in embarrassment. “Nate!” I moan, covering my face with my hands.

He removes my hands from my face, and I find him looking at me with a sharply raised eyebrow. “No hiding from me. I asked you a question, Angel.” He tilts his head to the side, “Are you still a sopping mess for me, or do you need me to eat your sweet cunt again?”

“I’m still wet,” I confess.

“Stand up and turn around, Whitney,” he orders.

Holding in an excited breath, I do as he asks, exhaling finally when he unzips my dress, allowing it to fall to the floor. With my panties still in his pocket, I’m completely exposed to him.

Suddenly feeling brave, I turn to face him and run my hands under his shirt to the rigid muscles underneath. I unbutton the shirt with nervous fingers and push it off his broad shoulders, exposing his powerful chest to me.

I run my hands down the impossibly broad chest, trailing my fingertips along the dips and grooves of his pecs and eight pack. “I can’t believe how cut you are.”

He runs his hands down my back and grabs the globes of my bottom in his hands, squeezing firmly. “It’s my job to be in shape, but I like that you enjoy it.”

His erection is raging hard between us when I move both my hands back down, unbuckle his belt, and reach for his zipper. Sliding both hands under the elastic of his boxers, I

push them down along with his pants and watch his penis spring free. It's so red and engorged that it slaps against his abdomen before it ends up pointing at me in seeming silent demand. I stroke the long hard shaft and see a drop of precum well up on the tip. Nate's head falls back in pleasure, and his breathing quickens as I use the moisture to circle the tip with my finger before running my hand down his thick length again.

I keep my eyes focused on his face as I slowly fall to my knees. Keeping my fingers circled around the base of his penis, I take him into my mouth, softly circling the velvet head with my tongue. He groans low again and grips my hair firmly between his fingers. "Fuck! Your mouth is going to be the death of me." With rapid circular motions, I explore his entire length with my tongue. I look up at him, gauging his reaction, and find his teeth gritted, nostrils flaring. He bucks upward, thrusting into my mouth, fucking my face with rapid strokes, his hands gripping fiercely onto my hair. He hits the back of my throat, making my eyes water. His eyes shudder closed, a pained look on his face. When they reopen, emerald eyes are burning brightly. He runs his index finger softly from my cheek to the curve of my jaw. "What a good girl taking all my cock in your mouth. You're so perfect for me. So fucking mine."

Nate looks down at me before he pulls out and kisses the top of my head. "This feels like heaven, but I want inside of you."

He lifts me up with one hand, wrapping the other around my back as he carries me to the bed. I wrap my legs around him for support, and we fall backward together, the weight of Nate's large frame pinning me down briefly before he braces himself on his arms.

My hands explore Nate's muscular back as he starts to kiss me again, his mouth plundering mine. His exposed cock is against my pussy, and I feel myself growing damper, aching to feel him inside of me. I rock against his dick, and Nate lets out a low groan of pleasure. "Patience, Angel."

His mouth explores every nook of my body, kissing and licking, leaving me panting with want. He stops to look at me, eyes hungry. He gazes at the bedside table, and his shoulders drop. He lets out a deep sigh. "Hold on a second." The air is suddenly cool around me, chilling my naked body. Nate reaches into the bedside table and brings out a new sleeve of condoms. Tearing open the foil wrapper with his teeth, he covers his erection.

Moving back to the center of the bed, he covers my exposed body with his own, resting his weight on one forearm, his girthy erection laying hard against my belly. With his free hand, he glides himself to my slit. The thick head of his dick nudges at my entrance as he pauses for a second before rocking his hips forward, claiming me.

"Mine, you're finally mine," he groans into my neck. I shutter my eyes, luxuriating in the feel of his skin under my hands as he takes tiny strokes, working his way into me as my

muscles relax. I wince slightly at the dull burning sensation as I stretch to accommodate him, resting my hands on the planes of his rigid back. Once I've taken his full length, he pauses, his cock impossibly deep inside of me, his emerald eyes searching mine before his lips caress me in a slow, drugging kiss.

He takes tantalizingly long strokes, angling himself to hit just the right spot as our lips stay joined.

I grind against him, needing the friction. "Please, Nate, I need more," I beg, breaking the kiss.

His fingers move to my clit, gently circling it until my back bows up and my legs tighten against Nate's waist. "You like that, Angel?" he asks as he starts to move faster, deeper, skin slapping against skin in a hurried wake of ecstasy.

I meet him thrust for thrust until my knees begin to tremble, my nails digging into his back.

"Come for me, Angel," he orders as the world around me implodes into a burning inferno of pleasure.

Nate's hands leave my over-sensitive clit, and he moves to cover me, supporting himself on his thick arms. I love the feel of my soft against his hard chest, my nipples grazing across him as he pistons inside me. Nate buries his face in my neck, and with a guttural bellow, he plunders deeper into me. I feel a flood of warmth as he holds me tightly to him, so impossibly deep.

He drops to my side, our breaths uneven as he wraps his arms around my body and kisses me softly on the forehead.

“You’re so fucking perfect, Whit.” He rolls me, so I’m lying on top of him, my head resting on the safety of his firm chest. I rest my hand on the dark trail of hair down Nate’s chest and sigh contently.

I’m satiated in a way I’ve never felt before, my body purring like a well-tuned engine to the stroking thumb that found its way to my back again. Despite my initial hesitation with Nate, something about this feels so right, so perfect.

I feel my eyes start to grow heavy as I listen to the sound of Nate’s heart beating, finally finding sleep swaddled in the warmth of his body and two arms holding me tightly against his chest.



I snap awake, my achingly full bladder protesting loudly. Nate’s drawn the blanket over us for warmth, and I’m all cozy, cocooned in the safety of his arms.

With a glance in his direction, I find him awake, dark eyebrows furrowed as if deep in thought.

I sit up, reluctant to leave the comfort of Nate’s chest, but his arms suddenly grip tighter, bringing me back to him. “Where ya think you’re going?” Nate scolds. “You’re staying here tonight, Whitney.”

“I have to use the bathroom,” I admit blushing.

His shoulders slump, and he lets me go. I catch a glimpse in the mirror and find my makeup smudged beyond all reason and my blonde bob a hot mess. I can't do anything about my hair right now, but I wash my face with soap from the shower.

He's sitting in bed, his head against the headboard, when I walk back. I stop at the edge of the bed. "Have you been awake this whole time?"

"Adrenaline," he answers before he reaches for me and pulls me down, sitting facing him. His erection is starting to grow hard between us when I drape my arms around his neck. He starts to finger my hair, staring into space.

"You've just been laying here?" I laugh. I'd noticed the bedside clock on my way to the washroom. I've slept for about an hour, and he's still wide awake.

"Deep in thought," he confesses. He glances back at me, rubs the back of his neck, and clears his throat. "You know I have to leave in a few hours to go to an away game. It'll be very late when I get back Sunday night. I'm hoping you'll spend the night here and wait for me?"

I smile up at him. "I guess. It's Labor Day weekend, so I won't have work the next day." I brush up against the growing hardness between us and feel myself start to grow wet at the skin-to-skin contact.

Nate hisses in a breath of air at the contact. His eyes hood with desire, and he rolls his hips into me. "Good, then I can wake you up when I get home," he says huskily as his mouth goes to my nipple, gently taking it between two teeth.

Our lips crash into one another hungrily as I grind down on him, chasing ecstasy. His hips roll with mine, sending shock waves of pleasure through me. I'm close, so close, when Nate suddenly stops. "Fuck, wait, hold on, Angel."

Reaching for the strip of condoms he'd left on the bed next to us from our last encounter, he pulls one off and rolls me gently onto my back before sheathing himself. "I like to watch you come on my cock," he says as he leans down to kiss me.

Nate grinds himself against my core until my back arches up in pleasure, and an orgasm comes barreling into my body. He doesn't wait until my orgasm is done, claiming my pussy with hard, fast, demanding thrusts, mercilessly fucking me before he finds his own release.

He stares down at me without pulling out, panting as he touches his forehead to mine. "We fit together perfectly," he says. He leans down to kiss me tenderly on the lips before falling to my side. He pulls me into him, so we're lying chest to chest. With a kiss on the forehead, he softly mumbles, "If I don't go to sleep soon, I'm going to play like shit Sunday."

I yawn an "Uh huh," before my own eyes shutter closed. I hear him get up again, presumably to dispose of the condom, before coming back to bed.

Chapter Ten

WHITNEY

I t's dawn when he wakes me again, this time making love to me as we lay side by side like spoons. I'd barely opened my eyes, allowing myself to become captivated by the pleasure he gives me. He stays inside me for what feels like forever afterward, holding me close to him as we sleep. Something feels different, better somehow, and I'm left in a post-orgasm haze when he leaves the bed to shower.

I feel myself fall back asleep but wake up to Nate standing over me with a small suitcase in his hands. At some point in the last little bit, Petal's found her way into the bed, where she's now curled up at my feet.

"I'm leaving to catch the team bus to the plane. I'm going to message you all of the codes for the house. Remember you promised you'd be here when I get back."

I give a drowsy "Uh-huh" and pull the covers back over myself. How had I managed to kick them off completely?

“Odette is here today, but she’s off Sunday and Monday, so if you need anything, just ask her today. Sleep sweet, Angel Face.”

I nod in acknowledgment, but there’s no way I’m asking Odette for anything. The woman glares at me like an interloper at every available moment.

His lips come down to give me a quick peck before he walks out of the room. I hear the beep of the security alarm re-engaging and then fall back into a deep satiated sleep.

When I finally wake up, it’s to Petal’s wet nose pressed against my cheek—her way of saying “good morning.” A look at the clock shows it’s actually closer to lunch. Not surprising since Nate kept me up all night. Combined with the evening out and working all week, I needed the rest.

Stretching across the soft sheets of Nate’s bed, I bury my nose in Nate’s pillow and inhale his scent. He always smells amazing. It’s probably all alpha male pheromones. I could lay here forever, enveloped in Nate’s smell. The bed’s so comfortable and soft. But, I have a lunch date with the other teachers today. I’ve spent most of my time with Nate, and I said that I’d make close friends near my new home. There’s no better time than when he’s away.

After walking groggily to the restroom, I find evidence of our lovemaking. We hadn’t used a condom the last time. I’m on the pill, and I’ve just been for my annual exam and tested. Surely the team tests Nate routinely for these things... Right?

Admittedly, we'd both been half asleep, but it raises the question...does he often not use them with partners?

I look at myself bleary-eyed in the mirror. My hair is still a mess, in desperate need of a brush, and my lips are swollen from a night of lovemaking. My makeup is still evident under my eyes, even though I'd tried to wash it off earlier. I splash water on my face and use one of the soft gray towels to dry it off when my phone chimes. I scroll up, realizing I'd missed some earlier texts from Nate.

Nate 7:27 am: The code for the gate is 696912. Hope you're sleeping

I laugh at the last text message, not at all surprised. Of course, Nate's door code would be his jersey number and sixty-nine.

Nate 10:35 am: Odette said you haven't left the bedroom yet. Are you still sleeping, or are you lounging in the bed?

I start to type several messages, deciding to delete them, trying to broach the subject of our unwise encounter. I decide to ease into it.

Whitney 10:45 am: Just woke up. I'm going to go grab my things and head home in a bit. I'm having lunch with the other Kindergarten teachers.

Nate: Enjoy your girl , Angel Face.

Whitney: We didn't use a condom the last time.

Nate: No, I didn't. But I know that I'm clean. I get tested constantly by the team, and I never, ever have unprotected sex.

Whitney: You didn't use a condom with me.

Nate: Totally different scenario, and not something I've ever done before.

How was last night any different than a night with any other woman he sleeps with? Does he not allow them to spend the night normally? I grab Petal and walk into the front of the house with the small bag I'd brought, careful to take all my belongings.

I hear furniture being angrily moved and muttering as I approach the living room entrance.

“Now this man's bringing his hussies into the house like it's some damn brothel and expecting me to clean up dog fur,” I hear Odette complain.

I freeze in place, stunned at the slight of being called a hussy. But then the impact of her words hit. *His hussies*. Plural. It's so humiliating to make the “walk of shame” in front of her, especially if Nate's bringing women here to the

point it's irritating the housekeeper. Waiting for her to finish vacuuming, I peek around the corner to ensure she's gone and slip out the front door to my car.

I'm suddenly furious with him— angry with myself for allowing myself to start to fall for him. I pull out of his driveway and drive back to my apartment.

I thought we were starting a relationship. We've been together non-stop basically since we met. He's been so attentive to me. But he also "works" a lot. When he says he's working, is he doing the same for other women? When I'd asked him about wearing a condom with other women, he'd said this was a totally different scenario...what does that mean?

Still, Odette's been seemingly rude and unwelcoming to me for a reason— an apparent parade of women floating through Nate's home.

I wait in the car with the ignition on, my eyes blurry with the threat of disappointed tears as Petal rests her tiny head on my leg, trying to comfort me. When I finally get inside, my hands are so shaky that it's hard to text Savannah to cancel. I should go make the best of my disappointment. But my head's starting to pound, and the last thing I want to do is plaster a smile and pretend everything's fine.

Glancing around the apartment, I take in the nearly empty space, devoid of any real charm due to my limited funds. I've bought the absolute bare basics, and even that's stretched my thin budget. The space doesn't feel like mine. Like home.

There are no soft chenille throws or large colorful prints covering the hospital white walls, no lavender-scented candles or brightly painted furniture, and no one calling to ask what movie to put on. This place doesn't feel like home yet, and I'm craving the comfort of familiarity.

Grabbing an overnight bag, I pack a few days' worth of clothing and some toiletries. After texting my parents to warn them I'm on my way, I grab Petal's belongings with my own and head out the door.

Petal rides shotgun on the drive, eagerly looking out the passenger side window on full alert, tail wagging excitedly as she watches the passing traffic.

I stop at a drive-thru for coffee and beignets, not caring about the mess the powdered sugar will make in my car. I need sugar and caffeine for the long drive ahead.

My phone alerts multiple times in the drive, but I turn it to silent. I don't feel like talking to anybody. I want to just drive and process everything that's happened this week. Opening the music app on my phone, I start to blare "Shake It Off" by Taylor Swift, my head bobbing to the music as I sing along, hoping the upbeat song brightens my mood.

Brendon Urie's tenor keeps me company as I park in my usual spot in front of my childhood home. My eyes shift nervously to the house next door before I rush towards the front path. Petal follows me, excitedly panting, running as fast as her tiny legs allow. She recognizes Grandma and Grandpa's house immediately and is thrilled to be back. The bright

flowers Mom plants twice a year welcome me as I walk up the tidy driveway to the door Dad painted yellow one particularly dreary March.

It's fall, football season, so I shouldn't be surprised to see the midnight blue and green wreath hanging from the door, declaring the occupant the "Number one fan." The reminder stings more than I'd ever thought it could.

Chapter Eleven

NATE

After a night of lovemaking with Whitney, I'd dreaded the sound of my alarm even more than normal, its intrusion signaling that it's time to leave her.

With my suitcase in hand, I pull back the blanket and inspect her naked form, trying to memorize every curve, every tiny freckle, every crook of her stunning body. This is a dream come true. Whitney asleep in my bed looking ruffled from a night of lovemaking, my cum inside of her.

When I notice the damp spot from our most recent bout of lovemaking, a pang of momentary guilt hits me. I'd seen a recent gynecologist appointment in her planner when I'd had it that first day, and I know I'm clean. Still, I have absolutely no idea if she's on any sort of contraception. I'd thought about reaching for a condom the last time, but I found I didn't want to use them, not being able to tolerate the barrier between us again. It's the first time I've dared to have sex without protection. So I didn't, knowing full damn well I was possibly risking conception.

A very real risk if Whitney's not on the pill. It just takes once. The idea both terrifies and thrills me.

Safe sex is preached to us when playing college ball and professional sports. This is why this morning was the first time I've ever had sex without a condom, the first time I'd ever risked a pregnancy with a woman. I've known this whole time that Whitney would eventually be the mother of my child. It's a probability, not a possibility. The prospect of making a baby with Whitney aroused me further, driving me on as I emptied myself into my woman for the first time. I hadn't wanted to pull out of her, and had dozed on and off with my cock still inside of her. I didn't want to leave the tight warmth.

Petal trots into the room and looks up at me, pink painted nails clicking on the hardwood floor as if to ask to get up on the bed. I lift her up and place her gently next to Whitney before I wake her to say goodbye.

“Sleep sweet, Angel Face,” I tell her softly before leaving.

For once, something else beckons to me more than the excitement of a game, and at this moment, the sport I've devoted my life to feels like an obligation. I want to crawl back into bed with Whitney, wrap my arms around her, and watch every tiny eye flutter, every little breath. After locking the door behind myself, I leave for the airport, comforting myself with the knowledge that I'll have my woman waiting for me at home.



My plane back to New Orleans lands later than it was supposed to, in the wee hours of Monday morning. A quick glance at my security cameras shows my driveway empty and no Whitney in sight. Of fucking course.

I'm starting to get worried. I'd left a perfectly content Whitney in my bed, only for her to stop answering my texts around the time she drove out of my driveway. Is she pissed I didn't wear a condom? Is she not on the pill and freaked out at the idea of a baby? Did something else happen?

I have no fucking clue because the stubborn ass woman didn't answer my texts.

I played like shit, partly due to my inability to focus. It's been a shit day, and I just wanted to fly home and crash with Whitney in my arms.

But something's clearly wrong since Whitney's gone radio silent. She's not the flighty type of person that just doesn't return texts, I'm sure of it.

I don't bother driving to my home, going straight to Whitney's apartment only to not find her car in the driveway. I'm officially worried.

I text Matias, my head of security.

Nate: I'm worried about Whitney. She was supposed to be at my place waiting for me. But she's not at her place or mine.

Matias: She's probably at a girlfriend's house.

Nate: No, she said she'd be here, and she's new to the area, remember? She doesn't have any friends close enough to spend the night with.

Matias: When did you hear from her last?

Nate: Saturday morning.

Matias: Did you piss her off?

Nate: No, everything was great when I left.

Matias: I'll get back to you when I find something.

Two hours later...

Matias: It looks like she's been at her parents' house.

Nate: What? Do you have the address?

Concern quickly gives way to anger— anger that she's not fucking answering me, that she made me worry, that she promised to be in my damn bed when I got back, and she wasn't.

My temper turns to a cool determination. She thinks she's just going to ghost me with zero communication? Cute.

Something about Whitney cracks open the careful self-discipline I've spent decades cultivating. A part of me wants to sling Whitney over my shoulder, drag her ass home and leave her handcuffed to the bed until she explains what the fuck happened this weekend. Instead, I try to soothe the inner lunatic that Whitney's brought to life.

With the long drive and impossible traffic due to an accident, it's almost lunchtime when I get to Whitney's childhood home. Parked on the street in front of the house, I find her piece of shit car, confirming she's run home to her mom from whatever happened.

After spending my summers with Grandpa Christopher and working on cars with him and Rory, it doesn't take long for me to break in and pop the hood, ensuring that Whitney's car isn't going anywhere any time soon.

I drop the hood of her car and go back to my own to retrieve wipes for my hands—need to make a good first impression with my future in-laws.

I walk up the flower-lined path, smiling to myself when I notice the wreath hanging on the door. After knocking curtly, a woman with graying blonde hair answers. I shoot my future mother-in-law my best smile as familiar blue eyes look at me curiously from the entryway of Whitney's childhood home.

You, Whitney Evans, are in deep trouble.

Chapter Twelve

WHITNEY

Reaching for the volume button on my sister Bethany's car radio, I turn down the Ethan Coleman song. In my attempt to escape Nate this weekend, I've found little things that remind me of him constantly— a little girl in pigtails wearing Nate's jersey at the supermarket, my sister's jade earrings the exact shade of Nate's eyes. Now his freaking parents' love song is on the radio. Fabulous.

I couldn't resist watching him play yesterday. My dad had eyed me curiously when I occupied the seat next to him on the couch for three hours, my eyes always searching for a glimpse of Nate.

Bethany looks at me from the driver's seat of her car. "Are you going to tell me why you've been so upset all weekend? Is this about Preston?"

"Why does everything have to be about Preston when I'm upset?" I moan before grabbing my iced vanilla latté and taking a long sip.

“Because that breakup was a big deal, Whit. We were all shocked,” Bethany says tentatively, choosing her words carefully.

I give her a sideways glare. “That’s over and done with. Let’s move on.”

I don’t see why my family makes such a big deal out of the breakup with Preston. I realized I wasn’t falling in love with him, decided I didn’t like how he spoke to me, and ended things. Things had been civil...until his mother took it as a personal affront that her son was allegedly broken-hearted at the sudden end of our relationship. Apparently, nobody told her about his weekend hijinx at the casino days later.

My phone alerts, and like the Nate Coleman junkie I am, I can’t stop checking it anymore.

Nate 8:17 am: When I get my hands on your lovely little neck Angel Face.... Don’t make me come find you.

Nate 8:18 am: Don’t say I didn’t warn you.

Nate 11:30 am: I’m waiting, Angel Face.

Whitney: I’ll see you when I get home. I’m at my parents’ house for the long weekend.

Nate: No. Now.

I don't answer this time, putting my phone back in my purse, my anger and hurt feelings keeping me company in the quiet of the car, with only the sound of gravel under the wheels as we finish the drive back to our parents' house.

I know there are other texts from him. Texts I've ignored as I try to collect my thoughts and feelings. I know I should have been an adult and discussed what happened with Nate, but my pride's hurt, and I have to admit, I'm a little bit heartsick and worried about what he will say when I broach the subject with him. He's never promised me monogamy, I will admit that, but I'd thought it was assumed. Especially after the way he'd acted at the stadium. I'd only spoken to Carlos, and Nate had behaved so jealously. Surely acting that way, he can't expect me to share him with other women?

My sister looks curiously at the luxurious black SUV parked in the street. It's parked against my bumper, blocking me in between the mailbox. "Who on Earth?" Bethany asks.

With one glance at the vehicle, I see the hair scrunchie I'd accidentally left in the car on the dashboard, and suddenly I have zero doubt precisely "who on Earth" is parked very rudely outside my parents' house. Nope, nope, this is not happening.

Walking through the kitchen door, I leave the groceries on the counter and walk to the den. My fears are confirmed when I see that cocky son of a bitch sitting on my parents' couch next to Dad, one of my father's home-brewed artisanal beers in his hand, and my traitor dog curled up next to him for a nap.

Mom's leaning in, offering him the cookies she'd made last night to cheer me up.

Mom notices Bethany and me walk into the den and stands up straight, her eyes wide in wonder, and she smiles a big goofy grin. Great, Nate's already gotten to her. "Whitney, honey, why didn't you tell us you had company coming?"

"Because even I didn't know, Mom," I answer back, my tone acerbic, even to me. "Whatcha doing here, Nate?" I only just told him five minutes ago that I'm at my parents' house. He had to have already been here waiting for me.

"You seem surprised to see me, Whit. Didn't you get my text?" Nate says with mock confusion as he stands to his full six-foot-six height. He raises his beer in a mock salute before taking a sip.

"I distinctly remember answering your text and telling you I'd see you later this week, didn't I?" My arms are crossed just under my breasts, my voice dripping with venom as I stare daggers at Nate.

"I told you I was coming for you, *didn't I?*" He poses it as a question, but his tone is a threat, delivered with a wink that makes me want to slap the cocky right off his face.

I ball my hands into fists at my side, not wanting to have this argument where my entire family can see (and undoubtedly be discussed for years to come), and slowly breathe in and count to ten as I attempt to cool my temper.

I glance around the room and see my family looking back and forth at one another, then back at us. Bethany's eyes are wide, and it seems like she's covering a smile with her hands, enjoying the little show Nate and I are putting on for her, while Mom and Dad look concerned and confused.

I shoot Bethany a warning glare, then grab Nate's hand and bring him into my bedroom, shutting the door behind us.

I stand ready for battle in the center of the room while Nate busies himself, glancing across the space. I haven't had the time or inclination to redecorate since high school. There's still a Harry Styles poster from a long-ago concert on the soft lavender walls, and my American Girl doll sits in a place of honor on a shelf, her prairie-style dress tattered from years of abuse.

Nate's rock-hard face softens when he walks up to the mirrored dresser and fingers the tassel from graduation in May. "Sometimes, I forget how young you still are," Nate says as he runs a frustrated hand through his hair and glances around the room.

"I'm twenty-two, a grown woman out of school with a job and my own apartment," I answer back incredulously.

"Barely," is all Nate says in response as he rubs his hand across his neck.

"What the fuck is going on with you, Whitney? I leave you in my bed happy as can be, things are going great, and then suddenly you're ghosting me. Would you care to explain?"

The anger is gone from his voice, replaced by annoyance with a splash of hurt.

He wants to do this? Fine. Let's do this. I bite back the tears, not quite able to meet Nate in the eye. "I overheard Odette telling someone about all the other women," I finally confess.

"What other women," Nate demands, his face looking almost confused.

I stand awkwardly, still not wanting to look at him, looking at the ground, feeling so insecure. "I don't know what other women, Nate. You tell me! She just said you're bringing all sorts of hussies into the house, compared your place to a brothel, and complained she has to clean up after them."

I muster whatever courage I have left and look up at Nate. He's thumping an impatient finger on his side and staring at the ceiling. "She told you this? To your face?"

I ignore how my heart skips when his eyes meet mine. "No, I overheard her telling someone. I think she was on the phone or something."

Nate sucks in a large puff of air and rubs his hands over his eyes. "Whitney, I don't bring women to that house, as a rule. You're the only woman that's ever been in that bed," he laughs incredulously.

"Then why would Odette say that, Nate?" I accuse.

"I dunno, Whitney. But I do know that if you'd acted like an adult and discussed it with me, we wouldn't be here now, would we?" he says, matter of fact.

“I’ve seen all the pictures of you with women on the internet, so don’t act like it’s some stretch of the imagination that you’re screwing around,” I throw back at him. During my initial online sleuthing of Nate, I found countless pictures of him with brunettes. Tall, impossibly slender brunettes with long flowing hair.

His eyes narrow at me. “If you’d bothered to look at the dates on the pics or, I dunno, asked me, you’d have found out that all those pictures were taken long ago. I was young, had just been drafted into the big league, and wasn’t ready to settle down yet. There’s no one else, and there hasn’t been for quite some time.”

I rack my brain trying to remember, but I can’t recall seeing a picture of Nate with the slightly longer haircut he wears now. Damn it.

“You weren’t in my bed like you promised,” Nate accuses. His voice lowers, nearly to a growl. “And you didn’t answer my fucking texts either.” There’s something in his tone underneath the anger and frustration that almost sounds like hurt, and I feel a brief pang of guilt.

“I haven’t scrolled up to read the older texts,” I confess.

“We didn’t use a condom,” he states, matter of fact.

“I’m aware. Thankfully we’re safe,” I mutter.

His eyes squint at me. “So, you’ve got an implant or take the pill or something?”

“Progesterone pills; I can’t take the regular estrogen ones.”

Nate's shoulders slump, and his face drops in what could only be relief.

We stand in awkward silence for two heartbeats before Nate reaches for me and wraps his arms around me. "Can we please call a truce now? I've barely slept since Thursday, and I'm fucking exhausted."

I narrow my eyes with mock skepticism. "Truce."

"So, did you watch the game?" The mischievous smile of his is back, making my heart flutter. Damn it.

I roll my eyes heavenward. "Yes, Nate, I watched the game."

I hear someone in the hallway and then the sound of my nephew, who'd been asleep in the bedroom next door, cooing, and I suddenly remember my family.

"What did you say to my parents to get them to let you in?" I ask, suddenly suspicious.

"I told them the truth," he says point blank with no other explanation as he reaches for the doorknob to let himself out.



We sit at the dining room table next to one another, eating the muffulettas and Zapp's voodoo chips we'd picked up from the grocery store for lunch as my family fires question after question.

How long have we known one another?

Have I been to any of his games yet?

Where did we meet?

Nate thankfully told a half-truth on that one and said I'd come with a friend I teach with to the party. I know that for every question my family is asking now, in front of Nate, four will be asked later.

When I realize it's already two pm, and I still have to drive back to the city, I excuse myself to gather my and Petal's things so we can return home.

Nate follows behind me. "You owe me an overnight," he accuses.

I groan, "It's the kids' first day tomorrow!"

"Shoulda been in my bed last night where your ass belongs," he says flippantly as he takes my duffel from me.

"You're going to have to let me sleep," I caution. There's no way I'm going to be able to handle the entire class of kids for the first time on limited rest.

He holds up two fingers, a Scout's promise as if he's ever been anything approaching a Boy Scout. "Promise you'll get at least a full eight hours."

After saying our goodbyes, we both walk to our cars, intending to meet at Nate's place after I've packed an overnight bag for his house. I look nervously at the home next door, relieved to see the cars gone.

Nate pauses in the driveway, still talking to my dad, who's positively stunned still that the quarterback for "his" team is in his house and dating his daughter.

"No wonder Whitney suddenly was watching the game with me. Couldn't get her interested in it at all growing up. Suddenly, she was asking about two-point conversions yesterday," my dad laughs. I feel my face warm overhearing the conversation. Just put it all out there, Dad, why don't you?

"Yeah, she's still learning about the game, but she's slowly picking it up," Nate says proudly. "She had to ask me when we first met what position I play," he laughs with a slight head shake. "That was enough of a clue that Whitney doesn't normally watch football."

I crank the hot car, leaving the door open to let out the hot air. The dashboard lights up, makes a weird noise, and then nothing happens.

"Everything okay, Angel Face?" Nate asks from the driveway.

"My car's acting weird," I groan, reaching for the key and trying to crank it again. Nothing.

Nate and my dad walk towards the car, and I get out, handing the keys to Nate. My dad, wonderful man that he is, has no clue when it comes to anything mechanical.

Nate tries to crank the car and gets the same result. "Hmm, strange. Landry bought a towing company last year. Why don't I have one of his trucks bring it back to the city for us?"

We can have a mechanic look at it there, and you won't have to drive back here for it. You can just borrow one of my cars until then."

I grimace and hate to accept, but I have no choice. I need to have a way to work. "You don't mind?"

"I insist. Whichever one you are most comfortable in."

When we transfer Petal and our belongings into Nate's SUV, with Dad's promise to see the car towed into New Orleans, Nate holds the keys up to me. "Feel like driving so I can rest? Traffic's going to be a bitch, and I need a nap."

Chapter Thirteen

NATE

Guilt isn't an emotion I feel often, and although it should, it's not a feeling currently nagging at me as Whitney drives us out of the one-stoplight town she'd called home until recently. Instead, I feel contentment deep inside of me as I finally close my eyes with the passenger seat fully reclined.

It'd been too perfect of an opportunity to finally rid myself of that car that makes me worry so much. Later this week, with a few tickets to the season's opening home game, I'm sure my mechanic friend will find Whitney's car unfixable.

That apartment's next on my hit list.

Sawyer keeps a small team of bodyguards on the payroll at all times here for movie sets, high rollers at the casinos, and appearances in local music venues. When I explained the situation with Whitney's neighborhood, Sawyer offered to have one of his regular employees stay at the apartment next door. Roxanne normally works at the casino, so she'll never be on my normal security team, where Whitney might recognize her.

Whitney's old neighbor moved out this weekend, and the "new neighbor" moved in. As much as I despise that Whitney's still in her apartment, I know she's safe until I can get her out.

We ride in silence for a bit while I rest my eyes. The tension from the fight had melted away while we laughed with her parents, and everything feels like it's at rights again.

"Do you know what could be wrong with my car?" Whitney asks when I incline the seat and flip the radio station.

"No idea. I'd have to get under the hood. Even then, I didn't spend as much time on cars as my brother did. I'm sure it'll be fine, and you can use my car for as long as you want."

"That's sweet of you, Nate, but I want to get my car up and running as soon as possible."

She nervously thrums her fingers against the steering wheel. "You're really not seeing anybody else? I mean, it's not like we'd talked about it and decided to be monogamous."

I stifle back a laugh. As if I have time for another woman with as much of a handful as this one is. "Whitney, it's just you. I have no interest in seeing anybody else."

She looks from the road briefly and gives me a pleased smile before looking back, and a thought crosses my mind. I narrow my eyes and lean forward, watching her face carefully for a reaction. "Whitney, you aren't seeing another man...*are you?*"

She lets out an outraged laugh. “Are you kidding me? You had to persuade me to date you! So no, Nate, I’m not seeing anybody else. Sheesh!”

Stopping first at Whitney’s apartment, we pick up fresh clothes for her to wear tomorrow. “How does a dip in the jacuzzi sound?” I ask as I watch her pick out her clothes for work tomorrow.

“After that drive? Fantastic. I’ll pack my swimsuit.”



Despite the early September heat, the stone is cool under our feet as we walk to the edge of the raised square hot tub attached to the pool.

Our little stinker dog is lying belly down on the ivory-colored travertine pool deck sunbathing. It’s quickly become Petal’s favorite spot since she’s learned to use the doggie door. “Petal, you lazy girl. Are you taking another nap?” She opens a tired eye before going back to sleep. “Petal! Where’s your ball?” She rolls over onto her back with her paws bent and gives me a disinterested snort.

“There’s no moving Petal when she’s napping,” Whitney laughs. “Not as old as she is.”

Entering the hot tub first, I grab Whitney’s hand and help her enter the bubbling water before we sit next to one another, both of our legs stretched out. The saltwater stings my turf burn before the heat starts to soothe.

“C’mere, Angel Face.” I draw Whitney to me, so she’s lying in the crook of my arm, and kiss the top of her head while we both relax, letting the bubbles work their magic.

A satisfied hum comes from low in Whitney’s throat as she rests her head on my chest. “I needed this.”

Reaching my arm around her body, I pull her around and into my lap so she’s straddling me. Her body tenses with anticipation when I kiss her pulse point and lick my way down her throat. “Hmm, me too.”

Whitney takes in a deep breath when I get to the crook of her neck in expectation of my next move. My eager hands creep past the thick elastic of Whitney’s bikini bottom, and I cup the delectable round of her ass in both palms, bringing her closer to me, sitting her on my already hardening cock.

She crooks her neck for me, inviting my mouth again. I lean in, gently sucking, resisting the urge to mark her.

My hands go to her hair, damp from the jacuzzi, and my mouth captures hers in a hungry exploration.

“Nate, someone will see us,” she tries to protest as she looks at me with hooded eyes.

Starting to pant, I point to a row of tall palm trees planted long ago along the fence line. “Strategically planted trees and a tall privacy fence. The security company I hired when I moved in made sure no one could see into the yard,” I explain before my lips smash into hers in a wanton fever.

Wrapping her arms around my neck, she rocks her hips tantalizingly over my throbbing cock as her breath quickens. Impatient after almost four days without her, I pull her bottom to the side and pull down my swim trunks just enough to free my dick.

We'd discussed condoms again on the ride back to New Orleans and agreed we were safe to go without, so I'm not surprised when Whitney seats herself on my unsheathed cock. I groan with pleasure as she uses the bench of the jacuzzi to ride me, quickly finding her release, hiding her loud groans of pleasure in my throat.

I slowly kiss her, helping her down from her orgasm until her breath evens out and her eyes reopen, sparkling with raw lust. I give her a devilish smirk. "My turn now, Angel."

I gently flip her so that she's sitting backward on the bench seat of the hot tub and pull down her bikini bottom, exposing her pussy to the jet stream of the jacuzzi, using it to help bring her pleasure.

She starts to groan with ecstasy at the sensation as I come up behind her and slowly slide my cock up into her pussy. With my hands on her waist, I piston my hips forward into her depths.

"Please, Nate, harder," she moans, egging me on.

Picking up the pace, I thrust in and out of her hot, slick wet heat when I feel Whitney's pussy start to tighten around me, signaling an impending orgasm. "Are you going to come for

me again, Angel? C'mon baby, give it to me. Let me watch you fall apart.”

“Don't stop,” is her only answer. The pressure of the jet stream beats down against the back of my hand when I reach down to pinch her clit. I gently stroke it and she clamps down on my dick as her body tightens with her orgasm, sending me into my own. My entire body tenses with pleasure as I grab Whitney's hips, pushing my cock as deep as possible inside of her as I spray my cum into her with a groan I try to stifle.

When my vision returns to normal, I wrap my arms around Whitney's waist, kissing her neck, her face, and pull up her bathing suit bottom as our breath slowly evens out.

Today started off shitty, but it's getting better by the second.

Once we go to the bedroom to dress, Whitney rummages around her bag, frustration on her face.

“What did you forget to pack?” I inquire.

“My favorite nightgown. I must have left it at my parents',” she pouts. “I hate, hate, hate, forgetting things. It drives me batty!”

I laugh at her and walk into the closet, retrieving one of my old Alabama football t-shirts. It's soft and thin with time and wear. One of my favorites. “Here, you can wear this...if you insist on walking around dressed.”

She shoots me a look before removing her bikini. I watch with hungry eyes as her bikini top comes off, revealing her nipples, still pebbled from her orgasm and the water. After

removing her bottoms, she slips on a tiny pair of lace underwear, covering her lovely little triangle of hair, and slips my t-shirt over her body. It falls to her knees, the short sleeves of the t-shirt reaching down to her elbows.

My heart starts to beat a weird rhythm deep in my chest, and my dick starts to harden again at the sight. I groan when she lifts her hands to put her hair in a low ponytail, revealing the globes of her ass in the lace underwear peeking out from under my shirt. I promise myself, God, and whatever other deity that's listening that from this night on, Whitney's going to sleep in one of my t-shirts.



We eat dinner at my rarely used dining room table, each with a glass of white wine in front of us, while Petal lays at my feet, looking for a small bite of meat.

I carefully chew my food and watch Whitney refill her wine glass halfway. "It was nice to meet your family," I remarked.

"Not the way I wanted that to happen," she laughs. "I think Dad is still shocked that you were in his house. I think he genuinely likes you, though."

"Yeah, he was cool. Your mom did mention an ex-boyfriend...what was his name...Prescot? Paxton?" I dig, knowing good and God damn well the fucker's name.

I look up, eager to see Whitney's reaction, and find her taking a large sip of her wine, looking to the side to avoid eye

contact. “Anyway, she said she was surprised you were with someone since you’d taken the breakup so hard and said you hadn’t mentioned dating anyone.”

She sets the wine glass on the table with a slight thud and grabs her fork again without looking in my direction. “Preston,” she corrects with a hint of anger in her tone. “My ex’s name was Preston. My mom would bring him up,” she mutters.

We sit silently for a moment while she seems deep in thought before she looks at me and blows out a frustrated puff of air. “I didn’t take the breakup hard. I ended things with him. What I struggled with was the fallout of the relationship ending. It wasn’t pretty, and Preston didn’t take it well.”

“So what happened there?”

She pauses, clearly filtering her thoughts. “Preston and I just weren’t meant to be, that’s all. It was one of those things. We were friends for a long time before we started dating, and it should have stayed that way.”

“Did you end on good terms?”

She picks up her wine glass again and looks in my direction. “We did, at first. But then his mom took it personally when I ended things. She’s a member of the school board and had me blacklisted in the district after the break up. I had to drive all the way to Tangipahoa Parish every day to do my semester of student teaching.” Her voice is dripping with a bitterness I’ve never heard from her sweet lips before, shocking me.

I lean back in my chair, watching her face carefully as she goes back to eating. “Is that how you ended up in New Orleans?”

“Yep,” she answers abruptly. “Couldn’t find a job any closer, thanks to *Deborah*.” She says the name with a sneer, and I can sense a long history of bad blood between the two women. She looks away for a moment, her eyes glistening with something approaching hurt. “But, it all worked out for the best, didn’t it?”

More than you even realize. You’ll find out just how true this statement is when you’re walking down the aisle to me.



As promised, Whitney was asleep on my chest at her usual bedtime. I’m quickly becoming addicted to sleeping with her...the soft velvet of her hair brushing on my chest and long legs entwined with mine while her breath starts to slow into long puffs of air.

She’s not in bed with me the next morning when I wake up, and her side of the mattress is cool.

Padding barefoot across the cool tile, I find Whitney in the kitchen brewing coffee. She’s already dressed for the day in a Collegiate Charter t-shirt. Earrings shaped like apples dangle from her earlobes. No one can ever accuse my Angel Face of

not dressing for the job she wants. It's fucking adorable, and I love it.

“Hey, I didn't think you would get up this early since you don't have to be at the field. Want a cup?” she says as she reaches for the mugs.

“Yeah, please,” I say, wiping the sleep from my face and sitting at the breakfast bar.

She comes over with a steaming mug and creamer. When she leans down to set the coffee in front of me, I can't resist and lift her onto my lap the second she puts the hot beverage down.

I try to capture every perfect movement of her body, the way her wavy bob curls around her face, the exact shade of blue of her eyes. And her smell. I take a deep breath and bury my nose in the crook of her neck, breathing in her scent. It's a mix of coconut milk body wash and her shampoo's fresh scent.

“Are you ready to walk out the door?” I ask as my hands wander around her body.

“Yep. I just have to grab my bags,” she responds, suddenly nervous. Light blue eyes dart down to look at the tote she'd brought in last night from the car.

“Hey, look at me,” I insist, cupping her heart-shaped face in my hands. “You've got this.”

She gives me one big grin and looks down at the ground. “God, I hope so. It would really suck if I spent four years getting a degree only to discover I suck at it.”

“Whit—I don’t think that is even a remote possibility.”

A loud creek from the front door and the beep of the security system alert us of Odette’s arrival. Whitney tenses in my arms at the noise, affirming a difficult decision I’ve already made regarding my housekeeper.

Whitney scurries off my lap and walks to the counter to grab her bags. No lunch, of course. I’ll have to remember next time to send her with one.

The nutty smell of Whitney’s favorite coffee fills the room while she carefully pours the steaming beverage into a stainless steel to-go mug. Leaning down, she gives Petal a pat on her head and straightens the lavender bow in the dog’s top knot. “You sure you don’t mind if she hangs out with you today?”

“She has a doggie door here, and there’s no neighbors to annoy with her barking. Besides, Petal and I are cool, aren’t we, sweet girl?” I coo down at our old lady.

Whitney gives us a playful roll of her eyes before looking into the mud room, where Odette is hanging up her purse. She leans down and quickly kisses me before taking the keys to the SUV. “See you tonight. Try not to spoil her too much?”

“I’ll try. But no promises....I kinda already told her we’d go to City Park today, and ya know, there’s a coffee shop on the way, and she’s going to want a puppy cuppy.”

She laughs deep in her throat. “I’ll text you later,” Whitney says with a small wave as she walks out the door.

Getting up from my seat, I place Petal on the ground and walk up to Odette. “We need to talk.”

Chapter Fourteen

NATE

Turning left with the green arrow at a stop light, I make the steep turn onto Whitney's street. I've managed to entice her into another overnight, although at her place, which is fine for now. As long as I'm there with her. It's her in that apartment alone that worries me. Driving past the shithole bar, I let loose a large grin when I notice a maroon and white sign advertising "Two dollar beer on college football days." That's definitely going to increase foot traffic and noise at the bar on Saturday nights.

Growing up with two loving parents watching out for you and an entire staff of bodyguards, you learn the fine art of mischief. While a typical teenager only had to open their bedroom window and make a run for it, I had to get by a high-tech camera system, my parents, and, hardest of all, Sawyer. This is how I know that meticulous planning is needed before any action to not only achieve said mischief but also get away with it.

This is why I haven't done something rash to get Whitney out of her apartment already. Sometimes, it's best to play the long game, and as far as Whitney's apartment, I think this is one of those times. I have a plan to get my girl out of that apartment. It may take a bit, but before too long, her clothes will be hanging up next to mine; I know it.

Pulling into Whitney's place, I watch her exit the "borrowed" SUV. Parking behind her, I notice a small security camera facing outward on the porch— not the type that bodyguards use, but the ones that you buy cheaply off the internet. It's an old trick used by security teams. If someone sees one camera, they don't look for the hidden three. Roxanne's been busy since she moved in. Grabbing a bag out of the back seat, I smile when a motion activated flood light pops on.

Whitney's checking the small letterbox by her front door, slowly rifling through each piece of mail as I walk up. Her face lights up when she looks at me, forcing a smile on my own. I hope she never stops doing that.

Whitney tucks her mail into her tote and cocks her head to the side. "Hey, handsome. I thought I had a bit before you got here."

I press a small kiss to her lips in greeting and grab a brown bag of groceries from her with my free hand. "I finished with my errands faster than I thought I would."

I watch Whitney pull out her apartment's key and unlock the door. "Did you see the camera? *Someone's* not getting their

security deposit back.”

“Yeah, but maybe it’ll keep more people out of the yard and away from the cars? You said they’d made the alarms go off once or twice in the middle of the night.”

“Don’t remind me,” she huffs. “I was dead asleep when that happened and found a group of people in my driveway.”

I feel my jaw clench at her confession and try not to imagine what might have been. This was before Roxanne moved in next door. She’s here now when Whitney is to make sure shit like that doesn’t happen anymore. There’s also plenty of backup to call if she needs help.

Walking through the tiny apartment, I carry the bags into the kitchen and empty the contents onto the yellow laminate countertop.

Petal dances excitedly at Whitney’s feet as she hangs her purse and tote on a hook by the door. Walking in behind me, she loops her arms around my hips. “What’s this? You’re always feeding me.”

I raise her hand to my mouth and kiss her palm before I finish emptying the bag. Lifting out a long green bottle, I place it on the counter and I turn to return Whitney’s hug with one of my own. Wrapping my arms around her waist, I pull her tight against me, meeting her soft gaze, and kiss her perfect pink lips. “Had to get a nice bottle of something to celebrate your first day with the kids. And since I was already out, I picked up a rotisserie chicken and grabbed some sides from the hot bar.”

“I was going to cook,” she protests as she drops her grip on my waist and walks to the cabinet to grab two long-stemmed glasses for the already chilled wine. “But the alcohol is definitely appreciated after today.”

“You’ve been on your feet non-stop. Besides, there’s more couch potato time for us like this.”

She carefully pours the first glass of wine and nods to her side without looking in my direction. “Did your mechanic friend call about my car?”

Opening the cabinet, I remove two brightly colored floral print dishes from the stack before shutting the cabinet door. “Yeah, I texted him. He said he wouldn’t get to it until closer to the end of the week.” *Because I told him it was no rush and to take his time.* “Besides, you have the SUV for now. Is it eating up too much gas driving back and forth to work? Because I can...”

“No, no, it’s fine,” she interrupts with a wave of her hand as she pours the second glass of alcohol. “You’ve done enough already. I’m just worried about the whole situation.”

I place the dishes on the counter, turn to her, and run my fingers through her hair. “Don’t worry about it, Whitney. It’ll all work out, I promise.”



We’re sprawled out on Whitney’s couch, my feet on the coffee table, hers in my lap as we slowly sip our wine after eating.

She slipped off her black ballet flats and left them on the small area rug beneath us. Instead of her normal dress, Whitney's wearing a pair of black dress pants today, limiting my normally easy access to her panties.

They're lavender. I'd noticed them when she leaned over earlier, and can picture them covering her tight little pussy underneath those damn pants. I've thought of them since, the image of her slipping them on over the curve of her ass running over and over in my head.

I knead her foot with my fingers, carefully massaging out the knots. I feel the blood rush to my cock when she lets out a low moan of pleasure. "That feels freaking amazing."

I quirk an interested eyebrow in her direction and watch her carefully as she closes her eyes drowsily before popping them back open. She lets out a loud yawn and pulls her feet off my lap. "I need to go get changed for bed. These clothes are just not comfy."

I flip off the tv and eagerly follow behind her as she starts to walk down the hallway, knowing full well what *let me slip into something more comfortable* is code for. I stop to flick off the lights and check the front door to ensure it's locked.

Her pants are already off when I walk into the bedroom, and she's slipping off her lace bra with her back to me. The round of her bottom that's tortured me all day is more pronounced, inviting me to grasp it as she leans over to put her clothing into the hamper. Before I can do exactly that, she turns around, exposing her front to me. My gaze starts at her milky white

breasts and pert nipples before gliding down past her flat belly to the scrap of lace covering that tiny thatch of hair she keeps neatly trimmed. Eventually, my eyes go back up to her face.

She's batting her eyelashes, and her lips are in a full pout. "It's laundry day," she says with an exaggerated sigh. "Can I borrow your t-shirt to sleep in?"

Oh, you little liar. That laundry hamper is very clearly empty. "I'll trade my shirt for those panties," I offer with a wide grin.

Her eyes soften with desire, and she slowly slides the scrap of fabric down her long shapely legs. She picks them up from the floor before tossing them gently in my direction. They hit me square in the face, and I breathe in her scent from the fabric. She's already wet for me, the fabric damp.

I slide the panties that tortured me all day into my pocket and stare at her perfect form. Narrow waist, wide hips that will easily carry my babies, and luscious breasts I love to sleep with cupped in my hands. My dick is painfully sore in my shorts, clearly tenting the fabric.

"Hey, Coleman. You just going to stand there and stare, or are you going to live up to your end of the bargain," Whitney giggles as she watches me with a raised eyebrow.

All too eagerly, I pull my solid gray t-shirt over my head and toss it in Whitney's direction. She slides it over her head and down her body. It falls almost to her knees, covering her up. "Thank you," she says with a twinkle in her eyes before going to the neatly made bed.

I watch, entranced, as she pulls off the throw pillows, flashing everything to me as she places the pillows next to the bed. Quickly stripping off my shorts and underwear, I toss them toward the hamper and make my way to Whitney with quick strides. Grasping her around the waist as she leans over to pull down the covers, I press my throbbing cock against her back. She turns her head to give me a coquettish smile.

“You look absolutely delicious in my t-shirt, Angel. I think I need to fuck you in it. Up on all fours in the middle of the bed.”

She creeps forward on the bed, her eyes dancing with mischief, leaving her ass in the air. Coming up behind her, I give the firm round of her ass a pop, the sound of flesh hitting flesh making my cock twitch painfully.

She bucks forward with a groan, and I give the other side a slap, and she grinds into my cock. “Please, Nate,” she groans low.

“Please what, Angel?” My dick is painful, wanting in Whitney’s tight wet warmth, but I want to hear her say the words, to beg for it first. Sliding my fingers into her, I curl them, hitting her G-spot.

Her voice is low, soaked with desire. “Please give me your cock. I need it.”

All too eagerly, I remove my fingers and replace them with my dick, gripping her hips as I bury myself deep in her. “You keep clenching that pussy, Angel, and this isn’t going to last long.”

She grinds up against me. “More, please,” she moans.

I gyrate my hips, brushing against her clit, and she rocks back into me, seating herself to the hilt.

I stay buried inside her and reach for her breasts, cupping the left one in my hand. I run my hand under the soft fabric of the t-shirt to her breasts and roll her nipple, pinching it between my fingers. She gasps and bucks against me.

“You need me to move, Whitney?”

She grinds against my cock. “I need it, Babe.”

Pulling my hips backward, I pull myself almost completely out before plunging back into her depths.

She groans loud as skin hits skin, and I bottom out. “Faster, please,” she gasps.

Holding firmly onto both her hips, I quickly pump into Whitney until her breathing becomes erratic. She starts to shudder beneath me with her orgasm. Her sweet pussy clinches onto my cock as she comes, her wetness dripping out of her when I pull out to slam into her again.

“I thought of this sweet pussy all fucking day,” I groan. Reaching down to her torso, I pull her upright against my chest without breaking our connection. I reach in front of her to rub her clit. “I need one more orgasm out of you, Angel,” I insist.

I piston my hips against her again with savage thrusts. She meets me stroke for stroke as she rides my cock, both legs bent backward. I rest one hand on her hip, the other working her

clit with hard, furious strokes. She begins to moan my name, and her pace becomes more erratic as she finds her orgasm again, screaming my name.

“That’s my girl. I knew you could come for me again,” I growl in her ear. Taking deep, hard thrusts against my woman’s tight wet pussy, I move both hands to her hips for better leverage, lifting her hips to work my cock.

My balls tighten, and my spine tingles with the familiar sensation of an impending orgasm. I grip her hips, impale myself one last time inside her, and let the ecstasy wash over me before I go limp. I let go of her hips, and she falls forward onto the bed with a content groan.

“That was...” she says breathlessly.

“Fucking amazing,” I finish.

Slowly starting to control my breathing, I move off the bed to get a washcloth to clean up Whitney. She falls forward onto the bed and lets out a sleepy groan.

When I return to the bed, she rolls over onto her back and gives me an impish smile. “Not a bad end to the day. I think I’m going to have to steal your t-shirts more often.”

I carefully clean up Whitney and instantly regret it, wishing I’d left her covered in us all night. Holding her chin between my thumb and finger, I kiss her softly. “Please do. You’re absolutely irresistible in them.”

Walking back to the bathroom to get rid of the cloth, I watch Whitney crawl under the covers and yawn loudly. “Hurry back

to bed. I'm ready to pass out," she complains.

She's stunning like this. Her skin flush from pleasure, her eyes a darker shade of blue after she comes, her hair mussed. At the edge of the bed, I lift the covers, slide in next to her naked, and pull her onto my chest. She lets out a deep, satisfied sigh as she wiggles to get into her spot and is out like a light in two seconds flat.

One thing I've learned quickly about my girl is that Whitney loves to sleep. She's passed out in bed within minutes of closing her eyes as long as nothing, or no one, is interfering with it....like the bar two doors down.

Whitney didn't live on campus for college and apparently didn't go to any of the games, so she has no idea what she's in for living next to a sports bar during football season. I figure a few sleepless Saturdays, and she'll consider my offer to stay at my place while I'm out of town.

She doesn't need to know that an "anonymous alumnus" for the lovely brothers of Beta Kappa Alpha has already offered to pick up the tab for the whole fraternity on Saturday nights, setting a hot ember to an already smoldering fire. With the watchful eye of the bodyguard next door, keeping unwanted visitors away from Whitney, I'm certain she'll be safe, but all too eager to stay in the quiet safety of our nearby home.

I watch Whitney's beautiful eyes flutter in sleep and smile contently to myself. It will take time, but all the pieces are slowly coming into place.

Chapter Fifteen

WHITNEY

It's finally Friday, and I'm celebrating my first week of actual teaching by enjoying a leisurely dinner with the other Kindergarten teachers. I needed this—the stress relief of a night out with new friends.

The mechanic called earlier this week and said my car was DOA. I guess I'm in the market for a new-to-me car, which will eat up a large chunk of my income. I'll need to find something, but my limited budget makes it difficult. I found one used car, but after the mechanic looked at it, he said it would cost more to repair than it was to buy.

The other teachers and I spend the next few hours laughing together, trying to get to know one another since we're going to be working closely. I eat every bite of my blackened redfish and more than my fair share of the French bread on the table.

If spending the night with Nate makes me a hussy, paint my door red and declare me open for business because I'm hooked. We haven't spent a night apart since our fight at my parents' house Monday.

Nate warned me that as the season progresses, he'll have less free time. He wasn't exaggerating. Even though we both have long, hectic days, we try to make time for one another at night once the busy day has calmed and we can just be.

Last night, we met at my place around supper time. We'd both slept horribly, thanks to the noise from the bar down the street. At one am, when we were both still awake, Nate suggested that we could stay at his place when the partying is at its worst. After a long day of work with very little rest, I'm not about to raise a fuss over staying at Nate's blissfully quiet home.

"I'm glad we did this," Alicia declares as she takes the last sip of her drink. "I never leave the house without Tom and the kids!"

"I'm usually so tired from working I just go home and sleep," Savannah confesses.

"I'm glad we did it too," I say softly as I wait anxiously for a to go meal for Nate. We say our goodbyes in the parking lot and I head to Nate's house.

Nate's stretched out on his couch when I walk into his place carrying my duffel bag. His face is tired, and his hair is mussed. The green Hurricanes athletic shirt he's wearing has ridden up, exposing that V-shaped muscle that makes the smartest women do the dumbest things.

Noting my full hands, Nate rushes to the door, leaning down to kiss me and take the plastic bag with his food inside.

“It smells amazing,” he groans as he reaches inside the bag and pulls out his food. “I burned off some serious calories today.”

I flop my tired body in the chair next to where he’s just sat. “You look like it. Are y’all ready for the game Sunday?”

“Meh, just about. We have an early morning meeting and a walk-through, but I’m free for a few hours afterward. It’ll likely be our last Saturday together for a while. During the regular season, they make us stay in a hotel the night before a home game.”

I blink over at him. “They make you sleep away when you’re only ten minutes from your bed?”

He chews his food and takes a sip of his water before answering. “Yeah, they want to make sure we’re not out carousing all night. It’s an old rule from way back.”

“Well, it’s a stupid one,” I mutter. “Some of the rules the football league come up with, Nate.” I’m disappointed. I’ve gotten used to the warmth and comfort of his body. Now he’s going to be away from me for twice as many nights.

I get up from the chair with a huff and walk towards the bedroom with my bag. Raiding Nate’s closet, I claim an older, softer t-shirt, and quickly change into it, leaving my boy-cut panties on. I’d asked the first few times I’d gone to borrow a t-shirt, but Nate had told me just to help myself. I might have also amassed a small collection of them at my place. I love sleeping in them. Not just because of the comfort of the soft cotton but the way Nate’s scent lingers on them. I’d feel guilty

stealing his stash of clothing, but the amount of t-shirts from various football teams this man has played on is ridiculous!

Nate watches me with hungry eyes as I walk back into the den and sit next to him on the sofa. “Whatcha wanna do tomorrow? I can’t stay out too late, but maybe we can go to the park for a nice dinner....”

“What’s going on with your dinners anyway?” I ask suddenly. “Did Odette stop cooking for you?” I’d realized earlier this week that there wasn’t a stash of prepared meals in the fridge, but I had assumed she’d simply been off or sick or something.

A dark eyebrow lifts, and he places his food on the coffee table. Nate wipes his face clean with a napkin before looking up at me. “I had to let Odette go. The agency found someone more appropriate, but they can’t start until Monday.”

Something sour rolls in my stomach. “I hope it’s not because of me, Nate. I mean, it’s not like she said those things directly to me....”

He shakes his head curtly. “It was for a multitude of reasons. The primary one was that Odette didn’t want to work. Plus, she deliberately made you uncomfortable, and that’s not nearly acceptable. But I don’t want to talk about this now...I want to figure out how to spend tomorrow with my woman.”

“I vote we spend a long lazy afternoon by the pool while we can. We’re getting our first cold snap Sunday. We might not be able to use it again until the spring,” I suggest with a false

cheerfulness to my voice, all too eager to drop the subject of Odette.

Nate smirks knowingly at me. “No, but we can use the hot tub whenever you want to, Angel Face.”



The sound of a lawn mower wakes me up Saturday morning. With a loud groan, I roll over onto my stomach and pull the comforter up over my head. The guys that come to mow the grass are working in the backyard. After making the bed, I pad into the kitchen to find caffeine. Petal follows behind me excitedly, the tags on her collar clinking together as she jogs at my side. With Nate in an early morning meeting, I have the house to myself for the first time. He’s told me repeatedly to make myself at home. You would think that with the sheer size of the house that it wouldn’t feel homey, but it’s actually the opposite. The traditional style furniture was picked with comfort over style in mind, and there’s no expensive looking tchotchkes around that I have to worry about breaking.

Nate’s kitchen is my second favorite room...right behind his study. The walls are painted a green-gray, which brings out the color of the dark wood cabinets. The black granite countertops are free of any clutter except for the single cup coffee maker. I love that thing. Half asleep still? No big deal. Put in a little plastic doohickey, press a button, and in a minute you have a whole cup of fresh brewed blonde roast in your mug. Bleary

eyed still, I pull off a yellow sticky note that's stuck on the coffee maker.

I fed Petal earlier than normal this morning, then took her on part of my jog with me, so she may need a snack. Text me when you wake up. XXOO

Pulling out the little storage drawer underneath the coffee maker, I find it empty. Crud. Odette did the shopping, meaning no one was around to stock up on the special cups for the coffeemaker. A pang of guilt hits me over the situation again. I know Nate said that she wasn't working out, but I can't help but feel some guilt. Just as I'm rummaging through the pantry to see if there's any coffee stashed in there, my phone vibrates on the glossy countertop.

Nate: I can't even begin to tell you how gorgeous you were this morning in my bed. Send me a selfie.

Whitney: Absolutely no selfies before caffeine.

Nate: That's ok, I can still picture it in my head. Are you still in my t-shirt?

Whitney: Maybe. Aren't you supposed to be in a meeting?

Nate: Yeah, but a couple of people are running behind, so we're waiting on them. Now about that selfie.....

Feeling a little mischievous, I walk to the mirror in the bathroom. Carefully angling the camera, I take over a dozen shots using the timer on my phone until I find one that I like.

The shot I end up sending is posed with me at an angle. With the t-shirt carefully bunched in front of me, you can see the curve of my ass and my bare legs. It shows just enough, but leaves quite a bit to the imagination. After sending the picture, I get ready to go run errands.

Nate: Holy fuck you're hot. Send me one of you angled around.

Whitney: Sorry, already dressed for the day. I have errands to run before we spend the day by the pool and you are supposed to be paying attention to your meeting.

Nate: Sad emoji.

I have to parallel park of course on my first stop of the day. It's a skill I've never quite mastered, but a very necessary one living here. Blue and green banner flags are posted at the entrance to the ornate metal fence that advertises it's occupant

is “Now Open.” Nate and some of his friends from the team opened the business together, and from what I’ve heard, it’s been a bit problematic. Boxes of supplies have gone missing, a very expensive juice press was broken, and they’ve already had to let one manager go. The guys are taking turns popping in on the business periodically to make sure everything is okay. Since they all have an early practice today, I offered to stop in.

The smell of fresh squeezed tropical juices hit me when I open the glass door. A large work area occupies the back of the storefront. It’s surrounded by a checkout counter and a large glass display case. On the back wall, a colorful chalkboard lists all the mix-ins for the coconut milk smoothie bowls, and meal replacement shake options. The main draw for the store is the cold pressed juice blends. They’re all cleverly named things like “The Morning After” and “Skinny Jeans” (a dieting blend) as well as coffees.

I look around curiously for a second at the unmanned counter. Table legs scratch against the linoleum floor. “I’m here!” Cassie says as she rushes from a table in the far back corner of the store towards the counter.

Similar to a coffee shop, there’s a small area for people to hang out in and enjoy their food, with board games stored on a nearby shelf for the patrons to use.

Roman is sitting at the small table, a chess board in front of him set up for an active game. I look at him curiously. “You don’t have a meeting this morning? Nate specifically asked me

to stop by because all the owners were supposed to be at the training facility...right?"

Roman anxiously looks down at his phone. "Yeah, but I have to be there a little after Nate. I'd better get there. Cassie, we'll have to pick this up another day."

A little after Nate? I'm pretty sure Nate left about an hour ago..

Grabbing his warm up hoodie off of the back of his chair and a plastic cup of iced coffee, Roman runs towards the door. With the door half open, he stops and moistens his lips. "Let me know if the customer comes back again, ok? We want you to be polite, but I won't tolerate people treating you like that."

The corner of Cassie's lips upturn at a hint of a smile. "I'll be fine," she assures him in her sweet voice.

"Hey! Nate didn't mention you worked here," I say as I watch Cassie run around to the back of the counter.

"Just started two weeks ago to help set up! I'm sorry I wasn't at the counter. We are having a slow Saturday! Welcome to Ambrosia! Did you need something in particular or..."

"An iced coffee, please. Nate brought home a sample for me to try, and it was so amazing."

"It's addictive," Cassie says as she carefully rings me up.

I walk around the store, looking around while I wait for Cassie to make my beverage. To the front of the counter is a glass display case with "healthy alternatives" like fat bombs

for keto dieters, brownies made from protein powder and gluten free banana bread.

“Want anything to eat with that?” Cassie asks as she hands me the coffee and a straw.

“Nah I’m good,” I say before I take a seat in the chair Roman just left. I was going to head to the pet store, but there must have been some sort of an incident with a customer for Roman to be that upset. Maybe I should hang around a bit.

“Want to play a game with me while I wait for customers? My school requires that you join a club or a team. Chess was the only one that I could stomach.”

I look down at the time on my phone. I have plenty of time before Nate’s due home. “Set up the board. But I should warn you, I play to win.”

Chapter Sixteen

WHITNEY

As predicted, the season's first cold front rolls in Sunday morning. Everything feels more alive and alert, finally getting a break from the heat. It's still warm enough to not need a jacket but cool enough to feel nice outside. Knowing Louisiana weather, I'll be back in shorts mid-week.

Wearing my number twelve jersey with a long sleeve shirt and black yoga pants, I ride to the stadium in the car Nate arranged for me. I feel like an imposter every time I get into the back seat of the shiny black town car in my cheap clothing and nails I've bitten to the quick.

Apparently, the wives and girlfriends have assigned seats at the stadium because I'm front-row center again, next to Marissa and Cassie. Shailene is to my left, holding baby AJ as he knocks a rattle on her leg. He's in a tiny Hurricanes onesie and sweatpants with tiny infant headphones to protect his delicate ears.

"Don't forget, team dinner tonight after the game at DeLucia's," Marissa announces once most of the seats are

claimed. “It’s the last home game of the preseason and likely our last time to get together until after the playoffs.”

“Oh, please,” Cassie snorts, pulling on white-framed sunglasses. “As if you’re not going to host a watch party for every single away game the minute those renovations at your place are done.”

Marissa crosses her arms over her body, and her shiny pink glossed lips form a frown. “It’s *our* place,” Marissa says, emphasizing the *our*. “And these types of get-togethers are important! The guys need....”

“These guys need peace and quiet and for us not to bicker,” Number forty-two’s wife breaks in with a wave of her hands. I’d learned her name was Jasmine from Shailene, and that her husband was a veteran player near retirement.

Marissa sits, sulking, her arms crossed as the game starts. I’ve barely started eating my loaded nachos when Nate throws the ball to Javier Cordova. I lose track of Nate, but the running back dodges and weaves around the opposing team, holding the ball as if it were his firstborn child. “Go go go go go go,” I scream so loudly it hurts my throat. Once our guy makes his way to the blue and green painted end zone, a player for the other team grabs Javier, and he falls, the ball safely cradled in his arms. Touchdown!

We all stand up to cheer loudly, the crowd’s roar deafening as Javier shakes his hips while fist-pumping in a sassy little end-zone dance. Nate and several other players jog to their teammate and give him congratulatory pats on the helmet

before moving back into position. The Hurricanes came to play today.



I'm not surprised when The Hurricanes walk away with another win. They were on fire! Every time I looked away—to grab a piece of gum from my purse or to entertain AJ while Shailene ran to the restroom, I seem to have missed something important.

The ladies still have to explain the ins and outs of the game to me, and I'm catching on. Still, a lot of the more complex rules are lost to me. It doesn't help that what I see happen and what the referees say occurs frequently doesn't match. Judging by the boos from the stands, I'm guessing I'm not alone.

As soon as the game ends, Marissa anxiously grabs Cassie's arm. "Come on, we'd better rush before we get stuck!" She's dodging and weaving around the crowd eager to escape, dragging Cassie with her while I hurry up behind them.

"I'm coming! Sheesh, you're going to yank my arm out of the socket!" Cassie protests as she slings her purse across her shoulder.

Earlier in the week, Marissa asked if I would help her with the team dinner at DeLucia's right after the game.

A press conference will keep many players, including Nate, at the arena longer, plus the time the team spends showering. If we're lucky, we'll have a good hour to work before the

others arrive...if we can get out of the stadium before the mad rush to leave.

The town car is idling on the curb in the players' parking lot. We're all out of breath when we make it to the warmth of the vehicle. "I think we beat most of the crowd," Marissa declares with a relieved sigh.

"That's because most of them aren't running to the parking lot like it's Black Friday at Macy's," I inform my slightly crazy friend with a shake of the head.

We give the driver the restaurant's address, and he pulls away from the curb.

The two-story "casually elegant dining" restaurant is at the edge of the French Quarter, close to the stadium. As we walk in, the gas-fueled exterior lighting is dimmed, casting the restaurant's wrought iron balcony into shadows. The dark green shades are pulled over the ancient wooden doors, and a small handwritten sign declares, "Closed tonight for a private event."

As we approach the hostess stand, a robust man with thinning hair slowly approaches us. "Good Evening, Ms. Miller. We just about have everything ready for you in the dining room," he says politely to Marissa.

"And the things I sent over earlier?" Marissa questions the gentleman urgently.

"We've arranged the balloons as you instructed, and the wait staff is still placing the decorations on the table," he

informs her. “I have the additional place cards here for you.” He hands Marissa a small stack of manilla cards. “I apologize again for the confusion.”

“It’s easily handled. Seating single people at random tables will work better. More mingling with people they talk to less often!” Marissa says with fake cheerfulness before turning to Cassie.

“Could you go around to each table and check to ensure there’s enough Mardi Gras beads for each person at the table? And that the balloons aren’t in anybody’s way when they’re sitting down?”

“I’m on it,” Cassie answers as she unzips her green fleece jacket and ties it around her waist, revealing a fitted gray t-shirt that says, “Sundays are for Hurricanes.”

Marissa holds out the thin stack of handwritten cards to me. “There’s just enough seating, but only if we fit ten at a table instead of eight, so we have to rearrange all the people without a guest. If you could find all the empty spots and add a name card? Don’t worry about who’s friends with who. We’re going to mix it up tonight.”

I give her a swift nod in acknowledgment and get to work. With my quick scan of the room, I can tell the well-trained staff has already taken care of everything. The Mardi Gras beads (in Hurricanes blue and green, made especially for tonight) are neatly arranged on the tables. Colored plastic confetti is carefully spread across the crisp white linen. I walk

table to table, adding whatever card is on top to the empty nameplate.

At our table, I find I'm seated with Shailene, Marissa, Cassie, and our guys. Not wanting Cassie to feel like the odd person out, I deliberately rifle through the cards until I find the name of a young first-year rookie named Daniel to keep Cassie company. He's my age but seems to be an extravert based on what I've seen of him.

Rhys Moreau is one of the first to arrive with a small group of team members from the practice squad. Marissa anxiously eyes the first of the guests' arrival as they look for their assigned seats. "The appetizers aren't ready yet!" she hisses out.

"We're in a nice restaurant with more than enough competent, well-trained staff. We're going to be okay," Cassie assures her.

"I just want everything to go perfectly," Marissa confesses as she heads to the kitchen to do God only knows what.

I roll my eyes and turn around to check on the last table, only to run into something hard. A loud gasp from the nearby table of rookies can be heard as cold fluid runs down my body, soaking into my shirt. I let out a loud squeal of displeasure and look up to find a horrified waiter holding a toppled-over tray of appetizers.

The waiter stares at me, mouth agape with wide eyes. "I'm so sorry, ma'am. Let me get you a towel."

“No, no, it’s my fault. I clearly wasn’t looking where I was going.” Glancing at my jersey, I realize I’m covered in remoulade sauce! “I’m afraid it’s too late for towels,” I sigh. “Maybe my boyfriend will have a sweatshirt in his car or something for me to change into.”

“I’ve got my duffel with me,” Moreau eagerly volunteers from the table beside me. “I took a car from the stadium since I knew we’d have a few drinks tonight. Had to bring my stuff in.” He reaches into the bag under the table and pulls out a clean jersey. He walks around the table with long swift strides before standing in front of me, the jersey held out in his outstretched hands.

I start to reach for the shirt before pulling back my hand hesitantly. I know wearing your guy’s jersey is “a thing,” but surely Nate wouldn’t mind me wearing his teammate’s while I’m in a pinch. It’s not like it’s the opposing team’s, right? It’s better than the alternative: staying covered in the dipping sauce. “At least I won’t stick out like a sore thumb,” I laugh, reaching for the clean clothing from Moreau. The players will change into street clothes, but the wives, children, and staff will still wear their game-day apparel.

“Thanks for the loan!” I tell Moreau before heading to the restroom to change.

“Oh, my pleasure,” he answers with an easy grin before sitting at the table with the other players again.

Chapter Seventeen

WHITNEY

More of the dinner guests have arrived when I walk out of the restroom in a clean shirt. Moreau is at the table nearby with his arms crossed over his chest. There's a smirk on his face and a mischievous glint in his dark eyes I don't like. "Hey, let's take a selfie!" he suggests as he reaches for his phone in the pocket of his loose-fitting jeans.

I narrow my eyes into suspicious slits before looking down to make sure there's nothing wrong with the jersey. Even I know the rookie has a reputation for being a prankster.

I hear a loud dramatic gasp and turn my head to look. "Oh my gosh, Whitney! What are you wearing!" Marissa suddenly screeches from nearby. Almond-shaped acrylic nails cover the bottom half of her face, but her blue eyes are large as saucers. "You have to go change!" *Of course, Moreau pulled some sort of prank.* Looking down at the jersey again, I see nothing wrong with it. Is this because it's not Nate's, or is there something wrong with the jersey? I wanted to support the team, even if my jersey was ruined.

Cassie is standing beside her with her eyebrows raised. “Too late,” she declares, pointing to the front door. She starts to nervously pull her long straight strawberry hair out of its ponytail, using her fingers to comb it out before running her tongue over her lips to moisten them

Nate looks every bit the handsome man he is as he walks into the restaurant with Roman, both of their postures eased with good humor after their win tonight. The running back says something to Nate with a sly grin, and Nate’s shoulders shake with silent laughter in response as he holds the door open for Roman. Javier follows behind them a second later, Roman nodding to Javier as he holds the door open for him in turn.

Pausing, Nate slowly scans the room, looking for me. I raise my hand and give him a little wave, helping him find me in the sea of similarly dressed patrons. Nate repays my welcoming grin from across the restaurant with one of his own as he slowly ambles towards me with his hands in the pockets of his dark wash jeans, followed by Roman and Javier.

Without warning, his smile drops, and his face darkens as he moves toward me at a clipped pace. *Oh no. Oh, come on! The jersey’s going to be an issue?*

Nate comes to stand between the two of us, followed by Roman and Javier. He looks at Moreau through cold hard slits as he clenches and unclenches his fist at his side, nostrils flaring with fury.

Moreau gives Nate a chin lift in greeting from the table. “Hey, what’s up, man?”

“You know *precisely* what’s up, Rookie,” Nate accuses with furrowed eyebrows as he moves closer to Moreau. *Seriously? He’s going to do this? It’s just a freaking shirt!*

Javier places a cautioning hand on Nate’s chest, and his eyes flick warningly toward the team’s businessmen at a nearby table. “Not the time, not the place, man,” Javier warns with a minute shake of the head.

Nate stares daggers at Moreau momentarily, a vein in his neck visibly twitching as he cracks his knuckles.

“Nate!” I scold, my voice low as I fold my arms over my chest, giving him an appalled look.

His slitted eyes meet mine, and I narrow my own at him in warning. He finally points an accusing finger at Moreau, and the shit-eating grin on the younger man’s face grows. “I’ll deal with you at practice tomorrow,” Nate warns, a sudden thin chill hanging on the edge of his words.

Taking my hand without as much as a hello, Nate brings me back into the single-stall restroom. Still holding my hand, he shuts the door behind us, stopping once we reach the counter area by the sink.

“Why’d you change your jersey?” he demands, nostrils flaring, his feet planted wide apart.

“I ran into a waiter carrying appetizers. It was covered in sauce!” I say defensively in an angry whisper, trying not to

raise my voice where it can be heard outside the restroom.

“So you were wearing *my* jersey at the game then?” he clarifies, narrowing his eyes again. He creeps towards me, and I step backward, hitting the edge of the cool granite counter.

“Yes, Nate! You are such a caveman with the jersey stuff. I’m wearing one, aren’t I?” My voice is higher than I’d intended, and I glance toward the door, where I can hear an occasional muffled voice.

“You’re wearing another man’s name and number, Whitney. Take it off,” he demands, his jaw clenched tight.

I look at him incredulously and furrow my brow in annoyance at him. He has a point, but I’d been stuck in stained clothes, for heaven’s sake! “I had nothing else to put on!” I protest, folding my arms defensively across my body.

“Well, you can have my button-down to wear now. Take... off...his...jersey,” he insists again, folding his arms around his body, determination in his stance as he watches me with an arrogant lift of the brow.

Frustrated at Nate’s behavior, I pull the jersey over my head, exposing my white lace bra to him.

He takes the jersey from my hand and gives the wadded-up fabric a sneer of angry displeasure before tossing it into the trash can next to us.

I watch him with pursed lips. “I should give that back to Moreau!” I hiss as my frustration begins to build.

“Not after it was covering your sweet little body,” Nate answers back in a matter-of-fact tone, clearly aggrieved at the mere suggestion.

He prowls slowly towards me, his eyes alight with fury, his body tense as he slowly unbuttons his black plaid shirt, leaving him in his charcoal t-shirt. He helps me put the clothing on with the front undone, leaving my breasts exposed to him. I feel my lips part, and my mouth turns dry as our gazes meet, my heart palpitating loudly in my ears. My nipples pucker in response to his heated gaze as I try to control my breathing in anticipation of his next move. Is he going to kiss me? Firm, claiming hands wrap around my waist and grasp the round of my bottom in both hands tightly.

Leaning into me, his growing bulge brushes against my belly as he presses me into the hard vanity. “You’re starting to give me a complex. Making me wonder what the fuck I’m going to find when I walk out of a game to you,” he confesses before stealing my lips in a hungry, demanding kiss.

My greedy hands go under his t-shirt to the chiseled contours of his back when he leans in and starts to lick his way down my neck as he unfastens my bra. Leaving it loose around my shoulders, he lifts up the cup, and captures the hard pink tip of my nipple in his mouth. His tongue swirls it before sucking. I rock into him, his erection steely between us.

“We can’t do this here,” I advise huskily as his calloused hands yank down my yoga pants and panties with one quick jerk, and roughened fingers start to stroke my core.

Nate's mouth leaves my breasts. "Looks like we already are," he says with a small laugh. "We'd better make this fast," he informs me mischievously. "Everybody's going to start looking for me soon."

He reaches for the zipper of his jeans and pulls them down with his briefs, exposing his cock to me. After lifting me onto the counter, his fingers digging into my hips, he spreads my legs wide for him. Inserting two fingers, he tests my readiness for him. "Even wetter. Getting off on the idea of me fucking you in public, Angel?" Nate says with a laugh.

Jerkface. Does he have to be so freaking cocky?

"Just shut up and fuck me," I half moan to the arrogant son of a bitch.

He grips the back of my hair, not painfully, but firmly. "Not until you tell me who the fuck you belong to."

"What? Nate, what game are you playing.."

"Tell me this pussy's mine," he demands, his pupils dilating, the jade in his eyes glistening with gold flecks as he raises a dark eyebrow.

He leans down without releasing his grip on my hair and starts sucking and licking down my neck and shoulders. He's deliberately left his mark on my skin; I know he has. He runs his stubbled cheek against my neck, and his free hand goes to my nipple, slowly caressing it. I arch into him, the wetness growing between my legs. "God, please just fuck me already!"

"Tell me first, Whitney. Say it. Say you're mine."

“Fine, I’m yours,” I say through gritted teeth.

He smirks proudly before lining himself up. He enters me with one long hard, claiming thrust. I gasp at the sudden invasion of his cock. He stills briefly so I can adjust, kneading my breasts in his hands. “Now was that so hard?”

Can he please just shut up and fuck me already? Wrapping my legs around him, I draw him closer, deeper, before leaning forward and draping my arms around his neck.

“God, I love fucking you raw,” he mutters into my neck as he relentlessly plunges into my depths. His nose travels from the crook of my neck before tracing the curve of my jaw. His breath is warm against my lips as he begins to mercilessly fuck me, his fingers bracing onto my hips.

I shutter my eyes and allow the pleasure to wash over me.

“C’mon Angel, I need that orgasm. Give it to me,” he groans as he gyrates his hips in the swirling motion he knows sends me over the edge. My back arches off the counter as my pleasure builds into a rush of warmth, and my orgasm hits me. My pussy walls clamp down on his hard cock, and I muffle my moans on Nate’s shoulder, riding out the wave of ecstasy. He moves deep into me one last time, emptying himself into my pussy, his moans of pleasure buried in my throat.

Nate stays inside me while we catch our breaths and kisses me sweetly with his hands in my hair. I feel all tingly, desirable, adored, with his hooded gaze on me and his gentle caresses to my body.

The distant sound of a man speaking loudly breaks our lusty haze. “That’s Coach. Giving a speech, it sounds like. We’d better get out there.” Nate takes a long pull of air before pulling himself out of me and zipping up his jeans.

I feel wetness dripping down my bare legs in a sticky mess. “Babe, can you please give me something to clean up with?” I ask, moving off of the countertop.

“No,” he answers, matter of fact. “Since you decided to wear another man’s number today, you get to walk around with me all over your sweet pussy to remind you exactly who it belongs to.” He leans over and steals a soft kiss before pulling up my underwear and yoga pants.

“Nate! I can’t walk out there like this!” I insist crisply. “I need to clean up!”

“You can, and you will,” he has the audacity to order. “You aren’t leaving this bathroom unless it’s like this, Angel Face. So you can leave now, like this, or we can have a standoff until someone finally knocks on that door looking for me, and we’re forced to come out.”

I fix my bra and button up Nate’s shirt with swift movements, giving him a venomous look. “You’re such an asshole!”

I turn to the mirror and smooth down my hair, trying my best to not make it totally obvious what we’ve been up to in the bathroom. “I’ll leave first,” I tell Nate once I’m satisfied with my appearance.

“What? Why?”

I slowly count to ten in my head and make my voice turn saccharinely sweet. “Because, Sweetheart, if we walk out together looking like we do, everybody’s going to know exactly what we’ve been up to in here.”

He gives me a careless shrug of the shoulders and swings open the door, further stoking my ire. “And the problem with that is...?” he says dismissively. “People are very aware we’re fucking, Whit.”

“But...wha...seriously?” I stammer. “In the bathroom of a restaurant Nate? Have you no shame?”

He rolls his eyes at me before grabbing my hand. We walk into the dining room together, his hand tight around mine. My face is flush as I avoid the eyes of the people closest to the door, afraid of the knowing looks I’ll see on their faces.

I’m surprised when I find everybody watching Roman as he stands, looking irritated as a waiter fits an extra chair at the table directly between Cassie and Daniel. There’s plenty of room, but was Roman not happy with where I sat him? I try to remember where I’d placed him. I thought it was with some other friends of his? He’s close with Caleb, though. Maybe he just wanted to sit near him? I hope I didn’t offend him in some way.

Once we reach our seats, Caleb gives us a smirk over his glass while Shailene looks me up and down wordlessly as if saying, “*I know what you’ve been up to. Hope you had fun.*” I feel my face turn warm with embarrassment as I reach the

table, noticing the tiny smirk Marissa was having difficulty suppressing.

Nate pulls out my chair for me as if he were actually a gentleman, before taking his own seat.

A waitress in black slacks and a vest walks over to get our drink orders. “Whatcha having, Angel Face?” Nate asks as if we’re not currently in the middle of a fight.

A shot of strychnine with an arsenic chaser would come in handy right about now. I bet he wouldn’t even be able to taste it in that whiskey he drinks. “I’ll have a cosmo, please.”

“Whiskey, neat,” he offers to the waitress before resting his hand on my thigh.

I push it off with a frustrated hand and turn towards Marissa and away from him. “Everything turned out so nicely, I think?”

Marissa takes a sip of her white wine. “Yes, it is! It’s nice to get into the French Quarter! You’d think living in the city, I’d be here all the time, but I never seem to be able to make it down here.”

The waitress returns with my mixed drink and Nate’s whiskey sans arsenic. I take a sip of the sweet liquor, hoping it helps calm my temper so I can make it through tonight. Nobody I’ve ever met has pissed me off quite as much as Nate does.

Chapter Eighteen

WHITNEY

Since we both have an early day the next morning, we don't linger long at the table after eating dessert. I've tried to ignore Nate while I cool my temper. Still, his non-stop little touches throughout dinner reminded me of his presence, as if my soaked panties didn't serve as reminder enough.

I'm so frustrated with him! He's a good man, I *know* he is, and these last few weeks with him have been amazing. But he goes all Neanderthal Nate sometimes, and it drives me crazy. My anger cooled to frustration during dinner. I'm sure the liquor and good company helped. It was initially uncomfortable for me at the table, and I'd waited for more teasing from my new friends, but the incident seemed to be forgotten by them.

The cool air hits us as I walk out of the restaurant with Nate's hand on my lower back. At the valet stand, a small group of players and their partners are waiting for their cars, each with Hurricanes beads dangling from their neck, the

mood light after the victory on the field, and the liquor with dinner.

The sound of a street performer belting out a bluesy rendition of “Stand By Me” can be heard softly in the distance as we wait for Nate’s car on the broken sidewalk lit by the lampposts. Tourists and locals alike are on the second-story balconies of the neighboring bars enjoying the nice weather.

Once the shiny black sedan pulls up, Nate opens the door for me before the valet has a chance. After he tips the valet and gets into the driver’s seat, he turns his green eyes to me. “Ready to talk yet, or are you still pissed?”

“I’m not angry anymore, Nate; I’m exasperated with you! What the hell was that back there?” I demand.

“I might have lost my cool a little bit when I saw you in his fucking jersey,” he confesses in the darkened car. He tightens his jaw and grips the wheel as he looks ahead at the busy street.

“A little bit? Nate, you went full Hulk!”

He gives me a haughty chuckle. “Not quite full Hulk. I save that for the field.”

I roll my eyes at the barbarian. “It’s just a jersey, Nate.”

Nate sucks in a deep breath. “It’s not just a jersey to Moreau or me,” he explains. “That number is a part of who we are. And with him putting his number on *my* girl’s back.....Moreau knew what he was doing.”

I lean back in my seat and process his words, looking out at the city as it passes us by.

Although rush hour is long over, the ancient streets of the French Quarter are still full of pedestrians and cars alike. Nate maneuvers the sporty sedan around a large pothole with the same finesse he handles a football. I can't help but watch him, taking in every careful movement of his hands, the way the shadows from the street lights briefly illuminate his handsome face. His forehead is wrinkled, and his jaw tight.

At a red light, impatient fingers thump against the steering wheel. He clears his throat and looks in my direction, his eyes meeting mine for a second before looking away at the street. He clears his throat again and opens his mouth as if he were going to say something, but flips on the radio, choosing to leave unsaid whatever is on his mind. Is it another apology? Had I embarrassed him, and he's mad at me?

"I should have freaking known Moreau was up to no good," I mutter in the darkness.

"Moreau has a lot of growing up to do." Nate's tone is biting. "He needs to stop.." He purses his lips and breaks off with a huff. "I've been on his case pretty hard lately, trying to get him up to snuff. He was fucking with me and put you in the middle of it."

I look at my hands folded in my lap. "Still, I should have known.."

"Pro football, well football as a whole, is its own culture. You won't understand some things until you've been around a

while. It's why I asked Marissa to keep an eye out for you. I'm surprised she didn't warn you not to do it."

"She was a bit distracted," I explain. "She was very worried about every little detail of the dinner and didn't know anything happened until a second before you walked in."

He lets out a little laugh. "That would explain it, then. She can be pretty intense when it comes to planning Hurricanes events."

"A little intense?" I laugh. "That's the understatement of the year...I hate to see what she's going to be like on her wedding day!"

With a glance at the sticker on Nate's windshield, the security guard at the entrance of Nate's neighborhood opens the large metal gates for us with a polite nod in our direction.

Petal's waiting for us at the door, greeting Nate first, excitedly standing on her back legs. "Hey, sweet girl. Have you been outside all this time? Your fur's all cold." He walks over to the security system's controls while I walk to the master bedroom and make a beeline for the connected bathroom.

I caught Nate organizing fresh bottles of my favorite face wash and toothpaste by the sink last week. Bottles of my shampoo, conditioner and a toothbrush have appeared. Sweet Nate, the guy that's been slowly worming his way into my heart, had done that.

I quickly clean myself up from our earlier escapades and dress for bed. He walks in, strips, and uses his side of the jack and jill sink to brush his teeth while I wash off my make-up.

It's already late, so I go to the side of the bed, turn off the lamp, and lay on my side, hoping sleep finds me soon. The adrenaline from our argument has long worn off. Mixed with the late hour, I'm feeling drained.

Nate's large feet make a light pattering noise across the hardwood floor as he makes his way to the bed. He stops right by me and pulls the covers down off of me with a swift jerk. "What the fuck is this?" Popping open my eyes, I find my favorite caveman looking at me with a deep frown.

"It's been such a long day. I'm going to sleep," I answer dismissively, grabbing the corner of the covers to pull them back up.

"Well, I know that, but why are you all the way over here?"

I look over to the rest of the empty bed. "What do you mean? I'm on my side."

"*Your* side of the bed? Nuh-uh, no. We're not doing this '*his and her side*' shit. You sleep in the middle, with your head on my chest like always. If you're too pissed at me to sleep like that, fine. We'll talk it out until you're ready to. But there is no opposite sides of the bed for us," he insists.

Walking around the mattress with determination written on his face, he stops at the end table to flick off the lamp. After

pulling back the covers, he climbs in. Reaching for me, he rolls me onto his chest and covers us with the blanket.

“Nate, I just wanna go to sleep. I’m so tired,” I say with a frustrated breath as I return to my pillow. I’m long since over my anger, but as tired as I am, talking is the last thing I want to do right now.

He reaches back for me and pulls me back down onto his chest. “I told you, if you’re too upset to sleep with me like this, we talk it out. We’re not doing the thing where you freeze me out in our bed. If you’re mad, let’s turn on the lights and discuss this.”

He starts to gently run his fingers through my hair. His soothing touch makes me drowsier, and I spoon deeper into his chest. “I’m not upset anymore. We don’t need to talk, Nate. Just sleep,” I groan.

I know Nate well enough by now to know that talking to him about his jealous behavior would be as fruitful as hitting my head against a brick wall. It’s pointless. It’s best to go to sleep and press the restart button tomorrow.

I hadn’t consciously moved to the side of the bed. It wasn’t my intent to punish him, but maybe I was seeking a teeny bit of space on some subconscious level.

“Fine, sleep away, Angel Face. As long as you’re where you belong,” he replies, matter of fact.

And just when I think sweet Nate is back, the neanderthal comes back to the party. Stifling back another groan, I lay my

head on his rigid chest, wrapping my arm around his body as I breathe in his deep woody scent. My last thought before I give in to sleep is one realization— It hadn't been Nate's skill with sex or the thrill of fucking in public that had excited me so much at the restaurant. As much as I'd raised a fuss with Nate about his barbaric behavior, I'd been aroused by it.

Chapter Nineteen

NATE

Sleep was elusive until the wee hours of the morning as my brain worked overtime, replaying the night in my head. I've gone from barely remembering the woman in my bed's name to self-imposed celibacy to the strong emotions I have for Whitney. The raw feelings are so new, so overwhelming at times, that it brings out this side of me I'd not known existed until she came into my life.

The silky softness of Whitney's hair in my fingers is comforting as I rest my hand on her lower back and watch her breathing slow. When her body softens with sleep, she nuzzles deeper into me, finding her usual spot on my chest. This feels so right, so perfect. She has to feel the same way I do. Right? The alternative is simply unthinkable. I ball my hands into fists at my side at the thought, the nails digging deep into my palm.

Breathing deeply to calm myself, I recall the pleased smile on her face after her orgasm tonight and how she leans against me whenever I'm near. I'd expected her to try to go to her

apartment alone after the incident in the restaurant. Still, it seems to have never crossed her mind, even if she did try to freeze me out a little bit at bedtime. No, Whitney's starting to feel as strongly as I do, whether she admits it to herself yet or not.

I'm able to crash for a few hours before I'm startled awake by my alarm. The sheet next to me is cool, and I don't hear the shower going.

Anxious to see Whitney before she leaves for work, I throw on a t-shirt and pajama pants and walk barefoot to the kitchen.

The smell of Whitney's freshly brewed coffee fills the kitchen. She's at the sink, rinsing out the tumbler she uses every morning on her way to work. It makes me happy she's making herself so at home here. A small smile finds her face. "Good morning. I wasn't sure if I would see you or not. You seemed like you were sleeping pretty heavily."

I walk up to her and wrap my arms around her waist. I bring my nose to her neck and breathe in her intoxicating scent. Leaning down, I kiss the crook of her neck. "Are we good?"

She turns her head and presses a small kiss on my lips. "We're good," she assures me with a slight nod. "The new housekeeper is already here. I let her in about ten minutes ago. She said her name was Helene."

A woman with pin-straight, short graying blonde hair walks in as if on cue. She's wearing black orthopedic shoes with the dark slacks and fitted snap-down top the agency requires.

Tying a sturdy cotton apron with deep pockets around her waist, she walks from the mud room half an hour early.

Petal opens a drowsy eye from her bed in the kitchen and stretches before walking over to inspect our new visitor. Some guard dog she is, allowing someone to walk straight in without as much as a peep. Let an egret land in the yard, though, and she's on full alert at the window, yipping.

The new housekeeper leans down to allow Petal to sniff her before gently patting her head. "Bon matin, petit," she coos at the dog in a thick Cajun-French accent.

A warm smile greets me when she looks up, her brown eyes meeting mine. "Hello, Mr. Coleman, I presume?"

"Hey. The agency gave you all of your paperwork, I believe?"

"Yes, sir. At the end of last week."

"Would you be so kind as to leave it on my desk for me? It's the third door on the left." The agency normally keeps copies of the employee files, but I like copies for myself. I always do background checks of my own and ensure the hourly wage the agency is paying the housekeeper (and billing me for) is at least equivalent to their last position.

She looks around the tidy kitchen. "Where would you like me to start?"

My mother taught me to clean up after myself, so despite the fact I've not had a housekeeper for a week, my home is

still pretty tidy. “Anywhere you’d like. The kitchen’s fine, I guess.”

I lean down to kiss Whitney’s cheek. “I have to go jump in the shower. Have you fed the dog yet?” We’ve both taken over the chore and discovered two days ago that once or twice we’d both fed her. Petal eagerly devoured both meals.

“Not yet, but I will in a second. My place tonight? I haven’t been home in a while.”

Leaning down, I give her forehead one last tender kiss before heading to shower. “Sure, I’ll bring Petal over with me, so she has access to the yard today.”

Walking down the hall, I hear Helene ask, “When will the children be here, ma’am?”

“Children?” Whitney asks with a little laugh, clearly confused.

My pulse beats heavily in my ears as I pause in the hallway, waiting to hear the conversation.

Fuck.

“Yes, the agency was very clear that there would be a small dog and young children about and that Mr. Coleman wanted someone comfortable around them. I assumed you had little ones at home. I wanted to make sure I have their food prepared for them.”

“Oh, he must have meant his nieces and nephews. Nate comes from a large family,” she says dismissively. “Although I

don't know why that's an issue. I'm pretty sure he said his family stays at a hotel when they come to town."

Taking a deep breath of relief, I walk into the bedroom. The last thing I need is for Whitney to figure out that for some strange reason, I hired a housekeeper that normally doubles as a nanny in other positions.



The locker room is suspiciously quiet the next day at practice. It's never this peaceful. There's always someone playing music to amp up the team and people talking on their phones. Today, however, there's nothing. Nor does anybody look my way as I walk into the room. The hair on the back of my neck sticks up with unease as I walk to my locker without a single glance in my direction, each of the player's attention on taping their joints and changing...anything but looking my way.

I remove my wallet, place it on the small shelf above my equipment, and notice a pink glittery gift bag next to my shoulder pads.

Lifting it up with two fingers, I peek inside and remove a rolled-up bundle of cloth secured with an elaborately tied ribbon. There's a small gift tag, "To Whitney," written neatly in a woman's pretty cursive. *How nice. The asshole took the time to have it professionally wrapped.*

I hear Moreau chortle, and I have no doubt who the gift is from. I don't bother unwrapping the contents of the bag. I

know the blue and green fabric of a Hurricanes jersey well, and I have zero doubt precisely whose name is emblazoned across it.

The rookie breaks into snickers, but he's alone; the rest of the team far too smart to even consider finding this amusing.

Nostrils flaring, jaw tight, I move with slow, deliberate steps, breaching the space between us, and grip the front of his t-shirt in my fists. "Think something's funny?" I say in a low, dangerous tone. I notice several other players surrounding us, waiting for my next move.

Moreau holds his hands up in full surrender as if it will somehow save him. "Man, chill. It was just a joke," he protests contemptuously.

"So, you decided to involve my woman in it? In your locker room, rookie fun bullshit?" I tighten my grip on his t-shirt, my knuckles turning white.

He stares at me wide-eyed. "Just trying to lighten the mood around here. You're always so fucking uptight."

"Maybe someone around here has to be uptight since you haven't stopped being a jokester since you made it off the practice squad. Think you're big shit, do you?"

He smirks at me, far too bravely for someone in his position. "Everything about me is big. Maybe your girl wants a taste."

I pull back my fist to smash it into his pretty boy face, but Roman stops my arm in mid-air. "*That* is your throwing hand,"

he reminds me, deadpan. “The rookie just isn’t worth it.”

I narrow my eyes at the younger player and drop my grip on his shirt, turning to walk away, trying to compose my temper before I’m fined or benched because of this asshole. Roman’s right... He’s not worth it.

“All this shit over a piece of ass,” Moreau mutters from his locker as he removes his shirt.

I stop dead in my tracks at his words and pivot to face him. Nope, I was wrong. It is worth it. I take two swift paces forward, my pulse pounding in my ears from the sudden adrenaline rush, fists clenched into balls at my side.

“Aww fuck! Man, don’t do it,” Caleb cautions from the doorway of the training room, having just arrived for practice.

Moreau seems to notice I’m approaching from his peripheral vision and turns swiftly. As if I would be chicken shit enough to jump a man from behind. Words start to come from his smart mouth just as my fist makes contact with his jaw, with a satisfying sound of flesh hitting flesh.

Caleb’s and Landry’s arms are suddenly around me, pulling me back and off of him before I can land a second punch.

I try to dart forward again, intent on wiping the floor with that grin of his, but can’t break free from the hold the offensive tackle has around me...not with Landry helping him.

“That’s enough!” Coach threatens from the entrance. “Coleman, my office, now!”

I give Moreau a warning glare. “Stay the fuck away from Whitney. I don’t want you even looking in her direction. Are we clear?”

He avoids my glare but nods his head up and down while a trainer runs forward with an ice pack for the pretty boy’s face. I’ve split his lip, and that red mark promises to bruise. I’m suddenly filled with regret...I should have broken his nose.

Coach walks ahead of me, greeting the office staff that passes us by with polite nods, his anger with me hidden behind a friendly facade for the staff.

He shuts the office door with a loud thud. “What the fuck was that back there? Why is my team captain in a locker room fight like this is some pee wee football game?”

“Sorry, Coach, won’t happen again,” I mumble, staring at the carpet.

“Damn straight it won’t. I don’t know what the fuck has you so fucking distracted lately, but I want your head screwed on right and out of your ass by the next game. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“Now get your ass to Naomi and have her ice that hand. The last thing I need is you fucking it up so close to the start of the season.”

I nod in acknowledgment and leave the office in search of the trainer to do his bidding. This isn’t my first ass-chewing from a coach, and it likely won’t be my last.

He has a point. Since I met Whitney, I've been distracted, not myself. It's not Whitney's presence in my life itself that's distracting. It's the fear of losing her. I need her bound to me in every way possible. It's become a need to see her with my ring on her finger, in my bed every night, our first baby at her breast. But these things take time.

I find Naomi in the same training room I'd recently all but fucked Whitney in. My girl permeates every tiny facet of my life, whether she realizes it or not. "I need ice for my hand," I confess to my friend, holding up my fist with the knuckles busted.

She shakes her head and sighs deeply, running her fingers through her short brown hair. "Did you have to use your throwing hand?" she half whines, looking down at my swollen knuckles. Naomi's been with the Hurricanes longer than most of the staff, including myself and the coaches. Nothing we players do can shock her anymore.

"Nice to know you have so much faith in me," I laugh. "I don't think I did any damage, just a little swollen, maybe."

She looks at me inquisitively. "What happened? Why risk so much when you're days away from starting the season?"

"He was fucking with something he had no right to be fucking with," I bite out.

She lifts her eyebrows knowingly. "This wouldn't have anything to do with Whitney wearing his jersey last night, would it?"

I feel my jaw tick. So word of the prank had spread to the training staff too. “Maybe the fucker will get the message and not fuck with my woman next time.”

“Uh-uh. I’ve never seen you like this with a woman before. She must be special.”

“Whitney is very special.”

She gently places the ice pack on my fist and looks up at me, her eyes softening. “I should have known when you finally fell, you’d fall hard.”

“I’ve....never felt like this before about anybody.” The words feel like a heavy burden lifted, somehow freeing me. Whitney’s turning me into a sap.

Naomi gives me a little laugh. “It’s always like this in the beginning. You can’t get enough of each other, heart racing every time you see them. But then you marry, have a baby or two, and things calm down to a new normal. You’ll see.”

I nod in her direction, but I think she’s wrong. I don’t think I’ll ever not feel this crazy about Whit.



The murky water of Lake Pontchartrain slaps loudly against the sea wall, the shoreline unusually high due to the recent weather. Practice today was a shit show and awkward after the locker room incident. Coach rode our asses—the entire team’s atonement for the fight.

The wind cuts through my fleece jacket as I stare at the clouds swirling around us, just as gray as my mood. I should have checked the weather before we left.

Eager for fresh air and peace, I've brought Whitney for a walk on the lakefront for a change of scenery and, hopefully, mood.

Whitney stops by a painted metal bench and looks up at the sky. "Look at that sunset! Isn't it breathtaking?"

She's right; it is stunning. While devoid of its normal pink and reds due to the clouds, the sun is fading into smoky ambers and mellow golds, giving it a more tranquil feel. That's Whitney, noting the beautiful sunset on what most would call a gloomy day.

"Yeah, it is," I admit, sitting on the cool bench, eager to watch the day take its final bow.

Whitney looks at me with a knowing eyebrow. "So, are you going to tell me what happened to your knuckles?"

Fuck.

"Things got a little too rowdy at practice. Scraped my knuckles up pretty bad."

Not exactly the truth, but not a lie either. She rolls her eyes, and I wonder for a moment if she's going to call me on my bullshit.

The lake is surprisingly busy, given the weather. Pedestrians on bikes and joggers still fill the busy sidewalk in front of us. Two sailboats are cruising at a clipped pace, headed to the

nearby pier. I guess when you're a New Orleans native, the rain simply becomes the norm.

The clouds thunder again, and I grasp Whitney's hand. "Let's get out of the rain."

Droplets start to pelt down on the windshield as soon as we're in the car. The click of two seatbelts breaks the silence, followed by the engine's purr and the wipers' squeak against the glass.

Whitney flips the heater vents away from her since they're still blowing cold air and tightly wraps her heavy knit sweater jacket around her body to ward off the chill.

Although I've put knit gloves with her jacket and tote multiple times, her hands are still frustratingly uncovered as she rubs them together to warm them up.

Whitney's irresistible like this. Blonde wavy hair is wind-blown, cheeks rosy from the cold air. Wrapping my arm around the back of the seat, I lean in and touch my forehead to Whitney's for a second, breathing in her sweet scent. Her breath is warm against mine as I feel her cheeks curve into a smile as my lips caress the top of her head.

I move back to my own seat. "So, Angel Face, wanna run away with me this weekend?" I offer playfully. "Since I'm playing Thursday, I'm free until Sunday. It's my parents' thirtieth wedding anniversary, and we're all going to their vacation house to celebrate."

Her smile melts into a concerned frown. “Isn’t your family’s second home a bit far away?”

I take the car out of park and pull out. “It’s a quick flight. I do it all the time. Besides, you did kinda introduce me to your parents. Seems like it’s only fair you meet mine.”

I glance over and catch her rolling her eyes at me. “More like you introduced yourself to them!” she laughs.

I clasp her hand in mine and kiss the back of it. “Po-tay-to, po-tah-to. It’s all details. Whatcha say, Whit? My family’s not getting there til Saturday morning, so we’ll have the house all to ourselves Friday night,” I say with a brow wiggle.

“A weekend in the mountains with a handsome man? How can I resist? But what about the dog? I don’t know if I can arrange for her to get on a plane so quickly.”

I look at her sheepishly. “Dad kinda already has his plane on standby for us. The dog doesn’t need any special paperwork. They’re excited to meet you. Everybody’s going to be there with the kids.”

She bites her lip, thinking. “Maybe I can do a little grading tonight to make sure I stay ahead. That way, I don’t have to this weekend....”

I can’t resist the urge to roll my eyes at her. “You know, Whitney, taking some time for yourself is okay. I know it’s your first year teaching, but it’s not the apocalypse if papers aren’t graded immediately.”

“I know. I just feel guilty. You’re not wrong, though...All work and no play, right?”

Chapter Twenty

WHITNEY

Nate's staring at me from the other side of the laptop, his thickly veined arm resting behind his head on the hotel room pillow. He's waiting at the hotel for his flight, resting after a long game. There were some weather delays, preventing the private flight from taking off for a few hours, so the team decided to go back to the hotel to rest for a while. "C'mon baby, show me what you're wearing." He wets his lips with his tongue. "That's not one of my t-shirts or a nightgown. I can tell from here."

With a coy smile, I angle the screen more, showing off the jersey I've cropped two inches below my breasts and the matching cheeky panties I bought just for the occasion. "Like it?" I ask in a breathy voice.

A slow devilish grin comes to Nate's face. "Yes. A lot. Now why don't you slide those panties down and show me my pretty pink pussy?" he growls hungrily.

I make a show of starting to glide my panties down my legs but pause when I hear a loud bang. I turn, listening for another

sound, and hear a familiar crash of metal hitting metal in the side yard. It's the trash cans. A raccoon, maybe?

I groan loudly and pull up my underwear. "There's something in my side yard by my garbage cans. I'd better go out there before I have a huge mess to clean up in the morning," I pout.

Nate darts up in his bed, his eyes wide. "Wait, something's in your side yard? Nuh uh, no, don't go out there, Whitney," he insists.

I start to move off the bed and can't hide the annoyance in my voice. "I have to, Nate. It's just a possum or something. I'll go shine a light on it, and it'll run away, I'm sure."

Nate picks up the phone, and I can see him texting furiously on his phone while I'm on video call on his tablet. "Do *not* go out there, Whitney. It could be a drunk from the bar or something."

There's a very loud ruckus and the sound of someone groaning loudly. "Nate, someone's in the sideyard!" I hiss, looking back at the window.

Nate jerks up, his face icy, his jaw tight from the screen. "Get into the closet, Whitney" he barks.

I move towards the sound of the noise to peek out.

"Whitney, get away from that window and get into the closet," he orders from the laptop, his voice breaking with worry.

I look around the room, searching for the phone I can never keep track of. “I need to call the cops!”

Nate shuts his eyes tightly. “I’ll call for help. Where’s your phone? Can you grab it real quick?”

“Maybe I should run out the front door?” I say urgently as I throw on a long fleece robe and a pair of house slippers. “That way, I’m not in the house if...”

“Whitney, I’ve gone through a lot of training with the bodyguards and my dad over the years. Get in the fucking closet *now*.”

My hands shaking, I grab my phone off the nightstand and a sleeping Petal off the bed and walk into the closet, leaving the feed live with Nate.

I go to the furthest corner, breathing rapidly in the tiny dark space, Petal clutched to my chest.

Nate: Turn off the closet light if it’s on, and turn your phone on vibrate.

Whitney: Did you call the police?

Nate: They’re en route. Minutes away.

Since when is NOPD’s response time anywhere near minutes?

Whitney: I'm so scared, Nate.

Nate: It's going to be okay. Just hold on for a little while.

I stay in the darkened closet, my phone in my hand, texting back and forth with Nate for comfort until there's a loud, authoritative knock on my front door. The type that the cops, firemen, and the like use.

Whitney: The cops are here. I may be quiet for a bit.

I place Petal on the ground, put my phone in my robe pocket, and slowly creep out of the closet as I look around the door anxiously. I want to call Nate to hear his voice reassuring me, but I'm worried that the noise of our voices will tip someone off as to where I am in the house.

My breath is loud to my ears as I search frantically for anything to use as a weapon. Spotting my new umbrella, I bring it with me and slowly creep down the hall.

I peep into the living space at the edge of the hallway, resting my hands on the cracked plaster. Something is definitely going on still in my sideyard...I can hear grunting and a loud female voice ordering someone to stay down.

Wielding my umbrella like a bat, I slowly walk toward the door, trying to stay out of the view of the oval glass. Once close enough, I can see a navy dress shirt and a suit jacket.

Nuh-uh. No way. I'm not answering the door for anybody without a badge, and that's not an NOPD uniform.

The man at the door bangs again. "Ms. Evans, I received a call. I'm here checking on you. Please open the door, so we know you're okay," the stranger calls out.

I look around frantically, trying to figure out what to do. Should I hide in the pantry or my bedroom again until the cops come? I take a deep breath and hold it for a minute before slowly exhaling.

Another bang. "Ms. Evans, we're concerned for your safety. Mr. Coleman called and asked us to come over. I'm an employee of Benson Security. Please open the door so that we don't have to break it down to check on you."

I've seen people in Benson Security polos around Nate occasionally and at Marissa's party, so I know it's the company Nate's brother-in-law owns. But I'm afraid and alone. Going through my options quickly, I decide on caution. Biting my lip, I remember a safety tip I'd seen once on a daytime talk show. "I want to see some ID," I call out.

"Well, ma'am, you need to open the door for that, don't you?" he suggests. "I can't show you my ID through wood."

"Put your ID against the window," I demand.

Dress shoes thump against the wooden porch, and once an ID is laid flat against the window, my visitor taps the glass. Slowly, I creep forward. A Tennessee driver's license identifies the man as Matias De Leon. Staying as far away

from the glass as possible, I snap a picture of the glass and send it to Nate. “Where’s your badge?” I demand, trying to make my voice sound as take charge as possible.

“Well, ma’am, I’m not NOPD, so I don’t have a badge. I’m off duty, so I don’t have my Benson Security ID with me. I was the closest person nearby when we got the call. But if you call Mr. Coleman, or his brother-in-law, Mr. Benson, they’ll both assure you they sent me.” His tone is cool, calming, as if he’s used to handling risky situations.

Whitney: sends pic. This guy’s at the door.

Nate: It’s okay, Angel. He’s one of my brother-in-law’s guys. Just let him in.

The man at the door is large...almost as big as Nate, which says a lot. His large frame fills up most of the doorway as he nods in my direction. Deep brown eyes look down at me through furrowed dark brows. “You okay, ma’am?”

My head starts to buzz, and my hands shake. “Ye-yeah, just a little scared. I thought I heard someone in the side yard still?”

He laughs. “Your neighbor took the guy out with a taser. My partner’s handcuffing him now while we wait for the police.”

My neighbor went after the intruder alone? Is she insane?
“Is anybody hurt?”

He shakes his head from side to side. “I think the guy’s regretting his choices right now. She only caught one of them, though, and she saw three. They’re young. Very young teenagers. Looks like they hit your car first.”

I take a tentative step onto the porch. The newly installed floodlight is on, lighting up the yard. The side passenger glass of Nate’s SUV is shattered. *Crap*. I don’t even want to think about how much that’s going to cost to repair. “I guess it’s a good thing I don’t leave much of anything in the car, then.”

“You have your purse, recent purchases, and so forth?”

My shoulders slump. “I left the dog’s leash and jacket in the car,” I groan. “Maybe they didn’t take it?”

“Kids have been hitting the neighborhood pretty steadily lately. They steal whatever is lying around, pulling door handles. They were likely snooping around to see if you had anything in your backyard to take.”

The loud siren of NOPD announces their arrival, finally, and Matias turns to look over his shoulder. “The cops need to talk to your neighbor first. Maybe you could pack a bag so we can drop you off somewhere tonight?”

I bite my lip and look back into my apartment. I don’t want to stay here tonight. I feel so violated, so unsafe. I want to leave, but my hands are shaky, and now, the glass on Nate’s car is shattered. I don’t even have a way to drive myself.

I turn to walk back inside. “I already have my bags packed for a trip. I’ll just grab them real quick.”

Lifting the phone, I sent a quick text to Nate.

Whitney: Police are here. I'm grabbing my bag so they can bring me to your house with Petal. Not sure what to do about the SUV? I'm so sorry, but they shattered the glass.

Nate: Matias told me already. I have a tow truck coming. Just grab the absolute necessities and get home. I'll be there in four hours.

Whitney: Okay.

I grab the small roller bag I'd packed for this weekend, and Petal. I'm just grateful Petal and I already have duplicates of some things at Nate's.

An officer is walking a young boy across my yard handcuffed. He's small, the same size as maybe an eighth grader, his face full of rage as the police opens the door for him. How is a child that age even out this late at night without their parents knowing? I can't even begin to think about it.

After a quick interview with NOPD, Sawyer's guy offers to drive me to Nate's. "It's okay. You've done enough," I say tiredly. "I can just call...." *Just call who, Whitney? Your coworkers are new friends, Nate's at an away game, your family is several hours away, and it's very late at night.*

I feel so isolated and alone and feel the anger at Preston's mother begin to build again for putting me in a situation where I'm so far away from home. Had she not had me banned from the parish, I wouldn't be living in the city.

I feel tears of frustration, fear, and a bunch of emotions I don't want to think about, building up as I look around, searching for an answer that isn't to be had. I sit on the front stoop with my bag in front of me, feeling numb.

"Ms. Evans, I can take you anywhere you need to go," Matias offers again. "It's no trouble at all."

I shake my head no, not sure what else to do or say. Seconds or maybe minutes pass as I sit in the cold, staring into nothing. I'm vaguely aware of the police leaving with a freaking child in the backseat. I can't even process that right now.

All I can think of is the eighth graders that come into my class to buddy read once a week with my kindergarteners. They're always so sweet and kind to the little ones, so proud to be the big kids on campus.

I want Nate. I'd give anything to have his big arms wrapped around me right now, my head on his broad chest making me feel safe, his hand rubbing my back comfortingly.

A new voice breaks into the silence. "Hi, umm hey, Whitney is it? I'm your neighbor, Roxanne." I scan my neighbor up and down. Despite the hour, she's fully dressed in tennis shoes and athletic wear, short sleeves revealing watercolor tattoos on her pale arms. Her car window is also busted in, but she's seemingly completely unbothered, not a hair out of place, and she'd been the one to confront the kid.

"Are you okay?" I blurt. "You're *way* too calm right now."

She makes a sound deep in her throat that sounds like a laugh. “I’m pretty unflappable. I was military police in the Army. If I can spend eight years fighting with drunken soldiers, I can handle a thirteen-year-old.”

From seemingly thin air, a long soft arm reaches around me. “Whit?” Marissa calls gently. “Nate told Caleb what happened. I thought you might like some company until Nate gets home.” I’d been so out of it that I hadn’t even realized she’d walked up.

I look at my friend, her worried eyes gazing at me. She’s not wearing any make-up and in an outfit that looks like she’d quickly thrown it on, and still, even in the bad lighting from the porch, she’s stunning.

“Whitney, you’re freezing out here. Why don’t we get you on over to Nate’s place?” Marissa suggests delicately. “I can stay with you while we wait on the guys to get home?”

I look around. “Where’s Petal?”

“I put her inside because of the cold,” Marissa says gently. “I’ll go get her. Is there anything else that you need from inside?”

“No, I can come back for it tomorrow if I do.”

I grab my bag from my lap just as Marissa walks back with Petal. “I couldn’t find her leash.”

“It may or may not be in the car,” I say sarcastically. “Let’s go find out.”

Treading carefully down the driveway, carefully avoiding the shattered glass, I open the door. The jerks took my freaking charging cord for my phone! Ugh! Petal's pink rhinestone leash that matches her collar is also gone, as is her pretty pink jacket. I'd taken it off after she'd been hot after a trip to the dog park. It's all coordinated so perfectly. What exactly is the purpose of stealing a dog leash?

I slam the door angrily and don't bother locking it since the tow truck is coming, and they need access to the driver's door. I bite down my newfound anger and frustration at the kids and reach down to scoop up Petal, so she doesn't cross the street on foot. "They took my favorite sunglasses," I complain to Marissa, pursing my lips.

She reaches over to rub my back gently. "Sunglasses can be replaced, but you can't. Let's get you on over to Nate's."

The dark black tow truck arrives just then, the brakes making a horrible squeaking sound as it parks in front of the driveway. A large magnetic sign advertises it as Landry's towing...his teammate's company.

I walk past the tow truck, while it starts making a beeping noise as it backs up to load the SUV.

"Whitney? Whitney," Marissa calls gently again. "Honey, you're in shock right now. Let's just get you home and into a hot bath."

After putting my bag into the back seat of Marissa's little bitty sports car, I sit in the passenger seat with Petal in my lap and stare into nothingness, wishing Nate were here.

Chapter Twenty-One

NATE

Eight minutes. The worst eight minutes of my entire life. I'd sat in a faraway hotel room, not able to do shit, while Whitney was in that fucking apartment alone for a solid eight minutes while we waited for backup for the bodyguard.

To be fair, Roxanne caught them in the yard quickly and called for backup before we even knew there was a problem. I'm just happy she'd managed to stop the kids before they'd made it any further. I'd used the airplane's wifi to check on the house cameras and watched as a visibly shaken Whitney walked inside. Marissa's still with her now, waiting for us to get home.

We land in the wee hours of the morning, long before dawn. I'm the first off the shuttle bus from the plane and jog to the parking lot. On the way home, I hit every fucking possible red light, sitting and waiting at empty intersections for the light to turn green again. I'd considered running them, moving my foot from the brake to the accelerator, and stopping when I

remembered the traffic cameras. With my luck, someone would run my plate and post a video of me breaking the law.

My fingers mess up the code to the door twice as I nervously try to input it a third time before it finally beeps, allowing me access. The dog greets me at the door as I stop to make sure the security system's engaged. Whitney is awake, curled into a ball on the couch in her robe. She's staring at the tv, but her face is blank as if she's not really watching the old Reece Whitherspoon rom-com.

I walk to her, and she stands to greet me on wobbly knees. I pull her into the safety of my arms, holding her tightly. She wraps her arms around my waist and rests her head on my chest.

She takes in a deep breath of air, "I'm glad you're home, Nate." Her tense shoulders start to relax in my arms as I brush my hand over the small of her back, trying to comfort her more.

"I'm not going anywhere any time soon, Whit."

Marisssa's on the couch next to Whitney, a fake smile plastered on her face. Free of her normal full face of makeup, she looks younger somehow. "Hey, welcome back. Congrats on the win!" she says as she stands beside us.

Marissa was such a good friend to Whitney tonight. Thank God there was a familiar face here for her. "Thanks for going to get her. I didn't even think to have you come."

She moves away from me and grabs her purse sitting on a nearby table with her jacket, likely eager to get home to her own guy after several days apart. “I was happy to go. She’d do the same for me.”

She looks at my girl, resting a kind hand on her arm. “Whit? I’m going home to Caleb and Cassie now. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

Whitney nods in her direction. “Thanks for coming again and for sitting with me. The last thing I wanted was to be alone in the house right now.”

I walk Marissa out and re-engage the security system after double checking the locks.

Whitney’s sitting on the couch again, her feet tucked under her body.

“I’m going to have to call a substitute. I’m in no shape whatsoever to teach tomorrow...well, today.” Her voice drops softer, sadder, as if she’s disappointed.

“If you want to, we can leave earlier today than planned. I have a meeting, but I can pick you up on my way back. We can be in Tennessee by three pm,” I offer. “You can sleep in, take a long dip in that big bathtub I never use. Helene bought some of those girly bath bomb thingies. Somebody needs to use them. I sure as fuck don’t want to smell like sweet pea and pear.”

I’m rewarded with a small laugh. “I dunno. Sounds kinda sexy. And I saw the bath bombs. You should *definitely* go to

your next game smelling like lavender vanilla.”

I look at my watch and rub the back of my neck thoughtfully. “Whit, what time can you start making phone calls for substitutes? Maybe we can rest a bit until then, even if we don’t actually sleep, giving our bodies downtime will help us both be fresher.”

She picks up her phone and checks the clock. “I have three and a half hours. Let’s pray I can even find a sub.”

I grasp her hand firmly in mine and lace our fingers together. “Let’s go get some rest. We’re both running on adrenaline.”

I guide her down the hallway into our room. She removes the robe, revealing the cheeky panties and cut-off jersey it conceals. She looks like the absolute dream I knew she would in that outfit. I bite back the disappointment at the lost moment with her. I’m going to be away from her so often. I want us to be able to enjoy one another; to have the connection sex brings between two people even if we’re physically apart.

She slips on the t-shirt I’ve just taken off, climbs to the middle of the bed, and pulls the covers over her, leaving the panties and jersey discarded on the floor. It’s not like her at all. When I pick them up, I tuck them in one of the drawers in my closet for now. Whitney doesn’t need another reminder of tonight.

I climb into bed with her, the touch of each other’s skin already so familiar. She’s still withdrawing into herself, just as

upset that a kid was involved as she is about the car break-in if I know Whitney.

Sometimes when you love somebody, the best way to comfort them isn't words. Sometimes, the best thing to do is to hold them tight and just be with them. So I pull her tight against me, wrap one arm around her waist, and use the other to rub comforting circles on her back until sleep finally finds her.



Despite my every effort to creep out of bed, Whitney's eyes pop open the minute I move away from her. I'd hoped she would stay asleep longer. A traumatic experience is draining, and her sleep has been very broken up. "I'm so sleepy," she groans as she rolls over, planting her face in the pillow.

Crossing my arms over my body, I shake my head. "We don't have to go this weekend, Whitney. My parents will absolutely understand."

She lets out a deep breath and throws the bed covers off her body. "Getting away and being around people sounds like paradise right now. The last thing I want to do is just hang around the house. Besides, isn't it your parents' thirtieth anniversary?"

I laugh, "Not their real one. That was last month while they were still running away to God only knows where this time

together. It barely counts...just an excuse for us to all get together again.”

It’s not that I don’t want to go anymore. I think my close-knit, rambunctious family might be too much for her right now. Maybe I’m wrong, though. Maybe she needs it. Sometimes the best way to deal with something is to keep busy and distract yourself.

I gently lean onto the bed and kiss her lips before standing straight again. “You have everything you need for the trip packed? Sure you don’t need me to pick up anything for Petal or you?” Whitney might be mine, but that woman has me wrapped around her finger, and I’m man enough to admit it.

“Nope, I packed two days ago. Planning in advance really worked out well this time. I just wish I’d thought to grab my electronics when I left the apartment.”

“You were kinda going through a lot.” I look towards my closet, then back at Whitney sheepishly. “I kinda didn’t pack yet. I was going to during the day today, but...”

“But then you had to deal with the SUV being towed to the dealership so the specialty glass could be replaced and an upset girlfriend,” she finishes.

I go into one of my dresser drawers, and pull out a set of athletic wear. “I’ve not had to *deal* with anything today as far as you’re concerned!”

I actually wish, at this point, she'd start crying or *something*. While I'd taken care of Petal, she'd calmly called her principal to explain the situation, and found a substitute before going back to sleep. Whitney's perfectly fine. Too fine.

"I'll pack for you then," she offers, as she rubs her sleepy face with both palms.

I look up at her from where I'm now tying my tennis shoes. "You really don't mind?"

"I need something to keep busy," she insists.

Leaning down to her, I cup her face in my hands and place a light kiss on her lips. "It'll really help me out, Angel. Thanks! I'll see you later today."

Walking into the kitchen, I find Helene in one of her tidy cotton aprons. She's sitting in one of the gray upholstered kitchen chairs, her legs crossed with Petal in her lap as she brushes out the dog's coat, speaking gently in what sounds like French Cajun.

"Good morning, Helene," I call out as I walk into the room.

She looks up as if she's somehow busted and not doing her job. "Oh, good morning, sir. Do you need breakfast?"

"No, just grabbing a protein bar. Can you try to coerce Whitney to eat, though?"

She gives me a knowing nod. "I'll try something sweet this time."

"Thanks, Helene!"



I stop at a small pet store on the way to the training facility. They tend to have better quality products for the dogs, and I want to make sure I get suitable replacements for Petal since they were taken from the SUV.

Walking down the aisle, I go straight to what I'm looking for— a nice sensible nylon leash and matching collar in just her size. Turning the corner, I start to look for a replacement jacket and rain boots because it's supposed to rain, and no way Princess Petal is going to be willing to get her paws wet. Then I see it, there on the end cap.

A lavender rhinestone leash and matching collar, a lavender and gray winter jacket in just Petal's size, rain boots, the whole kit and caboodle, all in Whitney's favorite shade.

Fuck.

I hated that last leash. It was just too fru-fru, and despite what Whitney says, Petal absolutely doesn't love it. If Petal likes something, she immediately tries to destroy it. Exhibit A: her stuffed footballs that I keep having to replace. But when I'd left the leash down, praying she'd chew it to bits, she'd turned her nose up at it. All the proof I need that my little girl hates it as much as I do.

But it makes Whitney happy.

With a deep groan, I grab the lavender rhinestone collar and leash, feeling its weight in my hands. It's much softer than the last one, real leather, easier on my large hands. The rhinestone embellishments are more subtle and lower, so they don't dig into my fingers.

The matching jacket and rain boots feel plush to my fingers, warm enough for Tennessee this time of year. I grab a bag of the special cheese treats I give her when her Mom isn't looking, and head to the register, the image of Whitney's happy face glowing again when she sees Petal filling my head. I'd do anything for this woman. Lie, steal, cheat. Tolerating overly girly crap feels like not such a big deal anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Two

WHITNEY

Looking back from the closet entrance, I hear the crinkle of a plastic shopping bag and quick steps into the bedroom next to ours. He whistles for the dog, and she runs to Nate, likely eager for one of the extra treats he thinks I don't know about.

There are conspiring whispers and the crinkle of the bag again, followed by a zipping noise. "Lemme see," Nate says low as the tags on Petal's collar tinkle together excitedly.

I can only shake my head. I'm so used to their antics by now. My last *surprise* was that Nate taught Petal to "go long" while playing fetch. When Nate would give the order, she would go from patiently heeling at his feet to swiftly darting for the ball, her stride not as smooth as it had once been with her aging body.

Opening the drawer in the closet, I find the gray joggers that hug Nate in all the right places. With a self-satisfied laugh, I place them in the suitcase, imagining Nate dressed in them for bed. I place my hands on my hips and look down at the

overstuffed bag. That should be the last item. I lean down to close the bag, pressing hard, so the zipper doesn't jam.

Petal's nails make joyful tippy taps on the hardwood floor as she approaches, her tail wagging, wearing a puffer jacket I've never seen before. She sits eagerly in front of me and cocks her head to the side, her top knot flopping over despite the new purple collar I've never seen before.

"Did you get a new jacket, sweet girl? And a pretty new sparkly collar?" She answers with an excited pant, sticking her tiny pink tongue out, and jumps up on her hind legs, her paws on the legs of my blue jeans, asking to be picked up.

"She's got to make a good impression on the other dogs at my parents' house," Nate says from the closet doorway. He leans against the door jam with his legs crossed around one another. "We can't let my sisters' dogs think they're better than our girl just because they're bigger, can we?"

I can't help it. I cover my face with my hand and shake my head at the two of them while letting out a small laugh. "I love it. That shade of purple looks better on her than the old pink did."

"So, I picked okay then? We can stop back at the pet store on our way out and pick up a different set if you want."

I pick up my puppy, rubbing her silky fur in my hands. "No, Nate, you did perfectly," I answer softly. And he did. I've tried to keep busy today after I woke up, eager to keep my mind off of the feelings I have towards the apartment, towards that kid,

and the look of rage on his face as he was led away in handcuffs. I didn't even know they arrest kids that young.

Nate's been amazing in all of this. As much as I want to strangle him at times for his caveman antics, he tends to do the absolute perfect thing at the perfect time. I adore that about him.

Last night, when he'd finally gotten home, we'd laid together in the bed, his strong hand against my back, softly rubbing it as I started to doze off. I'd breathed in the scent of the green soap he travels with and realized that Nate was starting to feel like home...my center. Am I in love with him? I'm not sure, but if I'm not, I'm at least halfway there. I do know I've never felt this strongly about anyone before.

The one car accident I've had, which resulted in wrecking the bumper of Preston's car, I'd gone to my mom for comfort — especially after Preston had acted the way he did about it. When I'd passed the standardized test I needed to get my teaching certificate, I'd called friends to celebrate since Preston had been busy with his post-graduate job. But last night, it wasn't my mom I'd thought to call or college friends that are slowly drifting away. It's Nate I wanted. I knew that he'd do exactly what he did...take care of everything, pull me into his arms, and hold me until everything was right in the world again.

Everything still isn't right, but it's as right as Nate can make it, and that means the world to me.



As we pull into the drive, all the lights are off in my apartment. It looks strange somehow to me now.

“I’ll go in. You can wait here,” Nate offers.

“No, I have to go grab one or two things. Plus, I want to make sure everything’s turned off,” I argue.

Nate had pulled parallel to the sidewalk instead of pulling into the driveway, and with a glimpse in that direction, I could tell why. Blue safety glass is still shattered all over both sides of the driveway.

Nate turns off the ignition, and we both get out. I feel my hands shake at the sight as I slowly make my way up the walkway.

Roxanne’s car is gone, as is her teal motorcycle that’s here most of the time. The lights are off, her side of the duplex dark, the kitchen chair that’s always left outside by her to indulge in cigarettes brought inside.

In the entryway of my dark apartment, I notice the trash can sticking out from the side of the house. Walking over to put it back where it belongs, I push it flush against the building, Nate following closely behind. As I step into the alley, my eye catches the black screen that covers the nearby window...the window where the kid had been caught. My heart starts to palpitate loudly in my ears, and my hands shake when I realize the screen’s bent. Some of the black paint chipped, and the trash can likely moved to give them better access to the

window. The window where my laptop and tablet are all clearly visible on a small console table. Where my purse had been visible. I feel my breath start to quicken as I pivot and walk away as quickly as I can.

Nate meets me in the entryway to the alley. “What’s wrong? You look upset about something.”

“They were trying to jimmy open the window,” I blurt out.

Nate’s face turns thunderous. “Wait, what?”

“The screen on the side of the house? It’s bent, and there are paint chips missing. The last time I took out the trash, it didn’t look like that. And why else would they have bothered to move the cans if they weren’t going in? My electronics are all right where they could get in the window, grab them real quick and leave.”

Nate’s eyes darken to a shade I’ve never seen before, and he turns to go to the side yard. He inspects the window, cursing a blue streak.

I let myself into my apartment quickly, grabbing my laptop and tablet. Stopping to look around the space once I reach the door to leave, my eyes scan the thrift store couch, the television from my bedroom at home, and a small area rug I’d found at Target and loved. It wasn’t much, but it was mine.

I’d been so excited to have my first place and slowly decorate it with pieces I love. Now I never want to be here again. I feel so violated, so unsafe. I don’t know if I can spend another evening here, regardless of whether Nate is with me.

Nate walks up, his face murderous as he takes my laptop case from me. “Is this all of it?”

“No, my tablet, too,” I say, gesturing toward the nylon case. “I can carry all of those, though.”

He lifts all of the cases in his long arms and starts to flick off lights as we go. “Lock the door behind us, Angel Face.”

“Nate?” I ask gently as we walk down the walkway. “Do you mind if we stay at your place until I can find a better apartment?”

He shakes his head as if disbelieving. “That’s something you don’t even have to ask,” he says, matter of fact. “All the more time to spend with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

WHITNEY

Pulling a key out of his pocket, Nate opens the door to his parents' Tennessee mountain home, revealing a cavernous living space. I was expecting a large house, but this room alone is twice as big as my apartment!

“We need a lot of space since there's so many of us,” Nate explains as if reading my thoughts. “Josie and Rosalie kept having kids, plus there was Rory's daughter, Emmaline. Mom and Dad wanted a house big enough for everybody to come together under one roof.”

I reach back to bring in my rolling bag, but Nate's already carrying it in with his own, one bag in each hand. I carry Petal inside and place her on the hardwood floor.

I look around, a little awe-struck. It's beautiful. The back wall is a large window that looks out into Fall foliage as far as the eye can see, with no other rooftops to mar the view. We must be facing the opposite side of the mountains I'd seen on the drive up.

A large sectional occupies the center of the room in front of a grand fireplace, and comfortable-looking chairs are scattered across the area. Plush throw rugs cover the shiny hardwood floor. In the corner, a baby doll sits seemingly forgotten in a toy-sized stroller, the only hint of children around.

Petal walks to a bed, the click of her pink-painted nails fading as she walks across the rug before she plops down for a snooze. She's been awake since we left the house, anxious about the new surroundings.

"Are you going to stare all day, or do you want the ten-cent tour?" Nate jokes.

"The view," I half-whisper in wonder. "Is that a river to the east?"

"Yeah, we take the kids fishing there all the time. Theo and Emmaline love it, but the others are still a bit young. C'mon, still plenty of the place to see."

Leaving the bags on the floor, he grasps my hand, lacing our fingers together.

"Kitchen's that way," he instructs, pointing ahead. "Room to the right is the kids' playroom. Enter if you dare. They'll never let you leave," he ends in a chuckle.

Up the stairs, Nate points to each room. "Big kids' bunk room," he says, pointing to the room on the right, "Nursery," he says, nodding to the left. "Of course, only Cole's in there now. Usually, there's at least two babies..." he breaks off what he's saying mid-sentence, and his face has a weird expression I

can't quite read. "Anyway, that's Mom and Dad's room to the right. We're at the end of the hall, so we get the big window."

He opens the last room on the right with a large flourish. "Our lair for the weekend," he says, the huskiness lingering in his tone, his lips pressed next to my ear as he pulls me close. "I've got you all to myself for the next sixteen hours before my family arrives. No wifi, no grading, no work, and I plan on taking full advantage of that fact."

I know what Nate's doing, trying to distract me, and I'm going to let him.

I spent our flight trying to occupy my mind with anything other than the near break-in, the what might have been...the little boy that I can't help but wonder about. Judging by Nate's behavior on the plane, he seems to have the same idea. I just want to put it behind me and enjoy my time away with my guy. This weekend is probably our last chance for some much needed quality time. I just want to get lost in Nate, get to know his family, and enjoy this beautiful home.

When he releases me, I walk across the large room to get a better view from the double glass doors that lead outside and look out at the view below before walking through the entry to the second-story porch. A round table sits further down, next to another set of glass doors.

We're facing the back of the house, and as I'd guessed, the mountains are in full view from this side. There are still acres and acres of Fall foliage in either direction. The kaleidoscope of rich maroons and breathtaking scarlets gives way to lighter

auburns and amber with a splash of saffron. The landscape's so stunning it almost looks surreal.

"I'm in love with this place," I tell Nate excitedly, the brisk cool air feeling refreshing on my face. "I can't believe your family doesn't just come out here every weekend!"

"The others come more often than I can since they're closer, but we'll likely spend a lot of time here during the summer when you're off work and the season's over...Maybe even come a full day or two before they do so we can have some more time alone."

I inwardly wince. "I feel so bad calling a substitute this morning. The kids and I are just getting to know one another. They're going to be so upset their new schedule's disrupted already."

"Uh-huh. Friday still test day?" he asks as if he didn't watch me prepare the quiz.

I roll my eyes, seeing exactly where this is leading. "Yes, Nate," I answer begrudgingly.

"Then, believe me, they were happy the teacher wasn't there today." He wraps one arm around my waist and guides me back inside, closing and locking the door behind himself with his free hand.

The mischievous sparkle in his eye is back when he turns around, and I narrow my eyes with mock suspicion and scan his body up and down. "What are you up to?" I accuse, slowly backing away.

One eye squints as he slowly makes his way to me. “I haven’t tasted you for four whole days. I think that’s a record for us,” he announces with a slow disapproving head shake as he creeps closer.

A mischievous smile finds my face. Oh, he wants to play? Game on. “Four whole days? Oh wow, you must really be suffering. The injustice!” I say with feigned horror.

He partially unbuttons his flannel shirt before slipping it off over his head, revealing his strong, tanned chest. My gaze automatically goes down the thin trail of hair that disappears below his waist, and I wet my lips with my tongue. “It’s been sheer agony.” His voice is calm, his gaze steady as I slowly creep backward toward the door.

I turn my head to measure my distance to the entryway, preparing to run. I won’t make it far, not against Nate, but far enough to make it interesting.

“Where ya think you’re headed, Angel Face?” His voice is low, a warning, as I slip off my ballet flats so I can run faster.

I can’t stop the smile on my face from spreading as I try to give Nate my most innocent look. I feel a rush of exhilaration at the fun to come. “Nowhere, Babe, just thought I’d...” I turn quickly, the sound of my bare feet striking the hardwood reverberating in the large room as I try to make a break for the door. I swing the door open, the heavy wood thumping loudly against the wall as I streak through, bounding down the hall as quickly as I can, heading for the maze of rooms downstairs.

He catches me as soon as I reach the stairs, not at all surprisingly, and swings me over his shoulder with a groan. He pops my left cheek hard, the sting of his hand turning me on even more.

“Now we’re running, Angel?” he chastises with an edge of laughter in his voice. “I just wanted a little bitty taste of my pussy to tide me over until after supper.”

Back in the room, he drops me on the center of the king-size bed and places a knee on both sides of my waist, pinning me down. He strips off my sweater dress and pink satin bra as my panties grow damp with excitement. My heart starts to beat fast in my ears as he unfastens his belt buckle and makes a show of slowly sliding it out of his jeans. I squirm with anticipation, watching him play with his belt, reminding me of the time he’d held my hands down. *He’s not, is he?*

He shakes his head at me again. “Only good girls get to touch, Angel. And you were not a good girl just now.” He reaches down and pops my left flank. *Oh, he absolutely is.*

I start to squirm under him in feigned protest as he pulls my leggings off, leaving my lace panties. He notices the damp spot on the leggings and smirks proudly before lacing them around the headboard, then around each of my wrists. He places a finger between the gap to ensure there’s enough give before moving away to inspect his handiwork.

He runs his hands through his dark curly locks that badly need a haircut. I pout up at him. “This isn’t fair.” I love orgasming with my hands in his hair, and he knows it.

“Maybe next time you won’t run from me,” he chastises.

If this is my punishment, I absolutely will be.

His hand sears a path down my abdomen and onto my thigh. His thumb gently brushes against my clit for a split second. I arch up and groan deep in my throat, as he chuckles proudly to himself. He parts my legs wide and lays between them.

Calloused fingers lightly caress the hardening peaks of my nipples before cupping my breast in his hand. Plush lips touch mine like a whisper as his slow, drugging kiss sends shivers down my spine. His mouth lingers on my lips, savoring every second of his tongue’s gentle exploration as a long arm reaches down slowly into my panties. The tip of his index finger finds the bundle of nerves, and my legs begin to shake as he rubs in gentle circles.

I gasp, breaking off our kiss. Nate leans down to pull my panties off, and I lift frustrated arms off the headboard. “Just lay back and feel, Whit,” he instructs. “You know I’ll take care of my Angel. I always do, don’t I?”

I whimper with need. The bed is damp beneath me, and I’m so close already. His tongue trails a path down my ribs to my pussy. He spreads my lips with his thumb and index finger. “My pussy,” he announces before his mouth goes straight to my clit with a hard suction. My vision immediately turns black as I breathe deeply, and allow myself to be swept into an orgasm with a groan.

My body feels chilled when Nate moves off the bed and removes his pants and underwear. His shaft is fully erect

against his belly. He looks at me from the foot of the bed through shuttered eyes. He strokes his thick cock in his large hands and growls low in his throat.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful. Spread your legs wider for me, Angel, so I can see all of you.”

His breath quickens, and for a second, I think he’s going to finish like that. “The only thing missing from my perfect pink pussy is my cum. Why don’t we see what we can do about that?”

He moves back onto the bed on his knees, kneeling at the wet spot I’ve made on the bed. He slides inside me, throwing my legs over his shoulders. Making slow, meticulous strokes, he watches his cock slide in and out of my pussy. “Can you come for me again?” he asks, angling to hit my G spot. I arch upwards, so overstimulated from my last orgasm.

“I don’t know. I..” I groan.

He plunges harder, deeper, and I buck off the bed with pleasure. “Does my Angel need it hard and fast?”

“God, yes, please, Nate.”

He pulls my legs from his shoulders and kisses the inside of my left calf. Holding onto my waist, he starts to stroke fast, making the grinding gyrations with his hips that I love. I lift my hips off the bed to meet his thrusts as he goes harder and harder, beating against my pussy. He gives me one last hard thrust, and I buck against my restrained hands. My pussy

clenches against Nate's member as my toes curl. I succumb to the pleasure, the warmth of his cum filling me.

He pulls out, our cum dripping from his cock. "Fuck that's hot," he groans as he comes to lay next to me, pulling me close as we lay breathless together for seconds until Nate unties the leggings. He leans down, inspecting my swollen pussy. I feel my face warm at his gaze and try to close my legs, but he only opens them again. "Look at my cum in that soaking wet cunt. Now it's fucking perfect."

He lies beside me on the bed and pulls me onto him. The sound of his heartbeat is loud in my ears, and I nestle into the safety of the chest that feels like home.

Chapter Twenty-Four

NATE

That didn't go as I'd planned it, at all. Not that I'm complaining. No man would after that. After such a hellacious Friday, I'd meant to spend the rest of the day helping her relax before my family invades tomorrow. I figured giving her a few orgasms from my tongue would go a long way toward that. Instead, she'd given me so much. I kiss her shoulder and watch her sleep dreamily. For the first time since I got back from my last game, her body's truly limber and soft on top of me, her forehead gently resting against mine as she takes even breaths.

Cassie and Marissa are boxing up the most urgent things of Whitney's this weekend, and I've already scheduled movers to come Tuesday for the rest so that she never has to go back to that apartment. I want her to put all that behind her and for us to move forward with our life together without the emotional upset. I've wanted us to live together for a while...to know that she's in the safety of my home. I wish she hadn't gone through the scare of the break in to make it happen.

I gently ease her from my arms, walk downstairs to retrieve our luggage, and let Petal out. When I come back, Whitney's padding back from the bathroom, stopping at the window wearing only my shirt to watch the sunset in bright oranges and pinks. She turns to me smiling, brush burn from my five o'clock shadow on her neck, her lips kiss swollen. "Wanna take a shower with me?" she offers as she strips the t-shirt up and over her head. She looks back at me invitingly. "I'll even wash your back," she offers with a wink as she opens her bag and removes the toiletries.

With eager steps, I follow her into the bathroom just as she's trying to figure out how to turn it on. I show her and wait for the water to warm on my hands before stepping in. The water is spraying down her shoulders in tiny streams and down the peaks of her still-hard nipples as she dampens her short hair.

I lean in and kiss her gently on the forehead. "Stay right here," I order. Reaching for the bath poof, I pour on a good amount of the lavender body wash and lather it up before leisurely soaping up the curves that I now know so well. Her skin is pale next to mine, tanned from long practices in the sun despite copious use of sunscreen. When I reach her breasts and the pert pink nipples at full alertness, my dick jerks to attention, and I do my best to calm it.

Once her body's washed, she steps to the point where the three heads meet to rinse. She turns up the heat of the spray and moans when the water hits her body. "This feels amazing."

After dispensing a small amount of shampoo, I slowly lather it into my hands, then apply it to her hair, repeating again with the conditioner. The floral scent, so familiar to me now, fills the shower as she shuts her eyes dreamily and sighs deep, relaxed as I work the conditioner through her hair. Once I'm done, she leans back and kisses my jaw.

Her eyes are soft, her skin flush from the hot water and orgasms, and I see a hint of a smile whenever she looks my way.

Whitney returns the favor, taking the plastic bath poof from me. With slow, deliberate strokes, she runs it over my body with an impish grin on her face. She soaps up my hard cock, caressing it in her silky hands for one stroke, then two, her hungry eyes coming to meet mine, mischief written in them. After switching places quickly to rinse off my dick in the hot water, she gives me a grin and falls to her knees on the bath mat right in front of me, the water spray splashing off her back to keep her warm.

Her hands go to my ass as her tongue slides over my cock for the first lick, and I slide my fingers into her hair, holding it at the base of her neck, guiding her down. I grit my teeth, my abs hardening as I try to hold back from fucking her face, at least for now. "Deeper, Angel," I encourage, and she plunges her mouth farther into my length, gagging herself before pulling back. She twirls her tongue around the tip of my cock, and I see stars before she engulfs me in her mouth, down my length, stroking with her tongue.

I rock my hips forward, and this time she swallows me down. One hand leaves the hard globe of my ass and clasps my balls, rubbing them in her palms. “That’s it, Whit. Keep going, Angel.” She stares up at me with those blue eyes watering as she picks up momentum, bobbing her head enthusiastically up and down. My thighs tighten and begin to shake as I grit my teeth. A low groan of pleasure comes from Whitney. No longer able to hold back, I move my hips back before plunging again. Whitney bobs her head up and down, working my shaft, meeting me thrust for thrust. “I’m about to come, Angel,” I warn when I feel a familiar tingling in my spine. Instead of backing off, she bears down and works me faster with her mouth. I finally hold her neck in place and jerk my hips forward with one long movement. The world around me ignites, and I come straight down her throat with a loud groan.

I’ve been very lucky in life. I had a very happy childhood, won a college championship. I’ve even made it as far as the playoffs, the elusive championship ring so close I could taste it. But this little moment alone with Whitney in front of me, her damp hair brushed back away from her face, blue eyes looking up at me for approval from her knees, is by far the most perfect.



Throwing another log onto the outdoor firepit, I stoke the fire, hoping to get it hot enough to keep Whitney cozy outside. It’s

colder here in the mountains than it is in New Orleans.

This part of Fall, night comes early. Only the lit pathway to the outdoor seating area breaks the darkness as Whitney walks towards me wearing one of her matching sweatsuits, a fluffy blanket from our room thrown over her shoulders.

“Fire’s not hot enough yet,” I warn as she comes to sit in one of the wooden Adirondack chairs my father painted green last summer.

“I’m warm enough. Got my comfy clothes on and fluffy socks,” she responds as she gazes at the sky.

I rub my cold hands down my gray sweatpants and pull down my long sleeves to protect my arms from the chill in the air. Lifting the other chair, I bring it close enough to Whitney that our shoulders touch when I sit down. “I don’t want you sick. The kids in your class are already one big germ factory.”

“You’re telling me. I had four kids out with some sort of a virus last week!”

Reaching for the chilled bottle of a buttery chardonnay, I open the bottle while she stares up at the sky. I hand her one of the two glasses I’ve brought outside, and she sighs contentedly.

“I’ve never been this far away from the city before,” she remarks as she brings the glass to her lips for her first sip.

“Never went camping?” Surprising. Her family’s so close they seem like the *do all the things together* type of people.

She gazes into the flickering flame of the fire, the smell of the crackling oak filling my nostrils, the light from the fire dancing across her face. “Nope. Mom is an inside, air conditioning type of girl,” she explains, looking up at the night sky, the stars impossibly bright this far away from the light pollution of the city. “Is that a planet or a star?” she asks suddenly, pointing to one particularly bright orb in the sky.

“It’s Jupiter. Saturn,” I offer, pointing to the right, “is that way. Mars is hanging around somewhere, but I think it’s still a little too early in the evening for it to stick out much.”

The rest of the night is a haze of sweet smiles in front of the lit fire pit, my first ever couple’s selfie (complete with Petal), and a deep throbbing pain in my chest every time I look at Whitney. I’ve never had her this long to myself without life interrupting us, and I want to cherish every single second of it.

With so few distractions, we finally talk. Really talk. She tells me about Mrs. Wellesley, her tenth-grade English teacher, who was the reason she became an educator. About how her family always dresses up for Mardi Gras day in themed outfits and that this is the furthest she’s ever traveled (which I’m going to correct the second she gets out for summer break).

I tell her funny stories about growing up in a large family, that, despite my parentage, I can’t carry a tune in a bucket or even read music.

When the final embers of the fire give out, I bring her inside and make love to her in front of the fireplace, taking my time with each inch of her, giving her all of me, her body telling me

what she isn't yet ready to say. She looks up at me, drunk off our lovemaking, with a smile that turns my world upside down.

As happy as I am, I feel a clock ticking in the back of my head at an impossibly slow pace. Mentally doing the math in my head, my frustration grows. It'll be months before she'll accept a proposal, then the time to plan the wedding, another ten months after that, at least, before we have a baby.

After running my hands through her hair, fingering the silky soft strands to comfort myself, I pick up my angel, kissing her lips when I see her dreamy smile, and bring her back to our bed, content at least with the smell of our lovemaking on her skin.



A sharp knock on the external porch door startles me awake the next morning.

My father's here.

Whitney protests the noise with a grumble and pulls the blanket back over her head. With a long exhausted sigh, I move my hands from the curves of Whitney's ass and roll from the bed, already missing her warmth. "Go back to sleep. It's just my dad," I mumble sleepily towards the bundle of blankets as I slip on my sweatpants and a Henley from last night.

It's become a small tradition with my father and I, the first morning at the cabin. I always get here Friday night, and he arrives in the early morning hours on Saturday with the bodyguards to pop into a small hunting and fishing store we own nearby. He stops for coffee and wakes me up to enjoy a few moments together before the rest of the family arrives.

Dad's in his usual seat on the second-story porch some distance away from my own, watching the white clouds dancing around the mountain while sipping his coffee from a styrofoam cup. His hair's finally turned gray the last year or two, and his full beard is now longer but neatly trimmed. He's wearing a short sleeve t-shirt and jeans despite the cold. The man seems impervious to the weather, he claims from years of performing on stage during the freezing cold and stifling heat.

When he sees me approach, he drops his crossed legs off the table and stands to greet me with a hug.

"How's things at the store? Are they still having issues?" I ask once we break our hug with a pat, and we both claim our seats.

Dad gives me a careless shrug of the shoulders. "Things got better once we hired a new general manager. This one is from around here, so they know the ins and outs of the area better. They're already sold out of deer stands."

I raise a curious eyebrow in his direction. "This early in the year?"

Dad puts his cup down on the table. "That's not what we need to talk about, Nathaniel, and I think you know it." His

voice was calm, his gaze steady in my direction. Leave it to Dad to get right to the point.

I turn toward the door, ensuring the external porch exit is closed tightly, the sound of our voices too muffled for Whitney to make out. “I’m not ready to have this discussion yet.”

Dad sucks his teeth and rubs a thumb across his lips with an understanding nod of his head. “But you brought her here, and after so short of a time. You must be really sure of her.”

I chuckle to myself behind closed lips. My parents haven’t met a woman in my life since....ever. “She’s absolutely the one. It’s just a matter of time at this point.” My voice is edged with the determination I feel.

“I never thought I would see the day where a woman catches your eye for more than a day or two.”

I let out a scoffing laugh. “That’s only because I hadn’t met Whitney yet. The woman’s driven me to the brink of insanity from the moment I first laid eyes on her.”

Dad nods knowingly. “That’s because finding the right person is like finding the other half of your soul. Being connected to them in every way possible is as much of a need as breathing.”

I sit, staring at the view as his words soak in.

Tapping his fingers on his leg, Dad’s forehead wrinkles, his face not giving away much as he searches my own. “And she’s from New Orleans?”

“No, nearby. Her whole family’s still there, about two hours away on a good traffic day.”

“Not many women want to dig up roots just when they’ve planted them. That’s....a complication, son,” he volunteers carefully.

I know what he’s thinking, and I’ve worried about the same. So often in professional football, we’re traded or released. Plus, there’s the issue of our family’s investments. My father runs everything most of the year, and I pitch in during the off-season while I’m in Tennessee, slowly learning so that I can eventually pick up the reins.

“Whitney’s in love with the kids at her school, and her family’s close. She’s very practical minded, though, so I know when and if it comes time for us to make decisions, Whitney and I will make them together, considering all the factors.”

“This is something the two of you need to discuss. It’s a big conversation, where to live. If the two of you decide to stay in New Orleans permanently, we can try to make things work. But the two of you need to make this a conversation.”

“I’ve made it work so far, haven’t I?” I snap.

My father leans back in his chair and raises an eyebrow in my direction. “Yes, but times are changing, and sometimes other circumstances change with them. We employ a lot of people, Nathaniel. That’s a lot of responsibility, and if your priorities are shifting towards staying in Louisiana for Whitney...” he suggests cautiously.

“I will. It’s just..not come up yet.” While we’re on such new footing, I’m worried Whitney will think I’m asking her to give up teaching and her family to move to Nashville eventually, and that’s not what I want at all. I want us to make a decision that’s best for us when the time is right...and it’s not now.

He raises a calming hand in my direction. “I’m not saying you need to decide today or even next month. We’ve always known it’s a possibility anything could happen at any time with your career. But I am saying keep it in the back of your head.”

He reaches into the pocket of his cargo pants and pulls out a tiny maroon box, sliding it in my direction on the table, and I feel a surge of excitement. My great-grandmother’s engagement ring. Grandma had worn it on her right hand in her lifetime and left the piece to me in her will since I was the oldest son.

“Pulled this from the safe when Tessa told me you were bringing Whitney up here. I know it’s not quite time yet, but I figured you’d need it sooner or later. Don’t want to have to courier it.”

I smile and flip open the ancient box to the familiar ring my father’s mother had worn on her right hand. It’s a square-cut diamond surrounded by a halo of smaller diamonds. The thin gold band is worn with time... I’ll need to have it resized. It’s perfect. Small enough that Whitney can wear it every day to work. I’ve thought of a ring but haven’t pulled the trigger yet, still looking for the perfect one. What if Whitney found it, or

what if I bought one cut and she wanted a different type of ring? But my grandmother's ring feels perfect in my hands. I know she'll love it once she's ready.

Snapping the lid on the ring with finality, my head turns to Dad with absolute certainty. "I won't come back to Tennessee this year until at least June. I won't leave Whitney," I say in a low composed voice.

Dad roars with sudden laughter, and he gives me a knowing shake of the head. "I'd be disappointed if you did leave your woman behind." He gestures pointedly to the ring on the table in front of us. "Don't make the same mistake I did, taking valuable time pussyfooting around. If she's it for you, lock it down. I've had thirty years with your mother, and my only regret is not doing it sooner."

With an understanding nod, I slip the ring into my pocket and watch the dirt road in the distance as Josie's SUV drives up, followed by Rosalie's minivan. "They're here already?" The hour's still early, and they've both had a bit of a drive in.

"We're all anxious to meet Whitney," he explains. "You'd better go wake her up and give her time to put herself together before they decide to introduce themselves. I don't think Whitney wants to meet your mom in one of your old t-shirts."

I dart irritated eyes up at him. How the fuck had he known what my woman was wearing? She was completely covered with the blanket, and there were blackout curtains drawn! I know for a fact there are no internal cameras at the house either. I look at my dad with steely, narrowed eyes, and his

chest barrels with knowing laughter as I walk away to wake Whitney.

Chapter Twenty-Five

WHITNEY

After we get dressed for the day, Nate leads me down the stairs and drapes a proud arm around my shoulders and introduced me to each member of his family. I expected a cautious stoicism, since Nate and I are still so new. Instead, I'm greeted with warm smiles as we stand around awkwardly in the kitchen. Nate's mother, Tessa, hugs me while asking about our flight.

Ethan (he insists I call him Ethan and not Mr. Coleman) breaks the uncomfortable silence left in the air once introductions are done. "Alright, everybody, let's all stop gawking at Whitney and get busy if we're going to take the kids to the river today. Everybody knows what they're supposed to be doing."

Everybody starts to scurry on Ethan's command, the guys immediately heading outside in their jackets.

Nate grabs my hand. "Let's go get our jackets on, Whit. You can help me."

An ear-piercing scream comes from the den where the children are playing, and Rosalie, a petite brunette with brown wavy hair, gives me a welcoming smile before running in that direction. “I’d better get in there before we end up in the emergency room again.”

Nate’s older sister Josie shifts the baby, cleverly named Cole (as in part of her maiden name), from one hip to the other and scans my body up and down as if sizing me up. “Good thing you’re a teacher. These kids can be overwhelming if you’re not used to so many in one place at a time.”

“There are a lot of them,” I confess. I’d only caught a brief glimpse of the Coleman grandchildren as I’d walked past the den into the hallway that led to the kitchen. Five little girls stair-stepped in age from about three to six were running, galloping, and twirling around the room. Two “big kids,” a boy and a girl seemingly close in age, were playing a video game while sitting on the floor. That had to be Theo and Emmaline, the oldest two. Eight grandkids total, six of them girls.

Nate tried quickly pointing out who was who, but they were all moving so quickly it was hard to keep them straight. Declan and Josie have the C’s: Cora, Cecilia, and baby Cole. Rory just has Emmaline, meaning the other four kids belong to Rosalie and her husband, Sawyer. Their kids are Theo, Willow, and the twins Piper and Violet. As far as putting names with the faces....I don’t even know where to start.

Once we're bundled up, I follow Nate out of the kitchen, where Tessa and Josie seem to be assembling snacks to take with us, and out the back door.

The cool air is refreshing on my exposed skin as we make our way down the patio. It smells like Fall, a rare treat for me. The musky, sweet smell of rich earth mingling with autumn leaves isn't something often experienced in Louisiana.

We walk across the backyard, the cold grass crisp under our feet, his arm draped around my neck. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Meeting everybody? No, they all seemed nice. I didn't have a chance to tell Sawyer thank you for sending the guy the other night. I'll have to later."

Nate pulls his beanie lower over his ears as we head towards a large metal outbuilding. "Sawyer was doing his job. His company's in charge of all of my security. I don't use them often, but I have them on the payroll for when I need them. The guy that came to the door, Matias? He's my head of security for what little I use him."

"I didn't realize you used security other than at the stadium for games."

"Sometimes I have to, you know, because of Dad. I grew up with two bodyguards around at all times. There's six of them here keeping an eye out since the whole family is together. Most of them are in the office on the third floor of the house."

A small engine roars to life as Nate opens the metal doors. Rory, Nate's youngest sibling, looks up from a large ATV with grease down the length of his tattooed forearms. "Finally got it running. Thank fuck. We'd have to carry everything."

Nate puts me to work helping him load various small items into the ATV. A bunch of fishing poles, some in small sizes for the children, folding chairs, and such. I'm looking forward to lounging at the river with his family and getting to know them better.

"That should be the first load," Nate says as he places a large tackle box in the back.

"Untle Nate!" a little voice bellows from the yard. "I wanna wide wiff you." She's wearing a pair of pink cowgirl boots and a purple cotton dress paired with zebra stripe leggings. I have no idea which one she is, but I think she's one of Josie's kids.

"Go ask your mom, Cecelia."

"I'd already did, and she says I can as long as I... as I behave for once."

Just as we're pulling out, another little passenger comes running out of the house, her little legs running as fast as she can, dragging a white baby blanket behind her. "I'm coming too, Daddy said I could!"

"Alright, Piper, get in. Hurry up. You have to help upload stuff, though."

We drive through a cleared path to the river with Petal in my lap, the girls grinning like lunatics from the back seat of the

ATV. Some of Nate's family is already at the riverbank setting things up. They seem to do this often. The family all shows up in spurts while we unload, Tessa carrying a ridiculous amount of food.

We spend most of the day at the river, trying to fish with the kids. Emmaline and Theo watched their tablets more than their poles, and the littles quickly lose interest and play happily with their cousins on the dock in careful sight of the adults. Not that we even needed to. Rosalie's aging German Shepherd and Josie's Golden Retriever sit patiently next to their kids the entire time, watching each movement for any impending danger, barking the second a kid takes a step anywhere near the river without an adult.

Little girls with crooked halos are taught how to bait their hooks, a picnic lunch appears, the baby is passed around, and many laughs are had. I love that there's always something going on with his family. It's this happy little chaos. I enjoy it. the sound of children running around happily, the sound of Nate joking with his siblings.

Nate takes the time to show me how to cast the line. Although Louisiana is called a fisherman's paradise, I've never had the opportunity to learn before.

"Keep the line tight," Nate patiently instructs when I finally catch something. "No, no, point the rod higher towards the fish." Catching the fish isn't difficult, but reeling it in is a workout!

“This is hurting my arm! It feels heavy!” I remark, trying to do his bidding, slowly turning the handle on the fishing rod to bring the fish to shore.

“Must be a big guy. Just keep doing like I said,” Nate says patiently. A few moments later, I’m holding up a large fish they say is a rainbow trout, excitedly hooting as it appears towards the land.

“Eh, good job there. Beginner’s luck!” Ethan tells me with a pat on the back.

“Now, what do I do with him?” I ask, watching Nate unhook the fish from the pole.

“We catch and release, so we’re going to take a selfie real quick, and then we’ll toss him back in.”

I quickly pose for a picture, feeling every bit the tomboy I’m not, and watch as Nate releases it back into the river.

He leans down and kisses me softly on the lips, with no regard for his family’s presence. “Good job, Whit. That picture is going to be my screensaver!”

I look down at my old jeans and my well loved hoodie. *Great.*

Catching one fish was plenty enough for me, so I decide to go chat with Tessa and Nate’s sisters.

When Tessa gets up to pour everybody cups of coffee from a large metal thermos, I move Petal from my lap and help pass them out to the guys, who are all wrestling with the kids nearby playing football. Even to my amateur eyes, I can tell

that whatever they're doing doesn't vaguely resemble the sport. There seems to be a lot of little ones scurrying, unsure which way they're supposed to go, adults "tackling" them, bringing them gently to the ground with tickles, and an occasional football tossed.

I walk up to the guys with the coffee on a tray.

Sawyer heads over to us with one of the kids slung on his back and takes his cup of coffee. "Thanks," he says with a curt nod before walking away. Ahh, the cautious stoicism I'd been expecting. I can't take it personally, especially since Sawyer worked to protect the Coleman family long before he was a member, and we're still getting to know one another.

Rory starts to walk in my direction with one of his nieces sitting on his foot, her arms wrapped around his long, thick, denim-clad leg like a koala bear. His legs make exaggerated swings as he walks forward carrying the little one.

"You're supposed to fall!" the little one protests, shooting sad eyes up at her uncle.

"Yeah, Uncle Rory needs a coffee break, Sugar. Why don't you go ask Emmaline to share her tablet so you can watch Cocomelon?"

She scowls up at her uncle before running off with a pout, but a second later, she's sitting with Theo and Emmaline, sharing a tablet.

"Your mom made sure to put your *special creamer* in it," I tease Rory when he makes his way to me. He gives me a

guilty grin.

“It’s only in the stores around this time every year,” he defends. “And it tastes like Mom’s pumpkin bread.”

“It tastes like dessert,” Declan interjects as he wraps inked fingers around the styrofoam cup marked with his name. He takes a sip of the coffee I know to be black and exaggerates a satisfied sigh. “Real men drink real coffee. Puts more hair on your chest.”

Rory shoots his brother-in-law an incredulous glower. “The last thing you need is more hair *anywhere* on your body, Sasquatch.”

“Oh yeah, well maybe we should switch cups then, cause the last time I saw you with your shirt off, I almost went blind from the shine.”

“The two of you squabble like a pair of biddies,” Ethan breaks in as he approaches, a little girl with dark pigtails on his back, her hand wrapped around her grandpa’s neck. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear I was listening to Violet and Cecelia.”

He takes his passenger off his back and reaches for the cup labeled “Grandpa,” taking a sip. “I’ve owned a fucking coffee shop for thirty years, and even I don’t understand how Declan and Sawyer drink this shit black. No matter how good the beans are, I need a splash of cream and a little sugar.”

When Nate starts to walk towards us carrying the football, Violet lets out a war cry that’s half feral cat/half Spartan and runs straight for Nate in an attempt to take him down. Nate

pretends to be surprised and falls, making an exaggerated “oof” on his way down. Once he’s lying in the grass, arms spread around his head, she climbs on his large chest, chuckling, proud of her handiwork.

Despite the number of little girls, I don’t think there’s a delicate flower in the bunch. Not one, and I think it’s amazing.

Once the moms declare it nap time, we start to pack up everything and head back to the warmth of the house. The overtired wails of the littlest children are finally silenced an hour later when their parents carry them up the stairs.

With the other adults occupied, Nate had offered to hold Cole in the warmth of the den with its fire so that his parents could deal with his siblings’ tired meltdowns. The baby’s lying across Nate’s broad shoulders with his head nestled in Nate’s neck, Nate’s strong arm resting on his bottom to support him. Tiny eyes fight rest as his uncle rubs a large calloused hand across his downy golden brown hair. Chubby cheeks slowly relax into peacefulness at his uncle’s soothing touch, and I feel an emotion I’m not yet ready to name. But it’s there in front of me. Nate glances down at the baby, and the stupid feelings well up even louder deep inside.

I know exactly where Nate and I are headed. I can see it in his eyes, in the way my pulse quickens while I watch him with Cole.

I might have once thought I was setting myself up to be hurt, but I have no doubt now that Nate adores me. It’s far too soon, too fast to feel like this, but I’m already so immersed in

this man that I don't even care. I know now that he's it for me. No other man could make me feel the way Nate does.

We have to leave very early on Sunday morning, long before the rest of the family is awake, so that Nate can make a midday practice. At least we were able to spend a solid twenty-four hours with his family. His parents are at the door to say goodbye to both of us with warm hugs.

After a quick flight, Nate drives us home from the airport, Petal riding shotgun excitedly in my lap. She enjoyed our quick visit with Nate's family, loving all of the attention from the kids.....until they tried to put her in a doll stroller.

At a red light close to home, Nate clasps his free hand in mine and rests it on the center console. He leans in to steal a quick kiss before the light turns green, and I practically melt into the seat. So sweet.

When we're finally home, and I walk into the bedroom I guess we now temporarily share, I find cardboard boxes filled with my clothing and personal items from my apartment.

"Marissa and Cassie," Nate explains, and I'm so grateful that it's just taken care of. "Take all the room you need in the closet. I'm happy you're here. I like the idea of living with you."

"Just until I find another place," I remind him.

He smirks. "Sure, Angel Face."

Chapter Twenty-Six

WHITNEY

Pulling into the circle driveway, I press the button on the garage door opener and drive in. I'm just happy to be home. I guess his house is officially my home now, even though I've only lived here a few weeks.

At first, I'd taken steps to find a safer apartment and a roommate to help afford said apartment. Nate had gotten all growly and moody whenever the subject came up, trying to persuade me to stay. I shouldn't be surprised at my decision to officially move in—Nate's very talented at getting his way.

In the end, I stopped looking for a new place to live. I like coming home from work to find him playing with Petal in the yard, the way he keeps me company while I grade papers. But I love the way he lit up like a little boy on Christmas when I had unpacked the rest of my clothing into the vacant side of the closet, clearly having decided to stay.

The house is starting to feel like home, even when Nate isn't here. I'm downright spoiled by the comfortable luxury of the house. The modern security system makes me feel safer

while I'm alone, although I sometimes feel a prickle on the back of my neck for no good reason.

He's waiting for me in his study, Petal at his feet. It's become our routine to meet in this room every night to get some work done before playing couch potato together. He usually has to talk to his dad about stuff or answer emails. When he hears the door open, he looks up from the monitor behind his computer glasses and gives me a wink before returning to his telephone call.

Slipping off my ballet flats at the door, I put my totes that have tonight's work by the couch, pull my hair down from its clip, and walk up to Nate to give him a hello kiss that makes sparks of electricity hum through my core. Gentle arms tug me into his lap as he always does. He ends the call quickly, wraps his arms around me, and smooths my hair with his hands. "Hello, Angel Face," he says before he takes my face in his hands and kisses me softly.

I wiggle at the slight erection already growing, teasing him. "Hello, Baby. I'm starving. Can you stop to eat supper now, or do you need to call your agent back?"

"Yeah, in a few minutes."

"Let me know when you're ready to eat, and I'll bring you a plate," I offer as I move off his lap.

As I move away, Nate catches my arm in his hand firmly, yet not rough. "Are you sore? After....last night. I wasn't too rough with you?"

Oh, you absolutely were not. I smirk in his direction and run my finger down the line of his jaw. “Not too sore, no. But I wouldn’t object if someone wanted to join me for another soak in the tub later tonight,” I hint.

His tense jaw smoothes into a hint of a smile, and he bites my finger playfully between pearly white teeth. “None of that almond vanilla shit, though. Javier called me Cupcake today at practice.”

Ha! He deserves it after his behavior last night. We’d bickered. The point of contention: His annoyance at the sound of my birth control reminder alarm that I set every night. Not that he complains about it. No, he just turns it off. He will take my phone out of my purse in the evenings and switch off the alarm before I hear it, saying the sound grates on his nerves when I ask. He says he doesn’t understand why I insist on setting it since I’m so organized I’ll never forget anyway. I reminded him I’m scatterbrained and will forget something without the reminder. I have half a dozen of them set in my phone, but the only one that goes off in the evenings when we’re together is my birth control alarm.

I’d been snippy, and he’d refused to bicker back. After giving him the evil eye, I’d gone to enjoy a soak in the large tub. Just as I had thrown a vanilla almond bath bomb in the water, enjoying the warmth on my sore muscles, Nate walks into the bathroom uninvited, with a roguish grin on his face.

I eyed him warily. “What are you up to?”

He let out a small laugh that hinted at mischief as he climbed in behind me, his chest to my back. It started innocently enough. A tiny kiss behind my ear, then my neck. But then the hand resting on my stomach traveled down my thigh oh so slowly while he gently licked and sucked at my neck. He spread my legs and sat me up in his lap, his erection hard against my back as he trailed a finger right to my center. He eased two fingers inside of me, hitting my G spot while his other hand wrapped around me, pinching my nipple between two fingers. He slowly, meticulously brought me to orgasm, trying to make me forget that I was supposed to be annoyed with him. This, of course, led to much naughtier games.

That doesn't mean I've forgotten that I'm slightly annoyed with him still.

Sort of.

I wrap my arms around his neck and run my thumb across his cheek. "When do you leave for the airport tomorrow?"

"Three o'clock," he answers, his eyes starting to shutter, his erection growing as he moves his mouth to me. I crane my neck to give him better access as he gently licks and sucks.

He gently picks me up off his lap, scoots his laptop to the side, and places me on the desk in front of him. "What are you doing!"

“Eating my dinner,” he says as his fingers go to remove my panties from underneath my dress. He sits back down in his chair, throws my legs over his shoulder, and, after spreading the lips of my pussy, proceeds to gently lick me from my opening to my clit. His tongue wraps around the bundle of nerves, twirling around it then gently sucking, and as I run my fingers through his hair, I decide that any slight annoyance I might have had with Nate is now long gone. As if I could ever have stayed mad at him anyway.



Leaning down to pick up a stub of a pencil, I carefully inspect the classroom for anything else that may be out of place.

It’s my first open house tonight, and I want everything to be perfect.

“You’re going through way too much trouble for open house,” Savannah warns from her usual after-school spot at the table in front of my class, sipping from her never empty water bottle. A thick school colored lanyard identical to mine hangs from her neck, holding her classroom key, a school ID, and a mini bottle of hand sanitizer.

I rub my sore neck and push my hair back from my face. “The parents are only invited into the classroom once a year, and I want to make sure I make a good impression,” I confess, nervously fingering my own lanyard at my neck. At twenty-two, I’m younger than all of the parents, and I don’t want them

to think that just because I'm a new teacher, I'm somehow underqualified or not doing an adequate job educating their kids.

“All they care about is the artwork in the class and that you're organized. Everything else is extra,” Savannah reminds me.

Today was a good day with the kids. They'd eagerly made artwork for their parents tonight, and I'd helped each one fill out a “what I love about kindergarten” worksheet. They're both waiting in each child's appointed seat with all of the other handouts for the parents.

I can't lie, though. I'm eager to go home to Nate. After Savannah leaves to see to her classroom, I pull my phone from my pocket to check messages one more time before the parents come.

Nate: I'll be there at seven-thirty to walk you to your car since it'll be dark out.

Whitney: Heart Emoji. I can walk out with Savannah but thanks, Babe.

I slip the phone back into my pocket just as the first of the eager parents walk tentatively up to the classroom, inspecting their child's artwork on the wall right outside.

It's a mix of mainly mothers that attend, and the dads at home with the kiddos. But Hazel's father, David, comes alone.

I know that he's a single parent, his wife having passed away when Hazel was only three. After my presentation to the parents and the others are grabbing their purses to leave, David lingers with his hands in his pockets.

David waits until I'm free before approaching me, asking a long stream of questions. I'm glad to see a parent so involved in their child's education.

"And the homework, you don't want them to correct their mistakes at night? You want them to do that later in class, correct?" David asks anxiously. I eye the door wearily, hinting, but smile back at him.

"We correct it together in the classroom so they can see what they did wrong. I'm just happy if they complete it."

Turning to start to shut down my classroom, a not so subtle hint this time, David grabs my wrist gently between his thumb and index finger. "Are you single?" he asks. "They started this thing so early... you must not have had a chance to eat yet. We could have dinner together?"

Looking down at my arm warily, I smile at him politely, only for the open door to bang against the wall with a loud thud.

My shoulders slump with relief, and the polite smile I'd forced melts as I take in Nate's large form filling the doorway, the rich outlines of his shoulders straining against the fabric of his t-shirt. He looks at us intently, his eyes narrowing in on David's grasp on my arm as his face clouds with fury from the

doorway, his chin high, his legs planted wide as he flexes his fingers at his side.

My caveman's back. I've almost missed him. I twist my arm from David's grasp, but the damage is already done.

"Came to pick you up, Angel Face. Don't want you walking across the dark parking lot alone this late at night on your way home to *our* house." His voice is eerily gentle as his powerful, well muscled body moves with warrior-like grace into the classroom.

"Hey, man, I thought that was you," David says far too eagerly after recognizing Nate, oblivious to the imminent danger he was in.

Nate's lip curls in response to David's greeting. A chilled dark silence surrounds us as Nate glowers, his features stony with anger, fists clenched at his side.

Finally reading the room, David takes a long stride away from me and shakes his head. "Hey, just having a little parent-teacher conference," David offers as if that somehow explains his hands touching me.

Nate gives him a sardonic nod. "Seems to me that it's open house night, which was over," he looks at his watch intently, "twenty-three minutes ago. You've kept Whitney here quite late after she's spent all day working."

"I had some concerns about.." he tries to explain.

"You had concerns about my woman's availability to fill your bed. Heads up. She's not. You should go....now," he

interrupts in a low dangerous tone.

Nate's eyes trace David as he quickly flees the classroom before his head jerks back to me. "Grab your stuff, Whit. I'm going to drive you home."

"I should drive myself, so I have my car in the morning," I suggest.

He shakes his head. "Yeah, not happening. There was a carjacking on Harrison earlier tonight, and the same people are hitting multiple times in one night. Matias is here to drive your car back. Lock up your classroom, and I'm bringing you home. It's late enough as it is."

He takes my heavy totes from me and places his free hand possessively on my lower back as we walk into the dark parking lot. Next to Nate's dark sedan, Matias is waiting with the SUV already running, the headlights bright in the darkness.

Nate opens the door for me, then places my bags in the back on the floor before circling the car to get into the driver's seat of the sedan.

Matias pulls in behind us as we drive home, following us closely. Nate's ire isn't dampened on the way. Instead, it seems to smolder as he grips the steering wheel, my half-hearted protests of his barbaric behavior only met with a wordless icy stare and gritted teeth.

Squirming in the leather passenger seat on the drive, my panties slowly growing damp with anticipation, knowing exactly what is in store for me, my head filled with the

memory of hard thrusts and Nate's heated possessive gaze in the restaurant bathroom. I can't be annoyed with Nate this time....the guy was clearly hitting on me. I'm just happy he's waiting until he gets me home to fuck me.

I have to give Nate credit. He makes it precisely three steps inside the garage before he pushes me against the wall. His mouth covers mine hungrily, his lips demanding my submission.

"This pussy is mine," he groans against my lips, his breath ragged as he pulls down my leggings with clumsy hands.

I rub my hands through the soft curls that I love, attempting to soothe my beast. Anticipation thrums through me, my heart beating in my ears. "It's yours, Baby. Just yours."

He pulls down his elastic-waisted pants and briefs, exposing his engorged cock. He lifts my bottom with eager hands and presses me against the sheetrock. I wrap my legs around him before he tests me for wetness with excited fingers. He powers into me with a hard thrust, his dick pressing impossibly deep as my pussy stretches to accommodate the sudden invasion of girth. He turns my face with his hand, holding it gently between his thumb and index finger. "Say it again," he demands, his eyes glaring arrogantly into mine, the green infused with flicks of embers.

"I'm yours," I confess. "Just yours, Babe."

Seemingly egged on by my confession, he presses his hard body against mine, buries his face into my neck, and goes into

a full rut, our bodies slapping against one another in a hurried passion of punishing lunges from his hips.

He'd not given me any special attention as he normally does to help me find my pleasure...he hadn't needed to, nor did he bother to slow down his own pleasure. His precum's warmth mingles with my wetness as I angle my hips and start to meet him thrust for hungry thrust. My body begins to tremble with a spark of electricity as an orgasm comes like a sudden flash of light. My hands go to his hair, gripping the curls, and I wrap my legs tighter around him as I ride out the pleasure. His fingers dig into my hips as he angles them up, seats himself into my depths, and spills inside me.

He grips my hair tightly in his fist, exposing my neck to him, and starts to lick and suck, marking me, claiming me as his while still inside of me. "When I say wait for me, Whitney, I mean fucking wait for me," he demands. "And that fucking guy...."

"I won't allow him to schedule a conference alone," I assure him.

With a nod of approval, he traces my lips with his thumb. "You're so beautiful, Whitney. So fucking mine." His lips touch mine in the world's most perfect kiss.

He pulls out of me, his hot cum leaking down my leg in a sticky mess, my breath still evening out from my orgasm.

He carries me bridal style into the bedroom, and we spend the rest of the night making gentle love until I'm downright

orgasm drunk, and it almost makes me think he regrets his behavior.

But early the next morning, the principal knocks on my door with an eager smile, and Nate follows behind her, carrying a large bouquet of flowers. A few of the students start to tease me about “Ms. Evans’ boyfriend,” but most of them recognize Nate. Probably because he’d shown up from practice freshly showered in a number twelve jersey. Funny coincidence since he always wears a t-shirt after practice. It makes the kids’ days to see their football hero in their classroom. He lingers for a bit, answering the kids’ questions patiently. They talk about it throughout the day, and without a single doubt in my mind, just as Nate intended, every single one of my students goes home to tell their mom and dad not only that Ms. Evans has a boyfriend but who exactly he is.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

NATE

Petal looks at me with her head cocked, eyeing the strawberries on the counter. Her tail wags anxiously as she lets out a low, pathetic whimper like I don't know Whitney's already fed her. "You've had your breakfast, ya chunky monkey. Go watch the egrets or something." I pop the strawberries into the top of the blender and flip it on, the noise of the appliance drowning out Petal's pathetic whines.

With a snort of protest, Petal goes out to her normal spot by the pool, the thwack of the doggie door reminiscent of a canine hair flip.

Brat.

In the past week or two, I realized that Whitney isn't willing to eat breakfast, but she'll drink it through a straw on the run. I've experimented with different flavor combinations, finding something she likes.

Whitney comes out of the bedroom ready for work, her face free of makeup today and her hair in a ponytail, not at all like her.

I wrap my arms around her body and kiss her cheek, “Morning, Angel Face.”

Whitney coughs into her elbow. “Morning, Baby. Is this for me?” she asks, pointing to the plastic tumbler of smoothie.

“Yeah, a matcha smoothie today. Thought we’d try something new.” My hand goes to Whitney’s forehead to feel for a fever. “Are you sick?”

“Just the change in weather. I think everybody gets sick when it changes so quickly here.” She wipes her nose, that I’m just now noticing is red, with a tissue from her pocket, and clears her throat. Typical of New Orleans, it’s gone from cool to warm to cool again in a week. We were wearing sweaters and shorts days apart.

“Huh, yeah, I guess. Did you take anything?” It’s probably from being around all the kids in her class. Adorable as they are, they’re little germ factories.

“I can’t; it all makes me super drowsy. I’ll take something tonight to sleep.”

“Can I bring you some soup to work?”

She shakes her head. “Lunchtime staff meeting. Zero breaks today. I won’t have time to eat it.”

I take in a deep breath. This isn’t acceptable to me at all. “Don’t you have sick days?” It’s bad enough she’s going to

work ill, but without even a break for a meal?

“Yeah, not a good idea after I’ve already used a substitute once this year. Plus, I have to find someone. That’s not happening thirty minutes before school starts. I’ll be fine,” she assures me as she picks up her tote and purse for work.

I inspect her pale complexion as she gives me an air kiss and heads for the door with a rushed “See you tonight, Babe.”



The smell of freshly cooked food wafts towards me when I walk into my home from practice a few days later. Shutting the door behind me, I look for our little ragamuffin but come up disappointed. She always greets Dad at the door when I get home from work!

I find Helene at the stove, pulling a whole boiled chicken out of a gumbo pot I didn’t know I owned. Remnants of diced onions, celery, and carrots are on a cutting board nearby.

I locate Petal in the same spot she always is when Helene’s cooking— a few feet away, sitting pretty, waiting for something to fall from the pot directly to the floor. No wonder she ignored my return home...she was holding out for table food. “Good evening, sir. I made her a little soup for supper tonight. I caught a glimpse of her heading to work looking poorly. Feed a cold, starve a fever,” Helene says with an eager smile. “Nothing is better than a little homemade soup when you’re not feeling well.”

“Is Whitney grading in my study?”

“She got home forty-five minutes ago and said she had a headache and was going to lie down.”

I quirk an eyebrow. Whitney must have left right after dismissal to have been home that long. “Leave the pot to simmer on the stove, please, Helene. You don’t need to stay until it’s done.”

“I’ll leave crackers out and will do the dishes first thing in the morning then.” From the corner of my eye, as I walk away, sure enough, I see Helene pull off the tiniest sliver of chicken and give it to Petal while cooing to her softly in Cajun. It’s been a long time since my high school French classes, and admittedly, Cajun differs from European French, but I think she’s softly petting the top of her head and calling Petal a little stinker.

The white noise of the bedside table fan is the only sound in the darkened bedroom. Whitney’s sprawled out, already in one of my t-shirts. Placing two arms onto the edge of the bed, I lean down to kiss her cheek and feel her head again for a fever.

She lifts her head from the pillow and gives me a tiny smile. “Hey, handsome,” she creaks out, half drowsy. “Come snuggle.” Her voice is husky from her cold still, and I don’t like it one bit.

“Did the herbal tea I sent with you help any?” I ask, pulling down my athletic pants and throwing them in the hamper without moving from my spot. I lift the covers and move onto the bed, pulling Whitney on top of me.

“Yes, a lot. It tastes like licorice.” She nuzzles in like she always does and drapes her silky soft arm across my ribs.

“That’s the fennel seeds in the medicinal tea. We use it on the sidelines during games when we’re sick,” I offer as I wrap one arm around her body, wanting her close to me after being away all day.

I run my fingers down her arm and back up again before kissing her forehead softly. “How was work today? Did you finish your Halloween bulletin board?”

She groans and pulls the covers up tighter against her body. “I got nothing done. I thought that the whole full moon, *everybody goes crazy thing* was just a myth. It’s not. Sooo not.” She sighs deeply and wiggles further into the bed. “How were things at practice today?”

“Also crazy. The full moon might explain that too. Landry was fined five thousand dollars by the league for a uniform violation, saying he didn’t pull his socks up to cover his leg in Saturday’s game.”

She blinks at me. “Seriously? For not pulling your socks up? I have literal five-year-olds, and I don’t police them like that! I swear, Nate, the league has some of the craziest rules.”

I shrug my shoulders. “There’s a good reason for some of them.”

I pull out her tablet and noise-canceling headphones, handing them to her. “Why don’t you take the night off? You look like you need the rest.”

An audiobook and a mindless game app— Whitney’s way of dealing with the worst of days.

“That sounds like a good idea. I’m too tired to be a couch potato with you tonight.”

I lean down and kiss her gently. “I have a video call with my dad scheduled. Try to get some sleep, Angel.”

She makes a kissy face at me, and I return it before padding down the hallway to my study.

I know many of the other players’ girlfriends quit their jobs long before they’re married, and caring for their boyfriends becomes their profession. My mom had done that for my dad, never using her degree a day, and it seems to have worked best for them. But that’s not my Whitney. Whitney loves being with the kids and teaching. So, as much as I want to coddle and spoil her, I know this makes her the happiest. I just wish I could do more to lighten her load.

Right before I reach my sanctuary, a text goes off. It’s Paul, the PR agent I hired to handle my social media, business deals, and such.

Paul: A personal message was sent to your social media account from someone named Preston. Thought you might want to know about it.

Nate: Thank you for letting me know. Please let me know right away in the future if he contacts me again.

Paul: You should know every time the message says read, he sends another one. Do you want me to block him?

Nate: No, not yet. Watch to see what he does.

Sitting down at my desk, I open up the messenger app, and sure fucking enough, there's a stream of angry messages from Pres0612, and somehow I doubt it's just some random guy named Preston.

Pres0612: You're never going to keep Whitney. She'll see right through you. And when she leaves your ass, I'll be right here waiting.

Oh, asshole, Whitney's not going anywhere. Whitney was single for quite some time and never came back to you. Take a hint.

Pres0612: Nothing to say, or do you need one of your lackeys to read it to you? I heard you barely made it through college.

Oh, c'mon, that's just not true. My grades were mediocre since I was balancing football, an education, and some modicum of a social life, but I wasn't near the bottom of my graduating class! Sounds like someone's been looking into me, though.

Pres0612: Does she know you were caught with three prostitutes the night your college team (barely) won the championship?

Huh. He sleuthed well. It was two girls, though, not three, and I certainly never paid for the pleasure of any woman's company. They were bottle service girls, if I remember correctly.

And then he sends his kill shot.

The active chat light comes on, and he sends a picture of Whitney curled up, asleep on her side in a pink silk nightgown. Her hair's longer and a different shade of blonde, her more youthful face free of makeup. Based on the bedding, it looks like a hotel room, a likely romantic getaway.

My heart starts to palpitate, and my hands start to shake uneasily as I stare at the younger Whitney, that I'll never know, sleeping peacefully in her lover's bed.

I stare at the image for what might be minutes, seconds, hours, every tiny detail searing its way into my brain. Will this image always haunt me at night when I close my eyes?

There were so many subtle differences in the picture from the Whitney I know. I despise him for knowing her like that when I never will. The twenty-year-old undergrad, the waitress working for tips to make her way through college. All this

time, Whitney was only a few hours away from me. I'd give anything to have that time with her, to know that version of Whitney. The thought makes my hands tremble with fury and regret.

I start frantically pacing back and forth as I run my hands through my hair, the image he sent still running through my head. What the fuck is he doing with a photograph of Whitney still, after all this time?

To add insult to injury, he has no issue sending it out. I wonder if Whitney even knows it exists since he obviously took it while she was asleep. The thought of him with such an intimate picture, taken likely without her consent and kept long after their break, enrages me.

It's bad enough he'd seen her like that, touched her, the mere thought plaguing me. He knows a part of her that I never will, and the pain of that is almost unbearable. I need an outlet for my fury, hurt, and grief of the time lost with Whitney.

Striding into the garage, I retrieve the ax I purchased to clean up after the last tropical storm. The tree stump from a tree it knocked down is still there since I've never bothered to have it ground down. Pacing quickly to the backyard, I find the remains of the trunk, stretching my legs wide in preparation.

I swing up, putting my strength into the heavy metal, and it swings downward, hitting the remains of the fallen pine tree. I swing up again, wondering where she'd traveled to with him, then swing the ax down with even more fervor.

Had she loved him? Upswing.

She couldn't have. Downswing. Thwack.

Matias will be able to get rid of the pictures. Upswing.

That won't erase them from Preston's mind. Thwack.

I take angry lashes at the stump again and again and again until large chunks fall away and splinters surround me.

I often don't understand why I pull the shit I do with Whitney. It's certainly not the actions of a man that practices the self-discipline I've cultivated over a lifetime as an athlete. Every other facet of my life, from the exercise regime I never deviate from to my sleep schedule, is followed religiously. Now I'm punching rookies and annihilating a poor tree stump as if it's the cause of all my troubles. I'll need to have someone come out to grind it down before Whitney notices it.

As my body starts to tire, I think back to my conversation with my dad and his words.

"Being connected to them in every way possible is as much of a need as breathing."

I need Whitney. Truly need Whitney joined with me in every possible way and as quickly as I can manage.



The next night, after Whitney's sound asleep, I rummage in her purse to take out the brand new prescription of birth control pills she'd picked up at the pharmacy earlier that day. She's almost done with the old ninety-day packet. With her just recovering from illness, I've decided to leave it alone, let her finish this cycle, and give her body a break before we begin trying for a baby.

While Whitney was in the shower this morning, I carefully examined the old packet and tested the foil packaging's weight to ensure I get every detail right.

I stopped by the craft store and bought some lightweight foil, an Exacto knife, and special adhesives in preparation, as well as some powdered prenatal supplements for her morning smoothies.

My work is slow going, making sure it's completely undetectable. The folic acid supplement is almost a dead ringer for her birth control pills, and I think I can successfully make my handiwork undetectable unless it's very carefully scrutinized.

I'm looking forward to a month or two of baby-making with Whitney, albeit unbeknownst to her. My dick stayed steel hard the entire time I'd replaced the contraception pills while I thought of the different ways I'd coax her into fucking multiple times a night. I'll miss the tight, warm heat of her lips

wrapped around my cock while I fuck her face, the perfect way she'd swallowed me down, looking at me eagerly for praise, but I'm going to need to save my cum for making babies.

I carefully examine my work one last time before replacing the packet back in her purse and pray this isn't one of the few times my mischief's discovered.

Bagging up the trash, I check to make sure it's all gone—the plastic canister from the powdered prenatal vitamins (which I poured into a glass container), the Exacto knife, the old foil backing of the pills, and the pills themselves, and stash them in my car to throw away anywhere but here on my way to the practice field.

I need to find peace again. Cure the insanity inside of me. Reset my focus back to my performance during the season. We're playing against Colorado this week, and if I don't get my shit together, we're going to be slaughtered. But most of all, it's Whitney I need. Having her bonded to me will bring me the peace I need, I'm sure of it.

She's rolled over on her stomach, still sleeping off what the doctor insists is allergies, when I come to bed. I roll her on top of me, her loose hair covering her beautiful face, and dream of a baby with Whitney's blue eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

WHITNEY

I shouldn't have expected anything but the elegant perfection of Marissa and Caleb's uptown home. With large white pillars and a second-story balcony overlooking the busy street below, the home blends into the picturesque beauty of the neighborhood.

After ringing the bell, I feel out of place on the porch, awkwardly holding the ceramic-covered dish Marissa asked me to bring. It's Nanna's spinach dip, a crowd favorite. I hurried home to throw it together after work, allowing it to heat up while I showered. With the perpetually fresh blowouts and expertly applied cosmetics of the other women, there is no way I'm meeting up with them tonight without at least cleaning up. With my luck, there'd be dried glue on my pants and shredded paper in my hair. At least I'm feeling better, the last remnants of illness finally gone. Nate's constant coddling and insistence that I rest in the evenings definitely helped.

Cassie greets me at the door, still wearing her private school-style uniform, the white oxford shirt untucked, and her

face free of makeup except for lip gloss. She has a smile on her face, but something about her always seems a little sad. I guess it's understandable, given the circumstances. "Hey! Come on in. You can put your covered dish on the table in the dining room. Fair warning though, when I say the wings are hot, I mean you need to have a cup of milk nearby!"

"Noted!" I laugh, following behind the teen. "Where's Marissa? Is she still in meltdown over the mess the contractor left behind?"

"No, she went and had a massage and came back declaring she was a whole new woman. She always gets so upset over the tiniest details."

Ironically, that's what I like most about Marissa. She cares about everything, often taking on too much to make things happen. It's the tiny details that make an event special. While Marissa stresses over things, rather overzealously at times, her heart's in the right place.

After being pointed in the right direction, I find my friend in the dining room organizing the covered dishes. She looks into a crock pot that's plugged in nearby and checks the contents before replacing the lid.

I greet her with a hug. "Hey, you! Did the contractor make it back to clean up the yard?"

She rolls her eyes upward. "Once I threatened him. I think we're going to use someone else to add a shower to Cassie's room after this nightmare."

“They just did the doors and entryways, right?” I ask, looking around.

“Yep. Caleb kept hitting his head on them because they were lower than normal...you know, because, it’s an old house. Apparently, athletic grace doesn’t occur when you’re six foot five and three hundred and seven pounds,” she laughs.

Caleb is a massive man, one of the largest on the team, which is saying a lot. It can’t be easy to move that amount of body mass around gracefully.

We walk into the large family room, where a dozen players’ wives and girlfriends are already seated. The rooms in the historic home are surprisingly small, so pocket doors have been opened to make two rooms into one larger room.

“Just us?” I ask, gesturing to the other women.

“Well, take out the wives who travel with their guys and the ones who are watching at home because they have to put the kids to bed at a decent hour....”

I hadn’t even noticed there weren’t any children around except baby AJ. He’s in Shailene’s arms, drooling all over his blue bib and making a game of removing his socks from plump little feet. One white sock comes off, slipping into his tiny little fists, and he smiles victoriously at his plunder before he tries to bring the sock to his mouth. He’s already unhappily wailing when I sit beside them, his sock confiscated. Dark eyes are brimming with tears I almost believe, his beautiful little lips in a full pout.

I turn to face the now-wailing infant. “What’s the matter, sweet one? Did Mama take your sock away? Aww, look at those tears!”

Shailene reaches into the diaper bag and pulls out a rattle. “Don’t believe them for a minute! He’s learned to fake cry, so Dad picks him up. He’ll be completely content playing, but the second Andre walks in, he goes into complete hysterics. Andre can’t stand to hear him cry. I swear the bigger they are, the harder they fall.”

I watch the pre-game footage intently for any brief shot of Nate. I’ve slowly learned to read the tiniest expressions to tell when my guy is tired, or his body’s hurting somehow, when he’s hyped up and running on adrenaline. He seems hyper-focused today and finally more relaxed.

Nate’s been distracted a lot this week. I caught him staring into space on multiple occasions, and he was reticent during meals. He’d had a long, private meeting with Matias (his head of security), so I assumed it was related to that. I waited, hoping he’d share whatever was troubling him with me. Whatever upset him must have been resolved because he was in much better spirits before he left.

Right as he was heading for the plane, he pulled me close, ran his nose down my neck, and whispered in my ear, “Tonight, when I call, I want you spread eagle on your back and those lovely little breasts of yours out so I can see them. No touching yourself before I call, and I’ll know if you do.”

He left me with damp panties, a knowing smirk, and a kiss to my pulse point that made my knees buckle. I'll admit, for a minute, I briefly considered stowing away on the chartered flight.

I feel my face grow warm when I think of the image that popped up when I answered the video call— Nate in his boxers sporting a large erection I yearned to taste, his eyes hungry with lust. I'd carefully angled the tablet and positioned myself just so, giving him the best view of my body. After he'd scanned my body slowly, a roguish smile had found his face as he purred at me, "Who's my good girl?" As much as I hate Nate being away, I love how much fun we have together while he's gone. Our ummm...conversations always leave me a little wanting, just taking the edge off, something I confessed to Nate before we ended the last call.

"Sounds like something I need to take care of the minute I walk in then, Angel. Do you want me to wake you up with my tongue or my dick?"

"Nate!" I blush.

"If you won't answer, I'll pick." He sits back as if thinking for a minute. "Definitely waking you up with my mouth on that sweet cunt of yours. I've not had a taste in days."

The memory of just his promise has me tingling with arousal, anxiously waiting for him to come home to me.

Marissa turns the tv onto surround sound, the blaring echo of the pre-game crowds breaking me out of my daydream. Cassie walks into the room again just before kickoff, moving a

chair closer to the television to sit down. “Oh, look! I heard they’re bringing on Roman’s dad!” Cassie says, bringing the attention back to the big screen television.

The hosts of the pre-kickoff show welcome the man, identifying him as Alex Jaworski, a former Quarterback for Colorado Cobras, who we’re up against today. His deep laugh lines do little to mar the handsome face that’s framed by a neatly trimmed gray beard. His tie is Cobras colors—red and silver—but a Hurricanes hat covers his hair. The interview is quick, mainly just banter and discussing how Alex’s “home is divided today.” The interview ends with the camera going to Roman warming up and the announcer saying that Colorado is “happy to have their boy back home, even if he is playing on the opposing team.”

Kickoff is its usual flurry of fast-footed men. The Cobras kickoff, and the ball flies directly to Landry in the endzone. He dodges and weaves as bodies fly towards him, all eager to take Landry down. He returns the ball to the thirty-yard line, and we all jump to our feet, loudly cheering him on.

I don’t see much of Nate for a few minutes— the downside of watching on television.

The broadcaster’s deep baritone interrupts the sound of the crowd when Nate takes the field to huddle with the rest of the team. “That’s Hurricanes quarterback Nate Coleman taking the field. Still going strong in his seventh season with New Orleans.”

The second color commentator, a former player, adds, “I think seven might be a good year for the former pro bowler. His current pass completion is at sixty-eight percent this season.”

My blood pressure rises as I watch Andre, the center, hike the ball, and it goes directly to Nate. He runs a few steps; his arm already lifted to pass the ball to a wide receiver. The ball leaves his hands by what seems like a fraction of a second when a Cobra comes out of seemingly nowhere, trying to grasp onto Nate’s leg. Nate falls but rolls and jumps back on his feet as the wide receiver catches the ball, running towards the end zone.

We all jump to our feet, crazily screaming, “Run, run, run!” as if they can hear us states away. It doesn’t matter, though. They know we’re supporting our guys, and although they can’t hear us, they can play knowing we’re all cheering them on. No room in the state of Louisiana is ever louder than a room filled with the Hurricanes’ women during a game.

When the play’s over, I search eagerly for Nate, worried about the fall. What woman wouldn’t after watching her guy trip like that? Aside from the time he’s away, this is the hardest part for me.

“They teach the boys how to fall without hurting themselves in pee wee football,” Marissa says assuringly after noticing my face. “It’s automatic for them. They do it without even thinking as they’re falling.”

“Girl, you need to grow some thicker skin quickly if that little bitty fall has you all worried,” Jasmine, the wife of number forty-two, says.

“I’m trying!” I mumble back.

“You’ll get used to it,” Jasmine says wisely. “Don’t worry unless they come onto the field for him, and even then, wait and see.”

“I know!” I mutter. This isn’t the first time I’ve received this lecture. But most of these women were with their guys back when they were still in college and have had years to get used to this.

Still, I search the brief glimpses of him, looking for any hint of an injury to his hand, a hint of pain or discomfort on his face. When I notice him finally on the field, Nate’s in “business mode,” his eyes laser-focused. *Stop being so neurotic, Whitney. He is literally a professional at this.*

Eventually, I’ll be an old hand at this, too, comforting the new girl, I’m sure, but I doubt I’ll ever stop worrying about Nate.



Nate’s tiny fall ends up being nothing compared to the hit he takes later in the game. Even Marissa’s eyes grow large. I watch, reminding myself he’s fine unless someone else takes him off the field. *You’re being ridiculous, Whitney.*

Some games seem almost like a slam dunk win—the guys come out swinging, quickly taking the lead. The players seem to be more evenly matched tonight, both in skilled athletes and determination to walk away the winner.

I expected Shailene to playfully mock the worried expression I can't conceal, but instead, with her tone soft, she gently says, "He'll likely be sore tomorrow, but he didn't limp away or anything. He might have some turf burn." In my crazy mind, this confirms, to me, that it was a big hit.

"They usually do ice baths and stuff, too, on them before they leave," Cassie throws out. "So even if he's sore, they'll make sure he's feeling right as rain before they head home."

Crazy me pulls out my phone, sending a text for Nate to find when he gets off the field. He won't see it for a bit, but if he's feeling a little sore, there'll be a little joke waiting for him when he gets back to the locker room.



The game ends in overtime, the Cobras winning by a breath. It's disappointing, but our guys played so well tonight. I'm proud of them.

"You don't have to stay and help clean up! I know you have work tomorrow," Marissa insists as she closes the front door, having just seen Jasmine and Shailene out. With the already late hour, no one lingered long.

"There's no point just rushing home to an empty house and leaving y'all alone to clean it up. Besides, I kinda want to

watch the post-game wrap-up.” Petal has Helene home with her all day, and a doggie door, so I don’t need to worry about my little old lady. Despite having lived alone until recently, I find the silence of our home deafening when Nate isn’t there.

The sound of the coach’s voice echoes through the house on multiple televisions, soon replaced by Nate’s. Anxious about the big hit, still, I stop to watch him on the kitchen television. He seems upbeat, despite the loss. I can tell he’s exhausted from the look on his face, wiped out from a hard game.

“The guys played so well today!” Marissa says excitedly as she unplugs her crock pot.

I open a large black trash bag, our fourth for the night. “They did. And even with this loss, they’re well into playoff contention.”

Leaning down, I pick up a gray scrap of fabric that fell on the floor—an overly large zip-up hoodie Cassie had pulled on for a bit during the game.

She took it off when we all came into the kitchen for something sweet to munch on. My eye catches the familiar tag on the shirt. It’s not the one from the pro shop like I’m wearing now, but the tags used by the team’s equipment managers to distinguish the owner of the identical clothing. It can’t be Caleb’s. As ridiculously large as this shirt is, it’s too small for a man with Caleb’s bulk. This one is more Nate’s size. Curious, I look at the tag, and marked in black ink is the number twenty-seven, Roman Jaworski.

“Weird. The equipment managers must have mixed up Caleb’s hoodie and Roman’s,” I say, holding the shirt out to Marissa.

“No way,” she says as she walks over to take the shirt from me. “They’re far too careful.” Her eyebrows furrow as she looks at the tag, then towards the family room where Cassie is tidying up. She clears her throat, her eyes coming back to me. “Dollars to donuts, that man of mine accidentally grabbed it off a bench in the locker room thinking it was his. Must have ended up in the laundry. I need to talk to that housekeeper about how Caleb’s laundry ended up in Cassie’s closet, though...She keeps mixing up mine and Cassie’s things constantly too.”

“Right, that must be it,” I offer, going back to cleaning.

Marissa’s face is serene as we finish our task, but something about the hurried way she’s cleaning and how unusually quiet she is worries me.

My phone pings with a text just as I’m getting ready to leave.

Me: Where do quarterbacks go dancing?

Nate: You hinting you want me to take you out to two-step it, Angel Face?

Me: OMG, Nate, it’s a joke!

Nate: Oh okay, where do quarterbacks go dancing?

Me: The Foot Ball.

Nate: Cute. Sounds like a kid's joke. Noah tell it to you? I saw the little hearts he drew on his test this week when you were grading.

Me. OMG, Nate! No, an eighth grader did during buddy reading.

*Nate: *Sends "watching" gif* Post-game interview stuff just done. I'll be home in a few hours. I want you on top of the covers, panties off, waiting for me. I need that sweet pussy the minute I walk in the door.*

Laughing at the gif, I put my phone back down, content that my guy's perfectly fine.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

NATE

The lobby of Hotel Noémie is bustling as usual. Another wedding party. The establishment seems to be the constant weekend host of nuptials and conferences, keeping the public spaces buzzing with activity regardless of whether it's tourist season or not.

I walk around two overly done-up ladies taking selfies and nod at the concierge as I pass in acknowledgment. They make us stay in the same hotel before home games to keep us focused on tomorrow's game and ensure that we get a good night's rest, not partying. I used not to mind it, but now I want to be home with Whitney in our bed.

Bypassing the line at the check-in desk, I find one of the team's staffers, Ralph, waiting by the elevators in his normal spot at a podium. He looks down at the clipboard in his hand when he sees me approaching, running a finger down the list of printed information until he finds my name.

"Room 421 this time," Ralph says as he leans over to retrieve my key card from a stack resting on the podium. "Bed

checks at ten.”

Same information for every home game, except for the room number. I don’t know why they even bother telling us anymore. “Hey, thanks, Ralph. Say hi to your wife for me.”

Hiding the disappointment I feel over my assigned room, I slide the card into my pocket, bringing my duffel bag. I’ve gotten to know the layout of the hotel. Room 421 will never work tonight. It’s too far away from the stairwell.

I start to leave but turn my head to address Ralph again. “Hey, what room are Richard Landry and Caleb Boudreaux in?”

He looks down at the notes on his clipboard, running his finger down the printed page. “Rooms 422 and 427.” Fuck, both of those are even further out of the way.

I drum my fingers on my thigh, thinking for a moment. “What about Cordova?”

Joe furrows his brow tightly. “There’s no switching rooms allowed.”

I give him a look of mock innocence that says, “*Who? Me?*” “Poker. Team building, ya know. Hoping to get a game started in my room tonight. Before curfew, of course.”

He eyes me warily before rechecking the sheet. “He’s in 404.”

Bingo. “Thanks, man,” I say with a wave before heading onto the elevator.

The Hurricanes' security guard looks up from his seat when the elevator opens on the floor but quickly looks back down, uninterested in my activity. Although everybody's supposed to provide him with ID before they're allowed entry, he knows most of the team on sight. Steve mainly sits in his chair, playing on his phone all night, getting up only to periodically patrol the usually empty hallway. Before a big game (rivals or the playoffs), they'll increase security, adding in a few NOPD officers, but since tonight isn't one of those, it'll just be Steve.

I walk down the hall directly to room 404, rapping briskly. Cordova swings the door open without checking to see who's outside. His face is blank in greeting.

"You just get here?" I ask.

He lifts his chin in greeting. "Just put my bag down. What's up?"

"Switch rooms with me?" I don't bother explaining. It's none of his business why.

Cordova drums his fingers against the door panel, contemplating it before turning, eyeing the stairwell. The beginning of a knowing smile tips the corner of his mouth. "Sure, man. Let me grab my bag."

The guy has no room to judge me for whatever misbehavior I might be up to tonight. I've heard female...sounds...coming from his room late on many a game night.

"Room 421. Courtyard view," I say, holding out the key card for him to take when he returns with his luggage. He

holds it between two fingers and taps it against the door.

He digs into his pocket, retrieving another magnetic key. “Here you go,” he says, holding out the key for this room. “Stay out of the wet bar,” he laughs, and I know the fucker’s on his way to rack up charges on my room left and right. Knowing him, it will be the wildest named porn he can find, just so that it shows up on the hotel bill. The office staff at Hurricanes’ headquarters go over that shit with a fine tooth comb and dock our pay accordingly.

Nate: You still at the craft store?

Whitney: Leaving now.

Nate: Meet me downstairs for dinner? I don’t feel like eating alone, and the guys ordered room service already.

Whitney: Oooh, dinner out sounds nice. I’ll have Helene feed Petal and head right there. xxoo

Nate: Park in valet. I’ll meet you down there in a few.

Today marks a week since Whitney’s period, and since she’s now taking the placebos, she’s likely either fertile or will be soon. We’ve had sex non stop lately, the thought of a possible pregnancy making her even more delectable to me. But there’s

no sense in ruining a perfectly good night of baby making just because I have to sleep away from home.

I'm getting her upstairs with me and spending a large portion of the night making love to her. To even the newest team member, the security guard and bed checks are a moderate inconvenience while attempting to bend the rules. To someone who grew up with a full staff of professional bodyguards, it's downright child's play.

Mindlessly scrolling through social media, my dick twitches at the idea of the night ahead. I want this so badly. The thought of how close I could be to having everything sends a surge of excitement thrumming through my body.

After waiting a few minutes, I head down the elevator to the valet stand to meet Whitney with eager steps.



The dining room at the Hotel Noémie is surprisingly empty for this time of year, but I've still had the waitress sit us in the back of the restaurant, where no one can stumble across us and recognize me.

I rest my chin in the palm of my hand and run my index finger over my lips, watching Whitney with hooded eyes. "My God, you're so fucking perfect."

Her face warms as she sips her second glass of wine, giving me a heated gaze over the brim. Her eyes scan from my face down to my torso. "You're not so bad looking yourself."

I run my thumb back over my lips pensively. “I can’t stop thinking about what I would do to you if you were lying beside me tonight. You’re so beautiful that it drives me crazy.”

Her nipples are peaked through her blouse, her voice husky when she leans forward and asks quietly, “and what exactly are you thinking of, Mr. Coleman.”

I lean forward, my face inches from her, as I grab her hands and start stroking one of them with my own. “You keep looking at me like that, Angel, and I just might show you.”

“Maybe I want you to do something about it,” she says with a playful lift of her eyebrows as she sits back in the booth. “Too bad you have to sleep away tonight.”

I smirk in her direction before standing to leave, throwing extra bills to make up for tying down the table for so long. I glance across the table at Whitney. Her legs are tightly pressed together as if that will give her pussy some relief.

Her face is flush, her eyes alive with arousal. Whitney might not have agreed to go upstairs with me yet, but she hasn’t left either, meaning she’s just dragging her feet to a yes.

I bite back a smug smirk and lead her out of the dining room with a gentle hand.

Stopping at the door to the first floor stairwell, I lead Whitney inside.

“What are you doing? You need to get upstairs,” she protests as I gently lean her against the coolness of the brick wall.

My hands roam to her hair, running my fingers into downy softness as my mouth ravishes hers. “Can’t. Haven’t finished with you yet.”

She breaks the seal of our kiss and gently pushes me away. “I don’t want you to get in trouble,” she warns, a hint of anxiety suddenly in her voice. *Always the rule follower.*

I lean back in, holding her face in my hands, watch as her eyes soften, and touch my forehead to hers. “You should come upstairs with me then so I’m in my room on time.”

“Isn’t there security?”

It’s cute she thinks Steve is anything close to an obstacle for me. “We can go straight up the stairwell to my room. The security guard is around the corner, by the elevator. He won’t even see us.” I lean in again, sealing our mouths together, wrapping my arms around her, silencing the beginning of a protest.

When the tenseness of her body again gives way to aroused softness, I break off the kiss, eagerly leading her up the stairs. “I have plans for you tonight. Let’s get you up the stairs before the coaching staff make it to my room.”

Her sapphire eyes have darkened to navy with her arousal and spark with excitement at my words. “You’re supposed to be resting tonight for the game tomorrow.” Her words are raspy, soaked in lust.

I give her a hungry look, stopping at the hard nipples poking through her blouse. “I’ll sleep quite well...once I’m done with

you.”

I reach into my pocket, pull out my phone, turn it off completely, and instruct her to do the same so we’re not caught. The vibrations still make a little noise when a text is sent. Plus, I need her phone completely off, at her own hands, before her birth control alarm sounds tonight—my cover story for “how Whitney got pregnant.”

Her body visibly jerks at the words, and she starts to move quickly up the stairs, a fly caught in my web of deceit.

I exit the top of the landing first, looking around the empty hallway for Steve if he’s walking around. Stopping for a moment to listen, I realize that a member of the coaching staff is already knocking on doors around the corner for bed checks. Fuck.

I quickly lead Whitney down the hall on quiet feet, cringing at the beeping noise the door makes when I’m given access to the room. Closing the door behind us, I breathe in a sigh of relief. It’s little more than a slap on the hand if I’m discovered, but after the fight with Moreau recently, it’s best not to be caught up to no good right now. Even if the transgression is a relatively small one in the grand scheme of things.

Whitney looks around the unremarkable hotel room and walks towards the large picture windows, the curtains open, revealing the cityscape below lit by the neon lights of the bars and clubs. A small trail of horse drawn carriages roll through the streets, a late-night tour of the city. I come up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist, my nose in her neck as

we watch the city below, the hardness of my erection pressing into her back. “They’ll be here any second now to check the room.”

She looks up, nodding nervously, her head turning at a knock on the door. “What if I get caught?” she whispers.

“You won’t. Just stay here,” I mouth silently as I go to answer the door. She moves closer to the side of the room, away from direct view of the door, her arms crossed over her torso, her body tense.

A veteran member of the coaching staff is waiting at the cracked open door. He’s tapping a foot impatiently, focusing on the list of room assignments in his hands. He looks up from the clipboard with surprise, then back down to the clipboard. “You are neither Cordova nor in your room,” he says, matter of fact, tucking the clipboard under his arm. *Seriously, a lecture? I don’t know why the staff even bothers. They always lecture about it, and we always switch again anyway with zero fucks given or consequences received.*

“Switched with Cordova. He was being a little bitch about all the neon lights from the street. He’s in my room,” I give a tilt to my head towards my assigned room. “We good?”

He shakes his head, used to the particularities of the players pre game. “Just don’t make a habit of it.”

“Absolutely not, one-time thing,” I assure him before I shut the door behind me. They only care that I’m in my room, supposedly resting for the game ahead.

The door shuts with a light click, and I turn to my woman, so beautiful with her pinkened cheeks and kiss swollen lips, her blue eyes shimmering with her arousal. My eyes catch the hard tips peeking out from her t-shirt, and I imagine them swollen with milk for our child, which makes my dick grow even harder, throbbing to get inside of her, to give her my seed.

I can't wait to hold our child, to have sleepy Sundays together as a family, to watch Whitney with our little one, and for there to be a tiny version of the two of us calling me "Dad."

I pace towards her, the image of her belly round, her breasts heavy from pregnancy frozen in my head. I should feel guilty about what I'm doing, but I don't. Whitney loves children, and I saw her reaction while I was holding Cole. Besides, I know Whitney and I are meant to be together. I'm just rushing us faster to the goal line. She's going to be breathtakingly beautiful while carrying our child. If only she knew how soon that will be.

Chapter Thirty

WHITNEY

I should have known he'd get me upstairs. With the way we've been going lately, having sex multiple times every day, it's no surprise we can't keep our hands off one another for twenty-four hours. We'll be away from one another for a few hours or just working, but by dinner time, I'm desperately craving the pleasure he gives me like the Nate addict I am. Nate isn't much better, often instigating a quickie on the study couch the minute I get home, then making love to me again at bedtime. We've spent much time enveloped in one another's bodies this week, and it's been divine.

So it's no surprise I'm sneaking into his hotel room with damp panties and my nipples poking through my blouse, hard as diamonds and aching for Nate's touch.

He's prowling towards me now with promises of debauchery written on his face, eyes shining with pure lust.

He cracks his neck, the hint of a mischievous smile on his face. My pulse begins to quicken and my hands tremble with anticipation. Neither of us are getting much rest any time soon.

When he makes his way across the room, he lifts me up with one strong arm, his hand under my bottom. My legs wrap around him for support as our mouths crash together in a hungry fervor. He walks us to the bed, leans me onto the mattress, and puts me down softly. I fall, legs splayed open, staring at the large erection bulging from Nate's pants. He eagerly pulls off his zip-up hoodie, throwing it to the side before lying on top of me, reclaiming my lips. My hands are trembling with eagerness as they go under the hem of his t-shirt, feeling the hard ridges of his back. He lifts my t-shirt up and off and pulls my breasts out of the cups of the bra. Nate hungrily claims one nipple in his mouth, circling the hard tip with his tongue while squeezing the other in his palm.

I grind against his dick, anxious for some relief, groaning loudly at the pleasure. He looks up from my breasts with a pleasure-soaked smirk, his hair mussed from my hands, and moves off the bed. His t-shirt comes off, exposing the fine line of dark hair that leads down into his jeans and the defined bulge of his crotch.

He stares at me as he empties his pockets onto the bedside table. "You've got thirty seconds to take off your clothes, or I'm ripping them off you." His words are panted breathlessly without breaking eye contact from where I lay on the bed.

He'll do it. I have zero doubt. My clothes are thrown over the side of the bed in record time. I lie on the bed, my legs splayed out in front of me, waiting for him to return.

He works the zipper of his pants, pushing them down with his underwear in one swift motion, exposing the impossibly thick erection between his powerful thighs.

He stares at me for a moment adoringly from the foot of the bed with a grin on his face. “So fucking beautiful. So fucking mine.”

My face warms at his words. He has this way of making me feel so adored. I cock my head to the side invitingly. “Are you going to come fuck me or what?”

His naughty smile is back when he kneels on the bed and loops my calves in his arms. “After I get a taste.”

He leans down and places a tiny kiss on my belly so soft and sweet it makes me melt, then nuzzles my folds with a groan of pleasure. He licks my slit, groaning low as if savoring the taste. He tortures me with soft swirls to the tiny bundle of nerves meant to tease me.

“Please, God, Nate, please.” I need just the tiniest bit more. I grind against his face, and he grips my hips and devours my pussy. I clutch the sheet as the sparks start to ignite around me. He pinches my nipples, and I come in a fiery inferno of pleasure.

He looks up from between my legs, wiping the wetness from his face, his dick standing erect between us. I crawl down to him, taking the hardness in my hand, gently stroking it. His eyes shutter closed as he leans on the bed on his knees. I lean down to swirl the tip of him in my mouth, and his eyes pop open. He weaves his hand in my hair and pulls me away from

his cock gently. “I need inside of you tonight and more than once. Go lie back on the bed.”

I move backward, resting my head on the pillows as he covers my body with his. He rests his weight on his arms and starts to gently suck and bite on my neck. He looks up at me, eyes hooded with lust. I feel the blunt, thick head of his cock against the entrance of my pussy before it slides inside of me, filling me to the hilt. I curve into his chest, feeling so full. “God, I love your cock.”

He throws my legs over his shoulders, allowing him to go even deeper and drive in harder, faster. He grips my hips, the tips of his fingers digging into the skin as he moves in impossibly deep.

“Come for me, baby. Let me see how beautiful you look all pink.” He begins to move frantically inside of me, an arm hooked around each leg, pulling me closer to him.

I can feel myself starting to fall over the edge. My body arches off the bed; my toes curl as I clutch the sheets in my hands. He gyrates his hips, hitting my clit in the perfect spot, and I slip into Nirvana, oblivious to the world around me as I succumb to the wave of pleasure washing over me.

Nate grips my thighs tightly and moves on top of me, covering my body with his large torso. His stomach muscles tense as he groans loudly, gritting his teeth as he lunges forward, filling me completely. I moan with pleasure as his grip tightens more on my legs. He thrusts one final time,

driving his cock so very, very deep until he bottoms out, and implodes deep inside me.

He stays above me, both of us gasping for breath for what seems like an eternity, his cock still buried inside me as our breathing evens out.

“Babe, I need to go clean up,” I say, trying to move him off me.

“No,” he answers abruptly.

“Nate, I’m all gross!” I protest, trying to move him from on top of me. He keeps my legs up around his shoulders. His lips caress mine in a drugging kiss, and I wrap my hands around his body, pulling him closer to me, feeling the hard planes of his back, the curve of his ass.

He nuzzles my neck, gently licking and sucking, and I already feel the spark of arousal again at his touch. “I like you like this, smelling like me. You’re the only woman I’ve ever given my cum to. It means you’re mine.”

We lay there together, Nate not breaking our joining.

When he finally pulls himself out, he leans down, inspecting the wetness dripping on my thigh. With a finger, he pushes it back in. He looks up at what I’m sure is my curious expression. “My cum stays inside of you,” he says again, tightly closing my thighs.

He moves to the head of the bed and pulls me against him, so we’re face to face. His arms wrap around me, pulling me

onto his chest. His hands gently graze across my bare back with gentle strokes, and I nuzzle into the warmth of his body.

“I should go,” I say softly.

He chuckles, and there’s a hint of something almost sinister lurking underneath. “I’m not nearly done with you yet tonight.”

The words are close to the tip of my tongue, but the anxiety of being the first to say them always holds me back. Nate always tells me that I’m his, but I know he’s just as much mine, something he’s showing me again and again tonight.

He locks our lips together as he climbs on top of me and laces our fingers together. As I fuse my body with his, I’m just as eager to enjoy the pleasure our bodies give one another again.

The prodding at my entrance almost feels like a caress, the slow, measured thrusts making my body purr as I revel in the feel of his chiseled muscles on top of me as he seeks his own pleasure. I curl into the hard ridges of his body as I orgasm, my nails digging into the hard globes of his ass. My pussy muscles tighten around his cock, sending him spiraling into his own orgasm.

His eyes shutter tight as a pained expression comes onto his face. His leg muscles tighten as he buries his cock at the entrance of my cervix. The cum pulsates out of his cock, filling me, marking me.

His.



The city below is long since asleep when I finally creep out of bed, the place between my legs sore from a night of sex. The mess from yet another round of lovemaking is evident between us as I move off him and towards the bathroom.

As I'm walking back from the bathroom, I stop to watch him for a moment. Nate's seemingly sated, for now. His dark lashes flicker as if dreaming. The sheet's pulled down, exposing the fine lines around his torso, the chiseled arms that make me feel so safe curled around his head. In his sleep, he lifts a hand, searching for me, his eyes popping open when he comes up empty. He sits up in the bed, sleepy eyes searching the room until he finds me walking back from the bathroom.

He rests his head on his bent arm. "Come back to bed, Angel." His voice is dripped with velvet and desire as he lifts the edge of the cover and gestures with his head for me to come back. I really should head home, but instead, I move across the room and back into the familiar comfort of Nate's arms.

"I'm sore," I warn, climbing back under the covers.

He rubs his eyes and draws me close before his eyes go to the clock on the nightstand. "Matias will be here in about half an hour to pick you up and take you home. We have time for a few more minutes together before you leave."

"You should try to sleep," I say softly. "I heard Houston's offense is amazing this year."

“I have plenty of time to sleep. I wish you could stay.”

We both know that isn't a good idea. Not only would I be seen, but Nate would stay up the entire night with me instead of resting for the game ahead of tomorrow.

“Why did you stop coloring your hair?” he asks suddenly, his eyebrows furrowed together.

What? How did he even know? He must have seen a picture at Mom's house. “My sister always did it for me, between clients when she had time. But then she was pregnant, and I wanted her to rest as much as possible. I didn't have time during my last year of school to bother with it.” *Is he hinting that he wants me to color it?*

He nods as if understanding. He winds a strand of hair in his finger loosely. “I like this shade better, I think.”

It's not long before we reluctantly leave the bed and dress. Nate leads me down the stairs of the sleeping hotel to the foot of the stairwell where Matias is waiting, his face expressionless.

“Stay away from Harrison Avenue,” Nate instructs his head of security.

He leans down and cups my face in his hands, kissing me gently. “I'll see you after the game. Sleep sweet, Angel Face.”

Chapter Thirty-One

NATE

“Turn that music up!” Coach bellows excitedly to a defensive lineman after he finishes his post game speech, looking every bit as self-satisfied as the rest of us after our win tonight. Houston isn’t an easy team to beat, and we’ve just decimated them, barely letting them even score. I feel more alive than I ever have, spending the entire game walking on air after my night with Whitney. Not only are things going amazingly with her, but I’m also starting to think with more certainty that we’re going to the playoffs this year.

Someone cranks the music on his phone up, and a group of rookies starts to dance, celebrating our victory.

Unwrapping the towel around my waist, I throw on my street clothes, and use the towel to dry my damp hair. I’ve already celebrated with the team, and now I want to get to Whitney, eager to share this moment with her.

Bypassing the continuing celebratory antics of the younger players with a shake of the head, I grab my bag to leave with the others that are just as eager to get to their loved ones.

At the locker room entrance, Landry's preschool-age daughter runs towards her dad and jumps into his arms, wrapping her hands around his neck. She takes a lollipop out of her mouth, holding it in her tiny fist. "You'd pwayed good, Daddy," she says before puckering her tiny pink lips to give her father a kiss. He smiles at his little girl's words of praise before he leans in to kiss her, whispering softly to her with a look of contentment on his face as they amble over to his wife.

I can't help but feel envious, but that will be me soon enough. My heart begins to beat quickly, the mental image of a sweet little princess of my own to coddle and spoil running through my head...a princess with Whitney's blonde hair and pretty smile.

Whitney's waiting a few feet away, standing next to Cassie and Marissa, chatting. I start to move faster, eager to get her into my arms. She notices me approaching and cuts the distance between us as readily as I do. Living together, you'd think we wouldn't be so eager for one another, but no amount of time with her is enough.

"Hey, big guy!" she says as she throws her arms around me. Standing on her tiptoes, she gives me a feathery kiss that promises so much more with no care to the curious eyes around us. Her eyes are soft with affection as she cranes her neck to look up at me.

Wrapping my hands around her waist, my thumbs brush over her flat stomach, reminding me of the potential child taking root inside of her. I need to be even more cautious with

feeding her proper meals. “Ready to go get a bite to eat?” I offer. “I feel like a steak.”

We’ve started this little tradition, always going to DeLucia’s after home games, enjoying something approaching an actual date in a private corner of the restaurant. We might be living together, but we both need to dedicate face-to-face time to one another, even if we only spend it chatting. I love hearing her chat about her day and sharing mine with her.

“I already called ahead. Our table’s waiting for us,” she informs me, her face still glowing with excitement from the game.

Leading her towards the athletes’ parking lot, I loop my arm around her waist, my thumb deliberately brushing against her stomach with hopeful strokes.

I feel new contentment I’ve never felt before. My team is having an amazing season, Whitney’s heart is mine, and there is a very distinct possibility that there is a little passenger with us. My life just keeps getting better and better.



The maître d’s face flashes with recognition as soon as we enter the restaurant. So close to the stadium, it’s busy with patrons eager for a hearty meal after the game. Knowing we’re trying to enjoy our time together undisturbed, a waitress quickly brings us to our normal table in the back of the restaurant.

We have a quiet dinner together, mainly just enjoying one another's company laughing about our day. She's asking increasingly technical questions about the game, her knowledge slowly building.

"I still don't understand why they didn't call a penalty in the third quarter?" she asks.

I feel my eye start to twitch at the memory. "Because referees, as a whole, are blind," I say bluntly. "Over a dozen cameras each show they're wrong, and still...."

"So, what do the referees think happened?"

I explain the play as simply as possible, using the sugar packets from the table, and she seems to absorb it.

"So, the referee was wrong?"

"Whitney, the louder the crowds, the more certain you can be that the refs are wrong," I laugh ironically. "Still feel bad because the referees get so much hate?" Always so tender-hearted, she'd mentioned the feeling to me once, in passing, after her first game.

"No," she answers deadpan before starting to laugh, and I know my girl finally converted into a bonafide football fan.

"Referees are human and make mistakes. There's bad calls on both sides of the ball, which is what the cameras are for."

My phone vibrates on the table. "Just my father," I explain. "I'll just have to catch up with him later."

She places her spoon on her saucer and bites her lip nervously. “The two of you talk almost every night these days.”

It’s a statement, but one that’s a question. “Yeah, we own a couple of businesses together in Tennessee. Business managers handle the day-to-day, but we still need to keep an eye out. Which reminds me. How do you feel about spending a part of the summer in Nashville? It’ll allow my dad to run off with Mom for a few weeks without worrying about things.”

She leans back against the booth, resting her hands in her lap. “Where would we stay that long? I mean, do you have a place there?”

I take my napkin from my lap and hold her hands out to place in mine. I grasp them tightly, reassuringly, in mine. “I was just about to discuss that with you. Right before we met, I bought a house to flip. Dad’s been overseeing it during the season for me. Let’s keep it. For us.” *Please like the idea. They’re already working on the fence for Petal and renovating the porch into a sunroom for you to read in.*

She’s thinking again, the wheels in her head churning quickly, her brow furrowed tight. “You don’t need to stay in Nashville longer than a few weeks? I need to be back two weeks before Labor Day to start getting things ready.”

Oh, Whitney, we’ll be far too busy becoming parents to spend any extended period of time there this summer. “Just a few weeks. Break in the house, you can say. I need to be here early in the summer to keep an eye on things while Marissa

and Caleb are in deep with wedding stuff, and I also need to keep an eye on a relatively new business here.” *And we’re going to need to be close to your obstetrician.*

The pensive look on her face fades, and the sides of her mouth upturn to a smile. “Are more fishing lessons included with this trip to Tennessee?”

“Angel Face, I’ll take you fishing in the mountains anytime you want.”



“I can hear the kids screaming already,” Landry laughs as we walk up to the front door of the modern one-story building.

“School chant,” I inform him. It’s sad I know that, but I live with a teacher. “They use it to get the kids pumped up.” Collegiate Charter might be a tiny school, but the kids can, for sure, be loud.

The school secretary is away from her normal perch at her desk, instead waiting by the door for us, eagerly opening it before one of us even has a chance to press the buzzer for access. I don’t have to talk my way in this time. Today I am... we are... invited guests at Collegiate Charter.

I give the gray-haired woman a welcoming smile, “Good Morning, Ms. Mary. How’s your hip?” I ask as I walk by her, Javier, Landry, Roman, and Caleb following close behind.

“Meh, not good in this cold. You know how it goes with old aches and pains when it’s chilly out.”

“Nice jersey,” I throw out at her as I walk away, noticing the large number twelve emblazoned across the chest. I catch a secretive smile from her as I walk away. I knew she liked me.

The entire administration team, Whitney’s bosses, are waiting in the school’s foyer to greet us. It’s the last school day before Thanksgiving break and Hurricanes Day at Collegiate Charter.

“Morning, Val,” I say to the principal as if we’re old friends. She’s wearing a more formal skirt suit today, unlike her typical casual pants and blouse, her dark hair perfectly coiffed. She beams at the familiar greeting before nervously shaking our hands one by one.

The woman’s been a good boss to my girl. Not only did she give Whitney a job when she was straight out of school and inexperienced, but Val was also very supportive when the break-in happened.

“The kids haven’t talked about anything else the last few days since we told them you were coming,” Val says eagerly as she escorts us to the gymnasium, her heels clicking against the flooring as she walks.

“We’ve looked forward to meeting the kids all week. I understand the basketball team had a good season?” Roman says with his normal politeness.

The gymnasium comes alive with an excited roar of welcome as we walk in, hundreds of smiling students and staff eager to see their football heroes in the flesh.

Cordova laughs eagerly at the hundreds of smiling faces as if thousands don't greet him at every game. "Man, these kids!"

I search the crowd for Whitney, finally finding her sitting on the bleachers, cheering as excitedly as the other people. The kids that must be her students are lined up like little ducks to her right. I scan their little faces, curious who is who... we'd not gotten to introductions the one time I'd stopped in her class.

Honestly, I'm happy for the distraction today's bringing. There's little I can do at this point but wait to see if Whitney's carrying our baby, and the anticipation is killing me. I have a stash of ginger lozenges for when morning sickness hits, I turned the temperature of the hot tub way down and placed an online order for organic, plant based cleaners. The legal stuff — my will and such— was handled as soon as I switched out the birth control. Other than that, it's just a case of "wait and see."

After introductions, and Roman's "work ethic" speech, the kids line up in six different queues to throw the ball with us. I smile when Whitney's class lines up next to me. I wink at her in welcome, and she beams back. I hate that I can't kiss her hello.

The first of Whitney's students make their way to the front of the line for their turn, throwing the ball with me— a little

boy. “Hello, who are you?” I ask him. Whitney talks about the kids so much that I can’t help but feel some fondness for them.

“Kai,” he answers shyly as he reaches for the ball I throw lightly in his direction. Ah, the precocious reader.

They each take their turns one by one introducing themselves as I throw the ball to them. Harrison (the mischievous one always in trouble), followed by Darius (the budding artist).

“Hey, that’s a good throwback!” I tell a little boy with sandy hair, impressed with his throwing arm at such a young age. “You play?”

“No, my dad says only meatheads play football. I play soccer,” he informs me smugly.

Ha! Little smartass. “What’s your name, kid?” I ask as he walks away to sit on the side of the gym with the kids who have had their turn.

He stops and turns to face me. “Noah,” he informs me before he joins the rest of his class.

I feel my eye start to twitch with annoyance. I should have known.

My eyes seek out Whitney in the crowd. I find her finally as she leans down to talk quietly to the last student. It’s a little girl with dark hair, wearing noise-canceling headphones. The type you put on the kid’s ears at the stadium. “Claire doesn’t want to take her turn,” she informs me gently. “She’s a bit overwhelmed by the noise in here.”

Ah. Little Miss Claire. Whitney will never admit it, but I think Claire's one of her favorite students. I reach into my pocket for a sharpie, quickly sign the ball since I'm done with it, and hand it to Claire. "Here, kiddo. You like to watch football with your parents?"

I'm rewarded with a second of eye contact before Claire looks back down at her feet and walks to the sidelines wordlessly, clutching her prize tightly. Just because she doesn't want to throw the ball with me doesn't mean she doesn't want to interact with me somehow.

Whitney shoots me a grateful look before she follows the girl to the spot where the rest of her class is waiting. When I turn to meet up with the other guys, I notice Claire nearby, clutching the ball tightly in her arms with a tiny smile, and it makes me feel like Captain freaking America.

Chapter Thirty-Two

WHITNEY

I rummage through the neatly ordered row of tailored suits, which are all neatly organized by color on one side of the closet. Most are made of fabrics intended to breathe, making them easier to wear in the oppressive southern heat. Today though, I need the opposite. It's supposed to snow in Minneapolis, and I want to make sure Nate's warm as long as possible before he plays in the frigid air in nothing but a jersey and a thin athletic shirt. I love the small task of dressing my guy. He always takes care of me, and it's nice to be able to do the same for him.

"Babe, do you have dressier gloves that match this?" I ask, holding up a stylish gray overcoat for Nate's inspection. If he wears layers, the wool will be warm enough for him in the frigid weather this week.

He lifts an indifferent shoulder my way as if he won't be photographed by Sports News Channel when walking into the stadium before the big game. "Umm, I think I have a pair of lined leather gloves in one of the drawers in the closet. Black,"

he adds before going back to rummaging through his clothing, seeming to look for something in particular.

Since I'm off work for nine days and Nate is busier than ever, I offered to help him pack for our trip to Minneapolis. Yes, our trip, because this girl is hitting the road for an away game! Nate says his family normally flies to see him on Thanksgiving, but with so many small children, they decided to stay in Tennessee this year. I can't even imagine the logistics of traveling with that many people. There's still two days before we leave, but I want to make sure we don't leave anything behind accidentally.

"I can still get a last-minute ticket for your folks," Nate offers again, and he tosses plain white socks into his suitcase.

"My parents are happy to have the holidays to rest," I say with a laugh. "Mom wasn't up to cooking the big meal this year, and Bethany's going to be at her boyfriend's family in Arkansas with the baby anyway."

"Still, if they change their mind, there's plenty of room in the suite."

I add a slim-cut suit to the hanging luggage bag. "Ha! There's enough room for the entire offensive line and their families!"

"Only room left at the hotel," he shrugs. Since Nate must be in his room at curfew for several days leading up to the game, he's booked a room for me at the same hotel so that I don't have to travel back and forth without him in a strange city.

Unfortunately, it's not pet-friendly, so Petal will go home with Helene at night while we're gone.

After putting together Nate's dressy attire for the Thanksgiving Day game, I retrieve my suitcase from the closet and open it on the bed next to his.

"Did you figure out what you're going to do with the girls while we're all at practice this week?"

"Yeah, Cassie wants to go to some art museum, and then we all want to hit the large mall there for holiday sales. I need to buy some nice bras and panties. I haven't bought anything new since Mom gave me a gift card for my twentieth birthday."

"You haven't bought any new underwear in more than a year?" he asks with an upturned eyebrow that hints at annoyance.

"I was very busy with school, and then all of my money went to moving and setting up my classroom," I said with a dismissive shrug.

"So, your ex saw you in them?" he asks in a low composed voice that hinted at impending danger.

Crap

Apparently, my body language is answer enough because he gives me a sardonic nod of the head and turns on his heels to storm into the kitchen.

I follow behind, hot on his heels, not liking the determined look on his face. He opens the cabinets, pulling out a garbage

bag, before stalking determinedly towards the bedroom.

I nervously play with my necklace at my throat. “Nate, baby, what are you doing?”

He doesn’t answer. He simply paces back into the bedroom, enters our closet, and opens one of my drawers. Grabbing a random handful of my panties, he throws them into the bag without inspecting them.

“*Knock it off!*“ I demand, angry now, my voice low, my hands in fists at my side.

“I’m throwing out all this shit. You’re not wearing anything another man saw you in,” he informs me in a cool, matter-of-fact tone.

My pulse is pounding in my ears as I purse my lips, cross my arms over my body, and glare in his direction. “That’s absurd, Nate! Who does this? It’s just freaking panties, for crying out loud.”

“I do this, Whitney,“ he growls as he glares in my direction, the jade of his eyes alight with the golden flecks I know well.

“I....we...who...” My nails dig into my palms as I watch him toss in a pair of practical briefs.

I grit my teeth as he rummages around the drawer, ensuring it’s empty before slamming it closed. “You’re crazy.”

“And you’re mine,“ he growls, looking me straight in the eye as if it’s a dare.

And then he opens the drawer underneath...my bras. My eyes grow wide, and I feel my breath catch. “No, absolutely not, Nate. Do you know how expensive bras are?” I yell, panic welling up inside of me.

“I’ll buy you more,” he says dismissively.

He holds up a black strapless bra. “Not that one!” I insist. “I had to special order it for my cousin’s wedding!” I reach up, trying to pull it from his grasp, but the big lug holds it high, further than I can reach.

He looks at me, his face stony, his jade-green eyes alight with fury. “And who was your plus one at that wedding, Whitney?”

I purse my lips tightly and cross my arms around my body. He knows the answer to that just as well as I do. He tosses the scrap of black satin in the bag, and I inwardly wince. I only wore it once.

He slams the now empty drawer closed with a thump, slings the bag over his shoulder like some deranged Santa Claus, and starts to rummage through the dirty laundry.

Seriously? Seriously? I suck in a deep, steadying breath. “You know what? I can’t deal with you.”

I hide the two bras I already packed under a pair of blue jeans when he isn’t looking and go to pick up my phone to read. I’ll wait for him to finish his mantrum and retrieve the bag from the trash once he’s done.

He paces over to my suitcase, rummaging through it, finds my hidden bras, and throws them into the bag. *Damn it.*

I watch wide-eyed as he heads towards the bedroom's slider door to the backyard, away from the trash cans.

Noooooo. What is he doing?

Before I can do anything to stop him, he empties the trash bag on top of the fire pit and sprays the clothes with lighter fluid from the charcoal grill. He holds up a hot pink bra, the only item not currently covered with flammable liquid, and places a lighter under it, setting it aflame. He doesn't look back in my direction, not once, just diligently goes about his task.

With no remorse on his face, he tosses it onto the pile with a careless flick of his wrist. All my underwear and bras quickly turn into a multicolored stack of flames.

I shutter my eyes, trying to steady my temper before I walk outside. He's now in a chair next to the fire pit, sitting with his legs crossed as he watches the carnage.

“Satisfied now? I can't believe you just did this!” I yell.

“And I can't believe you think I'd let you walk around wearing shit another man saw you in!” His tone is cool and matter-of-fact, as if it's in any way the rationale of a sane man. “I noticed there's no sexy lingerie in your drawers. I'm guessing you got rid of any you may have bought before the breakup. Would you wear a teddy for me that you wore for another man?” He lifts an arrogant eyebrow.

Jerkface.

“What about yours? Haven’t other women seen them?” I challenge before I turn to leave.

His words greet me as I’m at the entryway to the door. “I told you before, it’s been a long time since I’ve been with anyone else, and I had to replace every pair of underwear I own right before I met you. I accidentally left it all in the place I was staying in Tennessee in the off-season, every last pair.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You sure about that? Maybe I should start setting a little bonfire of my own!” I challenge.

He shrugs without a care and gestures toward the fire. “If it makes you feel better, go ahead. Toss them on. But I told you, I replaced them all.”

Furious, I spin on my heels and storm to the slider door that leads back into our room. I don’t even have a pair of clean panties for tomorrow!

Nate comes back into the house smelling of lighter fluid and smoke a few moments later; the fire extinguished with the garden hose. He grabs the hat and sunglasses he wears when going out in public to keep from being recognized, and shoves his wallet into his pocket. “Grab your purse. We need to go shopping.”



I glare at the hand resting on my thigh on the ride to the mall, then at my caveman, but Nate refuses to move it, deliberately ignoring my icy stare as he navigates the car toward the mall. The air is tense between us on the drive. Nate fiddles with the radio, breaking the silence.

“Was it really necessary to set fire to my underwear, Nate? You could have just asked me to replace them all.”

He lifted a blasé shoulder. “Consider it a sacrificial cleansing. Good juju. New relationship, new underwear.”

I glare at him, hoping that my heated gaze penetrates his thick skull. Couldn't he have just burned sage?

The lot is overly full, and it takes forever to find a spot. I wait to get out while Nate pulls on sunglasses and a snapback to hide his hair, hoping it keeps him from being recognized.

He reaches for my hand once we get out of the car, and I swat it away. Instead, he loops a possessive arm around my waist, pulling me to him, ignoring my icy glare as we approach the mall's main entrance. He leads me to an upscale lingere store that's normally well outside my budget.

“Welcome to Le Lacet! It's our five for forty panty sale this weekend,” the perky woman at the door says in greeting. Somehow I think we're leaving here with more than five pairs of underwear.

I shoot him an angry scowl when he releases my waist and ambles over to the lacy underwear table...the ones that are basically a bubble gum wrapper held together with a piece of

floss. No way am I rewarding his bad behavior by replacing my panties with sexier ones.

Taking a deep breath, I try to enjoy my little shopping spree. Underwear is the fun part. The store's well stocked, so I pick the cute prints I like, mixing in multiple pairs of practical black and nudes. I'm able to find enough to completely restock. The bras aren't going to be nearly this easy. It's difficult to find my cut and size. Trying to find something that fits comfortably and looks good on my body is frustrating.

With a sizable stack in my handbasket, I turn an annoyed eye at the bras.

I go through the neatly folded stacks of the cut of bra I prefer, and Nate follows me to the other side of the store. "Those are nursing bras," I inform him, trying to hide the irritation in my voice as he rummages through a hanging stack of bras. He's fastening and unfastening the clasps as if trying to figure them out.

His hand drops away from the sensible bras, and he ambles back over to the other side of the store to do God only knows what.

With the help of a sales clerk eager for a large commission, I'm able to find a couple of white bras, some nudes and blacks, some cute prints, as well as two very supportive sports bras. There was even a strapless bra that fit me very well.

"We just stocked up for the big sale on Friday morning!" the perky sales clerk interjects. "You came at just the right time!"

Walking up to the register after trying them on, I find Nate holding a pastel purple bag, placing his wallet back into his pocket. *Whatever that is, I'm not wearing it any time soon.*

Looking at my sizeable stack, he furrows his brows. "Is that all you were able to find? We can go to another store or shop online?"

I give him a sideways glare. "I was able to replace everything."

He pays for my purchase, as he should after he decided to incinerate all the old ones. Despite the daggers I shoot at him, he wraps his free arm around my waist. "I need to get you home so we can finish packing. You'll need to rest before you spend tomorrow traveling," he says.

I still can not believe he did this. It's beyond unreasonable and downright crazy. By far, his most neanderthal act to date. Who in their right mind does this?



We're stuck in holiday city traffic, the cars coming to a standstill by the stadium. Always right by the stadium. Nate turns his head to me, "Do we need to talk more about this, Angel Face? You look like you're still upset."

Damn straight, I'm still upset.

Through all of our fights after his jealous antics, I haven't tried to talk to him about it, and I think it's long overdue.

I count to ten, take in a deep breath, and start. “I don’t understand why you are the way you are when it comes to other men. I never have ever given you any reason not to trust me.”

“You, I trust completely. Other men? Fuck no,” he informs me matter of fact. “Like that dad that was alone with you for five fucking minutes that had the balls to touch you.”

“You got angry and fucked me in public just because I was wearing another guy’s number,” I point out.

He looks at me, irritated. “He might as well have been trying to brand you as his with that shit. Putting his number on my woman. Besides, you and I both know you liked what happened in that bathroom.” He ends his statement with a knowing smirk.

“You went all Hulk because I was talking to an old friend at the stadium.”

He looks almost ashamed for a second. “Thought he was an ex or something,” he says, clearing his throat.

“Today, you took every stitch of my underwear and burned them just because Preston saw me in them.”

He gives me a careless shrug of the shoulders. “Like I said earlier, you wouldn’t wear a teddy you wore for another man, would you? How is it any different?”

I feel a new wave of irritation. “It’s not the same at all!” I insist. He even burned the briefs I wear during my period, and there’s nothing sexy about them at all!

“It is to me. Not that it matters because they’re all gone now.”

“Why do I love you?” I huff out. “You drive me bat shit crazy, Nate.” I suddenly realize what I said in frustration and look at the driver’s seat, gauging his reaction.

His body tenses momentarily, and I brace myself, afraid of what he’s going to say. Or worse, not going to say. He turns to me with an upturned eyebrow. “I don’t know because God knows I don’t deserve you. But I know I love you more than you could ever know, Whitney, and I can only pray that I might be worthy of you one day.” His words are said so earnestly that I know he genuinely believes every word.

My shoulders slump at his sweet words. Sometimes I think Nate could commit homicide right there on the thirty-yard line, in a packed stadium, and get away with it. It’s infuriating.

Nate looks over at me with that damn grin of his from the driver’s seat. “By the way, Whit.... I didn’t forget about the bra and panties you’re wearing. They’re going the minute we get home.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

NATE

Even though Thanksgiving is still two days away, the Minneapolis hotel is putting the finishing touches on its Christmas decorations. It feels like the holiday season starts earlier and earlier every year. We haven't even had our turkey yet.

I've already spoken to Whitney on the phone after her plane landed, and we agreed to meet for dinner at the hotel restaurant. But she should have been here already. I hate that we couldn't fly in together, but I'm required to take the team's chartered flight to the game. At least she was able to travel with Cassie and Marissa. I glance at my phone again for the time and then click on the messages to make sure I didn't misread the last one from Whitney.

She was so distant after my stunt with the firepit, seemingly more exasperated with me than angry. She'd rolled her eyes and shaken her head when I brought her a bouquet of sunflowers before she took them from me with a polite, "thank you." But she still wasn't her normal cheerful self and I

wanted nothing more to put the smile back on her face. It's not that I'm sorry for what I did, because I'm not. It's that I very much love Whitney and I don't want to see her unhappy. So yesterday while on a coffee run, I stopped at Whitney's beloved teacher supply store. Between Josie and living with Whitney, I've learned there's nothing teachers love more than good pens and markers. I'd bought a little bit of everything—glitter gel pens, a box of thirty flare pens in rainbow colors, sticky notes in different shapes, and a new lanyard. After I tossed it all in a gift bag, I sat pensive for a few moments at the tiny note card I'd bought before writing something that had been in the back of my mind that I've left unsaid. “*I wish I'd had a teacher like you when I was little.*”

She looked up at me curiously when I'd handed her the bag with her usual iced coffee order. The side of her lips had turned into a small smile while she rummaged through the bag. I sat sipping on my shaken espresso for her to open the note, nervous about her reaction. Her eyes were misty with unshed tears when they'd finally darted to mine. She'd gotten up from the chair, hugged me, and for the first time in days she leaned in to kiss me. “The note was sweet Nate. I'll have to put it on my desk.” Her smile was back. Finally. Everything seemed better after that.

Caleb stands behind me cracking his knuckles as he swipes on a gaming app. “We did agree to meet in the lobby entrance to the restaurant, right?”

“Yeah, I even told them by the gingerbread house display,” I confirm, pointing towards the cordoned off area directly to our

left. It reminds me of the witch's house from Hansel and Gretel.

Just as I'm about to text to check on her, Whitney walks up to me in the lobby, her face rosy from the cold, grinning ear to ear with the other girls flanking next to her. Once she reaches me, I swing her into the circle of my arms and point to the doorway above us. "Caught you under the mistletoe, Angel Face. You owe me a kiss."

"It's not even December yet!" she half-heartedly protests.

"Still counts!" I insist before I lean down and claim her lips in a slow, thoughtful kiss as if I hadn't left her just hours ago in New Orleans. Her arms are looped around my waist, my hands on the small of her back, and I pull her close to me. The kiss continues for what seems like forever and not long enough. I'm vaguely aware of Marissa telling us to get a room, and Cassie blushes and nervously laughs at our open affection.

As I break off our kiss, noticing Whitney's pinkening cheeks, a defensive lineman walks out of the restaurant, shaking his head at us. "What's the pot up to now?" he asks Marissa.

"About eight large. You want in?" Marissa says low as if trying to keep us from hearing.

"I'm going with Tennessee in June. Put my name down," he tells Marissa before walking past us.

I narrow my eyes suspiciously. "What's the bet?"

She gives me a coy smile. "You'll see soon enough."

I sling my arm around Whitney's neck and eye Marissa suspiciously. There's no telling what it is, knowing her.

"Are we going to the museum tomorrow?" Cassie asks, peeking over at us from the menu.

"Spa day!" Marissa declares. "I already have everything booked for the three of us."

"I'll brace for the credit card bill next month," Caleb laughs.

"Oh, that's the best part. It's all on Nate this time," she says with a hint of a smile.

I shrug. "Early wedding present." It keeps them in the hotel, where I won't worry as much about Whitney's safety in a strange city, plus an opportunity to pamper Whitney a little. Besides, I owe Marissa a big thank you for looking out for Whitney like she does.

A small group of people, a family with school-aged kids, approaches the table. Caleb's eyes meet mine, wordlessly communicating our mild annoyance at the interrupted meal. I don't normally care as much when I'm alone, but it just hits differently when we're with our families.

"Excuse me, could we take a selfie?" a middle-aged woman asks politely as she approaches with a camera phone in her hand. Caleb and I both stand.

"Sure, you in town for the game?" I ask as I move in closer to take a picture with her.

"Yeah, my husband's from the area, so we came to visit family and watch the game tomorrow," the woman says

excitedly.

Caleb is talking one-on-one with the husband until we all pose for a selfie with the kids.

We both sign the Hurricanes hat one of the kids is wearing, give fist bumps as a goodbye, and just as we're about to sit down to continue our meal, another group of fans greets us.

Of course.

Word seems to have gotten out in the hotel that we're downstairs eating because there's a constant flow of visitors. Not just to us, but at a nearby table where some of the defense is eating with their families.

Marissa, Cassie, and Whitney chat quietly together, occasionally laughing about something while fan after fan approaches the table. I'm just happy she has someone to keep her company while my attention is taken away from her.

"Excuse me, ma'am, can you please box up these two meals for the guys to bring back to their rooms?" Whitney asks the waitress after Caleb and I have a third wave of visitors. I inwardly breathe a sigh of relief as the waitress walks away with my plate to package it to go for me. I've been drawn away from my meal for so long, I've not even had a chance to do that much. While I'm so busy, having someone do something thoughtful for me is nice. When there's finally a break in between visitors, I lean down to kiss Whitney softly on the lips before I grab my styrofoam container of food to bring upstairs to the suite.

I run my hand down her back and wrap my fingers around her waist. “Ready to go to the suite, Angel? We’ll never get out of here if we don’t leave now.”



Whitney throws her head back, moaning, “God, this feels so good.”

“Does my greedy girl like riding my cock? C’mon Angel, let me see you come for me.” I meet her thrust for thrust, my hands gripped tightly onto her hips as I watch her voluptuous tits bounce in front of me. I pop her right ass cheek, and she whimpers something I can’t make out.

She begins to ride my cock harder, clenching onto my length as she takes long, slick strokes. Her eyes shutter close, her pussy muscles tighten around me, and when I grind into her warmth, she slips into ecstasy.

She’s still panting, catching her breath from her orgasm when I flip her onto her back. I’m still joined with her when I delved into the depths of her pussy.

She starts to meet me thrust for thrust, groaning low in her throat, her nails digging into my back. “Yeah, you like this, Angel?” I say low in her ear.

“God, yes, Nate. Harder, Baby, please.”

This is paradise.

My brain begins to short-circuit as my spine tingles, hinting at my impending release. Her hands go to my hair, gripping onto it gently, and she moans low and deep. I grip her bottom, resting my forehead against hers as I pull her tightly to me and empty myself into her.

She sighs contently underneath me as I try to even out my breathing, still dazed from my orgasm.

I lean down, softly pressing my lips against hers, getting drunk on the sweetness when she wraps her arms around my neck. She groans, “You need to get downstairs soon, and I need to shower so I can get up early to go to the spa.”

I kiss her shoulder tenderly, my eyes soft as I brush my fingers against the satin skin of her arms. “I’ve got a bit. I’m going to join you in the shower first, though.”

I follow her into the bathroom and playfully swat her ass again, fully intent on instigating another bout of lovemaking. She gasps, startled, when my hand connects with her left buttcheek. She gives me a knowing look that says, *“I know what you’re up to, and you’re going to be late.”*

In the spray of the warm shower, I circle my arms around her waist, pressing my already hardening cock into her.

“I knew you were up to no good. You’re going to be fined,” she half purrs as she presses her hips into mine. Her mouth is saying one thing, her body saying another.

“We have time still,” I say huskily as I lean down to lick her neck. As much as I despise it, I’m watching the clock

carefully. I can well afford the fine, but after the incident with Moreau, I shouldn't risk the coach's ire that comes with a broken curfew.

I cup her breasts in my palms, circling one of the peaked tips with my tongue, and she winces. I lift an eyebrow. "Tender, Babe?"

"Yeah, my period's due in a few days."

Uh-huh. You've also napped almost every day since you've been off work for Thanksgiving break.

My eyes scan down her body, but I already know what I'll find. I've slowly noticed the changes over the last few days. Her nipples are pinker, and her breasts heavier and more sensitive. Calculate in her almost daily nap lately, and I'm certain Whitney's pregnant with our first child.

Excitement thrums through my body as I lift her, weightless in my arms, joining our lips together in the sweetest of kisses.

"I love you, Whit," I say as I break our kiss.

"I love you too," she says huskily back.

I feast on her pussy before making slow, sweet love to her. Our bodies press against the wall in the shower when I join our bodies together. I take tantalizingly slow strokes inside of her, luxuriating in the wet heat of her pussy. We come together, my forehead pressed against hers as I grip her hips in my hands and shudder inside her.

After helping her shower and clean up, we towel off, and I carry her to the bed.

“Nate, what are you doing?” She laughs in protest.

“Getting some more of that sweetness of yours.”

I lay on top of her, giving her lazy kisses, our hands exploring one another’s bodies as we lay together.

I reluctantly leave, albeit briefly just for bed checks, before slipping back upstairs as soon as I’m able to be with Whitney. She’s asleep on the bed, getting the rest she’s going to need with a pregnancy taxing her body. I lean down to gently brush the hair from her face, then press my lips to Whitney’s, then her stomach. *Hello, little one. I already love you so much.*

I scoot next to her on the bed while I read on my tablet for a bit, wanting to be as close to her and the baby as I can. Tonight for the first time, we sleep like spoons, with my hand resting protectively over Whitney’s stomach. I want to hold them both while we sleep. Them. Whitney and our baby.

I’m going to be a father.

Now, how the hell do I tell Whitney?



My fingers sting as they adjust from the long practice in the cold weather to the warmth of the hotel elevator. I take eager strides, rubbing my hands together in an attempt to warm them on my way to the suite. The team’s been here over twenty-four hours, and Coach has kept us so busy that I’ve had very little time to spend with Whitney.

“Whit, are you here?” I call out as I shut the suite door behind me. I quickly glance around the open floor plan and only find her jacket across the back of the couch. She must be on the second story of the hotel suite. I don’t bother to remove my own coat and scarf, intent on finding Whit quickly.

The modern staircase that leads to the bedroom is constructed of ashwood and glass, so dainty looking that I worry the steps will shatter with my substantial weight. I find her lying across the bed, fast asleep on top of the blanket, wearing the cozy robe I’d bought her at the lingerie store on Sunday. Fresh from the hotel’s spa, she smells like aromatherapy massage oil mingling with something minty.

She’s napping again. I grin inwardly at the reminder of our baby growing inside of her. I’m happy she’s listening to her body and getting the rest she needs, even if she isn’t aware yet of the reason why.

She looks so peaceful in her sleep. I hate to wake her up, but we’re already short on time. I sit on the edge of the bed and gently rub her back. “Good afternoon, sleepy head. Have a good day at the spa with the girls?”

Her eyes slowly open. She was sleeping deeply. “I need a minute,” she groans.

“Angel, if we’re going to make our dinner reservations, you need to get dressed soon,” I remind her. After the fiasco last night, there’s no way we can eat a meal in the hotel again. My teammates ordered room service, but Whitney wants to leave

the hotel a bit. I've arranged for us to have a private dining room at a restaurant in the heart of the city.

She sits up in the bed with a yawn and glances at her phone. Her eyes grow big when she seemingly notices the time. "No! Ugh. I'd better get moving."

With alcohol running so freely during Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow, I feel as if I shouldn't wait any longer to broach the subject. Besides, today is the soonest a pregnancy test will show a positive result...and it will show a positive result, I'm sure of it.

I'd read the instructions online before a delivery service brought a test to the hotel. I'd left a note to double bag and tie it closed so that a nosey concierge wouldn't notice the contents.

"You know, Whit, you've needed a nap every day this week," I hint.

She throws on a bra, fastening it at the front, and looks at me sheepishly. "Yeah, I'm just kinda drained lately, especially with traveling. I think I'm trying to catch up on rest."

You work very hard all day, but you sleep a solid eight hours every night, Whitney.

I want to bring this up later, but the local police will be patrolling our floor, and the coaching staff not messing around with curfew before such a big game. Officers will be positioned at the stairs, elevator, and in the halls to make sure

we don't leave our rooms at all. There's no way I can get away with not being in my room tonight at bed checks.

“Angel, I was thinking. The night you were at the Hotel Noémie with me. We were pretty busy that night, with our phones off. I didn't hear your birth control alarm go off.”

She glances at me with her forehead scrunched together. “Yeah, I missed a dose until the next morning when I saw the packet,” she confesses.

I nod knowingly, choosing my words very, very carefully. “Your breasts were very sensitive last night.”

She shifts her weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. “My period's due in a few days. It always makes my boobs a little sore.”

Not that sore, Angel.

“Whit, I think that there's a very distinct possibility that maybe something else is going on with you. You're napping a lot, there's some changes to your body....” I hint carefully.

You can tell the instant realization hits her. Her eyebrows raise to peaks, and her jaw drops. “You think I'm pregnant? No way,” she insists incredulously, arms crossed over her body.

“Probably not. I mean, you only missed one dose, right? But, maybe we should just be sure.”

She draws in a sharp breath, straightens her back, and tenses her body. “I haven't even skipped my period yet!”

“The box said you could test a few days before your period. You said last night it was due soon..”

“Yes, but..how do you know..?” Her words are broken off as she notices what I pull out of my coat pocket as the blood drains from her face. “You went and bought tests? Why would you buy tests, Nate?”

“I’m a little suspicious that you’re pregnant, and I’m not going to be able to concentrate on the game with a ‘maybe’ in the back of my head.”

“You’re that worried I’m pregnant? There’s just no way that’s even a remote possibility,” she insists.

I rip open the outer cellophane wrapper and the inner cardboard box and hold out the plastic test for Whitney.

“You want to do this *now*?” she sputters as she stands, mouth agape in my direction.

I shrug in answer, holding the test out to her. She takes it nervously between her slightly trembling fingers. Is she worried about the uncertainty of a pregnancy, or how I will react, or both?

“Whit, I think it would be amazing if you’re pregnant,” I say with an eager smile. “We love kids, and a baby with you is more than I could ever dream of.”

She stares at me pensively for a moment, holding the test as if seeking the courage. “I only missed one pill!” she insists again.

“Didn’t you say they’re progesterone-only pills, where you have to take them at the exact same time every day?”

“Well, yeah, because I didn’t do well on the traditional estrogen pills,” she says defensively.

“Waiting isn’t going to change the results, Whit,” I say encouragingly.

She turns and heads into the bathroom. “I’m only doing this because you’re worried. There is no way that I’m pregnant.”

“Well, it’s no big deal, is it?” I want to follow behind, but I also want to give Whitney a tiny bit of space I’m sure she needs.

She rolls her eyes at me as she turns, closing the door behind her.

A moment later she comes out with a freshly capped test, the digital screen still beeping with pending results.

She blows out a steadying breath. “I can’t be pregnant. I’m in my first year of teaching!”

“If you’re pregnant, we can make sure you have all the help we can to make it as easy as possible on you. I’ll be home as much as possible during the season, and during the off-season, I’ll be able to take over most of the day-to-day stuff.” I try to assure her, rubbing circles on the small of her back.

Her tense body loosens with my touch. “You’re really okay with this? You’re being so calm!”

I hold her face in between my palms and look at her gently. “I’m pushing thirty. More settled than you are. I think a baby with you would be the best thing ever.”

The test beeps, and we both look down, then at one another. Whitney’s shoulders drop, her jaw slackens with eyes wide as saucers, and I can’t even begin to hide the large grin on my face.

Chapter Thirty-Four

WHITNEY

Staring at the results on the test, my pulse starts to race in my ears. I don't wish the results to be different; I don't. It's just a shock. I'm pregnant. It was so obvious that Nate figured it out even before I did. I sit on the edge of the bed, my knees feeling suddenly weak. Nate looks at me with worried eyes before sitting beside me and wrapping his arms around me. There were a few signs that I've blown off until now as just an upcoming period. How could I not have seen it?

I go to the paper insert of the pregnancy test and read every single word of it, but it's very clear. Ninety-nine point nine percent accurate. Two lines means pregnant. I turn the test around, examining the lines in the light, but they're both bright blue, irrefutably positive.

The logistics of a pregnancy feel overwhelming, never mind the end result, a baby. A tiny person utterly dependent on Nate and me for their every need. I love children, truly love children, and I've thought of eventually having them with Nate. I'm just flabbergasted that fate's chosen for this to

happen now of all times. I've seen Nate with his nieces and nephews, and if he's that good with them, I know he'll be an amazing father to our child. In the time I've known Nate, I'm certain he'll be a good partner. But this is so sudden, so unexpected. There's going to be big changes in both of our lives.

I can feel my lip quivering and my hands shaking when I ask, "Aren't you worried? We're so far away from both of our families. What happens when the baby gets sick, and I can't find a sub? Oh gosh, what are we going to do for childcare?" I don't want to think about the days Nate will be gone, traveling to away games, or the long work days he keeps during the season. Shailene jokes about being the only one parenting a large portion of the time, saying that's why she needs a nanny. *Nate won't run off to go hunting like Andre does on his off time and leave you alone with the baby.*

My eyes darted up to Nate, worried about what I'll find on his face, despite his assurance that he'd be happy. A theoretical baby is one thing. A positive pregnancy test is another. A quick glance finds him grinning like a Cheshire cat. I should have known.

"You're really happy? Like, really, really happy," I mutter, astonished, mouth agape. Is he insane? We are only just now living together, and even that was moving too quickly in our relationship. It's only been a few months...

His toothy grin only grows as he pulls me closer to him, his strong arms making me feel safe. "This is everything I could

ever want, Whitney.” His words are soothing as I lean my head against his broad chest.

My gaze flits around the room, never settling on anything in particular as I work my lip, processing everything. I feel the tears start to well up in my eyes, then slide down my face. I wipe them away with the back of my hand in frustration. I should have gotten an implant in my arm. “It’s not that I don’t want kids, Nate. It’s just that I thought, ya know, later. Once I’m more settled.”

“What exactly are you worried about, Whit? Money, your job, or us? Because financially, we’re more than okay. I’ve been smart with my money. As far as your job, teachers have babies all the time, and we’ll make sure you have tons of help around the house. And if it’s us, because we’re so new...this is to the grave, Whitney. There’s no way you could ever get rid of me.”

I let out a little wry laugh and lean into the comfort of his body. “It’s not that. I’m just shocked. Six months ago, I was a single college coed in a different town. Now I’m in a new city, working a new job, and I found you. Now there’s a baby. It’s a lot to adjust to all at once.”

He smooths down my hair comfortingly, then grips my hips with his strong hands, running his thumbs over my stomach. He leans in, touching my forehead to his before grazing his lips across mine. “Why don’t you throw on something, and we’ll talk about all of this over dinner? We have the private

dining room to ourselves, and we have a little while.” His voice is excited, his green eyes shimmering with delight.

My shoulders drop with his words. My stomach’s churning, and I have absolutely no appetite.

“I know you’re upset, but you still have to eat,” Nate says as if reading my mind. *How does he do that?*

Moving on autopilot, I quickly pull my hair back in a ponytail and throw on a sweater dress and tall boots. I catch a glance at my figure in the mirror before we leave and pause, resting my hand over my still-flat stomach for a moment, finally letting a tiny smile run free. I’m going to have a baby—Nate’s baby. A tiny person that’s a little bit of both of us. While it’s a huge surprise and not the best timing, I can’t help but feel a little surge of excitement.

Nate comes up behind me and kisses my neck. “I can’t wait until you start to show. You’re going to be even more beautiful.”

And there’s Nate’s charm, always making me feel like the most beautiful woman in the room. My face feeling warm, I grab my jacket and scarf.

Nate puts on his hat and glances down at his phone when it chimes. “The car’s waiting downstairs for us,” he says before he reaches over and buttons the top button of my jacket.

Snow flurries dance around us as we approach the waiting car. I hold out my hand, catching a snowflake, but it melts right away. “I’ve never seen real snow before.”

“It snows all the time at my parents’ vacation home. Maybe we can slip in a trip somewhere before it melts.”

“I’m a big fan of anything to do with that house,” I say eagerly.

A quick trip in the car brings us to a Scandinavian restaurant. We’re able to walk uninterrupted to the private dining room, where a cozy table for two is set up.

We talk for what feels like forever. For every worry I have, Nate seems to have an answer already.

“What about going to Tennessee this summer?”

“We can fly back for a doctor’s appointment and have one right before we leave, or cut it short.”

“My parents are going to worry since we’re such a new couple.”

He narrows his eyes at that one, not liking something I say. “Leave your parents up to me,” he said with downturned lips.

Are we ready for this? What if I’m a horrible mother?

He downright laughs with that one. “You’re a kindergarten teacher. You nurture little ones all day long and love doing it. You’ll be a fantastic mother. And it is soon, but that’s just more time with our little one. We have what...eight months to get ready? We’ll read every book we have to and take every

class we need to so that we are. But, I have to say, Whitney, I think that a lot of this will come naturally to you.”

He reaches across the table to gather my hands in his as he brushes his thumb across my fingers, comforting me. I feel my body relax at his touch and exhale a long breath.

You’d expect a man to be reeling at the prospect of impending parenthood, but not Nate. I take in his easy posture, his excited smile, and none of the anxiety I’d anticipated seeing from him. “You don’t seem at all shocked,” I finally throw out.

He pauses for a minute before his eyes dart up. “I...had a little bit of time to put the pieces together and process it before you did. I was pretty sure you were pregnant already.” He ends with a careless flick of his shoulders. “And as I said, I want nothing more than this.” He says reassuringly, as he shoots me a toothy smile.

By the time we return to the suite, I’m still processing everything. As anxious as I am about certain things, Nate is so positive and so supportive that I can’t help but feel excited.

Nate lays with me for a few moments before he has to go down to his assigned room for curfew, turning me to sleep like spoons with his hands on my belly. I can’t help but notice the new sleeping position, changed so he can cradle our baby, even before it’s outwardly visible. It makes my heart hurt it’s so sweet.

Before he leaves, he kisses me, then my belly where our child is growing, “Goodnight, little one,” he says softly before looking at me like I’m his everything and saying, “I love you.”

I’m still reeling at the news, but despite the glitch the universe threw into my plans today, I know it’s all going to be okay because I have Nate.



The next morning, I feel like I’m walking on air. The moment curfew is lifted, Nate creeps into bed with me, pulling me close to cuddle and kissing me awake. “You need to get moving soon, sleepy head.” I can feel his smile pressing against my skin. “We need to feed the little one.”

I smile to myself, remembering the baby, and let out a content groan while I stretch. “I’m getting up.” I lounge for a second, not wanting to leave Nate’s warmth.

I finally roll out of bed, padding into the bathroom to relieve my protesting bladder. Walking out, I see Nate by the large picture window. He opens the floor-to-ceiling curtains, revealing the city below, blanketed in light snow from an overnight dusting. City and hotel employees work to clear the sidewalks, piling it near the road for the snowplow to clear. Nate looks down at the city, his face wrinkled with concern.

Walking up to him, I loop my arms around his waist. “I want to tell my family about the baby as soon as we get back,” I confess. As supportive as Nate is, I’m dying to tell Bethany.

Since she's just had Toby, she might know what she's doing. I'd quickly googled what is and isn't safe to eat during pregnancy before our meal last night and immediately went into information overload.

I should probably wait to tell them until a doctor confirms it, but the pregnancy tests are almost one hundred percent accurate, and it'll be weeks before I can see the doctor. I don't want to wait that long to tell my parents. They'd been upset that Bethany had a baby alone, but the baby's father wasn't around. I think with the different scenario, they'll be okay with it.

He wraps his arms around my waist and kisses my forehead. "I want to tell my family as well. They're going to be thrilled."

"I'm okay with that." I pause, searching for the right words. "I think we should keep it a secret from the team until I'm a bit further along, though."

Nate laughs from deep in his chest. "Dollars to donuts, they'll figure it out long before we tell them, Angel Face."

We both take our seats at the tiny dinette table in front of the picture window, looking out at the snowscape as I sit lost in thought for a while. I'm going to be a mother. There will be a tiny person I'm responsible for taking care of all the time around the clock, regardless of how tired I am or what else I have to do that day. There'll be a car seat in the back of my car and a stroller in the trunk. In six years, it'll be my own kid in kindergarten.

"Flurries are starting to fall again," I say eagerly.

“It’s shit to play in,” Nate confesses with a shake of the head. “Plus, it gives the other team an advantage since they’re used to maneuvering in it.”

I feel my forehead wrinkle with concern. “You’ll be okay, won’t you?”

“Yeah, it snows more often in Tennessee than Louisiana, so I’ve played in the snow a bit. Just not as often as the opposing team has. I have special cleats for today that help grip better,” he assures me.

“Don’t you get cold? The players can’t wear jackets or outerwear, and you’re sweating,” I ask, not able to hide the concern in my tone.

“Nah, we’ll be fine. They have heated benches, helmet warmers, and such,” he assures me.

Nate’s phone chimes and he goes to turn it off, laughing when he notices what’s on the screen.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

He turns the phone where I can see. Nate’s family has gathered for Thanksgiving, and the kids are up to no good.

On this occasion, Cecelia and Violet are standing next to a baby bed mattress at the bottom of the stairs with an “uh-oh, we’re caught” expression on their faces. Violet looks annoyed, her fun ruined, but Cora looks like she’s chosen instead to try to cry her way out of trouble.

With these girls, there is the usual mischief from young children— magic marker on freshly painted walls, climbing

too tall shelves just for funsies. But then they all get together, and there's never any telling what will happen with them.

“Well, it looks like the kids are having fun,” I laugh.

Nate shakes his head as he places his phone back in his pocket. “All I know is that if these girls are anything to go by, I'm going to need you to give me a boy or six to practice on before I'm anywhere near ready to handle a Coleman girl.”

The tips of my mouth slowly start to turn up at the beginning of a smile I try to hide, “I have no doubt it'll be a boy just like you and a sweet little girl that has you wrapped around her tiny little finger.”

Nate's head jerks up, and the smile he's worn all night drops as he leans back in his chair and slowly blinks at me. He moves a trembling hand into his lap, trying to hide it from me. There's the panic I was expecting.

“Nate, you look like you're starting to sweat. Are you okay?” I ask.

He rubs the back of his neck and lets out a small ironic laugh. “I just...I had this mental image of a kid that pulls the stuff I got away with. Add in the possibility of a girl with your looks... I'm a doomed man either way.” He mutters something about boys just like him coming around his princess, then goes eerily quiet.

I nervously work my lip. Is he starting to get cold feet now that reality is setting in? I don't know what to say to that.

Nate leans across the table and grasps my hands in his. “I’ve always known that, eventually, I would have children. It wasn’t something that I questioned, the wife and kids thing. I was just waiting on you, Whit.”

My heart starts to palpitate at sweet Nate assuring me, saying exactly the right thing again. He brings my hands to his lips, kissing them. “We need to get a doctor’s appointment soon. I can’t wait to hear our kid’s heartbeat.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

WHITNEY

I miss the familiarity of our home stadium as I walk through the Minneapolis' arena. You would think they were all pretty much the same, but the entire vibe is just different somehow. Fans with painted faces and plastic cups of beer are bundled up from the cold, eager for their seats before kick-off. Others linger indoors at the concession stands in long lines, enjoying the warmth while they wait for their food.

“Should we stop?” Cassie asks, pointing to the chain pretzel kiosk she loves.

“There's catering in the suite. I ordered a nacho bar and all the yummy dips for your pretzels,” I say with a grin, knowing they're Cassie's favorites. Nate rented a suite months ago, thinking his family would likely come. When they'd backed out (understandably), Nate suggested I invite the girls to hang out with me.

“You didn't have to do that,” Marissa protests.

“It’s beyond my turn to host, given how many times you’ve had me over this season. Besides, the catering package came with the suite,” I say with a shrug.

“I’m just happy this one can move around during the game,” Shailene says, motioning to baby AJ, chewing on two chubby little fingers and gazing curiously around the unfamiliar area.

The smell of freshly cooked food greets us as we enter the suite. A catering staff member in a tidy black uniform is arranging a mountain of food in silver chafing dishes at a table but stands alert to greet us as we walk in.

“Oh, we’re right at the fifty-yard line!” Shailene says excitedly as she walks to the front of the suite to inspect the field below. The front is glassed in, keeping out the frigid weather, but it’s close enough to be able to see what’s going on. Televisions are strategically positioned around the room for a close-up view, the large screens already showing the teams warming up below.

“I can’t believe your crazy husband is playing without long sleeves!” I tell Jasmine as I watch him stretch on the sidelines below us.

“Gives people less to grab onto. They rub petroleum jelly on their skin before the game to block the wind,” Marissa explains.

I try not to scrunch up my face at the thought of smearing the thick goo all over my skin. Ick. How do you even wash it off?

It feels weird not to be in our regular seats at the New Orleans stadium as I watch Nate huddle with the team, the grass beneath their cleats white from frost.

I don't like this weather one bit. I remind myself, again, that Nate knows what he's doing. He'd been a first-round draft pick even.

Nate's mood at kick-off seems the same as when I saw him this morning. He's just as hyper-focused as he usually is when he plays, but there's a little bit of bounce in his step as if he's having fun playing. He's slapping the back of his teammates' helmets when they play well, and if I didn't know better, I'd swear I saw him joking around with the referees for a second on the sidelines.

The game seems to speed by, and before I know it, we're in the third quarter. Minneapolis fights back hard, but the Hurricanes take the lead by a thin margin in the second quarter. The entire team seems pumped up, another victory close.

After they break a huddle, Andre hikes the ball to Nate. Nate takes off with the ball, carefully zig-zagging across the turf. Just as the ball leaves Nate's hand, a player from Minneapolis reaches Nate from his blind side and pushes him down to the ground before falling next to Nate.

Nate's body bends awkwardly from the hit as he skids across the icy turf. He doesn't move, his body curved almost into a fetal position, and I feel the same familiar stomach-churning that I always do in moments like this.

“Give him a minute. That was a hard hit,” Jasmine says sagely, but she’s not able to hide the concerned edge to her voice.

But then Nate’s clutching his knee. And he’s still not getting up. My heart plummets, and my mouth goes dry as I look out onto the field. The stadium goes quiet as horrified eyes notice the star quarterback ball up in pain on the thirty-yard line. Time moves in slow motion as we all eagerly watch the field.

I move from the window at the front of the suite to the nearby large screen tv so that I can see Nate more clearly, Marissa following behind. Javier runs up to Nate, seeming to ask him something, and when Nate shakes his head no, my tense shoulders drop.

My mouth turns to ash, my heart beating in my ears as I wait to hear Jasmine’s gentle chiding about my nervousness, assuring me that all is well, but instead, I feel kind arms around me.

Jasmine told me only to worry if they carry Nate off the field, but the athletic trainers and medical team rush onto it. The head coach asks him a question, and Nate again shakes his head no. I watch, hoping that this is somehow a mistake, that Nate gets up on his own, that he’s fine...but I see the team’s doctor carrying a bag onto the field.

There is no playful teasing. Just the other women surrounding me softly, whispering sympathetically.

“They have the best medical care for the guys. They’ll make sure he’s right as rain. You’ll see.”

“It’ll all be okay, Whitney. Nate’s been injured before and bounced right back.”

“He might have just sprained something. He’ll probably be around the house for a week or two driving you crazy.”

The same players just celebrating the hit are now on their knees, and I’m certain Nate won’t get up on his own.

“I can’t see his face,” I say, my voice breaking as I bite back the panic. I’m desperate to see him, desperate to read the tiniest expressions, to know what isn’t being said with just a glance at his features. Nate’s surrounded by so many people now that I can only make out the blue of his jersey and little else.

The camera shows Nate being loaded into a modified golf cart to be taken off of the field, his expression the deliberately blank one he usually saves for intrusive journalists. Instead of relief at being able to see him again, my heart starts to hurt for Nate when I notice a worried tightness around his jaw and the brief frustrated pursing of his lips as the injury cart disappears into the tunnel and out of sight.

Jasmine’s jaw clenches tight. “Whitney, you should go down to the training area where the staff can talk to you,” she says with a forced calmness in her voice.

“I’ll go with you,” Marissa says anxiously.

Shailene stays with a fussy AJ, while Jasmine and Marissa come with me. The walk is seemingly miles as we search for the training rooms. *Why did this have to happen now? Away*

from our stadium, from local hospitals, where the team doctor has privileges. Far from home, so he has to travel back.

At the double doors leading to the restricted area, I lean against the brick wall, my head swimming with so many questions. We have a baby coming. Is Nate going to spend the pregnancy recovering from an injury? It looks bad, judging by everybody's behavior. What if this is it? What if this is the injury that ends things? Will he want us to move to Tennessee? Will I want to move to Tennessee? I find the answer is simply that I want to be with Nate....I can teach anywhere and am already hours away from my family. *Stop being such a negative Nelly. Players get hurt all the time. He probably just has a bad sprain.*

The large brunch Nate coerced me into eating rolls in my stomach, unsettled. "*You need the extra protein for the little one to grow,*" he'd said with a proud grin before laying an adoring hand on my belly and kissing my cheek.

"I messaged the head trainer, Naomi," Jasmine says. "She's going to be one of the first people to know. The staff doesn't tell anybody they don't have to what the actual injury is, but she's one of the few people that will know what's going on."

I feel shell-shocked, her words barely penetrating as my hands tingle with nervous energy. My phone is pinging nonstop, the noise making me feel overstimulated. Everybody wants to know if the quarterback is out for the season ahead of the playoffs, but even I don't have an answer yet. Warm tears start to well up, stinging on their way down my face as I wait.

“Aww, honey, it’ll be okay,” Marissa says, pulling me in for one of her amazing hugs.

“Remember the time Lawrence had a groin pull?” Jasmine remarks. “He was the biggest baby, I swear.”

“No, it must have been before I moved to New Orleans. Was he able to finish the game?” Marissa asks.

Jasmine looks at Marissa, rolling her eyes. “Girl, no. He was in yoga.” She says the last word with playful mocking.

“Yoga?” I ask a little incredulously.

“Uh-huh. He took it to help improve his balance. But he decided that the beginner’s lessons would be too easy for him, so he jumped right into the expert-level classes. He learned real quick he was not an expert,” she says wryly with a head shake and snort.

There’s something about her tone that I can’t help but laugh at, mainly at the image of her big lug of a husband in a yoga studio with ten soccer mom types, trying to fold his large body into a pretzel-like pose.

My phone pings again, and I check it, thinking it’s likely my parents.

Nate: I’m okay, Angel. Are you in the suite still?

Whitney: No, I’m right outside the training room.

Nate: Sending somebody for you.

The crowd roars a protest one last time, the sound almost deafening, even this far away. The home team fans are unhappy.

“We won,” Jasmine says softly with a grin.

“That we did,” Marissa adds, the sides of her lips upturning.

I’m happy, I truly am, that our team’s victorious again, but it’s far from my main focus right now. It’s only Nate I’m worried about. I wait eagerly, my eyes never leaving the training room doors as I wait for my escort to bring me to Nate.

Seemingly forever later, a tall woman with dark hair comes out of the training room. She’s wearing the training staff’s sideline jacket and what looks like a forced smile. “Whitney, it’s so nice to meet you! Your guy’s told me so much about you. I’m Naomi, the head trainer. Nate sent me to you to bring you back.” She’s polite about it, but her tone is clear. Me only.

I look at the other two women, who are looking at one another, unsure of what to do. “Thank you for sitting with me. I’ll be okay.” With the game over, I’m sure they want to wait on their guys.

“We’ll see you back at the hotel. Check in with us later?” Marissa says as she leans in for a hug.

“Whitney, I’ll text you tonight. Don’t waste your time answering any of those messages from nosey ass people. That’s how rumors get started, and they spread like wildfire,”

Jasmine says before she turns to leave, and I follow Naomi into the training room.



Despite the fact the game just finished minutes ago, the room is surprisingly quiet, given the number of people that escorted Nate to the training room. The adjacent locker room is still silent. They must still be celebrating a victory on the field.

I feel a fresh prickle of anxiety when I walk into the training room and see Nate. He's submerged in an ice bath in fresh clothing, the bottom half of his body covered by the icy water. Thickly corded arms wrap around the edge of the large metal tub. His jaw is clenched, likely in an effort to hide the pain from me. *Don't waste your energy— I can read your every expression like a book.*

The team's orthopedist is nearby, carefully examining an x-ray on a lightbox, his forehead wrinkled with displeasure. I watch him, anxiously biting my thumbnail as he runs a worried finger across his lips. That can't be good.

"Hey, Angel Face. Come kiss it better," Nate says, trying to shape his pained face into a smile.

I lean down and brush my lips against his. I take a moment to steady my voice. "How are you? Have you had any medication yet?"

"They gave me a little something for now until the worst of the discomfort is over with." His eyes flick down to my

stomach. “How’s the little one? You’re not feeling sick, are you? You’re looking pale.”

I look around the room, anxious to see if any of the half-dozen people overheard his reference to the pregnancy. I’ve learned quickly that gossip spreads around a professional football locker room faster than in a high school. “The little one is fine,” I assure him. “I’m more worried about you.”

The team’s orthopedist moves next to Nate. “We’ll do an MRI on your knee as soon as we land and discuss treatment from there. You know the drill as far as physical therapy. For now, rest. Stay off of it completely. Hopefully, tomorrow we’ll have more answers.”

“Yeah, I know the drill. See you tomorrow,” Nate says, trying to hide the anxiety in his own voice with humor.

“Wait, he’s not going to the hospital?” I ask, shocked.

The doctor turns his attention to me. “We’ve done everything that we can for now. It’s best at this point to ice up his knee and keep it stabilized. We just need to get him home to New Orleans.” My stomach feels fluttery, my heart pounding as I imagine the trip home.

“Can he fly? I mean, isn’t the risk of blood clots an issue or something?” It’s a guess from Grandpa’s long ago knee replacement surgery, but I remember the doctor’s instructions said not to fly.

He shakes his head. “That’s not a risk until after the surgery. For now, it’s just a case of comfort and not banging the knee

on the row seats of an airplane. Even the first class seats pose too much of a risk.”

I nod in his direction with a furrowed brow. How on earth are we going to get Nate home?

“Another minute or two and take him out,” the doctor instructs Naomi before patting Nate on the shoulder reassuringly and leaving with a nod.

Naomi approaches, removing a black knee stabilizer from a plastic package. “We’re working on getting you home comfortably. I’ll go with you to make sure we keep that leg protected.”

“Ah, my own personal escort home. Dad texted. He’s already offered to send his plane for me. He has to get the backup staff on board since it’s a holiday.”

“Oh, well, la-di-da, flying home in a private jet, are we? I’ll have to get lots of pictures for my Gram,” Naomi laughs as she leans over the tub with another trainer to lift Nate out of the tub.

I move to help but stop when I remember the baby and take in Nate’s large size. How are we going to manage around the house while he’s injured? My hands start to tremble again while I think of the practicality of things like showers and maneuvering him into the car for physical therapy.

I step back, allowing the trainers to take over, clutching my purse and shifting position as I watch, not able to stand comfortably.

Nate can't stop the groan of pain he lets out at the exertion. His face scrunches up in pain, his teeth gritted as they sit him down on the padded training table nearby. The knit shorts and t-shirt they'd changed him into are sopping wet, and his body shivers from either pain or cold as he tightly grips the edge of the table, a loud groan coming from his body.

The trainers step back out of the way. "You okay?" Naomi asks as the trainers set up some wheeled contraption to help move Nate.

"Yeah," Nate says breathlessly, his face tense with pain. He's breathing heavily, his fingers still gripping the table's edge. I take a deep, steadying breath before I step forward to the table. *We've got this. Whether it's good or bad times, Nate and I have each other, and that's what matters.*

This time it's me that pulls Nate into the comfort of my arms with no care for his damp clothing. He buries his nose into my neck, holding me tenderly, and breathes out, relieved. "It's going to be okay," I assure him determinedly. I can't imagine the thoughts running in his head right now, especially since we just learned a baby's on the way. I'm not sure how I'm going to make things okay again, but I know I'll do anything I can to make it so.

Chapter Thirty-Six

WHITNEY

“I won’t stay too long,” Nate promises as two of the larger trainers lower him into a wheelchair.

“Just watch out,” I warn as Annette swings open the connecting door to the locker room. I’m worried about Nate as a whole, but I get it. He wants, maybe even needs, to be with his teammates for a minute. I know I’m lurking, but I want to look out for my guy.

Right before the door swings close, I hear the loud voices from his teammates greeting Nate. Sitting down on a training table, I wait, working my lip.

A middle-aged man wearing Nate’s jersey bursts into the room without knocking. Scowling, he looks around the otherwise empty room before he looks at me, confused. “Where did they take Coleman?” As soon as he opens his mouth, I recognize his voice as Nate’s manager, Bill, from the many conversations I’ve overheard.

“He’s in the locker room right now, and then they’re going to give him some pain medication,” I explain. I’ve never seen Nate on anything heavier than ibuprofen, and they plan on giving him a narcotic for the flight. There’s no way I’m letting anyone that doesn’t need to be around him while he’s out of sorts. Especially since I know Nate keeps a professional distance from his manager for some reason.

“I need to release a statement. Tell him I’ll see him on the plane,” he says before giving me a dismissive nod. I guess he knows who I am.

Cassie is thoughtful enough to run our luggage from the hotel to the airport, saving me the trouble. We meet at a tarmac before we enter Ethan’s private plane. They’re staying here for a few days, as Nate and I had originally planned, to make a little holiday of the trip.

“I got the charging cord for the tablet by the bed and everything from the bathroom. I hope I didn’t forget anything,” she says nervously, biting her lip.

I hug her tight. She’s such a sweetheart. “Thank you for doing this, Cassie. I was upset at the thought of leaving Nate.” I feel useless half the time, but it seems to comfort him that I’m around, even though I don’t know what to say or do half the time.

“It was no trouble. It only took me a minute.” She leaves me with a sweet smile and a wave.

The trainers help load Nate onto the waiting private plane, placing him on the plush mattress in the jet’s bedroom. He

grimaces in pain as they set him down, and my stomach rolls. Did the narcotic they gave him not help, or is it just taking the edge off? I hate that I can't take the pain away somehow.

He's acting so nonchalant about the whole thing, but a professional football team wouldn't expend their resources on Nate tonight unless he truly needs the attention. *Maybe it's just because he's the quarterback instead of the severity of the injury. Maybe it's because the playoffs are coming or because they have so much money invested in him. Maybe because of the quiet whispers that his backup is still too green.*

Three of the trainers walk out of the small bedroom to take their seats in the front cabin. Bill immediately tries to walk in since there's finally room for him to stand. "Perhaps we can do this later," I say to him with a smile.

"But I need to know..." he starts to say as he grips his hand on the half closed door to gain entry.

I rest my foot on the bottom of the door, blocking it from swinging open. "Is it life or death right this moment?" I wouldn't normally interfere this way, but Nate's had a very heavy narcotic, and he's drained emotionally. He needs a break, and the last thing he should be doing while he's under the influence of the medication is make decisions.

Bill scowls at me, clearly unhappy that I am denying him access to the back cabin.

"Whatever it is, we will deal with it once Nate's slept. I'll see you when we land," I add, closing the door behind me.

“There we go,” Naomi says cheerfully as she tucks a foam wedge under Nate’s leg to prop it up. He winces a little as he shifts his weight, trying to get comfortable. She lifts a small hand size ice chest connected to a wrap with thick hoses and wraps it around Nate’s leg.

“What is that?” I ask, pointing to the chest.

“My best buddy,” Nate says with an over-exaggerated sigh as he reaches over to pet the cooler like a cat. “Hello, old friend, we meet again.”

Naomi rolls her eyes at Nate. “It’s a cold therapy machine. You’ll need to keep it filled with ice water around the clock until the doctor says to stop. It goes under the knee stabilizer. Don’t take it off for now. Just disconnect the hose and refill the cooler. I’ll change out the compression bandages when I see him.”

“What else should I do?” I ask nervously as I move to help Nate tuck the pillows around his back so he can sit up comfortably.

“That’s it for now. Just keep his knee elevated and the ice therapy machine on his knee. Remember R.I.C.E—rest, ice, compression, and elevation,” Naomi lectures as she places the knee stabilizer over the ice machine’s wrap.

Nate grabs the remote to the television. “You know, I’ve done this once or twice before,” Nate says to Naomi with an eye roll.

“But I haven’t, so you’re just going to have to put up with all my questions,” I inform him. I know Nate well enough to know he will follow any rules he feels as if he has to and bend any others. Would he strictly adhere to a doctor’s instructions with such a serious injury, or would tenacious Nate try to push himself further than he should? Either way, I want to know to keep a watchful eye out.

We leave with the trainers and Nate’s management team on board, each occupying one of the leather seats in the front of the plane while Nate and I stay in the back with a do not disturb until we land sign taped to the closed door.

I start to go through my text messages slowly, muting the texts from some people for intrusive questions, ignoring others. I’ve already checked in with my family, so they know what’s happening. My principal stands out from the others; bless her whole heart. She didn’t ask any questions but said that she’s thinking of us, and I love her for it.



We stop briefly in Nashville around dinner time to pick up Ethan and Tessa. They’re waiting in a dark SUV when the plane lands, blue tarps forming a walkway to block prying paparazzi from taking intrusive photographs of Nate’s family getting on the airplane.

They come straight to the bedroom of the aircraft, knocking softly on the half-open door before they walk in.

Ethan greets us with a deep frown creasing his brow and a comforting arm around his wife's waist as they walk in together. Tessa's eyes are bloodshot, her body tense as she fusses over Nate. Despite the flight's provided meal, Tessa brought wrapped leftovers for us to have our Thanksgiving turkey.

"Are we going straight to the hospital for an MRI scan, or will we check into the hotel first?" Tessa asks, rearranging Nate's pillow for the thousandth time as he digs into a piece of pecan pie.

"The stadium. They have an MRI machine there now. I chose to have it done there for confidentiality," Nate volunteers.

I'm very quickly learning about privacy in pro football. Everybody wants to know if Nate's done for the season or his career. I don't blame him one bit for choosing to have an MRI done in the most private way possible.

"Is Matias...." Ethan starts to ask.

"He's already at the stadium seeing to things. Everybody thinks I'm on the team's flight back. When I don't get off, we hope they all assume I couldn't travel yet and I'm still in Minneapolis."

He answers with a curt nod before Tessa fills the silence, prattling on about the grandkids' antics. "I swear if our family keeps growing, we will have to build an extension onto the vacation house to accommodate everybody. With the kids as active as they are, it's practically bursting at the seams."

Nate looks at me as if asking for permission. I shrug, knowing what he wants to say. A little happy news is likely welcome right about now.

“Well, Mom, you’d better get to work on the blueprints,” Nate says with a self-satisfied smirk.

Her eyebrows lift in realization, her jaw drops while Ethan starts chuckling deep in his throat as if he’d heard something hilarious. What on earth?

“Nooo...when?” Tessa asks.

“Don’t know yet. We still have to go to the doctor. We just found out.”

Tessa walks over to me and wraps me in a big hug. “Oh, another grandbaby! Our ninth!” she says excitedly.

Ethan holds out a hand for his son to shake in congratulations and a disbelieving headshake. “Never thought I’d see the day, I really didn’t. You’re really surprising me these days.”

“Dad, I’m surprising myself.”



The MRI takes an hour, but the results come back quickly, despite the late hour. I’m holding his hand when the doctor breaks the news. Nate grips it for support while the doctor goes over the results. His ACL is torn, and he’ll need surgery. He’s out for the season and maybe the preseason next year.

Nate swallows nervously, his Adam's apple bobbing when he's given the news, his eyes downcast. I rub the small of his back with my free hand reassuringly, trying to bring him any comfort.

I keep expecting a smart ass comment, anger, or anything from him, but it's just silence and tense posture, his expression blank as the doctor goes over the details.

"We can do surgery as soon as the inflammation goes down. From there it's a solid eight/nine months of recovery," the doctor advised.

"When will I be off crutches?" Nate asks, his voice lowered as he gazes down at the floor.

"A week, maybe two, if you follow my instructions," the doctor says tentatively.

"Will I be fully mobile by late July?" Nate asks briskly, looking up at the doctor.

"You should be by then. You might need to have it taped or use a brace, but you should be ambulatory."

Nate rubs a frustrated hand across his face. "Will I be able to lift and carry? What about reinjury?"

He asks a string of questions, growing increasingly exasperated. The doctor mistakenly thinks Nate's worried about playing and reassures him he'll be able to participate next season. With the specific questions he's asking, I know Nate isn't just asking because of his career. He wants to make sure he's recovered when the baby comes.

As new and surprising as parenthood has come to us, Nate's repeatedly made it clear that his priority is our little family. He's worked his entire life towards his career. For the baby to be more important than his career this quickly is very shocking. But that's Nate. The man either doesn't give a shit or has very intense feelings.

The doctor answers the long stream of questions, all suggesting that Nate will be much better before I'm due, but Nate seems agitated as we leave, his new crutches squeaking across the polished tile as he moves quickly toward the parking lot.

"Why don't you go get the car with Tessa and Whitney since it's cool out," Ethan suggests to his bodyguard. "Give us a moment, why don't you?"

My eyes meet Nate's, and he wordlessly tells me it's okay before I follow Tessa. I mouth, "I love you," to him as I walk away.

Halfway across the lot, I look back to see Ethan resting an understanding hand on Nate's shoulder, talking to him. Nate begrudgingly nods his head yes, his eyes downcast. My eyes meet Tessa's, and we wait together in the car until the men are seemingly done with their discussion before we pull up.

Nate's movements are frustrated as he is able to load himself into the waiting vehicle. There's plenty of room for Nate's leg in the back of the spacious SUV, so I climb next to him while Tessa and Ethan get in the front, his bodyguards following closely behind.

I grab his hand and give him a reassuring smile. He gives me a stiff half-smile that doesn't go to his eyes. As soon as he looks away, his eyebrows draw together into a worried frown. He's probably still processing everything.

On the drive, seemingly out of nowhere, Nate breaks the stiff silence, and a small smile finds his face. He reaches across to grab my hand. When our eyes meet, he smiles at me and he gives me a reassuring wink. "Dad, can we stop at that fast food restaurant up ahead?"

"Ah, that's right, the in season diet's over with, isn't it?" Ethan laughs as he pulls in and finds a parking spot at the drive-in-style fast food place.

"Yep, and nothing sounds more appealing now than their fried mozzarella sticks and chili dogs. Plus, Whitney needs to eat again."

Ethan shakes his head at his son, a small relieved smile coming onto his face. "Want a milkshake?" Ethan asks before he presses the button to order food.

"Absolutely."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

NATE

The mini tennis ball bounces twice on the floor before Petal runs for it, the nails scratching across the tile as she moves as quickly as her old body will allow. She brings it back but moves to sit in my lap, panting. Her stamina is slightly better than it used to be but not quite that of a younger dog.

“Tired already, old girl? We gotta keep you active still. We gotta burn off all those extra snacks you’re getting,” I gently chide.

She drops the ball and climbs in my lap, intent on napping. I let out a deep sigh while gently stroking Petal’s soft fur.

I’ve gotten lucky the last few weeks; truly, I have. It was a hard hit to me at first, the injury. I’d worried that not only would I not be able to take care of Whitney and the baby when they came, but also afraid that I’d be a burden for her to take care of while we had a brand new baby.

My surgery went textbook perfect, and I should be more mobile in two to three weeks. My team may go to the playoffs without me, but at least they're going. With hard work, I'll join them again on the field next season. For now, I'm on the sidelines watching them.

And then there's my little family. Whitney's started to have morning sickness, and as much as I hate that she's ill, I love the little reminder that our little one is growing inside her. I'd stashed ginger tea around the house weeks ago to prepare for it and do my best to coddle her while she's not feeling well. I'm counting each tiny milestone in the pregnancy, determined to enjoy each and every second of it.

Lifting my crutch from the side of the recliner, I look down at the long incision running down my left leg. I lift Petal from my lap and place her gently on the floor before I rest the crutches under my arms to make my way to the kitchen. I've got to move around a little bit. I'm not used to staying still this much. I've just finished yet another season of my tv series.... seven down, three to go.

Helene glares at me, hands on hips as she walks into the kitchen from the laundry room; the crutches tell-tail thump against the tile alerting her that I was on the move. "Que fais-tu!" she says as she lifts an annoyed hand my way.

I've picked up quite a bit of French-Cajun while home with Helene all day, held captive to her constant protective clucking. I've figured out that "Que fais-tu" roughly translates

to “what are you doing,” since I hear it nine hundred times daily from her.

“I just need a snack!” I protest as I make my way slowly over to the stainless steel refrigerator, Petal at my feet, wagging her tail, knowing I’m likely to give her a piece of cheese.

“You can call me to bring you food!” Helene says, her accent even thicker in her irritation. “You need to sit down and rest to heal before bébé comes! You’ll need your energy for then.”

I’d thought that after Mom and Dad returned to Tennessee, I’d have fewer people on my back while Whitney’s at work. Turns out Helene alone is nag enough. Grumbling under my breath, I throw Petal her cube of cheese before I grab a banana from the fruit bowl, holding it in my hand as I hobble back to the den and into that fucking recliner.

It showed up a few days after I’d been injured since the doctor suggested I stay in one to keep my leg elevated as much as possible. Whitney tried to coerce me into sleeping in it. Ha! Nothing could keep me out of our bed and away from her and the baby. I’d demanded it be returned until we agreed I would stay in it during the day as long as she didn’t give me shit about sleeping in bed at night.

I anxiously check the time again, waiting for the sound of the car door. Whitney’s coming to pick me up before our first baby appointment. She’s just gone back to work after taking a couple of days off for my surgery, but she needed to go back

this week to do the holiday parties and some testing with the kids before the semester wrapped up. I'm okay with just Helene and Petal, but I get restless since I only leave the house for physical therapy.

Whitney's pregnancy has been the worst kept secret in the team's history. I ask about the baby once in a semi-empty room, and the next thing I know, I'm being congratulated by people I barely know. It was big news, though, because the bet wasn't just on when we'd marry (which is what I guessed) but also on whether Whitney and I would have a baby first. Marissa thinks she's already won, but boy, do I have a surprise in store for her.

Whitney finally arrives home carrying her purse and tote, having left work early for our appointment. "Ready to go? We have to rush with traffic," she says hurriedly.

Grabbing my crutches, I hobble towards the door, pressing my lips to hers. "It's seventeen minutes to the doctor if the traffic is bad, and we have forty-five before the appointment. We'll be fine." I might have timed the driving distance from our home to the medical plaza, the practice facility and arena, and the travel distances to the alternative birthing center where Whitney's chosen to have the baby. It's a special unit inside a hospital in case of an emergency, and there are multiple OB/GYN overseeing everything, but Whitney will have a midwife providing her care.

"I'll have paperwork," she says urgently.

I reach the table and hand her a stack of papers I'd already filled out. "It's done. I don't have your insurance number, so that's all you have left to fill out. The midwives' office emailed them to me earlier."

I was initially worried about Whitney's decision to use a midwife instead of an OBGYN, but in the end, I want her to be as comfortable as she can be while pregnant and delivering the baby. She agreed to check in with one of the supervising OBGYNs if there was a hint of complications, and if there are any snags during the delivery, an attending physician is seconds away.

She'd done hours of research while deciding, discussing the pros and cons of each choice with me. I like how much more homey the birthing hospital is for her and the ways that I can participate in the birth instead of just sitting and holding her hand the entire time when the baby comes.

The baby. The tiny little bean growing under Whitney's heart right now. It feels surreal sometimes, but there's a countdown app on my tablet that reminds me every time I glance at the home screen precisely how many minutes, days, and hours it is until our little one is here with us, in our arms.



The certified nurse midwife is about my mother's age and claims to have delivered hundreds of babies. She talks to

Whitney forever about her medical background, family history, etc.

“If the ginger tea doesn’t help with the morning sickness, try the chews or an acupressure bracelet. They’re meant for sea sickness but will also work for morning nausea.”

“Doesn’t she need to replace all the fluids she loses every morning?”

“That’s why Mom needs to drink non-stop. I know it’s not easy when you’re on the run at work, but keep a big insulated cup nearby,” she suggests. I already put two reusable water bottles in Whitney’s bag each morning...maybe I should start sending a third.

After a urine test and in office bloodwork, it’s time for the transvaginal ultrasound. The doctor moves the wand around, and suddenly there’s a large black area with a tiny little blob in the middle. Our baby. I feel my breath catch, and my heart stops momentarily, staring at the screen.

“Oh my gosh, Nate! Look!” Her eyes are misty as I lean down to grasp her hand, completely lost for words.

The technician starts to take measurements of the baby. “Okay, it looks like you are at about eight weeks gestation. Based on your last period and the baby’s size, we will put your due date as August Fourth. Just in time for the preseason, huh, Dad.”

I smile at being called “Dad” for the first time while Whitney snorts and shakes her head, wiping her misty eyes.

“Don’t remind me! The season’s crazy enough. It’s going to be interesting with a newborn.”

I figured our little one would be due as the season kicks off, just as I’m returning from a serious injury. I don’t even want to think about work pulling me away from Whitney and our brand new baby.

The ultrasound technician turns a dial, and the room fills with a sound similar to a galloping horse.

“Is that...” I ask, my voice suddenly cracking.

“That’s your baby’s heartbeat!” the tech says cheerfully.

Again my breath stills as I listen to the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard. I squeeze Whitney’s hand when I notice her tear-filled eyes and lean down to kiss her gently, unable to hide the smile on my face.

I’m going to be a father. One of those men in the locker room that retells funny stories about their mischievous toddler’s antics. One of the players who is always showing off the cute pictures their wife sends them. *One of those parents who are on the phone with their kids explaining that Dad’s at work far away, but he loves you and will be home soon.*

I hate the thought— being the guy that’s on his phone constantly because his family’s away from him while he works to give them a good life. On more than a few occasions, Landry’s pulled a child’s picture book out of a duffel bag and video called with his kid right there in the locker room with zero fucks as to any teasing from the other guys. At the time, it

felt like overkill. Couldn't the kid's mom read her a bedtime story just this once? Now just the thought of missing bathtime for a game makes me itchy and uncomfortable. Football may be in my veins, but Whitney and the baby are my heart.



“Do we have to use this many candles?” Caleb complains as he switches on the last of the two hundred LED tea lights.

“I helped you!” I remind him as I shuffle on my crutches to place rose petals down the path.

“We need to hurry. Marissa just texted that they're almost done at the nail salon!”

I blow out a steadying breath and look around. “I think this is okay,” I say half to myself as I examine our afternoon's work.

“Just okay? You bought out all of the candles in the store!” Caleb snickers.

Helene rushes in the front door, breathless, with Petal under her arm. “They took too long at the groomer's!” she complains as she places her on the ground. I'd asked Helene to pick out a new dress for my little beige monster and to have her bow replaced while she was being groomed. Helene didn't disappoint.

Petal's looking up at me, clearly aggrieved at her circumstances, fresh from the puppy salon. Her nails are

painted pink, and she's wearing a pink satin dress with a fluffy skirt. There's a matching bow in her slightly trimmed top knot. I catch a whiff of the fruity-smelling cologne the groomers use and shake my head. "Sorry, girl, I know you don't like it, but it makes Mom happy."

Despite the fact that Petal is a shih tzu, the epitome of a girly dog, she is one hundred percent a tomboy. I watch as she flounces to her bed to pout while Helene grabs her things to leave.

"I'll be getting out of the way now. I'll tend to the dishes in the morning."

"Yeah...can you make it ten am tomorrow instead, Helene? Whit and I are probably going to sleep in."

She shoots me an understanding smirk and shakes her head. "I'll see you tomorrow then," Helene says as she leaves.

Caleb wipes his hands down his pants legs. "I'd better get out of the way before Whitney recognizes my car. Good luck, man," he says with a hand stretched out for me to shake.

Balancing myself on my crutches, I grip his hand firmly in mine. "Thanks, man. And thanks for your help. I think it turned out well."

Once I'm alone, I carefully examine our work. The path from the front door to the study where Whitney and I first met is lit by two rows of tea lights. White rose petals are scattered on the path leading the way.

A moment later, the chime for the home alarm sounds. Whitney's home. I hear the familiar thump of her placing her purse on the foyer table and then silence.

I wait anxiously for Whitney, my palms sweating.

Finally, a smiling Whitney turns the corner. Her skin's glowing from the pregnancy. She's even more beautiful today than she was before. "What are you up to?" she asks with a silky voice, looking at me with playfully narrowed eyes.

"We should get married," I say.

She half laughs, half chokes. "Is that a proposal?"

"A proposal is a question, and I'm not asking," I say with a shrug and a grin as I reach into my pocket. Pulling out the tiny maroon box, I flip open it for Whitney. I bite back the tiny wave of anxiety as I wait for her to say something, anything.

She covers her mouth with her freshly manicured nails as she gazes at the box, her eyes wide with shock.

Taking her left hand in mine, I carefully remove the ring from the box and place it on Whitney's left hand. The square-cut diamond looks perfect there, the halo adding to the shimmer from her finger. "It was my great-grandmother's engagement ring. They were happily married for over seventy years, so I thought it would be a good luck charm for us. If you want something different, though...."

"I love it," Whitney whispers as she examines the ring on her hand, her mouth open in shocked delight as her eyes start to glisten. I lean in and touch my forehead to hers. "I love you,

Whit. We're going to be so happy together. I know we were meant to be together for the rest of our lives."

She presses her lips against mine, holding my face between her hands. "I love you too, Nate. So much."

Her misty eyes suddenly flick up at me. "I... don't want to get married while I'm heavily pregnant or plan a wedding with a new baby, though," she says tentatively.

"Do you want to spend the rest of your life with me, Whitney?" I ask as I reach for her hand.

Her shoulders drop, and her eyes go soft, "Of course I do," she says softly, lacing our fingers together.

"Then you'd better get dress shopping because I'm not waiting."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

WHITNEY

It's Grinch Day at school to celebrate the last day before the winter holiday. Each of the kids and staff comes to school dressed as a Dr. Seuss character. To celebrate, I changed the lettering and picture on the classroom's bulletin board and waited for one of the kids to notice. Everybody was too excited about the day's planned activities to pay attention to it.

We were eating the green cupcakes Helene insisted on baking for the kids at school when "The Grinch" showed up wearing a Santa suit.

It's not easy to find a guy who can fit into a standard Grinch costume when they're all professional football players, but Marissa bullied the smaller rookies into picking straws to see who got the privilege. Of course, Moreau drew the short straw...I'd feel bad for him, but honestly, I deserve a little payback over the jersey stunt he pulled.

Moreau makes an exaggerated "tippy-toe" walk as the kids laugh. When Nate follows behind him on his crutches, the

kids, used to his visits now, excitedly run over to him to say hello. Harrison, devilish sweetheart that he is, wraps his arms around Nate's waist to say hello. Moreau places annoyed hands on his hips at the attention Nate is getting, making exaggerated movements as he pretends to be put out at not being the center of attention.

"Alright, students, while we're waiting on our turn to take a picture, why don't we work on our craft quietly at the table," I announce to the noisy class to no avail. I don't know why I bothered. The kids couldn't be any more off-task if they tried. They're all high on sugar and excitement for the day.

Moreau is walking table to table in the noisy classroom to take pictures with the kids making increasingly silly poses when he suddenly starts pointing to the billboard excitedly and holds his hand over his mouth, surprised.

Nate looks at the bulletin board and smirks before taking out his phone and snapping a picture.

In green lettering, the bulletin board now says "Mrs. Coleman's Classroom." I knew most of the kids wouldn't be able to read the words, but they all know what the word "Coleman" looks like and that Mrs. is a married woman.

"You got married!" my early reader, Kai, announces suddenly.

"Yes, I did!" I tell the class. "Remember Friday when I wasn't here? Mr. Coleman and I went to get married! Isn't that exciting!"

“Can I be your flower girl?” Hazel asks.

“It’s too late to be the flower girl. They’re already married!” Carolina rebukes.

It should be no surprise to anybody who knows Nate that we were married a week after he proposed. We’d kept it simple, going to the privacy of the judge’s chambers at the courthouse.

With Nate’s profession, we have to share so much of our lives with the world. We decided it would just be our parents and us on our wedding day, and maybe have a small reception later to celebrate. My parents were much more surprised than Nate’s, but after they pulled me aside for an “are you sure” conversation, they seemed okay with it.

We’ve already told some of our friends, but no one else. I want to tell the kids myself before the news spreads publicly and they hear from their parents. Since I told my coworkers earlier today, the word is definitely out, but Nate and I aren’t intent on trying to keep it a secret for long.

But for now, I want to enjoy this brief moment with the kids just like any other newly married teacher would tell her students.

I look over to check on Nate just in time to see Claire pull a piece of candy out of the goodie bags Kai’s mother sent. She wordlessly walks up to Nate and hands him a sucker, with the side of her lips curled into a smile.

“The doctor gave me a sucker when I broke my arm to it better,” Claire explains in a toneless voice as she looks at

Nate's crutches.

“Well, my knee is already feeling a lot better. Thank you, Claire,” Nate says gently.

I feel my eyes start to mist up as I watch. That tiny interaction was so big for Claire, and Nate handled it perfectly. He's going to be an amazing father to this baby and the best of husbands to me. I know it.



At the start of winter break, we decided to drive up to spend time with my very surprised parents. They seem to be still in shock from the whirlwind romance.

With Nate's leg still in a brace, I drive us while Petal smiles from the passenger seat in her dad's lap, eagerly watching out the window in case there's another dog in a neighboring car or, worse...a nutria in the canal.

A new SUV appeared overnight this week. I just walked outside to find the old one gone and the newer, shinier midnight blue version in its place. When I asked Nate about it, he shrugged and said he ordered it months ago as a trade-in. Since it's my favorite color, I'm somehow dubious.

The traffic's horrible, but Nate and I are oblivious to it as we drive together down the interstate with music blaring as we sing along. A car with Matias and another bodyguard follows closely behind, a reminder of one of the many changes in my life now.

“I hate for them to have to go to Mom and Dad’s house with us,” I say nervously as I watch the bodyguard’s sedan pull in behind us. “Nobody’s going to see you there.”

“You never know when somebody will figure out where we are, Whitney, and it’s just until my injury’s old news. They’re still after a picture of me with my dad, and heaven only knows when someone at the clerk of court leaks our marriage license.”

Since returning from Minneapolis, we’ve had to take extra security measures. Matias had the principal take my picture off the school’s website, and all of my social media was locked down even tighter, and for now, Matias goes with us.

“Why do we have to bring Matias with us if there’s never been any issues in New Orleans?” I ask Nate.

“Because the only reason there’s never been any issues is because Matias is here,” he answers.

The house smells like the citrus-scented cleaner Mom’s used to scrub the house down with when we walk in.

Nate follows Dad to the den, moving quickly on his crutches before sitting on the sofa.

“Mom, you didn’t have to clean the whole house just because Nate’s coming over,” I whisper to her once Nate’s out of earshot. “He’s seen the house before you did your weekly once over already. Besides, he’s a part of our family now!”

“The house needed a good cleaning anyway,” Mom murmurs.

“I know, but Mom, you look like you’ve spent half the morning preparing food for them to watch the basketball game together after you worked all week.”

“Psh, it was no trouble,” she insists.

No trouble, indeed. She probably got up at five am. “Mom, I don’t want you going through all this trouble when we come over. Please?” I look at her with pleading eyes before she nods in my direction.

Petal scratches at the kitchen door to be let out into the side yard. I roll my eyes heavenward when she immediately starts yipping in an effort to remind our neighbors’ chihuahua, Manny, who’s boss in these here parts. This duel over territory has been ongoing for the last ten years or so, with no clear winner.

Annoyed at Petal, I step outside. “Get inside, missy!” With absolutely no remorse, Petal starts to strut inside the house, grabbing a stick on her way in. “Put it down!” I hiss.

At the same time, a familiar voice cuts across the small distance to the side yard next door. “Manny, cut it out!”

Noo. Nope. Leaning down to pick up Petal, intent on a quick exit, I hear a low voice say, “Whit? Pookie? Is that you? I thought I heard your voice.”

No, it is absolutely not me. You’re hearing things. Please go back to whatever parallel universe men disappear to after a breakup.

Gathering Petal into my arms, I walk as quickly as I can to the door, shutting it softly behind myself.

Maybe if I'm lucky he won't come over. Maybe if I'm lucky...

There's a light knock on the door, and I'm suddenly wondering if someone put the gris-gris on me. When exactly did I break a mirror and open an umbrella inside? Is it Friday the thirteenth? Did someone buy a Whitney-shaped voodoo doll in the French Quarter?

Mom moves to answer the door, but I know that knock. My stomach starts to roll with anxiety, and I rub the back of my tense neck. "It's for me," I say resignedly, keeping my voice low as I look into the den to make sure Nate is still distracted by my father.

Mom looks at me, confused, "Who on earth..." before her eyes grow big with realization. "Oh," her face says.

I'm not sure why exactly I thought it was a good idea to date our neighbor. Now they're all stuck in the awkward position of living next door to one another when we'd all rather not.

Or at least I'd rather they all not.

Before moving to New Orleans, I'd been victim to more than a few hateful glares from Preston's mother as I was innocently walking to my car post break up. I once despised Deborah, but I should be grateful to her. Without her, I

wouldn't have had to take the job at Collegiate Charter, and I wouldn't have met Nate or have a baby on the way.

I move quickly towards the door, eager to be rid of him before Nate sees him. Swinging open the door, keeping it half closed, just as I expected, I find Preston standing with his ankles crossed as he leans against the side of the house. He's wearing a tidy polo shirt tucked into his khakis and a toothy smile I know well.

"I thought I heard your voice," he says eagerly as he steps forward into the doorway for a hug, arms stretched out.

My skin prickles with annoyance, and I lean backward, avoiding his touch. "What are you doing here?"

Brown eyes stare back at me, hurt, and he frowns. "I wanted to see you. It's been so long..."

"Well, I don't want to see you after the messages you sent me after the breakup. They were so inappropriate! You should leave," I insist. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Matias and the other bodyguard walk quickly from the car that's parked in the street, towards the house with stony expressions and hands positioned by their gun holsters.

"But, I want you back. My life's been shit without you. Someone hacked into my tablet and phone, and I lost every picture and video. The virus ended up on my work laptop, and I lost my job because of it... Nothing's been right in my life since you left; nothing."

He starts going into a rant; we're the love of one another's lives, Nate is just a flash in the pan, blah blah blah.

I let out a huge groan of frustration and lean against the edge of the door. Unlike the few other times I've spoken to Preston since our relationship ended, I can't hide the sharp edge to my tone. "Look, there's absolutely no way we're getting back together. Period. You were a pretty lousy boyfriend to me. And, to be honest, you've acted like a petulant child! Maybe you should have taken the fact that I've long ago blocked you as a hint. And don't even freaking get me started on the crap Deborah pulled."

He actually almost looks ashamed for a minute. "I didn't tell Mom to do it," he insists.

"Well you certainly didn't tell her not to do it either. You knew how important teaching is to me, and you wanted to hurt me the only way you could. Well, guess what? It failed. I'm happier than I've ever been. Without you. As a matter of fact, I should send a thank you card to Deborah, because if she hadn't been such a malicious bitch, I wouldn't have met Nate. Now can you please let me be so I can enjoy my time with my family?"

When I hear the sound of Nate's crutches behind me, I know Preston's done for. Nothing I can say is going to save him. Nothing. Besides, why should I try with all the crap he's pulled since the breakup.

"You can't still want him...everybody knows he's washed up with that knee injury!" Preston's ranting just as Nate yanks

the door completely open.

Preston blinks at Nate, clearly surprised at his presence. His shock morphs into anger when he realizes that I've brought Nate home to my parents.

Nate stares for a second, an annoyed look on his face as he glowers at our visitor. "How did you know she was here?" he demands, nostrils flaring, fingers gripping tightly onto the door, his crutches resting under his arms.

"My parents live next door. I'm here visiting," Preston says with a smug smirk as he glares at Nate.

Ha! More likely another group of roommates kicked him out again.

"And you thought that you should come and bother my wife?" Nate demands.

Preston's eyes grow large as he looks at my left hand, finding the diamond ring and matching band Nate lovingly placed there.

"You...you *married* him?" Preston screeches.

"We wanted to get it out of the way before the baby comes," Nate says with an easy smirk as he pats my belly.

I roll my eyes at the obvious dick measuring between the two. "Preston, I think you should just leave," I insist.

"But Whitney, you can't..." he whines.

Nate moves me backward gently, and stands to face Preston.

“She can do whatever she wants. And nothing that she wants to do involves you. Just stay the fuck away from her. That includes those pathetic little messages you send on social media.” *Crud, he must have overheard me talking to Preston before he walked up.*

“Mr. Coleman, should we remove this gentleman?” Matias asks once he reaches us.

“Yes, and if you see him contact or approach Mrs. Coleman again, please immediately file a restraining order. That’ll look amazing with a pre-employment background check. I hear he can’t keep a job for long.”

Nate’s gaze flicks toward Preston one last time with a sneer. “Enjoy your pathetic little life. Your mommy might believe the bullshit you spouted off after the breakup, but nobody else does for a minute. You were playing way out of your league with Whitney.”

Just as the bodyguards move to remove an angry sputtering Preston forcefully, Nate slams the door in his stunned face. I brace myself for the inevitable meltdown, but Nate makes his way into the den and coolly sits on the sofa with crutches at his side.

I side-eye him warily, waiting for a response, but as annoyed as Nate seems, he doesn’t look nearly as ready to go neanderthal.

I sit on the sofa next to Nate, and wipe a tired hand across my face as my mom titters on about something to do with an election.

“.....and then I’d thought Deborah and Jay would move away after the scandal with Deborah and everything. But it’s been a few weeks, and the house isn’t on the market yet.”

“Mom, what are you talking about? What happened with Preston’s mom?” I ask.

“You didn’t hear? Well, it is a different newspaper in New Orleans. There was an anonymous tip to the press that Deborah was inappropriately using her school board expense account. The story leaked days before the election!”

“Wait, Deborah wasn’t re-elected?” I laugh. Deborah’s been on the school board since, well, forever, and before that, her father was.

My head turns to Nate when I hear him chuckle for a moment, but he starts to cough and then sip his drink.

“Well, no. She was caught using her expense account for a weekend in a French Quarter hotel during Mardi Gras and then the pricey Valentine’s Day dinners. Of course, she never stood a chance of winning anyway after her opponent was outspending her like he was on political advertising. Someone said they got a large donation from some business out of state....”

I shouldn’t smile. It’s wrong of me, but sometimes watching karma at its finest is truly divine. I watch Nate again as he calmly pops another handful of popcorn into his mouth, seemingly focused on the basketball game, cheering them on.

On the drive home, I'm still side-eyeing Nate. He seems calm as if meeting Preston was water off a duck's back, a mild annoyance at best.

"I can't believe Deborah got caught as she did with her hand in the cookie jar!" I say.

The corners of Nate's lips turn up with a hint of a smile. "Yeah, good thing someone thought to look into her since she was spending money that should go to the classrooms."

At a stop light, I turn to face Nate, "You seem pretty calm about Preston just showing up like that. I kinda expected you to go all caveman."

"I'm not happy you didn't tell me his parents live next door," he says, unable to hide the annoyance in his voice. "But he's nothing anymore."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

WHITNEY

Cassie greets me from her normal seat in the risers at the stadium. “Hello, Mrs. Coleman!”

I reach over and pull her into a hug. “Hello, Cassie! How was bridesmaid dress shopping?”

“It was okay,” she says with a shrug. “Shopping’s more Marissa’s thing, but I found a dress I look okay in.”

“You look gorgeous in it! We have to have it fitted in one or two areas,” Marissa interjects before Cassie gives her a skeptical sideways glance.

I smile at the rest of the ladies in greeting, but with it being the playoff game, everybody’s distracted, watching their guys warming up on the field.

A lot of the attention is still on Nate, despite the fact he’s not playing. Seeing him in a hoodie instead of his jersey on the sidelines feels strange as he chats excitedly with the other players and coaches.

It feels more comfortable to be here now than at the beginning of the season. After spending so much time with their wives and the frequent visits of his teammates to the house during Nate's injury, I can't help but feel as if they're all kind of "my guys" in a way.

Nate's an active participant on the sidelines in a headset, just as focused on the game as if he were playing himself. He gives pep talks to a teammate, amps up players about to go in, and seems to be helping his backup. The rest of the time, his eyes are on the game as he watches, fixated on every move the players make.

Nate enthusiastically cheers his teammates on when they score and is supportive when they're defeated at the last minute. The crowd boos loudly at the loss as the teams meet up for post-game handshakes on the field.

"That was a crap call from the referee!" Jasmine declares as she leaves her seat.

"So much for our celebratory dinner," Shailene laughs wryly.

"Well, now we can celebrate an amazing season," Marissa volunteers. "The guys still did so well this year!"

The players are in the locker room together much longer than normal, and we can hear roars and the coach's voice carrying through the steel doors that lead to the locker room.

"Coach doesn't seem to be letting them wallow," Shailene says.

“They did very well this season; despite our injuries, we still did our best today!” Marissa insists.

The guys come out one by one, disappointment written on their faces. We all are, but still, the game was close. Very close. They fought hard.

Nate is one of the last to walk out, which is strange since he’s usually one of the first. He must have lingered with his teammates a bit, as he should. He slings his arm around my shoulders before pressing his lips to mine.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get a championship ring this year, Sweetheart,” I tell him when he pulls away.

He makes a fist with his left hand and shows me the platinum band I’d carefully picked out for him. “I didn’t get a championship ring this year, but I got this one,” he says proudly.

Marissa’s had a well known mid-city bar and the grill close for our private party tonight. It will be the last time we all get together for a while since many players will now go to their off-season homes.

Music from a jukebox and the smell of beer welcome us as we enter together. For once, Marissa let the business do all the setting up, and I can tell she’s regretting it as she stands thin-lipped as the guys push a table together for us to sit at.

Nate and I are told “congratulations” many times throughout the post-game meal. Whether it’s for the baby, that they’re not supposed to know about yet, but somehow do, or

the wedding, I'm not sure. It's likely both with the way they gossip.

Javier walks over to where Marissa sits next to me with a shit-eating grin and an upturned palm. "Excuse me. I believe we have something to settle."

Marissa rolls her eyes. "I think it should be split evenly between us because I was right. They did technically have a baby before they were married."

"We already settled this," Roman interjects. "The baby isn't born yet, so Javier and I split the pot."

"Since y'all are betting on us, do we at least get to know what the terms were?" I ask with mock annoyance.

Marissa rolls her eyes hard. "It started when Roman said 'Ring by Spring.' Caleb insisted you wouldn't marry for at least a year but would live together. Javier said you'd be married before the playoffs. It took off from there. Roman and Javier were both right, so they got the pot."

"And you said we'd have a baby before we were married?" I laugh, shocked.

Marissa's shoulders raise in a half-embarrassed shrug. "All that hot sex the two of you were having? Girl, I'm surprised I didn't get pregnant from watching just how the two of you look at one another!"



Petal's sitting at the door, tail wagging excitedly as we walk in. With the baby coming, Nate's started to train her not to jump on our legs at the door. I've always thought Petal was too hard-headed to train if she didn't want to be, but Nate has that touch.

Nate leans down and gives her a treat from a bag on the foyer table. "Smart girl," he says as he picks her up, "I knew you could do it."

He's dressed her in a doggie jersey and has her Hurricanes bow in her hair for the playoffs. Petal has undeniably become a Daddy's girl.

I've never had to share her before, not like this. My parents spoiled her rotten, but in the end, she was my dog. Petal now, irrefutably, loves Nate as much as I do. I can't blame her... Hadn't I married the man in a matter of months?

I leave him to play whatever little game he's playing with the dog and walk into our bedroom. Our bedroom. In the home I share with my new husband. It's hard to imagine. This time last year I was worried about midterm exams and looking forward to my first classroom of kids. Now I have a child of my own on the way. Running a hand over my still-flat stomach through the fabric of my leggings, I can't help but wonder about the baby. Will it have Nate's smile? His eyes? As tall as he is, I can't imagine the baby not being above average height. I know it sounds cliché, but I just want a healthy baby.

Taking off my shoes, I leave them inside our closet, shutting the door behind me. I slip off the jersey and my leggings

before throwing them into the hamper. As I pull my hair down from its elastic, I notice Nate leaning against the doorway to our room watching me as I undress.

“My God, you’re breathtaking,” he says as if it were an oath as he starts to strip for bed.

I blush, shaking my head as I reach for the ancient t-shirt of Nate’s I’ve grabbed to wear tonight. I know exactly what I look like. My eye makeup is smeared, for starters. My hair’s a tousled mess. “You’re so full of it,” I laugh as I pull back the covers and climb into bed.

His clothing goes into the hamper, and he walks towards me, his erection hard against his belly. “No, you are. You’re glowing all the time now.... I’ve never seen you look so beautiful.”

My face warms, and I roll my eyes at him as he walks towards me with a heated gaze, his intent very clear.

Climbing into bed with me, he wraps his strong arms around my waist and pulls my back against him. “I need inside of you, Mrs. Coleman,” he whispers huskily as he runs a hand from the hem of the t-shirt. His fingers slide over the edge of my panties, and excitement runs through me.

“You’re going to hurt yourself!” I warn, thinking of his knee.

“My knee’s more than fine. It’s your pussy that will need to recover,” he says with a chuckle. His erection’s digging into my back already invitingly, teasing me.

We've made love since his injury, but there's an undercurrent in his touch this time that says he has zero intent on being as gentle.

Strong hands gently come to the rounds of my breasts. "They're already so much heavier," he says, flicking a nipple with his thumb.

"They're very sensitive," I say huskily as I bow into him.

"Are they too sensitive?" he asks as he pulls my panties out of his way.

I moan low in my throat as his lips go to my neck, gently sucking and licking. "No, I like you touching them."

He slides a finger inside me, then two, while his mouth stays on my neck. I'm growing wetter and wetter, aching for him. "Please, Nate."

He props himself up on one elbow. "You want my cock inside of you, Angel?"

"God, yes, please," I beg.

He lines himself up and takes long, hard possessing strokes with one hand on my hip. "You're the perfect fit for me," he whispers into my ear before taking one long hard stroke and gyrating.

I buck into him. "Please, Babe, I need it faster."

He chuckles deep in his throat. "Well, I want to give my Angel what she needs." He starts to take hurried thrusts, skin

thumping against skin until my orgasm boils inside me. I curl against him as I come, the bed soaked beneath me.

He growls low in his throat and raises my leg over his hip, moving faster deeper harder until he impales himself with one more long, deep thrust, filling me with his cum.

Our breath evens out together. I start to move off the bed. “Where are you going?” he demands.

“To clean up and get clean panties!” I say, turning to him.

“No, Angel, I’m sleeping like this tonight inside of you.”

He kisses my forehead, runs his fingers through my hair, and then pulls the covers over us. His body is relaxed beneath me as I listen to the white noise from my bedside fan.

“Do you think we’ll still be able to go to Tennessee this summer for a bit?” I ask, breaking the silence.

He looks at me, brows furrowed. “We’ll have to go and pop in to check on the new house, but I can’t be away from my physical therapist for long. Maybe we can go for a couple of long weekends or something.”

“It’s just that...well, all the other guys are headed to their off-season places,” I say softly.

He runs his arms over my torso. “Most of them, yes. Roman’s staying this year to keep an eye on Ambrosia, and of course, Caleb and Marissa moved here full time now. I’ll have friends to keep me company if that’s what you’re worried about, Angel.”

“Well, it’s not that, exactly. Isn’t Nashville your home? You even bought a house there to live in the off-season and just finished remodeling it. Aren’t you going to be homesick?”

He gives me his irresistible grin, and rests his palms on both sides of my face. “Nashville is where I’m from, Whitney. My home is wherever you and our baby are. The two of you... you’re all I need.”

WHITNEY

August

It's been eight months since Nate's season ending injury. With a lot of physical therapy, he's back to his normal athletic stride. There's a long pink scar down his leg, a reminder of that day. Finally cleared by the doctor, he's going to start in the first game of the regular season in a few weeks.

With it being the offseason, and me off work for a while, we spent the summer focusing on the baby— we took birthing classes, interviewed pediatricians (Nate rejected two), and set up the nursery. Which is why I'm a little confused as to what I'm seeing now.

The crib rails are lying against the back wall of our bedroom with the mattress, and Nate's on the ground, seeming to reassemble it.

"Sweetheart, what are you doing?" I ask in the voice I reserve for my naughtiest students and, of course, Nate.

"Moving the baby's crib," he says as if it's self-explanatory.

Rubbing my aching back, I count to ten and try again. “But we have a nursery set up already, and a bassinet for the bedroom.”

He stands up to grab the next rail. “Yeah, I was trying out the baby intercom in the nursery today, and the sound quality isn’t all that great.”

Because sound quality will matter when an infant screams at the top of their lungs at three am.

“You know, Babe, we can hear the baby cry through the open door you had the contractor put in to connect the rooms. Don’t you think we should maybe keep the crib in the nursery?” I try to hide the sarcasm from my tone, but I don’t think I’m very successful, not this pregnant.

“The baby will outgrow the bassinet too quickly, and I might not have time to move the crib into the bedroom later in the season.”

“But... don’t we want the baby to sleep in their room?”

He looks at me deadpan, then down at my round stomach. “No,” he says before he gets back to work.

Uh-huh. Let’s see what you have to say about that when you’re going to practice on three hours of sleep. Shaking my head, I just walk away.

Making my way back through the house, I can smell fresh disinfectant. Helene’s in the kitchen, scrubbing it down yet again.

“Helene, you’ll put a hole in the granite if you keep cleaning!” I laugh.

“We need a nice, fresh house. We can’t risk bébé getting a cold when they’re brand new!”

Okay, seriously, I’m the first-time mom, overdue, and I’m the sane one around here?

I carefully lower myself in a chair in the kitchen to finish packing the diaper bag for my hospital stay. I should have done this long ago, but I couldn’t decide which tiny outfits I want the baby to wear first.

My favorite is a cotton blanket with patches from a Hurricanes jersey. When the baby swaddled inside, it looked like the baby’s wrapped into one of Nate’s jerseys. I picked that for the birth announcement photo.

Nate and I talked about it amongst ourselves and the bodyguards and eventually decided with my pregnancy so well known, it was best to release a picture without showing the baby’s face. I’m still a little nervous about it, but it feels as if it’s best to squash any curiosity about our child.

My backache worsens as I finish folding up the tiny clothes in the beautiful gray backpack-style diaper bag Shailene gave me as a shower gift. She’d said she couldn’t live without it when AJ was a new baby.

Helene taps her fingers against the shiny granite. “You don’t look well. Should I go get Mr. Coleman?”

“Helene, we told you to call us Nate and Whitney!” I stand up, intent on walking to the bathroom, and pain rips across my stomach.

Helene’s wide-eyed and walks over. “Perhaps you should sit down? Maybe you should text the midwife?”

Nate walks into the room with a screwdriver in his hand, and a worried look. “Whit, I heard you all the way in the bedroom. That’s the third or fourth time that’s happened today. Should we call the midwife?”

“I just texted her a few minutes ago,” I confess. “She said to hold off for now and see if the contractions get more consistent.”

Petal approaches, her tags rattling against one another as she nervously rests her paws on my leg, making sure her mom is okay. I lean down to pick her up and waddle over to the sofa.

Nate narrows his eyes. “We’re going to the birthing center,” he insists as he walks over to retrieve the baby’s diaper bag from the table and slings it across his back. Despite its large size, it’s still hilariously small on Nate’s broad shoulders.

“It’s too soon! The midwife said to wait until contractions are happening every five minutes,” I remind him again, stroking my old lady’s soft fur. It won’t be easy for her to become a big sister at her age, and I want to comfort her as much as I can about the process.

With quick paces, Nate retrieves our pre-packed bags from the foyer and walks out the door nervously.

I hear the trunk of my SUV opening and closing and the door slamming behind Nate as he comes back. My purse is in his hands already when he holds out his hand to me. “We’re only twenty-three minutes away from the birthing center this time of day. Do you need to use the bathroom before we go?”

“I don’t need to go to the birthing center yet,” I insist again.

“You’re going!” Neanderthal Nate demands.

“You’re being ridiculous! They’re just going to send us home....” I warn.

“No, they won’t,” Nate says with great determination.

Nate opens my door and offers his hand to help me get in. The smooth ride of the SUV is very welcome now as we drive down the broken city streets. Another pain rips through my body, more intense and closer in time than the last few. Nate’s fingers tighten around the wheel, and he keeps turning his head toward me.

After we park in the overfull lot, Nate walks around to help me out of the SUV, and a trickle of fluid runs down my leg. Nate’s startled eyes dart up to mine as he stares at me, mouth agape.



Nate

Our birthing room reminds me of a mid-level hotel suite with a small sitting area, a second television in an adjoining room, a kitchenette, and a small dining table. Except, of course, for the birthing tub directly adjacent to the queen-sized bed, and the baby warmer waiting nearby for our little one's arrival.

“Do you want me to turn on the music now?” Susie, our midwife, asks. Whitney nods, and the soothing music playlist I'd put together for her comes from a Bluetooth speaker.

It's all part of Whitney's very precisely written birthing plan, which was given to the midwife, the backup midwife, and the attending OBGYN weeks ago. I have two copies in the bag. I've memorized it, determined that Whitney be granted every tiny whim she might have when she's so uncomfortable.

Labor goes slowly at first. We video call with both sets of parents, watch a movie together on the queen size bed and attempt to rest for a little while. As eager as I am to meet the baby, I want to enjoy these last few minutes with it just being us two. I hold her, my arms wrapped around her bump for the last time, rubbing her shoulders and her back during contractions. I'll miss seeing Whitney like this, but it means we get to meet our little one. I'm already excited to do it all over again, although Whitney says she's getting an implant as soon as the baby's born. Challenge accepted.

Whitney's restless most of the time and fidgety, quickly growing bored with a movie and then a card game.

I do everything I can to comfort her as the contractions increase in length and frequency. We do a yoga ball, massages, and breathing exercises. It's almost a relief when Susie removes her latex gloves and announces, "Oooh kay then, we'd better get the tub ready to meet baby!"

I hate leaving Whitney, but once she's undressed and in the warm birthing tub, I go into the adjacent bathroom to change into the swim trunks I packed just for this.

I sit behind Whitney in the warm water, wrapping my arms around her bump and kissing her shoulder. "Think of the baby, Whit. We'll have our little one in our arms when this is over."

"I know. I wish it were over already," Whitney says anxiously.

"Before you know it, the baby'll be in your arms. Just keep breathing deep and think of the little one."

Things move quickly from there. Whitney's moaning, resting against my chest. I feel helpless as I hold her in my arms, unable to take the pain away.

"Alright, Dad, remember the hold from class? Grab Whitney's legs. Yes, just like that," Susie instructs as I reach around Whitney, looping her bent legs in my firm hands to hold them back. I can't help but smile at being called "Dad" as Whitney starts the breathing exercises she'd learned.

"Breathe out slowly, that's right. Now when I say push, you push and bear down."

Despite warnings about how long labor and delivery might take, Whitney's has moved remarkably fast. Only twenty minutes later, we hear, "I see blonde hair!"

With a guttural bellow from her mother, Grace Coleman enters the world. I lean over her neck to better look into the water below Whitney.

She's placed directly on Whitney's chest while Susie dries our daughter with one of the pink and blue striped flannel baby blankets. Grace's tiny lips quiver with displeasure, forming into a pout, and she lets out the most pathetic little cry in the world. Whitney starts to cry, her shoulders jerking with movement as she holds our daughter.

Tears prickle my eyes as I wrap my long arms around Whitney's ribcage and rest my hands against Whitney's, holding both of my girls. I press my face against the side of Whitney's and watch them.

We sit together, life moving in beautiful slow motion as tiny blue eyes open for the first time, both of us staring adoringly at the tiny little girl our love made.

Once Whitney and Gracie are cleaned up, and Whit in the bed, Susie leans over to hand the baby back to Whitney. The front of the nursing nightgown is open so that Whitney can lay skin-to-skin with Grace. Whit takes the striped flannel blanket off the baby and lays her against her exposed chest, skin to skin.

"Hello, Gracie. Happy birthday, sweet girl," Whitney says as she smooths down Gracie's blonde peach fuzz.

I gently move to the other side of the queen-sized bed and sit next to them, watching my girls. Gracie's eyes open lazily, then close again.

“Can you please turn off the light above the bed?” I ask Susie, who's right by the switch. “I think it's too much for Gracie.”

Once the light flicks off, Grace's eyes pop open, and she stares with an unfocused gaze in my direction, her tiny rosebud lips in a tiny pout. I bring one of my fingers over to her hand, and she grips my finger. I feel the tears start to prickle my eyes again as I rub Gracie's tiny little fist.

“She looks like you,” I say softly to Whitney.

“A little bit maybe, but her hair's going to darken to your color I think,” Whitney says as she uses her free hand to wipe away a tear.

The door opens when Susie leaves, and Matias sticks his head in from his position by the door. He grins as he takes in the three of us on the bed. “Congratulations, sir. All's well, I assume?”

“Things couldn't possibly be any better,” I say with a huge grin. “Eight pounds, six ounces, twenty-two inches long.”

“Whoa...sounds like somebody's built like a linebacker!” Matias laughs as he closes the door behind himself.

They call it the golden hour—the first hour after birth in which the new parents and the baby spend time together skin

to skin. Mother and child, but father to child as well, and that it should be spent uninterrupted.

Whitney holds Grace against her chest, gently stroking her hair as she smiles down contently at our daughter.

We take our first family pictures, and Whitney tries to nurse, Grace latching on like a champ, and we both watch, entranced by every tiny movement Grace makes. I want to remember every millisecond of this moment. Every smile on Whitney's face, every tiny noise Grace makes, the way the baby's fingers curl up against Whitney's chest.

After I help Whitney get up to use the restroom, I carefully take the baby from Whitney's arms and lay her against the firmness of my bare chest. I've been dying to hold her, but after Whitney's worked so hard to bring her into the world, I couldn't bring myself to take the baby from her. I count Grace's fingers and toes, and gently sway back and forth, softly singing the lullabye Dad used to sing to us.

"Do you know how much we love you, Gracie?" I whisper softly into her ear. "We love you all the way to the moon and stars." Her tiny eyes flutter with sleep, and my heart melts.

Whitney stops outside the bathroom, taking us in, and her lip quivers as tears threaten to fall. She walks up to us, and wraps her arms around my waist. She kisses me, and then the baby.

"I'm so happy, Nate."

I wrap my arm around Whitney and softly kiss her forehead.
“Me too, Angel Face.”

BONUS EPILOGUE

Nate

Gracie's standing in the hallway, wide awake, and holding her lovie as I walk in. She might have just turned six, but she still drags the baby blanket around in the mornings when she's just waking up. "Daaaaaddy! You're home," she says with her new snaggle puss smile. Shaking my head, I roll my suitcase in her direction before leaning down to kiss the top of her head and give her a big hug. "Why are you up Gracie Girl? It's very early in the morning."

She brushes her long blonde curls out of her face, and looks up at me with her head tilted. "I woke up already!"

"I know you're excited, but you're not supposed to be out of your room this early. Why don't we put you back to bed for a bit so you're not tired and crabby all day?"

Her pretty little pink lips go into a pout, and her sapphire blue eyes are down cast before they look back up at me. "But Daddy! I waited so we can go get breakfast together!"

“It’s way too early to be up. I’ll tell you what. Why don’t we both go get some rest and when we wake up, we can have pancakes?”

“With chocolate chips?” the little schemer asks.

“That...is up to your mom. But we’ll see.”

I walk her back into her pretty pink floral room and tuck her in the twin bed. “Shut your eyes just for a little while, okay? When you open them again it’ll be time to wake up.”

“And we’ll eat chocolate chip pancakes?”

“And we’ll eat chocolate chip pancakes,” I say resignedly as I pull up the comforter.

Telling Gracie no is next to impossible. She has this way of getting exactly what she wants with a flash of the eyes that reminds me of her mother, and the sweetest smile. I don’t know why I even try to deny my princess anything.

In the hallway, I open the next bedroom door, walking over to the twin beds that are set up side by side. Liam and Jack are both sound asleep.

Liam, my oldest son, is rolled over on his side, his dark hair freshly cut, his face relaxed with sleep. A fresh bruise is on his temple, and a neon green cast is partially hidden by the football themed comforter. It’s his second fracture, this one acquired while attempting to do somersaults at the indoor trampoline park. He’s going to be the death of us.

While Gracie has always preferred to play indoors with her princess dolls, or “help” Helene in the kitchen, Liam is the

opposite. He always wants to be outside in the fenced yard kicking a soccer ball into the net, or playing in the swimming pool. He's always busy, always noisy. At five, he's already figured out how to disengage the alarm so he can sneak out of the house to play...a full year before I myself mastered the skill.

His brother Jack isn't much better. From the day our second son was born, everything has been such extremes with him. Whether it's the fact there's pepper on his eggs or the new swingset in the backyard, Jack has a strong opinion on it. He's sleeping on his belly in his new big boy bed, and in the crook of his arm Petal is curled up resting her old body on the edge of his pillow. While our dog loves the kids, for some reason, she's taken a shine to Jack.

Rolling my suitcase to the master bedroom, I leave it by the door. Then I strip and throw the clothes in the hamper. When I lift the covers up to crawl into bed with my angel, Whitney's eyes pop open. She yawns before rolling over to rest her head on my chest. "You're late. Was the flight delayed?"

"There was a problem with the plane. So what was with that text telling me to come get my boys?"

She groans, and buries her head further into my chest. "Same as always. Helene and I took the kids to the park. A boy pushed Gracie while she was on the monkey bars, so Jack decided to tackle the boy. Before we could intervene, that boy's older brother got involved, so of course Liam got in the middle of it. Then our boys refused to apologize."

Ha! Good job having your sister's back, boys. Yeah I see no problem here. “Did the boy apologize for pushing Gracie?”

“He was too busy crying. Besides, it's about being the bigger person Nate!”

Bigger person my ass. He shoved their sister! Not wanting to argue about it, I pull her closer to me, and breathe in her scent. Her breathing starts to even out, and her body goes lax on top of me. Just as my own eyes are growing heavy, the bedroom door swings open, and tiny feet scurry across the floor. “Daddy, I'd need a sweep wiff you, okay?” Cracking open one eye, I see Jack at the foot of the bed in his cotton footie pajamas, Petal hot on his heels.

Whitney groans, and scoots over to make room for our littlest one. “You have to go back to bed. The sky's still asleep.”

“I have a bad dweam,” Jack explains as he crawls onto the bed and lays directly between me and Whitney. Petal uses her stairs to climb onto our bed, and curls up next to her mom as I try to finally find sleep. I hadn't rested much at all on the flight, and I had a game yesterday.

When I wake up, I have Liam's elbow in my face, Jack has somehow flipped so that his head is at the foot of the bed, and Gracie's standing next to Whitney poking her. “Mommy, Daddy said we can have chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast,” she announces.

Whitney's tired eyes look over at me, shooting me a look that could kill. “Don't you think they're going to have a bit too

much sugar today already?”

Thanks, Gracie girl, now I’m in trouble with Mom.



Music booms loudly from the home audio system. Is it sad that I know all the lyrics to the animated musical that Liam and Gracie picked for the theme for today?

It’s their birthday party, typically shared since they were born precisely one year and three days apart. Everybody, including myself, was shocked when Whitney was pregnant again so quickly. I didn’t even know it was possible! Jack joined us two and a half years later. I’d waited for Whitney to say she was ready to have another baby, since Liam and Gracie were such a handful. I’m waiting again now, eager for her to be ready to add a fourth child.

Whitney’s sitting on the couch with Gracie at her feet. One rubber band is between her teeth while she works Gracie’s hair into a second pigtail. “Do you need me to do anything else?” I ask Whitney.

“Can you put the sandwiches on the table before the boys topple the whole tray over?” she asks, gesturing towards the kitchen counter with a hairbrush in her hands. The dome covered dish is sticking over the edge of the kitchen counter.

Carrying the large container in my hands, I place it on the table, next to the cupcakes. They’re topped with plastic black and white soccer balls. Liam’s choice. I always prayed my

kids would love football. I should have specified that I meant American football...

Jack walks up to the table, standing on his tippy toes as he eagerly eyes the cupcakes. "Don't even think about it," I say as I lean down to pick him up, resting his bottom on my forearm.

"I make good choices," he assures me, pointing back to the cupcakes.

Uh huh, I'm sure you did.

Before I know it, my home is crowded with over excited kids running around our backyard all sugared up. Matias is guarding the single entry of the pool gate, making sure no little ones slip by. He's wearing a suit and dark sunglasses, seemingly unbothered by the bedlam that surrounds him as he scans the area for any potential issues.

I walk past Whitney, who's chatting with some of the other team wives. I think they've been her lifeline at times. It sounds glamorous to be the spouse of a professional football player, but Whitney sacrificed a lot for my career. I'm glad she has them. I'm pretty sure they tell one another almost everything.

Helene walks in out of breath, a little blonde haired toddler holding her hand. "Hey, where ya been? The kids have been asking for you!" I ask as I lean down to take the present from her, freeing one hand.

"Carseat for the little one. My daughter forgot to install it," she says, gesturing down at the toddler gripping onto her hand.

She has platinum blonde hair, and is looking down at the ground shyly.

I crouch down, and meet the little girl's brown eyes. Helene's daughter recently moved back to New Orleans with her, so I'm just now meeting the child. "Hello, Noelle. Do you want to go jump on the bouncy house?"

She looks up from the ground nervously and nods her head yes.

My attention is pulled away from them by one of my teammates, and when I turn around again, Helene and Noelle are at the bouncy house taking off the toddler's shoes.

Just as I'm making a plate of food for myself, finally, I hear the loud cry of a hurt kid, followed by Liam's voice screaming above the white noise of the motor to the inflated building.

Putting down my plate with a groan, I run over to see what my son has been up to now. Savannah's four year old son is on his bottom crying while his mother helps him up. Helene's scooping up a crying Noelle, and of course my child is standing feet planted wide, forehead in a scowl. "What did you do?" I demand when I make my way over to Liam.

"I pushed that boy," he says, almost proudly, with absolutely no remorse at all in his tone.

One mississippi, two mississippi. "Liam, why did you push him?" I demand. A scuffle defending Gracie is one thing, two in two days is a completely different story.

“He tried to play with Noelle,” he answers petulantly, crossing his arms over his body, his cast resting on top.

Raising these boys is absolutely my just dessert. The universe’s way of making me atone for my many many sins. “We can’t shove people just because they were playing with somebody else.”

“He can’t play with her,” Liam says, pointing an angry finger in the little boy’s direction.

“And why is that?” I ask, my patience wearing thin quickly.

Eyes so similar to his mothers meet my gaze. “Cause Noelle’s mine.”

AFTERWORD

I've spent many many hours alpha/beta reading for other authors, and one thing I always caution them about is breaking the rules of a trope. Some people will love it while others prefer the familiarity of the trope's norm. While writing this book, I told my alpha readers from the get go that Nate would never get caught...he's just too skilled at what he does. It's just the nature of the beast with him. As I said in the book, he's spent a lifetime getting around bodyguards, his parents, and coaches in order to have what many of us would consider normal childhood/young adult experiences. In "The Inevitable Us" there's examples of his relatively harmless but mischievous teenage antics. That being said, when it comes to something as important as the "mischief" he gets up to in this book, he would absolutely have the skill set and motivation to ensure there was simply no way for him to be caught. Someone pointed out that the hero occasionally boasts about it, but that makes even less sense to me. Why would he? As far as a confession....why?? He certainly doesn't feel guilty. Sometimes desperate people do desperate things, and Nate is a

desperate man. I was determined to stay true to the story, and tell Nate as his true self. To me, these are people and tales that are alive in my head. I just hope that you've enjoyed it.

Annelise

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Annelise Deveraux is a married mother of three and cat mom of many. There's also a ridiculously large dog named George usually sitting at her feet. As military brat and now the mother of an active duty service member, she's had the opportunity to live in different places, and now travel to often to see her son.

As a young teen, her family finally settled in the suburbs of New Orleans, where she still lives.

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