



# DIBS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

KIMBERLY KNIGHT  
RACHEL LYN ADAMS

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RACHEL LYN ADAMS

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DIBS

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**From *USA Today* bestselling authors Kimberly Knight and Rachel Lyn Adams comes a MM forced proximity friends to lovers gay for you standalone romance with on-the-road secret hook-ups.**

SOMETIMES, AN UNEXPECTED NIGHT CAN CHANGE EVERYTHING  
...

It's said that college is where you try *things* and eventually find yourself. Chase Matthewson hadn't expected to *experiment* with his roommate and fellow teammate, Gage Statler, but a drunken night at a party led them to the same bed. Before either of them could wrap their heads around what happened, Gage suffered a devastating injury and left college.

With no closure, the two put *that* night behind them and never spoke of it or to each other again. They both moved on, married women, and started families. Chase lived out his dream of playing professional baseball while Gage found different ways to fulfill his passion for the sport.

Years later, both men find themselves divorced, focused on fatherhood, and not looking for another long-term relationship. But what they don't know is that the past is about to bring them together.

Gage starts coaching Chase's son's travel ball team, forcing the former roommates to come face to face and finally acknowledge their secret hookup. When the team moms joke about calling dibs on the hot coach, Chase wants to tell them he called dibs first.

## CHASE

TURNING AROUND IN THE DOORWAY, I TOOK A MINUTE TO LET it sink in that this would be the last time I stood in a clubhouse as a major league baseball player.

It had been a wild twelve-year run, but it had come to an end. It felt as though I was losing a piece of myself. Maybe I was. But at the same time, I would be gaining something priceless: more time with my kids. Things were going to be different for all of us. Jase was eleven and Cammie was seven, and they were used to me being home only half the year.

At the end of the previous school year, my ex-wife, Jamie, moved with Jase and Cammie to San Diego. It was the perfect time because Jase would be starting middle school, and we knew I would retire at the end of the season. When Jamie and I divorced five years ago, she agreed to stay in Denver where I played for the Rockies so I could see my kids during baseball season. Since I was retiring, we chose to move back to California where Jamie and I were from. I didn't grow up in San Diego as she had. My hometown was in Long Beach, but since Jamie and I had an amicable relationship, I'd decided to move further south. It was the least I could do since she'd stayed in Colorado to let me live out my dream.

I'd sold my house in Denver earlier in the season and closed on a beachfront four-bedroom home in Del Mar, just north of San Diego, a few weeks ago.



Taking a deep breath, I turned and walked out the door and headed toward the players' parking lot. I was the last to leave, having needed some time to process everything, and the moment I pushed the steel door open, my children rushed over and engulfed me.

“What are you two doing here?”

“We were waiting for you.” Jase beamed.

I looked to where Jamie was standing a few feet away. “They insisted on waiting for you since it was your last game.”

“If I'd known you were waiting, I would have hurried.”

“Mommy said to give you some time,” Cammie replied, her arms still around my waist.

I smiled down at my seven-year-old. “Thank you for that, baby girl, but you should be in bed.”

It was close to midnight, and I'd assumed I would see them for breakfast at the hotel the following morning because that was what we'd discussed before the game. The three of them had flown in from California to attend my final games and the retirement party Jamie had planned for me. I'd had no intention of having a celebration, but when Cammie insisted I have one because she wanted a party—with ponies—Jamie offered to set it up, minus the horses, of course. I wasn't going to turn down her offer and disappoint my little girl. Plus, we invited friends I hadn't seen in a few years, and I was looking forward to catching up with them.

“Mommy said we can sleep in since we will be up late for your party tomorrow,” my little girl advised.

“Is that so?” We headed toward my car.

“It's not every day their father retires.” Jamie grinned.

“Well, let's get you two in bed. I'm not the only one with exciting days ahead.” I winked at my son.

“I can't wait for you to watch me play,” he replied.

Before the three of them moved to San Diego, I would catch Jase's baseball games if my schedule allowed, but I

missed most of them. Since I was going to have more time on my hands, we signed Jase up for a fall travel ball team. To help him make friends after their move, he had played summer ball with the same team and I had yet to see any of his tournaments.

“I can’t either.” I squeezed his shoulder before unlocking my Lexus LX SUV with a press of a button on the driver’s side door.

They needed a ride to the hotel since they had taken a rideshare to the field. Everyone piled into the car and I cranked the engine, immediately turning on the seat warmers. With each passing day heading into mid-October, the nights became colder and colder.

“I’ll tell you this”—I turned to Jamie—“I’m not going to miss the snow.”

“Totally,” she agreed, strapping on her seatbelt.

“Coach Stat said it’s going to be in the eighties in Phoenix.” Jase beamed.

“That sounds amazing.” I backed out of the parking spot.

“Are you bringing your swimsuit?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s in my suitcase, buddy.”

After my party, we were heading to Arizona for his baseball tournament. To outsiders, we probably looked like one big happy family since Jamie and I had been determined to remain friends after we’d separated. We’d met at UCLA during my junior year and her sophomore year, dated for two years, and married in the fall of my debut season with the MLB after she graduated. We were married for seven years, but we mainly stayed together because we had Jase and Cammie right away. In the end, me being on the road a lot was hard on Jamie and she wanted a marriage where her husband was home every night. Funny thing was, we were both still single because she had yet to find anyone to settle down with and I’d never looked.

Once we arrived at the hotel I’d been staying at since selling my house, I handed my keys to the valet and followed

Jamie to her room to tuck the kids into bed.

“Drink before you go?” Jamie asked as she closed the door to the bedroom part of the suite.

“Sure.” I went to the minibar and grabbed a small bottle of whiskey for myself and a mini bottle of champagne for her. After pouring the alcohol into glasses, I handed my ex-wife her drink, and we sat at the dining table.

“It’s crazy this day has finally come,” she said as we clicked our glasses together.

“Yeah.” We took sips of our drinks. I’d hoped to win the World Series in my last year, but the Rockies hadn’t made the playoffs, so tonight’s game ended without fanfare, just a farewell. It was okay though because I’d had a distinguished career. I was a three-time All-Star, two-time World Series champion. I had four Gold Gloves and a Silver Slugger Award. Plus, to go out without a major injury was, in my eyes, just as good as winning the pennant in my last season.

“The kids are excited for you to be home every day.”

“I am too, even though home will be in a strange town.” I snorted.

“If they can get used to it, so can you.”

“I know.” Being in an unfamiliar place wasn’t necessarily new to me because I hadn’t always played for the Rockies. I was drafted by the Phillies right after Jamie and I started dating. I played for their minor league team for two years before being traded to Denver and making my big league debut with the Rockies. When I hit a grand slam during my first at bat, I became a fan favorite.

“And you know Jase is excited to show off his MLB father.”

I took another sip of my whiskey. “Tell me about this Coach Stat.”

Jamie grinned ear to ear. “Well, he’s hot.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not what I mean.”

“I don’t know.” She lifted a shoulder. “He’s the coach.”

“But is he good?” I knew the summer ball team had won one of their tournaments, but I didn’t know the specifics. That was all going to change and I couldn’t wait to be a more involved father finally.

“Yeah, of course.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” I gulped down the rest of my drink, made more small talk before saying goodbye to my ex, and then went to my room down the hall.

---

TAKING ONE LAST LOOK IN THE MIRROR, I STRAIGHTENED THE blue and gold paisley tie Cammie had given me for Father’s Day and then left my hotel room to meet everyone in the banquet room we had rented for my party. Jamie had instructed me to be the last to arrive. As I made my way to the first floor, my nerves took over. I could play nine innings in front of fifty thousand people and not bat an eye, but walking into a room filled with my close friends and family was a little overwhelming.

The moment I walked across the threshold, cheers and claps filled my ears. I smiled widely, giving a little wave before my children rushed over and wrapped their arms around me. Once we let go, I shook hands with people and said my thanks as they congratulated me on an epic career.

“Great to see you guys!” I greeted my old teammates, Aron and Drew, as I gave them quick hugs.

“My husband would never miss a party,” Drew stated.

“I wasn’t sure since you have these two little ladies.” I peered down at their twin daughters, Reese and Jolene who were almost a year old.

“You know, I thought the older they got, the easier it would be,” Aron said. “But even though we’re weeks from their birthday, it’s not getting any easier. It was much better before

they started walking at ten months and getting into everything.”

I bent down and smiled at Reese, who was a few minutes older than her sister. “Not these two beauties. They can’t be any trouble.”

Aron scoffed. “It’s been a while since you had a baby.”

“True, but my son is going to be a teenager soon and if he’s anything like I was, I’m going to have to take the door off his bedroom.”

“Full-time fatherhood is the best,” Drew said, clapping me on the shoulder as I stood. “You’ll see, and so will my husband eventually.” Drew winked at Aron.

Aron played for the San Francisco Giants and they’d made it to the playoffs. After the current season, he still had one more to go before he could retire. I wondered if he would because before he’d met Drew, baseball was all Aron knew.

“I’m looking forward to it. Jase is playing fall ball and I can’t wait to teach him everything I know.”

“Are you going to coach the team?” Aron asked.

I shook my head slightly. “Don’t think so. My ex said the coach seems good.”

“They might want you to be an assistant coach since you’re *The Chase* Matthewson.” Aron beamed.

“Or they’ll think I’m old and washed up.” I chuckled.

Jolene took that moment to run off, her sister Reese on her tail, followed by Drew.

“For me, I can’t wait to coach these girls. It’s going to be epic.” Aron rushed off to help his husband before I could respond. I smiled remembering how only a few years ago, the two men were at each other’s throats.

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MY RETIREMENT PARTY HAD BEEN A BLAST, AND I DRANK more than I should have, but my family had a plane to catch so I couldn't sleep in like I longed to do.

After leaving my car key with the front desk for the shipping company that would be delivering my vehicle to California, the four of us took a rideshare to the airport.

"Dylan said they'll be at the pool when we get there. Can we go to the pool?" Jase asked as we stood in line at security.

"Who's Dylan?" I asked.

"Coach Stat's son and my best friend."

"Best friend already?" I teased. "It's only been a few months."

My son rolled his blue eyes. "Yeah, my best friend."

"Then I guess I need to get extra friendly with your coach." Jamie had failed to mention Jase and the coach's son were friends.

"Why?" Jase furrowed his brow.

"Don't you spend a lot of time with Dylan?"

"Yeah."

I smiled warmly. "Then I can't show up his father."

Jamie tsked. "You better be nice."

"I am nice," I argued.

"Don't be one of *those* parents." She rolled her eyes.

"I'll try not to, but you know I know more about the game than any coach." I grinned and placed my shoes into a bin.

"Coach Stat knows you're coming," Jase chimed in. "And he said he was looking forward to meeting you."

"Then I'll be on my best behavior."

I didn't think I would be one of *those* parents—the ones that had an opinion about every little thing—but the more we talked about Coach Stat, the more worked up I became. Maybe I was jealous because I would love to coach my son but hadn't

thought much about it since I had only been looking forward to seeing Jase play. Aron had mentioned it, and deep down, I wanted to teach my kid everything I knew.

I supposed there was always spring ball.

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A FEW HOURS LATER, THE PLANE TOUCHED DOWN IN PHOENIX and after we got our bags, we took a car to the hotel where the team was staying.

“Dylan is at the pool. Can we go, huh? Can we go?” Jase asked.

The heat felt nice on my skin and chilling in the pool sounded like fun. I couldn’t remember the last time I had been swimming with my children since my off time had been during the brutal winters in Colorado.

“Yeah, buddy. Let’s go change.”

“Don’t wait for us,” Jamie said, as she took her key to her and Cammie’s room next door. “We’ll meet you two there shortly.”

After helping the girls with their bags, Jase and I went to our room next door to change into our swim trunks and then headed to the pool. He was giddy as he bounced up and down in the elevator.

“Excited to see your teammates?”

“I guess.” He shrugged, but I knew better. He was amped up to play with his friends.

We walked into the pool area and Jase took off toward his friend, calling out his name. Dylan was standing next to who I assumed was his father—the coach—and as the man turned around, my steps faltered.

Coach Stat was Gage Statler, my old college roommate.

My old college roommate I ...

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

## **GAGE**

ALTHOUGH IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF OCTOBER, IT WAS STILL warm in Phoenix. The desert heat was a lot different from the weather we had on the Southern California coast. My sons, Tyler and Dylan, had been wanting to swim since we'd landed, so after checking into the hotel and grabbing some lunch, we changed and headed to the pool.

As soon as we walked through the gate, Dylan rushed off toward one of his teammates, who appeared to be with an older sibling. Not seeing any other parents out yet who I needed to greet, I followed Tyler over to a couple loungers on the other side of the pool.

At fourteen years old, he thought he was too cool to hang out with his younger brother. He didn't play baseball and only attended the tournaments with us because his mother often wasn't available to have him stay at her place during the weekends, which was fine since I enjoyed having my boys with me.

It had been the three of us for most of their lives since my ex, Lisa, and I had divorced ten years prior. We'd been high school sweethearts but took a break when I left to attend UCLA. After getting injured during my freshman year, I transferred to Cal State San Marcos and Lisa and I got back together. A couple of years later, we found out she was pregnant with Tyler. We married, had our sons, and then



divorced, all in the matter of a few years. We shared custody, but Lisa's priorities had never been our family, so the boys spent most of their time with me.

"When is Heather going to get here?" Tyler whined as he plopped onto a lounge chair near the pool's deep end.

"Later this evening. She should be here in time for dinner."

He rolled his eyes.

"What's wrong? I thought you didn't mind her coming on this trip."

Heather and I had been dating for six months, but I'd only introduced her to my boys about two months ago. She had attended a couple of Dylan's local games, but this weekend was the first time she was traveling with us. Unfortunately, she couldn't fly in until the evening due to prior work commitments.

He shrugged. "It's fine she'll be here. I just think she's annoying."

If I'd learned anything as a parent, it was that kids could be brutally honest. "How so?"

"I don't know." He sighed heavily. "She always tries to make things about her and wants to be the center of attention. It's just ..."

"Annoying," I finished for him. "Yeah, I get it."

I understood why Tyler felt that way about Heather because even I found her antics over the top sometimes. She definitely preferred to be in the limelight. Her career as a news reporter was perfect considering she could talk to anyone and loved having all eyes on her. And for a kid—especially a quiet one like my son—her extroverted personality could be interpreted as annoying.

Over the next thirty minutes, more families arrived. As Dylan and I were chatting with a parent, someone shouted my son's name. I spun to see Jase Matthewson running toward us, and my gaze was drawn to the man behind him.

The man I never expected to see again until I learned I was coaching his son.

Chase Matthewson was wearing sunglasses, but I could still feel his eyes on me as he neared. Judging by his halting steps, he hadn't known his former college roommate was his son's baseball coach. Or if he did, he didn't expect to run into me so soon.

I'd had plenty of time to prepare to see Chase again. Jase was extremely proud of his father and talked about him often. I'd said nothing about knowing who Chase was beyond his role as a famous MLB player. Instead, I had waited to see if Jase ever mentioned that his dad knew me, but it'd never come up.

"Hi there." I stuck my hand out to shake his, trying to act as though running into him after seventeen years wasn't a big deal. "Glad you could make it this weekend."

He hesitated for a moment before grasping my outstretched hand. "Uh ... yeah. Me too." There was an awkward pause as he released my grip. "I didn't realize Stat was short for Statler."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't have expected you to remember me anyway." I rubbed a hand against my sweaty nape.

His brow furrowed. "You wouldn't expect me to remember a former teammate and someone I shared a dorm with for half a year?"

"Wait a minute!" Jase looked between his father and me. "Dad, you know Coach Stat?"

Chase nodded with a small smile. "Yeah, we played baseball together at UCLA."

"No way. That's so cool." Jase turned to my son. "Did you know our dads knew each other?"

Dylan glanced between us with wide eyes and shook his head. I hadn't realized it would be such a big deal.

"By the way, I remember *everything*," Chase said, low enough for only me to hear.

I swallowed hard, trying to find a response. Did he mean he not only remembered me, but he remembered *that* night? Thankfully, more parents converged on our group before I could reply. Everyone was excited to meet former MLB star, Chase Matthewson.

Stepping away from all the fawning, my phone chimed with an incoming text.

Heather: Landed, babe. I'll be there soon!

Maybe once she showed up, I'd be too distracted to worry about my old college roommate.

---

“WHERE ARE WE GOING FOR DINNER?” HEATHER PEEKED around the corner of the bathroom door.

My gaze moved from the ESPN commentators on the TV to her. “At the restaurant downstairs.”

She frowned, her auburn hair dripping from the shower she'd just taken. “Really?”

“Yeah, the team thought it would be easiest to meet there so everyone could get the boys back to their rooms at a decent time.”

She stepped back into the bathroom, and I heard the blow dryer turn on. I was surprised she didn't reply or complain about not going to a fancy restaurant.

“How much longer, Dad?” Dylan griped from the door of our connected rooms.

“As soon as Heather's ready, we'll head down.”

He rolled his eyes, and I couldn't help but wonder if he felt the same way about my girlfriend as his brother did. Still, I didn't ask him about it. The awkwardness I'd felt with Chase was enough of an issue for one weekend, and I didn't feel like dissecting my relationship on top of it.

Forty-five minutes later, we finally entered the restaurant, and the hostess led us to where our group was seated in the back. The table was full except for the four chairs next to Chase and his family. Dylan hurried over and took the seat next to Jase. Tyler sat next to his brother, which left the two seats across from Chase and Jamie for Heather and me.

“Hi there. Sorry we’re late. Heather just got in a little bit ago.”

Jamie smiled. “You’re not late. We’ve only been seated for about five minutes.”

Our server appeared a moment later, and once everyone ordered, conversations picked up around the table. One of the dads, a few seats down, turned our way and addressed Chase. “Congratulations on your retirement. What are you going to be doing now?”

I was curious to hear his answer. From the conversations I’d overheard between Jase and Dylan previously, I had learned that Chase was moving to the San Diego area permanently, but I had no clue how he planned to occupy his time.

Chase took a sip of his water and then answered, “I’m not sure. For now, I’m just looking forward to spending as much time with my kids as I can.”

Heather leaned toward me and whispered, “Isn’t he a little young to be retired? Where did he work?”

“He played baseball for the Rockies.”

Heather’s eyes immediately flicked toward my old roommate. “So, you were a professional baseball player?” Resting her chin on her hand, she smiled at him. “You should help with the team. I’m sure there’s a lot you could teach the kids.”

*Was she flirting with him?*

Chase shrugged. “From what I’ve heard, Coach Stat has been doing a great job. I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes.”

Hearing he didn't want to come in and change the way I'd been coaching was encouraging, but I could admit his expertise would be beneficial to the team. I could ignore our history and ask for his assistance ... for the sake of the kids.

"If you're up for it, I'd love to have your help during our practices." When he didn't say anything right away, I added, "No pressure, of course."

He looked at his son, who beamed up at him, and then turned to me. "I'd love to help."

---

THE NEXT MORNING, WE ARRIVED AT THE FIELD EARLY FOR OUR nine o'clock game. I had the boys stretching in the outfield while I spoke with one of my assistant coaches. Glancing over to the stands, I saw Heather chatting with Chase. He said something that must have been funny because she threw her head back and laughed. After a moment, she reached out and placed her hand on his arm.

*I remember a time when those arms...*

I shook my head, ridding myself of memories I had no business recalling, and turned back to Bob who was filling me in on the team we'd play first. I tried to pay attention; however, I couldn't stop myself from glancing at Chase and Heather every few minutes as she continued to talk and flip her hair. Her body language made it apparent she was flirting with him, and I wondered if she was always like that with other guys and I was just now noticing because it was with someone I had a past with, or was she that enamored with his sports star status that she couldn't help herself?

Her behavior was reminiscent of what had ruined my marriage with Lisa. My ex-wife had fallen in love with baseball when I played in high school, but she moved quickly from the love of the game to love of the players. Shortly after Dylan was born, she scored a job at the hotel where opposing players stayed when playing in San Diego, and it didn't take long before she was cheating regularly.

“I just got a text from John,” Bob mentioned as I finished filling out the lineup card. “He said he’s not feeling well this morning and was wondering if we could handle the games on our own.”

I nodded. “Yeah. We’ll be fine.”

“Or ...”

“Or what?” I asked.

“Or maybe you could ask Chase if he wants to help. He seemed willing last night.”

That wasn’t a bad idea. The kids would probably love having a pro ball player out there with them. It would also keep him away from Heather.

I walked over to the two of them and stood next to Heather before wrapping my arm around her shoulder and kissing her temple.

“Oh. Hi, babe,” she greeted as her gaze bounced between Chase and me.

I didn’t usually act like a jealous asshole. As a guy, Chase was probably aware of what I was doing, which made me feel like a dick. Still, I felt the need to stake my claim. I just wasn’t sure if I was reminding Heather that she had a boyfriend or if I was telling Chase to back off.

“Hey, Coach. Nice morning for a win.” He smirked.

“It is,” I agreed. “And I was wondering if you wanted to help with the games today? Unfortunately, one of the assistant coaches isn’t feeling well.”

He nodded. “Yeah, sure.”

“Thanks.” As I walked back to the dugout, I peeked over my shoulder and was relieved to see Chase following behind me while Heather had moved to sit next to Tyler on the bleachers.

“All right, Coach, what do you need me to do?”

“Mostly, I need you to be the first base coach.”

“I can do that.”

While going over the lineup with him and giving him a brief rundown on the players, I couldn't help but wonder if his reappearance in my life had the potential to cause some serious chaos.

Or at least bring up the past I never expected to face seventeen years later.

## CHASE

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO – EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD

EVERYONE WAS AMPED AS WE LEFT THE FIELD AFTER OUR 11-2 win against USC. Most of the guys on the team lived in the same dorm as me and my roommate, Gage Statler, and we were all talking about hitting up the party at the Lambda Chi Alpha house.

Gage and I were both attending UCLA on full-ride scholarships for baseball and had become good friends quickly after being assigned as roommates. There were a lot of similarities between us. We both grew up in Southern California, though he was a little farther south in the San Diego area than where I was from in Long Beach, we loved baseball with equal intensity, and we could both eat an entire pint of our favorite Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream in one sitting while watching whatever sports game was on the small TV in our room.

Gage pulled his phone out of the pocket of his hoodie after we slid into my Honda CR-V and groaned.

“Everything okay?” I asked and cranked the engine.

“It’s just Lisa.”

*His ex from high school.*



“And?”

“She’s here.”

I whipped my head in his direction. “She’s here? Where?”

“Said she was at the front of the stadium waiting for me.”

“Waiting for you? Was she at the game?”

“I don’t know.” He opened the car door. “I’m going to see why she drove all the way here. Catch you later.”

“Whatever, bro. That’s your crazy to deal with.”

He rolled his eyes and got out of the car with a groan. All I’d heard for months was how happy he was to be free of his clingy girlfriend, and now she was hanging out at our stadium, wanting to see him.

And that was why I was single.

Once I pulled up to the dorms, I made my way into the Dykstra building, giving head nods to say hello to people as I passed and they congratulated me on the win.

By the time I got out of the shower and was ready to head out, Gage wasn’t back yet, so I sent him a text.

Still going to the party?

It took him a few minutes to respond:

Lisa wanted to grab a bite to eat. We’ll meet you there.

Since it was getting late and the party would go into the wee hours of the morning, I was almost certain Lisa would stay the night in our tiny dorm room. Whatever. The beds were a little bigger than a twin and good for cuddling, but I didn’t want to listen to them fuck all night and not get any action myself.

While leaving the room, I pulled out my phone again and texted one chick I’d had a few flirty banter with.

Going to the AXA party?

Erika: Can't. I'm at home for the 3-day weekend.

I had no clue where home was for Erika because it didn't matter. If she wasn't going to be at the party, I needed to find someone else to hook up with. Maybe even someone I could go to their room and not have to worry about a fucking orgy in mine. Though, an orgy sounded fun too.

College was for experimenting, right?

The ten-minute walk didn't take long and Gage and Lisa were nowhere in sight as I entered the house that was bumpin' with base. Before I tried to scope out the place, I made my way to the kitchen where the keg was and filled a blue cup with whatever beer came out.

"Matthewson!"

I spun to see two of my teammates approaching and gave a nod of my head as I made eye contact. "Sup?"

"Where's your boy Statler?" Richards bellowed over the loud music.

"With his girlfriend, why?" The word 'girlfriend' was sour on my tongue and I didn't know why. Maybe it was because she wasn't his girlfriend but his ex. Did it really matter though?

Richards lifted a shoulder. "Thought he said he was coming with you?"

"Change of plans," I responded.

"So, you're out on 2 versus 2 then?" Campbell asked.

"Hell no." I wasn't going to miss a chance at winning money off these guys when it came to pool. "I'll find someone else to team up with and still kick your asses."

"Let's go then."

Richards gestured for me to follow him through the sea of people hanging out drinking, or dancing, or making out. Just as we passed the front door on our way to the room with the pool table, Gage and Lisa walked in. My gaze moved to their

clasped hands, and I snorted a laugh. It appeared they were back together after all.

“Just in time. Ready to play pool?” I asked my roommate.

He looked over at Lisa and then back at me. “Yeah. Need to get a beer first.”

“I thought you said we could dance?” Lisa pouted, her bottom lip protruding.

“Come watch us play a game and then we can dance,” he offered as a compromise.

I rolled my eyes and continued to follow Richards and Campbell to the pool table. A game was already in progress and as we stood off to the side, Lisa continued to whine.

“Can’t we dance while you wait to play?”

“This one is almost over,” Gage replied.

She opened her mouth again, but I stepped forward and stuck out my hand. “I’m Chase, by the way. Gage’s roomie and teammate.”

Lisa blinked, and then a huge grin spread across her face. “Oh right. You’re the shortstop.”

I guess that meant she’d caught the game.

“I am,” I confirmed, and took a sip of the beer in my hand.

“You’re really good,” she cooed.

“Matthewson is going to go pro, just you watch.” Richards clapped me on the back.

“Wait. You play on the team too.” Lisa pointed at Richards and then at Campbell. “And so do you.”

My gaze met Gage’s, and he closed his eyes and let out a small breath.

“Let’s go get you that beer.” I chugged the rest of mine, and while Gage and I went to get drinks, Lisa stayed behind to chat with Richards and Campbell. “Back together I see.”

“I don’t know what we are.”

“You two came in holding hands. That’s telling every girl here that you’re taken.”

“I know.” He sighed. “She drove all the way here. What was I supposed to do?”

“Put her ass back in her car and tell her goodbye.”

“It’s over a two-hour drive. I felt bad.”

“And is she crashing in our room?”

He grimaced. “Yeah. Didn’t think you’d mind. Sorry.”

“It’s cool, man.” I handed him a blue plastic cup when we reached the keg. “I’m not planning on coming back to our room until the morning anyway.”

“Oh yeah? Where do you plan on staying?”

I looked around the dim room lit by multiple strings of colored lights, making eye contact with a gorgeous brunette. I pointed at her. “Maybe her room.”

His eyes followed to where I was indicating. “Well, don’t let me stand in the way.”

“I’m not.” I held up an empty blue cup, asking the brunette if she wanted a beer. She nodded with a grin and I smiled back. “See?”

“Go do your thing, but bring her over so we can wipe the floor with Richards and Campbell.”

“Will do.”

Gage filled two cups of beer and gave them back to me, and I left to head toward the brunette. She smiled as I approached and I handed her the amber liquid.

“Well, here I am. What are your other two wishes?” I smirked.

The brunette snorted. “The night is still young. I’ll let you know.”

I grinned as she took a sip. “Okay, I can work with that. Are you cool with watching me handle some balls?”

She choked on her drink. “Handle some balls?”

I nudged my head toward where the billiards table was. “Pool. About to take my friends for twenty bucks.”

“You’re that good at pool?”

“It’s not just pool I’m good at, sweetheart.” I winked.

“Oh yeah? What else are you good at?”

A slow smirk spread across my face. “You’ll just have to find out.”

“Okay, well, let me see how you handle a pool stick then.”

“Right this way.” I reached out with my arm to direct her to the pool table where it appeared the game was wrapping up. Gage was a few steps behind us carrying two beers. “I’m Chase, by the way.”

“I know.”

“You do?” Gage bumped into me as I stopped walking before moving around me.

“I watched the game today. Congrats, by the way.”

“Well, thank you.”

“I’m Miranda.”

We started walking again, and I said, “So, Miranda, am I your favorite player?”

“Maybe.” She grinned.

“Maybe?”

She shrugged. “The season just started. How am I to make a fair assessment of everyone’s abilities in such a short amount of time?”

For a moment, I stared at her as we waited for the game to end. “I’m not drunk enough for this conversation.”

“I’m just teasing. You’re one hell of a shortstop. Do you think you’ll go pro one day?”

Lisa moved closer to us as though she wanted to hear my answer too. I looked at Gage and he shook his head. What the fuck was he doing with a chick that clearly had a hard-on for

baseball players? Was she only with him because he might go pro one day? He had a chance because he was the best I'd seen play second base and he wasn't bad in the batter's box either. Wasn't my place to ask him though. I just hoped it didn't mean she was going to be around more because again, I didn't need to listen to them fuck.

"That's the dream," I responded to Miranda.

"Yo," Campbell called. "We're up."

"Ready to see how I handle some wood?" I winked at Miranda.

She snorted a small laugh, and I went to the wall where the pool sticks hung.

The entire time we played against Campbell and Richards, I flirted with Miranda, lining up my shots so my ass was pointed in her direction, winking at her over the lip of my cup as I took each sip of my beer, and I might have stood shoulder to shoulder with her as I waited for my turn.

"Can we dance now?" Lisa moaned just as I sunk the eight ball to win the game. I was too buzzed to worry about her anymore. She was a bump on a log the entire forty-five minutes the game went on.

Gage ignored his girl too while we both stuck out our hands for our teammates to put a twenty in each of them.

"Next weekend, we switch teams," Richards groaned.

I chuckled. "Hell naw. It's roommates versus roommates. We're not switching because you two suck."

"Yeah, whatever," Campbell mumbled. "I need another beer."

I turned to Miranda. "You want another beer too?"

She blew out a breath. "I should head back to my dorm. It's getting late."

"Which dorm? I can walk you back." And then go inside and not have to leave until after Gage and Lisa were asleep.

"Rieber," she replied.

“All right. Let me walk you back.”

Lisa continued to bitch at Gage. “Come on, babe. You promised me dancing.”

“Have fun dancing.” I grinned at the fool and winked before grabbing Miranda’s hand to lead her through the house that was still full of partiers.

Once the two of us made it outside, I let go of her hand and grabbed my phone to check the time, only to realize I had a text from Gage.

I don't dance, asshole. Code: Ice cream.

We had a dry erase board on the door and used it to leave secret notes. One being code words if we were with someone inside the room and didn’t want to be disturbed.

I slid my phone back into my pocket and Miranda and I chatted as we made our way to the Rieber Hall building and up to her dorm room. I’d thought things were going well until ...

“Thanks for walking me back. I appreciate it.”

“Sure, no problem.” I rubbed the back of my neck, waiting for her to invite me in.

“I had a good ti—”

I was stunned, frozen in place, when she finished her sentence by barfing on me.

“Oh, my God. I’m so sorry.” She covered her mouth as though she was going to hurl again and took off toward the bathroom.

I stood there for a couple of seconds while I processed what had happened. Miranda had consumed only a few beers that I knew of.

Not wanting to smell like puke, I left and headed back to my dorm. There was no code word on the dry erase board and I hurried inside to grab my things to shower.

By the time I was clean, my buzz was fading, and all I wanted to do was jerk off and crash. When I returned from the

bathroom, there was still no note on the door indicating Gage was inside, so I entered the empty room. Needing another beer, I grabbed one from the small fridge and downed it in two gulps. Still needing to relax, I crawled into bed, fired up my favorite porn site, and started to go to town.

Only to realize at some point that Gage had walked in alone and was watching me.



## GAGE

STILL SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO – EIGHTEEN YEARS OLD

*HOLY FUCKING SHIT.*

I wasn't expecting to see Chase back in our dorm room so soon, and I especially didn't expect to walk in on him jacking off.

But there he was.

Naked.

With his fist wrapped around his hard dick.

And for some reason, I couldn't stop staring.

"Dude, close the door."

Embarrassed that he'd probably noticed me watching him, I spun around and pushed the door closed. Without the light from the hallway, I couldn't see a thing. I stumbled toward my bed and stubbed my toe on my desk chair. "Fuck."

Chase chuckled. "You can turn on the light."

I flipped on the small desk lamp on my side of the room, but kept my back to him, not wanting to make things even more awkward. "Sorry for barging in. I assumed you were still with Miranda."

“Nah. That ended the second she puked all over me.”

“She what?” I faced him out of surprise and noticed he had covered himself with his sheet.

“You heard me. We made it back to her place, but before anything could happen, she hurled.”

I dropped onto my bed. “That’s gross, man. I didn’t realize she was that drunk when you guys left.”

“Neither did I.” He shrugged. “What about you? Where’s Lisa?”

“We got in a stupid fight, and she decided to go home.”

Chase chuckled. “Damn, so neither of us are getting laid tonight?”

“Doesn’t look that way.”

The room was silent for a few minutes before he asked, “You want to get drunk instead?”

“Sure.”

He climbed out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweatpants, but not before I caught another glimpse of his dick. Why the hell did I keep looking at it? It wasn’t as though we hadn’t seen each other naked before. I would have blamed it on the beer, except I was barely buzzed. Maybe the massive case of blue balls Lisa had left me with had me on edge.

Chase grabbed the bottle of vodka we had hidden behind the mini-fridge and a couple of shot glasses before pouring us each one. I threw the shot back as soon as he handed it to me, hoping the alcohol would help me chill the fuck out and stop thinking about my roommate’s crotch.

“So, what’d you and Lisa fight about?” he asked as he sat next to me on my bed and poured me another shot.

I scooted over since sitting close to him was fucking with my head. “Just the usual shit. She wants us to be exclusive, which really just means she doesn’t want me dating other chicks. She has no problems flirting with other guys, though.”

“Seriously?”

“You didn’t notice her flirting with you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I thought maybe she was just friendly.”

“Well, she tried to get friendly with Richards too.”

“What did he do?”

“He laughed it off and then found another girl to talk to.”

“Sorry, man. That sounds like a whole lot of drama. “

Chase wasn’t wrong. Drama had always been a part of my relationship with Lisa. Still, I couldn’t quite seem to break things off for good with her. I’d hoped moving away from home would have allowed us to move on from each other, but that hadn’t seemed to work.

“Enough about my fucked-up relationship. We don’t have school or practice tomorrow, so I’m getting drunk.”

Chase handed me the bottle, and I poured us another shot. An hour later, more than half the bottle was gone, and I was feeling good.

“You think the Lambda party is still going?” he asked.

“Doubtful. It was dying down when I left. Why?”

“Because I’m still fucking horny,” he said as he adjusted his junk.

“I could help you with that.” The words tumbled out of my mouth before I realized what I was saying.

His head whipped around. “How drunk are you?”

“Pretty damn wasted,” I lied. I could feel the effects of the alcohol, but I wasn’t completely fucked up.

He laughed. “Well, don’t go around offering shit you won’t follow through on.”

“Who said I wouldn’t follow through?” I challenged.

“Okay, prove it.” He smirked.

“You need to take off your sweats first.”

Without hesitation, he stood and pushed his pants down. I eagerly shuffled to the edge of my bed, coming eye-level with his dick and a bit of panic seeped in. Was I really going to help my roommate get off?

“See, I knew you wouldn’t—”

I grabbed ahold of his length and began stroking him. The doubt in his words was all I needed to spur me into action, my competitive nature taking over. My eyes focused on where my hand wrapped around him, and the concern I’d felt just moments before had faded away and was quickly replaced by my desire to make Chase feel good.

“Holy shit,” he groaned as I fisted him a little tighter.

His cock grew harder under my touch, and it was a bit of an ego boost knowing I affected him. After a few more strokes a drop of pre-cum formed at his tip, and I couldn’t stop myself from leaning forward and licking it away.

“Fuck, do that again,” he groaned.

I peered up at him. “You liked that?”

His eyes were screwed closed. “A tongue licking my dick? Hell yeah, I liked that.”

I repeated the motion, eliciting another groan from my roommate. The next time, I started at the base, trailed my tongue along the underside of his hard rod, and then swirled it around the tip.

“Is that all you got?” he gritted out, placing a hand on the back of my head.

Without another thought, I opened my mouth and started to suck him off. My dick was uncomfortably hard inside my jeans, so I quickly unbuttoned them and pulled down the zipper to relieve some of the pressure.

I braced my hands on Chase’s hips as I bobbed up and down his length, taking him as far as I could without gagging.

“Fuck, I’m going to come.”

I pulled off him, not quite ready for *that*. “Already?” I teased.

“Shut the hell up.” He took over, pumping himself as I stared at his large hand working his shaft feverishly.

I ripped off my shirt and handed it to him. “Use that. I don’t want your jizz all over my bed.”

Watching him come on my T-shirt had me horny as hell, so I reached down and began stroking my dick. Within seconds, I could feel the familiar tingle in my spine, and I knew I’d be coming soon.

“Let me do that,” Chase said as he slapped my hand away.

He wrapped his calloused fingers around my shaft and began jerking me off. There was no hesitancy on his part as he worked me over. Much to my disappointment, I shot my load all over his hand faster than I’d wanted. He grabbed my T-shirt and used it to clean it off before tossing it into my laundry basket.

“Thanks. I think I can sleep now,” he stated.

As I watched him climb into his bed, I couldn’t help but wonder if things would be strange between us. He didn’t appear to be weirded out by what we’d just done, but maybe that was the alcohol flowing through our veins. Maybe we’d go about things as though this night never happened.

Or maybe it would change everything between us.

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CHASE’S PHONE RINGING WOKE ME A FEW HOURS LATER. “Dude, answer it already,” I grumbled.

“Hello?”

I rolled over and covered my head with my pillow, hoping to block out his conversation, but something hit my back. “What the hell?”

“Campbell said he and Richards are hitting up the beach. They asked if we wanted to go with them.”

I didn't have anything else going on, and it would probably be better to hang out with a group than stay in the dorm with Chase alone. “Sure.”

“Statler's in. See you in a bit.” Chase hung up. “They're leaving in twenty.”

“Cool. I'm gonna grab a shower real quick,” I said and rushed off to the communal showers.

Even though Chase hadn't said anything or acted strange, I wasn't quite prepared to deal with what we'd done the night before.

I'd just gotten back to the room when we got a text from the guys stating they were ready to leave. We hurried down the stairs and hopped into Campbell's Jeep, throwing our bags and towels in the back.

“Thanks for the invite,” I said as I sat behind Richards.

“No problem. Figured this was the last day off we'll have for a while. Might as well make the most of it.”

I couldn't agree more.

---

THE BEACH IN SANTA MONICA WAS PACKED WITH FAMILIES enjoying the three-day weekend when we arrived, but there were also several groups our age hanging out. We grabbed our backpacks and began looking for a place to sit.

“How about we head over there?” Chase pointed to an open spot next to a group of girls.

His expression was unreadable as I peered over at him. It seemed as though things were back to normal with Chase looking for his next conquest.

*Why did that bother me?*

We set our stuff down on the sand and Campbell asked, “Wanna play some catch?” He tossed a football at me, and I caught it without a problem.

“Sure.”

“How about we switch things up? I’ll team up with Richards against you two,” Chase suggested.

“I thought it was always roommates versus roommates. Isn’t that what you said last night?” Richards questioned.

Chase shook his head. “That’s just for pool.”

I couldn’t help but wonder if Chase wasn’t okay with what had happened the night before and had just been playing it cool earlier.

“Sounds good, but don’t come crying to me when Statler and I kick your asses,” Campbell responded.

“Want to wager our usual?” Richards asked.

I shrugged. “Sure. I could use an extra twenty bucks.”

Campbell chose to be the quarterback and I ran down the beach, trying to get open for him. Chase was coming up quick behind me, so I planted my foot to turn and heard a loud pop before a sharp pain radiated through my knee. I dropped to the ground and rolled around in agony.

“Dude, what happened?” Chase fell to the sand beside me.

“It’s my knee,” I gritted out as a sheen of sweat formed on my brow.

“Campbell, go get your Jeep. Richards, help me get him up,” Chase called out to our teammates. “We need to get you to the hospital.”

Campbell ran to the parking lot as Chase and Richards pulled me up. I wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders, placing most of my weight on them as they walked me up the beach to where Campbell waited for us.

“I’ll go grab our stuff,” Richards said as Chase helped me into the front seat of the Jeep.

Once we had everything, Chase grabbed some ice from the cooler and wrapped it in his T-shirt before placing it on my knee.

“Hold that on there,” he ordered then climbed into the backseat.

The drive passed by in a blur, the pain not allowing me to focus on anything else. Once we pulled up to the emergency room, Chase hopped out. “I’ll go grab a wheelchair.”

It was harder to get out of the Jeep than it had been to get in. The pain had intensified, and I couldn’t put any weight on my leg. Chase wheeled me up to the registration desk while I assumed Campbell and Richards went to park.

“Go ahead and take a seat. We’ll get you called back as soon as possible,” the receptionist stated.

“Do you want me to call anyone for you? Your parents maybe?” Chase asked as we waited.

I shook my head. “Nah. No need to worry them until I know exactly what’s going on.”

He nodded and turned his attention to the TV in the corner.

A few minutes later Campbell and Richards came in and sat with us.

“Don’t be mad,” Campbell said. “But we called Coach to let him know what was going on.”

“What? Why?”

“He sent out a text to the team, reminding everyone to stay safe over the holiday weekend,” Richards explained. “We thought it might be better to tell him now rather than later. You know he’d be pissed if we didn’t say anything.”

They were right, but I didn’t look forward to our conversation the next time I saw Coach.

Forty-five minutes later, I was called back. After answering a few routine questions and waiting for the doctor, one finally came into the room to check me out. “Hi, I’m Dr.



Chisolm.” She walked to the computer and pulled up what I assumed was my file. “It says you’re here for a knee injury?”

“Yeah, something popped while I was playing football on the beach.”

She asked me a series of questions about what I’d heard and felt and performed a couple of physical tests that hurt like a bitch.

“Based on what you’ve said and my exam, I think you’ve torn your ACL.”

My shoulders sagged. “Are you sure?”

“Well, I’m going to order an MRI, but that’s really to check the extent of your injury. Given what I’ve seen, I feel confident in my diagnosis. Someone will be in shortly to take you to imaging. In the meantime, I’ve ordered some pain medication to make you a little more comfortable while you wait.”

I went to pull my phone from my shorts, only to realize it was still in my backpack where I’d put it when we started to play football. I wanted to let the guys know what was going on. A torn ACL was not the news I’d wanted to hear. If that was the case, I’d likely miss a large portion of the season—at least—but I didn’t want to think about that.

As I waited to be taken for the MRI, a nurse came in and gave me some pain meds. “A few guys in the waiting room want to check on you. I can let one of them back if you’d like.”

I nodded. “Yeah, thanks.”

I expected Chase to come back, but Coach Phillips entered my room a few minutes later.

“Uh, hey, Coach.”

“Don’t ‘hey coach’ me. What the hell were you guys thinking?”

“I’m sorry. We were just tossing a football around on the beach. I didn’t think I’d get hurt.”

He shook his head. “And what did the doctor say?”

“Possibly a torn ACL.” I grimaced.

“Fuck,” he muttered under his breath.

I let out a shuddering breath. Disappointing Coach, as well as my team, was the last thing I wanted to do.

Coach Phillips stayed with me until I was wheeled back for the MRI. “I’m going to let the guys know what’s going on and send them home. I’ll give you a ride back to your dorm once you’re discharged.”

I nodded. “Okay.”

The MRI took almost an hour, and Coach was waiting in my room when I returned. The tech moved my bed back into position and informed us the doctor would be with us as soon as they had the results, but it could take a little while.

“Your parents are on their way,” Coach said and handed me my phone. “Matthewson grabbed this for you.”

“Thanks.”

There were a few texts from my teammates, and I opened the one from Chase.

Coach Phillips updated us. Man, that sucks. Let me know if you need anything.

I typed out a quick response:

Yeah, it doesn’t look good. I’ll keep you posted.

A little while later, a text from my parents came through that said they’d made it to the hospital. Before I could respond, the doctor stepped inside the curtain.

“I have the results from your MRI,” she announced.

“My parents just got here. Can they come back before you tell me what’s going on?”

“Sure.”

She stepped out of my room and walked to the nurses' station. She said something before the nurse nodded and picked up the phone. Less than two minutes later, my parents came rushing into my room.

"Gage, are you okay?" my mother asked as she bent down and hugged me.

"I've been better," I murmured.

"Let's hope it's not much more than a sprain," Dad said, squeezing my shoulder.

I looked over at Coach, who was standing in the corner with a grim look on his face. We both knew it was likely more serious than a sprain, especially since the doctor suspected I'd torn my ACL.

Dr. Chisolm walked back in and introduced herself before delivering the news. "Well, the MRI confirmed that you have an ACL tear. The damage is extensive and will require surgery. I'll put in a referral for you to meet with an orthopedic surgeon so you can discuss further treatment with them."

My mother gasped. "Surgery?"

Dr. Chisolm nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"How long of a recovery process are we looking at?" my father asked.

"Every patient is different, but you can expect about nine to twelve months of recovery time before resuming any sports."

Mom squeezed my hand and tears pricked my eyes. Nine to twelve months was a lifetime for an athlete. What the hell was I going to do?

"Do you have any other questions?" Dr. Chisolm asked.

I shook my head, refusing to look at anyone.

"Okay, I'm going to write up your discharge paperwork, and then you can head home."

"Thank you, Doctor," Dad said before turning to Coach. "You know he's at UCLA on an athletic scholarship. How

does this injury affect that?”

Coach traded a glance with me, his eyes filled with disappointment. “He could lose his scholarship.”

“What?” my mom cried.

My chest ached. Baseball was my life, and I fucked it all up for a few minutes of fun with my teammates. On top of that, I’d let my parents down. They had been so happy when I’d been accepted to UCLA and now my future at the school was in jeopardy.

“His injury didn’t happen while playing baseball, so they can revoke his scholarship. I’ll talk to the athletic department, but I can’t make any promises.” He said his goodbyes and told me he’d call once he spoke to the school.

After getting discharged, I was wheeled outside to where my dad and mom were waiting with their car.

“We got a room at a hotel down the street. We can stay there until we figure out our next steps,” my mom said as my father pulled out of the parking lot.

“I just want to go home.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think the dorm is the best place for you right now. There are stairs—”

“No, I mean home to San Diego.”

## CHASE

### PRESENT DAY

I DIDN'T THINK I WOULD BE BACK ON A BASEBALL FIELD ONLY three days after I'd retired, but there I was, standing near first base as I watched my boy in the batter's box. People were talking around me, trying to figure out if I was Chase Matthewson, or if I only looked like him. I didn't pay them any attention because my focus was on my kid.

The first pitch was right down the middle and Jase didn't swing.

"You've seen it, now make contact," Gage instructed from the third base side.

The next pitch was a ball. Jase stepped out of the box with one leg, took a few cuts with the bat, and then stepped back in.

"You've got this, Jase," Jamie encouraged from the stands.

The pitcher threw a fastball and Jase swung, driving the ball between the shortstop and third baseman. He hustled to first base.

"Way to go, buddy," I said and gave him a high-five.

"Did you see that hit?" He beamed.

“Of course I did. I’m so proud of you.” I wanted to hug him to show him how much, but instead, I said, “If Dylan hits it in the air, be prepared to tag up. Anything on the ground, you run.”

“Got it,” he replied.

Dylan swung on the first pitch, sending the ball into center field. Jase stopped halfway between first and second, waited to see where the ball went, and then as it flew over the kid’s head, I shouted, “Go!”

My son took off for second base and rounded the bag as he looked toward Gage for a sign to keep running. The boy in center field was still chasing the ball as Dylan hit first base.

“Two,” I said, and Dylan didn’t hesitate, touching the bag with one foot and sprinting toward second.

The kid in center finally scooped up the ball and threw it to his cutoff. As the other boy caught it, he spun and threw it to second just as Dylan slid into the bag and was called safe. I glanced across the diamond to see Jase standing on third.

Not a bad way to start the first inning, and by the time the inning was over, we were up 2-0.

I made my way to the dugout on the third base side. As I approached, Gage asked, “So, how was it out there?”

“It was good. Thanks for letting me help out.” I was grateful he’d given me the opportunity to do exactly what I’d been looking forward to when I decided to retire: spend time with my kids while they did what they loved.

He urged the boys to get out on the field, his son going to center and mine to shortstop. “Jase is a natural out there. Like his father.”

“Yeah, I’ve caught a few games over the years, but I’m looking forward to watching all of them now.”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

We stared at each other for a beat. “Me too.”

Just inside the opening of the dugout sat a bucket with a lid and I took a seat on it while Gage collected the two baseballs the team used for their warm-up. He threw them into another bucket and then leaned against the pole of the dugout opening. The other coach, Bob, sat on the bench. During the inning I found myself wanting to ask Gage how he'd been over the last two decades. How his knee was, what he did after he left UCLA and never came back, but instead I watched my son throw a bullet to first base after a ball was hit right at him and he made the out. I clapped for another kid who made a running catch in right field, and I jumped up a little too excited when our pitcher struck out the third batter to end the inning.

High-fives were given as the boys came off the field and then I made my way to first base again. As I stood there, waiting for the pitcher of the opposing team to get ready, I thought to myself, this was what fatherhood was all about.

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WE WON THE GAME 4-1 AND AFTER, WE HAD ABOUT A TWO-hour break before we needed to warm up for the last game of the day.

“Cammie is starving,” Jamie stated as I made my way to them. Jase was still grabbing his stuff in the dugout. “I searched for restaurants on my phone and there’s a cafe just down the street.”

I picked up my daughter. “What do you want to eat, baby girl?”

“Mac and cheese.” She grinned.

“I think we can make that happen.” I kissed her cheek.

Jase walked over. “Are we eating now?”

“Yeah, bud, we are.” I rubbed the top of his baseball cap-covered head.

Dylan ran over. “Dad said I can ride with you guys, and he’d follow with Tyler.”

I glanced over at Jamie and she said, “We usually have lunch together.”

I tilted my head to the side and teased, “You didn’t tell me you’re super close with Coach Statler.”

She snorted a laugh. “Our boys are best friends and play on the same baseball team. I wouldn’t say we’re close, but the boys are.”

If only she knew how close Gage and I were once upon a time.

My gaze met Gage’s as he and Heather walked toward us. “We’re just going down the street.”

“Cool. I’ll follow.”

We headed to our rental cars parked just outside the sports complex and, after the boys threw their bat bags into the back of the SUV I’d rented, we headed to the American-style restaurant. I couldn’t help but peek at Gage a few times over my menu as I sat across from him at the table for eight. During one of my stolen glances, his brown eyes met my stare, and I quickly looked down. Why was I staring at him? I knew why. It was because the last time we were alone together, the unimaginable happened and seeing him again was bringing back a memory I’d tried to forget.

I’d mentioned it once to my buddies Aron and Drew after I had inadvertently discovered the relationship they were trying to hide. That was a few years ago and since then, I tried not to think of my former roommate, but as he sat across from me, I couldn’t help but remember how his mouth felt sucking my dick.

I shifted in my seat as Jamie called my name. “What?” I asked, looking up from my menu.

“What do you want to drink?”

My gaze moved to the waitress, who had appeared without me realizing it. “Coke, please.”

The waitress finished taking everyone’s drink order and left.



“Coach, Chase mentioned to me last night that you two were college roommates. What a small world,” Jamie stated.

Sure was.

“Was that at UCLA before you got hurt, babe?” Heather asked, and it appeared she squeezed his knee under the table.

Gage put his arm across the back of her chair. “Yeah.”

“You got hurt?” Jase asked.

Gage nodded. “Tore my ACL.”

“Is that why you didn’t go pro like my dad?” my son inquired.

“Jase,” I scolded.

“What?” he breathed. “I’m just asking.”

I didn’t know for certain, but remembering how Gage left school and never returned, I had to imagine that hurting his knee had done a number on him. There was talk amongst the team that he had his scholarship revoked. I wanted to believe that the injury and the loss of his scholarship was the reason he hadn’t returned and not because of what we had shared in the wee hours of the morning before going to the beach. I knew his leaving made the situation easier for me to pretend it had never happened, even though I had enjoyed the hell out of it. But in the months that followed, I’d wondered what would have transpired if he hadn’t gotten hurt and left school. Would we have messed around again? Would it have just been a one-time thing and we would have both pretended it hadn’t occurred? Would I have met Jamie and had our kids? So many things could have happened.

Gage shook his head. “I don’t think I would have gone pro. Your father was the superstar.”

I smiled, my cheeks heating slightly. “I don’t know about that. We were the dynamic duo.”

Gage grinned. “Yeah, we were.”

“What does that mean?” Dylan wondered.

“Your father played second, and I was the shortstop. We were like clockwork with turning double plays.”

The waitress came back with our drinks, took our lunch orders, and left.

“So, how is your knee?” I asked my former roommate, who was in damn good shape for a dad our age. He had to spend hours at the gym to have the arms he had on him.

“It’s like it never happened.”

I nodded slowly in understanding. “Sucks that it did.”

“How did it happen?” Jamie asked.

“Playing football,” he answered.

She balked. “Football?”

“We went to the beach for fun and he hurt his knee,” I clarified and took a drink of my Coke.

“Well, that sucks,” she stated.

I choked on my sip because Jamie’s words had made my mind flash back to Gage sucking me off. He eyed me and I wondered if we were thinking the same thing.

He cleared his throat. “Yeah, it did, but I think things happen for a reason.”

“I do too,” Heather chimed in and smiled at her boyfriend.

If that saying was true, then what was the reason for the night in the dorm? Was it only because of the alcohol or something more?

## GAGE

WE WON OUR SECOND GAME, AND THEN THE TEAM RETURNED to the hotel where the kids swam for a while before the families met up for dinner. After we ate, Dylan went to play video games with some of his teammates in another room while Tyler chilled in his, watching some videos on his phone.

“Do you want to grab a drink downstairs?” Heather asked, peeking up from her laptop.

I stood at the door connecting our rooms and asked Tyler, “Are you good if Heather and I head downstairs for a bit?”

He didn’t take his eyes off his phone before answering, “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Let’s go.” I held out a hand to Heather and we headed down the hall to the elevators.

As the doors opened, two moms from the team stumbled off the lift, giggling to each other, a wine glass in each of their hands.

“Oh, hi, Gage.” Mary beamed at me, while Lydia didn’t attempt to hide her slow perusal of my body.

“Ladies,” I greeted as Heather tightened her hold on my hand.

Mary’s arm brushed against mine as she stepped around me. “The team looked good on the field today.”

“It’s because they have an excellent coach,” Lydia giggled.

“Thanks,” I replied and moved into the elevator behind Heather and pressed the lobby button. “Have a good night.”

“See you tomorrow, Gage,” Mary said as they both waved.

“He is so hot,” Lydia gushed as they walked away and the doors to the elevator closed.

“I can’t believe they flirt with you like I’m not even here. Isn’t one of them married?”

Heather seemed indignant about the whole thing, making me wonder if I’d misread the situation earlier when she was talking to Chase. Maybe she had been acting friendly, and I saw it as something more because of the history I had with my ex-wife.

I shrugged. “No one was flirting. They were just a bit tipsy.”

She huffed. “You’re oblivious. Sitting in the stands, I’ve heard some of the things the moms say about you.”

“I don’t care what they might say. I’m with you, and that’s all that matters.” I pulled her in close and pecked her on the lips.

That seemed to satisfy her, and she smiled as the doors opened to the lobby. We walked into the hotel’s restaurant and found a couple of seats at the end of the bar. As the bartender walked our way, Heather’s phone rang.

“It’s my mom. Can you order me a glass of chardonnay?”

“Sure.”

She walked toward the lobby while I ordered her wine and a scotch on the rocks for myself and massaged my aching knee.

“I thought you said your knee was fine,” a low, familiar voice rumbled behind me.

“Yeah,” I said with a chuckle, glancing at Chase. The bartender placed the drinks in front of me, and I handed over my credit card. “It’s usually fine, but standing on the field all

day can aggravate it a bit. I've been dealing with it for so long, it seems normal at this point."

Chase took a seat on the barstool next to me. "I texted you a few times after you left UCLA, but never heard—"

"Thanks for ordering my drink," Heather interrupted, saving me from an awkward conversation with my former roommate. A conversation I was sure would bring up topics neither of us was prepared to discuss. She sat on my other side and leaned around me to talk to Chase. "Where's your wife?"

"Uh." He waved to get the bartender's attention and ordered a beer. "Actually, Jamie's my ex. She's upstairs with our daughter."

"Oh really?" Heather ran her finger around the rim of her wine glass. "You guys get along so well. Gage and his ex can't even stand to be in the same room with each other."

Chase quirked an eyebrow, and I shrugged. I had no idea why Heather felt the need to bring up Lisa. I tried to avoid anything having to do with my ex if I could help it. Would things be easier if she and I had a relationship like the Matthewsons?

"We don't need to talk about my ex."

Chase cleared his throat and changed the subject. "So, how did you two meet?"

"Well." Heather smiled. She loved talking about her job. "I'm a reporter for KNWL news, and we were doing a story on the Teacher of the Year award for our local school district. When I interviewed the award winner, the sparks flew. We've been dating ever since."

Chase glanced at me. "You're a teacher?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I teach history at Coastside High School."

The three of us continued to chat while we enjoyed our drinks. We kept the conversation to our kids and the team. It seemed as though Chase and I were both a bit apprehensive about diving into learning much about each other. That was

fine with me because I didn't want things to be weird between us since we'd be seeing a lot of each other given our sons were best friends.

---

AFTER WINNING BOTH GAMES THE DAY BEFORE AND ONE earlier in the morning, we made it to the tournament's championship game. The opposing team was up to bat in the bottom of the last inning with a runner on base and two outs. We were only ahead by one run after a rocky inning earlier. I knew our boys had the talent to pull off a win, but that didn't stop my knuckles from turning white as I gripped the chain-link fence surrounding the dugout while watching our pitcher set up to throw. The batter swung at the first pitch and sent the ball flying toward center field, where Dylan was playing.

"Let him catch it," I murmured under my breath.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion as I watched him track the ball and move underneath it. The sound of the ball hitting the leather of the glove was music to my ears. The parents in the stands cheered as the boys raced back to where I was standing.

Dylan's teammates gave him high-fives as he passed. When he stopped in front of me, he couldn't seem to contain his smile. "Did you see that, Dad? That was awesome."

"It sure was." I ruffled his dark brown hair. "You did a great job out there."

After we shook hands with the other team, I had a quick chat with my players before we all headed to the parking lot, most of us having flights that left in a couple of hours.

"Hey, Jase, wait up," Dylan shouted as we walked toward our rental car.

His friend and Chase stopped and waited for us to catch up.

When we reached them, I clapped Jase on the shoulder. "You played great this weekend."

A huge grin spread across his face. “Thanks, Coach.”

Our sons began walking together; Chase and I followed a few steps behind. “Thanks again for your help yesterday. The boys enjoyed having you out on the field with them.”

“I had a blast out there. I’d love to help in the spring if the offer is still good. I know you were sort of put on the spot at dinner the other night. You’ve clearly got a great program going, and I don’t want you to think I’m trying to change anything.”

I shook my head with a small smile. “I think Dylan would be pissed if he found out his dad turned down your offer to help with the team. In case you missed it, the kids think you’re the shit.”

Chase laughed. “All right then. I can’t wait.”

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MONDAYS AFTER TRAVELING FOR A TOURNAMENT WERE ALWAYS difficult. I could barely keep my eyes open as I graded a stack of essays before school started. After landing the night before, I dropped the kids off at the house so they could get ready for bed and then drove Heather home. By the time I crawled into bed, it was well past midnight.

“Knock, knock,” Brandy, a fellow history teacher, called from my open door.

“Hey, Brandy. Come on in.”

She strolled over to where I sat, her heels clicking on the tile floor before perching herself on the corner of my desk.

“How was your weekend? We missed you at The Brickhouse on Friday.”

A group of teachers met up once a month for drinks as a way to destress from the expectations of working for the public school system. I joined them as often as possible, but being a divorced dad while teaching, coaching, and playing with my band, I had little time left for other things.

“I’ll try to catch the next one,” I promised. “My son’s fall ball season just wrapped up, so I should have a little extra time.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” she responded with a gleam in her eye. “Maybe we don’t need to wait until the next staff get-together. We could grab a drink this Friday.”

Heather accused me of being oblivious, but I wasn’t as dumb as she thought. I knew women flirted with me often, and Brandy wasn’t any different. The muscles and the tattoos that ran down both arms from my shoulders to the tops of my hands seemed to garner attention. While it felt nice to know people found me attractive, I didn’t do anything to encourage the flirting. I wouldn’t do that to Heather. Having been burned in the past, I’d never dream of stepping out when I was in a relationship.

“My girlfriend and I have plans on Friday.”

Her shoulders slumped and the bell rang, forcing Brandy to return to her classroom. As my students filed in, my phone rang. I glanced at the screen and noticed it was the middle school calling. I hit the answer button and stepped into the hallway.

“Mr. Statler?” a woman on the other end asked.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Hi, Mr. Statler, this is Sandra from Pine Middle School. We have Dylan here in the office. He got sick right before class and has thrown up twice. You’ll need to come pick him up.”

I ran a hand down my face. “Okay. Someone will be there to get him as soon as possible.” I walked back into the classroom and addressed my students. “Take out your textbooks and start reading chapter five, please.”

As the kids did what I asked, I texted Lisa.

Dylan got sick at school today. Could you pick him up?



Lisa worked at a hotel in the Gaslamp Quarter, and last I knew, she was on the late shift.

A couple of minutes later, my phone dinged with a notification.

Lisa: Sorry. I can't.

There was no explanation as to why she couldn't pick up her child. No matter how often she flaked on promises she made to our sons or didn't take on any responsibility, I continued to hope that one day she'd change and act like she gave a damn about our children. Clearly, it wasn't going to be any time soon.

## CHASE

SINCE OUR DIVORCE, JAMIE AND I HADN'T SPENT A HOLIDAY together. This year, instead of going to my folks' for Thanksgiving, I was going to my ex-wife's place because it was her year with the kids and my parents decided to take a trip to Italy. I'd originally planned on spending it alone, unpacking the rest of my moving boxes and getting my new house in order, but I also wasn't going to pass up time with Jase and Cammie when Jamie had invited me over.

A few years back, I had wanted to make Thanksgiving even more special since it was always the first holiday after baseball season that I could devote my time to my children and they had to alternate their holidays with my family or Jamie's, so I'd bought a couple of gingerbread house kits and started a new tradition. Jase and Cammie would decorate theirs—Cammie needing some help—and my parents and I would vote on the best one.

Wanting to make our new life in California even more familiar, I ran it by Jamie and bought two kits to have as part of my Thanksgiving at her place. She'd said it would be a wonderful idea. We'd also had a mini discussion of how custody would go now that I was retired. We'd decided to keep the off-season agreement intact and make it for the entire year, which was the kids staying with one of us for a week at a time and switching off every Friday. Since the following day would

be Jamie's time with the kids, we'd agreed for them to stay the night after Thanksgiving dinner instead of going back and forth.

"Let's go," I called out and grabbed the shopping bags with the gingerbread house kits.

"Coming, Daddy!" Cammie shouted from her room.

Footsteps pounded on the hard floor as both of my children came into the kitchen, Cammie running and Jase following behind her.

"Did you pack everything you wanted?" I asked, eyeing the duffle bags in their hands. They had clothes and everything they needed at each of our respective homes, but there was still stuff they liked to take to both places.

"Yep," they replied at the same time.

"Well, let's go. I'm starving."

We drove the short distance to Jamie's and as soon as I pulled up, the kids hopped out of the car and raced off into the house without their bags. Getting everything from the vehicle, I made my way to the front door and entered, the smell of the roasting turkey hitting me when I stepped inside. My stomach growled as I walked toward the kitchen. Knowing there was going to be a lot of food, I'd only had coffee and my stomach was protesting.

"There he is," Jamie's mom beamed when she saw me. She walked over from where she was sitting at the kitchen island to hug me.

"How are you, Helen?"

"Doing all right. Heard your parents went to Italy."

"They did," I confirmed and walked over to Jamie's dad, Pat, who was still sitting at the kitchen island, and shook his hand. "They should be in Florence today."

"I'm a bit jealous," Helen said.

"Maybe Pat will take you next year." I winked at him and squeezed his shoulder.

He grunted a small laugh. “Yeah, okay, we’ll see.”

“Need any help, James?” I asked, using the nickname I used for her and hugged her with one arm as she stirred melted cheese for her famous cheese dip on the stove.

“Can you get the chips out?” She pointed toward the walk-in pantry.

“Coming right up.” I opened the pantry door, grabbed the bag of chips, and walked back out to see Jase walking into the kitchen with a frown. “Why the long face, bud?”

“Dylan was supposed to go to his mom’s for Thanksgiving but she bailed and now they have nothing to do. He asked if I could come over but I know you’ll say no.”

I sucked in a small breath at the mention of the Statlers and before I could respond that he was right, Jamie spoke up.

“Why don’t you invite them over here?”

My gaze shot to her. Even though the boys were best friends, I hadn’t seen Gage since the tournament a few weeks prior, and the thought of seeing him again caused something to stir inside my body. Maybe it was because we had *that night* hanging over our heads that neither of us seemed interested in addressing even seventeen years later. Did we even need to talk about it? It was college experimenting, and we were grown-ass men now. Plus, it was almost two decades ago. We’d both been married and moved on, but then again, we were back in each other’s lives like it was fated.

“Really?” Jase lit up.

“Sure, we have plenty of food,” Jamie stated.

Jase typed something on his phone and I moved to a cabinet in search of a big bowl for the chips.

“He said Coach wants you to call him to make sure,” Jase advised.

“You do it or I’ll burn the cheese,” Jamie said to me.

“Oh, okay.” I set a bowl down on the island. “I need to use your phone because I don’t have his number.” Even though he

was my son's baseball coach and had asked me to help with spring ball, I realized Gage and I hadn't exchanged contact information.

"It's over there." Jamie pointed to the end of the counter.

I picked it up, held it in front of her face to unlock it and then scrolled through her contacts to find Gage's number before pressing the call button.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Jamie," Gage said as he answered on the second ring.

"It's, ah, Chase," I stammered.

"Oh .... Hey."

I cleared my throat as I felt all eyes on me. "So, Jase mentioned your plans fell through. Why don't you and your sons come over to Jamie's? We have plenty of food."

"Are you sure? We don't want to impose."

"Yeah, totally cool."

There was a pause and then Gage replied, "Yeah, my ex-wife bailed and I actually have a thing tonight. Would it be okay with Jamie if the boys slept over after we ate?"

I pulled the phone away from my mouth as I asked Jamie, "Gage has plans tonight and is wondering if his sons can spend the night?"

"Of course."

"Yes!" Jase boomed from across the kitchen.

"Yeah, man. Have them bring their stuff," I said back into the phone.

"All right. When's dinner?"

"Come over now," I answered without hesitating.

"Okay, we'll be there soon."

We hung up, and I immediately went to the fridge for a beer. Why was I freaking out? It wasn't as if we'd have *the talk* in front of my family and former in-laws. Or at all.

---

BY THE TIME GAGE AND HIS BOYS ARRIVED, I WAS ON MY second IPA. Jase beat me to the door to welcome them and once I saw my former roommate, we shook hands, and then I offered him a beer.

“Just one.” He handed me a bottle of red wine as though he needed to bring something over and not show up empty-handed.

“Right, you need to leave after we eat.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t elaborate why.

“Are you meeting Heather?” I asked after Gage greeted Jamie and her parents and I went to the fridge to get him the beer. Dylan and Jase had run off to Jase’s room, Tyler had settled in the corner of the kitchen, glued to his phone, and Cammie was playing with her dolls in the other room.

Gage reached for the bottle. “No. I have a gig tonight.”

I blinked. “A gig?”

“I play in a band.” He twisted the cap off the bottle.

“You ... play in a band?” I leaned against the kitchen island. I knew it had been almost two decades since we’d been close, but I hadn’t known him to play an instrument.

“I do. Just a little side fun.”

“What do you play?” Helen inquired.

“Guitar,” he replied and my eyes went to his hand that was wrapped around the beer bottle.

“You should go watch him play tonight,” Jamie suggested.

Gage and I stared at each other for a beat and then he said, “Yeah, that would be cool.”

It wasn’t as though I had plans other than going home and showering before I crawled into bed for the night.

“I guess it’s settled,” I agreed.

“Okay, well, there are too many cooks in the kitchen. Why don’t the men go watch football?” Jamie suggested.

“Don’t need to tell us twice.” I chuckled and grabbed my beer.

“Turn the Cowboys game on and I’ll be there in a bit. Need the little boy’s room,” Pat said.

I motioned for Gage to follow me to the living room and I turned on the game. Tyler stayed in the kitchen, still on his phone, and Gage and I sat on opposite couches, a ton of questions I wanted to ask swirling in my head.

Before I could ask one, Gage said, “Funny story, I just learned that my ex is dating one of your former teammates.”

“No shit?” I balked. “Who?”

“Miguel Santiago.”

“Ah, that asshole?”

Gage furrowed his brow. “You don’t like him?”

“He’s a homophobic prick.” The words spilled out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Pat walked into the room and the conversation between me and Gage died off while we watched the game on TV. I was thankful too, considering the conversation might have led to us being even more awkward around each other.

---

“THANK YOU FOR A LOVELY MEAL,” GAGE SAID TO JAMIE AS we headed to the door to leave.

We had eaten, and the kids had built their gingerbread houses. This year Jase and Dylan teamed up against Cammie and Tyler and in the end, it was tied, of course. I kissed my kids goodnight, told everyone else goodbye, and then Gage and I walked outside.

“I’ll follow you,” I said.

“All right.”

He climbed into his Chevy Tahoe and I followed him as planned, pulling up to a public garage in the Gaslamp Quarter. After we parked, we got out of our vehicles and I asked, “Need any help?”

“Nah. I got it. You can go grab a beer and get a good seat.”

“I can do that.”

I left Gage to do whatever it was he needed to do and made my way down the street to the bar. After ordering a pint, I found a seat, which had a great view of the small stage at the end of the room.

The bartender kept glancing at me until finally he walked over and said, “Sorry to ask this, but are you Chase Matthewson?”

“I am.” I nodded with a small smile.

“I knew it. I’m a huge fan.”

“Thanks, man.” I took a sip of my beer. “Didn’t know there were Rockies fans in Padre territory.”

He smiled back. “I’m from Denver, so it’s in my blood.”

“Nice.”

“How’s retirement life?”

“It’s going well. Thanks.”

“Are you just here for a cold one or did you come to watch California Thunder?”

California Thunder? Was that the name of the band?

“Both,” I answered and looked toward the stage where Gage and his bandmates were setting up.

“Well, let me know when you need another.”

“Will do.”

I was on my second beer when a male voice came over the speakers. “Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!” The packed bar erupted into cheers. “I don’t know about you, but we are



stuffed like a fucking turkey.” I chuckled at the guy’s play on words. “Anyway, we’re California Thunder and we hope to rock your night.”

Seconds later the band started to play and my gaze immediately went to Gage. His hands expertly ran over the strings of his guitar and I was captivated watching him work the instrument as though it was a part of him. My eyes moved to his tanned forearms that were tatted, and even though I knew he was in good shape, I was enthralled once again by how muscular his arms were. The last and only time I had his hands on me, they weren’t as strong. *He* wasn’t as strong, but as I watched, I couldn’t help but wonder what his calloused fingers would feel like working my shaft as he had that night.

Or what his mouth would feel like again wrapped around my dick as I came down his throat.

“Another?” the bartender asked, pulling me from my thoughts. Why the hell was I thinking about Gage’s hands and mouth being on me again? Did I want that? I hadn’t been with another guy since—hadn’t even thought about being with another man—but now I’d be lying if I didn’t admit to myself that I was enjoying the fantasy.

I blinked and looked over at him. “I’ll wait a bit. Thanks.”

I needed something stronger than beer to wash away the memories racing through my mind, but since I was driving, I knew that wasn’t an option.

---

I STAYED UNTIL THE SHOW WAS OVER, WANTING TO TELL GAGE how amazing he played. Once he was all packed up, he made his way to where I was sitting at the bar.

“You’re still here,” he said as he leaned against the wood top between me and another guy.

“I wouldn’t just leave without saying goodbye.” The words fell from my lips before I realized what I was saying.

“I’m glad you stayed,” he said while flagging down the bartender. Maybe he hadn’t thought my words were a jab about how he’d left school after his knee injury without a word even though they could be taken that way.

I cleared my throat. “I had no idea you could play the guitar like that.”

“After I hurt my knee and went back home, I needed something to occupy my time. Picked up the guitar and have been playing ever since.”

“That’s ...” My words trailed off as I saw a familiar face walk in the door. “Shit, man. Miguel Santiago just walked in, and is that your ex?”

## GAGE

MY HEAD WHIPPED AROUND TO WHERE CHASE'S GAZE WAS focused. Sure enough, my ex and her current boyfriend were walking in with a group of people. "Yeah, that's her, all right."

"She looks familiar."

"That's because you met Lisa before."

"I ... Wait, your ex is the girlfriend you had in college?"

Nodding, I responded, "One and the same."

The bartender came over, and I ordered a Sam Adams.

"Wow. I had no idea you married her."

"Unfortunately."

The bartender placed my beer in front of me.

"When you said your ex bailed, I figured she had to go out of town or something. Not go out with friends."

"I had no idea either." I shrugged and took a drink. What else could I say? It wasn't unusual for Lisa to cancel plans at the last minute and disappoint our kids. Unfortunately, not everyone could be as lucky as Chase to have an ex who actually gave a damn and wanted to co-parent.

"How did the two of them even meet? As far as I know, Santiago splits his time between Denver and Phoenix."

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “She works at a hotel near the Padres stadium where a lot of the visiting teams stay when they’re in town. She probably met him during one of your road trips last season.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lisa and Miguel approach the bar, and her eyes widened when she spotted me.

“This should be fun,” I muttered under my breath.

“Hi, Gage,” Lisa huffed as she and Miguel squeezed into the space next to where I was standing since the bar was packed.

“Tyler and Dylan were really upset that you bailed tonight,” I said without returning her greeting.

Miguel wrapped an arm around her as he straightened to stand at his full height. I wasn’t sure what he hoped to accomplish by that move. Maybe he was trying to intimidate me, but I couldn’t imagine why. I wasn’t the deadbeat parent in the scenario.

Lisa rolled her eyes. “There weren’t going to be any other kids where we were having Thanksgiving. They would have been bored out of their minds.”

I wanted nothing more than to call her out on her selfish behavior. She could have changed her plans to make things better for her children, but what good would it have done for me to say anything? It was a battle I’d been fighting for over ten years. If things hadn’t changed already, I doubted they ever would. She was only going to have herself to blame when our kids finally decided they didn’t want a relationship with her, and it was something I had a feeling was going to happen sooner rather than later.

Before we said anything else, Miguel must have noticed Chase sitting next to me because he said, “Chase Matthewson? That you, man? Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Me either,” Chase mused. He didn’t seem excited to see his former teammate, but after what he’d said about Miguel earlier, I wasn’t surprised.

“You guys are here together?” Miguel asked, his gaze bouncing between us.

I waited for Chase to answer, but when I looked at him, he opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, appearing at a loss for words. He’d mentioned not liking the guy, but I couldn’t think of why Miguel’s question would have caused Chase to be tongue-tied.

“We were roommates in college and got a chance to catch up,” I explained.

“Don’t you remember me mentioning that Gage knew your teammate, baby?” Lisa asked.

“That’s right,” Miguel replied as the bartender came to take their order. “Except, *former* teammate now.”

While Miguel was distracted, Lisa turned her attention to the man in question. “Hey, Chase. Been a long time. What brings you to San Diego?”

I recognized the twinkle in her eye and chuckled to myself. Miguel had another thing coming if he thought his girlfriend would ever remain faithful.

Chase shrugged. “This is where my family decided to settle after I retired.”

Miguel rejoined our conversation. “So, your family lives here, but you’re at a bar together on Thanksgiving?” He quirked a brow as though he didn’t believe the explanation I’d given a few seconds prior.

“Actually, we invited Gage and his boys over for dinner when their Thanksgiving plans fell through. I’m surprised Lisa didn’t mention that our kids are friends.”

I grunted a small laugh and Lisa glared at me. The truth was, she probably had no clue who her children spent time with. Dylan and Jase had met only a few months before and Lisa had seen the boys maybe three times since then. When she did spend time with them, it was all about her. She didn’t make an effort to learn about what was happening in their lives.

I drained as much of my beer as possible and glanced at Chase. “As fun as this has been, I’m gonna head out.”

He finished his drink and said, “I think I’m going to leave too.”

I stepped around Lisa. “You should probably call the boys soon. Maybe try to make it up to them for missing today.” I walked away.

Chase and I headed toward the door, but I stopped short of going outside with him. “I need to grab my stuff, but thanks for coming to watch the show tonight.”

“I had a good time.”

Things felt a bit awkward as the night was coming to a close. I didn’t know when I’d see Chase again, and it seemed weird to say we should hang out again, so I settled for a generic, “See you later.”

“Yeah,” he responded before walking out to where he’d parked.

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“DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE TO CHAT?” PAUL, THE HIGH school’s athletic director, asked as I warmed up my lunch in the staff lounge.

“Sure.” I grabbed my food when the microwave stopped, and followed him to the tables outside, where we sat at the one farthest away from the door. “What did you want to talk about?”

He blew out a breath. “Coach Feder called me a few minutes ago. His wife got a promotion, so they are moving to New York.”

“Oh.” I stirred my soup. “Are you asking me to help out?”

“Actually, I’ve heard some great things about the program you’ve got going with your travel team, and I was curious if you were interested in taking over the freshman team.”

“What about Harris?”

Harris was the assistant, and it would seem logical he would be considered first.

“I talked to him before coming to find you. He’ll be retiring in the next year or two, so he agrees it would be better to bring in someone fresh. Someone who will stick with the team for a while.”

The idea of coaching the team Dylan would play for in a couple of years was tempting. However, I wouldn’t have time to coach the travel ball team if I were coaching at the school.

“Can I think about it?” I asked.

He nodded. “I can give you a few days, but we need to get someone in there soon. Practices start as soon as we get back from winter break.”

“All right. I’ll let you know soon.”

For the rest of my lunch break, I thought about the pros and cons of coaching for Coastside High. After my baseball dreams were crushed in college, I followed in my parents’ footsteps and decided to become a teacher. A part of me had wanted to coach for the high school when I got hired, but there hadn’t been an opening in the baseball program for years. Figuring I was done with that part of my life, I put all of my focus into being the best teacher I could be. But when Dylan said he wanted to play baseball, my excitement for the game came roaring back. I loved coaching, and I could picture myself out on the field helping prepare young athletes for their high school playing careers.

I needed to talk to my boys. Working with the high school team would take up a lot of my free time, plus I didn’t know how Dylan would feel about me not coaching his next season. If they were okay with it, I needed to figure out what to do about spring ball. Lucky for me, I had an idea that might make everyone happy.

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AS I MANNED THE GRILL IN MY BACKYARD, I HEARD MY doorbell ring through the open sliding glass door. The steaks were almost done, and I assumed Dylan would answer the door, knowing how excited he was to have Jase coming over. He'd tell Chase where he could find me.

A few minutes later, I heard Heather laugh, followed by the deep rumble of Chase's voice. I pulled the meat off the barbecue and made my way inside.

"Hey, man," Chase greeted me the second I walked into the kitchen. "Thanks for inviting us over for dinner."

"Of course," Heather responded before I could say anything. "It only makes sense with how often the boys hang out that we should all get to know each other better."

Heather was talking as though she was regularly involved in Tyler and Dylan's lives and expected to get to know their friends' parents. The only reason she was part of the dinner was because she always came over on Fridays. When I'd texted Chase, whose number I'd gotten from Jamie, and told him I wanted to chat about spring ball, he'd mentioned Friday was the first night he was free.

Chase quirked a brow in my direction, probably just as confused by Heather as I was.

I set the tray of steaks on the counter and grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge, handing one to Chase. "Where are the kids?"

"Jase followed Dylan up to his room, and Jamie offered to keep Cammie for the evening knowing a girls' night would be more fun than hanging with her brother and his friends. I'm going to pick her up later," he replied.

I chuckled. "Can't say I blame her."

"Well, guys, dinner is ready. Why don't you take a seat at the table, and I'll bring the food out," Heather offered.

"Can I help with anything?" Chase asked.

Heather placed her hand on his bicep and squeezed. "That's sweet of you, but I've got it."



My jaw clenched when it took her a few more seconds to remove her hand. There was no reason for her to touch him, and I wondered if I was mad because I didn't want Heather touching anyone else or if I didn't want someone else touching Chase.

I shook my head. Why did the thought even enter my mind? Chase was my friend, or at least we were on the path to becoming friends again. Heather was probably just being cordial.

"Boys, dinner is ready," I called from the base of the stairs.

Within seconds, it sounded like a herd of elephants running around. Chase and I sat across from each other at my dining table, while the boys pulled out their chairs. Jase spent so much time at our house, he even had a "usual" seat.

It took a few minutes for Heather to bring out all the food. As she placed the bowl of rolls on the table, she said, "These are a special recipe that's been in my family for years. I hope you enjoy them." She smiled at Chase before taking her seat and scooting it a little closer to him.

"Everything looks great," he replied, and we began passing dishes around the table.

"Well, I love cooking. I'm sure Gage wouldn't mind you coming over for dinner whenever the boys get together."

I choked on my sip of water. First, Heather rarely cooked or baked. Those rolls were the only thing I'd ever seen her make. She'd much rather order delivery than spend any time in the kitchen. For whatever reason, she must have thought her cooking prowess would somehow impress Chase. Second, I was getting irritated with her flirting. When she first met him, I was able to brush off my concerns, but it was beyond obvious what she was doing.

The only good thing was Chase didn't seem interested.

Once we filled our plates, Dylan and Jase took over the conversation talking about their plans for winter break while Tyler checked his phone periodically. After eating, they ran

upstairs to play video games, leaving just the three adults sitting around the table.

“Can I get you something else to drink?” Heather asked, eyeing Chase’s empty beer bottle. “Coffee, maybe?”

“That would be great. Thanks.” While Heather was in the kitchen, Chase said, “You mentioned talking about spring ball in your text. What’s up?”

I finished the last sip of my beer, wondering if Heather might also bring me a cup of coffee or if that was an offer for only my former roommate. “Yeah. Last week, the athletic director at my high school approached me about coaching the freshman team. It’s a great opportunity, and in a couple of years, I’ll be able to coach Dylan, which would be pretty awesome. Anyway, I’ve decided to take the job, but if I’m coaching at Coastside, I can’t coach spring ball. So, I was wondering if you might be interested in taking over the Mavericks?”

His eyes widened. “Oh wow. I wasn’t expecting that. To be honest, I hadn’t planned on helping out until it had been brought up in Arizona, but I think coaching would be a lot of fun. I had a great time that weekend. Do you think any of the parents would have an issue with it though?”

I chuckled. “No. I don’t think anyone will have a problem with a professional ball player coaching their child.”

“A retired professional ball player,” Chase corrected with a wink.

“Yeah, I don’t think that makes you any less desirable.”

The words slipped out, and I realized how they could be misconstrued to mean something other than what I’d intended, but before I could check his reaction Heather returned with coffee for all of us.

We continued to chat about how to make the transition smooth for the team before Chase checked the time and stated he needed to pick up Cammie.

“It was lovely having you here,” Heather gushed as we walked him to the door. “I ... I mean ... We hope to see you

again soon.” She rubbed her hand across his back as I opened the door.

Chase took a step away from her, and I couldn’t help but hope he didn’t want her attention.

“We should get together soon and talk about tryouts,” I suggested. “They happen at the end of January, and I’d be happy to help out with that part as much as possible.”

He grinned. “I’d appreciate that. I’ll probably have some questions along the way. I hope you don’t mind if I bother you occasionally.”

“Not at all.”

“Cool. See you soon.”

“Night,” I replied and closed the door behind him.

Heather followed me to the kitchen as I began to clean up, and said, “Well, that was fun.”

I closed my eyes. Her behavior during dinner was too reminiscent of how Lisa had acted when we were around ball players. I’d been too stupid to stand up for myself in the past, but I wasn’t about to tolerate that sort of disrespect a second time.

“We need to talk.”

**CHASE**

“CAN DYLAN SPEND THE NIGHT?” JASE ASKED, PEEKING HIS head in from the hall.

I looked away from the Denver Broncos game on the TV. “It’s a Sunday night.”

“But it’s Christmas break and I don’t have school tomorrow.” He begged, hopeful.

He had me there, and I would rather he be under my roof while it was my week with the kids. “Did he ask his father yet?”

“Yeah. Coach said if it was okay with you, then he could.”

“All right.”

My heart rate kicked up a notch at the thought of seeing Gage again. It had been a couple of weeks since I’d had dinner at his place, and I’d thought the more time that passed since I’d seen him would help with the images swirling in my head since Thanksgiving when I’d watched California Thunder perform. Except every time I would lay my head on my pillow, I couldn’t stop thinking about his hands or his arms or *him*.

If we hadn’t fooled around *that night* all those years ago, would I be thinking about him the way I was? Would I be making more of an effort to rekindle our friendship? I had to

believe I would want to hang out with him, but none of those thoughts would be in my head if a line had never been crossed.

But they had been, and I was torn about whether I wanted to think about him or if I *didn't* want to think about him.

---

THE DOORBELL RANG AN HOUR OR SO LATER. JASE RACED from his bedroom and beat me to the front door, even though I was engrossed in the Broncos game a few feet away. Right away, the boys took off for Jase's room.

"Hey," I greeted Gage with a handshake and peered around him to his Tahoe. "Where's Tyler?"

"Spending the night at a friend's place too."

"So, you have the house all to yourself or is Heather coming over?"

"Nope, have the house to myself." He smiled.

Given Lisa was an absent mother, I figured Gage appreciated the quiet when his boys were away. However, I found myself asking, "Want to come in for a few beers? Broncos are in the fourth and then the Chargers play."

He hesitated for a beat and then replied with a little bounce to his head, "Yeah. Sure."

After I gestured for him to come inside, he took a seat on the couch while I went to the fridge for a Coors.

"Here you go." I handed him the can with the blue mountains on it. "So, what's new?"

Gage cracked the top. "Well, I broke up with Heather the other night after you had dinner at my place."

I balked slightly as I plopped onto the opposite end of the sectional. "Really?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah. Just wasn't working out."

“Sorry to hear that. You guys seemed good together.”

He gave me the side-eye and then took a sip of his beer.

My brow furrowed. “What?”

“Let’s just say ever since she met you, she reminded me of Lisa.”

My eyes widened. “You broke up because of me?”

“Do you remember how Lisa was that night ...” He trailed off and cleared his throat. “The, ah ... The night she showed up on campus.”

I thought for a moment, trying to remember anything other than what I had been thinking about for the past several weeks. “You mean her whining about wanting to dance?”

“I mean that once she found out that you were probably going to go pro, she got all cozy with you.”

“She didn’t get cozy with me.” I grunted a small laugh.

“As soon as it was mentioned you might go pro, she was all over you. Then she moved on to Richards after you left.”

I shook my head, still snorting a laugh. “The only thing I remember from that night is getting puked on by that chick.”

Gage and I stared at each other and I swallowed hard. *That* wasn’t the only thing I remembered.

“Is that really the only thing you remember?” he asked as we continued to lock eyes.

“No,” I exhaled.

Before anything else was said, the boys barreled into the living room and flopped onto the couch.

“Can we order pizza?” Jase asked.

“Yeah, sure.” I looked at my old roommate again. “Want to stay for pizza?”

“Sure, why not?”

---

“I WANT TO WATCH *ENCANTO* NOW.” CAMMIE GRABBED THE remote before anyone else as soon as the Chargers’ game ended.

“No,” Jase whined. “If you watch that, Dylan and I are going to play Mario Kart.”

I expected Gage to hightail it out of there at the mention of a Disney movie. Instead, he said, “You boys go play your game and we’ll watch *Encanto* with Cammie.”

*We will?*

“I want popcorn too,” she stated.

“We just ate pizza,” I reminded her.

“So? We always have popcorn with movies.”

“Fine.” I chuckled. “Popcorn it is.”

“And fruit snacks.” She beamed.

“And juice?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She smiled widely.

“We want popcorn too,” Jase stated.

“How about this?” Gage cut in. “We’ll go make the popcorn and get the snacks. Boys, go play your game and we’ll bring it to you. Cam, get the movie cued up.”

The boys rushed off and Cammie got comfy in her spot with her blanket.

“You don’t need to stay and watch a cartoon,” I said as we walked into the kitchen.

“Do you not want me to stay?”

I spun to face him. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then you want me to stay?”

“I ... yes.”

“Good.”

I turned back around and headed for the pantry to pull out four bags of popcorn. “Think four will be enough?”

“We could always make more.”

“True.”

“Mind if I grab another beer?”

“Not at all.”

Gage went to the fridge and pulled out two cans of Coors. “Want one?”

“Sure, but you know I won’t let you drive home if you have another one after that.” I opened the cellophane wrapper of the popcorn and stuck the bag into the microwave.

“I’m sure after a two-hour movie, I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” I reached for the cabinet door to grab the popcorn bowls just as Gage took a step in my direction. We were inches from each other; my gaze moved instantly to his lips.

He retreated and looked down at the floor. “For what it’s worth, I remember more of that night too.”

“Dad! Hurry. The movie is starting,” Cammie screamed from the living room, causing Gage and I to step farther away from each other.

“Press pause. We have four bags of popcorn to pop!” I called back.

Gage cleared his throat. “Next Friday you don’t have the kids, right?”

My heart felt as though it had stopped in my chest as I anticipated where he was going with the question. “Yeah, why?”

“I have another gig. You should come.”

“All right. Text me the details.”

I went to the freezer and pulled out a pint of Ben & Jerry’s Chunky Monkey ice cream. “Still your favorite?”



Gage grinned. “Hell, yeah.”

---

MY NERVES WERE RUNNING WILD AS I TOOK A RIDESHARE TO the bar Gage texted me for his show. Nothing else was said on Sunday after the declaration in my kitchen. We’d finished getting the popcorn, fruit snacks, ice cream, and juice, watched the movie and then he headed home.

Throughout the movie, there were stolen glances, but nothing else. Would we finally deal with the giant elephant in the room after his gig?

Before going up to the bar and ordering a drink, I made my way through the establishment, looking for the men’s room. As I grabbed the door, someone on the other side pushed it open.

“Sorry,” I muttered and took a step back, only to realize it was Gage.

“You made it.” He beamed.

“Of course. Looking forward to watching you play again.” Though I knew his hands and tattoos were going to continue to replay in my head after the refresher.

“Good.” He grinned.

My gaze went to his mouth and then back up to his eyes. His eyes did the same, and he licked his lips and my stomach dropped to the floor. What the fuck was going on with me? Why was I thinking about kissing him? Why was I turned on by it?

“Let’s go!” someone shouted down the hall, breaking the moment.

“I’ll find you after the show,” Gage said.

“Cool,” I breathed.

He walked around me and I finally stepped into the restroom, did my business, washed my hands, and sauntered

up to the bar. After ordering an IPA, I found a seat near the tiny stage. The place was almost packed, and I wasn't sure if it was because of California Thunder or because it was a Friday night. Whatever the case, I had a good view.

It didn't take long for the show to start. I sat there staring as, once again, I was fixated on Gage's arms and hands as he worked the guitar expertly. I knew what I needed to do; I needed to find out if my reaction to my former roommate was because of the man himself or because of some underlying part of my sexuality I had never entertained.

After the hour-long set, I waited at the small table for Gage since he'd told me he'd come to me when he was done. As I was scrolling through news articles on my phone, I felt someone come up behind me. Before I could turn around, he leaned in close to my ear and whispered, "Let's get out of here."

**GAGE**

“DID YOU DRIVE HERE?” I ASKED, AS CHASE FOLLOWED ME out to the parking lot.

“Nope. Took a rideshare.”

“Cool. I’ll drop you off later.” I unlocked the doors to my Tahoe.

He climbed into the passenger seat, and I backed out of my spot. “Where are we going anyway?”

“Still good with a stick?” I smirked, and pulled onto the road.

He furrowed a brow. “You mean a pool stick?”

“Sure do. When was the last time you played?”

He shook his head slightly. “It’s been a while. Probably not very good anymore.”

“Are you kidding me? We were the reigning champs back in college.” I turned onto the street that led to Stripes, a local billiards spot.

“We did kick some ass, didn’t we?”

When Chase had agreed to come out to watch my band, a tiny thrill had run through me. I wanted to spend more time with him, even though I didn’t know exactly why. It could have been because he represented a time in my life when

everything was fun and exciting. Or it could have been more than that. I couldn't deny I felt drawn toward Chase Matthewson, and it brought up questions I'd thought I'd come to terms with years ago.

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## TEN YEARS AGO

WE HAD JUST FINISHED PRACTICING FOR OUR UPCOMING GIG when Calvin, the lead singer for California Thunder, approached me.

“You okay, man? You seemed off tonight.”

I shrugged. “Lisa and I got into a fight earlier.”

“That’s not surprising. What was it about this time?”

It was no secret Lisa and I had a volatile relationship. We hadn't been able to get along as a married couple, and things had only gotten worse in the six months since our divorce.

“Just the usual crap. Her being flaky and not picking up the boys when it's her turn, and me always having to be the responsible parent. I don't know what I'm going to do when my parents move to Florida next month. I can't count on Lisa to pull her weight, which means I'll be taking care of the boys completely on my own.”

“You're going to be fine. You're one of the best dads I know,” he praised. “Although you should probably take advantage of the time your parents want to spend with your kids before they leave. Go out and get laid or something.”

I laughed. “That's not a bad idea.” We finished packing up our equipment before I said goodbye and headed home.

As I drove along the coast, I thought about what Calvin had suggested. I had gone out with a couple of women since Lisa and I separated, but nothing had gone further than a few dates, and I hadn't had sex for months. Sometimes when I couldn't sleep at night, I wondered why I had such a hard time

finding someone I wanted to spend time with. Lisa and I had been a disaster from the beginning, and I knew what I didn't want in a future relationship. The last time I had been with someone who I felt a real connection with had been *him*.

The memories left me wondering if maybe I was more attracted to guys than I had thought. Perhaps it wasn't just *him* I could feel a connection with. Maybe I needed to open myself up to the possibility of dating men.

When I finally arrived home, I texted my mom to check on my sons. Once I knew they were good, I grabbed my laptop and opened my internet browser. I knew people had success with online dating, but I'd never tried it. I assumed it worked the same way, whether I was looking for a woman or a man to date. I searched for gay dating sites even though I wasn't sure if that label applied to me.

Several sites popped up, and I clicked on the first one. It was easy to navigate, and I had a profile set up before long. I selected pictures for my account that didn't show my face. Though I wondered if that would keep people from messaging me, I wasn't comfortable with the possibility that anyone, like a parent at the school, could come across my profile. On the other hand, if someone reached out and things progressed, I could send them a picture directly.

Knowing I'd keep refreshing the page to check for messages if I didn't step away, I closed my laptop and told myself I'd check it in the morning. When I climbed into bed, I had a hard time falling asleep. No matter what happened with the dating site, I owed it to myself to figure out if my most exciting college experience had been a fluke or an awakening I'd chosen to ignore.

The following day, I checked the dating site as soon as I got up. Much to my surprise, I had received a handful of messages overnight. A couple of them were immediately deleted. I wasn't ready to deal with guys who told me in explicit detail exactly what they wanted to do to me. I was about to give up on reading any more when one caught my attention.

Steven: *Hi there! I wouldn't usually message someone who didn't post a picture with their face, but I admit, I was intrigued when you said you play in a band. I happen to play the drums. Maybe we can chat sometime.*

I scrolled through his bio, which stated he was twenty-six years old, worked in finance, and loved to surf. I clicked on his profile picture and could admit he was good-looking. He had the typical Southern California vibe with his longish blond hair, blue eyes, and golden tan. The dot by his name wasn't green, which meant he wasn't online, but I typed out a message anyway.

Me: *Hi Steven. I'd like to chat sometime, especially since we have music in common. By the way, I play guitar.*

Since he wasn't online, I closed my laptop and got ready for work. The day seemed to drag by. At lunch, instead of going to the staff lounge like I did most days, I headed to my car to check my messages.

Steven: *Nice. And for what it's worth, I liked the pics you did post. 😊*

I smiled. It was always nice to have someone compliment me. Glancing at the top of his profile page, I noticed the green light next to his name. Did I want to message him when he might respond right away? I thought about it for a minute before deciding I couldn't chicken out.

Me: *Thanks! I appreciate that. What are you up to?*

Steven: *On my lunch break. What about you?*

Me: *Same. I've got about twenty minutes before I have to head back.*

Steven: *Sounds like we've got some time to get to know one another.*

We continued to message each other until it was time for me to get back to class. He was quite funny, and I enjoyed talking to him. Before I had to go, we decided to meet up for a drink, which meant I was going on my first date with a guy.

---

WHEN FRIDAY ROLLED AROUND, I WAS A GIANT BALL OF anxiety. The thought of going out on a date with a guy was both exciting and nerve-wracking. What would happen if I hated it? What would happen if I liked it?

Using the map app on my phone, I pulled up the address to the bar Steven had suggested. I'd already looked up the place a couple of days ago and knew it was a gay bar. But, having never been to one before, I didn't know what to expect. Walking inside, it appeared to be like any other bar I'd ever been to. I scanned the room, looking for my date. Thankfully, he looked exactly like his profile picture, and it didn't take long to spot him sitting at a small booth in the corner.

"Steven?" I asked as I approached.

A large friendly smile spread across his face. "Gage, hi."

I took the seat across from him. "Thanks for asking me to meet up."

"Of course. Thanks for agreeing."

The first thing I learned was a date with either gender always seemed awkward at the beginning before the conversation started to feel natural. Luckily, someone came over right away to take our order, giving me a minute for my nerves to settle.

"I'll take a Coors in a bottle," I said.

Steven turned to our server. "I'll have the same."

"Do you come here a lot?" I asked once we were alone again. Sure, it sounded cliché, but I needed something to get the conversation going.

He shook his head. "I've been here a few times, but not a lot. How about you?"

"First time," I replied as I glanced around the bar again.

The place was packed, which wasn't surprising for a Friday night. A DJ was playing a mix of upbeat music interspersed with some slower songs.

The server brought our beers to us, and we each took a large sip.

“So, tell me about your band. California Thunder was it?”

“Yeah. A few of my friends and I started the band a couple of months ago.”

“What kind of music do you guys play?”

“Mostly covers of rock songs.”

The two of us continued to talk for quite a while. All the usual first date stuff, and while Steven seemed like a nice guy, I wasn't feeling a spark between us.

When “I Don't Want to Miss a Thing” by Aerosmith played, Steven stood up and asked, “Do you want to dance?”

“Sure.” Despite not being certain about him, I didn't think there was any harm in dancing together. Maybe I needed a little physical contact to determine whether there was a connection with him. Besides, I liked to dance, contrary to what my ex-wife thought. I told her no sometimes when she suggested it because I felt she was using it as a way to pull me away from my friends when I wasn't giving her one hundred percent of my attention.

He grabbed my hand and led me out to the dance floor. While I didn't feel awkward or uncomfortable with the gesture, I also didn't feel that thrill I usually felt when touching someone I was into.

I continued to feel the same way throughout the song. His arms weren't the ones I wanted wrapped around me. Instead, my thoughts drifted back to the one man who'd actually made me feel something. When the song was over, we returned to our table and ordered another drink. We talked for a while longer, but about an hour or so later, I was ready to call it a night. So, after settling our bar tab, we walked to the parking lot.



“I had a lot of fun tonight,” Steven admitted as I stopped next to my Toyota Camry.

“Me too. Thanks again for inviting me.”

I noticed he glanced at my lips, and then he stepped forward. Instead of leaning in, I gave him a one-armed hug and backed away, because I realized there was only one guy I wanted to put my lips on.

Too bad that ship had sailed years ago.

## CHASE

### PRESENT DAY

ON THE WAY TO THE BILLIARDS HALL, I FOUND OUT THAT Gage hadn't played pool in several years, either.

"And you think we can win?" I laughed.

"Worth a shot." He shrugged.

"I don't know. Not really looking forward to getting my ass handed to me tonight," I admitted.

He chuckled slightly. "Well, I can just drive you home."

I looked at the time on my phone. "It is getting late."

"Need to get up early tomorrow?"

"No, I'm just old."

"We're the same age and if you're old, I'm old. But last I checked, thirty-five wasn't old."

"Tell that to our boys." When I was their age, I thought anyone older than sixteen was old.

"True."

We were quiet as he drove toward my place and it was on the tip of my tongue that maybe it was a good night to have

*the talk.* The one about that damn elephant.

“What if ...” He trailed off.

“Yes?” I probed, looking over at Gage. The orange streetlights lit up his face with each one we passed.

“Never mind.”

“Just say it.”

“You wanna talk about that night?”

“Yes,” I replied without hesitation.

He cut his eyes to me. “You do?”

“Is it weird we haven’t?” I questioned. It had been two months since we had come back into each other’s lives, and while we hadn’t been alone except for now, I still felt the uneasiness when we were together. Plus, if he told me that night was only mere college experimenting, then maybe I could stop thinking about his damn arms.

Or would I?

“Yeah, it is.”

“Then let’s do it. Been seventeen years in the making.”

“All right. Let me park.”

Gage pulled into the parking area of a beach, and instead of getting out, we stayed inside his SUV and removed our seatbelts.

“Where do we start?” he asked, turning his head to look out the driver’s side window and not at me.

“I ...” I hesitated, peering down at my lap. “I don’t know, but I’d be lying if I said I haven’t been thinking about it.”

He glanced at me. “Because you regret it?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I mean, we both married women, had kids—”

“And are now single.”

“Yeah, but—”

“You regret it.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I was just confused after it happened.”

“Me too, and after my divorce I went out on a date with another guy to try to figure shit out.”

My eyes widened. “You did?”

“I had to know.”

“And are you?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so, but ...”

“But?” I prompted when he didn’t continue.

He let out a long breath and looked out the front window of the Tahoe. “Seeing you again is making me question it.”

“Yeah, I’m having the same problem,” I admitted.

He turned his head back toward me. “Really?”

It was my turn to sigh and stare at the dark water in the distance. “After that night, I tried to forget about it. I started dating Jamie, got drafted, and just put it out of my mind because the sports world would have been less accepting of gay me.”

“Until your teammates came out as a couple,” Gage added.

I glanced back at him and shifted to face him better. “Yeah, but still, they weren’t welcomed by everyone. Miguel Santiago for one.”

He turned his body in my direction the best he could with the steering wheel in front of him. “No shit?”

I bobbed my head. “Had to break up a fight between him and Aron Parker after a game.”

“So, that’s why you didn’t find out if you had any sort of attraction toward men? You were worried about how you’d be treated in the clubhouse?”

I lifted a shoulder. “Yes and no. Aron and Drew confided in me after I caught them sneaking around. It didn’t bother me one bit, and I told them about you.”

Gage's eyes widened. "You told them about me?"

"Well, not your name, but that I fooled around with a guy in college. I had to tell them I was okay with them being together because I was. Didn't bother me any, and later that night, I thought about what we'd done in our dorm room. I wondered about you and whatever happened to you. Had no idea you were about to coach my son and our kids would be best friends."

"Yeah." He grunted a small laugh. "Small world."

"But you said you went on a date with a guy. It didn't go well?"

"Didn't have any sort of spark with him and deleted my account from the dating app afterward."

"But seeing me again is bringing up feelings or just renewing questions that maybe you're bi?" I wondered.

"All of it," he replied.

"Me too," I admitted.

He balked slightly. "Really?"

I smirked as I responded, "Since the night I first saw you play with your band, I've been thinking about how your hands would feel on me again."

"Chase." Gage swallowed.

"What?" My brow furrowed.

"Saying that is only going to make matters more complicated."

"I'm sorry, but it's the truth."

He stared at the dark ocean in front of us for a few moments and then asked, "What do we do?"

I looked off into the distance too for a few beats before I said, "We can kiss."

"And if we feel nothing?"

"Then we move on from this but at least we've finally had some sort of closure from that night."

“And if we *do* feel something?”

“Then I guess we see what happens.”

“Okay,” he breathed.

I leaned in and Gage bent forward. I felt as though I was about to kiss someone for the first time. I suppose I was, but only because it was going to be my first kiss with a man.

I licked my lips slightly and went in further. I could smell the mint of his gum just before our mouths met, and a rush of something raced through me as we opened at the same time. A burst of passion washed over me, and I was certain Gage was feeling the same because we both deepened the kiss at the same time. I pulled the back of his head while he cupped my cheeks and our tongues swirled around, the mint tasting sweet on my taste buds. I had to think that because he wasn't pulling away that he was enjoying it too. I was loving it so much that my dick was getting excited.

After several long moments, we pulled apart.

He exhaled. “That was ...”

“Yeah,” I agreed to his silent words.

“Now what?” Gage asked.

“I think we should get out of here before we get arrested because kissing you makes me want to recreate the night in our dorm.

“I feel the same way.”

“Good.”

He cranked the engine. “Where to?”

“My place for coffee?”

“Coffee?” he snickered.

“Coffee.” I winked.

---

I COULD STILL FEEL GAGE'S LIPS ON MINE AS I OPENED THE front door to my house. Before I could turn on a light, he surprised me and pushed me against the wall, our mouths going at it again. Our shirts went next, both of us ripping them over our heads in a frenzy. Gage dropped to his knees and worked my belt buckle free before I helped him push my pants and boxers down. My rock-hard dick sprang free, bobbing in front of his face.

A hiss escaped my lips as he took his first taste, running his tongue across the slit of my crown before engulfing me with his mouth. I held onto his head, urging him to continue as electricity ran up and down my spine.

"I want to taste you this time," Gage admitted against the head of my shaft and looked up at me, the minimal glow from the moon lighting his face from a nearby window.

"Fuck," I groaned. Instantly, images of shooting down his throat raced through my head.

Gage took me once again, rubbing my balls in his giant hand as he sucked. I started to thrust my hips, keeping my hand on his head and urging him to suck harder. He did and moved his free hand to my dick, pumping me while massaging my balls and sucking the tip.

"Jesus," I moaned. "That feels so fucking good."

He hummed a response, the vibration sending a zing through my entire body. Every nerve ending was coming alive. Without warning, I came, shooting into the back of his throat.

With my pants around my ankles, I spun Gage so his back was against the door, worked on his jeans, and returned the favor.

## GAGE

“WHEN IS JASE COMING OVER?” I ASKED DYLAN AS HE emptied the dishwasher.

“He said his mom would drop him off around 6:30.”

I felt a slight pang of disappointment hearing it would be Jamie dropping off Jase instead of the person I longed to see. Chase and I hadn't seen each other since the night we'd fooled around. We weren't ignoring each other. We'd texted a few times but, between the holidays and Chase having his kids during the previous week, we hadn't found time to get together.

“Is he eating dinner with us?”

Dylan lifted a shoulder. “I don't know.”

“Well, I'm ordering pizza, so there will be plenty if you want to let him know.”

“Sure.” He pulled out his phone and texted his friend.

I grabbed the broom to sweep the kitchen, and Tyler rounded the corner, typing furiously on his phone. “Hey, bud, did you finish cleaning the bathroom?”

With two boys, it was imperative that we stayed up on chores because the house could turn into a disaster quickly.



“Yeah,” he mumbled, and sat on one of the stools at the kitchen counter.

“I’m ordering pizza from Rosario’s. Any special requests?”

“I want hot wings,” Dylan stated.

My gaze went to Tyler, who was still focused on his phone. “Tyler, did you hear me?”

“Uh huh.”

“Hey, how about you put your phone down for a second and respond to my question? Who are you texting, anyway?”

“He’s texting his girlfriend, Quinn,” Dylan mocked.

“Shut up, Dylan.” Tyler put his phone down on the counter.

“Knock it off, both of you. Dylan, go take out the trash.” I took a seat next to Tyler. “So, who’s Quinn?”

“Just someone I know. Quinn’s not my girlfriend.”

“Okay.”

After a beat he whispered, “How do you tell someone you like them?” His words were so quiet I barely heard him.

“Well, if you want her to know, you should just be honest.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but I don’t know what to say? Can you help me?”

It had been a long time since I’d been in school, asking a girl out, but I wasn’t going to turn down my son’s request for assistance. “Of course. Let me order dinner and then we’ll come up with a plan.”

We spent the next thirty minutes talking about asking her out and how he should treat someone he was interested in. It was a conversation I’d already had with both of my boys, but I felt it was important for some reminders if he was talking to a girl now.

Tyler had gone back to texting when the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Dylan yelled, and I heard him running toward the entryway.

Needing to speak with Jamie, I made my way toward the door behind Dylan. Lisa was supposed to pick up her sons in the morning, and I needed to make sure Jamie could pick up Jase before Lisa arrived.

As Dylan pulled the door open, my eyes widened when I saw Chase standing behind his son.

“Let’s go play Mario Kart,” Dylan suggested to Jase. “We can play until the pizza gets here.”

“Hi, Coach Stat,” Jase greeted before he followed my son.

“Hey,” I returned, but they were halfway up the stairs already. I turned back to the man I hadn’t expected to see. “I thought Jamie had the kids.”

“Not happy to see me?” Chase grinned.

I shook my head with a slight chuckle. “That’s not ... I’m just surprised to see you. You want to stay for pizza? It should be here soon.”

“Yeah, I could go for pizza.” He walked inside.

I led the way to my kitchen, where I grabbed a beer for each of us.

Tyler still sat at the kitchen counter, engrossed in his phone. “Hi, Tyler,” Chase greeted him.

“Hey,” he replied before addressing me. “Is it okay if I go to Miles’ house after dinner?”

“That’s fine, but don’t be gone too long. You still need to pack your stuff to go to your mom’s tomorrow.”

“Okay. Thanks.” He stood and walked out of the kitchen, and then we could hear him climb the stairs.

“I think that’s the most I’ve ever heard him speak.” Chase chuckled.

“Yeah, it turns out he’s been on his phone so much because he’s been texting a girl.”

Chase took a seat on the stool where Tyler had been and popped the top off his beer. “Oh, man. I’m not looking forward to that with either of my kids.”

“He asked me for help because he wants to tell her he likes her.”

“Did you help him?”

I leaned against the counter. “I did, but I don’t know if I’m the best one to give him advice.”

He quirked a brow. “Why’s that?”

“It’s not like I’ve had the best luck with dating. The whole thing with Lisa was toxic as hell, and I’ve only dated a handful of women since my divorce.”

“Maybe that’s the problem.”

“What is?” I asked over the top of my beer.

“You keep dating women.”

“We already established I tried dating a guy. It wasn’t great either.”

“Maybe one guy isn’t enough to decide. How about you give dating another one a shot?”

The doorbell rang before I could respond. The boys came running down the stairs as I grabbed our dinner from the delivery guy.

“Dad, what are you still doing here?” Jase asked his father.

“Gage invited me to stay for dinner,” he explained as I set the pizza boxes on the counter.

“Then we’re going to talk about spring ball,” I added, hoping Chase understood that I didn’t want him to leave after we ate.

The smile he aimed in my direction told me he knew exactly what I wanted.

---

AFTER TYLER LEFT FOR HIS FRIEND'S PLACE AND THE OTHER two boys returned to Dylan's room, Chase and I moved to the living room.

"Want to watch a movie?" I asked.

He took a seat on the couch. "Sure."

I scrolled through some options until we settled on a new action flick.

"So, not that I'm disappointed or anything, but how did you end up bringing Jase over tonight?"

"I had something to give Jamie. While I was at her house, Jase mentioned he was spending the night here, and I offered to drive him over." He glanced at the television and then added, "And, maybe I wanted to see you."

"I wanted to see you too," I admitted with a grin.

We continued to watch the movie for a bit, but the words he'd said before the pizza delivery had interrupted us kept playing through my mind. I turned to face him, propping my knee on the cushion between us. "What did you mean earlier when you said I should give dating a guy another shot?"

"What do you think I meant?" He smirked.

"I don't want to assume anything. I spent the last seventeen years thinking you regretted the first time we messed around. It's probably best if we're just honest with each other about how we're feeling."

He nodded. "Okay. You're right. I've been thinking about everything since you left my house and I want us to spend more time together. Is that something you want?"

Knowing the boys couldn't see into the living room from the second floor and I would hear them if they made their way down, I slid a little closer to Chase. "I think I'd like that."

He leaned toward me, and I wrapped my hand around the back of his head, pulling him closer. My lips crashed against his, and he returned the kiss with the same level of intensity, our tongues tangling together.

We'd already taken things further the night I'd accepted Chase's coffee invitation, but given our circumstances with the kids under the same roof, making out was probably as far as we'd go. I wasn't going to complain, though, because kissing Chase was pretty fucking good.

I trailed my hand down his back, feeling just how muscular he was. It was such a contrast to all of my previous partners, who had been soft and delicate, and I couldn't get enough. As much as I loved touching him, feeling his hands on me felt just as amazing.

Needing to be closer to him, I got up on my knees and gently pushed him back until he was lying down on the couch. I covered his body with mine and returned my mouth to his. I could feel his hardness pressing against me, and I let out a small groan.

"Damn, I can't get enough of you," I mumbled against his lips.

"Me either." He ran his hands across my ass and tugged me closer to him.

We continued to move together, my hips rotating and causing my dick to rub against the hardness behind his zipper. Who knew dry humping like a couple of teenagers would be so hot?

I was desperate for more and considered moving things to my bedroom. The words were on the tip of my tongue when I heard the front door open reminding me we weren't alone.

"Shit," I grumbled and pushed myself off of Chase.

We moved to opposite ends of the couch and turned our focus back to the movie that was still playing.

"You're home already?" I asked Tyler as he sauntered into the kitchen.

"Yeah." He grabbed a piece of pizza from the fridge. "I still need to do some laundry so I can pack."

Any hope I had about resuming our make-out session faded as Tyler walked through the living room with his

laundry and Dylan and Jase came into the kitchen looking for dessert. By the time they each finished a bowl of ice cream, and Tyler switched his laundry from the washer to the dryer, Chase had fallen asleep on the couch.

I grabbed a blanket and pillow from the linen closet and walked back to Chase.

His eyelids fluttered open. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“It’s fine. I got you a blanket and pillow. You had a couple of beers, and you seem pretty tired. I’d feel better if you just slept here.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Any time.” Looking around to make sure everyone had gone upstairs, I leaned down and pressed a kiss against his lips.

As tempting as it was to stay downstairs with him, I forced myself to get up and go to my room. Still, I had a smile on my face when I shut my bedroom door. Chase had said he wanted to spend more time with me, and I couldn’t have been happier.

## CHASE

I TOSSED AND TURNED, FIGHTING THE URGE TO THROW THE blanket off me and go upstairs to Gage's room for more of his mouth. Running water rushed through the pipes above me and I wondered if it was the man himself taking a shower. Images of a naked Gage filled my mind and I could no longer contain the need coursing through my veins.

Jumping from the couch, I made my way up the stairs, trying to be as quiet as possible. As I passed one closed door, I heard Tyler talking on the other side and I assumed he was on the phone. In the next room, I could hear Jase and Dylan playing their racing game. That meant the last closed door was the one I sought.

Not wanting anyone else to hear, I didn't knock. Instead, I slowly opened the door a crack and peered inside. A lamp on the nightstand illuminated the space and the sound of water intensified.

Stepping into the room, I closed the door behind me, locked it for good measure, and then stripped out of my T-shirt as I moved toward the bathroom. My heart raced with each step because when we were younger, I'd seen Gage naked many times as we changed in the locker room or dorm room, but that was the younger version of him, and I was about to get my first full view of the muscular father of my latest fantasy.

A billow of steam fluttered out as I pushed open the bathroom door that was slightly ajar. My eyes moved to the shower encasing, a naked Gage on the other side of the somewhat fogged-up glass, and my gaze instantly went to the movement of his hand that was working his shaft.

“Need a hand with that?” I asked, my mouth watering at the sight.

A part of me thought he would startle and pretend as though I hadn’t caught him jerking off. Instead, he stilled his movements, keeping his hand on his dick, and looked over his shoulder at me as the hot water cascaded down his taut back. “Are you sure you want to?”

I began working on my belt. “Wouldn’t ask if I didn’t mean it.”

“The boys are right down the hall.”

“I locked the door.”

“And what if they come looking for me or wonder why you didn’t say bye to Jase?”

I unclasped my belt and unbuttoned my jeans quickly. “I don’t know. Make something up.”

Gage turned, his hand slipping to his side and allowing me to see his erection was still at full mast. Fuck he was gorgeous. “I guess I can pretend I didn’t hear them.”

I cracked a grin. “That works.”

“All right. Get in here,” he ordered.

I licked my lips and hurried to remove the rest of my clothes. My thickness matched his as I stepped into the steamy shower. These secret hook-ups Gage and I were having were exhilarating, and a part of me felt as if we happened to be found out, the excitement would fizzle.

Or maybe not, but I wasn’t ready to share our newfound experimentation with anyone but the naked man in front of me.



We closed the distance between us, our mouths connecting feverishly as the water beat down behind Gage. Our dicks rubbed against each other and we both groaned at the same time. He pulled me closer, moving his hips in a circle to rub his length on me.

“I want to taste you,” I admitted against his lips.

He pulled his head back slightly. “Yeah?”

Without a reply, I dropped to my knees.

---

MY BACK WAS STIFF AS I ROLLED OVER, MY HAND HITTING something as it hung off the bed. As I opened my eyes, pajama-clad legs filled my vision. I looked up to see my son standing in front of me and I quickly realized I wasn't in a bed, but on Gage's couch.

“What are you doing here?” Jase asked.

“I ... ah ...” My gaze drifted past him to see Gage walk into the room, shirtless and in sleep pants. I sat up, remembering the night before. “I guess I fell asleep.”

Gage winked as he went to the kitchen and asked, “Who wants pancakes?”

The boys shouted their desire for pancakes, and then Jase turned back to me. “I was wondering why you didn't say bye.”

“Coach and I thought I drank too much to drive home. He offered his couch.” *Among other things.* I stood and made my way to the kitchen. “Need any help?”

Gage grinned and gave me a you-helped-plenty-last-night look. “Yeah, I could use a hand.”

I looked down at the floor trying to hide my smile.

“Are those Coach's pants?” Jase asked, coming into the kitchen.

My head snapped up, my eyes wide. I couldn't find the words to explain why I was wearing another man's pants.

“Yeah, buddy, they are,” Gage answered for me. “When you get older, you’ll understand that when you have friends over and they drink too much, they should stay on your couch. I let your dad borrow a pair of sweats so he would be comfortable.”

“Ah. That makes sense,” my son replied.

“Why don’t you both get dressed?” Gage suggested and looked at Dylan. “Your mom will be here right after breakfast.”

The boys ran off. Tyler was still not out of his room.

“Is she going to show up this time?” I asked as Gage handed me a carton of eggs.

“She fucking better.”

---

BREAKFAST CAME AND WENT. I COULD FEEL THE TENSION rolling off of Gage as he scrolled through his phone, waiting for his ex to arrive.

“We should head out.” I walked into the living room after changing into my clothes and tousled Jase’s shaggy brown hair. “Get you back to your mom’s.” I’d texted Jamie that I was able to pick up our son and take him back to her so she didn’t need to rush to get Cammie fed and dressed.

We made our way to the front of the house and once we were in the family room, a car door slammed out front. All of our heads turned in that direction, and the blinds were open just enough for me to see Lisa walking up the path toward the front door, followed by my former teammate, Santiago.

Miguel Santiago and I never had words, but I didn’t like the guy once he gave my buddies Aron and Drew shit about being a couple.

Before Lisa could ring the doorbell or knock, Gage swung the door open. “Hello,” he clipped.

“Are the boys ready?” she asked.

“They’ve been ready for almost forty-five minutes.”

“We overslept. Sorry,” his ex sassed.

“Get your things,” I said to Jase. He and Dylan went to Dylan’s room, doing what I’d asked.

“Chase?” Lisa asked.

I peered around Gage and gave her a little wave. “Hey, Lisa. Good to see you again.”

Santiago decided to insert himself into the moment. “Matthewson? What are you doing here?”

I could ask you the same thing, I wanted to say. Instead, I replied, “My son stayed the night last night. Just came over to pick him up.”

“You two spend so much time together, I’m going to start thinking you and Gage are fuck buddies,” Santiago mocked.

I stepped around Gage and Lisa and walked down the steps toward the asshole. “I see you’re still a homophobe.”

“So, you are fucking?” he probed.

“It’s none of your fucking business what we do with our personal lives. Our sons are best friends and your girlfriend would know that if she spent more time with her children.” I hadn’t expected to say any of what had come out of my mouth, but Santiago was getting on my fucking nerves.

“Excuse me?” Lisa bellowed.

“Chase.” I heard Gage warn behind me, but I didn’t turn to look.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Santiago asked, puffing his chest.

“You and your fucking unnecessary comments. I dealt with them over Aron and Drew, and now you’re insinuating the same about me and Gage.”

“Aron and Drew were gay.”

“*Are* gay,” I corrected. “And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I’m straight as an arrow. Can you say the same?” Santiago challenged.

Before I could reply, Gage roared, “Enough! Everyone needs to calm down. The boys are ready to go.”

I turned to see Jase, Dylan, and Tyler staring at me and Santiago. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d lost my cool. Even with the shit in the clubhouse I had to deal with, I was always Switzerland, but when it came to Gage Statler, I wanted to protect him.

Or I wanted to protect mine.

“Let’s go,” Lisa ordered.

Tyler and Dylan said goodbye to their dad then walked down the stairs.

I tossed my car keys at Jase. “Go get in the car, buddy. I just need to apologize to Coach.”

Everyone went to the street except me and Gage. Once Lisa drove off, I turned to my former roommate.

“Sorry about that. I don’t know what came over me.”

He took a few steps toward me and lowered his voice. “You just made me so fucking hard. You better go drop your boy off and come right back.”

My eyes met his. “Yeah?”

“Unless you have plans.”

“Nope.” I shook my head.

“Good, because we’ll have the entire house to ourselves.”

## GAGE

AS SOON AS CHASE DROVE AWAY, I GRABBED MY KEYS AND headed out to my car. When I'd asked him to come back to my place, his blue eyes lit up, and if things progressed as I hoped they would, I wanted to be prepared.

I hit up the convenience store down the street and purchased the items I needed before hurrying back home. After stashing the box of condoms and lube in my bedside drawer, I looked around my room to find something to keep me occupied until Chase returned. Jamie lived about twenty minutes away, so I didn't expect him back for a bit.

Grabbing a stack of essays I needed to grade, I walked downstairs and sat at the kitchen counter. I tried to focus on the words in front of me, but I couldn't stop my leg from bouncing up and down in nervous anticipation.

Much sooner than I expected, my doorbell rang. Opening the door, I was met by a smiling Chase. God, he was sexy. It still felt a little odd to think about a man that way, but it was true. Everything from his dark brown hair, perfect smile, and athletic body drew me in. Watching him stand up to Miguel was an added bonus.

I grasped his hand and pulled him inside. "Damn, you got here fast."

“I may have broken a few traffic laws on my way back.” He used his foot to push my front door closed before crashing his lips against mine.

Not wanting to wait any longer, I led him up to my room. I didn't bother shutting the door since we were home alone, and I was beyond desperate to get him naked. Instead, I spun him around and pushed him against the wall, kissing him hard and letting my tongue explore his mouth. My hand snaked down and cupped the bulge behind his zipper.

“Fuck, you're so hard,” I mumbled as he nipped at my chin.

“It's a constant problem whenever we're alone.”

I ripped his T-shirt over his head and flicked open the button on his jeans. “We should probably do something about that.”

Pulling him over to my bed, I pushed on his shoulders until he was seated on the edge of the mattress. Without a second thought I knelt between his legs, making quick work of his shoes and socks. “Lift up,” I instructed so I could remove his jeans and boxers. Spitting on my palm first, I gripped his shaft and began working my hand up and down.

“Damn, that feels good,” Chase moaned.

“We're just getting started.” My own erection was becoming painful behind my jeans. “Now lay back on the bed.” I stood and began to strip.

“You're bossy today,” he said, taking over stroking himself.

I glanced down at the bead of pre-cum on the tip of his dick and grinned. “I think you like it.”

“Fuck yeah, I do.”

I climbed onto the bed and knelt next to him, replacing his hand with mine once again. “I've been wanting to suck you off since last night.”

“No one is stopping you.”

Leaning down, I ran my tongue from the base of his shaft to his crown before wrapping my lips around him and sucking.

Chase caressed the back of my head, but still left me to decide how deep I took him.

“I want to try something,” he said.

I pulled off his cock with a pop. “What’s that?”

He rolled onto his side. “Lay like this, but with your legs by my head.”

I followed his directions, my face still level with his dick.

Without another word, he leaned forward and engulfed my length.

“Oh, God,” I called out. “Keep sucking me just like that.”

Needing to get my mouth back on him, I leaned forward and took him deep.

We continued blowing each other until I felt my balls tighten. I wanted to come so bad, but not down his throat. “I want you to fuck me,” I admitted.

He pulled back and looked into my eyes. “Really?”

I nodded. “It’s all I’ve been thinking about.”

“Me too.” He sat up and grabbed my face with both hands and pressed his lips to mine.

When we pulled apart, I leaned over to grab a condom and the bottle of lube from my bedside drawer and tossed them on the bed.

“Someone’s prepared,” he teased.

“I ran to the store the second you left the house,” I admitted.

He smirked. “Okay. How do you want to do this?”

I thought about it for a second. “I think you should lay back and let me be on top.”

His eyes glittered with lust. “Damn, I don’t know if I’ll last long with you riding me.”

He laid back and once he was in position, I bent down and gave his dick a few more licks to make sure he was nice and hard. Pulling back, I grabbed the foil package and ripped it open with my teeth. I rolled the latex down his erection, giving it a couple more strokes.

“You’re a fucking tease,” he groaned.

I smirked and grabbed the bottle of lube, pouring a generous amount onto my fingers. Looking into his eyes, I reached around and rubbed the cool gel around my opening and then added some over the condom for good measure.

Facing Chase, I threw my leg over his hip and straddled him. With our dicks pressed together, I reached down and wrapped one hand around both of us. I couldn’t wrap my fingers all the way around because of our size, but I still had a firm grip. The feel of his cock against mine, even with the latex barrier, was like nothing I’d ever experienced.

When I felt ready, I lifted onto my knees and guided him to my eager hole. The feeling of his tip stimulating the nerve endings around my opening encouraged me to sink down, letting his generous girth stretch me out slowly.

“You good?” he asked through clenched teeth, appearing as though his control was hanging on by a thread.

“Mhmm.” I’d lost the ability to form any actual words.

Chase placed his hands on my hips, but still allowed me to control the pace. With one last movement he was seated fully inside of me. “Fuck, Gage. You’re wrapped around my cock so tight. I love it.” He reached out and wrapped his fist around my rod and began stroking me. “Move whenever you’re comfortable.”

After my body adjusted to the sinful invasion, I relaxed and began moving up and down. Feeling someone inside of me for the first time was both odd and exhilarating. I rubbed my hands up his stomach and then braced them on his chest, using him for leverage so I could fuck him faster. He continued to pump my shaft as I rode him and I felt the overwhelming need for release.



“I’m going to—” I didn’t even finish the sentence before my cum shot all over Chase’s chest.

“Fuck! That was hot.” He reached around and squeezed my ass as he pumped his hips from underneath me.

Within seconds, I felt Chase shudder as he found his release.

“Wow,” he mumbled as I moved off him and cuddled into his side. “That was amazing.”

After a minute, when it felt like my legs were strong enough to hold me up, I climbed out of bed and held my hand out to Chase. “Take a shower with me?”

---

CHASE SLIPPED HIS BLACK BOXER BRIEFS ON, AND I COULDN’T stop myself from wrapping my arms around his waist and kissing the bare skin between his shoulder blades.

He let out a small groan. “You keep that up, and we’re going to end up right back in your bed.”

“While I like the sound of that, I probably need a little rest before we do that again.” I smirked. “You want to watch some TV instead?”

“Sure.”

We crawled back into bed, and I turned on the television, switching the channel to ESPN.

Rolling my head to the side so I could look at him, I said, “So, about what happened earlier with Miguel—”

“As I said, I’m really sorry for losing my cool.”

I shook my head. “You don’t need to apologize, but I was curious about something.”

Chase’s brow furrowed. “About what?”

“When Miguel asked if we were dating, you said no. Things were heated, and I don’t think that moment was the

right time or place to say anything about us, but are we keeping whatever this is”—I gestured between us—“a secret for now?”

He took a deep breath. “Santiago is the last person I want to know any personal details about me, but what are you thinking?”

“I’m not ashamed of us.”

“I’m not either,” he interjected.

That was a relief.

“But ...” I ran a hand over my head. “Our boys are best friends. It could affect their relationship if things don’t work out with us. Besides, I’ve had a rule not to introduce my kids to someone I’m dating until I’ve been with them for a few months. Of course, things are different because they already know you, but I still think we should wait a bit.”

He nodded. “I agree. I’m having fun keeping you all to myself for now, and I think we’ll know when we should talk to the kids. I’m sure they’ll have a ton of questions once they find out.”

“Hell, I still have questions.” I chuckled.

“Me too,” he admitted. “Never in a million years did I think the next person I would date would be a guy, but spending time with you and doing what we’ve been doing ...”

“It feels right.” We were so in sync that I could finish his sentence.

“Yeah.”

“Since we’re laying our cards out there.” I twisted so my entire body was facing him. “I need you to know this isn’t just a casual thing for me. I want to be with you, and see if a relationship between us can go somewhere.”

“Dating wasn’t really on my radar right now.”

My shoulders slumped and I glanced away. “I get that.”

He placed a hand on my face and turned my head toward him. “You changed that for me. I think there is definitely a

connection between us. Something that is deeper than just sex. And I want to see where it goes.”

A grin spread across my face, and I pulled him in for a kiss. “Glad we’re on the same page.”

“But let’s stay in our own little bubble for a little while longer because sneaking into your bedroom makes me rock hard.”

“I’ll agree to that.”

We continued watching television for a bit before we both drifted off.

---

MY PHONE RINGING WOKE ME UP FROM THE NAP I WAS thoroughly enjoying while tangled up with Chase. I grabbed my cell from the bedside table and saw Tyler’s name on the display.

“Hey, buddy. What’s up?” Chase stirred next to me, so I lowered my voice. “Is everything okay?”

As much as I wanted the boys to have a relationship with their mother, I was always on edge the entire time they were gone. It was why I bought them both cell phones years ago.

“Can you come pick us up?” Tyler asked.

“Of course,” I responded without hesitation as I slipped out of bed. Knowing my son, he wouldn’t ask me to go get him and his brother for no reason. “You want to tell me what happened?”

“Mom and Miguel argued the entire drive to her apartment, and Miguel called Chase an a-hole. Dylan told him not to say that, and Mom and Miguel started yelling at him. They kept fighting until Miguel finally left, and now Mom refuses to come out of her room.”

*Fucking hell.* Miguel was becoming a problem, which meant Lisa and I needed to talk.

“Okay, I’ll be right there.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

We hung up, and I slipped on my jeans.

“Is everything okay?” Chase asked, cracking his eyelids open.

“No.” I sighed and tugged on a T-shirt. “Tyler wants me to pick him and Dylan up. Miguel and Lisa got into it, and now the boys don’t want to stay there.”

“Can’t say I blame them.” He climbed out of bed and slipped on his clothes.

We headed into my garage together, and I turned to him. “I’m sorry about this. It’s not how I imagined the day going.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m a dad too, and I understand your kids come first.”

I was grateful he not only understood but shared my priorities. I leaned forward and placed a kiss on his lips. “Thank you.” I pressed the button to open the garage door. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

He smiled and walked outside. “I’ll be waiting.”

---

BY THE TIME I PULLED UP IN FRONT OF LISA’S APARTMENT complex, I was fuming. It was bad enough that she rarely showed up for her visitation days every other weekend, but knowing she couldn’t even make it a couple of hours with them in her care was infuriating. I’d been more than generous by not forcing her to live by the agreement in our divorce settlement and letting her come and go as she pleased. Just once, I’d love for her to put her sons before anything else, but it seemed unlikely that would ever happen. Maybe I needed to revisit our custody arrangement with my lawyer.

I knocked on her door, and it only took a couple of seconds for Tyler to answer. “Hey, Dad.”

Placing a hand on his shoulder, I asked, “Where’s your mom?”

“She’s in her room.”

“Go get your brother, and then I’ll chat with her.”

My boys returned quickly with their duffle bags. “We’re ready.”

Dylan’s eyes were red and glassy, and I could tell he’d been crying. It was a good thing Miguel had already left since I wasn’t sure I’d be able to hold back from letting him know exactly how I felt about him yelling at my kid.

I pulled my youngest in for a hug. “Why don’t you guys head down to the car, and I’ll let your mom know you’re going home with me.” I tossed the keys to Tyler.

Dylan nodded and rushed down the stairs.

“You might need to go inside, she’s still refusing to come out,” Tyler stated before following his brother.

Despite the fact that Lisa and I had a contentious relationship at best, hearing that she hadn’t come out of her bedroom caused me some concern about her well-being. I didn’t want to invade her privacy, but I didn’t feel right just taking our children and leaving. After a moment of debating what I should do, I entered the small two-bedroom apartment and knocked on the closed door at the end of the hallway.

“Go away,” Lisa called out. “I told you I’ll come out later.”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Gage?” she questioned.

“Yeah, it’s me. Get out here.”

It took a minute, but she finally opened her bedroom door. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Since she seemed fine and was acting in her usual nasty manner, any concern I’d had for her dissipated. “Tyler called me and asked me to come get him and Dylan. He said you and Miguel were yelling at Dylan. What the hell, Lisa?”

“He was rude to Miguel,” she huffed.

“I don’t give a shit. He has no right to yell at my kids.”

“They’re my kids too.”

“Yeah? Then maybe you should actually act like a mom.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she seethed.

I shook my head. “It means you barely have a relationship with your boys. You rarely show up for them, and when you do, it turns into a disaster.”

“Get the hell out of my apartment!” she yelled.

As usual, Lisa refused to acknowledge the damage she was doing to her relationship with her sons.

“I’ll leave, but you need to make this right with Tyler and Dylan. Maybe you can call them in a day or two.”

“Can’t they stay?” Her voice cracked a little, and I would have felt bad for her if she didn’t constantly play games with other people’s emotions.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I explained as I walked to the door. “And if you want them to stay here in the future, you better talk with Miguel. It won’t be pretty if I have to.”

## CHASE

WHEN GAGE RE-ENTERED MY LIFE, I HAD NO IDEA WE WOULD end up dating. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would be with a man, but I was, and it was the happiest I'd been in a long time. Not that I was unhappy before, but being with him made me feel alive. Or maybe like a teenager who was horny all the time because Gage Statler made me insatiable.

We took advantage of every second we could spend with each other the following weeks. While my schedule was a bit more flexible because I knew when I would or wouldn't have my kids, Gage could never rely on Lisa. But somehow, we had a weekend together with no kids. There weren't many clothes involved either, even though it was late January.

Gage's alarm on his phone rang, making both of us startle.

"It's morning already?" I groaned and wrapped my arms around him from behind.

"Yeah. Go back to sleep."

"I don't want you to leave." I held onto him tighter so he couldn't get up.

"High schoolers can't teach themselves." He chuckled.

"Fine." I let go of him and rolled onto my back. "But I remember you played hooky a few times in college and I

would be okay with spending the day in bed with you.”

“We’ve only been back from break for a couple of weeks. I can’t call in sick.” He got out of bed and rubbed his knee.

“Your knee is bothering you?” I asked, ignoring the school situation for a moment.

“It’s just stiff in the mornings.”

I rose onto my elbows. “I haven’t heard you complain before.”

“Not complaining. Just need to walk it out. Maybe rain is coming.” He smirked over his shoulder as he headed toward my connecting bathroom, his bare ass staring me in the face.

I snorted a laugh. “Okay, old man. Glad you can feel the weather in your bones.”

“I just need a massage.”

“I can help you with that.”

The toilet flushed, and I heard the sink turn on. A few moments later, Gage walked back into the room.

“So, you’re saying if I play hooky, you’ll give me a massage?”

“I’ll give you more than a massage.” I winked.

He narrowed his eyes at me playfully. “You’re a bad influence, Chase Matthewson.”

I let the sheet slip down my body, revealing my abs, and looked at his crotch as I answered, “No, I’m not.”

He grunted a small laugh and knelt on the bed with his good knee. “Yes, you are.”

“Are you going to send me to detention, Mr. Statler?”

We stared at each other for a few beats, and then both of us burst into laughter.

“I’m going to take you over my knee,” he replied, still laughing.

“Your good one or your bad one?” I teased.



He tackled me onto my back. “You need to watch your mouth.”

“Or what?” I taunted. “You’ll give me something to put in it?”

“Jesus,” he groaned, his dick hardening against my lower belly.

“What?” I smirked.

“If I get fired—”

“You’re not going to get fired.”

“I’ve never called in sick.” We stared into each other’s eyes.

“Then they won’t suspect anything.”

“But Tyler goes there.”

“Is he in one of your classes?”

“No.” Gage shook his head. “But sometimes I see him around campus.”

“Just text him you’re not feeling well and you’ll see him later at home.”

“I also have practice after school,” he argued.

“I’m sure your assistant coaches can handle a single practice. Any other excuses?”

He laughed. “No, but just this once.”

A slow grin spread across my lips. “Just this once.”

“And you’re giving me a massage after I call out.”

“I’ll get the lube. I mean, oil. I’ll get the massage oil.”

He sat back on his heels, his cock at full mast. “You’ll need both.”

---

THE MINUTES RACED BY AS GAGE AND I LOUNGED ON MY BACK deck that overlooked the Pacific Ocean. Soon he would have to leave and both of us would have our kids the rest of the week, and since school was back in session and he was busy with the high school team, there would be fewer sleepovers where one of us could “fall asleep on the couch.”

My phone buzzed on the side table next to me with a text. Grabbing it, I saw it was my ex-wife.

I'm on my way over. Jase forgot his glove in my car.

I sat up quickly, trying to untangle from Gage as fast as I could.

“What? What is it?”

“Jamie is on her way over to drop off Jase’s glove.”

“Oh shit.” He jumped from the couch.

Gage being at my house wasn’t a problem, but he was supposed to be at work and Jamie knew that. How would we explain why he was at my place instead of teaching?

He raced off to my room, probably in search of the rest of his clothes. I had no idea if Jamie would want to come inside to shoot the shit for a minute or if she planned to drop the glove off to me at the door. I didn’t want to take a chance that it was the former.

Following Gage to my bedroom, I pulled a Rockies sweatshirt from my closet and tugged it over my head. “I feel like I’m kicking you out.”

“It’s fine.” He slipped on a shoe and began tying it. “I need to head home and pretend I was in bed all day. Make soup for dinner or something.”

“Yeah, I need to think about dinner too. Cammie will probably want spaghetti and I’m all out of sauce.”

After he got his other shoe on and grabbed his bag, I followed him to the front door. I pulled it open. “Thank you again for playing hooky.”

“It was worth it.” He leaned in and his lips met mine. We kissed for a few moments and then broke apart. “I’ll call you.”

We both turned toward the front, only for my breathing to stop.

“Wow,” Jamie exhaled. “I ... Wow.”

“James—” I started to say, trying to come up with a lie in the blink of an eye.

“No, it’s cool. Just had no idea,” she stated.

“I should go,” Gage said.

“No, looks like I should be the one leaving.” Jamie backed away. “Sorry for the interruption.”

“Please wait,” I begged her. “Let me explain.”

“What is there to explain?” She waved her hand in our direction. “You’re free to be with whoever you want. We’re divorced.”

“So, you’re cool with this?”

“Do the boys know?”

“No,” both Gage and I answered at the same time.

“Are you going to tell them?”

“Not yet,” I replied, and hooked my thumb in Gage’s direction. “We’re still seeing where this goes.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “I trust your judgment. Sorry again for the intrusion.”

“Wait,” I called out. “The glove?”

“Oh, right.” She snickered and thrust it in my direction. “Can’t forget this or I might walk in on something else.”

“James, are you sure you’re okay with this?” I wondered.

“I don’t have a problem with the two of you, if that’s what you’re asking. I’m just in shock.”

“Don’t tell anyone, okay?” Gage pleaded.

“I won’t.”

## GAGE

CALLING IN SICK HAD LED TO A FANTASTIC DAY WRAPPED UP with the person I wanted to spend all of my free time with. It had been perfect, at least until Jamie caught us kissing. She'd said she was fine with it, and while her approval wasn't needed, I appreciated it. Still, that split-second worry I'd had that she was going to freak out was hard to ignore.

The reality was, not everyone would be as accepting as Jamie. At least she'd promised not to say anything about us. Of course, it wasn't her story to tell, and from the little I knew of Jamie, she didn't seem like someone who would betray confidences, especially about something as personal as who someone was dating. If Chase and I got to the point of wanting to go public with our relationship, we both needed to be prepared for the possibility that some people would be close-minded assholes. It sucked we had to be concerned about negative reactions, but based on things said in the media, that was the unfortunate reality we were living in.

Feeling secure that my relationship with Chase would be kept under wraps for the time being, I glanced at the clock on the dashboard and determined I had plenty of time to grab some stuff at the grocery store and get home before the boys would. Every day, the two of them met up at the park near Dylan's school and walked home since I often stayed at work for a while after dismissal.

Once I made it home, I opened the back of my Tahoe to get the groceries and noticed Lisa pulling into my driveway behind my SUV. The boys climbed out of her car, and I double-checked the time on my phone and realized school hadn't let out yet.

"You're home from school early," I said.

Dylan looked at Tyler, who glanced toward his mother, and then said, "Uh ...we didn't go to school today."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Why not?"

"Mom woke up late and said we were going to have a lazy day."

It felt a little hypocritical to be upset about them taking a day off from school when I'd done the same thing. However, as a teacher, I also knew how important it was for kids to attend class every day.

"Okay. Go take your stuff inside and see if you can get your homework assignments from your friends and start working on those." I handed them my keys.

While the boys grabbed their bags from the trunk of Lisa's car, I walked to the driver's side and waited for her to lower the window before whispering, "We need to talk."

She rolled her eyes. "Jesus, Gage. It was one day. Besides, I'm their mom, and according to our divorce paperwork, we have joint legal custody, which means I can make decisions like letting them have a day off without consulting you."

I waited for the boys to go inside before saying, "You kept them home because you overslept. I'd feel differently if it was so you could spend quality time with them, but if I had to guess, you didn't do shit today other than hang out at your place."

"Miguel was right," she huffed. "You always try to make me out to be a bad parent."

"I've never said you were a bad parent." *At least I hadn't said it to her face or in front of the kids.* "But I'm the only one who seems to take their parenting responsibilities seriously."

“Fuck you,” she sneered, then threw her car into reverse and backed out of the driveway.

Sometimes I wished I could time travel and avoid getting caught up with Lisa, but then I reminded myself that if it weren't for dating her, I wouldn't have Tyler and Dylan. And my sons were my entire world.

I grabbed the plastic bags from the back of my car and went inside. Tyler was rummaging through the fridge while Dylan looked in the pantry.

“I'm starving,” Dylan grumbled as he reached for the Cheez-Its.

“Didn't you eat at your mom's house?”

“Yeah, like five hours ago,” Tyler replied.

My hands gripped the edge of the counter, and I counted silently to five. Some days, it was harder to bite my tongue when it came to their mother. Instead of losing my shit in front of them, I took a deep breath before responding. “I bought some soup and stuff for grilled cheese sandwiches. If you want, I can make it now.”

“Yeah.” Dylan closed the pantry. “That sounds good.”

“You're not going to get us sick by making our food, are you?” Tyler questioned.

It took a second for me to remember that I'd texted him I wasn't going to be at school because I wasn't feeling good. “Nah, I'm feeling fine now.”

I felt like an asshole lying to my kids, and I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to hide my relationship with Chase if it required me to keep secrets from them.

---

IT TOOK A WEEK AND A HALF BEFORE CHASE AND I WERE ABLE to see each other again. He'd had his kids, and I'd been busy with my boys and the high school baseball team. Since Jase

and Cammie were back with Jamie, Chase was coming over to chat about the upcoming tryouts for the travel ball team.

I'd just started the dishwasher when the doorbell rang. A smile spread across my face as I dried my hands and opened the door. "Hey," I greeted, my voice huskier than normal.

"Hey," he returned and stepped into the entryway quickly checking that we didn't have an audience before pecking me on the lips. It was difficult to have him right there in front of me and not be able to touch him like I wanted since my boys were home. We had texted every day, but that was a poor substitute for actually spending time together.

"I've missed you."

"Me too," he replied as he followed me further into the house.

I grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge on the way to the living room.

We sat next to each other on the couch, close enough our arms brushed against each other. I twisted the cap off my beer and took a large swig.

He did the same before whispering, "I really want to make out with you right now."

Heat coursed through me as his warm breath tickled my neck. How could those simple words turn me on so much? I'd experienced nothing like the passion Chase and I shared, and I was quickly becoming addicted.

I faced him and looked into his eyes. "Then do it."

It was still risky since Tyler and Dylan were in the house, but we'd hear them before they made it to the living room, so we'd have some warning if they ventured downstairs.

He cupped the back of my head with one hand while resting the other on my thigh. Time seemed to stand still as he leaned in and brushed his lips against mine. I needed more, so I deepened the kiss, our tongues moving together languidly. His grip on my leg tightened while I ran my hands over his shoulders and down his muscular back.

Before we got too lost in each other, I heard one of the bedroom doors open and someone clambered down the stairs. Chase and I broke apart, and I grabbed my coach's binder from the coffee table just as Dylan rounded the corner and headed to the fridge.

"Hi, Chase," he greeted and pulled out a water bottle.

"It's Coach now," I reminded him, hoping he didn't notice that my voice was off. Chase's kiss had nearly left me breathless.

Chase smiled. "Hey, Dylan. Are you ready for tryouts?"

My son smiled. "I think so. I've been practicing every day."

"That's what I want to hear."

Dylan grabbed a cookie from the counter. "Dad, can I play Mario Kart now?"

"Are you done with your homework?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay, but you need to take a shower in an hour."

"All right," he replied and headed to his room.

When I heard his door close, I turned to Chase. "As much as I'd love to continue what we started, we should probably talk baseball like we planned. This binder includes all the drills we use to assess the players' abilities as well as the ranking sheets."

"Are you going to stay when Dylan tries out?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, but this is your team now. I'll be in the stands like any other parent."

Time flew by as Chase asked some questions, and I helped him finalize his plan for the upcoming weekend.

Chase glanced at his phone. "I better get going. It's getting late, and I know you have work in the morning."

"Yeah, and I have Coastside's first scrimmage after school tomorrow."



We stood and walked to the front door. “Are you excited?”

I nodded. “And nervous. Coaching high school kids is different from travel ball. Some of them are depending on baseball to get into college. I hope I can help them achieve that dream.”

He reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “You were an amazing baseball player in college, and from what I saw in Arizona, you are an outstanding coach. You’re going to do great.”

It felt nice to know he was confident in my abilities. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

A look passed between us, and we both moved in simultaneously. Our kiss was brief but no less passionate than our other ones.

He opened the door to leave before whispering, “Video call me later when you’re naked and in bed.”

I chuckled. “I will.”

## CHASE

SAUNTERING UP THE FRONT WALK TO JAMIE'S HOUSE, I SLID my phone into my back pocket and then rang her doorbell. It was my week coming up with the kids and since they came over to my place from school, I usually picked up their bags if they had anything they wanted to bring over so they didn't have to drag it with them all day.

When Jamie opened the door, I expected her to have the bags in her hand and we'd make small talk for a minute and then I would be on my way. Instead, her hands were empty, and she asked, "Have a minute to come inside and chat?"

I cocked my head slightly. "This doesn't sound good."

She smiled warmly. "We haven't had a chance to sit down and talk just the two of us like we used to. Was hoping you had time to do so."

"Yeah, is everything okay?" I stepped into her house.

"Everything is fine. Want something to drink?"

"Sure, water please." I followed her to the kitchen and sat at the island as she went to the fridge for a bottle of water.

She handed it to me. "How are you and Gage doing?"

I frowned. "Is that what this is about?"

“No.” She shook her head. “Well, kinda. We just haven’t had a chance to talk since I saw—you know.”

“And you want to ask me about it?”

“I know it’s none of my business, but I have so many questions.”

Even though Jamie and I were divorced and had been for several years, we were still close. I’d figured she would have bombarded me later that night after she caught me and Gage, but she hadn’t. I didn’t mind giving her the answers she was seeking because, at the end of the day, we’d remained friends. I also felt if she were dating someone and I had questions, she would be forthcoming too.

“All right. Let me have them.” I took a sip of water.

“Okay.” She beamed. “When? How? Who made the first move? Have you always been into men? Has Gage? Did you date—”

“James.” I chuckled. “I get it. You want to know it all.”

“I mean, this isn’t just you dating a woman.”

“I know.”

It was so much more, and not because Gage was a man, but because I hadn’t felt the connection with someone like I had with him since Jamie, and even then, it wasn’t the same. Gage was different, and I didn’t know why.

I started with college, explaining how Gage and I had bonded right away, and then telling her about the night before Gage had injured his knee. I told her how he had left without a goodbye and I never thought I’d see him again, so even though I had been confused then, I’d put him and what had happened out of my mind. But seeing him again in Arizona brought it back full force and I couldn’t stop thinking about him. I explained how Gage and I finally talked about the past and I thought we would just walk away and be the fathers of our sons’ best friends, but the kiss in his SUV stoked the embers of the fire we’d lit so long ago, and since that night, we’d been fooling around and then some.

“I don’t know, James. I never thought I would be with a man, but it just feels ...” I hesitated, trying to find the words, but the only one I could come up with was, “right.”

She stared at me, not saying anything.

“What?” I prompted.

“You love him.”

My brow furrowed. “What? I don’t love him.”

“I’ve known you for sixteen years and I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Like what?” I challenged.

Jamie leaned across the countertop and reached for my hand, cupping it with hers. “Head over heels in love, Chase.”

“I was in love with you,” I reminded her.

She shook her head and stood upright. “Not like this.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Let me ask you a question.”

“Okay.”

“If Gage were to come to you right now and tell you he just wants to be strictly friends again, would you be able to do that?”

I opened my mouth to tell her yes, but the thought of saying that word and Gage and I not being together had me hesitating.

“See? It hurts, right?”

“But it hurt when you walked away too,” I argued.

She nodded slowly. “I don’t doubt you loved me, but I was always competing with baseball. Everything is different now. You don’t have the pressure of your career hanging over you.”

“I didn’t love you any less because of baseball.”

“That’s not what I mean. What I’m trying to say is maybe I was a different chapter in your life. We have two great kids together, and if you and Gage would have been something

more in college and you had never dated me, then we wouldn't have that. But I'm also telling you that I haven't seen you this starry-eyed since you signed with the Phillies."

"You know comparing my love for you and my love for Gage is like comparing apples to oranges."

She smiled. "But you love him."

I chuckled slightly because I had said I loved him without realizing it. "Yeah, I love him."

I let the realization sink in for a few moments before Jamie said, "Now that we have that out of the way, I need to tell you something else before you go."

I cocked a brow. "Okay?"

"I've met someone."

---

ON THE WAY BACK TO MY PLACE, I REPLAYED THE conversation with Jamie in my head. She had met a guy and was dating him. They were new, and she wasn't ready to introduce him to the kids yet, but she felt it was coming. I was happy for her, and of course, couldn't wait to meet him. I hope he enjoyed having her ex around because I wasn't going anywhere and would always be there for her.

I never doubted the love I had for her one bit, but she was right; what I was feeling for Gage differed completely from anything I'd ever felt for her, but I couldn't put the difference into words.

Two men I knew had been in a similar situation to mine. One of them was at spring training, so he was probably unreachable, and the other I hoped would pick up the phone as I dialed his number after setting the kids' bags in their rooms.

"Chase Matthewson," Drew greeted as he answered the phone. "How's retirement treating you?"

"Good, really good."

“But you miss the game.”

“Of course, I do.” Drew himself had retired from the major leagues, so he knew what it was like.

“Me too, but it will get easier.”

“How’s Aron?”

“Back on the field and doing what he loves.”

*I was always competing with baseball.* Jamie’s words played in my head. “Doesn’t he miss you and the girls?”

“Yes, he does, but you know Aron Parker. That boy lives and breathes the game.”

“Do you feel like you’re competing with baseball now?”

“What?”

“Sorry, that came out wrong.” I sat and stared out my back door at the ocean. “I just had a conversation with my ex-wife and she said she was always competing with the game.”

“Oh. I guess I can see what she means, but since I played and know what it’s like being on the road for half a season, it doesn’t bother me. Of course, I want to be with my husband every night, but it’s just not possible now.”

“But you want him to retire?”

“His contract with San Francisco is up at the end of the next season. We’ve talked about it some, but I don’t know what he’ll do.”

“But you want him to retire,” I said again, this time not as a question.

“I don’t know, but *you* have retired. Plus, you don’t need to worry about what she said because she’s your ex.”

“Yeah, you’re right, but that’s not why I’m calling.”

“Okay, what’s up?”

“You have time? I know you have two princesses that need your attention.”

“They are napping right now. I have time until one of them wakes up.”

I took a deep breath and walked out onto my deck. “Remember that morning you and Aron told me you were dating, and I said I was cool with it because not only did I not have a problem with someone being gay, but also because I’d fooled around with a guy in college?”

“Yeah?” he drawled.

“So, that guy ended up being my son’s travel ball coach and now we’re dating.”

Drew said nothing for a few moments. “Wow. Okay. I didn’t see that coming, but I’m happy for you, man.”

“Thanks, but I was also hoping to pick your brain about something.”

“Okay?”

“How did you know you were in love with Aron?”

“I just knew.” He paused. “Are you saying you’re in love with this guy?”

“I am, but what if he doesn’t love me back? We’re both new to this.”

He chuckled slightly. “You’re not new to love, Chase.”

“True, but what if I tell him and he doesn’t love me back?” I asked again.

“That, I don’t know. It’s a risk you take when telling anyone. Aron told me first, and I admitted I was in love with him too.”

“Oh.” My shoulders sagged.

“But you won’t know how he feels until you ask, right?”

“Yeah,” I breathed, agreeing.

I wasn’t sure why it scared me so much to admit my feelings to Gage. I’d never had that problem before. When I told Jamie I loved her before summer break at the end of my junior year, I knew she loved me. I didn’t know how, but at the

time, I didn't doubt she would reciprocate the feelings—and I was right. But I didn't know how Gage felt.

What if he didn't love me back?

---

A FEW DAYS LATER, I HELD TRYOUTS FOR THE TRAVEL TEAM. Most everyone from the fall ball team returned, and there were some fresh faces. After talking it out with Gage, I had my team.

When I retired, I knew my life was going to change. I wouldn't have guessed how much so. Given that I had spent a lot of time on the road in my career, now that I was done, I wanted to attend every dance recital for Cammie, every baseball game for Jase, and whatever else I normally missed. I had no idea I would become Jase's coach, but I was looking forward to teaching him and his peers everything I knew. Even if they were only eleven.

With the start of practices for my team and Gage having his games and practices after school and on weekend for his high school team, we spent less time together. It wasn't for lack of trying; we were both just busy.

After my practice ended, I dropped Jase off at Jamie's because it was her week with the kids. Knowing Gage had a home game, I drove toward the high school. Once I was there, I parked, grabbed a baseball cap out of my back seat, and made my way to the field. I spotted him immediately where he stood in the opening of the dugout. He hadn't seen me arrive, nor did he know I was coming, so I made my way into the stands, not wanting to distract him.

"The new coach is so hot," a woman in the row in front of me said to two other women.

"He was my daughter's history teacher two years ago, and let's just say, the parent-teacher night was my favorite event of the year," another one said.



“I wouldn’t mind having detention with him,” the third lady admitted.

I grunted a small laugh, trying not to be noticed, but it made me snigger since I’d once wanted Gage to punish me in detention too.

“Well, I’m the single mom here, so I’m calling dibs.”

If only they knew *I* was the one to call dibs first.

**GAGE**

“HOW WAS BAND REHEARSAL?” I ASKED TYLER AS HE climbed into the Tahoe.

My oldest may not have been interested in playing baseball, but he’d inherited my love for music and had started a band with a couple of his friends.

“It was good. I think we’re ready for the talent show auditions. And ...”

“And?” I prompted as I backed out of the driveway.

“Quinn came to watch us practice.”

I still hadn’t met Quinn, but the two of them had continued to text non-stop after he’d admitted he liked her, and he still seemed smitten with the girl. The fear he’d get too wrapped up with his first girlfriend, as I had in high school, was always in the back of my mind, but he kept his grades up and still took part in things he enjoyed, so I tried not to worry too much.

“That’s cool, and I’m sure you’re going to rock the audition.”

“Thanks. So, how long will it take for us to get to LA?” he questioned, and I backed out of the driveway. Dylan was playing in a tournament there and the Mavericks first game was scheduled at ten the following day, so most families were already at the hotel, including Dylan, who had ridden with

Chase. Tyler and I were getting a late start since he'd had practice, and my team had had a game right after school.

"It should only take about two hours unless traffic sucks. Do you want me to stop and get you some food?"

"Sure."

I pulled into the McDonald's drive-thru and placed his order.

"You're not going to get anything to eat?" he asked.

"Nah. Chase and I are grabbing a bite after I get to the hotel to discuss tomorrow's games. He's got some questions since it's his first tournament."

Technically, that was true, but not the full truth. A couple of days ago, Jamie helped Chase and me devise a plan to sneak in some alone time during our weekend in LA. She offered to take all four kids out for ice cream and then they'd watch a movie. When I asked Tyler if he wanted to join them, he'd agreed, much to my relief.

While Jamie kept the kids entertained, Chase and I were going to grab a late dinner and then go back to my room. I couldn't wait. It had been too long since we'd last been together, and I was looking forward to devouring every inch of him.

Once Tyler had his food, we pulled onto the freeway and were met with a sea of red lights. What should have been a two-hour drive ended up being closer to three thanks to the heavy Friday night traffic.

After we finally checked in and took our stuff to our room, I sent Chase a text:

We're here. What room are you in?

My phone buzzed immediately:

Fucking finally. We're all waiting in Jamie's room.  
#335.

“Let’s go meet up with your brother.” I grabbed my room key, slipped it into my pocket, and handed Tyler the spare.

We took the elevator up two floors and headed to Jamie’s room. As soon as I knocked, the door flew open.

“What took you guys so long?” Dylan asked. “We’ve been waiting to get ice cream forever.”

I entered the crowded room where Chase, Jamie, and the kids were all waiting. “Sorry, buddy. There was a lot of traffic.”

“All right, kids, put on your shoes so we can take off,” Jamie instructed.

While they were busy following Jamie’s directions, I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and whispered, “Thank you.”

She grinned. “No problem. Just remember you guys owe me.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Chase chuckled but kept his voice low. “If you need us to return the favor, we got you covered.”

A pang of jealousy passed through me, watching their playful banter. I’d give anything to have an amicable relationship with Lisa, let alone a friendship like Chase and Jamie shared.

When all the kids were ready, we made our way down to the lobby and headed outside. After they all piled into Jamie’s car and took off, Chase said, “I found a steakhouse down the street that looked good. You want to try it out?”

“Sounds great. Are we going to walk?”

He nodded. “My map app said it would only take about ten minutes.”

“All right. Lead the way.”

Once we were away from the hotel, I reached down, laced our fingers together, and admitted, “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too. As much as sneaking around is fun, I’m tired of going days at a time without seeing you.”

We walked up to the restaurant, and before Chase could reach the door handle, the door was pushed open from the other side.

“Hey, Coach,” Nathan Lewandowski, one of Dylan and Jase’s teammates, greeted as he walked out of the steakhouse with his parents.

Chase and I broke apart immediately, and I wasn’t sure if any of them had noticed we’d been holding hands. Although we weren’t ashamed of our relationship, I knew neither of us wanted word to get back to our kids before we had a chance to talk to them.

“Hi, Nathan,” Chase replied. “All fueled up for the games tomorrow?”

It was clear he was trying to make small talk, but I could hear the tiniest bit of concern in his voice.

“Yep.”

“Well, make sure you get some sleep tonight. We have a big weekend ahead of us.” Chase looked over at Nathan’s parents. “See you at breakfast tomorrow.”

Nathan’s mom looked up at her husband, whose eyes were narrowed as he glanced between us. “Um ... we’ll see,” she responded, gently nudging her husband toward the sidewalk.

“Okay,” Chase replied.

“Have a good night,” I added before pulling the restaurant door open.

I gave the hostess our name and sat next to Chase on the couch in the waiting area. “You think they noticed us holding hands?”

“Yeah, and Kurt didn’t look thrilled about it.”

I rubbed a hand over my head. “You think he’s going to tell the other parents?” I didn’t know anything about Nathan’s family since it was his first year playing with the Mavericks.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve only talked to him once at practice. He didn’t seem very chatty with the other parents,

but that doesn't mean he won't mention what he saw tonight."

"If he says anything, you know it will get back to the boys."

"Yeah." He blew out a breath.

"What should we do?"

Chase turned his head toward me. "I think we need to talk with them tonight."

---

WE ORDERED OUR DINNER TO GO AND LEFT THE RESTAURANT to head back to the hotel. Chase texted Jamie to let her know something had come up and that we needed to talk to everyone when they got back from getting ice cream.

A short time later, Jamie replied back to Chase to say they were back in her room.

We knocked on her door, and she answered with a concerned look on her face. "Hey, everything okay?"

Chase shook his head and then peeked into the room. "Tyler, can you keep an eye on Cammie for a second?"

"Sure," I heard him reply.

"Now I'm worried," Jamie stated as she stepped into the hallway.

"Let's go talk in my room real quick," Chase suggested and led us to the room a few doors down.

When we stepped inside, Jamie said, "You're starting to freak me out."

"One of the families from the team saw us tonight," Chase explained.

"Okay?"

"We were holding hands," he added.

Her eyes widened. "Oh. Did they say anything to you?"

“Nathan didn’t seem to notice, but his dad glared at the two of us while his wife rushed him away,” I answered.

“Shit,” she muttered under her breath. “Do you think they’ll tell the others?”

Chase shrugged. “I have no idea, but I can’t risk having the kids find out because of people gossiping. We think we should tell them. Tonight.”

“Okay. You know you have my support.”

“Will you stay with us while we tell them?” he asked her.

Jamie smiled. “Of course.”

The three of us walked back to her room, and I turned off the TV when we entered. “We have something we want to talk to you all about.”

Once I had everyone’s attention, I glanced at Chase, who leaned against the wall next to me. Even though it wasn’t the first time I had to tell my kids I was dating someone, it felt different. A small part of it may have been because Chase was a man, and Tyler and Dylan probably hadn’t expected me to bring home a boyfriend. I had raised them to be open-minded, so I hoped they’d be accepting. Still, we were in uncharted territory.

“So, Chase and I have some news.” Four pairs of eyes watched me intently. Figuring the best way to tell them was just to be matter-of-fact about it. “The two of us are dating.”

“The two of who?” Tyler asked and then gestured between Chase and me. “You guys?”

“We know this probably comes as a surprise, and we’re happy to answer any questions you might have,” Chase offered.

Everyone was quiet for a moment, and then Jase spoke up. “Does that mean me and Dylan will be step-brothers?”

Chase turned his head toward me before responding. “Uh ... no one is talking about getting married. We’re just dating.”

“That would be so cool though,” Dylan added, and he high-fived Jase.

I chuckled. At least they didn’t seem to be bothered by our announcement.

“Does Mom know?” Tyler asked.

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

“Oh,” he responded but didn’t say anything else.

“Cam, are you okay with me and Gage spending a lot of time together?” Chase asked.

She shrugged. “Yeah, sure.”

Given Cammie was only seven, she might not have understood what the big deal was, but the boys had taken it just as well as I’d hoped.

“Are there any other questions?” All of them shook their heads. “All right. Then I think it’s time to call it a night,” I suggested.

“Can I still stay here with Jase?” Dylan asked.

I glanced at Chase, who nodded. “Sure, but you boys need to actually sleep, so you’re ready to play in the morning.”

“We will,” they said in unison and ran to the bedroom.

Jamie and Cammie went back to their room, and Tyler stepped into the hallway to head to ours.

“Go on to our room,” I said to Tyler. “Make sure you take a shower and I’ll be there shortly.”

I wasn’t entirely sure he was okay with my dating status since he was quiet and his only concern was if Lisa knew.

“That went better than I could have hoped. You think they’re really okay with all of this?” Chase asked.

“They might have more questions for us later, but yeah, I think they’re fine.” I smiled.

“It’s not quite the night we had planned though.”



“Nope, but now that everyone knows, it might be easier for us to spend time together.”

He wriggled his eyebrows. “I can’t wait.”

I leaned in and gave him a peck. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Tyler was in the shower when I got to the room. Once he was finished, I brought up the one thing I was curious about. “Why did you want to know if your mom knew about me and Chase?”

He shrugged. “I’ve heard some things she and Miguel have said, and I don’t think she’ll be happy that you’re dating a guy.”

Given what Chase had told me about his time playing with Miguel, it didn’t surprise me my son had picked up on their attitudes toward same-sex couples. I wanted to tell Tyler I didn’t give a damn what Lisa had to say about my relationship, but I also didn’t want him to feel as though he had to defend us to her, either.

“Don’t worry about your mom. When the time comes, I’ll talk to her.”

I only hoped I could maintain my cool if she or her boyfriend talked shit about my personal life.

## CHASE

MY HAND ITCHED TO GRAB GAGE'S AS WE WAITED FOR THE elevator to take us down to breakfast. The most important people in my life knew we were together and I no longer wanted to hide it, but after the run-in with the Lewandowskis at the restaurant, I wasn't sure if holding Gage's hand would be okay since that was what had been the catalyst for our night to go haywire.

The doors to the elevator opened, and Jase and Dylan rushed in. My feet faltered as I saw the Lewandowskis standing in the back of the lift. I noticed they had their luggage with them and Nathan, the kid on my team, looked as though he'd been crying.

"Morning," I greeted. "Ready to win today?"

"We're going home," Kurt, Nathan's father, clipped as the elevator doors closed.

"Why?" Jase asked as Gage and I shared a look.

"You need to ask your father," Kurt spat.

"Kurt, please," his wife, Tammy, begged.

The doors opened to the lobby and Kurt pushed past us before roaring to his family, "Let's go!"

"Dad, please!" Nathan whined. "I don't want to go home."

A few other team members and their families were within earshot of the commotion, and they turned and stared.

“Kurt,” I called out.

He glanced at me and then at the other parents in the vicinity. “You should all know that Coach Matthewson is a fa—”

“I dare you to finish that sentence.” In an instant, I saw red. Gage reached for my arm to hold me back. I’d never been in a position where I had to think before I acted in public because of who I was dating. Given my position as the head coach for the Mavericks, I knew my relationship status might matter to some.

I remembered when Aron and Drew had had their relationship outed and that had been a shitshow. It had also shown Santiago’s true colors because he had been the main person who’d had a problem with them being together.

“See?” Kurt argued. “You want a guy like him to coach your sons?”

Gage stepped around me before I could respond. “This guy is Chase Matthewson. He is overqualified to coach this team but loves the game so much that he didn’t bat an eye when I asked him to step in for me.”

“Because you’re fucking him.”

There were audible gasps in the lobby, and before any more was said, I cut in. “Our dating life has nothing to do with this team.” I turned to address everyone who was watching. “If you’re not comfortable with your son being coached by me, then I’m not going to stop you from leaving, but most of you were with Coach Statler before I arrived, and he trusts me with this team.”

“He’s right.” Gage squeezed my shoulder. “There is no one better suited for this position than a three-time Major League All-Star, two-time World Series Champion. Coach Matthewson has also won four Gold Gloves and one Silver Slugger award. And he did all of that in the span of a twelve-year career.”

Everyone was stunned into silence, including me. I had no idea Gage knew my stats like he'd rambled off.

"I don't fully understand what's going on," Will, another father, said, "but are you saying the Lewandowskis are pulling Nathan from the team because you two are dating?"

I nodded. "It appears that way, yes."

Will turned his attention to Kurt. "Like Coach Statler was saying, do you know how amazing it is that our boys are being coached by Chase Matthewson?"

Kurt rolled his eyes. "All of you are starstruck. I don't want my son thinking being gay is acceptable."

"Being gay is acceptable," Lydia, one of the moms, said. "Why would you think it's not?"

Before Kurt could answer, I stepped in. "Everyone, I'm sorry this was brought up this morning, but we have a tournament to play and that's what we should be focused on. I hope to see everyone out on the field in an hour." I turned on my heel and ushered Jase along back to the elevators. Gage, Dylan, and Tyler followed. I didn't want to have breakfast in the hotel any longer and I needed to get out of there. When we got to the elevators, the doors slid open and Jamie and Cammie were on the other side. "We're going somewhere else for breakfast."

Jamie blinked. "What? Why?"

"Nathan's dad is a homophobe," Jase stated.

Jamie sucked in a breath as I closed my eyes. I didn't know what to do. What if a lot of the players didn't show up to the game? If it happened, we would have to forfeit, and the boys would miss all the fun. I hated to think that it might end all because the person I wanted to wake up next to every morning was another man. Only two parents had offered their support, but I hoped more felt the same way.

"Let's grab all our stuff and get breakfast somewhere else," I said, needing to get out of the hotel.

---

NO ONE SPOKE MUCH AS WE ATE BREAKFAST AT A FAST-FOOD place down the road.

Once we arrived at the sports complex, everyone piled out of our cars. Before we headed inside, I said, “I need you all to give me and Gage a minute. We’re playing on field three, so start warming up.”

They hesitated for a moment, and Gage nodded to Tyler. “Go with Jamie. I’ll be there shortly.”

I motioned for Gage to get into my SUV and after we shut the doors, I turned slightly to him. “If you want to find someone—”

“Stop.” He held up his hand. “I’m not going to replace you.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Did you not hear me back at the hotel? You’re the best one for this job.”

“But what if other parents agree with Kurt?”

“Then they are fucking assholes and we don’t need them on the Mavericks.”

“But wouldn’t it be easier?” I argued.

“It may be easier, but it’s not the right thing. Those kids are lucky to have you as a coach, baby.”

My head twitched slightly at his term of endearment. We hadn’t used those words before, but as it hit my ears, I instantly felt the stress of everything wash away. However, I knew once we opened the doors to my car and stepped back into reality, everything would come back to weigh me down. How was it that in less than twenty-four hours, my world had been tilted on its axis?

“I just hope we still have a team.”

Gage cupped my cheek. “Just know that whatever happens with all of this won’t scare me away. I love you too much to let some shithead parent destroy what we’ve discovered.”

I blinked at his words, unsure I’d heard them correctly, but then I grinned and asked, “You love me?”

His brown eyes widened, and he dropped his hand. “I ... I didn’t mean to blurt it out like that, but yeah, I do.”

I smiled. “I love you too.”

“Fuck,” he growled and pulled my head toward him, taking my lips in a scorching kiss. Once we came up for air, he said, “We better get out there, but we are having alone time as soon as we can because I don’t know how much more of not tasting you I can take.”

My dick hardened slightly at his words as I envisioned him on his knees. Clearing my throat, I cracked the driver’s side door. “I’ll get another hotel room tonight and after everyone is asleep, you’re mine.”

Without another word, we both exited my vehicle and walked to field three. When we arrived, it appeared everyone was there except Nathan. As the day wore on, I kept reminding myself that it wasn’t my fault his father was an asshole and he was missing out on winning our two games that day. Maybe his mother could talk Kurt into letting Nathan play, while he skips the tournaments. Or maybe I needed to forget about Nathan and remind myself I could still coach twelve other boys and two of them might become brothers one day.

---

THE HOTEL HAD AN INDOOR POOL AND, AS EVERYONE PLAYED, I went to the front desk and booked another room. It was the only way for me and Gage to sneak away because Jase and Dylan were sleeping in my room, Jamie and Cammie were in Jamie’s, and Tyler was in Gage’s. Sure, we could have had Jase and Dylan sleep in Jamie’s, but the thrill of still being able to sneak in alone time was making me giddy.

Walking up to the lounge chair Gage was in, I handed him a key packet with the room number on it.

He took it and mumbled, “If only we could go now.”

“Then we might get caught.”

“We can just tell them after dinner that we’re going for a walk. No one needs to know we have a room. If they need anything, Jamie will handle it.”

“Thank God for Jamie.”

I chuckled slightly. “Yeah, thank God for Jamie.”

The hour at the pool seemed to go by slowly. After the kids were all swum out, we went back to our rooms, ordered pizza, and called it a night. Everyone showered, changed into their pajamas, and went to their respective rooms.

“All right, if you need anything while I’m gone, make sure to call your mom,” I instructed Jase.

“How long will you be gone?” he asked.

I lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. Gage and I just need to talk about what happened this morning and stuff.”

“Are you breaking up?” Dylan wondered.

I shook my head. “Of course not, but we haven’t had a chance to be alone and we need to see how the other one is feeling about it all.”

“Where are you going?” Jase questioned.

“Just for a walk,” I lied.

“It’s dark out,” Jase went on.

“Then maybe for a drink downstairs. I don’t know, but he’s waiting so make sure to call your mom if anything happens. She’s just a couple of doors down and is going to check on you in a little bit. Also, you better be asleep when I get back. I won’t be gone long,” I fibbed again. I hoped it would be several hours before I crawled back into a bed alone.

I left the room and walked down the hall. Using the key for the new room, I unlocked the door, a glow coming from the

bedroom part of the room as I entered. After dead-bolting the door behind me for good measure, I went farther into the room. The king-size bed came into view and in the middle of it was Gage Statler in all his glory.

“About fucking time you got here. Take your clothes off.”

I didn't hesitate to get naked after throwing the room key on the dresser near the TV.

“Get on the bed on your stomach.”

I grinned. “You're topping me tonight?”

“Are you ready for that?”

I was so worked up about having our secret rendezvous that I was almost giddy. “Yeah, I'm ready.”

After I laid face down on the bed, Gage leaned over me and slowly placed kisses on my back, working his way down until he was flicking his wet tongue up my crack and around my tight hole.

“Jesus,” I groaned, experiencing a sensation I'd never felt before.

“You like your ass eaten?” he questioned.

“Yes,” I admitted, even though it was new to me. It was almost soothing in a way, and my body relaxed further into the mattress.

Gage dove back in, licking up and down my ass crack as I rocked back to give him a better angle. I was becoming greedy, wanting to fuck his tongue. He spread my ass, going back for my puckered ring and causing me to moan. A wave of pleasure washed over me and I knew I was on the verge of losing it. I wanted to ride out what Gage was doing to me, but I was wound tight and close to coming. Reaching my hand between my legs, I fisted my dick and squeezed, trying to hold off.

“Gage,” I breathed.

“Yeah?” he whispered back.

“Fuck me already.”



Without another word, he reached over and grabbed the bottle of lube from the nightstand and I rose on all fours. To make sure I was ready, he poured some down my crack and used his fingers to rub it around my hole.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes.” I looked over my shoulder to see that he was stroking his bare cock. Weeks ago, we’d decided to forego condoms after being tested.

Gage ran the tip of his shaft up my crease and back down. He went slow, savoring every second. I didn’t blame him. I wanted him to enjoy every second, minute, and hour we were together. He positioned himself and pressed into me the tiniest bit.

“That’s it,” I coaxed, needing him to fill me. “Don’t stop.”

He rocked his hips slowly, and with each push, he slipped farther until he was all the way inside. “Fuck, baby.”

“I know,” was all I said. Sex with Gage was amazing, and his dick in my ass was pure bliss.

Slowly, the speed of his pumps increased until he grabbed my hips and finally fucked me hard. The sound of slapping skin filled the quiet room until the bed squeaked, and we were moaning and groaning and panting. I grabbed my cock, jerking it with each thrust.

“Fuck, that feels so good,” I praised.

“I’m gonna come soon.”

“Do it,” I urged. “Come inside of me.”

“Oh fuck,” he grumbled, and came inside my ass.

I came too, filling my hand with my cum.

We both turned onto our backs and caught our breaths. After I cleaned up, I walked back into the room and asked, “So, round two before we head back?”

“Yeah, but this time, you can fuck me.”

“With pleasure.”

## GAGE

MONDAY WAS MY LEAST FAVORITE DAY OF THE WEEK, AND THIS one was no exception. After Kurt lost his shit before Saturday's games, I realized I could encounter a similar problem with my high school team. To avoid any potential issues, I thought it would be best to have a chat with the athletic director, Paul since he was the one who had asked me to coach.

Swiping my sweaty palms down my legs, I knocked on his open door before calling out, "Do you have a minute?"

He glanced up from the stack of papers on his desk. "Sure. What's up?"

I sat in the chair across from him. "There was an incident this weekend at my son's baseball tournament."

"Is everyone all right?"

"Yeah, everyone's fine. It was another parent. He uh ..." I rubbed the back of my neck. "He pulled his son from the team because the coach is dating a guy."

"Okay?" His question hung in the air.

I took a deep breath and then admitted, "And I'm the guy he's dating."

"Oh—"

“I don’t want to cause any problems for the program here,” I added before he could say anything else.

Paul took his glasses off and set them on the desk. “I appreciate your concern for the team, but I don’t want you to worry about anything. Who you’re in a relationship with has no impact on the sort of coach you are. You were my pick for a reason, and the school has your back if a parent says anything. We don’t discriminate here at Coastside.”

“Wow.” I breathed. “Okay.”

“You look like you expected a different reaction.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what I expected. Teaching and coaching are a huge part of who I am, and it’s good to know I don’t have to fear losing my job because I’d pick my person over anything.”

He smiled. “I can understand that. Just keep doing what you do at this school, and you’ll be fine.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” I stood, shook his hand and left his office.

As I walked to my classroom, I pulled my phone from my pocket and sent a text to Chase:

The meeting with Paul went great. Love you.

It only took a couple of seconds for him to respond:

I’m so glad. Love you too.

I felt on top of the world each time he said those words.

---

CHASE AND I STRETCHED OUT ON THE COUCH, FULL FROM THE dinner I’d prepared. The last few weeks since we’d confessed our love for each other had been some of the happiest of my life. Despite our busy schedules, we spent a lot of time together, sometimes just the two of us, but mostly with our

families. The kids had grown accustomed to seeing us together, and everything seemed as perfect as possible.

“Oh shit,” Chase mumbled while looking at something on his phone.

“What is it?”

“Santiago’s been traded to the Astros.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, it’s all over social media.” He turned his phone, so I could see.

“Well, damn. At least he won’t be showing up at my front door anymore.”

“Do you think that will change things with Lisa? Would she move with him?”

I shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. But who knows with her.”

My ex and I didn’t have a relationship where we shared personal details about our lives unless it directly affected our sons. So I had no knowledge about her relationship with Miguel other than they were still dating, and I didn’t care to know anything more.

“Is she picking up Tyler and Dylan for her visitation tomorrow?”

“She’s supposed to after Dylan’s game, but you know how that goes.”

He gave me a sad smile. “I hate that for them. They deserve to have their mother put them first.”

The fact he was showing concern for my children didn’t escape my attention. I knew how important being a father was to him.

I leaned over and kissed him. As usual, what was supposed to be a simple kiss to thank him for caring, turned into one where our tongues tangled together.

We were so lost in each other, we didn't hear Tyler come into the living room. "Do you really have to do that where anyone can see you?"

He'd had the same reaction when he saw me kiss Heather, so I knew his irritation wasn't directed at Chase. Tyler was like any other teenager who would prefer not to see his parent making out with someone.

"Sorry, bud. We didn't hear you come downstairs." I moved away from Chase.

"Clearly," he grumbled.

"I should probably get going anyway." Chase rose from the couch. "Those lineup cards won't write themselves."

The Mavericks didn't have any out-of-town tournaments scheduled for the next couple of weeks, but they were playing games at home against some local teams.

I walked Chase to the door and planted my lips on his briefly. "I'll see you in the morning."

Although the kids accepted our relationship, we weren't doing the sleepover thing while they were home.

"Okay, but I'm looking forward to tomorrow night more." He winked.

---

"MAYBE SHE'S NOT GOING TO SHOW UP," DYLAN SUGGESTED, staring at the TV with his duffle bag by his feet. His game had ended two hours earlier, and we'd been home for over an hour waiting for Lisa. She hadn't called or responded to my texts asking for an ETA.

"Maybe she got stuck in traffic." Even after so many years of disappointment, I still found myself making excuses for her in an effort to lessen the rejection my sons felt. After all, she hadn't attended the game even though it was her day to get the boys.

“Or maybe she just doesn’t give a damn,” Tyler interjected.

I glanced at my oldest, who sat at the kitchen counter and texted on his phone. I wouldn’t chastise him for what he said because I knew the harshness in his tone stemmed from pain.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. I waited a moment to see if either of the boys would get up to answer, then I stood and made my way to the front door when neither of them made a move. When I pulled the door open, Lisa stood on the other side with a massive smile on her face.

“You’re late,” I stated, even though I suspected she didn’t care. “Tyler, Dylan, your mom is here.”

“Do you think you and I can talk for a minute before we take off?”

“Sure,” I replied, wondering if her request had anything to do with Miguel’s reported trade.

“See you later, Dad.” Tyler walked over and gave me a hug, followed by Dylan. “We’re ready.” He told his mom, his voice void of any excitement.

“Go wait for me in the car. I need to talk to your father.” She handed her keys to Tyler.

“So, what’s up?” I asked after the boys climbed into her car.

“Look, I know I’m late, but I just flew back into town after visiting Miguel at spring training in Arizona.”

“You could have called or texted.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. My mind’s been all over the place because while I was there, Miguel proposed.” She beamed, flashing the sizable ring on her left finger.

“Um ... congratulations, I guess.” I crossed my arms over my chest, not caring about her announcement one bit.

“Don’t be an ass, Gage.”

“I’m not being an ass. It’s just the last time I saw your fiancé, he tried to start a fight with Chase in front of our kids.

Sorry for not being excited that he will be a permanent fixture in our lives.”

“I knew you wouldn’t be happy for me,” she huffed. “You’re just jealous because I’ll be living the life you couldn’t give me.”

“Wow. You’re a piece of work, you know that? Nothing about your life makes me jealous.” There was a time when her statement would have cut me deep, but these days I loved the life I was living with my boys and, more recently, with Chase.

She rolled her eyes. “If you say so. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you because Miguel is going to be playing for Houston.”

“Yeah, I heard about the trade. What’s your point?”

“I’m moving to Texas in two weeks.”

“What about your sons? How will you see them if you live halfway across the country?”

She kicked at a bit of dirt on the walkway. “I know it’s not ideal, but I’ll figure something out.”

“Really? Because you can hardly keep up on your visitation while living in the same city.”

The fact she had shown up as happy as could be without a thought about how her moving would affect our children had me shaking my head. Once again, Tyler and Dylan took a backseat to her desires.

“Our custody agreement says I get them for spring break in three weeks.”

I lifted my brows in surprise that she actually knew the details of our schedule. “And?”

“I want them to come to Houston.”

“What?” I seethed. “You can’t be serious.”

“Miguel’s family lives there, and they want to meet Tyler and Dylan. You really can’t say no.”

“If you expect me to pay for them to fly out there—”

She held up her hand. “Miguel offered to pay.”

“Fine, but you might want to find out from them if they even want to go.”

“They don’t get a choice either, Gage. I’m the parent.” She turned to leave.

“Then maybe act like one.” I slammed the door before she could respond and walked back to the living room, grabbed my laptop, and fired off an email to my lawyer.

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KIDS RAN THROUGH THE HALLS OF THE SCHOOL, EXCITED FOR spring break to start. Unfortunately, I didn’t share in their joy as I locked up my classroom. The upcoming week was going to be the longest period of time I had ever spent separated from my boys, and I wasn’t looking forward to not having them around. I worried the house would feel empty without their laughter and bickering. The only bright spot was knowing I’d have Chase to keep me busy.

Tyler was waiting for me when I got to my SUV. The boys were taking a late flight to Houston to visit their mother. “Let’s go pick up your brother.”

We hopped in and left for the middle school. Once we had Dylan with us, I headed toward the freeway. Since we had to leave right after school, we’d loaded their luggage in my vehicle before leaving that morning.

“You guys are sure you got everything?” I asked as I merged with the traffic.

“Yep,” they both answered.

The airport was only a fifteen-minute drive and the time passed too quickly. When we arrived, I found a parking space in the short-term lot, and we walked inside. Since I had secured a pass, I could wait with them at the gate and watch them get onto the plane.



After checking in and getting through security, we found a restaurant to grab a bite.

“If you guys need anything while you’re gone, you can call me.”

Dylan nodded while Tyler stared at his food. I knew he hadn’t been looking forward to the trip, and I hoped it would be the last time Lisa forced him to spend an entire vacation with her if he didn’t want to. My lawyer and I were in the process of drawing up a petition to change my custody agreement with Lisa, but she wouldn’t be served until after the boys returned home to San Diego, for fear she’d do something rash. I didn’t want them to have to deal with any fallout that might happen if she got pissed.

“Hey, I’m sure you’ll have fun.” I tried to sound reassuring.

“What day are you picking us up?” Dylan asked.

We’d already gone over the plan several times, but I thought he might have been anxious about being away from home. “Chase and I will be there on Friday.”

“Jase too?” he asked.

“Yes, Jase too. Then we’ll fly to St. Louis for the baseball game.”

That brought a smile to his face.

While making plans for the boys’ trip, Chase found out the Giants were playing the Cardinals in St. Louis the day after we picked them up. We thought it would be fun to take the kids to the game so they could see Chase’s friend, Aron Parker, play and visit a stadium they’d never been to before. We would also hit up the National Blues Museum since Tyler and I loved music.

“Do you think Aron Parker will sign my glove?” Dylan asked.

“Maybe,” I answered.

Before I was ready, it was time for them to board the plane. Pulling them in for hugs, I said, “I love you both, and

I'll see you soon."

"Love you too," Tyler replied.

"Love you, Dad." Dylan squeezed me tight.

A sense of unease ran through me as I watched them walk down the jetway. I wanted them to have a great time, but I also worried because Lisa had never been one to handle taking care of them for more than a day or two. What if they were miserable there? Or worse, what if she ignored them most of the week?

I waited until the gate agent closed the door before I left. As I walked out of the airport, I grabbed my phone from my pocket to fire off a text to Chase.

I'm on my way.

## CHASE

MY CELL RANG ON MY NIGHTSTAND AS GAGE BOBBED UP AND down on my dick. “Don’t stop,” I ordered, grabbing his head so he wouldn’t move away. The phone continued to chime, and I reached for it to make sure it wasn’t my kids, only to see the name on the screen. “Shit. It’s my agent.”

Gage rose and wiped his bottom lip, his cock hard too. “Your agent?”

I sat up. “Yeah. I should take this.”

“Of course.”

I slid my finger across the screen to answer the call and stuck the phone to my ear. “Toby, how are you?”

“Great. Is this a bad time?”

*Yes.* “No, what’s up?” I was surprised to hear from him, given I’d retired six months prior.

“How’s retirement treating you?”

I blinked, staring at Gage. Toby called to talk about my retirement, and I could be getting off instead? “It’s going well. Super happy.”

“Do you miss the game?”

Gage crawled under the covers and I leaned against the headboard as I answered, “A part of me will always miss it,

but I've started coaching my son's travel ball team and I'm really enjoying teaching him and the other boys .”

“Oh, really? Does that take up a lot of your free time?”

“Just a few hours a day and my weekends. Nothing like when I played and was on the road half the year.”

“Good, good. So, you like the San Diego area?”

Had Toby called just to make small talk? It wasn't how I wanted to spend the last afternoon with Gage before we boarded a plane to Houston, that was for sure.

“I do. Feeling at home here.” I glanced down at Gage as he lay next to me and my heart smiled. I was truly feeling at home.

“That's good to hear. So, listen. I was contacted by San Diego Sports Network and they're interested in having you as a *Padres Live* guest analyst for their pre- and post-game shows. They have an immediate opening and want you.”

I blinked, stunned by his words because even though I lived in San Diego, my heart was purple given I played most of my career with the Rockies. I'd also never done television before and didn't know how I would do in front of a live camera.

“What?” Gage mouthed.

“I ... They want *me*?” I asked into the phone.

“Who?” Gage asked without an audible sound.

I shook my head, still too dumbfounded to find the words to answer my boyfriend.

“I just got off the phone with them,” Toby explained. “They want you to come in as soon as possible and meet with the director and producers.”

I slid out of the bed, my erection softening. “It would need to be next week. I'm going to a Cardinals game on Saturday and flying out tomorrow.”

“Does that mean you're interested?”

“I need to think about it.” Was I interested? A broadcasting career had never crossed my mind. I sure as shit hadn’t considered working with the Padres, but now the thought piqued my interest.

“Let me set up a meeting for Monday and see what they offer. I know a big part of your retirement was so you could be home with your kids, and this would allow that.”

“All right. Send me the details and I’ll be there.” Even though I had sufficient resources and I didn’t need to work, I missed being part of the MLB community. It had been a part of my life for so long, and being back in it, so to speak, could give me the puzzle piece I wanted.

I disconnected the call and turned to Gage. “The Padres want me to be a guest analyst for their pre- and post-game shows.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

“Is it?” I wondered and sat on the edge of the bed.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” He rose and leaned against the headboard.

“Depending on how many games they want me to cover, my nights won’t be free, possibly my weekends.”

A lot of MLB games were in the evenings. If I took the position and they wanted me to do a few games a week, or more, would I still be there for my kids during my custody time? Would Gage and I still have time together after he got off of work? Would I be able to keep coaching the Mavericks?

“Right,” he agreed, nodding his head slightly.

“But it would be an excellent opportunity to get back into that world,” I went on.

“You really do miss it, huh?” he asked.

I nodded. “It’s been a part of my life for so long. Kinda hard not to.”

Gage rose and moved closer. “I’ll support whatever you want to do, and you know I’m not going anywhere. Your

nights and weekends might not be free for a few hours, but you'll still be home every night."

"Things would be easier if we lived together," I admitted, and my eyes widened. "I mean ..."

We stared at each other, neither of us saying anything until he finally said, "We lived together before ..."

"Yes, we did," I agreed, remembering college with a gleam in my eye.

"We have a lot of factors to consider."

"Right."

Nothing was said as the wheels turned in my head. Finally, Gage broke the silence. "You could crawl into bed with me every night."

"I'd like that." I smiled.

"And we know Dylan and Jase would be all for it."

"One thousand percent."

"Maybe we should consider it even if you don't take the broadcasting job," he suggested.

"Yeah, it seems I have a lot to think about." But even saying those words to him, I knew I wanted nothing more than to share a home with Gage.

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THE PLANE TOUCHED DOWN IN HOUSTON THE NEXT afternoon. We'd picked up Jase from Jamie's on the way to the airport and once we had our bags from baggage claim, we piled into the rental SUV.

"Excited to see Dylan?" I asked Jase. I knew Gage was, but my son had also gone a week without seeing his best friend. If Gage and I moved in together, the boys would get their fill of each other, and depending on where we lived, they might have to share a room.

“Yeah, duh,” he mocked.

Gage put Lisa’s address into the GPS and I headed in that direction. Forty minutes later, we pulled into the gated community and parked in front of the house.

“Wow, their place is huge,” Jase stated.

“Yeah,” Gage muttered, looking at the two-story brick home.

I reached over and squeezed his knee. “Don’t do that. You know the cost of living is different here.”

“I know, but I’m not looking forward to having Lisa gloat in my face again.”

“She only lives here because of who she’s going to marry. Not because of anything she’s accomplished. You own a home in the third most expensive state in the US and are more than capable of providing for your family. She didn’t win.”

“And if”—he eyed the back seat and then lowered his voice—“we do what we discussed yesterday, wouldn’t I be in the same position?”

“No, and I’ll tell you why at another time.”

“Okay.” Gage opened the passenger side door. “Guess I’ll go get them. A part of me expected them to rush out to greet me.”

I watched him walk up the path to the front door. He rang the bell and waited. He rang it again. Nothing. In an instant, something wasn’t sitting right with me. He rang the bell again and added a few knocks on the door. Nothing.

“Um, dad?” Jase spoke.

“Yeah?”

“Dylan just texted me that his mom and Santiago won’t let them leave.”

I turned in my seat quickly. “What do you mean ‘won’t let them leave’?”

He turned his cell phone toward me to show me the screen full of messages. “I don’t know. That’s what he texted.”

I opened the driver’s side door just as the front door to the house opened. “Stay here,” I ordered my son.

Santiago came out of the house alone, and Gage took a few steps back. “You should have called first,” Santiago stated.

“I texted Lisa what time our flight was getting in,” Gage affirmed.

Santiago shut the door behind him. “And if you would have called, we would have told you that you aren’t welcome here and your sons are staying with us.”

“Excuse me?” Gage clipped, and I picked up my pace, getting in behind him.

Santiago let out a sinister laugh. “And you, Chase Fucking Matthewson. I should have fucking known you were a faggot too when you defended Parker and Rockland.”

I took a calming breath, trying to keep my temper in check because my kid was watching. “Look, man. This has nothing to do with that. Gage and Lisa have a custody and visitation agreement. You need to get Gage’s kids, and we’ll be on our way,” I specified.

“Yeah, I’m not going to do that because *we* don’t want those boys turning into queers like you two homos.”

“You son of a bitch!” Gage roared.

Before he could take a step, I grabbed his arm and held him back. “Don’t handle this with your fists.”

He shrugged out of my hold. “What do I do? He won’t let my kids out.”

I turned my attention to Santiago. “You have thirty seconds to get his sons out here or I’m calling the cops.”

“Go ahead and call the police.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

I pulled out my phone and didn’t hesitate to dial 9-1-1. Once I had the dispatcher on the line, I told them the situation



and they replied that they'd be sending a couple of officers over. "All right, they're on their way. This is your last chance."

"Don't fucking threaten me, Matthewson."

"Why are you doing this?" Gage questioned. "And where the fuck is Lisa?"

"Lisa is with *her* kids. Don't worry about that," Santiago clipped.

"Her kids? Are you fucking serious right now?" Gage's temper flared.

"Dad!" Jase called from the rental car. I held up my finger for him to hold on but he repeated, "Dad! Come here."

"Not a good time," I called over my shoulder.

"Dad!" he yelled again. "Come. Now."

I finally looked at my son and he was waving me over. I jogged to him. "What?"

He lowered his voice. "Dylan and Tyler are going to come out the back."

"What?" I balked.

"Dylan texted me they are going to go out the back door and come around the side."

"What about their mother?" I wondered.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Didn't ask, but he said they'll be out soon."

"Okay." I walked back toward Gage, keeping the information to myself. As soon as the boys came around the side, I was going to get them in the car and lock the doors.

"Just give me my kids. You knew we were flying here," Gage pleaded.

"No." Santiago shook his head. "We knew *you* were coming. Not your butt buddy."

I wanted to throttle my former teammate, to punch his fucking lights out, but I refrained. Not only for my son who

was watching, but also to stop Gage from doing anything stupid that could result in him losing his children.

“Do you think the cops are going to let you keep my boys?” Gage questioned.

Before he could respond, Dylan and Tyler ran out from a side fence. They didn’t have any belongings, and I raced to them, needing to get to them before Santiago had a chance.

“Get in the car,” I bellowed.

“Stop!” Santiago ordered.

When I was within reach, I ushered both of them to the car. What sounded like a tussle hit my ears and I turned to see Gage blocking Santiago. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a police car turn onto the street.

“Cops are here,” I called back.

Gage moved to the side, causing Santiago to stumble forward. The door to the house flew open and Lisa appeared in the doorway.

“You were supposed to keep them inside,” Santiago yelled at Lisa.

“They slipped out the back,” she advised.

The cop car pulled to a stop behind the rental and Gage jogged to them. I stayed by the car, not wanting to interfere with whatever Gage was going to tell the police. Instead, I opened the back door.

“Are you two okay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” they answered together.

“Good. The cops will handle this.”

“Will they ... make us stay?” Tyler asked with hesitation.

“They better not.”

Gage spoke to the officers, and once they had his story, they went to Lisa and Santiago. I stayed back by the children and Gage moved over to us. After a while, the cops came back to us.

“Given you have a custody agreement, we’re in no position to change the order. I’ve advised Ms. Statler and Mr. Santiago that the matter needs to be brought to family court in your jurisdiction in California.”

“Does that mean we can leave with my sons?” Gage asked.

“Yes, and I suggest you contact your attorney immediately.”

The cops ordered Lisa to get the boys’ belongings that they’d brought with them from California and then we piled into the car and got the hell out of there.

**GAGE**

MY HEART WAS RACING AS ADRENALINE WAS STILL COURSING through me. Thank goodness Chase had been there to stop me from going after Miguel. When he spouted his homophobic bullshit, I was ready to throw down and didn't give a fuck about the consequences I could have faced if I'd hit him. I prided myself on being a laid-back guy, but I snapped the moment he tried to come between me and my children.

"I'm so sorry, Dad," Dylan whimpered.

I twisted around to look in the backseat where he sat between Jase and Tyler. Huge tears streamed down his face, and my chest ached.

"You have nothing to apologize for. You didn't do anything wrong."

"But I told Mom you had a boyfriend, and that made her and Miguel mad. I promise I didn't mean to tell her," he sobbed.

I'd wondered how Miguel knew about us, but I wasn't mad at Dylan for saying anything. It wasn't as though Chase and I were keeping our relationship a secret, and I wouldn't expect my eleven-year-old to hide things from his mother, either.

"It's not your fault," I reiterated. "They're responsible for their actions."

“Why would they care that you’re dating?” Jase asked. “I thought he was your friend, Dad.”

I glanced at Chase, who took a deep breath before responding. “We were friends, but then he was a jerk when he found out Aron and Drew were dating. Some people have a problem with two men loving each other.”

Jase frowned. “That’s stupid.”

“It shouldn’t matter who people want to date,” Dylan added.

It sucked that our boys had to experience people acting like assholes just because the two of us wanted to build a life together, but I was also incredibly proud of how they reacted to hate.

Chase smiled at me. “You’re right. It shouldn’t.”

Tyler had been quiet since we drove away, and I worried about how he was handling everything. “You okay, buddy?” I questioned.

He shrugged but said nothing.

Instantly, my fatherly instincts were on high alert, and I asked the question I should have the minute the boys came out from the side yard. “Miguel didn’t hurt you, did he?”

Tyler shook his head. “No, he didn’t do anything like that.”

My head fell back against the headrest and I let out a sigh of relief. If Miguel had laid a hand on my sons, I wasn’t sure I could have stopped myself from going back there.

Still, I was worried about Tyler since he hadn’t answered my question about whether or not he was okay. I decided I would take him aside once we were at the hotel, in case he didn’t want to say anything in front of the others.

We pulled up in front of The Grand Resort. Chase popped the back open so we could grab our luggage and then he handed the keys to the valet.

After Chase checked us in, we headed to our rooms. We’d requested for them to be adjoining and Chase and Jase would

share one room, while Tyler, Dylan, and I would have the other. While the hotel was able to accommodate our request, Chase and Jase were going to have to share a king-sized bed, while my room had two queens. It would've been nice to share a bed with Chase, but we still hadn't stayed overnight together when the boys were around.

We each entered our own room, but we quickly opened the doors connecting the two spaces.

"Dylan, come here," Jase called out, and Dylan ran to his room.

Taking advantage of being alone with Tyler, I sat on the bed opposite of the one he was lying on, texting on his phone. "Hey, are you sure you're okay?"

He kept his focus on his cell. "I'm fine."

Those fatherly instincts were prickling again. "What happened back at your mom's place would be a lot for anyone to process. It's okay if you're upset or confused."

"I'm not upset or confused. I'm pissed," he clipped.

I was slightly taken aback by his confession. Tyler and I had similar personalities, and it took a lot to rile us up. "That's okay too, but we should probably talk about it."

He turned his gaze my way. "The things Miguel said about you and Chase ..."

"He's an asshole." I wouldn't usually talk shit about someone in front of Tyler, but after what happened earlier, it was the only word I could use.

He blinked and I could see tears welling up in his eyes. "He scared me. I thought for sure he was going to fight you when you came to get us."

"Why didn't you call or text me?"

"Mom took our phones and would only let us use them when she was with us. We snuck them out of her room when you showed up. We tried to text you, and Dylan texted Jase when you didn't answer."

I'd left my phone in the car when I walked up to the house, and hadn't checked it after we took off because my focus was on making sure Tyler and Dylan were okay. "What the hell was she thinking?" I asked, mostly to myself.

Lisa had her issues with being a crappy mom, but I'd never known her to be downright hateful.

"Please don't make me go back there," he pleaded. "She'd said some things in the past that were homophobic, but ever since she started dating Miguel, she's gotten a hundred times worse. I don't want to be around that."

"I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure you're not put in a position like that again," I promised. "In fact, I'm going to call my lawyer right now. Why don't you go hang out with your brother."

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and pushed call on the contact I had saved.

"Thompson Law Firm," the cheery receptionist greeted.

"This is Gage Statler, one of Kyle O'Neill's clients. I've got an urgent matter I need to discuss with him if he's available."

"Okay, can you please hold?"

"Sure." I stood and paced while listening to the classical music pumping through the line. A few moments later, the line picked up.

"Gage, you've managed to catch me between meetings. Is this about your request to modify your custody agreement?"

"Yes, I need to get it changed ASAP." I explained everything that happened earlier in the day in great detail.

"Okay, we need to get an emergency hearing set. I'll get the ex parte application drafted and emailed to you for your signature. When do you get back in town?" Kyle asked.

"We're flying home on Sunday."

"Okay. I'll have Linda call you once we have a court date. She'll send you an email with all the details. In the meantime,

enjoy the weekend with your boys, and let me worry about the legal stuff.”

“I appreciate that.” I ended the call and tossed my phone on the bed.

I walked into Chase’s room, giving him a small smile before sitting next to Tyler on the couch.

“Did you talk to the lawyer?”

I nodded. “Yeah. He’s going to get an emergency hearing set.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Tyler said.

I wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “You know I’d do anything for you and your brother.”

He smiled for the first time since we picked him up. “I know.”

“Hey, Dad.” Dylan looked up from the game he was playing on his phone.

“What’s up, kiddo?”

“Can Jase stay in our room with me and Tyler, and you stay in here with Chase?”

My eyes widened, his question catching me by surprise. “Um, you’d be okay with that?”

“Why not? You and Heather used to sleep in the same bed when you dated.”

I cringed because I didn’t think Chase needed to be reminded of my most recent ex, but when I heard him chuckle, I knew he understood that kids often said whatever was on their minds.

“If you guys are cool with it—”

“We are,” Dylan and Jase shouted in unison and ran into the other room.

I looked toward Tyler who gave me a nod and followed the other two. Maybe talking to them about Chase and I moving in together was going to be easier than we thought.



But was it the right time considering the shit with Lisa?

## CHASE

WHEN WE ARRIVED IN ST. LOUIS, WE ONLY HAD TIME TO check into our hotel before we needed to head to the Cardinals' stadium for Aron's night game. It hadn't fully hit me how much I had been missing the game until we were on our way.

"Everything okay?" Gage asked, squeezing my knee slightly as I joined the line of cars trying to enter the parking lot.

I looked over at him and smiled the best I could. "Yeah, why?"

"You've been awfully quiet since we left the hotel."

"Just used to coming to this ballpark on a team bus."

"Have you thought more about your meeting on Monday?" Being in front of the camera and talking about the game wasn't the same as playing on the field, but I understood why he was asking.

"Kinda. It will be weird rooting for another team, you know?"

"Maybe look at it as rooting for the players themselves like you do for all your buddies you've previously played with. I know I cheered for you when you faced the Padres."

The cars pulled forward. "You did?"

“Of course, I did.”

“I had no idea.”

“Dad used to watch almost all the Rockies games,” Dylan stated.

I smirked at my boyfriend. “Really?”

“Don’t you know we have the MLB package?” Dylan continued.

I knew they had it, but I had assumed it was so Gage could watch any game he wanted since baseball was in his blood too. I had no idea it was to keep up with me. Though he had surprised me when he knew all of my accomplishments.

“Keep it up and no nachos,” Gage warned his youngest.

I was still grinning as I inched the car forward. “Next, you’re going to tell me you have Matthewson memorabilia you need me to sign.”

“I might.” He winked.

I chuckled, pulling the car forward and handing the attendant the parking fee. After we parked, we made our way into the stadium and found our seats. Aron scored us five tickets three rows back from home plate. It had been over six months since I’d been close to a major league field and my heart longed to run out and grab a glove.

“I’ve never been this close before.” Dylan beamed from his seat.

“Isn’t it awesome?” Jase asked.

“So cool.” Dylan continued to smile.

I looked over at Gage and he was grinning too.

“Thank you for this,” he said.

“Of course. Glad it’s got them smiling again.”

Or at least one of his kids. Tyler still seemed to be struggling with what had happened during his time in Houston. Maybe that was because he was older and it affected him harder.

“Excuse me.” There was a tap on my shoulder and I looked toward the aisle. “You’re Chase Matthewson, right?”

“I am.” I grinned at the Cardinals fan.

“Could you sign my jersey?” He turned so I could see the back of his Card’s jersey. It had Aron’s last name and number on it.

“Only because I *half* like your jersey.”

The guy chuckled. “Parker’s my favorite player. Sucks he’s on the Giants now, but I’d understand if you don’t want to sign it.”

“I’ll sign it. Parker’s the reason we’re here, and even though he’s on the other team, you can still root for him.” I stood and took the marker from the young man before scribbling my name.

“I do and will until he retires.” He took the pen from me. “Thank you. It was great to meet you. I’m a huge fan of yours too.”

“Thanks, man.”

He left, and I sat back in my seat. I’d told him he could still root for Parker even though he was on the other team and I had to take my own advice. I’d forever bleed purple, but brown and gold could be my new colors if I got the job. I was building a new life and a blended family I never expected to have.

I glanced over at my boyfriend a few seats over. “The question you asked about Monday?”

“Yeah?” He raised his brow.

“I’m leaning toward taking the job if the offer is good.”

He smiled. “Good, and we’ll make it work.”

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THE GIANTS BEAT THE CARDINALS 8-3. ARON WENT THREE for four with a home run in the sixth. He’d waved to the boys

each time he went up to bat, and they were bursting with excitement the entire way back to the hotel. It took them forever to fall asleep because all I heard from the other room while Gage and I lay in bed was how awesome Aron Parker was and they couldn't wait for breakfast with him. It was as though my son forgot I used to be a professional baseball player too.

“Am I old and washed up?” I whispered in the dark even though the door to our connecting rooms was closed.

“What?” Gage asked in a low voice.

I turned on my side to face him. “The boys are so excited about breakfast with Aron. They never did that for me.”

He moved, and by the glow of the clock, I could see he'd turned to face me too. “First of all, Jase used to gush about you all the time to the other boys on the Mavericks. About how his father was *the* Chase Matthewson. That kid thinks you hung the moon. And second, Dylan talked non-stop about you in Phoenix. He asked continuously if he could get your autograph, but I told him he needed to wait. That was my doing, given our history, and I'm sorry, but I think it's safe to say you have fans in the adjoining room.”

“And you,” I reminded him. “You have a secret stash of Chase Matthewson collectibles you've never told me about? Are you a fan?”

“I'm your number one fan, baby.”

He leaned in and pressed his lips to mine. Like always, the kiss turned deeper, our tongues tasting each other. We both slid closer to one another, our erections meeting in the middle.

“We better stop.” I pulled back from his mouth.

“Yeah,” he agreed breathlessly.

A second later, we were kissing again. I reached between us, my hand slipping inside the waistband of his pajama pants. Gage wasn't wearing boxers, and I had direct access to his hardening cock.

“Will you be quiet?” I asked, pumping him a few times.

“Will you?” he questioned back.

“I will if my mouth is around your dick.”

“Fuck, Chase,” he groaned, getting harder in my hand.

“You better put a pillow over your face if you can’t contain yourself.” I slid down the bed, taking his pants with me.

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THE HOTEL WE WERE AT WAS DOWN THE STREET FROM WHERE the Giants were staying. The team had another night game, and being the great guy Aron Parker was, he’d agreed to meet us at his hotel’s restaurant for breakfast.

After giving the car key to the valet, the five of us made our way into the lobby. Jase and Dylan were still amped as they asked a staffer where the restaurant was located. Once they had their answer, they took off in that direction and we followed.

“Excited about today?” Gage asked Tyler and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

He shrugged. “I guess.”

After breakfast, we were going to the National Blues Museum. Even though I couldn’t carry a tune to save my life, I was looking forward to walking around and reading about the history and legends of the genre. I’d assumed Tyler was too, but by his nonchalant response, I thought differently. Gage and I shared a look. Tyler was still melancholy about the situation with Lisa and Santiago, and my instincts were telling me there was something he wasn’t telling us.

Before Gage could probe, Aron stepped out of the elevator a few feet from us, carrying a couple of handled brown paper bags in his hand. We greeted each other with bro hugs and then I introduced him to my boyfriend.

“Aron, this is Gage Statler. Gage, Aron Parker.”

They shook hands and Gage said, “Good to meet you finally. Thanks for the tickets last night.”

Aron waved him off. “No problem. I’d do anything for this guy.” He jabbed me lightly in the shoulder with his free hand. He handed Tyler one bag. “This is for you.”

Tyler grabbed it. “Thank you, Mr. Parker.”

My friend grinned. “Please, call me Aron.”

Jase and Dylan walked around the corner, Dylan’s eyes going wide when he saw Aron. They walked up to where we stood.

“Are you going to introduce Dylan to your friend?” I asked Jase, figuring calling Aron Jase’s friend would stroke my son’s ego a little.

Jase beamed and then said, “Dylan, this is *my* friend Aron Parker.”

Dylan stuck out his hand. “Nice to meet you, sir.”

Aron chuckled slightly. “Just like I told your brother, please, call me Aron.”

“Yes, sir,” he responded.

Aron handed each of the boys a paper bag. “Hopefully, these all fit.”

The three of them opened their bags and pulled out orange San Francisco Giants jerseys. As they unfolded them, I saw Parker on the back.

“You could have at least brought them Slater jerseys. They don’t need no old and washed-up player’s gear,” I teased my former teammate.

Aron laughed. “I figured they already had your vintage jersey, old man.”

I snorted. “I’ve missed you, dude.”

“I’ve missed you too,” he said and then looked at Gage. “And it seems we have a lot to catch up on.”

I smiled at Gage. “Yeah, we do.”

---

AFTER WE ORDERED, AND WHILE WE WAITED FOR OUR FOOD, Aron asked me, “Take a walk with me?”

“Yeah, sure.” I smiled warmly at Gage and our kids. “I’ll be back.”

Gage nodded slightly and Aron and I headed out of the restaurant toward the courtyard at the back of the hotel.

“You didn’t introduce Gage as your boyfriend, you know?”

I blinked. “I ... was I supposed to?”

“You don’t have to, but you know I know, right?”

“Yeah. Figured Drew would tell you.”

“He did.”

“Then what’s the issue?”

“You tell me. Why didn’t you introduce him as your boyfriend?”

“I didn’t know I needed to because I assumed you knew,” I stated.

“Wouldn’t you have introduced a woman with the title of girlfriend?”

I stopped walking and faced him. “What?”

“When I introduce Drew, I say ‘this is my husband’, so why didn’t you give Gage a title?”

I hadn’t realized that I didn’t. Gage was Gage. Yeah, he was my boyfriend, but Aron was right; I hadn’t said who Gage was to me.

“Are you still hiding your relationship?” Aron continued to probe.

“No, but—”

Both of our phones chimed with alerts. We pulled them out of our pockets and I read the notification on my screen:



*FORMER ROCKIES SHORTSTOP, CHASE MATTHEWSON, WAS SPOTTED AT THE CARDINALS GAME. SOURCES CONFIRM HE WAS WITH HIS BOYFRIEND, GAGE STATLER.*

“Sources confirm’? What the fuck?” I muttered.

“Seems someone has loose lips,” Aron stated.

I glanced up from my phone. “Santiago.”

“Santiago? That asshole?”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and then explained how our former teammate was still in my life.

“I hate that son of a bitch,” Aron clipped. “He needs his ass beat.”

“Trust me, there’s a list forming of people who want to do it.”

“Let me have the first punch, would ya?” he asked.

I chuckled slightly. “Yeah, no problem, but ...”

“But?” he prompted.

I took another breath. “I have a meeting with the Padres’ broadcast station for a guest analyst position. What if this news fucks that up?”

“It won’t.” Aron reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “If they have a problem with your sexuality, then they will have a fucking lawsuit on their hands. Just like being married to Drew doesn’t affect my game, dating Gage or any other man doesn’t mean you can’t do your job.”

“Right,” I agreed, but I was still fearful.

Would there ever be a time when it didn’t matter who I or anyone else loved?

---

THE ENTIRE TIME WE WERE AT THE NATIONAL BLUES MUSEUM, I kept looking around to see who knew the latest gossip in the baseball world. You would think there was a picture of me and

Gage kissing. Instead, it was one of me three seats away from him with our kids in the middle. No one would have batted an eye if not for the so-called source.

My head was spinning and I couldn't focus on all the exhibits in the museum. When Aron and I had returned to the table, I'd shown Gage the article while Aron distracted the boys with baseball talk.

*"What do we do?" he asked.*

*"Are you okay with it?" I wondered.*

*"Yeah, if you are. Everyone we know is already aware."*

*"Yeah. Just sucks that our relationship is in the media."*

*"Do you know who the source is?"*

*I gave Gage a look to mean, are you serious?*

*"Miguel?"*

*I nodded. "I'm guessing he thinks once it's out in the world, no judge will grant a gay father full custody."*

*"That can't be true, can it?"*

*"I doubt it, but he's so fucked up in the head that he probably believes it."*

*"Can we go swimming when we get back to the hotel?"*  
Jase asked as we left the National Blues Museum.

*"Yeah, buddy," I answered. "And then we can order room service and watch Aron play on TV."*

Once we were at the pool, my man and I sat off to the side and watched the boys play.

*"Want to talk to the boys tonight?" I inquired, looking over at a bare-chested Gage.*

*"About moving in together?"*

*"Yeah."*

He sat up and turned to face me. *"Do you think it's best, given the shit with Lisa?"*

*"You don't want to live together anymore?"*

He reached over and cupped my thigh. “Of course, I do. You know that.”

I sighed. “I get it. Just sucks.”

“I know.” He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t know what I’ll do if the judge either keeps things the same or gives her more time.”

“You don’t think a judge will do that, given how far away she is, do you?” At least when Jamie and I got divorced, she stayed in Denver for me. Even though I was on the road for half of a season, I still knew I could come home to my kids. What would happen if the judge’s order was for Lisa to have summers with them? That would be the end of travel ball for Dylan during that time. What if she got weeks at a time for major holidays? That would devastate Gage.

“I don’t know, to be honest.” He blew out a breath.

“We’ll get through this. Let’s hold off on telling the boys we want to move in together until you’re done dealing with this shit,” I suggested.

“Deal, but I still wouldn’t mind looking at houses together.” He smiled.

I grinned back. “That reminds me. When I told you that Lisa hadn’t won because she was living in some fancy house, I meant because we can pool our money and buy something together. Besides, did you see any ocean views from her place?”

“No.”

“I bet you the next five blowjobs that her name isn’t on the deed either and there’s a prenup waiting for her to sign.”

“You’re probably right.”

“So, you owe me five blowjobs.” I winked.

Gage threw his head back and chuckled. “You act like that’s a punishment.”

---

I'D NEVER GONE TO A JOB INTERVIEW BEFORE. LUCKILY FOR me, I had a boyfriend who had, and he made sure I picked out the perfect suit and tie. Climbing into my Lexus, I drove to the network's building. Even though they had sought me out, I was still nervous as I pulled up, but what was the worst that could happen? I wouldn't get a job that I hadn't been seeking.

Making my way into the building, I stopped at the front desk. "Chase Matthewson. I have a three o'clock meeting with Mr. English."

"Please have a seat, and I'll let him know you're here." The receptionist motioned to the chairs behind me.

"Thanks." I turned and walked over to take a seat. Highlights of the games from the previous days were playing on the TV.

Before I got too engrossed in what'd I'd missed around the league, I heard my name. "Chase Matthewson, great to meet you." I stood and walked toward the man with his hand outstretched. "I'm Larry English."

"Nice to meet you too." I shook his hand.

"Can I get you anything? Water? Tea? Coffee?"

"Water would be great, thanks."

He nodded to the receptionist, and she hurried off.

As we made our way through the building, Larry gave me a mini tour. He pointed out offices of people I didn't know and various other rooms. He showed me the studio for the on-air pre- and post-game shows, and then he brought me to a conference room where several other people were waiting. Larry introduced me to more executives and then I sat in the seat he had motioned for me to take. The receptionist placed a bottle of water in front of me and made a quick escape.

Each person around the oval table had a notepad and pen in front of them. Before they could begin to interview me, I

said what had been on my mind for a few days.

“If I may, before we start, I’d like to know where you stand on a matter.”

“Okay,” Larry said and leaned back in his chair a bit.

I cleared my throat. “A few days ago, an article was published online about my dating life and I don’t want to waste anyone’s time if that will be a problem.”

“Oh.” Larry balked slightly and then looked around the table at his colleagues. “I see.”

“Even though the so-called source is unknown to me, the truth is, I am dating a man. If that’s going to be an issue—”

“Let me stop you right there.” Larry held up his hand. “We are well aware of the article, but we don’t care. Your relationship status has no bearing on your ability to give your insight about baseball and the players around the league. And to be completely honest with you, Chase, we want you on our team. You played for over twelve years and know the game better than anyone in this room. We just wanted you to come in and tell us what it will take to make it all happen.”

“Oh.” I blinked, my anxiety lowering at his declaration. I relaxed in my chair and said, “Well, tell me what you have in mind.”

---

THE INTERVIEW WENT BETTER THAN I’D IMAGINED. THEY offered me a decent amount of money, told me they’d give me a trial run to make sure I was comfortable in front of the camera, and then showed me where I’d be working. I met other analysts there and one of them offered to show me the ropes.

I felt good as I pulled onto the freeway toward Gage’s high school where he had a home game for his freshman team. He had no idea I was coming, but I couldn’t wait to see him and tell him the news.

Once I got to the school, I rolled up the sleeves of my white button-down shirt and made my way to the field. I spotted Gage immediately where he stood in the third base coach's box. He winked at me and I waved a hello. Since his team was up to bat, I decided to wait until the inning was over before I walked over to talk to him.

Making my way up the metal bleachers, I sat at the top and looked out at the field. The women I'd remembered from before were each slowly turning around to glance at me before going back to their gossip huddle.

"Just ask him," one lady whisper-hissed.

"No, you ask him," another one suggested.

"Fine, I'll do it," the third one stated and turned around to face me. I looked down at her. "You used to play for the Rockies, right?"

"I did." I gave a quick nod.

"And you retired at the end of last season?"

"Yep."

She looked at her friends briefly and then back at me. "And you're dating Coach Statler?"

I chuckled slightly, and a smile graced my lips. "I am. Is that a problem?"

The three ladies shook their heads rapidly and the brave one spoke again. "Not at all. We just ..."

"Thought you called dibs first?" I grinned.

The woman's eyes widened. "You heard that?"

"I did, but just so you know, I claimed him first."

## **GAGE**

CHASE PARKED HIS CAR IN MY DRIVEWAY, AND WE WALKED toward my house. I had a huge smile on my face because, after weeks of stress and drama, the judge overseeing my custody case had ruled on our final order. I was awarded full legal and physical custody and Lisa got monthly supervised visitation. In addition, a protective order was issued against Miguel that required him to stay one hundred yards away from my kids.

At the emergency hearing following our trip to pick up the boys in Houston, the judge determined that Tyler and Dylan would stay with me in San Diego until a new custody arrangement was put in place.

We worked with a mediator for over a month, but Lisa rejected every single plan my lawyer, Kyle, and I proposed. There were two points I refused to budge on: her not being allowed to take the boys to Texas and making sure Tyler and Dylan didn't have to be around Miguel. Since Lisa and I hadn't been able to come to an agreement, a judge had to intervene.

Since it was finally all over, I couldn't wait to share the news with the boys, who were waiting at home with Jamie, Jase, and Cammie. They were more than capable of staying home alone, but I'd been worried about Tyler since we'd left Houston. He was often solemn and withdrawn, and even though I'd found a counselor he met with twice a month, he

still seemed to struggle. It wasn't until recently that I noticed he seemed to enjoy Jamie's company and appeared more at ease when she was around. Since Dylan and Jase spent a lot of time together, Tyler also got to see her frequently.

The house was quiet when we walked in, and I didn't see anyone. We found Jamie in the kitchen, chopping up vegetables and tossing them in a bowl.

"Whatcha' doing?" Chase asked. We both walked around the island and took turns giving her a friendly side hug.

"Sorry." She gave me a sheepish smile. "Any time I feel anxious or don't know what to do, I cook. I had the boys show me where everything was and kind of made myself at home."

"I'm not going to complain about you cooking for us," I reassured her.

"Good, because there's lasagna in the oven and garlic bread over there." She pointed at the counter by the refrigerator. "I'll stick it in the oven after the lasagna is done."

"Thanks, Jamie. I really appreciate it. Now, where is everyone?"

"Tyler's been in his room most of the afternoon. When he came down a little while ago, he said he was texting with Quinn."

I was surprised he was still talking with Quinn. He was only fourteen years old, and most crushes didn't last long at that age. However, he'd been chatting with Quinn for at least five months. Maybe I needed to suggest he invite her over for dinner sometime so I could meet the person he was investing so much time in. "The other three are in Dylan's room playing video games."

"Even Cammie?" Chase asked.

"Yep," Jamie replied. "Surprisingly, they seemed to enjoy teaching her how to play Mario Kart."

I stood at the base of the stairs and called out to everyone, "Hey, guys. Come on down here for a minute."



Within seconds, doors were opening, and four pairs of feet stomped down the stairs.

“Dad, you’re back. What did the judge say?” Dylan asked, following me into the living room.

“We should give you guys some privacy,” Jamie suggested. “How about we run to the store to grab something for dessert.”

Chase squeezed my shoulder. “I’ll go with them.”

We had discussed the possibility that no matter what happened in court, Tyler and Dylan might have difficulty handling everything. Even if things went our way, which they had, it still meant what small relationship they had with their mom would change. There were sure to be some hurt feelings over that. While I believed the boys would have been fine with Chase staying, I thought it was a kind gesture on his part to give us some time alone.

“If the timer goes off, can you take the lasagna out of the oven?” Jamie asked, looking at me.

“Of course. Thank you.”

Tyler and Dylan sat on the couch while I sat in the chair across from them.

“Is it all done?” Tyler asked once the Matthewsons left. His eyes were downcast, and his voice was barely above a whisper.

“It is, and neither of you has to go back to Texas to see your mom. She has to come here to San Diego during her visitation times, and the visits will be supervised.”

“What about Miguel?” Tyler asked.

“You won’t have to see him anymore.”

He nodded, but didn’t respond. I thought he would have been happier about that part, but he still appeared upset by the whole situation.

Dylan looked at his brother and then turned his gaze toward me. “Do you think Mom will fly here to see us?”

That was one question I didn't know how to answer. "I'm not sure."

"She won't," Tyler mumbled and took off for the backyard.

"What was that all about?" Dylan questioned.

I shrugged. "I'm going to check on him. You stay here."

I slid open the glass door and stepped outside. Tyler was sitting on a patio chair with his back to me.

"Tyler?"

He didn't respond.

"Hey." I rested my hand on his shoulder. "Please talk to me."

It was killing me that my son was struggling, but I didn't know how to help him because he was shutting me out.

He lifted his head, and he had tears streaming down his face. I leaned down and wrapped him in a hug.

"Why doesn't Mom love us?" he cried into my shoulder.

*Fuck.* I may not have liked Lisa in the past, but right then, I truly hated her. My sons were hurting, and it was all her fault. I didn't want Tyler to feel that way.

"Your mom loves you, but she's also selfish." I stood and took the seat next to him. I'd spent fourteen years being careful not to say anything bad about his mother, but I'd rather he knew that about her than believe she didn't love him.

"She won't love me once she knows the truth."

My brow furrowed. "The truth about what?"

His body shook with each breath he took. "I'm scared."

Worry prickled under my skin, but I tried to reassure him. "Son, you can tell me anything."

He sniffled and looked down at his feet. "I'm ... gay."

At first, I wasn't sure if I had heard him correctly, and I was tempted to ask him if that was all. Obviously, given who I was in a relationship with, he didn't need to worry about my

reaction. Then it dawned on me. He hadn't been upset about what Miguel and Lisa said because I was dating Chase. Maybe that was part of it, but he'd been crushed because the hate his mom was spouting affected him directly.

"Hey." I waited for him to look at me. "I'm so proud of you. I know the situation with your mom has been really hard, and I understand why you've been struggling. Unfortunately, we can't control her thoughts or words, but I hope you know I will always love and support you."

"Thanks, Dad." He lifted his T-shirt and wiped his face. "I love you too."

We sat together in silence for a couple of minutes before I asked, "Just out of curiosity, what's the story with that girl Quinn you've been talking to?"

He chuckled, and it was the best sound I'd ever heard. "Quinn's a boy."

"Seriously?"

"When Dylan said I was talking to my girlfriend, I just played along. It was before you and Chase started dating. I wasn't sure how you would react to the news, and Mom was being ... how she is. It was easier to let you guys think Quinn was a girl."

I couldn't argue with his reasoning, although I was a little bummed he had been unsure of my reaction. But I also understood how it was only human to come up with worst-case scenarios.

"Does anyone else know?" I asked.

He nodded. "A couple of my friends know, and I'm not keeping it a secret, if that's what you're wondering."

If he'd asked me, I would have kept it a secret for however long he needed me to, but I was relieved he felt confident enough in who he was to open up about it. I also hoped that given my own relationship, he felt as though I wouldn't judge him. I wished he would have come to me sooner though, because I hated knowing he had been hurting for so long.

I gave him another squeeze and stood to go back inside. Tyler and I must have been outside longer than I realized because I could see Chase sitting on the couch watching TV with his kids and Dylan. And through the kitchen window, I saw Jamie pulling a stack of plates from the cabinet.

“Things with your mom may not be great right now, but I want you to look inside for a moment.” I pointed and he glanced through the sliding glass door. “You have five people in there who love you and want you to be happy.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

---

THE LAST SEVERAL WEEKS HAD BEEN NOTHING SHORT OF amazing. After Tyler and I talked, I could tell an enormous weight had been lifted from him. He smiled more and didn't hide away in his room all the time.

Things between Chase and me were going great as well. He was enjoying his job, even though it kept him out late a few nights a week. When Chase accepted his new broadcasting position, he and I talked with Bob, the Mavericks' assistant coach. Bob agreed to take on the head coach role, and Chase and I would assist as our schedules allowed. School had ended for me, so I was spending my time playing with my band and coaching Dylan and Jase.

Everything seemed to be working out well, except I wanted more time with my boyfriend. We had decided to hold off on moving in together while I was going through the custody stuff. Since life had calmed down slightly, we thought it was time to bring it up to the kids.

We were hanging out at Chase's place, Cammie playing in her room, the boys in Jase's, and Tyler on the couch laughing at something on his phone. After ordering pizza, I hung out in the kitchen with the man I couldn't imagine life without.

“Do you still think the kids will be okay with us living together?” Chase asked, taking a sip of his beer.

“I do. In fact, I think Jase and Dylan will be stoked.”

He nodded. “How did your meeting with the realtor go?”

“As long as everything goes well tonight, like I think it will, my house hits the market on Monday.”

“Hopefully, it sells quickly. I’m looking forward to house shopping with you.” He grinned.

The doorbell rang, and Chase went to get the pizza from the delivery driver while I grabbed some plates and cups.

“Tyler, can you tell the others that dinner is here?” I asked.

“Okay.” He hopped up and went to the bedrooms.

After everyone grabbed a couple of slices and poured themselves a drink, we headed into the dining room. One of my favorite things was eating dinner together as a family of six, and I couldn’t wait to do it more often.

As the kids dug into their food, Chase cleared his throat to get their attention. “So, Gage and I wanted to talk to the four of you about something.”

Their eyes moved between us. “We’ve been talking about this for a while, and we have decided we would like to move in together.”

“How do you guys feel about that?” Chase asked.

Tyler spoke up first. “Are we going to live here?”

I shook my head, and his shoulders slumped. I couldn’t blame him; Chase’s house was pretty badass with its ocean views and updated everything.

“Are they moving into our house?” Dylan asked.

“We’re actually looking at buying a new place,” Chase clarified. “Something that we all love.”

“Can I have a purple bedroom?” Cammie asked.

Chase laughed. “We’ll see what we can do.”

His answer seemed to appease her.

Jase glanced at his dad. “Can we still live near the beach?”

Chase nodded. “We can definitely see what’s available.”

“Are you all okay with this?” I asked again, just to make sure.

Everyone said yes before moving back to their pizza. When I looked at Chase, a grin spread across his lips. I couldn’t wait to live with him.

## CHASE

SINCE I'D BEEN SPENDING MOST OF MY TIME WITH JASE because of travel ball, I decided on a day off from baseball and working the pre- and post-game for the Padres that I would take Cammie to the zoo. It was just the two of us as we pulled into the parking lot and headed toward the front gate.

"What do you want to see first?" I asked as the attendant scanned our tickets.

"The flamingos. They're my favorite." She beamed.

We walked to the map near the front entrance and, to our luck, the flamingos were a hop, skip, and a jump away.

"Did you know flamingos are born gray or white?" I asked my seven-year-old as we gazed out at the pink birds standing in a lagoon.

Her little blue eyes stared up at me. "Really?"

"Yeah. They get their pink color from what they eat."

Cammie thought for a moment. "Flamingos eat watermelons?"

"Probably." I chuckled. "But I'm not sure wild flamingos can find watermelon to eat."

"Then how do they turn pink?"

I should have known my daughter would ask a ton of questions because she was a curious little thing. I pulled out my phone and skimmed an article before blurting out, “Shrimp. They eat shrimp.”

She blinked. “Shrimp?”

“Yeah. Shrimp are pink.” Well, they were when they were cooked, but I wasn’t sure I could explain to an eight-year-old how a flamingo turned pink from a non-cooked shrimp because of pigments they digested. I left it at ‘shrimp were pink’. “Let’s go check out something else.”

Since neither of us had been to the San Diego Zoo before, we took the Kangaroo Bus so we could see all the animals along the way. We saw everything imaginable, even monkeys that were in an apparent love triangle.

“What’s a love triangle?” Cammie asked.

“I ... Uh ...” I rubbed the back of my neck as the bus continued along. “Oh, look. An alligator.” I pointed in the distance at what I hoped was an actual alligator.

She was distracted, thank heavens. Animal after animal, Cammie was in awe of everything she spotted.

---

“ARE FLAMINGOS STILL YOUR FAVORITE?” I ASKED AS WE walked out of the front gate several hours later. It had been a long day, but one that both of us enjoyed.

“No.” She shook her head. “I really loved the polar bears.”

“Yeah, those were amazing.”

“They were soooo big.”

“They sure were, baby girl.” I smiled.

“Like two of me.”

I snorted. “More like ten of you.”

“Yeah.” She laughed. “I wish I could have one as a pet.”



I threw my head back and roared with laughter. “I think maybe we need to start with something a little smaller.”

She stopped walking and squealed. “Can we get a puppy?”

“Um ...” My eyes widened.

“Please?” she begged, clasping her hands together as though she were praying. “Or a kitty. Or a bunny. Or—”

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa.” I held up my hands. “We can’t just go get a pet.”

“Oh.” Cammie stuck out her bottom lip.

We’d never had a pet before and I wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was because they were a lot of responsibility, and I used to be on the road often. Since I was no longer traveling, perhaps a pet was in our future.

“Let me talk to Gage. Maybe we can get something when we move into our new home,” I suggested.

Gage and I hadn’t found the perfect house to build a life together in. We had been looking, and his house was still on the market. We were waiting to put mine up once we found a place, so we didn’t have to worry about being homeless. I had four bedrooms and could fit everyone, including a dog or cat, or rabbit.

“Okay.” My daughter glowed “I bet Gage will say yes.”

I chuckled, not sure if he would or not. Gage had a soft spot for Cammie, always down to watch cartoon movies about fairies and princesses with her. “We’ll see. How about we grab ice cream before we head to Mom’s?”

---

THERE WAS NO MORE TALK ABOUT PETS AS WE ATE OUR ICE cream and then drove to Jamie’s. Maybe Cammie could talk my ex-wife into getting a dog. That would probably be better, given I was working nights and weekends a few weeks out of the month.

I loved my job as a guest analyst. During the first couple of shows, it was tricky to get a feel of the cameras, but since it had been a few months, I was getting the hang of everything. I got to dive into former teammates' and other ball players' stats and pick them apart, evaluating how the Padres could beat them. It sucked to root for San Diego, but since moving to Southern California again, I realized my heart had always been in So Cal. Even in college, a part of my heart lived there since Gage moved back when he left school.

"All right, baby girl." I pulled up in front of Jamie's house. "Don't tell your mother you had ice cream before dinner."

"I won't." She grinned.

We got out of the car and I walked her to the door, wanting to thank my ex for letting me have an extra day with my daughter. Before we got there, the door opened.

"How was it?" Jamie asked.

"So cool," Cammie said excitedly. "We took a bus around the entire zoo and then we got on a tram thing in the air and went from one end of the zoo to the other, and then we saw polar bears, and it was so amazing!"

"So, you had a good time, then?" Jamie smiled at our daughter, who didn't take a breath during her entire rehash of the day.

"It was really fun," I replied.

"Well, go get cleaned up for dinner. It will be ready soon." Jamie motioned for Cammie to go inside.

"Okay." My daughter turned and wrapped her arms around my waist. "I'll see you on Friday."

"Can't wait, baby girl. Love you."

"Love you too."

She lowered her voice and whispered as she looked up at me, "But don't forget to ask Gage if we can get a dog or a cat."

I grunted a small laugh and replied in a low voice, “Maybe you should ask your mom just in case he says no.”

“What was that?” Jamie questioned.

Cammie and I grinned at her and both of us sang, “Nothing.”

Knowing my daughter, none of us stood a chance at denying her request, and she was going to have a pet within the week. She was just playing coy with her mother until the time was right when she could use her softening eyes to plead for a pet.

Cammie ran past her mom and I turned to leave.

“Have a minute?” Jamie asked.

I spun back around. “Sure, what’s up?”

“Tomorrow night, the kids are going to meet Tony.”

“Oh.” I blinked. “Okay.”

“I just wanted to give you a heads up.”

“Honestly, I thought they already had. It’s been several months, right?”

“Yeah, but we were taking things slow. He has kids too and we just wanted to make sure, you know?”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“But things are no longer slow,” Jamie stated.

I blinked. “Okay?”

She held up her left hand, a massive diamond shining in the evening sun.

“Oh, wow,” I breathed. “Congrats.”

“It was all so sudden. I wasn’t expecting it at all because, like I said, he hasn’t met Jase and Cammie.”

“But you said yes.” It wasn’t a question given the rock that was blinding me.

“I did, because it feels right even though we haven’t been dating long.”

“I know what you mean,” I said, thinking about Gage. Staring at Jamie’s engagement ring sparked an idea. I wanted to spend forever with Gage, and I wanted the entire world to know. We were buying a house together, but why not add a little more bling to our lives?

---

GRABBING THE NOTES OFF MY DESK, I MADE MY WAY TO THE set, ready to go live for the pre-game broadcast. The Padres were playing the Giants, and one point I had covered was how to beat Aron Parker at the plate. I wasn’t an expert, but it helped that I had played with him for half a season on the Rockies.

Me: Still can’t hit them outside?

Aron: LOL!!! What the fuck? Are you trying to scout me?

Me: Throw me a bone. It’s for the fans.

Aron: I’m not going to tell you how to do your job motherfucker.

Me: I will take your hostility as a sign that I’m correct and you can’t hit outside.

Aron: You know damn well that I can hit anything thrown at me.

Walking on set, I took a seat across from Mark, the Padres *Live* host.

“Hey, Chase,” he greeted.

“Evening, Mark. How’s it going?”

“Good. Think the Padres will win tonight?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. The Padres were having a great season, sitting at number two in the division behind the Dodgers. The Giants were third, but only a few games behind the Padres. “But it will definitely be a good game.”

“You’ve got that right.” He stacked the papers in front of him. “Have any plans for the 4<sup>th</sup>?”

I did have plans for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Plans Gage didn’t fully know about. “We have family coming into town and are having a party at our new place,” I answered Mark.

“Cool. We’re going to Tahoe to catch the fireworks show there.”

If things went as planned, there would be fireworks at my house too.

---

THE GAME WENT INTO EXTRA INNINGS AND AFTER DOING THE post-game show and discussing how Aron had hit a home run in the tenth to pull ahead, leading to a Padres loss, I drove home. I was exhausted as I opened the door. It was after midnight as I threw my keys in a bowl near the front door, slipped off my shoes, and made my way to the bedroom. I’d expected Gage to be asleep like I assumed Tyler and Dylan were, but he was sitting up reading in bed as I entered our room.

“The boys are officially Giants fans,” Gage stated as he looked up from his book.

I chuckled slightly. “They’re Aron Parker fans.”

“True, but can you blame them?”

“Nope.” I kissed Gage quickly. “But I wasn’t lying when I said he couldn’t hit outside.”

Aron had fouled off almost all the outside pitches he was thrown throughout the game. Of course, the Padres’ pitchers didn’t only throw him balls that were outside, and therefore, he went four for five.

“Maybe you’ll be a major league coach one day.” Gage winked. “You know your shit.”

“Yeah, okay.” I snorted a laugh and unbuttoned my shirt.

“I’m serious. You never know.”

Gage was right; I didn’t know what the future held. Some players went on to coach, but I wasn’t sure if I would want to given I’d retired and enjoyed not having to travel city to city and was home with my family. Then again, I hadn’t imagined I would be an analyst either.

After undressing, I took a hot shower and then crawled into bed with Gage.

Just like I did every night since we’d moved in together.

## GAGE

WHEN WE WERE HOUSE HUNTING, THE FIRST THING THAT caught my eye about the place we ended up buying was the massive deck overlooking the Pacific Ocean. These days, it was where Chase and I spent the most time, eating our meals, watching the waves, and relaxing when we were home.

“It looks great out here,” I said and planted a kiss on my boyfriend’s cheek.

The Padres had an off day, so Chase didn’t have to work. Instead, he’d spent the morning decorating and setting up tables and chairs for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July party we were hosting. I had spent that time getting all the food ready.

“Thanks, baby. I’m going to grab a shower before everyone gets here.”

“I’d join you, but I’ve got a few more things to prepare.”

“That’s okay, but you’re all mine tonight.” He grabbed my ass, pulling me in for another kiss.

A shiver ran through me and I was grateful the boys would be spending the night at the hotel with their grandparents who were flying in for the holiday.

We walked inside, and I put my foot out so Arlo, our new gray and white cat, wouldn’t escape from the house. Cammie had pleaded for us to adopt a kitten as soon as we’d moved in.

I couldn't deny her anything when she looked at me with her bright blue eyes and told me that her dad said it was up to me. I could have kicked his ass for that because he knew damn well I wouldn't say no.

Chase headed to our bathroom, and I veered off toward the kitchen. I had pulled the homemade baked beans from the oven when I heard the doorbell ring. I checked the time on my phone and saw that the party wasn't set to start for another thirty minutes. "Who shows up early for a party?" I muttered under my breath.

I walked to the door and pulled it open, grinning like a fool when I saw who was standing on the other side. "Mom, Dad, you're early, but I'm glad you're here."

"Sorry about that," Dad replied, clapping me on the back. "But your mom began pacing the second we checked into our hotel room, eager to see her baby boy." My parents moved to Florida ten years ago, so we didn't see them as often as I'd like. Having them here for our party only made the day better.

I chuckled. "Sounds about right."

My mom wrapped her arms around my waist. "We've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too." I gave her a squeeze.

"Your house is beautiful," my mom commented while looking around the open-concept first floor.

"Thank you. Let me get the boys down here, and they can give you a tour."

I jogged up the stairs and knocked on Tyler's open door. "Hey, Grandma and Grandpa are here. I told them you'd give them a tour of the house."

"Oh, cool." He stood and slipped his phone into his pocket.

I headed to Dylan's room and told him the same thing. The boys ran downstairs and took turns hugging their grandparents.

"Where's Chase and his two kiddos?" Mom asked as I followed behind them toward the kitchen.



I'd told my parents I was dating Chase shortly after we'd told the kids. They were definitely surprised and even more shocked when I told them my boyfriend was my old college roommate. Even though my announcement had caught them off guard, they'd been nothing but supportive, which was precisely what I'd expected from them.

"Chase is taking a shower and will be down in a few minutes. Jase and Cammie are coming with their mom," I explained.

"I can't wait to meet them," she added before Tyler and Dylan led her and my father outside to show them the views from the deck.

Twenty minutes later, I had the burgers and hot dogs sizzling on the grill. Chase walked outside, and I couldn't keep myself from checking him out. His shaggy, dark brown hair, still wet from his shower, begged me to run my fingers through it. With his white T-shirt hugging his broad chest and the navy board shorts hanging on his trim hips, he was seriously hot.

"Mr. and Mrs. Statler, I'm so glad you could make it." Chase walked over to shake my dad's hand and hug my mother.

"It's so great to see you again, and please call us Martin and Rebecca. Or Mom and Dad."

I laughed at my mom's suggestion. My parents had tried their hardest to form a relationship with Lisa, but she had never warmed up to them. My mom was so hopeful she'd finally have a chance to bond with the person in my life.

"Got it, Mom." He winked in my direction. "Can I get you two anything to drink?"

"I'd love a beer if you've got one," my father replied.

"We have beer."

"Do you have any wine?" Mom asked.

"White or red?" Chase queried.

"White, please." She smiled warmly.

“Coming right up.” Chase walked inside. When he returned, he handed my parents their drinks. While they continued to chat with my boys, he came over to me. “The food is looking good. Do you need anything?”

“I’m good, but thank you.”

“Okay, I’m going to open the side gate so people can come back, and we won’t have to answer the door a million times tonight.”

Our family and friends began to trickle in, and Chase introduced Jamie, Jase, and Cammie to my parents as soon as they arrived.

“Hey, Jamie.” I gave her a side hug when she stepped up next to me. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

Her face lit up. “Thank you.”

I looked behind her. “Speaking of your engagement, where’s Tony?”

She shook her head and chuckled. “He’ll be here soon. We forgot to put Luna in her crate before we left. We didn’t realize it until we pulled up, so he offered to go back and take care of her.”

“I still can’t believe Cammie managed that one.”

After we adopted Arlo, we found out Cammie had also convinced her mom to get her a dog. Chase and Jamie communicated better than most married couples on everything going on with their kids, and I found it hilarious they had been outplayed by a soon to be eight-year-old. Although, I thought we got the better end of the deal since a cat was less maintenance than a dog.

“I know,” Jamie agreed. “But as long as she helps take care of her as promised, I’m good with it. Besides, Luna is pretty darn adorable.”

“Gage, Jamie,” I heard someone call out and saw Chase’s mom wave at us.

“Hi, Lori,” I greeted, and then shook Chase’s dad’s hand. “Ken, how’s it going?”

Shortly after I told my parents I was dating Chase, we met with his parents to share the news with them as well. Since then, we've met up for dinner with them every couple of weeks.

"Not bad." He smiled.

Lori and Jamie continued to chat and Ken went looking for his son, while I continued to man the grill.

Once the burgers and hot dogs were ready, Chase joined me in the kitchen to grab the rest of the food, and we invited our guests to eat. After we both loaded up a plate, I found seats for us next to my mom.

Chase leaned over and said, "I've barely had a chance to talk to you all evening. Are you having fun?"

"I am." I looked at the crowd sitting on the deck and the tables we'd set up on the sand below. We were surrounded by the people who meant the most to us. "It's nice hanging out with everyone."

"I'm glad they're all here."

I looked at him, wondering if he was going to elaborate, but he just smiled at me.

"Hey, Dad," Dylan shouted, interrupting us. "Grandpa wants to take us fishing tomorrow. Can I take our poles and tackle box?"

"Oh yeah? That sounds like fun. You'll have to grab everything from the garage before you leave tonight."

"I will." Dylan went sprinting back to my father who had been sitting on the sand with his grandsons.

"I can't believe how big they're getting," my mom said, taking a sip of her wine. "They really seem to be doing well."

I nodded. "They are."

"Have you heard from Lisa?" She wrinkled her nose like she smelled something foul.

*Yeah, Mom. I feel the same way about my ex.*

“She messaged them once, but after Tyler told her he was gay and would only talk to her if she could accept that, she sent me a text telling me what a horrible example I’d been to our son and hasn’t tried to contact us since.”

Shortly after Tyler had come out to me, he asked if I would tell his grandparents for him. Knowing how his mom was, I figured he was worried about having more people he loved turn their back on him. He hadn’t needed to worry, as my parents told him just how proud of him they were.

“I’m surprised he told her, but I’m glad he did. If she can’t be accepting, then he can cut the toxic people out of his life. Besides, it looks like he has a ton of people who love and support him. Especially Chase”—she gave him an adoring look—“and even his ex, Jamie.”

I grinned. Some people may have found it odd how involved Jamie was in our lives, but it worked for us. I considered her family and loved how much she cared for my children.

“Yeah, things have a way of working out exactly as they should. I don’t think the kids and I have ever been this happy.”

---

THE SUN HAD SET A WHILE AGO, AND THE SKY WAS DARK. WE were set to have a perfect view of the fireworks show over the ocean. I tuned our radio to the station that was supposed to play accompanying music for the display, which had a countdown informing us the show was to start in three minutes.

Chase stepped to the edge of the deck and asked for everyone’s attention. “I just wanted to thank you all for being here. Gage and I are so grateful for each of you. And having you here makes what I’m about to do that much more special.”

My brow furrowed as I watched him make his way toward where I was standing. Once he stood in front of me, he grabbed my hands and looked directly into my eyes.

“When I retired last year, I thought I’d be living a quiet life with my kids. I never considered the possibility of finding someone and falling in love. Then, after seventeen years, you came back into my life in the most unexpected way. You are the most amazing man I know, and you make me a better person in every way.” He dropped to one knee and pulled something out of his pocket. I didn’t see what it was—although I could guess—because I was lost in his eyes. “Will you marry me?”

There wasn’t an ounce of doubt in my mind that Chase Matthewson was the man I was supposed to spend the rest of my life with, so without hesitation, I lowered myself down in front of him and pressed my lips to his. When I pulled back slightly, I answered with the only word I could. “Yes.”

Everyone clapped as we stood, and Chase placed the platinum ring embedded with an emerald-cut diamond on my finger.

“I love you,” I said against his warm lips.

“I love you too.”

We leaned in and kissed just as the first firework exploded over the water.

# EPILOGUE

## GAGE

SIX MONTHS LATER

CHASE AND I OPTED FOR A SHORT ENGAGEMENT SO WE COULD get married in January when he wasn't working and the boys had a break between fall and spring ball. It also allowed some of Chase's baseball buddies to join us too.

We found a winery about an hour north of San Diego that was the perfect location for our wedding. The ceremony was being held outdoors under a gazebo in the garden. We rented heaters in case it turned chilly, and the reception was being held in their large event room.

Dressed in my gray tux, I peeked through the curtains and saw most of our guests had arrived. Our parents were seated on either side of the aisle. In the row behind Chase's parents were Jamie and her fiancé Tony, as well as Aron and Drew, who sat with their adorable two-year-old twins, Jolene and Reese. On my side, behind my parents, my bandmates and their families, took up two rows. The rest of the seats were filled with coworkers and baseball families who had become our friends.

"It's almost time," the winery's event planner said as she ushered our children to line up by the door.

“Cammie, you look beautiful,” I gushed, and she gave me a little twirl in her burgundy dress. “And boys, you all are very handsome.” They were wearing gray tuxes similar to the ones Chase and I had on, except they had gray ties, while we had burgundy ones.

The music started, and our kids walked down the aisle one by one. They would be the only ones standing with us during the ceremony. Once they were in place, Chase stepped up next to me and laced his fingers with mine. I glanced at him, my lips tipping up in a smile. He looked gorgeous, and I was half tempted to take him somewhere so we could be alone for a bit, but that would have to wait until later.

“You ready to spend the rest of your life with me?” He winked.

“I’ve never been more ready for anything,” I admitted.

Instead of having someone else escort us down the aisle, we decided to walk out together while holding hands. For me, it symbolized the two of us stepping into our future together.

As we passed by our friends and family, it was hard to miss all the cheerful faces present to witness us proclaim our love for each other and watch the six of us become an official family.

Once we were at the gazebo, the officiant began to speak, but I had difficulty paying attention to him as I was fully focused on the man standing in front of me. Luckily, I knew when to answer questions and recite my vows.

When it was time to exchange rings, Tyler handed me the one I had for Chase while Jase did the same with the ring meant for me. Sliding the platinum band onto Chase’s finger caused emotions I hadn’t expected to bubble up inside me, and my voice cracked as I repeated what the officiant said.

After Chase slipped the ring onto my finger, he mouthed, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I repeated back to him.

“I now pronounce you soulmates for life,” the officiant announced, using the language we requested because it fit our

relationship perfectly.

I wrapped my arms around Chase's neck and molded my lips to his, thoroughly enjoying our first kiss as a married couple.

---

THE MUSIC, COURTESY OF MY BAND CALIFORNIA THUNDER, was pumping as we waited to enter the reception. When the song finished, Calvin, our lead singer, addressed the crowd. "It's time for us to welcome the newlyweds. I present to you Chase and Gage Statler-Matthewson."

Our guests applauded as we walked through the door and made our way to the table set up for us and the kids. I leaned over and placed a kiss on Chase's lips before we took a seat.

We enjoyed a wonderful dinner, and then my band announced it was time for the first dance. Chase stood and held out a hand to me, which I accepted and let him lead me out to the dance floor. We swayed back and forth as the first notes of Benjamin Gibbard's "And I Love Him" played.

"You look hot as hell in that tux," Chase whispered in my ear. "I can't wait to rip it off you later."

I chuckled. "I thought the same thing about you before the ceremony started."

As the song continued to play, I couldn't imagine a better moment than the one I was experiencing with my husband in my arms. When I'd walked away from everything eighteen years ago, I never expected to see Chase Matthewson again, but fate had other plans, and I couldn't wait to see what a life together held for us.

When the song ended, Calvin invited everyone out to the dance floor. We danced together and with our kids for at least an hour before taking a break to chat with our guests.

"We're going to call it a night," Drew said as he and Aron approached, each with a toddler asleep on their shoulder.



“You guys really are the old married couple now, aren’t you?” my husband joked.

Aron glared at him. “I’m still younger than you.”

I clapped Drew on the back. “Thank you for making the trip down here.”

“We wouldn’t have missed it,” he replied.

We said our goodbyes, and they headed outside.

Looking around the room, everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. I spotted Dylan and Jase jumping around the dance floor while Tyler spun Cammie around. All four laughed as though they were having the time of their life.

“Should we give them their gifts now?” I asked Chase, who watched them with a grin on his face.

He nodded. “I’ll get the kids if you want to grab the presents. I had my mom stow them behind the bar.”

With the gifts in hand, I walked back to the head table where my family was waiting for me.

“Chase and I wanted to get something for each of you since today wasn’t just about the two of us getting married. It’s the start of us being a family forever,” I explained to the four of them.

“We love you all so much, and we want you to have a reminder of that love wherever you go,” Chase added.

I passed out the presents and watched as they unwrapped them. Dylan got his opened first and lifted the watch we’d selected for all three boys. Jase and Tyler checked theirs out and proclaimed they were pretty cool.

Finally, Cammie unveiled the charm bracelet we’d picked out, and her face lit up. “It’s so pretty.”

“There’s something engraved on the large charm,” Chase said. “It’s also on the back of the watches. Cammie, go ahead and read it out loud.”

She twisted the charm around so she could see it. “Today, I told your dad I do, and I promise you forever, too.”

The End.

Tyler Statler's story is kicking off Kimberly's and Rachel's Forbidden Series. Pre-order *After Hour Lectures*: A Forbidden Student/Professor Romance today!

Also, keep reading for a sneak peek of *Traded*; Aron & Drew's story!



OFF  
THE  
FIELD  
DUET

# TRADED

A MM BASEBALL ROMANCE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

KIMBERLY KNIGHT  
RACHEL LYN ADAMS

# CHAPTER 1

**ARON**

PLAYING BASEBALL WAS ALWAYS IN MY BLOOD.

My father had been a two-time MVP for the San Francisco Giants. He played outfield for them during most of his career, and I'd always wanted to follow in his footsteps. I busted my ass in school, getting a full-ride to Arizona State, where I was drafted during my sophomore year into the major leagues. I'd been the first overall pick in the MLB draft by the St. Louis Cardinals and played one season in the minor leagues before I was brought up to play right field when another player was injured. That was eight years ago, and I'd played right field for the Cards ever since.

The home fans loved me too. Whenever I came up to bat, my walk-up song would be drowned out by the roar of the crowd, and it fueled me. I couldn't wait to feel the rush as I stood in the batter's box, staring down the pitcher, and hitting the ball deep.

"Yo, Parker!" Nash hollered at me from across the clubhouse as I stood at my locker. We'd finished batting practice and were about to go back onto the field to start the game. "Coming out tonight?"

"Is water wet?" I rolled my eyes.

Chicks loved my eyes. I'd been told more times than I could count that they look like the ocean. They also loved my

golden-brown hair, powerful arms, muscular legs, and impressive dick I used to make them scream my name.

“Cool. You wanna play winner between me and Forrester?” The guys and I always played pool at Stadium View, a bar across the street from the ballpark. We would drink beer and watch whatever game was still playing on the TV. Since there was a massive storm in New York, we weren’t leaving until the morning, which meant the guys and I would go to the bar and have a *really* good time, probably not stopping at one or two beers.

“Fuck yeah.”

“Parker’s in!” Nash shouted to Forrester.

I couldn’t worry about pool or what was happening after the baseball game we were about to play. My head needed to be in the game because I had goals. While the team always strived to go to the World Series, I also wanted to be a two-time MVP, to make the All-Star team again, and to be the fucking best. My stats for the first part of the season were some of the best in my career, but I couldn’t carry the team alone. So far, we’d only won a game for every five we played or some shit, and it was unlikely we were going to the World Series this year because we fucking sucked.

Even though I had played for the Cardinals my entire career, I could potentially join a team that had a shot of winning it all when I entered free agency. It had been years—before my time—since the Cardinals won the pennant. When I was first drafted, the team seemed to be on a roll, going as far as the final games in the World Series but never winning. I wanted to be on a team where we had champagne raining on us in the clubhouse as we cheered for finally fucking doing what every professional ballplayer dreamed of. We hadn’t been farther than the second round of the postseason in several years, but my dream could soon come true because my contract with the Cards was up at the end of the season, and we had only half a season to go.

The team and I headed out to the field, warmed-up, sang the National Anthem, and then it was go time. By the fourth

inning, I was two for two with a home run. We were still losing, but it didn't matter because the fans gave me *that* rush every time I stepped into the batter's box.

"Hey, Aron," a woman purred behind me. I looked over at her from where I stood on deck, but I said nothing. "If you hit another home run, I'll let you hit this." She stood, running her hands along her sides, ensuring I got a good view of her ample breasts in her Cardinals tank top and her long tan legs in her *short* shorts.

Yeah, I'd do her.

Wilcox hit a pop fly to third, making the second out of the inning. "Flower" by Moby played over the stadium sound system as I was announced, the crowd going wild because their star was up to bat again. Even though the blonde had propositioned me, I wasn't going to hit a home run for her. Whatever I did on the field would be all for me. But there was no harm in letting her think her offer was my motivation, so before I made my way to the batter's box, I winked at her.

Standing in the left side of the box, my knuckles were lined up around the bat handle as I cocked my left arm, waiting for the pitcher to get his sign. He nodded to the catcher, my breath pausing a moment later as I watched the ball release from his hand. It came up and inside, exactly where I liked it. I didn't hesitate to swing, knocking the ball toward right field and into the second level of the upper deck. The fans went wild because not only had I hit my second home run, but I'd tied the game. Rounding third, I slapped the third base coach's hand and trotted to home plate, stepping on it and high-fiving Lake, who was batting after me.

"Nice job, Parker," he said.

*If only he could do the same*, I didn't reply. Instead, as I jogged past the blonde on the way to the dugout, I said, "Stadium View two hours after the game."

---

THE BAR WAS PACKED AS USUAL AFTER A GAME. FANS KNEW we liked to frequent the place. Didn't matter if we won or lost, but since we'd actually won, there was much to celebrate.

“A win and a night off? I'm getting wasted!” Nash boomed as Wilcox opened the wooden door for us. It wasn't the entire team that went for drinks, mainly those who didn't have to go home to wives and shit.

Cheers erupted as we entered the dimly lit sports bar. The six of us smiled and waved as we made our way to the table reserved for us when there were home games. As we sat, I noticed the Mets were playing the Giants on the TV above us. My father's former team was kicking the Mets' asses in the eighth inning, and I smiled. He'd always be a Giant—a Forever Giant—and maybe one day, I would be too.

Since we were playing the Mets next, I watched the game while Forrester and Nash played pool. At some point, the bartender brought us three pitchers of Bud Light, and as I drank my beer, I took mental notes of who hit balls into right field. We went over scouting reports for each player before the start of a new series, but still, I watched because it was the game I loved.

“Hey, Aron.” A hand brushed my shoulders and across my neck. I turned to see that it was the blonde from before. “Good game tonight.”

“Thanks.”

She looked at her friend and then back at me. “So, uh ...”

“You ready to do this?”

“I ... uh,” she stammered.

Did she expect to make small talk? We both knew why she'd come to the bar. She'd propositioned me, and I was taking her up on her offer. I wasn't going to sit around and chat all night. We weren't on a date. That wasn't what I was about. That wasn't what I was looking for. There was no tying me down or whatever else some jersey chaser wanted to do to score a baseball player. I loved being twenty-eight and single. Having to call home after each game wasn't something I

wanted to do. I lived in St. Louis, but that was during the off-season and when we had home games. Otherwise, I was either in Arizona for spring training or on the road for away games. I had no time to be concerned about another person. Plus, I got all the ass I wanted without being tied down.

“Let’s go.” I stood and downed the rest of my beer. “Give your phone to your friend.”

The blonde blinked. “Why?”

“You won’t need it,” I simply answered. I didn’t need my dick showing up on the internet.

She handed her purse to her friend, and I grabbed her hand, winking at the other guys as I led her to the women’s restroom. I found out a long time ago it was much nicer than the men’s room. And smelled better too.

After checking that it was empty, I locked the door behind us. “Take your shorts off and bend over the sink.”



## CHAPTER 2

### DREW

WE SHOULDN'T HAVE WON OUR GAME.

Giving up a three-run homer in the first inning was never how I wanted to start an outing, especially after an hour-long rain delay. In the second inning, our infielders had made two errors that gave the Giants a 5-0 lead. We somehow tied up the game in the ninth, and it took us playing into the twelfth to pull out a 7-6 win.

It had been a brutal game, and I'd been pulled in the fifth, making it my worst start of the season so far. I had a decent win-loss record, but as a team, we were playing sloppy ball. Every baseball player strived to win a championship. It was something I had dreamed about but hadn't achieved during my nine years in the majors, and it was clear we weren't making a run for the playoffs unless some miracle happened during the second half of the season.

I'd spent the first five years of my career playing with the Diamondbacks and then two years with the Mariners before signing a four-year contract with the Mets. I enjoyed living in New York and had finally started to feel settled, but the recent rumblings of a team rebuild had me on edge. There was one year left on my contract after the current season, but without a no-trade clause, I could be traded to another team before the deadline at the end of July. If the Mets rebuilt, there was a

chance they wouldn't want to stick with a thirty-three-year-old pitcher who probably only had a couple years left to play.

After walking into the clubhouse, I hit up the postgame spread before grabbing a shower. With the rain delay, three extra innings, and a quick interview where I was asked routine questions about my shitty performance, it was a little after midnight by the time I was getting dressed to head home.

We had one more game against the Giants before continuing our home stand with a four-game series against the Cardinals. I'd be pitching the last game in the series, and I needed to focus on that rather than the mistakes I'd made in the game we'd just played. We were only playing slightly better than St. Louis, which wasn't saying much.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw our catcher, Anderson, walk toward his locker next to mine.

“You headed to the family room to meet Jasmine?”

I shook my head. “Nah, she just texted me from the airport. Her flight was delayed, so she didn't make it back in time for the game. She should be home when I get there.”

Jasmine and I started dating shortly after I signed with the Mets. She'd moved in with me at the end of last season, but we were rarely home at the same time. She was a model whose career took her all around the world, and baseball took up most of my time for seven months of the year.

It wasn't easy maintaining a relationship under normal circumstances, and with jobs like ours, we had to put in more of an effort to stay connected. We tried to spend as much time together as we could whenever we were both in town, and I couldn't wait to get home to her.

“Nice. Enjoy your night.” He waggled his eyebrows as he got up and walked to the door that led to the family room.

Anderson had a wife, two kids, and one on the way. Most of my teammates were married or in serious relationships. It was nice playing with guys who weren't always looking to go out after every game. We hit up the occasional bar when we were on the road, but when we were home, most of us

preferred quiet nights to unwind after a game—win or lose. It suited me just fine. Even in college, I hadn't been one to party a lot. I'd chosen to put all my energy into becoming the best baseball player I could be.

Growing up with a single mom, I witnessed the sacrifices she made to ensure I had everything I needed. When I was in high school, it became clear I had an excellent shot of going to college on a baseball scholarship, and my coaches said they wouldn't be surprised if I made it to the big leagues one day. That was all it took to light a fire inside me. From that day on, playing for the majors was my end goal and not just because I loved the game, but because it meant I could make sure my mom was always taken care of.

I grabbed my bag and keys from the top shelf of my locker and headed to the players' parking lot where I slid into my all-black Mercedes. Thirty minutes later, I parked in the garage at my Sky Tower apartment building in Hell's Kitchen before getting in the elevator that took me up to the sixtieth floor.

As I unlocked the door, the apartment was dark and silent. Jasmine's luggage was in the entryway, so I knew she was home. I put my bag down on the small bench by the door and walked to our living room. The faint moonlight coming through the floor-to-ceiling windows provided me with just enough light to see her asleep on the couch. The two of us were night-owls, often up late because of work commitments and events, so she must have been exhausted from her flight. I didn't want to wake her if she was that tired, but I knew she'd be more comfortable in our bed. I slipped one arm behind her shoulders and the other behind her knees and gently lifted her.

"Hi, babe. I didn't mean to fall asleep," she said as I carried her to our room.

"It's okay. I left the stadium later than I wanted."

Once I laid her down in bed, I stripped down to my boxer briefs and slipped in under the covers. I brushed her long blonde hair off her shoulder and kissed her neck as I wrapped my arm around her from behind. "I missed you."

With how tired she was, I didn't think she would respond, so I was surprised when she reached behind her and rubbed her hand up and down my cock. "I missed you, too."

From there, we were a tangle of arms and legs as she showed me just how much she'd missed me.

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STICKING TO A ROUTINE WAS VITAL FOR BOTH MY performance and my sanity during the season, but that normalcy had been thrown out the window the night before. What I had assumed would be a quickie had turned into a marathon fuck-fest, but I wasn't complaining. I preferred to get a full eight hours of sleep, but six hours would suffice since I wasn't pitching and only had to stretch and weight train before the game later.

Jasmine wasn't in bed when I woke up as she usually hit the gym early in the morning. On days that I wasn't starting, I didn't have to be at the field until mid-afternoon, so I took advantage of that time to spend it with her.

After a quick shower and getting dressed, I walked into the kitchen, planning on making a bowl of steel-cut oatmeal mixed with flaxseed and a few blueberries for breakfast. While grabbing what I needed from the cabinets, I heard the front door open.

Jasmine entered the apartment. "Oh good, you haven't eaten yet," she said as she glanced at the container of oats on the counter. "We're going out to brunch with some friends."

"What?" I shook my head. "I need to be at the park by two. I was hoping we could spend some time together, just the two of us, before I left."

Jasmine had a large social circle, and we spent a lot of time going out, especially in the off-season. While parties and other events were fun, I also enjoyed the quiet times we spent together.

“But Heidi and Kari leave for Paris tomorrow.” She looked up at me with her big, bright eyes. *God, I was a sucker for blue eyes.* “Besides, we’re going to Friedman’s. It’s only a few blocks away, so you’ll have plenty of time to get to the field.”

“Okay,” I responded. I needed to eat before heading to the field anyway, and I’d still get to spend time with her.

She bounced over and kissed me on my cheek before starting toward our bedroom. “I’m going to shower real quick. We’re leaving in thirty minutes.”

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I HEARD THE CLACKING OF HIGH HEELS ON THE HARDWOOD floors as Jasmine walked over to me. “Babe, aren’t you going to change before we leave?” she asked while I sat on the couch watching SportsCenter.

I looked down at the dark wash jeans and black T-shirt I was wearing. “What’s wrong with what I’ve got on?”

“Nothing’s wrong. There’s just usually a photographer or two in front of the restaurant.”

The paparazzi were something we dealt with regularly. Jasmine’s popularity within the modeling world was expanding, and she was getting noticed by movie and television executives. And even though the Mets weren’t playing great, dating a baseball player only added to the appeal of getting a photo of us out together.

“I’ve laid out some clothes for you on the bed. We’ll go as soon as you’re ready.”

While I didn’t give a shit how I looked in the pictures posted online, I knew her career was based almost totally on her appearance, and since fashion was her thing, I followed her lead.

I grabbed the cornflower blue chambray shirt—a color I only knew because Jasmine said the light blue contrasted well with my brown eyes—and the white jeans she’d picked out,

and dressed quickly. With a final look in the mirror, I was ready to go.

Jasmine gave me a once-over as we walked toward the elevator. “I love your hair like this,” she said as she ran her fingers through my brown hair that was curling a little around my ears and neck.

That was a good thing, seeing as I didn’t plan on cutting it anytime soon. The last time I got a haircut, I had a bad outing and racked up my first loss of the season. Baseball players were a superstitious bunch, and I wasn’t about to do anything that might cause me to lose a game.

“Good morning, Mr. Rockland and Miss Sharpe. Will you be needing a car?” the doorman asked as we exited our building.

“Not this morning, Hank. But thank you,” I responded as I put on my sunglasses to shield my eyes from the bright sun.

I wrapped my arm around Jasmine’s shoulders and pulled her close as we began the short ten-minute walk toward Friedman’s. She was taller than the average woman at five-ten, but she seemed small compared to my six-foot, four-inch frame.

Jasmine’s friends waved us over as soon as we walked into the restaurant. There were more people at the table than I’d expected. Some I’d met before like Heidi and Kari, and all were clearly part of the fashion world.

“Oh, Zane’s here,” Jasmine said as she pulled me over toward a guy I didn’t know.

They hugged each other, and then she turned to me and said, “Drew, this is Zane, one of Franklin’s newest models.”

“It’s awesome to meet you. I’m a huge fan.” He stuck out his hand to shake mine.

“Thanks, man,” I responded before being introduced to a few more people.

After we took our seats and placed our orders, I sat back and listened to the conversations around me. There was talk of

who was hosting the hottest parties and which clubs were the best. I had little to add to the conversation, so I remained silent. While I had fun whenever we went out, I was just as happy hanging at one of my teammates' homes, barbecuing, and spending time with their families. It was the sort of life I wanted.

At twenty-five, Jasmine was eight years younger than me, but she was the one I saw standing next to me when I imagined my future. She wasn't ready for kids yet, and that was okay. Maybe it would be easier to wait until I was done with baseball before starting a family. Plenty of guys on the team had kids, and they were happy. But there were also times when they mentioned feeling as though they were missing out on some of the day-to-day parenting things. Growing up without a dad made me realize I didn't want to miss out on anything if I was ever lucky enough to have kids of my own.

"Oh my god," Heidi gasped, looking at her phone. "Ellie is pregnant!"

"No!" Jasmine breathed. "Her bikini body is going to be ruined."

"Who's the father?" Zane asked.

"Probably Jason Thomas. Those two were fucking in the bathroom at Soar a month ago," Jasmine stated.

"I wonder what she's going to do," Kari mused.

Jasmine shook her head. "I don't know. I don't want kids, so I can't imagine being in that situation."

Jasmine didn't want children? That was news to me.

And a big fucking problem.

\* Need more? Click [here](#) to purchase a copy of *Traded* or read it with your Kindle Unlimited subscription!

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Kimberly Knight is a USA Today Bestselling author who lives in the Central Valley of California with her loving husband, who is a great *research* assistant, and young daughter, who keeps Kimberly on her toes. Kimberly writes in a variety of genres, including romantic suspense, contemporary romance, erotic romance, and paranormal romance. Her books will make you laugh, cry, swoon, and fall in love before she throws you curve balls you never see coming.

When Kimberly isn't writing, you can find her watching her favorite reality TV shows, including cooking competitions, binge-watching true crime documentaries, and going to San Francisco Giants games. She's also a two-time desmoid tumor/cancer fighter, which has made her stronger and an inspiration to her fans.

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She loves to travel and spend time with her family. Whenever she has some free time, which is rare, you'll find her with a book in her hands or watching reruns of Friends.

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