



Vegas
Heat

THE EXPANSION TEAM
BOOK ONE

Curveball

LISA SUZANNE

Curveball

LISA SUZANNE

CURVEBALL
VEGAS HEAT: THE EXPANSION TEAM
BOOK ONE
© Lisa Suzanne 2023

All rights reserved. In accordance with the US Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher or author constitute unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the author, except where permitted by law and except for excerpts used in reviews. If you would like to use any words from this book other than for review purposes, prior written permission must be obtained from the publisher.

Published in the United States of America by Books by LS, LLC.

This book is a work of fiction. Any similarities to real people, living or dead, is purely coincidental. All characters and events in this work are figments of the author's imagination.

Cover Design: Najla Qamber Designs

Content Editing: It's Your Story Content Editing

AUTHOR LINKS

[Newsletter](#)

[Amazon](#)

[Web](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Reader Group](#)

[Instagram](#)

[TikTok](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Pinterest](#)

BOOKS BY LISA SUZANNE

THE VEGAS ACES SERIES

[Home Game \(Book 1\)](#)

[Long Game \(Book 2\)](#)

[Fair Game \(Book 3\)](#)

[Waiting Game \(Book 4\)](#)

[End Game \(Book 5\)](#)

[The Complete Series](#)

VEGAS ACES: THE QUARTERBACK

[Traded \(Book 1\)](#)

[Tackled \(Book 2\)](#)

[Timeout \(Book 3\)](#)

[Turnover \(Book 4\)](#)

[Touchdown \(Book 5\)](#)

VEGAS ACES: THE TIGHT END

[Tight Spot \(Book 1\)](#)

[Tight Hold \(Book 2\)](#)

[Tight Fit \(Book 3\)](#)

[Tight Laced \(Book 4\)](#)

[Tight End \(Book 5\)](#)

VEGAS ACES: THE WIDE RECEIVER

[Rookie Mistake \(Book 1\)](#)

[Hidden Mistake \(Book 2\)](#)

[Honest Mistake \(Book 3\)](#),

[No Mistake \(Book 4\)](#),

[Favorite Mistake \(Book 5\)](#),

MY FAVORITE BAND STANDALONES

[Take My Heart](#)

[The Benefits of Bad Decisions](#)

[Waking Up Married](#)

[Driving Me Crazy](#).

[It's Only Temporary](#).

[The Replacement War](#)

[The Complete Collection](#)

[CLICK HERE FOR MORE](#)

DEDICATION

As always, for Team M.

CONTENTS

[CHAPTER 1: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 2: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 3: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 4: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 5: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 6: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 7: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 8: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 9: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 10: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 11: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 12: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 13: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 14: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 15: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 16: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 17: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 18: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 19: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 20: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 21: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 22: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 23: GABBY](#)

[CHAPTER 24: COOPER](#)

[CHAPTER 25: GABBY](#)
[CHAPTER 26: COOPER](#)
[CHAPTER 27: COOPER](#)
[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)
[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)
[AUTHOR LINKS](#)
[BOOKS BY LISA SUZANNE](#)

CHAPTER 1

COOPER

“Thanks for inviting me to the club tonight, man,” I say to my buddy Troy as we wait near the bar to order another round.

I don’t really want to be here, but when Troy Bodine calls with an offer to hang out at the club he owns in Vegas, it’s a hard offer to turn down.

And so here I am.

“This floor is great, but the third floor isn’t really my thing.” It’s not a sex club, per se, but more of a place for the rich and famous to hang out where sex happens to take place on level three.

“I had ulterior motives,” Troy admits.

Color me shocked. Troy *always* has ulterior motives. “You always do.” I offer an easy laugh to dispel the accusation in my voice.

“I’m sure you’ve heard by now the expansion team was approved,” he tells me. “Las Vegas is getting a new baseball team, and they’ve given me an offer to be the manager. I want you to come play for me.”

I shake my head, maintaining my cool despite the tightness in my chest at his words. Of course I’ve heard, but I haven’t really been following the news about it. It affected my former life, I suppose, but it doesn’t affect what I’m doing now in San Diego. “Nah, man. I’ve been out of the game for years. You don’t want me.”

“Is the elbow healed?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah. Surgery pieced me back together, but I’m far from being ready to play.” I’ve been enjoying my fair share of pizza and beer in between my work for StrongFitKids, an organization designed to offer affordable fitness to kids, and I

haven't tried tossing a ball twenty feet since my surgery, let alone the hundred twenty feet or more it takes to get the ball from third to first base.

Troy laughs. "Then it's a good thing we've got five months of off-season training before we need to head into pre-season training."

He's not wrong. If I put in the work, I'll see quick results. It's like riding a bike, right? Baseball was my life from the time I was seven until I dislocated my elbow at thirty. You don't just lose your love for the game even though you've been out of it a few years. "You really want me to unretire? I don't know. I mean, I miss the game, of course. I loved every second of playing. But I've got some good shit going on now, too."

"Listen, Coop. You know how these expansion drafts go. Everyone holds tight to their best players, and we get our pick from the leftovers. We need you. We need a born leader. We need someone to be the face of the Vegas Heat, and I want that someone to be you."

"The Vegas Heat?" I repeat, a chill running up my spine as the words leave my mouth for the first time. Vegas isn't really in my blood the way it is for some people, and I've been out of the game three years now. But the Vegas Heat? "That's a kickass name."

The couple in front of us turns around, and I recognize Tristan Higgins, a wide receiver for the Vegas Aces. "Hey man," he says to me.

I nod a friendly greeting to the kid, and I turn back to Troy. "Let me think about it."

I can't just throw out a yes the second he asks when I'm half-drunk in the middle of the desert. I need to analyze it from every angle, but I also need to make him sweat it out.

"If it's a yes, I need you here by September first," he says.

I nod. "You'll have an answer by then."

We each order another drink—a beer for me, some whiskey for him—and as we're waiting, a woman sidles up to Troy and

whispers in his ear.

He glances at me. “If you’ll excuse me, I have something I need to tend to. Enjoy yourself.”

The bartender sets our drinks in front of us, and I nod my thanks.

“Thanks, man,” I say to Troy. I take my beer, drink down half of it, and bolt.

He got his words in, and as nice as the exclusivity of this club is, it’s just not the place for me.

Troy offered me his personal driver, so I have him take me back to Caesars Palace, the hotel where I’m staying on the Strip. It’s early, and I’m in Vegas. I’m not just going to head up and go to bed, so on the way back, I send out a few texts to see what my buddies in town are up to.

And I come up empty.

Baseball is in season, so my friends that still play the game are busy tonight. I know a few local football players, but they’re in preseason now and nobody’s available tonight—and a handful of them were at Troy’s club. I check in with a few other friends, but everyone’s busy.

I stare out the window at the flashing lights of Las Vegas Boulevard as we get closer to my hotel.

Could I really live here?

I was raised a Cubs fan in the suburbs of Chicago but chose to play for UCLA and eventually worked my way up from the minors to the Dodgers, where I played my entire seven-year career.

My mom is still back in the Chicago suburb where she raised me, but my life is in California now. I love San Diego even though it’s a little too close to my ex up in Los Angeles. I love what I’m doing now with StrongFitKids. I feel like I’m making an impact, and I’m working with kids—exactly what I wanted to do after I stopped playing the game.

But if I’m being honest, I’m also a little bored. I need something new and exciting to focus on.

There are certain things I wanted out of life by my age, and it feels like the decisions I've made along the way have prevented those things from happening.

I thought by nearly thirty-three I'd be married and have a few kids running around. Instead, I have zero prospects on the horizon. After a brutal end to a five-year relationship, I'm more than a little reticent to get back in the game. I just want to have a little fun.

I guess I'm reticent to get back into more than one game.

I wasn't ready to be done playing ball, but when I dislocated my elbow and tore my UCL, I knew I had a long recovery ahead. The Tommy John surgery following my injury two years ago was a success, but it was only recently that I started to feel back to my old self again.

I'm nervous to pick up a ball, though.

My life is different now than it was then.

What if I reinjure it? What if I injure something else?

On the other hand, I could just ease myself back into both games. Maybe I need to look at it as a way to get a little fun and excitement back into what has become a rather monotonous existence.

It's a risk, but everything in life is a risk. You either sit on the sidelines or play in the game.

And I think I want to play in the game again.

Talking with Troy tonight felt very much like I was in the right place at the right time.

Well, metaphorically. Coax isn't really the right place for me, but Vegas very well could be.

I thank the driver and get out of the car. As I walk through the casino toward the bank of elevators, not sure what comes next now that I know I want to jump into not one but two games again, my eyes fall onto the blackjack tables. I glance ahead toward the high-limit area. I'm sure I could get a private table if I wanted one, but tonight...well, since I'm into playing

games, I park my ass in the first chair I see and toss a few bills onto the table.

Game on.

CHAPTER 2

GABBY

“Happy Birthday!” my group of girls yells at me as we clink our glasses together. I chug down the champagne much faster than I should, but I’m fine.

It’s not like it’s the first time I’ve had champagne despite the fact that it’s my twenty-first birthday.

We just came from a club and took a quick detour at the casino bar for a glass of champagne before we head to the next club. “Let’s play blackjack,” I suggest, wanting to try everything I can now that it’s legal.

“I want to try the slots,” Cassie says, and a few of the other girls opt for the slots, too.

“I’ll come with you,” my best friend Mia says.

“Meet back here in a half hour?” I suggest, and everyone nods.

Mia and I head toward the first blackjack table with two open chairs we see, and there’s a super hot guy sitting there playing by himself.

“Mind if we join?” I ask the table in general since I don’t really know the etiquette. The man on the other side of the table doesn’t look up from his chips, and the dealer eyes Mia and me.

“IDs please,” the dealer says as we sit, and I reach into my wallet and proudly hand it over as Mia does the same.

“Happy birthday,” she says, and I thank her as I slide the card back into my wallet and toss a hundred-dollar bill onto the table like I know what I’m doing.

“It’s your birthday?” the man on the other side of the table asks.

When I glance up at him, our eyes connect across the small table. My jaw falls open as a beam of heat seems to pass between the two of us, as if our eyes have powered some electrical connection the likes of which this planet has never seen before. The room goes silent and it's as if we're the only two people in it, in the casino, in Vegas...in the entire world. It's surreal, some out of body experience as I feel like I'm looking into my future, like I already know this man even though I've never met him before.

He's a little older than me, but it's hard to tell how much older. His blue eyes light with surprise as they focus on mine, like he feels the same thing I'm feeling, this weird feeling like my life's about to change.

He runs a hand through his dark hair and then along his jaw peppered with the sexiest scruff I think I've ever seen in my life. It's not quite a beard, but it's almost a beard that covers a chiseled, strong jawline.

Even just sitting at a blackjack table, he looks like he could command the attention of every single person in this room.

Mia elbows me, pulling me out of my trance, and the volume in the room turns back up as I realize I'm staring.

My cheeks flush as my voice seems to return to me, but I have to clear my throat before any words squeak out. "Yes, it is."

"Happy birthday," he says, and he shoots me a smile.

But it's not *just* a smile.

It's absolutely devastating. It's the kind of smile that burrows into your soul, the kind of smile that makes me want to take him upstairs to my hotel room.

My eyes flick down to his lips.

It's the kind of smile that makes me dream of what those lips taste like. What they'd feel like on mine, on my body.

Damn.

"Have you ever played blackjack before?" he asks.

I shake my head. “Want to teach me?” I’m flirting, but I can’t help it. How do you *not* flirt with Hottie McHotFace? It’s my body’s natural response.

He laughs, his lips tipping up into a warm smile, and a tingle runs from my chest all the way down to my toes.

“Sure. Come here,” he says, patting the chair beside him, and I practically fall off my chair to get to him.

The dealer pushes chips over toward Mia first and then toward me in my new seat next to Hottie McCuteGuy. I glance at his hands, and good gravy even *they* are hot. They’re all strong and lean, like the rest of him, and the sudden image of those hands on my body flashes through my brain.

Welp, I know that’s an image that’ll stay with me a while.

I blow out a breath.

It’s just blackjack, Gabby. Focus on the cards. He’s just being nice. Plus he’s like...older. There’s no way he’d be interested. Slow your roll.

“Put two chips on the circle,” he says, and his voice is all gruff and deep and even *that* is sexy.

Geez, this dude.

“Two chips?” I ask.

“Oh, man, you really are a newbie. It’s a ten-dollar table, so yeah, two chips equals ten bucks.” He nods toward the little sign that tells us it’s a ten-dollar table, and I nod...and then I watch as he takes a few chips off the top of his pile in the circle.

“Why’d you do that?” I ask.

“I’m not betting a hundred bucks a hand with a total newb playing next to me.”

I giggle. “I know the basics. I’ve played at home with my dad before, just never in a real casino.”

“Prove it.”

The dealer, whose nametag reads Kelly, deals the hand, setting a card each in front of Mia, me, and Hottie McHotStuff, face up, and then she deals one to herself face down.

“What about you?” he asks Mia, and the slightest twinge of jealousy bolts through me that he’s talking to her rather than me.

I brush it off.

He’s just a guy at a table being friendly to the birthday girl.

Scratch that. He’s just a *hot* guy at a table being friendly to the birthday girl.

“I’ve played a couple times,” she says.

The dealer gives us each another card before placing one face-up on top of her other one that’s face down.

The dealer is showing a seven. I glance at Mia’s cards. She has a ten and an eight, and she waves her hand to stay.

I look down at my own cards. I have a three and a six.

“The object is to beat the dealer, and a nine doesn’t beat a seventeen, assuming she’s got a ten under there. So tap the table if you want another card,” the hot guy tells me.

“I thought the object was to get to twenty-one,” I say, narrowing my eyes at him.

He shakes his head. “You want to get closer to twenty-one than the dealer without going over. If she has a sixteen or less, she has to take another card.”

I tap the table, and she gives me a queen.

“Nineteen,” he says. “Wave your hand if you want to stand at nineteen.”

“What if I want another card?” I ask.

“Then I’m going to another table,” he mutters.

I giggle and wave my hand.

He has a twenty, so he stays, and the dealer flips over a ten, giving her a seventeen, which means we all win.

He holds up a fist, and I bump his with mine.

And then I freaking die right there on the spot as his hand touches mine for the first time. It's a simple, friendly gesture, but in my semi-champagne-tipsy state, it feels like something else entirely.

My face flames as heat seems to engulf me, and a waitress comes by just then.

"A glass of champagne, please," I order, and Mia gets one, too.

"Miller Lite." He throws another poker chip on top of his pile.

"Do I need to do that, too?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Up to you. I don't know your budget, but when I win, I stack one winning chip on top of the pile."

I do the same, and Mia does, too. My budget went out the window when I sat next to Hottie McSexyPants.

Yeah, another glass of champagne is a great idea right about now.

We all win another round, and on our third hand, the dealer deals me an Ace. She sets my other card face down. "Why'd she do that?" I whisper.

"She's teasing you," he whispers back.

I don't really know what that means, so I wait my turn. She flips my card over when it gets to me, and sure enough, it's a jack.

"Twenty-one," he says, and I let out a little whoop. "Hold your cheer until she shows her cards. If she's got twenty-one, you tie."

My brows dip. "What?" I nearly screech. "I might not win with twenty-one?"

He shrugs. "That's the way the cookie crumbles, babe."

Babe.

Oh my God.

Did he really just call me *babe*?

Hottie McGorgeous just called me *babe*?

I die again. Right there on the spot.

The dealer flips her card, and she has a six. She pays me my money with a little extra for the blackjack on top, and she finishes the hand with Mia and the hottie. He wins, she loses, and we go again.

And again and again.

I've doubled my money after a half hour, and not only do I still not know this guy's name, but I'm also supposed to be meeting my friends.

Mia, who has *not* doubled her money, cashes in her chips. "It's time to go meet everyone."

"I think I want to play here a little longer," I say. It's my birthday, and I'm winning and having fun laughing and drinking with this sexy stranger at my table.

Maybe I want to get a little crazy tonight. Would that be so bad?

I'm in freaking Vegas. I'm twenty-one now. I want to live a little, and what better way to celebrate my birthday than flirting a little longer with Hottie McHandsome?

"I'll tell them," she says.

"Thanks, Mia." I shoot her a furtive grin on her way by, and she lets out a little laugh.

"Your friend's name is Mia?" the hot guy asks, and that little pang of jealousy darts through me again. Is he interested in her? "Should I call you Mia's friend, birthday girl, babe...or something else?"

I laugh. "Birthday girl or babe would be fine, but my name's Gabby."

"Nice to meet you, Gabby," he says, and the way my name rolls off his tongue sends a shiver right down my spine. "I'm Cooper."

“Nice to meet you, Cooper.” And then, because I’m a huge dork apparently, I stick out my hand for him to shake. He chuckles and grabs it in his, and damn if I don’t feel the launching of a million butterflies flapping way down low in my belly as they ascend all the way into my chest.

“Thanks for teaching me how to play blackjack.”

“My pleasure.” He leans in close. “I can think of a few other things I could teach you.”

My eyes widen as I catch his innuendo, or maybe the champagne is playing tricks on me.

“You know, like roulette or craps,” he amends, and my cheeks flush at the gutter where I find my mind. I keep my eyes down on the table as I feel his gaze on my profile. “Wait a second. Were you thinking I was implying something else?”

I laugh a little nervously. “Baccarat?” I suggest, and he laughs.

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking, too.” He winks at me, and I giggle. He really *is* flirting with me. It’s not just my imagination.

I spot the girls across the way as they all stare at Cooper, and he notices them, too.

“Are those your girls?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say.

He waves at them, and they all squeal to my total and complete mortification.

“You want me to give them a show?” he asks.

My brows dip. “What does that even mean?”

He laughs, and before I realize what’s happening, his hand finds the back of my head and he pulls me in until his lips crash down to mine.

A million different sensations hit me all at once as his lips move over mine. His are firm and commanding at the same time as they’re gentle and tender. He smells like beer mixed with some sort of woody aftershave, and he intensifies the

kiss as he opens his mouth and his tongue brushes mine. It's not tentative or nervous like the boys who've kissed me in the past. No, this is all man. He is one-hundred percent confident in what he's doing, and I have no issue sitting here allowing him to do it to me for the rest of the night.

Allowing him to do *whatever he wants* to me for the rest of the night.

I don't even know him, but I know feelings. I know attraction. This is it.

The room goes silent again as the only thing I hear is the rushing of blood through my body as it seems to come completely alive with his mouth covering mine.

He pulls back, and his eyes are hazy when they focus in on mine again.

"Whoa," I breathe, and he chuckles. The volume comes on again in the room, and I hear my friends squealing across the way.

He seems wholly unaffected while I'm just glad I'm sitting because my knees would've given out after that. He leans in toward me. "I've wanted to do that since you first sat down," he murmurs, and maybe we're both a little drunk...and maybe that's the recipe for the kind of twenty-first birthday I'll never forget.

CHAPTER 3

COOPER

Holy *fuck*.

I can't remember the last time I felt this sort of magnetic connection with another person. She's younger than me, but age is just a number, right? She looks like she's in her mid-twenties, eight or so years younger than me at most.

Maybe I felt it with Stacy back when we first met seven or eight years ago, back before she cheated on me and everything went to hell...but I don't remember ever feeling it with her.

And it's not just that.

She has no idea who I am.

There's something insanely hot about that.

And she's not just hot—though, to be fair, she *is* hot with her almost black hair falling in soft waves down to the middle of her back and the black dress she's wearing that showcases her mouthwatering tits and perfect little ass. She's also adorable and wide green eyes that make her look like she stepped out of a movie about princesses and the way she looks at me with curiosity like I'm a tiger who could pounce at any second.

Is it any wonder I had to know what she tasted like?

I wasn't disappointed.

Champagne mixed with cherries. Sweet with just the slightest edge of spice.

She's piqued my interest, that's for sure.

But I'm only in town for another thirty-six hours, and she's here celebrating her birthday. It's not like we're two people destined to end up together.

That doesn't mean we can't have a little fun over the next thirty-six hours, though. Except for the dinner date I have planned for tomorrow night.

"Feel free to do that again any time," she says, and her cheeks fill with color again.

I chuckle. "How long you in town for?"

"I live here," she says.

"I thought locals stayed off the Strip."

She shrugs. "We do, but we make exceptions for birthdays."

I laugh. "You staying here tonight?"

She nods. "The seven of us are sharing a suite upstairs. You?"

"I'm staying here, too. Just tonight and tomorrow night."

"Where are you heading to after that?" she asks.

"Home in San Diego."

She presses her lips together and nods, and I can't help but think I detect a little disappointment there. Maybe I'm projecting. Maybe I want her to be disappointed I'm not sticking around longer.

"Are you in town on vacation?" she asks.

I shake my head, wondering how to word the complicated situation that brought me to town. "A buddy invited me to town to talk about a job offer," I say, minimizing the extent of what really went down tonight.

Her wide eyes flutter up toward mine. "Are you going to take it?"

I shrug. "I don't know. What do you think I should do?" I don't know why I ask her. She doesn't know anything about my situation or what the job even is.

She chuckles. "Do you like what you're doing now?"

I nod.

“Then ask yourself whether you’d like the new job more.” She shrugs. “Do whatever will bring you the most joy.”

The way she says it so simply makes me think this is a conversation I’ll revisit time and time again over the rest of my life. Honestly, it’s solid advice for *any* major decision. *Do whatever will bring you the most joy.*

I think tonight...this girl is what will bring me the most joy.

“What about you?” I ask. “What do you do?”

“I’m in marketing,” she says. “I also occasionally substitute teach dance classes for a friend whose sister owns a studio.” She glances up and waves to her friends across the way, and it’s clear they’re waiting for her to join them.

“Stay with me.” I’m not sure why I’m not quite ready to let her go yet. She should go celebrate with her friends. She should make memories with them...not with me, a dude passing through town.

Her brows dip. “Where?”

I lift a shoulder, not sure whether I mean in my hotel room with me or here at this blackjack table, but I just came from a sex club owned by a good friend of mine who offered me a job playing ball again, and I’m still a little fired up from that, if I’m being honest. Add in some beer and the high of winning at the blackjack tables plus a gorgeous woman who has definitely caught my attention, and I feel more than a little out of sorts at the moment.

I just told myself I want to jump back into both games, right?

It’s been too long since I’ve had sex, an even longer time since I’ve spent the night with a stranger, and it might be just what I need to kickstart my dating life back into gear.

I lean in a little closer to her. “With me,” I say, and I press a soft kiss just below her ear.

She shivers, and I know she feels it too. How can she not? It’s too powerful to be one-sided, and she’s been giving me the nonverbal cues since the second she sat down.

The way she scrambled to sit beside me when I told her I'd teach her how to play.

The way her nostrils flared when I addressed her friend.

The way she leans in a little closer to me with every glass of champagne she finishes.

The way she sticks her chest out when I glance over at her, like she's trying to make those tits look even more appealing than they already do.

The way her knee keeps bumping mine, and I'm pretty sure it's on purpose.

The way she gasps softly every time I find some excuse to touch her.

I want to make her gasp like that when I have her writhing naked on my bed as I drive into her.

I blow out a breath as I try to get Indiana Bones, the pocket rocket under control...an impossible feat with Gorgeous Gabby beside me.

These are inappropriate thoughts...but like I said, it's been a while.

Stacy and I broke things off a year and a half ago. She stayed in the house I still own in Los Angeles, and I moved to San Diego, where I took a job working as the co-programming director for StrongFitKids, an organization that promotes active and healthy lifestyles to kids through a series of health and fitness programs. The hot chick who was my partner at work, Kaylee, became my close friend when we worked and lived together in San Diego, but she was from Vegas and ultimately moved back. She was never a real option anyway since she was hung up on another dude.

Incidentally, she's my dinner plans for tomorrow—along with her husband, who plays football for the Vegas Aces. We still work together, but we're no longer co-programming directors out of the same office. Instead, she and her husband took the content Kaylee and I created and repurposed the StrongFitKids program to fit into the chain of fitness clubs her husband owns.

I had a friends with benefits situation with another woman in San Diego, but we broke that off nearly six months ago.

Jesus, has it really been that long since I've had sex?

The pocket rocket says yes. It's been a long and lonely six months, but I've been busy with work.

Or so I've said. It's an easy excuse to avoid the complications that come with relationships, but diving into work rather than trying to meet somebody just pushes the goals I always wanted for my future further and further away.

It's complicated and complex, and I know one night with a girl like Gabby won't solve anything, but maybe it doesn't have to be just one night.

Not if I'm coming back to Vegas to play for the Heat.

Not if she's from here.

If it's meant to be, it'll be.

Or maybe I rock her world for a few hours and we both leave in the morning with smiles on our faces. Right now, I'm enjoying drinking beer, playing blackjack, and laughing with the gorgeous woman by my side. I guess we'll see where the night takes us.

CHAPTER 4

GABBY

When he asked me to stay here with him, I assumed he meant the blackjack table. But the longer we sit and play, the more I think he means something else entirely.

And the longer I sit beside him, the more I want whatever he's implying.

"What did the dealer say to the deck of cards?" he asks me when the dealer starts to shuffle the six decks we've been playing with.

I glance over at him in confusion. Did the dealer say something and I missed it? "What?" I ask.

"I can't deal with you anymore." He laughs at his own joke, and I roll my eyes. "What?" he says, holding up his hands. "It's funny!"

I twist my lips as I narrow my eyes at him. "It's the cheesiest joke I've heard in a long time, my friend."

"You got something better?"

"How's a casino like a woman?" I ask. I know this one's raunchy, but he's been flirting with me all night, so I have a pretty good feeling he won't be offended.

He squints at me a beat before asking, "How?"

"Liquor up front, poker in the back."

He laughs. "Yeah, that was better than mine but I didn't know we were on dirty joke terms just yet."

"Dirty jokes are always fine by me," I say.

He nods. "Okay, then how about this one? How do you make a pool table laugh?"

"How?"

“Tickle its balls,” he deadpans, and I giggle.

“That’s still pretty cheesy,” I say. “What’s the difference between a G spot and a golf ball?”

“What?”

“Men will actually search for a golf ball.”

Even our straight-faced dealer Kelly chuckles at that one.

“What’s the difference between a genealogist and a gynecologist?” he asks.

I shrug.

“A genealogist looks up your tree. A gynecologist looks up your bush.”

I giggle. “You’re getting better. I may have to teach you a thing or two.”

His eyes seem to heat over at the prospect of that.

My friends are watching from across the way, and they seem to be waiting on me. I’m not the girl who ditches my friends for some random dude no matter how hot he is, but I’m torn because just for tonight...I want to be that girl.

It’s strange, this connection I feel with Cooper. It’s the first time a guy has ever made me feel this way literally seconds after meeting him, but maybe that’s what twenty-one is. Legal to drink, gamble, and have one crazy night with a stranger.

“They’re waiting for you,” he murmurs.

“I know,” I admit. “But I don’t really want to go.” I glance sideways at him, and he grins with exactly zero modesty, so I decide to take him down a peg as I nod toward my cards. “It’s a hot table. I can’t quit now, not when I’ve nearly tripled my investment.”

He chuckles. “Is that the only reason?”

I shrug. “You got more than that?”

He leans in and presses his lips to mine again, and I’m immediately convinced.

“Does that count?” he asks when he pulls back.

Oh *God* yes, it counts.

An ache of need pulses between my legs, and I nod. “That’s uh...quite a convincing argument.”

He chuckles and leans back in his chair as we play the round of blackjack mindlessly, not focusing on the cards or the dealer but instead on each other. “The birthday girl should get what she wants on her birthday. So what do you want?”

You. The birthday girl wants YOU.

I bite my lip to keep from saying those words aloud as I scramble for a solution. “What are your plans tonight?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t actually have any.”

“Come with us to the club.”

He wrinkles his nose. “Nah, that’s not really my scene.”

I raise my brows pointedly. “It’s what the birthday girl wants.”

He chuckles and pushes his chips toward the dealer. “Touché.” He nods toward my chips as if to tell me to do the same. He stands then holds out a hand to me, and he doesn’t let go of it as he leads me toward the cashier. We cash in our chips, and then we walk over toward my group of friends.

“Ready for the club?” I ask, and I’m met with whoops and cheers. “This is Cooper. He’s coming with us.”

My friends are all pretty tipsy at this point—in fact, I think I’m most sober in the group of girls, and two bow out, heading up to the suite my dad booked for my group of friends here at this hotel tonight while the rest of us walk toward the other nightclub.

We’re carded before we go inside, and Cooper stops to say something to the hostess. She leads us to a table, and a minute later a waitress brings over a few bottles of champagne along with champagne flutes and a bottle of beer for Cooper.

He wiggles his eyebrows at me as the waitress hands me a glass of the champagne, and I can’t help but laugh—and at the same time, I can’t help but wonder why he’d do this for me.

It's not exactly cheap to get last-minute bottle service at a club, and he doesn't even know me.

I head out to the dance floor with my girls, and he hangs back at the table, sipping his beer. I spot a woman approach him, and she walks away a few beats later. A man approaches him, and they get to talking for a minute.

Admittedly my eyes keep edging over toward the table to see what he's up to.

He's talking to another guy, and they fist bump.

Does he know these people? Who exactly is this handsome mystery McHottie who's taken an interest in me tonight?

And why me?

Because I happened to sit down at the table beside him?

I finish my glass of champagne and realize it doesn't matter why it's me.

I'm just going to count myself lucky that it is.

I head back for a refill, and two of my friends, Kelly and Becky, follow. "We're going to head upstairs," they say. Mia and Chelsea are next, and Mia makes sure I'm okay before she heads upstairs. And that's it. That leaves Cooper and me all alone in a club filled with people.

"Dance with me," I demand, and he chuckles and nods.

He follows me out to the floor, and suddenly our bodies are pressed up against each other as the mass of people out here moves and sways with the beat. His hands find my hips, and I link my arms around his neck. His eyes burn down into mine, and I get the strangest sensation like I already know him. I know I'm safe with him even though I just met him tonight, and my gut instinct about people is usually spot on.

He seems like a good guy, and even though I'm slightly champagne-drunk, I've got enough wits about me to know I can trust him.

Our dancing starts playful but quickly turns sexy as he shoves his hips toward mine. I feel his erection against my

side, only confirming how much want and desire pulls between the two of us. Someone bumps into him, sending him careening a little closer into me, and then no space separates our bodies as his leg comes between both of mine. I grind down on his leg, a side effect of the champagne that I'd normally be way too reserved to do with a virtual stranger, but tonight all bets are off.

He wants this.

I want this.

Heat consumes the space between us, and tingles light up my spine as my tummy flips. His lips collide with mine again, and this kiss is hot and desperate in the middle of a crowded dance floor. It's sexy and nearly illicit as his tongue batters mine, his fingertips digging into my hips as we continue to sway to the beat of the song. I feel so much more than just attraction coming through this kiss, like attraction is just the spark that's going to light this inferno between us...like it's leading us somewhere bigger than just tonight.

I still know nothing about him. He's staying here at this hotel, so I don't have high hopes for more than one night together.

But it still feels like the type of opportunity I can't let slip by. If my dad has taught me anything over the last three years, it's that we can't live life with regrets. We can only take what's right in front of us.

He drags his lips from mine, across my cheek and toward my ear. "Spend the night with me." His voice is raspy and filled with some unspoken promise, like he can somehow see into my thoughts and he feels the same way...he doesn't want to let this chance slip by, either.

I nod, and he grabs my hand. He weaves through the throng of people and leads me back out to the hallway.

"Hey, that's Cooper Noah!" some guy yells at him, and Cooper simply nods at the guy, tightens his grip on my hand, and leads me through the hotel.

I hear other people say his name, too, and maybe this was happening earlier and I was too tipsy to notice, but all the dancing has sobered me up a little.

We arrive at a bank of elevators, and I think about that name. Cooper Noah. It's vaguely familiar, like I've heard it before, but I have no idea who he is.

"How do all those people know you?" I ask softly.

He twists his lips. "You really don't know?"

I shake my head, and the doors open in front of us. A couple gets off, and we step on. The doors seal us into isolation, and he walks toward me, backing me up against the mirrored wall. His blue eyes focus down on my green ones. "God, you're gorgeous," he murmurs. "And you don't even know who I am." His mouth crashes down to mine, and as much as I want to ask more questions, it seems his kiss offers the exact sort of distraction he's going for.

CHAPTER 5

COOPER

They say dancing is like foreplay, and if that's true, we're both in for a treat tonight.

I can't stop thinking about the way her eyes lit up with laughter when we were telling each other jokes, or the way her body moved on that dance floor, and when my leg moved in between her thighs and she rubbed her pussy on me...

Fuck.

I haven't been this attracted to a woman in a long, long time.

Hell, I haven't been this *horny* for a woman in a long time, either.

I can't keep my mouth off hers. I can't stop kissing her. I don't want to stop unless it's to taste more of her, and it's a brand-new phenomenon for me to feel this connected to a woman. It certainly started as physical, but I already like *her*, too. I like her dirty jokes. She's funny and smart, and she isn't afraid to tell me my jokes are cheesy.

Women rarely tell me like it is. They usually want me because of what I used to do for a living, because of my bank account, because of my connections. They tell me what I want to hear. They don't challenge me. They laugh at my cheesy jokes, or they ditch their friends to spend time with me. They tell me to do whatever will most benefit themselves instead of telling me to choose joy.

This girl isn't like that, and it's a fucking breath of fresh air.

It's the kind of fresh air I want to spend more time around, and I'm not sure I'll be able to let her go when morning comes.

The elevator doors open to let us off on our floor, and I hold her hand as we stroll down the hallway toward my room. I open the door, and I let her into a suite.

At first I think she'll be impressed by the suite until I remember that she was planning to stay in one herself—with six of her closest friends, by the way.

“What do you need all this space for by yourself?” she asks.

I shrug. The truth is that Troy flew me out here and got the room for me. He probably figured I'd spend more time exploring his club, but I wasn't really feeling it.

I'm glad I didn't. If I would've stayed there, fate might not have intervened by putting Gabby at the same blackjack table as mine tonight, and she might not be walking over toward my windows to look down at the view.

“This place is ridiculous,” she mutters, and I move in beside her to look down at the traffic.

“Did you grow up in Vegas?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I've only been here about three years. I grew up near Denver.”

“What brought you to Vegas?”

“A combination of things,” she says vaguely. “What about you? Did you grow up in San Diego?”

I shake my head. “I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, but I moved to California when I was eighteen and that's home now.”

“How long has it been home?”

“Almost fifteen years,” I say, and her eyes widen a little as she does the math. “How long was Colorado home for you?”

She clears her throat. “Eighteen years.”

I raise my brows. “Today's your twenty-first birthday?”

Twenty-one.

The same number you need to score a blackjack.

The same number I've worn on the back of my uniform since little league.

The number that's been my lucky number my entire life.

She giggles a little cautiously and nods.

I wouldn't have guessed that. I don't hang with a lot of women in their early twenties, but she strikes me as much more mature than her twenty-one years, like maybe she's lived through some things but came out the other side with that same sunny disposition.

"Twelve years between us," she murmurs, turning toward me. "Is this crazy?"

"I don't think the age thing is what makes this crazy." I reach over and pull her into my arms, and I drop a kiss to her forehead as she links her arms around my waist. "I don't know what this is, Gabby, but I like you. A lot. I could throw out the cliché about age just being a number, but somehow I don't think it would matter. It doesn't bother me. Does it bother you?"

She shakes her head, and she tips her chin up. I drop my lips to hers for a quick kiss.

She pulls back but not out of my arms. "Have you done this before?"

"What?" I ask cautiously.

"One night with a stranger," she clarifies.

I duck my head a little, averting my eyes behind her for a beat before bringing them back to hers. "I've had a one-night stand before, yes. But it wasn't like this. It was just attraction, no substance. But with you..." I shake my head as I trail off, grappling for the right words. "I don't know. There's substance. There's something between us I can't explain."

"Why does it feel like I've known you my whole life?" she asks.

I shake my head. "I don't know. It feels like the start of something, though, doesn't it?"

She nods. “It feels important, Cooper. It’s a little scary.”

“I keep thinking about your words from earlier, about doing what brings you joy. I’ve been in such a goddamn rut for the last year, but tonight...it’s been full of joy.” I can’t help but wonder if it’s because of her age. There’s a certain naivety that comes with being over a decade younger than me. Shit, if she’s twenty-one, she’s probably not even out of college yet.

Disappointment looms over me at the thought. I can’t go back into the big league holding onto a girl that’s still in college. It wouldn’t be fair to her, and the press would have a fucking field day with that.

But that doesn’t mean I can’t bask in her joy for tonight. Besides, we’ve made no promises to each other going forward. We didn’t agree to anything beyond tonight.

But without anything more than a kiss, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that whatever this is will take us beyond tonight. It has to. A connection this magnetic feels like a once in a lifetime experience.

Her eyes seem to sparkle at my words, and then she leans in and rests her head on my chest. I tighten my arms around her, and as much as I feel the heat radiating between us, as much as I want to strip her naked and slam into her for the rest of the night, I’m also content right here, just talking and getting to know her on a different level in private without prying eyes wondering what we’re up to. Up here in my room, I can just be Cooper and she can just be Gabby and the rest of the world ceases to exist. There’s something magical about that. Something I’m not going to be ready to let go when the time creeps in on us.

“I feel the same way,” she whispers, and her eyes flick to my lips for a beat.

“Is this okay?” I ask. “I mean...are you drunk?”

She nods then shakes her head. “Yes, it’s okay. And no... I’m not drunk. But I do want this. I want *you*.”

And then because I can’t wait another second without tasting her again, my mouth crashes back down to hers.

CHAPTER 6

GABBY

I've never been with a man like Cooper before. I don't know what life experiences he carries or what baggage he has because of them, but I find myself thinking less about the fact that he was twelve when I was born, that he was seventeen when I started kindergarten, or that I was six when he started college.

Instead, I'm thinking about what he knows as an experienced, confident man compared to the unsure boys I've been with before.

I'm thinking about all the ways he knows how to pleasure a woman—because he certainly knows how to kiss one.

And I'm thinking that I'm pretty damn lucky that I sat down at that blackjack table tonight...and not just because I walked away two hundred dollars richer than I was when I sat down at it.

His hands start to move, dragging along my back and up into my hair, and then they trail down to my ass. He squeezes it then slides one hand along my thigh and beneath the hem of my dress. I moan into his mouth, never wanting this to stop, and then he grabs the backs of my thighs and tugs, lifting me. I link my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck, straddling him as we shift so I'm situated above him now. Our tongues continue to tangle as he carries us over to the bed, and then he gently leans down as if I weigh nothing, setting me on my back on the bed. He thrusts his hips toward me, hovering over me as he still stands on the floor, and I haven't let go of the way I'm clinging to him. He drives his hips again and again, and I feel his hard length as it pummels against me through his jeans and through my dress and panties.

I finally loosen my grip on him, and he doesn't stop kissing me as he reaches under my dress for my panties. He slides

them to the side as if he can't get to me fast enough, and he dips a finger right inside me.

"Oh!" I cry out, arching my back and accidentally disconnecting our kiss. He uses the opportunity to dip his face down into my cleavage, and then he reaches down and pulls one of my breasts out of the cup of my dress. He sucks my nipple into his mouth as he drives that finger into me then lets it go to swirl his tongue around the tip. He groans as if it's the best meal he's ever eaten, the sound landing straight in my core and pulsing a needy ache between my legs.

He moves down the bed then pulls his finger out of me. He uses both hands to yank my panties down my legs, and he tosses my shoes to the side, too. He pushes the hem of my dress up then dives face-first into my pussy.

That joke I told back there about the G spot?

Yeah...it doesn't apply to Cooper Noah.

He's the type of guy who doesn't need to search for his golf balls *or* the G spot. He already knows just where to find it.

He sucks on my clit as he shoves a finger into me, and then he adds another one, curling them in a way that also makes my toes curl. I grip onto the sheets as my legs start to thrash, and then my body seems to lose all control as my legs clamp around his ears and violent contractions of pleasure careen through my entire system.

I'm not sure what animal noises come out of my mouth, but growls and moans seem to burst forth out of me the likes of which I've never heard before. When the spasms start to slow, this heady sense of euphoria takes over for a few precious beats, a blissful sort of paradise I would live in forever if I could.

But these things aren't meant to last forever, and even if I wanted to, I wouldn't.

Because Cooper straightens, and then he unbuckles his belt. He flicks the button of his jeans and lowers his zipper.

Since I want a front row seat to this show, I sit up. Wooziness overtakes me, but I fight through it. I'm not about

to miss a single second of this.

He yanks his black shirt over his head and tosses it to the side.

Oh. My. God.

I've never seen an actual six-pack in person before.

Wait...is that six? Or eight?

It's unreal.

I think for the briefest second he's wearing one of those t-shirts with a picture of hot abs on it...but nope, it's real. I know because I can't help when I reach out and touch them. I run my fingertips along every cut ridge, and my mouth waters.

He pulls his jeans down along with black boxer briefs, exposing a thick erection pointed straight up at the ceiling.

My mouth waters again.

I have never had a male form in front of me that I've wanted to taste so badly in my entire life. The ache between my legs is back in full force even though he just satisfied it, but I have a feeling that with someone like him, I'll *always* want more. It'll *never* be enough.

It's animal and primal and not meant to last. I push away the sadness that seems to blanket me at the thought, and I reach forward, taking his cock in my hand. He hisses when I fist him and pump my hand up and down, the tip of his cock glistening with his arousal. I scoot forward to the edge of the bed and take him in my mouth.

He grips my hair with a throaty growl, and I already know that sound will be the soundtrack of my dreams for the foreseeable future.

I take him all the way to the back of my throat, and he groans. "Fuck, Gabby," he mutters. "Your mouth is magic." He pushes his hips toward me then pulls them back, his head tipped back in pleasure and his neck corded as he fucks my mouth.

It's hot.

Like...*really* hot.

Hot enough that I have the sudden urge to let my fingers drift down to touch myself, and I can't say that's something I've ever done in the middle of the action. I always let the guy take over.

Just another thing that feels different with Cooper. I can just be myself, I guess, even in the heat of the moment. Something about him allows me to just let go, to take what I need.

I glance up, and our eyes connect. He's watching me as I suck him down.

"You're so gorgeous taking me all the way like that," he mutters. "Do you like how my cock tastes?"

I moan my affirmation to that question. God, yes, I fucking *love* how it tastes.

He shoves into my mouth again, and I swallow as he hits the back of my throat. "Good girl," he murmurs, and I rub the circles over my clit with one hand a little faster as I fist the base of his cock with my other hand at his sexy words of praise.

He moans through his pleasure, and then he pulls back abruptly. His eyes are ferocious when they meet mine.

I let go of his cock, and he pulls my hand away from where I'm touching myself. "That orgasm belongs to my cock," he says, his voice raspy with a needy desperation that I feel, too.

I'm not sure I've ever heard anything hotter in my entire life.

He's possessing me, possessing my pleasure. He wants to give it to me, and I want to take it, and I don't know how I'll walk away from this hotel room after knowing this guy all of a few hours with just the memories. I don't think I can do it.

Maybe that's my age showing. My naivety.

It's just one night, I remind myself. Just enjoy it. Get out of your own head.

I decide to listen to that inner thought.

“Fuck,” he mutters.

My brows dip. “What?”

“There is nothing I want more than to be inside you right now...but I didn’t bring any condoms with me.”

“Oh.” I snag my bottom lip between my teeth. “I, uh...I have a few. Over in my purse.”

He looks surprised. “Were you expecting to get laid tonight?”

I giggle and nod. “Oh, yeah. I just found the first guy who looked desperate and sat at the same blackjack table as him.”

He chuckles as he shakes his head. “Well, mission accomplished.”

“Do we need to have the talk before we have the sex?” I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have said that if I hadn’t had a handful of glasses of champagne tonight, but it felt like something that merited mentioning.

He wrinkles his nose. “Do we have to? I’d rather just get to the sex.”

I laugh. “Do you do this with a lot of women?”

He shakes his head. “I got out of a serious relationship about a year ago. I had a few...uh, *encounters* since then, but it’s been a few months since the last one.”

I raise a brow, and then I think better of it. It’s not really my business to question what he means by that. “It’s been a few months for me as well,” I say, not going into detail about my recent dry spell.

“Are you on birth control?” he asks.

I shake my head. It doesn’t merit mentioning why, but suffice it to say I had an IUD that was less convenient than advertised, so I had it taken out after my last relationship ended, and I haven’t really had much reason to get back on anything.

“Condom it is, then,” he says, and I stand and walk across the room. We’re both naked, and as I walk by, he says, “God

damn, you're fucking hot." And then he proceeds to grab my ass.

I squeal with a giggle. "Back at you, Handsome." I grab my purse and pull out a condom. I hold it up between my fingers. "Your love glove, sir."

He chuckles as he snatches it out of my hands. "I prefer the term *cock sock*, if I'm being honest."

I can't help a laugh at that, and I also can't help but think how much *fun* I'm having. Is sex supposed to be fun? It's always been serious for me. Pleasurable, sure, and most often with a boyfriend or with someone I knew more than a few hours, but I can't recall cracking a smile in the midst of it.

But with Cooper, it's different. It's fun and it's easy. It's lighthearted and uncomplicated.

I can't help but wonder whether he's like this in everyday life, too—outside of this bubble where we find ourselves. He seems laidback and easygoing. I wonder what he's like when he's fired up. I wonder what he's passionate about. I wonder what makes him angry, what makes him happy, what drives him and what challenges him.

I can't think like that, though. I can't allow my naïve expectations to creep in on our good time. Whatever happens tonight happens, and either I walk away with a memory or I walk away with a phone number.

I'm hoping for the latter, especially after the way he licked my pussy, but I guess time will tell.

CHAPTER 7

COOPER

How will I ever leave this place with just that little taste?

I tear open the condom and roll it on while she settles back onto the bed. She's on her back, and I wonder how many guys she's been with. It's not a fair question to ask, and it's not like I want to give her my total, but I get the strong inclination she's never been with somebody who knows what he's doing.

And I know what I'm doing. I enjoy doing it.

I've learned a thing or two over the years, and I want to show her all the ways I can make her come.

One night won't be enough.

And furthermore, how do I leave this place with a girl like her, one who's so eager to please, who can take my cock all the way down her throat the way she did?

I don't want morning to come.

I don't want our time to end.

It's why I pulled out of her mouth. She was sucking me so good, I was going to lose it. I couldn't lose it in her mouth when I haven't had the chance to fuck her yet.

This isn't me, this dirty talking guy. I've never once asked a woman if she liked how my cock tasted, but I wanted to know. And when she nodded her head while my cock was still in her mouth, well...it was nearly enough to end our night too early.

And so I'll tease her.

I'll tease myself, too.

I'll drive us both to the edge of explosion before I pull it back and slow it down.

I climb over her and hover for a beat, and I drop my lips to hers. It's a way to prolong the night, to kiss her as I try to get my cock back under control, but I can't.

And so I fist myself and slide my dick through her slit, stopping to pump myself over her clit for a beat before I slide it in.

Her body clamps onto me, tight and hot and wet as we both moan at how good it feels to be connected this way. I slide out and push in again, and her eyes lift to mine. Hers are filled with wonder and need as everything about this feels so right.

I drive into her again, slowly, luxuriously, as if we have all the time in the world when the truth is that we don't. We might only have tonight...and that's why we both have to take advantage of the time we have together.

She wraps her arms and legs around me as I pump into her, and I hold onto her, buried inside her as I flip us so she's on top of me. I perch on the edge of the bed with my feet on the floor, and she buries her face in my neck as she settles into her new position. I lift her ass and pump into her from beneath her, her body still clinging to mine and wrapped around me like a vine. I bury my face in her hair, and it smells like warm vanilla. It's not overpowering, but it's deeply sensual and gives me an odd sense of comfort.

I wrap my arms around her, too, holding her close to me, and she lifts her face from my neck. I gaze into her eyes, and I'm not sure if I've ever had a more intimate moment during the act of sex before.

It's like some ethereal connection bonds us, something totally out of our control. I could easily see myself becoming addicted to her, and I'm afraid I'm already halfway there.

It's intense, these feelings.

Strong.

Powerful.

But she's twenty-one. We're in different places in our lives, and I'm not sure how they can intersect beyond tonight. But I have to try. This feels like the type of thing that only happens

once in a lifetime, and I'm not stupid enough to let that go without a fight.

I lift her ass and slam her back down over me as her tits brush against my chest, and I feel my balls tighten as the need to come pulses through me.

I lift her off me and set her on the bed.

"Why'd you stop?" she pants.

"I'm not ready for it to end."

Her brows dip. "Why's it going to end?"

"Because you feel so damn good that I'm going to blow my load way too soon, and I'm nowhere near done with you."

Her eyes glaze over with lust at my words, and I stand, pulling her legs up so they're resting on my shoulders. I slide my cock back inside her, and it oddly feels like I'm home, like this woman's body was made for mine, like we're two souls put on this planet to find one another.

I drive into her like this, my eyes down on her tits as they sway with every thrust I make into her.

"Oh my God, Cooper," she gasps. "Right there! Oh God, oh God, oh God!" Her words are paired with shrieks as she starts to come, her pussy contracting over my cock. The vicelike grip she has on me is too much, and as much as I wanted to make this last longer...I can't.

I start to come, some ferocious growl ripping from my chest as I do, some sound I've never heard myself make before to match the symphony of her gorgeous shrieks. I usually close my eyes when I come, but I find I can't take my eyes off her gorgeous face as it twists with pleasure while she works through her own climax.

Her release wanes first as my cock continues to pulse and twitch inside her, and when it finally comes to an end, I lay down over her. I don't slip out of her, not yet, because I'm not ready to break the physical connection we just shared.

But it's so much more than physical.

How can I have an emotional connection with somebody I don't even know?

I don't have the answer to that, but I already know one hit won't be enough.

CHAPTER 8

GABBY

I stare at myself in the mirror a beat as I wonder whether that was real or if I'm dreaming.

I'm pretty sure I'm dreaming, but I'm naked and I'm starting to wonder if it's one of those dreams where you're naked and when I open that door to my left, an audience is going to be there waiting for me to give an important presentation on stage.

Except when I open the door, I'm still in Cooper's hotel room, and he's pulling on a pair of athletic shorts near his suitcase. I realize too late that the only item of clothing I have is the dress I wore tonight, and I don't really want to slip back into that to cuddle. So my options are walk around naked, or put the dress on and leave to get my own suitcase on another floor where my friends are. That also doesn't sound overly appealing, so I stare awkwardly at Cooper for a beat, and then he tosses me a blue Dodgers t-shirt and a pair of shorts.

"You're a Dodgers fan?" I ask.

He chuckles and shakes his head, and I feel like I'm missing the joke as I pull his shirt over my head.

It smells like him, that same woodsy scent I picked up on earlier.

It's *hot*, and I want to smell like him, too. I want to roll in the scent and remember it forever.

I wonder what comes next and whether it's about to get awkward as I pull my panties on and skip the shorts. He lays on the bed and waves me over, skipping right over the awkward conversation about what comes next. Instead, I snuggle into the nook between his shoulder and his chest like we've done this a million times. His fingertips flutter in little circles on my bicep.

“I usually ask this *before* I have sex with somebody, but tell me about yourself,” he says.

I giggle and press a kiss to his jaw. “Well, it’s my twenty-first birthday, as you know. I moved to Vegas to attend UNLV, where I’m majoring in marketing, and I’m about to start my senior year.” I leave out the complicated part about finding my dad when I turned eighteen and my toxic mother who made me think my dad wanted nothing to do with me. Instead, I keep it simple.

“Jesus,” he mutters. “You’re still in college and I’m already on my second career.”

“Your second career?” I echo.

“I currently work as the programming director for an organization in San Diego that promotes active and healthy lifestyles to kids through a series of health and fitness programs,” he says, and it feels like he’s leaving stuff out of the conversation, too.

“But you’re here in town for another job offer, right?” I ask.

He nods. “Sort of. It’s complicated, but basically an old buddy wants me to work with him. I could probably do both jobs to a very modified degree, but I’m not sure I want to.”

“What’s holding you back?” I tilt my head up so I can look at him, and he tilts his head down to look at me. When our eyes connect, I feel like I see some clarity in his.

“Fear,” he answers, and the honesty in his tone is unnerving.

“What’s there to be afraid of?”

“Giving up the stability and freedom I have now for the type of career that’s totally and completely consuming,” he says.

“But one which you think might bring you some degree of joy?”

He nods and twists his lips before running a hand through his hair. “I know it will.”

“And will it mean you’ll be in Vegas more?” I ask, the ulterior motive for my question clear in my suggestive tone as I toss a thigh over his leg with the unintended effect of my vagina rubbing on his leg.

“Fuck,” he groans. “Hell, if it means I’ll get to see you again, I’ll quit my job tomorrow.”

I let out a little gasp at his words. “Do you really mean that?”

He clears his throat, and I lean up on my arm and gaze down at him. He blows out a breath. “I don’t know what the fuck is happening, but I’m not walking out that door tomorrow morning without knowing how to get in touch with you again.”

I can’t help the wide smile that stretches across my lips. “Thank God,” I murmur, and I lower my lips to his.

“It’s crazy, right?” he asks against my mouth.

“Definitely,” I say against his.

“Insane.”

“Totally,” I agree, and we kiss for a beat before he pulls back.

“This doesn’t happen to me,” he says. “I want you to know that. I want you to know this is different. I don’t take twenty-one-year-olds back to my hotel room just to give them a birthday present.”

I giggle. “Well, it was my favorite of all the gifts I received today.” And my dad got me a new truck...something I fail to mention.

I don’t want him to know about my dad.

I don’t want to feel like he only wants to be with me because of my connections.

Maybe that’s what makes this even more special. Our connection developed first, and now we can get to know one another. First impressions mean a lot, and, well...he’s made a good one.

“It was pretty damn good,” he says, pressing a kiss into my hair. “God, you smell good.” He tightens his grip around me. “You *feel* good.”

I run my hands along the cut ridges of those abs. “You’re all right, too.”

He bursts out a laugh, and it’s contagious. I laugh, too.

“So when *was* the last time you were with somebody?” he asks.

“Going there already, huh?” I ask. He shrugs, and I plow forward. “That would be my ex, Jace. He was a year older than me, and when he graduated in May, he moved to Nashville for a job. I didn’t go with. It was as simple as that.” We’d only been together eight months, and while I did have feelings of love for him, I knew neither of us was willing to put in the work to make a long-distance relationship last.

Before him, there were a total of two other guys.

“You?” I ask.

He clears his throat. “My ex and I broke up about a year ago. A friend and I hooked up a few times, and I had some Tinder dates that went exactly as advertised.”

I make a face at the Tinder dates. “So you’re thirty-two?” I ask.

“Yep. Thirty-three next month.” His tone is flat, and I can’t get a read on how he feels about that.

“Damn, you’re old.”

He laughs. “Thanks.”

“How are you still single?”

“I always feel like that question is a backhanded compliment,” he says.

“I don’t mean for it to be. I just mean that you seem like you’re the total package. I don’t know how some little filly hasn’t snatched you up yet.”

His brows dip. “Some little filly?” I giggle, and he shrugs. “Some fillies have tried, I guess. I played the field a long time, and then I was with Stacy for five years. It took me a while to move on from what happened between us, and I guess I haven’t met the right person.”

Yet.

Until now.

Until me.

I force the thought out of my brain. It’s dangerous. And yet, the longer we sit here talking about ourselves and getting to know each other beyond a physical attraction, the more that thought keeps sneaking back in.

CHAPTER 9

GABBY

At some point, we both fell asleep, and I wake when the sun starts to peek into the windows we never bothered to cover last night in our haste to have sex.

We talked late into the night, and even though we just met last night, it feels like I've known him my entire life. I know his favorite singer is Dave Matthews, he's obsessed with Slim Jims, he likes to eat mangoes, he's six feet, four inches tall, he loves sports, he wants at least three kids by the time he's forty, he's a total mama's boy, and he's a Dodgers fan.

He learned that my favorite singer is Taylor Swift, I've never eaten a mango before in my entire life, I clock in at five-seven, I'm more of a movie buff than a sports fan, I don't know if I want kids ever, I'm not close with my mom, and if I *had* to pick a team to root for, I guess I'd say I'm a Vegas Aces fan...a Ben Olson fan, in particular, but I wouldn't kick Jack Dalton out of bed for eating cookies if you know what I mean.

We laughed together, and he held me in his arms as he traced patterns on my skin, and there was zero pressure on either of us. We just lived in the moment, and I'm not sure I've ever done that before with a guy. I prefer living in my head, overanalyzing every word, every smile, every tick of an eyebrow.

Cooper's just about the easiest-going guy I've ever met, and I'm not exactly uptight, but sometimes I suppose I can be. I was once described by my high school math teacher as the sunshiniest Type A personality he'd ever met, and he was right. I'm positive and sometimes I can be way too nice, which can often make me a doormat, but I'm also competitive and have a strong aptitude for achieving whatever I set out to do. I just do it with a smile on my face, I guess.

He wakes with a bit of a jolt when I move out of his arms, and he grabs onto me and tightens his grip, not letting me go.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” he says, his tone gruff.

I can’t help a soft giggle. “I really have to pee.”

“I need a kiss first.” He puckers his lips, and good gravy, I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a man who was both so dang hot and also adorable at the same time. I drop my lips to his, and he grabs onto me, hoisting me over his lap and gripping onto my butt cheeks with both hands. He moves my body over his, letting me know he’s raring to go even at this early hour.

I let out a soft moan, and then I climb off him because I really do need to go use the restroom. He grunts as I leave.

“Be right back,” I promise on my way.

When I get out of the bathroom, I expect things to be awkward. Despite the unfamiliar feelings streaming through me, he’s still a virtual stranger, and I’ve never really done the one-night stand thing, so I’m expecting one of us to make it weird.

But that doesn’t happen.

Instead, he’s pulling on a shirt, much to my disappointment. “Wanna grab some breakfast fuel then come back here and have sex all day long?”

I laugh. “Uh, yeah. I do.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me into him, wrapping his arms around me so I’m crushed against his body, and his lips tip up as he gazes down at me. He drops a soft kiss to my lips before letting me go. He looks me up and down a beat.

“You’re gonna need some pants, Sunshine.”

“Sunshine?” I ask.

He shrugs. “It’s your sunny personality, I guess. Or the fact that the sun coming up is casting you in this spot of gold right now and it’s fucking ethereal, like you’re some angel dropped down into my hotel room.”

I step out of the spot of light. “What about now? Am I whatever the opposite of sunshine is?”

He chuckles. “Moonshine?” He shakes his head. “Nah, I don’t think so. Still Sunshine.”

“What about you?” I ask.

His brows furrow in confusion. “What about me?”

“If you’re going to call me Sunshine, what should I call you?”

He tosses an arm around my shoulder. “Stud Muffin? Captain Orgasm? The best sex of your life?”

I twist my lips. “I’m thinking Snuggle Bunny.”

He tosses me the same pair of shorts I didn’t bother to wear last night. “We’ll work on it over breakfast.”

“Hottie McHotFace?” I suggest as I pull them on.

He narrows his eyes at me. “It’s a little better, but I’m kind of partial to Captain Orgasm.”

“You were definitely captain of my orgasms last night,” I murmur, and I grab a hair band out of my purse to pull my hair up.

“I will be again this morning after a balanced breakfast with a lot of protein.” He grabs a black baseball hat with a simple black UA for Under Armour on the front out of his suitcase, and he turns it backward when he puts it on.

Good God, as if he wasn’t hot enough before.

I’m pretty sure my ovaries explode. Something is definitely happening down there, and I’m not sure I’ve ever gotten horny before just from *looking* at a man the way I feel around Cooper. I’m at a point where the disbelief is hitting me so frequently that I’m *almost* starting to get used to the idea that this is reality.

I follow him out to the hallway, and he tosses an arm around my shoulders. I slide my arm around his waist, and we navigate down the hall and toward the elevators as if we’re a real couple and we’ve been together forever.

He turns his hat forward and tugs the bill down lower once we're on the elevator. Still hot, still captain of my orgasms, but the backwards thing was more *king of the world* material than captain of one single entity.

It's half after six as we're seated toward the back of the restaurant in a booth. He faces the kitchen from the seat he chooses, while I can see the entire restaurant from where I sit.

It's as we're perusing the menu that I ask, "So Snuggle Bunny is a hard no?"

He laughs, and it's that same hearty laugh I've heard out of him before. It lights me up from the inside, and the wide smile that accompanies it is nearly enough for me to strip naked so he can take me right on top of the laminate tabletop between us.

"At least make it something cooler than *bunny* if you're going that route. Snuggle Fucking Tiger or something."

"Snuggle T-Rex?" I suggest.

"Snuggle Wolf," he throws out.

"Snuggle Jellyfish?"

His brows dip. "Jellyfish? You want to nickname the best sex of your life fucking *jellyfish*?"

I shrug. "I read somewhere that there's this one jellyfish that has a sting a hundred times more potent than a cobra. That's pretty freaking ferocious, right?"

"Oooh, Snuggle Cobra. Now that's kick ass."

"Maybe we drop the snuggle all together," I say, squinting at him as I twist my lips.

"Back to square one, then. Captain Orgasm?"

I giggle. "You're not letting that one go, are you?"

He shrugs.

"Okay, Captain."

He smirks at me, and a waitress comes by to take our orders a few beats later. He orders a protein-filled breakfast skillet,

while I opt for the pumpkin-walnut pancakes with a side of bacon.

He wrinkles his nose after the waitress walks away. “Damn, just when I thought you were the perfect woman, you go and order pumpkin pancakes.”

“What’s wrong with pumpkin pancakes?” I demand.

“Just the thought of what it’s made out of...pumpkin guts.” He shakes his head. “Disgusting.”

“You’re trying them, and you’ll like it, Captain.”

He laughs again.

“When do you head back to San Diego?” I ask.

“My flight is tomorrow morning,” he says.

“What’s your plan for the rest of your trip?”

His eyes seem to glaze over with lust, and he leans in a little closer toward me across the table. “You.”

I raise a brow. “What if I have plans?”

“You’ll cancel them. After all, it’s not often you get full access to the captain.”

“So modest,” I say, rolling my eyes.

He chuckles. “In all seriousness, I’m meeting some friends for dinner tonight, but otherwise I’m free. Unless I decide to meet up with the buddy who offered me a job.”

“What are you going to tell him?” I ask softly.

He thinks about it for a beat before he answers. “I’m not sure yet. But if I’m deciding based on what brings me joy, then I think I want to spend more time in Vegas.” He raises his brows as his eyes focus in on mine, and I melt into a pile of lust right there in the booth.

I hope he decides to take the job—whatever it is.

I hope I get to see him again.

I hope we get the chance to explore whatever this is outside of this fantasy weekend.

But one thing's for sure.

I didn't stay together with Jace because neither of us wanted to bother putting in the work that would be required of a long-distance relationship.

I haven't even known Cooper twelve hours yet, but I can already tell he's someone worth putting in the work for.

I can't help my curiosity over who he's meeting for dinner or what the job offer here in Vegas is, but he's been pretty open with me, all things considered. He'll tell me when he's ready.

Just like I'll tell him more about my parents when I'm ready, too.

"What do you want to do all day?" I ask.

"Sex," he says.

I laugh. "*All* day?"

"Well, yeah. Have you seen yourself? I could get lost in that body for the rest of the month. One day won't be nearly enough time."

My cheeks flush, and he chuckles at my reaction.

"You shine brighter when you're embarrassed," he says. "So I'm going to do it as often as I can."

I purse my lips. "Great."

He laughs, but he reaches over and squeezes my hand. "Since you live here, I want you to show me a side of Vegas I've never seen in all the times I've been here."

I raise both brows. "Way to put pressure on a girl."

He shrugs. "You want to plan a day date or something after my dinner tonight?"

An idea comes to mind, so I opt for tonight.

He nods. "It's a date."

"So what about the rest of the day?" I ask.

"Want to be tourists in between all the sex?" he suggests.

I nod. “Absolutely. I want one of those yard drinks with a strawberry daiquiri, and I want to play slot machines, and I want to watch the fountains at Bellagio.”

“I want to ride the giant Ferris Wheel and I want to go to the top of the Eiffel Tower. Can we fit all that into one day?”

I shake my head. “Nope, but we’ve got today plus part of tomorrow, and then...” I trail off as I realize I don’t know the answer to that.

His face falls a little, too, and his voice is low when he says. “And then I have a good reason to come back.”

I press my lips together and nod, and then the waitress delivers our food.

And, incidentally, he *loves* my pumpkin pancakes.

CHAPTER 10

GABBY

After breakfast, I head up to the suite I was supposed to sleep in last night with my friends while Cooper heads to his room to make a phone call.

When I open the door, my six closest friends are all awake and lounging around, and they all look a little hungover. I, on the other hand, have a wide smile gracing my lips.

“Where have you been?” Mia asks, leaping to her feet with an accusatory finger pointed in my direction, anger all over her face.

“I was with Cooper,” I say, my voice all dreamy even to my own ears.

“Haven’t you checked your messages?” she asks.

“I was with Cooper,” I repeat. “Sorry, allow me to amend that. I was getting banged like a drum at a marching band parade by Cooper.”

Mia’s jaw drops open. “You had sex with him?” she whisper yells.

“Yes. And I’m just here to grab my suitcase so I can get back to his room and have some more sex with him. Have I mentioned how good he is at the sex? He’s got this tongue that’s, like, unreal, and he—”

“Gabby!” Mia says, fisting my biceps. “Do you know who he is?”

My brows draw together. “He’s Cooper,” I say. I think back to the semi-fuzzy walk last night when people seemed to recognize him as they called him by his full name.

“He looked familiar to Chelsea, so we looked him up. He’s Cooper Noah. He played third base for the Dodgers for seven years before an elbow injury took him out of the game.”

My eyes widen as my palm moves toward my forehead. “A baseball player? For the Dodgers?” I think I might be in shock as her words hit me. Why would a megastar baseball player have any interest at all in someone like me?

The t-shirt I’m still sporting makes a hell of a lot more sense now.

I don’t follow baseball. My mother hated the game, so we never watched it when I was growing up, and it wasn’t until much more recently that I took an interest in it at all.

I still don’t know much about the game, but I’m learning.

Maybe Cooper can teach me a thing or two. And if he’s been out of the game a few years, I guess it makes sense that I wouldn’t know who he is since my interest in the sport is very recent. Our timelines just didn’t overlap, I guess.

I wonder why he didn’t mention it, but I don’t want to be the one to bring it up. Maybe he prefers it this way, and I think I do, too. If we see each other beyond this weekend, I’m sure it’s something that will come up at some point, but I don’t want him to think I’m just after him because of who he is.

And I really don’t want him to find out who I am, either. I don’t want what we’re starting to be tainted by things completely out of our control. Not when our dynamic together is so good.

“I don’t even know what to say,” I admit. “I’m supposed to just come up and grab my bag so we can spend the day together.”

“Well...how was it?” Becky asks.

I sigh dramatically as I drop down into a vacant chair. “I can’t even come up with the words, to be honest. It was...” I shake my head. “It was like I’ve known him my entire life. It was like we were destined to sit next to each other at that blackjack table, like our paths were meant to cross.”

“But he’s like, in his thirties, isn’t he?” Kelly asks, scrunching up her nose. “Doesn’t he have wrinkly old balls?”

I nod. “When the connection is this strong, age is just a number,” I say, citing the same words he used as a cliché. Maybe it’s a cliché, but it’s also the truth. “And there’s nothing wrong with his balls. They’re quite firm, as a matter of fact, and they seemed to be working just fine as they slapped against me last night.”

Mia’s still narrowing her eyes at me like I’m a child who needs scolding, but Chelsea lets out a loud laugh. Chelsea’s the resident perv, so I know she’ll be on my side. She probably wishes she was the one in my shoes right about now.

Proving my point, she sighs. “You’re so lucky. He’s hot, even if he does have wrinkly old balls.”

“Yeah,” I murmur. “He is pretty fucking hot. His abs are just...” I lick my lips as I think about those abs. Damn, I want to run my tongue along every ridge.

I miss him.

I already fucking miss him and we’ve been apart all of four minutes.

This isn’t good.

I’m in deep. Way too deep for how little we know about each other. He didn’t even tell me he used to play baseball, but he *did* shake his head with silent laughter when I asked him if he was a Dodgers fan. I guess that makes a little more sense, too.

It’s fine. I’ll let him keep his secret.

That way I can keep mine, too.

I bid my friends goodbye, grab my suitcase, and head back to Cooper’s room. He throws the door open and basically attacks. “Shower with me,” he demands once we come up for air.

“Can I brush my teeth first?”

He laughs. “Be my guest.”

“I’ll go fast. Promise.” I brush my teeth in record time, and as a fun surprise, I decide to strip naked. I open the door and

step out into the living area of our hotel room, and his jaw falls open.

“I think I want to marry you,” he says, and heat floods my core at his words.

We’re nowhere near that yet, and it was obviously a joke, but now it’s in my head, and I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to move on from the former professional baseball player who just told me he wants to marry me.

He stalks toward me, the hunter as I wait quietly as his prey, and when he gets to me, he runs his palms along the sides of my torso, grazing the sides of my breasts before sliding them around to cup my ass. He squeezes as he pulls me against him, the fabric of his t-shirt rough against my nipples as his mouth crashes down to mine.

We stand there kissing a few beats, our tongues dancing in a hot, intense battle, and then he pulls back suddenly. He rips his shirt off and slides his shorts down his athletic legs, and then he grabs my hand and pulls me into the bathroom. He starts the shower water and peppers kisses along my neck while we wait for it to warm up, and I pull the tie out of my hair. He steps in first and pulls me with him, and then he wraps his arms around me and kisses me in that deep, intense way he has as we stand under the spray of water together.

I’ll be honest. I’ve never taken a shower with a guy before.

It’s not that I’m totally inexperienced, but my most serious relationship was Jace, and college dorm showers aren’t exactly built for romance.

But this shower clearly was. It’s all encased in glass, and it has two showerheads—one which happens to be detachable. There’s plenty of room for two people, and there’s even a bench that’s probably designed for towels or shower gel but also would work as a seat.

He lets me go and spins me around. I turn to watch as he pumps some shampoo onto his hand then massages it into my hair, and I lean back as I let his fingers work his magic. I moan

at the feel of his hands on me anywhere—even my hair—and he thrusts his very hard dick against my ass.

I grab the bar of soap and lather up my hands while he works his magic, and then I reach behind me, fisting his dick with my slippery hands.

“Jesus,” he grunts, and I grin. I can’t help it. Hearing him make sounds like that because of what I’m doing to him might be the biggest turn on of my life.

He pulls his hips back out of my reach then grabs the detachable shower head to help me rinse the shampoo out of my hair. I shampoo his hair next, and even though I ran my hands through it last night, I love the feel of the thick strands between my fingers. He’s quite a bit taller than me, so he bends down as I reach up to scrub, and he moves in to latch his mouth onto my nipple.

Have you ever tried shampooing someone’s hair while they’re sucking on your nipple?

It’s quite the distraction.

I manage to finish the job, and then we wash each other with the bar of soap. Our bodies slide together in a sensual way as we work, and once we’ve rinsed each other, he orders me to sit on the little bench.

He pulls the detachable showerhead down. “Spread your legs for me, baby,” he says, and I do as requested. “Now lean back and enjoy.”

I lean back and watch as he sinks to his knees, and then I close my eyes as I wait for the sensations to hit me.

He doesn’t disappoint. He aims a burst of water right at my clit as he grabs a nipple between his fingertips with his other hand, tweaking and pulling in painful pleasure. He pulls the water away and licks his way through my entire pussy, stopping to suck on my clit before dipping his tongue back in, and then he pulls his finger from my nipple to thrust it into me. He aims the water at my clit again as he drives his finger in and out, taking a nipple in his mouth again.

It's too many sensations. Pleasure on top of pleasure on top of pleasure.

I spiral out of control as wave after wave of bliss careen through my entire body.

And as the pulses start to slow, he doesn't stop what he's doing. I'm writhing on the bench, need and desire pummeling through me even though he literally just sated that ache, and he *keeps going*.

Jace would always stop as soon as I hit my peak.

Cooper wants to do it again. He makes me feel like he could spend the entire day in here with the sole purpose of making me come.

But I want to make him come, too.

I shift, and he gets the hint as he pulls his fingers out of me.

"I want to see you come again," he murmurs. "It's the most gorgeous vision I think I've ever witnessed."

"Your turn first," I pant. "Stand up."

He does, and he places the showerhead back in its cradle. When he turns around, I don't get up, but I do grab onto his thighs to pull him closer to me. I fist his cock and pump it a few times before I suck it into my mouth, and he reaches onto the wall over my head to brace himself as I suck and pump and lick.

He groans through his pleasure, and I pick up speed, wanting to give him the same type of bliss he gave me. "I'm close," he warns, but I don't care. I keep sucking, pulling him as far back as I can, and his thighs tremble as he starts to lose control.

The hot jet hits the back of my throat, and my automatic reflex is to swallow. A few more pulses hit the back of my throat, and I keep sucking, keep doing what I'm doing as he fights his way through an intense, brutal orgasm.

When the pulses slow, he pulls out of my mouth and collapses on the bench beside me. He tosses an arm around me, and I settle into his side, the perfect placement as our

bodies just seem to fit together, like we were each missing a piece of ourselves until we found each other. We both sit in quiet bliss as the water streams down in front of us, and eventually he stands and shuts off the water.

He silently exits the shower and grabs a towel, wrapping it around his waist, and he steps back in with a second towel. Instead of handing it to me, he starts to dry me off. Something about it is intimate and sweet. We're both quietly lost in our thoughts, quietly lost in the afterglow, quietly lost in each other.

He pulls me to a stand and wraps the towel around me, and I grab another one to towel dry my hair while he finishes drying himself, too.

We comb our hair together in the bathroom, me fighting through the tangles while he makes quick work of his hair. I put a little make-up on, and we each get dressed, both of us comfortably quiet as we work through our individual routines together.

Once we're ready, his gaze lifts to mine. His eyes look a little tormented—something I haven't seen from him in the short time I've known him, a reminder that we have a long way to go. "When can I see you again?" His voice is low, and I'm not sure how to lighten the sudden somber mood in here.

My chest warms as I think about the fact that he wants to see me again, and it tightens at the same time as I think about how this blissful time with him will inevitably come to an end. "Depends on when you're back in town."

He presses his lips together, slinging one arm around me as he crushes my body to his. "That's not good enough."

I'm not sure what to say. My instinct is to tell him to stay, but I worry that'll just show my age. He has responsibilities. I'm not even sure if he has the ability to just pack up and move to Vegas with the snap of a finger.

But I want him to.

"Then stay," I finally say because it's the only choice I have. Fuck naivety. Fuck my age. All that matters is how

we're both feeling right now, and the desperation in his tone is the exact same thing I'm feeling down to my core. "Take the job, whatever it is, so we can see if this powerful thing between us is as big as we feel like it is."

He drops a soft kiss to my lips rather than responding, and when he pulls back, he heaves out a heavy sigh. "Let's go get you a daiquiri."

I blow out a breath, too, and then I slide my hand into his and follow him down to the Strip.

CHAPTER 11

COOPER

I order her a strawberry daiquiri and I get myself a half-pina colada, half-strawberry daiquiri mix. It's quite a delight, if I'm being honest, and I keep my ballcap pulled down low over my eyes. Between that and the sunglasses mixed with the amount of day drinkers here on the Strip, nobody notices that Cooper Noah is strolling down the sidewalk hand-in-hand with a gorgeous woman twelve years his junior.

I was hit with a blast of reality when I asked her when I could see her again.

This is real, but we're providing an awful lot of fodder for the media—particularly if I take the offer on the table from Troy. I'll be thrust front and center back into the tabloids, and if we take this thing beyond this weekend, she'll be thrust there, too.

At some point I have to tell her who I am...but I sort of like the dynamic between us just the way it is. Once people find out, they change—and I don't want this to change.

We walk with our drinks down to the Bellagio, where we watch the fountains. We step inside to play some slots. We even manage a romantic trip to the top of the Eiffel Tower, where we kiss as we look down over Vegas and I tell her how I want to take her to the real one in Paris someday.

We ride the giant Ferris Wheel, which is neat during the day but would be spectacular at night, and I note how she attacks every new activity with excitement and a positive attitude. The line for the Ferris Wheel was longer than we'd been expecting, and she spent the time waiting by grilling me with *this* or *that*, allowing us to get to know one another on another new level.

I discover she prefers pizza over pasta, tacos over spaghetti, and pancakes over waffles. She learns that I like trucks over sports cars, outdoor activities over indoor—sex included, and bars over nightclubs.

We wind up back at the hotel a little before it's time for me to meet Kaylee and Ben.

I think about asking if she wants to tag along as my date, but I realize I could use the opportunity away from her to talk to some of the people who know me well and to see if it's all just the illusion of sex or if there are real feelings taking root after barely knowing her a full day.

And so we have to say goodbye.

I kiss her in my hotel room once more. I'm already running late for dinner, so we didn't have time for sex, but at least we fit in all the touristy things we'd planned for the day.

"You'll be back at ten?" she asks.

I nod. "I'm anxious to find out what sort of inside look at Vegas you have planned. Give me your phone," I say. She pulls it out of her purse and hands it over, and I send a text to myself with one word.

Sunshine.

"You've got my number now, and I have yours." I hand her phone back to her. "I'll text you if I'm done early."

She drops it back into her purse then links her arms around my waist. Her head tips back and her green eyes gaze up into mine in that way where she has the ability to completely strip me raw. I want to give her every single part of myself when she looks up at me like that. I want the world to stand still so we can be with each other in it in this way just a little longer.

But time marches on no matter how much we want to freeze the perfect moments.

"Tell me this was real," she murmurs.

I drop a kiss to her lips, and then I pinch her ass. "It was real."

She yelps and giggles as she swats at my hand, and it's that giggle that I could spend the rest of my life listening to.

She leaves, and the second the door closes behind her, I feel the loss. It's a strange sense where I feel like she walked out with a piece of myself I've never been without before.

The only time I've ever felt that way before was when she left earlier to grab her suitcase from her suite.

A strange feeling of restlessness pervades even though I have things to do.

I change my clothes ahead of meeting my friends. Dinner is at a restaurant inside my hotel, so I don't have far to travel to get to them, and when I walk into the private room in the back Kaylee booked for us, I spot Ben Olson, the tight end for the Vegas Aces—Kaylee's husband—first. Of course I do. He's a big dude, and he's just a *presence*. No matter what room he's in, he fills it with loud and gregarious laughter. He glances up and nudges Kaylee, who's staring down at her menu.

She grins and leaps up to tackle hug me before she sits back down, and Ben stands and gives me a bro-hug, too. "Good to see you, man," he says.

He hated me when we first met since he thought I was stealing his girl from him when they were on a break, but eventually he came around when he realized Kaylee and I were nothing more than good friends.

"You too," I say. I slide into the chair across from the two of them, not bothering with the menu. "How's everything?"

They both stare at me with tilted heads for a beat, and then Ben speaks up first. "Why do you look different?"

"I *look* different?" I ask.

Kaylee nods, the crease between her brows deepening as she studies me. "You're right," she says to Ben. "He *does* look different."

"Different how?" I ask, my brows knitting together.

Kaylee studies me with narrowed eyes. "Your smile is wider." She squints at me a little. "You're... I don't know.

Lighter, maybe, like your shoulders aren't pressed down by a weight."

"Dopamine," Ben says to her, and then he turns toward me. "Did you...did you get laid?"

Jesus. One fucking night with the girl and even my closest friends can see the difference.

"In fact, I did," I admit.

"Are you dating somebody and you didn't tell me?" Kaylee asks, her voice full of both accusation and bewilderment.

I chuckle. "I'm telling you now, aren't I?"

"How long has this been going on?" Kaylee demands.

I clear my throat. "I just met the girl last night."

"Wait a second. You met her *last night*?" Ben asks. He lets out a low whistle. "Was it a one-night thing?"

I shake my head. "We didn't go into it with any expectations. We spent the night together, and then we spent the day together."

"And you let her go to come meet us for dinner?" Kaylee screeches.

"What can I say? I'm a good friend." I offer an arrogant shrug. "Besides, the Captain down low needed a recharge and she's meeting me back at my room after dinner for another round."

Ben bursts out a laugh as he shakes his head. "Man, are you fucked or what?"

I twist my lips then let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah, I am. Totally fucked."

Kaylee giggles. "And you *got* fucked, which, good for you, Coop. We all know how bad you needed that after your recent dry spell." I shoot her a glare, and she laughs. "Tell us about her."

I don't even know where to start. "She's fucking hilarious for one. We laughed all night together. She's honest and tells it

like it is. Plus she's so hot it's unreal, and she's smart, too. She doesn't know who I am, which is an obvious bonus."

"You best believe that girl is Googling the fuck out of you right now, sir," Ben says.

I purse my lips with an easy shrug. "Probably. And it's fine. She got plowed by the Captain first, so she knows what she's getting into." I wink at Kaylee, who giggles as Ben offers a hearty laugh.

"Good for you, man," Ben says.

"What does she do?" Kaylee asks.

I run a hand through my hair and along my jawline, and then I clear my throat before I give it to them straight even though I *know* they're going to tease the shit out of me for it. "She's, uh...studying marketing at UNLV. Last night was her twenty-first birthday."

"Fuck yeah," Ben says, fist pumping. "Wreck that shit, man." He tosses an arm around Kaylee. "You gotta get 'em young these days. Chicks our age just aren't as fun."

Kaylee's lips tighten into a flat line as she gives her husband a look. "I guess I'll let the *chicks* comment slide since you're somehow complementing me. I think?"

Ben laughs, and Kaylee looks at me.

"So that puts, what...about twelve years between the two of you?" she asks.

I nod.

"Ben and I are a decade apart and it works for us. People talk, but we ignore it. With that said, though, she's still in college. Twenty-one is *young*."

"Weren't you twenty-three when you and Ben got together?" I point out.

"Right, but Ben and I had known each other for years and years, and I was out of school," she argues. "We both knew what we were getting into. He was getting a mature, capable woman, and I was getting a big old oaf."

“Hey!” Ben grumbles, and I laugh at the two of them.

The waitress comes by for our order, and I scramble to find something since I haven’t bothered with the menu yet.

I change the subject once our orders have been placed.

“How’s Tight Fit doing?” I ask Ben, referring to his fitness club. He started with one in Montana, and between Kaylee and him plus the StrongFitKids program, they have six incredibly successful locations with more in the works.

“Doing great,” Ben says. He nods toward his wife. “She’s more well-versed in what’s going on in particular with SFK since I’m in pre-season now.”

Kaylee’s eyes light up at the chance to talk about StrongFitKids. “SFK’s exponential growth has been totally overwhelming. I have all these ideas about running Jumpathons or other types of -athons and charity events in the different Tight Fit locations, probably starting here at one of the locations in Vegas, but I don’t have time to put any of it together and all our employees are already overworked. Between the Montana location, the three Vegas locations, and the two in San Diego plus the one we’re building in Los Angeles on top of taking care of the twins...” She glances over at Ben as she trails off, and his eyes meet hers tenderly.

It’s beautiful to witness the love between these two. They have the whole package—the love, a marriage, jobs they love, a couple of kids. It’s what I want, too. It’s what I’ve always wanted, but it’s the thing that’s always escaped me, the thing that’s always been just out of my reach.

“She’s doing great,” Ben says. “Amazing. She’s the best mom in the world. She’s the best *partner* in the world, and I don’t know how she does all she does.”

“I need help,” she admits.

I clear my throat. “Would it help if I moved to Vegas?”

They break their gaze as both their heads whip in my direction.

“What?” Kaylee asks.

“This is on the down low, and I haven’t made a decision yet, but there’s a reason I’m in Vegas,” I begin.

“What is it?” Kaylee presses.

“Troy Bodine has been tapped to manage the expansion team the MLB is bringing to Vegas. He wants me back in the game.”

Ben lets out another low whistle.

“Oh jeez,” Kaylee murmurs. “And then you met the girl last night. All signs point to Vegas. What are you going to do?” She bounces a little excitedly in her seat.

“I think I’m gonna do it,” I admit. I blow out a breath. “Not because of her, to be clear, though I’m definitely interested in seeing where it can go with her. But before I even met her last night, I thought it through and knew it was time to get back into the game. Well, both games. Baseball and dating.”

Kaylee claps her hands together with excitement as she squeals. “Oh my God, you’re moving here?”

“Hey, Peaches,” Ben teases his wife. “Calm your tits. You’re married.”

She rolls her eyes. “I know I am. And so does he,” she says, jerking her thumb in my direction.

I nod. “The only romance between the two of us was for your benefit,” I say, referring to the brief time we teased the media when we first met.

Ben chuckles. “I’m just teasing you both. It’ll be great to have you in town, man. Another dude for golf and poker nights, another face for Tight Fit. Shit, the Daltons will want you at every Monday night family dinner.” He glances at Kaylee. “We’re all gonna need bigger dining tables.” He turns back to me. “But you won’t have time to help with SFK if you’re playing ball in between wrecking that chick’s pussy,” he points out.

“I’ve got five months of offseason,” I counter. “Plenty of time for both pussy-wrecking and helping out at SFK.”

“So this is really happening?” she asks.

I press my lips together and nod. “Yep. It’s really happening.”

Kaylee squeals as realization dawns.

It’s really happening.

CHAPTER 12

COOPER

A woman stands near the window when I open the door and walk into my hotel room, and the tightness I felt in my chest on the walk back to my room seems to dissipate at her presence.

I wondered whether she'd really show up.

She did.

"Hey," I say when I walk in, and she blows out a breath when she spots me. I twist the ballcap I'm wearing down low over my eyes so the bill is in the back since I know I'm going to want to kiss her and the bill tends to get in the way of that.

She studies me a beat. "Did you get hotter in the time we were apart?"

I chuckle as I make my way across the room. "Yes. I worked hard on that."

We stare at each other a beat, neither of us touching as we both take in the fact that we're here in this place again and the fantasy we started twenty-four hours ago can continue.

I lean in and press a soft kiss to her neck just below her ear. "I missed you." My voice is low and gravelly, and it forces a soft moan from her.

"I missed you, too," she says, and then she loops her arms around me and my lips find hers.

Just like with everything between the two of us, the kiss intensifies to fire rather quickly, but she forces the end first. "My truck is down at valet if you're ready for the thing I planned, but if you'd rather get naked, I'm down with that."

"Back up a second," I say. "You have a truck?"

She laughs. "I do. A Ford Ranger."

“I drive an F-150,” I admit. “And can I just say it makes you even hotter that you drive a truck?”

“Yes, you can say that,” she deadpans. “And it’s true. I always wanted one, and I find guys who drive trucks hot, too. Now answer the question. Date or sex?”

I laugh at her impatience. “Let’s go on a proper date. Then I’ll get you naked afterward.”

“Deal. Unless *I* get you naked *during* our date.” She grabs my hand, and heads toward the door, pulling me behind her.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“It’s a surprise.”

“Is it another nightclub?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “A, you don’t like nightclubs, and B, the challenge was to show you a side of Vegas you haven’t seen before. I assume you’ve been to your fair share of Vegas clubs, so no, that’s not what it is.”

I turn my hat forward again to duck beneath the bill as we approach the elevator. “Thank God.” I sling my arm around her shoulders as we take the trip down to the first floor, and I follow her out to the valet stand.

As expected, a black Ranger pulls up a minute later. She hops into the driver’s seat, and I settle into the passenger one. I pull my hat off and run my hand through my hair, and she navigates out of the busy valet area and onto the even busier Strip. Taylor Swift plays in the background, the *Red* album, and I’m quiet as I let her focus on getting out of traffic.

She heads toward the highway and merges on. We travel north for a few minutes before she merges onto another highway to head west. As the car carries us further away from the bright lights of Las Vegas Boulevard, I start to see stars in the sky and I’m even more curious as to where the hell she’s taking me.

Eventually she gets off the highway and turns toward Red Rock Canyon. I spot the hours of the driving loop, and it’s closed, so I still have no idea where we’re going. She follows

the signs toward a campground but then drives right past it, dust kicking up in our wake toward the nearly deserted campground. She drives another couple minutes, and eventually she pulls off the road to a stop in total darkness except for the lights of her truck.

“We’re here,” she announces proudly, and she gets out of the truck. She opens the door to the backseat while I jump out of the passenger seat and walk around toward her, and when she emerges, she holds a huge basket.

“We’re...here?” I ask.

“Yep!” She nods toward the tailgate. “Can you open that?”

I pull the handle, and she sets the basket down. She pulls out a camping pad with pillows built in, and she spreads it out along the bed of the truck. She grabs a blanket, too, and a bottle of wine—no glasses.

“Are you a camper?” I ask.

“I’ve gone a few times, but I got this pad for my birthday and figured it was time to break it in.”

I hop onto the tailgate easily, and I hold out a hand to help her up. She sets the bottle of wine on the side, and we both take off our shoes to get comfy before we lay back on the camping pad.

I draw in a deep breath. It’s still hot and dry in the middle of August here in Vegas at eighty-five degrees at nearly ten at night, but without the sun beating down on us, it’s not so bad.

“You asked for a side of Vegas you’ve never seen before, and I assume you’ve never driven out to the middle of the desert to look at the stars,” she says as she settles into a comfortable position.

I reach over and grab her hand, linking my fingers through hers. “This is incredible.” My voice is low even though it’s just the two of us out here. The closest people are probably a mile away at that campground, and it was pretty quiet back there.

We stare up at the night sky as it glitters with stars. It's a clear night, so clear that I can even see the milky haze of the Milky Way from here.

It's peaceful and quiet—the opposite of the loud exuberance the Strip offers, and it's hard to believe all that excitement is just a half hour away from this tranquil paradise.

“The pad's comfy,” she muses as we both stare up at the sky, baffled by its complexity and its beauty from this angle.

“I want to take you camping someday,” I say. “We can sit around a bonfire drinking beer and roasting marshmallows, and then I can wreck you in the best way inside our tent.”

She laughs, and it's that heartwarming sound that's already so familiar to me. “I'm in.” She clears her throat. “But that assumes we're taking this beyond this weekend.”

“I'd like to,” I say quietly. Earnestly.

“I'd like to, too. But you'll be in San Diego, and I'll be here...it'll get complicated, don't you think?”

“Most definitely. But it'll be easier once I move here,” I say carefully.

She sucks in a breath. “You're taking the job?”

“I was seventy-five percent sure I was going to take it anyway, and then I met you. You put up a pretty convincing argument to cover that last quarter, and then I talked to my friends tonight at dinner...it just feels like this is where I'm supposed to be.”

Her fingers tighten in mine. “This?”

“Right here. Beside you. We'll have challenges, but I want to figure out how to make this work in the real world. You're in college, and I'm...not. You're young and have so much life to experience.” Meanwhile, I'm almost thirty-three and I'm at a point in my life where I'm ready to start a family.

Could it be with her?

Crazier things have happened.

My parents were only together a few weeks when they got engaged.

“But if you want to see where it goes, well...so do I,” I finish.

“I want that more than anything,” she breathes.

“My parents only knew each other three weeks before they knew they were going to spend their lives together,” I admit.

“Tell me about your parents,” she says.

“I grew up in Chicago. My mom is a first-grade teacher, and she’s my best friend. My dad was an electrician.”

“Was?” she asks softly.

“He passed away when I was nine.”

“Oh, God, Cooper. I’m so sorry,” she murmurs.

I squeeze her hand. “Thanks. He lost his father when he was a teenager. It made me feel like the men in my family don’t get much time with their kids, and that’s part of why I always wanted to have kids at a young age.”

“Do you have kids?” she asks.

“No. I have two nephews, my brother’s kids. He’s four years older than me and his kids are nine and eleven. It just... hasn’t worked out for me yet, and now I’m beyond what I’d consider *young* to have kids. But I still want three or four,” I admit. “What about you? Do you want kids?”

“Yes and no. I don’t think about it much. I figure I have plenty of time, and it’s not a pressing priority at the moment. I’ve never been one of those people who felt like I was born to be a mother. I want to establish myself in a career first before I’m ready to go down that path.”

I think about that for a beat. It’s the first red flag of our short time together. I’m at a point in my life where I want to settle down, where I want to start a family. She’s not ready for those things, and that’s fine. She’s young, and she shouldn’t have to make those types of decisions yet.

But what the hell am I doing here?

Am I just prolonging the inevitable?

Or is this worth exploring?

I don't know the answer to that, but I do know one thing.

I'm not quite ready to let go yet.

CHAPTER 13

GABBY

He's quiet, and I wish I knew what he was thinking. It's a reminder that we're still virtual strangers.

I want to know everything about him. I don't want to be strangers.

But the thought of having kids right now is pretty low on my radar. He wants them, and soon. That feels big—like it's something that could eventually spell the end of whatever it is we're starting. It's a reminder that the twelve years that span between us actually *could* get in the way of making this work outside of this fantasy weekend.

“What about your parents?” he asks.

“I didn't know who my father was until about three years ago. My whole life, my mother lied to me and told me she didn't know who he was. Just before my eighteenth birthday, I took one of those ancestry tests. I tracked down a first cousin, and I ended up meeting my dad through her. He lived in Vegas, so I decided to switch from UC Denver, where I'd already committed to attending, to UNLV, where my best friend had already committed to attending anyway and I'd already been accepted. I've spent the last three years getting to know my father and learning all the ways my mother was totally and completely toxic through my entire childhood.”

“That must've been really tough,” he says.

I press my lips together as the hot sting of tears threatens behind my eyes. “It was. She lied to me my entire life. My dad knew she'd had me, and he sent her checks every month, but she threatened him in a lot of different ways to stay out of my life.” I sigh. “It's complicated. I had a good childhood, for the most part, but every time I asked about him, she lied.”

“Why?” he asks. “Did she do it to protect you or something?”

“I haven’t asked, to be honest. I’m still too angry with her.”

“She’s still your mom, Gabby. She must have had some reason,” he points out.

“Maybe. And maybe someday I’ll ask, but I’m happy living with my dad and getting to know him better,” I say. “I don’t want to cloud that with whatever my mom says about him now. I won’t know if it’s truth or lies anyway, so I’ve taken the last three years to form my own opinion.”

“What was it like when you met him?” he asks.

I shake my head as I swipe away a tear that tips over. “It felt like I’d found a missing piece of myself, you know? I’m so much like him and I never had the chance to know him growing up. I don’t know if I can ever forgive my mother for that.”

“Well if losing my dad at a young age taught me anything, it’s that we’re not guaranteed anything. If you want to make amends with your mom, do it before you lose your chance,” he says.

“Yeah,” I murmur. “You sound like a wise old man spouting platitudes.”

“I’ll show you old, Sunshine.”

I giggle, but then he shifts so he’s suddenly hovering over me, and the giggling ceases as pure lust drives into its place. He thrusts his hips against mine, his hard cock ready to come out and play.

He presses soft kisses to my neck. “We need to get you on birth control so I can have my way with you any time I want,” he mutters against my skin.

“I’ll get on it tomorrow,” I moan as I roll my hips against his.

He chuckles, the sound humming through me as my tummy does a little flip.

His lips move along my neck to my jawline and eventually to my own lips, and we kiss luxuriously there in the bed of my truck, the stars gleaming above us as the feelings I've been feeling since the moment I met him take root deep in my chest, burrowing in as they vow to stay a while.

I reach down and pull a condom from my pocket, and I hold it between the two of us. "I came prepared," I say, and he nips another soft kiss to my lips as he snatches it from between my fingers.

We both glance around. There's nobody out here, and even if someone *was* coming, we'd hear them from plenty of space away to cover ourselves with the blanket.

With that in mind, I push on his chest. I pull my shirt over my head and unhook my bra, and then I shimmy out of my jeans and panties. I push on his chest until he's lying all the way back. He's still fully clothed, but I'm completely naked. I climb over the top of him, spreading my legs so they're on either side of him as I feel the rough fabric of his jeans right against my most sensitive parts. He reaches up to run his hands along my torso, stopping to feel my breasts, and I gyrate over the top of him, my movements picking up speed as he tweaks my nipples. He pumps up into me, managing to hit my clit through his jeans, and I cry out into the quiet stillness of the night.

"Fuck yeah," he murmurs. "Get it, baby. Come for me." My eyes meet his as he brushes his thumbs across my nipples, and the sight of his lust-glazed eyes in the darkness out here is overwhelming.

I reach down to tease my own clit as I keep gyrating over him, and he continues to thrust toward me.

The sensations are enough to push me over the edge, and I tip my head back and push my tits into his hands as a fierce orgasm rips through me. My legs shake as the contractions ripping through me start to slow, and he drops his hands from my breasts to run them along my thighs.

I collapse down on top of him, and his palms move to my back. He rubs my back gently as I live in the bliss for a few

beats, and then he says, “Fuck, that was hot.”

I’m inexperienced. I’m not a virgin, but he makes me want to do things I’ve never done before. He makes me feel confident and sexy...something the boys I’ve been with before never managed to make me do.

Eventually my heartbeat starts to return to normal, and I sit up again. His dick is still hard against my body, and I reach down and tug on his shirt. He wrestles out of it, and I move off him long enough to tug on the button of his jeans. He helps pull them down and kick them off along with his boxer briefs, and then he rips open the condom and rolls it on.

“Do you need a minute?” he asks.

I shake my head slowly as I climb over him again. “I want you inside me.”

“Your wish is my command,” he says, and he fists his cock as I line up over the top of him.

I slam down, and we both grunt at the feel.

“God, you’re so tight after that orgasm. I fucking love how you feel,” he says.

I don’t know what to say to that. *You’re so big and hard* sounds stupid, but I force the self-conscious thoughts away and live in the moment. “Your cock feels so good inside me.” My voice is tentative, but the lust in his eyes seems to intensify at my words, so he must like it.

“Get used to it, Sunshine,” he says, and then his hands move to my ass, and he directs our movements from the bottom as he starts to move his cock in and out of me.

Emotions course through me as we each fill the air with our moans, a beautiful soundtrack to the quiet night. I never want it to end, but I feel it building toward another orgasm. I never want to let him go, but he has to. He’s catching a flight back home tomorrow and who knows what will come next? Even if he moves here, there’s no guarantee it’ll feel the way it has over this weekend.

It's unnatural for feelings to be this intense this soon...or maybe that's just what we're taught either by society or through personal experience as we allow feelings to grow and develop over time.

It's not love yet...but at the same time, what I feel for Cooper after the last twenty-four hours is even stronger than what I felt for Jace, who I dated for eight months.

It might be love. And if it's not, if it's just passion and lust, I know that with enough time and nurturing, it could turn into love.

We don't need to define it for now. We just need to live in the moment, to live in the feelings, to live in each other as inhibitions are tossed aside and we allow this to happen.

"Fuck," he growls, and my eyes fly open to watch the show as he starts to come. His face is beautiful as it contorts with pleasure, pleasure he's taking from *me*, from my body, and I memorize every beautiful freckle, every gorgeous line, every masculine detail as he pumps into me. When his pleasure slows, he lets go of my ass and grabs one of my breasts in one hand and he thumbs my clit with the other. I ride out the wave, and then the pleasure slams into me all at once.

I cry out as the brutal climax takes over. I writhe over the top of Cooper while I wait it out, and when it slows, I collapse over him once again.

He doesn't pull out of me. Instead, we lie together for a long time in silence as he strokes my back and our panting slows. I think I fall asleep for a beat, because eventually he shifts and slips out of me, and it's the loss of our connection that seems to wake me.

I move off him and reach into the basket, and then I hand him a little package of tissue I brought along in case that happened. He chuckles as he takes care of the condom, and I put my clothes back on. He does the same, and then we gaze up at the stars together a little longer.

Soft conversation flows between us as we continue to get to know one another on a deeper level...as we continue to

inexplicably fall for each other, the end in sight as time
marches on later and later into the night, both of us dreading
daybreak when it'll be time for this weekend together to end.

CHAPTER 14

COOPER

We drive up the hill a little and gaze down at the view of the Strip as we pass the bottle of wine back and forth.

I'm really doing it.

This will be home.

I have a lot to do before that can become my reality, though, and only a few weeks to do it in. Troy wants me back here September one to start training, which means I have less than three weeks to train someone to take over my position at SFK, pack up my apartment, find a place in Vegas, and make the move.

And I don't really want to tell Gabby the truth about the job yet—not when things are so new between us. Not when things are so *easy* between us. My career will complicate things, but it won't affect what's happening between us until spring training, and that's still months away. I'll tell her before then. In fact, it might be fun to take her to the stadium once I've signed my contract and tell her there in person.

Despite our easy conversation as we learn more about each other, I've left baseball out of the discussion entirely. Surely she knows by now. Surely like Ben suggested she's looked me up. But if she has, she hasn't mentioned it. I love just being regular guy Cooper who works for a health organization for kids, not being the five-time All-Star and World Series MVP known for keeping calm under pressure.

It's a huge part of who I am, but I like that I'm not defined by it in her eyes. It makes me want to leave it out of the conversation a little longer, especially after what happened with Stacy.

She didn't just cheat on me. She cheated on me after I got hurt and had to stop playing. She cheated on me with a

teammate.

She said it was because she felt alone and sad, that I was lashing out at her because I was depressed I had to stop playing.

I wasn't depressed. I was a little down, sure. A little out of character considering I'm the kind of guy who's always in good spirits. Maybe not the party animal Ben Olson is, but still generally friendly and sociable, even when I was hurt and taken out of the game.

She blamed *me* for her cheating on me. That's the thing that hurt the most, I think. That was the part that made me question things about myself...like how I could be with someone like her in the first place. I don't mention much of that to Gabby, though over the course of this weekend, we managed to touch on a lot of it.

"What time's your flight?" she asks.

"Nine," I say. I glance at my watch. "Less than nine hours from now."

"Can you stay a little longer?"

I blow out a breath. "I wish I could. My mom is coming to visit me, and her flight gets in close to the same time as mine so I can just drive us both home from the airport. This was just supposed to be a quick trip to town to meet with my buddy about a job opportunity, and I booked an extra night to meet my friends for dinner."

"Your mom is coming to visit you?" she asks.

"Yeah. She's going to love you." The words are out before I can stop them, but they feel as natural as breathing. Of course she'll meet my mom someday. Just as I'll meet her dad, and maybe her mom down the line when she's ready to forgive her. "She always hated my ex, and I guess I should've listened. She's a great judge of character."

"How long's she staying?"

"Tomorrow through Friday, so all week." I take a sip from the bottle of wine and hand it back to Gabby.

“Don’t you have to work?”

I nod. “And give my notice. And pack up my place.”

“What will she do while she’s in town?”

“Spend her days either shopping or reading at the beach under a giant umbrella, and spend her evenings cooking me all my favorite meals.”

“She sounds amazing,” she says.

I smile as I think about my mom. She’s my biggest cheerleader, and she’s also candid and honest with me even when the conversations are difficult, and I’m very interested to hear what she has to say about me playing again before I confirm with Troy. Even though I’ve already made up my mind, I’m still curious to get her take on it. “She is.”

We finish the bottle of wine between the two of us, and we fall asleep on the mat in the back of her truck for a while. I wake first just as the first dawn of light starts to paint the horizon.

When I shift, she jolts awake, too, and we both sit up and lean our backs on the rear panel. I toss an arm around her shoulder and she leans into me as we stare silently together at the landscape. Dawn turns toward the sunrise. It’s gorgeous here, and I look around at the red rocks where this canyon derives its name.

As I glance around, I can’t help but think that we’ll be back here together someday.

Of course we’ll be back. This is where we fell in love.

That *has* to be what’s coursing through me right now.

One of the things my previous relationships always lacked was the ease in which I find myself with Gabby. She’s lighthearted and fun, my perfect match in a lot of ways despite the differences looming between us. I want to make this work. If I can wake up with this same feeling one more day, that would make it all worth it.

I think back to my time with Stacy. Not once in the five years we were together did we drive out to the middle of the

desert and fall asleep in the back of my truck after staying up too late talking and stargazing.

Not once.

She wasn't right for me, but I suspect Gabby just might be.

I hear a quiet snuffle, and when I glance over at her, I see her brushing away her silent tears.

"What's wrong?" I whisper.

She lifts a shoulder. "Sunrises always make me a little emotional. I'm not sure why. The beauty of the Earth, the gratitude for another day."

"Oh, Sunshine," I murmur, thinking how appropriate that nickname is for her even though it just sort of spilled out of me when I first said it.

"It's something else today. Today it signifies the end of our time together. I don't want it to end. I don't want the sun to rise."

I pull her in closer to me, squeezing her shoulders. "This isn't the end," I say softly, pressing my lips to the top of her head. "It can't be."

I feel emotion clogging my throat, too, an unfamiliar and strange feeling that tells me just how deep I already am into this thing with her.

It's a little terrifying, if I'm being honest, but we're jumping in together.

That makes it feel like we're both going to be okay.

We don't have time for one last bang once we're back at my hotel. I have enough time to toss my clothes in my suitcase and grab her into my arms as that same emotion closes up my throat.

I don't know what to say, and I'm the kind of person who is never at a loss for words.

But even if I *had* the words...I'm not sure I could get them out at the moment.

“Well,” she says. “You’ve got my number. Ball’s in your court, I guess.”

I chuckle. “Ball’s in both our courts, Sunshine. We’re not playing games here. If you want to text me the second the car door closes behind me, do it.”

“It won’t scare you off?” She snags her bottom lip between her teeth.

I drop a soft kiss to her lips to get her to stop biting them with worry. “Would it scare you off if I did it first?”

She shakes her head. “Point taken. Have a safe trip.”

“You too.”

“Why is this so hard?” she asks.

I press my lips together then offer her a sad smile. “Because it’s real, and reality hurts sometimes. Come home with me.”

My mom will flip if I bring a girl home to meet her, but I’ll deal with that storm when the time is right.

Her shoulders drop a little, and I think it might be from relief that I invited her. “I can’t. I’m going out with friends tomorrow and I’m meeting with my advisor on Monday. And I’m helping substitute a dance class for kids this week while the regular teacher is out of town.”

“Next weekend, then. Come to San Diego.”

She nods a little as she thinks it over. “Okay. Yeah, I think I can do that.”

I can’t help the wide smile that breaks across my lips. I knew I’d be coming back here eventually, but having solid plans in the works to see each other again lifts a weight that was heavier than I realized.

I press my lips to hers. “I need to go, but I can’t wait to see you again.”

“Back at you, Captain.”

I chuckle and kiss her once more, and then she walks me out. I get into the car, close the door behind me, and pull out

my phone to send her a text.

There's already one waiting for me.

Gabby: *Boo. I'm first. Hope I didn't scare you. [kiss emoji]*

Me: *Boo back at you. Miss you already.*

I turn toward the window to wave, and I spot her as she brushes away the tears falling from her eyes.

My heart cracks as I wave until she's out of sight, and then I exhale a long breath as the car carries me away from her and toward the airport.

CHAPTER 15

COOPER

I head down to baggage claim even though I carried on so I can meet my mother. I spent the whole flight thinking about my weekend in Vegas, and the second I landed, Gabby was the first person I texted, and she replied with a selfie she took of us on the top of the Eiffel Tower and a line about how she wishes I was there with her.

It felt right for her to be the first person I contacted with news.

My mom was the second.

I spot her standing by the carousel waiting for her suitcase. She's never been a light packer, and she's only gotten worse with age.

She's in her own little world when I sneak up behind her with a bear hug, and she whirls around to face me, her face breaking into a huge smile when her eyes land on mine. "Cooper Michael Noah, don't you ever scare me like that!"

I chuckle.

"Good timing." She nods toward the belt. "That purple suitcase is mine."

I grab it off when it comes near us. "Ready?"

"No, I've got one more."

"One more what?" I ask stupidly.

"Suitcase."

"You brought *two* suitcases for a six-day trip?"

"Honey, yes, of course I did. One of them is filled with stuff for you, though. I did some spring cleaning and found a few things I thought you might want now that you're settling into San Diego," she says.

Oh boy.

She pauses as she studies me for a beat. “Oh my God, you met a girl.”

“What?” I ask, the second time in the last five seconds I’ve sounded like a dumbass.

“You met someone!” She claps her hands together and squeals a little. “When can I meet her?”

“Not anytime soon.” I don’t mention that I actually invited her to come home with me and if she hadn’t had plans tomorrow, she’d be meeting my mom right now.

“So there *is* someone? That was a test! You failed!” She grabs onto my arm and hugs it. “Tell me everything about her and leave out not one single detail.”

I laugh. This is going to be a long six days. “I have a lot to tell you, but let’s save *something* for the car ride home.”

“Ahh, I’m so excited, my baby boy!” she says, clapping again.

So I get my sunny disposition from her. But she’s more Type A, while my dad was more laid back—I get that from him. My older brother is my opposite. He’s Type A like my mom, but he takes it to the extreme as a successful attorney in Chicago. He’s married to his high school sweetheart and they have two very active boys. He seems like he’s got it all.

“How’s Connor?” I ask.

“Busy busy. He’s got some big case he’s been prepping for, and he’s been in and out of town a lot. I went to Ethan’s summer league baseball game a few days ago, and gosh, every time I watch him play it reminds me of you at that age. And Jacob’s still doing swim. He had a meet a few weeks ago and got second place,” she says, catching me up on the latest news with my nephews.

“And Marissa?” I ask, referring to my sister-in-law.

“Did I tell you she decided not to return this year?” she asks. She and my mom teach at the same school—my mom

teaches first grade, and Marissa teaches fourth. Or she did until this year, I guess.

I shake my head. “Why?”

“Those little journals she makes went viral on the clock app and she can barely keep up with orders. Between that and the kids, something had to give.”

“The clock app?”

“TikTok,” she clarifies, and I laugh.

“Right. And you?” I ask.

“I go back next Monday for teacher meetings, but I’m all ready for the year. My team and I met over the summer to plan and we even made all our copies for first quarter. We’ve got it down pat, which is why I get to enjoy the last week of summer with my baby boy.” She squeezes my cheeks, and she’s pretty much the only person in the world who could get away with squeezing Cooper Noah’s cheeks in public.

I laugh. It might be a long week, but it’s also going to be a fun week.

The second we’re sealed into the quiet privacy of my truck, the relentless grilling begins. “So this girl...”

“I have other items to discuss first, but I will get to the girl.” I navigate out of the parking lot and pay the exorbitant fee for leaving my truck at the airport, and then I head toward the highway.

“Go for it,” she says, holding her hands out.

“When we get home. Maybe over a glass of wine.”

“Uh oh,” she says. “He’s already breaking out the wine. This must be big.”

“It’s huge.”

She sits quietly, her mind working I’m sure on the thirty minute drive from the airport to the three bed, two bath luxury apartment I’ve been renting. When I first moved out here, my boss, Carla, put me up in corporate housing close to the office. I opted for a place with a view of the water despite the

convenience of literally walking across the street to get to work. This way I can relax with a view when I get home, but I'm also not far from downtown where I can find the action if I want it.

So far I've not really found myself wanting it, though. I've been enjoying my quiet existence here in San Diego.

I'm in East Village, literally a three minute walk from Petco Park, where the Padres play. I've attended more than a few games since I've lived here, and I still keep in touch with a lot of the men I played ball with over the years.

Once we're home, I lug my mom's suitcases plus my own up to the eleventh-floor suite I rent. She gets settled in while I open a bottle of merlot, her favorite, plus a bottle of beer for myself.

"Chinese okay for dinner?" I yell across the apartment, and I hear a *yes* from her bedroom.

She appears a few minutes later, and I hand her the glass of wine while I grab a second beer since the first one's already gone.

"Balcony?" I suggest, and she nods. "The food will be here in a half hour or so."

She follows me out, and we each take a seat in the chairs out there. This place came fully furnished, a definite bonus considering all the furniture I own is currently in the house where my ex lives.

I don't know why I let her stay there. I just wanted to get out of town. I should sell the place, but it's a lot of work to sell a house and I haven't had the motivation to put the work into it.

And so it sits there, my ex who cheated on me living there because I'm too goddamn nice to kick her out.

"What's going on, Coop?" my mom asks after a long sip of wine.

I rub my palms together up and down as I draw in a deep breath. In my head, I recite the little poem my dad used to say

when he was teaching my brother and me to remain calm in any situation. *Up palm, down palm, time to get calm. Breathe real deep and take the leap.*

She glances at my hands. She knows what I'm doing.

"Troy Bodine asked me to fly to Vegas with a job offer. The Vegas expansion team was approved, and he'll be its manager." I pause, and then I rush the final sentence. "He wants me to play."

She spits out her wine, the red liquid flying everywhere. "What?"

I suppress a laugh. It's so her personality to have an over the top reaction to the news. "He said with expansion teams, he'll end up with leftovers, so he wants someone who can be the face of the team."

"You do have a cute face," she says, grabbing my jaw to cup it and squeeze. "But do you even *want* to play again?"

I clear my throat then kick my feet up, balancing them on the handrail in front of me as I stare out at the view.

"I think it's time to get back in the game." I chug some more of my beer as I think that through.

"Is your elbow back to a hundred?"

"Yeah. And the stats don't lie. Remember what my doctor said? Around eighty-five percent of patients who get the Tommy John surgery are back in the game after a year of recovery. The pain is gone." I straighten and bend my arm at the elbow to demonstrate my bionic elbow after the orthopedic surgeon reconstructed my elbow with ligaments from my hamstring tendon.

"How are you feeling about it?" she asks cautiously.

"I'm thinking honestly I'm a little bored. I like working with Carla, but I can still do work for StrongFitKids off-season, and Kaylee and Ben are up in Vegas, so I can work more closely with them on that side of the program. When I left Troy's place," I say, leaving out what Troy's place actually was, "I made a vow to myself that it was time to get back into

both games—baseball and dating. And wouldn't you know it? A gorgeous woman sat down at my blackjack table not ten minutes later."

"Oh!" she says, clapping her hands again. "This is it! The meet cute!"

I roll my eyes. "We spent the entire weekend together," I admit.

"And?"

"And..." I shrug, and I take another swig of my beer before I answer. "And I think I might have fallen in love with her."

"What?" she screeches again, and thank God she didn't have a mouthful of merlot this time.

I nod. "She's incredible, Mom. She's beautiful. Long dark hair that's almost black, and these big green eyes that just look into my soul. She's smart, and she's hilarious."

She looks a little skeptical, and I answer the question before she even asks it.

"She has no idea who I am," I say.

"You're sure?"

I shrug. "Maybe she looked me up, maybe not. But she never mentioned it, and neither did I."

"You can't fall in love with someone when you're not being honest about yourself," she says.

"I *was* honest about who I am." I lift a shoulder. "I just left out baseball."

"But that's a huge part of who you are, Coop! You can't just leave it out of the conversation," she points out.

"I'll tell her at some point. I keep thinking it might be good to take her to the stadium and confess it all there. Once I've signed the contract and it's been made official, of course. But for now, I really like being Cooper, the guy who works with kids, instead of Cooper, former baseball player."

“I suppose I can’t fault you for that, but you have to be honest with her. She needs to know what she’s getting into before she falls for you, too.” She follows up that statement with a sip of wine.

“Too late. We both felt it, Mom. We toured Vegas, and she took me out to the middle of the desert where we watched the stars when it was dark and we stayed out there long enough to watch the sun lift over the horizon while we drank wine and talked about everything.”

“Except baseball,” she reminds me.

“Except baseball,” I confirm.

“So she’s the one?” she asks.

“It’s way too early to decide that, but if the next time I see her feels anything like this past weekend did...then yeah, I think she might be the one.”

“I want to meet her.”

I laugh. “No.” I don’t tell her I invited her home with me.

“Oh, come on! You *know* I’ll know within ten seconds whether she’s right for you. Like with Stacy, remember?”

“Exactly why it’s a negative, Mother. I’m not letting anyone get inside this yet.” I drain the rest of my beer.

She blows out a loud and dramatic sigh. “Fine. But if I don’t like her and you want me to say I do, I’d do that for you.”

I laugh. “Like you did with Stacy?”

She rolls her eyes. “Point taken.”

Stacy first met my mom when she came into town from Chicago to visit during the offseason. We’d only been together a few months, and she wasn’t living with me yet, but she was staying over most nights. She headed up to bed first, and my mom let me know how she felt the minute she was out of the room.

“I don’t like her,” she’d whispered to me.

She hasn't liked anyone I dated. Ever. Mostly, I always suspected, because even though she wanted me to settle down and have kids, nobody would ever be good enough for her baby boy.

She loves Marissa, but it's different with my mom and Connor. He's always kept to himself, while I've probably overshared with her. He was thirteen when we lost my dad, and he turned inward while I clung onto my mom. He bolted from her house the second he turned eighteen, and that left us time to grow closer and closer as her life became my baseball games.

"Do you at least have a picture so I can have the mental image of you with her?" she asks.

With a bit of reluctance, I pull out my phone. I flip to the message she sent me with the photo of the two of us, and I stare at her for a beat. Her smile is wide, and her green eyes are expressive. God, she's beautiful.

I hand over the phone, nerves pinging my chest as my mom studies the photo.

"She's gorgeous," she says. "Those eyes...wow. So pretty." She looks over at me. "And your smile, Coop. It's genuine. It's the first genuine smile I've seen out of you with a girl...maybe ever." She studies the picture again, and then she looks back at me. "I like her with you. You complement each other really well." She hands the phone back and clears her throat. "How old did you say she was?"

I let out a long, deep sigh. "Twenty-one."

"Twenty-one?" she shrieks.

"Twenty-one," I confirm.

"Cooper Michael Noah! You're robbing the cradle!"

"Oh my God, Mother. Stop it. I am not." Keeping true to character, my tone is even rather than defensive. "She's legal."

"Barely," she mutters. "What does she want with an old man like you? Money? She wants a sugar daddy?"

“Mom!” Okay, maybe I’m getting a *little* defensive. “It’s not like that. I taught her how to play blackjack, and it was her birthday, so she invited me to the club. We danced, and then we talked, and then we spent the night together. We ate breakfast, we went up the Eiffel Tower, we got to know one another. It was a perfect weekend, and I won’t let you sit here slandering it and vilifying me.”

“Is she still in school?” she asks quietly.

I nod. “She’s studying marketing.”

“And you’re getting back in the game?”

I know where she’s going with this. “Yes.”

“You don’t think the press is going to have a field day with you dating someone half your age?”

“Half my age would be sixteen,” I say dryly.

“Almost sixteen and a half,” she points out. “Meanwhile, she’s only five years beyond that.”

“Half plus seven is the old saying, isn’t it?”

Her brow crinkles. “Yes, exactly. Half plus *seven*. Not half plus *five*.”

I blow out a breath. “I don’t care about her age. You shouldn’t, either.”

“She’s almost twelve years younger than you, darling. When Dad died, she wasn’t even born yet. When you went into high school, she was *two*. When you went into college, she was starting first grade. When you hit the minors, she was in fifth grade. It’s a wide gap, baby boy.” Her tone is gentle even though her words are harsh.

“You don’t think I’ve thought of that? And I keep coming back to the same thing. It. Doesn’t. Matter. All that matters is how she makes me feel, and I’ve never felt like this with anybody else.” The passion in my voice surprises even myself.

“Okay, then, honey. I’ll give this a chance.” She takes a quick sip of her merlot. “But only because you really do seem a little different to me. You really do seem like you made some

connection, and I just want you to be happy. But I want you to be happy while you've ensured you've fully thought this through."

"Thanks, Mom. I will make sure to do that." I say the words to brush her off, but the truth is clear. I've already thought it through, and I can't wait until the moment Gabby is back in my arms.

CHAPTER 16

GABBY

“Have you thought about an internship for your senior year?” Dr. Foley, my academic advisor at UNLV, asks.

I shake my head. “Not yet. When do I need to have that lined up?”

She glances at the calendar in front of her. “By February first, so you have lots of time, but some students have already started finding them and they’ve started working.” She lifts a shoulder. “Something to think about. You’ll just have the internship and your Marketing Policies course remaining.”

“I’ll find something.” Now that I think about it, I bet I could work with my dad. I’ll have to ask him, but he’s been gone a lot the last few weeks.

My meeting lasts all of five minutes, but it’s the kickoff to school starting in just two short weeks. My advisor reviewed my schedule for this semester, which is intense but not horrible as I finally get to focus on the courses I’ve always been interested in taking: Marketing Planning and Analysis, Global Consumer Behavior, Leadership and Management Skills, and Business Marketing. It should be both a challenging and interesting semester of classes, and I overloaded my previous semesters so I could take a slightly lighter schedule my senior year.

That way I can enjoy it, too.

And I’m hoping I get to enjoy it with Cooper around.

Speaking of Cooper, we talked last night for an hour before we both reluctantly called it a night, and we’ve already texted a little this morning.

I decide to try calling him on my way home from my meeting.

“Good morning,” his warm voice answers, and it sends a little thrill up my spine. “How was your meeting?”

“Good,” I say. “My advisor told me I need to figure out an internship next semester.”

“Have you thought about it?”

“A little. I have some ideas, but nothing set in stone yet.”

“Let me know how I can help,” he says.

I hear someone in the background yelling from what sounds like another room. “Cooper Michael Noah! You have to come see this!”

“Just a second!” he yells back.

“Is that your mom?” I ask.

He chuckles. “Yeah.”

“Cooper Michael?” I tease.

“What’s your full name?”

“Why do you want to know?” I narrow my eyes even though he can’t see me.

“So I can yell it out when I come inside you.”

I gasp. “Gabriella Rose Grant.”

“Well, Gabriella Rose, I told her about you.”

“You did? What did you say?”

He lowers his voice. “That you’re so goddamn hot it’s not right. That when I slide my dick into your tight pussy, it’s the best feeling I’ve ever experienced in my life.”

“Shut up,” I say, my cheeks flaming as I merge onto the highway, his voice filling my truck with his dirty words over the Bluetooth. “You did *not* tell her that.”

“No, I didn’t.” He laughs. “I said you’re funny and beautiful and honest and smart, you light up the room with your sunshine, and you make me feel things I’ve never felt before.”

“Back at you, Captain.” Warmth spreads through my chest at his words.

The depth of emotion I feel with him already is frightening. I can’t imagine the exponential growth that might occur if we nurture this and give it time to grow.

“I better go before she asks to talk to you,” he says.

I giggle. “Tell her I said hi.”

“And stoke those flames? Not a chance in hell. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Okay. Miss you.”

“Not as much as I miss you, Sunshine. Bye.”

We hang up, and I can’t help the dreamy and breathless little sigh that falls from my mouth.

Instead of heading home to my dad’s place, I head to the apartment Mia and Chelsea share to pick Mia up for lunch. Chelsea headed to California for a trip with her family for a few days, and Mia and I made lunch plans.

“How was the meeting with Dr. Foley?” she asks once she opens the passenger door and slides into the seat. She’s working toward her bachelor’s in business management, so we’ve taken a lot of the same classes together over the last three years and we share the same advisor.

“Fine. She told me I need to start looking for an internship for next semester.”

“Any ideas?” she asks as she buckles her seatbelt.

“I want to find somewhere that might hire me on after I finish my degree,” I say. I pull out of the parking lot and head toward her favorite Thai restaurant. “I’ve thought about asking my dad if he might have something for me.”

“Ooh, that’s a great idea. Ask him if there’s anything for me, too,” she says. “Wouldn’t it be fun to do an internship together?”

“It would be *so* fun!” I say, but the truth is I’m not sure I’d really want that. We’ve done everything together since we met

our freshman year of high school. I love her dearly. She's the sister I never had. But I also sort of want something that's just for me. I feel selfish telling her that, though, so I exaggerate my excitement over the idea.

"It probably wouldn't work out, though, since I'd need something on the business side and you'd more be looking at the marketing angle. Maybe he can get me in the front offices and you in the marketing department," she suggests.

"I'll ask," I say.

If it was anybody else, I'd assume she's using me for my connections. But this is Mia. She'd never do that.

Still, it feels...weird. We've never had issues regarding my family, but for most of our friendship, we didn't know who my dad was.

And then we did, and now I'm a little territorial over him.

I shouldn't be. I trust Mia more than anybody else in the entire world.

But that doesn't mean I want her getting close to my dad. He's been like a father to both of us since we moved here, and just like when Cooper asked Mia her name at the blackjack table that first night we met, a bit of jealousy tears through me any time my dad gives Mia fatherly attention or advice.

It's not just that.

My dad...he's a complicated man.

As it turns out, he has a lot of money. He has his hands in a lot of different business ventures in Las Vegas, and he recently accepted a new position that will take him away from me a lot more. I'm so excited for him—thrilled, actually, since he told me it's everything he ever wanted out of his career, but I'm sad I won't get to spend as much time with him. So maybe if I can snag an internship with him, I'll get to have more time with him.

And it's not just all that. Sure, he's successful. Sure, he's rich. He's even pretty famous, which is why I don't want to mention him to Cooper.

But he's also devastatingly good looking. Women flock to him, and I see the way my best friend looks at him.

She literally swoons when he pays her the tiniest bit of attention, and he never does it in any type of sexual way. But he's young at only forty-one. He got my mom pregnant when he was nineteen, long before he became a household name, and when I tracked him down through a cousin, of course her first instinct was to believe I showed up out of the woodwork to claim something that didn't belong to me.

But my uncle was there at that first meeting, and he saw the resemblance immediately. He knew my dad had gotten a girl pregnant. He knew my dad sent monthly checks to help with the expenses of raising a child. He believed me, and a DNA test proved the rest of the truth.

It was weird at first, and I didn't live with my dad when I first moved to town, instead opting to live in a dorm my freshman year. But I found myself driving over to his place for dinner or meeting him in between classes, so when the school year was over and I needed to find housing for the summer, I opted to stay with him. And he convinced me not to leave when my sophomore year started.

My close group of friends know who my father is, but for the most part, I've kept it quiet at school. We don't share the same last name since my mother put her last name on my birth certificate, and sometimes I wonder what he did to her to make her hate him as much as she does.

And then I think about how narcissistic she is, and I truly believe it had more to do with her than him. He's a good man, passionate about the things he loves, smart and business-minded, talented and athletic. I admire so many things about him, and I often wonder what it would've been like to grow up with him rather than with her.

But I can't change the past. I can only react to the present and plan for the future.

Such an optimistic life view, and I find it adorable how Cooper immediately picked up on that part of my personality so easily that he nicknamed me Sunshine.

I love when he calls me Sunshine. I love when he calls me Gabby. I love when he calls me babe.

That feeling of missing him claws at me in a way I've never felt before.

"Are you okay?" Mia asks.

"Fine," I murmur, still lost in thought about Cooper as I pull into the parking lot.

"You're just...quiet."

"If I say what I'm thinking, you're going to think I'm crazy."

"Say it anyway," she says.

"I miss Cooper."

Her brows rise. "That's not what I was expecting you to say."

"What were you expecting?"

"I don't know. Something about the internship maybe. How'd we get from A to B? Or C, for Cooper, I guess."

I shrug. "I feel like I'm always thinking about him. I don't know what took up my brain space before I met him, because he's starring solely in my thoughts at the moment."

"You're in deep, huh?" she asks.

"I'm in deep," I confirm.

"But you just met him," she points out. "How can it be more than just sex?"

A prickle of defensiveness races up my spine. "I don't know. It just *is*. We had amazing sex, sure. But we had amazing conversation, too."

"Do you love him?" she asks softly.

I stare out the windshield at the restaurant in front of us. "I think I do," I murmur, and she lets out a soft gasp. I glance over at her. "I've never felt this before, Mia."

She reaches over and squeezes my arm. “I’m happy for you, girl.”

“I’m happy for me, too.”

“Just be careful. You hardly know him.”

I feel like now would be a terrible time to bring up the fact that I’m going to San Diego this weekend, but I tell her anyway.

I trust him implicitly, but I’m not dumb enough to go out of town without telling someone where I’ll be.

“He invited me to San Diego this weekend,” I admit.

Her eyes widen. “Are you going?”

I nod. “I want to see where he lives. I want to see what his life is like. And despite the fact that he’s a celebrity and he still hasn’t told me, I trust him. I refuse to look him up, but Chelsea said everything she’s read about him has been positive. He’s not going to do anything I don’t one hundred percent want to do, too.”

She purses her lips. “How about this...if you have sex in the first hour after you get to his place, it’s just sex. If you have a conversation first, then maybe it’s more.”

I roll my eyes. I know she’s just looking out for me, but now she put that in my head and I sort of hate her a little for it.

We head inside, and we spend our lunch talking all things internships and our senior year of college as I avoid the topic of Cooper. He’s all I want to talk about, but I don’t want more warnings about him. I know what I’m getting into.

I just hope I can make it all work together. If our one weekend together taught me anything, it’s that I’m not going to be able to focus on much of anything except him once he moves to town.

And I can’t wait for the distraction.

CHAPTER 17

COOPER

I stare at the mess in front of me.

My mom literally brought every paper she saved of mine starting from preschool and going all the way through high school.

It's cute, but...what the fuck am I going to do with all this?

She holds up a paper that must be from preschool. There are raw noodles glued to it in the shape of a baseball, and a few have fallen off.

"Look! You were even into the game when you were in third grade!"

"Third grade?" I repeat. "I made that in *third grade*? I thought I was *three* when I did it based on the terrible artwork."

"Yeah, you weren't very artistic back then." She shrugs. "Not everyone's a Picasso, honey."

"Clearly. What do you want me to do with all that?"

"I don't know, but it was just sitting in a bin at the house and I don't really need it, so I thought maybe you'd want it," she says. She flips through more papers, and it seems like she kept virtually every single thing I ever did. It's all a disorganized mess, but at least she wrote the grade and year on the back.

"I guess I'll go through it and keep what I want for the memory book," I lie to make her feel better. The second she's on a plane back to Chicago, it's going in the dumpster.

"At least keep the noodle baseball. Oh! And this paper on Jane Eyre. Your insight was incredible for a high school junior." She holds up the paper.

“Correction. Sparknotes had incredible insight on the book, not Cooper Noah.”

She purses her lips and rolls her eyes. “Don’t tell me. I don’t even want to know.”

“I made it to the big leagues, so I guess I did something right along the way, right?”

She sighs. “You just don’t tell a teacher these things.”

“You teach first grade, Mother. I hardly think your first graders are looking up plot summaries for Dr. Seuss.”

She purses her lips again, clearly annoyed at the direction of this conversation. “You just never know. My job is to keep those kiddos honest.”

“Your job is to teach them *how* to read, not to worry about whether they’re looking at Sparknotes.”

“Touché.” She sets down the Jane Eyre paper with a clear look of disapproval, and my phone buzzes with a notification that tells me I have a delivery down in the lobby.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell her, and I head down to grab my package. Or my *packages*, I suppose.

It’s a big load, so the doorman grabs a cart to help me out. I take it all upstairs, and my mom’s brows dip when she spots me and my big load.

“What’s all that?” she asks.

I open the box and pull out packing tape, unprinted newspaper, and two tape guns. I open the other rather large box and pull out an assortment of brand new boxes that aren’t even taped together yet.

“I’m putting you to work, ma’am,” I say. “I need to pack up this place so I’m ready to move to Vegas.” I gloss over the fact that Gabby’s coming next weekend and I don’t want any baseball shit out. I don’t have much since it’s an apartment that came furnished, but I do have a closetful of clothes, a kitchen full of dishes, and a pantry full of beer.

And a few priceless items of memorabilia that dear ole Mom can help me pack while she's here in town.

Plus, of course, the assortment of schoolwork from my tenure in education.

I tape up a huge box and set it beside her, and then I start heaving the papers she brought me into it. This'll fit nicely in the dumpster once she's gone.

She snatches the noodle paper out of the box and hangs it on my fridge as I continue shoveling the stuff she brought right into the box.

"You're not even going to look?" she whines. "Maybe I should just take it all back home."

"What are you going to do with it? It sat in your basement for the last fourteen years."

She presses her lips together and nods. "That's right. Fourteen years since you graduated high school. Remind me how long your girlfriend has been out of high school?"

I blow out a grunt of frustration. "I thought we were letting that go," I say.

"We are, we are. But it felt like it merited mentioning again."

"You're not okay with it," I say.

"And I don't have to be. As long as *you* are good with it, how I feel doesn't matter. But I do want you to think about one thing. If you're getting annoyed at *me* for bringing it up a second time today, imagine how you'll feel when it's *all* the media talks about once they get wind you're not only playing again, but you're dating someone half plus five."

I press my lips together.

I guess I don't have a response to that.

It's something I'll face when the time comes. Until then... I'm not going to worry about it.

After lunch, we drive to the beach and sit in the sand for a bit, and I think about the things I want to do when Gabby gets

here this weekend.

If we even leave my apartment, of course.

I want to take her to all the places I love here in town, and I feel like we'd have a lot of fun together at a place like Sea World. We can ride the roller coasters and admire the fish, walk around hand-in-hand as we laugh and buy cotton candy and ice cream to share.

I want to take her to the beach, and to my favorite pizza place. I want to show her SFK and all I do there. I want to introduce her to Carla and my friends at work.

But I also don't want to do any of that. I want to spend the entire weekend naked.

"When are you going to officially accept Troy's offer?" my mom asks, breaking into my thoughts as I stare out at the waves.

I glance over at her. "It's kind of fun to make him sweat it out. He wants my answer by September first, so...August thirty-first?"

She smacks me in the arm in jest. "Be nice. If your answer is yes, call him now. Nail it down. Get the contract, and make sure he shows you the money."

"He will. He's a good friend, and he's been in this business a long time. He wouldn't fuck me over that way."

She raises a brow.

"Sorry. He wouldn't *screw* me over that way."

"Better," she says, and I chuckle.

"I'll do it when we get home," I say.

We spend another hour or so at the beach, and once we arrive back at the apartment, I make good on my word to my mom. I sit at the kitchen table and pull up Troy's contact information, and my heart starts to race.

I'm really doing this.

He really wants me to play even though he hasn't seen me pick up a ball in three years.

And I really want to do it. I'm scared I'll fail, but that's a fear in anything in life, not just in being a professional athlete. What if I don't fail? What if I soar? What if it's even better than the first time I did this?

It's a new team, and it'll be a new dynamic—one that he wants me to lead. I love the idea of mentoring young players, of building a team with Troy and creating our own destiny.

I click the call button.

“You got an answer for me, Noah?” he answers.

“I do. Pending contract negotiations, of course, it's a yes.”

“Fuck *yeah!*” he yells, and I laugh. “We're really fucking doing this, man. This is *our time.*”

We never played on the same team. Troy played shortstop fourteen years for the Rockies, and I played my seven years with the Dodgers. The difference between us is that he retired a few years ago, while I was forced from the game due to an injury, and I decided to turn it into an early retirement.

Despite never having played together, we found a friendly rivalry on the field and we became close friends off it. He started taking more and more interest in charity events, and he invited me to many of them over the years. We lost touch for a bit when I stopped playing, mostly because of me. I isolated myself from my friends because I didn't want to hear about how they got to play when I didn't.

But Troy continued to reach out despite my silence. He's a good friend, and even though we don't talk as much as we once did, I'm excited to get back on the field with someone I know will support me one hundred percent in the dugout.

And I'm even more excited to make the move to Vegas...to start my life there and see where Sin City takes me.

CHAPTER 18

COOPER

I took Monday off to spend the day with my mom, but when Tuesday rolls around, I have no choice but to head into the office. I'm not sure what my mom does all day when I'm at work, but she said she'll find things to entertain herself. I'm pretty sure she means walking downtown to find a store to shop in. That's enough to fill her day, I guess.

I'm dreading going to work today. I texted Carla after I spoke with Troy last night. I told her I needed to talk to her in the morning, and I'm sure she's expecting anything but my two weeks' notice.

I knock on her doorframe when I get into the office, and she waves me in.

I shut the door and slide into the chair across from her desk. She tips her glasses down her nose and glances at me over the frames, and she looks a bit like a stereotypical librarian about to scold a loud child.

"What's this about, Cooper?" She presses her palms together in silent prayer. "Please tell me you're not leaving me."

"I'm not leaving you," I say, and she lets out a loud sigh of relief. "But I do need to modify my schedule." I clear my throat. "And location."

"What?"

"This is confidential." I squeeze my eyes shut and rip off the bandage. "Troy Bodine is managing a new expansion team in Vegas. He wants me to play third and I sort of already agreed to it."

Her eyes widen. "You're going back to the game?"

I nod. “I know. The reality of it hasn’t quite hit me yet. And I’m not quitting. I’ll be in Vegas, so I can work on things there with Kaylee. She’s totally overwhelmed right now and could use some extra hands. And I promise you, Carla, I will shout about this program from the rooftops every chance I get. Think of it as free advertising.”

She huffs out a chuckle. “Free advertising, huh?”

I lift a shoulder as I try to lighten the weight of my words. “I need to be back in Vegas September first to start offseason workouts, but I’m happy to train my replacement here.”

“Ugh, your replacement. Don’t you know yet that Cooper Noah is irreplaceable?”

I laugh. “Obviously,” I say sarcastically. “Do you still *need* professional athletes with celebrity status for this position? Or do you think Jamie could take on the whole thing?”

When Kaylee left, the idea was to find a replacement for her, but Carla ended up not really doing that since Kaylee and Ben were taking the program into his fitness clubs. She restructured how we run the office here, but she still uses me as the face of her company. And I can continue to do that from anywhere—I just won’t be able to attend as many in-person events as I do now.

Since I knew I wanted to work with kids after the game, I worked hard to earn a degree in elementary education.

I had several reasons for selecting that as my major. On the one hand, I did it since the classes were filled with hot girls. On the other hand, my mom’s a teacher, and she’s the strongest, bravest person I know. I wanted to be like her.

And then the farm system came calling. I was drafted into the minor leagues my sophomore year of college, and I had to work hard in the off-season over several years to complete my degree. Players around me were working on degrees in business management, but I knew I wanted to work with kids. Maybe not as a teacher, but the degree set a base for my career here at StrongFitKids.

“Jamie could probably do it, especially if you, Kaylee, and Ben would consider splitting duties as our spokespeople,” she says.

“Ben?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at her.

She shrugs and raises her brows. “What? He’s a hot commodity right now, and he’s supportive of his wife. You think I’m not going to capitalize on that?”

“Touché.” I nod.

“But if I move Jamie there, she’ll need help with her current position. You’re not quitting, exactly, but I’d still like you to stay two weeks—until you need to be in Vegas, if that’s okay with you. That way you can go over everything with Jamie and we can work on finding someone to help her out,” she says. “I’ll put up the application today, and if you know of anybody you can recommend, let me know.”

“Will do,” I say. “Thanks, Carla. For everything.”

“I hate to lose you, but these opportunities are once in a lifetime. Just know one of your biggest fans will be watching every gameday and cheering for a W.” She offers a sad smile, and then she says, “Now get out of here. I have a job posting to create and you have work to do.” She sighs. “I can’t believe I’m losing another perfectly good employee to Las Freaking Vegas.”

I laugh, and then she follows me out of her office to announce to the rest of the staff that I’m going to be relocating...but she doesn’t say where or why just yet.

They’ll all find out soon enough.

I call Troy later in the evening after my mom has called it a night. I can tell he’s at the club since I can hear music playing in the background, and I swear that guy practically lives at that place. I’m not sure how he’s going to handle it once he’s back in the game and managing a team. He won’t have the time to do whatever it is he does on the third floor—a place I still haven’t seen. A place I’m not sure I’ll *ever* see.

“Hey, it’s Twenty-One!” he answers. “What’s going on, man?”

I kick my feet up on the handrail on my patio as I let out a chuckle. “I gave my notice at my job today. My boss would like me to hang around a bit to help train my replacement, but I’ll be there September first as promised.”

“September first. Great. I’ll throw a party here at the club,” he says, indicating he’s there right now.

“Maybe just at your place,” I suggest. “I need a few things from you first, though.”

“Name it,” he says.

“A real estate agent, for one. I’m booking a flight out for next weekend to look at places.”

“Done. I’ll text you my strongest recommendation. What else?” he asks.

“Well, if I can’t find a place in time, I’ll need somewhere to live,” I say.

“You’re welcome to stay with me until you figure out where you want to settle.”

I pull my feet off the handrail and push to a stand. “You sure?”

“Of course. What else do you need?”

“Well, since you’re asking, my boss could use some extra hands at StrongFitKids. You know anybody who can help her out?” I ask. “She needs someone who knows something about athletics in San Diego, and my friend working out of Vegas could use some local help there, too.”

“I have a few buddies who retired to the area that might be able to help in San Diego, and I have a daughter who might be interested in helping in Vegas,” he says.

My brows dip. “You have a daughter?” I had no idea, and we’ve been friends for years. But he does seem like the kind of guy who keeps his personal life close to the vest.

Except for sex, of course, which he possibly performs in public on the third floor of his club.

I'm not here to judge anybody who likes to partake in that particular brand of fruit punch, but it's not my beverage of choice.

He chuckles. "Yeah, I do. She's smart, too. So much smarter than me."

"She'd have to be if I'd even consider passing her name along to my boss."

He barks out a laugh. "Fuck off. I'll talk to her and see if she's interested. Any other requests, Twenty-One?"

"That's all I got for now, boss, but I'm sure I can come up with more soon."

"Great. Now get your ass to Vegas. We have a team to build at the draft mid-November after the World Series, and we have workouts to start."

I grin. "Yes sir." I hang up as excitement permeates my chest that he wants me to be a part of the team build. It'll be as much my team as it is his, and there's already a sense of pride in that.

I dial up Gabby next for our nightly chat.

"Hey there Hottie McCuteStuff," she answers, and I laugh.

"Hottie McCuteStuff?" I repeat.

"You should've heard all the names that raced through my head when I first saw you at that blackjack table," she admits.

"I only had one thought in my head when you sat down," I say, sitting back down and kicking my feet back up on the railing.

"Oh? What was that?"

I mimic a robotic voice when I answer. "Hot girl alert! Hot girl alert! Need to get inside her now."

"The voice in your head sounds like a robot?"

"When I see someone as hot as you, yeah. My brain turns to mush and the robots take over."

She giggles. “Well glad I could help bang the robots out of there.”

“You think that’s what happened? Pfft,” I say. “Nah, it’s all mush up there since the moment I met you.” I turn the robot voice back on. “Call hot girl. Get hot girl to San Diego. Let hot girl know how much you miss her.”

“I miss you, too. I’ve honestly been a little bored this week, but Mia and I have gone to lunch a few times, and I’ve been enjoying that toddler dance class. Oh, and Mia is seeing this dude who rented a boat on Lake Mead tomorrow, so she invited me to that.”

“Sounds dangerous. You shouldn’t go,” I tease, mostly because I don’t want some college kids ogling my girl when I’m not there to ogle her myself.

“Yes, Father,” she mocks.

“That’s Daddy to you,” I say, my voice low and gravelly.

She lets out a soft gasp that might be part laughter, part surprise at my words. Honestly, I’m surprised, too. I always thought the *daddy* thing was a little weird, and maybe even weirder since she’s twelve years younger than me. But it slipped out, and she gasped, and maybe it’s a thing now.

She clears her throat. “Whoa.”

“Yeah. Saturday needs to get here faster,” I groan.

“Agreed,” she says. “But you know, we *could* do stuff, um...over the phone.”

I wish we were on a video call right now so I could see the color lighting up her cheeks at her own suggestion.

“Now there’s an idea I like,” I say. “I’m hanging up now.”

“What? You hated my suggestion?”

I laugh. “Fuck no. I’m hanging up so I can call you back on video.”

“Oh sweet Jesus, what can of worms have I opened,” she mutters, and then I disconnect the call.

CHAPTER 19

GABBY

“Hi,” I say a little tentatively as I look at the handsome face filling my screen. My chest races and my tummy flips.

“Hey.”

We just stare at each other a few beats, and I wonder why we haven’t done more video chatting since he’s been gone.

With his mom there, though, I don’t want to bother him.

“Are you outside?” I ask.

“On my patio.” He flips his phone around, and it’s mostly dark but I can see lights in some buildings and a view of total darkness. “That’s the water.” He flips it back around so I can see him again.

“I like this view better,” I admit.

“I like this one, too.”

“So...when I said that, I really thought we’d just, you know, do whatever to ourselves and listen to each other breathe heavily through the phone.”

He laughs. “I want to see your face when you come.” His voice is low and sexy with a little growl behind it. “Are you wet?”

I lift a shoulder. “I’m always wet when I’m with you. Or talking to you. Or thinking of you.” My cheeks burn with the admission.

He chuckles, and his eyes seem to glaze over with lust.

“Are you sure you want to do this outside?” I ask.

“I’m on the top floor of my building. Nobody can see me, and nobody’s out tonight. It’s silent out here, and I’d rather do

this out here in the dark than risk my mom hearing when I come all over my hand in my bedroom.”

“Yeah, let’s not do that,” I say. “So...now what?”

“I assume you’re alone?” he asks.

I nod, and then I get up and lock my bedroom door just to be safe.

“Show me your tits,” he demands quietly. “I miss your gorgeous tits.”

I lift my shirt and flash him.

He chuckles. “Take off your bra and your shirt, and then show me.”

“You first,” I demand, and he lifts his shirt over his head and tosses it somewhere out of the frame. He pans down to those gorgeous abs, and my mouth waters as I think about how good it felt when his weight hovered over me.

I set my phone down, pull my shirt off, and unhook my bra. I toss it to the floor before I pick my phone back up. I pan down to show him my breasts, and he groans audibly through the chat.

“God, those look perfect. Touch one of your nipples for me,” he says, and I do. I pinch it between my fingers, and he moans. “Flick it with your thumb.” I do what he says. “Now reach down into your panties and touch your clit, but keep the phone on your face so I can see how good it feels.”

“First you have to get your dick out,” I say.

He does it, and he shows me the evidence a second later.

“Stroke it,” I demand.

“It’s real fucking hot when you tell me what to do,” he murmurs, and I hear the slide of his hand over the thick, tight skin he just showed me. “Now finger yourself while I jerk off.”

I dip a finger in and close my eyes at the feel of it, his groans in my ear, his face in my sight, and the feel of my own touch making me hot and needy.

“Just like that, baby,” he murmurs, and I drive my finger in and out a few times.

I pull it out to rub my clit, and the feel is almost too good as I listen to him touch himself. I watch the phone as he tips his neck back, closing his eyes for a beat while he pumps his fist up and down his shaft.

“Oh God,” I whisper, rubbing myself faster as the ache starts to build. I wish it was him here doing this to me, but this will work for tonight.

His eyes open as he hears my whisper, and he starts to move his hand a little faster, something I can only tell by the way the phone starts to move.

“Fuck, even in a different state you make me come undone,” he mutters.

“Right back at you,” I moan, and it’s too much, way too much as the pleasure edges in on me. “I’m going to come.”

“So am I. Come with me,” he demands. “Fuck yes, baby. Oh God, yes.”

I let out a loud gasp as the pleasure hits a peak, and we come together, my legs trembling with the brutal force of it, and as soon as the contractions start to wane, the ache is back. It felt good to give myself an orgasm, but it feels far better when it’s him giving them to me.

He grabs his shirt and uses it to clean up his mess, and I grab my shirt, too, pulling it back over my head.

“That was unexpected,” I say.

“It was your idea,” he points out.

I laugh. “Maybe I should have that idea tomorrow, too.”

“Or again in, say, forty-five minutes?” He grins, and it’s so sweet and sexy at the same time.

It didn’t bring us that much closer to Saturday, but it was still a fun way to pass the time.

It’s the only time we do that, in fact, before I head to the airport to board a plane a few days later. The week dragged for

me, including the boat ride where Mia hung out with the boy who invited us and I hung out by myself in a corner wishing Cooper was with me. A few college boys flirted with me, but I had zero interest in flirting back. I let them down gently by telling them I was seeing someone, and we left it at that.

Cooper was busy between training his replacement at work and entertaining his mom while she cooked meals for him. I'm only staying the weekend since I promised the dance studio I'd sub again this week, and then school starts.

I don't know how much time I'll have to spend with him once I have the weight of four senior-level classes in front of me, but school has always come easily for me. If anything, I'll have tons of time on my hands. Maybe I should look for a job, but that might interfere with my internship next semester.

It's why I started helping out at the dance studio. I always loved to dance, and I took ballet all the way through my sophomore year of high school. That was when my mom started pressuring me to look at colleges for ballet, and I didn't want it to be my career. I wanted it to be my hobby.

I taught one class last semester on Thursday mornings when I had an opening in my schedule, but I opted out of that this semester so I could focus on finding an internship to benefit my major.

I'm sure Cooper will find other ways to fill my hours anyway, depending what his new job is.

The flight is only about an hour long, and when I land, I practically race through the airport to get to him. I know he's here somewhere, and it's on the other side of security when I spot him.

He's standing there, black Under Armour baseball cap on his head, jeans and a black t-shirt...and my memory betrayed me. He's even hotter than I remember.

I run across the airport to get to him, and he laughs with an *oof* when I plow into him. He turns his hat backward to lean down to kiss me, and he *really* kisses me good, even dipping me at the end. I'm pretty sure some audience standing nearby

is clapping for us, but I can't be positive since the only thing I'm positive about right now is that I'm back in his arms, exactly where I belong.

The dynamic between us is exactly the same. His kiss is even more intense, his arms hold me even more tightly—everything is kicked up a notch between us including the feelings. Last weekend was about getting to know each other. This weekend is about seeing if the magic we both found last time we were together was an anomaly or if it's still there.

And in the first five seconds he holds me in his arms, I already know the truth.

It's still there, and it's even better than it was before.

"You smell good," he says, pulling back and pressing a wet kiss to my neck as he breathes me in.

"You do, too," I say, pressing a kiss to his cheek where I take in the woodsy scent that's all man and all him.

"Let's get home and get naked," he suggests. He turns his hat back around and nods at my suitcase. "What's in there?"

"Clothes."

"Pfft. Won't be needing those," he says, and I laugh as I smack him in the arm.

We head out to his silver Ford F-150, and he helps me into the passenger seat, lugging my suitcase into his backseat while I buckle in. He drives us toward his apartment, and he's cool and easy behind the wheel, just like he seems to be in every other aspect of his life.

"Welcome to San Diego," he says once we arrive, and I'm curious to see where he lives. It's like I'm getting an inside look at who this guy is after we skimmed the surface last weekend, and I feel like by the end of this weekend, we'll know each other on an even deeper, more intimate level.

I'm not sure what that means or where we take it from there, but I can't wait to find out.

CHAPTER 20

COOPER

I open the door and usher her in first with my hand on the small of her back, and she glances around with a bit of awe.

If she still doesn't know who I am, that's fine by me. But surely she'll have questions given the fact that I live in a luxury apartment with a killer view in downtown San Diego... and, at least as far as she knows, I work with an organization focused on kids' fitness.

She doesn't know about the eighty-four-million-dollar contract over three years I was guaranteed the year before I got hurt. She doesn't know about the money I made before that, either.

This place costs a pretty penny in monthly rent, but it's a drop in the bucket. It feels strange even thinking that considering I'm not really a guy who cares about *things* so much, but I do care about a nice view and comfort. This place offers both, and it's a monthly lease so I can move out whenever I want.

And that appears to be the end of this month.

Everything's already packed thanks to mommy dearest and her Type A organization skills, and the boxes are stacked neatly in the third bedroom. The essentials are all I have left to pack, and I have plenty of time to get the rest before it's time to head to Vegas.

So this weekend is about relaxing with my girl.

My girl.

The girl I didn't even know a week ago.

While the snake trouser is telling me to get her naked, my brain is telling me she'd probably like a little romance before I fuck her until she can't walk straight.

I give her a quick tour of the place, and when we stop in the kitchen, she moves toward the refrigerator to check out the artwork displayed there.

“A noodle baseball?” she asks, and I laugh.

“My mom brought all my papers she saved from when I was in school. The noodle art I made in third grade, a paper on *Jane Eyre* I wrote in high school...”

“Wait a minute. You did this in *third grade*?” she asks, her eyes widening as she looks between me and the noodle baseball.

I clear my throat. “I didn’t exactly win any awards for my stellar artwork as a kid.”

She laughs, but it fades as she stares at it. “Your mom kept stuff like this?”

I nod. “Yeah. Doesn’t everybody’s mom do that?”

She shakes her head, and my chest squeezes for a beat. I take for granted that my mom is thoughtful, kind, and an all-around incredible mom. Gabby didn’t have that, and it makes me sad.

I wrap my arms around her.

“I wish my mom would’ve done stuff like that,” she says quietly.

A pang of guilt stabs me in the ribs. I was planning to take that box filled with all the shit my mom brought me straight to the dumpster, and it took one conversation with Gabby to realize how priceless all that shit actually is. I took it for granted, and I should know better. After losing my dad at such a young age, I should know how fleeting life is, how lucky I am to have the mom I have. And yet, even after spoiling her here with me for the last week, I was less than grateful that she kept all those papers when Gabby would love to have just one ridiculous piece of noodle art from her own childhood.

I hold her in my kitchen for a beat, and then we head out to the balcony. She looks out over my view with a bit of awe. “This is beautiful.”

“Have you been to San Diego before?”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t go on vacations with my mom when I was growing up. She was busy either working or dating. We did some local things, and my junior year we took a class trip to New York City. That was my first time on a plane, and my mom made me raise the money for the trip myself.” She blows out a breath, and I sling an arm around her shoulder as she shares the memory. She slides her hand around my waist, squeezing me closer to her. “By the end of my senior year, I knew the best option for me was to get out of Denver, away from her, and then I found my dad. It was perfect timing. What about you? Did you travel much?”

“We’d drive up to Wisconsin Dells every spring break when I was a kid. My parents love to travel, so they had something planned for every summer break and every winter break. We were almost never home on New Year’s Eve since we’d be on an adventure somewhere in the days after Christmas.” I smile fondly at the memories of my childhood. My mom did her best after Dad died, but money was a little tighter as she raised two boys on her teacher salary, so mostly we went to the Dells, oftentimes with her parents tagging along.

“What’s Wisconsin Dells?”

“It’s a place known for water parks and all sorts of different entertainment. It’s changed a lot since I was a kid, but we used to go to Noah’s Ark and race down waterslides all day, then we’d go next door and battle it out on the mini golf courses as our sunburns started to peek through. We’d stay at some seedy old hotel that always smelled like smoke and mildew, but it was walking distance to the park, and we’d go across the street to Pizza Pub for a late night dinner.” I stare out over my view of the water. This is sure a long way from Wisconsin, but there aren’t any places quite like the Dells out here.

“Oh wow! We didn’t have anything like that by us in Denver. You and your brother would battle over mini golf?”

I chuckle. “All four of us would battle. I was the youngest, and I never won, but I always spent the entire time with a

stomachache from laughing so hard. Time with my family always meant a great ab workout.”

“Must be how they got to be the way they are today,” she muses, and I chuckle. “So where else did your family go on vacations?” she asks.

“Oh, we went anywhere and everywhere. Before my dad passed, the trips that stick out the most in my memory besides the Dells were to Disney World, Disneyland, Hawaii, South Carolina, and Nashville.”

“Do you like to travel?”

I nod. “I love it.” And I do it—a lot, and I will even more once I’m playing again. But my time to actually tour the cities I’m traveling to is limited. We get a decent amount of free time if we’re not warming up, working out, sleeping, or rehabbing, and I made it a personal goal a long time ago to visit at least one landmark or museum and to try a new restaurant in every city I travel to.

I get that wanderlust from my dad. He loved museums, and when I was a kid, I found them boring as hell. I wish I could get those years back.

“You’re quiet,” she murmurs. “What are you thinking?”

I pull her a little more tightly into my side. “I’m thinking it’s a little scary how well you already know me.”

She wraps her other arm around me to hug me from the side. “You’re thinking about your dad, aren’t you?” Her voice is soft, and I lean over and press a kiss to the top of her head.

“Yeah. He’s been gone twenty-three years, and I miss him every day.”

“He’d be proud of the man you’ve become,” she says.

“I like to think so.” I press my lips together as emotion plows into me.

Stacy never once brought up my father, and Gabby is bringing him up a week after knowing me. She’s asking about him...asking about *me*. She cares about *me*, the guy who

works with kids and might move to Vegas to accept a job offer.
She wants to be with *me*, not the All-Star MVP third baseman.

It's a breath of fresh air.

She is a breath of fresh air.

And I don't want to stop breathing her in.

CHAPTER 21

GABBY

This place is pretty sweet for a guy who works with a kids' fitness organization for a living.

I know that's not what he does, exactly, but I can't imagine he's making big bucks from his current place of employment. At least not enough to finance this fancy apartment—and he knows I'm smart enough to figure that out.

I decide not to ask. He'll tell me when he's ready. I'll tell him I already knew, and then we'll just move forward from there.

I have to admit, though, I'm curious as to *when* he's going to admit what he used to do.

I get the sense he likes keeping it in his past, though I'm not exactly sure why. From what I gather about his ex-girlfriend based on snippets here and there, I can't help but wonder whether she was with him because of his job, not because she actually loved him.

I imagine that happens far more often than it should in his former industry, and my heart breaks for him that someone would treat him the way she did. He's such a good guy. He didn't deserve that.

He ordered up lunch from the restaurant inside his apartment complex, and we eat out on the balcony. I've been here at his place for an entire hour already, and neither of us has even brought up sex yet since we've been so busy talking.

The snarky voice inside my head reminds me to tell Mia that we made it past the first hour without sex, but even if we didn't, it wouldn't have made a difference to me.

That flame burns bright, and each passing second we spend together, it gets more and more dazzling.

Once we finish lunch, we take a walk and end up at a cute little area with restaurants, shops, and bars that Cooper refers to as the Gaslamp Quarter. It's only about a ten-minute walk from his place, and we find ourselves strolling along, hand-in-hand as we duck in and out of shops. He wears his hat pulled down low as usual, we steal kisses on the sidewalk, and we stop in one dive bar for a drink before we head back to his place.

On the walk back, he nods in the direction we just came from. "Another few miles that way is my office."

"Have you talked to your boss yet?" I ask.

"Oh, Jesus. I forgot to tell you." He snaps his fingers—the ones on the hand that isn't holding mine. "It was that day we had phone sex, and then the week just got away from me. But yes, I talked to her. I told her I'm moving to Vegas, but I'll still be able to help out from there."

"How will you be able to help from Vegas?" I ask. He hasn't told me much about what he does, just that it's some organization and he gets to work with kids and help them become stronger and more athletic.

"It's a long story."

"I'm here all weekend," I joke.

"When I first started working at StrongFitKids, the company partnered with the San Diego school district to promote healthy and active lifestyles for kids. I had a co-programming director, but she relocated to Vegas. When she moved, she proposed this idea to rework the program we were using in schools to get it into fitness clubs—so kids could go there while their parents worked out in the adult area. Her husband owns a chain of fitness clubs in Vegas, and she started it there. It's been really successful so far, but Kaylee's gotten really overwhelmed with all the work. Plus she just had twins in January, so she could use some help in Vegas since it's growing so quickly. And Carla could use some help here in San Diego, too."

“I’m looking for an internship for next semester,” I say. “I might be able to help out with your Vegas friend if there’s any sort of marketing angle to it.”

He considers that for a beat. “I’ll talk to her. I have a buddy whose daughter might be interested in helping out, too, but I’m still waiting to hear back from him.”

“Let me know. My advisor told me on Monday it’s never too early to start looking for opportunities. I think my dad might have something for me, but it doesn’t hurt to come up with a few options to make Dr. Foley happy.”

We arrive back at the building and head upstairs after a quick stop to a corner market so he can pick up some Slim Jims because, according to him, the four he has left feels like a really small supply, and as soon as we get inside, he kicks the door shut behind me and backs me up into it, his eyes dark with lust as he stalks his prey.

His lips slam down to mine, and we kiss in his foyer until I’m completely breathless. He is, too, and we both pant as his lips drag from mine down to my neck. His scruff is rough against my skin, a reminder that this isn’t just some dream but I’m really here with him.

His hips drive against mine, and I feel his erection against my side.

“I need you,” he says, his voice low and gritty and full of longing. “I love every second I get to spend with you,” he says, kissing my neck some more as I lean my head back to give him more space to work with. “Clothed or naked. Talking or silence. Laughing or not. But you’ve been here six hours, and right now, I need to fuck you like I need to take my next breath.”

Whoa.

I gasp at his words, and my only response is to jump up, wrap my legs around his waist, tighten my arms around his neck, and press my lips to his as this kiss in the front hall turns from hot to intense. “Fuck me, Cooper,” I say, my voice breathless and hoarse and needy.

He lets out a little growl at my words then grabs on under my thighs. He carries me toward his bedroom, his mouth connected to mine the entire way. He sets me down on the bed, reluctant to let me go but doing it simply so he can start stripping off his clothes. I do the same from where I perch on the bed, tossing my shirt and bra in a pile on the floor as I kick off my shoes then shimmying out of my jeans and panties.

I lie back naked on the bed, and he pauses in his movements, his jeans unbuttoned but not pushed down yet, those gorgeous abs of his smiling over at me.

“Christ. Am I the luckiest guy in the world or what?” He stalks over toward me again, and he settles in between my thighs, his jeans still on. I wrap my legs around him as he presses a soft kiss to my lips, and my clit rubs right against the rough fabric of his jeans.

I moan at the sensation, and he rocks his hips toward mine, brushing against my clit again.

I cry out this time, and he breaks our kiss to offer a salacious smile down at me. “My girl likes that,” he murmurs, and he does it again as I tilt my neck back and push out my breasts, a clear invitation for him to do what he wants to them.

And does he ever.

He sucks a nipple between his lips then laps at it with his tongue, driving his hips toward me and hitting that magic spot over and over again.

I’m so close, so damn close to coming, when he stops. He moves off me, finally stripping off his jeans, and I pant as I impatiently wait for him to return. He grabs a condom and rolls it on, and then he moves back toward me, settling in between my legs again.

“We’ll take our time later, okay?” he asks softly, and I nod.

He lines up his cock and slides into me.

“Fuck, that’s so tight,” he mutters, and his lips find mine. He pulls back and looks at me, his eyes connecting with mine as he stills inside me.

A hot beat of intimacy passes between us, his blue eyes focused on my green ones, nothing between us except a condom, both of us here and present in this moment as emotions course through me in the stillness.

How can I possibly love somebody I just met?

It doesn't make any sense.

It defies logic.

And yet...I feel it.

My pussy seems to contract all on its own, goading him into movement as his eyes stay on mine. I close mine as he pulls back and pushes in.

"Eyes on me," he demands, and why is that so freaking hot?

My eyes open and focus on him again.

"I'm going to go hard and fast now, okay?" he murmurs, and I nod.

And then he delivers.

Hard. And. Fast.

And holy fuck, it's unlike anything I've ever experienced in my life.

My chest tingles with butterflies and my stomach flips as he rocks my body thoroughly and vividly, the heat between us palpable and the intimacy thick all around us.

He hammers into me, long, strong drives, pushing himself all the way to the hilt before pulling out, over and over, his eyes on mine as I start to see his cloud over with the need to come. Watching it all unfold as I hang on for dear life at the intensity of his body slamming into mine is something I'll commit to memory and dream about for the rest of my life.

I lose my mind as everything around me starts to fade away except Cooper and the way he makes me feel—not just physically, though that's certainly topping the list at the moment, but also emotionally, and spiritually and mentally and every other pillar of health that exists. I force my eyes to

stay on his as my climax slams into me with brute force, my body quaking as it hits the peak. With anyone else, it might feel awkward...but this is Cooper, and nothing has *ever* felt awkward with him. It's been natural since the moment he patted the chair next to him and told me he'd teach me how to play blackjack.

And it's as I'm coming in that state of numbness, my mind and body lost to the pleasure, lost to *Cooper* himself, that the words come out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"I love you."

His face contorts as he loses his mind, too, and as he comes, my cheeks flame with the juvenile words that escaped my mouth. I study his face, his beautiful face with the sexy, masculine scruff, the blue eyes that are so pure, so kind, so beautiful, the straight nose and the perfect jawline, the light smattering of lines that prove more than a decade stands between us. I study those lines and admire them for every laugh he's laughed, every smile he's cracked, every frown he's made, every emotion he's ever felt, and when his thrusts start to slow and his cock stops twitching inside me, he drops a kiss to my lips, and then he buries his face in my neck.

"I love you, too," he whispers, his breath warm near my ear, and tears fall from my eyes as I feel like this is the type of love people wait their whole lives for. The type of love people dream about and pray for and long for.

I only hope we can carry this feeling well past these first two weeks and hold onto each other through whatever the future may bring.

CHAPTER 22

COOPER

It was a blissful weekend that was far too short, and she cried when I dropped her at the airport.

I'll be honest. My own eyes burned when I had to pull away knowing she was flying out of my reach.

Carla tracked down a replacement for me through Troy's recommendation, and she tapped former outfielder for the Padres and homerun hitter Tim Williams. I've met him at several different events, and I have no doubt he'll be a great spokesperson for local events. Plus he has four kids, and they're all in the San Diego district, so he's already somewhat familiar with the mission.

So now I just have to see if I can work something out between Gabby and Kaylee, and then Gabby and I might have opportunities to work together.

Maybe it's a little crazy to even be considering that, but I know what I feel, and this is way more than just some fling.

When she said the words, I felt them in my chest.

We didn't say them again over the weekend apart from that one time, and her words came out in the blissful moment when her body was racked with pleasure, but it didn't matter. There they were, and she couldn't take them back.

I wouldn't let her even if she tried.

It was the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me.

With my ex, she said the words so often they lost their meaning.

When Gabby said them, it was because she *felt* them. She was in the moment, living and breathing that feeling, and the words just fell out of her. It was pure and beautiful, and that's how I knew it was genuine.

And when I leaned down and buried my face in her neck, it was so she wouldn't see the emotion in my eyes. I'm not an emotional man. I tend to be incredibly even-keel off the field. On the field...that's a different story. I'm passionate, and I feel things, but there are only two times I can remember feeling enough emotions to cause me to cry: at my father's funeral and when the doctor told me I'd need surgery that would take a year to recover from and I might never play baseball again.

The first was tears of sadness. The second was tears of frustration.

And when Gabby said those words, this strange sense of relief filled my chest that I wasn't alone.

She made me feel like I'll *never* be alone again because I'll always have her by my side.

We've known each other a sum total of eleven days. It's too early to be thinking that way.

But I'm also a firm believer that people are put in our paths for a reason.

It took me a long time to see why Stacy was put in my path. In fact, I'm not sure I fully realized it until this moment.

I wasted five years on her.

I knew she was wrong for me from the start, yet I continued to chip away and try to make it work.

I should've listened to my gut.

And that's the reason she was in my life. To learn that lesson.

To listen to my gut.

To not waste any more time.

I want to be with Gabby. She wants to be with me.

We can take it fast, or we can take it slow, but the end result will be the same either way. There's no other choice.

The week drags as I get busy training Tim and spending my post-work hours at the apartment complex gym. I'm not out of

shape, exactly, but I'm also not in playing shape, but I remember the rebuilding process from my playing days. I'm in the phase that comes before training to train, a place I refer to as Phase Zero. My goal is to start running five times a week and to do a total body workout three times per week. Then I'll take the weekends off to rest...or, better yet, to work on my endurance in other areas.

Wink, wink.

I drive to Coronado Island to run on the beach since the scenery is nicer than the workout room at my complex. I see Gabby everywhere I go, including on the small island where we went out to dinner Saturday night before driving to Torrey Pines State Park to stargaze in the back of *my* truck this time.

I start to change my diet, opting to only eat pizza once per week and getting back on the lean meats and veggies I used to eat.

I'm feeling a difference already, and even though I'm exhausted by the end of each day, I still call Gabby before I head to bed.

"I hate to cut this short, but I need to go to bed," I say with a yawn on Thursday night.

"Can I ask you something?" she asks, and she sounds a little nervous.

"Anything," I say.

"Are you...avoiding me?"

"*Avoiding* you? Why would you think that?" My brows dip as I rack my brain to figure out some reason she'd ask that.

"Well, we said *The Big Thing* last weekend, and this week it just feels like you're rushing through our calls and you're not texting me throughout the day...I don't want to sound juvenile or needy, but you set the expectation early and I feel like you're fading away."

My chest tightens.

I feel like shit that I've made her feel this way.

“No!” I say, vehemence in my voice. “No, that’s not it at all. I’m training a new guy at work to take my place, and I’ve been spending time away from work, uh...prepping for my new job. I’m wearing myself out, that’s all. My feelings for you haven’t changed, Gabby.”

“I just keep thinking how I’m going to start school and you’re going to start a new job, a job you still haven’t told me about, by the way, and I don’t know...I guess I’m just feeling insecure. The distance is hard when you’re still getting to know someone, but the feelings don’t go away, you know?” she asks softly, baring her very soul to me with her words.

I wish I could hold her in my arms right now. I wish I could kiss her and show her that nothing has changed. “I have never felt like this in my life, and your ass better be at the airport waiting for me tomorrow at exactly seven twenty-six so I can take you back to my hotel room or to your place or just to the back of your truck and fuck you until you can’t walk straight.”

A soft laugh falls from her lips. “I’m still sore from last weekend,” she admits, and I chuckle.

“I’m sorry, Sunshine,” I murmur. “I’m sorry I made you feel like I’m fading. I promise, that’s not what this is, and I appreciate you being honest with me.”

“Okay. And let’s go with your hotel, by the way. My dad will flip out when he finds out I’m dating someone twelve years older than me.”

“Oh great,” I mutter. “Something to look forward to.”

“You have no idea,” she says. “So listen, when do I get to hear about this new job?”

I’ve been thinking a lot about when to spring it on her, and I still think the best time to do it is to just take her to the stadium and show her in person like I told my mom. “I haven’t officially signed the contract yet, but I’m supposed to meet with my new boss September first to make it official.”

“So you’re telling me you quit your job, you’re coming to Vegas this weekend to look at places to live...and you haven’t even signed a contract yet?” I hear the disapproval in her tone,

and it's just one more thing to love about her. The way she asks the hard questions will prove challenging in the future, I'm sure, but it'll also keep our relationship strong and healthy. "Cooper Michael, that's a terrible idea."

I laugh. "Normally I'd agree with you, but the contract and salary negotiations are purely a formality at this point. My boss and I used to be really tight. He's a good friend, someone I could see becoming my best friend in Vegas, and it's a done deal."

She clears her throat. "Um...what now? *Who* is going to be your best friend?"

I laugh at her teasing. "You, of course, but what am I going to do when you have a big project due and you want me out of your hair so you tell me to just go have a boys' night out? This way I know who to call."

"I guess I can let that slide."

Our conversation returns to lighthearted teasing, and it's the dynamic where I find my cheeks hurting from smiling so widely.

I love how this girl makes me feel, and I can't wait to get her back in my arms—and my bed—tomorrow.

CHAPTER 23

GABBY

School starts Monday, and traditionally the weekend before it starts is filled with on-campus parties and shenanigans. It's something we've looked forward to every year...something my friends will participate in this year.

But I just can't muster up the enthusiasm to go to college parties when Cooper Freaking Noah is in town.

I don't give a shit about the shenanigans taking place on campus when Coop and I can get into some private trouble of our own.

And so when I pick him up from the airport, the group text chat with my closest friends is going bananas. They're setting up where and when to meet, and meanwhile I ate dinner an hour ago and sat around twiddling my thumbs until an appropriate time to leave for the airport to pick him up.

I glance at my watch. It's seven twenty-five, and a text comes through.

Cooper: *Landed! [airplane emoji]*

Me: *I can't wait to see you. [kiss emoji]*

Cooper: *I can't wait to get you naked. [eggplant emoji]
[waterdrops emoji]*

Me: *I really like how you don't beat around the bush.
[eyeroll emoji]*

He writes back with a laughing emoji, and then I wait as patiently as I can until I see the familiar black Under Armour baseball cap pulled forward and low over his eyes.

My tummy flips as thrills start to dance along my spine.

My body seems to have the same reaction every time I see him, but it gets more and more intense each time. The feelings

of love are starting to edge out the lust, but both are fierce.

If you didn't know you were looking for him, he'd be just another hot guy walking through the airport. But I know who he is. Intimately. And even though there are still parts of himself he hasn't shared with me—and I him—I still feel like I know him in a way nobody else in this airport ever will.

I mean...assuming he's never banged a flight attendant.

We haven't really gotten into our histories where that's concerned, and I still haven't Googled him to learn more, but Mia has informed me that he was a player in more ways than one back in the day. It sounds like it was before his time with his ex. And he wears that ballcap all the time in public, so I assume people know who he is. I just don't want to know his past since I'm enjoying who he is now.

We all have histories, and he can share his with me whenever he's ready. And maybe that'll be the same time I'll be ready to share mine with him, too. My recent history, anyway. I've been pretty open about the other stuff.

His eyes lift to mine across the airport, and I can't help it. I spring into a sprint and launch myself into his arms, and he laughs as he catches me this time, prepared for the impact. His lips immediately collide down to mine as everything seems to tilt back to the way it's meant to be.

"God, I missed you," he says, his voice raspy and low against my mouth. He pulls his lips from mine and buries his face in my neck like he's trying to get as close as he possibly can to me, and I simply wrap myself around him and hang on for the ride as much as I decently can in public, still unsure how it's possible to feel so completely whole again with him when we're still at the early stages of this.

But that's the thing. I'm here to hang on for the ride, whether it lasts one more week or one more lifetime.

"Let's get to my hotel," he suggests, and I nod. We walk out of the airport hand-in-hand toward my truck, and I weave through traffic, racing to get to Caesars Palace where Cooper's staying again.

After all, it's where we first met when we were playing blackjack together, and it's a place I will forever associate with him regardless of what happens between us.

I have a feeling I'll always look at this landmark with hearts in my eyes and the fondest memories.

I leave my keys in the car, collect my valet ticket, and head with Cooper toward his room, bypassing the check-in counter since he already took care of that whole process digitally while I drove.

He waves his phone in front of his door, and it magically unlocks. We walk in, and he abandons his suitcase in the middle of the entry, instead stalking toward me. Thrills shoot up my spine. I am so ready for this, ready for *him*.

Last time we spent half the day together before we got naked. This time, it's about half a second after we enter the privacy of his hotel room. To be honest, I'm a little surprised we made it this long and didn't just get naked in the back of my truck.

It's with lightning speed we both shed our clothes, and we stand naked together making out in the middle of the room. He booked a suite with a view, and the bed is located in a room to the left. I don't care if we do it on the bed. Hell, I'll opt for doing it up against the hotel window if that's what he wants.

He must read my mind.

"Go put your palms up against the window and bend over for me," he orders, his lips inches from mine, and I love the needy edge to his demand. He kisses me once more before he lets me go to submit to what he just requested, and I stand with my ass up in the air, my palms against the glass, and my tits on display for everyone outside to see.

We're on the twenty-fifth floor in the land of hotel rooms and blinking lights, so it's not like anyone can actually *see* us, at least not without binoculars. But the thrill of it is ever-present anyway, the thought that someone could be watching as Cooper slams into me in our most private, intimate moments, and something about that makes this even hotter.

The ache between my legs becomes unbearable as I wait for his touch, and it's featherlight at first, his fingertips tracing down my spine and along the curve of my ass.

My pussy aches for him, and I'm certain I'm wetter and more ready for him than I've ever been for anybody in my life.

He leans down and peppers soft kisses along my spine, and then he sits on the floor and leans up against the window. I look down at him, and he's looking up at me, lust in his eyes along with a gleam.

"Sit on my face," he says.

"What?" I ask.

"Lower yourself down, use the window for balance, and *sit on my face.*"

Dear. Lord.

I've never had a man ask me to sit on his face. I don't even know what he means by that, but I lower down all the same.

My thighs tremble as I'm basically doing a squat over him, and I feel his tongue as it swipes through me before sinking inside me for a beat. He moves it up to suck on my clit, and then he inserts two fingers.

And then my thighs *really* start to tremble.

"Oh God!" I cry out, bracing my arm against the window and bracing my head on my forearm. I look down at him.

He pulls back to peek up at my face, his fingers still driving into me, and he grins. "My name's Cooper, but you can call me whatever you want."

It's cheesy, it's adorable, and it's so freaking sexy all at the same time.

He pulls his fingers out and dips his tongue into me again, and then he really goes to town, licking and sucking and doing something magical that I've never experienced before. "Fuck, you taste good," he says, and he continues doing what he's doing, but my legs can't handle it.

"Cooper!" I gasp. "I can't—I can't—I can't—"

I can't form a sentence, apparently.

He chuckles as he pulls away, and then he moves out from under me, and I straighten then collapse on the couch beside us. I watch him as he pads across the room toward his suitcase, and he opens it, locates a condom, and rolls it on as he walks back across the room toward me. "I'll take you up against the window before this weekend is over, but I don't want your legs giving out on you," he says once he's hovering over me.

I don't have time to form actual words since he chooses that moment to slam into me. My eyes roll back at the feel of him again, of *this* again, and I was seconds from tipping over the edge while he ate my pussy, so my climax is nearly immediate once he's back inside me again.

He keeps going, riding out my orgasm with me, and then he slows his pace, luxuriating in the feel as the pulses over him start to wane. He keeps thrusting, making love to me, and I swear I see fireworks as he goes.

Once I've come back down, he starts to pick up speed again. He leans down to suck one of my nipples into his mouth, and I feel the crescendo start to build all over again.

This has never happened to me before.

Usually I'm a one-orgasm-per-night kind of girl, not multiple in the same few minutes.

But Cooper Noah has experience that trained him well. He knows what he's doing when it comes to my body. I'll gladly let him lead me into my second orgasm of the night. Hell, I'll gladly let him lead me pretty much anywhere when he has me in his clutches this way.

"Fuck," he hisses, drawing out the word, and just the sound of his voice and knowing that he's deriving that pleasure from my body is enough to kick me into my second one.

"Wait for me," he murmurs. "I'm almost there." He picks up the pace, slamming into me, and I can't hold it off. I'm desperate to come, greedy to soothe the brand new ache pulsing inside me, and then he growls, "Now."

We both moan through the intensity, the two of us in sync as our bodies vibrate and throb with racking pulse after pulse of pleasure. And when it's all over, when our bodies start to calm, he pulls out and collapses beside me, the two of us panting and sweating after the workout that just wrung us both out.

The *best* kind of workout.

"Let's just stay here all weekend," he suggests sleepily.

I giggle. "Didn't you come to town to look at houses?"

"I'll just stay with my boss."

"Is he cool with you bringing women over?" I ask.

"Well, he's part owner of a sex club, so yeah, I think he'd be okay with it," he says. He shifts so he's leaning up on his elbow, his eyes moving toward mine. "And let me clarify. Not women. Woman. One. Singular. I'm almost thirty-three. I'm allowed to bang my girl."

"The one singular woman thing is cute, but back the truck up a sec," I say, my brows knitting together. "What's this now about a *sex club*?"

He chuckles. "That's what you picked up out of all that?"

"I said the other thing was cute," I protest. "Sex club. Explain yourself."

"I have nothing to explain," he says, his hand moving to his chest in defense. "The dude invited me to this club he owns. The first floor is part nightclub, part..." He trails off as he searches for the words. "I don't know. Part lounge with pool tables and these leather wingback chairs where big men can talk business." As he says the last part, he lowers the pitch of his voice to mock the very men he's talking about. "The second floor is basically a high-rent strip club, according to my buddy. I stuck to the first floor when I went. But the third floor..." He trails off again, and this time he shakes his head.

"The third floor?" I press.

"From what he said, it's six private rooms that are basically suites with big beds and plenty of sex toys, and then there are

four rooms that aren't so private with either windows or two-way mirrors and little viewing areas where voyeurs can sit and watch." He lifts a shoulder. "To each their own, and I won't be a killjoy, but I feel like sex should be a private thing between two people."

"Two things here. One, let me just say that I agree completely and I'm so glad we're on the same page. I'm also glad to hear you didn't actually go on the third floor. Or the second, for that matter. And second, just so you know, *killjoy* is an old man word. Now we say either *buzzkill* or *don't yuck someone else's yum*," I tease.

He laughs, and then he tackles me, peppering kisses on my naked body as I laugh right along with him. "Maybe I should take *you* to the sex club."

"If it means I get to have sex with you...I'm in."

CHAPTER 24

COOPER

“This one’s gorgeous, Cooper,” Gabby says as she twirls around in the kitchen.

It’s spacious, I’ll give it that, but the location isn’t exactly what I’m looking for...and neither are all the nail holes in the walls from the previous owners. Honestly, I think I’m after a new build at this point.

The realtor, a dude named Paul that Troy recommended, gave me the addresses and had his assistant unlock them for me ahead of time to give me privacy to look around. I appreciate not having someone hovering over us, and even more, I appreciate not having someone talking baseball stats with me the entire time we’re looking around.

Gabby drives while I navigate from the passenger seat to the next one and the next, and I text Kaylee to see if she knows of any new builds in the area.

Kaylee: *Yes! My brother is in real estate development in the off-season, and I can check with my sister-in-law to see what spec homes are currently available.*

I thank her profusely for the help, and she texts me a handful of addresses shortly after that, telling me her sister-in-law, Kate, happened to be on site and unlocked a back door for us to check them out as long as we promised to turn the handle lock on our way out.

Done and done, I texted back, and we drive toward the first address.

On the way there, she pops a question completely out of the blue. “Are you excited to start your new job?”

I press my lips together and nod. The more I’ve thought about it, the more excited I’ve become. I’m at a point where

I've finally wrapped my head around the fact that this is real. It's actually happening.

"Are you excited for your senior year to start?" I ask.

She sighs and stares out the windshield. "I am."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm just a little scared, I guess," she says.

"Of what?"

"Of things changing between us. I'll get busy with classes, and you'll get busy with your new job. Then I'll be working an internship that hopefully leads to something full time, and who knows if I'll even find something here in town? What if we lose this dynamic between us?" she asks.

I glance over at her, and then I reach over and grab her hand. I squeeze it in mine. "We won't lose the dynamic, Gabby. We can't. When it's this strong, it's impossible for it to be any other way."

She nods, but she's quiet the rest of the trip.

The community Kaylee sent over is gated, so I read the gate code to Gabby once we arrive. A large iron gate swings open, and she drives slowly through the neighborhood as we look at the mansions in here. They're spaced apart so every lot is enormous—perfect so I can put up some batting cages in the backyard—and they're situated on a hilltop with a view of the Strip not so far away in the distance.

We pull into the driveway of the first address Kaylee sent, and Gabby squeals. "Oh my God, Cooper, this is freaking incredible!" Gone is the melancholy mood that fell over us for a beat, a reminder that we can talk about the fears, but ultimately that's all they are. Fears. We just have to hold hands and conquer them together as they plow across our paths.

I have to admit...the curb appeal of the first house is pretty fucking sharp. The driveway and sidewalk leading to the front door are white travertine, and the entire house is a pristine white. Desert landscaping is already planted, and it looks like

it's close to being finished and nearly move-in ready. I click the link Kaylee sent me and read the features aloud.

“This one is six bed, eight bath, and fifty-five hundred square feet. All the bedrooms have ensuite bathrooms. They're putting in a pool out back along with an outdoor kitchen and a full basketball court, and inside there's a gourmet kitchen, upstairs and downstairs wet bars, dedicated office spaces with custom built-ins and bookshelves, an exercise room, and a huge two-story fireplace in the living room.”

“Isn't that a little...big for you?” she asks.

“It's ridiculously huge for one person, but I'd like to have space for when my mom comes to visit or my brother and his family,” I say. “And, you know...I'd like this to be a permanent move, so I want space to grow into should the right time come.” I chance a glance over at her, and her eyes are sparkling as she catches my drift.

I can see us in this place just from staring at the imposing black security door, and as we get out of my truck and walk around the house to the door Kaylee said would be unlocked, I get the sudden feeling like I'm already home.

Maybe it's the Gabby effect, of listening to her oohs and ahhs with each new feature we discover, or maybe it's because I really can see myself moving into a place like this with her.

As we walk through the house, that feeling only intensifies. Everything in the place is black, white, and gray, a perfect balance of monochrome that just somehow works. Despite the cold, raw colors, the place is filled with warmth.

And then we step out onto the balcony off the primary bedroom upstairs.

Holy shit.

I stare out over the hills and into the distance, where I have a perfect view of the entire Strip from Mandalay Bay on one end all the way to the tall tower of the Stratosphere at the other end. It's fucking magical in the daylight. I can only imagine what this view would look like at night.

Included in that view is the House, the nickname for the brand-new stadium built for the brand-new team.

I guess this one will be close to work.

“Wow,” Gabby breathes beside me.

“What do you think?” I ask.

“I think it’s too much, but I think it’s absolute and total perfection.” She glances inside at the primary suite. “I can see myself spending a lot of time here.” She winks over at me, and I chuckle.

“Sold.”

“And bonus, it’s close to my dad’s place, too, and not too far from campus,” she says.

I pull her into my arms. “Total bonus.” I drop my lips to hers. “And there’s a market within walking distance in case it’s three in the morning and I’ve had a few drinks and I’m running low on Slim Jims.”

She giggles.

I glance around again. “I’ll just text Kaylee and let her know I want this one.”

“Don’t you want to look at the others?” she asks.

I shake my head. “Not really, but I did promise I’d lock the doors, so we can go check them out.”

The other two she sent me are beautiful homes, but my gut instinct was right. The first one is *the one*, and I let Kaylee know that immediately while Gabby drives us back toward the Strip.

Me: *I want the first one. I locked up the other two, though.*

Kaylee: *Your decisiveness is out of character. [wink emoji] Glad you’ll be close. I’ll let Kate know.*

Another one comes through before I get the chance to reply.

Kaylee: *She said it’ll be ready to close by September thirtieth. Does that work?*

Me: *I need to be back in town the first of September, but Troy said I can stay with him.*

Kaylee: *You can stay with us, too. If you don't mind twin girls who don't give a shit if you're in the bathroom.*

Me: *Thanks for the tempting offer, but I'll stick with Troy.*

Kaylee lets me know that Kate will be in touch with the paperwork. I text Troy next to let him know I found a place but that it won't be ready until the end of September, and his reply comes quickly.

Troy: *The offer to stay with me is still on the table. I have plenty of space.*

I thank him, and he tells me that a draft of my contract is waiting in my email.

My chest tingles with anticipation as I quickly open it and scroll to the number on the bottom line.

My eyes widen.

It's more than I thought...and yep, I can definitely afford this place.

Ninety million over three years.

The next three years of my life, I'll be playing baseball again.

I'll be thirty-six when the contract is up.

Three years is enough time to build a brotherhood. To lead a team. To give this everything I've got.

I forward it to my agent for a quick review.

"The contract for my new job is in my email," I say nonchalantly even though excitement courses through my veins.

"And?" Gabby asks.

"And I think I'm about to start the adventure of a lifetime." She glances over at me with her sunshine smile, and that pretty much seals the deal.

CHAPTER 25

GABBY

It's another weekend come and gone way too soon, and I find myself leaving the airport as Cooper boards a plane Sunday evening after yet another tearful goodbye.

My dad isn't home when I get there, but his cook left some dinners in the fridge. I settle on a salad and add some chicken to it, and I stare out the window as I eat by myself.

I'm my dad's only child—that we know about, at least—and he tells me how I'm the puzzle piece that's always been missing from his life. He regrets not being there in my childhood, and he's been good to me since we found each other. We've gotten very close in a very short amount of time, but he's busy with tons of different business ventures.

And now he'll be embarking on the busiest one of all. He's excited, and I'm excited for him, but I already miss having him around. It gets lonely in this big old mansion, but as I stare out at the view that's similar to the one in the house Cooper's going to purchase, I can't help but think maybe I won't be living here much longer.

It's a little early to think I'll be moving in with Cooper once he's in town, but he hinted at it, and I did, too. It's the path we're traveling, and I think we both see it coming sooner rather than later. My only reservation still is that he wants kids—and soon. I'm not there yet. I'm not even out of school, and I always imagined I'd work a few years to establish myself in a career before I settle down with kids.

Cooper texts me when he gets home, and I know it's time to focus on school. I open my class schedule and start reading through the materials in preparation of classes tomorrow.

When I set up my class schedule for this semester, I created an ideal schedule. I have no classes Thursday or Friday, I don't

start on Monday or Wednesday until ten, and I'm done by early afternoon every day. It's a great schedule in terms of having a long weekend and having plenty of time to get my classwork done throughout the week, and it's also a great set-up for snagging either a job or that internship I'll need for next semester.

Or, you know...plenty of time for Cooper Noah.

Mia and I chose two classes to take together, so I'll see her on Mondays and Wednesdays in Global Consumer Behavior and on Tuesdays in Leadership and Management Skills.

My first class on Monday morning is a marketing one, and it meets for seventy-five minutes. It's a tedious first class where we go over the syllabus and play icebreaker games that are pointless given that I know the majority of my classmates since we've been in the same cohort for our major for years. We get our first writing assignment, one I'm confident I'll be able to knock out in a few hours, and then I have a fifteen minute break before heading to my second class of the day—the one I have with Mia.

She's already waiting for me, and I slide into the open seat beside her.

"How was your morning?" I ask.

"Eh," she says with a shrug. "First day means the same old shit in every class."

"Same," I admit. And then Dylan walks in, and he sits on Mia's other side. Her attention moves to him. Mine moves to my phone, which I pull out to text Cooper, and I find one from him already waiting for me.

Cooper: *Good luck on your first day. Miss you.*

Me: *Thanks! Just about to start my second class.*

Cooper: *How was the first one?*

Me: *Boring. Syllabus and icebreakers, just like every other first day of every other college class.*

Cooper: *I've got syllabus and an icebreaker for you.*

Me: *Why does it sound sexual when you say it?*

Cooper: *Because it IS sexual when I say it. [wink emoji]*

The professor starts talking, so I reluctantly put my phone away.

But I want to hear more about that icebreaker Cooper has in mind.

I'm having a hard time focusing on much of anything this week as Cooper's move-in date looms closer and closer. I run home from classes, eat, and immediately get my work done so my weekend will be clear.

We talk every night, but his daytime texts have been limited as he finishes training his replacement and starts working on the new role he'll take on with his company once he's in Vegas.

It's on our Tuesday night call after my second day of classes when he says, "I talked to Kaylee, and she said she'd love to have you come help out. But I think she's more interested in actually meeting you than in having you work for her."

I wrinkle my nose even though he can't see me. "I'm nervous to meet your friends."

"Don't be. They're pretty awesome."

I let out a nervous giggle. "I'm sure they are if you chose them to be friends with, but they're going to judge the years between us."

"So? We've already determined it doesn't matter to us. Besides, Kaylee's only like twenty-four, and she's already married with two kids. Her husband is a decade older. If anyone will understand, it's the two of them."

"Okay, okay," I grumble. "Still, it's scary to meet the friends, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. I lucked out that I met yours the night we met."

"Truth," I say with a giggle. "So when can I meet her?"

“My boss invited me to his place Thursday night, but maybe we can plan a dinner Friday if they’re not busy.”

“I’d love to,” I say. “What time is your thing with your boss?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll talk to him, and I’ll be staying at his place, too, but let me get there and make a good impression before I start inviting you to stay the night.”

I laugh. “Deal. But make your good impression fast because it’s either your boss’s place or my dad’s house, and neither really sound like a good option.”

“Maybe I’ll rent a room for the month at Caesars so we can stop by whenever we need some private time,” he suggests, and there’s a sexy, desperate edge to his tone.

“I think that’s a great idea for the month of September. Or we can just, you know, put that camping mattress to good use in the bed of my truck,” I suggest, and I hear the desperation in my own voice, too.

He chuckles, and it’s a raspy sound that sends an ache pulsing between my thighs. “I better go or this is going to turn into another night of phone sex and I need to finish packing up my kitchen since my storage pod is arriving tomorrow, and you need to finish writing your paper due tomorrow.”

“All right, buddy. But be warned. I’ll be ready to put that camping pad to good use once you’re back in Vegas.”

“So will I,” he promises, and we say our goodbyes.

Only a few more days until he moves here. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to concentrate on which global consumer behavior I want to change about myself when all I can think about is Cooper.

CHAPTER 26

COOPER

The drive from San Diego to Vegas is a little over five hours, and I pull up to the address Troy gave me a little after six at night. I took a half day for my final day at StrongFitKids' San Diego location, and we spent most of it eating celebratory cake and talking about what I'll be doing with Kaylee in Vegas. I'm excited to work closely with her again, excited to be close to Ben, too, excited to get back into the game, and most of all, I'm excited to live in the same town as Gabby.

So when I passed over a hill and the famed Las Vegas Strip came into my view, my heart started beating faster. That view is home now—especially given that it's a similar view to what I'll see when I sit on my balcony at my new house in another month.

The same view is in sight from Troy's place, which is only about a mile from my new place—he's a mile closer to the stadium than me. We're both close enough that it won't be much of a commute, convenient given that the field is where we'll spend most of our time once we're in season and not traveling.

And that convenience store that's within walking distance of my place is the mid-point between our houses. I stop just to grab a few Slim Jims, and sure enough, there's a big display of them right beside the register.

I tell the cashier to keep them fully stocked since I'll be in quite often.

I suck in a breath.

This is it.

I'm really doing this.

I talked to my mom for an hour on the way here.

I blasted Dave Matthews Band for the other four hours.

I allowed a few Taylor Swift songs in the mix, too, and I thought about Gabby the entire time, imagining her dancing across the room as she belts out the words to the songs.

My life is about to change. There's no way around that. I'm finding myself suddenly in a committed relationship with a girl twelve years younger than me. I'm getting back into the game. I'm moving over three hundred miles from what's been home for the last few years.

There will be highs and lows with these changes, of course. That's just part of life. But right now, everything's looking pretty damn rosy.

I ring Troy's bell, and the door opens a few beats later. Troy stands there, a glass of whiskey held out in greeting. "Welcome to Vegas, man," he says, and I take the offering from his outstretched hand.

"Thanks, boss."

"Come on in," he says. He glances down at my suitcase beside me and the duffel bag slung over my arm. "You got more in the car?"

I shake my head. "All my shit is packed up on a pod that's being parked in the next day or two in some storage facility a few miles away. I'll be living out of my suitcase until my house is ready."

"Well, mi casa, su casa. Make yourself at home, and help yourself to anything you'd like." He opens the door wider to allow me in. "Let me show you your room."

He takes me through the mansion, and I recall him mentioning a daughter, but apart from her, nobody else appears to live here. Nobody else is home, either.

"A few others who will be working with us are coming over in a bit," he says as he shows me the bedroom where I'll be staying. It has a king size bed with nightstands on either side, a desk and dresser, an ensuite bathroom, and a balcony

with a great view—all I need, really. “My daughter’s room is right next door, so try to keep your bachelor shenanigans to a dull roar when she’s home.”

I laugh as I think about Gabby, and sometimes we just can’t help it...we’re not quiet when we’re in the heat of the moment.

“I’m not so much the bachelor anymore,” I admit as I roll my suitcase to one corner and set my duffel down on the bed.

“Oh?” he asks.

“I met a girl when I was in town for our initial meeting. It’s been a fucking whirlwind, but...yeah, I think it’s safe to say I’m officially off the market.”

“Good for you, man. I’m off the market myself. My better half, Joanie—at the club, she goes by her last name, Sapphire—and I have been in a relationship for a while now. It’s probably about time to introduce her to my daughter, but it’s complicated,” he says.

I offer a wry smile. “Aren’t they all?”

“Doesn’t sound like it was for you,” he points out.

I shake my head. “Nah. It came really naturally, actually. There’s just something about her...it’s like I’ve known her my whole life and we were both just spinning our wheels until fate brought us into each other’s orbits.”

“Good for you, man. I know you had it rough with Stacy.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “You have no idea. This girl’s a breath of fresh air. She’s warm and kind, and...” I trail off, and then I glance over at him.

He fills in the rest. “And she’s a fucking animal where it counts?”

“Top notch.” I make a circle with my thumb and forefinger.

He raises a brow. “You sure you don’t want to bring her to the third floor of my club?”

I chuckle. “Thanks for the offer, but we’ll pass.”

“It’s on the table if you change your mind. Let me show you around the place,” he says, and I follow him around his house. He shows me the kitchen, the family room, the workout room, a game room, and the massage room. It appears to be a totally normal house—something I questioned in my mind after learning about Coax, but since his daughter lives here, I imagine he keeps his extracurricular activities limited to the club.

He takes me outside last, and he shows me the killer batting cages he has set up out there along with a gorgeous, luxury pool that I could spend hours relaxing in.

“I think this’ll do for the next month,” I admit, and he laughs.

A catering service arrives shortly after that, and while they set up for the party tonight, I set to unpacking in the room where I’ll be staying for the next few weeks.

I text Gabby, too.

Me: *Just got to town. Wish you were here and wish I could see you tonight but I have no idea how late this party’s going to go.*

Gabby: *I wish I could see you, too. I’m planning to just stay at Mia’s until late, but let’s meet for breakfast in the morning. Work for you?*

Me: *If by “breakfast” you mean your body, yep, that works for me.*

Gabby: *Did you figure out a hotel room situation yet or are you cool with bringing me over to your boss’s place yet?*

Me: *Camping pad, back of your car. I’m sure we can find a dirt lot somewhere. Or we can sneak into my house if there aren’t any workers there.*

Gabby: *Lol YES. I keep thinking about that balcony off your bedroom and how you could just bend me right over it...*

Me: *If this party’s over early, I’m calling you for phone sex. No way I’m waiting until morning to rub one out.*

Gabby: *I'm down for phone sex, but if I'm still at Mia's, I'll have to go out to my truck to do it.*

Me: *Works for me. Then I can picture you doing that to yourself every time we get into your truck. That's hot as fuck, Sunshine.*

Gabby: *I'm cool with allowing you to let that live rent free in your head.*

I laugh out loud, and then we say our goodbyes. I head down to see if Troy needs my help with anything, but it's already done, and a few guys have already shown up.

The party celebrating my contract is underway, and it feels like the kickoff event for many, many more fun evenings to come.

CHAPTER 27

COOPER

I haven't been this drunk in a long time.

We've been drinking straight whiskey all night while I've been on a beer kick the last couple years, and we've eaten our weight in finger foods and appetizers. We've moved onto playing poker, the other guys are smoking cigars, something that never appealed to me, and we're laughing. Loudly and heartily.

I'd estimate there are around fifteen or twenty guys here, some who I've met before and others who I haven't, and we're already building the sort of brotherhood that comes with working together for a common goal.

Most of the men here are from either the coaching staff or the front office staff. While our team draft isn't for another two months, Troy has already managed to sign a bunch of free agents, a couple who showed up tonight. I know most of the coaches here from when I played, so the majority of the night has been spent really just catching up with old friends.

It feels good. It feels *right*, like I've landed in the place where I'm supposed to be...like it doesn't matter that I haven't played in the last three years. It'll all come back exactly as it's meant to, and that's been a big theme of my night here.

Guys head in and out as they go outside to smoke cigars, the heat of Vegas swooping in every time the door opens or closes. I'm facing away from the door, too wrapped up in my poker game to worry about who's walking in or out, but by midnight most of the guys have left and the last of the poker tournament is down to Troy, Aaron Jacobs, Holden Thatcher, and Jeremy Bardot, three of the free agents Troy already signed.

Holden goes all in, and that's when my cockiness rears its head. I feel good about my pair of queens, so I call him even though it'll wipe me out if I lose.

He flips his cards, and he's got a full house.

My queens look weak in comparison, but I laugh it off, pay the man the money I owe him, and call it a night.

I have phone sex to get to, after all.

I stumble up to my room, trying to remember which one's mine, and I set my hand on a doorknob before I remember that was the daughter's room. I move to the next door, open it, and I'm elated to find I chose the right door.

I leap onto my bed and grab my phone.

She answers on the first ring. "Hey, Captain."

"God, you sound sexy. You should come over right now."

She giggles. "Are you drunk right now?"

"Maybe a little."

"Ooh, this'll be fun." She giggles. "I've never had phone sex with a drunk Cooper before."

"Are *you* drunk?" I demand.

"No. Mia had a boy over so I ducked out early and snuck back home even though my dad's got some friends over. I snatched a seltzer from a big tub of alcohol and snuck up to my room, but I'm definitely not drunk."

"Was it boat boy?" I ask, and she giggles.

"It *was* boat boy. I felt like a third wheel, so I bolted early. My dad's old friends are still downstairs, so I put on my earbuds to drown them out and now I have you in stereo in my head."

"That's hot. But now you're home, so my fantasies of you fingering yourself in the front of your truck will have to live on in my imagination."

"Correct. But I'm open to doing it in person for you if it's really a fantasy." Her tone is sly and sexy and Jesus Christ,

when did I get in so deep with her?

Oh, right. The moment I met her.

“You’d do that?”

“I’d do anything for you,” she breathes.

Her words speak directly to my cock once again.

“Where are you now?” I ask.

“My bed.”

“What are you wearing?”

“You want the truth or the fantasy?”

I laugh. “Whatever story you want to tell.”

“Black lingerie with a garter belt and straps holding up my thigh-highs. But I’m not wearing any panties under the garter belt.”

My cock strains painfully against my jeans as I close my eyes and picture it in my mind.

“What are you wearing?” she asks.

I glance down at my faded jeans and plain Under Armour shirt. “No shirt, just for you, and gray sweatpants you can definitely see the Captain through.”

“Oh, God,” she whimpers as she pictures it. I love that I do to her the same thing she does to me.

“Since you’re not wearing any panties, slide your finger through your pussy for me, baby,” I murmur.

She must do it, because I hear her soft moan over the line. “Reach into your gray sweatpants and play with your balls,” she demands, and she’s no longer tentative when she issues instructions over the phone.

Fuck, that’s hot.

I touch my nuts, and then I stroke myself. “I can’t help it,” I say. “I’m fisting my cock now as I imagine your hot little mouth.”

“Mm,” she groans.

I hear a knock on the wall beside me. I guess Troy's daughter's back home. It takes me out of the moment for a beat, and I move away from the wall and over to the desk chair just in case someone's in the room next door.

"Take off your bra and touch your nipple," I demand.
"Pretend it's my hands on your body."

I hear some rustling through the line, and then a soft moan.

I love the sound of her moans. I love knowing that she can touch herself and imagine me doing it. I love that she can be so completely herself with me. I love *her*. "Now finger yourself while I jerk off, and let me know how good it feels."

"Oh, God, Cooper," she moans. "I wish it was you. God, I wish you were here."

"So do I, baby." I fist my cock and squeeze the head before pumping the shaft. "So do I." I pick up speed, listening to her soft sighs and moans as she does the same thing to herself, as we listen to each other move toward the brink of climax.

"Faster," I say, and we both pick up the speed even more.
"I'm close. Rub your clit for me."

"Oh God!" she practically yells, the sound forcing my orgasm to wash over me way too soon. The white jets stream onto my hand as I think about her touching herself and picturing me.

I grunt through my climax as I listen for her moans through the line, and when we're both finished and panting slightly, neither of us says anything for a few beats.

"Damn," I eventually say, breaking the silence.

"Yeah," she agrees. "I can't wait to do that in person."

"Neither can I. I need to go wash my hands. Are we still on for breakfast?"

"Absolutely. Let's meet at Kings Diner at nine, okay?" she asks.

"I'll see you then. Sweet dreams."

"Same to you," she says, and we end the call.

I sag back into the chair for a beat, but then I really do need to wash my hands.

The hangover that hits me in the morning is accompanied by slight regret, but I'm seeing Gabby for breakfast, and that's enough of a motivator to get me out of bed.

Damn. I can't drink like I used to.

I fumble my way over to the shower, and I feel a little better after breathing in the steam. If I don't get a move on, I'm going to be late for breakfast.

I run a hand through my wet hair after my shower, grab a pair of athletic shorts and another Under Armour tee, and head down to the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee before I run out the door to meet my girl.

When I get down to the kitchen, a young woman is bending down as she looks in the bottom drawer of the fridge, which I assume is the freezer. Her ass is sticking up in the air, and I assume this is Troy's daughter. Out of respect for both my girlfriend who I'm meeting shortly and Troy, I glance away.

"Dad? Is that you?" she yells from its depths.

"No," I say tentatively, my mouth dry from the hangover. "It's your dad's houseguest."

She straightens and whirls around to look at the stranger in her kitchen, and when she does, she gasps as a hand moves to her chest. I suck in a sharp breath as a shot of disbelief darts through my chest.

My wide eyes meet her even wider eyes.

"What are you doing here?" we say at the exact same time.

"Oh good, you two have met," Troy says as he saunters into the room. "Cooper, this is my daughter, Gabriella."

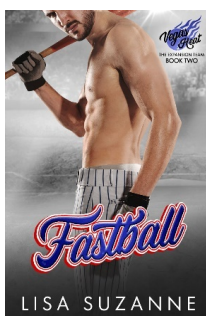
Oh fuck.

This has to be some sort of joke...or some sort of nightmare.

It can't be true.

Gabby is Troy's daughter?

To be continued in Book 2, [FASTBALL](#)



kindleunlimited

It was over as quickly as it started...or at least I *thought* it was.

But as it turns out, I can't stay away. Life keeps throwing us together, and it seems like she's everywhere all at once.

She's in the same house as me, in the bedroom next to mine as I dream about what she's doing in there.

She's interning at the baseball stadium when I'm there to focus on the game, and her boss has assigned her to shadow me as we work on a project together.

She's out at the same bar with her friends when I'm out with mine. And don't even get me started on the guy sitting next to her...

I can't keep fighting against this thing between us, but the fastballs keep flying at me, and I don't think we have a choice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'll save my acknowledgments for the final book! I can't wait for you to see what's coming.

*xoxo,
Lisa Suzanne*

Don't miss a thing! Sign up for Lisa Suzanne's Newsletter:
[CLICK HERE.](#)

Join Lisa's Reader Group on Facebook: [CLICK HERE](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Suzanne is a romance author who resides in Arizona with her husband and two kids. She's a former high school English teacher and college composition instructor. When she's not chasing or cuddling her kids, she can be found working on her latest book or watching reruns of *Friends*.

AUTHOR LINKS

[Newsletter](#)

[Amazon](#)

[Web](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Reader Group](#)

[Instagram](#)

[TikTok](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Pinterest](#)

BOOKS BY LISA SUZANNE

THE VEGAS ACES SERIES

[Home Game \(Book 1\)](#)

[Long Game \(Book 2\)](#)

[Fair Game \(Book 3\)](#)

[Waiting Game \(Book 4\)](#)

[End Game \(Book 5\)](#)

[The Complete Series](#)

VEGAS ACES: THE QUARTERBACK

[Traded \(Book 1\)](#)

[Tackled \(Book 2\)](#)

[Timeout \(Book 3\)](#)

[Turnover \(Book 4\)](#)

[Touchdown \(Book 5\)](#)

VEGAS ACES: THE TIGHT END

[Tight Spot \(Book 1\)](#)

[Tight Hold \(Book 2\)](#)

[Tight Fit \(Book 3\)](#)

[Tight Laced \(Book 4\)](#)

[Tight End \(Book 5\)](#)

VEGAS ACES: THE WIDE RECEIVER

[Rookie Mistake \(Book 1\)](#)

[Hidden Mistake \(Book 2\)](#)

[Honest Mistake \(Book 3\)](#),

[No Mistake \(Book 4\)](#),

[Favorite Mistake \(Book 5\)](#),

MY FAVORITE BAND STANDALONES

[Take My Heart](#)

[The Benefits of Bad Decisions](#)

[Waking Up Married](#)

[Driving Me Crazy](#).

[It's Only Temporary](#).

[The Replacement War](#)

[The Complete Collection](#)

[CLICK HERE FOR MORE](#)

