



ILLEGAL

contact

**RILEY HART &
NEVE WILDER**

ILLEGAL CONTACT

RILEY HART
NEVE WILDER

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SYNOPSIS

TUCKER: I've hated spoiled, cocky, Patrick Whitt since the first time I saw him at football camp when we were kids.

Once we made it to the NFL, of course he landed on the LA Royals, the biggest rivals of my team, the Denver Rush. Everything about him rubs me the wrong way...until one unexpected night we happen to rub each other the right way, and suddenly I can't get enough of him.

And Patrick can't get enough of me either.

I'm his secret and he's mine, stealing moments together, where he comes undone for me.

There's more to Patrick than I thought, and now one thing is clear to me.

Despite all of the obstacles in our way, Patrick Whitt is mine.

Whitt: I don't know what it is about Malik Tucker that gets under my skin, but he irritates the hell out of me. Maybe it's that he was drafted instead of me to my dream NFL team, the Denver Rush. Or maybe it's that he's a force to be reckoned with on the field, and adored by fans and his family off the field. He seems to be living the perfect life while I live the perfect lie.

And then we have a chance encounter that changes everything.

We keep it professional on the field, but off the field there's all kinds of illegal contact happening between us.

Every time we're together, I'm drawn in deeper, intoxicated by the way Malik makes me feel, the things we do to each other in the bedroom.

At some point we're going to have to let go, but I'm not sure I'll be able to.

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FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

Thanks so much for continuing this journey with us. We hope you enjoy *Illegal Contact*! We did want to make sure you know that this book takes place over three seasons. You'll notice new and old scenes from *Rookie Move* and *False Start*, only from different points of view. It was really fun to go back and revisit parts of previous books in this one. We really hope you enjoy it too.

Also, while we did our due diligence in regard to football research, we also ask that you keep in mind this is a romance novel, and the relationship comes first. We took some creative liberties for plot and flow of the book.

Thanks!

Neve & Riley

PROLOGUE

TUCKER

As I stood in the living room of the house party, watching Patrick Whitt dance in the middle of three girls, all of them vying for his attention, all I could think was how much I wished I could knock the smug expression off his face.

One little punch wouldn't be so bad, would it? Maybe I could even make it look like an accident...something like...oops, I almost tripped and your face caught my fist? Nah, that wouldn't work, but maybe I could come up with something else.

Technically, our asses shouldn't even have ended up at the same party. Sure, we lived in the same Florida town and both played football, but Whitt went to private school and hung out with the other trust fund kids who had more money than someone like me would ever know what to do with. It wasn't like we hung around in the same circles...but I knew him, and we ended up at the same football camp every summer—one I had to apply for a scholarship to get into. So basically, my existence was taunted by Whitt in more ways than it should be, and I really needed the universe, or whatever the fuck was out there, to stop right now.

He glanced over one of the girls' shoulders and winked at me. Did he think I couldn't get girls, too? Maybe it would be a little harder here because I wasn't wearing designer shit, but I didn't give a fuck about stuff like that. And I didn't give a fuck about Whitt.

I turned and made my way through the crowd of teenagers to search for the keg. I found it and waited in line to get my red Solo cup filled. The foam sloshed over the top, making my hand sticky, but I just wiped it on my jeans while I looked for my friend, Dimitri. It was because of him we were here. He was always trying to get into rich kid parties, though I didn't know why he gave a fuck what the Whitts of the world thought anyway, but he did.

“Yo! D!” I called over the music and people when I saw him. He was in the living room, talking to two girls I didn't recognize.

“What the fuck, bro. I was looking for you,” he said.

“Not too hard, obviously.” I nodded to the girls. “What's up, ladies? Is this guy bothering you?” I laid it on thick, and they smiled.

“Fucking idiot,” Dimitri teased. “This is Shondra and Leigh. This is Shondra's house we're partying at. Ladies, this is Malik, but everyone calls him Tucker.”

The girls were both gorgeous—Leigh with long, thick curls and Shondra with her hair in purple faux locs. It was Leigh who stepped closer to me. “Hey, Tucker.” Leigh ran her hand down my pec and let it stay there, her bright pink nails vivid against her flawless brown skin. She looked up at me beneath lashes that didn't hide her interest.

“Hey, girl.” I appreciated her confidence in touching me like that. She flashed a smile at me that I couldn't help but return. Maybe this party wasn't so bad after all.

She gave me a smile that I couldn't pretend didn't make me do the same thing.

Dimitri and I talked to Shondra and Leigh for a while, which then led to making out with them. We didn't bother to find a room. I just pressed Leigh against the wall and let my tongue explore her mouth.

“Did you see my fucking catch in the third? No one can touch me. My dad says I'm the best player that Gable High has ever seen.”

I pulled back at the sound of Whitt's voice pumping himself up. I glanced over. He and a group of people were closer to us than he had been before.

"Is something wrong?" Leigh asked.

No, no, it wasn't. I'd been kissing a beautiful girl, so why did I pull away when I heard Whitt's voice? *Because he's a cocky motherfucker and can never stop talking about how much better he is than everyone and his rich dad, who gives him all the support in the world.*

My stepdad had been the same—not the rich part but the supportive one—only he'd passed away. My real dad was a piece of shit who had bailed on us when I was young. I shook those thoughts from my head, hating that Whitt made me think about stuff like that. Especially when someone had their tongue down my throat.

I kissed her again, but every time I got really into it, his stupid fucking voice would interfere, and I'd stop. Leigh huffed and leaned in, and we tried again, but my brain was back with Whitt, wondering why I couldn't hear him anymore. Had he left?

"Is something wrong?" Leigh crossed her arms.

Before I had the chance to reply, the bane of my existence was standing beside us. "I heard that's a problem for him... satisfying women," Whitt said with a smirk.

"Fuck you." Not my most creative of comebacks, but it seemed to be all I had at the moment. Whitt screwed with my brain.

"You know what? I'm over this." Leigh walked away. My attention was pulled to her for a moment before Whitt spoke again.

"I don't swing that way. It doesn't look like you'll be fucking her either." Whitt laughed, all his friends doing the same.

The back of my neck prickled with annoyance. Why was he able to get under my skin so easily? "You sure seem really interested in me for someone who doesn't swing that way.

Even had to chase my girl away.” Not that she was mine...or like I was into dudes. “What? If you can’t have me, no one can?”

“Ooooh!” a bunch of the surrounding people taunted.

“You wish, Tucker,” Whitt replied.

“Seems like you’re the one who wishes,” I countered.

“Is that why you were staring at me while I was dancing with those girls?”

I rolled my eyes, even though I had, in fact, been staring. “You’re trippin’.”

“I know I’m better than you on the football field, but you don’t have to pretend you hate me.”

He winked, and again, why couldn’t I punch him? Why wasn’t that a thing I could do? Besides the fact that, really, I was a lover and not a fighter...and his rich daddy would likely sue me or get me thrown in jail. At the very least, I’m sure I wouldn’t be able to go to Football Plus Camp anymore, and as much as I hated being there with him, it was the best chance I had of improving my skill even more so I could play college football and ultimately go into the NFL. “Fuck you,” I replied again, because what else could I say to him? Even if I won this round, people like Whitt always won in the long run.

I walked away.

It wasn’t the last time I ran into him that night. Later, he was sitting at the table, talking about his dad and how much he wanted to nurture Whitt’s career and how proud his family was of the fact that they just knew he would make it to the NFL one day. They must have been really close because Whitt was always talking him up, bragging about how much his dad supported him and how there was nothing he wouldn’t do for Whitt when it came to football.

It must be nice to have the perfect fucking life.

I left the party after that, walking two miles to the nearest bus station and then taking the bus back to my neighborhood. D hadn’t fucked up with Shondra, so he was staying there.

Even though it was after midnight, my mom was sitting in the kitchen, wearing her uniform from the restaurant. She worked Monday through Friday in an office and then evenings and weekends waitressing, just to make ends meet. It's what she'd done when my real dad bailed. Then she'd met Steven. He'd been great—treating me and Kayla as if we were his own, even after they had Zuri and Savanna. She'd been able to quit the restaurant, too, but then a heart attack had taken him away from us.

“I thought you were staying at Dimitri's?” Mama asked before giving me a kiss.

“It didn't work out.”

“You smell like beer. Boy, you know how I feel about drinking!” Mom gave me that look that said I was fucked.

“I only had one. The other someone spilled on me.”

“You're sixteen. You don't need to be drinking at all...or at a party where there's drinking. You're gonna get yourself into trouble.”

“I'll be careful,” I told her, but we both knew it didn't always matter how careful we were. Trouble could still find people like us.

“I just love you so much...and I want what's best for you. You got a bright future ahead of you, Malik, and I don't want to see you mess it up.”

“I know, Mama,” I replied before sitting at the small table across from her.

“I'm sorry. I just want you to have it easier. You're so damn talented, and I'm so proud of you...Steven was, too. I can't wait to see what the future holds for you.”

All she wanted was for her kids to be happy. I was second out of four, Kayla being the oldest. She would graduate high school this year and would be going to community college and staying home. I wanted a better life for them, wanted to play the sport I loved and to support my mom so she didn't ever have to work again.

“The NFL, baby,” I said, making her laugh. “You hungry? I’ll make something for you to eat, and then you should get to bed.”

Mom grabbed my hand and squeezed, her brown skin darker than mine since Kayla’s and my biological dad had been white. “How about we make it together?”

“Deal,” I told her. And that’s exactly what we did.

A year and a half later

It was the first day of another year at camp. We had an NFL player coming to spend a day with us toward the end of the two weeks, and I was fucking stoked. This year was the first one I'd feared I wouldn't be accepted, that they'd found another low-income center who deserved the scholarship more than me. Maybe they had and that person had changed their mind since the letter, which usually came several weeks before camp, had come just a few days ago.

Mom moved heaven and earth to change plans to make sure she could get me here since she hadn't scheduled any time off, and we had to be dropped off by a parent or guardian.

Parents always stayed for most of the first day. Mom had just left a little while ago, and I was sitting under the bleachers they kept close to the field for parents and sometimes scouts who came to watch. I liked to go under here to chill, only this time, I was wondering where Whitt was. Not a year went by that I'd come to Football Plus and he hadn't been here, but I hadn't seen him or his dad all day. He still played, that much I knew. At least he had during football season because, even though our school didn't play his, Whitt's name was in every article and on every fucking local news channel when he played.

But he wasn't at camp...and I was still thinking about the motherfucking guy I hated. I had no idea why he messed with my brain so much, and I didn't like it at all.

It was only a few minutes later when I heard the voice that haunted my nightmares—Patrick Whitt.

“Dad...people are going to wonder why we came so late...”

I snuck quietly toward the direction of his voice, still trying to stay hidden beneath the bleachers.

“I don’t care, Patrick. You’re lucky we allowed you to come at all. Don’t you think it’s time you put this silly dream to bed? We’ve indulged you long enough. You’re a Whitt, and you belong at Whitt Industries.”

“It’s not silly,” Whitt replied. “This is what I want—what I’ve always wanted.”

Silly dream? What the fuck? This wasn’t what Whitt led us to believe about his dad at all.

“And what makes you think we always get what we want? You have for most of your life, but you’re almost eighteen. What are the chances you’re going to make it to the NFL?”

“Really good, which you would know if you watched me play. If you actually listened when scouts or Coach...” His words trailed off, and I couldn’t hear what he said next.

I was trying to figure out if I’d fallen asleep and was having a really weird Whitt-dream or something. His dad never watched him play? Now that I thought about it, Whitt always bragged about how supportive his parents were, but neither of them was ever at our end-of-camp scrimmage games. Whitt always made up some excuse about work shit.

“I’m tired of pretending like playing a sport your whole life is a viable career path. This business has been in our family for over a hundred years, and you want to throw that away for a silly game?”

“How many times do I have to tell you it’s not silly to me!” Whitt shouted. “It’s the only thing I’m good at! The only thing I love!”

Whitt’s dad’s cell rang. “I need to take this. I won’t be able to pick you up at the end of camp. I already had to rearrange my entire schedule to bring you since they want a parent or guardian here for drop-off and your mom was unavailable. Candace will pick you up though.”

His dad answered the call and walked away. Whitt closed his eyes and dropped his head back, his body language completely changing. Gone was the cocky shit-talker, and instead, he looked...fuck, he looked really goddamned sad.

His shoulders curled in, and his body nearly slumped. This wasn't the Whitt I knew.

I took a step forward, then another, watching as Whitt took a few deep breaths. When his eyes opened, they automatically landed on me, rotating through shock, embarrassment, then anger.

“Are you fucking spying on me?” He stormed at me as if he were going to punch me.

“Don't give yourself that much credit. I was chillin' under here and heard you... I...I'm sorry.” Why did he lie about his dad? I had no problem letting people know my sperm donor had been a son of a bitch.

His blue gaze hardened, hooded beneath his thick lashes. “Don't feel sorry for me, and I swear to Christ, Tucker, if you say a goddamned word—”

“I won't,” I cut him off. I didn't like the guy, but I disliked his dad more now. And I wasn't the guy who spread people's business. Whitt's shit was his own.

“Fuck off,” he replied like I hadn't answered in agreement with him. Then Whitt turned and walked away.

PART ONE

FIRST HALF

This section crosses over with the timeline of Rookie Move, occurring during Garrett McRae's first season with the Rush.

WHITT

Preseason was one of my favorite times of the year. Even entering my fifth season in the league as a cornerback, the anticipation of what was to come still electrified me, and it wasn't just because every year meant the fresh possibility of getting to the Super Bowl. It was also the energy level of the team, knowing that all the hard work we'd been doing off-season and during training camp was about to be tested. I'd always been a competitive motherfucker, and this preseason was no different. We'd nailed our match against Tennessee last week, and a bunch of us had been gathering to watch the other team's games whenever we could.

This afternoon, seven of the OG's who'd been with the Royals as long as I had had gathered at our QB, Karim LaForge's, Thousand Oaks pad to watch the Rush take on Las Vegas.

I was hoping they'd choke, but after the first quarter, I couldn't deny the Rush were looking even better this season with the addition of Garrett McRae, their rookie wide receiver, and Brandon Cross, their new tight end.

"Okay, McRae's pretty decent," LaForge said with a groan as the Rush completed another pass. "He always play like this?" He looked over at me from his beat-up old recliner we called his throne. He'd had it since college, and it stuck out like a sore thumb among his other expensive furniture, but he swore it was good luck and that he'd never get rid of it.

"Am I his rep?" I laughed. "I have no idea."

“You played with Houston in college, though, right?”

“For one year before I transferred to Franklin U. Garrett was still a kid then.” But apparently, one who’d grown up to be every bit the threat his older brother was before he’d been permanently sidelined by a knee injury.

As the Rush offense trotted back down the field to set up their next play, the camera panned to the crowd and found Garrett’s family. Houston was there, of course. He’d talked about his family a lot freshman year when we’d played together at Southern U. They’d always seemed tight-knit.

Envy wound through the pit of my stomach. I had a sister, but she was a decade older than me and seemed more like a distant relation than anything else. She was already married with kids and living in Seoul, where several of the Whitt Industries factories and warehouses were located. And though I was way too old for the sad, lonely boy schtick, it crept in on occasion. Still, I’d grown up well taken care of by what I called accessory parental units, had anything I could have wanted, gone to the best schools, and lived what anyone else would consider a luxury lifestyle. And I’d achieved my dream of playing pro football in spite of my family’s wishes and despite not being drafted to the Denver Rush like I’d initially wanted. I tried to remember that when those moments of envy crept in. I had nothing to complain about. There wasn’t a motherfucker out there that would ever spare a moment of sorrow for me.

I focused back on the screen in time to see Tucker, the Rush’s starting center, hunker over in preparation to snap the ball to Warner Ramsey, their quarterback. Tucker had been smaller than me the first couple of years we’d attended the same football camp, something I’d taken a weird, petty pride in. And then he’d hit a growth spurt. Now, the guy was solid as an anvil but fast as a tornado. He was cocky as hell, too, which the media and fans seemed to find somehow charming. Not me.

Yet, I couldn’t stop looking at him as he crouched, the round muscles of his quads tensed, the pop of his bicep visible even from the zoomed-out angle. He was a machine, and I

knew if the camera had been close enough to capture his expression, his jaw would be squared, eyes laser focused and intent the way I'd seen plenty of times at camp. He'd been a favorite there, making friends off the field but all business on the turf. Meanwhile, I'd always felt like I had some kind of perimeter fence around me that kept people at a distance. "Closed off," a girlfriend had told me once, and I knew damn well what that meant but not why I was like that.

My phone chimed with a text, and I lazily thumbed it open to see a message from Candice.

Candice: I know what you're watching right now.

Me: Clown porn?

Candice: I'll pretend I didn't just read that. The Rush making you nervous?

Me: Like I said, clown porn.

Candice's eye roll emoji made me grin. She and her husband, Leon, had started working for my parents when I was just a kid. Candice had moved up from house manager to general life manager. She and Leon were the only ones who'd been visibly excited when I was drafted to the Royals.

Candice: Did you call your mom yet?

Me: No. She wants me to call later since they're on Oz time.

Candice: Don't forget.

Twenty years later and she was still trying to engineer the whole nuclear family ideal. I didn't have the heart to tell her outright that just wasn't in the Whitt gene pool.

Me: Okay, mom2. Game's back on, so I've gotta run. I got the tickets you requested set aside for the first home game. They'll be at the VIP box office. Friends and family section.

Candice: Okay, sweetheart. We're looking forward to it! Don't forget to call your mom!

I sighed at the screen, even though a smile tickled the corners of my mouth at the second reminder.

Me: Heard you the first time. Tell Leon hey for me.

I tossed my phone on the table and got back to the game, where Garrett was tearing up the field all over again. They were definitely going to be a challenge this year, and I was determined to be ready for whatever they threw our way.

I GOT HOME A LITTLE AFTER TEN, TOSSED MY KEYS ONTO THE kitchen counter, and immediately opened all the sliding doors to the balcony before pouring myself a glass of whiskey and taking it onto the deck with me. The Hollywood Hills house was the first thing I'd ever purchased using my own money.

Back then, my pro football dreams had seemed like a long shot to my parents, which was probably part of the reason they hadn't given me too much grief over my choice to go to Southern; they figured I'd be back eventually, and I had. Sort of. Southern U wasn't Stanford, but it'd been the switch I'd needed to kick my game into high gear.

As I sipped my whiskey, I couldn't shake the image of Tucker from my head. His strength and focus had been intimidating on the field, and it was all I could think about. Maybe it was the fact that he seemed to have it all together. Meanwhile, I felt like I was constantly struggling to keep up with expectations I wasn't sure were mine or someone else's. I knew it was stupid to dwell on someone who was little more than a stranger I used to go to camp with and who'd once witnessed a moment between me and my dad that still made me feel exposed and vulnerable when I thought about it. I hated that feeling. Or to dislike him just because he'd been drafted to the Rush instead of me in a plot twist not even the best NFL draft analysts had predicted, but I did, and the sour taste he left in my mouth had lingered even after multiple seasons with the Royals and despite how much I'd grown to love playing for them.

I pulled up a replay of their earlier preseason game via the NFL+ app and fast-forwarded to the end of the game, checking out the team interviews I'd missed earlier. I sped through Ramsey's and Garrett's interviews, pausing only when I

caught a glimpse of Tucker in the background, high-fiving who I assumed was one of his siblings. I waited to see if they'd interview him, but after another minute and a glance at the time, I closed out the app and called my mom's phone.

"Evening, Patrick," she said, "Your father and I were just talking about you. Sure wish we could convince you to fly out here and check out this new warehouse with us." She did that a lot, just sort of barreled into a conversation without the standard exchange of "hello" or "how are you."

"I'd love to, but you know I'm knee-deep in preseason stuff," I responded with rote diplomacy.

"Of course," she said like she'd forgotten, though I knew she hadn't. My career was mostly treated as a minor inconvenience rather than the substantial accomplishment and accompanying paycheck it was. I'd gotten used to it. They'd never understood the allure for me or that I didn't want to just be enfolded into the family dynasty. Hell, most people wouldn't understand, and I couldn't entirely explain it myself. I just knew that from the second I'd stepped on the football field, it'd felt right. It had ignited a passion inside me I'd never felt for polo, piano, debate team, math bowl, or any number of other "appropriate" extracurriculars for a Whitt.

"Your father and I watched some of your preseason game," she continued smoothly. "The team is looking really good this year. Think LaForge can get you all to the Super Bowl?" The second disappointment I'd delivered to my parents was that I wasn't a quarterback, which was apparently the only acceptable position in football. I'd never been cut out for that, though, definitely not the way LaForge was or Warner Ramsey. I was meant for the grind.

I finished off my whiskey, focusing on the way the smooth slide of it down my throat soothed my burning thoughts. "It'll be a team effort, as always, Mom. But I agree that we're strong this year."

She made some small talk about the weather and other topics that hardly seemed important before getting to the reason she'd probably asked me to call in the first place.

“We’re hosting another gala this year, and your father and I would love it if you could make it,” she said, excitement creeping into her voice. The Whitt Industries annual gala was a revered who’s who of industry leaders she’d started hosting a decade ago. “And before you can say no, we’ve scheduled it during your bye week this time, so no excuses!”

My brow wrinkled. This was new. Though they asked me to attend every year, I usually couldn’t go due to football commitments. I straightened in my chair, on guard. Was it possible they just wanted to see me? Or was there some ulterior motive? The fact that I was even considering the latter made my head hurt. “Then I can probably make that, sure,” I said, even though flying to Naples to hobnob with their business associates was about the last thing I wanted to do during my only break of the season.

“Ahhh, I’m so pleased to hear that, Patrick.” After a few more minutes of chatter, she excused herself from the phone call, saying she and my dad had a dinner to attend.

Restless, I thumbed through my phone contacts after hanging up. There were plenty of names and numbers in there. I’d never had trouble finding anyone to keep me company, both when I’d played college ball or when I’d first gone pro, but for the last couple of years, nothing had stuck, nothing was exciting, and I was sure, as always, it was me, not the women. I was gone too much, was too closed off.

Could you be a more miserable bastard? The thought flitted through my head as I scrolled, then paused to squint at the three Madelines listed one after another—one of whom didn’t even have a last name listed, just the letter *T*—trying to conjure up their faces. The no-last-name one kept tripping me up. Whatever. Regardless, what I could remember of them wasn’t more tempting than my bed down the hall.

I scrolled down further, then zipped back up and halted at the name that had caught my eye. Malik Tucker. Why the fuck did I have his number? Had he put it in my phone? Had I? And when the hell would that have happened?

I scratched my jaw and racked my brain, the pleasant buzz I had spreading to my limbs and making me drowsy. Try as I might, I couldn't recall any time in my life when we'd exchanged numbers.

I hesitated over his contact, considering asking outright, then thought of his face on the screen earlier and shook my head at myself before pocketing my phone and carrying my glass inside. Fuck that dude.

TUCKER

I loved playing center. It was what I'd wanted from the moment I'd fallen in love with football. The guards and tackles to my left and right were badass and athletic as fuck, which I was, too, but I loved that the offensive line revolved around me. That it was me who made sure my line was in the right places to block the correct defenders, me who had to be able to make split-second decisions and understand the defense of each team we played.

People talked shit sometimes, said centers didn't have what it took to play some of the other positions or we were a slower step, but the quarterback and I controlled the offense. Every fucking offensive play we ran, I was the director of traffic. Nothing happened without me and my quarterback kicking it off.

I took my spot at the line of scrimmage, my Rush teammates around me. Ramsey had called a play, and I watched Pittsburgh closely, trying to read what their plan was. I couldn't ask for a better first game of the season since we were currently wiping the floor with them. As cocky as I was on the outside, I didn't let it affect me inside, and I sure as shit didn't let it risk my game. Until the final second of the clock ticked off, I wasn't going to count this as a win. Anything could happen.

"White eighty! White eighty! Set! Hut!" Ramsey called out, and I snapped the ball to him, immediately blocking the nose tackle to keep his ass from crossing the line and getting close to my QB.

Phillips was a big motherfucker and wasn't backing down as I fought against his massive body weight. Every muscle inside of me was bruised, but I didn't feel it during the game. It was just something I knew was there. Later, I'd be miserable, though, and I fucking loved it.

Rams got the ball to Ward, who managed to push through and earn a few more yards.

"We're gonna go long and get the ball to Garrett," Ramsey said in the huddle, then let us know which exact play he wanted to run. It was the third quarter, and we were up by fourteen. Baby G was killing it.

"Let's do this," I said and headed back for the line of scrimmage.

I examined the defense, watching for any clues about what they had planned or if they'd changed anything up. If I had any suspicions, I'd be the one to communicate them to my offensive line.

Ramsey called out the cadence again, and as soon as the word "hut" left his mouth, I hiked the ball to him with perfect fucking accuracy.

We created a pocket for him, keeping Ramsey safe while Nance, who I fucking hated, and G bolted toward the end zone. There was a man on G's ass, the space between them small, to the point where I wasn't sure Ramsey was going to be able to get the pass off and he'd have to make a different split-second decision. At the last moment, Baby G put a little more space between them, and Ramsey launched the ball in front of him, right where it needed to be, Garrett crossing into the zone to get his first touchdown in a regular season game.

"Fuck yes!" I punched into the air, happy for him. Garrett did an excited dance, and then we nailed the extra point, putting us up by twenty-one.

After the game, Alice Andrews from NBC grabbed Ramsey and Garrett as I made my way to the locker room. It was always certain positions they wanted to speak with the

most, the center not being one of them, and I was fine with that.

We showered there, my body starting to feel some of the aches and pains of getting my ass beat for a living.

We were staying in Pittsburgh tonight, so once we were all set, we headed for the bus that would take us back to the hotel.

I sat next to Ramsey, but he seemed distracted, probably because Baby G and Cross, another rookie, wouldn't shut the fuck up, talking about the game. I got it, though. We'd all been there. Most of the time, I'd be right there along with them, but...I didn't know. I just wasn't feeling it tonight. I probably needed to get laid. It had been a while, if I was being honest. Fixing that was suddenly on my agenda for tonight.

“We're out of here at 4:00 a.m. No going out, no women, get your sleep, and then get your asses up to get back to Denver. We won tonight, but that work's not done,” Coach told us when we arrived at the hotel.

Fuck, there went my plan to get my dick wet.

I roomed with Cross, so the two of us headed to number 714 together. While I didn't know him well yet, he was good people and played good football. He and G had already gotten close. “Turn on ESPN, would ya?” he asked the second we were tucked away behind the door.

“You say that as if it wasn't going to be the first thing I did,” I chuckled.

I grabbed the remote because if we couldn't get laid, watching football highlights was the next best thing.

After stepping out of my shoes, I went to tug my shirt off just as I heard, “We played a good game tonight. Our passes were on target, defense was tight. We wanted the win, and we got it. We'll study some film and get ready for the next game.”

Fucking Whitt. Now, he'd plague my nightmares with his stupid, annoying, aristocratic voice. And stupid, fucking aristocratic looks. He was the definition of a bougie white dude—his short brown hair always sexily mussed but also looking styled at the same time. His eyes with those thick-ass

lashes and blue irises that rivaled the ocean. I thought those eyes might hold some secrets. His jaw was square, almost in an unreal way, like someone had crafted his smug ass out of stone. Ugh. He still got on my last nerve. All he had to do was breathe.

“Study some film and get ready for the next game,” I mocked, turning in time to see his pompous smile. Cute smile, but still snobbish.

Cross laughed. “You guys must be close,” he teased.

“He wishes,” I replied, climbing into bed in my shorts.

“Yeah, I’ve heard he’s a dick.”

“That’s an understatement.” He was arrogant, annoying, and, unfortunately for me, sexy as fuck. Luckily, the second he opened his mouth, I typically forgot how much I wanted to bone him—if for no other reason than to make him come his brains out so he remembered for the rest of his life that I gave him the best orgasm he’d ever had.

Nope. I hadn’t thought about that before at all.

Clearly, I still had feelings when it came to Patrick Whitt. The years hadn’t changed anything except that ever since college, when I’d fucked around with a few guys, I could admit he got my dick hard.

We watched ESPN for a while so we could get caught up on who won their games before we hit the sack. Four came way too early, most of us half-dead and quiet as we headed for the airport and then back to Denver.

My house was smaller than most of the guys’ in the league. It already felt too empty, too quiet, so I couldn’t imagine if I had a mansion like some folks did. Sure, I couldn’t pretend it wasn’t bigger than anything I’d lived in when I was growing up, but it was a modest, four-bedroom house, which was big enough that if shit ever went down, my mama and my sisters could stay with me. Not having them around was why things felt too quiet. When we were together, we were always giving each other shit. That was how the Tuckers rolled.

I changed and went on a quick jog before heading back home and soaking in an ice bath that nearly froze my dick off.

Once I was dressed and ready for the day, I called Andre, the little brother I'd been assigned through a program for at-risk youth.

It was important to me to give back, to help kids who had grown up like me, without a father, whether it was from them being a deadbeat like my sperm donor or dead like the man who had been my dad in the ways that mattered.

“Hey, bro. What’s up?” I asked when he answered.

“Chillin’. I watched the game last night. You’re the fuckin’ man.”

“What did we say about cursing?”

He grumbled. “Please, it’s not like you don’t do it.”

He had a point, but I was also grown. “There’s a time and a place. Also, it’s disrespectful to curse in front of people who are older than you.”

“You’re right, I forgot you’re older than dirt,” Andre teased, chuckling. The little shit liked to give me hell, but I couldn’t pretend like I didn’t enjoy it. The fact that he felt comfortable enough to do so was important to me. Andre also didn’t treat me like I was famous, which I also loved. To him, I was a positive role model who cared about him, and there wasn’t a title more important than that.

We chatted for a little while and made plans to hang out before I ended the call.

We didn’t have practice today, so I grabbed my notebooks, settled in on the couch, and spent the rest of the day studying film for our upcoming games.

Our offense wasn’t going to run itself.

And later, when I climbed in the bed and beat off, there was a pair of pretty blue eyes and an annoying, regal jawline in my head.

WHITT

The woman was a ten. Muscular and fit, with a smile that dazzled—one she'd been aiming in my direction since we'd arrived at Sway earlier. She was vaguely familiar, too, so as I finally slid into a pocket of space at the bar where she was sitting to make my move, I cocked my head. "Where do we know each other from?"

She laughed. "That's your line?"

"It's genuine curiosity."

"If you're wondering if we've slept together, I can assure you we haven't."

"Ouch." I placed a hand over my heart. "These assumptions wound me."

"I'm almost certain they don't, Patrick Whitt." She extended her hand, blue eyes sparkling. "Monica Laprese."

"Monica..." I drawled, trying to place her before the lightbulb went off in my head. "The trainer." She had a badass fitness-focused IG that had become popular over the last few years with its emphasis on healthy bodies of all sizes—not just skinny bodies—which happened to be right up my alley. I'd had enough skinny debutante types foisted on me in my formative years to last a lifetime. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but I just kinda appreciated a woman who looked like she would go head-to-head with me on some wings, could possibly kick my ass, and didn't care about being a size zero. "Damn, I really love your channel and all the work you're doing. Cool content."

It was her turn to cock her head at me. “Alright, that’s a little better.”

“That wasn’t a line.”

Monica grinned. “I know. That’s the part that made it better. Want to sit?”

I glanced behind me. A bunch of my Royals teammates had taken over one of the bar’s VIP sections earlier but had scattered over the course of the night as the drinks flowed. No one was gonna even notice I was gone at this point, and I wasn’t exactly known for being the team’s Mr. Congeniality. So I sat.

A half hour and another round of beers later, I made my way toward the bathroom with a grin. Monica was cool, and I was pretty sure I was gonna get laid tonight, which would be the perfect cherry on top of our killer win against the Rush. Those fuckers had been so sure they had the game in the bag with the new addition of Houston McRae’s brother as their wide receiver.

But the little rookie had apparently forgotten basic ball-handling skills and had practically placed the pigskin in my hands, sealing our win.

Even better, I’d had a front-row seat of Malik Tucker’s usual cocky smirk replaced with a baleful frown as he realized the game was effectively over. The guy had only become cockier over the years, even if it wasn’t unwarranted, considering how damn hard he played, but still. He got on my nerves and under my skin. So yeah, I was on cloud nine.

Fuck him, and fuck the Rush.

I pushed thoughts of him away and exited the bathroom, already anticipating the rest of the night with Monica as I walked down the hall and back into the main bar before stopping in my tracks.

Someone was sitting in the seat I’d recently vacated. Someone with light brown skin, dark, close-cropped hair, and broad shoulders.

I choked back a territorial growl as I approached and pasted on a tight smile instead. I thumbed over my shoulder. “I think you’re in the wrong seat. Loser section is over there.” Tucker brought out the juvenile in me, apparently. While I wasn’t ever going to be mistaken for a social butterfly, Tucker seemed to know people everywhere and even had a couple of friends who played for the Royals. So while his presence wasn’t exactly surprising, it was annoying as fuck.

Tucker glanced around, his smile never faltering. “Aren’t you supposed to be on a bus or private plane? Or maybe there’s a pier you could go jump off of?”

Monica laughed. “Am I sensing a little NFL rivalry here?”

Tucker slugged my shoulder. “Nah, we go way back, don’t we, Whitt?” He leaned closer to Monica and cupped a hand over his mouth like he was letting her in on a secret. “We used to go to football camp together as kids. Dude couldn’t even catch a ball. I had to teach him how fingers work.” He wiggled his demonstratively.

“I had to teach him how to sprint,” I fired back. “Those giant clown feet of his had him constantly on his ass until I showed him how to put one in front of the other.” Tucker had been a kinda goofy fucker during our camp days, but his times had improved dramatically. Not that I’d ever let him know I’d been paying attention. “He’s still workshopping all that. S’why I outrun him on the regular. You break 4.48 yet, buddy?” I feigned concern, and Tucker’s grin faltered briefly as Monica cackled.

“I don’t need to, *Pat*. How many pass blocks did I have just tonight?”

“And what was the final score?”

He shrugged. “We’ll be back up next game.”

“Maybe your new rookie isn’t all he was cracked up to be.”

Tucker waved a hand. “He is. Just wait.”

Just when I was about to tell him to fuck off, Tucker slid off the seat he’d stolen from me and gestured toward it. “All

yours.”

“Thanks. Have a good night.” The tension in my shoulders relaxed by degrees.

Until he skirted around me and sat down on the other side of Monica and beamed at me. “I will. It’s just getting started.”

I was hoping Monica would tell him to get lost, but instead, she seemed amused by the two of us. “I wanna hear more about these two left feet of Tucker’s and fumbly fingers of yours.” She wagged her brows coyly.

“They don’t fumble anymore, I promise you that.” Behind Monica’s back, I flipped Tucker off deftly as he choked-laughed. “We did go to football camp together, but this dude doesn’t know shit about me.”

“Sure about that?” The intensity of Tucker’s gaze caught me off guard, and I knew he spotted it before I could smooth out my expression. I’d never forgotten about him overhearing the tense conversation with my dad, and as stupid as it probably was, and despite how far I thought I’d come with all that, it still filled me with embarrassment. I’d been raised in a family where appearances were everything, where being caught in a vulnerable moment meant the other person had leverage and could take advantage of you. It was even shittier when you felt compelled to guard yourself with your own family. I’d been successfully wearing a mask for over a decade, and only one person, to my knowledge, had ever spotted the cracks in it. I hated how exposed that made me feel.

I steeled my jaw, aware Tucker was trying to get under my skin. The best thing I could do was not let him, so I turned the conversation to Monica. Tucker could sit here all night. He wasn’t gonna get in the way of me closing this deal. “We just run balls down a field. I wanna hear about how you got into the whole personal training gig in the first place.”

TUCKER WOULDN'T FUCKING LEAVE. THE THREE OF US HAD been talking for an hour, Monica acting as a kind of hinge between the two of us, asking about our teams, Denver. Tucker's presence was like a fly buzzing around my head, irritating and distracting. I was ready to make my move with Monica, but it was hard to concentrate with him there. And, unfortunately, Monica seemed to be enjoying his company as much as mine. I had to reluctantly admit Tucker was pretty funny when he wasn't being a cocky asshole, but my patience was wearing thin, and I knew I needed to make a move before Tucker ruined my chances.

I leaned in closer to Monica. "You know, I've been wanting to switch up my training routine lately. Maybe you could give me some personal tips."

"Sounds like a snooze fest. How about you come with me and have the time of your life," Tucker cut in before Monica could reply.

"Orrrr..." Monica batted her lashes coquettishly at us. "You could both come home with me. I'm always up for an adventure, and I haven't been sitting here with the two of you all night just to play eenie-meanie-miney-mo."

While I tried not to choke on my last swallow of beer, Tucker chuckled without missing a beat. "A woman who knows what she wants. I definitely appreciate that. I'm down, but Pretty Boy Floyd over there is probably a little too uptight for the kind of adventure you and I are game for. Maybe we should leave him behind."

That definitely wasn't in the fucking plan. Tucker, Monica, and me? It was laughable. So laughable there was no fucking way he was serious, no way this would actually go down. One of us was gonna concede, and it definitely wasn't gonna be me.

"I'm in." I affected a casual shrug, loving the way Tucker tried to hide his double take. Catching him off guard was instantly my new favorite pastime. *How's it feel now, fucker? Still keen on a threesome?* The expression on Tucker's face suggested he was two seconds from tapping out, so I pressed

forward. “I’m not kissing him or anything.” I offered the caveat with an affable grin. “Maybe ol’ Tuck here could learn a few things, though, take some notes.”

Tucker smirked. “That some sort of flex? I never assumed that bougie mouth was good for anything besides talking shit.”

“Ouch,” Monica whispered with a smile and then said, louder, “This night is already one of the most interesting of my life.”

I pressed my lips together, tamping down the urge to bite out a reply as my blood pressure spiked. Interesting wasn’t exactly what I’d call it.

“So... In or out, fellas?” Monica continued, sliding from her stool and tossing some cash on the bar before she stretched, giving me a peek of her smooth stomach that I would’ve been able to appreciate much more if Tucker’s big-ass shoulders hadn’t been lurking behind her.

My gaze swerved toward Tucker, where it met his dark eyes. He arched a brow, maintaining the level stare.

I held steady, too, as I said, “I’m in.”

“In,” Tucker fired back just as quickly, and I knew just by the return of his cocky smirk I’d shown my hand. If I bailed now, he’d win. Petty? Yeah. But fuck it.

“Let’s go, then.”

I’D NEVER BEEN IN A THREESOME THAT INCLUDED ANOTHER man. The closest I’d come was freshman year of college when my roommate and I had both hooked up with other women at the same time in our cramped room in the athletic dorms. It’d been dark, I’d been drunk as hell, and the memory was fuzzier than a yellow peach. Nothing like the technicolor eroticism happening right next to me as Monica lowered the zipper on Tucker’s fly, took his cock in her hand, and stroked it with an appreciative hum.

I'd assumed it was going to be awkward as fuck, and it had definitely started that way with the three of us returning to Monica's apartment and sharing some beers on her couch. I didn't know how these things kicked off, but I guess Tucker and Monica were no strangers to multiple partners at once because somewhere around my fifth nervous swallow of beer, they'd seemed to communicate telepathically that it was go time, Tucker pulling Monica onto his lap and kissing her long and slow.

And now I couldn't take my eyes off them. Off Tucker, more specifically. He let his head fall back, lips parted in bliss as Monica licked and sucked his tip while stroking his shaft. I'd never seen that expression on him, how it softened his features in some places, tightened them in others. And his dick, Jesus, it was so hard. He was disarmingly sexy, and I hated how my cock was reacting. I was supposed to be focused on Monica, supposed to be inserting myself into the fray, touching her, kissing her, *something*, but three minutes in and I was more curious about how Tucker kissed, what he tasted like.

As if he could sense my thoughts or, more likely, sense my eyes on him since I couldn't seem to tear them away, Tucker cut his gaze in my direction, a brow arching lazily. "You a voyeur, Bougie, or are you going to actually participate?"

A muscle in my jaw ticked. "I'm just patient, that's all."

Monica chuckled. "No room for patience here," she said and scooted sideways, sliding between my thighs and pushing them wider as she lowered my zipper. "Fuck," I gasped, caught off guard by her speed as she pulled out my cock and immediately wrapped her lips around it, wasting no time. My fingers flexed against the couch cushion, a ragged groan leaving my chest, and for one brief second, I forgot about Tucker completely. Then I could feel his eyes on me, the warmth of his knee pressed to mine. When had we gotten so close together on the couch? I slid a half-lidded gaze sideways, and our eyes locked for a long, heated beat before I gritted my teeth and jerked my attention back to the crown of Monica's head where it was supposed to be.

Monica moved back and forth between us, working us with deft, expert touches. Her head game was fucking amazing, so why did my attention keep shifting to Tucker and how, gradually, contact between our bodies increased? Knee to knee, then thigh to thigh. It was like my dick was wrapped in gauze, the sensation of Monica's mouth muffled versus the acute awareness of Tucker's thick quad hard against mine. When she rose from her knees to climb on the couch, she straddled the place where we joined and leaned to kiss Tucker before moving to me. I was sure it was my imagination, but I swore I could taste him on her, and it amped me up even more. I tried to lose myself in the softness of her lips as I kissed her and got distracted all over again as Tucker teased his fingertips over Monica's breasts, his big knuckles brushing over my chest. I kissed down the side of her neck, tossing a glare Tucker's way when the back of his hand moved lower, pressing into my abs. The half-smile playing over his face said he knew exactly what he was doing and that he was enjoying the hell out of trying to provoke me into bailing. I pulled Monica tighter to my body, trapping his hand between us, but the fucker only exhaled an appreciative sigh a second before he slid his hand free, fingers dragging over my aching cock. If I hadn't kept my mouth busy on Monica's skin, I would've moaned at the contact, regardless of how brief it was. Filthy images played behind my eyes of Tucker wrapping his hand around my cock and stroking me. But that was definitely where that stupid fantasy was going to stay.

Monica rolled her hips against me, and my hands slid to her waist, keeping the friction concentrated while I tried to ignore that Tucker's eyes remained trained on us. Was he curious about me the same way I was him? Surely fucking not. We were nothing more than opponents. More likely, he was just enjoying the free show the way I had been. At least, that's what I was going with.

Monica leaned back, her appraising gaze moving between us. "How about we take this to the bedroom, boys. I need more space for what I'm about to do to the two of you."

I could tap out right now, make some excuse about needing to get back to my hotel or that I was tired, but a quick glance

at Tucker's sharp eyes and the amused hitch of his mouth had me twining my fingers through hers. "Lead the way, gorgeous."

I CRACKED AN EYE OPEN, SCANNING THE WEAK GRAY LIGHT filtering through the blinds before glancing at my phone on the bedside table. 5:00 a.m. Still plenty of time before departure.

Disoriented, I rose onto an elbow at the quiet click of sound to see the bedroom door shut while, beside me, Tucker stirred and exhaled a long breath.

Great, Monica had left the two of us alone.

Tucker groaned, stretching his arms over his head, and I went still, closing my eyes and slowing my breathing, hoping he'd stay asleep long enough for me to get the fuck out of there without having to deal with him. The night filtered through my brain in flashes and tightened in my stomach. I squeezed my eyes shut harder, trying to push the images away until the movement beside me stopped.

My clothes were on the floor just beside me, along with my shoes. I should be able to slide quietly out of the bed and get out the door with them before Tucker woke up; I just needed to be stealthy.

With that plan in mind, I peered through a slitted eyelid to check Tucker's status again and nearly jumped out of my skin to find him staring at me.

He grinned. "Morning, Bougie. That pillow sleep alright, or was the lack of feathers a problem for your aristocratic neck?"

"I've slept on worse." I feigned nonchalance. "Is she coming back?"

"What, to bring us donuts and coffee?" He laughed. "She had that early morning training session with a client, remember? Mmmm, I hit that tight ass again in her shower, though. I won't be forgetting it anytime soon either." He ran a

hand over his chest and offered me a lazy smile that washed over me like a wave of heat. How was he so cavalier and mellow at the same time while my entire body was one big knot? Including my dick.

“No you didn’t.” I would’ve heard them, I was almost sure of it, and the intimate chuckle that followed confirmed it. He was just trying to get a rise out of me.

“Would’ve, though. Wish I had. Goddamn, what a night.” He sighed happily.

Another sliver of heat coiled in my stomach, accompanied by an unfamiliar prickle of jealousy that made no sense, so I was pretty sure it was just competitiveness and the fact that I hated the idea of Tucker getting one up on me—whether it was on the football field or with a woman. “Don’t you need to be somewhere?” I echoed his question from the night before.

“I’ve got as much time as I want to lie here and wait for her to come back. Bonus of being the home team.” Eyes still on me, Tucker arched his back in a luxurious stretch that highlighted the miles of hills, dips, and honed muscle that made up his naked chest. Why the fuck wasn’t I already on my feet and pulling on my clothes? Tucker’s grin widened at the tent he was making in the sheets and probably the fact that I’d looked a little too long at it. Definitely hadn’t meant to do that. I’d seen his dick enough for a lifetime last night. “Feeling a little intimidated, Whitt? Jealous?”

“Not a fucking chance,” I bit out, but I was feeling something as my gaze drifted back to that bulge, and I didn’t like it. Images of Tucker’s big hands gripping Monica’s waist wound through my brain, the slow, smooth piston of his hips as he moved inside her, his lips parted, eyes half-mast with pleasure stoking mine higher as she’d worked my cock. I’d never had an experience like that in my life, and Tucker seemed so fucking casual about it that it made me wonder if that was a regular thing for him. Threesomes, men, women, whatever he wanted. The guy could be having regular orgies, and the idea of that was oddly disconcerting as he wrapped a hand around his dick over the sheets and squeezed. Fuck, he had a nice dick, I’d give him that. No wonder he was slinging

it around regularly. “You just gonna rub one out right here like a fucking heathen?” The question came out less accusatory and condescending than I’d hoped, and once again, Tucker offered an unruffled hitch of his shoulder.

“That a problem? You kinda look like you want to watch the magic.”

“I don’t.”

He grinned. “Feel free to join. You know that shit was hot as fuck last night.” He gave his dick another tug and let out a raspy groan that rocked my core. “I’ll even let you give me a hand if you want to.”

My instinct was to leap from the bed and get the fuck out, but he was giving me that look again, the challenging, amused one that said he was trying to see how far he could push me before I snapped, so I arched my back, too, mimicking his earlier stretch. It pushed the sheet down, and my cock sprang into the cool air. I smirked at how fucking quickly his gaze dropped to it. “Maybe I will.” I could match him, play for fucking play, any day. And I would.

Then he opened his damn mouth again. “Bullshit, Bougie. It’s okay to admit you’re terrified right now, that you were terrified last night, but you let that big fat fucking ego do all the directing, and now you’re panicking.”

Said ego flared to life. “Terrified? Panicking?” I scoffed. “If you’re trying to imply I’m a homophobe who’s gonna go home and freak the fuck out that another man’s hand brushed mine, you’ve got another think coming. I wasn’t keen to share, that’s all.” As I spoke the words, I realized they were mostly true. Tucker’s presence hadn’t bothered me because he was a man but because he was Malik Fucking Tucker and grated on my last nerve.

He arched a skeptical brow, and I rolled toward him, letting go of my dick as my body pressed into his warmth, my lips hovering near his. “I’m not a homophobe, and I’m not intimidated by you, Tucker, I promise you that.” Also mostly true. “Between us, you’ve got more ego than you have any right to. You’re overrated on the field, and you’re definitely

overrated off of it.” I let the implied insult hang in the air as I wrapped a hand around his cock, and the shock in his face kept me there. “Know what else I think?” I squeezed his shaft. “I think you wanted me as much last night as you wanted her. Bet that burns you up, doesn’t it? Being curious about this ‘bougie’ mouth.”

Tucker’s grin was slow, dangerous, and made me suddenly too aware of how close we were, the fact that my hand was on his cock, the fact that I was more turned on now than I’d been last night.

“I think you’re playing an interesting game. Curious how far you’re gonna take it.”

“I think you underestimate me.”

“Nah.” With a viper’s quickness, Tucker steamrolled me, the lazy leonine pose a facade for the strength and speed he had on field, and I’d somehow not anticipated it. The length of his body pressed to mine, his cock flush on my naked abdomen, a velvety torture against my aching shaft. He dipped his head, lips close to my ear, breath warm and humid on the side of my neck. A trail of goose bumps rose up my back as he spoke. “You were watching me last night. Watching me like you were wondering how it might feel if I was behind you instead of her, wondering what it might feel like to suck this big dick—” He rolled his hips against me, and the friction along my shaft almost made me gasp. My hands flew to his hips instinctively as he continued. “You were wondering if I’d suck yours. Admit it, and I’ll do it. I’ve never had a complaint.”

I froze, my eyes widening, and the words that tumbled out of my mouth were louder, harsher than I intended, but I was afraid if I didn’t speak, if I didn’t fill the air with noise, I might actually succumb to his offer, might actually confess I’d been watching him last night, that it’d turned me on, that he’d turned me on. “The only thing I’m wondering right now is if you’re going to quit fucking around and get me off.” Words I’d never said to any man or woman in my life, but as I spoke them, heat mingled with desire raced through my body, and I was almost certain I could see the same in Tucker’s eyes.

The chuckle that rumbled in his chest was deeply amused as a hand closed around my throat and his lips hovered closer. I couldn't tear my gaze from his, the amber flecks that darted through the depths of that brown showing me what really fucking scared me about this whole situation. Underlying lust. The kind that stayed with you. The kind that hooked you, made you crave things that defied logic, defied rivalry, defied everything I thought I knew about myself.

The fucker was teasing me before, but now he picked up the pace, rubbing his cock against me again, harder and faster, and despite my best intention to hold out, to watch him as he grew closer to the edge and then push him away and leave him hanging, the weight of him on me, the slide of his skin against mine, and the way his breath spilled from his lips in sharp, hungry gasps overrode all my senses. I was too horny, too turned on, and Tucker felt too fucking good. His breath came harsh in my ear, the hand he'd slid to the back of my neck tensing, fingers stroking the sensitive skin, but I didn't fucking care, didn't care about anything but the way his cock felt thrusting against mine.

With a harsh curse, I slipped my hand between our abdomens and wrapped both our cocks in my fist, jerking his against mine. Pleasure ignited in my veins and licked like flames through every part of me as heat jetted from the tip of my dick and spattered my abdomen.

The silence after was deafening. I couldn't move, couldn't think, couldn't do anything but lie there, my chest heaving, still pinned beneath him. Our breaths mingled, and Tucker's heart pounded against mine. There was something different in the depths of his gaze—vulnerability? Acknowledgment? Whatever it was, it scared the hell out of me.

A blink of his hooded eyes sent it away.

“You know, you're a real fucking cliché, Bougie.” Tucker's tone was dark and raw, his rock-hard dick still on me, his hand still around my throat. The aggressive way he used it to keep me in place, eyes still locked with mine, was almost as intoxicating as my orgasm had been.

But post-nut clarity was real, and I was instantly pissed and filled with regret—mostly at myself for getting into this situation with a guy like Tucker.

I shoved him as hard as I could, and he fell onto the mattress next to me as I sucked in lungfuls of air.

“Takes one to know one, I guess,” I said, sliding from the bed and swiping my clothes from the floor. “Catch you the next time we wipe the turf with your asses.”

Without looking back, I headed into Monica’s bathroom and turned the shower on.

When I came out, Tucker was gone, and a mixture of relief and some other inexplicable feeling I didn’t give a shit about examining poured through me. I was just glad to be heading back to LA, far, far away from Malik Tucker.

It wasn’t until I was in the Uber halfway to the airport that I realized Tucker hadn’t come.

Oddly enough, that was the thing that fucked with me most of all.

TUCKER

“How ya been, man?” I asked Houston. We’d had a game earlier today. Ramsey and I decided to go to the bar to blow off some steam, and since Houston had been there watching us play, he came along. It was good to chill with Houston. We didn’t spend nearly as much time with each other as we used to. Part of that, I figured, because it was likely hard for Houston since the rest of us played and he couldn’t anymore. I didn’t know what I’d do if I lost football, and hanging out with guys who still had what I wanted would likely be tough for me, too.

“Good, just getting this knee stronger and trying to figure out what in the hell I want to do next,” Houston replied from where he sat across from me in the private booth at the upscale Denver club.

I took a drink of my beer while Ramsey picked at the finger foods on the table.

“Sucks, man. We miss you out there. Baby G’s doing good, but it’s not the same as having you.”

Houston swallowed a large gulp of beer, then set his bottle down before Ramsey asked me, “Is your family flying out for the holidays?” effectively changing the subject.

I always missed my family even more this time of the year. Thanksgiving was only a few weeks away. Depending on my football schedule, we tried to spend either Thanksgiving or Christmas together every year. It wasn’t right without them, and the times we couldn’t make schedules work, I felt their

absence. “I’m hoping so.” If not, I’d head out for Christmas. It was a whole lot easier for just me to get on a plane rather than everyone else coming to Denver. “You know you’re welcome with me,” I told Ramsey. His mom had passed away when he was a kid, and his dad, an ex-NFL player, was a real piece of work. Ramsey hadn’t shared all the details with me, but I knew he was a dickhead—one who’d gotten kicked out of the league. Ramsey had fought the stigma of being his son most of his career.

“I’ll be with McRae...s. The McRaes, I mean.”

Ramsey and Houston tossed an awkward expression back and forth that was pretty fucking suss. That was...strange. What were they hiding? And why had Ramsey answered that question like he was just learning how to talk?

That line of thought was snuffed out by three beautiful women approaching us, which was honestly just the distraction I needed. Because Whitt was the most annoying motherfucker in the world, I hadn’t had much sex since the threesome, which resulted in me basically mounting him and Whitt jerking our cocks together until he busted a nut between us. I played the game real well, flirted, and went out, but no one grabbed my attention, and I’d emptied my own balls a few times with the memory firmly planted in my mind. It wasn’t because of him, I told myself. Not because I liked him, at least. Knocking the cocky SOB down a few pegs while we’d been in bed together and seeing the want he likely hadn’t even known he had in his eyes was a powerful aphrodisiac.

My dick had liked it a lot and clearly still did, considering it was starting to chub up months later just thinking about it.

“You’re Houston McRae, aren’t you?” the blonde asked. “And Warner Ramsey and Malik Tucker?”

“Yeah, we are. And who do we have the pleasure of speaking to?” I flirted because they were hot, and maybe I just needed to fuck Patrick Whitt out of my head.

The women introduced themselves, and I couldn’t stop thinking about how perfect it was—three of them, three of us. The night was looking up.

“Do you guys want to dance?” Lydia, the gorgeous Black woman with a sexy smirk and ass for days, asked.

I stood and held my hand out for her, expecting Ramsey and Houston to do the same. “I would love to dance with you.” I looked at my boys, who still had their asses parked in their seats. Um...did they not know what was going on here? I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen Ramsey hook up with anyone. In fact, I was surprised we'd even gone out tonight. He'd been busy lately, always seeming to have plans when I asked.

Houston was even more private with his personal life, but it was just the three of us, and there had been times in the past when we all three went home with women before.

“Thanks for asking, but I'm going to have to pass tonight. I'm...seeing someone,” Ramsey stuttered out.

What the fuck? When had this happened? Apparently, Houston was just as confused as I was because his head whipped in Ramsey's direction, another strange look like the one they'd shared earlier passing between them. One that was filled with all kinds of secrets and intimacy and...nooooo. I had to be wrong. Were Ramsey and Houston hooking up? There was no fucking way. Houston was bi, but as far as I knew, Ramsey wasn't. But then I didn't think Whitt considered himself bi either, but our dicks had rubbed together a few months ago, so knowing someone's label didn't mean shit.

“My knee is acting up,” Houston blurted out, which was one hundred percent a fucking lie. Okay, maybe it was bothering him, but that wasn't the reason he couldn't dance.

I shot a look back and forth between them, but then three beautiful women were touching me and talking, and that short-circuited my brain, leaving my dick in charge instead of the head planted on my shoulders.

“Shall we, ladies?” I asked before they grabbed me and pulled me to the dance floor.

They were apparently really fucking into me, asses grinding against my crotch, lips on my neck, hands grabbing my junk. It was hot, but for some annoying-ass reason, my gaze kept shooting to Ramsey and Houston, talking animatedly about something, before Whitt's stupid face would make an appearance in my mind, the way his head dropped back when he came, the corded muscles in his throat when he'd drained his balls, and the way he'd said my name so softly I wasn't sure he'd even realized he'd done it.

Why couldn't I get that dumbass moment out of my head?

So, I got another drink, hoping to numb myself from Whitt taking over my brain like he was some kind of magician or something.

Lydia was in front of me, one of the other women behind me, sandwiching me between them when my cell buzzed against my thigh. I'd already decided I would go home with one or all of these ladies, if they were game. Three women had to make me forget one threesome with Whitt, where I didn't even get to touch him as much as I'd wanted to, right? No. I didn't want to touch him. Bad Tucker.

My phone went off again. I had a feeling this was likely Ramsey telling me he was going home to fuck Houston's brains out or something, so I should check.

The text didn't use those words exactly but did tell me they were ready to leave.

"You ladies want to get out of here with me?" I asked them. They looked back and forth at each other as if trying to decide before they said yes. "Let's do it, then."

When we got outside, I didn't see Houston, but Ramsey was there. I snuck up behind him, putting my arm around him and letting the whiskey talk for me. "Don't worry. I won't tell anyone."

"Huh?" Ramsey asked.

"About you and McRae. I don't know how I didn't see it before. He's bi, and you guys have been close for years." Ramsey frowned, likely surprised I'd figured it out. "I saw the

way he looked at you in there when you admitted being in a relationship. I'm happy for you guys. You didn't have to hide being bi from me. No shame in the game. I fucked around with a few guys in college."

I had a threesome with Whitt and watched him come a while ago, too.

Christ, I couldn't imagine what anyone would say if they found out. Every member of the Rush fucking hated Whitt. Everyone in Denver did. He was a bougie, stuck-up bastard, and I'd ruttet against him and had to fight myself not to kiss him. What had I been thinking?

"Jesus." Ramsey dropped his head back. "I'm not—"

"Don't deny it. I won't believe you anyway. Your secret's safe with me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have three women to satisfy."

We ended up taking a car to Lydia's place, where I did, in fact, satisfy three women. Too bad I was thinking about a very specific prick the whole time.

WHITT

“Winter Wonderland” rang through the whole-house speaker system in my parents’ Florida estate as I flipped the switch on the gas fireplace in the great room and then plopped into one of the cushy leather club chairs in front of it. To my left, a twelve-foot tree decorated by Candice stood sentinel over the cavernous space, bright white lights slowly fading in and out. We’d had the colorful kind as a kid until my mom decided they were tacky. I’d loved them, though, and in a moment of orneriness, I hopped up again and approached the tree, squatting next to the power cord to see if there was an option to change the light color, and found there was. I switched the lights and returned to my chair. That was better.

I was three old-fashioned in and still full from dinner at Candice and Leon’s earlier. My parents’ flight back from London had been delayed, and they wouldn’t get in until tomorrow morning. I was used to that, though. There’d been more than one Christmas when Candice-Santa had delivered presents, or she and Leon had come to stay with me. They’d offered to tonight so I wouldn’t be “lonely,” but I’d laughed them off and reminded them I was an adult and I’d be fine.

Having the house to myself was nice anyway. I wasn’t lonely. Not at all. My head had been a noisy, crowded place for months since I’d hooked up with Tucker. Some peace and quiet back in Florida was just what I needed. Sure, it would have been fun to have some company—who wouldn’t want that on Christmas Eve?—and I’d considered hitting up some of the parties I’d been invited to, or clubs, but I didn’t want to

chance running into Tucker, no matter how unlikely that was since he was probably spending the evening with his mom and siblings anyway.

I poured a fresh whiskey and gazed between the tree and the fire. Yeah, this was nice. Peaceful. Just the respite I needed before playoffs started next month.

Except half an hour later, my head started getting noisy again. I'd ruminated for weeks after the incident with Tucker, alternately wondering what the fuck I'd been thinking and then reliving every brutally erotic second of that morning until I thought my head would explode. But I hadn't reached out to him or contacted him, and he hadn't gotten in touch with me either, so I finally decided it was a one-off thing that we never needed to speak of again. Hell, for all I knew, Tucker had had a ton of other hookups like that in the intervening months. Meanwhile, I'd thrown myself into turbo game mode and couldn't remember the last time I'd looked at a woman with anything more than passing interest.

Picking up my phone, I idly scrolled social media to see what my teammates were up to. Family pics were abundant. Dean, the fucker, was celebrating in the Turks and Caicos with his gorgeous wife and their new baby. Barker was with his parents in Ohio. It looked... snowy. LaForge was in Vegas.

I clicked over to my page, which mainly featured team pics or PR photos my PA posted. Somehow, I still had a shit ton of followers.

On a whim, I found Tucker's account and clicked on it. Unsurprisingly, he had more followers than me, because of course he did. I skimmed through the photos, pausing on one of him at the beach with his sisters during the off-season. The most recent photo was predictably a shot of him, his mom, and sisters grinning in front of their Christmas tree, the quintessential happy family.

I hopped back over to my contact list and scrolled down to his name. I could text him. I debated as I took another slug of whiskey. It was going down extra easy now, and my limbs had a pleasant, soft-at-the edges feeling.

I went back and forth with myself, because why the fuck was I considering reaching out to him after so much time unless I was some kind of masochist? Besides, it'd probably just blow Tucker's head up even more if I did. Still, I'd been fighting an incessant curiosity to know if he'd enjoyed himself, if it'd been some power play of his that he hadn't gotten off that morning. It had to be.

I sawed at my lower lip in thought, going around in mental circles. Christ, if I was a band, I'd be called Conflicted. I should go buy some Ed Hardy tees and riveted jeans. Grow my hair out. Growl into a microphone about my angst.

I chuckled to myself at the idea and realized I must be a little drunker than I thought if I was band naming my own dumb ass.

Fuck it.

I tapped Tucker's name and typed out my message, then sent it before I could overthink it.

Me: Why do I have your number in my phone?

That was innocuous enough. Didn't mention our hookup, didn't tell him how much I'd thought about it, didn't ask him the same.

I frowned at the quick reply.

Tucker: Who dis? Plenty of people have my number.

Because I was an egotistical bastard, it aggravated me to no end that Tucker didn't know immediately who was texting him.

Me: I'm sure they do.

Tucker: Laura?

Me: No.

Tucker: Shit. Melinda?

Me: No.

Tucker: Sarah.

Me: No.

I drank another swallow of beer. This was entertaining. I wondered how many names he could get through before one or both of us got bored of the game.

Tucker: Jake.

What the hell? Who the fuck was Jake?

Fuck this game. The entertainment had been short-lived and quickly replaced by the feral ache of frustration mingled with desire. I tossed my phone aside only to pick it up again when it chimed twice in quick succession.

Tucker: What's up, Whitt?

Tucker: Think I can't use google to reverse lookup a number, you dumbass?

Shit. I hadn't thought of that. Definitely drunk.

Me: My number isn't public in any way. My agent made sure of that.

Tucker: No shit, which makes it easy to figure out it's you.

Me: You didn't answer my first question.

Tucker: No clue. Are you in Florida?

Me: Yeah.

Tucker: With your family?

Me: Nah. They're not getting in until tomorrow. It's just me, a fire, some whiskey, and a stupid tall Christmas tree that I switched to the rainbow lights. I hate white lights.

Tucker: Are you drunk?

Me: No, I'm just sharing my light preference. The colorful ones are more festive.

Tucker: You're drunk.

Tucker: Do you want something from me, bro, or are you just reaching out to send holiday tidings?

Fuck, I didn't even know how to answer that, and I stared at the message for a long minute, trying to read between the lines. Was he somehow implying he'd be up for something if I

asked? I didn't want to ask, though. I didn't want to ask Tucker for a goddamn thing. But I absolutely wanted something from him. That was undeniable, or so said my cock.

I inhaled deeply, blew it out, and hit the mental "fuck it" button again.

Me: I want you over here in 25 minutes.

This time, I was the one left waiting. I counted three minutes that he stewed on my message, and I fully expected him to beg off since it was Christmas Eve, after all, and he was with his family. Mostly, I just wanted to see how he'd handle my demand, so my eyes almost bugged out of my head when his reply finally came.

Tucker: On my way. Better be worth my time, Bougie.

I almost called it off based on that stupid nickname, but goddamn, the prospect of getting off with him again already had me on fire, and now I wouldn't be able to sleep until I quenched it.

Twenty-three minutes later, the security system chimed to let me know there was someone at the gate, and Tucker's voice came over the intercom. "It's me. We still doing this?"

I buzzed him in without a reply, went and unlocked the front door, leaving it open a crack, and returned to my chair in front of the fireplace after a quick stop in the kitchen for a beer.

"Who's Jake?" I asked when I heard Tucker's footsteps approaching. I didn't turn around, not yet. I didn't want to until I was sure I could keep my reaction cool and on the level since the last time I'd been this close to Tucker, I'd been naked and grinding my way to an explosive orgasm.

"Merry Christmas to you, too." Tucker's steps halted, then resumed, slower. I could feel him behind me, just a sense of presence, and I let my head drop back on the chair and angled it toward him.

"Merry Christmas," I replied. He always seemed bigger in person. He smelled crisp and clean and looked like a filthy fantasy come to life. All the memories of his naked body—

smooth brown skin, his short-cropped hair under my fingertips—I'd been repeatedly shoving into the compartments of my mind came rushing out at once, and I swerved my gaze back to the fire to keep from staring at him like a predator. Why had I thought this was a good idea? Swallowing against the ache in my chest, I waved a hand in the direction of the kitchen. "Plenty of drinks in the fridge or bar if you want one." *Who's Jake* was what I'd wanted to ask again, but I didn't. His nonanswer was answer enough, and I was tipsy, but not tipsy enough to show my ass like that.

"I don't want a drink, Patrick." Suddenly, he was right there, moving around the club chair to stand in front of me, a colossus framed by the fireplace, his shape delineated by the orange glow of the fire. Fucking gorgeous. His gaze moved over me slowly and with a painful thoroughness that both excited me and put me on edge, leaving me feeling naked and raw. "You're hammered."

"Not hammered. A little drunk." I straightened in my chair and spread my knees wider, an overt invitation and one he eyed a moment before arching a brow and then leaning slowly forward, big hands landing on my knees. His dark eyes bored into mine, and I could see the question in them before he spoke it.

"You know what you're doing?"

"Yes." *No*. I only knew what I was doing on a primal level, the visceral reaction that occurred when the heat of his hands spread up my thighs and into my groin, the full-body buzz that ignited at the base of my spine and radiated, more powerful than anything I'd had to drink tonight. "You can't stay the night."

"Wasn't planning on it."

I snapped a hand out, grabbing a fistful of his collar, and yanked until his lips were on mine. I'd wanted to taste them—regretted not tasting them—since the second he'd walked out of Monica's bedroom.

TUCKER

The second our lips touched, it was like a bolt of lightning landed straight in my chest, electricity ping-ponging around my body.

I was kissing Whitt. Patrick Whitt had called me to his house because he was alone on Christmas Eve, and now I was kissing him.

Talk about a mindfuck.

He tasted like whiskey, sadness, and somehow excitement—that feeling you got waking up on Christmas morning, eager to find out what the day would bring.

I dropped to my knees, Whitt leaning closer, spreading his legs wider for me to settle between, while I tangled a hand in his dark hair, tightening a fist around the strands. My first thought was how soft it was, the way it almost felt like silk against my fingers. Everything about him was fancy as fuck, even his stupid hair.

My dick was already aching, telling me not to slow this down, while my brain was saying the complete opposite. This had been coming since the night of the threesome, maybe even before that. I'd make him come, get it out of my system, and then pretend he didn't exist.

Whitt growled when I pulled back. "Don't," he grumbled like he could read my mind.

I ignored him. "You're positive you want this? I gotta make sure, Whitt, but I promise if you do, I'll make you come

so hard you won't have another orgasm in your life without comparing it to me."

"Pfft." He puffed out a breath but couldn't hide how his pupils had blown wide.

"I'm waiting."

He shook his head. "I want this. Come on. I don't have all night. You keep stalling and I'm going to think you don't know what you're doing."

"Fucker." I chuckled, hating how easily he could make me do that. That electrical storm of excitement kicked up a notch, all of this because it was Whitt, and I was about to blow his fucking mind.

I fought to bury the nerves sprouting up like pesky weeds inside of me. Sure, I was bi-interested and had hooked up with guys, but I hadn't given a whole lot of blowjobs in my days, and because this was Whitt, I was determined to ace it. He really could compare every other BJ to me, and I'd sure as shit make sure those came up lacking.

I fumbled with the button and zipper on his jeans. When I got them open, I said, "Lift your hips."

"Ask nicely," he countered.

"Lift your fucking hips before I leave you with a hard dick and a bad case of blue balls. This shouldn't take long. We both know you're a quick trigger."

"Fuck you, Tucker. I got off so fast because I didn't want to be bothered with you."

Yeah, right. "Lift your hips, and you can shut me up with your dick."

Apparently, those were the magic words because he did what I said. I tugged his pants and underwear down, tossing them toward the monstrous Christmas tree. Hadn't they ever heard less was more?

His thick erection already leaked precum on his belly, the head of his dick red. Whitt wasn't a small guy, definitely bigger than any of the other men I'd fucked around with—his

balls heavy with his load—sac tight and pubes perfectly groomed.

“Aww, you manscaped for me?”

“Aren’t you shutting up and sucking my cock?”

“Yeah, I got five minutes.” It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him he had a nice prick, but I didn’t have it in me to compliment him at the moment. I had no business being here, no business wanting him, but the second he texted, I’d said yes, and there wasn’t a chance in hell I was walking away.

My gaze firmly locked in his, I bent forward, licking a stripe up from his balls to his tip.

“Fuck,” Whitt gritted out. “Do it again.”

“Only because I want you to think about me every time you come.” This time, I didn’t just lick him, though. I stared at him, challenge in both our gazes as I took Whitt into my mouth. For his part, he didn’t look away, watching me as I bobbed up and down, getting drunk off the taste of his salty skin.

“I thought this was going to be good?” He quirked a brow, and I was stuck between wanting to swallow him down and kissing the smug look off his handsome face.

“I bet I can suck you better than you can suck me.” I tongued his balls.

“You wish. Why do I still hear you talking?”

“Because you can’t hold my attention?”

He smirked, grabbed his cock with one hand, and held the back of my head with the other, and damn, this shouldn’t be hot, but it was. I let Whitt push me down, let him force his dick back into my mouth.

I was done playing games, done issuing challenges, and ready to drain his balls.

This time, I took him deep, all the way to the back of my throat. Whitt bucked his hips gently, holding my head, and for the first time, I was deep-throating a guy. I choked a few

times, but that just seemed to fuel him more—me too, if I was being honest.

I sucked his dick like my life depended on it, like it was a test that I had to pass. Every time his cock hit the back of my throat, I swallowed around him.

Whitt was quieter than I thought he would be, quieter than he had been when we'd fucked Monica. Because it was his first time with a guy? Feeling some kinda way about it being me or because he was a little sad and lonely? Because he was. I could see that, and I wanted to make it better, which was some fucked-up shit if I'd ever heard it.

My eyes watered when he thrust harder. Desire flared brighter in Whitt's blue eyes. He liked this. I liked it, too, choking on his dick and making him feel good. My own erection was throbbing. My balls felt like they were going to explode. Not gonna lie, my jaw was starting to hurt, and it had been a whole lot more than five minutes.

I let my hand join the party, stroking him off while I blew him. When our eyes clashed and held again, Whitt's movements becoming jerkier, I knew he was about to lose the war he had with himself, trying to make this last as long as possible.

“Say my name,” I told him, pulling off. “Say my name when you come.”

I couldn't read the expression on his face as I took him back into my mouth, sucking him like he was my favorite fucking treat.

“No.” Whitt's hand shot out, trying to grab the arm of the chair but hitting his whiskey on the table and knocking it to the floor. “Fuck...motherfucker...” he groaned, still fighting it, fucking my face and trying not to shoot.

I took him deep again, swallowing around the head just as his thighs tensed up, his balls drawing up, Whitt's release like a fucking geyser spilling down my throat.

“Tucker,” whispered softly past his lips. I swallowed down every drop of him.

Then smiled. He'd said my name. I won.

"Stand up," he ordered the second his balls were empty.

Unfortunately, I couldn't enjoy my victory too long. I didn't know Whitt's story when it came to being with guys, but the last thing I wanted to do was rush him. Bust his balls? Yes. Have him do something he wasn't ready for? Not at all. "No. I was giving you shit. You don't have to suck me."

"Fuck off, man. Don't do that. Don't go easy on me. That's not how we work. Stand the fuck up, Malik."

"Wow...you just first-named me." I pushed to my feet. "And if you insist." I wasn't a saint, after all. I gave him a chance. He wanted to keep going.

I was wearing Rush sweats, which I went to shove down, but Whitt beat me to it, grabbing them and my underwear and pulling both to my knees.

He sat up on the edge of the chair too quickly, my dick almost poking him in the eye. "Watch what you're doing with that thing."

I chuckled. "You're the one that was so excited to see it you almost rammed yourself with it. Big, isn't it?" I stroked my erection.

"Fuck you."

"Is that all you know how to say to me? And are we doing this or not?" When he paused again, I added, "I'll jerk off for you," because I really didn't want to push him.

"Shut the fuck up and stop being worried I'll be better than you." He smacked my hand out of the way, grabbed my dick, and swallowed me down.

"Oh, fuuuuck." That easily, my eyes rolled back. Goddamn this motherfucker and my reaction to him. All I could think about was the hot suction around me was Whitt's mouth, that he was blowing me. He'd called me over, and now he was giving me head.

I opened my eyes, forced myself to look down because no way I wanted to miss Patrick Whitt sucking my dick.

Threading my fingers through his hair, I held on tight as he learned how to pleasure me.

Whitt didn't do anything half-assed, taking me deep, working to get as much of my dick down his throat as he could, even when his eyes watered and he choked.

"Hey, slow down. We're good. Get used to having me on your tongue before you go for dick-sucking champ."

He chuckled around me, which was strangely hot.

Whitt jacked me while working me with his tongue, not looking at me the way he had been when I blew him. I let him get away with it, which would probably just piss him off if he knew.

He hollowed his cheeks, which was sexy as hell, his forehead a little wrinkled like he was really concentrating on what he was doing. It was cute, which wasn't a word I ever thought I would use to describe his bougie ass, but there it was.

I moved my hips slightly, getting him used to it but knowing that if I didn't, Whitt would likely get pissed because I was going easy on him.

"Suck on my nuts," I told him, surprised when Whitt pulled off and did as I said. "Fuck yes. There you go." I groaned, reveling in the feel of his mouth and tongue on my sac.

"I'm not impressed so far. I'm a little bored," he said.

"You going crazy for it. Don't lie." I wrapped a hand around my dick. "I want to jerk off on your face."

"Fuck you, Tucker. I'm out," he spit out, but the blaze that ignited in his eyes told a different story.

"If you don't want me to, tell me to stop." Slowly, I stroked myself, giving him time to take me into his mouth again if he wanted.

But he didn't.

Whitt held on to my hips and licked his lips. “Only because I’m bored sucking you off.”

I traced his mouth with my prick. “Lies.”

“Get on with it and get the fuck out of here.”

“Sure thing, Bougie.” I sped up my moments, hand working quickly on my shaft.

Whitt’s fingertips pressed into my waist. His breathing picked up, his mouth opening slightly on a breath. When his tongue snuck out again, running from one side of his bottom lip to the other, I lost it. The pleasure at the base of my spine erupted, setting off an avalanche inside of me, balls drawn up, cum spurting from my slit and onto his face, his lip, his cheek.

Whitt licked some of it away. The rest I scooped up with my own fingers and sucked them clean.

Whitt stood, and I had no choice but to move out of his way. He went for his underwear while I pulled my sweats up. “Come home with me,” I said.

“What the fuck?” He whipped in my direction and asked, “Why would you say that?”

Yeah, it was a surprise to me, too, but it was Christmas Eve, and that made me think of his dad that day at camp and how Whitt was alone. “We’re a more-the-merrier type. I’ll come up with an excuse. I make a kick-ass Christmas morning breakfast. I’ll even let you suck me off again if you want.”

“I’m not going home with you, Tucker. Or going down on you again. This was a onetime thing.”

“Stop biting off your nose to spite your face.”

“I’m not,” he said, and I knew there was no changing his mind. “Look, you need to go. I’ve gotta get to bed.”

I shrugged. “Your loss. I had fun. We should do this again,” I said, even though the quick dismissal stung a bit, then walked over to him and kissed him. Whitt didn’t push me away, his tongue automatically dipping into my mouth. Before I knew it, the kiss was over. “Jake is my trainer, by the way.

It's cute you were jealous, though." I didn't give him a chance to reply before I left.

I sat in my car for a good ten minutes, then pulled away, still trying to figure out what in the fuck had just happened.

My sister Kayla was up when I got home. She was a night owl, so I wasn't surprised. Plus, she had her own place, and she didn't always sleep well in a house that wasn't her own. Zuri and Savanna were old enough to move out, too, but neither of them had yet.

"Where were you?"

I scratched the back of my neck. "I'm still trying to figure out if this night was even real." It was the only answer I had.

She cocked a manicured brow. "She that good?"

"He," I replied, and while I couldn't say it was the best I'd ever had, it was fucking Whitt, and that made it really goddamned hot.

Surprise flashed over Kayla's features. "No shit?"

"Yeah. It's a thing. Not something that happens a lot. But that's all you get to know." Having been with guys wasn't something I actively hid, but it wasn't something I talked about much or something that many people knew. "See you in the morning, sis," I told her before heading to the room I stayed at when I was here. When I first got into the league, I'd bought my mama a new house before I'd even bought one for myself.

I stripped down, turned off the light, and climbed into bed.

Me: Miss me?

Bougie: No, but clearly, you miss me.

I chuckled and then wanted to fuck with him.

Me: I can still taste you on my tongue.

Bougie: I bet you like that. Gonna think of me while you jerk off?

Me: Who says I'm not jerking off now?

Bougie: Really?

I laughed.

Me: I'm giving you shit. And then, because I was a fucking saint tonight or something, I added. No second thoughts?

Bougie: No.

Bougie: So you're bi?

Well, I guessed we were doing this. We'd hooked up, and now we were texting.

Me: I guess. I say bi-interested because curious doesn't really fit since I've been with a few guys. It's not something I do often though, but yeah, basically it boils down to me being bi.

We messaged back and forth for the next hour. I wondered if Whitt was still sitting in that chair and if he was thinking about what he had done with me.

WHITT

My parents arrived home at the same time Candice brought over the Christmas dinner she'd ordered at my parents' behest from their favorite steak house. As far as I knew, they didn't do personal orders but had been making an exception for my parents for the last ten years.

Candice helped them get settled and then, unobtrusive as ever, slipped out once the food was on the dining table. We'd long stopped exchanging presents, so Christmas centered around eating together now.

We sat together at one end of the table—which had always felt weirdly sad to me instead of cozier—and dove in.

I got the cursory questions about the season, updates on investments they were looking into, and then my mom started probing deeper.

“So, are you seeing anyone?” The sharpness in her blue eyes never quite aligned with the soft femininity of her smile. I imagined a lot of people experienced that disconnect. She looked like a porcelain doll but was an absolute barracuda in a boardroom, as was my dad. They were a perfect match that way, something that never failed to trigger a hint of envy in me. They'd met when they were on the opposite sides of a merger in their early finance days. My mom had always joked that they'd negotiated themselves into marriage.

“Nope.” I speared another bite of roast, chewing slowly as the memory of my hand on Tucker's head, his perfect lips around my cock, resurfaced. Just that split-second recall

before I shoved the image away was enough to make my cock perk. “Too busy.”

“We find time for the things we love,” my mom chided, and I set down my fork, frustration bubbling in my chest.

“Do we?”

I felt my dad’s gaze swerve in my direction more than I saw it, but my mom’s smile didn’t falter.

“No hurry. You’ll find someone when the time is right. I’d love some more grandkids, though.” She sighed wistfully.

For what? To send cards to on holidays? Jesus. “Then talk to Elizabeth. I’m not having kids. I’d never see them. What’s the point?” I wondered if Tucker wanted kids, given all his siblings. Probably.

“Patrick.” The warning in my father’s voice was apparent, but I met his gaze evenly. He was a smart man, knew a subtle dig as well as my mom did, and I was being an outright ass. I didn’t hate my parents. Age, experience, and my own career provided me with a lot of insight, and what I understood was that they weren’t bad people; I was just a puzzle piece that hadn’t fit where they’d wanted me to in their jigsaw of life and still didn’t.

But I refused to back down. The night before with Tucker and lack of sleep had left me raw and irritable. “I’m just telling the truth.”

We ate the rest of dinner in silence, and then I returned to my room. So much for my respite. Now I was looking forward to my flight out tomorrow, looking forward to the playoffs and being back on the field where I always knew what to do. That was the great thing about sports. There were defined roles and rules. On the turf, I knew my place. It was more home to me than anywhere else.

I checked my phone—no messages—and then idly opened my old high school yearbook, trying to keep my mind off Tucker. What had happened last night was...embarrassing. And highly fucking satisfying and so erotic I’d jerked off again before bed thinking about it. This morning, too. I wanted

to erase the night from existence and for it to happen again immediately, a feeling I'd never before experienced in my life. What the hell was wrong with me?

I flipped through the pages, checking out the pictures, reading the quotes under the pictures, then paused on some candid shots from senior year. In one, my junior and senior year girlfriend, Hannah, had her arm around my waist. Mine were draped both around her shoulders and the shoulders of the grinning guy next to me. Jenson. If you looked close enough, you could see the tight clutch of his fingers around my waist, opposite of Hannah's. I sucked in a breath as I gazed at Gable High's handsome quarterback. I remembered that photo being taken, the casual way he'd grabbed me and pulled me in, how Hannah had shuffled closer and made room for herself like she was tacking herself onto me. She'd joked relentlessly about our "bromance." Hell, some of the guys on the team had, too.

I picked up my phone on a whim, an uneasy feeling roiling in my stomach as I scrolled through my numbers until I found Hannah's and then called it. First Tucker, now Hannah? Apparently, I was turning into a gregarious bastard during the holidays.

Just when I thought I was going to get sent to voicemail, Hannah's voice came on the line, thick with confusion. "Patrick Whitt?" In the background, a kid hollered something, and another answered in kind.

"Hi, yeah, it's Patrick. Merry Christmas. I'm, uh, I'm sure I'm interrupting."

"I've got a few minutes. Just a sec..." She muffled the phone and spoke to someone before coming back on the line. "Is everything okay? Definitely not a caller I was expecting on Christmas Day."

Or probably ever since we'd not spoken in over a decade.

"Sorry about that. Yeah, everything's fine. Those your kids in the background?"

“Yeah, and my husband. My parents are here, too.” Her voice softened with fondness as she spoke. “They got the kids socks. The tradition continues.” She chuckled. Senior year, she’d been bummed when she opened her presents from them to find a bunch of socks and practical stuff for college before discovering they’d tucked some brand-name purse she’d been dying for behind the tree. “I mean, they obviously got other things, but now I can see the humor from their perspective and...” She blew out a breath, and I could imagine her waving her hand through the air just like she used to do when she’d gotten flustered in high school.

“You sound really happy. Congratulations on the kids and husband. That’s great.” Jesus. When had I become so awkward?

“Thanks? Anyway, what’s up, Patrick?”

I rubbed a hand over my eyes and sank back onto my bed. “I was just thinking... You remember our senior year?”

“Yeah,” she hedged, drawing out the word slowly. “We fought a lot.”

“We did?”

“Yeah,” she laughed. “How do you not remember? I always felt like I was fighting for your time or presence or something. If you weren’t on the football field, you and Jenson were hanging out, and I was tagging along.”

I sucked in a breath at that gutshot because I knew the feeling well. Jenson had transferred to our high school junior year, but we hadn’t really become friends until our senior year. We’d been thick as thieves, though, as Hannah’s parents had always said. He’d eaten dinner with us at her house almost as often as I had. “I’m really sorry about that.”

“Oh, I...thank you. I mean, it’s okay. We were young, you know? I figured it out later on.”

“Figured what out?”

“That there was something going on between the two of you.”

“Wait, what?” I frowned into the darkness.

“Yeah, I mean, you two were always together and...I don’t know. There was just this vibe. This way he looked at you like...” I held still, my breath trapped in my chest, remembering the warmth of his dark brown gaze. I’d not had a friend like him since. “Like he really liked you, maybe more than a friend, and then at our ten-year reunion, when he showed up with his partner, I just figured—”

“I wasn’t with him, Hannah, or cheating on you, I promise,” I said. I’d also skipped the ten-year reunion, but I’d heard before that Jenson had come out in college. At the time, I hadn’t thought anything of the fluttery feeling in my stomach, but since Tucker, it was all I could think about. “So you thought I was into him...like that?”

There was a long pause before she said, “I did, yeah. It made me feel bad at the time, but now I get it. You really never did anything with him?” She laughed. “Because that’s kind of a shame. You two would’ve been really cute together. I don’t know if that’s exactly what you’re getting at here.”

“I’m just trying to figure some things out. About myself.”

“Ah. Well, I don’t know if I’ve been any help.”

“You’ve been an enormous help. Thank you. I don’t want to take any more of your time. I hope the rest of your holidays are good, and I’m really sorry for the way I made you feel. Truly. You deserved better, and I hope you found it.”

“I did. You take care of yourself, Patrick.”

The slight sting of her parting comment was assuaged by the contentment I heard in her voice. She definitely deserved happiness after putting up with my bullshit.

We hung up, and I dropped the phone on my chest and closed my eyes, conjuring up images of Jenson, his smile. The way we’d cut up and crack ourselves up. There’d never been any kind of confession on his part. We’d parted for college with a hug and a back clap and had lost touch quickly after. NYC had seemed to swallow him up, and I’d been similarly absorbed by football at Southern U, and for a long while, I

hadn't allowed myself to think of him at all because the truth was that I'd missed him. And when I thought deeper on it, I could feel the stir of emotions in my chest, a tamped-down longing I'd never allowed any space for. It wasn't the same thing I felt for Tucker, but a close second.

"Fuck," I muttered, though it wasn't accepting that I was bi that was throwing me off. It was that the person I was most attracted to on this Earth was the one person I hated being attracted to. Wasn't that some fucked-up karma?

I WANTED THIS WIN AGAINST THE RUSH. I WANTED IT THE WAY I wanted Tucker as he crouched down with the ball and waited for Ramsey to call the cadence. I wanted to see the defeat on his face, wanted to crush him as much as I wanted to be crushed by him in a bed or against a wall.

I'd been on fire the first two quarters of our playoff game against them, and then after halftime, something had happened. I couldn't put my finger on it. The Rush were playing like they shared a brain, and we were starting to fall apart. We were evenly matched, but the home-turf advantage was real. We should have had this game locked. The LA fans were going crazy in the stands, and still, the Rush had pulled ahead.

I adjusted my stance, trying to anticipate what they were going to do, moving my gaze to Tucker as he gripped the ball.

It was only a fraction of a second, but it felt like hours when he canted his head in my direction. A broad, smug grin stretched over his lips, like he knew they had the game and were one step closer to the Super Bowl. I despised that grin in the moment and answered it with a sneer, and then Ramsey called the cadence, and the action exploded around me.

In the two seconds that infuriating grin was knocking around my brain, Garrett McRae managed to break free of me and get wide open for the perfect fucking pass that Ramsey sent hurtling in his direction. I could see where this was going

as I automatically sped toward the end zone. Benson and Sparks did, too, because they moved like they'd been shot out of a rocket, racing for McRae and launching at him until he went down. But it was too late. McRae landed in the end zone, ball still clutched to his chest. The pass was complete. Touchdown.

The Rush had a twenty-point lead on us now.

“Fuck!” I swore, and I wasn't the only one, but when the stands quieted, I glanced around to find medics running for the end zone. McRae wasn't getting up, just lay sprawled on the field like a boneless scarecrow. Ramsey raced into the fray and dropped down next to him, splaying a big palm over his thigh. The fear in his eyes was evident from where I stood, and a prickling sensation spread through my chest at the way he touched the fallen receiver. I stood frozen, watching the two of them and then Tucker as he trotted up to Ramsey and gripped him by the arm, holding him back as McRae was put on a stretcher and hustled off the field.

We all knew what had happened to Houston McRae, Garrett's brother. And as much as I didn't like the Rush, it'd be a fucking shame to see a rookie—any rookie—go down that way.

Where I could feel a further pall cast over our team, the Rush played like they were on a vendetta once we took the field again. They made us look like a bunch of freshman JV players playing football for the first time, and when the clock ran out, sealing their win, I walked off the field with a mixture of fury and relief. Relief that it was all over. Fury that I'd let Tucker get in my head during such a big game when clearly he'd held his focus just fine.

The mood in the locker room was defeated, and I showered and got the fuck out of there as fast as I could, just wanting to be at home on my own.

As soon as I got to my car, I punched the steering wheel like a fucking idiot, but it worked, siphoned off some of the aggression coursing through my body.

I picked up my phone, thinking about Tucker, Ramsey, and McRae out on that field, the concern etched on both Tucker and Ramsey's faces. I hadn't realized they were so close until then.

Me: Is McRae okay?

Tucker: Yeah. Concussion. He's out for a while, but not permanently sidelined.

Me: Okay, good.

Tucker: I'm around if you want me.

Me: Fuck off.

Tucker: I figured you'd say something along those lines. Regardless, you played good.

Me: Not good enough, but I will next time.

Tucker: Maybe.

Me: Bet.

This defeat had taught me one important thing. I wasn't letting Tucker get in my head ever fucking again. Come next season, nothing would stop me.

TUCKER

One of the many benefits of being a celebrity was getting invited to events like the one a car service was taking me to at the moment. A party in the Hollywood Hills, thrown by Alexander Montrose, one of the biggest movie producers of the moment? Sign me the fuck up. The guest list was exclusive, the drinks would be flowing, and half-naked men and women would be everywhere. There were worse things to do on a Saturday night during the off-season.

Ramsey was practically hitched with Baby G now. I was still trying to wrap my head around that one—how I'd thought he was into Houston, but lo and behold, he was boning his best friend's brother. It was more than sex, though. All I had to do was look at both of them to see that. I'd never seen Ramsey like this before, and I was happy as hell for him, even if it meant there was no chance I could talk him into going to a party like this with me. He probably wouldn't have been up for it even before Garrett... G, on the other hand, he'd been jealous as fuck I was going and tried to talk Ramsey into letting me try to get them in.

I liked the Hollywood Hills, how it felt like you were in a small mountain neighborhood when the city was right below you, sprawling mansions dotting the tree-covered hillside.

I was pretty sure Whitt lived somewhere up here—not that I cared. We hadn't talked since we took them out of the playoffs, only to lose in the next round. I'd thought about texting him a few times. My stalker ass knew his birthday had been a few weeks ago, and I'd wondered what he was doing, if

his family had made time to see him, or at least call him, the way my family would do. I should have just done it. I didn't know what had held me back other than not wanting him to know I was annoyingly obsessed with him ever since the Christmas Eve Blowjob—the CEB was something I tried not to think about, but to this day, I still did.

The driver pulled up to the white iron gate. There was a security guard under an awning, so I rolled down the window and said, “Malik Tucker,” before handing him my ID.

He checked his list, then replied, “You can get out and walk from here.”

Well, shit. This really was exclusive. They must not want to risk anyone, even drivers, sneaking in.

I thanked the driver and got out, tugging my bag with me. He pulled away while the security officer handed me my ID back. He unlocked the gate and told me to follow the sidewalk up to the house. It was surrounded by tropical-looking plants and palm trees all the way up to the mansion Young Tucker never would have believed he would get to be inside.

There was a man at the gate there, too. He checked my bag, then pointed, “Head around the house.”

It was a huge white stucco villa-style mansion. Music played from the backyard. There were two pools, one with a slide, more tropical foliage, waitresses and waiters walking around in basically nothing. Some of the women were topless, the guys in tiny Speedos, and, well, there was a cock, so it looked like they were walking around naked, too.

Hollywood was fucking awesome.

I grinned. Was Whitt there, I wondered before I wanted to punch myself in the face for caring. Something had to be done about how obsessively I thought about him.

I grabbed one of the glasses of champagne from the waiter with his dick hanging out and took a sip. There were people swimming and dancing and lots and lots of alcohol all around. Likely coke, too, but I wasn't into that shit.

There were three sets of french doors along the back of the house, which were all open, more half-naked people manning the grills.

I went inside, where there were even more people and more drinks.

I hadn't seen anyone I knew and likely wouldn't outside of Alexander, but I didn't much care about that kind of shit. I was always pretty comfortable in my skin and was good at meeting new people.

First things first, though, I wanted to change. Random people I'd never seen before said hi to me while I worked my way through the crowd to try and find a bathroom.

I finally found it, feeling a little overdressed in the board shorts I'd brought with me. I was happy with my body, but my ass wasn't walking around in a Speedo. Naked...well, that was a maybe. We'd see how the day went.

I wasn't back outside for more than five minutes when a beautiful blonde woman approached me, handing me a bottle of beer.

"You're Malik Tucker."

I smiled at her. "I feel at a disadvantage here. You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"Pfft," came from behind me, and I turned around to see Whitt. He was wearing a pair of simple black shorts and no shirt, lots of tan skin on display. He had a patch of hair on his chest, abs that should be illegal, even though I saw them on other players all the time, and scruff along his jaw. He was fucking hot and cocky, as always.

"You choking on something? Do I need to do the Heimlich?"

He rolled his eyes. "You wish." He grabbed a beer from one of the minifridges and walked away. Damned if it didn't take everything inside of me not to follow him.

"You were saying?" I asked the woman with the great rack. Her swimming suit top was just two small, white triangles.

“Serenity.”

“Beautiful name for a beautiful woman,” I flirted. Whitt could pfft all he wanted, but I was fucking good at this shit.

“Thank you. Are you here with anyone?” Serenity asked.

I gave her my best grin, then looped my arm with hers. “I am now.”

SERENITY WAS BEAUTIFUL, FUNNY, AND SMART AS HELL, YET I couldn't stop my eyes from casing the backyard, looking for Whitt. I'd seen him two or three times in the last few hours. He was with a brunette woman who seemed to hang on his every word like he was the king or something. He wasn't that fucking interesting...or sexy—okay, maybe on the sexy part.

When I saw Whitt and the woman in the pool, I nodded in that direction. “Want to go swimming?”

“Sure,” Serenity replied.

I noticed a bin full of balls and Frisbees, so I grabbed a football. “Hey! Patrick!”

He looked my way with a scowl just before I threw the perfect spiral at him. He easily caught it, and while he was distracted doing that, I jumped into the water like I was a kid, creating the perfect cannonball right beside him.

His brunette screeched.

“Are you fucking twelve?” he snipped, but I could see how he bit the inside of his cheeks, the corners of his mouth threatening to curve up into a smile.

“Shut up before I dunk you, Bougie.”

“Yeah, like you could do that.”

Serenity laughed from beside him. I quirked a brow at Whitt. “Do you know me? There's not a challenge I can turn down.” I maneuvered myself so I was closer to him, speaking

low for only us. “Unless you do know and it’s what you want. You wanna wrestle with me?”

“You’re a—”

I jumped on him before he could counter, trying to wrestle Whitt beneath the water. I was a bigger guy than he was, but Whitt was a strong motherfucker, so I couldn’t get control of him as easily as I could if I wasn’t fighting another football player.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Whitt asked, trying to work himself free of my hold.

“Oh, I forgot, you’re allergic to fun.”

He growled, but it was just the chance I needed to distract him. I swept my legs through the water, hooking his as I tugged with my upper body. I sank below the surface, dragging Whitt with me. He fought back, somehow working himself so he was in front of me, with his back to me, his ass against my cock. When he jerked himself around, instead of loosening my hold, it just made him rub his ass against my dick, where I was pretty sure all the blood in my body was pooling.

He tensed when he felt it. I thought for sure he would pull away, and this time, I would let him, but he didn’t, Whitt’s strong hand reaching back to grab my hip. He held on, fingers digging into me, which made me make slow circles with my hips so my cock rubbed up and down his crease.

My lungs started burning, and I figured his were, too, so as much as I wished I could shove a hand down his trunks and grab his dick, I pushed off the ground so we broke the surface.

“Jesus Christ. Get off me,” he said, but his pupils were so big I could hardly see the blue of his eyes.

I cocked a brow, silently asking, “*Are you sure?*” while Whitt’s gaze mapped out the landscape of my chest.

Fuck yeah, he wanted me just as much as I wanted him. What in the hell was it about this man?

“You guys are so silly.” Serenity wrapped her arms around me, reminding me she was there. Shit. I felt like an asshole. My intention wasn’t ever to lead anyone on, but I was pretty sure that regardless of what did or didn’t go down with me and Whitt tonight, I wouldn’t want anyone except him.

“I’m going to go dry off for a minute,” I said, nodding toward the stairs. Serenity went with me.

“For some reason, I don’t feel like I’m holding your attention tonight. If that’s the case, tell me now because I don’t want to waste my time.”

I barked out a laugh. Fuck, a confident woman was sexy, and if it wasn’t for Whitt, nothing would have taken me away from her tonight, but I couldn’t get that asshole out of my head. “I like a woman who knows what she wants and isn’t afraid of saying it.”

“You’re still not interested in hooking up tonight, though, are you?” She crossed her arms, giving me a knowing smile.

“It’s not you,” I told her.

“Of course not. I never would have thought it is.” She winked. “Have fun, sugar,” Serenity said before taking off to find her trick for the night. More power to her.

I grabbed a towel, dried off, found my bag, and went into the house in search of an empty bedroom. A lot of them were occupied, but there were also people kissing, touching, and fucking out in the open.

The first two rooms I found had locked doors. The next one was unlocked, but there were three people going at it inside.

“Wanna play?” the guy asked, but I shook my head and snuck out.

I took the stairs leading to the ground floor and followed another hallway until I finally found a room that was empty.

My phone was in my bag. I scrolled down to where it said *Bougie*.

Me: Downstairs—bottom floor, second door on the right.

I plopped down on the bed, silently berating myself for sitting around at a party like this and waiting for Patrick fucking Whitt to find me.

Six minutes later, the door opened. He came inside, closing it and locking it behind him.

“That was fast.”

“What can I say? The prospect of getting my dick sucked was motivating.”

I shook my head. “What if I want my dick sucked?”

Whitt didn't reply for a moment. He just walked over, not stopping until he was standing right in front of me. “I dare you to get on your knees and suck my cock.”

Goddamn it. He knew I couldn't pass up a bet. “Motherfucker.” I pushed him out of the way and slid to the floor.

WHITT

I knew what I was doing this time. Couldn't blame it on booze because I'd had one beer since arriving. Couldn't blame it on loneliness because I'd been a lone wolf long before Tucker, and I'd managed fine. Couldn't blame it on being pent up because I'd jacked off this morning and could've had someone in my bed in seconds, man or woman—or both, judging by everything I'd seen since walking through the door of this party—and I'd wanted none of it the way I wanted Malik Tucker's hands on me again.

After months of only seeing him on a screen, his presence at the edge of the bed before me was too real, too magnified. I noticed things I didn't want to, like a tiny scythe-shaped scar at his temple, the natural upturn at the corners of his mouth, how fucking calm he seemed. And how something inside me had felt settled as I'd closed the door behind me.

I'd had time to sort through this shit in my head. I got off with Tucker harder than I did anyone else, that was a fact. Also a fact: his mere existence pissed me off at least ninety percent of the time I thought about him. But these two things somehow coexisted. And if I was able to stay on the level about it all, why the fuck shouldn't I indulge myself every now and again?

My gaze locked onto the depths of Tucker's as I approached, and my thoughts distilled into a single one. I knew why I was here, and Tucker did, too. In his dark eyes, the same sentiment was reflected back at me.

He ran a hand up my thigh, over the growing bulge in my shorts, as I stopped in front of him. My dick leapt at the brief contact, hips angling forward, chasing the sensation as his fingers trailed upward, following the waistband of my shorts and skimming the bare skin of abs that flexed automatically with the caress. He held my gaze as he grabbed the top of my shorts and yanked them down. My cock popped free, hard and ready for the hand he wrapped around it.

I stifled a moan as he stroked me slowly, tried to ignore the precum that beaded up on my slit when he tightened his grip, but I lost the battle and let out a quiet huff of pleasure as he ran his thumb along my crown, spreading the slickness. Arching into the sensation, I barely registered that I'd let a hand fall to his shoulder, that my fingers caressed the bare skin of his collarbone, moving around to the smooth skin of his neck, flexing and contracting of their own volition as he jerked me.

“Eager,” Tucker murmured and leaned back, which was the wrong direction. I wanted that mouth, that smirk, so much closer than it was. I wanted it wrapped around my cock and his caustic tongue licking up my shaft. When I responded by increasing the pressure of my fingers on the back of his neck, urging him closer, he chuckled but relented, and the warm exhalation over the head of my cock was almost as good as his mouth. Almost.

“Jesus, get on with it,” I whispered, a mix of frustration and anticipation as he flicked his tongue out and it barely touched the tip of my cock. His hand was still moving leisurely up and down my shaft, and it was evident the fucker was going to take no small amount of pleasure in making me wait.

Closing my eyes against his smirk, I let the sensations wash over me, the darts of wetness where he pressed his lips or glided his tongue on my skin, the spike of pleasure when he gripped me harder and gave me one blissful second of suction before pulling off again. As much as I hated to admit it, Tucker was as good in the bedroom as he was on the field and just as focused. Within moments, I was close to coming

unhinged, and when I was afraid I'd come too soon, I gripped his neck tighter and urged him upright, where he barely managed to suck in a breath before our lips crashed together.

It was a rough kiss, my teeth digging into his bottom lip savagely, my tongue plunging recklessly into his mouth. He retaliated by pulling me impossibly closer, hands on my ass, gripping and spreading me open and pulling me in tight. His erection ground against me, and I gave him the same back.

“That’s it.” Tucker’s voice was a low grunt in my ear. “That’s what I want.” And fuck, the words alone spiked my arousal, his tongue lapping at my earlobe, his teeth, his hands, the scent of his skin an overwhelming assault.

I reached between us, trying to shove his shorts down and fist both our cocks at the same time like we’d done in the past, but Tucker flipped the script on me, spinning me around so that he was behind me the way he’d been in the pool, his cock grinding against my ass. It fucking sucked how much I liked him in that position.

His arms came around me, and my eyes started to flutter shut in relief that he was about to grab my cock and finish me off, but instead, his voice came low in my ear. “Not even close to done with you, Whitt. Lie down.”

Seventy-five percent of me wanted to tell him to fuck off, wanted to tell him that he should be the one lying down, but the other twenty-five percent of me—which was comprised of my throbbing erection and the reluctant acknowledgment that Tucker clearly knew what the fuck he was doing—won out.

I stumbled onto the bed, rolling onto my back in time to get a split-second view of Tucker shucking his swim trunks and sandals and his stiff, swollen cock bobbing in the air. Then he was on top of me.

He dipped lower and claimed my mouth, one hand on the bare skin at my neck, forcing my head back, his thumb gliding along the taut tendons. His other hand traveled down my body and gripped my aching shaft.

I hissed in a breath as it slid up and down my length, teasing. He pressed his mouth to my ear again. “We’re gonna do something a little different.”

Before alarm bells could go off in my head, Tucker was sliding down my body, leaving a trail of kisses over my chest until he got to my cock and closed his mouth around it.

If this was “different,” it was fucking perfect, and I gripped the sheets, surging into his mouth and then crying out as a flicker of lightning shot through me when he brushed a finger over my hole. The fuck? “Malik!” I rasped when he did it again.

Tucker popped off my cock with a dark chuckle. “First-naming me again, already? Relax, Bougie.”

The protest died on my lips as he met my eyes and left me in a captivated stupor. He arched a brow before sinking lower, hands gripping my thighs and pushing them wider and up, exposing me completely. And somehow, I was just...letting him.

The warm lash of his tongue raced through me like fire as he flicked it over my hole.

“You’re locked up tighter than a fucking secret, you know.”

“I don’t have secrets,” I grated out because it felt like I didn’t, not with him, and definitely not in this position. The motherfucker could see straight into my desires, and if it hadn’t felt so fucking good, that fact alone would have made me dislike him even more.

“You do now.” He dipped his head and licked a long stripe up to my balls. “I’m your secret, and you’re mine.”

“Fuck.” The word leaked out of me like a deflating balloon, like a white flag of surrender, and every muscle in my body simultaneously tingled and melted. Malik Tucker rimming me in the guest bedroom of a famous producer’s mansion had not been on my list of possible outcomes for tonight, but there was no way I was going to stop him now.

I threw my arm over my face and tried to keep myself from moaning obscenely loud when he paused for a second and blew a steady stream of air over my hole, but when the tip of his tongue dipped inside, I couldn't help another raspy curse.

Tucker's tongue flicked in and out of me in a deliciously dirty rhythm while his hands caressed up my thighs, pinning me down and holding me captive as he teased me.

He worked me with his tongue in a way I'd never in a million years imagined, let alone felt, and the thought that this was only a sample of the pleasure to come left me light-headed and feeling the first tingles of my orgasm stir. With a whispered curse, I gripped the sheets and forced my body to relax with the unspoken promise of more to come.

"Shit, do it." I groaned the encouragement as Tucker pressed the tip of his finger against my entrance, and his gaze flickered up at me, seemingly checking for my permission.

My body resisted the invasion for a scant second and then gave way, Tucker's finger sliding smoothly, slowly inside.

"Damn, baby," Tucker murmured, and if I'd had any ability to think rationally, I would have side-eyed him, but he seemed just as lost in what we were doing as I was, his focus intent and steady. He opened me wider, sliding a second finger into me that stung. Until his mouth closed around my cock again.

The dual assault had me writhing, grating out curses and nonsense until the knot forming at the base of my spine exploded with little warning. My hips pistoned into the heat of his mouth, filling it with my release as I cried out.

Tucker swallowed it all, then crawled up my body. I reached for his cock reflexively to get him off, but he shook his head. "Want that ass, Whitt," he said before urging me onto my stomach. I flipped over, still floating in the blissful haze of orgasm. I wanted it, too. I wanted to feel more than his fingers inside me. As I stretched out on my stomach, I spread my legs to make room for him.

Tucker spit into the furrow of my ass, slicked up his hand, and then trapped his cock between it and my crack so that I felt every inch of his swollen shaft sliding against me but never breaching me. It was a kind of torture I hadn't known existed.

Gripping my shoulder with his other hand, he drove his cock relentlessly into the tunnel he'd created, and despite the fact I'd just come, my dick twitched with renewed interest as I pushed my ass out like a cock-hungry slut, anticipating him pushing inside me at any second.

But he didn't, just continued moving against me, using my body the way he wanted. Arching my back, I surrendered to the rhythm.

"I know you're not ready to let me fuck you yet, but this is what you want, isn't it, Whitt?" he rasped. "You want this cock inside you?"

My eyes popped open, and I strained to turn a glare on him as he teased the head of his cock over my hole.

"You're dying to know what it's like. Isn't that right?" he said, voice low and hypnotic.

"You're an asshole," I grumbled, my cock thickening regardless.

"And you're a motherfucking liar, Whitt, but we all know that." Malik punctuated his words by thrusting harder against me, and I lost my breath a second time, imagining what it would've felt like if he'd actually been inside me, filling me up. The soft cotton sheets beneath me made the friction on my dick deliciously rough, and I moaned as he pulled back and moved, more slowly this time, fucking my crack with shallow strokes, his mouth brushing over my bared shoulder. "Don't lie. You want me to fuck you, don't you, Bougie? You want to feel what it's like to have a cock sliding into your tight little ass."

Yes. The word resounded in my mind, and it fucking pissed me off that it was so blatantly obvious, that *I* was so blatantly obvious. "How do you know I haven't already?" I reached an

arm up and back, finding the nape of his neck and pulling until he was pressed against me and groaned, a primal sound I wanted more of. “Think you’re the only motherfucker out there who knows how to work a cock?” Instead of clapping back, Tucker growled, hips moving faster, breath harsh, and I could tell he was losing his shit, which only encouraged me. “Think you’re the only one who’ll get down on his knees for me?”

Tucker’s body tensed, hands gripping me tighter, and for a split second, I thought I’d pushed him too far, and then he growled out a string of curses mixed with my name seconds before he bit down on my shoulder. Thick, hot spurts of cum splattered my ass and lower back.

He collapsed on top of me seconds later. When I tried to move from beneath him, he closed his hands around my wrists and kept me still as he spoke. “Next time, this goes in your ass, and don’t tell me there won’t be a next time because you and I both know there will be.” He rolled his hips against me once more, softening cock smearing his release and sending a fresh jolt of desire through me that warred with the fury of him being able to pin me down. “I fucking own this ass, and I’ll be the one to take it first.”

“Fuck you,” I spat out.

“If you’re lucky, Bougie.”

And then he released me and was out the door so damn fast I checked the floor to make sure he’d taken his clothes with him. They were gone, but no way he’d had time to put them on.

PART TWO

SECOND HALF

This section crosses over with the timeline of False Start, occurring during Cullen Atwood's first season with the Denver Rush.

TUCKER

September

I hadn't had sex in months, and it was fucking with my brain.

After that night with Patrick at the party, I just...hadn't fucked anyone. At first, I didn't notice, but then about a month in, I realized I hadn't hooked up or even tried to hook up with anyone in four long weeks.

That truth bomb had fucked with my brain. Why hadn't I really thought about indulging in a night of pleasure with another person? I was young and single. There was no reason not to have a good time. Hell, I spent part of the off-season in Florida with my family, and there were a few ladies there that were regulars for me, yet I'd never called them, and when they called me, I never answered.

It wasn't because I was stuck on him because fuck that noise, but I couldn't stop thinking about how he had melted beneath my touch. How hungry he'd been for my cock and how needy my dick felt for him, too. It had become an obsession until eventually, I knew that no one would satisfy me until I had him beneath me.

Until I had his ass.

Yet, I didn't call or text him, and Patrick didn't call or text me.

He wouldn't, though, would he? Not after how I had told him his ass was mine, then walked out on him.

That was maybe a mistake.

Or not.

Who the fuck knew?

At the time, I'd told myself it was because Whitt had dismissed me the night of Christmas Eve, and yeah, while having the last word had been fucking great, there was more to it than that.

It was how much I'd wanted to possess him, how much I really expected him to save his hole for me, that even back then had been fucking with my brain.

Time hadn't dulled that shit.

I just needed to fuck him and be done with it, but I wasn't making any moves to enable that to happen either.

God, I hated him.

Only I didn't.

Point proven by the fact that we were in the locker room after our first practice of the season with our new wide receiver, Cullen Atwood, and while he was going back and forth with Baby G and Ramsey, all I kept thinking was how much of a cocky motherfucker Atwood was, which reminded me of a certain someone who wouldn't be named. Atwood had been traded for Nance, who I couldn't say I would miss. He'd always been a dick but showed his true homophobic colors last season when Garrett was an out and proud bi man. It had only gotten worse since the whole world knew G and Ramsey were together, so basically, the trash had been taken out.

I wasn't sure about Atwood yet, though. He was a dream receiver on the field, but his life outside of it was a mess. He'd been known to party and get into a lot of trouble. He was a hothead, and that wasn't something that me or Rams would deal with on our team. I was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and not judge him yet, though.

I stepped closer to the trio, ready to get my thoughts off Patrick and onto shit that mattered, just as Garrett said to Atwood, "I'd offer to hang right now, but football gets me horny, so I'm gonna take Ramsey home and let him score on me."

I groaned, less because of what Garrett said and more because I wanted to score on someone, too, and the innocent comment just reminded me of that. "They do this all the time," I told Atwood.

"Says the guy who has my boyfriend's hand up in his ass?" Garrett replied.

Jesus fucking Christ. Only Baby G.

I ignored his comment and let Ramsey deal with him, the two of them both trying to tackle each other in the middle of the locker room.

Ramsey got the best of him before the couple said goodbye and headed out. Atwood glanced around, almost looking lost for a second, like he wasn't sure quite what to do with himself. I'd been lucky enough to be with the Rush since my rookie year. I'd never had to be the new guy, coming in after the preseason on an already formed team, and considering he'd publicly come out when he got caught with a guy a few months ago, I figured things hadn't been real easy on him. "I'll walk out with you," I told Atwood.

"Thanks," he replied.

With my bag on my shoulder, the two of us made our way to the door. We didn't talk for a moment, so I tried to think of something to say to engage with him. "You ready for our first game this weekend?"

"You know it."

"Heard you're a bit of a cocky SOB." I mean, it was the truth. We might as well put it out there. That wasn't unique in the NFL. Hell, I was a cocky SOB myself.

So is Patrick.

Motherfucker!

"Aren't we all?" Atwood replied.

Yeah, I figured we would be alright. As long as he focused on football and didn't get into trouble, there was no reason he wouldn't be an asset to the team. Either way, he was better than Nance. "You got that right, man. What's your number?" Atwood read off his digits to me, and I sent him a text so he would have mine.

We talked for another minute, me scrolling Instagram as we did. A photo popped up of Whitt with his arm around a beautiful redheaded woman, making my gut clench. Who the fuck was that?

Why do you care?

Atwood asked about getting some food, and I rumbled out a BS excuse, my brain still too occupied with pap photos of Patrick with someone who could be his fucking aunt for all I knew. Sure, a sexy aunt who was younger than him, but it was possible.

The second I was in my SUV, I pulled up Bougie in my text messages.

Me: You still savin' that ass for me?

I hit Send with a smile, then tossed my cell to the passenger seat and drove toward Andre's house, my little brother in the at-risk, youth program. We still tried to get together as much as possible. It was always enough, in my opinion, but being in the NFL didn't always make everything easy.

Andre was waiting outside of his apartment when I pulled up. He jumped into the car with a wide smile and some books in his lap.

"I like the hair," I told him. He had cornrows in, something I hadn't seen him wear before.

"Thanks, man. How's it going?"

We chatted a bit as I drove us to the restaurant. We were doing pizza, which was Andre's favorite. It was the kind of place where you ordered at the counter, then sat down and waited for them to bring you the food. It wasn't until we were at the table that I could finally ask him about himself. "How's school?"

Andre rolled his eyes. "You know me. I'm the smartest in my grade. You don't have to ask about that."

"I know, but I also know learning is important to you, so I wanna hear about it. I wish I had been as smart as you at your age."

Andre beamed, and damned if that didn't hit me right in the chest. I loved doing this, loved being there in a kid's life this way.

He rambled about engineering shit that was way over my head. I listened raptly, asking questions and making sure he knew his interests were important.

“I’m so proud of you. You’re going to do amazing things.”

“You’re in the NFL,” he countered.

“Yeah. And I’m damn proud of that, but what you can do is just as incredible, if not more.”

Spending time with Andre was the distraction I needed to keep my mind off waiting for a reply from a certain stubborn football player. We hung out for a little over an hour before I dropped Andre off at home with plans for when we would see each other again.

I was sitting on the couch watching ESPN almost two hours later when my phone finally buzzed on the cushion beside me.

I told myself I didn’t care who it was, but that didn’t explain why I picked my phone up too quickly to see Bougie on the screen.

I also told myself I didn’t care what he said, but if that was the case, why in the fuck was I already opening the message?

Bougie: I already told you, you’re not the only person with a cock.

He was lying. He had to be. Patrick wasn’t the guy to trust anyone with something like that. I’d known him long enough to see that. That didn’t stop the foreign riptide of possessiveness from pulling me out to sea and damn near downing me.

I pressed his name roughly with my thumb. It rang twice before he picked it up. “Why the hell are you calling me, Tucker?”

“Did you let someone else fuck you?”

“You don’t get to call me demanding answers to questions like that. Christ, Tucker. Are you jealous?”

That was a damned good question. Was I jealous? Fuck yes, I was. What I didn't want to contemplate was why. I sure as shit didn't want to let him in on the truth either. This was all too much of a mindfuck to be able to make sense of it all. But the thought of someone else getting Whitt's ass first? Anger burned through me, the possibility that created a backdraft that exploded inside of me.

"Cat got your tongue?" Patrick asked when I went too long without a response.

I'd gone months without getting any, my messed-up thoughts with him, and Patrick had fucked another guy? "I told you that ass was mine."

"I don't give a shit what you told me."

The kicker? He was right. He didn't have to care what I said, and I had no right to be going all caveman on him, but did whoever it was even know him? They weren't the one he'd called when his parents had ditched him on Christmas Eve. They weren't the one who had gotten his first orgasm with a man. They hadn't been the one to have Patrick writhing and silently begging for his first cock.

But he'd given whoever it was his ass.

"You just growled," Whitt broke through my thoughts.

"No, I didn't."

"I just heard you. Jesus Christ, this is weird. Don't call me again."

"Did you like it?" I rushed out before he could hang up. "Was he good to you?"

The line was silent except for the sound of Patrick's heavy breaths. It stretched out into eternity before there was a quiet sigh, and he said, "I didn't let anyone fuck me, Malik."

The air in my lungs seeped out like a popped balloon. There was no excuse for me to be so relieved, but I was. "Good" was all I could manage to say.

"Why does it matter?"

I shrugged as if he could see me. “Because I want you first. And I’m the best. You deserve that your first time.” And while I didn’t have it in me to admit it, maybe there was a part of me that wanted Patrick to be my first time with a guy, too. Handjobs and BJs were one thing, and yeah, like I said, I’d done that with guys, but I hadn’t actually fucked one before... and I wanted to share that with Patrick.

“And people think I’m a cocky bastard,” he said, not knowing all the turmoil that went on inside of my head.

I smiled. “I keep it hidden better than you do.” Maybe because I’d never been like this about anyone. I was competitive and confident, but Patrick made everything about me amplified. It made sense that my desire for him would be more than it was for anyone else, too.

“I don’t try.”

“Because you want to push people away, and I don’t,” I said, not willing to hold back on the truth. Patrick couldn’t allow himself to get close to anyone. I hadn’t been lying all those months ago when I said he was locked up tighter than a secret, and there was nothing I wanted more than to unravel him. “No comment?” I asked when he didn’t respond.

“I don’t answer to you.”

Somehow, I knew I wasn’t getting any more out of him than that, so I asked, “What are your thoughts on Atwood?”

“I think you’re a lucky motherfucker, and he makes your team a whole hell of a lot stronger, so basically, I hate him.”

I laughed, then leaned back on the couch, putting my feet on the coffee table. “He’s bi, too.”

“Yeah, I don’t live under a rock, so I heard the news.”

“Snippy tonight, aren’t you?”

“I’m snippy every day.”

Again, I grinned because he really fucking was. “Didn’t you go to college with him?”

“For a year. I didn’t know back then, though.”

“What about you? Did you know about you?” He was quiet for a moment, so I added, “Oh, I forgot. I turned you bi. You were so charmed by me you couldn’t help but start jonesing for cock.”

“Fuck you, Tucker,” he growled out when I started laughing. His sigh afterward just made me laugh more. “I’m hanging up now.”

“No. Don’t,” I rushed out, not ready to end the call. “Do you think you’ll ever come out...as whatever label you are?”

“I dunno. I haven’t given it a lot of thought. I’ve only ever been interested in one other... You know what? Never mind.”

“Aww, hell no. You’re not getting off that easy.”

“I’m just saying you’re not the only guy I’ve ever been interested in, you cocky ass.”

“I’m waiting for deets,” I said, grinning to myself as I imagined him scowling. He was gonna cave, though, I knew it.

Whitt sighed again like he wanted it to be perfectly clear how annoyed he was at this line of questioning. It was actually kinda cute. “It wasn’t some big thing at the time. In fact, I didn’t even really get it at the time. It was a guy I used to go to high school with. We played football together and were close, but we never did anything. I just had this...this feeling, and it was different than how I felt about my other guy friends, and even different than how I felt about my girlfriend at that time, but I didn’t really know how to categorize it until later. Later meaning...kinda recently.”

“You mean recently as in after me?”

“Maybe, I don’t know, I just kind of put it all out of my head once we left for college.”

“You ever talk to him again?”

“Calls and texts dropped off once college started. You know how it is, people drift. I’ve never spoken to him again. He came out at some point, and I think he’s married now, maybe even has a family. Do you think you’ll ever come out?” he countered, his attempt to turn the conversation back to me

obvious, though I wasn't gonna call him out on it this time. That he'd even shared all of that in the first place was more than I'd expected, even if I'd pestered him.

"I'd come out now if I needed to. I'm not closeted. I've just never had a reason to tell most people my business."

"I don't give a shit what people think" was how Patrick answered, and I believed that about him. We had that in common.

"Your parents?" I asked softly, hoping I wasn't going to fuck up whatever common ground we'd just found ourselves on.

"I don't give a shit what people think," he answered again. "What are we doing here, man? Talking on the phone? We're not friends."

He was right, but I didn't have an answer to what we were doing. Well, not one other than "I want you. I told you I own that ass. You're stuck talking to me until I get it."

"So I have to put up with you until the day you die?"

A quiet chuckle fell from my lips. "You can't hold out that long. You want me, too."

"I want you as much as I want a hole in the head."

I doubled over laughing. "You say that when someone says you need something, not want it. I need it like a hole in the head. No one ever wants a hole in the head."

"Same fucking thing, smart-ass."

This conversation was more fun than it should be. "I can't wait to play you this season."

"Can't wait to get your ass kicked?"

"Not gonna happen. We should meet up before that, though. You probably won't be in the mood for me to dick you down before or after a game. What's your schedule like?"

He gave a gentle, husky laugh. I liked the sound of Patrick's laugh. He should do it more often. "I'm not meeting up with you."

“Who was the redhead?”

“Jesus, Tucker. Your stalker ass really is jealous. She’s a friend, which is more than I can say about you.”

“You like it, though. You like knowing how much I want you.”

He sucked in a breath, and I knew I had him. “I’m gonna go.”

“Why? Too much?”

“I have a date.”

I rolled my eyes. “No, you don’t, Bougie, but I’ll let you pretend you do. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“I won’t answer.”

“We’ll see about that,” I replied, then ended the call before he got the chance.

WHITT

October

Houston McRae walked fresh from his post-interview dinner with the Royals' coaching staff into Le Blanque's VIP area with the swagger of a king and the outfit of a lumberjack. I'd debated the wisdom of inviting him to meet for a drink in the first place, but curiosity had gotten the better of me and, hell, if he was going to come coach for the Royals, I wanted some kind of rapport with him. Besides, I'd liked playing with him at Southern U, even if revisiting those years filled me with a strange sense of dread.

Houston grinned, giving me an assessing up-and-down as he slid onto the leather bench opposite me. "Bougier than ever, I see."

The nickname nearly made me flinch, though it wasn't one I was unfamiliar with—even my own teammates referred to me that way sometimes—it was just that Houston's proximity to Tucker had me wondering if he'd been talking about me to him.

Schooling my reaction, I waved a hand nonchalantly. "Just keeping up appearances, man." I reached out and clapped him on the back before lifting my glass, and before it was even halfway in the air, a server was at the table. "Another whiskey on the rocks, please. McRae?"

Once our drinks were delivered, McRae dug in, asking me a few questions about the team and clearly trying to figure out how he'd become the Royals' top choice as a wide receiver special teams coach, wondering if I'd had any sway. The truth was, I had no clue. Some of the other guys obsessed over management and the everyday ins and outs of the admin side of the NFL, but I wasn't one of them. If I was playing, it was a good day, and if I got called in or reamed out for something—which was rare—I did my goddamn best to not repeat the mistake. I'd had eyes on me all my life, so I'd gotten good at staying within bounds, even if I flirted with the edge sometimes.

“You’re my secret, and I’m yours.” Tucker’s whisper wound through my brain as McRae rambled on, and I shifted uncomfortably, tossing off a joke about making a PowerPoint presentation detailing why management shouldn’t hire him.

“Like you’ve ever made a PowerPoint in your life.” Houston scoffed. “Didn’t you pay someone to make one for you once for a class freshman year?”

“Sure did,” I said. “Some of the best thirty bucks I ever spent, too. God. I can’t believe you remember that.” I hoped like hell he didn’t remember much more. I’d all but left skid marks on the interstate transferring to Franklin University. I’d had reasons that had worked out best for me in the long run but had seemed a little...impulsive and dumb in retrospect. FU, in Southern California, had simply been farther away from Florida than Southern U. Farther from the long shadow of my family name, farther from my parents’ disappointment. In California, there were tons of millionaires, financiers, and movie stars. Out there, if I wanted to make a name for myself, it had to be on my own merit. At FU, a ton of students had high-profile parents, so off the field, I was completely unremarkable. On the field, though...

“Me either.” Houston grinned, bringing me back into focus. “It’s been a while.”

“Sure as shit has. A lot has changed. In the league. In... Just in general,” I said, snatching the opportunity to turn the conversation away from college. “You and Cullen Atwood, though. For real?” Photos of the two of them together had been published recently and they’d subsequently confirmed they were in a relationship. Cullen had also played for Southern U with me and Houston and the two had seemed tight. But I’d never heard anything about them being together back then—much less gay or bi. Then again, I’d only been at Southern for freshman year.

“For real.” Houston nodded, though something in his gaze made me more alert, searching for a layer of context beneath.

“The two of you were close back at Southern. I always kind of wondered if you two had a thing—”

“We didn’t,” Houston snapped so quickly it took me aback. The guy had never been the snappish type, but since the subject seemed to put him on edge, I lifted my hands in placation.

“Easy, tiger. Just speculating. We all played football together. Not out to mess anything up for you. Or him. I was just curious.” Houston McRae had also never struck me as a liar, but he was definitely lying to me right now, and I had to assume he had his own reasons.

“Sorry,” he grumbled, shifting once more into the affable guy I remembered from college. “We get a lot of questions like that. Media scrutiny and stuff. Puts me on edge. Thought I was done with that.”

“You won’t be so long as you’re with him or working with LA. That’s straight-up facts,” I said, and as I spoke the words, a heavy weight settled in my chest. I might as well be talking about myself. Or worse, myself and Tucker.

“Yeah, I’m aware. I can handle it, though.”

“I know you can. You were always good under pressure.” He’d always been cool as a cucumber on the field. “The Rush seems like a good fit for Cullen, yeah? He gets along with all the guys? There are a few on there...” I trailed off with a shake of my head, Tucker once again invading my thoughts.

“You still butthurt over Tucker getting drafted to the Rush instead of you?” Houston chuckled amiably, obviously unaware of how that simple comment lanced me. This conversation had become a minefield, and it felt like we were doing a back-and-forth dance of deflect and defend. “You should be thanking your lucky fucking stars every day you wake up,” he continued. “LA’s one of the winningest teams of the last decade, you shit.”

I forced a laugh. “Fair point. But what’s football without a good rivalry? Gets the ratings, too. Gets my face onscreen, gets me more sponsorships,” I quipped.

“Like you didn’t have enough money before you got signed.” Houston rolled his eyes. “It’s nice to know you’re still

the arrogant prick you've always been."

"I like that people know what to expect from me," I countered. All of what Houston had said was technically true, and yet, for the first time, it all felt like a lie. I wanted desperately to ask about Tucker, fish for information about how he was doing, how his season was going aside from what I saw onscreen, what the hell he'd been up to in general, but I didn't dare. It would've seemed odd, so when Houston turned the conversation back to playing football our freshman year of college, I let him, suddenly glad he'd be leaving the next day and I wouldn't have to bob and weave through another conversation with him.

WHEN I GOT HOME, I PULLED MY PHONE OUT OF MY POCKET, found the message thread with Tucker, and read through our last few messages. We hadn't spoken or talked since he'd called to pry into my nonexistent love life a couple of weeks ago.

I was having one of the best seasons of my career, and the Royals were on track to be a real contender for the Super Bowl. I'd proven to myself that even having hooked up with Tucker, I could set that aside on the field and not let it get in my head.

So far. But we hadn't played the Rush yet.

I closed my eyes, giving myself a solid thirty seconds to remember our last encounter, his skin on mine, his big hands splayed over my abs. Then I blinked my eyes open and tapped out: *No more of this.*

He'd know what I meant, and I suspected he'd honor it, too.

I paused before hitting Send and stared at the message long and hard. Did I want this? What the fuck did I want?

Then, exhaling a curse, I erased the message and typed a different one.

Whitt: I wanted the Rush bad. I fucking despised you when they drafted you instead.

I was starting to send another message when his reply came through.

Tucker: I know.

Tucker: And now?

No witty banter, no snarky replies. It felt inexplicably different, and I considered my reply for a long, uncomfortable moment.

Whitt: I don't know.

Whitt: But I do know they made the right choice.

After hitting Send, I silenced my phone and put it facedown on my nightstand. Whatever he had to say, I didn't want to hear it.

Or maybe I just wasn't ready to.

I LOVED WHEN WE PLAYED VEGAS. SOME OF THE OTHER Royals had beef with them, but I had absolutely no ties with them, good or bad. Had hardly spoken more than a few words to any of their players, which meant there was no internal noise to shut off, even when we were on their turf, like tonight. There was nothing but clarity and focus.

As their offense lined up, ready to take on our defense, I stood at the line of scrimmage, my eyes locked on Ramirez, the wide receiver in front of me, my senses fine-tuned for any flinch or shift of his body. It was the kind of focus I'd practiced for hours a day when I'd first started playing, just trying to be conscious of every little movement the human body could make, spot the tells of motion even within minute movements. Over time, my body adapted and learned to pick up the patterns and assess in a split second. There were moments it felt like a superpower and made all the grueling practice worth it. Hell, that feeling was a huge reason I loved

football. I'd put in the work. I'd done it. No one bought it for me, no one handed it to me. Every bit of my prowess on the turf had been paid for with my own blood, sweat, and tears.

The QB's voice echoed through the air, shouting the cadence amid the roaring stadium, and the second the ball was snapped, Ramirez exploded off the line. I mirrored his movements fluidly, effortlessly, fully in the zone. It wasn't the first time I'd been up against him, and his speed easily matched mine. He made a sharp cut, trying to shake me off, but I anticipated it and, with a burst of acceleration, closed the gap at the same time I stretched my hand out, aiming to block the incoming pass.

My goal was always to interrupt passes. Anything on top of a blocked pass was icing. The receiver stumbled a fraction, and I saw an opportunity. As the ball soared through the air and Ramirez regained his footing, I pivoted, arm outstretched. My fingertips grazed the leather, and for a split second's worth of disappointment, I thought I'd lose it. Fuck that. Adrenaline surged through me, and I leapt, clamping down on the ball with my other hand and barely keeping my balance as I landed. I had no time to think; I just took off running at full speed, expecting at any second to be slammed from behind. Barker ran interference, crashing into one of Vegas's guards as he rushed me. Spotting a seam to the far left, I kept booking it, weaving down the field, trusting my teammates to rally, trusting my legs, trusting the furious and wild beat of my heart as exhilaration lit up every nerve ending and fueled me. The noise in the stadium crescendoed to a raging buzz as the end zone loomed. Dodging another guard, and certain I could feel the collective breath of Vegas on the back of my neck, I dove.

Time slowed, and I swore I could count the blades of grass as I broke the plane of the goal line on my way down. Every bone in my body jarred as I slammed into the turf, but the only thing I felt was the solid weight of the ball still in my grip.

The last thing I saw before my vision was occluded by other bodies on top of me was the ref's hands shooting up.

Touchdown.

Head still spinning, I was yanked upright, registering the smack of my teammates' hands on my shoulders and ass, their whoops of joy.

“Fucking A!” LaForge shouted, eyes filled with glee. “Holy fucking shit. What is that, your third?”

Interceptions returned for touchdowns were pretty fucking rare. I'd spent countless hours studying Deion Sanders and Rod Woodson's tapes, convincing myself I could do the same. It'd still taken me two seasons before I managed my first.

My lips split in a grin as I knocked a fist against LaForge's. “It's my fourth. Second this season.”

“Jesus Christ, dude. Drinks are on me tonight, and you're definitely coming out with us.”

For the first time in a long time, I decided I'd actually do it instead of begging off to be a loner in my hotel room or striking out solo like I usually did.

With the Royals solidly in the lead, I played the rest of the game like my feet had wings, high on the sense of accomplishment and wondering, distantly, if my parents might have seen the play.

Or if Tucker had.

I didn't have to wait long. I was leaving the locker room when my phone pinged, and the way I scrambled to pull the fucking thing from my pocket should've been embarrassing.

Tucker: That interception was fucking insane. What's it feel like to touch the sky?

Realizing I was grinning at my phone like a fool, I schooled my features as a couple of teammates passed by me and then leaned against a wall to compose my reply.

Me: I was always told clouds were just water vapor. Nope, they feel like cotton candy.

I was poised to type more when LaForge clapped a big hand on my shoulder. “Ready to go, man? I'm gonna buy out the whole fucking bar for you tonight. Who you talking to?” He tried to peer over my shoulder.

“No one.” The lie was bitter on my tongue, at odds with the glow suffusing my veins. “A friend,” I corrected myself, frowning as I tucked my phone away, because that wasn’t exactly it either. I didn’t know what Malik Tucker was to me anymore, but it wasn’t “no one.” “Let’s go,” I said and shoved off the wall.

TUCKER

I *was always told clouds were just water vapor. Nope, they feel like cotton candy.*

I didn't know why I couldn't stop staring at the text from Patrick. I couldn't say what kind of response I'd expected out of him, but that wasn't it. Maybe something with more bravado? Cockier or more indifferent like it didn't matter to him, because he knew he was that fucking good. But this wasn't either of those things. This was real.

Damned if I didn't want more real from him.

Me: You celebrating tonight?

I was home in Denver, hanging out at my place. We hadn't played today, and I'd sat around watching the Royals game with Andre, but his mom had picked him up in the third quarter. Jesus, if any of the guys had seen me, I'd have been embarrassed as shit about how I was hoping for something good for Patrick. How I'd wanted him to win and the buoyancy that had filled my chest when he'd made that interception and taken it all the way to the end zone for a touchdown. I wasn't supposed to want his team to do well, only I did, and I sure as shit shouldn't have felt fucking giddy about it, only that had been the case, too.

Luckily, Andre hadn't noticed anything.

I glanced at my phone again, looking for a response that hadn't come. It had only been a couple of minutes, but eagerness made my muscles twitch, which was fucked-up beyond belief.

Leaving my phone behind, I went into the other room to get on my treadmill. The thirty minutes I ran ticked by slowly while I tried to pretend I wasn't anxious to get back and see if Patrick had replied. He was messing with my head in a way I wasn't sure what to think of.

Sweat made my eyes sting before I wiped it away. I did a slowdown, then ended my jog. I told myself I wasn't going back to check my phone, but I was a fucking liar because that's exactly where I went. It still sat face down on the arm of my couch. When I turned it over, I saw his name at the bottom of the screen and...Jesus fuck. Why was I smiling? This motherfucker was getting me twisted.

Bougie: LaForge is trying to feed me all the alcohol in Vegas. Might celebrate by getting my dick wet.

Every muscle in my body went tight in an uncomfortable way, jealousy spreading through my bloodstream like a virus. The thought of someone else touching Patrick made my gut clench up and my stomach rumble.

Me: No.

Bougie: You're mistaken if you're under the impression you have a say in who I fuck or not.

He was right. Of course, he was. We weren't anything to each other—not really. Hell, it hadn't been long since I realized I didn't hate him. This wasn't some in-the-moment sex thing where I told him he was mine...it was more. It was uncalled for. Still, I couldn't stop myself.

Me: I told you before, I want you. I don't want anyone else to touch you until I've had my fill.

Bougie: Because you're not fucking other people, either?

Me: No. I haven't. Not since before the night at the Montrose party.

And then...nothing. An hour went by where I didn't hear from him. I told myself it didn't matter, that it was better this way. That I could still fuck Patrick if he had sex with someone else because I did that shit all the time. That was the name of the game, but then why did my chest feel so tight? Why did it

feel like the weight of the whole fucking world sat right on my sternum, making it hard to breathe?

I showered and got into bed, telling myself I wasn't going to check my phone again, but then it buzzed, my fingers too twitchy not to reach for it.

Bougie: You were watching my game.

That's what he had to say to me after I admitted I hadn't been with anyone else but him? Had he gone home with someone? Did he spend the last hour between the legs of a beautiful woman and then go back to his hotel to message me?

Me: Where are you?

Translation: *Who are you with?*

Bougie: Christ, Tucker. I didn't fuck anyone tonight. I came back to the hotel.

I grinned, and before I could send a message, another came through from Patrick.

Bougie: I don't believe you...that you haven't been with anyone else.

Jesus, this guy. He was so fucking cocky in a million ways. It was what he showed to the world, and part of that was real, but it also wasn't...not completely. Again, these were the parts of Patrick that were real, all the secrets he shared with me that made him who he was.

Me: I haven't. I don't want anyone other than you. It's annoying as shit.

And then, because I thought he needed to hear it, I added:

Me: I always watch you play. It's sexy—how fluidly you move, how light on your feet you are. It gets my dick hard, but fuck, Patrick, even more than that, you're just good.

The admission wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. Maybe before I knew him, before I realized that as badass as he was, and no matter how many people told him, I didn't think he heard it from anyone who mattered. His parents weren't proud of him. They didn't see how hard he worked or

what he had accomplished because all they cared about was their business and him not being a part of it.

I let myself breathe while I watched, waiting for a response. It didn't surprise me that it didn't come right away, but this time, I knew it was because he didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to let himself feel things.

It was less than five minutes later, though, when my cell lit up.

Bougie: Why are you saying shit like this to me?

Me: Because it's true.

I pressed his name on the screen to call him. Patrick answered right away. "What do you want, man?"

"Aww, come on. Don't you like it when I tell you how pretty you are on the field?"

He puffed out an annoyed breath that didn't have any bite behind it.

"My bye week is coming up. I'll fly out to you, show you just how sexy I think you are. Jesus, Patrick. I'm dying to get inside that ass."

He inhaled sharply, and damn, I wish I had video called him instead. I wanted to see the look on his face, how his Adam's apple bobbed, and see those secrets in his eyes that he couldn't keep from me.

"One time. And then this is done."

I grinned. "Baby...one time isn't gonna be enough for us, and you know it."

THE NEXT FEW WEEKS WENT BY AT A SNAIL'S PACE. PATRICK and I texted, but other than when we'd sorted out what day worked for both of us, we didn't talk about whatever it was that was going on between us. We spoke about football and other teams. We talked shit to each other because that was just

what we did. We pretended everything was the same, ignoring the big-ass elephant in every conversation that I was going to fuck Patrick Whitt...that neither of us had been with anyone except each other in months, and we had some kind of confusing relationship that we didn't want to dissect.

But fucking finally, the day had come.

The flight from Denver to LA was only a couple of hours. Patrick would be picking me up at the airport. I'd told him I could take car service, but he cutely wasn't having it. I was pretty sure there was a closet sweetheart under his rough exterior, and damn, did I like to be the one to uncover it.

I didn't check a bag or anything, so with my carry-on in tow, I made my way outside of baggage claim at LAX, where he was picking me up. I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that this was happening at all while trying to figure out how in the fuck I felt about it when he pulled up at the curb in his Audi.

I tossed the bag in the back before climbing into the front seat. "Hey, baby. You miss me?" I teased, which immediately made him roll his eyes.

"You're an idiot."

"You like it," I countered because I knew he did. And I liked that he liked it. "You know there's a possibility that paps might see us?"

He shrugged but didn't respond right away. Granted, the last thing they would suspect is the fact that he was picking me up and taking me home so I could get in his ass, but I still wanted to protect this, that we even spent time together.

"This is LA. Sometimes it's easier to hide in plain sight."

Was that what Patrick did in a lot of ways? Hide his pain or his hurt? Hide the fact that he felt so much and his parents fucking sucked and how goddamned lonely I knew he was? Because before we'd gotten close, before I'd let myself really see him, I would have never believed those things were there, so yeah, I understood what he was saying. Sometimes hiding in plain sight kept you camouflaged more than anything else.

“Hey,” I said, reaching over and putting a hand on his thigh while he drove. He glanced my way, trepidation in his stare. “Want some road head?” I teased, knowing he had expected something a little deeper.

Patrick laughed, not smooth and cultured the way he did when it wasn't honest, but like the joy couldn't be contained or couldn't be bothered with pretending it wasn't real.

“That might get some attention, asshole.”

“I can't wait to be in your asshole.” I pumped my brows, knowing that was a terrible comeback but not caring since it made him smile.

“How the fuck do you get women with lines like that?”

“Men, too, and I don't know. I got you, didn't I? You tell me.”

“I just want to see what it's like to be with a man. Let's not pretend you're something special.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Depends on what you're offering.” I winked, earning myself another bit-back grin.

“Jesus, why the fuck is it you?”

This time, it was my turn to laugh. “Like I'm not thinking the same shit about you. Would be easier if you weren't so fucking hot.”

He didn't look my way, but I could have sworn his cheeks tinged a slight pink. Would you look at that. Patrick Whitt was blushing. “That why you pretended to hate me your whole life?”

“Oh no. I did hate you...but I also didn't know you,” I admitted. “You made it easy to hate you because you were always putting on a show.” And he still did in some ways. Maybe Patrick thought he wanted people to hate him. I'd prove to him it didn't have to be that way.

LA traffic was a bitch like always, but we distracted ourselves the whole drive by talking about shit that didn't matter.

I'd been right before when I'd imagined that Patrick's house was in the Hollywood Hills.

This sure as shit wasn't somewhere I ever thought I would be. "You hungry?" he asked again, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was nervous. You couldn't tell it by looking at him, but then, he was good at keeping secrets.

"Yeah, I could eat. What do you got?"

We ended up grilling some chicken in his backyard, with his pool out in front of us, sipping on a cold beer while the food cooked.

"You guys have always been close? You and your family?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. My bio dad was a real piece of work. He didn't give a damn about us. He treated my mom like shit and bailed on her. Never saw us, never paid a cent of child support or anything. It was real hard on my mom. She had me and Kayla when he bounced the fuck out. Eventually, she met Steven. He was fucking great. He came into a ready-built family, but he never treated me or Kayla like we were anything but his kids, even after Zuri and Savanna came along. There wasn't a difference in how he parented his biological daughters compared to us. We never had money, ya know, but it was the first time in Mom's life she didn't have to kill herself to make ends meet. He's my pops if you ask me. Fucking broke us all when he died."

It was strange talking to Patrick about things like this. I never would have let him in this way when we were younger, would have felt like it made me weak in his eyes or something. Back then, I'd thought he had everything—money, the perfect family—but he hadn't—not the family part at least, and what the hell good did money do you if you didn't have people around who showed they loved you? In that way, I'd been richer than him.

“I’m sorry that you lost him.”

“Yeah, me too,” I replied. “Wish he could have seen me... wish he knew how hard I’ve worked and what I became. I just want to make him proud. Want him to know I’m taking care of mom and my sisters—not that they need it, but yeah, I hope wherever the fuck he is out there, he knows.”

“He does,” Whitt replied. “I don’t know how I feel about what happens after we die, but he’s proud of you, and he knows you’re taking care of them.”

My mouth pulled into a smile, one that I couldn’t hold back, even if I wanted to. Fuck, I liked hearing shit like that from him, believed what he said because it was Patrick who said it.

“Did I ever tell you about Andre?” I asked.

His brows pulled together. “Who the hell is that?”

I clutched my stomach, laughing. “Clearly, we’re both jealous SOBs. Here.” I pulled up a photo on my phone and showed it to him.

“Cousin or something?”

“Nah. I do that big-brother type of program. I don’t get to see Andre as much as I’d like, but we hang out as often as we can. He’s a great kid. Fucking genius. I wish I had his brains, but yeah, part of me does that so I can be a Steven to someone else...”

“I...” He gave me the softest smile I had ever seen from him. “That’s incredible. I don’t know what to say.”

“Yeah? First, you say my dad is proud of me, and now this. Damn, you’re sweet.”

“Fuck you,” he groaned, and then I was surprised when he lunged at me. We tumbled off the chairs and onto the concrete, wrestling each other. It wasn’t something I’d expected, so he got the best of me, Whitt on top of me, his boy next door smile shining through. He was so fucking different than anything I’d thought he would be.

“Gotta catch me off guard to beat me,” I threw his direction while I thrust up to try and buck him off, then rolled us so he was beneath me.

We went at it for a few minutes, rolling around, each of us giving as well as we could take, when we ended up in the grass, me on top of him again, holding down his arms. This time, Patrick didn't move, just looked up at me, chest heaving in and out, the blue pools of his eyes locked on me, those perfect bow lips calling my name.

“Christ, I hate that you're so fucking beautiful.” I leaned down and took his mouth. My tongue swept inside, Patrick opening up for me and inviting me in. My dick got hard, his cock firm against me as we rutted together in the grass, tongues tangling and hard bodies pressed together.

I loved that he nearly matched me, that he was almost as tall as me. Though not as broad and big, he still held his own in ways women or the other men I'd been with didn't.

I kissed my way down his neck, then shoved my hand in his shorts, wrapping my fist around his dick and stroking him.

“Fuck.” He thrust up and into my palm.

“You gonna come for me, baby? Gonna shoot your load in your underwear because you want me so much? I'll lick it all off my fingers like an appetizer before the main meal. You come now so later, when I take your ass, you can go all night.”

“Jesus!” He cried out, fucking my palm until his balls emptied. I rutted against him, fucked his leg like I couldn't control myself. My body shot to the sky, then fell down again like dead weight when I came.

“You're right. It does feel like cotton candy,” I said against his mouth, kissing him again before I licked my hand clean like I'd promised I would, Patrick's gaze never leaving me the whole time. “Come on. Let's eat.”

He looked as I sprung to my feet, then held my hand out to help him up.

Patrick took it without me even having to ask again.

WHITT

The Denver Rush's starting center was in my house. He was in my house, and we were about to eat dinner like old friends or, worse, like lovers. Then he was going to fuck me. Malik Tucker had taken a flight from Denver to LA just to fuck me. Everything else—the dinner, the wrestling, the conversation—was like tissue paper wrapped around that fragile knowledge. I felt the anticipation and nerves with every beat of my heart but maintained a casual air as best as I could. There were a shit ton of other things to consider, like...that he was in my house in the first place. A hotel in LA had seemed too dicey, though. The high-end ones often had paps within easy reach, and the seedy ones...yeah, that wouldn't work either. I'd rarely had anyone to my house since I'd moved here, aside from a woman I'd dated for a while. But that had been years ago. Shit, had I even had anyone I was dating or hooking up with here since? I was sure I had, but could recall nothing from the last two years, which just seemed kind of weird now.

“Do people come over to your house in Denver?” I asked once we'd sat down at my dining table with our plates of grilled chicken and veggies—which was also fucking weird. I hadn't sat down at this table in ages, and here we were, again, doing something completely “normal” in a situation that was anything but.

“Huh?” Tucker said, popping a bite of chicken in his mouth, brow flickering up in apparent confusion.

“I mean, do you have people over to your house a lot? Women? Men? Friends? Hookups? Whatever?”

Tucker’s brow held its perch before he shook his head with a quiet chuckle. “Some of the shit that comes out of your mouth, man... Yeah, people come to my house all the time. That’s kinda what a house is for. I like having people around. Barbecuing, hanging out, watching games, whatever.” He paused, seeming to catch himself. “Not hookups for a long time, though.” He swiped a hand across his mouth. “Meant what I said about that. But in the past, sure? Why?”

I shrugged. I knew what Tucker’s house looked like. It’d been in some magazine article once. Now, I tried to imagine him in it, doing what we were doing, but with someone else, and it made my stomach tighten. “Just curious.”

“Don’t you?” He glanced around. “It’s a pretty sweet place.”

“Not really.”

“Why not?”

I’d known that question was coming but still wasn’t prepared for it. “Don’t know. It just doesn’t happen. If the guys are getting together, it’s usually at LaForge’s because he got that crazy deal on that compound in Thousand Oaks. Talk about sweet. The theater room is legit the size of the real thing.” I’d only been there a couple of times, but Tucker didn’t need to know that. Besides, I’d been making more of an effort lately to hang with the guys, go out with them, even if my nights always ended up with me alone, wishing I had Tucker’s hands on me.

Tucker had stopped eating and was looking at me thoughtfully before he offered a “huh” that I couldn’t parse the meaning of. Before I could ask, though, he followed up with, “So who’s the last person that was over here?”

“Candice.” He knew how Candice fit within the family but still frowned. “Okay, and before that?”

“If you’re asking who the last person is that came here to hook up with me, I guess that’d be Lila Monroe.”

He barked out a laugh. “Lila Monroe, no shit? I had no idea. I thought she dated Cullen Atwood for a while.”

I shrugged again. “She did, I think. We just hooked up for a few weeks.” She’d ghosted me, probably for Cullen now that I considered the timing on it, but I hadn’t been butthurt over it. The sexual chemistry between us had been hot, but that was pretty much where it’d ended for me, and we’d both had crazy schedules.

“Huh,” he said again, in that vague way that was starting to drive me crazy because I felt like he was making some assessment of me. Fuck if I cared to ask about it, though. The closer we got to finishing our meals, the more the buzzing sensation in my body amplified, like my dick was on a timer, counting down to what came next.

When Tucker pushed his plate away, I did the same and then stood too fast, almost knocking my chair over as I reached to grab his plate and clear it.

Tucker’s warm chuckle ran through me like spiced honey. “Eager much?”

I hoped my answering laugh didn’t sound too forced. I took the plates to the sink and dropped them in before spinning back to the table, where Tucker was resting back in his chair, arms folded over his chest, watching me with those dark eyes.

“I should shower, probably,” I said, and Tucker stood.

“Me too.”

I didn’t offer the guest shower. The look in his eyes said he was coming with me.

Once inside, we washed quickly, and with the spray of the dual showerheads pelting us, Tucker pressed against me, lips moving over mine, down my neck, and back up again. It was a slow and sensual contrast to the roughhousing that had happened outside earlier, and with the heat and steam billowing around us and the knowledge of what was about to happen, it ramped my arousal higher. Our slick bodies moved against each other, and in seconds, I was thrusting against him, moaning when our cocks bumped and glided together.

Just when I was ready to tell him to fuck me right there, Tucker reached out and turned the faucets off. “C’mon.”

He trailed me into the bedroom and let fly one of those annoyingly sexy laughs when I dropped the towel I’d been running over my hair and crawled onto the bed on all fours.

“What?” I asked, peering over my shoulder at him. “This is happening, right?”

The curve of his lips didn’t falter. “Yeah, if that’s how you want it, sure.”

I glanced down at my own body and then back up at him. “I’m pretty sure this is a go-to position.”

Tucker laughed again and walked toward me like he was on a Sunday stroll, big dick bobbing in the air between us and making it hard not to stare. At it. At all of him.

He ran a hand lightly up my spine, and I couldn’t help arching into his touch or the goose bumps that blossomed over my shoulder blades when he leaned down and pressed a kiss between them. “I guess I just had something kinda different in mind.”

“Yeah? Like what?” I wasn’t the expert, but I could hear the tinge of frustration in my voice that came from feeling vulnerable and exposed beneath his gaze. I was guessing Tucker sensed it, too. Though his eyes didn’t lose their amused sparkle, his voice was gentler when he said, “Flip on your back.”

I flipped onto my back and pointed to my nightstand. “I got some, uh, supplies and stuff in there.”

“Mmm,” Tucker murmured, leaning over me and letting his lips drift over mine, down my chin, neck, and sternum, a soft, fluttery feeling that bordered on ticklish but left a searing heat behind. “We’re not there just yet.”

Before I could open my mouth again, he swallowed my cock, and I let out a sharp moan, arching off the bed into the heat of his mouth as he sucked me. I’d been fantasizing about his mouth on me again for what felt like a hundred unsatisfying jerk sessions, and my hands moved automatically

to his head, anchoring him in place. He let me thrust into that blissful wetness until my breathing dissolved into sharp gasps, and I could feel my orgasm gathering, ready to explode. Then he popped off.

“Fuck, don’t stop,” I gasped.

Tucker grabbed the supplies from my drawer and climbed onto the bed, settling between my thighs. My dick gave a hopeful lurch as he raked his teeth across his lower lip and gazed down at me. “You saying you want more?”

Fuck it. “Yeah...yes. Fuck yes.”

“You saying you want me to make this ass mine?” His hands trailed over my thighs and around to my hamstrings before gently pushing them up, and I decided we could argue semantics later. Right now, I wanted to know what it felt like to have him buried inside me.

“Fuck yes,” I assented.

“Good,” he murmured. With one hand, he pinned my hip to the bed while the lube-slicked fingers of the other smoothed over my hole. The second he slid the first finger inside, he grasped my cock, giving it a long, slow stroke and causing me to cry out again at the sudden friction.

Exhaling a string of curses, I let my head fall back, trying not to come again as he worked me open and teased me at the same time. How many fucking times had he done this before to be so damn good at it? I’d have asked if I could’ve formed words, but the combination of his rough, deft touch, the cool sheets against my skin, and the slide of his finger in and out of my ass was driving me crazy.

“Tucker, fuck,” I managed, letting my knees fall wider.

Tucker groaned some response and pressed closer to me, the head of his dick kissing my hole. I registered the warmth a second before the pressure came as he eased slowly inside me, one hand gripping his shaft.

“Ahhh, shit,” he groaned, the husky arousal in his voice making me wild. “Goddamn, Patrick.” His voice was a raspy whisper as he slid farther inside. “This ass...” His eyes

fluttered shut, and the immense pressure inside me eased, transmuting to a hot glow that rippled upward through my body. In that second, as he filled me completely, I realized I'd been missing a whole fucking world of pleasure.

I had nothing to offer but curses and groans of encouragement as he started moving, slowly at first, so that it felt like every nerve ending down there was awake and on fire with pleasure in a way I'd never experienced before.

I clutched at his sides, then his ass, urging him deeper and faster as the knotted-up sensation in my groin escalated.

“Like this dick inside you? You want all of it, baby?”

“Fuck yes. All of it.” I was damn near stuttering, mindless with the heat and desire racing through my veins, the blunt ends of my nails digging into the meat of his asscheeks.

“Gonna come for me again?”

When I started to reach for my cock, Tucker batted my hand away, head dipping to claim my mouth. He pressed harder against me, smooth skin gliding against the balls and base of my dick as he thrust. It drove me to the brink, and I arched into him, chasing the friction over and over until...

“Shit, Tucker... Fuck!” My eyes damn near rolled into the back of my head as I shattered, pleasure pummeling me from all sides and leaving me breathless. Tucker kept hammering me, prolonging the ecstasy that suffused my body, and then, with a cry, one hand fisted tightly in my hair, he came apart, too.

He collapsed against me a handful of seconds later, limbs spent and loose, chest heaving, his sweat mingled with mine. I licked it from my upper lip as we caught our breath and tried to think of something to say. *I really enjoyed that. I like you a whole fucking lot more than I want to. Can we do it again?*

Tucker saved me from having to decide, though, when, with a sleepy grin, he licked the salt from the side of my neck and said, “We'd better go to sleep 'cause I'm gonna want to do that again before I leave.”

And that was exactly what we did. In the morning, I woke to the hard press of his cock against my ass, one of his arms flung around me. He took me like that, slower and softer than the night before but just as intense, whispering “mine” in my ear as I moved against him.

“*One time isn't gonna be enough for us,*” he'd said before. Now, I had to agree.

I wasn't sure a hundred times would be enough.

TUCKER

We talked nearly every day since I flew out to California just to make Patrick Whitt's ass mine—and it was mine. That was on the real. At least until we managed to stop doing whatever it was the fuck we were doing.

We hadn't put a label on it, both of us likely trying to pretend this wasn't happening. I had no issue wanting him. Anyone who had a problem with it could kiss my ass, but I wasn't sure if Patrick would feel the same. And I wasn't an idiot, so I knew this would be difficult. He wasn't an easy person to get along with. We played on different teams. Everyone I knew fucking hated him. Actually, there was a small chance Houston didn't. Ever since he'd gotten the job as the wide receiver coach in LA, he'd spoken more fondly of Whitt. Patrick mentioned hanging out with him sometimes.

All of that shit aside, again, I just didn't know what in the fuck this was or what I wanted it to be. It hadn't been a lie when I told him that once wasn't going to be enough for us. Just thinking about him got my dick hard on the regular.

Me: Good game today, baby. You better not try to pull that shit when you play us.

We'd played as well. Atwood was on the hotel bed beside mine, smiling at his phone like a lovesick fool while he was trying to pretend this thing between him and Houston wasn't real. What would he say if he knew I was sitting here messaging Whitt? Cullen wasn't the kind of guy who followed the rules, so I thought he would be okay with it.

Bougie: Scared we're gonna kick your ass?

For the past few weeks, I'd been playing around with calling him baby more often. It was one thing when I was in his ass, or about to be in his ass, but something else entirely in regular fucking conversations. But he still didn't call me out on the term of endearment. He never did. I was pretty sure Whitt wanted to feign ignorance about what was happening between us even more than I did.

Me: You'll be too dickstrated by the thought of riding my cock again to play well. You gonna give me your ass?

Bougie: Fuck off.

Me: I want you again. Think we can meet up in Florida at Christmastime?

I hadn't gotten to touch him again since he dropped me off at the airport after leaving his place, and it was killing me. I still hadn't had anyone else either. There was no use in pretending that would change anytime soon. Until I fucked Patrick Whitt out of my system, he was it for me.

Bougie: Not gonna be in Florida.

He wasn't going home? My stomach twisted. Fuck his parents. They were going to bail on Patrick again? Jesus, they didn't deserve him.

"I'll be right back," I told Atwood.

"I'm probably going to FaceTime jerk off with McRae, so you might want to stay gone for at least thirty minutes."

I laughed, even though there was no doubt in my mind he was serious. Hell, he'd probably do it with me in the room. Cullen just didn't give a fuck.

"Noted." I slipped on some shoes and a hat, trying to stay incognito. I took the elevator downstairs, then searched around until I found an empty meeting room that wasn't locked. I was already dialing him before the door clicked softly behind me.

"Why the hell are you calling me?" Whitt's game had been in LA today, so I had no doubt he was home and alone.

“Aww, there you go crushing my heart, baby. Maybe I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Has anyone told you you’re broken?”

A laugh spilled out of my mouth, and I had a feeling he was smiling. “Because I want to talk to you?”

He sighed. “What do you want, Tuck?”

“Go home to Florida with me.” I hadn’t acknowledged the words before I’d spoken them, but deep down, if I let myself look, I knew that’s why I was calling.

“What are you talking about? Go home to Florida with you for what?”

“Christmas. We can tell them we’re just friends. My family won’t say shit. No one else will know you were there.”

“Christ,” he said softly, and I imagined Patrick running a hand through his hair, picking up his whiskey glass, and taking a drink because he didn’t know what else to do.

The thing was, now that I’d said it, I realized how much I wanted it—to introduce him to my family. To show him what it was like to be loved by my mom and sisters. To make sure he wasn’t alone and fuck, just to be with him. This was so messed up.

“What makes you think I’d want to go spend Christmas with you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Do you always have to pretend you don’t feel shit? Even if you don’t want to spend time with me, you can’t want to be alone. I don’t want you alone. While we’re doing this, I told you you’re mine, and I take care of what belongs to me.”

He was quiet for a moment—the only thing I heard was the sound of his usually measured breaths coming out more quickly. “Stop saying shit like that to me, and who said I’ll be alone?”

Jealousy wrapped a gnarly hand around my throat. “Who the hell are you going to be with?”

He laughed, clearly enjoying that he'd made me uncomfortable. "My family will be here next week. Simmer down."

Oh. Well, that was different. He wouldn't say so, but I knew he appreciated they were coming to him. "Just know the offer stands. They fuck it up or bail on you and you get your ass to Florida."

"Yeah. Okay. Whatever." He pretended not to care, but I heard his unspoken words, heard what Patrick didn't have in him to say. *Thank you.*

ON CHRISTMAS EVE MORNING, I WOKE UP JUST BEFORE SIX IN the small double-sized bed I had in my room at my mom's house. Kayla was here because she always stayed at Mom's house when I was there. Savanna and Zuri seemed to want to live with her forever, so they were there, too. I'd just arrived the night before, so there was no reason I should be awake, but I was.

Rolling over, I plucked my phone off the nightstand and scrolled social media for a minute. It was only three in LA, but I noticed a photo Patrick had posted just a couple of hours before of his legs as he ran on a treadmill. What the fuck was he doing working out in the middle of the night?

He was likely asleep now, but I still shot him off a text to find when he woke up.

Me: Get some damn sleep, Bougie. Also, did you get your multi-colored lights this year? I mean, it's your house, so don't forget you can do that.

I frowned when a response almost immediately came through.

Bougie: Nah, I didn't decorate. What's the point when I travel for football so much?

Me: Because it's fun and you like it? And your family is there this year.

Bougie: It's cute that you think they'd stay at my place. My parents ordered me to spend last night and tonight at this fancy fucking mansion they rented in Brentwood. Staff will come in that will serve us Christmas dinner. My family time isn't the same as yours, Tuck.

Jesus, I really hated his people. How goddamned hard was it to give someone some colored fucking Christmas lights? Or to stay home and not somewhere they had staff and that looked good for photo ops?

I also might love it when he called me Tuck.

Me: You're stuck there?

Bougie: Yeah. Until Christmas night.

I imagined him sitting there in a sterile environment, with nothing but clear nights and feeling alone, even when he had people around him. That shit wasn't going to fly—not on my watch.

Me: I'm sorry.

Bougie: For what?

I rolled my eyes in response, then got online and booked a last-minute, extremely fucking expensive flight.

MY FAMILY HADN'T UNDERSTOOD WHEN I'D TOLD THEM I'D BE gone for the day, but they were my people, so they'd trusted me. We'd had a quick breakfast and decorated the tree because Mom liked to do it with all her kids home, and then I'd left, leaving out the fact I was jumping on a plane.

Before I'd landed, I made an order from the local Target for a shit ton of Christmas lights, a tree, decorations, extension cords, and a ladder, complete with delivery.

Now, after getting dropped off at Whitt's house, I had to hope like hell I didn't get arrested, that no one saw the brown guy sneaking around Whitt's property and called the police.

Clearly, that was a legitimate concern.

But then, they'd also probably think I was someone he had hired.

Good thing I'd watched as he'd typed the code in last time I was here and made sure to remember it.

It was 5:30, and my flight left again at 9:30, so this was going to have to be really fucking quick. I decorated the best I could, using all multicolored lights on his house, porch, and in his yard. I was able to get those lights that looked like a blanket to go over the shrubs. I twisted lights up the bottom half of trees and strung them through the branches and the lower part of his home. I'd wanted inflatables, but those were all gone, but I did get reindeer, candy canes, and a Santa Claus.

I put the Christmas tree on the porch, with extra strands of colored lights and bright bulbs without any pattern or professional-looking skill that his parents' house had when I saw it last year. This whole thing was gaudy, over-the-top, and fucking perfect.

I even hung stockings by his door, one with a *P* and one with an *M*, then set up Santa's mailbox decoration beside it.

I was really fucking sweet...

He was worthy of more.

Patrick,

You deserve colorful Christmas lights. Don't let anyone take that away from you.

—*M*

I put the note in an envelope and stuck it in Santa's mailbox, then stood on the street, looking at what I'd created while I waited for a car to pick me up.

As proud as I was, it didn't feel like enough.

I reluctantly climbed into the car, wishing I could take Patrick with me back to Florida.

It was a long-ass day. At nearly six in the morning, I tried to sneak back into Mom's house, hoping like hell everyone was still asleep, but there Mom was, sitting on the couch. She cocked a brow, holding a mug of coffee in her hand, and I knew I was fucked.

"Where were you?" she asked when I sat beside her.

"California."

"Excuse me?" Mom spit out, but I mean, could I blame her? "You left yesterday, went to California, and came back home?"

"Couldn't miss Christmas."

She placed her hand on my thigh, her red-painted nails looking pretty against her dark brown skin. "Who is she?"

"He," I admitted, and shit, I'd just come out to my mom, hadn't I?

"Oh...thank you for telling me. Who is he?"

"The last damn person I should be falling for."

She squeezed my leg. "That's what people said about your stepdad, too. I had two kids. I wasn't supposed to be looking to settle down with a man who didn't have any, especially someone younger than me. I was told to focus on you and Kayla, but when I met him...I knew. Actually, that's not true. I hated him at first."

That made me grin. "Really?"

"Yeah. I thought he was an asshole. He used to struggle to let people in, but he didn't with me. Not after a little while, at least."

Jesus, what were the odds that we had such a similar situation? I laid my head on her shoulder. "I hated him, too."

"And now you love him?"

Love? I wasn't sure I'd go there, I didn't think. But... "Now, it's different. Now I like him a lot. He's not what I thought he was, but like I said, it's difficult."

It meant the world to me that she didn't ask specifics, that she didn't ask names or try to get me to explain the situation. She knew I would tell her when I was ready. "Malik Tucker... you've never met a challenge you couldn't handle. If anyone can make it work, it's you."

I didn't even know what I wanted from Patrick...or what he would ever be willing to give, but I couldn't pretend I didn't want something. Once I figured it out, I damn sure planned to get it.

"Come on. Let's make breakfast, and then we'll wake the girls up."

We still acted like we were kids on Christmas morning, getting up early to open our gifts.

Mom and I went into the kitchen and started the bacon, eggs, hash browns, and grits. As if they smelled the food, Savanna, Kayla, and Zuri woke up, making their way into the room with us.

"Merry Christmas." Kayla hugged me.

"You too, sis." I hugged her back, then did the same with my other two sisters.

The five of us ate breakfast together, laughing and just enjoying each other. Afterward, we made our way into the living room, all of us sitting on the carpet, opening presents together.

"I love having my boy here so much."

"I swear Malik is your favorite," Kayla teased.

"Right?" Zuri added.

"Stop being a hater. Mama can't help it that I'm that good," I replied just before I was tackled by my sisters and my mom, the four of them laughing and trying to get the best of me. This was what life was all about right here. I couldn't help but wonder what Patrick was doing with his family. Did they laugh together and play around together the way we did? Unfortunately, I knew the answer to that, which just made my muscles tense up.

“What’s up with you? You seem like you have a lot on your mind.” Savanna nudged me while we cleaned up the mess from all of the packages.

“Nothin’. I’m good. Just glad to be home with y’all.”

“Aww, we love you, brother.”

I’d told Kayla that I was bi last Christmas and my mom today, so when Zuri stepped up, too, I said, “It was a guy... yesterday. That’s where I went.”

They smiled at me, not even missing a beat. “Is he hot?” Zuri asked.

“So fucking hot.” I wanted to tell them who he was, tell all of them, but I couldn’t do that without Patrick’s permission. And let’s not forget my ass was getting way ahead of myself. But if this turned into something, at least I’d laid the groundwork.

Savanna added, “Good for you. I’m pretty sexually fluid, too. I once had this threesome—”

“Oh my god! Stop!” I put a hand over her mouth. “You’re my little sister. I don’t want to hear that shit from you.”

Zuri laughed, and it was just another part of a perfect day.

Still, I couldn’t stop thinking about Patrick the whole time and hoping he wasn’t pissed at me for what I’d done.

WHITT

As I pulled into my driveway after spending Christmas Day with my parents in Brentwood, I was looking forward to popping a couple of Advil and crashing into my bed. The massages my mom and I had gotten together had involved cupping, and it'd felt like the lady was trying to suck my organs out through my back.

Instead, I nearly crashed my Audi, slamming on the brakes as the gate to my property shut behind me. There were lights fucking everywhere. Hundreds of them strung from what seemed like every bit of manicured foliage on my property, like a team of elves had collectively vomited Christmas all over my yard.

It was ridiculous; it was gorgeous.

I stepped out of the car, then leaned back inside to turn it off before approaching the sidewalk and standing there, taking it all in.

The colorful lights danced over the leaves and lawn, painting them in splashes of color that shifted every second. My folks and I had spent Christmas once at Disneyland when I was a kid, and I'd never thought something could rival the sheer volume of Christmas spirit per square inch, but this did. The twinkling lights had a hypnotic effect, and I watched them for a while before my brain caught up and started asking questions. Who? Why? Even as the questions arose, a sneaking suspicion bloomed in my stomach, solidifying when I spotted the stockings on the door. I shook my head, trying to

bite back a grin as I approached, noting the cheesy Santa's mailbox next to the front door.

"Jesus fucking Christ," I muttered, examining the initials on the stockings—where the hell had he gotten all of this stuff? And when?

I flipped the mailbox open out of curiosity, thinking it was just a prop. But no, there inside was a folded note, Malik's scrawled words in dark ink.

I probably stared at his message the longest of all.

For a split second, fury filled me. How fucking dare he do this? And it wasn't because he'd trespassed on my property or violated my privacy. It was because of the warm feeling inside me, like thawing in front of a fire after being stuck playing in the freezing cold, had nowhere to fucking go. Tucker and I weren't anything, and we never could be. So why the fuck would he do something like this?

I shouldn't even acknowledge it, and I resolved to do just that.

That resolve lasted about an hour, but those damn lights flashed in every window of the house, reminding me of their presence, reminding me of Tucker. I grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen, bathed in their glow, then said fuck it and poured a tiny glass of whiskey and picked up my phone.

"Hey." Tucker's voice was thick with sleep and all the sexier for it. I suddenly forgot what I was going to say and reverted to the obvious, the words almost catching in my throat.

"You flew out here."

"Yeah."

"You decorated my house with Christmas lights."

"Other decorations, too. The stockings were a cute addition. They have our initials on them." He sounded pleased with himself, but instead of matching it with gratitude like I knew I should have, or even just a laugh and a joke like we often did, I stumbled.

“I... Why would you do that? Leave your family and...” Tucker’s family was more important than anything else to him.

“I told you in my note you deserve colored Christmas lights. If you’re not going to give them to yourself, I’ll damn sure be the one to make sure you have them.”

My jaw hung open, and once again, all the good manners I’d been trained on growing up eluded me. “You’re fucking with my head.” It was an admission of truth and fear at once.

“You’re fucking with mine, too,” Tucker replied, but in a way that made me unsure he’d fully grasped what I meant.

“You don’t have to...you shouldn’t do shit like that,” I said. God, I sounded like an asshole. I *was* an asshole. “I just mean we can fuck without you doing anything like that.” It made things confusing, but I didn’t want to say that aloud. “I don’t want you to do that.” Because I was clearly a Scrooge, and Tucker confused the fuck out of me.

“I’ll do whatever I want, Patrick.” Tucker barked out a laugh. “Merry Christmas.”

Before I could interject, he’d hung up the goddamn phone, though I couldn’t say I blamed him.

I dumped the rest of my drink down the drain and got ready for bed. My room was cool and dark as I pulled back the covers. It was at the back of the house with a view of the canyons I’d always loved. But as I crawled into bed, I kept thinking about the Christmas lights. After five minutes of staring at the ceiling, I threw the covers back and walked into the guest room that hadn’t been used in maybe ever. Situated at the front of the house, a shifting kaleidoscope of colors twinkled through the closed curtains. I pulled them open, then crawled into the guest bed, turning toward the window.

As I lay there, letting them lull me to sleep, the tiny seed of warmth inside me exploded into a bright burst that suffused me, filling me with a glow even brighter than the lights outside.

Just before I fell asleep, I snapped a photo and sent it to Tucker along with a message.

Me: It's beautiful. Thank you.

PLAYOFFS

“This is your third interception returned for a touchdown this season. The fifth of your career. Are you trying to break records?” The blonde reporter smiled as she pushed the mic toward my face, and it took every ounce of focus to resist scanning the crowd on the opposite side of the field for Tucker.

The Royals had just bested the Rush in divisionals at the tail end of the game with my interception turned touchdown. Exhaustion hadn't set in for me yet, but I knew I'd hit the wall at some point. Right now, I was running on an adrenaline high, and yet the only thing I could think about was Tucker. It was a huge loss for them. I'd held my focus the entire game, not even allowing myself to look his way for any reason other than trying to anticipate their next play. And I knew he'd given his all, too. He always did. Our communication had been a little more limited lately, but we also had both been hyperfocused on the upcoming game. Or at least that was what I'd told myself. After Christmas, Tucker texted me almost daily, but I didn't always respond because I didn't fully grasp what the hell we were or what we were doing, and eventually, his texts ebbed before stopping altogether. The kicker was I wasn't sure how I felt about that either.

I leaned in a bit so the mic would pick up over the crowd and chaos happening around me. “It's not an intentional goal, but if it happens, I won't cry about it.” The reporter laughed, and I continued. “I'm just trying to do my part to get the Royals to the Super Bowl. Anything on top of that is a bonus.”

The reporter gave me a subtle nod and another toothy grin that let me know she'd gotten the sound bite she wanted before she stepped aside to talk to LaForge.

Finally. I spun around, casting my gaze over the field, but aside from Ramsey and Cullen, who were still being

interviewed, the rest of the Rush was heading for the locker rooms, and I couldn't spot Tucker among them.

After Coach Grant went through our recap, we showered and changed. A bunch of the guys were going to some club and then probably a strip club afterward. I stepped aside before committing to fire off a text to Tucker.

Me: Hey. You played a great game.

Tucker: Not good enough. It's fine.

Me: Are you all going out?

Tucker: Probably going to hang with some of the guys and lick our wounds, yeah.

Me: If you want to lick something else, let me know.

Tucker: Okay.

I frowned at the message on my screen, tucking it away as Houston brushed past me.

"Hey," I said, catching up to him as he headed toward the visitors' lot. "Cullen and your brother handling the loss okay?"

"Yeah, they'll be alright," he said in his usual laconic style.

"You meeting up with them?"

"Yep."

By then, he was eyeing me curiously, probably wondering why the fuck I was so interested, so I clamped my mouth shut and nodded instead.

"Have a good time."

An hour into drinks with the guys, I was checking my phone constantly, worried I'd miss a text from Tucker telling me he wanted to meet up. I was craving it, needed it, and another half hour later, I decided, fine, I'd be the one to take the initiative.

Me: Where are you?

I'd assumed Tucker was caught up with his teammates, but his reply came surprisingly fast.

Tucker: Rumba

Me: I want to meet up.

Tucker: I'll let you know.

For the second time that night, I found myself frowning at my phone. Maybe Tucker just wanted to hang with the Rush crew, lick his wounds like he said. I could understand that, or at least told myself I could, but as the minutes ticked by and turned into an hour, and when the guys I was with decided to head to a strip club, I bailed.

I hopped in an Uber and stared at my phone screen the whole time, willing Tucker to message me, but he didn't. Hell, maybe he was with someone else tonight. Just because he hadn't been before didn't mean he might not now, and oh, how the thought lit a spark of jealousy inside me that grew into an inferno as we drove.

As the driver pulled up to my house, I looked at my screen again and then at the lights still decorating my yard. I'd not taken them down yet. "Hey, I need to go somewhere else, actually."

The driver glanced back at me and nodded. "Sure, whatever you want."

I needed to know. Or I needed him to know. I wasn't sure what it was, but I hated that gnawing sensation eating me alive from the inside out.

It didn't take me long to spot the crew of Tucker, Houston, Ramsey, and Garrett at Rumba. They were sequestered in a corner, gathered around a table cluttered with pitchers of beer and empty glasses. I searched their little crew for any sign of any groupie types and felt relief pour through me when I realized it was just Rush guys. Cullen, Houston, Ramsey, and Garrett all looked cozy together, settled and happy, and that spark of envy flared to life all over again. I should have been happy for them. Happy for what it meant on a larger scale, but all I could think about was that I was never gonna have the same, that I couldn't. That Tucker and I...how the fuck would something like that ever work out between us? Would he even

want more between us? And why the hell was the enormity of what we would never be hitting me like a ton of bricks right now? Memories of Tucker next to me were wound up in twinkling Christmas lights, and a fresh wave of irrational frustration surged through me as I approached.

“Damn, look at the Rush licking their wounds. You’re the most morose-looking motherfuckers I’ve seen in a while, and that’s saying something. Especially you.” I arched a brow at Tucker.

Was it the best choice of lead-in to a team that had just lost? Probably not, and I realized that as Tucker looked me up and down with a shrug before flipping me off at the same time Houston’s brother Garrett squared his shoulders and made like he was about to get out of his seat.

Way to read the room, Patrick.

“Why are you such an arrogant prick?” Garrett sneered. “Does that come with being a trust fund baby, or are you trying to make up for some other deficiency?”

Garrett eyed my crotch meaningfully, and I smirked.

“Why don’t you ask your boyfriend?” If I was gonna go down, I’d go down in flames. Defiantly, like I always had.

“Watch it,” Ramsey growled.

As Ramsey stood, Houston stepped between us, turning to me. “You come over here to harass the guys?” He shook his head. “Bad form.”

Over the top of his shoulder, I caught Tucker’s steady gaze, impenetrable to me in the moment.

I met it and held. “Maybe I just came by to say hello to my favorite rivals. Buy them a drink as a token of a game well played.”

Cullen snorted. “Fat fucking chance unless you’ve had a lobotomy in the last couple of months. Since when have you ever been gracious?”

It stung. I had a split-second flash of our freshman year in college, Cullen, Houston, and me laughing and cutting up after

practice. Even then, I think we all suspected we were good enough to go all the way.

And now I was standing here being a raging ass because I was fucking jealous.

I glanced over the group and opened my mouth to apologize and make good on my offer to buy them drinks. Hell, I'd just buy their entire night. I didn't understand what the fuck was happening to me.

Tucker's big paw clapped down on my shoulder. "You need to go."

"Or what?"

"Or you're going to regret it like nothing else in your life, I promise you that."

I perked a brow. "You're telling me to leave?"

"I am." I didn't like the look in his eyes. It was closed off, unreachable. Like a stranger. "Right fucking now."

My stomach clenched. One second, two, three, we stared at each other. His hard expression didn't waver.

Shit, I'd really fucked up this time.

I put up my hands in a placating gesture as I pasted on a smile. "Better luck next time, gents. Sorry about that pass, Garrett. You'll get it next time, I'm sure." I spun on a heel, flashing a peace sign as I went. If Houston hadn't been there, I suspected I would've been tackled by Ramsey or Garrett. And I supposed I would've deserved it, too.

But it was Tucker's eyes I couldn't let go of.

My phone chimed the second I exited.

Tucker: The fuck is wrong with you?

Everything, probably. I considered that question as I started down the sidewalk and opened the app to call for another Uber as I walked aimlessly. I needed the air anyway. I wondered what Tucker would say if I explained that I hadn't been able to stop thinking about those Christmas lights. Or him. That the stupid texts we sent to each other, that lying next

to him in bed, made me feel something I'd never felt in my life. How did you write that into a text?

Before I could reply, he messaged me again.

Tucker: Where are you?

Me: Heading home.

I was still trying to figure out how to answer Tucker's earlier question when a white SUV pulled into the bike lane and the window rolled down. My Uber driver.

I watched my phone the entire ride home, but Tucker didn't reply, which I supposed meant he was done with me for the night. Possibly longer.

But when the driver pulled up to my house for the second time that night, a shadowed figure stood up from where he'd been sitting on my front porch.

Tucker.

He stepped back into the shadows as the driver's headlights splashed across him.

"Hey," I called out, as I got out of the car. "Sorry about earlier—"

Tucker lifted his hand, cutting me off. "Not a goddamn word until we're inside." He glanced meaningfully at the Uber driver, so I glanced back at him, too, and waved him off before opening my door.

Tucker followed me inside, and the second I locked the door behind him and whirled around, he was in my face. "Were you trying to out us, showing up like that?"

"No!"

"Are you fucking crazy?"

"Maybe." I shoved him back an inch to give myself some breathing room. "How the hell did you get here so fast anyway?"

"I have my ways and means." His lips twisted in a smug smile that only made me more frustrated.

“Were you going to text me back or leave me hanging all night?”

“You mean like you’ve done before?” He stepped into my space again.

“I haven’t,” I ground out. “You need to step the fuck back.”

Tucker didn’t move. “You have, and you will again, because that’s what you do. You want me close but not too close.” A fist wrapped around my heart as he glanced down at his feet, the toes of his shoes a hair’s breadth from mine. “So how’s this right here? You fucking tell me. Too close?”

His flashing gaze met mine, and I swallowed back the instinct to do what I always did, to push him away again, and instead answered with the truth. “Not close enough. And it never will be,” I said and then crashed my mouth into his. The kiss seared through me for long seconds before cool air rushed over my face as he pushed me away.

“You’re a fucking pain in my ass, you know that?” he rasped as he caught his breath.

“Yeah,” I answered as he yanked me toward him again. “What are you gonna do about it?”

TUCKER

“Not close enough. And it never will be,” Patrick said, and before I knew it, his lips were smashed against mine.

I couldn't stop myself from kissing him back, tasting him because I craved having Patrick on my tongue, but I only gave myself a split second before my good sense took over, and I pushed him away. “You're a fucking pain in my ass, you know that?”

It took everything inside of me not to claim him right then and there. Hell, it had been like that all night. He hadn't texted me at all since Christmas and only sporadically replied to my messages. And when I stopped sending them first, I just didn't hear from him at all, yet tonight of all nights, he'd touched base? Joked about letting me lick him as if I hadn't basically put my cards on the table when I flew across the fucking country to decorate his house? A person didn't just do that for someone who didn't matter to them, and near radio silence since then had hurt.

But I also knew Patrick, knew how hard this shit was for him. He didn't know how to give himself to someone, how to let them in, which was how he ended up doing dumb stuff like he'd done tonight—talking shit to Rams, G, and Atwood because he was sad...and fucking lonely...and it was easier for him to actively push people away rather than to tug them closer. It was easier for him to pretend to be an asshole so no one would ever know he cared.

And he would regret it, just like I'd known he would regret his behavior at the bar tonight.

“Yeah. What are you gonna do about it?”

I tugged him closer to me, a possessive hand on his nape, fingers dancing along the tender skin there. I wanted him so fucking much. Jesus, I had never wanted anyone in my life the way I did Patrick Whitt. He'd had control over me one way or another since we were kids, and I was done with pretending otherwise.

“No more games.” I let my lips linger just a breath away from his but didn't give him what he wanted. When Patrick tried to kiss me, I held him back, eased away so I was just out of reach. “No more games,” I said again. “If you want me close, that means you're fucking mine for real now.”

I loosened my hold, letting the choice be his. Patrick inhaled sharply, and then words spilled from his lips. “Fuck you for making me need this,” before his mouth slammed down on mine. This time, I let him kiss me, opened up for him to push his tongue inside. He ate at my mouth like he needed it for nutrients, like kissing me was the only way he could breathe.

My arms encircled him, hands on his tight ass before one slid up his torso and tangled in his soft hair.

Patrick fed me needy sounds, all of which I devoured, swallowed them, trying to hold a part of him inside of me that way. He rutted against me, his dick hard against my thigh.

“Fuck me. I want you to fuck me,” he rasped out before lips suctioned to my neck, biting and sucking my skin into his mouth to the point that I knew he was leaving his mark behind. He was claiming me because he wanted me that goddamned much, and it made me feel like the luckiest person alive.

“That's it, baby. Take what you need from me. You wanna make sure everyone knows I'm yours?”

They wouldn't, of course. Not him specifically, but they would know I belonged to someone. I wished the whole fucking world could know it was him.

Patrick moved to the other side, teeth digging into the meaty part where my shoulder and neck met before licking the sting away, then marking me there, too, sucking on my neck and rutting against me like he could come that way.

I shoved a hand down the back of his pants, and he spread his legs for me. It was awkward and a tight fit while I traced his crease, then pushed my finger between his cheeks to find his tight, hungry hole. He damn near melted against me. “Look at you, dying for my cock. You’d live with it inside of you if you could.”

“Christ, Malik. Why do we still have our clothes on?” he asked, making me chuckle.

I swatted his ass. “Upstairs. I want you in your bed.”

“I hate shit like that being so hot,” he replied, then didn’t meet my gaze as he took my hand, Patrick threading his fingers between mine. It made my heart thump against my chest in triumph, my way of throwing my arms in the air in victory, like I’d just won some fucking battle or something. That was the shit he did to me.

“Who knew you were so fucking sweet.”

“I’m not sweet,” he argued.

“You are to me.”

He rolled his eyes, but I could have sworn his cheeks pinkened.

I frowned when we got upstairs and Patrick didn’t go to his room. He led me to another, one where it was clear he’d been sleeping. Well, he or someone else had.

The Christmas lights shined through the window, the first thing I had noticed when I’d arrived. He’d kept them up. Weeks later, they were still hanging from his house, twinkling through the night.

It hit me then that the view was the same as the photo he’d sent that night. He’d been sleeping in this room so he could see the lights.

“Jesus, baby.”

“It’s not a big thing. The bed is actually more comfortable in here.”

It was a big thing, and we both knew it. Had so few people done something special, just for him, that it meant this much to him? I sure as hell planned to find a way to keep making Patrick feel cared for.

I cupped his cheek, tilted his head. He was only about an inch shorter than me, but still he looked up at me through the veil of his thick lashes. “I’ve never felt this way before,” I admitted. I was the one who’d said no more games, so I wasn’t going to hold back. “I think about you all the time. I see something funny and I want to tell you about it. When I’m missing my family, I want to hear you say it’ll be okay. You got me feeling some things, baby, and that shit ain’t going away.”

His blue eyes turned stormy, flashes of lightning that struck me in the heart. “You make me feel like I matter...like I’m important. Like I’m more than my last name, more than the son who won’t follow his family legacy or the asshole that people only tolerate because of how I play on the field.”

Was that what he really thought? That he didn’t matter? That he was only those things?

“You’re so much fucking more. I wanted you to know it back then, even if I didn’t understand it—or at least I wanted you to know there was someone who would have your back. That’s why I slipped my number in your contacts after I heard what your dad said that day.”

“That’s how...you did that...? I...” Instead of finishing his sentence, our mouths just snapped together, a swift and magnetic pull. We kissed while we struggled out of our clothes, only separating to pull something off.

The second we were naked, I tackled him to the bed. Patrick laughed and wrestled me before we dissolved into kissing again.

This was so unexpected, so convoluted, and a huge-ass mess, but I wasn’t walking away. He was fucking mine now.

“You gonna let me eat your little hole?” I asked, hand drifting down his body and between his spread thighs. Patrick was on his back, looking up at me, gaze blissed and horny.

“Hell yes.”

I moved off him so he could flip over. Straddling his thighs, I leaned over, pressing my lips to each knob on his spine, going lower and lower. “Have you thought about this? What it would be like to have my tongue in your ass again?”

“Yes...god yes.”

“Do you stick your finger up there sometimes and pretend it’s me?”

“Christ, Malik.”

I grinned against his spine. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

I eased down his body, still kissing as I went, then pushed his legs open, fitting myself between them. “I dream about this ass, too—every day. I fuck my fist and wish it was your hole or your mouth. I come saying your name because I don’t want anyone else. I want your taste on my tongue every motherfucking day.”

He pushed his ass back, then thrust forward, fucking the bed. “Do it. Right now.”

I smiled while spreading his cheeks, taking in the tight, pink pucker that had never known another man but me. I lashed my tongue over it and chuckled when he nearly shot off the bed. “Again,” he all but begged.

Gladly. I dove in then, taking what he was offering, taking what was mine. I lashed my tongue over his rim over and over again, softening him up for me.

Patrick made words I didn’t understand. He pumped his hips backward and forward, getting me inside him while taking advantage of the friction on his cock.

Leaning back, I spit on his hole before watching as I slipped a finger inside. Slowly, I pushed it in, inch by tortuous inch.

“So good. Why is that so good?”

“Because it’s me.”

Cocky? Sure, but it was true. There was something about the two of us together, and I wasn’t in the place to deny it any longer.

I went from one finger to two, watching him fist the pillow and writhe beneath me. I added my tongue to the mix, alternating between finger and tongue fucking him. His skin tasted like he was made of all my favorite things, and I would never be satisfied of my need for him.

When I rubbed his prostate, he bucked beneath me. “Get your fucking cock inside of me. I need it.”

“Do you have supplies in here?” I shoved to my knees.

“Lube in the drawer.”

“You brought it in here to play with yourself while you thought of me?”

“Get your fucking cock inside of me, Tuck.”

I laughed while plucking the bottle from the nightstand. “Condom?”

“Crap. In my room.”

“Do we need them? I haven’t been with anyone else in an embarrassingly long time, and I’m checked regularly. I’m negative.”

“Me too.” He pushed up onto his knees, too, and this time, I let him. I got dizzy and almost thought I was going to pass out. I was about to fuck him raw. I hadn’t ever been willing to risk that before, mostly because of women and pregnancy but also just because I’d been taught to always suit up.

“You want my load inside of you?” I lubed my fingers and pushed two inside of him again. I knelt behind him, his perfect ass on display, body so fucking banging, hole open for me, and his heavy balls hanging.

“Unless I get too bored first. Are you going to fuck me or what?”

Another chuckle fell from my lips. I had so damn much fun with the prickly asshole. Once my cock was slicked up, I thrust into him, filling him with my swollen cock.

“Fuck yes!” he called out, my groin smacking against his ass as I took out what felt like a lifetime of want on his hole.

My fingers dug into his hips. The muscles of his back contracted as he met me, thrust for thrust, fucking himself on my cock. He was so hot and tight that I wanted to shoot right then, give him my release, and then push it back into him with my fingers all night.

But as hot as this was, I needed more.

“What the hell, Tuck?” he complained when I pulled out.

“I’m not going anywhere, baby. Lay down.”

I maneuvered him so he was partway on his side and also kind of on his stomach. His bottom leg was stretched down, so I took his top one and bent it, pushing it up closer to his torso. Holding his ass open, I watched as my bare cock breached him, fought to contain myself so I didn’t blow my load before he got to come.

Once I was buried in his tight ass again, I leaned down, Patrick’s head to the side so I could take his mouth while I fucked him. We kissed like we were starving for each other, me drilling into him like my life depended on it.

I was sensitive and already teetering on the edge, body primed to spill inside of him, but it still wasn’t enough, wasn’t what I needed to give him, so without pulling out of him, I tugged him with me until we were both on our knees, Patrick’s back against me. He turned his head to make out with me again, swiping his tongue against mine.

Wrapping an arm around his body, I fisted his cock, stroking it in unison with my thrusts inside of his body.

Patrick gasped, pulled back just enough for our mouths to part, before his body went rigid, a ragged puff of breath pushing past his lips and against mine. His hole tightened around my cock, pulsing and throbbing while his release shot

against the bed, sliding between my fingers, and I used it for more lube to stroke him.

It spurred my own release to spill from my balls, jetting into his hole and filling him with my pleasure.

We came down from our high together, with me pulling him into my arms. "Say it," I whispered close to his ear. "Say you're mine."

"I'm yours."

"And who do I belong to?" I asked next.

"You're mine, too."

Yeah, I really was.

We fell asleep stuck together with cum and sex, and I fucking loved it. I took his ass again once during the night while Patrick sucked and licked at my neck again, making more of his marks on my skin.

"I want to cook you breakfast," I told him the next morning when we woke up. He frowned cutely, and I kissed the expression off his face. "Remember? I take care of what's mine, baby." He deserved someone looking out for him.

He nodded, and we put on underwear before going downstairs. I'd be leaving soon, so I didn't have a whole lot of time. I'd miss my flight if I had to, even though it would get me a hefty fine from Coach.

"What do you want?"

"You don't have to make me breakfast."

"Sit down and shut up." I winked and made myself at home, looking through his kitchen and fridge.

As I started omelets, he asked, "What are we doing?"

"We're boyfriends having breakfast after a night of incredible sex."

"Boyfriends?"

"Yes," I replied simply. "Didn't we spell all of this out last night?" He nodded slowly, brown hair sex mussed with

stubble along his jaw. “I told my family about you.”

“What?” He blanched.

“Not that it’s Patrick Whitt, but when I flew out here on Christmas, I told them it was because of a guy I’m into. I’m playing for keeps.”

“Jesus. You’re like a bulldozer sometimes.”

“Are you complaining?” I pumped my brows.

“No. I like it. How are we going to do this? Where the fuck do we go from here?”

That was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it? “For now, we have breakfast.” I set his plate in front of him at the bar. “We’ll figure the rest out later.”

I didn’t have a better answer than that.

PART THREE

OVERTIME

This section picks up where the False Start timeline ends and continues into a fresh season.

WHITT

Early July

We almost always ended with breakfast, alternating who cooked. Tucker was better at it than me, hands down, but he'd shown me how to bake bacon in the oven to give it a texture we both moaned over and then use the bacon grease to fry the eggs.

After the Royals had beaten the Rush in playoffs, we'd been eliminated in the next round, and Tucker and I had spent all of our free time during the off-season sneaking away to meet up wherever we could. Not just in LA and Denver, but also Miami, Boston, Atlanta, Phoenix, and Dallas—anywhere we could easily and feasibly travel to and then hole up in hotel rooms or Airbnbs that one of us would reserve. The last time we'd gotten away, we'd been in Arizona. Tucker had never seen the Grand Canyon and wanted to, so we both had. Just... not together. And that was the downside. We existed in liminal spaces, pockets of time between our public lives, sequestered on our own. And never, ever in public.

"You're gonna burn those eggs, baby," Tucker said from behind me before reaching around and snatching the spatula from my hand to give the eggs—which were definitely about to burn—a swift stir.

The warm weight of him pressed against my back, and I couldn't help but lean into it. Every time we met up, it was harder and harder to leave, took me longer to make the shift from my private life back into my public one. Currently, we were at Lake Tahoe, where some of the Rush guys were spending a long weekend hanging out on the lake before training camp started. Tucker dipped out most mornings after breakfast to join up with them while I'd remained at the huge, secluded house he'd rented, hiking, kayaking, and swimming until he returned each afternoon.

"What are you thinking about so hard, hmm?" His lips skimmed my neck, and he flipped off the burner, pushing the pan of eggs onto the cool eye at the back of the stove.

“The Grand Canyon,” I said, twisting around to face him.

He grinned. “Yeah, that was pretty badass.”

“I wish I could’ve seen your face when you first walked up to the edge.” I was getting greedy. The sex, us indulging in each other’s bodies, our talks about football, the things we saw each day, it had all sustained me for a while. At first, there’d been the pleasure of just being together. But it sucked sometimes not being able to experience the world outside together—a feeling I’d never thought I’d have with another person in my life, much less Malik Tucker.

“How about a reenactment?” Tucker pulled a face, letting his mouth fall open and widening his eyes dramatically. “It looked like this. Then I screamed. Want me to do that part, too?”

I laughed. “Only if you take a few steps back. Still need to be able to hear when the play is called. Did you really scream?” I arched a skeptical brow, even though I could sort of picture it in my mind.

“It was more of a whoop.” Tucker stepped back, cupped his hands around his mouth, and made a noise that sounded like a cross between a bird call and a hyena that had me busting up. “Don’t fucking judge.” He shot me a warning look. “The guide said we’d hear our own echo. I wanted mine to be distinctive.”

“You end up with a bunch of buzzards following you around the rest of the time?”

“How’d you know?” He feigned shock before cracking up. “Nah, no buzzards. Just some football dude who wouldn’t stop trying to suck my dick when I got back to my room.” He wagged his brows pointedly.

“Sounds like a real pest. I’ll bet that football dude would really appreciate getting his dick sucked after the breakfast he labored so diligently over.”

“Mm, yeah. It’s thirsty work cracking eggs into a pan and stirring them around with absolutely no finesse. Probably

deserves the same kind of blowjob. Extra sloppy. Like these eggs.”

I knew Tucker was joking, but extra sloppy sounded pretty damn hot to me, and it must have shown on my face because he closed the distance between us, hands skimming up my waist as he brushed his lips over mine. “I’ll give you what you want if you sit that tight ass on my dick after.”

That would’ve happened regardless, but I pretended to think for a second before letting the backs of my knuckles glide down his bare chest to the bulge in his boxers.

Afterward, we lay tangled in the rumpled mess of covers, the ceiling fan above us on high and cooling the sweat layered over our bodies. His fingers drifted through the damp ends of my hair in a soothing, hypnotic drawl. I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t think he did either. We were about to start preseason and then regular season, and the amount of time we had to get away with each other would collapse into almost nothing at all.

“I meant what I said earlier. About the Grand Canyon. I wish I could’ve been there with you.”

Tucker canted his head toward me, a half-smile playing on his lips. “This is the part where I say you were there in spirit. Or some romantic shit like that.” I flipped him off, and he sobered. “I wish you could’ve, too.”

“We’re never gonna have that, though. We can’t.”

He sucked on his lower lip, nodding slowly. “I guess not, no. We’ll just have to make the best of what we have. Maybe —”

He cut himself off and, when I prompted him with a look, shook his head. “Nothing. I don’t know. Would you rather not do this at all anymore? Like, we leave today and cut it off? I wouldn’t like it, but I’d do it.”

“It’s not. I’ll take this over nothing at all.” Because I wasn’t going to be able to cut it off. I couldn’t, even as I suspected I wanted so much more than we would ever be able to give each other.

“Me too.” Tucker rolled fully toward me. “Hey, serious question.” The playful glint in his eye said it was anything but. “Are you gonna be a supportive boyfriend when the Rush takes the Super Bowl this year?”

I rolled my eyes with a grin. “Never gonna happen ’cause we’re taking it. We’ve got Parker now and Ronson.” I whistled low as I mentioned a seasoned guard who had been traded from Tennessee and our rookie wide receiver. “We’re unstoppable.”

“Psht. Parker is, like, eighty-two years old, and Ronson is an untested rookie. You should see G and Cullen. I’ve been working out with them, and we’re gonna run circles around y’all. Yeah.” He poked me. “Even you, Mr. Lightfoot.”

I chuckled as we devolved into smack talk, one of our favorite pastimes.

Just before we crawled out of bed and showered so we could catch our flights home, Tucker yanked me back toward him, nose grazing over my jawline. “I would be happy for you if the Royals took the bowl, you know.” I knew he meant it, too. “It’s just never gonna happen, baby.”

COACH GRANT FLIPPED OFF THE FLAT-SCREEN TV AND dropped into the chair next to it, facing me and the Royals’ key defense. We’d been in the film room for the last hour, going over the preseason game we’d played against San Francisco earlier in the week.

“I’m going to level with you, fellas. I think we’ve got the best shot at the Bowl that we’ve ever had.”

Barker, a safety, chuckled. “You’ve said that exact same thing the last three years.”

“He means it for real for real this year, though.” Wyatt, one of our linebackers, grinned, and Coach flipped him off.

“I do. You all represent my dream defense here. We’ve got two solid seasons under our belt. We worked out some kinks

during camp, and the win against Vegas proves that. There's no damn reason we shouldn't get there as long as you all keep your heads out of your asses. It's time to bring it home, boys."

"Fuck yeah," Wyatt whooped, and we all joined in until the room sounded like a zoo gone wild. Coach rolled his eyes with a smile and then smacked his palm against his thighs, his usual signal he was done talking. "Now, get out of my film room and go rest up. I'm planning on tearing all of you new assholes at Tuesday's practice."

"Sounds kinky," someone joked as we all stood and started filing for the door.

"Whitt, lemme talk to you for a minute," Coach called out.

"Sounds like you're up for asshole tearing first." Barker clapped me on the back as he passed, and I laughed, checking him with my shoulder.

I hung back, waiting for Coach, and then we stepped into the hall, heading for the locker rooms, where I'd left my gear.

"You've become a true shutdown cornerback," he said as we walked. "You read the quarterback's eyes, jumped the route, and made that interception the other day. That little game changer fired up the whole team. You're making smart decisions and capitalizing on them. I just want you to keep doing it the whole season."

"I will," I promised, trying not to let my expression show how fucking chuffed I was at the praise. I didn't know if it had something to do with all the time Tucker and I spent together or the shift in our dynamic having a trickle-down effect, but I'd been able to focus during camp and preseason like never before, and even I could feel the difference when we played.

"How's the hip?" he asked next. I'd had a rough meeting with the turf during the game, but it'd been worth it for the win.

"Nothing to worry about." It'd been twinging today, but it wasn't anything some ice and heat therapy couldn't resolve, I didn't think. Still, it was a reminder that my body wasn't gonna hold out in this sport forever, and one bad hit would

probably knock me out permanently. That knowledge was like a shadow that never fully left me. I hoped to manage at least one more season after this, though, and possibly two. Beyond that, I had no fucking clue. Tucker and I had talked about it extensively because he was feeling the same pressure. And, like me, he was hoping for a few more seasons. “I’m not leaving this career without a ring,” he’d said, and by the determination in his voice, I knew he meant it. Didn’t mean either of us wouldn’t be forced out, though. It happened all the time. Contracts weren’t renewed or were bought out. I didn’t want that for either of us. I hoped we both could leave on our own terms, and I hoped that was reflecting in how I’d been playing.

“Good,” Coach said. “You just let me know if you need anything extra. PT, massage. I want you in top form, want to see you take Sanders’ record.” I’d idolized Deion Sanders as a kid. Watching replays of him on the field had been like watching lightning strike. Over his career, he’d had fifty-three interceptions, and nine of those he’d returned for touchdowns. I was at five, and I had every intention of at least matching him.

“I’m on it, I promise. I want it, too.”

“Just know I plan on keeping you around until you say ‘when,’ Whitt. So stay on top of your game, and we’re good.” He winked at me and nodded me toward the locker room. “Go sleep the rest of the day. Give that hip some more time to heal.”

“Yessir.”

I didn’t sleep, though. As soon as I was home, I called Tucker. We talked almost every damn day. “You alone?” I asked when he answered.

“Yep.” The drawl in his voice sounded relaxed, which I loved hearing. More so when it was right next to me, but I’d take this as second best. “I’m sprawled on the couch. I hung out with Andre some today, and now I’m beat.”

I flopped onto mine after grabbing ice packs from my freezer to put on my hip. “Me too. Coach asked me about my

hip. I told him it was fine.”

Tucker laughed. “Fucking liar.”

“Fuck off, it’s not that bad.”

“You get that special shit Houston uses?”

“FedEx says it’ll arrive tomorrow, Dad. Settle down,” I said, trying to sound irritated even though I was smiling. Cullen had mentioned some specially compounded shit that Houston used for his knee injury, and Tucker had found the source and ordered some for me immediately after he’d seen the game. Though I wouldn’t admit it, I’d fucking loved him for it, too.

“What else did Coach say?”

“That he’s going to tear us new assholes on Tuesday. And then we’re going to the Super Bowl.”

Tucker laughed. “We’ll see.”

“Bet. Hey, you want to FaceTime for a sec?”

“Why? Want to see me naked, baby? Miss me?”

“I absolutely do,” I said, not even bothering to hide it. The sleepiness in his voice had the unintended side effect of making me hard, remembering the last time we’d been together.

It already felt too long.

“Then you get naked, too.”

I clicked over to FaceTime and set the phone down to shuck my clothes, probably breaking speed records as I did. Fuck my hip. This would probably cure it, anyway.

TUCKER

I'd never felt this kind of excitement ping-ponging through my body before. I was always stoked to play football, of course. I lived and breathed that shit and had since I was a kid. Another well-known fact about me was that I thrived off competing; it made my heart beat faster and my blood flow quicker. The thought of playing against my man? Yeah, that was some next-level shit.

This was different from our games with the Royals last season. At first, Patrick and I were just fucking. We hadn't admitted there was something real there until the night they took us out of the playoffs, so this added a whole new layer. It was the best kind of high, all of my favorite things wrapped into one except...well, except that I couldn't show I was even more eager than usual to play them. I couldn't share the why of it with anyone. I couldn't publicly celebrate with him afterward, no matter who won, because no matter how much I wanted to beat them—and I really did—there wasn't a universe where I couldn't be happy for Patrick either. That I didn't think he deserved it. That I didn't know he had fought for football his whole life on his own and didn't have a family to celebrate his successes.

I tried to wipe those thoughts from my head as I finished the drive to the stadium. There was a football game to focus on, but instead, I was remembering the last time I was with Patrick a couple of months ago in Tahoe and how different our phone calls and FaceTimes were now. It was getting harder for him—the secret and the distance—and the truth was, it was

getting harder for me too. I tried more to play it off like it didn't matter, to joke with him and try to make him smile, but every time I saw Ramsey and G together, I wished that could be us.

It was ridiculous, and if I weren't so damned crazy about him, I would walk away.

I killed the engine in my SUV when I arrived. I got out just in time to see Ramsey and Garrett pull up together, because that was a thing they got to do—drive to work in the same vehicle. Play together. Live together. The whole damn world got to know who they were to each other, and I couldn't pretend I wasn't jealous about that.

“Hey, man, what's up?” Ramsey said as they approached.

I must have shown my emotions on my face, or maybe it was the way I grumbled out a “Sup” that told him I was feeling some kinda something.

“You good?” Ramsey frowned. He didn't see it, but both he and Houston were the daddies of the group—Houston because he was the most responsible motherfucker on Earth—maybe except when he lost his head around Cullen and Rams because he was a caretaker.

“Yeah, sorry. Just have shit on my mind.”

“Is everything okay with the family?”

I waved off his concern. “Yep. Ignore me. Just ready to play some football.”

“Ready to beat Whitt's ass is more like it. I hate that prick,” Garrett said as we made our way toward the building.

“Everyone hates that prick,” Ramsey added.

I mean, I couldn't say they were wrong, only that the people who hated him didn't really know him. Not the way I did. Not the real Patrick.

“Was he not hugged as a child? I don't get why he's such an asshole,” G teased.

I got it, got why they said the shit they did, and yeah, last time they talked to Whitt, he was shitty to them, but I couldn't stop my protective instinct from rearing up. "You obsessed with Patrick or what? We're here to kick their ass in football just like any other team."

Garrett and Ramsey stopped walking, tossing each other confused looks before they both started cracking up laughing at the same time.

Um...what the fuck? Had I missed something?

"Shut the fuck up. You hate him just as much as the rest of us," Ramsey said.

"You really had me going for a minute. You first-named his cocky ass and everything."

I tried to force myself to laugh with them, but I wasn't feeling it because I didn't hate Patrick Whitt at all.

WE WENT OVER ROYALS FILM FIRST, THEN GOT READY FOR THE game.

Me: See you tonight, baby. Winner gets to choose how we fuck.

I didn't know if he would get the message before the game, but he would see it at some point.

We played each other twice this season before the playoffs, once now in September and then again in November. I wasn't sure how often we would be able to get together outside of those days and maybe our bye week. All I knew was I planned to do everything in my power to get him to Mom's house for Christmas this year. I wanted him to have that, to decorate with us, and for my family to get to know him.

I shoved my phone into my cubby as Ramsey and Coach gathered everyone around for a quick team meeting before it was game time.

THERE WASN'T ANYTHING IN THE WORLD SEXIER THAN PATRICK Whitt's ass in a pair of football pants, but from the first kickoff of the game, he wasn't my man anymore—he was my competition, and I took that extremely seriously.

They had Whitt on man-to-man coverage with Garrett all fucking night, and while G was our fastest player, Patrick fucking Whitt was the quickest cornerback not only on the Royals but in the league.

And he had the speed that G did. That was just a fact, though Garrett could keep him on his toes better than anyone else.

Whitt had been smothering Garrett all night. Nearly every pass Ramsey tried to aim G's way was dead in the water before it left Ramsey's hand, or Whitt tackled Garrett's ass before he could gain much yardage.

Our saving grace of the night was Atwood played like a man on a fucking mission, throwing every ounce of himself into beating the team his boyfriend helped coach.

“Jesus Christ, I fucking hate him,” G complained in the huddle.

“We're going to switch things up and try the short game for a few yards to see what Ward can do,” Ramsey said, calling out a specific play. It was the third quarter, and the game was tied. We'd been volleying the lead back and forth all night.

We broke the huddle and made our way back to the line of scrimmage. My gaze caught Whitt's as we got into position, him giving me a small nod that I recognized as *whatever the fuck you're planning, it ain't happening*.

We'd see about that.

“White eighty! White eighty! White eighty! Set. Hut!” Ramsey called out the cadence, and I snapped the ball to him. Garrett and Atwood immediately ran forward like they were

expecting the ball to go their way. Instead of following him as we'd hoped, Whitt read the offensive play and went straight into cover one defense, his safeties going for our wide receivers while he tried to barrel his way toward Ward.

Like fucking hell that was happening. Not on my watch.

I was quick, the fastest feet of any center in the league, and coupled with my brute strength, I held my ground, the leader of my offensive line, and not letting Whitt through.

When he rammed into me, I tackled him to the turf as Ward, with the ball tucked close to his body, bulldozed his way through the crowd of defenders and got us four yards.

I spit my mouthguard out. "Having fun down there?" I pumped my brows at him.

"Fuck off, Tucker." He shoved to his feet and jogged away.

Goddamn, this was fun.

IT WAS PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST BRUTAL GAMES OF MY career, but we'd squeaked out the win. My body ached beyond belief, and I knew that I was probably hurting less than a lot of the guys when you compared some of the hits they took.

"Winning against the Royals makes me horny. Hurry the fuck up, Rams." Garrett was bouncing on the balls of his feet in the locker room after the game. We'd already had press conferences, satisfied the media's ferocious hunger for more, and like always, G was a ball of energy. Sometimes, I didn't know how Ramsey kept up with him.

"What doesn't make you horny?" Ramsey asked as he tugged on his underwear beneath his towel.

"No shit," I added but knew Ramsey loved the fuck out of everything about G.

"Stinky cheese," Garrett teased. "Atwood's hairy feet—WTF, Atwood, my brother doesn't make you shave those

things? Come over sometime, and I'll give you a pedicure."

Everyone ignored him. Cullen's feet weren't hairy.

"All I know is I have the whole fucking night to spend with Houston, and I plan to enjoy the shit out of it."

Another pang of jealousy hit me because, again, G and Rams were going home together, and since Houston was the Royals WR coach, he didn't have a curfew like the rest of the guys. Where the four of them would get the whole night together, Patrick and I would only get a few hours.

I'd never been such a mopey motherfucker in my whole life.

"What's up with you?" Garrett playfully swatted me with the towel that had just been around his boyfriend's ass. "You haven't been talking about all your hookups lately."

"I noticed, too," Rams added.

"Same, but I didn't care enough to mention it," Cullen piped in next. He was a bit of an asshole, but we all loved him for it.

"On that note, I'm out." I pushed to my feet.

"Wait. What? That's all we get?" Cullen asked.

"I thought you didn't care?"

"Houston might want to know."

I laughed at him pretending he didn't give a fuck. He and Whitt were actually alike in that way.

"Just know I'm always getting mine, and that's all you gossip queens are getting from me."

I peaced the fuck out of there before they could say much else. Patrick took a car service from the hotel, where I'd be all incognito while I picked him up in a designated spot. It was a whole-ass thing, but we tried not to have Uber drivers take us to each other's houses anymore.

I bailed and drove too fast to where I was supposed to meet him. My SUV was only parked on the side of the road

for about two minutes when he walked up from around the corner and jumped in.

“Don’t smile at me like that” was the first thing he said to me, which, of course, made me laugh.

“Aww, baby. I’m sorry we beat you tonight.”

“No, you’re not.”

I pulled away. “Truth. But it’s sweet as fuck of me to pretend, isn’t it?”

He shook his head, but I knew he was biting back his smile. Something about me made Patrick happy. I could see that every time we were together. I’d accomplished a whole lot of shit in my life, but none of it held a candle to that truth—that I did something for him, gave him something that no one else could.

“Does it help that I’ve decided you can have my ass tonight?”

Most of the time, Patrick bottomed, but sometimes he was in the mood to take all that bottled-up emotion he felt out on my hole, and damn did I enjoy it—we both did. I loved knowing that we were each the only men who the other had fucked. It gave me a rush.

“Maybe a little,” he responded, and I couldn’t stop myself from reaching over, taking his hand, and squeezing it.

“I miss you,” I admitted.

“I missed you, too.”

“Jesus, we’re a mess.”

“We’re fucked is what we are,” he said, seriousness to his voice, so I tried to find a way to lighten the mood, to make him smile.

“I’ll be in a few minutes, at least.”

“Fucked?”

“Precisely.”

He chuckled and didn't let go of my hand until I needed it back to drive. The second we were inside my house, we were on each other, the pain in my limbs no longer existing when Patrick was there, his skilled tongue stroking mine.

We stumbled into the wall by the table in my entryway, him kissing his way down my neck before he stopped. "You put the lube by the door?"

"Hey, I knew we'd be in a hurry. I didn't want to waste time."

"Thank god you think ahead."

He grabbed the bottle, and then our mouths were fused again, tasting each other, taking out months of want in how we kissed and ripped each other's clothes off.

His body was bruised, purple marks there that didn't come from my mouth but from the hits he'd taken on the field. "I hope none of these are from me." I brushed my fingers over them.

"It's the game. You better never go easy on me."

I rolled my eyes. "Like that would ever happen."

"Good because I wouldn't with you either."

"Is it bad that I wanted to kick the shit out of my own offensive line when they tackled you, though?"

"Nope. Not as long as you never actually do it." He knew I wouldn't. We both did. Football and our relationship had to be completely separate. "I used up my patience during our time apart. Bend your ass over the arm of the couch, Malik."

The way he said my name, smooth and thick, like warm honey on a biscuit, made my heart race in a foreign way.

"Get inside of me."

"I'm getting there, Tuck."

I did as he said, ass in the air as Patrick slicked his fingers, pushing one, then two, inside of me. He fucked me with them slowly, like we had all night, even though we both knew we didn't. I understood how he felt, that need to have me right

away but the urge to draw it out as well. It was how I felt every time we were together.

He rubbed my prostate, making me moan for him.

“I jack myself off thinking about all the sounds you make, the way your body feels against mine, and what it’s like to be inside of you or have you inside of me,” he whispered close to my ear.

“Fuck yes. I bet that’s a pretty sight. I want you to do it for me sometimes, let me watch you pleasure yourself while you’re thinking of me.”

He twisted his fingers inside of me, stretching me as I pushed back against him, trying to get more.

“Hungry for it, aren’t you?”

“Shut up and fuck me, Patrick.”

I knew he was grinning but had to look over my shoulder to see it. It damn near made my legs go out beneath me.

He grabbed the lube and got himself slicked up, pressing the head of his cock against my hole, hands on my hips, and filling me with one thrust.

Neither of us would last long, we both knew. I stroked my cock while he slammed into me over and over again.

“You feel so good, like your body was made for mine.”

It was. Maybe that was fucking crazy to think about, but I believed it.

“Give it to me. I want your cum. Fill me up,” I ordered, my own orgasm already barreling down on me.

The second he leaned forward, pressing a kiss to my nape, I lost it, shooting my release all over the arm of my couch, feeling like I was drowning in pleasure.

Patrick’s cock jerked inside of me, his own release pulling from his balls, my ass milking him dry.

“Fuck, I needed that,” I told him.

“Me too.”

“Lay down. I’ll be right back.”

Patrick looked at me curiously but did as I said. I went to the kitchen and grabbed a couple of ice bags from the freezer before I returned, the two of us naked and fitting together like two puzzle pieces on the couch that was too small for us.

I held one of the packs to his hip, and he pressed one to the bruise on my shoulder.

“You were a little ginger on this tonight.”

“It was bothering me some, but not much.”

“Yeah, even hurt, you’re a fucking badass. I hate it.”

We laughed and talked until the last moment we could.

We were quiet as we got dressed, and then I drove him to a residential neighborhood, where I dropped him off. The car would pick him up one street away.

“Call me when you get in the car.”

He rolled his eyes, but I knew he would. “I’m a football player, and you think I’m going to get attacked by an Uber driver?”

“You’re tough, baby, but no one is invincible. Do it for me.”

He nodded, and then before I could say anything else, he got out of the car and started to walk.

I jumped out, jogging to him, and cupped his face. “Who said you could leave without kissing me?”

Patrick grinned, leaned in, and did just that.

WHITT

I dragged some gym shorts on and shook excess water from my hair, earning a “Hey, fucker!” from LaForge as we dressed after practice.

“Don’t know how to use a towel?” he grouched.

I grinned. “Then I’d miss out on annoying you.”

He rolled his eyes at me, but it lacked heat. “Want to cook out tomorrow?”

“Yep. Should I bring steaks again, or are we doing burgers?” I’d started hanging out more with my teammates last season. Initially, it had started as a way for me to distract myself from thinking about Tucker, which I guessed it still was in a way, but over time, I’d started genuinely looking forward to grabbing beers with the guys or cramming in an extra workout, and it’d become a near weekly thing unless we were all toast from an especially brutal practice. Tucker’s enthusiasm about my social life had struck me as odd at first, but now it seemed...almost sweet. The dude put out strong caretaker vibes, loved his crew of Ramsey, G, and Cullen and wanted me to have the same. I would probably always be more introverted than him, but I couldn’t deny that it was nice to have a crew of guys to hang out with.

“I’m thinking burgers, but if your fancy ass wants to spring for steaks again, I ain’t gonna complain.”

“We all know how much your contract renewed for,” I scoffed back. “You’re the one that needs to be buying the steaks.” Not a damn one of us on the Royals was hurting for

money, but it was still fun to give each other shit about it at every opportunity, and because of my family name, I remained the easiest target. I didn't mind it so much anymore, though. Didn't even care when people referred to me as Bougie, especially Tucker. Hell, him calling me that was foreplay now.

“What I'm hearing is you want hot dogs,” LaForge said.

“I'll bring wieners, sure.” I snapped my teeth at him, and he cracked up.

“I'll bet you will.” He flicked his towel at me, but I danced to one side, evading the lash. “I'll drop a text in the group chat, and we can figure it out later.”

“Sounds good.” I hoisted my gear bag onto my shoulder and headed out to the parking lot, checking my phone as I went. Nothing from Tucker yet, so I fired off a quick text to let him know I was leaving practice. Hopefully, we'd get a FaceTime session in later, maybe even some dirty FaceTime. I bit back a smile while thinking about all the ways I could tease him, then tucked my phone away as Barker fell in step beside me.

“Sup?” I upnodded him. “Sounds like we're cooking out at LaForge's again this week.”

He offered me a tight smile. “Yeah, I heard. Ummm.” He wrinkled his nose, and I slowed my pace. He'd had a rough couple of practices this week, and I wasn't sure what was up with him. Guys hid or downplayed injuries all the time. I definitely had, but the way he winced and cursed softly put me on edge.

We slowed to a stop beside my car, and I dropped my bag so I could fully face him. “Everything okay?” I wasn't about to comment on the practices because sometimes that just put a player even more into their head, but I would try to be a listening ear if he needed to vent. We weren't crazy close, but he was usually at our hangouts, and I liked the dude.

“Shit,” he said on a sigh and rubbed a hand over his head. “I don't... I need to talk to you about something, and I don't even know how to fucking begin because...” He shook his

head. “I wasn’t snooping. I mean, I wasn’t trying to. I’m not eagle-eyeing you constantly or anything, but...”

I felt the blood starting to drain from my face even before he finished.

“I saw...is there something going on with you and Malik Tucker? Or is there maybe someone else in your phone you’re hooking up with named Tucker?”

The hope in his eyes almost had me opening my mouth and spewing out a huge fucking lie, but the weight of the truth on my chest wouldn’t let me.

I closed my eyes, drew a breath, and said a single word. “Yes.” We’d been so fucking careful in every other way that I’d never considered the goddamn phone would be the thing to out us. I shielded my phone most of the time when texting Tucker, but there’d been times when a notification from him popped up and I’d scrambled to darken the screen or disguise it.

“Fuck, dude.” Barker scrubbed a hand along his jawline. “Does Coach know? Does Tucker’s coach know?”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “We planned on it staying that way until we figured shit out.”

“Do you two... You’re not throwing games or anything for each other, right?”

“What? No fucking way,” I barked, caught off guard. I’d fucking relished taking the Rush on, and I loved football too much to ever do something like that. But goddamn, I supposed I could understand why he asked that. “I wouldn’t do that shit, and neither would Tucker.”

Barker put up his hands. “I didn’t think so, but dude...I think you need to talk to Coach. This could call our entire record into question if it gets out.”

I turned a steady gaze on him. “Is it going to get out?”

“Not from me, but trying to keep something like that secret is playing with fire. And if the press picks up on it first, they’re gonna have a fucking field day. I think—” He squinted

his eyes shut. “I think you need to tell Coach. You need to tell him or cut it off and tell him. I can’t unsee it, dude. I can’t just forget about it, and I’ve got too much on the line here. I’m sorry.”

I sank against the side of my car and winced. He was right, and asking him to keep quiet felt disingenuous and just... wrong. “I’ll talk to him,” I said at last.

After Barker walked away, my instinct was to call Tucker immediately, but then panic set in, and I made a different call instead.

“I NEED A BEER,” HOUSTON SAID WHEN I FINISHED SPILLING the details to him an hour later. I’d asked if I could come to his place and talk, which had probably confused the fuck out of him initially. We were cool, even after the incident at the club, but we weren’t what I’d call close.

He extended a beer to me and plopped back onto the sofa as I twisted the cap off and took a long swallow. I needed about a bucket more of these. “I know, it’s bad.”

“It’s complicated, that’s for fucking sure. Jesus. I thought the two of you hated each other.”

“Hate is a strong word,” I ventured, even though it was totally the word I’d have used before Tucker turned everything on its head.

“Okay, strongly disliked. How...?” He waved a hand. “Never mind, none of my business how it started.”

“Tucker’s going to flip his shit, and he has every right to. It was my carelessness that caused this, and if this ruins his career, I don’t know if I’d be able to forgive myself.”

“Maybe the two of you should’ve considered that before you started down this road.”

“We didn’t expect it to amount to anything. It was supposed to just be a hookup here and there.”

Houston chuckled. “Funny how many times I’ve heard that before. Funny how many times I’ve said that before.” He arched a pointed brow. “And now?”

I paused, trying to choose my words carefully. “It’s not just hooking up to me. Tucker either. I know that. But if it ruins his career...”

“What about yours?”

I shook my head. “I don’t care. I’ll take all the heat. Shit, maybe that’s what I should do. Maybe I can just say that it was my mistake, my fault.”

“Your fault that the two of you have been bumping uglies as often as possible? His dick just kept falling out of his shorts on accident when the two of you were alone?” Houston’s wry tone made me sag in defeat. Yeah, that wasn’t gonna work. I’d had a knot in my stomach for hours, and I didn’t think it was gonna let up anytime soon, especially if Tucker took any heat for our relationship.

“Fuck, this is a mess. He’s gonna be pissed.”

“Hey.” Houston thwapped me on the thigh, causing me to look up and meet his steady gaze. “You know what Tucker is like. He’s not gonna hate you, not gonna blame you. Shit, it sounds like he’s in love with you, and he’s not one to just cut someone off when things get tough—and believe me, it’s gonna get tough. Talk to him first, come up with a plan, an approach, because I agree with you and Barker that admin needs to know.”

I groaned. “Yeah, alright. That’s what I’ll do.” I pushed to a stand. “Thanks for hearing me out.”

Houston rose with me and clapped a hand around my shoulder. “For what it’s worth, I’ll stand beside the two of you if your integrity is called into question. Tucker’s like a brother to me, and you—”

“I’m an asshole.”

He chuckled again. “Sometimes. But I’ve seen your dedication to the game. I know you’ve got that same integrity,

too. And if you and Tucker make each other happy, that's all I need to know. Makes you family, too."

I swallowed against the lump that had suddenly formed in my throat at "family" and nodded. "Thanks, man. That means more than you know."

I made the drive home with my head spinning, didn't even dare look at my phone until I was standing in the kitchen. Outside the window, one of the strands of Christmas lights had burned out. A few of them had, actually, but I'd left them where they were. It'd become a running joke with us, and I grimaced as I picked up the phone and dialed Tucker's number.

"Hey, baby," he answered. "I just sent you a text about Seattle."

"I know, I just saw it," I said miserably. "Seattle sounds fucking nice right now."

"Hey." His tone gentled. "What's going on?"

"Maybe it'd be best for you to sit down." I sighed. "I've fucked up everything."

"Tell me."

TUCKER

I couldn't figure out how I felt when Patrick told me that Barker knew about us. Part of me was relieved because I was already over this hiding shit. Patrick was mine, and everyone would have to learn to deal with it, but then when he told me Barker made it pretty fucking clear that Patrick needed to go to Royals management, taking the choice out of our hands, heat scorched a path up my spine. "Fuck him. Did he threaten you?"

"Simmer down, Tuck. It wasn't like that, but he has a point. If he found out about us, anyone could, and what do you think is going to happen if we haven't told them first? Jesus, he asked if we've thrown games for each other. Keeping it a secret is going to make us look even more guilty."

My jaw tightened as I fought to control my anger. "He asked if we've thrown games? Not endearing that motherfucker to me at all."

Patrick sighed. "I thought I was supposed to be the hothead?"

"You are with everyone except me, because you know you can always be real with me. You don't have to pretend with me, and I like to feel like I'm defending my man's honor."

Patrick chuckled but sobered seconds later. "What are we going to do?"

I paced my living room, all of our options swimming around in my head. A text. A stupid fucking text, and now the choice of how we did this was taken away from us. "It

shouldn't be up to him or anyone else if we announce our relationship."

"You don't want anyone to know? At this point, the only other option is to end it."

"What? No. Fuck no. I'm not walking away from you, and I don't give a shit who knows about us. It's just not fair that we don't get to decide. And now people are going to scrutinize every game of ours, doubt our loyalty to our teams, question our integrity—I mean, throwing a game? Fuck that shit."

"I'm sorry," he said softly, taking a hammer to my anger and breaking it apart so that all that was left was what really mattered—him.

"Hey, what do you have to be sorry about? This isn't your fault."

"It was my text he saw."

"And I'm the dumbass who sent it. This isn't on us, baby. It's on them. Don't blame yourself for something that's not your fault. The shit hit the fan, and now we figure out how to deal with it together."

"What if you lose your career?"

Me. It didn't escape my attention that he only asked about me. How had I ever thought he was selfish? "Neither of us are losing our careers. I won't let that happen." He groaned, and I added, "Don't roll your eyes at me."

"Holy shit. How did you know?"

"I know you...and you're mine, okay? I'm not losing you. The rest of it doesn't fucking matter. We'll get through it together. No matter what happens, you're worth it—we're worth it. Don't let that head of yours tell you anything different."

The silence stretched for too long before Patrick said, "This isn't going to be a small thing. This is going to be a mess."

Yeah, yeah, it was. I felt that deep in my bones. "I'm in if you're in," I told him.

“I’m in.”

I WENT TO MY AGENT, TRAVIS, FIRST. HE NEEDED TO KNOW what was going on, and to say he wasn’t happy was putting it mildly. He almost got his ass fired when he asked me if I was sure Whitt was worth it. There wasn’t anything in this world he wasn’t worth, and now that I could admit that shit out loud, it was a relief, no matter what happened.

It was my agent who called the meeting with Coach Baker, Larry Dixon, our team owner, the GM, and Paul and Cynthia from PR. I wasn’t one to beat around the bush, so the second we were seated and Larry asked, “What can we do for you Malik?” I spit it out.

“I’m in a relationship with Patrick Whitt.”

“What do you mean a relationship?” Paul asked as Coach Baker cursed.

“He’s my partner...boyfriend...mine, whichever way you choose to see it, but I’m pretty sure you knew what I meant.”

“Malik,” my agent warned. I was coming in hot and knew I needed to relax, but I was pissed that it came to this. That I didn’t know what was going to happen and knew that no matter what it was, Patrick would blame himself.

“How long?”

“Who knows?”

“Has he told the Royals?”

“Patrick Whitt?”

They all volleyed questions in my direction at the same time, not giving me enough time to answer before someone asked me something else. I opened my mouth to respond to one of them—I didn’t even know which one—when the walls of the room vibrated with Larry’s “That’s enough!” The whole room went silent. I’d been with the Rush my whole career and had never heard him use that stern of a voice. Larry turned to

me. “I’m not going to sugarcoat it...this isn’t good. You’re telling us you’re in a relationship with a player from our biggest rival team.”

“There’s nothing in the rule books against this,” Travis said.

“Who the hell thought it would ever happen?” the GM tossed out.

“Why not? Because football players can’t be queer?” I bit out. That wasn’t what he meant, and I knew it, but I was already over this.

“That’s not what he said,” Coach added. “We’re just trying to figure this out.”

“But it needs to be figured out without any discrimination.” Travis had come to play. He was definitely making sure they knew that they had to tread carefully here.

“Have you ever shared private Rush information with Patrick Whitt?” Cynthia asked.

“No.”

“Has Patrick ever asked you to? Has he asked you about plays? Game plans when we play them?” she continued.

“Fuck no.”

“Has he asked you to go easy on them...screw up a play... I mean, he’s your boyfriend. It would just be a favor, right?” She cocked a brow, and I knew she wasn’t asking me those questions herself—well, maybe partially she was—but she was also telling me what was to come, what everyone would ask, and what they would think.

“We didn’t do that. We would never do that.” I rubbed a hand over my head, frustration making my muscles twitch.

“How important is this to you?” Larry asked. “How important is he to you? Once this ball starts rolling, we can’t stop it, and I can’t promise you’re going to come out of this unscathed. I’m not telling you to end it. I can’t do that, but if this isn’t the real deal, maybe you cut your losses now.”

I didn't have to think about it. Being with Patrick was more important than anything to me. "It's the real deal."

There were a lot of groans around me that made it clear they wished that wasn't my answer.

"Get the Royals on the phone. We need to figure out how to handle this together before it gets out."

I WASN'T THE TYPE OF GUY TO LET NERVES GET THE BEST OF me, but my stomach had been tied up in knots ever since I left the Rush facility. The first thing I did was send a message to Ramsey, Baby G, and Atwood, asking the three of them to meet me at my place. I wasn't sure how long it would take the Rush and the Royals to decide my and Patrick's fate, but I wanted to tell them before shit got out on its own.

I cared about the whole team. We were a family in a lot of ways, but it was different with the three of them, and I couldn't in good conscience not go to them first.

I was still trying to wrap my head around all of the possibilities. I wanted to wring the PR crew's neck when they were asking me all those questions about throwing games and shit like that, but it was the first thing Barker had said to Patrick, too.

Everyone would think it...wonder about it. Fans would be fucking livid. This was just the beginning.

I'd gotten nothing done except pacing my living room when there was a knock at the door. For a split second, I considered pretending I wasn't home, but I'd never been the type to back down from a challenge, and I sure as shit didn't plan to start now.

"Couldn't wait for practice tomorrow to see me, huh? You miss me that much?" Garrett wrapped a hand around the back of my head and pretended to try and give me a kiss on the cheek, but I playfully fought him off.

Ramsey gave a deep growl in response.

“I love it when he gets all possessive.” Garrett pumped his brows. My best friend really had his work cut out for him when it came to his man.

“Everything okay?” Rams asked. Leave it to him to realize this was something important, or I wouldn’t have called them over.

“It’s good.” I just hoped it stayed that way and hoped the people in this room would have my back. Patrick had told Houston, and he was cool about it, so I was expecting the same response here.

He frowned, the perceptive fucker, but moved out of the way for me to greet Atwood. “This better be good. I was about to have a FaceTime jerk-off session with Houston. I almost didn’t come over here, but he forced me to.”

Well...that was because his boyfriend knew, now, wasn’t it?

“What’s going on, Tuck?” Ramsey asked while he joined Garrett on the sofa. Atwood sat in the armchair beside them.

Fuuuuck. This sucked. I tugged at my earlobe, scratching it to distract myself. It was one thing to tell the Rush organization as a whole, but saying it to them was more personal.

“Some shit’s about to go down, and I honestly don’t know what the fuck is going to happen, and before it gets out, I wanted to tell you guys.” That grabbed all their attention. Garrett sat forward on the cushion, gaze zeroed in on me, Atwood watching me in a similar way. “I’m with Patrick,” I said.

“Who the fuck is Patrick, and why does that matter?” Garrett asked while Ramsey cursed. G wasn’t even used to hearing Whitt’s first name, and the thought of me being with Whitt was so foreign to him he would never guess it.

“You’re fucking Patrick Whitt?” Atwood asked. “So? He’s hot.” Leave it to him not to be bothered by it.

“You’re fucking Patrick Whitt?” Garrett questioned, an edge to his voice. “That motherfucker? Jesus Christ, Tuck.

He's a prick."

"I'm with Patrick Whitt, and I love you like a brother, but if you don't calm the fuck down when his name's in your mouth, we're going to have a problem."

"I love you like a brother, but watch how you talk to him, or *we're* going to have a problem," Ramsey threw back at me. "He's surprised, is all."

This was going all wrong. Fighting with them was the last thing I wanted to do.

"Aren't I supposed to be the wild card out of the group of us?" Cullen broke the tension, and I sighed.

"Fuck. I'm sorry. It's just a mess." I collapsed into the other armchair, leg bouncing up and down. "Someone from their team saw a text from me and went to Patrick. He talked to Houston, and we decided to go to management before shit got out, but...it's not good. They're talking about investigations—asking us if we've ever thrown games or given insider information."

"You wouldn't do that," Ramsey said. "Anyone who knows you knows that."

A relieved breath escaped my lungs hearing him say that. "That's not how a lot of people are going to see it. I'm freaking the fuck out here. Patrick's blaming himself, and Jesus, what if I lose football over this?" What if I lost Patrick?

"Cullen and Houston are together, and it's not a big deal," Ramsey added.

"They put shit in his contract about it. He didn't tell me until later," Cullen replied. "And I can't believe he didn't tell me about this."

"No shit?" That made me feel a little better.

"Plus, he's not a player. He can't fumble the ball on purpose or miss a fucking tackle." Everything we did would be scrutinized from this moment forward. Every move we made would be under the microscope. I rubbed a hand over my face, muscles tight with stress.

“Holy shit. You’re in love with him,” G said, surprise softening his voice. “You’re in love with that—” Ramsey nudged his arm. “Whitt.”

“That Whitt?” I cocked a brow.

“I’m trying here, bro.”

He was, and I appreciated the shit out of him for that...and I was. Garrett was absolutely right. “I’m in love with that Whitt,” I told him. “He’s not who you think. I mean, yeah, he can be a dick, but so can Atwood, and we like him.”

“Hey, fucker. I’m being supportive. Why are you throwing me under the bus?” he teased.

“How long?” Ramsey asked, hurt in his voice.

“A little over a year.” The party at the Montrose mansion was last summer. “We were talking before that. It wasn’t supposed to be a thing. Fuck, you know more than anything how much I used to hate his ass, but it just happened. Now he’s mine, and I won’t lose him. I don’t care what the consequences are. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Ramsey sighed, then reached over and squeezed my shoulder. “We’re good.”

“Thanks, man.” I looked at Atwood next.

“I got your back if for no reason other than I’m not the one on the team with the biggest fuckups anymore.” He winked, and I appreciated his humor. Cullen had gotten into trouble for a lot of shit over his career, but not for sleeping with someone from another team. He’d never had his integrity called into play.

“G?” My gaze found Garrett’s. His brows were drawn together, and his—yep, there was definitely a tic in his jaw, but then he let out a deep breath.

“We’re good. I seriously question your taste in men, but we’re good.”

Thank fuck. I needed these three guys in my corner.

My phone rang before I could say anything else. My stomach dropped out because I knew whatever it was wouldn't be good.

“Hello?”

I listened as my agent spoke, not arguing, no matter how much I wanted to. The second I ended the call, my arm drew back, and it took everything in my power not to throw my phone against the wall...but if I did that, I couldn't talk to my man.

“What'd they say?” Ramsey asked.

“Both Patrick and I are suspended while there's an investigation. The NFL is going over the film of every single game we've played against each other. They'll make a decision and an official announcement afterward.”

“Shit, man. I'm sorry,” G said.

“Fuck that. They're not going to find anything, and they can't drop you for being with another player. It's a lawsuit waiting to happen,” Ramsey added.

I nodded, but I couldn't do this with them. Not right then. “I need to call Patrick.” He was all I needed.

WHITT

The last couple of practices had been rough since Coach had called a team meeting ahead of the NFL announcement, explaining our suspension and what was going on. Not because my teammates were outwardly aggressive or anything, and if they were pissed, no one said anything directly to me, but it felt like we were all trying to figure out how to navigate an awkward situation. I understood why, but that didn't make it suck any less, and I couldn't help but feel like I'd let my team down. At the same time, I refused to regret my relationship with Malik. I just couldn't. Being with him had given me as much as football had—hell, I'd been playing better than I had in my whole career—so to feel like the two things I cared for most had now been put in opposing positions was a hard pill to swallow. I worried about shit on Malik's end constantly, even though he told me not to, and I knew he meant it, too. But I'd be fucking gutted if he lost all he'd worked for because of me.

Tomorrow, the team would be heading to Kansas City to play, and I'd be staying in LA. Coach had told me I was welcome to tag along, but I didn't want to make further waves by being there and potentially distracting from the game. Tucker had chosen the same route.

Barker had come to me the day after the NFL announcement and apologized, but I'd told him it wasn't necessary, because it wasn't. What he'd said to me wasn't wrong. Tucker and I had made our bed; we'd lie in it. Or not, as it were, for the time being. Maybe forever if shit went really

south, but I forced those thoughts from my mind, trying not to get ahead of myself. If everything fell apart, we'd figure it out.

I headed into the changing area of our locker room with growing dread. The chatter had seemed quieter lately, and maybe I was being overly paranoid, but I constantly felt like every eye was on me. In turn, I'd been keeping to myself, and I did the same today, moving to my cubby and dressing as quickly as possible.

"You know, Whitt, if you were itching for some football dick, you could've just chosen me," Clancy, one of our linebackers, called out, and I spun around.

Though he was smirking, the room got even quieter, as if everyone was waiting to see how I handled it.

I shrugged. "Yeah, but then you'd talk with that fucking Yankee accent and ruin it," I joked back wryly and wasn't sure if that had been the right move until several of the guys cracked up.

"Fuck you, dude! It only comes out when I'm drinking."

"Psht. I can't understand a goddamn word out of your mouth sometimes," Barker teased.

"That's cuz you're from the swamps. Do you speak in anything but vowels at top speed?"

"Landry ain't no swamp. My mama would kick your ass if she heard you say that."

"She run as slow as your ass?"

"Sheee-it."

"You know how often I'm staring at Horton's ass," LaForge piped up. "Definitely thought of it once but then remembered it's attached to his ugly mug." He faux shuddered, and Horton hurled his wet towel, smacking LaForge in the side of the face.

"But seriously," LaForge continued. "You couldn't have, like, maybe blown Tucker's back out or something before we played them last time? Helped us out a little?"

I dragged a hand down my face and rolled my eyes. While there was some relief that we were joking about this shit, I was still leery of talking about it, especially since the NFL had stepped in with their inquiry.

“Oh fuck, hold on a second,” Clancy said. “Is that what’s going on with your hip? Tucker knock it out of alignment?”

I snorted. “Nah, that was your dad. Or your mom.” I scratched my chin. “Both, maybe. Memory is kinda fuzzy now.”

“Dayum,” Barker said, and a fresh wave of laughter rang through the room. It felt fucking good. A tiny moment of levity that I soaked in, suspecting it wouldn’t last.

We finished getting dressed, and as we walked out, LaForge wrapped an arm around my shoulder, voice dropping to a confidential tone.

“I think it’s gonna be alright, bro. Just keep kicking ass, and we’ll all do the same. It’ll get figured out.”

For the second time in a month, a lump formed in my throat, and I nodded since I didn’t trust myself to speak.

He grinned and nudged me. “Don’t let Clancy see you like this. He’ll probably ask to use your tears as lube or something.”

AFTER THE INQUIRY WAS ANNOUNCED, I’D SPOKEN WITH MY parents, and they checked in here and there but mostly left me alone. Maybe because it was what they’d always done or maybe because they were worried I’d reflect badly on them. I had no fucking clue. Candice, however, messaged me daily, telling me to hang in there or sent a stupid meme that never failed to make me smile. I looked forward to those. Not so much the missed call from my dad. As I headed home, I punched the callback, ready to get it over with.

“Patrick,” my dad said in his standard confident businessman tone when I answered. “How’s it going, son?”

I blinked. How's it going? That wasn't standard.

"It's going," I replied hesitantly. "How's New York?"

"Smoggy as ever." He cleared his throat. "Listen, I was thinking about this inquiry thing." Inquiry thing, like it was just a passing gnat and not a hornet's nest capable of ending mine and Malik's careers. "It could be worthwhile if we put a little pressure on the inquiry committee. Remind them who we are. We've got a lot of lawyer connections, Patrick. A lot of connections, in general. Couldn't hurt."

"What?" I spluttered, halfway between a laugh and a groan. "Dad, this isn't a business deal. That shit doesn't fly in this world."

He chuckled. "It flies everywhere. You'd be surprised."

"No. No fucking way," I said, and then realized I was shaking my head vehemently while driving alone in my own car. "You want to talk about bad looks, that would be one. Someone runs a story about how the Whitts bribed the NFL? That's ridiculous."

"We wouldn't bribe them. Hell, we could buy the Royals if it came to that."

Had the man been drinking? Had a stroke? Lost his damn mind? "Not only is that not necessary, but it would just do more damage. They're not going to find anything. Neither of us were cheating in any way whatsoever. I already told you that."

"Well, you know how it is with these kinds of things... guilty until proven innocent."

I gripped the steering wheel tighter. "Thanks, but I'm good. Seriously, don't get involved; just let me handle it. If this inquiry doesn't kill my career, that definitely would."

There were a few beats of silence, and then my dad said quietly, "I don't want that. I know how important football has always been to you. And I hope you know there's not a bone in my body, or your mom's, that thinks you did anything wrong. A bit messy in the execution, perhaps, but...not wrong."

He'd never spoken to me that way in my life, and while I was tempted to go down a rabbit hole of a thousand things that might have motivated him to say something like that, in the end, I said the only thing I could say. "Thank you." I meant it.

"HE MUST HAVE BEEN HIGH AS FUCK," TUCKER SAID WHEN WE hopped on FaceTime later. "That fancy millionaire shit. Probably comes from some private stash grown in a cave on Mt. Olympus."

"Watered with the tears of virgins."

"And the blood of third-generation warriors for extra potency."

We both cracked up, and fuck, just hearing his laughter and seeing his grin caused a pang of longing to run through me.

"What if we meet up tomorrow?" I blurted. We'd sat our first games out in our respective hometowns but had watched them together while FaceTiming. Tucker said his crew had given him no shortage of shit for that, but I knew he'd enjoyed it as much as I had. Made us feel less alone. "We can watch the games together in person."

Tucker perked a brow. "Where?"

I hadn't thought that far ahead. "Somewhere we can both fly directly to and then disappear for twelve hours?"

Which was how we ended up in a Marriott in Phoenix. Tucker's flight had gotten in first, so he'd booked the room, and though I wasn't sure it mattered much now, we still tried to be low-key, so I sauntered in two hours later, dressed down and with a ball cap pulled low like we'd always done.

I'd barely raised my hand to knock on the door when Tucker flung it open with a "Get your ass in here."

My mouth was on his in an instant, my arms twining around him. I managed to flip the dead bolt on the door behind me and kick the backpack I was carrying out of the way just

before we tripped over it on the way to the bed. The weeks that had passed since this fucking disaster had begun had felt like years, and there was a fervency in our movements, a desperate intensity.

“Slow down, baby,” he murmured as I shoved down his sweatpants to get at his cock. I craved the connection, craved the sensation of him filling me up after weeks of loneliness. “You’re gonna get me too worked up.”

“Can’t.” I kicked off my own sweats and tee, then worked my way up and down the smooth lines of his body, touching, kissing, and licking his warm skin until he pushed me onto my back. I fought to catch my breath as he planted a big hand on my chest, pinning me as he swallowed my cock.

My body reacted like I’d never had a blowjob in my life, back arching, fingers scrabbling at the sheets, and he alternated between licking and sucking my crown while pumping my shaft until I was incoherent with desire that spilled over his knuckles minutes later.

I was still gasping when he used my release to slick himself up, spread my thighs, and push inside me.

“Fuck,” we groaned together.

The burning hot spark of connection rushed through me, filling the void I’d been battling, and I grasped Tucker’s waist, pulling him closer, harder, faster until he was grunting with exertion, pummeling me deep and hitting all the nerve endings that sent my eyes rolling back in my head. It was quick, primal, and exactly what we both needed. He came on a guttural cry and sank against me, lips brushing over mine.

“Hey, good to see you.” He laughed, rolling onto his side, one hand still possessively splayed over my hip. I’d never tell him how much I fucking loved when he did that because I never wanted him to be conscious of it.

“Hi. Did we just fuck, or did a tornado hit us?” I quipped.

He craned his head up and scanned the room before turning back to me. “Hard to say.”

“Don’t hate it, though.” I sucked in a breath, rolling onto my side to face him, my gaze gravitating to the warm depths of eyes that felt like one of the few safe havens in my life. “That stuff you always say about how I’m yours, it’s true. I’m yours, even if you just sort of say it because it’s hot and sexy and gets me worked up. It’s still true for me.” I paused for a breath. “I, um...I fucking love you. And even if I can’t ever play football again, that’ll still be true.”

“Haven’t you figured it out yet?” Tucker’s laughter was quiet and intimate as I lifted a quizzical brow. “That’s what ‘you’re mine’ means, Patrick. I’ve been telling you how I feel for a long time. Glad you finally got a clue, you dumbass.”

My mouth opened, but no words came out, so I did the next logical thing, which was to steamroll his ass and kiss him again.

We lay in bed after we’d showered, watching the Royals play on TV and the Rush on Tucker’s laptop while we stuffed our faces with room service.

“You know, if we get fired, we could always go play for Canada or something,” Tucker said around a bite of macaroni.

“Canada? For real?”

“I’m half-joking, half-serious.” He shrugged. “I’ve always wanted to visit Banff.”

I smirked at him sidelong. “Funny, that’s the exact sound you made when Clancy knocked your ass to the turf last time we played you.”

Tucker damn near choked on his food but managed to swallow before he took his turn steamrolling me. Silverware and plates clattered as we wrestled, but we both went still when his phone rang. Like me, he’d become highly attuned to the sound, on edge to see what our fate would be.

Tucker moved just as fast as he did on the field to grab his phone off the nightstand. “Shit, it’s Larry Dixon.” He rolled upright as he answered. “Hey,” he said, and as he listened, cocking his head, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

My appetite vanished in a second, the food sloshing around in my stomach suddenly making me queasy.

TUCKER

“Hey, Malik. How are you doing?” Larry Dixon asked as if he was just calling for a random chat rather than having my career in his hands. Part of me wanted to hang up and lose myself in Patrick’s body again, getting so blissed-out by the pleasure of him that I forgot what was at stake. I’d be pissed if this didn’t go our way, but it would be worth it. Having him was worth any-fucking-thing, but I also didn’t want to go out like this. I wanted it to be on our terms and without the dark cloud of an inquiry hanging over our heads.

“Just tell me,” I replied, not having the patience in me to play this game. Stalling wasn’t going to change a damn thing.

He cleared his throat while I held eye contact with Patrick, wondering why it was my phone that rang before his, seeing the fear in the swirl of different blues in his eyes and knowing there wasn’t a damn thing I wouldn’t do to take the fear away.

“After a thorough investigation, the league could find no evidence of cheating in any of the Rush vs Royals games.”

“No shit,” I cut him off before he could say anything else. Maybe that wasn’t the smartest thing to do, but none of this shit should have gone down. We should never have been accused of this.

“We had to be sure, Malik.” His voice softened. “You have to understand where the league is coming from. This is unprecedented.”

“Is it, though?”

He automatically referred to Houston and Cullen. “The league knew about them before Houston coached the Royals. They went into the deal with Houston with an understanding that Houston was with Cullen.”

Which I already knew, and Cullen had said there were stipulations in Houston’s contract. Larry might not know and wouldn’t be able to share that with me.

I sighed, understanding but still frustrated. “We would never cheat—not now, not ever. So what does this mean going forward?”

“It means you’ll be playing next week. Both teams and the NFL will make formal announcements tomorrow.”

For the first time since this began, my lungs were able to exhale fully, but the truth was, I knew this wasn’t over. It wasn’t something I mentioned to Patrick because I hoped I was wrong, but this would just be the beginning. The NFL might announce we hadn’t done anything wrong, but that didn’t mean the fans would agree. They would be brutal. It was incredible how fast people could turn on you, how everyone thought they had all the answers, were always right, and loved nothing more than sharing their opinions with everyone—especially on the internet. And it was going to be real fucking hard for me to keep my mouth shut when people had something to say about Patrick.

“This part is over, but be careful, okay? I hate to say this, but people are going to scrutinize everything the two of you do. They’re going to be watching you like a hawk, and accusations don’t need evidence for people to latch onto them.”

No, no, they didn’t. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

We ended the call, and I’d just finished sharing all the information with Patrick when his call came through. He responded to everything he was told as if he hadn’t just sat through it all with me.

The second Patrick set his cell down, I took his mouth, not wanting to think about anything but him. He opened for me,

letting me explore his mouth and suck his tongue. I shoved him down to his back, slicked his cock, and rode him until we both lost ourselves to the pleasure.

We fell asleep, stuck together with sweat and cum, tangled up in each other's arms like we both knew how much the next few months were going to test us.

In the morning, I woke up before Patrick did, brushed his dark hair from his forehead, and kissed the corner of his mouth. He was so fucking beautiful...soft features even though he was tough as shit. And as big of an asshole as he could be, there was only what I would describe as a sweet innocence to him that always made me come undone—this man who could be so cocky and was so fucking good at everything he did had a tender heart that I wanted to protect at all costs.

I fucking love you.

The way he'd said that last night tied me up in knots, made me feel like the luckiest bastard alive.

Deciding I would check out the damage online before he got up, I quietly snuck out of bed. I grabbed my cell and pulled on my underwear, then slipped out to the balcony in our room. There were missed messages from Ramsey, Atwood, Houston, Baby G, and Coach already. I ignored them all, but before I could get online, a video call rang through from my mom.

I answered, having a feeling I would need a little of her strength. "Hey, Mama."

"Hey, baby. I see they made an announcement that you and Whitt didn't do anything wrong. They said the NFL is supporting your relationship while also protecting the integrity of the game."

"Fuck that. When they say shit like that, it makes it sound like we are doing something wrong."

"I know... How are you holding up?"

"As good as I can. The team mostly has my back. A few of the guys are being assholes, but the rest are cool. I'm worried about Patrick, though. His team hasn't given him trouble, but

he takes the weight of the world on his shoulders. He's so damn afraid I'm going to lose my career and blame him."

"Wow, what a coincidence. He sounds a whole lot like you," she replied, and I chuckled. "You're both good men. You play the game we all know you can play and hold on to each other. Don't let the drama pull you apart, and everything will be okay."

I nodded. "I love him. He's it for me."

Mama smiled. "I can't wait to meet him."

There was a sound behind me, and I turned just as Patrick came outside. "Hey, what are you—" He looked down, noticing my phone. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. I'll go back inside."

"Don't you take another step, Patrick Whitt," Mama said, and Patrick froze, eyes wide like he wasn't sure what to do. Laughter fell from my mouth because I was pretty sure Patrick just met his match in my mama.

"You better do what she says. She don't play," I told him, then tugged him down so he sat on my lap. It wasn't easy because neither of us were small guys, but we made it work.

"Don't look so scared. I just wanted to officially meet my son's boyfriend. I'm Bernice."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am," Patrick told her.

"Isn't he gorgeous? I told you he's gorgeous," I said, rubbing his lower back.

"He is, but you say that like I don't know who Patrick Whitt is. I watch him play nearly as much as I do you. And stop embarrassing him. His cheeks are pink."

"Hey! You're not supposed to watch my rival team!" I teased, then brushed my lips against his face. "I like him pink."

"You're doing that on purpose," he said. I could tell he was trying to act like this wasn't a totally different experience for him. Patrick's family wasn't like mine.

“I already asked Malik, but how are you holding up, Patrick?” Mama asked him.

“I’m doing okay. Glad we get to play next week. I just don’t want him to lose anything because of me. I’m sorry this has turned into such a mess. If it comes down to it, I’d retire before I let him lose his career.”

How had I ever not realized how big his heart was?

“Don’t do that. Don’t make it sound like any of this is either of your faults. It’s not. It’s them. You didn’t do anything wrong. Like I told Malik, the two of you just need to stick together. And if shit gets real, I’ll get involved. They don’t wanna mess with a mama if they hurt her son or his boyfriend.”

I laughed, so fucking grateful for her, grateful that she was involving him, too, and showing him he was accepted.

“I will. I’ll stick by him,” Patrick told her. “Thank you.”

“Nothing to thank me for. I’ll expect you home for Christmas.” She grinned at both of us, then said she had to go. Patrick slid into the other chair as I ended the call.

“She’s great,” he said softly.

“Yeah, she is. And she meant every word she said. Did you look online?”

He nodded, his jaw tense, telling me it wasn’t good.

I went to Instagram first. The comments were a mixed bag. There was a lot of support, but there was a whole lot more shit-talking and name-calling than I would have liked to see—calling us cheaters, saying they didn’t believe we played at one hundred percent against each other, calling us traitors and saying we shouldn’t be allowed to play. Of course, there was homophobic stuff, too.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” I turned off the phone.

“That we play our fucking asses off and prove them all wrong? Show them who they’re fucking with and what they would be missing without us?” Patrick grinned.

“Fuck yes. That’s my man.” I replied. “God, I love you.”

I was going to do everything in my power to make sure this was my best season in the league. I was bringing home that motherfucking ring, and I knew Patrick was going to be fighting just as hard for it.

THE RUSH WERE ON-FUCKING-FIRE. WE WON THE NEXT THREE games following my suspension. Everything clicked on the field. It was like we were in tune, mentally connected in a way I wasn’t sure I had ever experienced.

I think we all wanted to prove the haters wrong—me, Rams, Atwood, and Garrett more than anyone, because we were all queer and in relationships with other men. We stuck together, all of us having something to prove, even if it was in different ways, but there was no way the three of them weren’t going to fight like hell to make sure the people who doubted us, who doubted me, were proven wrong.

The really fucking cool part was that the Royals were kicking ass and taking names, too. While I wasn’t technically supposed to be rooting for them, I couldn’t deny that I’d maybe jumped on my couch celebrating when they won their third game in a row as well.

We were playing St. Louis at home tonight, and it was the closest game we’d had since all the drama started. It was basically like we were just taking turns scoring or stopping each other. Every time one of us scored, the other did, hitting their PATs, too, which kept the game tied a lot of the time.

It was the third quarter, and we were down by seven. We only needed one yard for the first down, so Ramsey, who’d been on all night, went for the quarterback sneak, getting us two yards on the play.

When we were in the huddle, I said, “They’re keeping their asses on Atwood and McRae. Why don’t we go for the sweep play and get the ball in Ward’s hands and see what he can do with it.”

Ramsey eyed me, trusting my gut, and gave a quick nod.

We went back to the line, St. Louis again running their 4-3 defense.

“White eighty! White eighty! White eighty! Set! Hut!” Ramsey called out the cadence, and I snapped the ball to him. Atwood and McRae took off toward the end zone. Ward did his job, going off to the left, Ramsey pulling his arm back like he was going for a long pass before pitching it to the side, the ball landing in Ward’s arms. My line blocked for them, taking out the St. Louis players who tried to get to our guys as Ward maneuvered his way around the defense and dove into the end zone!

“Fuck yes!” I whooped, throwing my fist in the air. We made the PAT, and then Cross got a touchdown in the fourth, securing our win.

“Tucker! Over here!” One of the sports reporters got my attention. I bit back my groan. I wasn’t used to being the guy they wanted to talk to every game. That was typically saved for Ramsey, Atwood, and McRae, but ever since the news broke about me and Patrick, I was the first name they called every night.

“You got this,” Ramsey told me, then, being the protective fucker that he was, followed me over.

“The Rush are playing some really great football. You’re men on a mission. Does that have anything to do with the announcement you’re in a relationship with Patrick Whitt and the recent inquiry into your cheating scandal?” he asked, making me feel like my brain was going to explode.

“There is no cheating scandal. There never was a cheating scandal because neither Patrick nor I would do that. Believe me, I get a whole lot of joy out of beating the Royals. I don’t appreciate you making it sound like there’s more to the story than there was,” I bit out.

“I didn’t mean—”

“Yes, you did. You were trying to get your sound bite and trying to get me to respond like the media has been doing

every week.” And I was the pissy motherfucker who fell for it, but I couldn’t help myself. I was tired of getting this shit day in and day out.

“The NFL supports Tucker and Whitt, our teams support them, there was no evidence they did anything wrong. It’s time to drop it,” Ramsey warned before taking my arm and tugging me with him. I wasn’t the type to need protection, but I was extremely grateful for my teammate right then.

Fans yelled at us as we headed down the hallway for the locker room, the supportive voices drowned out by the taunts of traitor and cheater—peppered with a whole lot of f-bombs and other names I tried to ignore.

“Motherfucker!” I shouted, doing my best not to throw my helmet the second we stepped inside.

“They still giving him shit?” I heard G ask Rams.

“Yeah,” he replied right before Atwood sauntered into the room with a bold-ass smile on his face. He must have been at the podium for the press conference.

“Don’t worry. They asked me how I felt about you and Whitt—I told them if I could get fucked down by the Royals WR coach, you should be able to have some fun with their cornerback, too.”

My mouth dropped open. He hadn’t really said it like that, had he?

“Atwood! In my office!” Coach called, and yep, he really fucking had. I had to admit that helped a little.

“You want to go out and get a drink tonight or something? Blow off some steam? You can come over to our place,” Ramsey asked.

“Nah.” I shook my head. “I just want to go home and talk to Patrick.” This would all be a whole lot easier if that night at the Marriott wasn’t the last time we’d been able to meet up. Touching him made everything better.

“I still can’t believe you’re in love with Patrick Whitt,” G said. When Ramsey gave him a warning glare, he held up his

hands in defeat. “I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with it, but it’s...Whitt. Ew.”

I laughed, knowing he was just trying to give me shit and take my mind off everything else.

The second I got home that night, I tugged out my phone to call Patrick right when a video call came through from him. “Hey, baby,” I said, suddenly feeling a whole lot better.

“Jesus Christ, did you hear what Atwood said in the postgame press conference? Houston nearly died.”

I laughed. “That’s Cullen for you. I don’t want to talk about that, though. I miss you...so fucking much.”

He gave me that grin that said I made him the happiest man in the world, one that showed just how much he needed to hear stuff like that. “I miss you, too.”

We talked for hours, until I could hardly hold my eyes open. “I should let you go,” he said.

“I don’t wanna.”

“Okay. We can stay on the phone all night.”

And that was exactly what we did.

WHITT

After my first season playing for the Royals, where my family name had been the draw and there'd been cheesy headlines about the "American Royal" playing for the Royals, reporters hadn't approached me regularly. Not the way they did some of the other guys on the team, like LaForge. But boy, had they ever since our suspension had been lifted, and after today's home game against the Rush, they were hovering near me like gnats. I'd intercepted one of Ramsey's passes during the game, but they didn't want to talk about that, of course. I was doing my best, but I didn't have Tucker's charm or affable grin. He'd once told me I had the worst case of RBF he'd seen, with the exception of his sister Kayla. But I was trying.

The reporter currently interviewing me while both teams were still milling around the field had asked me two softball questions about my performance during today's game, which had been fucking stellar, and then inevitably hit me with, "During a pregame interview, your boyfriend seemed convinced the Royals were going to fall apart during the third quarter."

I chuckled at the obviousness and then gestured at the scoreboard. "I think the final score speaks for itself. But in case it doesn't, I also had that interception, and hopefully, no one missed Ronson absolutely killing it in the fourth quarter." He'd gained us a lead that secured our win and made the final minutes of the game a hell of a lot less stressful. "So I guess I'd say Tucker might want to take the smack talk down a couple of notches." I cupped a hand around my mouth,

feigning confidentiality. “But since that’s never gonna happen, feel free to remind him we smoked them today. Are reporters allowed to say that?”

“Excuse me, Patrick?” I whirled around at the sound of Tucker’s voice to find him smirking as he walked toward me.

I held up a finger to the reporter, signaling I’d be back, and then walked toward him, biting back a grin. “You realize I’m in the middle of an interview right now? You know, about how we just annihilated the Rush?”

“Thought you might need some tips on how to be more personable.” Tucker didn’t miss a beat at my jab, his smooth voice pouring into my ear, and goddamn, I couldn’t wait until we could be alone.

“We can trade. You give me interview tips, and I’ll teach you how to suck less at football.”

Tucker’s booming laugh was infectious. “Yeah, sure. That’s generous of you. I’m feeling generous, too.” He lowered his voice. “So maybe I’ll let you suck my cock twice tonight.”

My eyes darted to the reporter several feet away, but no way had he heard that over the noise.

“Low blow,” I said, trying hard for diplomacy and to focus elsewhere before Tucker’s stupid mouth got me hard in the middle of an interview.

“If that’s how you prefer it,” he joked. “Anyway, finish your interviews and get dressed. I want you to come out with me and the guys tonight.”

My eyes shot to the reporter again, but he was talking to Ronson now. “Sure that’s a good idea? I’m...uh, some of those guys are not my biggest fans.”

“Which is why you’re gonna win them over tonight. I mean, since you’re on a winning streak and all. Call me when you’re dressed. No pressure or anything.” With another mad cackle, the fucker spun on a heel and casually ambled toward the locker rooms, throwing up a peace sign as he went.

I huffed out a sigh and headed back toward the reporter, who'd just finished up with Ronson. "Sorry about that. Did you have any more questions?"

"What did Malik have to say?"

Nosy ass. I supposed I couldn't blame him, though. "He just wanted to tell me what a badass I am." I smirked, knowing that if they used that sound bite, Tucker would definitely have something to say about it. I looked forward to it. Offering the reporter a salute, I headed toward the locker room. "Shower's calling me."

Not my best exit, but good enough. I needed a long, hot shower and some time to myself to get it together before I entered the lion's den known as Tucker's crew.

"STILL SURE ABOUT THIS?" I ASKED TUCKER AGAIN AS I drove us to the Salty Pearl, which was one of Venice Beach's newest hotspots, an oxymoronically hyped "swanky dive bar."

"Nah. Let's just go back to your place." I tapped the brakes, totally on board with that idea, and then Tucker cracked up. "We're doing this, baby. It'll be fine. Or it won't. But there won't be any bodily harm involved. At least not on my watch."

I stared flatly at him. "Super reassuring. Thanks."

"I mean it." His fingertips landed on my shoulder, moving in soothing arcs as I drove. "Still getting heckled by fans?"

"Not much. I think most of them have moved on to the next big thing." It'd been rocky for a couple of weeks after the NFL concluded their inquiry, though. I'd seen signs in the stands calling me a traitor or implying I or my parents had bribed the NFL, and that was just the obvious stuff. "The Hardaways breaking up helped a lot." The famous New York quarterback and his former-model wife had been together forever, so their separation and the subsequent crazy details coming out about mass orgies they'd hosted were all over the

news. “I stopped looking at the headlines. I mean, fuck it, I’m just gonna play until I can’t or until I get let go. Everything else is just noise, right?” I glanced over at Tucker to find him grinning at me. “What?”

“Two things. One, would you ever be involved in a mass orgy?”

“Probably not, but shit, isn’t that kinda how we ended up here in the first place?”

He chuckled. “On a much smaller scale, maybe, but yeah. Mostly, we ended up here because your stubborn, jealous ass didn’t want to be one-upped by me.”

I rolled my eyes. “I just didn’t want Monica to experience the inevitable disappointment of going home with you. So, what was the second thing?”

“Hold up, ‘disappointment’?” Tucker snorted. “You saying sex with me is disappointing? Cuz those sounds you make when I’m railing you don’t sound so much disappointed as—” I reached out, clapping a hand over his mouth to muffle him, and felt his laughter vibrating against my palm. “The second thing is,” Tucker said after pushing my hand away, “that you’re nervous as fuck right now.”

“I’m not nervous.”

“Yeah you are, baby. But it’s cool. It’s gonna be fine.”

I was nervous as fuck.

Houston, Cullen, Ramsey, and Garrett were already at a table when we arrived. Unlike the last time when I’d busted in on their get-together, Tucker was at my side. We approached, and they all fist bumped and hugged him before upnodding me and making room for us at the table. Despite the casual ambience, I sat down feeling like I’d just stepped in front of a firing squad.

Garrett smirked. “Isn’t this cozy? Just a bunch of Rush guys and one Royal asshole hanging out.” Ramsey smacked him on the back of the head. “What? Just stating the obvious.”

“Houston’s a Royal, too,” I pointed out, refusing to get my hackles up.

“Can confirm he’s also an asshole,” Cullen said, earning a bird from Houston.

“Hey, everyone’s gonna play nice tonight, okay?” Tucker grabbed a pair of beers from the bucket the waitress delivered and passed one to me.

“You’re no fun,” Garrett groused.

I cracked my beer and set it aside. Time to broach the elephant in the room. “I should probably just offer a blanket apology for the last time we all met up. I was...not in the best headspace, and it was totally uncalled for.”

Houston clinked his beer to mine. “Been there, I get it.”

But Cullen cocked his head. “Patrick Whitt is apologizing?” He shot a pointed look at Tucker. “You got that magic peen or something?”

Tucker cracked up, but Ramsey looked horrified. “I better never hear the word ‘peen’ come out of your mouth again.”

“I can’t wait until we can get out of here and I can play with your peen,” Garrett faux-whispered dramatically before cracking up with delight.

“Swear to god, G.” Ramsey groaned.

“Oh yeah, there’ll be plenty of swearing when I’m handling your peen.”

“It’s always like this, pay no mind,” Tucker said to me sidelong, which I supposed meant my apology had been accepted. Maybe?

“Your touchdown in the second quarter was incredible,” I said to Garrett, trying to move away from peens, because Jesus. Though it was kinda reassuring that the Rush guys descended into dumb jokes as often as the Royals guys and I did when we hung out.

Garrett eyed me up and down. “You trying to butter me up now?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Is it working?”

“No.”

Ramsey glanced over at Garrett and burst into laughter. “He’s lying. He’s a total praise slut.”

“Maybe you should keep it coming.” Garrett waggled his brows. “You see that interception I had against Seattle?”

“Not as impressive as today,” I replied.

“Shit.” Garrett scoffed, then paused and nodded. “Alright, you’re not wrong on that one.”

“We gonna keep Whitt in the hot seat all night here, or are y’all about done?” Tucker asked as he draped an arm around my shoulder.

“We’re done,” Ramsey said, twining his hand with Garrett’s below the table just as Garrett opened his mouth to speak. He clamped it shut as Ramsey studied me. He had a piercing gaze and an air of authority about him I’d always admired. “Tucker’s family to us, so we’re a little protective.”

“He’s family to me, too,” I confessed. “Probably more than my own.”

Tucker pressed a brief kiss along my jaw, and Cullen reached for another beer, condensation dripping on the table as he waved the bottom of it at us. “Great. Can we proceed with the drinking now that we’ve had this touching Lifetime movie moment? I’m trying to drown my sorrows, and you’re all fucking it up.”

“TOLD YOU THERE’D BE NO BODILY HARM,” TUCKER SAID AS we walked back to my car a couple of hours later, our arms draped loosely around each other. Not having to hide anymore was one of the nice things to come out of all of this, and I wasn’t taking it for granted. “At least not by them. Now, when we get to your place, there are no guarantees.”

I pulled him closer, smearing a messy kiss over his lips before clicking my key fob to unlock the car. “Actually, after all of that, I think you should be the one giving me two blowjobs tonight. That was almost as nerve-racking as the fucking NFL’s inquiry. Almost.” There had been some awkward pauses and some touchy moments, but even Garrett had mellowed enough over the course of the night that he gave me a short hug when we left.

Tucker grinned and smacked me on the ass. “I think I can manage that. We’ll see if you can, though.”

“Psht. Try me.”

TUCKER

The Royals had a Christmas game this season, and when I discussed it with Mom, she decided to change our family holiday to a day earlier in the week so we could both make it. The trip would be short, but then everything during the season was outside of football. I had stayed in LA with him during my bye week, and Patrick had stayed in Denver during his, and even though there was travel for whichever of us was still playing, it was nice to come home to each other.

“I feel weird that your family is rearranging Christmas for me. How is that fair to everyone else?” he asked while we were in the car heading to Mom’s from the airport.

“They’ve done it for me before in the past. That’s what you have to do when you love a football player.”

“Yeah, but you’re family.” He shifted in his seat, and it still amazed me that I got to see him this way, that Patrick was comfortable enough with me to be himself, to be real rather than wear the façade he used to keep firmly in place.

“True...but like I’ve said, you’re mine now. That means you’re family, too.”

“Fuck.” He palmed his dick, adjusting it, which made a laugh jump out of my mouth.

“Are you getting hard just from that?”

“I can’t help it. You know it gets me going when you call me yours.”

“Mine, mine, mine, mine,” I teased, but he just rolled his eyes, looking out of the window with a small smile on his lips. I wanted this to be the best Christmas Patrick Whitt had ever had.

When we pulled up at the house, there were four anxious women standing on the porch waiting for us.

I put the car in park, my heart thumping in my chest because I loved being with my family, and I loved the idea of it even more with Patrick being here.

“Is it too late to change our minds?”

“You don’t want to change your mind. It’s okay to be happy about this, baby.”

He nodded, voice low and smooth like high-priced whiskey when he said, “Thank you. For this. For everything.”

I snickered. “You might not be saying that when you meet my family.”

“If they’re anything like you, I know what I’m in for.”

I barked out a laugh and gave him a playful “Thanks, baby” before opening the door.

“There’s my boy,” Mama said when I got to the front of the rental, immediately pulling me into her arms.

“She likes Malik more than the rest of us,” I heard Kayla tell Patrick.

“Can you blame her?” I asked before getting swatted on the back of the head by Zuri. “Ouch. Shit. Y’all are mean. No wonder she likes me more.”

Everyone laughed as I hugged my sisters, then introduced the group of them. They all hugged him as they did me, only without the shit-talking and acts of violence. Savanna and Zuri stood on either side of Patrick, hooking an arm through his and leading him inside. He glanced at me over his shoulder, and I just gave him a grin, glad they were taking such an interest in him. He deserved that.

“I’ll grab the bags,” I told Mama, Kayla having followed the others. We each had only a duffle, and she waited for me to grab them.

“I can’t believe my boy has brought someone home.” She kept her natural hair cropped close to her head, brown eyes with thick lashes, so damn similar to mine, trained on me.

“I want him to have the perfect Christmas.”

“Then I guess he came to the right place, didn’t he?”

Yeah, he had.

We went inside, and the tubs of decorations were already in the living room waiting for us. The only things that had been hung up already were stockings on the mantel. My feet stumbled when I noticed the extra one with Patrick’s name on it. He was looking at it, too, wonderment in his eyes, like it was a Christmas miracle or something.

I dropped the bags, then put an arm around him and kissed his temple.

“Awww. Malik is sweet. Who knew?” Zuri teased, earning the bird from me.

“Not to you, brat.”

Ignoring me, Kayla asked, “Can we decorate now? That’s always our favorite part.”

“Even though I never have much time at home for Christmas, we don’t decorate until we can all do it together. Family rules,” I told Patrick. He nodded, seeming slightly overwhelmed by it all. “Come on, Bougie. Let’s do this,” I teased.

We had an artificial tree covered with white flock that Patrick and I put together while my mom and sisters started to pull out the decorations. We made sure to use multicolored lights this year, which he and I strung on as soon as the tree was up.

“Now it’s a free-for-all.” I pumped my brows playfully as we all searched through the decorations to find some to hang up.

“Are most of these homemade?” he asked, studying the choices laid out.

“Yeah, a lot are from when the kids were little. There were times when we couldn’t really afford to buy decorations, which is why we started making them. Then it just became a tradition,” my mama replied. “You’ll have to make us some, too.”

“I’d like that.” He bent and picked one up. “This was your handprint?” He held it out to me.

“Yeah, I was five, I think.”

He brushed his fingers over it like it was something precious to him, which made my heart go crazy. Goddamn this man and what he did to me.

“Remember when we tried to make popcorn strings, but Malik ate all the popcorn?” Kayla asked.

“Remember that time Kayla ate Santa’s cookies?” I tugged one of her box braids.

“I did not, and you better not touch my hair.”

“Sisters are the worst,” I told Patrick.

“Have you met you? You’re pretty bad,” my boyfriend teased.

At that, everyone dissolved into laughter at my expense, but damn, I couldn’t pretend it wasn’t fucking perfect.

We decorated the house together, Patrick fitting in seamlessly. Afterward, we all went to the kitchen together to make dinner.

I watched him with my mom while she taught him her famous cornbread recipe, Patrick soaking it all in. I wondered if he realized that meant she liked him. My mama could cook, and she didn’t share her secrets with just anyone.

“He’s great,” Kayla said softly from beside me.

“Yeah, he is.”

“Do you know how hard it is for me not to clap back at all the haters online?” Zuri added, and I sighed.

“You and me both, but it’s getting a little better. The fact that both our teams are kicking ass helps.” I couldn’t pretend I didn’t still struggle with letting all of the shit people said fly, but I was dealing with it. I didn’t pay attention to the shit online, but it was mostly when people said something at one of the games where it got to me. I wasn’t lying when I told them it was getting better, though, so we just kept our heads down and did what we were there to do—win football games.

“What are you guys doing to do?” Savanna asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. About everything.”

I shrugged because I didn’t really have an answer for that. We each had a year on our contracts after this one, and then who the fuck knew what would happen? One or both of us might get traded. One or both of us might stop playing. All I knew was... “I love him, so the other shit doesn’t matter. I’ll do what I have to do to make it work.” It would be hard. It already was hard, and I figured the time away from each other wouldn’t get easier.

“Like this?” I heard Patrick ask my mom.

“Yep. Just like that,” she replied, and I couldn’t stop the smile from spreading across my face. Whatever the fuck happened would be worth it because I got him.

WE WATCHED *A CHRISTMAS STORY* AFTER DINNER LIKE WE always did, and then everyone headed to bed. Patrick and I took a shower together before heading to my room.

“Your family is great.” He ran his fingers through his wet hair.

“They like you. I wonder why?”

He rolled his eyes but grinned before stepping closer to me. Patrick set his hand on my chest, his fair skin a contrast to my chestnut tone. "I'm pretty sure you're obsessed with me."

I chuckled, wrapping my arms around him. "Oh, really? What makes you think that?"

"The way you look at me." His words were thick with emotion and more serious now. He leaned in, brushing his lips over the pulse in my neck. "The way you make me feel." I trembled as his mouth traveled to the other side of my throat. "The way you fuck me...multicolored lights, today, every day."

"Jesus, baby. Come here."

I took his mouth before we collapsed onto the bed, tugging off our underwear, kissing and rutting our cocks together until we both spilled our release between our bodies.

Neither of us bothered cleaning up afterward. I just pulled the blankets over us, and we fell asleep that way, sated and sticky with cum.

I woke up early the next morning. Patrick was sleeping with his mouth partially open, his lips curved into a cute smirk.

I crawled over him in bed, trying to be quiet while I found some clothes.

"What are you doing?" he asked, voice sleepy.

"I always cook breakfast with my mama. We get up early for gifts here. You can go back to sleep for a bit."

"Do I have to?"

I grinned, loving that he wanted to be part of this. "Nope. Come on."

We cleaned up in the bathroom because of our activities from the night before. Mama was already in the kitchen. She beamed when she saw Patrick with me. "You ready for my biscuits and sausage gravy recipe today?"

"Can't wait," he replied.

The three of us cooked breakfast while she told him stories about me and the girls as kids. She talked to him about my dad—the one who raised me, not the prick who ditched us—and she hugged him when Patrick shared some of his own upbringing.

Like they had a radar installed for when breakfast was ready, my sisters got up as soon as it was done—all of us laughing and talking while we ate.

Afterward, we opened presents—everyone having gotten something for Patrick, too, and then he snuck gifts from his bag that he'd gotten my family without me knowing.

We already had to leave late tonight, and I didn't want to go. We spent the day soaking in as much fun as we could. Mama cried as she told us goodbye, then asked for Patrick's number. He looked surprised but gave it to her and my sisters, too.

We rode together to the airport, neither of us saying much. Our flights were at different gates, with me on a nonstop to Denver and Patrick on one to LA. Luckily, we were at the same terminal, at least.

"I'll miss you," I told him as we found a quiet corner to say goodbye.

"It's going to be a rough month for the playoffs. You'll still love me when we beat you?" He smirked.

"You wish, baby. It's the Rush's year, so I should be asking you that question."

He shrugged. "Whatever you have to tell yourself. It's gonna get ugly."

I nodded because it likely was. If we got to the point where we played each other in the playoffs, the scrutiny would intensify. "We got this," I told him.

"Yeah," he replied. "We do."

When we walked away, all I could think about was that for the first time in my life, I couldn't wait for the football season to be over, because then I got to have him every fucking day.

WHITT

The locker room after our final game of the season against Minnesota was a madhouse. Players, reporters, coaches, and staff were all over the place, and the air resonated with whoops and laughter. It wasn't our first time going to division finals, and it wasn't even our first time going up against the Rush in the finals, but given everything that had happened this season and the scrutiny we were under, the pressure to hit peak performance from here on out had exploded exponentially. At least for Tucker and me.

I showered and dressed quickly, then tried to sneak out as stealthily as possible because I was exhausted. As I walked down the hallway, one of the open offices caught my eye, and I peeked in to find Houston hunched over his desk, brows etched with concentration as he stared at his computer screen.

"You're either watching some really engrossing porn with plot or..."

He glanced up with a smirk. "It's been a long time since I've been remotely interested in porn, much less needed it." He gestured me inside. "I'm watching Cullen's game against Jacksonville."

"Yeah? Prepping for our match? Looking for weak points?"

Houston chuckled. "No. I do this with all of his games, go back and scrutinize his performance." He frowned. "Shit, that sounds weird when I say it aloud. It's just a thing I do in case he wants to talk more in-depth about shit so we're on the same

page. Plus—” A hint of pink touched his cheeks. “—I just like watching him play.”

I dropped into the chair across from the desk. “Does it get weird sometimes? Like, do you dissect each other’s performances?”

“It never gets weird, oddly enough.” Houston chuckled, then seemed to consider. “I’m not coaching him, you know, and he’s not coaching me. He for damn sure doesn’t need me coaching him. We’re...appreciating each other, connecting, sharing. You and Tuck don’t do that?”

“Mostly, we just smack-talk each other, but while the inquiry was happening, we were scared to even breathe a word about football, terrified somehow we’d be overheard and assumed to be cheating.”

Houston nodded. “Understandable. You holding up okay?”

I chuckled. “I don’t think I’ve ever been asked that so much in my life.”

“The team cares about you. Tucker for damn sure does.”

“I know.” I fiddled with the zipper on the gear bag I’d dropped beside me. “Does all of this ever get to you and Cullen?” I waved a hand around. “The games, the pressure, the competition. The distance?”

“It did at first, yeah.” Houston closed his laptop and settled back in his chair. “I was afraid to get too invested, afraid it would all be taken away from me or I’d get blindsided somehow, like with my knee. Just going about my business, and boom, my life would be upended all over again—which it was. And that did happen but in a good way this time.” His fond smile made me miss Tucker all the more, but it would be another week before we could see each other again, and this time, it would be on the field first.

“Yeah, all of that. Same.”

“The thing is, I think if you love someone, if you put them ahead of everything else, all of those tough choices you think you’ve got to make? That you stress the most about? They

kinda make themselves. You ever felt for anyone else the way you feel for Tucker?"

"Nope. It's scary as fuck."

"Yeah, that's the investment part. How many goddamn financial advisors have you had telling you how to invest and when? But the investments that really matter, the ones that happen in our lives? They're the ones that seem the riskiest, and yet they're the ones that'll have far more of a return in the long run."

I smiled. "You saying you think all that 'love conquers all' bullshit is true?"

Houston cracked up. "I guess I am. But don't tell Garrett or Cullen. I'll never hear the end of it, considering the amount of shit I've given them over the years." He sobered. "You don't need me to coach you, on the field or off, Patrick. You know what to do. Just keep your head down, do your goddamn best on the field, and know that the real prize is what's happening after the game. You do that, I think everything will work itself out."

I sure fucking hoped so.

ON THE DAY OF OUR MATCH AGAINST THE RUSH, I ARRIVED TO find Candice, Leon, and my parents waiting just outside the entrance to the locker rooms, Candice wearing a cheesy grin.

"Surprise!" she and my mom said in unison when I got closer.

My dad reached out, squeezing the hand I extended automatically when he did, still in shock. "Son," he greeted me with a nod.

"I thought you all were halfway across the world closing some deal," I said, still confused.

"Fell through," my father replied with a grimace. "They didn't approve of our...whatever. Doesn't matter. Fuck 'em."

It was the most flippant I'd ever seen him in my life.

“That was last week, though,” my mom chimed in. “We were planning to come no matter what.”

I was skeptical, but a quick glance at Candice had her confirming with a nod.

I narrowed my eyes. “They didn't approve of what? You? Business practices? Me?”

My dad shrugged. “Like I said, fuck 'em.”

“We don't deal with...people who are not forward-thinking and progressive,” my mom said primly, confirming my suspicions.

My dad cleared his throat. “And we wanted to be here to support our son.”

“Whitt,” LaForge called out. “Let's go.”

“I've gotta go...” I thumbed toward the hallway. Maybe later, it would all sink in, but I was still caught off guard, and right now, I needed to keep my focus squarely on this game as much as possible. “Thanks for coming. You have seats and everything?”

“I took care of it all,” Candice said cheerily.

“Great, thanks. You all...enjoy?” I said awkwardly, then scooted down the hall, fumbling my phone from my pocket.

Me: My fucking parents are here.

Tucker: For real? That's awesome.

Me: It's weird.

When he replied with “lol,” I could hear his chuckle in my ear, and it made me grin, easing some of the tension in my shoulders.

Tucker: Maybe they're trying. Idk. Is it going to throw you off your game?

Me: Fuck no, it's just more fuel.

Me: Okay, maybe a little. The combo of them and the hecklers outside the stadium got to me a little.

Tucker: They're over here, too. But you know what? Fuck that. They can't touch us, baby.

Words we'd repeated to each other multiple times in the last week, but I never could seem to fully believe them.

Me: I know.

Me: I'm more concerned about you.

Tucker: Psht. I'm good.

Me: You still gonna be 'good' when we kick your ass?

Tucker: Yep. But that's not gonna happen anyway. See you on the field, baby.

Candice had messaged me when I was chatting with Tucker, so I opened that message thread next.

Candice: They wanted to support you.

Me: Okay. Just surprised me.

Candice: I think they're trying. Maybe try to meet them halfway? Or not. Up to you.

The same thing Tucker had said. But trying for what? To make up for years of disinterest? I sighed, tucking my phone away, and closed my eyes, memories of football camp, Tucker, my parents, swirling in my mind. My parents and I were never gonna be like Tucker's family. I just couldn't see it happening.

I exhaled the breath I'd been holding and stuck my phone in my bag. Regardless of my parents, there was only one thing I needed to do today: kick some ass.

BY THE SECOND QUARTER, THE ROYALS WERE AHEAD BY THREE points. We'd gained some yards in the last play, and then the Rush had intercepted LaForge's last pass, taking control of the ball.

I kept my eyes on Ramsey, blocking out the roaring crowd as the Rush lined up. I studied their formation, the running

back hovering near Rams, Garrett near me. My gaze flicked toward him, and our eyes locked for a steady beat a split second before I returned my focus to Ramsey as Tucker snapped the ball. The second their linemen started moving laterally, I exploded toward their screen.

A maze of bodies, huge bodies, formed ahead of me, and my mind raced as I tried to figure out the best path to avoid their blockers. I'd always thought football was, in a way, like a chess game, just with more violence.

A quick sidestep gave me some distance from Garrett before I cut inside to squeeze through a gap between two linemen. I felt the impact on both sides of my body and braced my shoulders and arms to create space as I barreled through before they could close the gap and take me down. My lungs burned from the exertion as I thundered toward the running back who'd just caught Ramsey's short pass. Grunts of engagement sounded behind me as the Royal defense rallied. Sprinting toward the running back and his blockers, I angled, trying to force him toward my teammates. I spun away from another blocker, and the second I caught a whiff of the running back's hesitation, I launched myself forward, wrapping my arms around his waist and dragging him with me to the turf. We landed with a thud that rattled my bones and jarred my hip. All the air in my lungs left in a rush as bodies piled on top of me. I felt the strength in my weight pinning the guy, the satisfaction of having taken him down. Weirdly, this was one of the moments I loved most about playing, that breathless second of execution and reaction where, for just a moment, the world seemed to stand still. And then it rushed back in full force. Someone yanked me upright, and the dizzying sense of euphoria spread as I pumped a fist in the air.

"Gonna try to get us with that weak-ass screen? Please," I muttered low as I passed Tucker, then snuck a quick glance at him to find him shaking his head. The smirk on his face, though, had me fighting back one of my own.

The next two plays were a blur of movement and adrenaline, but we went into halftime still ahead by three points. I lingered as we all trotted off the field, scanning the

crowd to find Tucker's family, then mine. My parents were easy to spot with their tailored outfits and perfect posture, clapping along with the fans. A tinge of guilt touched me for having assumed the worst. Maybe Candice was right; maybe they were trying. And maybe we'd never be the cozy, perfect nuclear family. But maybe that was okay. Maybe I had enough already.

Maybe I had for a long time.

They waved when they saw me looking, and after a beat, I waved back.

I jogged toward the locker room, mentally tamping down the cheers and jeers of the crowd as I tugged off my helmet, the cool air hitting my scalp a welcome relief.

The air was thick with the scent of sweat and adrenaline, and I crowded around Coach with the rest of the guys as he talked animatedly about our strategy for the second half of the game.

We needed to keep pushing forward, stay aggressive, and continue to break down the Rush's defense. The thrum of excitement was electric, an open circuit coursing through our team and connecting us. We all knew what we needed to do, and as we headed back onto the field after the break, I found Tucker in the crowd and met his eyes, the intensity in them causing a fresh surge of anticipation inside me. He wanted this as badly as I did, and for some reason, instead of that making me feel threatened, it made me smile.

TUCKER

I hefted Garrett into the air and screamed, sweat stinging my eyes, lungs burning, adrenaline zipping through my body.

We did it. We fucking did it. We took the Royals out of the playoffs, and we were heading to the motherfucking Super Bowl.

The second I set Baby G on his feet after his game-winning touchdown, the mob of Rush players descended on us. We were all shouting and cheering, crying and celebrating what was a huge-ass win for us—not just because of what it meant for our record, but because of all the fucking drama leading up to this night. All of the ways we'd been doubted and the accusations that had been thrown around, we shut them all down with our game.

Gatorade was thrown over our heads, the press all trying to get a piece of us.

“Tucker, how does it feel to have taken your boyfriend out of the playoffs?” A mic was shoved into my face.

“It's fun beating someone you love. Winner gets to—”

“Buy the other one dinner!” Ramsey put a hand over my mouth. I licked it, but he didn't pull it away. The reporter looked back and forth at us like they weren't sure what to say. When he thought I was under control, Ramsey removed his hand.

“Getting serious for a moment, this game means a lot to me. I know people are always going to have something to say,

but every man on the Rush and the Royals played our hearts out there tonight. We gave it one hundred percent like we always do, like we always will, and now we'll leave the game on the field. And if people keep having something to say, both of us will keep playing the best football we can until the people who don't have what it takes to be on that field with us stop talking about things they don't know what they're talking about."

Maybe I shouldn't have said that. Maybe I would be fined for it later, but right now, I didn't care. I was flying too high.

"I give it up to the Royals for a great game tonight. Next stop is for the Rush to get a ring!"

Another round of cheers went up behind me. Atwood, being Atwood, jumped on my back and rode me as we headed toward the Royals.

There was a train of hugs and good games, the devastation clear on their faces, until I got to the last person.

Atwood jumped down and mumbled something about not being allowed to have threesomes anymore, which I assumed was a joke about me and my boyfriend, as my gaze caught with Patrick's. My damn heart sped up just seeing him. "Good game, baby."

"Good game to you, too."

"You okay?" I wiped a smudge of dirt from his cheek.

"I hate you right now, but yeah, I'm fine." He grinned. I understood exactly how he felt and knew I would be the same. There wasn't a part of me that doubted he was happy for me, but I also knew he'd rather have been the one walking out of this stadium the winner.

"You gonna introduce me to your parents so I can tell them how much I love their son?"

His cheeks pinkened, and damn, I would never get tired of getting that reaction from him. "Yeah. I'll meet you after everything calms down."

I nodded and waited until he turned and headed for their locker room before I did the same. We had press conferences up the ass, and all I wanted to do was finish up and be with my man. I heard some of their questions to Patrick, the media again bringing up the inquiry and what effect it had on his game tonight.

He'd played a perfect game and did everything right. Anyone who watched knew that Patrick and the whole team had played their fucking hearts out—but there was always a winner and a loser, and tonight, we got the W.

“We going out tonight to celebrate?” G asked after we were all showered and dressed.

“I can't. My family flew out, and Patrick's are here, too. I'm not sure what the plan is, but I'm hoping to spend most of the night in his bed. I'll be there to get on the plane in the morning, but don't be surprised if I'm not at the hotel tonight.”

They all laughed as I flung my duffle bag over my shoulder and headed out. I'd gotten my family passes and wasn't surprised when they were in the hallway waiting when I left the locker room. What I was surprised to see was Patrick, his parents, and Candice standing there with him.

“Hey...” I said, gaze darting between everyone in the group.

“I'm so proud of you!” Mom pulled me into a hug. I kissed her cheek, then looked at Patrick over her shoulder, my gaze asking, *You good?*

He gave me a small nod.

“Congrats, buttface.” Zuri hugged me next, and I couldn't help but wonder what Patrick's family thought of mine. We were so damn different, but I loved my people for who they were and would never ask them to change.

“Thanks, brat,” I replied.

“Congrats, Tuck,” Kayla added, followed by Savanna giving her congrats, before Mom spoke again.

“Patrick introduced us to his family. We were just chatting while waiting for you.” Mom smiled.

“Hi. I’m Malik. It’s good to meet you officially.” I held my hand out for his dad.

“Charles,” he replied. “Nice to meet you, too. Didn’t you go to camp with Patrick when he was a kid?”

Wow. I was surprised he remembered. Maybe that was a good sign. He was clearly trying, and that was what mattered. “Yes, sir.”

Patrick finally spoke next, “This is Candice and my mom, Caroline.” He introduced me to both of them. Candice hugged me, but his mom shook my hand.

“I’m proud of him. He played a great game out there. Even when I was younger, he inspired me more than he knows.”

Patrick huffed. “Inspired you to hate me.”

“Nah. I just thought so. He’s the most dedicated player I know.”

Patrick took my hand as his parents looked at him, maybe trying harder to really see him than they had before. There was no doubting what I was saying, and I could tell they heard my message.

“We’re proud of him, too,” his mom replied. “He really is talented, isn’t he?”

“Yeah. He is.” I squeezed his hand just as Patrick’s dad asked if we all wanted to go out to dinner. I really wanted to take his son home and bury my dick in his ass, but of course, I wasn’t going to say that.

We agreed, and they took us out to a fancy place. At moments, the conversation was awkward, but we all found our footing, and again, I could tell his parents were trying to get closer to him, to understand him.

After dinner, they headed back to their hotel, and my family went to theirs. I palmed Patrick’s bulge while he drove, needing to touch him. “God, it’s been killing me to keep my hands off of you all night.”

He chuckled. “You didn’t. You had your arm around me nearly the whole time.”

“Does that bother you?” I questioned.

“No. I like feeling claimed by you, Malik. You know that.”

Fuck, if that wasn’t the hottest thing I’d ever heard. I growled in return, wishing we could fly over the LA traffic and get to his place.

I unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans.

“What are you doing?”

“Playing...unless you tell me to stop.”

But he wouldn’t because he didn’t want to. Not yet. “Don’t make me come.”

“I won’t. We’ll save that until we get home.” I stroked his shaft as it filled with blood, growing hotter and hardening against my palm.

“How are you feeling about tonight?”

“Are you asking me about my parents with your hand on my dick?”

I chuckled. “I am.”

“Fuck,” he gritted out when I ran my thumb over his tip and collected the moisture there before sucking it into my mouth.

“Keep talking, or I stop.” I slowly stroked him again.

“Goddamn you.” Patrick sucked in a breath. “It was... good. I’m not totally getting my hopes up yet, but since everything went down with me and you, they’ve seemed more attentive.”

“And the game? Did they give you too much shit afterward?” I palmed his balls, then went up to rub his glans.

Patrick’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “No...I... fuck, most people just talked about how good of a game I played, then asked how I felt that my boyfriend beat us.”

“Little do they know I’m beating off your cock right now.”

He chuckled, then hissed, the muscles in his thighs tightening. “You’re killing me, Tuck. I want you in my hole. Want to feel you stretching me out. It fucking kills me to be away from you as much as I am.”

“I know, baby. It kills me, too.” And we still had to figure out what we were going to do. I guessed we didn’t have a choice. Not if we planned to stay together, and we did. I wasn’t losing him. Not now.

I hadn’t realized how close we were to his place. Patrick pulled into the driveway. I bent to the side, kissing the tip of his cock before I tucked it away again. “We don’t want anyone to see this, now do we?”

“Definitely not. That’s all we need is a sex scandal next.”

“Race you to the door,” I replied before we both jumped out and started to run. He’d given me a key to his place; I could use it, but the bastard was faster than me and made it there first. He unlocked the door, and the second we were inside, we were on each other, stripping and laughing, hands frantic for bare skin.

Patrick’s mouth slid down my neck as we took the stairs awkwardly, half-naked and wrapped up in each other. “I want to take our time tonight.”

“Fuck yes. Me too.”

Once we were in his room, we hurried out of our clothes, the two of us standing there naked, my hands on his face as I kissed him. My tongue pushed into his mouth, needing to savor the taste of him.

Patrick’s hands went up and down my back, then went lower to cup my ass.

“I love that you still sleep in here.” And that after all of this time, the same lights were still on his house.

“Makes me feel like I’m closer to you.”

“Fuck, baby.” I lifted him, carrying Patrick over to the bed. I laid him down, bent over him, thrusting my cock against his as we slowly fed each other all of the pleasure inside of us.

Patrick moved up, and I continued to follow him until we positioned ourselves with his head on the pillow and me still above him.

I kissed my way down his chest, stuck my tongue in his belly button, then sucked his cock to the back of my throat.

“Fuck yes.” He thrust up and into my waiting mouth.

I blew him until his thighs started to shake, and he threw a bottle of lube at my head. Chuckling, I asked, “I thought you wanted me to go slow?”

“We have all night,” he responded, but one night with him would never be enough.

WHITT

Nothing else mattered right now. Not the game, not the fans, not my parents showing up. Just Tucker. I was single-mindedly focused on him as he did his best to drive me out of my mind, licking and sucking me. He ignored the lube I'd thrown at him and the desperate noises coming out of my mouth as I tried to resist coming too fast—an issue I'd only ever had with him. But the fucker knew exactly what he was doing, and he did it with a focus and determination that was equal parts intoxicating and infuriating, much like the man himself.

Gathering what willpower I had left, I pushed him off me and forced him onto his back, taking over control as I straddled him.

He reached for my hips automatically, a wicked grin painting his lips because he thought he knew how this was gonna go.

I caught his wrists and guided them back toward his head. “Uh-uh,” I said with a tsk. “Those stay up there. No touching.”

“Oh yeah?” He arched an amused brow, then moaned as I tilted my hips so my rigid cock glided along his.

“Yeah.” I wanted him inside me so badly it was hard not to just lube him up and slide down on his cock, but I was a sucker, too, for the way ecstasy played over his face, tensed his jaw, the ragged puffs of air that escaped his lips every time my dick brushed his.

I curled over him, hands pinning his wrists once more, and kissed him, the increased friction between us and the familiar taste of him making me dizzy. “Tell me you want this ass. I wanna hear it.”

“You know I fucking do. Forever and always.” Tucker groaned, arching his hips.

He looked so fucking sexy this way and so very, very... mine. It was a heady, powerful sensation to know how far we’d come and that he was still mine, and I was his.

Reaching behind me, I fiddled the cap off the lube and slicked us up quickly. Tucker’s eyes fluttered closed, and he took a deep breath, his whole body practically vibrating with the force of his restraint as I positioned him at my entrance.

“Fuck yes, baby.” The muscles along his forearm tensed as I slid lower, taking him inside me inch by slow inch.

Unadulterated bliss consumed me, and I gasped, gritting my teeth as his thick cock stretched me open. I could tell he was fighting the urge to break free of my grasp and grab me, slam deeper inside me. With the first roll of my hips, his nostrils flared as a grunt escaped him.

“Goddamn, you feel good,” I whispered, and his body shuddered beneath me. I wasn’t gonna last long, and the bulging veins in Tucker’s neck told me he was in the same shape. I licked one of them and then nipped it as I rode him slowly, trying to draw us both out. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Tucker’s hazy gaze latched on mine, a solemnity surfacing in his dark eyes that matched the way I felt inside. I let go of his wrists and slid my palms up, fingers lacing with his, a trail of heated tingles racing over my skin everywhere we touched. I couldn’t imagine ever going without it. Going without him.

I picked up the pace, thighs smacking his and my breath growing ragged as pressure built inside me. And then I couldn’t hold on any longer. I pressed my forehead against his and fucked him hard and fast, wave after wave of pleasure sending me over the edge and dragging Tucker with me. I

cried out as my release tore through me, every thrust of his cock sending another hot spurt of my cum over his abdomen until we were both wrung dry, our hearts beating a wild rhythm against each other.

I collapsed on top of him and gave myself over to the warm, postorgasmic haze. I'd been all over the world in my life, but being tangled up with Tucker was easily my favorite place.

He brushed a sweaty strand of hair from my forehead and then turned my face toward his, eyes still touched with intensity. "You mean that about me being the best thing that ever happened to you?"

"Yeah." It was an easy confession.

"You're always mine?"

"Always yours," I said, rubbing my thumb over his lower lip before I kissed it.

ONE WEEK LATER

The first time I'd ever gone to the Super Bowl, my parents had taken me. It was the one and only time they had, and it had only happened because they were trying to woo the bigwigs of some other corporation. We'd sat near the fifty-yard line. I'd been eight, my love for the sport just undefined, casual interest back then. But the energy in the stadium had captivated me—it was so electric, all of the people in the stands cheering, the players on the field going for broke in the biggest event of their careers. I'd gone home on fire for the sport, begging my parents to let me play in a peewee league, and probably assuming it'd be a passing fancy, they had.

This was the first time I'd attended not just as a spectator but as someone deeply invested in the outcome. I'd never wanted anything as bad in my life as I wanted Tucker to take home a ring. Tucker had played it cool all morning, but I knew

he was feeling it, too, and was doing his best to stay calm and centered.

“Bring me home a ring,” I’d texted him earlier.

“I got you, baby,” he’d replied, and it was such a damn Tucker thing to say that I’d burst into laughter.

His mom had invited me to sit with them, which I’d managed for all of five seconds before I was on my feet. Zuri joked that they needed to add extra floor space for people to pace because she could tell that’s what I wanted to be doing. I just couldn’t sit still, could barely stand still, my body full of anticipation and nerves as the Rush and New Orleans had gone head-to-head in the first half.

I’d not even dared to message Tucker during halftime, when they were down by 7, because I didn’t want to risk distracting him, but he’d texted me anyway.

Tucker: So what do I get if we win this thing?

Me: Anything you want.

Tucker: Anything? (*Big eyes emoji*)

Me: Literally anything. Quit messaging me and focus on kicking ass.

Tucker: I’m a good multitasker.

Me: You feeling good? Nothing’s hurting? Ramsey’s okay?

He’d taken a hard hit during the final seconds of the second quarter.

Tucker: lol. We’re all fine, you damn worrywart. Even if I was hurting, pretty sure I wouldn’t be able to feel it. Gotta go. See you after we take this thing.

I grinned and pocketed my phone.

“How’s he holding up?” Tucker’s mom asked.

I narrowed my eyes playfully at her. “How do you know who I was texting?”

“It better only be my son, or I’ll kick your ass myself.”

I broke into laughter. “You wouldn’t have to because he’d do it first.”

“I’d get a kick in once you were down, then.” She nodded resolutely, and I threw an arm around her, squeezing her shoulders.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” I said, bending closer to her ear. “I’d kick my own ass before I’d let anyone—or anything—else get in the way of me and Tucker.”

We quieted as the teams trotted back out for the second half. The Rush evened up the score in the beginning of the third quarter and were neck and neck with New Orleans going into the fourth. I was on pins and needles the entire time, hoping for just one more fucking touchdown that would give the Rush a tiny bit more breathing room, but it wasn’t happening. Both teams fought tooth and nail, holding each other off with every turnover of the ball. As the minutes ticked by in the fourth quarter, it looked like they might head into overtime.

I’d thought I was antsy before; now, it was like I had ants crawling all over my body.

The Rush called a time-out with a minute left on the clock, and I stared at their huddle like I could hear what was being said, eyeing Tucker for any sign of exhaustion or stress.

A cool hand over the top of my own made me glance at Kayla, standing at my left. With a soft smile, she looked pointedly at the railing I was gripping. “You’re gonna dent that thing you keep squeezing it so hard. Never knew you were so high-strung.”

“I really want this for him.”

“I know. It’s one of the reasons I like you.” She patted my hand and let go with a smile.

The Rush’s offensive line took their places again. The cadence was called, and shortly after the snap, New Orleans collapsed the pocket, forcing Ramsey to make a quick decision. He sent the ball hurtling toward Ward, but it sailed just out of his reach, incomplete. Fuck.

The third down was critical, and I was back to gripping the railing as I scanned the defensive line when they took a blitz formation. This was how they'd sacked Ramsey in the second quarter, so I knew Tucker would be extra alert.

The moment the ball left Tucker's hands, the Rush offense surged forward. Tucker slammed into a linebacker who was trying to blitz the A gap, holding the guy at bay long enough for Ramsey to read the field and send the ball to Ward, who'd manage to evade New Orleans' defense long enough to catch the ball before he was taken down in the red zone.

Cheers erupted in the stadium, but I hardly heard them. I was focused on Tucker as he loped back into position. The Rush called another time-out, thank fuck, giving them precious minutes to regroup before the next play.

The stadium seemed eerily silent as the teams took the field again. Kayla's cool fingers slid over mine once more. This time, they didn't let go, and when she squeezed, I squeezed back.

"You've got this, baby," I whispered as Tucker positioned himself over the massive nose tackle. I knew his heart must be pounding with adrenaline, the pressure on him enormous. I felt it like I was on the field next to him, a unique sensation of edginess and drive.

"Set! Hut!"

The ball rocketed into Ramsey's hands, and he minced backward, giving himself space while the offensive line anchored their positions, determined to hold the pocket under the relentless pressure of the linebackers' pass rush.

Time slowed to a syrupy crawl as Ramsey made his read and let the ball fly toward the end zone. The Rush's receivers were covered up, but Garrett broke free suddenly, cutting a hard right line and leaping in the air just as New Orleans' safety dove toward him.

"Jesus fuck," I whispered. The words were barely out of my mouth before Garrett went down, a slew of guys piling on top of him.

But I'd seen the ball in his hands before he'd disappeared.

All eyes swiveled to the ref as he threw up his arms, signaling the touchdown, and then the stadium erupted in a deafening roar, the collective energy of the fans shaking the stands. I was right there with them, whooping when Garrett reappeared from the fray and pumped a triumphant fist in the air as Tucker and Ramsey tackled him.

With five seconds left on the clock, the teams set up for the extra point. The Rush drove hard into the offensive line as soon as the ball was snapped, fending them off long enough for their kicker to kick the ball at the literal last second. The ball sailed through the goalposts right after the buzzer sounded on the clock.

Chaos exploded on the field as confetti rained down. The Rush had finally gotten their Super Bowl win.

“Oh my god, oh my god!” Savanna yelled.

Tucker's mom and I turned toward each other at the same time, the sheer joy in her expression amplifying my own. We threw our arms around each other, jumping up and down and screaming like a bunch of fools. There were tears in her eyes that she swiped at when we finally let go of each other, and then she leveled me with a stern look and said, “What the hell are you still doing up here?”

“Didn't want to leave y'all hanging.”

“We'll catch up. Go on.” She shoved my shoulder gently. “Go get your man.”

I didn't need any more encouragement than that. I raced toward the field, my heart pounding, flashing my pass to the security guard as I ran. I'd barely touched the turf when Tucker glanced over his shoulder and spotted me. Breaking away from his teammates, he took off running toward me, bits of confetti flying from his shoulders and hair.

When we were within five feet of each other, Tucker leapt, tackling me to the ground. Air rushed from my lungs in a whoosh, and we both cracked up as we landed in a messy sprawl, the entirety of Tucker's weight on top of me.

“Shit, that was too hard. I was excited,” he said, pulling back. His brow knit with concern. “You okay?”

“What the fuck?” I cracked up again. “You just won the fucking Super Bowl. I’m more than okay.”

“I meant did I land on you too hard? Hurt your hip?”

I grabbed his face and forced him to meet my eyes. “Fuck my hip. I’m good. Everything’s good. Everything’s fucking perfect.” Then I pulled his mouth to mine and kissed him until we were both gasping for breath.

“Hey, uh...you two might wanna save some of that for later.”

Tucker rolled off me, and we both glanced up to find Ramsey and Garrett smirking and a group of reporters beelining for us.

“Shit,” I muttered. “We probably shouldn’t—”

Tucker silenced me with another quick kiss, then rolled upright. “I don’t give a fuck what anyone thinks.”

I took his extended hand and let him yank me up, then stared at him in confusion as he immediately dropped back to the ground again, kneeling.

“What...?”

Tucker held up a finger and fished with the other hand just inside the waistband of his football tights. “You told me to bring you a ring,” he said, then yanked a metal band from the string of his pants as my mouth fell open. “So I did. I wasn’t sure I’d have a Super Bowl ring for you, though, so I figured I should have a backup plan. Funny thing, though, this seems like the more important one anyway.” The world around me disappeared as I stared down at the simple silver ring between his fingertips. “You said if I won, you’d give me anything I wanted, was that right?”

I nodded mutely, unable to find words initially, then cleared my throat against the lump that formed in it. “I said that, yeah,” I croaked. “Meant it, too.”

“And you said you were always mine. Wasn’t that right?”

“Yes,” I whispered. “No matter what.”

“Then I want you to say yes to it again, to me, right now.”

“Holy shit, Tucker...” I stumbled forward, my brain finally coming back online as I reached for his extended hand and yanked him to me. “Yes, fuck yes,” I murmured into the side of his neck. Tucker leaned back, eyeing me with a smirk before turning to the crowd that had formed unnoticed around us.

“Let it be known that Patrick Whitt, the biggest pain in my ass of all time, has agreed to continue being a pain in my ass for all eternity,” he hollered.

“Jesus, a fucking trophy and ring weren’t enough for you today?” Cullen joked.

“Nope. Wasn’t complete until now,” Tucker hollered back, then gave him the bird as he turned back and kissed me.

“Next time, we’ll be celebrating your ring,” he said, speaking low in my ear.

Maybe that would come to pass, or maybe it wouldn’t, but I had everything that truly mattered to me already, my heart so full I could barely stand it.

I didn’t need anything else.

EPILOGUE

Five years later

“The most important lessons that you can take home from the Dream Big program are that hard work and dedication pay off, there’s nothing you can’t accomplish if you put your mind to it, and probably the most important lesson of all is never listen to Coach Tucker,” Patrick said to the group of one hundred high school football players.

“Or Garrett!” Ramsey added.

“Count Cullen in that, too,” Houston tacked on at the end. The players laughed the way they were supposed to, and I rolled my eyes.

“Clearly, you can tell which of the coaches will be the most fun,” I added. “And I’ll give you a hint: it’s not Whitt, Ramsey, or the Senior McRae.”

“I hate it when you call me that. I’m not old.” It was a new nickname for Houston that had recently started making rounds. We had to have some way of distinguishing them, and Baby G wasn’t so much of a baby anymore.

There was another round of laughter, energy, and excitement pumping through the air. This was the second summer for Dream Big, the football program we’d started with the McRae brothers, Rams, and Atwood. We’d started planning it while Atwood was still in the league. He and Baby G played longer than the rest of us.

Right now, Garrett was the only one still in the league, but I wasn't sure how much longer that would last. He'd really fallen in love with the camp like the rest of us had, the group taking a page out of Houston's love for teaching football to the next generation.

Patrick and I had played one more season after the Rush won our ring. That's how long we'd each had in our contract, and at the time, neither of us had been ready to let football go. Plus, Patrick had wanted his championship and to break Deion Sanders' record. While I'd wanted him to have one, I couldn't pretend it wouldn't have been cool to win again myself. Patrick had won on both accounts—the Royals going all the way and smashing Deion's record. The only time I had seen him happier was our wedding day.

While we had both gotten offers to play again after the Royals' win—not just from our current team but others — we'd decided to walk away together and on top. We weren't cut out for that long-distance thing. We were too needy for each other all of the time and didn't care who knew it.

“So, everyone has their room assignments. You have free time until tomorrow morning. We start at seven o'clock on the dot. Anyone not on the field by 6:55 is late and will spend the morning running gassers,” Houston threatened.

“See what I have to deal with?” Cullen joked as the kids dispersed to enjoy themselves before we made them question why they loved football so much. All in good fun, of course.

“Anything we need to know?” I asked. We already had the schedule set, all of us knowing our responsibilities for the following days.

“Not anything pressing, but we should all be thinking about how we plan to spend that donation from Whitt's parents. I think more scholarship programs are a good way to go. It's a lot of money, though, so we'll have some left.” Ramsey crossed his arms. He was the numbers guy and did a lot of the financing.

While we had high hopes for the Whitt family after the conference finals game they'd gone to, things didn't go as well

as we'd wished. They definitely tried, but the truth was, they were just built differently. Writing a check was easier for them than the consistency of being in someone's life on a day-to-day basis. Unless you were working for them. Their business was their world, and while Patrick knew he was loved, they would never see football as important as we did.

When we'd retired and had decided to just enjoy our lives without much responsibility before starting Dream Big, there had been a whole new discussion over Patrick going to work for his family. It wasn't what he wanted, what he would ever want, which had created a new ripple of tension between them. They accepted it now, and Patrick had learned to be okay with yearly visits and random phone calls.

"Strippers and booze?" Atwood suggested.

"I second that," Baby G added.

We all ignored them. It was par for the course by now. "We'll figure it out. The money isn't going anywhere. For now, we should probably make sure these kids don't set the place on fire, and then I'd like to disappear into our cabin with my husband before this camp kicks our asses and we're too exhausted for sex," I teased. Patrick and I had gotten married the summer after our last season in the league before he had moved to Denver for good. Dream Big was located here, too, which made it easier.

Garrett clapped Patrick on the shoulder. "Yikes. Sorry about your luck, bro. The rest of us don't have that problem."

"Ha-ha." I gave him the finger.

It was a few hours before lights-out, and we took shifts keeping an eye on things. Patrick and I headed back to our cabin first because we had a video call scheduled with Mom and my sisters back home in Florida.

Kayla had a son who was a year old, named Steven after our dad, and the little shit was obsessed with my husband. "You're not supposed to love Uncle Patrick more than me," I told him when he started clapping and reaching for Patrick like he could grab him through the computer screen.

“Don’t be jealous,” Savanna told me.

“It’s not fair,” I pretended to pout.

“It’s not his fault he has good taste,” Zuri teased, and we all laughed.

We chatted for about thirty minutes before they had to go. Kayla and her husband lived next door to my mom now, and they had to get Steven to sleep.

When my phone buzzed, Patrick handed it to me. There was a text from Andre there. He was just checking in. He’d moved to California for college, but we were still close. Patrick and I were helping to put him through college, and that was the best feeling in the world.

Later that night, we were lying in the bed, lights out, the camp quiet around us. We’d be up early the next morning for a high-protein breakfast before we’d start with warm-ups and drills.

“I still remember the last summer we were at camp together. When I heard your dad while I was under the bleachers. That was the first moment I realized there was more to you than I’d ever let myself see. It’s weird, but I felt connected to you from that moment on. I just wouldn’t admit it to myself.” I brushed the dark hair off Patrick’s head as he took me in with those eyes that screamed how much he loved me. I would never understand how I got so lucky, but I would spend my life making sure I deserved him.

“And now we’re here, married, with our own camp. Funny how that came full circle. Hell, for all we know, there could be two other boys here right now that will fall in love with each other one day.”

“They still won’t be as cool as us,” I teased.

“Obviously.” His voice lowered when he said, “I think I wanted you even before that. Maybe a part of me always knew it was you for me, and that’s why I liked getting under your skin so much.”

I grinned because how could a person not when Patrick Whitt said something like that to them? “Understandable.”

“Asshole.”

“I love you,” I countered. “You were mine from that day forward, and you always will be.”

“Yours,” he replied, and I kissed him, something I would do to him every night for the rest of my life.

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ABOUT RILEY HART

Riley Hart is the girl who wears her heart on her sleeve. Although she primarily focuses on male/male romance, under her various pen names, she's written a little bit of everything. Regardless of the sub-genre, there's always one common theme and that's...romance! No surprise seeing as she's a hopeless romantic herself. Riley's a lover of character-driven plots, flawed characters, and always tries to write stories and characters people can relate to. She believes everyone deserves to see themselves in the books they read. When she's not writing, you'll find her reading, traveling or dreaming about traveling. She has two perfectly sarcastic kids and a husband who still makes her swoon.

Riley Hart is represented by Jane Dystel at Dystel, Goderich & Bourret Literary Management. She's a 2019 Lambda Literary Award Finalist for *Of Sunlight and Stardust*. Under her pen name, her young adult novel, *The History of Us* is an ALA Rainbow Booklist Recommended Read and *Turn the World Upside Down* is a Florida Authors and Publishers President's Book Award Winner.

ABOUT NEVE WILDER

Neve Wilder lives in the South, where the summers are hot and the winters are... sometimes cold.

She reads promiscuously, across multiple genres, but her favorite stories always contain an element of romance. Incidentally, this is also what she likes to write. Slow-burners with delicious tension? Yes. Whiplash-inducing page-turners, also yes. Down and dirty scorchers? Yes. And every flavor in between.

She believes David Bowie was the sexiest musician to ever live, and she's always game to nerd out on anything from music to writing.

And finally, she believes that love conquers all. Except the heat index in July. Nothing can conquer that bastard.

Join her for daily shenanigans in her FB group:

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