



**VEGAS
ACES**

THE PLAYBOOK
BOOK FIVE

FIELD

Goal

LISA SUZANNE

FIELD

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VEGAS ACES: THE PLAYBOOK
BOOK FIVE
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DEDICATION

To my family.

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CHAPTER 1: TRAVIS

Fuck. Fuck! I handled that about as well as a lava monster making an ice sculpture.

Maybe I've been watching too much *Moana*, but that's the thing. You watch your kid's favorite movie and you think you're fine. You think nobody will ever swoop in and take her from you once she's with you. You think you're safe, but as it turns out, you're not.

As it turns out, greedy assholes are everywhere, and it's suddenly my job to fight them. To protect my daughter.

Even as her words twist a knife into my guts. Even as it replays over and over.

I hate you.

It's your fault.

I hate you.

I don't want to live here anymore.

I hate you.

I wish I never met you.

I hate you.

I should've expected all those words at some point, but I was hopeful she'd hold onto them at least until she became a teenager.

Nobody has ever loved me the way Harper has grown to love me over the last few months. Nobody has ever loved me the way Victoria grew to love me, either.

And now I've somehow managed to lose them both.

I've fucked up my entire life. It wasn't so long ago I thought about how close I was to rock bottom. I was falling toward it, and I knew that there would be a crash landing once I got to the bottom.

Here we are.

Rock fucking bottom.

The only thing that would make this worse is if Jerry Callahan actually did take Harper away from me. After the way she just stormed out of the room, I can't honestly see her walking into a court room and telling the judge she'd prefer to stay with me.

And that sounds about right. That sums up my entire existence. People hold on a little while, but then they see what's inside me and decide it's just not for them, so they bail.

Why should my own daughter be any different than everyone else?

I answer my own question.

Because she *is* different from everyone else.

She's the one rock I have left, and *I will not lose her.*

I will fight for her until my dying breath.

Maybe I've lost everything else, but she isn't going anywhere.

I give her a minute to cool off, and then I head upstairs to talk to her.

She ignores me when I knock on her door, and I try the doorknob.

It's locked.

"Harper," I murmur. "Please open the door."

She doesn't answer, and a well of grief fills me.

I can't even turn to Victoria to help me with this. Maybe she'd tell me that Harper's just acting out because she's upset. She doesn't mean those words. She feels comfortable with me and that's why she feels safe in misbehaving.

Maybe she'd tell me that.

Or maybe I'm saying it in my own head since there's no one to say it to me.

I don't know if I've ever felt so alone.

“Please.” My voice cracks as I beg. “Don’t shut me out.”

I turn around, lean on the door, and sink down to the floor as the emotions plow into me.

What if the Callahans really do take her from me? What if she really does want to go there instead of staying here?

What if I lose her?

Heat leaks from my eyes as I mourn everything I’ve lost over the last few months. Somehow not having a different woman in my bed every night and not being able to eat peanut butter pales in comparison to losing Harper and Victoria in one fell swoop.

I don’t know how to manage any of this.

I haven’t come to terms with this whole divorce business just yet, but I’ll find a way to fight for Victoria. I have to believe not all hope is lost since she’s still living in the apartment attached to my house. She’s still in close proximity. She’s still caring for my daughter.

I’ll take what I can get. It’s not like I can start interviewing nannies when I have to be back at camp in the morning.

And maybe that’ll buy me enough time to win her back.

I just need to figure out how.

How do you convince someone who is so certain this life isn’t for her that it actually is? It’s not just me or our relationship that she’s fighting against. It’s the outside forces she was never prepared to deal with. Her picture on the gossip sites. Paparazzi clamoring to get a photo of her, preferably with my kid. Being with a celebrity. Being the target of a jealous ex-lover’s wrath. All of it combines into one package that’s not real attractive from the inside.

How can I make her see the positive side of all that? What even *is* the positive side of that?

Because if I can’t see it, I’ll never figure out how to make *her* see it.

I sniffle as I paw at my face to wipe away the emotions, and that's when the door opens.

I fall backwards into her room, and usually that would make Harper laugh, but I guess she's pretty mad at me.

"What do you want?" she grits out.

"I want to talk," I say as I push to a stand, my body still feeling every ounce of pain I've put it through over the last couple weeks. I walk into her room and lean against her dresser as she climbs on her bed and sits with her legs crisscrossed.

"I have nothing to say to you."

I blow out a breath. "I'm sorry."

She just stares at me and purses her lips.

"I know this isn't what you want, and to be honest with you, kid, it's not what I want, either."

"Then fix it, Travis. You have to fix it," she says quietly.

I nod. "I know I do. But I just don't know how." I refuse to put the blame on Victoria. I can't do that to either one of them when my girl fucking idolizes her.

She starts to cry, and I move over to the bed and sit beside her. I pull her into my chest and let her cry, and I cry, too.

This fucking sucks.

But one thing is true.

I have to fix it.

I may not know how right now, but I'll figure it out.

I have to.

Now that I've had a tiny taste of what life could be like with Victoria and Harper, I refuse to let it all go without the biggest fight of my life.

CHAPTER 2: VICTORIA

I stay in my casita until I hear Travis leave for camp in the morning.

I used my own entrance when I got in after work last night so I didn't have to go through the house, and as much as I don't want to miss out on seeing Harper, I can't keep interacting with Travis when I know it's over.

It's too hard.

And so I waited until he left, and then I opened my door to the main house so Harper knows she's welcome in. It's early, and the house is quiet, but I find Harper nestled on the couch.

"What are you doing up so early?" I ask.

She sits up. "I couldn't sleep."

"Too excited for day two of school?"

She shakes her head. She's subdued—maybe just tired, but my gut tells me it's something more than that.

I sit next to her, and I put an arm around her shoulders. "Is everything okay?"

She leans into me. "Not really."

"Did something happen at school?"

She shakes her head. "Something happened at home."

My brows knit together, but I have a feeling I already know what it was. I wait for her to say it.

"My dad told me you're getting divorced."

The way she says it like an accusation breaks my heart, and it sort of just adds fuel to my anger with Travis. More miscommunication—or lack of communication altogether.

It would've been nice to get the warning that he was telling her. Even though I should've surmised it was coming, it still feels like a blindside this morning.

On the other hand, I note that she said *we* are getting divorced...not that I'm divorcing him. He didn't blame me in this scenario, and my overly analytical mind will definitely spend way too much time dissecting that.

The gap of silence widens as I'm left without words. I'm not really sure what to say.

"Did he do something?" she asks.

"It's complicated," I begin.

"Of course it is. All relationships are," she says, and she sounds much wiser than her ten years. "But I'm big enough to handle the real reason. Don't you think I deserve that much after everything I've been through?"

She does. Absolutely. And so I give her the truth. "As it turns out, I wasn't prepared for a life in the spotlight. I wasn't ready to handle having my photo taken just because of who I'm married to. I wasn't ready for a lot of things, and we rushed into it without stopping to take a breath. I guess this is my way of breathing."

"So...you're the one ending it?" she asks.

"I suppose I am."

"He, uh...he didn't mention that. I yelled at him a lot and told him I knew it was his fault."

"It's not really anybody's fault," I say, wanting to defend her father but also being careful not to make her angry with me. I wonder how much he told her. I wonder if she knows part of why we got married in the first place was because we were trying to protect her.

It's not my place to tell her that.

"But you love him," she says.

I nod. "I do. Very much. But sometimes that's not enough." My voice holds the sadness I feel over that fact. I guess real life doesn't always have the same sorts of happily ever afters my spicy books have.

I'll get my happy ending someday. It's just not my time. It's not my situation. Maybe I'm not meant to have kids even though I want them with my whole entire heart.

Come to think of it...I don't even need a man for that.

I'm still young, but my dream was always to be a young mom. Maybe if I turn thirty and I'm still single, I'll start looking into it. The thought of doing it alone is a little scary, and I'm sure it's a mere fraction of the same fears Travis is facing right now.

But I can't stay with somebody just to alleviate his fears.

I get Harper off to school and spend the day with Ellie. We're halfway through the day when she finally looks up at me.

"What's up with you today?" she asks.

My brows knit together. I thought I was doing a better job of hiding it. "What do you mean?"

"You're quiet, and you're fidgeting. I can tell something is bothering you. So spill it, sister."

I blow out a breath. "I told Travis I wanted a divorce. I handed him the papers. All he has to do is sign them."

"Whoa," Ellie murmurs as she sits back in her chair. "That's big."

I nod.

"Are you okay?"

I shrug. "Not really, but I'm getting through it one minute at a time, you know?"

"Are you sure this is what you want?" she asks softly.

I shake my head. "No, I'm not. But what other choice do I have?"

"There's always choices." Her words linger, but before I get the chance to respond, she asks, "Do you think he'll sign the papers?"

“I’m not sure. I’ve been actively avoiding him since I gave them to him.”

She clears her throat. “Tell me if I’m overstepping, but can you tell me why you want to divorce him?”

“Let me ask you a question. As a happily married woman, what’s the one cliché everyone says is the key to a strong marriage?” I ask.

“Communication,” she answers immediately.

I nod. “Exactly. And he just...doesn’t. I found out his league punishment from his Instagram live. I heard about the vape pen and the sex club news from you, not from him. As his wife, he should be sharing all the breaking news with me, don’t you think? And instead I’m getting it from everywhere except him.”

“They’re busy with training camp—” she starts, but I cut her off when I hold up a hand.

“I know they are. Trust me, I know. But he had time to sneak off with a vape pen. He had time to issue a public apology. Don’t you think he had time for a quick warning text to me? Something? Anything?” I don’t pause long enough for her to answer that rhetorical question. “And it’s not just that. I wasn’t prepared to deal with the sorts of things I’ve had to deal with. I wasn’t prepared to lose the things I held dear. My sister isn’t talking to me. I was fired from my dream job. We got married to give Harper some stability but it’s pushing my own dreams of kids further away.”

She nods sympathetically. “I totally get it. I understand where you’re coming from, and I don’t blame you for wanting to get out while it’s still early. But I thought you two were going to make it, Vic. You make him happy in a way I’ve never seen him. And when the two of you and Harper are in a room together, he lights up. Are you sure about this?”

“I’m sure.” My voice is resolute.

She presses her lips together. “Did he say whether he was going to sign before the court hearing?”

My brows knit together. “The court hearing?”

She nods. “The one for Harper’s custody.” She says it like a question.

“The one for...what?”

“You don’t know?”

I shake my head.

She sighs. “August twentieth, there’s a judge who wants to see Travis in California. Some family filed a petition to declare him unfit to raise Harper.”

“He didn’t tell me,” I murmur.

“He didn’t tell you?”

I shake my head. “I knew a family was after him, but I didn’t know they filed anything. See what I mean about communication?”

“I just found out last night,” she says.

“And I’ve been avoiding him. I’d like to chalk it up to that, but it feels like it’s not quite that simple.” I blow out a breath as I wonder when he was planning on telling me...and whether he’ll sign those papers or hold out until after the hearing.

CHAPTER 3: VICTORIA

Mandy: *Drinks tonight?*

I blow out a breath. It's Thursday which means it's sleepover night for Harper. Drinks with a friend sounds good, but I haven't told her I filed for divorce. I'm not ready to talk about it, and Travis hasn't signed the papers yet anyway.

None of the players will be at the Gridiron tonight since they're working hard all day at camp and studying the playbook at night, often in small groups that appear to stay at the Complex well past the official camp hours.

It's an intense few weeks for players, and they get a little time off just before the first game. But Travis's time off will be a little longer than that of his teammates.

I don't have any other plans, and maybe I'll have enough to drink that I'll spill to Mandy that it's over between Travis and me.

Or maybe not. Maybe a public setting isn't the best place for that conversation given the fact that his hearing is less than two weeks away.

Me: *Sure.*

Her reply is immediate.

Mandy: *Gridiron at 7?*

Me: *Yep.*

I show up right at seven, and Mandy is already working on her first margarita at the bar. The stool beside her is open, and I plop down onto it. I order a margarita of my own, and she takes an exaggerated sip of her drink, holding her hand at an odd angle.

And then I see why she's doing it.

I gasp. "Oh my God! Amanda Lynette Miller, are you betrothed?"

"I am indeed," she says, and then she squeals.

“Congratulations!” I squeal back and I toss my arms around her awkwardly since we’re both sitting. “Tell me everything!”

“It’s so crazy,” she begins, and her face is flushed as she talks with excitement and animation.

Looks like tonight’s not the night to bring up my impending divorce. I push down the pessimistic feelings festering in my chest as I put on a mask of excitement for my friend.

“So you know the whole deal with asking me the way he did the first time. Well this time, we were at his house, and he sent me on a little scavenger hunt that basically documented our entire relationship. I found different charms in each place to add to a charm bracelet, and he was waiting in the last spot with the ring.” She sighs all dreamily at the end and shows me her finger again then shakes her wrist with the bracelet on it.

“That’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard,” I gush. I wish I felt more sincerity. I want to be happy for my friend, but it’s just hard when my heart is shattered.

How did Jaxon have time to devise an entire scavenger hunt with charms meaningful to the two of them when Travis can’t even be bothered to tell me he’s got a custody hearing coming up regarding the legal guardianship of his daughter?

Part of me really believed Travis and I had what it takes to make it the long haul. Those few days we had in the Bahamas were magical—barring the issues with my sister and Owen, but it felt like we were a real family for those days. We were happy, and I saw a future for us full of joy and love.

And then everything came crashing down on us the minute we got back home, and nothing’s been the same since.

We couldn’t make it past the first hurdle.

That tells me we never would have made it the long haul.

We both gave up.

That tells me it wasn’t that important to either of us.

Except...it was. It was everything for the short time I was able to hold onto it, and now I feel very much like I’m left with nothing.

“I know, right!?!” Mandy is still squealing, and the bartender places my margarita in front of me.

It’s gone in two long chugs.

I’m going to need a few more to get through this night of celebrating when all I really want to do is go home, crawl under *his* covers so I can smell him, and cry.

“Damn, girl!” Mandy sings.

“We’re celebrating!” I say, and I tap my glass to indicate I need another.

“So I know this is sort of fast, but we decided to do it before the season starts.”

My jaw drops. “Before the season starts? But...why so fast?”

“I, uh...the district called me in to talk about the sex club thing, and rather than deal with any potential consequences, I decided to put in my resignation. I’m staying until they find a replacement because as it turns out, I’m pregnant.”

My eyes move to her margarita glass in horror as a million thoughts plow into me at the same time. She’s pregnant? And drinking a margarita?

She quit her job?

She’s having a baby?

With a football player?

It was supposed to be me.

The thought enters my brain before I can stop it, and I immediately feel guilty.

“Oh my God! Congratulations!” I squeal, forcing myself to play up my excitement for my best friend. It feels like she’s getting everything I ever wanted while I’m losing it all after it was just within my grasp.

“By the way, there’s no tequila in here,” she says with a giggle as she holds up her glass. “And I wanted to ask if you would be my maid of honor. Or matron of honor, I guess.”

Matron of honor. Right. Because I'm married.

For now.

"I'd love to," I say, tears filling my eyes.

I wish they were tears of happiness and joy for my friend. I wish I could push away the cloud of sadness that's hovering right above me.

But I can't seem to step out of it no matter how hard I try. I can't pretend like I'm not jealous that yet another person in my life is getting everything I ever wanted. To her it's an accident—a happy one, to be sure, but still not intentional, and meanwhile I'm over here wanting it all and not finding the right person to get it all with.

So close. So damn close...and, as always, just outside of my reach.

I order another margarita in celebration of my new designated driver's happy news.

I chug it down.

I get wasted.

She takes me home, and I just barely make it to my toilet in time to expel the contents of my margaritas.

And then I lie down on the cool tile and pass out.

When I wake, I'm not in my bathroom anymore.

I'm not in my bedroom, either.

I am, however, still in the clothes I wore to the bar, and sleeping in jeans is less than comfortable.

Warm arms are linked around me, and I'm epically confused as a monumental pain pierces through my temples.

Well that was stupid.

I turn in his arms and find it's Travis holding me.

I think I'm sober now—I threw it all up last night, so now I'm just left with the hangover, and I'm not sure how I got here in Travis's bed.

I surmise that Mandy passed me off to him without knowing we're not together anymore, and I assume he didn't tell her. At least I hope he didn't tell her, not after all the happy news she had to share. I don't want to dampen her excitement in any way.

It feels natural and right and perfect here in his arms, and I live in it for a few extra beats because I don't know if this will ever happen again.

And then I force myself out of his arms, out of his bed, and out of his room just like I'm forcing myself right out of his life.

CHAPTER 4: TRAVIS

“Sneaking out like it never happened?” I ask.

She freezes with her hand on my door handle, and I chuckle.

“It’s fine. You can go.”

She slowly turns around to face me. She clears her throat, and she looks like she’s in a world of hurt right now. “What exactly happened last night?”

I sit up, giving her a view of the abs I know she can’t resist—even more so now that I’m back in season and getting closer to season shape. I blow out a breath. “When I got home, I saw Mandy’s car parked in the driveway and I heard retching coming from your casita. I relieved her of her duties. Why didn’t you tell her you filed for divorce?”

She looks guilty, but then she shocks me with her next words. “She’s pregnant. Jaxon proposed and she quit her job. It didn’t feel like the right time to dump our news on her.”

Our news.

Like she’s giving me any sort of choice here.

My eyes widen and I choke a little. Holy shit. This is news to me.

Jaxon is getting married? I thought he was even further away from that than I was. It’s just...unexpected, I guess.

As is everything in my life lately.

“Can you expand on *relieved her of her duties*?” she asks before I get a chance to process what she just told me.

“Wait. Mandy’s pregnant?”

She nods. “Yes. Catch up. She’s preggers, Jaxon proposed, they’re getting married before the season starts, and she’s apparently going to be a stay at home mom to their child because she put in her resignation. Now what the fuck happened last night?”

I outright laugh, and she glares at me.

I clear my throat as I try to calm the laughter. “Sorry. You’re just funny when you’re hungover.”

Her glare deepens, and I think she might really be back to hating me in this moment.

“There’s nothing *funny* about this. Now talk.” She’s being demanding, and it’s fucking hot. I realize how damn much I’ve missed her and her bratty mouth in the last few weeks between camp and avoiding each other.

“I told Mandy she could head out and I’d take care of you. You were passed out on your bathroom floor at that point, so I carried you up here just to make sure you didn’t get sick again. That’s all. Nothing happened, and you didn’t even wake up when I brought you up here.”

“Oh,” she says, the glare not as deep as it was before. “Well, thanks, I guess.”

I duck my head a little. “You’re welcome, I guess.”

She purses her lips at me before she twists the handle and walks out of my room.

Mandy and Jaxon. Huh.

The season starts one month from yesterday. That gives them less than a full month to plan and execute a wedding. I wonder how pregnant she is.

I wonder how Victoria feels about all this given how badly she wants children of her own.

Come to think of it, I suppose I already have my answer if her response was to get drunk enough to puke and pass out.

But it’s not like she’ll come talk to me about it.

My phone starts to ring on my nightstand, and I reach over to see it’s my dad calling. “Hello?” I answer.

“Travis, it’s your father.”

“I know, man, but thanks for identifying yourself.”

“Habit,” he says. “I had an idea for you regarding your situation.”

“I’m listening.” I’m not sure which situation he’s talking about, but I assume it’s the part about Jerry Callahan trying to take my daughter from me.

“What if you lean into your status?” he proposes. “Go out on the town as a family, and use the paparazzi to your advantage. Let them take pictures of the three of you. Let them showcase the stable family you’ve built. Get outside and have a family day. Go to the zoo, the aquarium, the mall, the children’s museum. Do it more than once.”

“I think it’s a great idea. Just one problem,” I admit.

“What?”

“Victoria’s filing for divorce.”

“What?” he gasps. That’s right. I made old man Woods *gasp* with my news.

“You heard me. She doesn’t want to stay married to me. I guess the sex club news was the final straw, but she hates that people follow *her* around to get intel on *me*. Among other things.” Like the fact that I’m a terrible communicator. I can’t keep blaming my lack of experience when it comes to relationships for that. At some point, it’s up to me to step up.

But my father might be onto something here. Just yesterday I was trying to figure out what the good side of having access to the paparazzi is. Maybe this is it—to showcase our family. But what if there’s more? What if I can do something that would be meaningful for her on the larger stage I have access to?

My mind starts whirling with possibilities.

Her last relationship ended because Owen was a toxic piece of shit who stopped caring about the beautiful woman he was lucky enough to land for a few years.

I won’t be a toxic piece of shit like him.

But the only way I can win her back is to prove this *is* the life for her...to need to prove I’m the right man for her. To

prove I can communicate—to prove I’m more than some sex-crazed drug addict with a criminal record.

And I think I know just the way to do it.

It all starts with a day of family fun...if I can get her to agree to it.

She’s in her casita getting ready for work when I head down to the kitchen. Her door is open, an unusual occurrence lately unless Harper is home. I need to get to the Complex for today’s meetings, but I stop by her door and lean my head in, knocking on the frame at the same time.

She glances up at me. Her hair is wet as she pours a bowl of Cheerios, as if she just got out of the shower and decided she needed to eat. “What’s up?”

“You feeling any better?”

She shrugs. “I took some ibuprofen that hasn’t kicked in quite yet, but I’ll live.”

“Can I talk to you about something?”

“You took care of me last night, so I suppose the least I could do is listen.” Her words are short and clipped.

“I appreciate that,” I say dryly, knowing if she thinks just listening to me is a favor then the real question I want to ask is quite the long shot. “I, uh, haven’t mentioned this to you, but given all the headlines lately, the judge presiding over my custody hearing decided to move up the date to August twentieth. I need to talk to Coach about potentially missing some of camp to attend the hearing.”

“I knew the date was moved up.” Her voice is soft and gentle. “Ellie told me. I was wondering when you were going to.”

“It felt like big news, and you’ve been pretty good at avoiding me lately.”

She presses her lips together.

“Anyway, my dad just suggested we use the paparazzi to our advantage and have a family day out in public. Would you,

uh, mind... *faking* it with us for the day?"

Her brows knit together.

"I know it's a huge ask, and I understand if it's a no. I can just take her out the two of us, too. It doesn't have to be the three of us. I just thought since we got married to show stability, we should show stability."

She stares at me while I ramble, and when I finally stop, she nods. "Sure, Travis. I'll do anything for Harper."

"Does that include waiting to file the papers until after the hearing?" I press. I have to ask, or it'll eat away at me not knowing the answer.

She sighs. "Yeah. I guess."

"I appreciate it."

"Sure. I guess I'll see you around." It's her way of dismissing me, and I need to go anyway, so I take the hint.

"Let's, uh, plan for Sunday for our family day of awesome. Is that okay? It's the only day off this week." I grip the doorframe as I wait for her answer, and she finally nods.

"That'll work. Let me know if you need help planning anything," she says.

"I've got it," I say, and then I head to the Complex with a quick call to Ellie on the way for some additional assistance.

CHAPTER 5: VICTORIA

I'm nervous as I drive over to my parents' house.

I shouldn't be nervous. They're my parents. We're close and they'll support me no matter what.

But I hate disappointing them, and they seemed to fall for Travis and his daughter much like I did. Now I'm on my way with the truth.

I hate disappointing *anybody*, but most of all my mom and dad. Add Harper to that list, too. I feel awful that she's upset about our impending divorce, and maybe that's a big part of why I'm pushing it along. It's new. We've barely celebrated our two-month anniversary at this point, and the longer we stay married, the harder it'll be on Harper.

My sister and her family have moved back into their own house, so they won't be here. She still isn't talking to me, but I'm sure I'll get the latest update about her life, her home renovations, and the level of her current anger at me from my mother.

I take a deep breath after I pull into the driveway and cut the engine. Part of me wonders if this would've been easier with Travis by my side, and a little voice in the back of my head tells me of course it would. Everything is easier with him by my side.

But that's the whole problem. We haven't been by each other's side in the literal or metaphorical sense in far too long to support the foundation of us long-term.

I ring the bell, and my mom opens the door. Her brows crinkle together, and I can't help it.

I burst into tears.

"Oh, honey," she says, reaching out to give me the sort of comforting hug only a mom can give. I let her hold onto me a few extra beats as I try to draw in some strength, but it's harder than I thought it would be.

“What’s going on?” she asks as she pulls back and I draw in a deep enough breath that I’m able to get the tears to subside. I brush them away.

We walk into the kitchen, and my dad is in there stealing cucumbers off the plate my mom has them sitting on. She swats playfully at his hand, and he grins at her innocently, and that’s what I want out of a marriage. I want it to be playful and fun. I want to be with someone who is still my best friend even when the kids are grown and moved out and adults all on their own.

I want my kids to come by for dinner and I want to maintain a close relationship with them.

I want the sort of marriage my parents have modeled for me. They’re far from perfect, but they’ve made it last, and they still have fun together even after nearly thirty years of marriage.

“Why do you look sad?” my dad asks me, giving me a hug, too.

“Travis and I are getting a divorce,” I blurt.

My mom gasps and my dad’s eyes widen, but neither of them says a word for a beat.

And then my mom asks, “Why?”

“You may have seen the recent headlines regarding my husband,” I say dryly as my face heats with embarrassment over the sex club headlines. “It’s just too many hits, and we rushed into things.”

“Don’t you think he needs your support now more than ever?” my dad asks, and I’m frankly shocked that he’d ask that. “I mean, he did get the ball back…” He trails off as if to say that what he did was heroic and deserves celebration when I’ve started to view that moment as the vehicle that drove this entire thing right into the ground.

“Are you sure it’s what’s best?” my mom asks.

“Yes. I’m doing the right thing, and sometimes the right thing is the harder thing.” I nod my head resolutely.

“Do you want to talk about why?” she presses.

I blow out a breath. “We started growing apart, and then he left for training camp, and I found out about all his offenses from the media instead of from him. He basically cut off communication with me, but it’s not just that. I’ve got paparazzi following me around, and it’s terrifying. It’s not the sort of life I ever wanted. I just want my quiet existence, maybe a couple of kids...”

“What does this mean for his little girl?” my dad asks quietly.

I glance down at the counter as a heavy sadness blankets me. “Travis technically hired me to be her nanny, and I’m still in that role until Travis can find a replacement. Harper and I are close, and I will always be there for her in whatever way she needs me to be. If she needs to let me go because it’s what’s best, then that’s what we’ll do.”

The thought alone breaks my heart, but I will forever do whatever is right by her. And maybe getting out of a marriage that’s turned toxic is showing her the right example, too. It’s showing her there’s a way out when things are at their worst.

“There’s something else, too,” I say. I run a finger along the countertop and keep my eyes there as I talk. “There’s a family trying to prove Travis is unfit to raise his daughter. He has a hearing later this month, so I’m not officially filing the paperwork until after we’re sure Harper is staying with him. I mean, that’s sort of why we rushed into this in the first place.”

My dad’s brows pinch together. “What can we do to help?”

I shrug. “I’m not sure. He’s a good father, and this man is just after Trav’s money I think.”

My mom grabs my hand sympathetically. “That’s awful.”

“You said that’s why you rushed things...” my dad says.

“We never intended to get married in the Bahamas, but we knew Owen was going to have Travis arrested as soon as we got back. We both just wanted to ensure Harper was taken care of.” I say the words matter-of-factly, pushing down the rush of emotions I feel over it.

I'm doing the right thing...right?

If I am, why is it so hard? Shouldn't it be easier?

"Do you think..." my mom trails off.

"What?" I ask.

She clears her throat and glances at my dad. "Do you think you would have gone down that path eventually anyway?"

"Marriage?" I pick up a cucumber, too, and I shrug when she nods. "It felt like we were heading that direction, yes. But we would've waited, and the season would have started, and then I'd be here telling you I'm breaking up with him instead of divorcing him. It was all inevitable, I guess."

"I guess," my dad repeats. "If you're guessing...are you really sure about it?"

"Yeah, honey," my mom says. "Have you thought about giving it a little more time? There are growing pains in any relationship, and maybe this isn't how it has to happen."

"I can't change the way things happened, so I just have to deal with where we are now. And yes, I'm sure."

I nod resolutely again, though to be honest...I'm starting to wonder whether I'm doing the right thing. And it only gets worse with my dad's next words.

"We didn't teach you to give up without a fight." He says it quietly, like that'll lessen the blow. It doesn't.

"I'm all out of fight," I whisper.

I can't stay with someone that isn't willing to give me the type of future I've always wanted. Or maybe he *is* willing, but I wouldn't know since he can't be bothered to tell me.

"If you're sure," my mom says, but she looks doubtful.

I shift to safer subjects—my sister, for one, who I discover is still angry with me.

It seems like just about everyone is lately, but I have to do what's right for me even if other people don't agree with it.

CHAPTER 6: VICTORIA

I suck in a deep breath and puff out my cheeks for a beat as I stare at myself in the mirror and then I blow it out until my cheeks hollow.

My hair is up in a neat ponytail, and I have my sunglasses ready. I'm wearing a sleeveless black romper and sandals, and it's cute and summery and also representative of the dark hole inside me as I push for this divorce.

But today is family day.

I'm worried what it's going to do to Harper. It's giving her false hope that we can mend this when I've already made up my mind that as much as I feel for him, love just isn't enough. It's heartbreaking for someone who always believed so strongly in love stories, but I have to follow what logic tells me no matter how painful it is.

This just isn't the life for me. Losing my job was just the tip of the iceberg, and I feel like the longer I stay here, the more I'll lose of myself.

When I walk into Travis's kitchen, Harper's already there. She races over and squeezes me into a tight hug that nearly cracks a rib, but I hold on tightly to her anyway.

"What's the plan?" I ask Travis.

"It's family day," he reiterates. "The three of us are showing a united front as we go out together."

"But we're not a united front," Harper points out. "Not if you two are getting divorced."

"Nobody has to know that yet, and that doesn't mean we can't enjoy a nice day out together. And that's the extent of it—just a nice day out." It's clear he's saying it for Harper's benefit, and I appreciate that. "We'll start at the children's museum, and then we'll go to Target and get whatever's left on Harper's list of school supplies, and then we'll hit a restaurant."

“Uh, sorry to be the bearer of bad news,” I say, “but Target will definitely be sold out of school supplies this late in the game. School started an entire week ago.”

Travis’s face falls and I swear you’d think I just ran over his dog with my pronouncement.

“But we can totally hit up the dollar section,” I suggest, and he nods brightly again. It’s not like I need an excuse to visit my favorite store.

We head toward the children’s museum with Imagine Dragons at full blast, and I’m not sure if he’s setting the joyous mood or if he’s putting a stop to all possible awkward conversation. Either way, we all sing and nobody talks.

Travis must have tipped off the paparazzi because the place is swarming with people waiting to take our picture as he pulls into a parking spot.

To that end, Travis grabs my hand as we walk toward the entrance, and he takes Harper’s hand with his other one. Harper wants to be in the middle, so she shimmies her way in, forcing me to let go of Travis’s hand.

But for a few beautiful seconds, I felt connected to him again. I felt like I didn’t want to let go.

Am I doing the right thing?

Yes. I know I am. I think back to how hard those two weeks of training camp were, and I know I can’t stay married to him if I want the future I’ve always dreamed of.

But just for today, I sort of want to pretend.

And as we walk toward the entrance with photographers snapping our pictures along the way, though, I’m reminded why I may not *want* to let go...but I still *need* to let go.

We walk around the museum like this—with each of us holding one of Harper’s hands. She stops to interact with the exhibits and we stand close by watching or helping. We’re the picture-perfect family—the DILF, the mother-figure in her cute romper, the daughter laughing and having a great time.

Except we’re not the picture-perfect family.

He's still getting to know his daughter in a lot of important ways, and he missed the entire first decade of her life. I've only been a part of his life a short while.

We're on the edge of divorce.

It's a lot to contemplate.

But we all put on the act.

We buy souvenirs and laugh at each other as we pick out ridiculous shirts. We head to Target and we laugh some more. We go out to dinner and end up at the mall food court since we can't decide where to go. We stuff ourselves on various cuisines from pizza to Chinese to tacos, and then we all get slushies for dessert.

And through it all, the trusty photographers capture the moments. It's exactly what we want, and it was smart of Travis to use the paparazzi to our advantage.

It marks the first time I've seen *any* sort of advantage to having them around.

But part of why the Callahans were able to escalate this fight was because of this same thing—the photos splashed all over the tabloids. The gossip and the rumors. The arrest.

It's such a catch twenty-two.

By the end of the day, I'm exhausted from faking it all day. I'm tired from pretending that everything is perfect when inside I'm dying a slow death from the wholly shattered heart in my chest.

And that's why, once we get Harper down to bed and the two of us meet back in his family room, I force the words from my lips.

I need this to be over.

I need some sort of insurance that once the judge decides Travis should keep Harper, I'll still have my out.

"Today was amazing," Travis says with a smile.

I nod a little curtly. "It was lovely," I agree. "But it was also very difficult to put on the act all day. I really just need a clean

break, Travis. I promise I won't file until after everything is settled with Harper, but if you could sign those papers, I'd really appreciate it."

And with those words, I turn to retreat back to my casita.

When I wake in the morning after a fitful sleep that only blessedly fell upon me after I cried my way there, I spot the manila folder under my door.

I pull the paperwork out.

He signed it. It's dated the day after the hearing—August twenty-first.

And as I hold the papers in my hands, tears stream down my face as the reality that this really will come to an end in a few short weeks plows into me.

CHAPTER 7: TRAVIS

When you start your day by sliding the signed divorce papers under your wife's door, you can probably expect it's not going to be the best day ever.

And as I arrive at the Complex for camp today a few minutes early, I'm dreading the talk I need to have.

I texted Coach last night to ask if I could have a few minutes of his time, and I have no idea how this is going to go. I wish I was in a better headspace, but signing those papers made it real.

My entire chest aches. I keep rubbing at it, expecting the shooting pain there to go away, but it won't. I guess that's what happens when your heart is ripped out and torn to shreds.

"What can I do for you, Woods?" Coach asks at the start of our private meeting.

I fidget for a beat, and then I draw in a bolstering breath. "I know I'm in a lot of trouble, sir, but I have to put my family first, and if that fucks up my chances to play for you, I understand."

His brows crease together. "What are you talking about?"

"I'll need to miss camp on August twentieth. It's a Monday, and I know we have practice, but I will not be there and I wanted to give you plenty of notice." My voice is strong despite the anxiety darting through my spine and making me break out into a nervous sweat.

"Why won't you be there?" His eyes don't break as he stares at me. His expression gives away nothing. Apart from the creased brows, he's stone cold, and I have no idea what he's thinking.

I press my lips together. *Honesty, Trav. Be honest.* "As you know, I just met my daughter a few months ago. It's been quite a transition for the two of us, and there's a man in California, the father of one of Harper's classmates there, who is trying to prove I'm unfit to raise her. All the recent headlines haven't

done much to solidify me as the patriarchal type, so the judge has moved up the hearing. It's not looking good for us, but I need to be there. I have to go fight for my daughter. She belongs with me. Football has always been my first and only priority, but then I met her, and...well, I guess things have shifted a little."

He's silent as he stares at me, so I ramble on a little longer.

"And I get it, sir. I understand that this is a business and you will do what you feel is the best thing for the team. I will be—"

He clears his throat in some effort to stop me from blabbering on. He leans back in his chair and folds his arms over his chest, and he lets out a long, heavy breath. "I gotta be honest with you, Woods. This season has not gotten off to a shining start. But hearing you tell me this...I think it might be exactly what I needed from you. You've got your convictions, and you're showing fight. You're putting your little girl first, *family* first, and I admire the hell out of that. What can I do to help you keep her?"

Relief filters through my chest at his words. "I don't know," I admit. "I have no idea what to expect."

"If you're in need of character witnesses, I'm happy to provide that for you. Any reference to prove what a dedicated, loyal, and hardworking man you are."

Heat climbs up my back at his words, but I will not get emotional here. I fight it off, keeping my expression neutral as I say, "I appreciate that more than you know."

"You'll be back on Tuesday the twenty-first?" he asks.

I nod. "Yes."

"Thank you for keeping me in the loop on this," he says. "I've always tried to run this team with a family first mentality when it comes to the big things. This is a big thing. This isn't just missing your kid's birthday party. This is fighting to keep her in your life, and the entire organization is right here ready to fight alongside you."

“Thank you, Coach.” I stand and reach over his desk to shake his hand, grateful for an incredible coach like him as he stands in my corner with me.

“We’re keeping you around, you know. You’ve proven yourself so far, and with Mike’s plans to use three or four WRs for many of our plays, we’ll need you this season.”

“I hope to continue proving I’m an asset to this team.”

He looks impressed with my words, and I guess honesty was the right move.

I head down to the locker room a little early and find one of the trainers in there, so I do some cupping before I head to the sauna to get my day off to a nice, relaxing start.

The other guys start to show up, and when Jaxon shows up, I wait for him to walk over to me. He starts the day with a vague greeting and one of those head nods. He looks wrecked, like he was up most of the night...and from the sound of things, that Mandy is a wild one.

I nod back before I lean in and lower my voice. “I heard about you and Mandy, man. Congrats.”

His eyes light up a bit at the mention of her name, and he grins. “Thanks, man. We’re still figuring everything out but we want to make this happen before game one.”

“I heard. I’ve been through it pretty recently, so let me know if you have any questions.” I don’t mention the whole divorce thing or the papers I signed this morning. That feels more like a conversation I’ll have with Tristan than Jaxon.

He laughs, and then he surprises me by asking, “Will you be my best man?”

We’re close, but I didn’t think we were *that* close. I didn’t even invite him to my wedding in the Bahamas. Surely he’s closer to another running back or somebody else...right?

“I’d be honored,” I say.

“It’s just...I know it’s probably out of left field, but you and Victoria were there pretty much every step of the way since the night we met, and it just feels like the right move to have

you both stand up with us, you know? We're keeping our wedding party small. Just a maid of honor and a best man. We'll have a huge blowout party back here, but we agreed to get married in Denver since that's where my family is. Just my parents and hers plus my siblings who are all in Colorado."

"When are you thinking?" I ask.

"September first."

"The Saturday before game one," I murmur, and he nods. "You got it, man. I'll be there."

A trip to Denver when I'm suspended anyway to stand in a teammate's wedding while my future ex-wife will be on my arm as the maid of honor and she'll know nobody else there except her best friend, who will be awfully busy...and me?

Yeah. I will most definitely be there.

Game on.

CHAPTER 8: TRAVIS

I know he has no real case against me.

I know this is a waste of everyone's time—including the court's.

And yet as I walk into the courtroom a week later, I'm terrified.

Harper wants to stay with me. She belongs with me—her real father. I don't know why Callahan is fighting this fight other than to try to squeeze money out of me.

It makes no sense to me.

Still, beads of sweat form on my forehead as Victoria takes Harper's hand and they wait in the lobby since my father informed me Harper should not be in the courtroom. If the judge wants to ask her questions, she'll do so privately.

I take a seat next to my father, and I wipe my forehead with a tissue on the table as a knot forms in my stomach. I spotted my mother in here along with Victoria's mom and dad, too.

People showed up to support me. To support *us*. These people know my daughter belongs with me.

I know I'm right. I know she'll go home with me.

Yet a tiny voice in the back of my mind can't help but ask *what if*.

What if she doesn't go home with me?

What if Callahan wins?

What if the judge agrees that I'm unfit to raise my daughter?

What if Harper changes her mind today and tells the judge she doesn't want to be with me?

I've never been so scared in my entire life.

Getting sent away to live by myself at age twelve has nothing on the feelings coursing through me right now.

I'm projecting a confidence I'm not feeling.

I love that little girl with a sort of love I never knew existed, and I will always want what's best for her. The Callahan family is not it.

I can't imagine them winning and her going to live with them and being happy, and that's what tears at my soul.

They can't win.

The judge walks into the courtroom, her expression stern and giving nothing away. We all rise for her honor, and she tells us to sit.

"This hearing is to determine custody of Harper Randall," the judge says. She reads through the formalities, and I try to focus on what she's saying, and I can't help but think of my daughter's face as I walked into the courtroom and she stood outside it.

She looked as scared as I feel.

Victoria was clutching her hand tightly, and she looked terrified, too.

This is horrible, and it's all at the hand of someone who has literally zero business being here.

Callahan's lawyer is his brother-in-law, and he's a slimy character who probably told him he'd be able to squeeze some cash out of the famous football player thanks to his connection to the little girl.

"Let's hear from the petitioner first," the judge says, and Jerry takes the stand as his lawyer stands in front of the judge.

"Your Honor, my client believes Mr. Woods is unfit to raise Miss Randall due to his criminal history."

My chest aches. I should've known they'd hammer my recent mistakes first. I should've known doing something as fucking dumb as violating that douchebag's property would be brought up in the most important trial I'd ever face.

I swallow thickly as I keep my eyes down on the table in front of me.

Jerry starts blathering some bullshit about how he's known her since she was born, how he's loved her and always been there for her.

I very nearly stand and blurt how this asshole hasn't been there a goddamn single day for my child since she moved to Vegas with me, but my father must sense my rising anger as he places a hand on my arm to calm me.

The judge seems to be listening carefully, and when Callahan's lawyer finishes his argument, the judge nods and dismisses him from the stand.

"Next we'd like to hear from Mr. Woods. Do you have anything to add?" she asks.

I nod, and I stand to be sworn in. My dad moves to stand, too, but I shake my head.

I don't want this fight full of lawyers. I want to speak from my heart.

My dad's brows dip, and he doesn't sit, but he also doesn't move toward me.

I glance out at the small group gathered, and Victoria is sitting in here now. My mother is no longer in the room, so I assume she went out to sit with Harper and switched places with my wife.

"Your Honor, I'd like to begin by saying I know I've made mistakes, but I've worked hard to turn my life around to be a good person, a good dad...a good human. Before Harper came into my life, I was a pro football player who didn't need anyone or anything else. And then along came this little girl who was terrified after a horrific tragedy, and she immediately took center stage in my life. Over the last five months, we've had our ups and downs, but I will never stop making sacrifices to do what's best for her, and I know that staying with me is what's best. I know this with every fiber of my being. I've never known a love like what I feel for her, and it's my duty to protect her at all costs. Sending her to live with someone who was in the right place at the right time in the most tragic of situations wouldn't be the best thing for her. Keeping her with

her one surviving biological parent is. It's what her mother wanted, and it's what's allowed me to turn my life around. It's what's allowed me to open myself up to love and at the same time give Harper the most wonderful female adult role model I've ever known."

My eyes find Victoria, and she brushes away a tear as I continue.

"It's what allowed me to find the type of stability I've never really known in my own life. It's why I'm missing practice today—because she comes first over everything. And it takes a father's love to treat his daughter that way...not some friend's dad. Not some virtual stranger. Not some old neighbor. It takes *me*. If you're so inclined, Harper has told me she'd be willing to tell you that herself, though I wouldn't want to subject her to that if it's not absolutely necessary. Thank you for your time."

As I speak, I notice something change in the judge's expression. She's considering my words carefully, and the stone-cold sternness seems to shift into something just a little softer.

I glance over at Callahan and his lawyer, and they both look furious.

"He has a criminal record!" Callahan's lawyer argues. "He has no business being responsible for a child!"

The judge's eyes flick to Callahan's lawyer with a bit of distaste and then back to me before looking out over the courtroom. "Do we have any other witnesses?"

To my complete and utter shock, Victoria stands. "Your Honor, I'd like to be a character witness for Mr. Woods."

The judge nods, and I step down as she's sworn in.

"Go ahead," the judge says.

Her voice trembles as she begins her testimony. "I'm Victoria Hartley...uh, Victoria *Woods*." Her eyes dart over to mine, and a frisson of fear darts up my spine. "I first met Harper in March when I became her reading teacher. We immediately diagnosed a reading disorder, yet that didn't stop

Harper from thriving at Stratford Elementary when she moved schools after moving in with Travis...um, I mean with Mr. Woods.”

She pauses as her eyes meet mine again, and they stay on mine as she speaks from the heart.

“Her father supported her by helping her read, and buying her ability-appropriate books, and working with her to ensure she had a tutoring program set up to help her reach the potential we all knew she had. He’s a wonderful father, and if you know anything about how he was six months ago versus five months ago, he’s a new person. The one criminal act he was arrested for was my fault. My ex-boyfriend had kept an important memento of mine, and Travis got it back for me. My ex decided to press ridiculous charges, and Travis never should’ve gotten in trouble for that. He’s a hero. He’s dedicated to his little girl. He’d do anything for her. He’s loving and caring, and he’s an adult that Harper immediately trusted the moment she met him. They have a sort of unbreakable, impenetrable bond that only daddies and daughters can have. It’s been my honor to watch the two of them grow together into a family, and I can’t say enough about how good he is with her.”

She finally looks away from me and turns toward the judge, and my chest feels like it’s cracking in two. I can’t believe she’s saying the things she is about me.

Tears prick behind my eyes. I can feel the love in here. I can feel how she feels about me. I can feel her passion.

And I can’t believe it’s over. I can’t quite make the two thoughts meet in the middle. It just doesn’t make any sense.

“Ripping Harper out of the arms of the father who loves her and provides for her and cares for her the way Travis does would be a horrific mistake, your Honor.”

The judge nods. “Thank you, Ms. Hartley.” Victoria steps down, and the judge flips through some paperwork. “I have additional character witnesses here for both parties which I’ve already reviewed, but I have to be honest with you. After reviewing this case and listening to both sides here today, I can

see how hard Mr. Woods has worked to turn his life around after Harper came into it. He seems to be both a positive role model and a wonderful influence on the child's life. He's worked hard to help her adjust after the most tragic thing a child could face. Barring the recent media attention, I can't in good faith take this little girl from her father. Mr. Callahan's petition for custody is denied, and I find Mr. Woods fit to raise his child. Case dismissed."

The courtroom erupts in noise—some cheers and some outcries as my father claps me on the back. I turn toward him to hug him as reality plows into me.

I'm fit to raise my daughter.

Of fucking course I am. She's mine, and she belongs with me.

"Congratulations, son. I'm so proud of you," my father says, and the tears that pricked behind my eyes before start to fall.

We rise as the judge exits, and then I ignore Callahan and run up the aisle and out the courtroom to give my daughter the news.

She knows as soon as she sees the wide smile on my face.

I don't have to say a damn word.

She lets go of my mother's hand then stands and races over to me. She leaps into my arms as tears stream down her face, and I squeeze her tightly to me as we both cry.

I knew I had found my place in this world the moment I became a real father to this beautiful and perfect little girl who has brought me so much joy. Together we'll face anything that comes our way.

I want to shout from the rooftops and celebrate the joy, but it's all so short-lived.

Victoria steps up behind her, and she reaches over to hug me, too. It's a Harper sandwich as Victoria's arms come around my shoulders. "Congratulations," she says. "I'm so happy for the two of you."

And it's then that I'm reminded now that the court case is over, Victoria is going to file the papers.

It's over.

Both the court case and my marriage.

I'm both overjoyed and devastated at the same time.

I guess now we go home and attempt to move forward.

CHAPTER 9: VICTORIA

The car ride back home is full of joy after that victory, but I still sense that Travis is a little subdued.

I promised him I'd wait to file the papers until after the hearing, and it's time. I know that's what's eating at him. He doesn't want this...at least I don't *think* he does, which leads us straight into more of the same reason I'm doing this in the first place.

As soon as we get home, I should send them to Travis's lawyer. But maybe I'll wait until tomorrow.

I'm second-guessing whether it's the right thing to do. I really believed all the words I spoke at the hearing about what a wonderful man he is. My parents put doubt in my head that I'm doing the right thing, too.

But just because he's wonderful doesn't mean we should stay married.

The two weeks before the start of the season are light practices, and Mandy and Jaxon decide to throw an impromptu bachelor and bachelorette party with only twenty-four hours' notice.

I find this out Thursday night when I'm over at Mandy's apartment helping her pack up since she's moving in with Jaxon after they get married a week from Saturday.

"Jax rented out an entire nightclub at one of the fancy hotels on the strip, so get ready to party party," she says.

"If you're planning the bachelorette party, what am I supposed to do as matron of honor?" I ask.

I still haven't told her about the divorce.

I still haven't filed the papers.

"Nothing. We've got it covered. We're doing this party, we're getting married in Denver next Saturday, and then we're throwing a big party after the baby gets here," she says as she pulls plates down out of a cabinet.

“What about a wedding shower?” I suggest.

She twists her lips and shrugs a little. “Nah. We don’t need pots and pans and all that jazz. In fact, I’m donating most of the shit in here because Jax has better stuff.”

I laugh. “What about a baby shower, then? When are you due again?”

“Early January. A baby shower after the wedding would be lovely,” she says.

Did I know this? Did I ask this that night I got wasted? I guess it makes sense. If she’s due in early January, she must be around five months along. She’ll start showing any second, but it’s hard to tell around the giant Aces sweatshirt she’s wearing.

“You got it. Start registering and figuring out what you want and I’ll start planning. And you better expect all the ridiculous games,” I warn.

“I’d expect nothing less from you.”

We both giggle.

“So how’s it going with DILF Woods?” she asks.

“I don’t think you can call him that anymore now that you’re knocked up by the running back,” I say.

“Ooh, that reminds me. Have you read *Knocked Up by the Running Back* yet?”

I giggle. We haven’t talked spicy books in a while. “Does that really exist?”

“Just the version I’m working on.” She wiggles her brows at me.

I gasp. “Are you serious?”

She winks at me. “What else am I going to do between now and when the baby gets here? I have plenty of real-life experience to write about.”

I giggle. “Don’t forget about me when you’re a famous author.”

“How could I? Book two will obviously be your story with Travis. Picture it.” She closes her eyes and makes a rainbow in the air with her hands. “*Knocked Up by the Wide Receiver*. After he’s the best man at our wedding, naturally.”

I can’t help when my face falls.

For one thing...he’s the best man? That’s news to me.

And for another...that’s the whole problem here, isn’t it?

Our spicy books are supposed to have happy endings. But as Travis and I plow toward the end, it’s not looking very happy at all.

Twenty-four hours later, I find myself at the bar ordering a drink at my best friend’s bachelorette party...a party which, by the way, the bride herself cannot drink at.

I may have pre-partied a little knowing Travis is going to be here. I may have regrets tomorrow, but right now, I’m feeling nice and fine until said wide receiver sidles up next to me at the bar.

“Put hers on my tab,” he says, and it’s reminiscent of the first night we met at the Gridiron.

I glance over at him with a scowl.

“She’s my wife,” he tells the bartender, as if he cares.

It’s not a lie. I *am* his wife.

For now.

I blow out a breath knowing this is a totally useless argument, and I tap my glass to indicate I’d like another... especially since my *husband* is picking up the tab.

“So what are your plans for the night?” he asks, tapping his tequila against my vodka soda.

I shrug. “I’ll Lyft it home I guess.”

“I got a suite upstairs. You’re welcome to stay with me.”

I purse my lips. “No thanks.”

He leans in close. Too close. So close I can smell him. So close my tummy does one of those traitorous flips.

“I thought you didn’t want Mandy finding out about the divorce yet,” he says, his breath tickling my ear.

“I don’t,” I grit out, ignoring the shiver down my spine and the goosebumps pebbling my skin. “But I know what you’re doing, and it isn’t going to work.”

“What am I doing? I’m offering to fake it with you just for tonight so your best friend can go on believing we’re happily married so it doesn’t ruin her wedding. Unless you want that to be your thing.”

“My thing?” I ask, my brows creasing.

“You know. Ruining the wedding weekend of people important to you with your own relationship news.” He shrugs at the end.

“Fuck you,” I hiss at him.

My sister still won’t talk to me. I’m sure she’ll be overjoyed Travis and I are over. Hell, she’ll probably try to push me back toward my asshole ex.

“It’s not like that.” I’m getting defensive, and I shouldn’t let him push my buttons.

And yet...he does it so damn well. He’s the only person who knows how to get me all riled up only to salve the frustration with his tongue.

Wait a second.

I did *not* just think that.

Absolutely not.

“Prove it, then. Fake it with me just for tonight.”

My tummy did *not* just flip again.

Shit. I am so fucked.

CHAPTER 10: TRAVIS

I shoot her a sly grin.

I've got her right where I want her, and she knows it as well as I do.

I love it when she fights back. I love it when she shows fire and passion. I love everything about her, whether she's yelling at me or talking to me and everything in between...except maybe when she's avoiding and ignoring me.

The chemistry is still there despite the divide that's come between us. That hasn't changed, and if I can just get her to see it, too, maybe I can change her mind.

I was sure the family day would do it, but then she still wanted me to sign the divorce papers.

I'm not giving up. I can't. Aside from Harper, I've never had something this important before, and I refuse to let it slip through my fingers.

She downs the rest of her vodka soda and looks up at me. "Fine. But just for tonight."

We'll see.

I don't voice those words, but they're big and bold in the back of my mind.

The party is underway, and we both have friends here—former colleagues of hers from the school where she and Mandy both taught along with three-quarters of the Vegas Aces squad and half the celebrities who reside in Vegas.

Jaxon is a popular dude, and everyone showed up tonight to celebrate him and his bride.

It makes me regret how we did things. It makes me wish we hadn't rushed into it, that we'd taken our time to plan out whatever dream we wanted.

I guess Mandy and Jaxon are rushing things for their own reasons, too.

“Want to dance?” I ask once we both have fresh drinks in hand.

She glares at me, so I take that as a *Fuck yes I do because I still want you but I have to pretend like I don't even though I'm pretending like I do just for tonight*. Or, you know...as a yes.

I lead her toward the dance floor with my hand at the small of her back. She tenses when she feels my touch there, and she doesn't relax as we start dancing to the beat.

It's too fast to really pull her close, but I do it anyway, grinding against her—using those sex receptors in her brain to my advantage as we both move out of tipsy to the next stage.

It's all I can do not to lean down and take her mouth with mine right there in the middle of the dance floor—to really put on the act.

But I hold back. For now.

As the night progresses and we dance and drink and laugh with friends, I start to see little glimpses of what we could have. She loosens up with more vodka, and I see peeks of our life together, the one where we were happy and in love. I'm reminded of those days we were in the Bahamas right after we got married when everything felt perfect and we were building our family and our life together.

It's all still there just within our grasp...but it's just a little too far, and if I keep reaching, I'm not quite sure what's going to happen.

I'll fall, I guess. I won't be able to climb out of it, and I have a daughter relying on me to climb out of it and to be present for her.

People start to leave, but I don't want to. If I leave, I have to let her go. She never agreed to come up with me, but I have to figure out a way.

I grab my chance when Jaxon sidles up to us while we're dancing. “Are the newlyweds heading up soon?”

“How long are you considered a newlywed?” I ask.

“For the first year,” Victoria says with a shrug.

We haven't even made it out of the newlywed stage and she's already trying to divorce me. Should that be telling me something?

Maybe. Probably. But it's not. Instead, it's telling me I need to fight harder.

My plan has been coming together. Every second I'm not at the Complex or chilling with my daughter, I'm working on it.

I haven't told a soul about what I'm doing except my lawyer and my father, but soon I'll need help. It'll be an all hands on deck situation, and I know I have the crew to back it up.

"Yeah, I think we'll head up," I finally say to Jaxon as Mandy moves in behind him and wraps her arms around his waist.

I feel Victoria's eyes on me, but even if I just get her up for a few minutes and she sneaks out to get a Lyft home, at least I can shoot my shot.

I grab her hand and kiss her knuckles, and she's still playing the part. Maybe she's drunk, or maybe she still wants this, too. Or maybe I'm drunk.

We bid the happy couple goodnight and head toward the exit, her hand still planted firmly in mine. There's a few players outside the club, and we spot some of her friends as we walk through the casino. She's sort of forced into walking with me all the way to the elevator, and when we step on, we're alone.

Thank fuck.

I hit the button for the top floor and don't wait to see if anybody else is going to join us.

I glance over at her, and she's staring daggers at me.

"Can't we just have one more night?" I ask.

She purses her lips and shakes her head. "It's not a good idea."

“Remember the night you sat on my face?” I remind her. “I was thinking we could do that again...”

Her eyes widen and her nostrils flare as the memories fall over the two of us.

She wants it. I want it. Let’s just fucking do it already.

“Hell, you hated me back then, and your intention was to just fuck me out of your system. So let’s have one last goodbye fuck to let me fuck you out of my system this time.”

“Because that worked out so well last time,” she retorts.

I take a step toward her. “It did work out well, Hartley,” I say. I take another step, and she backs up against the elevator wall until I’ve boxed her in. I smell her strawberries, the scent that’s become so comforting to me, the scent that means *home* to me now, and my chest aches. This can’t really be over, can it?

I run my fingertips along her jaw as I push my hips against hers. She closes her eyes and leans into my touch, and the way she does that tells me absolutely everything I need to know.

It’s not over. It’ll never be over.

Not when it’s this strong.

“God, I hate you,” she whispers.

“I hate you, too.” I lean down and catch her lips with mine, and one of her arms comes up to brace herself as she grabs onto my bicep.

She opens her mouth first, a clear invitation, and she ignites that fire that’s always burned between us. I lift her into my arms and she wraps her legs around my waist as the kiss intensifies, only to be broken up as the elevator stops and the doors slide open. I let her down, and as she finds her footing, I’m afraid the moment is lost.

I grab her hand with hope and we race down the hall to my suite. Once we’re in, we pick up the kiss without missing a beat. Her legs come around me again as I drive up against her, pinning her to the door. We can’t even make it into the damn room we’re so hot for each other.

And that's the thing with her. When there's the hot sex aspect combined with the emotional element...that's something I've never had before, and that's the thing I know I need to hold onto. Add that on top of the fact that she's been the mother figure my daughter has needed, and it's everything I know I can't let go of.

I lower my lips from hers to trail down her jaw to her neck then to the hollow of her collarbone. "God, I love you," I murmur against her skin as I trail down, and she shoves her tits toward my face without answering.

I carry her through the suite and to the bedroom. I toss her down onto the bed, and then I proceed to yank her clothes off as I toss them in every direction until I have her naked—exactly how I want her. I leave mine on for now even though my cock is straining against my jeans and demanding freedom. Jesus, the things this woman does to my body.

We didn't bother with the lights, and instead the room is lit with the glow of lights from Las Vegas Boulevard outside my window.

She whimpers and moans as I slide along her body. She opens her thighs for me so I can slide in between them, and I stop to suck her tit into my mouth. She grinds her pussy against me, and I move up her body. She moans as she feels my skin against her clit.

I move off her and climb up the bed, settling in on my back and staring up at the ceiling as the demand falls from my lips. "Sit on my face."

Her eyes light up with something. It's passion combined with lust and heat and need, and she does as instructed, clamoring to get up and toss a leg over me before she settles in where she belongs—straddling my face with her hot cunt.

I drag my lips along her swollen clit, and she moans when I lick her with long strokes before dipping my tongue inside her. She starts rocking against me until she's fucking my face with each jerk of her body. Her breathing picks up as I worship her pussy with my tongue, and I reach around to slip a finger inside her.

“Oh fuck, I’m gonna come!” she screams, and then her thighs clamp over my ears as she rides out a long and hot climax. I reach up with my free hand to stroke her nipple as she comes, and her moans and cries are a pure symphony of sounds I never want to stop hearing.

As the wave starts to subside and her movements start to slow, she pulls back off my face and moves down a little until she settles in with her head on my chest. I wrap my arms around her as she comes down from the high, and heat pricks behind my eyes as the reality hits me that that could be the last time she’ll ever sit on my face.

It can’t be...can it?

She shifts down as she starts to come down from the high, and she rubs against my cock. I’m so hard it’s fucking painful, but I revel in the feel of her—of her tits dragging along my skin and her naked body as it writhes against me. I don’t have any other choice but to memorize every single second of this night.

I allow myself to drink in her touch, the weight of her on top of me, and I give her a minute before I slide my hands down to cup her ass. It’s the hint she needs to slide down and pop the button of my jeans. She fingers the waistband of my boxer briefs before she slides her hands up to my abdomen, still covered by my shirt. She lifts it up and pushes it over my head as her greedy hands find purchase on my stomach.

Fuck, I can’t take it. I force a patience I definitely don’t feel upon myself as she runs her fingernails back down toward my cock, and finally, *finally* she pulls it out. She backs up and leans down to suck it into her mouth, and Jesus I’m going to lose it here with the way she’s sucking on the head before sliding my entire cock to the back of her throat.

I want to fuck her mouth forever, but I want to fuck her cunt more, and my cock is going to explode in her mouth if she stays where she is much longer.

“Stop,” I demand, and she freezes, confused for a beat as my cock falls out of her mouth and she looks up at me. “I want to fuck that sweet cunt until you can’t walk straight, and if you

keep sucking my cock like the beautiful expert you are, our night is going to end way too soon.”

She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand then stands. She pulls my pants off with my boxers and tosses them on the floor, and then she slides her way up my legs until her hot cunt is poised right over my aching, leaking cock.

The heat is unbearable as she slides her pussy along me, and I grind my teeth together to keep from coming too soon.

She reaches down between the two of us and fists my cock, holding it as she slides down onto it. Her eyes close on a soft whimper as I impale her. I watch and feel, and it's the hottest and most erotic moment I've ever had the pleasure to experience.

She slides up and down excruciatingly slowly, the hot, wet slide of her cunt pushing me closer and closer to the edge of total oblivion. I grip onto her hips while she moves, my fingers digging into her flesh as she claws at my chest while we both luxuriate in the feel of the other.

She starts to pick up the pace. She might've just come from my mouth, but she's about to come again from my cock.

My grunts pick up as the heat brews within me and moves me closer and closer to my orgasm, and then she slows down again. She's teasing me, and I hate it as much as I love it. She's doing it to her own damn self, too, as her moan of disappointment that she brought us so close only to slow us down filters over us.

And that's when I decide I'm going to take control.

I lift her by her hips and push her beside me, and she looks confused for a beat. “Get on your back,” I demand, and she does. Eagerly.

I stand and pull her to the edge of the bed, and I lift her legs until they're poised on either of my shoulders.

I play near her asshole for a few beats. It's still uncharted territory in this relationship, and as strange as it is, I feel a little sad that she never gave that to me. I don't know if she

ever gave it to anybody. We never really covered that other than for me to say that someday it would be mine.

And maybe it won't be.

Maybe this is it. She claims it is—our final goodbye.

She also claimed the first time would be the only time.

It wasn't.

I hope this isn't, either.

I line my cock up with her pussy, and then I fuck her senseless.

I hold onto her legs for support as I bang into her over and over. I reach down to rub her clit, and her eyes roll back at the feel of all the sensations coming together at once.

She starts to lose it first. I feel her pussy contracting over me, and that's what sends me into my own oblivion. "I'm coming!" she screams, and I yell back something similar but also incoherent as both of us are hit with a brutal orgasm at the same time, my come taking off and burying deep inside her as I spend it all on her.

I slide out of her and collapse beside her as we both come down, our bodies slick with sweat as a warmth fills my chest.

This can't have been our last time together. I refuse to believe it.

And yet...what happens next tells me it is.

CHAPTER 11: TRAVIS

“She filed.” Allen’s voice is clear and concise. The news is anything but.

How could it be clear to me why she’d file after the night we shared?

Devastation plows through me.

My chest hurts and my stomach twists, and I’m glad I’m sitting because I swear I’d fall over if I wasn’t.

She filed?

She filed.

I was so sure our night together was going to be the catalyst for mending what we broke.

I guess I was wrong...and being wrong has never hurt so much in my entire goddamn life.

We’ve been floating by and it’s been fine. Harper’s been adjusting well to sixth grade, and Victoria’s been running off to Ellie’s every morning and returning home late. It’s a busy season for PCPR as Ellie gears up for the start of another season, so there is plenty to do. For my own part, I’ve been attending my anger management classes and performing my community service in between working on my secret project.

“Can you just...hold off on filing them with the court?” I ask.

Allen sighs. “It’s not ethical given that I’m representing you both.”

“I’m not paying you to be ethical,” I hiss.

“Yes, Mr. Woods. I understand. How long do I need to wait?”

“Just give me a month.”

“All right,” he says. “One month, and if she asks, what do I say?”

“That the courts are slow because they’re so busy.” I cut the call. I need to confront her. I need to talk to her.

I need to calm down.

I hate that she filed the papers. I’m fucking devastated, and yet somehow I also feel numb as despair sweeps through me, my stomach sinking as reality plows into me.

She fucking filed the papers.

She really wants this.

But I still have a plan.

I need to talk to my publicist, but Victoria is there with her now...and I can’t have her overhear what I need to ask.

So I start with the most obvious solution. I glance toward the door to my office. Harper is up in her room, an entire floor away from where I sit. She’s on her iPad playing games and it’s quiet here in my new office, so I call Victoria.

She answers right away. “Is everything okay with Harper?”

I ignore her question. “You fucking filed?” I practically yell at her. “Did the other night mean nothing to you?”

“Oh, uh...yeah. Hold on.” It goes silent, and I imagine she’s excusing herself from Ellie’s office to have this conversation in private.

When she comes back, she’s quiet. “It meant everything to me, Travis. And that’s why I *had* to file.”

“That doesn’t make any fucking sense!” I yell.

“I just need a clean break.” There’s a certain desperation in her tone, and it pulses the need to protect her inside me. It’s a strange need, and I can’t quite piece together what I’m protecting her from—other than myself, of course. “It’s too hard being stuck here in limbo when we both know it’s over, so I did what I said I was going to do so I can get on with my life. The things I’ve wanted...I can’t have them with you.”

“But we did have them, Vic.” My voice comes out raspy as I fight off the emotion clogging my throat.

She's quiet on the other end, and I hope it's because she's realizing her mistake.

"Just give me one more chance," I beg.

That's right.

I fucking beg.

I've never begged for a goddamn thing in my life, but this I'm begging for. Another chance. A way to prove to her that we belong together. A way to make her see that this life isn't *all* bad. It comes with its perks—it just sometimes takes a little bit of time to see them.

"I know I went radio silent when I was at camp, and I'm sorry. The days are long and busy, and I did what I could to make time for you. For us. It wasn't enough, and I know that now. I know it'll be different next time if you just give me the chance to prove—"

"Please stop," she interrupts. "It's too hard." Her own voice is laden with the same emotion I'm feeling, and I guess I just don't get it. If it's so fucking hard...why is she doing it?

"Don't do this," I whisper—not by choice, but because I can't make my voice work. Is this really the end? It can't be. "Please, please give me a chance to prove that we belong together."

"I can't." She whispers back, and then she ends the call.

I slam my phone on the desk. "Fuck," I mutter, and then I slam my fist on the desk, too. "Fuck!" I yell a little louder.

"Swear jar!" I hear a voice out in the hall.

Fuck indeed.

I blow out a breath as I try to calm down, and that's when Harper appears in my doorway.

"Is everything okay?"

I shake my head, and I hold up my hand and make the signal for her to come in. "Sit," I say, and she does.

“Victoria filed the papers with the lawyer. She said she’d wait until after the custody hearing, and she did.”

Harper’s face falls. “Fuck,” she says.

I think about correcting her, but if there’s any good use for a curse, it’s now. “Swear jar,” I say instead as I try to lighten the mood.

“I think we just canceled each other out.”

I nod a little sadly. “It’s you and me, kid,” I say. “Victoria will still be around, and honestly I’m not putting much effort into finding a suitable replacement because you’re right, there isn’t one.”

“Can’t you just find some way to get her back?”

“I’m working on some things,” I admit.

“What things?”

I twist my lips. “You’ll see.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “It better be big if you want to win her back.”

“Oh it’s big.”

I just hope it’s enough.

I work hard on my secret project for the next few days, and then I’m packing my suitcase for a quick trip to Denver for Jaxon and Mandy’s wedding.

A few other guys from the team were invited, mostly the Thursday night crew, and I have no idea who else is going. But it doesn’t matter. I’m using this weekend to get my wife back.

Because Jaxon and Mandy don’t know we’re getting divorced, so they only reserved one room for us.

It’s a suite, and I’m sure my *wife* will kick me out to the couch, but that’s irrelevant. There will be one bed in the room, and I am absolutely here for it.

We say our goodbyes to Harper as we drop her at Evan’s place on the way to the airport on Friday morning, and after an uneventful flight where Victoria slipped in her Air Pods and

watched a movie, we check into our hotel. Before I even get the chance to head up to our room, Jaxon's slapping me on the back as Mandy squeals to greet her matron of honor.

The bellman takes our luggage up to our room while Mandy steals Victoria away.

"I've got a tee time in a half hour. You in?" Jaxon asks, nodding toward the pro shop located in this hotel. It's convenient staying at the hotel on a golf course where the wedding will take place. "Tristan and Cory will be there, too."

I don't have much choice considering I'm here for his wedding weekend, so I nod. "I'll meet you there." I need to hit up the gift shop for some ibuprofen and water because I'm already feeling a headache edge its way in as the altitude change hits me.

I wander down toward the golf course a short while later, and it's hard to muster up any enthusiasm for the big event knowing Victoria will be there on my arm for all of it but it's all fake.

I wonder if she's going to tell Mandy about the divorce before the wedding. I wonder if we can fake it through the whole weekend and if I can get her naked one more time even though she already said last time was the last time.

Once my lawyer files and the papers are in the courts, it won't be long before the paparazzi figures it out and it's all over the headlines. I don't know if either one of us is ready for whatever shitstorm we'll face once that hits.

But since Allen's holding onto the paperwork for a month, I've bought myself a little time. The problem is that the season starts next weekend, and I need help.

I need the big guns.

And so I think it's essential I tell the boys today what's going on.

Tristan's already standing near the pro shop waiting for the rest of the crew when I arrive.

"Whazzahhh motha-fuckaaaa?" he greets me.

I nod in his direction, and then I can't stop myself as I vomit the entire story including my plan to win her back.

By the time I'm done talking, I spot Cory walking toward us across the lobby and Tristan's jaw is hanging open.

"I don't want Jaxon to know about the divorce yet," I say hurriedly when I spot him walking toward us, too. "But I'll need help getting it ready before my time is up and my lawyer gives the papers to the court."

Tristan nods, and he talks fast as we try to work this out before other ears are listening. "You know you've got me, and we can dress it up so Jaxon won't know why. We'll just call it a surprise for your wife. Does that work?"

I nod. "Thanks, man."

He claps me on the back. "Dude, I know what it's like to lose the one you're supposed to be with. We'll fix this."

"I hope so," I murmur as Cory sidles up to us.

CHAPTER 12: VICTORIA

“I know it’s my wedding weekend and the attention is all on me for the next thirty-six hours, but I’m pressing pause on the wedding because you need to spill why you’re so down in the dumps,” Mandy says as we sit at the salon getting pedicures.

“It’s nothing,” I say, shaking my head. “Talk to me about your bouquet. What flowers did you decide on?”

She purses her lips. “Look, I’m pregnant and I’m the bride and I’m not sitting here bullshitting about the flowers when something is clearly up with you. Talk or you’re being demoted.”

I can’t help a small giggle that immediately turns into tears.

“Oh shit,” she says, and she reaches over to pull my hand in hers. Good thing we opted for pedicures first and manicures second. “What’s going on?”

“I filed for divorce.” My voice is barely above a whisper.

She gasps dramatically. “Oh my God! Why?”

I shrug. How do I tell her precisely why? It’s complicated considering who I’m talking to. I get that Jaxon and Travis are two different people, but she may run into a lot of the same things I’m running away from by rushing into a wedding with a football player when there’s a kid involved.

Man, our situations are even more parallel than I thought.

Before I get a chance to answer, she gasps again. “Wait a minute. Have you been...*faking* it? Is this a fake relationship playing out before my very eyes just like in the books? Oh my God! You’re going to fall back in love with him. That’s how fake relationships *always* work out.”

“Stop. Yes, we’ve been holding off on telling everyone. I didn’t want to ruin your wedding.”

“Ahh! And we got you a suite with a king bed! One room at the inn! Forced proximity! It’s all our favorite tropes,

girlfriend! Just add two or three more guys into the mix...” She sighs dreamily as she stares off into the distance for a second.

“It’s not quite like that,” I say dryly.

“Then what’s it like?” she demands. “And why are you divorcing him?”

Eventually I draw in a deep breath and take the coward’s way out by minimizing the real story. “It’s just...we rushed into things, and we didn’t really know what we were getting into. And now that the custody thing with Harper is settled, we don’t need to keep up the ruse. Except for this weekend, where we’re faking it to keep the attention off us and on you.”

“Oh come off it, Hartley,” she chastises. “We both know it was more than a ruse.”

I should’ve known she’d see right through me. “Yeah. It’s just...complicated.”

“And you’re going through it alone. Talk,” she demands.

“It’s everything, you know?” I swipe at an errant tear. “It’s the paparazzi chasing me. It’s losing my job. It’s trying to protect Harper when I don’t even know how to protect myself. It’s his lack of communication and me finding things out from social media rather than my husband. It’s everything, you know? And it’s so early and so new that I’d rather cut my losses so I can move forward to start looking for the things I really want out of this life than sit here wasting my time on another guy who won’t be able to give me what I really need.”

“Do you really think he can’t give you what you need?” she asks softly, and before I get a chance to answer, she adds more. “Because I think you’re wrong. You want the husband and the kids and the whole dream, and you had it, Vic. You *had* it. You had the family and the kid and the husband who adores you. Why are you giving it up? Why are you letting it go?”

“Because I’m scared. I had the good stuff, sure. But I also lost my dream job.” I stare up at the ceiling in some futile attempt to ward off tears.

She squeezes my hand. “It *is* scary. But I also think maybe you’re using the dream job thing as an excuse.”

I clear my throat as my brows dip and I glare over at her. “Why would I possibly do that?”

“Was it *really* your dream job?” she asks. “Is pushing paperwork at a higher level what you really want to do with your life? You wanted to work with kids, and you just gave that up to take that district position where you’d never get to even *see* kids. What’s really your dream?”

I don’t answer because I’m afraid she might be right.

What *is* my dream?

Was it upper-level paperwork with a bigger paycheck?

Or was it being a mother? Working with kids by raising a couple of my own?

I loved the part of my job where I got to make opportunities to help kids learn to read, to help kids overcome their disabilities, to help kids learn to love reading.

I got to do that with Harper.

And as a bonus, I also got to step into a sort of mother-figure type role with her, too.

I’m throwing it all away, but why?

Because I’m scared?

Maybe that’s part of it. But there are other issues at play, too.

Unless Mandy’s right and I’m simply using all that as an excuse.

“Pull the papers before it’s too late,” she suggests. “Or at least ask the lawyer to wait a minute before filing them.”

She gives me a lot to consider.

After our pedicures and manicures, we get our make-up and hair done ahead of the rehearsal tonight. I head upstairs to our room to get dressed, and he’s still at the golf course, so I head to the bedroom to get dressed.

“Hartley?” he yells a few minutes later.

“I’m in the bedroom getting dressed!” I yell back. The door is closed.

“Can I watch?”

“No!” I screech.

He laughs. “Fine. I’m going to take a quick shower.”

I’m not planning to tell him that I let Mandy in on our secret, and part of me is thinking I sort of want to play the part one last time...to experiment and see what I really want now that I have this new perspective.

I text Travis’s lawyer before I head out of the bedroom and into the main sitting area of our suite.

***Me:** If it’s not too late, can you hold off filing the papers with the courts for a few days? This is Victoria Hartley, by the way. I’m still sure it’s what I want, but I guess I’m just not ready for you to turn them in and make it official.*

His response is immediate.

***Allen:** How about I wait until next month?*

I sigh. Am I just prolonging the inevitable?

Or am I buying us more time?

***Me:** That would be fine. Thank you.*

I open the bedroom door and I spot him standing over by the window, looking out over the view. It’s gorgeous—all mountains and trees from here, a totally different terrain than the desert of Vegas we’re used to looking at.

He’s deep in thought, almost in prayer, but when he hears me, he glances over at me.

My breath catches in my throat as my eyes land on Travis Woods in a suit.

Good Lord, he’s handsome.

His beard is a little overgrown on his strong jawline, and somehow it just adds to his sex appeal. His blue eyes look

pained when they land on me, and I draw in a sharp breath because suddenly it feels like I can't breathe.

He looks powerful in that suit, like he could command any room he walks into. He looks like the lawyer his parents wanted him to be instead of the sexy football player he became.

And the way he's looking at me like he wants to eat me alive steals my breath again.

CHAPTER 13: TRAVIS

Jesus Christ.

She's an absolute vision as she stands in front of me, and for a split second, I think I might be dreaming.

Her dark blonde hair is curled into waves and her make-up is a little darker and more dramatic than she usually wears. She's in a dress that hugs every beautiful curve of her figure and pushes up her tits in a delicious buffet that I'm not allowed to partake in. It's a real fucking tragedy.

She steals my breath as I stare at her. I'm unable to form actual words as my eyes feast on the most gorgeous creature I've ever laid eyes on.

For a brief moment in time, she was mine. And once this is over, once the month passes and Allen files our paperwork, at least I'll have those memories. At least I'll be able to say I had a true love once upon a time, and it was fleeting and beautiful and true. No one else will ever measure up to what we shared. No one else will ever be able to break through the heavy armor she was able to so easily dismantle.

I finally clear my throat as I attempt to draw in a breath. "You're uh...you're not supposed to outshine the bride, Hartley."

She chuckles. "And you're not supposed to be hotter than the groom."

I laugh, and that seems to break most of the tension between us, though it's hard to break it down completely when there's a divorce underlining our every move.

Fuck.

Can it really be over when there's still so much heat in the room I nearly need to take off my coat?

I just need to get her to fall back in love with me.

That plan is in motion.

I talked with the guys about it today while I hit bogeys and flew into bunkers without mentioning the divorce part of it, and Jaxon is confident we'll get it ready in time. He suggested I call in Ellie for help, and between all of us and our pooled resources, I think we can do this. I have a tentative date in mind...I just need to make it happen before my suspension is over because once I'm in season, everything will change again.

I need to make it happen before the one-month clock runs out on Allen's promise to hold onto the papers.

I've got this.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

She shakes her head, walks over to the little counter where she spots the bottle of tequila I picked up earlier, and she unscrews the cap. She takes a very unladylike swig from the bottle before handing it to me.

I shrug and grab the bottle from her outstretched hand.

"Thanks." I take a swig, too, and hand it back. She takes another and hands it back to me, and we head toward the elevator to go down to the rehearsal dinner that's taking place right here in our hotel.

I smell strawberries in the small elevator car, and my cock hardens. I already had a semi just from doing tequila shots with her, but now she's too close. I can't be this close to her and *not* be hard for her. I can't be mere feet away from her in a fucking elevator and not contemplate shoving my hand up her dress and feeling the inside of her cunt again.

She glances over at me as if she can read my mind, and I swear I see lust in her eyes.

"Do you need me to fake with you tonight again?" I ask softly.

She swallows before she cuts off our eye contact, her eyes moving straight ahead before she nods. "Yeah. Tonight and tomorrow too. Is that okay?"

I nod. “Of course. And just to be clear, it’s not faking for me, Hartley.”

She presses her lips together, and part of me thinks just maybe I’m getting through to her.

The other part of me thinks she probably just can’t resist the cock.

Either way, I’ll take what I can get tonight.

I grab her hand as we walk toward the restaurant, and she glances over at me with narrowed eyes. I just shrug innocently. I realize holding her hand isn’t what’s going to be the thing that wins her back, but I can’t stand beside her and not touch her. I lean in close and drag my lips along her neck until my lips are right next to her ear. “To faking it,” I say.

I don’t miss the way she shivers a little at my breath on her ear, and I squeeze her hand as we walk into the restaurant.

Jaxon rented out the entire place. The wedding will take place tomorrow in the garden just outside the restaurant with the mountains and golf course as our backdrop, and the view is both romantic and scenic.

I spot Jaxon and Mandy talking to an older lady who I assume is the event coordinator when the two of us walk in. The rehearsal is first, and it appears to be just a few family members along with the two of us. Everyone attending the wedding is invited to the dinner scheduled for a half hour from now, and that’s when I’ll get a better look at who will be in attendance for this thing.

So far, the only person Victoria seems to know is Mandy. Hopefully that’ll bode well for my chances at keeping her attention.

Mandy spots us and waves us over, and we walk hand-in-hand toward the two of them. Her eyes dart down to our joined hands, and she gives Victoria a look that tells me she knows. She has to know. These two are as close as sisters.

And then Mandy winks at me...which tells me that maybe she knows, but she’s in support of the two of us holding hands regardless of whether it’s genuine.

I've got the best friend on my side. That *has* to mean something.

We practice for tomorrow's event. I'll be escorting Victoria down the aisle, and the music plays while we walk toward the spot where Jaxon will marry Mandy tomorrow. Her arm is tucked into mine, and strawberries surround me. Warmth surrounds me. *Love* surrounds me.

And, you know, lust.

A thick tension lies between us, and I can't possibly be the only one who feels it. I feel like everyone in the entire room must feel it. In the entire hotel. Maybe even in the entire world.

Okay, so that's a tad egotistical, but it really does feel like it's that strong. And it's not just the underlying tension of the divorce. It's not just the sexual tension. It's some combination of all of it pulling us together like two magnets.

I remember playing with magnets when I was a kid. My parents got me one of those ones that had a handle and I'd put it next to anything that looked metal. I was always fascinated by how the opposite poles attracted each other and the same poles resisted each other.

Victoria and I are opposite poles.

We always have been.

And maybe the magnetic force pulling us together is stronger than either one of us alone.

CHAPTER 14: VICTORIA

Weddings dredge up feelings we don't always want to feel, I suppose, and this one is no different.

When my sister married Jake, I was happy for her as I felt my own future slipping out of my grasp.

And now that Mandy is getting married, I feel that future slipping away from me once again. I'm thrilled for my best friend, honestly and genuinely.

But it's a stark reminder that I'm moving in the wrong direction.

I never *really* thought of Travis as the forever material even though there were a few days where it struck me that it was a possibility.

Is Mandy right? Am I pushing Travis away because I'm scared? Am I cutting my losses early so I don't get irreparably damaged in the end, or am I cutting us off short when we could really have it all?

Maybe that's the question everyone asks when they're in love.

And I *am* in love with Travis. There's no question about that. I'm in love with our little family. I'm in love with his daughter. I'm in love with the glimpses of the life I thought we could have.

I've convinced myself none of that is enough, though.

So what, exactly, am I searching for?

I'm trying to answer that question while I'm standing too close to him as he escorts me back up the aisle after the practice ceremony is over.

I'm still trying to answer it when I sit beside him at dinner and he casually tosses an arm over the back of my chair, his fingertips grazing my shoulder as we chronicle the relationship of the bride and groom. And later, as we laugh with his teammates over stories of Jaxon Bryant and his raunchy past

once his family calls it a night, and Travis's hand lands on my thigh, I can't quite figure out why I'm the one walking away.

I don't have the answer when we get back up to the hotel room and we both walk in knowing there's only one bed in here.

Tension fills the air as we stand awkwardly in the living area of the suite. There's a television and a couch with a couple chairs near the window, and I walk over to the window to look out into the darkness.

It's literally pitch black beyond the gardens and pool we're overlooking.

"Can we talk?" he asks.

I don't hide my surprise at his question. "About?"

"Us."

I clear my throat. "I'm not sure what's left to say."

"Really?" he asks. He looks nearly offended. "Because I have a lot to say."

I sigh, sure I don't want to do this right now. I'm tired, and the altitude is getting to me, and I feel like I should go lie down after a long day and travel and maybe a tad too much to drink. "Then say it."

"You said I'm not good at communication, so this is me trying. Please don't walk away from this, Vic." His voice is all low and raspy as he begs me. "I'm learning how to be in a relationship, and you are absolutely right about everything. I should have called you first when I got my punishment from the league and when I was caught vaping and when the news broke about Coax. I won't make excuses about it. You deserved that, and now I know better. Don't punish me for one mistake. Don't leave me."

My chest hurts as I listen to his words. He's really trying here, but his lack of communication skills aren't the entire problem. And even so...it feels like it's too little too late. "I wish it could be different. I really do. But it's not one mistake,

and I'm not punishing you. It's an entire life I wasn't prepared to handle."

His brows push together. "Harper?"

I shake my head as my hand flies to my chest. "Oh, God, no. She's a miracle, Travis. Even now she's often the very best part of my day. It's nothing to do with her at all."

"Then what is it?" he asks.

I sigh as I try to come up with some way to word this delicately. "You're a celebrity. I'm a reading teacher. I wasn't ready for this life...to have people following me around to get to you. I wasn't ready for the judgment I'd get just for being associated with you. I wasn't ready to have people hate me just because of who I'm married to when I've gone my entire life being a people pleaser. I love you, Travis. With everything inside me, I love you. And you know me. I believe in happy endings. The books have taught me that there's always a happy ending, and if there's one thing in this world I believe in, it's love. But I've also learned over the last few months that just loving someone isn't enough. Lust and sex and passion...none of it is enough to protect me from the fallout. I wish it was. I wish things could be different."

"What can I do to win you back?" he asks quietly.

I shake my head sadly, my heart breaking all over again. "I'm not some prize to be won. That line of thinking is what ended my last relationship, and I can't do that to myself all over again."

He stares out the window as he presses his lips together. He nods a little. "Okay. So that's it?"

I press my lips together. I'm not sure what else to say.

"Well, I guess...I guess I'll just stay out here on the couch, then. You can have the bed."

"It's fine, Travis. We can sleep in the bed together and it doesn't have to be weird."

He shakes his head. "I can't share a space that small with you. It's too confusing for my heart, and it's too hard on my

dick.”

I force a laugh. I know it’s his way of lightening the mood, but it’s heavy in here. Too heavy. The load we’re bearing is too heavy, and suddenly I’m not even sure how I’m going to get through tomorrow pretending like we’re happy when I’m probably the saddest I’ve ever been in my entire life.

CHAPTER 15: TRAVIS

My back is stiff and my head is aching when I wake up on Saturday morning.

I should've taken her up on the offer to sleep in the same bed as her. Maybe it would've led to something...or maybe I'd be waking up in a little less physical pain.

It's the altitude causing the headache and the couch causing the back pain, so I pop some pain pills and return to the hard couch where I slept as I wait for the physical pain to lessen.

Emotionally, though...that conversation last night was rough.

But I did glean one important fact from it, and that is that Victoria Hartley is running scared.

She said a lot of things last night, but one thing stuck out the most.

I'm not some prize to be won. That line of thinking is what ended my last relationship, and I can't do that to myself all over again.

I said the wrong thing when I asked her how I can *win her back*.

I'm learning. It was a teachable moment.

And what I learned is she's terrified she's going to end up in the same sort of toxic situation she found herself in with that rat bastard Owen Platt.

I'm not Owen. I would never treat her the way he did. But I get where she's coming from now. I get that she's scared. Her words taught me a lot of things, and maybe the most important thing I learned was that this ain't quite over yet.

She can run scared, but I'm always going to be chasing right behind her because I will not give up on her.

Not in a stalker way, obviously. In a way that shows her how damn much I care about her. About us. About the family we built in such a short time.

I will fight for her even after Allen files those papers if my big plan doesn't work.

And I'm not just doing it for me.

I'm doing it for dance parties in the kitchen as we sing at the top of our lungs to Imagine Dragons. I'm doing it for the three days of bliss we felt in the Bahamas after we got married. I'm doing it for all the times she sat on my face and all the times she kissed me like she needed me to breathe. I'm doing it for stolen moments in the back of a car or on my patio. I'm doing it for the little moments and the big ones. I'm doing it for my daughter and the family the three of us deserve.

I stare out the window as I contemplate whether my big secret is going to be enough for her. It has to be. There's no other choice.

She rolls out of bed a short while later, and she stumbles to the bathroom with a mumbled *good morning* on her way by.

She must've tossed and turned all night. She probably wanted the cock.

I would've been more than happy to deliver.

She has to go down to the salon to get ready with Mandy, so I'm on my own for breakfast. I call up room service, and I call Ellie to check in on things. She's running my big project while I'm out of town this weekend, and I could not be more grateful.

"I really think this is going to work, Trav," she says.

"I hope so."

"I do, too," she says quietly, and then she has to tend to her kids.

Despite the heaviness in my chest, I feel good as I get ready for the wedding. I meet Jaxon down in the garden for photos before the event kicks off, and he's a nervous wreck.

"You're marrying the love of your life," I remind him.

"Last night you two shared stories about your short history

together, and I saw it, that special thing that only comes along once in a lifetime.”

“Like you and Hartley?” he asks.

I nod. “Like me and Hartley. And you’ve got a kid on the way. Could it be more perfect?”

He stares off at the golf course. “Life changes in the blink of an eye,” he says. “Six months ago the two of us were prowling Coax, and now that place is up in the air.”

“What have you heard about it?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Just rumors for now. It’s not going anywhere, but it may not be the secret it once was. And it sounds like Troy Bodine might’ve sold his stake in it to keep himself out of the news.”

“Probably smart given his position with the Heat,” I murmur, referring to the baseball expansion team he both owns and manages.

He sighs. “On a separate note, we’re both about to be husbands and fathers.” He shakes his head as his dark eyes meet mine. “It’s fucking terrifying, man.”

“Yeah,” I murmur. “Life’s fucking terrifying. All we can do is hold on and enjoy the ride.”

He blows out a breath, and we both hear the click of a camera behind us as the photographer memorializes this conversation.

I think it was a conversation we both needed to have.

An hour later, I’m waiting for Victoria on the other side of the doors so I can escort her in. I’m standing beside Mandy’s dad, who’s a quiet dude since she gets her gift of gab from her mother, and it’s pure awkwardness as we wait.

And then Victoria and Mandy come running through the lobby, both giggling with excitement as they head toward Mandy’s wedding. She’s a gorgeous bride, but her matron of honor outshines her as I stare at her coming toward me. She turns her head as her eyes meet mine, and her smile fades a little. And then she trips a little, but she catches herself on

Mandy's arm and they both laugh a little harder. Mandy's dad moves toward them to take his daughter's arm, and Victoria hugs Mandy and says something to her before walking over to me.

"What did I tell you about being more beautiful than the bride?" I ask pointedly—but also softly so the bride doesn't hear me—and she laughs.

"Well thank you, Mr. Woods." She adjusts my tie a little, and her eyes get a little misty as she glances up at me. "You clean up nice."

"Thank you." I blow out a breath. I want to bring up our conversation from last night. I want to tell her I understand why she's running scared.

But now's not the time, and besides...I think I need to prove it to her rather than say it to her.

I need to show her that she's not a prize to be won, but she's my partner and the love of my life. I'll do whatever it takes to make her see that.

I take her arm in mine, and we walk together down the aisle. I think about what it would be like to marry her all over again, but the right way this time, in front of family and friends. I think about all the ways I can show her how much she means to me. I'm so lost in thought about our future together that I hardly even notice the helicopters flying overhead even though I can't hear a word the officiant is saying, and I nearly miss it when Jaxon and Mandy kiss and the small group gathered erupts in cheers.

We take our walk down the aisle after the bride and groom, and I hold her close to me—as close as I can given the circumstances. We take photos together as I find ways to touch her, and she leans into my touch as the helicopters continue to circle.

She leans over and whispers to me. "What is that?" She nods upward toward the choppers.

I shrug. "Probably paparazzi."

Her eyes widen, and I realize why right away.

More ammunition for her against being with me. More reasons why she doesn't want this life.

"God, they're here for the big moments and the little ones, I guess," she muses, and I'm not sure what to say. It's clear from her tone that it isn't what she wants out of life.

"There can be some advantages to all that," I say quietly.

Her eyes dart to mine. "Like what?"

I shrug. "It's not about the money or the fame, and yeah, it sucks most of the time. But we can also use the paparazzi to our advantage for exposure."

"Exposure?" she echoes.

"Sure. Like charity work or personal causes." I leave it at that, hopeful I've given her something to consider.

Despite the fact that several of my teammates are here, I spend the entire reception with Victoria. Her best friend is busy doing whatever it is brides do on their wedding day, and I'm here with her. We dance, and we drink, and we eat, and we put on the act for everyone around us as I try to just live in the moment and act like she didn't file papers, like we're not going to get divorced, like this is just our lives now. I feel happy and free as I drop the act, and maybe she does for a while, too. She's smiling as we dance. We avoid the heavy topics as we just let go and have a good time together.

The only act I'm putting on is pretending like this isn't some elaborate goodbye.

It can't be.

And so once the party's over and the guests leave, we head up to our hotel room together.

The tension is thick in the elevator as we head up to our suite. It grows to something palpable as we walk down the hall, and it thickens even more as we enter our room.

She clears her throat. "Thank you for a lovely day today. I'm sure it would've been more fun for you to hang out with your teammates—"

I shake my head, cutting her off. “I had a great time with you. I always have a great time with you.”

She presses her lips together. “Travis, I—”

I cut her off again. “Please don’t. Just...can we just have this one night?”

She blows out a heavy sigh. “The helicopters,” she blurts. “They were a reminder why I can’t do this. They’re always there. The big moments, the small moments. It’s not what I want. I don’t think one night would be wise. We already said the last time was the last time.”

“We also said the first time would be the *only* time. So we bend the rules, or better yet, we make our own. You can’t tell me you don’t feel it, too.”

“I feel it. I’ve never felt anything like it, and that’s what scares me the most.” Her eyes dart out the window instead of focusing on me.

“Give me time to prove there’s nothing to be afraid of.” I’m begging, but I have to.

“I don’t have time. I’m twenty-six. I wanted to have at least one baby by now, and I was stuck with that other asshole for three years and it didn’t pan out. I feel my clock ticking and it’s getting louder and louder and...”

I walk over and grab her into my arms, and she trails off as I hold her against my chest. I press a kiss onto the top of her head. “You have a lot of time, Vic. One night isn’t going to change that, and sometimes life throws things at us that forces us to change our plans. And that’s okay. Part of this scary, amazing thing we call life is rolling with it and figuring it out along the way.”

She nods against my chest, and I feel her start to melt into me, though her arms don’t come around me. Yet.

We’ll get there.

“I love you, Hartley.”

She lets out a little sob. “I love you, too.” Her voice trembles against me, and I pull back, tip her chin up with my

fingertips, and force her eyes onto mine.

“Then be with me.”

“It’s not enough,” she argues again, but I can see her defenses crumbling as she starts to see me coming through for her. It’s not just words. I’m really trying here. I’m trying to show her I’m the man she needs...the man she deserves. I’ve never been that for anybody before, but I want to be. With my whole heart. I want to be everything she and Harper deserve. Together, they make me want to be better.

“Okay,” she finally murmurs. “One last goodbye.”

“One last goodbye,” I echo.

Tonight I will give her every single bit of tenderness and emotion I feel inside for her as I pray this isn’t *really* goodbye.

It can’t be.

Our bodies are still entwined as I walk her backward until her legs hit the mattress. I gently lower her until she sinks into the mattress, and I hover over her, making every touch, every kiss, every breath count since this is the last one.

Her fingers trace softly along my jaw as my eyes study hers, and I see pain there. I see confusion and unrest and a whole lot of fear.

I lower my lips to her neck and feel her shiver beneath me, and then I trail my lips to hers and kiss her as slowly as I can even though my body—my cock, specifically—is telling me to get this show on the road.

I’m not ready to get this show on the road.

Not if it’s the last time.

She wraps her arms around me and deepens the kiss, and it doesn’t feel possible that we won’t have this again. It doesn’t feel right.

I pull back and lean my forehead against hers. “How can this be goodbye?” I whisper.

A tear falls down from her eye and drags slowly across her temple since she’s laying on her back. She doesn’t answer,

instead pulling my head down until my lips meet hers again.

I slowly move to a stand and peel her clothes off her, and she does the same to me, like she's unwrapping a gift. I move over her again, and before I grab my cock to plunge into her, I stare into her eyes. It's intimate as we study each other, and she doesn't look away like I expect her to. Instead, the fear is still there, but the confusion seems to have been displaced by something else. Lust, maybe. Love.

She keeps telling me it's not enough, though, and in this moment, I know there's nothing more I can do to prove that it's all we need. It's everything.

So instead of saying words, I use my body to show her how I feel about her. I push into her, and we immediately find a slow and sensual rhythm together like our bodies were made for this. They were. I was put here to find her, and I know that. I just have to figure out how to make her see that.

Emotions are thick around us as we make love, and I hold her tightly to me, as if I can hold onto her tight enough to keep her from leaving me.

We're in perfect harmony as we tumble toward a climax together. The passion mounts as each kiss and each caress carries a deep emotional connection I know I'll never find again.

She clings to me as her body starts to tighten, and I know her well enough to know she's about to spring into an intense orgasm. I'm close, too, and as soon as she tips over the edge to a beautiful symphony of moans, I grunt out my own release, the wave of pleasure folding over us together.

I hold onto her tightly even when the moment passes, when we both start to come down from the high. If this is the last time, I can't let it end. I can't let her go.

Because once I do, that'll be it. And I'm not ready to face that.

The silence between us is deafening, but eventually she shifts. I pull out of her and lay beside her, a cold chill pulsing

in my chest as she presses her lips together and moves to a stand.

She heads to the bathroom to clean up, and I lay in the bed alone as regret fills me that I couldn't find the right words to somehow convince her to stay.

CHAPTER 16: VICTORIA

The wedding really felt like our goodbye.

In a way, it *was* our goodbye. Literally.

We've barely seen each other since we got back from Denver, and now the first game of the season is in forty-eight hours and he won't be playing. I assume he's keeping himself busy because he doesn't want to deal with the reality of his suspension, but he's literally never home.

Admittedly, I haven't called Allen back and told him to go ahead with filing. I'm not sure what I'm holding onto, though. He seemed like he wanted to work on communication between us, and then he cut it off the moment we landed back in Vegas.

I don't know where Travis has been spending his days, but I'm doing the nanny thing with taking Harper to school in the morning on my way to Ellie's. I work all day and pick her up after school, and then we come home and I help her with her homework until it's time to make dinner. It's monotonous, but it's a routine, one Harper seems to be thriving on.

"How's Travis dealing with the season starting tomorrow?" Ellie asks me around lunchtime on Friday.

I shrug. "I've barely seen Travis since we got back from Denver."

Her brows pull together. "Why not?"

"I have no idea. He gets home in time to put Harper to bed and then he goes into his office. I think he's keeping himself occupied so he doesn't have to face missing the season. Or maybe he's spending time at that secret sex club. Who knows?"

"He hasn't talked to you at all about the suspension?" she presses.

I shake my head. "Why?"

She lifts a shoulder, but her eyes sparkle just a little as if she knows something I don't.

My brows dip. “What’s going on?”

She just presses her lips into a fake smile as if she’s not talking, and I narrow my eyes at her. She shoots me a look of total innocence, but I get the feeling something’s going on.

And I’m not sure if I like it. I’ve grown close to Ellie along with Leah and Tessa, and I feel like they’re real friends to me now.

But for how long? How long will that last once the divorce goes through and I’m no longer part of the football wife club?

I trudge through my day as that thought plagues my mind.

I get a text from Travis just before it’s time to leave to pick up Harper from school.

Travis: *I have some things to take care of this weekend and need to take a quick trip out of town. Are you available to watch Harper?*

I would’ve spent the weekend with Harper if Travis was playing on Sunday anyway, so we do what I figured we’d do if he was gone. We do a little reading. We turn on the game for a while even though Travis isn’t there. We cook together, and we have dance party after dance party. We get in the pool and swim, and then we do a little more reading.

The Aces win the first game without Travis, and he gets home Sunday night just in time to get his daughter down for bed. I wait for him in the kitchen. Maybe we’re getting divorced, but I still love him, and I still care about him. Something pulls inside me to make sure he’s doing okay.

I hear his heavy footsteps coming down the stairs, and he walks straight for the pantry to grab down the bottle of tequila. Just like we did in that hotel room in Denver, he takes a swig then hands me the bottle.

“You doing okay?” I ask quietly.

He shrugs. “Yes and no. Did today suck? Yes. But do I have any other choice than to just deal with it?”

“You can talk about it,” I say a little dryly. “Where’d you go this weekend?”

He twists his lips then guzzles another sip from the bottle. He clears his throat. "California."

"Your parents?"

He nods but keeps it vague.

"Are they okay?"

He nods again, and he passes me the bottle. "I had some legal stuff to take care of."

"Are *you* okay?"

"Yeah. I realize how that sounded now." He chuckles a little. "I guess given the last few months, I should clarify. I'm not in any trouble or anything. At least not any *more* trouble. I paid my fines and finished my anger management classes, and I've got most of the service hours done now."

"Was it about the divorce?" I ask quietly.

He shakes his head. "I have a project I've been working on and needed help with some paperwork. My father's been helping me out."

"Not Allen?"

"It's more...personal, I guess." He shrugs. "And my dad had a few things for me to review with the Randall's estate while I was there, too. I'm the custodian for all of it even though I hardly knew them."

"You know them through her," I say softly, pointing upstairs.

He nods, and he looks a little...despondent. Forlorn.

Sad.

He looks like he needs a hug, and I feel the strong urge to be the one to give it to him. I walk into him and link my arms around him.

He wraps his arms around me, too, and I rest my cheek on his chest.

"That must've been hard," I say.

“It’s just...strange. It’s walking into a house of ghosts. One car in the garage. The other was totaled. Clothes hanging in the closet. There was some food in the pantry that I tossed out. I didn’t have the heart to do it when I was there for the funeral. My dad had a cleaning crew go in just after we came back here to take out anything perishable. Their bed is made like it’s waiting for them to come home and get in it. Everything’s neat except for the new layer of dust since it’s been closed up for months.” He shudders a little, and I hear a sniffle.

My heart squeezes for him.

I wish I could take away his pain. I wish I could make it better, and instead, I’m compounding it with a divorce I know he doesn’t want, and that doesn’t even take into account the fact that he’s suspended and missing important events and games with his team right now.

But just because I feel bad for him doesn’t mean I can live a lie. I still have to do what’s right for me even if it’s the harder thing.

As he holds me in his arms here in his kitchen, though, I’m having a hard time remembering why going through with the divorce is what’s right for me.

CHAPTER 17: TRAVIS

I don't tell Harper where I was over the weekend.

In part it's because I've hardly seen her the last couple weeks, but it's also not something she needs to know. Eventually we'll discuss putting the Randall's house up on the market. It's just sitting there for now. It's paid off, so it's not like it's a financial burden, but at some point I need to let it go. The money will go into Harper's account that she'll be able to access once she turns eighteen, but with or without it, she'll be financially set for the rest of her life thanks to some of the financial things I worked out with my father over the weekend.

I haven't spent a lot of time concentrating on houses and assets and finances, though.

I've been putting every ounce of my energy into my secret project. Maybe some part of me deep down is doing it to avoid dealing with my suspension and the games I'm currently missing, but a bigger part of me feels like this is what will bring Victoria back to me. It will make her see how much I see her.

It will make her see that I'm not the toxic ex who doesn't care about her feelings or her wants or her needs.

It will make her see that we can use paparazzi to our advantage.

It'll make her see that this *is* the life for her and I *am* the man for her.

It has to. I'm banking on it working out.

If it doesn't...

Well, I don't know. I haven't allowed myself to think it might not work. She's close to coming back to me. She still cares about me. The feelings are still there. She's just scared, and so I'm exercising a patience I didn't know I had.

The other reason I didn't tell Harper where I was is because I don't want to tell her about what I've been working on. I want her to be as surprised as Victoria when she finds out.

I pour all my energy into finalizing everything, and now we're here.

I missed the third game of the season, but it barely registered that I wasn't at the game yesterday as I spent the day working on the finishing touches.

I look around and feel pretty fucking great about the entire thing. It's even better than I imagined.

I head outside and find the stage, and I climb up onto it.

Months of hard work have led up to this moment.

Now I just have to get her here.

The paparazzi is set to arrive at ten, and the ribbon cutting ceremony will begin at ten-fifteen.

I need her here for the ribbon, and I have Ellie on *get her here* duty.

I need Harper here, too, and Trudy has agreed to excuse both Harper and Bella from school and get them here.

I'm ready.

I glance nervously at my watch as I sit on the stage overlooking the parking lot.

Nine thirty-six.

It's do or die. Now or never.

I turn on the music so it pours over the parking lot.

This is it, and nerves flit up my spine as the first car pulls into the lot. A man steps out with a camera slung around his neck, and another car pulls in.

And then another and another.

Tristan's been here all morning, and he walks out and sits beside me on the stage. "You ready for this?"

I nod, and the lot continues to fill with cars.

I spot Evan, and then Cory arrives. Jaxon and Mandy get out of Jaxon's car and walk hand-in-hand toward the rows and

rows of chairs set up for the big event. Somehow he kept this secret from his wife so I could keep it from mine.

Austin and Deon. Josh, Cason, and Damon.

Jack Dalton. Ben Olson.

Coach Thompson, Calvin Bennett, and Steve Shanahan.

I think my entire fucking team showed up with their families and friends.

I can't believe this is really happening, and the fact that I managed to keep it a secret from Victoria is...well, it's one for the books.

My parents pull in, here to show their support, and my chest warms with that sense of family I've missed my entire life.

I spot Trudy as she pulls up, and Harper and Bella race out of the car toward Evan. Harper sees me on stage and looks confused for a beat, and I grin and wave at her as she narrows her eyes at me. I shrug, and then her eyes move up to the sign just above my left shoulder.

Her brows dip together, and then she starts to cry.

I wave her over, and she runs up on stage. I grab her into my arms but I don't say anything just yet. I want her to get the full idea the same time Victoria does.

She takes the seat beside me, a million questions falling from her lips.

"I'll answer everything in just a minute," I promise.

She looks positively giddy.

It's ten-twelve when Luke's car pulls in, and Ellie, Tessa, and Leah all get out. My heart pounds as I wait for the final person to exit, and there she is.

My Victoria.

She's stunning as always, and I watch as she looks at the crowd. Ellie told her there was some huge team publicity event they needed to attend, which seems to be true as they greet my

teammates. But it isn't long before Victoria's eyes move toward the stage and then to the spot just over my left shoulder, too.

I watch as her mouth falls open and her eyes widen in shock before they move down to me. I offer her a smile before I stand to deliver the speech I worked hard to prepare over the last few weeks as we put the final details on this place.

My stomach twists and nerves shoot up my spine as I walk to the podium with the microphone. Tristan cuts the music so I can talk, and the crowd starts to quiet and take their seats.

Ellie ushers Victoria to the front row, and I draw in a shaky, trembling breath.

I didn't bring a paper up with me to read the speech.

I memorized it, and I'm speaking from the heart.

"I'm Travis Woods, and I have a reading disorder. I wasn't diagnosed until earlier this year when a reading specialist was able to identify it. I was born to play football. All my life, I've been passed along because I was good at football. Maybe my coaches pressured my teachers so we could get the W, or maybe my teachers just thought I wasn't very smart because I'd been hit too many times in the head. Whatever the case, one woman took a special interest in my situation and helped me. She gave me tools to memorize a brand-new playbook. She gave me tips to help me learn to even sort of *like* reading. She gave me so much more than that, and today I want to give her something in return."

I look down in the crowd and spot my wife. Tears stream down her face.

"Victoria, can you please join me up here?"

Ellie hands her a tissue then gives her a little push toward the stage, and she walks up the side stairs toward me until she stands beside me at the podium. I turn around toward Harper.

"Come here," I say softly, and she pushes to a stand and walks to my other side.

“These are the two most important people in my life. Victoria Hartley, my wife, the love of my life, and the best reading specialist I’ve ever known, and Harper, my incredibly intelligent and creative daughter.” I look at each of them as I say their names. “And today is opening day for *their* brand-new bookstore, Harts & Harps Book Nook.” I sweep an arm behind me. “This is so much more than a bookstore, though. It’s a place where adventure awaits in every nook and every corner. It’s a place where you can leave your worries behind as you get lost in another world for a few hours. It’s a place where you can fall in love with books and reading. It’s a place where friends can gather for book clubs on the sleek couches, or where families can read together in the children’s section. It’s a place where you can gather with others for lunch in the café or where you can steal an hour to yourself with a cup of coffee and a good book. And it’s a place with a special tutoring center where the best reading specialist I know can help others learn to love reading the same way she does.”

I look over at Victoria, and tears are streaming down her face.

“And now I’d like to have Victoria cut the ribbon for the official grand opening of her new bookstore, Harts and Harps Book Nook.”

The crowd cheers loudly while Tristan walks over with a giant pair of scissors. He stops behind us, and Victoria looks at me.

“You did this for me?” she asks softly, just out of range of the microphone.

My eyes search hers for a beat. “For us.”

“Are you serious?” she whispers.

“I wanted to show you there’s a positive side to this life. We can make good things happen, too, and I understand if you don’t want to be with me but I still felt like there’s a lot left between—”

“Oh shut up,” she says, cutting me off, and she practically leaps at me as her mouth crashes to mine and her legs wrap

around my waist in front of the entire crowd—and paparazzi—gathered to celebrate this grand opening.

The crowd goes wild.

Only a few in the group gathered know this was my attempt to save our marriage. This was my attempt to show her that this is the life for her.

Still, the support I feel from everyone here cheering us on makes me feel like together, we can do anything.

I kiss her back for a few beats before we break apart and I lower her down to the ground. She wipes her cheeks and smiles sheepishly at the crowd, and I give her one more soft kiss for good measure.

She takes the scissors from Tristan and snaps the ribbon in two, and it's official. Harts & Harps Book Nook, my secret project for the last six weeks, is officially open for business.

CHAPTER 18: VICTORIA

He takes me on a tour of the store, and I never imagined I'd actually be the owner of my own bookstore.

I'm not sure I could've even *dreamed* of something this incredible.

I've learned a lot about this place over the last hour, and he really thought of everything.

He took a struggling bookstore and bought it from the owners. He brought in a new management team and his ideas, and with his lawyer father and his teammates, he transformed the place into what it is now.

A beautiful book haven with dinocorn wallpaper where the dinocorns are reading books...drawn by his daughter.

And he invited the paparazzi, which means press coverage, which means...well, amazing things. A long line at the register and all sorts of free advertising just because of the name behind the place.

He took me on a tour first before inviting the public inside, and I swear I haven't stopped crying since he took the microphone on that stage and publicly admitted that he has a reading disorder.

He was embarrassed about it when I first mentioned it to him. He refused to believe it. He refused to believe it about his daughter, too. So to admit to the world that it affects him and that I helped him by giving him the tools he needed means everything to me.

As he spoke, everyone's advice over the last few weeks came to a head, and I realized I was running away because I was scared. I was scared that in the end, I was going to end up alone like I did with Owen. I was scared that I was only repeating a pattern that I didn't want to be a part of. I was scared that he took opportunities away from me when I lost that job. I was scared that I'd lose more because of the paparazzi following us around. I was scared I was just in

another toxic relationship that would cause me to come out even more damaged than I was before.

But he's not Owen.

He's not toxic.

Instead, he's giving me opportunities. He's showing me how we can use his status to our advantage. And in doing so, he's giving dozens—hundreds, even—of kids opportunities to overcome their own disabilities and learn to love reading.

He's giving me my own space to work with kids...the very thing that I actually did dream about but didn't exactly know how to manifest.

Everything happens for a reason, and the reason I lost that district job wasn't because of the paparazzi. It's because it wasn't really fulfilling the dream I had.

Instead, Travis is. In every sense of the idea.

And my heart is bursting with love.

I knew it wasn't over, but I was so blinded by stubborn fear that I refused to see another way.

But this gesture has wiped away that fear, and I stand here with excitement as I look toward a future that belongs to the three of us—Travis, Harper, and me.

My mom runs up to us and grabs Travis in a hug.

"I can't believe you did all this!" she squeals. My dad hugs him next.

"I needed a grand gesture that would show her that life in the spotlight isn't *all* bad," he tells my parents. "I needed to find a way to show her that I will never stop working to show her how much she means to me even when we fall into a routine." He's talking to my mother, but his words hit me right in the heart as I think back to one of the final straws in my relationship with Owen.

He told me he didn't have to try anymore because he won me.

The real prize was finding my way out of that toxic relationship and into the arms of a man who loves me the way Travis does.

I mill around the store and offer advice to people as they look at different books, not sure which to purchase. I grab a coffee from the café. I stop by the children's area and by the tutoring tables. I spot little details everywhere.

Harts Recommends... spicy books.

Harps Recommends... Babysitter's Club books.

I can't believe this is ours.

It's beyond a dream.

The cashiers are busy as they ring up customers, everyone from football players to fans to anything in between, and Harper is busy checking out the children's section with Bella when Travis leans over. "Can I show you your new office?"

I nod, and he leads me through the store to the back. He keys in a code—eight one eight one, his jersey number twice, as if nobody will be able to crack that code—and we head into the back room. There's a kitchen and break room for employees on one side and private offices on the other side. He takes me into one that has *Victoria Hartley* on a name plate on the door with *Owner* underneath it, and tears fill my eyes again.

"I'm going to need a new name plate," I say softly as I finger the engraved wood.

His brows dip when I look over at him.

"Victoria Woods."

"Woods?" he repeats.

I nod. "Woods."

He leans his forehead to mine and draws in a deep breath. "Are you sure?"

I close my eyes and hold onto his biceps as I squeeze a little. "I'm positive. I don't want to get a divorce. I want to go

through this life with your hand in one and Harper's in the other."

"Thank God," he murmurs, and then his lips collide down to mine.

Somehow he must open the office door, and then I hear it slam as he kicks it shut behind me. As much as I want to see the inside of this office, I also know my husband and I have some making up to do.

There will be plenty of hours logged in this space—maybe even doing the very thing we're about to do now. And right now, he takes precedence over everything else.

He kisses me like his life depends on it, and I realize how very much I've missed this—how very much I've missed *him*. His closeness, and his intimacy, and his love.

I happened to wear a dress today, and he makes quick work to get his cock out, shove my panties to the side, and slide right into me.

I gasp at the sudden sensation, my body awakening as he moves inside me.

I wrap my legs around his waist and set my palms behind me on my desk to prop myself up while he slams into me, both of us in a frenzy of need and want and desire as he pushes us both to the edge. His thrusts become desperate, pushing me quickly toward ecstasy, and my legs tighten around him. With every pulse of his hips, I find myself getting closer and closer to the edge, and then his thumb starts to work furiously over my clit to send me straight over it. Just as my body starts to ripple with pleasure, he tenses then lets out a sexy growl as he starts to come, too.

And in the quiet moments of the afterglow as he holds still inside me and leans forward to kiss me some more, I can't help but think that life doesn't get any more perfect than this.

CHAPTER 19: VICTORIA

What a day.

What a life.

“I still can’t believe I own a bookstore,” I say.

“I still can’t believe my grand plan worked,” Travis admits.

I chuckle as I squeeze his arm to my chest and lay my head on his shoulder. “There were a few things holding me back, but when I told Mandy I filed the papers, she said something that stuck with me.”

“Wait a minute. You told *Mandy*?”

I snag my bottom lip between my teeth and scrunch up my nose with a little bit of guilt.

“And you *still* made me fake it with you?”

I nod. “I was testing the waters. Making sure it was what I really wanted.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “So you filed the papers even though you weren’t sure?”

I blow out a breath. “Full disclosure, I asked Allen to hold onto the papers for a bit before sending them along to the court.”

His eyes turn to saucers as his jaw drops. “You did what?”

I scrunch my nose some more, and he just shakes his head.

“Full disclosure...so did I,” he admits.

I gasp with a side of extra dramatics. “What?”

He chuckles. “I knew I needed to buy a little more time since I was putting it all on the line with the store, so I asked him for a month. I needed to give you your dream. I needed to prove to you that I’m not your ex. I needed to show you that this *is* the life meant for you, and it won’t always be easy and yeah, usually the paparazzi kind of suck, but we can find ways to use them to our advantage and we can build whatever life we want together.”

Tears heat my eyes at his words.

“Now tell me what Mandy said.”

I laugh and brush away a tear that splashes onto my cheek. “She asked me what my dream really was, and I’ve been contemplating that a lot over the last couple weeks. I think she made me see that the job at the district office wasn’t *really* my dream. I just want to help kids learn to love reading, and I got to do that with Harper. I was starting to believe that was enough. But then today, when you were on that stage and you admitted your disorder to the entire world and told them it was *me* who helped you...” I pause as I shake my head, and I brush another tear away. They’re coming faster now.

He leans over and kisses one away, too.

“I guess in that moment, I realized that *you* are my dream. I was letting everything else get in my head. I was running scared. I kept thinking about the communication issues, but that’s something we both need to work on. I need to be more understanding that when you’re away, you might not have the chance to get in touch. I need to remember that this is new for you, and we’re both just doing our best.”

“For what it’s worth,” he says quietly, pressing a kiss to my temple in between his words, “you are always on my mind and in my heart whether we’re together or apart.”

More freaking tears. I brush those away, too, and I draw in a fortifying breath. “I kept thinking your pattern is one and done, and eventually you’ll move on from me. But you haven’t. You bought me a freaking bookstore. You created a safe place for me to help more kids than I ever would’ve been able to help at the district position. You’ve given me the family I’ve always dreamed of. But more than that, you kept fighting for me. You didn’t give up on me even when I was so sure it was over, when I kept telling you it was over, and I think *that* is what I needed from you all along.”

He drops his lips to mine, and our sweet reunion is interrupted by a loud crash at the bottom of the stairs.

“Whoops!” Harper yells, and then she dashes into the family room squealing. “Put on the news!”

Travis sits up to grab the remote, and he turns the television on. He navigates to the local news channel, and it’s on commercial.

We both look over at her.

“They said something’s coming up about our bookstore,” she says breathlessly, and she rubs her elbow a little.

“Why are you watching the news?” Travis asks. He eyes her warily. “And are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” She giggles. “I heard someone say this will be all over the news, so I checked it out and I saw there’s a segment coming up.”

When the program returns from commercial, Denise Fields starts in on our segment. She’s standing outside our store, and it’s dark since it’s nighttime now, but the neon sign with our store name shines brightly behind her. “It was a star-studded event and an apparent surprise as Vegas Aces wide receiver Travis Woods surprised his wife and daughter with their very own bookstore. Harts & Harps Book Nook specializes in everything from steamy romance to children’s books with a special section dedicated to helping kids who struggle with reading.”

The program cuts to footage of Travis on the stage. “This is so much more than a bookstore, though. It’s a place where adventure awaits in every nook and every corner.”

Denise’s voice picks up the story from there as the video pans around different areas of our very crowded store. She talks about some of the different features of the store, and the segment fills me with excitement and hope and love. “Store owner Victoria Hartley’s background as a reading specialist will enable her to create specialized programs for kids to learn to love to read, and I for one think this is something Las Vegas will really benefit from. Back to you in the studio.”

Travis squeezes my knee, and Harper squeals.

“That’s ours!” she yells. She does a little twirl. “That’s our store!”

She’s as excited as I am about it, and the realization pulses inside me that he didn’t just do this for me. He didn’t just do this for Harper. He didn’t just do this to win me back or whatever.

There’s a lot more to it.

He did it for our family.

His last day off is Tuesday, and the plan is to spend the entire day at the store. He’s told me several times that I can spend as much or as little time as I want there, and I want to spend it all there.

But I also don’t want to leave Ellie hanging.

I have a tentative plan.

I take Tuesday off from working at PCPR so I can spend the day with Travis at our store. It’s his last official day off—his suspension is over now, but the Aces don’t practice on Tuesdays, so he’s spending the day with me while Harper is at school. Tomorrow is his first day back, and I can sense his excitement over everything.

Not just the store, but the fact that he gets to play again. He’s been waiting for this moment for three weeks, and he’s nearly giddy with excitement. I’m giddy with excitement over the store, and it’s just all-around giddiness in the Woods household.

And that reminds me.

After we drop Harper at school and we’re on our way toward H and H, as I’ve already affectionately nicknamed it, I bring it up. “You know how I said I wanted to change my last name to Woods?” I begin.

He nods.

“There are many reasons why I want to do that, but there’s one that stands out sort of above the others.”

“And that is...?” He flips his signal and turns down the street our store is on. The fact that he kept this secret from me still completely blows my mind.

“My last name should reflect my family situation. And you are my family. You are my husband.”

He glances over at me and grabs my hand in his, and he brings my knuckles to his lips. His beard is still a little overgrown, and the scruff there tickles me. “You are my wife. And I can’t wait to show you how you’re my one and only in your brand-new office again.”

I shift a little in my seat as his words hit their intended target. “Before we get into all that, I have a question. Have you thought about having your daughter share your last name, too?”

His brows dip as he clears his throat a little. “I guess I’ve thought a little about it,” he admits.

“Have you asked her about it?”

He shakes his head.

“I’ve gotten to know her pretty well, you know. And I think she might even *want* your last name.”

“Has she said that?”

I shake my head. “No, she hasn’t. But if the reason I want to take your last name is because it reflects my family situation, then I think changing hers would do the same. I know this is still relatively new for her, but this is her reality now. It’s been six months since she moved here with you, and it might be time to say goodbye to the past, to use that symbol to really transition into the family we’ve become.”

“I’ll talk to her about it. I like the idea, but I don’t want to pressure her or do anything too soon. You know?”

I squeeze his hand since he’s still holding mine. “I know. And I think you’re an incredible dad for recognizing that.”

“I think you’re an incredible mom, too.”

My eyes widen at his words.

I've never thought of myself as Harper's mom. I'm a mother-figure to her, maybe. An adult she can trust. A teacher.

But her mom?

I'll never replace her mom, but if I'm married to her dad, well...I guess that makes me her stepmom. Officially.

How have I not even thought of that fact until now?

It sort of blows my mind.

We arrive at the store, and it's empty. We still have about ninety minutes before employees start showing up, and Travis introduces me to every single corner of the place.

He makes good on his promise to show me I'm the only one in his heart in my office.

And up against the spicy books section.

It sort of gives that section a whole new meaning.

We're fully dressed and back to being professional when the first employee shows up, the store manager Travis hired. The business manager stops in, too, a friend recommended highly by Allen, and we have a quick meeting before the day gets underway.

We have ham and cheese croissants for lunch from the café, and we walk around with coffee as we take it all in. There's a steady stream of customers throughout the day, and we've already had several inquiries about our reading programs.

It looks like all those plans I had to improve the program at Stratford Elementary are going to come in handy here in our new store.

I talk with Ellie and rearrange my schedule to make it part time. The store doesn't open until ten anyway, so my new routine will be dropping Harper at school, going to Ellie's until lunchtime, and then heading to the store to work for a few hours before I have to pick up Harper.

And then Harper and I will head back to the store for homework and our after-school programs. The official schedule will be released next month as I gain my footing and

come to terms with this new reality, and I could not be more excited for what the future holds for us.

CHAPTER 20: TRAVIS

I don't know if I've ever felt this excited about the start of a season.

I've never felt this *ready*, either.

I have every reason to be down where my career is concerned given the fact that I missed the first three games, but I'm having a hard time being upset about anything at all when there's so much good happening right now.

The Aces are three for three without me, a stark reminder that the game goes on with or without me. And that's okay. That's as it should be. We should have built a team that doesn't rely solely on one player or one position.

Still, with my talents, I'm hopeful we can make it four for four. Five for five. And all the way down the line until we win the championship game at the end.

I'm up before everyone else. How can I sleep when it's my first day back at the Complex?

I set the wrapped boxes on the kitchen table before my girls get up, one labeled Harps and the other Harts, the conversation we had yesterday about changing Harper's last name still fresh in my mind.

I wasn't sure how to customize the gift for Harper. Randall? Woods? Neither?

I'm happy with what I settled on.

I head back upstairs to get ready to head out for the day. I won't be back until late, and as much as I'll miss the dynamic we've formed here, it'll give us something to look forward to in the off-season as I get back to what I was born to do for the next few months.

It used to be that the field was the only place I ever really felt like myself. But that's not true anymore. I feel like myself when I'm with Harper. I feel like myself when I'm with Victoria.

They love me unconditionally, somehow, somehow, and I count myself the luckiest man in the world because of it.

I just need breakfast before I head out, and I stop by the bed to kiss my wife...but it's empty.

I head down to the kitchen, and I find my girls waiting for me.

They're both holding big posters they decorated themselves.

The one Harper holds says, *Good Luck Dad!*

The one Hartley holds says, *Go #81!*

Both are full of glitter and decorated in red and black...the Aces colors.

My heart feels so damn full as I grin at the two of them. Victoria points to the bottom corner of her poster, and I spot the letters DILF. They're small enough that Harper probably didn't notice them, and I can't help my laugh.

"What's in the box?" Harper squeals, jumping up and down in her pajamas.

I chuckle. "Open it up and find out."

They rip off the paper at the same time, and I watch as they both open the boxes.

Harper pulls it out and gasps. A hot pink jersey with my number on it, blinged out with sparkly shit from the place Ellie told me about, and *Harps* on the back.

Victoria goes at the same time, a few paces behind, and she has a similar reaction when she finds her matching jersey with *Harts* on the back.

"I'll get you a Woods one next time," I say to Victoria with a wink.

"Oh, I want a Woods one too!" Harper says. "Please please please?"

"Because it's my last name?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Because it should be mine, too."

I grab her into my arms as Victoria puts her arms around me, too, and we hold each other in a family hug.

My heart squeezes and my chest practically bursts with love.

It doesn't get any better than this.

Except somehow, inexplicably...it does.

When Sunday rolls around, it's my first game.

I don't start.

And I don't care.

I don't need to start to know I'm a key member of this team, and I prove that in the second quarter when Josh Nolan is gassed and needs a break.

It's my turn.

I step up.

I step in.

Jack Dalton calls *badger*, and I picture the small toe on Victoria's left foot.

I know this play. I know what to do.

I learned it well because the woman I love gave me everything I needed to memorize this new playbook.

And so I haul ass toward the end zone. When I get to where I need to be, I turn around to see the pass Jack fired at me about to drop right into my hands. I grab it out of the air by a narrow margin as the defender on me catches up, and I run it into the end zone to the sound of the sold-out stadium going absolutely wild.

We're up sixteen to three and it's only the second quarter.

My teammates slap me on the back and bump my helmet with theirs. I skip the showboating and instead clamor to get out of the crowd surrounding me so I can get over to the sidelines. I run toward section one-twenty-one, row one, where my girls are sitting just shy of the thirty-yard line on the home team side.

Families are often invited to sit in the owner's suite, and today was no different. Calvin Bennett offered free food and drink to both Victoria and Harper, but I declined.

This is the first game I'm playing in as a married man. This is the first game I'm playing in as a father.

And I wanted my wife and my daughter close. I wanted them to see all the action on the field, and I wanted to be able to run over to them, fist bump my girl, and kiss my wife.

And that's exactly what I do.

Harper is screaming in her pink Harps jersey as she leans down and links her arms around my neck, and I pull my helmet off to give Victoria a quick kiss before I run back to the sidelines.

And for the first time in my life, the two people who mean home to me are at the place that's always felt most like home to me...the football field.

For everything we fought through to get to this place, it feels pretty damn sweet.

CHAPTER 21: VICTORIA

I scramble to put the last-minute details into place.

The store has been open for a little over a month and a half now.

Mandy has been married for a little over two months.

Today's the day of the surprise baby shower I promised her in lieu of a wedding shower.

Between raising a ten-year-old girl largely on my own for the last month and a half since Travis has been in-season, attempting to create a tutoring schedule and start making a difference for kids at the bookstore, working with Ellie in the mornings, and planning a baby shower for my best friend, the days and weeks are passing in a flash as I attempt to wear all the hats.

But as I thank another guest for another pack of diapers and bring them over to the gift table, I can't feel anything but gratitude.

I didn't tell her it was today. I told her mom, who apparently can keep a secret, and she's bringing her here in twenty minutes.

They didn't register. Jaxon told her to put everything she wanted in a cart and use his credit card to check out, so that's what she did. Instead of asking for gifts, I told guests to bring diapers in a variety of sizes and, you guessed it, a book for the baby.

We're at her favorite restaurant, and it's all women from our past and present, some friends who we worked with at Stratford together and some football wives who we've befriended over the last couple months as we stand together and cheer for our husbands often in the team owner's suite.

Ellie was a key part of planning this shower with me. She loves events of any kind, but she's especially good at anything related to football—ironic considering she knew nothing about

the game before she married her husband even though her brother was one of his teammates.

She loves telling that story, and I love hearing it.

“She’s coming!” Jenn, one of the teachers still at Stratford, yells from her lookout by the window.

We all take our seats, including me, even though one of the centerpieces is a little crooked and a pack of diapers just fell off the table.

She won’t care.

She’s waddling a little when she walks into the room, and everyone yells, “Surprise!”

She freezes as her jaw drops, and her hand flies to her baby bump that seemed to pop out of nowhere overnight. “Oh my God! For real?” I’m grinning when her eyes land on me, and she narrows hers a little. “Was this your doing?”

“I had a lot of help,” I admit, and I sling my arm around Ellie, who’s sitting beside me. The two seats on my other side are reserved for Mandy and her mom.

It’s classy, and it’ll stay that way until it’s time to play some raunchy games after lunch in true Amanda Miller style.

She hasn’t spilled whether she’s having a boy or girl yet, but she knows.

We place our orders and wait for our lunches, and I elbow my bestie and lean in close while everyone around us chats merrily amongst themselves. “So are we having a Mandy Junior or a Jaxon Junior?”

“A Man—” She slaps a hand over her mouth as her eyes widen comically like some emoji. “I’m not telling!”

I giggle. “Right. But if I wanted to buy you a gift for the baby, I should get something pink?”

She pretends to zip her lips as she looks around to make sure nobody’s listening, and then she nods.

Aww, my best friend is having a baby girl.

After lunch, we play a rousing round of Pin the Sperm on the Egg as our blindfolded guests have to pin a little felt spermie onto the center of a rather large egg. Mandy can't stop laughing as she watches everyone attempt to pin a sperm, including her mother.

We have an egg shaped pinata and a penis-shaped stick to hit it with, and each woman at the party takes a turn. This time I can't stop laughing as these professional women I used to work with in dresses and heels take a dick and toss it at an egg to win what's inside.

And when it finally bursts open, candy doesn't come flying out. Instead, a variety of different sorts of condoms burst out of it along with some...toys. Ribbed for her pleasure, strawberry flavored, and even a cock ring spill onto the floor, and I watch as Mandy's mom rushes to pick up one of the cock rings.

She looks at it then wiggles her eyebrows, and yeah. That's a little more than I needed to know about Mrs. Miller.

We match celebrity dads to their babies, and then Mandy opens the books. She cries when she sees the final stack of board books and baby books, and I start to cry, too.

I can't wait for my own little one that I can read books to. I can't wait for Harper to read books to a little one, too.

My time will come, and I've finally come to terms with that. It's okay not to rush things. It'll happen when it's supposed to. And if it doesn't, I still feel so blessed that I have Harper in my life, and I'll get to be an aunt to Mandy's little one. I'm an aunt to my sister's kids, too, but she's still not talking to me and I haven't had the time in the last couple months to try to mend what's broken between us. Someday we'll get there, but running a store even though Travis has others officially managing it has taken up all my time and energy...because I want it to. I want to make it the most amazing place it can be, and so far, it's been nothing short of incredible.

After the games and the presents, we eat cake with one layer of pink and one layer of blue, and then the guests start to

leave after wishing Mandy well and thanking me for organizing the fun party.

It was a beautiful way to spend a Saturday afternoon. Travis is out of town this weekend with the team, and he'll be back tomorrow night.

And I for one can't wait. Maybe it'll be the perfect time to start trying for a little one of our own.

CHAPTER 22: VICTORIA

“I’ll see you back here next week,” I say to Jasmine, one of my favorite homeschooled kids who frequents our shop.

It took a solid two months to get the right tutoring program underway, and I hired Mandy to come in part time to help me out until the baby gets here.

I never dreamed we’d be working together again, but she comes in at two o’clock every day, we sit in the café and gossip over a croissant and tea for her, coffee for me, and then we get to tutoring.

The store has really taken off, and we’ve been featured in several local magazines as well as news programs more than once. Because of the famous owner who makes frequent visits to the shop, we have customers who stop by just in case he’s in, and they almost always pick up a book while they’re in.

Imagine my shock when one of the customers who walks by the café on a Tuesday about a half hour before Mandy is set to meet me is none other than my sister with my two nephews locked into a double stroller.

“Ness,” I murmur when I see her, my feet pushing me to a stand. “What are you doing here?”

She clears her throat. “I miss you, Tor,” she says quietly, and I rush over to her and grab her into a hug.

“I miss you, too,” I say. “How have you been?”

She looks around the store without answering. “All this is yours?”

I beam with pride as I nod. “Travis bought this old shop, renovated it into what you see now, and gave it to me.”

She shakes her head a little. “So it’s real,” she murmurs. “What the two of you have, I mean.”

I press my lips together and nod. “It’s real. It hasn’t always been easy, but everything that got us here has just made us stronger.”

“I’m happy for you,” she says. Her eyes are down on the ground when I hear the words I never thought I’d hear. “I’m sorry. I’ve been horrible to you.”

I grab her hands in mine. “No, you haven’t. I understand why you were upset with me, and you had every right to be. But I couldn’t take you pushing me toward Owen anymore when it was over.”

“And that’s why you got married on my wedding weekend?” she presses.

I shake my head. “It’s more complicated than that.” I glance at the stroller. Colton is munching on some goldfish crackers while he watches his mom’s phone, and Mav is asleep. “Do you want to sit for a minute and talk?”

She lifts a shoulder. “Sure.”

I order us each a coffee, and we sit on two comfy chairs in a quiet corner with the stroller pulled right up to Vanessa.

“So it was more complicated?” she asks, picking up our conversation where we left it.

I clear my throat. “Yeah. The night Travis went to Owen’s place, he called his dad, who’s a lawyer, when he got home.”

“Wait,” she says, interrupting me. “Can you tell me what happened that night?”

“Owen was holding onto that baseball Dad gave me when we went to the Astros game. He wouldn’t give it back. Travis went to his place to get it for me when he found me crying in a bar because of things Owen said to me.”

Her jaw slackens a little. “Are you serious?”

I nod. “He didn’t go about it the best way, but Owen wouldn’t tell him where it was so he went on a scavenger hunt until he found the ball. Owen took photos while he was going through the house, so he had evidence against Travis. We got him to agree not to press charges until we got back from the Bahamas, and that same night Travis called his dad and found out there was a family in California who was petitioning to have Harper taken away. His dad told him the best thing he

could do is show the courts the stable home life he's providing for his daughter, and we both knew he'd be arrested the minute we stepped back onto US soil, so I agreed to marry him to protect his daughter."

Her slacked jaw drops a little more. "So it started out as... fake?"

I lift a shoulder. "We both felt like it was heading that way anyway, so it wasn't fake, exactly. More...convenient." I reach over and grab her hand. "I'm so sorry it went down the way it did. I never wanted to take away from your wedding."

"I know that now. I should never have let it go this long without talking to you about it. And I'm sorry I kept pushing you toward Owen. I was just so sure you two belonged together...but now I know you're with the man you're supposed to be with. It was never Owen, and it was never for me to push you or try to decide that for you."

I reach over and squeeze her hand again. "I appreciate you saying that, Ness. In the end, he wasn't very nice to me."

"Because of what he did to Travis?"

I shake my head. "Because of how he treated me. He changed into a different person when I moved in with him."

"How?"

I take a sip of my coffee before I answer as I relive the last few months of our relationship. I'm not sure how I've gone this long without telling my sister the whole situation given how close we were before all this, but maybe that's what happens when you push something on someone that they just don't want. They retreat away, and it causes damage that takes a while to repair. "He basically stopped trying to date me. Does that make sense? He stopped trying to impress me, and when I called him on it, he said he didn't need to do those things anymore because he won me."

She makes a face of disgust. "He said that? And then I come along pushing you back at him?" She shakes her head. "I'm so sorry. I never should have gotten involved."

“Yeah.” I clear my throat, and then I realize I have nothing to lose, so I press. “So why did you?”

“You remember back before I had Colt and we’d go on double dates? We’d drink and we’d laugh and it was always such a blast. And then I got pregnant and we stopped doing that, and I guess I just thought if you two stayed together, somehow we’d find our way back to that.” She shrugs. “It’s silly, and I should’ve been there for you instead of pushing you away when you needed me most.”

“We can still do those things,” I point out. “It just won’t be with Owen. Travis is a hell of a fun time. Promise.” I offer a smile.

“You wouldn’t have married him if he wasn’t,” she agrees.

I nod and pause for a second, and then I ask, “So what changed? What brought you in today?”

She clears her throat and looks uncomfortable for a few beats. “I, uh, might’ve seen Owen’s true colors recently.”

My brows knit together. “In what way?”

She looks away and studies the store before her eyes return to mine. “He was fired. Apparently he’d been stealing client information for years and using it for a side hustle where he’s cutting out the middle man of the company and making all the cash himself under the company’s name.”

My eyes widen.

“And when he first got caught, he tried to pawn it off on Jake.”

My wide eyes are accompanied by a gasp at that. “Whoa.”

“Yeah. In the end, like you said...he wasn’t such a good guy, I guess.”

I abruptly change the subject, not wanting to get into that mess but glad he got what was coming to him. “Let’s plan a trip for the off-season. And if you and Jake want to go, I’m sure Travis would be happy to score you some tickets to a game.”

“We have kids now. It’s not that easy.”

“And Auntie Victoria is happy to watch those little cuties once in a while if you two want to go out. Harper is great with little ones,” I say, thinking back to my stint at Ellie’s over the summer.

She narrows her eyes at me. “How would you know this?”

I chuckle and let her in on the real story, and she sighs in disappointment.

“What?” I ask.

She twists her lips and lifts a shoulder. “I was just hoping it was maybe because she’s been practicing to watch her own half-sibling.”

I laugh. “You’re ready for me to have a baby?”

“Oh I’m ready. Go get it on with your football player so I can have a little niece or nephew to love and snuggle and babysit *all the time*.”

Mandy picks that moment to walk up to us and interrupt our conversation. She sets a hand on her huge belly. “Maybe not so little,” she says. “These football players make beefy kids.”

We all have a good laugh at that, and it feels good to have my sister back in my life...especially since it sounds like I already have a babysitter lined up if I ever need one.

I guess she’s right. My football player and I need to get it on. I think we’re both ready to start the next chapter of our lives together, and this will be the most exciting one yet.

CHAPTER 23: TRAVIS

I lucked out that the hearing was scheduled for a Tuesday—my day off during a week when we have a home game.

The minute Harper told me she wanted to change her last name, I got started on the paperwork. I haven't told her, but I'm not sending her to school today.

Instead, it's a couple weeks before Christmas and she's coming with me to court.

Again.

But this time, it's so she can tell the judge that she wants to change her last name.

I'm not nervous to walk into the courtroom this time. This is good news. This is a happy occasion, and while Harper will always be a Randall, she's also a Woods, and I'm beyond thrilled that she wants to do this.

And so, with that in mind, I petitioned to legally change her middle name to Randall.

Harper Randall Woods.

It has the sort of beautiful ring to it that I could listen to forever.

"I'm gonna be late!"

I hear her voice from down the hall as she scrambles to get ready, and I can't help my laugh as I force myself out of bed where I'm holding my beautiful wife in my arms after the rather...raunchy night we had last night.

My neck is a little stiff this morning, and my breath might still smell like pussy, so I run to the bathroom for some mouthwash and throw on some clothes before I head down to Harper's room.

"It's Tuesday! Why isn't Victoria getting up? Why am I the only one worried about getting me to school on time?" she screeches at me when she sees me in her doorway, and I can't help my laugh. She's wearing pajama bottoms and a dress on

top—backwards—and her hair is flying around her in all different directions.

“Why don’t you just take the day off?” I suggest.

“Take the day off? *Take the day off?* Who are you and what have you done with my dad?” she demands.

“I have a surprise for you,” I say calmly as I lean on her doorframe, though I have to admit I’m impressed that she associates me with dedication and work ethic.

“Well save it for the car ride to school because we need to get out the door.” She walks toward me thinking I’ll move, and instead she plows into my midsection. “Oof.”

I laugh, and I kneel down. I put my hands on her shoulders. “It’s maybe a couple weeks early for a Christmas gift, but we’re doing something special today, and then we’re going out afterward to celebrate.”

She looks confused and flustered for a beat, but then she draws in a deep breath and narrows her eyes at me. “What is it?”

“We’re going to court today for a hearing to officially change your last name to Woods,” I say gently.

Her eyes widen in surprise mixed with a little bit of uncertainty.

“If it’s still what you want,” I add.

She freezes for a beat, and my heart races as I wait for her reaction.

And then she tosses her arms around my neck. When she pulls back, she says, “I’m sure. You’re my dad, and you and me and Victoria, we’re a family now.”

“And because your mom and dad will always be a part of your life, I asked if we could change your middle name to Randall. Is that okay?”

Her little eyes fill with tears, and she hugs me again. “I think it’s perfect. Harper Randall Woods,” she says, repeating the words in my head in her own little girlish voice.

My heart squeezes hearing it drop from her mouth.

“Today we’ll meet with the judge and he or she will decide if we can move forward with legally changing your name,” I say.

“What if they say no?”

“It’s okay, ladybug. If they say no, it doesn’t change our family. It doesn’t change how much I love you. But I don’t think they will.”

She swallows thickly. “I love you, Dad,” she says softly.

“I love you, ladybug. And I have an even better question than what if they say no.”

Her little brows pinch together. “What is it?”

“What if they say yes?”

Her lips lift in a smile. “Then we’ll officially be a family.”

“We already are, but this will make it legal, and nothing will ever change that.”

A tear splashes onto her cheek. I know this won’t change the past, and it won’t take away the pain she’s feeling, but giving her a family in the worst time of her life will be something I’m forever grateful that I got to do.

“Okay, then,” she says with a resolute nod. “Let’s go to court.”

“You may want to change out of those pajama pants first.”

She giggles as she looks down at herself, and then she nods. “A dress?”

“Whatever you want.”

Victoria helps her brush her hair while I head downstairs to get breakfast rolling, and then it’s time to go. On the drive there, I sit in back with my daughter while Victoria drives. “I’m proud of you, Harper,” I say softly. “And no matter what happens today, you’ll always be my brave, strong, smart little ladybug.”

Harper squeezes my hand in hers, and I hope she knows how fiercely I love her.

The closer we get to the courthouse, the quieter the car becomes as we all feel anxiety starting to creep in. When we arrive, I have a knot in my stomach. The last time I was here, I was punished for getting Victoria's ball back, and it set off a chain of events I'd rather not relive.

But today we're here for happier times, and as we step inside the building, I draw in a deep breath.

Harper does, too, and so does Victoria.

"You ready?" I ask my girls, and together we head into the courtroom.

My parents are there, and my chest squeezes that they're showing up for us in these important moments.

I watch the judge as Allen presents our case for changing her name. I force confidence as I take the stand and answer the judge's questions.

My hands shake as I wait for the verdict.

"After reviewing this case carefully and talking with you today, I see no reason not to approve this request," the judge tells us, and Harper lets out a little squeal as I jump up and grab her into my arms.

We did it.

We're now legally and officially the Woods family, and I can't wait to see what the future has in store for us.

CHAPTER 24: VICTORIA

Christmas looks awfully different this year...in the best way I could imagine.

We spent Christmas Eve with my mom and dad, and Travis's parents made the trip out to be with us, too. It was a wonderful night filled with family and laughter, and we just got back home. Travis's parents are staying in the casita that formerly belonged to me, and they'll give us privacy during Christmas morning so we can create our own traditions as a family of three.

In the car on the way back home tonight, Harper said, "It's so weird that this is my family now."

Her words echoed around the car, and Travis murmured something about how blessed we are despite how we got here.

But I can't stop thinking about her words.

So much has changed in the last nine months, and she's still mourning the loss of her parents. As blessed as I feel to be where I am now, her parents had to lose their lives for us to get here.

The thought of it makes me sad, but rather than dwell on the tragedy of it all, I have to look at the bright side.

I now have a girl who's a daughter to me and who brings so much joy to my life. I have Travis, the man who loves me like nobody else ever has. We may not be perfect, but we're family. And on this Christmas, I'm grateful for every second we have together.

As we walk into the house, I can't help but cherish the moment. The smell of fresh pine fills the air as the twinkling lights on the tree cast a warm glow over the family room.

The *family* room. The room where family gathers.

Harper runs over to the tree, her eyes bright as she surveys the gifts already wrapped and sitting beneath it.

“Are you excited for Christmas morning?” I ask as I saunter up behind her and place a hand on her shoulder.

She covers my hand with hers and squeezes, and when she turns to look up at me, her eyes are shining. She nods. “I know my mom and dad would have wanted me to be happy, and that’s why they gifted me with the right mom and dad for me.”

I wrap my arms around her and kiss her cheek. “I love you, Harps.”

“Right back at you, Harts,” she says as she squeezes me and we cry together for a beat as the realization hits me that no matter what comes our way, we will face it as a family because that’s what we are now. A family with an unbreakable bond forged through tragedy and love.

Travis joins us by the tree and wraps his arms around us both. “I love you both so much,” he says softly. “This is going to be an amazing Christmas.”

We tuck Harper in even though she’s excited for Santa to come. Neither of us is clear on whether or not she still believes, and neither of us wants to be the one to ruin the fun, so we both just go with it. We place more gifts under the tree once she’s asleep, and then we head up to bed ourselves.

Travis leans over and runs his fingertips along my thigh as his lips find my neck in the dark. I tilt my head to give him more room to kiss my neck, the anticipation growing between us as his fingertips glide along my leg until he reaches the hem of my shorts. He teases me as he moves his hand up further, playing with the hem of my panties before removing his hand and pulling me closer against his body. He wraps his arms around me, and I shift into him as his mouth finds mine.

His hand slips under my shirt and I feel his rough palms on the soft skin of my back before he slides his hand up my torso and his palm lands on my breast. His tongue batters against mine as he massages my breast, the rough palms pure heaven against my nipple, and I moan into him as my body starts to move all on its own, my hips crashing to his even though we’re locked in a tight embrace.

He moves with me as I feel his own desire starting to grow thicker and harder between us. I run my nails along his back, and he grunts softly before he pulls away from me and lifts my shirt over my head. He buries his face between my tits then moves between them, sucking one nipple into his mouth before moving to the other as I reach for his boxer briefs. I run my hand along his hard cock on the outside of his boxer briefs, and he groans with need.

I pull at the waistband of his briefs then slide my hand inside, and I fist him as he keeps sucking on my breasts. One of his hands slides down into my panties, and he pushes a finger inside me before I even see it coming.

“Oh!” I cry out as I start to move my hand up and down his shaft.

“Keep doing that,” he whispers, and I chuckle as I move my hand faster up and down his cock.

My pussy is dripping with need for him as he fingers me while sucking on my nipple, and then he slips another finger inside, spreading me wide as my body starts to tremble.

He pulls his fingers out of me and pulls off his boxer briefs before he yanks my panties down my legs. His lips crash back to mine, and our tongues tangle as he positions himself between my legs.

He fists his own cock and slides it through my wet heat for a beat before he pushes himself inside, and then he starts to grind against me.

“Oh, God, yes,” I moan, and he picks up the speed as we find a fast rhythm together. I wrap my legs around him, and he uses the headboard as leverage to push harder and deeper into me.

I lose my mind as I bask in the feel of him, of this moment, of the two of us doing this thing our bodies were made to do. I roll my hips as he thrusts, both of us edging toward the release we crave even though we’ve had sex nearly every night for the last month.

It keeps getting better. I keep falling harder.

If this is really what love is like, I don't ever want it to end.

And if it's just some dream, I don't ever want to wake up.

But this is my life now, this passion and lust mixed with adoration and love, and it's that thought as he fucks me deep inside that makes me lose all control.

Shocks of pleasure course through me and my body jerks as I fly headfirst into my climax. He follows right behind me, a soft growl escaping him as he starts to come, too. His mouth collides down to mine as he fights his way through the pleasure, and when we both finish, he's still kissing me as we bask in the warmth of the afterglow.

He stays inside me a few extra beats, and I feel his cock twitch as we both come down from the height of pleasure, our kiss extending a little longer in a sweet and loving show of affection after the hot way he just railed the hell out of me.

Eventually he pulls out, and we lie together a few quiet beats before I get up to clean myself up.

I get dressed, and then I collapse into bed and fall fast asleep.

I'm pulled out of that deep sleep by what I think is an earthquake at first, but I quickly discover it's just Harper jumping on the bed.

And my first thought is that I'm grateful I had the foresight to get dressed after we had sex last night. The last thing this child needs is to be scarred for life by waking her parents up on Christmas morning only to find them naked.

"Wake up, wake up, wake up!" she sings. "It's Christmas morning!"

I pull the covers over my head as I groan, but she's not so easily deterred.

"Come on, Harts! Let's see if Santa came!"

Oh, Santa came last night, that's for sure...

I peek out from under the covers and see her dark hair flying around her shoulders, her blue eyes bright with

anticipation. Her cheeks are rosy and she looks excited.

I nudge Travis, who has also pulled the covers up over his head, and he groans.

“We need coffee first,” I tell Harper, and she grins.

“Already beat you to it. I turned on the coffee maker and already checked out what’s under the tree.”

“So did Santa come?” I ask.

“You know he did,” Travis mutters, and I giggle.

“How do you know?” Harper asks, narrowing her eyes at us.

“I peeked earlier,” I lie.

“Yeah you did,” Travis says, finally moving the covers as he grins and holds his hand up for a high-five.

“You’re such a perv,” I mutter to him, but my thoughts went exactly the same direction.

Harper’s too caught up in excitement to hear us. “Come on!”

“We’re coming,” I say. “Give us five minutes.”

“Ugh fine!” she groans as she races out of the room.

“Five minutes is enough to make you come again,” Travis mumbles.

I giggle as I reach out a hand to him. “Come on. Our girl is waiting.”

We head downstairs, grab a cup of coffee, and meet Harper by the tree. She digs in right away, paper flying in every direction as she tears into her gifts with abandon.

I think Travis bought every single thing an eleven-year-old girl might enjoy, but he saved the best gifts for last.

He hands me a large box, and when I open it, I find the word *Family* cut out in script from a piece of wood and painted white.

Another box has a necklace with the same word inside. “I wanted to get you something that represents what we’re creating together, and nothing captures that better than family.”

Tears fill my eyes as he clasps the necklace around my neck. “Thank you,” I whisper as I touch the letters there, so thankful that this is where we landed.

I pick up the gift for him from me and hand it over. “I didn’t know what to get you,” I say softly.

He tears off the paper and opens the box. A smile tugs at his lips as he lifts the leather-bound journal out of the box. “Woods Family Adventures,” he reads from the cover, and he grins.

We exchanged gifts with *family* on it without ever talking about it, and the meaning of that isn’t lost on me.

All three of us had different needs when we created this family, and somehow we ended up in a place that’s perfect for the three of us.

The theme continues as Harper opens two canvas prints to hang in her bedroom. One is a photo of her with Caroline and Simon, and the other is a photo of her with Travis and me from that day we went to the zoo. She holds the photo of her parents tightly against her chest, and somehow it fills me with hope. We’re going to be okay because we have each other now.

“Open this one!” Harper says, running over to me with a box.

“Oh, it’s so light,” I say. I read the tag. “To Harts from Harps and Travis.” I glance up at the two of them who are both looking at me hopefully, and then I tear off the paper.

When I lift the lid off the box, I find some papers inside. I read the top aloud. “Petition for Adoption.” Heat prickles behind my eyes as I glance up at Harper and Travis. “Are you serious?”

“I want you to officially be my mom,” Harper says quietly.

Travis presses his lips together and glances away as if this is all a little too overwhelming for him, and when his eyes meet mine again, I see why. His are shining as much as mine are.

I brush away an errant tear that escapes.

“We already are a family, but this is something Harper and I really want if you want it too,” Travis says, his voice raspy with emotion. “Allen put this together for us. All you need to do is sign, and then we have a family visit and it’ll be official.”

“Oh my God, yes,” I practically yell. I grab Harper into a hug. “I love you so much, ladybug.”

“I love you, too... Mom.”

My chest feels tight as I squeeze this little girl with all my might.

Harper scampers off to check out her haul, and Travis walks up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. “Merry Christmas, Mrs. Woods,” he says, his voice low as he drops a soft kiss to my neck.

I turn around in his arms to face him and press a kiss to his lips. “Merry Christmas, Mr. Woods.”

We spend the day eating cookies, watching movies, and reveling in the warm feelings of family.

It doesn’t get any better than this.

CHAPTER 25: TRAVIS

It's been brewing all season, and it's here.

Chatter has abounded in the locker room about what Coach Thompson is going to do at the end of this season, and we have one more playoff game—the conference championship—before we'll either play for the title or we'll hang it up until next summer.

As we've edged toward the end of the season, the media has gotten more aggressive with their line of questioning. Coach always answers the same way. "Right now we're focused on winning games."

And we are.

We've only lost one game this entire season, and we've been picked as the favorites to win the big game.

My gut tells me that if we win it all, Coach will go out on a high note.

And I'm starting to wonder who will go out on that same high with him.

We're moving in on the next generation of players. Will Jack Dalton hang it up? Josh Nolan? Ben Olson?

Josh was out four games this season with a hamstring injury, and I got to step in and prove myself during his absence.

I started nine of the fourteen games I was able to play during the regular season, and so far I've started in the playoffs as well.

But I have no idea what anyone's plans are beyond these next two games, and the thought of winning it all and then playing with an entirely different team and coaching staff next season is daunting to say the least.

A new head coach could mean another new playbook.

I don't want to learn another new playbook. I just learned this one.

But it's my job, and I'll do it if it comes down to that. Victoria and I have talked at length about that, too. It'll be my job for a long time to come. I hope I can continue playing in Vegas, but if I have to move, then we move. I love playing this game that has given so much to me, and Victoria loves watching me play. She loves being a football wife. She loves working part-time with Ellie, and she loves running her bookstore without having to do much of the management.

I listen to my pregame playlist, now largely made up of Imagine Dragons songs. I do my warm-ups. Coach goes over the game plan.

Teams are introduced. The National Anthem plays. The coin is tossed.

The game starts, and I'm on the field. Jack drops back to pass, and I run a deep route down the field. Marcus Hanson is blocking me, but I shift to my right as the ball drops into my hands. I grapple with it a little, and my heart races as I nearly fumble it, but I pull it into my chest and run it over the line into the end zone.

The crowd goes wild.

I go wild.

I know my girls are out there going wild.

They're who I think of the moment I score, just as they have been every time I've crossed into the end zone this season.

For the first time in my life, something comes before football.

My family.

I never had a family like this. I never felt unconditionally loved. I never felt loved at all except for what I could do on the football field, and having Harper and Hartley in my life has made every victory all the sweeter.

I find them up in the crowd and give them a wave, and they're screaming and blowing me kisses.

My heart is so damn full.

We coast to a victory, and then we have two weeks to prepare for the Super Bowl.

During that time, we rest. We get treatment. We get massages. We get lots of sleep. We practice, and we start to prepare mentally. We stay calm and focused, and we try to enjoy ourselves.

I enjoy my wife's body more than a few times, that's for damn sure.

And suddenly I find myself in a locker room in Dallas, Texas.

That's right...home of the Cowboys. My wife's *former* favorite team. She's all Aces now.

Everything we've worked for this season comes to a head today as we face off against Philadelphia for the title.

I'm nervous, but I'm also excited.

I get to play the game I love in front of the people I love, and if that's not everything a man could ask for, what is?

Coach puts me in to start along with Tristan, Cory, and Josh.

The first play is going to me, and I make the catch. We advance a little but not enough for a first down.

New dad Jaxon Bryant carries the ball next, but Philly's defense is strong and he's immediately stopped. His wife and little girl Gracie are watching from the stands beside my wife and daughter.

Jack throws to Josh next, and then tries a few handoffs to Jaxon again, and we keep moving closer and closer. We get the first points on the scoreboard with a field goal, and we're ahead. For now.

The Eagles come back with a touchdown, and by the end of the first quarter, we're down seventeen to ten.

By the half, we're down twenty to seventeen after Jack runs in a touchdown himself.

It's a good game, and it's still within our reach as we run into the locker room.

And that's when Coach gives us the speech we need.

"We're in this. We're only down by three, so let's make some adjustments and get back in front." He goes over a few of the adjustments he's referring to, and then he looks around the room, pausing to make eye contact with what feels like every single one of us. "Listen up. This is my last game, boys, and I'm not going out on a loss. I believe in you, and I believe in this team. Play with your heart. Play with the intensity I've seen from you all season. Play for your families, and play for *this* family. Have fun out there. Now let's fucking go."

The room erupts with the exact sort of intensity he's asking us for as we all call out "Let's fucking go!" in response.

And then we fucking go.

We play with passion, and a couple minutes into the second half, we're tied.

We focus, and then we pull ahead.

Our defense is solid as they hold the Eagles to twenty through the third quarter, and Jack is on point as he threads needle after needle with perfect passes.

By the start of the fourth quarter, we're up by ten, but we don't settle into contentment. Instead, we play hard.

The Eagles play hard, too, and they score another touchdown.

We're only up by three when the Eagles defense puts the pressure on Jack. In an attempt to throw the ball away, he tosses it right into the arms of a waiting defender, who runs it in for a touchdown just before the two-minute warning.

They score the extra point, which puts us down by four.

We need a touchdown to win.

The stadium roars as we receive the kickoff, a fair catch to put us at the twenty-yard line. We have eighty yards to go.

We can do this.

I look up into the crowd and see Victoria biting her nails. I see Harper screaming.

My body tenses in anticipation as the crowds chanting rings in my ears, but I block out the noise to focus.

Jack shakes off the mistake as we step up to the line of scrimmage, and he yells out the play call. This one's for Jaxon, who takes it seventeen yards downfield.

We run the same play, and we grab another first down.

We're in Eagle territory now, and we move a little closer.

Twelve seconds on the clock.

We can maybe get off two plays if we're quick, but then I hear the play call.

“Eagle Nine!”

Eagle... Victoria's hand.

Nine.

Eight plus one is nine. That's me. Eighty-one.

I take off running the second the ball is snapped, dodging defenders as I move left and right through them. I find a place where I can open myself up, and I turn around to see the ball flying toward me.

It feels like slow motion as it falls into my arms, and then I turn to run. I see a clear path to the end zone except for one last defender standing in my way.

I run right for him, and he's a big dude about to block the hell out of me. I get as close as I can then spin to my left, falling over the goal line for the touchdown.

The crowd goes wild again, and I'm screaming incoherently in victory. But we still have three seconds left on the clock after we score the extra point, so we're not in the clear yet.

I stand nervously on the sidelines as Declan, our punter, kicks the ball. It goes deep but doesn't hit the end zone, and I yell as it's the perfect kick to set us up for victory.

The kick returner on the Eagles catches the ball and starts running like hell, but he's no match for Evan Wilkinson, who takes him down just after time runs out on the clock, the final play sealing us as the champions.

We all yell as we run out onto the field, jumping in celebration and hugging each other. Adrenaline pumps through me as we all congratulate each other on our victory.

It's my first ring.

My first championship.

And my family was here to see me win.

CHAPTER 26: VICTORIA

I hold tightly onto Harper's hand as we scream and make our way onto the field. Confetti rains down on us, and I search through the colorful paper for Travis.

If his goal this season was to prove he's essential to this team, it was a job well done.

I'm so freaking proud of my husband.

He scored two touchdowns tonight, and he worked hard all season to overcome the bad rap he got in the offseason.

He's a hero tonight in the eyes of every Vegas Aces fan out there, but to the two of us, he's a hero every night.

Someone grabs me from behind, and I immediately know it's him as I spin in his arms.

"You did it!" I scream. "You were amazing!"

"I love you," he says, his lips colliding down to mine before he grabs our daughter into a hug.

It's the creation of a core memory that I'll cherish for the rest of my life.

We don't have long to celebrate with him as certain members of the team are called to the stage for the presentation of the trophy. I hold Harper's hand as Travis makes his way to the stage, and after the commissioner gives Coach Thompson the trophy, it's passed among the players. I slip my phone out of my pocket and take a video of Travis as it's passed to him.

What a moment of pure joy after so much heartache over the last year.

Coach talks about what this win means to the team, Jack Dalton is crowned as the MVP, and then it's time to party. Some players are quickly interviewed while the rest of the team heads back to the locker room, and families start to clear out from the field as we're taken to a holding room to wait for our players to exit.

I hear the occasional rousing cheer from the direction of the locker room, and I can't help but wonder what's going on in there.

It's a brotherhood where they're sharing in the celebration, and they deserve this. They worked hard for this.

It's over an hour before the first player emerges, and a stream of them come out after that. It's still a bit longer before Travis appears, and his eyes dart around the room until they land on Harper and me. I watch as they soften when he spots his girl, and they seem to heat when he spots me.

A shiver runs down my spine.

I can't wait for our very own private celebration.

Harper runs to her daddy, and he scoops her up into a hug then carries her over toward me. She's tall, but she looks like a little girl in her dad's arms. He sets her down then pulls me into his arms, resting his forehead to mine for a beat.

"Congratulations," I say softly.

"I couldn't have done it without you." His words are whispered, but I still hear the emotion in them. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

His lips drop to mine, and we both hear Harper's *eww*. I giggle as I pull back.

"Some of the guys are going out to dinner," he says.

I nod. "Oh, of course! Go. Have fun."

His brows pinch together. "Not without you two."

"It's for families?" I ask.

"This *is* a family. And it's a celebration."

I lift a shoulder. "Then let's go!"

He laughs, grabs my hand and takes Harper's in the other, and then we walk toward the bus taking us to the restaurant.

When we get there, it looks like the entire place has been rented out for this celebration. I find Ellie and her two kids, and I spot Luke over by his brother Jack and tight end Ben

Olson. I see Coach Thompson and his wife, Monique, as they stand near what looks like a head table. Tristan runs up to Travis and grabs him in a bro hug, and I see Tessa and Fallon, too, standing with Jack's wife Kate and their kids. Mandy sidles up beside me with Gracie, and Jaxon is right behind her. Josh and his wife and their kid, Leah and David, and Cory, Declan, Austin, Damon, Deon, and Patrick walk in together. Evan and Trudy walk in with Bella, and Bella beelines right for her little bestie.

This really is family, and it's amazing to think that I'm somehow part of it.

We mingle for a bit as hors d'oeuvres are served and servers walk around with trays of champagne, and I do my best to soak it all in and to remind myself that this is my life now.

What a complete whirlwind. What a one-eighty from where I was a year ago, miserably pushing papers when I wanted to make a bigger impact, stuck in a relationship with the wrong man, wishing for a future that was just out of my reach.

I have it now, and so much more than I ever dreamed of since it comes with this entire family.

Eventually Coach Thompson's voice over the loudspeakers quiets the room. "Can I have your attention, please? Let's take our seats for dinner, and I have a few words I'd like to say. Jack and Calvin, will you join me up here?"

Jack grins at Coach then strides across the room, and even the way the man walks is disciplined. He's truly a force, and hot as hell on top of it. His wife is one lucky lady.

We all find seats, and we end up at a round table with Tristan, Evan, and Jaxon plus their families.

"Friends, family, and teammates," Coach begins. He raises a glass. "Congratulations. Every single one of you in this room is a champion. To the men who fought hard to get here, I'm so damn proud of you. I said it in the locker room, and I'll say it again. You worked hard this season, and we deserve this. This is a dream come true."

He takes a sip of his champagne, and everyone in the room does the same with their beverages of choice before he continues.

“This is the perfect way to end my coaching career as I step back to a position with the front office staff, and we have more news for you, too.” He hands the microphone to Calvin Bennett, the team owner.

“Congratulations, men. What an honor to be in this room with so much talent. You should be proud of yourselves for everything you accomplished this season. Just like Coach Thompson, I’ve decided to go out on a high, too.”

A small collective gasp fills the room.

Seems like this may have been the best-kept secret, and as he talks, I glance at Jack and can’t help but wonder whether he’s retiring, too.

He must be. Why else would he be up there?

“As many of you know,” Calvin continues, “I’ve battled some health issues this season, and I’ve made the difficult decision to focus on my health. I’ll be moving to California to be closer to my ex-wife and my daughter, and I have chosen to sell my majority ownership of the team. I’ll still have a small stake in it and it will still remain close to my family. You won’t get rid of me that easily, and I’m always happy to call any one of you into my office to threaten you with bench time if you don’t shape up.”

That statement garners a collective laugh from the room—including from my husband, who’s sitting beside me. I reach over and squeeze his hand as I wonder what this means for both him and for the team as a whole.

And something I’ve pushed out of my mind to the backburner is the fact that his contract is up now. He’s a free agent.

Will he stay here in Vegas? Does he *want* to stay here in Vegas?

The family meals at Mom and Dad’s, having my sister just a few miles away, my close friendship with Mandy...what

happens to all that if we have to pack up and leave?

But then again, he did score two touchdowns tonight. That has to mean something to the team. New management means new thoughts on that, though.

I'm both curious and nervous about what the future may hold as Calvin continues talking.

“Steve will remain our General Manager, but you'll have a new head coach and a new owner overseeing team operations. I'd now like to introduce you to your new team owner, Mr. Jack Dalton.”

This time a huge collective gasp fills the room, and Jack takes the microphone from Calvin. Before he starts talking, he smiles, and I glance over to where he's looking.

It's at his wife and kids.

My heart melts.

“Kate, JJ, and Ava, will you three come up here?” he begins. Kate looks embarrassed for a minute, but she gathers up the little boy and girl and heads up to the stage.

“My family and I are thrilled to be the new owners of the Vegas Aces. What we have here is a winning franchise in one of the greatest communities in the country.” His speech is interrupted by raucous cheering from the crowd, and he waits for the room to settle before he continues. “There is so much talent here, and I will take pride in being part of this organization for years to come as we keep collecting the Ws. Though I'll be retiring from playing in order to manage team operations, I'll still be here as a mentor, brother, and teammate to you all, and I look forward to all we can accomplish together. Thank you.”

Cheers rise up from the group gathered, and I glance over at Travis. I wonder how he feels about losing his quarterback. I wonder how close they are. I wonder what it'll be like for a new quarterback to step in. Will they go with their back-up, Brandon Fletcher? I'm pretty sure he was the starter before Jack was traded here. Will they trade for someone else? Or will they get someone straight out of college?

Only time will tell, and I hope we get to stick around to watch which direction this family will grow.

CHAPTER 27: TRAVIS

“What are you nervous about?” Jack asks me a few weeks after we won the big game, and it’s so strange sitting in this office having a conversation with Jack rather than getting yelled at by Calvin.

It’s also strange seeing Jack in a Vegas Aces polo instead of a jersey. He’s a businessman now, though with his real estate developments I suppose he always has been. I’ve just never seen him in that role before.

I suck in a breath before I answer him. “I guess I’ve been yelled at one too many times in this office.” I think about the last time I was in this office when I was threatened with bench time or even a trade thanks to the arrest that’s now planted firmly in my past.

Jack chuckles, and so does Steve, who sits beside him. “You know, sitting on this side of the desk is a lot more fun. The first time I sat on that side was actually the day I met my wife.” He nods to the chair beside me where my agent sits, and he seems to get a little nostalgic at that. “But that’s a whole other story. Let’s get down to it. Your contract is up, and Steve and Jimmy have negotiated the terms.” He slides a packet of papers across the desk to me with a pen sitting on the top. Even the pen has a Vegas Aces logo. “We’re prepared to offer you eighty-seven million for five years. The breakdown is listed on the top page.”

I glance at the top page and study the figures—guaranteed money plus a signing bonus that’ll be paid out as soon as I sign on the dotted line.

Five years.

That’ll put me at thirty-three—almost thirty-four. Only about six percent of wide receivers are thirty-three or older.

That means this contract will more than likely take me to the end of my career.

Over fifteen million a year plus endorsements and bonuses.

It's a lot of money...especially for doing something I fucking love to do in the place I fucking love to do it.

I sign on the line without hesitation.

I knew what Jimmy was negotiating with Steve, and to be honest, I would've played for less than eighty-seven million.

That's a hell of a lot of money.

But part of Jimmy's job is to get me the most money he can, and I wonder how much higher the Aces would've gone to keep me.

I wasn't willing to risk it.

My wife wants to stay here in Vegas. My daughter does, too. They come first, but we've talked about this at length over the last few weeks, and I'm sure this is what the three of us want. I get to play here for potentially the rest of my career, and then I get to retire and stay here in Vegas...the land of opportunity and entertainment and—for me, at least—love.

What a fucking dream.

Jack stands in his black Vegas Aces polo shirt and khaki pants, and he sticks his hand out across the desk. I stand, too, and I set my hand in his to offer a firm shake back.

It's a done deal.

“The team will look different next year, but one familiar face will still help lead us to victory,” Steve says when he shakes my hand.

He's not wrong. The team *will* look different next year.

It's the next generation of the Vegas Aces.

Over the last few weeks, more players have announced their retirement.

Ben Olson is retiring to spend more time with his wife and two kids. She's pregnant with their third, and he wants to be there for every moment. He owns a chain of health clubs, and he's excited to put more of his time and energy into watching them grow.

Josh Nolan is retiring, too. Even though his retirement means I'll likely be starting the seventeen games this season—barring any unforeseen circumstances, of course—I'm still sad to see him go. He's like a brother to me, but he wants to be healthy for his young family, too. His wife is also expecting another baby, and I don't blame him for wanting to be there with them. He and Luke are best friends, and both men have talked about taking on a larger role with the coaching staff. I'm curious to see if that'll happen or not, and I'm also curious what that will mean in terms of spending more time with his family. Coaching is much like playing—with the constant meetings and travel, anyway.

These men have been star players for the Aces for years, and it'll be a brand-new dynamic without them. They're all staying in Vegas, though, so they won't be far. They'll still come to games, but they'll get to sit and watch instead of being out on the field.

The future is uncertain and unclear for the team, but I'm excited to be coming back. I'm ready to put in the work to build another winning team, and I know whoever stands shoulder to shoulder with me on the field will feel the exact same way.

We have a celebratory drink in Jack's office before I head home to my wife and daughter...except my wife is at the bookstore and my daughter is at school.

Once everyone's home, though...we celebrate. Harper blasts Imagine Dragons as Victoria starts up the stove for our favorite homemade chicken fajitas, and we dance while we cook together, slicing and dicing and chopping as we stop to sing into a wooden spoon or to twirl and dip each other as we dance around the kitchen. It's full of loud laughter and warmth, and my heart feels full.

This whole thing may have started on quite the fumble, but with a little forward progress, we made it to where we are now: a house filled with laughter and love all because of this beautiful little family.

EPILOGUE: TRAVIS

I was asked to sit in on an interview today. Tristan sat in on one yesterday. Jack is very hands-on with this process, ensuring he selects the exact right man for the position of leading our team to victory now that Mitch Thompson retired.

Tristan liked the guy yesterday. He had an impressive history in college football as an assistant coach and as the defensive coordinator for the Vikings, but Tristan said he came off a little nervous—not what you want in a head coach, that’s for sure.

There have been seven other candidates interviewed aside from yesterday’s guy and today’s, and I have no idea what direction Jack wants to go. In every interview, though, he’s had at least one player sit in on it along with a whole host of people from the Aces staff.

I look over the impressive resume in front of me. Lincoln Nash is part of football royalty. His father played for the Giants for over a decade, his uncle played for the Titans, and his two brothers are both current players.

He was a tight end at Ohio State and played a few years with the Saints before he blew out a knee and decided to turn to coaching. He started as an offensive assistant for the Falcons and stayed there a few years before moving with the head coach to the Bengals where he worked as a tight end coach. He stayed there for a few years until he took the position of offensive coordinator for the Rams, and he’s been there ever since.

But now he’s interviewing to be the head coach of our team.

There are several stakeholders present at this interview aside from myself, including Jack and Steve, Declan, Patrick, Mitch Thompson, Luke Dalton, and the Vice President of Football Operations, Perry Watkins, the Director of Player Personnel, Sue Williams, and the Head of Scouting, Bill Pace.

He hasn't entered the room just yet, and Jack stands. "Thank you all for being here today. Your input is valuable to our decision here, and I'll be conducting the question and answer portion. Your job is to tell me what you think of what this guy has to say."

Jack looks around the room and sees we're all on board.

Given who this interviewee is and the type of family he comes from, I'm already on board with hiring him, but I'm curious about what the other candidates will bring to the table as well.

Jack opens the door, and Lincoln Nash walks in. I recognize him since he's a well-known presence in this industry along with his famous family, and he nods pleasantly to those of us gathered. He holds his head high, and he has a presence about him that I immediately like.

"Mr. Nash, welcome," Jack says. "I'll have everyone go around the table and introduce themselves before we get started."

We each say our name and who we are, and then Jack asks the first question.

"What is your coaching philosophy?" he asks.

Lincoln starts right up without hesitation. "I believe my job as a coach is to get the most out of my players by putting them in the best position. I'm here to motivate my players to realize the full potential of their talents. They made it this far, and my job is to continue to push them to their greatest heights. I believe in a powerful offense who will attack defense and make big plays. I enjoy creative play calling and I think catching a defense off-guard is one of the greatest pleasures of the game. Finally, we're here to have fun and win games, and I believe I'm the right fit for this organization to do just that."

I'm impressed with his answer on all fronts, and the rest of the interview goes just as smoothly. He's asked about his strengths and weaknesses as a coach, and how he'd build a winning team, and how he'd manage the media. He has plans

for developing the talent of younger players and older players alike, and he has goals for long-term success for the team.

All in all, it's a great interview and I can really see myself playing under this guy next season, and the next four seasons after that until my contract is up and my time here comes to an end—if that's what we all decide, anyway.

I express that to Jack once it's all over, and it's as I'm heading out to my car that I spot Jolene Bailey, a local sports reporter, walking into the building as she talks on the phone. She's a gorgeous blonde woman who takes no shit, and she's an aggressive and honest reporter. She's the type of person you either love or hate, and as I listen to her on her phone call, I nearly feel bad for the guy we just interviewed.

"I'm told they're going to announce who they just interviewed," she says to someone on the phone, and I assume she's talking about the Aces since she's walking into the Complex. "Rumor has it it's Lincoln Nash, and if it is, by God, I'll put a stop to it however I can."

My brows shoot up, and I'm half-tempted to head inside and see what she has to say.

He came off really well in the interview. He was likeable, and he had a certain charm that head coaches need to have—where he can be smart and disciplined and at the same time, he can command the attention of his players. Head coaches have to be personable and still have that attitude that tells players we aren't here to fuck around, and that guy had it.

So what's so bad about him, and why does Jolene want to make sure he isn't hired?

I guess I'll find out...but for now, it's time to head home to my girls.

And when I get there, they're finishing up their dance party as they wait for me so we can all start dinner together.

My heart is full as I join in on the dancing, and I can't help but think how much I'd love to add to this beautiful family.

I want more kids. I want to be there for all of it. I want to see Harper as a big sister, and I want to see Victoria hold a

baby we made out of our love.

These are thoughts I never thought I'd have, yet here we are. I never thought I'd be the man who wanted more kids, but the thought of filling this home with more warms my chest. It's the icing on the cake. The extra point after the touchdown. The field goal we never knew we needed.

We both have jobs we love and lives filled with friends and laughter and joy. We've made a home out of this mansion, and I have this beautiful family I never deserved. I traded in my little black book for a bookstore. I traded in my peanut butter for pink unicorns.

I wouldn't change a single second of it.

And to think...this is just the beginning for the Woods family.

* * *

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And finally, thank YOU! Thanks for being part of this Vegas Aces world. I am SO EXCITED to bring you the next chapter of the Vegas Aces with a brand-new coach and team owner as some of our major players take on new roles. But you know the Dalton boys and Ben are never very far away, and Tristan and Travis are still playing. I promise you'll see them all in this next series, so get Rivalry on pre-order today! We've got more baseball on the way, too, if you're a Vegas Heat fan, so be sure to pre-order the first book in Danny's story, Scoring Position!

Cheers until we meet again next season!

*xoxo,
Lisa Suzanne*

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Lisa Suzanne is a romance author who resides in Arizona with her husband and two kids. She's a former high school English teacher and college composition instructor. When she's not chasing or cuddling her kids, she can be found working on her latest book or watching reruns of *Friends*.

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