



*Inevitable*  
**RECEIVER**

**RHELAND RICHMOND  
EMERSON BECKETT**

***INELIGIBLE RECEIVER***

THE PACKAGE DEAL

BOOK 5

***RHELAND RICHMOND***

***EMERSON BECKETT***

# Ineligible RECEIVER

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## ***CONTENT WARNING***

This book contains instances of homophobia, mention of conversion therapy, and heated verbal arguments between parents and their adult children. There is no physical violence whatsoever.



## ***FOREWORD***

*Ineligible Receiver* is the fifth book in The Package Deal Series. Cooper and Greg have been with us since the first book, *The Quarterback Keeper*, so their story covers three years. Along the way through *Pass Interference*, *Unnecessary Roughness*, and *Illegal Motion*, we've dropped proverbial breadcrumbs about them.

For you to get the most enjoyment out of their story, after the Prologues from both characters, we have written their backstory, starting from when they first met. We've given you all the details and answered the questions that have driven readers crazy over the first four books. Their story is too eventful and emotional to leave to conversational dialogue, and we wanted you to know it all!

With that said, the present-day story starts in Chapter 19, with the edited prologues and additional content. It's our hope that you will read through it as if meeting them for the first time in *QK*. We've added some date and event markers to help you keep track of where the story is in relation to the first four books.

As always, thank you for loving our men from Portland.

Emerson and Rheland

“In all the world, there is no heart for me like yours. In all the world, there is no love for you like mine.”

– **Maya Angelou**

# ***PROLOGUE - PART 1 - COOPER***

## ***NEW YEAR'S EVE***

HOW DID I let Christian talk me into this?

*It'll be fun, Coop, he said.*

*You can hang out with us, he said.*

*You're not a loser because you're alone on New Year's Eve, he said.* Okay, maybe that one was me trying to be positive.

Maybe if I got wasted and just sat in the corner watching the countdown on TV it would all pass quickly and I wouldn't feel a thing. But I knew that wouldn't happen.

And I also knew this wasn't like me. I was the happy one. I made everyone laugh. But ever since the day before Thanksgiving, my world had been turned upside down. All I knew was I missed Greg with every fiber of my being, and now I was left with a gaping hole in my chest where he'd taken up residence.

Sure, he was hot as fuck in his uniform and I'd been attracted to him the first time I saw him at the Pirates season opener with Christian. Then when I talked with him after the game, I knew he was going to be someone important to me. I had no one to blame but myself for what I was feeling. *Hey, Alex, introduce me to #88, and we'll be even.*

When I walked into the private party wearing my best black jeans and the camel-colored cashmere sweater Christian had given me for Christmas, I was fairly confident I could make it through an hour unscathed. Maybe he wouldn't even be here.

A man could hope.

But one scan around the room and there he was, looking as uncomfortable as I felt. He leaned against the bar as some girl talked his head off about who knows what. The half-smile on his face told me he wasn't interested in her. She was probably

a jersey chaser looking for a way to become a WAG. And why the fuck did I care?

Because it hurt. And I felt like I'd lost everything I ever wanted. I'd lost him.

While our mutual friends were busy with their boyfriends and husbands, we'd spent the last three years getting to know each other. They had no idea that we'd been spending a lot of time together. We played video games at my place and bar-hopped our way through Portland. Back up, it was more like I dragged him along by force. And he was the only person who knew about Adam, the guy I'd met in Seattle. Greg never liked him. Guess I know why now.

Our friends thought we'd avoided each other since late November because we'd had a falling out. But they couldn't be more wrong. An argument would never keep me away from a friend. I simply refused to talk about what really happened. And until tonight, I'd only seen him once in seven weeks.

Before I could turn away, he looked up, and our eyes met. My blue to his green. A wave of heat and bone-deep pain from the loss flooded me, and I had to look away. Coming tonight was not a good idea. Where the fuck was Christian?

"Hey, there you are," came the familiar voice of my best friend and former roommate.

I turned to meet his gaze and tried to muster a smile that didn't show how miserable I really was. "Hey, yeah, I'm here." I ran my fingers through my hair.

Christian studied me with concern in his eyes. "You doing okay, Coop?" Then he confirmed what I already knew. "He's here. I saw him earlier."

I nodded quickly, then pasted on a smile I only half felt. "Yeah, of course, I'm fine. I just..." I trailed off, not quite knowing what to say.

Christian was one of my best friends, and I knew I could tell him anything. But since he'd married Alex Hayes, the Pirates Quarterback, we'd grown apart. Our lives had gone in

two different directions. Now Callum was my closest friend, and I really wished he was here.

Christian looked over my shoulder, and I knew who he was looking for. I steeled myself for the onslaught of questions I assumed he'd ask. But he only asked one.

“Are you guys still not talking?”

I shook my head no. Knowing I didn't want to talk about it, he just changed the subject before we even got started.

“Are Callum and Declan coming? I haven't seen them yet.”

“Uh, I don't think so. Callum said Meredith had the flu, and they don't want to leave her with Nora.”

Christian nodded, then his expression changed. “I'm sorry about all this. I don't know what to say, Coop. I know I haven't been around much, and I feel terrible about that. That's not how you treat your friends.” I knew he was sorry, but this was not his fault. No, that was all on me.

I shook my head. “Don't be sorry for getting married and living your life. I'm just down in the dumps, I guess. Just ignore me. Let's get a beer.”

Christian nodded his head. “Yeah, okay. Alex is actually holding mine, but you get one and meet me over there at our booth.” He gestured over his shoulder.

I looked around and spotted Alex talking to Aidan. Jackson and Simon weren't here, either. “Go ahead,” I motioned with a tilt of my head. “I'll be there in a minute.”

He watched me as if I might bolt... not that I hadn't considered it. I chuckled. “I swear, Mom, I'll be right over.” He knew me too well. I'd never been able to mask my feelings from him like I could with other people.

Christian punched me in the shoulder. “Shut up, asshole. Sue me for being concerned about you. I'm allowed to be, even though we don't live together anymore.” He smiled, nudging me before leaving my side to weave through the crowded bar.

I watched as he walked toward his husband. Alex's eyes lit up the moment he spotted Christian heading back to him. Those two had eyes for no one except each other. When Christian reached him, Alex pulled him in for a kiss but didn't let go. His arms settled around Christian's waist as he went back to his conversation with Aidan. I was happy for him, but terribly sad for me.

*Fuck. I was not going to feel sorry for myself tonight.* Coming tonight was a step toward making the effort to get back into my life. I'd just get the fuck out of here before the strike of midnight. I couldn't watch him kiss someone else. Not after...

"Hey, babe." The deep timbre of his voice caused my pulse to pick up. The familiar endearment hurt more than I ever imagined it would.

Why was he talking to me? Hadn't I made that clear the last time I saw him? Didn't this hurt him as much as it hurt me?

I took a deep breath and turned around to face him. The painfully familiar scent of his woody cologne mixed with our favorite body wash hit my nose and sent me hurtling back through all the memories. We had the same group of friends, and with each passing day, it got progressively more difficult to be around him.

Pasting on another fake smile—I'd become a master at them, I responded. "Hey, Greg. How's it going?"

He swallowed, then allowed his gaze to travel up and down my body before he answered. "Surviving, I guess." He hesitated for a moment before he continued. "You look good, babe." His jaw tensed and he looked at the floor. "I know I have no right to ask, but are you here with a date?" His voice was low, but I heard the question as if he'd shouted it.

*How could he ask me that? I may never date again after this was over.*

This is what almost two years of secrecy and hiding had gotten us. Not one soul knew about us or what happened.

We'd told no one we'd gotten married in the Keys nine months ago. Or that the day before Thanksgiving, I'd talked about ending it.

"No, I came alone," I muttered, glancing at the bar to see if it was my turn to order. "And only because Christian guilted me into it." It hurt to look at him.

Greg released a puff of air. "Yeah, I didn't want to come either. Didn't quite feel like there was anything to celebrate tonight." He ran his long fingers over his stubbly jaw, and I ached to reach out and touch it. To trail sensual kisses across his skin.

Thankfully, Nick called my name and drew my attention away.

"Hey, Coop, what can I get you?" Nick grinned at me wide enough to ensure I smiled back at him. I knew he was into me, but I only had eyes for the giant behind me.

"My usual IPA, thanks."

Nick nodded, then looked at Greg. "And what about you?"

I felt the warmth from his firm chest against my back as he leaned in to place his order. It was the sweetest torture but at the same time a balm to my battered heart. It was all I could do not to turn around and hold on to him. "I'll take one of those, too."

Thankfully, my sense of self-preservation kicked in, and I stepped forward to reach for my wallet. I had to put some space between us. But before I could move, Greg's hand went to my hip, causing me to shudder and close my eyes at his touch.

"I've got it," he hummed into my ear. He leaned back but left his hand glued to me.

"You don't need to do that anymore. I can pay for my own beer." I was irrationally angry at him, as I'm sure my tone conveyed. And I knew it was my own damn fault for standing too close to him. *Why the fuck was he still touching me?*



“I know,” he murmured. I could hear the pain in his voice, and I knew he was suffering as much as I was. But he’d left us with no other choice.

Nick sat the bottles in front of us, and I reached for my wallet. He shook his head and waved me off. “Alex told me to put it on his tab.” He shot me an empathetic smile.

I nodded and tried to curve my lips into something I hoped resembled one in return. “Thanks.”

As soon as I had my hand on that bottle, I took a long pull and swallowed before I turned to face him. I was met with sad green eyes that broke my heart again. “I gotta go.”

As I walked away from the only man I’d ever allowed into my heart, I felt his hands brush my body as if I were slipping through his fingers. I couldn’t give him a chance to say anything else. It would break me.

Resigned to make it at least an hour, I pushed down the emotions and made a plan. I’d have a few beers, then I’d bail on this night. I could say Callum needed me to check on something at the stables, and then I’d get the fuck out of here.

Hopefully, next year I wouldn’t have to see Greg Foster quite so much. It’s the only way my broken heart would heal.

## **PROLOGUE - PART 2 - GREG**

I WAS PRETTY SURE every single woman in this bar had hit on me at least once tonight. And most of them were beautiful. But I couldn't tear my eyes away from Cooper as he sat in the far corner with Christian and Aidan.

I wanted to be over there, celebrating the New Year together, but I needed to give him space. He didn't have to draw me a picture to let me know how he felt about me. He'd made it perfectly clear last week when I'd stopped by his apartment unannounced to drop off his Christmas presents.

And I didn't blame him for asking me to stay away. I couldn't give him the life he wanted, even though I thought I could. And I really wanted to. But there was only so much waiting I could ask for and only so many times I could tell him not right now. But fuck, I knew it was risky giving him space. What if someone else... I couldn't even think of it without wanting to punch something. Who wouldn't want Cooper? He was the best person I'd ever known. *And you're hurting him.* Maybe a divorce was best, but every time I thought about it, I felt sick.

I pushed my hands over my head and groaned. Why did it have to be so damn complicated? All I wanted to do was hold him in my arms where he belonged. To kiss him and make love with him, and go back to our villa in the Keys. Not only was I losing my husband, but also my best friend. And I was lonely as fuck.

I tipped back my third IPA in the last two hours. I was six-foot-eight and weighed in at two hundred thirty pounds;

drinking three beers was no concern. But I ordered a bottle of water, just to be on the safe side.

Nick smiled at me. “Anything else I can get you?”

*Yeah, Cooper.*

I shook my head. “Nah, I’m good.”

“Hello, brother.” The familiar lilt of Marcus’s voice made me smile as he leaned on the bar.

“Hey, man. How’s it going?” I glanced over his shoulder to see if Cooper was still over there with Christian and Marcus’s husband, Aidan.

He studied me, a small furrow in his brow. “A hell of a lot better than your sack of sad shit. Why aren’t you over there with us where you belong?”

I huffed humorlessly. “It’s a long story.” I ran my fingers over my unshaven face and tried to figure out a good excuse that wasn’t the truth.

Marcus nodded. “Still not talking to Evans, huh?”

My eyes flew up to his, and just like that, I was busted. The fucker just smiled at me. “You know you can’t keep shit like that from me. I busted Jackson and Simon in Atlanta.” He pointed to his temple, a knowing smirk on his handsome face. “I just have a sense about these things.”

I shook my head at him and narrowed my eyes. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Monroe.”

He cracked up. “Foster, I know more than you give me credit for.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s not hard to figure out, brother. Anyone with eyes can see it. Especially your best friends.”

I was so tired of denying how I felt about Cooper. But I wasn’t in a place to let all that shit out just yet. And I knew I was playing with fire the longer I held back.

“Foster,” Marcus said, lowering his voice, “we’ve got your back, no matter what.”

I nodded, refusing to meet his eyes cause I knew I'd see understanding and support there and I didn't deserve that.

“Just take it from me. Don't wait too long to act. I'm just lucky Aidan was as fucked up over me as I was over him.”

I couldn't say anything, even though I found myself hoping Cooper felt the same. I turned to my friend and just looked at him. Marcus was intuitive, and of course, he knew something was wrong without me saying a word. “We've got you. No matter what. We've got your back.”

My stomach rolled and suddenly three beers felt like a bad idea. Fuck, my emotions were all over the place. I needed to get out of here. “I'm gonna head out in a bit,” I said, glancing around for a clock. “I don't wanna be here at midnight. I'm not in the mood to fend off jersey chasers.” And the last thing I needed to see was Cooper locking lips with anyone. I would fucking lose it.

Marcus smirked. “Funny. Evans said the same thing. I think he might agree with your sentiment. Maybe you two should head out at the same time.”

The relief that washed through me damn near knocked me off my feet. My heart leaped into my throat, and my blood fizzed with excitement. Maybe I could kiss Cooper one last time. I glanced in his direction for maybe prayed to Mother Teresathousandth time and saw he was on his feet. I went to pull my wallet out of my pocket.

Marcus glanced over his shoulder. “Go on. I've got this,” he said. “At least start the new year out better. Don't need your sad face in the locker room.”

What could I say to that? Nothing. Saying nothing was the story of my fucking life. Cooper deserved more... better. It was time to own up to my feelings for him publicly and beg him to give me a chance to make it up to him. We'd been dancing around each other for too long. And I'd hurt both of us so much. I'd hurt the person I loved more than my own damn self. And we'd both suffered long enough.

Nodding, I clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks, man.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cooper head out the door. I grabbed my jacket and followed him, weaving my way through the crowd. It was almost midnight, and I had to catch up to him.

Once I was out on the street, I looked both ways, trying to find him. I finally spotted him walking north toward his apartment and broke into a jog to catch him.

“Cooper!” I shouted, hoping he could hear me over the flow of traffic and the crowd on the street.

He kept going, and I ran faster. It was my job to run, so I had no trouble catching up with him.

“Coop, wait!” I yelled again. And this time, he heard me.

He froze and scrubbed his hands over his face. Turning, he met my gaze with confusion and hurt, then I saw it change to anger. Those blue eyes I adored turned stormy, and his fist clenched at his side. It was clear he was not better off than me.

“What the fuck do you want from me, Greg? I told you I couldn’t do this with you anymore. I can’t be your secret. It’s killing me....” Hearing him say that felt like salt in an open wound.

I stepped forward and took his face in my hands, then lowered my forehead to his. “I know, baby. It’s killing me, too,” I murmured across his lips.

I let my coat fall to the ground as he grabbed hold of my shirt. Our breathing was harsh as we struggled to control the feelings we both couldn’t seem to contain. As soon as the fireworks over the water exploded, I gave in. I brought my mouth to his and tasted Cooper, my husband, for the first time in over a month.

He whimpered and clung to my shirt, pulling me closer until not even air could come between us. Cooper’s arms wrapped around my waist, and I hung on for dear life. I could stay like this forever.

The agony we’d felt was too much, and we’d suffered long enough. When the flashes started going off, I reacted on

instinct. I pushed him back and away from me. The horror of being exposed took over my brain.

When I looked at him, the hurt that swirled in his eyes gutted me.

“Never do that again,” he gritted out before the emotions took over. “I fucking hate you right now. Just stay away from me, Greg. Leave me the fuck alone.”

Cooper turned and walked away as I stood there helplessly empty and alone on the street. It was right then, watching him walk away with his back held straight like it was all that kept him from falling apart, that I knew I’d never love anyone like I loved him. Cooper Evans. My husband. And I had to find a way to win him back.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m so sorry,” I whispered to myself as unshed tears filled my eyes.

If I had any hope of keeping him, I was going to have to take control of my life and protect my brother at the same time.

# ***CHAPTER 1***

## **COOPER**

I WIPED at the tears streaming down my face as I made my way home. Why the fuck did he have to come after me? Why couldn't he have just let me go?

And more importantly, why did I stop walking when he called my name? The answer was obvious. I've been waiting for weeks for him to say what I wanted to hear.

Thank God I was only two blocks from my apartment. The fireworks were going off overhead and people were celebrating. But for me, there wasn't anything to celebrate. The new year held a divorce in my future and immeasurable heartbreak.

Sometimes I wished I could forget him. Anything to stop the pain that threatened to send me to my knees every time I thought about him and what we had. I knew better than to get involved with a straight guy, much less fall in love with him. I happily agreed to marry him, and it had been the best eight months of my life.

I needed to have my head examined.

This level of pain was new to me. I'd never been deeply involved with anyone like this because I thought I knew myself pretty well. I was an incorrigible romantic who loved helping people, and the shy tight end checked all my boxes from the very beginning.

It was probably why I hadn't seen it coming. Falling in love with Greg wasn't like a storm; it had crept up on me one day at a time like the movement of the ocean smoothing a stone.



At times like this, I wished I could talk to Callum. Or maybe Jackson. I knew I could go over to either of their houses. But they had their own lives with their husbands and kids. The life I wanted and thought I could have with Greg.

If tonight had proven anything, it was he would never be ready for us in the real world. And my head was done with the shadows, but I still had to convince my heart. It wanted him.

When I reached my building, I climbed the stairs to my second-floor apartment. Since Christian had married Alex three years ago, I'd lived alone. It wasn't something I loved, but Greg had filled a lot of the space Christian had left behind.

After closing the door, I took off my jacket and threw it over the kitchen chair. Collapsing onto the sofa, I turned on the TV, trying to drown out my memories of us.

My memories were so vivid that I thought I could smell his cologne. That's when I realized it was all over my sweater. And it made me miss him even more.

*God damn it, I'd have to have it dry-cleaned.*

Staring blindly at the television as a few more tears trailed down my face, I let my mind wander back to when all this shit started.

\* \* \*

## ***THREE YEARS AGO AT THE PIRATES HOME OPENER***

This was going to be epic. “I can’t believe we’re sitting on the 50-yard-line at the home opener,” I said to Christian.

“Uh-huh,” he muttered, completely unenthused about where we were. These seats were easily a grand each. And my best friend was unimpressed.

He shrugged. “The best part is when they come out in their tight uniform pants and do all that stretching. The rest of it is whatever.”

I stared at him standing there in Alex’s jersey. “How in the hell did you land one of the sexiest men ever to play football when you don’t even like the sport?”

Christian looked over at me and shrugged again. He took a sip of his beer before answering. “Honestly, I think part of it was the fact I didn’t know who he was. You know me, Coop. I don’t care about all this.” He waved his hand at the field. “I just care about him. But I’ll also support him because he needs me to.”

When the surrounding fans started cheering, we looked towards the tunnel at the far end of the stadium. The Pirates were coming out to do their pre-game warm-up.

I knew the moment Christian spotted Alex. He let out this really unattractive squeal and almost dropped his beer. I just chuckled and shook my head. I saw him pressing down on the front of his jeans. No one had ever affected my best friend like that. It was as sickeningly sweet as it was cute to watch.

When the team finally made their way onto the field, we watched as Alex stopped to get two footballs before walking directly over to us. Our seats were in the first row, making it pretty easy for him to talk to us. Well, not me, but Christian.

As they bantered back and forth, Alex grinned as he signed two footballs. I tried not to listen. Instead, I let my gaze roam

over the field until one player caught my attention.

Number 88.

He was really tall and had the lightest blond hair I'd ever seen. His upper body was sculpted like a work of art in his performance wear, while the black uniform pants left nothing to the imagination. And when he ran and caught the ball, he was grace in motion.

Alex's words quickly shook me out of my lust at first sight.

"... heard he had a big cock."

Oh, my fucking god! I didn't want to hear that unless it involved me. I stuck a finger in my ear since I was still holding my beer.

"LALALALALALA! I don't want to hear that shit, ew!" I shivered in mock disgust as they laughed at me. Then number 88 came to mind, and I pointed to the field.

"But if you tell me number 88 is gay or bi, I'll take that as payment for your faux pas."

Alex turned and looked at him. "Sorry, Coop. I don't think Foster shares our preferences, but I could be wrong. You can never really tell."

My eyes wandered back to him, assessing that gorgeous piece of eye candy as Alex handed Christian the two footballs.

"Careful there, teach. Someone looking at you might think you like me." Alex was teasing him, and Christian loved it, no matter how much he denied it.

Christian huffed and bent over the wall, a little closer for Alex to hear him. "They'd be wrong. I don't like you. I love you."

Okay, that was the straw that broke the camel's back.

I started gagging and retching like I was going to throw up. Christian elbowed me. "Shut up, fucker."

Alex laughed at us and looked at Christian with that same goofy, love-sick gaze. "After the game, meet me here on the

field. I want to introduce you to my friends.”

Christian nodded, and I grinned at the chance to go down there on the field. I sure hoped number 88 was a friend of his.

Throughout the first half, I tried to teach my anti-sports friend about what he was seeing out there, but he was totally uninterested.

“I give up,” I said, throwing up my hands. “You’re not paying attention at all. All you care about is watching his ass move around.”

Christian scoffed at me. “Do you blame me? Look at it.” He pointed down to the sideline at Alex, but all I saw was number 88. “Your teaching methods are not as *rewarding* as his.” He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

I held up my hands because I knew what he was talking about. “Forget I brought it up! Keep watching his ass and be oblivious if you want.”

Christian laughed at me for being put out with him. “Okay, I will. Carry on watching the match!”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re hopeless.”

But one good thing came out of it. I got to watch the game in peace and stare at number 88 as he ran and blocked and caught a couple of passes from Alex.

After the game, Alex met us behind the bench and introduced us to some of his friends. And number 88 was one of them. Hot damn!

“Hey, I want to introduce you to Christian, my boyfriend. And this is Cooper Evans, his best friend,” Alex said to his teammates. “Guys, this is Marcus Monroe and Greg Foster.”

“We’ve heard a lot about you, Christian.” Marcus struck up a conversation with Alex and Christian, and I took a minute to commit Greg to memory. He might just end up playing a starring role in my spank bank later, and I wanted to remember everything.

As I looked at the tight end, it was obvious he was painfully shy. I hated the awkward silence. So, me being me, I

dove right in.

“It’s nice to meet you. Great game today. You guys kicked ass.”

Greg smiled, and damn, he was beautiful. Long lashes surrounded beautiful hazel-green eyes. “Thanks. This was my first game.”

I marveled at him. “Really? You’re a rookie?”

He blushed a little and looked down at the helmet in his hands. “Yeah. Drafted this summer from Texas Tech.”

“Well, you looked great out there. You sure don’t play like a rookie. You ran some really precise routes today.”

A reserved smile crept up his face as his green eyes met my blue ones. This time, the smile reached his eyes. “Thanks, I appreciate that. My family couldn’t make it, so I’m glad someone was watching.”

*Oh, buddy. I was watching. I watched so much I want to jump on you right now.* “Well, I did. You’re going to do great here.”

“Thanks, Cooper. You like football?” This guy was so shy. Holy cow, I’d have to bring him out of that.

I snorted. “Uh yeah, not like this guy over here.” I rolled my eyes and motioned to Christian. “He’s hopeless.”

Greg laughed. “Is that so?”

“You have no idea,” I said, smiling. He was slowly beginning to warm up to me, so like the jabber jaws I was, I kept talking.

“So do you like Portland? There are a lot of really cool things here.”

He hesitated. “Yeah, I guess so. I haven’t looked around much. I’m kind of a homebody.”

I watched as he ran his hand over the top of his buzz-cut blond hair. There were no dark roots, and damn, that must be his natural color. I couldn’t tell if he was embarrassed or just

uncomfortable. Either way, it wasn't like me to let someone suffer.

“Oh yeah, you're busy with football and practice. Of course you haven't had time. But if you wanted to start out with one place, there's one particular bar we frequent. And the food is good too.”

Greg smiled and nodded his head. “That sounds cool. Which one?”

“Alejandro's. If you ever want to get a beer and watch a game, come by.” *Please come, please come.*

Greg nodded his head again. He was a man of few words, and I was going to have to change that for him. “Yeah, that sounds good. Maybe I'll see you there sometime.”

“Great, sounds good. If you ever need someone to hang out with or wanna try some of the cool places to eat here, get my number from Alex. My buddy from home just moved here, so I'm experienced in tour guiding. And this guy is wrapped up in your quarterback, so I have some time on my hands.”

He chuckled and looked over toward the tunnel. “Thanks, I appreciate that. I'm gonna go shower. And I need to get into an ice bath for the soreness.”

I smiled. “Yeah, okay. I'll see ya.”

Greg nodded, then jogged his sweet ass off the field. He was a baby and gorgeous. Brand new to the NFL and to Portland.

And by the looks of it, he needed a friend. I'd pack my attraction away and be that for him. Better friends than nothing.

Alex looked over at me. “That might be the most I've seen him talk since he got here.”

I smirked. “Well, I'm a talker and refused to let him just be passed by.”

\* \* \*

THREE WEEKS LATER, I SAT AT THE BAR AT ALEJANDRO'S waiting for Alex and Christian to show up. It was a Thursday night, and the Pirates had an away game this upcoming weekend.

I was having an IPA and chatting with Nick, one of the bartenders, when Greg came in and took a seat next to me.

"Hey, Cooper." The deep, melodic voice sent a shiver down my spine as I looked up into the green eyes of my new friend.

"Hey, rookie! How ya doing?" I grinned as he shifted to get comfortable.

"I'm good. Alex mentioned you guys were meeting here, so I thought I'd stop by for a few minutes."

"Well, I'm really glad you did. You're too young to stay holed up in your apartment. You gotta get out and live, my friend. And I'm just the person to help you."

Greg chuckled nervously. "Uh, okay. Why does that scare me a little?"

"Maybe because you're smart," I teased, laughing. "There's nothing to be worried about. I'm harmless. Mostly."

"What can I get you?" Nick asked him. I'd forgotten all about him.

"Um..."

"Give him an IPA like mine," I answered, then turned to him. "Do you like beer? If not, we'll get you something else."

"No, an IPA is fine, thanks."

"Coming up."

We watched as Nick went to the end of the bar to get the beer from the cooler, then popped the cap off before sliding it to him.

After he'd taken a swallow, I decided to probe a little.

"So, Texas Tech, huh? Did you finish your degree, or leave early for the pros?"

Greg's eyes met mine, and he nodded. "Yeah, I got my degree."

"What is it?" *He was going to make me pull it out of him.*

"English Literature," he said, running his big hand over his head.

"You like to read?" I was intrigued.

He nodded again. "Yeah, I love it. Kinda fits my personality."

"The quiet one?"

He smiled. "Yeah, that one. I've never been a partier or anything like that. I told you, I'm kinda weird and prefer to stay home." He rolled the bottle between his long fingers.

*Interesting.* "That's not weird. What else do you do to relax?"

Greg chuckled. "Why does this feel like an interview?"

All I could do was smile. He was so fucking adorable.

"Well," I said, "it just so happens I have a spot open for a new friend, and you seem like the perfect person to fill the position."

Our eyes met, and my pulse picked up. The shy smirk that crossed his face made me smile. He was breathtaking. I was really going to have to work to tamp down my lust for him.

"Well, I guess I better finish the interview then."

I waited. And waited some more.

"Well?"

"That's a deep subject." He tried his damndest not to smile.

My eyes widened. "You've got dad jokes!" I pushed his shoulder. "What else are you hiding in there, rookie?"

Greg laughed and visibly relaxed in front of me. This was good.



“Nothing, I swear.” He took another drink of his beer. “Go back to your interview.”

All I could do was grin. “Let’s go back to the last question. What do you like to do other than read? That’s not really something we could do together. Although, now that I think about it, I guess we could. Maybe we get a couple of velvet dinner jackets, some armchairs, and some pipes to smoke. Would you like that?”

I watched his throat bob as he laughed at my suggestion. His beautiful smile allowed a tiny bit of his warmth to peek through.

“Uh, that’s not necessary. But it would make a cool picture to send to my brother.”

*Okay, he has a brother.*

“Really? How old is he?”

“Brock is thirteen. He’s my best friend.”

I smiled. “Well, now you’ve got another one. Give me your phone.”

Greg looked at me warily but complied. “What do you want with it?”

I was helpless to do anything but smile. “I’m going to text myself, so you have my number. How else am I going to get you out of that apartment to explore Portland?”

His head dipped, and a hint of a grin crossed his face. “You like video games?”

I stopped and glared up at him. “Are you kidding me? I’m the reigning champion of Donkey Kong!”

The laughter that burst out of him filled me with pure happiness like I’d never known before. Why the fuck did he have to be straight?

“Donkey Kong? Really, Cooper? That’s the best you got?”

I scoffed. “No, but it made you laugh.”

After I texted myself, I entered my contact information into his phone, then handed it back to him.

Greg took his phone and looked at what I'd done. The grin on his face almost took my breath away.

“Best friend, huh?” His eyes sparkled in the dim bar light.

“Yep, that's my title now. And you need to finish your interview.” I motioned for Nick to bring us two more beers.

“Okay, lay it on me. Next question.”

Before my lust went any further, I had to find out some personal information.

“Got any significant others I should be concerned about stealing you away from?” Yes, I was fishing.

“Nope, the last girlfriend I had was in high school.”

*Fuck.*

“What about boyfriends?” I teased. *Please let him be at least bisexual.*

He shook his head. “Nope. Never had one of those.”

*Double Fuck.*

“Okay, then let the friendship commence,” I said as I tried not to let my disappointment show. “No one to compete with. Excellent!”

We sat at the bar and chatted more until Alex and Christian finally arrived. They were both a little flushed. Probably had to fuck before they came out. Lucky bastards.

Marcus showed up a little later, but Greg remained relaxed. He was already comfortable with me, and that made me ridiculously happy.

I could be his friend. He needed me.

And I just might need him, too.

## ***CHAPTER 2***

***GREG***

## ***THREE YEARS AGO - JANUARY - CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME***

AS THE CLOCK RAN DOWN, I looked around the stadium, taking it all in as the home crowd got an early start on the celebration. Marcus Monroe stood beside me, watching our defense stifle Arizona's drive to score. If they could hold them off, we'd get the ball back. All Alex would have to do was take a knee.

"You ready to play in your first Super Bowl, rookie?" Marcus asked, grinning at me.

I grinned right back. "Hell, yeah! You ever played in one?"

"Nope, but I got close my second season with Chicago."

I nodded my head and counted my blessings. Who knew if we'd ever make it back again, so I was going to enjoy every minute. How many guys could say they played in the Super Bowl during their rookie season?

Marcus clapped his hand on my shoulder. "Alright," he said, putting his helmet back on, "let's go end this thing!"

I followed Marcus onto the field after the ball was turned over on downs. Jogging up to the huddle, we waited for Alex to relay the play. But our quarterback had other ideas.

"We're almost there, guys. One more series. Let's get this thing done. Blue 7 on my count."

We broke the huddle and took our places at the line of scrimmage. When Alex called the play, Edwards snapped the ball, and down on one knee he went. The clock continued to run, and we wasted as much time as possible.

Back in the huddle again, Alex looked each one of us in the eye as he spoke. "Celebration at Alejandro's for anyone who can make it. I'm proud as hell of this team."

He'd missed the last three weeks with a concussion, and having him back was the shot of adrenaline we needed. He'd taken me under his wing at my first training camp. And now he was genuinely a friend.

"We wouldn't be here without you, QB," Edwards yelled out.

Alex inclined his head, acknowledging the words. "Team effort. One more time, blue 7 on my count."

One more snap of the ball, and we'd make Pirate history. We were headed to Miami to play in our very first Super Bowl appearance as the AFC Champions.

After the post-game interviews and trophy presentations, we headed into the locker room to change and shower. Coach spoke for a few minutes, then Greer Rowan told us how proud he was of what we'd accomplished before we could get moving.

I opened the drawer under my stall and pulled out my phone. I had two messages waiting for me. One from my little brother, and one from Cooper.

Brock: That was freaking awesome! Mom and Dad said to say congrats.

I smiled at my kid brother's message. He was my biggest supporter and cheerleader. I'd once been very close to my parents, but the bond I had with my little brother was special.

Me: Thanks, B.

Brock: I wish I could see you play.

Me: Me too, brother. One day you will. I have to shower. I'll call you tomorrow.

Brock: Yeah, okay. Love you.

Me: Love you too.

I missed him so much. Even though he was nine years younger than me, he had been my best friend since he could talk. Thirteen was a hard age, so I made sure to call him every single day.

When I was eleven, two-year-old Brock used to stand on a little stool at the front window waiting for me to get off the school bus. He'd bang on the glass and yell "Geg! Geg!" when he saw me. And the minute I walked in the door, he'd come running and hug my legs. He wouldn't let go until I picked him up.

I was the only one who could get him to eat his Brussels sprouts and who he wanted to read *Goodnight Moon* to him. Those memories never failed to make me smile.

Leaving his messages, I swiped back to read my new best friend's text.

Coop: Congratulations, asshole! Where are we celebrating?

Me: Cap says Alejandro's.

Coop: Great! Meet you there, or wait for you?

Me: Just wait. Did you drive?

Coop: No, took an Uber with Christian. He's leaving with Alex.

Me: Meet me at the player's entrance. Twenty minutes.

Coop: Okay. Hurry up. I need to run to my place and change. I'm wearing beer.

I smiled and put my phone back in the drawer. Stripping off my uniform and pads, I headed to the shower so I could meet my friend.

An hour later, I sat in the back booth and surveyed the crowd as I waited for Cooper to get our beers. The other guys

hadn't arrived yet, so we lucked out to get our favorite booth.

Alejandro's was, without a doubt, one of the best bars in Portland. I felt confident saying that since Cooper and I had bar hopped our way across Portland over the last three months. He was determined I would experience everything Portland had to offer. I'd even reluctantly gone to my first gay bar, and much to my surprise, we'd had a great time.

For the first time in my life, I had friends. Real friends. Hell, I had more fun with Cooper than I did the entire four years of college.

Over the last three and a half months, Coop had bullied his way into becoming my best friend. We went to dinner together after every home game, walked lots of dogs, and played video games at his apartment. After the season was over, we had a road trip planned to Seattle to see our favorite band, Fallen Angel. The lead singer, Cole Bradley, was absolutely sick on guitar.

Coop was on a mission to make sure I never stayed home alone, even though that's what I really preferred. He'd ignored my shy side and pestered the fuck out of me until I gave in. Secretly, I kinda loved that about him. It was easy being around him.

When he finally made it back to the table, Cooper slid into the other side. I'd never admit that I was happier since he started pushing me out of my comfort zone rather than leaving me to stew until the next time we hung out.

I'd actually started looking forward to hanging out with him.

"Here ya go, rookie," he said, sliding the bottle to me. Holding up his bottle for me to tap mine, he looked at me. "Congratulations, man. I'm really happy for you! I hear Miami is great, and the nightlife is on point."

I just stared at him. "Why would I care about the nightlife? You know I'd rather stay in my room."

Cooper gave me a look that I'd come to recognize. It was the one that said he couldn't believe I was serious.



“Have I taught you nothing the last four months? You cannot go to the Super Bowl and hang out in your room! At least get out with your family and go to the beach. But don’t get eaten by a shark.”

I laughed at his ridiculousness. “I won’t get eaten by a shark because I’m not going in the water.”

Coop just stared at me and shook his head in faux disgust. It shouldn’t have, but it made me happy.

My lips quirked before I took a sip of my beer. There was something on my mind, and I wanted to talk to him before the others showed up.

Cooper studied me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I wanna ask you something.”

“Okay, ask away.”

Cooper relaxed into the booth and waited for me to speak. He never rushed me. He always gave me time to collect my thoughts.

“Well,” I started, “I want you to come to Miami. For the Super Bowl.”

His eyes widened, and a smile stretched across his face. “I’d love to, Captain, but I don’t have that kind of money. Plus, I agreed to keep Jake for Alex. You’ll have a good time with Brock.”

I slowly shook my head. “They’re not coming.”

Cooper’s brow furrowed; his mouth tightened into a flat line. Seeing his anger on my behalf did something in my belly. “Why the fuck not?”

I leaned over and patted his shoulder. “Relax, uh... Thunder Muffin.”

The anger drained out of his face as he tried to stifle his laughter at my new nickname for him.

“Thunder Muffin, huh?”

I nodded. “Yep, because you called me *Rookie* and now *Captain*. What the fuck is that all about? Rookie I understand.”

Cooper threw his head back and laughed. “I could ask you the same thing with the *Thunder Muffin*. And the Captain is because of all that.”

He waved his hand at me, motioning to my body.

I frowned in confusion. “What are you talking about? I’m not in charge of a ship. I don’t even know how to drive a boat!”

Cooper was laughing at me, so I huffed, crossed my arms over my chest, and pouted like a little kid who didn’t get his way. And that only made him laugh more. When he could talk again, he finally enlightened me on his word association.

“No, not *that* kind of captain. I meant Captain America. You’ve got all that blonde hair, height, and muscles. That’s what I was referring to.”

I flexed my muscles for him, making him laugh again. This goofing around and teasing was so unlike me, but Cooper brought out a playful side I didn’t know I had. And he saw me as Captain America? I didn’t know what to do with that. But Cooper didn’t give me time to think about it.

“What about this Thunder Muffin thing? Where did you come up with that ridiculousness?”

I motioned to him. “Well, you’re kinda loud like thunder and kinda sweet like a muffin.”

His mouth hung open before he started laughing, making me laugh. “Did you come up with the nicest way to call me a sweet loudmouth?”

I shrugged and took a pull from my beer. “The loudmouth part, for sure.”

Cooper laughed. “Asshole. All I do is look after your sheltered ass, and this is how you repay me. And I still wanna know why they aren’t going to the Super Bowl.”

“My dad has a work thing he can’t get out of.” I shrugged like it was no big deal when it really was to me. But I was used to it. And since they couldn’t come, I wanted one of my best friends to be there.

“What’s more important than your kid playing in the Super Bowl?”

All I could do was smile at him. “It’s okay. Especially if *you* come to watch me play. Can’t Callum keep Alex’s dog?”

Cooper frowned, but looked like he was considering it. “Yeah, he probably could. But I can’t afford the flight or the hotel expenses.”

I held up my hands and shook my head. “No, you wouldn’t be paying for any of that. The tickets come with airfare, and you can stay with me. It’s just me in my suite since they aren’t coming.”

My best friend looked at me like I was nuts. “Greg, are you serious?”

“Of course, I’m serious. If you don’t want Alex to know you’re coming, we won’t tell them.”

Cooper seemed to run the possibilities around in his head. “Can I think about it?”

“Sure. Deciding whether or not to go on an all-expense paid weekend trip to the Super Bowl must be excruciatingly difficult,” I deadpanned.

“I know, smartass.” The humor in his tone made me smile.

A round of cheers swept across the bar, and that meant Alex was here. Christian trailed behind him; his hand tightly clasped in Alex’s. I wanted that kind of relationship with the right girl one day, but for now, I was happy with my ride-or-die across from me.

Alex and Christian walked through the rounds of congratulations and handshakes before making their way back to us. Cooper got up and slid into my side of the booth. The surrounding air stirred, and I got a hint of his cologne. It was nice.

We were two beers in when Marcus joined us along with some of the O-line. Cooper elbowed me and nodded. “Yeah, okay. I’ll go.”

My happiness and the two beers took over my brain because I grabbed him around the neck and pulled him to me.

“Simmer down there, Captain. Your glee is showing,” he teased, nudging me in my side, then shoved me off him.

“Whatever you say, Thunder Muffin.”

Alex and Christian just stared at us as we horsed around.

When Christian asked him about signing the lease, I leaned over and tugged my phone out of my pocket. Navigating back to the flight details I’d been looking at earlier, I chose the Friday morning nonstop flight, filled in his name and the other details, then hit purchase. He’d be pissed when he found out I’d booked him in first class, but I wanted to do it. He’d get over it.

\* \* \*

## ***FRIDAY BEFORE SUPER BOWL SUNDAY***

Me: Text me when you land.

Coop: Aye, aye, Captain.

I rolled my eyes at the SpongeBob reference. And couldn't help but grin at the stupid nickname that he now used instead of rookie.

His flight was scheduled to arrive at four-thirty this afternoon, and I was eager to see him. The team had been here for five days, and we'd had fun. But I was finding out that most things weren't as good without Cooper. He never failed to make me laugh and lighten my mood.

I stood in baggage claim, staring at the flight board and trying to blend into the wall. With so many celebrities attending the game on Sunday, I was nothing special. And that made me happy.

My phone buzzed in my hand, and I lifted it to look at the screen.

Coop: Just landed.

My heart picked up a beat or two knowing he was here. I'd never had a friend affect me the way Coop did.

Me: I'll meet you in baggage claim.

The dots bounced on the screen, making me smile. He didn't know I was going to meet him here.

Coop: You're here?

Me: Yep. Surprise!

The dots bounced again.

Coop: First class was enough, G. But I'm really glad you're here.

I knew I was important to him. No one would give someone the amount of attention he gave me if they didn't care. But I couldn't put my finger on how I felt about him. Cooper had become more than just a friend, but it also wasn't the same way I felt about my brother. Cooper made me smile, and I was happy with my life.

It wasn't long before I spotted him coming down the escalator to baggage claim. He looked around, and when his eyes landed on me, he broke into a huge grin. Then yelled my stupid nickname.

"Captain!"

I shook my head in faux disgust while trying to hide my grin. God damn, he embarrassed the fuck out of me, but I was learning to give it back.

"Thunder Muffin!" I yelled back.

Cooper rushed over, arms spread wide, then dropped his bag to hurl himself in my arms like it had been years since we'd seen each other. He'd given his audience a Hallmark worthy moment in the Miami Airport.

"I missed you," he whined as he squeezed me hard.

"Okay," I choked out, trying to catch the breath he'd knocked out of me. I lowered the crazy asshole back to the floor.

Laughing, I looked at him. "What's wrong with you?"

Cooper smirked. "Not one damn thing! I just flew in first class all the way from Portland."

"Yeah, I know." I deadpanned.

When he pulled away, there was something in his gaze and grin that made my heart beat a little faster.

"Ready to show me Miami, Captain?"

I smiled. "Yeah, let's go. I've got a car waiting outside."

Cooper clapped me on the back. “Of course you do. You’re spoiling me, Captain.”

All I could do was smile. I enjoyed spoiling him; he made everything better.

When we arrived at the hotel, I pulled a key card out of my pocket and handed it to Cooper. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks, Captain.” His grin was infectious.

Somehow, we’d avoided Alex and Marcus the entire weekend. We moved around Miami in stealth mode, taking in all the good things the Super Bowl Committee had arranged. When we spotted Jackson with a woman and a little boy, we ducked into a store until they passed by. It was like a weekend game of hide and seek, but only with hiding.

Sunday, after our victory, we planned to meet at the suite before heading out on the town for the night. Marcus was going out with Alex and Christian, and Alex’s brother, Aidan. From what I’d heard, they had some history and were not on good terms. I hated public displays of anything, so I was even more grateful Coop was there, so I didn’t have to go out with them.

A couple of my teammates who’d played for Miami had given me some suggestions of places to go. So when I opened the door, I wanted to give Coop some options.

Walking into the suite, I looked around and noticed his door was ajar.

“Hey, Coop. I’m back.”

He didn’t answer, so I called his name again as I walked toward his room.

“Hey, Coop,” I called, pushing the door open. My eyes widened when I took in his damp, almost naked body. His towel sat low on his hips, and I could see the distinct V-lines in his sculpted abs.

I froze. And I wasn’t sure why. I’d played football since I was twelve, and seeing naked guys in the locker room was nothing anymore.

But this felt different.

And my reaction to seeing him like that was very different.

He was my best friend. Maybe I was just shocked to see what he looked like under his clothes.

Snapping out of it, I knocked on the door and called out to him again.

“Hey, I have recommendations on where to go.” I held up my phone as if I needed proof of why I was standing there.

Cooper looked up at me, his blue eyes brimming with joy over our win.

“Sounds good. Pick one and let’s go. You were amazing out there, and we gotta celebrate. I just need ten minutes.”

I nodded and backed away from his doorway. “Yeah, I’ll change and we can go.”

“Hey,” he called. I turned to look at him. “You really lived up to your nickname, Cap. I’m really fucking proud of you!”

I grinned and looked at the floor. “Thanks, Muffin,” I called, causing him to launch his hairbrush at me.

Laughing, I made my way to my room to change. We were going to have a great time tonight.



## ***CHAPTER 3***

***COOPER***

## **LATE MARCH - ROAD TRIP TO SEATTLE**

SEATTLE WAS a three-hour straight shot up Interstate 5. While Greg and I had been bar hopping in Portland last fall, we'd discovered we both loved the new Seattle indie rock group, Fallen Angel. They'd only released two singles, but we both loved them.

After the Super Bowl, Greg had gone home for two weeks to see his family. We texted while he was gone, and I took that opportunity to spend some time with Callum.

I'd missed hanging out with the handsome fucker while he was in Colorado. Spending time with him was like watching a flower bloom. Every day he opened up to me a little more, and it made me happy to see him enjoying his young life.

I didn't realize how much fun it would be to drag him from bar to bar and explore Portland through his eyes. Now he wasn't so eager to stay home all the time. He was getting used to me, I guess.

And I hadn't given him a choice. But if he didn't want to go, he could have said so. And much to my surprise, he didn't.

When he returned to Portland, we finalized our plans to spend the weekend in Seattle. We'd talked about taking this trip for three months.

"Have you ever been to Seattle?" I asked Greg as he drove onto the Interstate.

"Not like this. I've only been there for a game."

"Cool. You're gonna love it." I bounced my leg and head to the music in his *Tacoma*.

We were both quiet for a few minutes as we listened and sang along with Cole Bradley on the sound system. Fallen Angel's lead singer and guitarist was an amazing musician. When the song ended, I reached over and turned the volume down.

“So, how was your trip home?” I shifted in my seat to look at him.

A hint of a smile crossed his lips when he glanced over at me. I couldn't see his eyes because Greg had on his aviator sunglasses, making it difficult to read him.

“It was good.”

*Wow. Give my ears a rest, buddy.*

“That's all you're going to give me? You were gone for two weeks, and it was good.” I sounded like a brat, but I didn't care.

Greg chuckled but shrugged. “What do you want me to say, Coop? I spent most of my time with Brock and my mom. We stayed home for the most part.”

I shook my head. “All that hard work to make you more of an extrovert, and you go home and ruin it with two weeks of hibernation.”

I sighed and shook my head like I was disappointed. But I wasn't upset with him, and he knew it.

“What did they say about the Super Bowl?” This had to be a pleasant topic. Except I saw the muscle in his chiseled jaw tighten.

“They were happy we won.” He continued to stare out the windshield as he drove.

Here we go again. More pulling out the words from him. He knew I'd push. Why couldn't he just give it up already? Why did we have to do this dance?

“Okay. Then why did you just grit your teeth together?” I wasn't letting it go.

Greg sighed. “Sometimes my dad makes comments that bother me.”

He stopped there again.

“You can't leave me hanging, asshole. What did he say? It'll make you feel better to get it out. I know this for a fact since I'm almost a therapist.”

His lips pursed, and I could tell he was trying to stifle a grin. Score me.

“Fine, nosy. I’ll tell you.”

Greg was quiet for a minute, evidently trying to choose the right words to lessen the blow, which meant it was bad. Or he thought it would shock the shit out of me.

“My dad was glad we won, but he also made some shitty comments about Alex.”

I watched his jaw tense again, but he didn’t look over at me.

“What kind of comments?”

He released a heavy sigh before continuing quietly. “About him being with Christian,” he whispered. “He kept saying Alex was scarring his kids for life. I don’t share his view at all, and I reminded him about how Alex had taken me under his wing at training camp.”

I nodded and looked out the windshield. Alex was a great person and a fantastic guy. And he loved my friend so much. All you had to do was look at them together to see it.

“Coop? You okay?”

I smiled and nodded. “Sure, I’m fine.”

Now it was his turn to pull words out of me.

“Why did you go all quiet? That’s not like you.” He had jokes.

I turned to him. “You know I’m gay, right? I just assumed you knew.”

I watched his face closely for his response. There was no hint of concern. Just playful Greg coming out. He sucked in a breath as if he were shocked and covered his mouth with his hand. “You are?”

I smirked at him. “Yes, asshole. Does that bother you?”

“Yes, terribly. Now I’ll have to worry about my clothes every time we go out. Locker room chic won’t work

anymore.”

My grin could not be contained. “Asshole.”

Greg laughed, and the beautiful sound made me happy. He sobered and looked over at me when I didn’t continue talking.

“Coop, you know I don’t care who you date, right? I told you I don’t share his opinion about any of it.”

I nodded and shifted my gaze out the window again. “Good, cause you’re not getting rid of me that easily, Gregory.”

He snorted. “Yeah, Muffin. I know.”

\* \* \*

AFTER WE CHECKED INTO THE HOTEL, WE HIT THE STREETS, taking advantage of the clear weather to explore some of Seattle. The concert at The Crocodile didn’t start until eight, so we had time to check out some of the cool things Seattle had to offer.

“Hey,” Greg asked as we exited the hotel, “isn’t this where they throw the fish in the market?”

I smiled at his excitement.

“Yeah, it is. Wanna go see?”

“Fuck yeah. Maybe they’ll throw me one and I can add fish-catching to my resume.”

“Dude, if you smell like fish, you are not going with me to the concert. You’ll have to go shower again while I eat those fresh mini doughnuts from Public Market.”

He sucked in a breath. “You wouldn’t.”

“Yes, I would. Try me, fish boy.”

Greg laughed and threw his muscled arm over my shoulders. I tried not to think about what it would be like to be wrapped in my new best friend’s arms. I’d done so well, and I wasn’t ruining this because I was hot for him. I could look past

it, but I wasn't sure my dick could. So I pushed him off me. He was too close for my own good.

We walked around and saw the men from the fish market throwing the fish. After scoring our doughnuts, we got some coffee from Starbucks, then explored a little more before grabbing dinner. At seven-thirty we headed toward The Crocodile.

There were two lines outside the venue. One for those of us who bought our tickets online, and the other for those hoping to get in. According to the website, the club held over five hundred people and had been the launching pad for some major indie bands from Seattle.

When our tickets had been scanned at the door, we walked into the dark, cavernous club. A huge open area with no seats in front of the stage was for standing room only.

“This place is so cool!” he grinned, looking around like a kid in a candy store. No one would guess this big guy was the starting tight end for the Pirates. “And they have wood-fired pizza back there.”

“You just ate, man. How can you be hungry?” I looked over his rocking body and brought my eyes back to his face before my brain got ideas and invited my dick to join the party.

Greg laughed at me, then ran his hand over his well-defined abs before leaning down to talk to me over the music pumping through the speakers. “Dude, I’m still a growing boy. You know I can always eat. But I’m not hungry right now, but maybe later.”

I chuckled and looked around. “They have a bar. Wanna grab a beer?”

“Sure,” he said, “lead the way.”

Greg put his hand on my shoulders as we weaved through the crowd to the bar. The guy in front of me smelled wonderful and when he turned, he spilled some of his beer on me. Normally, I’d be concerned. But not so much when my gaze locked with his.

When he realized what he'd done, he looked horrified. "Oh fuck! I'm so sorry!" He sounded genuinely upset. I looked up from my now damp shirt at the guy with inky dark hair and the warmest brown eyes staring back at me. He was fucking stunning.

"Uhh, no. It's okay. Really," I stammered, never taking my eyes off his.

"Let me get a towel. I'm such a dumbass," he muttered, then turned to the bartender, who appeared to know him.

"Here ya go, Adam," the bartender said, before glancing at me with a wistful smile.

"Thanks, man. Put his drinks on my tab," the hottie said before turning around.

"That's really not..." I started, but the words dried up. He handed the towel to me, and our fingers touched. Sparks flit down my arm and I looked up in surprise, meeting his gaze.

He cleared his throat and held out his hand. "I'm Adam."

My eyes never left his as I extended my hand. "Cooper."

Adam smiled and leaned in closer to talk to me, still holding my hand in his. "Can I tell you a secret, Cooper?"

I nodded and inhaled the faint scent of man sweat and a scintillating cologne. My hand tingled from the contact of his rough fingers over my skin. "This is not how I usually hit on people I find attractive. I'm usually much smoother than this."

I felt heat suffuse my cheeks. "You're doing a pretty good job from where I'm standing, considering..." I waved down at my wet t-shirt. "No worries about the beer, Adam." His name rolled off my tongue.

When we continued to stare at one another, Adam stepped closer. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I get the feeling we bat for the same team. If I'm wrong, I apologize."

I laughed. "If it's the gay one, then you'd be right."

Adam chuckled and nodded to me. "Are you here with anyone?" His stare held me in place.



“Yeah, my best friend,” I said, turning to motion to the six-foot-eight Captain America a few feet behind me talking to a blonde girl. I’d never seen him talk to a woman before, so it kinda threw me there.

Adam’s eyes widened when he saw Greg. I knew how he felt. He took my breath away plenty of times before I shut all that down. Leaning back into me, he brought his lips to my ear. “I’d really like to buy you a drink after the show. I’ve got to go to work now, but if you’d be willing to wait...”

I smiled at him. “Yeah, I can wait. Do you work for the band?”

Adam grinned. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you at the end of the bar after the show.” I smiled at him, and he let go of my hand to pick up what was left of his beer.

His warm brown eyes met my green ones. “See you in about ninety minutes, Cooper. Don’t leave me.”

I nodded my head slowly, watching his every move. “I won’t.”

Adam lifted his hand to say goodbye before he walked into the crowd and down toward the stage.

When I could think again, I turned toward the bar and ordered two IPAs for Greg and me. I never expected to meet someone tonight, especially since I was with Greg. But there was something about Adam that had captivated me, and we evidently both batted for the same team. So already a better bet.

When the IPAs appeared on the bar in front of me, I pulled out my wallet to pay. The bartender waved me off. “Adam’s got them. It’s all good.”

I tucked my wallet away and thanked him before turning back to see Greg engaged in what looked like an uncomfortable conversation with the blonde girl. She was really pretty and clearly into him. A pang of guilt about Adam flashed through me, but I had to remind myself we were not

together. We'd never be together because he was straight, and I was not. We'd never be more than friends.

I waited a minute before interrupting them. Handing him his beer, Greg glanced over at me with a look of relief that I returned. I hated it when he looked at me like that. It fucked with my head. And my heart. But I reminded myself again that we were not together like that. We were just friends.

“Cooper, this is Amanda. Amanda, this is my best friend, Cooper Evans.”

She grinned at me, and I shook her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

After a minute of uncomfortable silence, she offered her number to Greg, and he dutifully entered it into his phone. Whether he used it was yet to be seen.

Amanda waved and made her way back into the crowd.

“She’s cute,” I said, even though my throat felt like I’d run a marathon.

He nodded. “Yeah, she is.”

Greg drank some of his beer.

“Who was that guy you were talking to?”

I studied his face as he waited for my reply. There was nothing there that resembled jealousy, so I knew I’d been right. And even if there was, it would be friend jealousy, not lover jealousy.

I smiled. “That was Adam. He spilled his beer on me, then asked me to wait for him after the show. He works with the band.” I wiggled my eyes at him.

The crowd cheered as Fallen Angel was introduced.

Greg looked over my shoulder at the stage. “Yeah,” he said, leaning down for me to hear him. “I’d say he works with the band. He’s *in* the band.” He held his beer up and pointed to the stage.

I turned to find Adam lifting the strap of a bass guitar over his head. *Holy mother fucking shit!* My Adam was the bass

guitarist for my favorite band.

As if he could sense my eyes on him, Adam looked up and scanned the crowd at the back of the bar before our gazes locked. He shot me a breathtaking smile that made my pulse race.

When the band started playing, I couldn't keep my eyes off him. He'd looked out at me occasionally, and I was mesmerized.

"I think he's into you, Coop," Greg said next to my ear.

I turned to look at him and saw a flicker of something there in his green eyes. "You think so?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, I do."

We stood side by side and enjoyed the concert. They didn't take a break, and when they announced their last song, the crowd was disappointed.

I looked over as Greg took the last pull from his beer. He looked down at the bottle, then looked at me. "I'm gonna take off. I'll meet you back in the room. Or not. Just text me if you're not coming back tonight."

I looked at my best friend, then grabbed him by the arm. "I'm coming back to the room tonight. He just wants to buy me a drink for spilling his on me. You don't have to leave. You should stay."

He laughed humorlessly. "Coop, he's looking at you like he could eat you with a spoon. He wants more than a drink. I may not be the most experienced dater, but even I recognize that look."

I turned my head to look at the bassist keeping the beat for our favorite band. They were playing their last song. Maybe he was right. I hadn't been with anyone in forever. Maybe meeting him back in the room was best.

"Okay," I said. "I'll meet you back in the room. Maybe you'll get lucky." No matter how attracted I was to Adam, we didn't share the same bond I had with Greg. And it hurt to

think about losing my friend to a girl. It would change everything between us. I was so fucked up.

He laughed and squeezed my shoulder. “Have a good time, Coop. You deserve it. I’ll see you later.”

Greg squeezed my shoulder and gave me a shy smile before walking away from me into the crowd. I wanted to call him back to me or follow him.

I was conflicted when there was nothing to be conflicted about. Greg was not into me. We were *just* friends. And I had to keep reminding myself of that fact.

I don’t know how long I stood there looking at where he’d disappeared to in the crowd. It was dark, and I couldn’t find his hair. Callused fingers ran along the waistband of my jeans and found my warm skin before splaying out on my abs. His touch sent shivers waving across my skin.

I turned in his hold to face Adam. His grin was sexy as hell, and I could see what Greg saw. He leaned closer to me and whispered into my ear. “Can I kiss you?”

His warm breath against my ear sent more goosebumps erupting along my spine. My hips involuntarily thrust toward him and found him equally hard.

I smiled at him, and he brought his mouth to mine. Our tongues swirled around one another, and I got lost in the kiss. When he pulled back, he whispered in my ear again.

“Do you wanna get out of here? My apartment is four blocks away.”

I knew Greg would never be mine, no matter how badly I wanted him or how much I pushed my feelings down. I had to accept the reality of the situation. And Adam was the first step to getting over my best friend.

“Yeah,” I said, sounding surer than I felt. “Let’s go.”

Adam smiled at me, kissed my cheek, and took my hand in his. He led me from the bar and to his apartment.

Adam was more than a one-night stand. He became the boyfriend that only Greg knew about. For some reason, I never

chose to share anything about him with my friends. And we stayed together until I ended it a couple of months later.

## ***CHAPTER 4***

***GREG***

## ***EARLY JUNE - TWO MONTHS LATER***

Me: Do you want to come over for dinner? I'm making your favorite.

Coop: Yeah, I want to come, but I can't. I've got to finish this paper before Adam gets here. Raincheck?

My gut churned as I stared at his reply. I rubbed my temples to relieve the headache I got every time I thought about Cooper being with Adam. There was something about the situation that I didn't like, and I couldn't put my finger on what it was.

Ever since he'd met Adam in Seattle, things had been different between us. When Cooper finally had time for me, I was busy with offseason training. And when I had time to hang out with him, he was either going to Seattle, or Adam was coming here.

Me: Yeah, sure.

Me: You guys seem to be serious.

Coop: I guess we are. I've never had this kind of relationship before.

Me: I'm happy for you.

Coop: Thanks. I'll text you after he goes back on Sunday. Maybe we can hang out?

Me: He's staying the whole weekend?

I was trying not to be angry with him. I had no right or reason, but it wasn't working very well.

Coop: Yeah. They're touring soon. He'll be gone for three weeks.



Me: Maybe I'll get my best friend back.

I knew I shouldn't have said that, but I couldn't help myself. Deep in my grown-up brain, I knew I should be happy that he found someone who adored him, but I wasn't that mature yet. All I wanted was to spend time with him like we used to.

Coop: I'm sorry, Captain. I'll make it up to you.

I tossed my phone on the sofa and stared out the window of my apartment. I never realized how much time I actually spent with Cooper until now, and I was missing my friend. He'd made it his mission to get me out and now he'd all but disappeared on me. I'd gotten used to hanging out with him, but all his extra time went to his boyfriend now.

My phone buzzed with more texts from him, but I ignored them. Walking back to the refrigerator, I tossed everything back onto the shelf. My appetite had disappeared. I'd get something later.

Needing to get this off my mind, I called my brother since we hadn't talked today yet.

"Hey!" Brock grinned at me over the screen.

"Hey. How's it going?"

Brock's smile faded at my sullen mood. He knew me well. "What's wrong?"

I forced a smile. "Nothing. Everything's fine."

"I don't believe you, big brother. Is it your friend?" Brock was intuitive.

I sighed and ran my hand over my buzzed hair. "Yeah, it is. He's seeing someone and can't quite find enough time to hang out with me anymore."

Brock narrowed his eyes. "You sound jealous."

I looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows of my apartment and thought about it. Was I jealous?

“Yeah, I guess I am.” I looked back at my brother. “Am I wrong to be upset?”

“No, but didn’t you meet a girl in Seattle?”

I’d gone back to the room after the concert and waited for Cooper to come back. I was hoping we’d get a late-night snack, but it was almost three a.m. when he returned to our room.

“Yeah, I did. I haven’t called her.”

“Why not?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Never mind about me. What’s going on with you?”

Brock laughed. “You’ll do anything to deflect the attention from you, won’t you?”

*Yes. I would.*

“Why do you have to know me so well?” I grumbled.

Brock stared at me, his matching green eyes reflecting at me. For as well as he knew me, I knew him just as well. He was holding something in.

I straightened and looked at him. “What’s going on, Brock? I can tell something is on your mind.”

My brother checked over his shoulder to make sure no one was around before he spoke.

“Can I tell you something? And you have to swear you’ll keep it to yourself.”

My pulse sped up, and my brow furrowed in concern at the serious tone of his voice. Not to mention he was making a meal out of his lips.

“You can tell me anything, B. I’m a vault. You know that.”

He nodded his head and looked down at his hands. When he looked up at me, I knew whatever he had to say had to be important.

“Greg,” he whispered into the phone. The terrified look on his face made my pulse jump. “I think I’m into guys,” his

voice was barely above a whisper.

I nodded and swallowed, keeping my eyes on him. I processed his words and steeled my spine. “It’s okay, Brock.”

“But it’s not. You know how mom and dad are. Especially dad.”

I nodded again because he was right. “Just make sure they don’t find out. I know that’s terrible advice, but I’m here for you no matter what. It doesn’t matter to me who you’re attracted to, or who you love.”

Brock nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

I wasn’t expecting him to tell me that. “How do you know?”

My brother looked at me. “I just do. There’s not one girl I’m attracted to at school. My eyes always land on the guys and make things uncomfortable, you know, down there.” He motioned to his pants, then paused for a moment. “I’m drawn to them. Sometimes I play that choice game on Instagram. The one where you have to choose whether you would you rather kiss this person or that person. I choose the boy every time.”

This was a lot to take in. I didn’t know what to say to him, other than what I’d already said. I really wished Cooper were here right now. “I’ve always got your back, brother. One hundred percent. If you need me, I’m here.”

The pounding on my door drew my attention away from Brock. “Hang on, Brock. Let me see who’s at the door.”

“I’ll let you go. We’ll talk tomorrow,” he said.

I looked at my baby brother. “I’ve got your back, always,” I told him firmly.

He smiled. “Yeah, I know. Talk tomorrow.”

When he disconnected the call, I opened my door to find an angry Cooper glaring up at me.

“What the fuck, Greg?” he asked as he stormed through my door.

If I'd known all I had to do to get him to come over was piss him off by ignoring some text messages, I'd have done it a month ago.

After closing the door, I followed Cooper into my family room. He paced the floor with his hands on his hips, then looked up at me for an explanation.

I propped my hands on my hips and stared right back. "What?"

"You know *what*. I don't know what's wrong with you. Why haven't you answered my texts?"

*Because I'm an immature child.*

"I didn't think there was anything else to talk about. You obviously had plans with Adam, and I didn't want to waste any of your time talking to me." I stared back, mirroring his moves.

Cooper's face scrunched up in disbelief. Then his hands went to his head, and a disbelieving laugh left his throat. "You're jealous."

"Damn right I am. And you hurt my feelings."

I knew he was expecting me to deny it, but what was the point? I was jealous and hurt, and I could admit it like a big boy.

His hands left his head and went back to his hips. I watched as the anger slipped from his features, and his gaze went from irate to apologetic.

"Greg," he said quietly, "I never meant to hurt you. I'd never do that, not intentionally." Cooper walked over and wrapped me in his arms. I slipped my arms around my best friend and hugged him back. Everything was okay when Cooper was near me. My insecurity melted away when he walked through the door, and something inside me settled.

As I hugged him, my thoughts went immediately to my brother. Was this what he felt?

I held on and savored the closeness until Cooper took a step back. As my hands fell away from his body, I dropped my

gaze to the floor. I took a deep breath before meeting his gaze. “I’m sorry, Coop. But we’ve been two peas in a pod, hanging out and doing everything together for almost a year. Then you met Adam, and it’s like you’re slowly disappearing from my life. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I don’t just let anyone in.”

Cooper now wore the same hurt expression on his face. “I know, and I’m sorry. I’ve just been so busy with school and working, then trying to see Adam when he’s not on the road. I don’t remember the last time I saw Callum. Seems like I’m just not balancing things too well.”

He flopped down on the sofa, and I followed him down. We sat side by side for a minute, and I could feel the warmth from his leg against mine. It was comforting, and it felt like home.

“I’m the one who’s sorry, Coop. Being selfish is new to me, but I’m pretty territorial over my friend.”

“You’re not gonna pee on me now, are you?” he snarked.

It was just like him to lighten the mood with his humor. “Not unless you want me to.”

Now he was laughing. “I think I’ll pass on that. That’s not the way I’d want to be marked.”

My face heated at his comment. “Yeah, well... yeah.”

Music started playing from Cooper’s phone, and I recognized the familiar tune from Fallen Angel. I guess we knew who that was.

Pulling it from his pocket, he smiled as he swiped to answer the call.

“Hey, babe,” he said into the phone.

The smile on his face wasn’t the same one he gave me, and it didn’t reach his eyes. Coop was quiet and listened as Adam spoke.

“I’m at Greg’s. I needed to talk to him.”

He listened again, and I could hear Adam's deep voice from through the receiver. Cooper ran his hand through his hair and closed his eyes.

"Yeah. I'm leaving now. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

He smiled again, and it still didn't meet his blue eyes. I guess I took that away from him.

"Okay, bye."

He ended the call, then looked my way. That small smile was there, but not the one I was used to. A little dimmer.

"I've gotta go. He's at my place." He stood and stuck his phone in his pocket.

I stood and followed him to the door. "I'm sorry, Coop. I'll try to be a better friend. Go have fun with your boyfriend."

The words were bitter in my mouth, but I still had to say them. Good friend and all.

My best friend gave me a tight smile and nodded. "We'll talk later, okay?"

I nodded, holding on to the top of the door. "Yeah, maybe I can cook you dinner when he goes back."

Cooper nodded. "Yeah, I'll text you."

"Go," I said. "He's waiting. And I'm fine now. You know my biggest weakness is time."

He frowned at me. "What are you talking about?"

I smiled. "Captain America. His biggest weakness is time."

My best friend smirked at me and shook his head. "I'll text you, Captain."

As I watched him walk down the hall, I suddenly had a slightly better inkling of understanding for what my brother was going through. Cooper was the one person I wanted to be around all the time. And apparently, I was going to have to learn how to share his attention with his boyfriend.

\* \* \*

SATURDAY MORNING, I WAS THINKING ABOUT A RUN WHEN MY phone rang with a call from Cooper.

Swiping across the screen, I answered it.

“Hey! Wanna hang out?”

“Greg?” a male voice asked. “This is Adam.”

I’d like to say I was surprised, but I wasn’t.

“Hey, Adam. Is Cooper okay?”

The humorless laugh that came from him had me on edge. “Yeah, he’s great. He’s actually in the shower, and I should be in there with him. But I needed to call you.”

My hackles went up at the mention of the shower.

“Why are you calling me on his phone?”

I heard him moving around. “I need you to back off, Greg. I know you guys are best friends, but my boyfriend was upset when he got home to me last night, and that’s your fault. He’s with me now, and I need to be his priority. Not you.”

Anger erupted through me like magma rising in a volcano. I took a deep breath to calm down, then replied. “You’re threatened by me, aren’t you Adam? I’ve been in Coop’s life longer than you have, and no one, including you, will tell me how to handle my relationship with him. So I’m gonna save us both some time and tell you to go fuck yourself, and to fuck off with all that.”

I ended the call and put my phone in the pocket of my athletic shorts. A long run might be just what the doctor ordered. Maybe it’d help me burn off the anger that was coursing through me.

Grabbing my running shoes and my keys, I closed the door behind me and headed downstairs, ready to hit the pavement running.

## ***CHAPTER 5***



***COOPER***

## ***THE BACHELOR PARTY IN VEGAS***

I LOVED LAS VEGAS. The variety of cool things to do was a pleasant distraction from the craziness in my own life. Things had become rocky with Adam and me, and I wasn't sure what was going on with Greg, either. It was obvious they didn't like each other, so the timing of the wedding and this quick trip were the perfect distraction. I needed to get out of my head.

Marcus and Aidan had planned an impromptu day and night of pure luxury for Christian and Alex five days before their Cannon Beach wedding. Alex and Christian had an enormous suite, complete with its own pool where we'd hang out tonight. None of us wanted to share space with the two of them and the guaranteed porno worthy soundtrack that would surely make an appearance. So Jackson and Simon were sharing a room, as were Marcus and Aidan. That left me sharing one with Greg. Maybe I could find a way to diffuse the tension between us because I hated it.

The first event of the day was golfing. Christian and I had played nothing more than putt-putt, but we'd finally gotten the hang of it. After I teed off the first time and the ball went sideways instead of straight, things could only go up from there. It might have taken us a while, but we finally got the ball to move in the right direction. And to get those assholes to stop laughing at us. I guess we were the first round of entertainment.

After a fun afternoon of golfing, we all headed to our rooms to shower and change. On the way up to our floor, questions started about our next activity. When we'd planned what we wanted to do, the football players had decided they each wanted to foot the bill for something planned. I couldn't pay for anything in the extravagant hotel, but Aidan told me not to worry about it. He said those guys had more money than

they knew what to do with and to let them pay for it. So I relaxed and chose to have a good time.

The only ones who didn't know what was happening were the grooms. We wanted it to be a surprise, so I had to play my part.

“What's next?” I asked.

“It's showering and changing for the evening. Dinner reservations are for eight o'clock, so dress appropriately,” Marcus replied. He was the best dressed man I knew in his designer everything.

I smiled. “Well, at least I know not to wear board shorts.”

Marcus looked horrified and made us laugh. “Absolutely not. That's later in the evening in Alex's sky pool.”

That got me excited. I couldn't wait to try out the invisible pool on the terrace. All this luxury was the distraction I needed from the mess of my life.

“God, Cooper, you're like a big fucking kid,” Greg chided.

Of course I was. That's who I was, but I was also aggravated with him and Adam for putting me in the middle of their angst.

“You have no idea what kind of fucking *anything* I am, Foster.”

Greg wasn't expecting that if the look on his face was anything to go by. But before he responded, Simon shut it down.

“Settle down, assholes,” Simon barked, making everyone laugh. He was former military, and it showed.

When we reached our floor, Marcus laid out the plan before everyone went their separate ways.

“One hour, here by the elevator. Set your alarms. If we're late, we'll miss out on the next event, and Jackson will be out four thousand bucks.”

“Yeah, assholes, don't be late.” Jackson glared at everyone, then smiled at us.

Christian's eyes flew wide open, and I elbowed him. "No worries, dude. It's gonna be fine. I promise."

He nodded at me before Alex took his hand. "Okay, Coop. I'm glad you're here."

I smiled at my roommate. "Me too, buddy."

A year ago, we were two twenty-something guys living pretty ordinary lives in the city. Now, because Christian met and fell in love with Alex, we rubbed shoulders with the professional athletes who made millions each year. Times like these made both of us feel awkward, but they'd never made us feel like less because we didn't have what they did. They treated us just like they treated each other.

I pulled out my keycard and swiped it to open the door. Greg was behind me, so I didn't hold the door for him. Walking in, I kicked off my shoes and turned on him.

"What the fuck was all that about?"

I propped my hands on my hips and stared at him.

"What was what?"

It took a lot to make me angry, and all the shit over the last two months had reached a point of no return.

"That out there in the elevator. You calling me a kid."

Greg looked at me. "I was just joking, Muffin. Geez."

"Don't call me that. Nicknames are reserved for friends who support each other, not assholes who turn their back on you."

I was irrational, and I knew it. He hadn't turned his back on me.

The green swirled in his eyes as the tension built. "I didn't walk away from you, asshole. You got a boyfriend and had better things to do than hang with me. I told the asshole I wasn't backing off."

I glared at him and tried to piece together what he'd just said. "What do you mean you told him you weren't backing off?"

Greg ran both of his big hands over his head as he looked up at the ceiling of our room. He didn't answer me for a minute, so I poked him in the chest.

“Answer me, asshole.”

Greg caught my hand in his and held on to it, before flattening my palm on his chest. I could feel his heart beating under my hand. Involuntarily, I stepped closer to him. He stared the half a foot down into my eyes and appeared to be searching for something. We were both breathing raggedly, and I had to push away the desire building in me. The same desire I worked so hard to push down every single time we hung out together.

“Adam called me, Cooper. From your phone.”

I was confused. “What? When did he call you?”

Trying to piece together what he was saying, I saw when the look in his eyes changed from anger to something else. “Two months ago.”

Doing the math in my head, I began to piece things together. “Is that why you've been so distant from me?”

Greg blinked. “Maybe a little.”

“What did he say to you, Greg?” My heart was beating erratically now.

He looked pained and dropped his gaze to the floor. It was pretty obvious he didn't want to tell me anything.

When I put my hand on his cheek to force him to look at me, he closed his eyes and leaned into my touch. He'd missed me as much as I'd missed him.

“Tell me what he said to you.”

Greg searched my eyes, and I swear we'd never stood this close to one another. His panting breath ghosted across my face as he continued to search for something. He looked into my eyes and down at my mouth, tension and emotion building between us.

“He wanted me to back off from you. He said you were his, and I needed to get used to the fact that he was your priority, not me.”

Anger grew in my belly. “What did you say? Did you agree?”

I went to step back, but he held me in place with his left hand on the small of my back. This was not good. We were too close, and I wouldn’t be able to put that wall up again.

“No, Coop. I told the asshole I wasn’t backing away from you.”

We stared at each other for what felt like hours. He didn’t step away, and neither did I. I wanted him so badly, more than I ever wanted Adam, and he was right here. Close enough to kiss. Close enough to lean in and feel his hard body against mine. But I’d never do that to him.

“What’s happening here?” I whispered as I tried to settle my pounding heart.

Greg shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said, “but all of this feels different. I want to...” he trailed off, but never dropped his gaze.

“What do you want, Greg? Just tell me.” *Please God, let it be me.*

I could see him warring with himself. And when he finally decided, he opened up. “I want to kiss you, Cooper, and I’ve never once thought about kissing another guy before. I’ve been struggling to figure out what this is between us. It feels like more than friendship, but it also might be because he told me to stay away from you. But I need to know if this is right. At the same time, I don’t want it to ruin our friendship. I don’t want to use you to experiment on because I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I swallowed hard. I couldn’t believe we were standing only inches apart and the words I’d longed for were coming out of his mouth. “Are you saying you have feelings for me?”

He nodded. “That’s exactly what I’m saying, except I don’t know what *kind* of feelings they are. All I know is I’m so

drawn to you. And I hate when we're apart."

Greg had the power to ruin me. But he was struggling, and I could help him figure it out. Would it kill me to kiss him, knowing he could say he didn't want me that way?

Yeah, it would. But I had the power to help him, and I loved him enough as my friend to help him.

Would I do it for Callum or Christian if they were struggling to figure themselves out? Again, yes, I would. When I looked at it that way, maybe we'd be okay.

"I'm drawn to you too," I said. "Always have been. But you need to know. And that's what friends do. They help each other." I looked into his eyes. "Kiss me, Greg."

My best friend hesitated, then leaned in to put his lips on mine. A shiver ripped through my body, and I felt myself fall. Greg pulled back long enough to put his right hand around my neck, then he pulled my body to his.

This time, when our lips met, I was pressed to him and could feel how hard he was. I opened my mouth, and he dove in like a starved man. Our tongues explored one another and the groan from him made my cock pulse.

Greg broke the kiss and pulled back to look at me. My heart was hammering in my chest and his saliva was all over my mouth, and mine was on his. He looked sexy as fuck, and I wanted more.

But the rational side of me knew he had some thinking to do. So I stepped back from him and put some space between us. He looked confused.

"I'm going to go shower," I said.

He nodded. "Yeah, okay. I'll shower after you."

"Okay." I smiled at him. "It's okay, Captain. You can breathe now."

Then I walked into the bathroom and closed the door. We both needed some space to figure things out. But there was one thing I was certain of. My feelings for the handsome tight end were more than what I felt for Adam. Right then, I knew

I'd done the right thing by breaking up with him two weeks ago, before the tour. It wasn't fair to him that I harbored feelings for Greg. He deserved more than that, even if he went behind my back to call him.

We didn't talk about the kiss once we walked out of the room that night to meet the guys. He'd flirted with me and called me babe a couple of times, but I chalked it up to him trying things out. Things were like they'd been before, and it was frustrating as hell. But my friend needed time to figure himself out. And I'd give him what he needed.

Hell, I knew I shouldn't have started anything with anyone, especially with my unresolved feelings about Greg. He owned a piece of my heart, even though he hadn't asked for it. I felt like the world's biggest asshole.

Two weeks ago, when I'd broken things off with Adam, it was almost like he knew what I was going to say. "Just spit out Coop."

"I can't do this right now," I said to him.

Adam stood with his hands in his pockets, looking at the floor. "Is this about Greg?"

"No, it's about me."

He shook his head, then looked at me. "I'm crazy about you, Coop."

"I know," I said, "and I'm sorry if I hurt you. It was selfish of me."

He smiled, but it wasn't the same. "I'll miss you, Cooper. I hope you find what you're looking for."

I gave him a faint smile. "Have a good tour. You guys are gonna take off really soon, and I'll be able to say I knew you before you made it big."

He chuckled and brushed my jaw. "Yeah, maybe I should take a page out of Adele's book, and write a song about a beautiful man that stole my heart, then broke it. But I don't regret a second of it." He chuckled, "We'll end up at Number 1."



When I didn't say anything, Adam sobered, then held my gaze. "If you change your mind, call me."

All I could do was nod. Adam turned and walked to the door, but stopped before walking out. "You're special Cooper Evans. Never doubt that. And don't let him—" he shook his head, "just make sure he deserves you."

With that, he was gone.

## ***CHAPTER 6***

***GREG***

## ***MID JULY***

AFTER THE WEDDING, Cooper and I were back to how we were before we went to Seattle. Neither of us mentioned the kiss, but I couldn't get it off my mind. I'd even dreamt about it. And that I couldn't get it off my mind told me it meant more than I was ready to admit.

When our lips met, I wanted to devour him. And I was sure Cooper would have let me. But I couldn't do that to him. I knew he felt something for me. It was in his stare and his smile every time he looked at me.

I wasn't sure how I'd missed it before. But now that I'd seen it, I couldn't pretend I hadn't.

Did I want to keep kissing him? Yeah, I did. But I wasn't sure if my reactions were purely biological from the stimulation of kissing, or if it was him that did that to me. I needed to find out before I hurt us both.

I'd started texting with Amanda before we went to Vegas. She was a nice girl, and easy to talk to. But even though she was beautiful, I wasn't sexually attracted to her. That confused things even more, and I had to figure this out before I went out of my mind. We'd agreed to just be friends. I'd never had a close female friend, so this was a first.

I downloaded a dating app and created a fake profile. The only real thing was the picture of my abs I used for the profile picture. The way I figured, I could talk to some guys and see if I was attracted to anyone. Easy, right? Not so much.

When Cooper left for Atlanta to help Jackson, I went home to see my family. I missed them and needed to see Brock. I kept replaying what he'd told me, and I felt like it was only fair that I tell him about what I was going through.

When I got home, Brock and I headed out for a run. He was long and lean and also used running to help him combat

his stress. About a quarter mile into our run, I slowed to a jog.

“What’s wrong?” my brother asked.

“Nothing. I just wanted to talk to you about something.”

We’d slowed to a walk. When I glanced his way, there was tension in his shoulders and a furrow in his brow that told me he was worried, so I needed to get this out.

Running my hands over my head, I tried to voice the chaos I was feeling. “I’ve been thinking about what you told me, and I think I might be going through the same thing as you.”

Brock’s eyes widened, then his brow wrinkled. “What do you mean?”

I told him about Cooper, the kiss in Vegas, and what I was feeling. When I’d got it all out, my little brother hugged me. When the tears came, I pulled back and looked at him.

“What’s wrong, Brock? Are you okay?”

My baby brother looked at me and nodded, then wiped his eyes. “I’m just glad I don’t have to go through this alone. It’s not easy, but knowing you have some of the same feelings makes me feel like it’s okay.”

I clutched him to me. “It *is* okay, B. Even if I didn’t, you’re not wrong to feel the way you do.”

He nodded and pulled back to wipe his eyes. “So what are you going to do about Cooper?”

I wished I knew. “I’m not sure yet. But I think he could be perfect for me. He’s snarky, gives me shit, and I feel like everything is okay when we’re together.”

Brock smiled. “I hope you figure it out. He sounds great. I hope I get to meet him soon.”

I grinned. “He is. And I can’t wait for you to meet him.”

We finished our run and returned home. I went to shower and took a minute to text Coop.

Me: When are you coming back?

The dots on the screen bounced almost immediately.

Coop: Probably Wednesday. Maybe Tuesday. Bringing his stuff with us on the team jet. Simon worked it out.

Me: Oh wow! How's it going?

Coop: The service was nice, but Parker was a mess. I'm going to hang close to him over the next couple of weeks. Jackson needs me to take care of him during Training Camp and all that. So we're going to work out a schedule.

I frowned. That meant we'd have even less time to hang out than before.

Me: Yeah, that's good.

Me: When will you start that?

Coop: When you guys go to training camp.

So two weeks from now. I guess Adam would get most of that time.

Me: Okay, but we need to hang out.

Coop: Miss me, Captain?

Me: Duh.

Me: And I'm sure you'll be tied up with your man most of that time. You'll need to make time for me.

Coop: I broke it off with him.

I couldn't keep the smile off my face. Was it because of me?

Me: I'm sorry it didn't work out for you.

Coop: Sure you are. Might need to take some acting classes after this season.

I could imagine him rolling his eyes.

Me: I don't know what you're talking about. \*🙄

Coop: LOL sure you don't - anyway got to go. Going to Parker's house to pack up some things.

Me: Okay. I'll see you when you get back.

The next time I saw Cooper was on the tarmac at PDX when the Pirate's team plane landed. Callum had called me to see if I wanted to go help with the furniture, so of course I said yes. I didn't know Callum very well, but he was a nice guy. He was Coop's other best friend, so I wanted to get to know him.

Cooper was surprised to see me when he got off the plane. After we'd loaded Callum's big horse trailer with Parker's stuff, he rode with me to Jackson's.

"We need to make a quick stop by Voodoo. Parker loves them."

I snickered. "Yeah, okay. He's not the only one."

Cooper shoved me in the shoulder. "You saying I'm fat?"

"No. You're perfect just like you are." I felt the blush take over my face. "Shut up. You know what I mean."

He grinned. "Yeah, I know..."

Cooper was cut off by the unmistakable sound of a notification from the dating app I'd downloaded. I knew it was mine, but I couldn't bring myself to check.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he frowned when he saw it wasn't his notification. "Do you have that app?"

I really didn't want him to know. But I wouldn't lie to him either. "Uh, yeah."

I could feel his stare on the side of my face as he went quiet. How was I going to explain this to him?

“I downloaded it,” I said, “after Vegas. Just trying to figure some things out.”

I didn't have to look at him to know things had changed again. I could almost feel his pain at my words.

“Yeah, that's good. Hope you find what you're looking for.” His tone was clipped, and when I glanced his way, he was staring out the window, his body tense as a bowstring.

“Cooper,” I started, but he put his hand up.

“It's fine, Greg. No need to explain to me. It's really none of my business. I just wish you felt comfortable enough to talk to me about it instead of... that.” He gestured toward my phone.

I ran my hand over my head. “I do feel comfortable talking to you. I'm just trying to figure out if what happened in Vegas was situational or if it's real.”

When I pulled up to the curb outside of Voodoo, Cooper looked at me. “Maybe we've made a mistake by not talking about it. I know we've both ignored it, but you need to know that it's okay that you don't feel that way about me.”

I shook my head. “No, that's not it. I'm trying to figure out if the guy that kissed you is the real me. You're my best friend, and I don't want to fuck this up and you never speak to me again. I'm not willing to take that chance. I've just got to try some things to see if I can figure out who I am.”

God, this was fucked up. But I had to make everything make sense in my head.

“If I were bisexual, would you want more with me than friendship, Coop?” I held my breath and waited for him to answer.

He laughed humorlessly and ran his fingers through his light brown hair. “I think you know the answer to that. The real question is, would you?” he asked. “That kiss makes me think yes.”

I'm fairly certain that I knew the answer in Vegas, but I owed it to us to find out for sure. “Yeah, I think I do. I just



never thought it was possible.”

Cooper reached over and put his hand on my shoulder. I looked over into his beautiful blue eyes. “Do what you need to do. And no matter what, I’m on your side. But if it helps reassure you in some way, that kiss was unforgettable.”

We stared at each other, and I wanted to reach out and pull him to me. But that wouldn’t be fair. “Are we okay?”

Coop smiled at me. “Yeah, of course,” he replied, but I didn’t miss the emotion in his voice. “I’m going to grab doughnuts for Parker. You should probably check that message.”

He reached for the handle, but I stopped him this time. “I don’t want to hurt you, Coop. And it feels like that’s what I’m about to do.”

Coop, being Coop, just smiled. “I’m a big boy. I’m walking into this with my eyes open. I can take it.”

Cooper got out of the truck, and I watched him walk away.

Please don’t let me hurt him. I don’t want to lose him.

## ***CHAPTER 7***

***COOPER***

## **THANKSGIVING**

I ABSOLUTELY LOVED THE HOLIDAYS, and Thanksgiving this year was going to be even more special. We had Parker, and now that Simon and Jackson were together, it just made things even better. Callum and I had become part of their little family since we spent so much time with Park. They were like brothers to us. And I was closer to them than my own.

Greg and I were still hanging out when we could around my new schedule with Park and his practice schedule. Not to mention he was working on figuring things out. I knew he'd been on a few dates, but I didn't care to focus on that. Instead, I was choosing to focus on spending the entire afternoon together with our friends. I'd been looking forward to it all week.

We hadn't kissed again, but after our talk in the truck, we both agreed—albeit grudgingly—that he had to figure out who he was before we jumped into any type of relationship. Just knowing we both seemed to want the same thing was enough for now. Still, every time we were together or when we were texting, the feelings were there. At least for me, and I was pretty sure he felt that way, too. All I knew was I couldn't stop smiling.

With that said, there were still times when he confused me. When we were alone, everything was normal between us. We still enjoyed hanging out together, but we were still keeping our shit quiet by mutual agreement. If things didn't work out between us, we didn't want to put our friends in the middle, even though they already assumed we were together. We just never confirmed it one way or the other.

So when Jackson asked me to get the door on Thanksgiving Day, I never expected to find Greg standing there with the girl from Seattle. My eyes widened, and I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. I imagined this was

what it would feel like to be stabbed in the chest. I wasn't sure how long we stood there staring at each other, but I finally snapped out of it and stepped back so they could come in.

"Hey," I managed to get out, trying to speak around the lump in my throat. "Uh, come in."

When our eyes met, I could tell he was regretting his decision to bring her. But it didn't help to see that look in his eyes. It hurt. It really fucking hurt.

"Coop," he said as he walked by, "I'm..."

"No," I said, lifting my chin and steeling my spine. "It's okay. Enjoy your day."

Greg stiffened but gave me a nod and ushered his date into the house. I wanted to throw up, but I refused to let him see how much it affected me. Thankfully, it only took seconds before Christian appeared in front of me.

"Hey, you okay? You don't look so good."

He was probably right. If I looked like I felt right now, I must look like crap. And I'd probably just confirmed their suspicions about how I felt about him.

"Yeah, but can we please go outside? I need some air." I held Christian's gaze, begging him not to ask right then because I was ten seconds away from losing it.

Christian put his hand on my back as he opened the door. We walked out onto the sidewalk in silence. I concentrated on breathing deeply and calming myself. I knew I had to go back in there and face everyone.

"Cooper, what can I do?" The concern in his voice made me want to break down.

I shook my head from side to side. "Nothing. I just don't feel well right now."

He looked at me with such concern, and it brought back all the memories of us in college and when we lived together before he married Alex. I owed him my confession, and I really needed my best friend, so I gave in. I needed to talk to someone about all this, and who better than Christian? He'd

always been there for me, and even though things had changed, I knew that hadn't.

“He's trying to work some things out about himself. We kissed in Vegas and I'm... in love with him.” Saying those words out loud had my heart beating faster in my chest. “I'd never force him to come out, especially since he doesn't know if he's bi or gay or pan or demi.” I was really going for it now.

“Shit,” Christian murmured. “Are you together?”

“No. At least not yet, and maybe never. But that in there fucking hurt.” I rubbed my chest over my heart.

“I know. We saw it. But he looked shell-shocked, too.”

I paced back and forth on the sidewalk as more details fell from my mouth. “I don't know why I'm so upset. I told him to do what he needed to do. He's downloaded a dating app, and I know he's had some dates, but never one right in front of me. I just don't know what he was thinking. Or what the hell I was thinking falling for a straight guy. I know better, Christian... or I thought I did.”

Christian grabbed me in a hug, and I almost broke. My brain kept reminding me he'd done nothing wrong. We weren't together, only best friends like when I was dating Adam.

So why did it feel like my heart was being ripped apart?

“I'm here, Coop. I'll stay right beside you today. It's my turn to take care of you.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, “but it's okay. You need to be with your husband.”

Christian let go of me and walked over to their Tahoe. He opened the door and pulled the latch to the back. “Alex forgot to take in the bag of ice from the cooler. Let's grab it like we came out to get it.”

I nodded and tried to think. Maybe I should be worried. He'd met her in March and was still talking to her.

When Christian retrieved the bag of ice, we walked back to the door. “Ready?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I nodded firmly, even though I really wanted to run in the opposite direction. “Let me power off my phone first, then we can go. I’m sure I’ll talk to him later.”

“Did you already talk to your mom and dad today?”

“Yeah, first thing this morning,” I said, stuffing it back in my pocket. “And she wasn’t happy I didn’t come home, but it’s okay. I promised her I’d be home for Christmas. Jesse’s there, so she’ll be okay.”

Christian looked me over. “Are you okay? Because if you need me to, I’ll text Alex and he’ll bring the keys out and we’ll leave. You don’t have to go back in there.”

Was I? “Yeah, I can get through this. Just promise me you won’t say anything. What he’s going through isn’t my story to tell.”

“You have my word. It’s going to be okay, Coop. You’re too good of a person for it not to work out.”

I snorted, “You’re my best friend, you have to say that.”

He shrugged, “Yeah, but it helps that it’s true, though.”

I chuckled and tried to visualize how today would eventually play out. “What kind of holiday would it be without a little family drama?”

“Oh, god,” he said, “I hate drama.”

“I know,” I said, pasting a smile on as we walked back inside to spend Thanksgiving with our friends.

Before I left with Callum, I’d spoken to Jackson about his surgery on Monday.

“Do you need me to come to hang out with Park at the hospital?”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “he’ll be with Simon in the waiting room. But if something changes, I’m sure Simon will call you.”

I nodded. “Good enough. Tell Parker to text me and keep me updated on how it goes.”

He smiled. "I will." Jackson hesitated before he continued. "You should know, Greg regrets bringing her. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with him, or what's going on between the two of you, but Alex and I thought he was going to lose it when you walked out of here with Christian. Is there something going on between the two of you?"

"Nope," I said, "just friends. He's questioning some things about himself, and I'm trying to be his friend. But I've always had a soft spot for him, and he knows it."

Jackson watched as I rubbed my chest again. It seems that was my new tell when it came to Greg Foster.

"Okay, just don't let him hurt you, Coop."

I laughed. "Yeah, I'll try, but it's probably too late for that."

When I got home, I kicked off my shoes and sunk down on my sofa. Grabbing the remote, I turned on the TV and flipped from channel to channel to find all the regular Christmas movies were on.

I needed their cheesy joy.

As *It's a Wonderful Life* played on, I thought about my life. I was a single, twenty-seven-year-old man pining for a twenty-three-year-old who wasn't sure he could be with me.

I scrubbed my hands over my face and decided I needed to get my shit together. I'd dropped the idea of starting an equine therapy center on Callum on the ride to the stables.

"I have an idea."

Callum glanced at me as he drove. "Should I be worried?"

"No," I laughed. "But I think it could benefit us both and help a lot of kids like Parker."

"Okay. I'm listening. What are you thinking?"

I grinned. "Equine therapy. You saw what learning to ride did for Parker. Imagine if we could help more kids who are going through trauma. The horses get a workout, and we help people who need it."



Callum looked thoughtful as he drove. “I like it. But we’d have a lot to do to get that up and running.”

“I know,” I said. “And who better to do that than me?”

If I could throw myself into that, I could keep my mind occupied with something other than Greg. But I knew I needed to deal with the feelings from today first.

If I knew Greg the way I thought I did, he would have already blown up my phone. So I reached for it and powered it on. Just as I suspected, there were a bunch of texts waiting for me.

Greg: God, I’m sorry.

Greg: I don’t know what I was thinking. Please forgive me.

Greg: I knew it was a bad idea the minute I saw your face.

Greg: I shouldn’t have involved you in my shit storm of a life.

Greg: I wish we could go back and start over.

Greg: I know you’re mad when you don’t text back.

Greg: You can tell me to fuck off if you want. But I hope you won’t.

Greg: Please text me back, Coop.

Greg: Please.

As I read his texts, I knew I’d made the mistake of letting my feelings for him override my good sense. He was trying to figure himself out, and I couldn’t hold that against him. I’d told him to do what he needed to do, but the nine texts I’d received from him proved he cared about my feelings. This

was so fucked up, but it was a shit storm we'd need to wade through.

Me: It's fine. I told you to do what you needed to do.

Me: I was just surprised. I wasn't expecting it, that's all.

Me: But maybe we need to take a little break from each other. If you feel guilty about dating someone because you kissed me, you'll never figure it out.

Greg: It's not because I kissed you, it's because of the feelings I have for you.

Greg: I knew I'd end up hurting you.

As much as it hurt, I knew what had to be done. He had to have some time to figure things out without worrying about me.

Me: I think we've hurt each other. So let's take a break and see where we are at the end of the season.

Greg: What do you mean by a break?

Me: We won't see or text until after the holidays. You can focus on football and do what you need to do without worrying about how I'll take it. Date whoever you want and try to figure out who you are. Help your team make it through the playoffs.

Greg: I don't know if I can go that long without seeing or talking to you. You're my best friend.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

Me: I know, but we both need it.

Greg: You sound like Coach.

Me: He's right, and you know it. Without Jackson, it's going to be difficult. So focus on that.

Greg: When will I see you again?

Me: After the season is over.

Greg: I don't like it, but okay.

Me: Text me after your last game. And we'll see where we are.

Greg: No, let's set a date right now to meet.

Greg: 7:00 at Alejandro's if we play at home or 7:00 the following night if we're away or at the Super Bowl.

His tenacity to schedule a date of sorts gave me hope.

Me: Okay. That's fine.

Me: And if you meet someone, it's okay. All I want is for you to be happy.

Greg: I can't believe we're breaking up over text.

Me: We can't break up when we haven't been together.

Greg: Then why does this hurt so fucking much?

I felt the same way.

Me: Because we're close friends. And we've spent the better part of a year together.

Greg: It still hurts.

Me: I know, Captain. It hurts me too.

## ***CHAPTER 8***

***GREG***

## ***JANUARY - THE DIVISION CHAMPIONSHIP GAME***

I NERVOUSLY WATCHED the clock run down on the loss we were getting ready to suffer that would end our season. We'd made it to the Division Championship, but one step shy of the Super Bowl. Denver's offense was just too much for us without Jackson out there terrorizing their quarterback. Even though he was here on the sideline trying to motivate the defense, not being on the field was a game-changer.

While I was disappointed at the loss, I was also excited about what was to come. If he remembered.

"Wanna head over to Alejandro's?" Alex asked us.

"Sure, that should work," Jackson said as Dominick raced by.

"Damn, that kid's fast."

Jackson laughed. "You should have him push you in a wheelchair. That's where he shines!"

"No thanks. That would mean an injury, and I'm good without that."

An injury was the last thing I needed.

"You coming to Alejandro's?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that because I was going to Alejandro's, but not with them.

"I, uh, kinda have a date."

Jackson raised his eyebrows. "Kinda? You don't know?"

Leave it to him to tease me. "No, asshole, I know I do. If he shows up."

Jackson stopped walking and looked at me. "He?"

"Yeah," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. I had to get away before they asked too many questions.

“I gotta go get showered.”

He said something to Alex and Marcus, but I had other things on my mind. I had a date to keep with my best friend. I just hoped he remembered.

I walked into Alejandro’s at 6:45pm and made a beeline for the bar. I needed a beer to settle my nerves. If Cooper didn’t remember we’d set this up back in November, I wasn’t sure what I’d do. But knowing him, he’d be here. He wouldn’t leave me hanging like this.

I slid onto a barstool that faced the door. When Nick came over to take my order, I asked him the most important question of the day.

“Have you seen Cooper here tonight?”

Nick smiled. “I don’t think so. He was here last weekend, but I haven’t seen him since. You just missed your teammates.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know. Can I get an IPA?”

“Coming up.”

As I waited, I pulled out my phone and scrolled through our last thread of messages in November. I’d missed the fuck out of him. I was fairly sure he’d missed me, too. The only time I saw him was at Jackson and Simon’s wedding. I just hoped he hadn’t gone back to Adam. I couldn’t bear to lose him like that. But if I did, I would have no one to blame but myself.

Nick slid my beer to me. “Wanna start a tab?”

“Yeah,” I replied, “and you can get another one for Coop. He should be here soon.”

“Who should be here soon, Captain?”

The smile that broke out across my face would probably blind people. I turned to find my best friend smiling at me, and I couldn’t control myself.

“You. Only you,” I said, then got up and pulled him into a bear hug. He was warm and smelled of citrus and sandalwood.

Holding him in my arms calmed the storm inside me. Damn, I'd missed him so much.

"Simmer down there, Captain, before I think you missed me or something..." Cooper could be such a tease.

"I have, asshole." I let go of him and we both slid back onto our stools.

Nick brought his beer and placed it on the bar in front of him. "Good to see you, Coop."

"Hey, Nick," he replied, "you too."

As Cooper took a swallow of his beer, I took a moment to really look at him. For the first time, I noticed what a handsome man he was. His light brown hair was neatly styled to straighten out the little waves I knew he had. And I could get lost in his blue eyes. That had to mean something.

"Sorry about the game," he said. "I know the guys are bummed."

"Yeah, so close, but so far, ya know. Jackson being out really changed things."

"I bet. He's a good man. Parker and Simon are lucky to have him."

I nodded and took a swallow of my beer. "You guys are close, huh?"

"Yeah. I love the shit out of Parker. I hate he lost his mama, but I'm so glad he's got Jackson and Simon."

I nodded, then turned on my stool to face him. "So, what have you been up to?"

Cooper blew out a breath. "Well, Callum and I decided to open an equine therapy center out at the stables. He wasn't sure what he was going to do with the property, and since Parker has done so well with it, we thought we'd give it a go."

"That's great! Was it your idea?"

He smiled and nodded. "Yeah. It's going to be a great way to use my master's degree when I graduate."



I could feel the questions he had, and I really didn't want to get into this here in front of Nick.

“Hey, would you want to come back to my place so we can talk?”

Cooper looked at me with his big blue eyes and I could see the apprehension in them. But he gave in. “Yeah, okay.”

“Good, I'll pay the tab. We can order dinner if you haven't eaten.” I raised my hand to get Nick's attention, then slid him two twenties I had folded in my pocket.

“See ya, guys.” Nick grinned like he knew something I didn't. Maybe he did.

“Bye, Nick,” Cooper said.

When we got out onto the street, the mood shifted from flirty to sensual. It had started to rain, and like an idiot, I'd walked instead of driving my truck. We stood against the wall of the building as I plotted how we'd get to my place without being drenched.

“Well, what's the plan, Captain? Where did you park?” Cooper looked around, trying to spot my truck.

“I didn't drive,” I said, rubbing my neck. “I was kinda nervous, so I walked.”

Cooper grinned at me. “You walked after playing a game today?”

I nodded. “Yeah, it's no biggie.”

He laughed. “Okay, are we running or getting a car?”

“Definitely a car.” I pulled out my phone and opened my rideshare app to order a ride. “It'll be here in a few minutes.”

“Guess we have to wait it out here in the rain,” he said, gazing up at me. The heat in them had me thinking all kinds of dirty thoughts. And the attraction to each other hadn't waned an ounce.

I looked over at Cooper, with damp hair and raindrops on his long eyelashes. It hurt to think I might lose him, and I knew I was taking a risk with what I planned to tell him. But I

couldn't help it. The more time I spent away from him, the more I missed him. I was pretty sure I was in love with him.

"Why are you staring at me, Captain?" he asked as the rain picked up and the moment grew between us.

We'd both turned to face one another, and it felt like we were in some kind of romantic movie, standing in the rain.

"I've missed you," I said, then reached for his hand.

Cooper looked down at where our hands were joined and took a deep shuddered breath. He was nervous like I was.

"I've missed you too," he murmured, the wind carrying his words away on the breeze.

I stepped forward and brought myself closer to him. He looked up at me and we stared at one another, slowly leaning in toward each other. Just before I made the decision to kiss him again, a car horn honked, breaking our spell.

Cooper turned his head and cleared his throat. "I think that's our ride."

"Yeah, that's it. Let's go."

We ran through the rain to the car. I opened the door and Cooper slid in and I followed. Both of us were just wet enough to be uncomfortable.

Leaning towards him, I put my hand out. Cooper put his in mine, and I couldn't help smiling. I ran my thumb over the skin on his hand. We didn't look at each other, because we both knew it wouldn't take much to give in to the tension between us.

Fortunately, the ride only lasted a few minutes since my apartment was only four blocks away. We made another run for it when we reached my building. As we waited for the elevator, I finally gave in and looked at Coop.

"I'll get you some sweats to wear. You can pop your clothes in the dryer."

He grinned. "I'm gonna look like a little kid in your long sweats."

“Nah, they won’t be that long.”

When the doors opened, Cooper went to one side, and I leaned on the other, facing him. The tension grew as we held each other’s gaze. No words were needed to say, *I missed you* and *I’m in love with you*.

“Why are you staring at me, Captain?”

I smiled. “Why are you staring at me, Muffin?”

The familiar sound of his voice made my heart skip a beat, and I was losing control of myself here. I was likely to spill my guts and all my thoughts at any second, but I had to find it in me to wait until we were in my apartment. I had much to explain to him, and we were almost there.

When the bell signaled that we’d reached my floor, I held out my arm for him to go first.

Cooper walked down the hallway and stopped beside my door, pressing his back to the wall. I reached into my pocket and took out my keys.

Before I left to go to Alejandro’s, I’d turned on the lights in my newly re-decorated home so I wouldn’t come back to a dark apartment. The slate gray walls, and brown leather furniture were new since the last time he’d been here, and I hoped he liked it.

“Wow, Greg. This place is gorgeous.”

“Thanks.” I’d been waiting to get his thoughts since they completed it. “I wanted the place to feel warm and comforting, like home.”

I watched as Cooper walked around and took in the new decor and the lights of the city shining through the rainy night. He stopped to look out the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the city. I wondered if he was as nervous as I was. What if he decided we should remain just friends, then where would I be?

Shedding my jacket, I put my keys and phone on the table before I walked over to him. I was nervous as hell, but I had to take the lead here. I knew he’d be waiting for me to start the

conversation since coming back here was my idea. Hell, he'd been patient leaving me to figure shit out.

"Do you want to get out of those clothes?" My voice was huskier than usual, and Cooper must have noticed it. I waited for a smart-ass comment to come from him, but he didn't give me one.

"Yeah, that would be great."

"Come with me. I want to show you the rest of the apartment."

I reached for his hand, lacing our fingers together. Cooper followed me as I showed him the kitchen, the guest bathroom, and the two other bedrooms on the other side of the apartment before ending the tour in my room.

He stopped inside the doorway of my dark gray bedroom, and I leaned on the doorframe to look at him. Coop studied me before asking his question.

"Can you feel it?"

I stepped closer. "Yeah, babe, I can feel it."

"Why does everything seem so different between us now?" His eyes took me in.

I didn't miss the nervous look in them. I hated that I'd put it there.

"Because it is," I replied. "I have so many things to tell you."

As I leaned down to place a feathery kiss on his cheek, Cooper closed his eyes and nodded. "Okay, I guess I better get changed."

I reluctantly let go of his hand and strode to my walk-in closet to retrieve a new pair of sweats and a Pirates t-shirt. When I returned to my room, Cooper took my breath away.

He'd already taken off his jacket and damp shirt and stood bare-chested with his jeans unbuttoned. I watched as he ran his hands through his damp hair. I wanted to peel him out of the rest of them and worship him on my knees.

For once in my life, I forgot about all the constraints on me from my family and let my heart take the lead. I knew he loved me as a friend and, hopefully, a lover. So I tossed the clothes on the bed and walked over to him. Cooper watched me with wide eyes, but he didn't look away as I took his face in my hands and kissed him.

The taste of him on my tongue made me hard, and I wanted more. I pulled him closer to me and pressed our bodies together.

I heard the sigh of relief that came from him, and I knew I'd finally done something right. We didn't need words right now to reconnect, we needed to touch and explore. Coop ran his arms around me and tugged at the hem of my soft t-shirt to get to my skin.

My cock was hard as steel and when he shifted against me, I almost came in my pants. I pulled back for air but refused to let him go.

I looked at him as I held his beautiful face in my hands. The fear in his eyes tore me apart. "I'm never letting you go again. I've missed you so fucking much, and I know we need to talk, but can we just feel right now and see where it takes us? I need to know what it feels like to be with you. No one affects me the way you do."

Cooper looked at me and brought his hands to my face. "I've missed you so much, and the possibility that I could lose you scares the shit out of me. Once we cross this line, there's no going back. As much as it hurts to say this, I'd rather have you as a friend than nothing at all."

I leaned down and kissed him softly. "You're not going to lose me, Coop. You're going to have to walk away from me for that to happen, and I won't go quietly. I have a lot of shit in my head to work through that I'll explain later, but one thing I'm positive about is all the good things about my life include you. Please, Coop. Teach me how to love you."

He looked into my eyes for a moment before giving in. "Okay, baby," he whispered, and I took his mouth again. Hands roaming and tugging at clothes, I couldn't get close

enough to him. I needed him on me, over me, and under me. I needed to be consumed by him. And I needed him to take me apart.

I broke our kiss and stepped back just enough to get my clothes off. Cooper watched as I stripped out of my shirt, then worked my jeans off until I was left in nothing but my boxer briefs.

Dropping to my knees in front of him, Cooper ran his fingers over my short, buzzed hair as I wrapped my arms around his waist. I pressed the side of my face into his abs and held on for dear life. The smell of him and the feel of his skin against mine felt so right. I'd had erotic dreams of being on my knees for him, and no matter how many other men I looked at, he was the only one who affected me this way.

Pressing kisses to his abs, I put my fingers through the loops of his jeans and slowly tugged until they pooled around his feet. Cooper kicked them off and ran his fingers over my head before pulling it back to meet his gaze.

“What do you want, babe? Don't think about it, just say it.”

“I want to suck your cock.” My body burst into flames as I confessed that to him.

“Fuck, Captain. You're gonna make me cum talking like that... on your knees for me.” He stroked my jaw with his thumb, “Anyone ever told you that you're beautiful?”

His words gave me the confidence I needed to do this. So I leaned back to finish the job with his briefs and watched his cock spring free. I was mesmerized by it and the pre-cum leaking from the tip. I did that to him, and I wanted more of it.

Leaning in, I swept my tongue over the head to collect the salty drops from his dick. Cooper hissed at my touch and grabbed onto what little hair he could tug on.

I ran my nose along his skin and into his pubic hair, taking in the masculine scent that made my own cock throb. Reaching down, I squeezed it to keep myself from coming.

“Don't jerk yourself off. I wanna do it.”

My eyes rolled into the back of my head as I thought about what he wanted to do to me. I knew this wouldn't take long because we were both riding the edge. So I reached for his cock and took him into my mouth. I sucked and tongued his shaft while pumping him the way I thought he'd like it. I got a little overzealous and tried to take him to the back of my throat, but I gagged, making him groan even more.

"I'm gonna cum, babe. Pull off if you don't ..."

I sucked and worked him harder, waiting for the reward that came when he blew his load into my mouth.

"Baby, baby, I'm ..." Cooper thrust gently into my mouth as his orgasm took him over the edge. I swallowed down every last drop and licked him clean.

He was a wobbly mess, so I urged him back onto the bed and crawled over him. My cock was hard and leaking like a faucet. If he touched me, I knew I'd blow immediately.

Coop's eyes were closed in exhaustion as I kissed him, sharing the taste of us on his tongue. He ran his hands up and down my sides as I delved into his mouth. He pulled back, panting ragged breaths.

"I wanna suck you off, Captain," he whispered. "Will you let me do that?"

I scrambled up the bed so quickly that it made him laugh.

"Give me that beautiful dick," he chuckled.

I watched as he licked the tip, making me shiver. This wasn't going to last long, but I prayed that I didn't cum on contact.

Cooper took hold of my shaft and ran the head over his lips, painting them with my pre-cum. The sensation of his stubble rubbing across my most sensitive flesh made me shiver. When he sucked my cock to the back of his throat, the intense pleasure went straight to my balls and took my breath away. I was lost in the pleasure as I rocked my hips, trying to get a little deeper before I blew my load.

It was too good, and before the first pump of my shaft, I came with a rough grunt.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck...” I chanted as he sucked me dry.

When I couldn't stay upright any longer, I fell to the side and sprawled out beside him. My breath was ragged, and I'd never felt better in my life.

Cooper rose up on one elbow and looked at me. There was apprehension in his eyes, so I pulled him into my arms and across my muscled chest. I held him close to me as the tears welled in my eyes. The emotional overload and realization made my breathing hitch.

“Baby, what's wrong?” he asked, moving to look at me.

“Nothing. Not one fucking thing. It was perfect, Coop. Exactly how I knew it would be with you.”

He kissed my chest and placed his head back down over my heart.

I was right where I was supposed to be, with Cooper in my arms. I was in love with a man, and for the first time in my life, I knew who I was. A weight had been lifted off me.

We both dozed off and woke up wrapped up in each other's arms. And it still wasn't weird. We got up and got dressed in my sweats to order pizza like we'd been doing it forever. Since the season was over, I could indulge a little.

When the order was placed, I grabbed two beers from the fridge and met him on the sofa. Cooper was sitting on one end, clearly trying to give me space. But I wasn't having that shit. I needed him close to me. So I sat down, put the beers on the table, then reached over to tug him closer to me.

“Well, okay then,” he laughed as he settled next to me.

I wrapped my arm around him. “I need you close to me. It's taken me too long to figure out you're the one for me. I think we've had enough distance, I don't want anymore.”

When he looked up at me, I could see he still wasn't convinced.



“How do you know I’m the one?”

“Easy. I’ve looked at all sixty-four of my teammates.” I shuddered at the thought. “And not one of them affects my heart or my dick the way you do.”

Cooper burst out laughing. It was my favorite sound in the world.

“You’ve been looking, huh?”

“Yep, let’s call it research. I’ve determined that I’m Coopersexual.”

The sound of his laughter was like a drug to me. The more he did it, the more I wanted it. He was happy, and I was blissful.

When the laughter faded, I told him what I’d learned about myself. “No one has ever made me feel the way you do, Coop. Being with you is like scoring the winning touchdown of every game. There’s a magnetic pull between us that is undeniable. When we’re not together, I miss you. When we’re in the same place, I want you closer. I’ve never had a bond with anyone the way I do with you. No one else appeals to my heart, mind, and soul like you.”

He was quiet for a moment, then looked up at me. “Are you sure? It will wreck me to lose you.”

I nodded. “I’m 100% sure. But you may not want me after what I have to tell you.”

Cooper looked at me quizzically. “What do you mean?”

I took a deep breath and said what I needed to say. “I want to be with you, Cooper. I want to explore your body and take up residency in your heart. I want to make love to you and be everything you need.”

He turned and kissed me. “I want that too, Greg. I’ve wanted that since the day I met you a year and a half ago. Why wouldn’t I want to be with you?”

I loved him so much. But I had to be honest, even if it meant I might lose him. “Because no one can ever know about us.”

## ***CHAPTER 9***

## **COOPER**

I WOKE up to soft kisses on my neck and a roaming hand trailing up and down my naked torso under the sheets. The hard body and warm skin pressed to my back brought a smile to my face before I even opened my eyes. He was awake, and that meant he couldn't keep his hands off me.

Not that I was complaining.

A month ago, I would have thought it was a dream, but after the last two weeks, waking up with him every morning had become my reality. And I loved it. Every touch, every kiss, every way he made me cum.

The only thing I didn't love was the secrecy. But if that was what we had to do in order to be together, I'd take it. For now, anyway.

Casting those thoughts aside, I reached back and ran my hand down the side of his tree trunk of a thigh. Greg moved his hand lower to my balls, massaging them with his fingers before trailing his fingertips through my pubic hair. When he took my hard cock in his big hand, he squeezed my shaft and slowly pumped my erection as he thrust his hips forward, nudging my ass with his hard dick.

I hummed at the feel of his big hands on my body. Over the last fourteen days, my new boyfriend—that hadn't gotten old yet—had learned that I loved how he collected my steady flow of pre-cum in his palm, then smeared it down my shaft to use as lube. It turned me on that he was too worked up to stop to get the lube.

“Babe, I’m close. Need you to go faster,” I whined as he continued to trail kisses down my neck, never breaking his slow rhythm while stroking my shaft.

“Not yet,” he mumbled in that sexy gravelly voice he had first thing in the morning.

I nudged him. “Lay back.”

“But I wanna finish you off this way.” I could hear the pout in his tone.

“Trust me when I say you’ll like it.”

Greg did as I had asked and shifted onto his back. I got up and looked at his now six-foot-eight naked body stretched out in my bed, his left arm tucked behind his head, showing off those so-perfect-they-should-be-illegal biceps. His blond hair was impossible to mess up, but his green eyes swirled like pools of heat as he stroked his massive cock with his right hand. It had to be every bit of eight inches, and so far, I’d only had it in my mouth. He’d managed to grow two more inches in height, and it made me wonder if his dick was keeping up with it.

“Like what you see?” The sexy smile he only gave me lit me up inside.

“No,” I said, moving to the foot of the bed to crawl up his body, “I love it. It’s my own personal playground.”

He chuckled. “Well, my pogo stick is ready for you.”

I turned my heated gaze onto his body. “So are the basketballs you’re hiding.”

Greg took a deep breath and slid his size fifteen feet up the bed to bend his knees, exposing his balls to me. “You mean these basketballs?”

He was just as corny as me.

My smile refused to be contained. “The very ones,” I said. “Put your legs back down, baby.”

He obeyed, and I crawled from his feet to his chest, leaving behind a dripping trail of pre-cum along his leg. I

stopped to take the head of his shaft between my lips, swirling my tongue around the leaking head, making him moan.

I let it drop from my mouth, loving the sound of the heavy thwack on his abs.

“You’re trying to torture me, aren’t you?” His muscles tightened in the most delicious way.

“Why would I do that?” I teased, running my stubble over his sensitive skin.

“You know why.”

I loved the rise and fall of his big sculpted chest when he was turned on and the quiver in his defined abdominal muscles. God, that v-cut along his hips drove me crazy.

I kissed my way up the valleys of his hard chest, then to his neck, before stopping just shy of my mouth on his.

“Open up, big boy,” I whispered, then dipped my tongue into his mouth, letting him taste himself on my tongue.

Greg moaned and growled, then took my cock in his hand. He jerked me slowly, until my own breathing sped up, I reached back and took him in hand. We jerked each other off as I hovered over him, our combined cum painting his stomach and chest.

When the heat between us had cooled, I pulled back and looked at the mess we’d made. I put my finger in it and wrote my name on him in our cum. Satisfied with my penmanship, I brought my finger to his lips.

Greg kept his gaze riveted on me, and I watched as his beautiful green eyes were swallowed up by his dark pupils. I painted his bottom lip with our cum before his tongue snaked out and licked it away. My mouth hitched up on one side to grin at him.

“You’re mine, Captain America, all mine,” I whispered to him. “I marked you and wrote my name on you.”

Greg wrapped his arms around me, then flipped me onto my back. He brought his mouth to mine but didn’t give me the kiss I was expecting.

“I’m all yours, and you’re all mine, baby. Don’t forget it.”

He lowered his big body to mine and took my mouth again. I was lost to him as we both hardened again. One of the perks of loving a twenty-three-year-old. Thankfully, I could keep up.

After another round, we finally crawled out of bed and stripped off the sheets. Again.

“I’m gonna need to buy more sheets if we keep going at it like this,” I joked. “You’re gonna wear holes in them.”

Greg leveled me with that sexy, heated smile I’d come to love over the last two weeks. “What color? I’ll order them. Maybe fourteen sets, since we average a sheet change twice a day.”

I laughed. “I don’t think we need fourteen sets of sheets. Maybe four. You’re going overboard.”

Greg stilled and looked at me, his serious expression stopping me. “I’d do anything for you, Coop.”

*Except come out. Or not take Amanda to the Super Bowl Party.*

I sobered at his words, the lightness of the morning fading with every tick of the clock. Nodding, I tossed my pillow back onto the bed. He knew what I was thinking.

“I’m going to start the shower,” I said, rounding the bed toward the bathroom.

Greg remained quiet, then gathered up the sheets. “I’ll start the washer.”

I tried to push away the disappointment as I stood in my bathroom, waiting for the water to heat. All I wanted was him. I wanted to hang out with our friends and sit on his lap like Christian did with Alex. I wanted them all to know we were together and that we loved each other.

I wanted us to host one of the family parties we’d gotten in the habit of throwing.

But that wasn't in the cards for us right now. Maybe never from what he'd said.

Stepping under the warm water, I hung my head and let the water work its magic on the now tense muscles in my shoulders and neck. Swinging my head from side to side, I tried to look at what I had now that I didn't have two weeks ago. I had him. But only the private part of him.

Was that enough? And how long was I willing to keep us a secret?

Lost in thought, I startled at his body pressing to mine, and the feel of his long muscled arms wrapping around me. He nuzzled his stubbly beard along the side of my face.

"I'm sorry, baby."

I laughed humorlessly. "Yeah, I know. It's just difficult thinking about seeing my boyfriend on a date with a girl. I have to be honest; I don't know how long I can watch that."

Greg tightened his arms around me. "I know, but you know why. If Jackson hadn't invited the PR team, who take pictures of everything, I wouldn't have had to worry about it. But since he did, I needed a cover. And she agreed to go as my friend. She knows I don't want more than friendship with her."

I nodded. "Yeah, I know. It's just difficult to watch."

Greg kissed my forehead. "We could cancel and stay here. I'd be good with that."

I thought about it. "I know, but I promised Jackson I'd get Callum over there today. He's got the PR people coming to talk about possibly raising some money for our project. This could be the thing we need to get started. And you know how Jackson is. He'd pester me all day until I went over there."

HE LOOSENED HIS HOLD ON ME AND TURNED ME AROUND TO face him. I'm sure he could see my disappointment.

Cradling my face between his hands, he kissed me sweetly. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

I put my hands over his. Looking into his bright green eyes, I could see how much this bothered him, too.

“I know,” I whispered, “but it still hurts. I want to walk in there and tell our friends that you’re mine, and we’re together. But I understand why, especially with the PR team there to talk to Callum and me.”

I tried to force a smile, but that just made him kiss me again.

“I promise I’ll find a way around all this shit. My brother still lives at home, and I told you what he confided in me. I have to protect him because if they knew how I felt about you, life would be horrible for him. I just need some time to figure it out. And we need to keep our performance going in front of our friends.”

I knew what Brock was up against with their parents. Greg had told me about his confession to his brother, and the relief Brock felt when he told him about his feelings for me. I’d agreed to everything two weeks ago when he explained the situation. I didn’t want to back out now. I loved him too much to do that to him, and I wanted to find a way to help them both.

“I know, babe.” I put both hands over his heart. “I’ll be patient. I trust us. I know we’ll find a solution for all of this.” I smiled at him and rubbed my fingers over his stubbled cheeks.

“Every time you see me today, remember why I’m doing it. And as soon as I can get out of there, I’ll be right back here to you.”

I nodded and accepted that it wouldn’t be forever. He’d take Amanda, I’d go with Callum, and I’d get the fuck out as soon as I could.

“Let’s go to your place tonight. Your bed is way bigger.”

Greg smiled and nodded. “Deal. Go over whenever you’re ready and use your key. We’ll get in my enormous bathtub tonight. Focus on that.”

I shivered. “Okay, we have a plan.”



We finished our shower and got out. After we dressed and threw the sheets into the dryer, Greg kissed me goodbye before we left my apartment. We walked together to the parking deck, then he got in his truck and went one way. And I went to the stables to get Callum to make sure he showed up today.

Time to start acting.

## ***CHAPTER 10***

***GREG***

## ***THE HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM***

I COULD SAY without a shadow of a doubt that I was the happiest I'd ever been in my entire life. The only thing that would make it better would be telling the world Cooper was mine, and my brother was safely out of our family home. I adored my family, I did, but their views on the LGBTQ community were intolerable. Especially my father's.

Since my father had pursued his new position, Brock and I almost didn't recognize our parents. They'd gone from laid-back, supportive, and fun parents to people we didn't recognize.

I'd just stepped out of the shower when I got a group text from Jackson that had my heart stopping and then racing like it wanted to beat out of my chest.

Jackson: C was kicked by a horse. Unconscious with a head injury. Get to OHSU as soon as possible.

My heart pounded as I read the text message. I dialed Cooper's number, all the while praying, "Please god, don't let it be Cooper."

It rang multiple times, then went to voicemail.

"Baby, when you get this, call me. Please call me."

I raced around my room, hunting for clothes and shoes before heading to the front door. Grabbing my keys from the console, I dialed his number again. No answer. Only voicemail.

When I finally reached my truck, my hands were shaking, and tears were beginning to form. "Get it together, Foster." I had to get myself under control in case Cooper needed me. I'd be no good to him if I had an accident and ended up in the hospital, too.

After several calming breaths, I started my truck and backed out of the space. All I could do was drive and pray the entire way across Portland.

*Please, God, don't let it be him. I just found him, and we haven't had enough time. Please let him be okay. I love him, God. And I need him. Please don't punish him for my mistakes.*

I don't know how long it took me to get to the emergency room closest to the stables. I was on autopilot and continued to call his phone and pray when he didn't answer.

Arriving at the hospital, I found a parking space and ran into the emergency room. When I reached the desk, the attendant's eyes widened, her eyes filling with recognition. "My friend was just brought in with a head injury from a horse. I need to find him."

She nodded rapidly. "Yes, sir. The other Pirates are waiting in the private waiting room down the hall on the left."

"Thank you," I murmured.

When I reached the private room, I jerked the door open, thankfully without ripping it off its hinges. I scanned the room quickly, my heart pounding in my chest, glancing from person to person. Then I finally found him sitting in the chair beside Christian. My legs felt like they were about to buckle from under me.

It wasn't him. He wasn't hurt.

Cooper stood when he saw me. As our eyes met and held, relief crashed over me so fast that I had to take a second and breathe deeply.

I hurried over to him, pulled him into my arms, and kissed the fuck out of him. I didn't care who was here in the room. All that mattered was he wasn't hurt.

Pulling back, I looked him over, then hugged him to me before burying my face in his neck.

"I was so scared when I got the text. I've been calling your phone, and you never picked it up. Why didn't you answer? I

prayed the whole way here that it wasn't you. God, I don't know what I'd do without you."

Marcus and Aidan came in and stopped in their tracks when they saw me wrapped around Cooper. Marcus's eyes widened as he took in the room. He glanced at us, then at Jackson and Simon. His mouth opened and closed before he looked back at us. I didn't care what they saw. I was just thankful as fuck that he was okay.

Jackson smiled when Aidan used his finger to push his husband's chin up. "I'm not sure I've ever seen you speechless." Aidan steered him to an empty chair.

I held on to Cooper as the others talked about Callum's condition. We listened in as Simon explained what was happening. Declan was a fucking mess.

"I thought they didn't like each other." His reaction confused the fuck out of me.

"I'll tell you later," Cooper whispered to me. "You can let go now, babe."

I shook my head emphatically. "Nope. Not letting go."

A female doctor walked into the waiting room and immediately recognized Jackson. "Hello, Jackson. I didn't realize Dr. Kennedy was a friend of yours. Hello again, Dr. Taylor."

"Hey, Dr. Sanchez. Are you treating him?" Jackson asked.

The doctor looked up at him. "Yes, I set his arm in a cast. We're still waiting on the results of the CT, but Dr. Kennedy keeps asking for Declan."

We all looked at him as he stood. "That's me. I'm Declan Miller."

Her eyes widened for a second, but then she smiled and said, "Another Pirate, I see."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, then shook her hand.

"If you come with me, I'll take you to him."

Declan nodded and took a step forward before he paused, glancing back at Cooper. “I’ll come back and update you on what’s happening.”

Cooper was surprised. “It’s okay, Declan. Go be with him.” He nodded and followed Dr. Sanchez out of the waiting room.

All eyes turned to us, but they didn’t ask. They let me have my moment with him.

We waited for more news as Simon was called to see Callum.

“They let Simon back since he told them he was his doctor,” Jackson explained.

I nodded and held on to Cooper until Simon came to get him. “Hey, Coop. Callum wants to see you.” He smiled at him, and Cooper slipped from my arms.

“I’ll be right here, waiting for you.”

Cooper smiled at me and nodded, before following Simon.

I collapsed in the chair as the adrenalin wore off. Cradling my head in my hands, and with exhaustion came a headache pounding in my temples.

I don’t know how long I sat there before Jackson slid over and whispered to me. “You okay?”

Picking my head up, I nodded, then returned to cradling my head. Maybe if I didn’t speak, he wouldn’t ask me anything. I wanted to tell everyone he was mine, but I couldn’t.

Although kissing him staked a pretty big claim.

Jackson gave me one bounce of the head. “Okay, good.”

We sat there until Cooper came back and put his hand on my shoulder. I looked up and found him wearing a small smile, and a lot of the anxiety was definitely gone after seeing Callum.

“How is he?”

“He’s going to be okay. Declan’s going to stay with him at the stables so he can take care of the horses, too. He’s been doing that for a while, actually. But I need to go to Callum’s and pack a bag. Can you take me? I don’t have my car.”

Was he nuts? Of course, I’d take him. Like I’d let him out of my sight. But I quickly realized he was still playing along to deny our connection.

God, I hated this. Hated that I was asking this of him. But I was too selfish to give him up.

“Yeah, of course,” I said, standing immediately.

Cooper looked over at Jackson, who stood up when I did. He hugged him and leaned back, holding his shoulder. “We’ll get him home. Don’t you worry about him. Get some rest, okay? You look beat. Simon will check him out again.”

“Thanks for getting here so quickly,” Cooper said to him.

“No other place we’d be. I told you and Callum, you’re family to us.” I knew they were close but sometimes it didn’t hurt to be reminded. Jackson shifted his gaze to me, then held out his hand to shake. “All of you are family to us.”

I’d give anything to be honest with them about us, and I knew it would be okay if we told them. I’d lost my cool in the waiting room and kissed Cooper and even though they were probably dying to ask questions none of them had. They were our friends, and we were safe. But I knew if I let myself, I’d get lazy and slip up. If we were the way I wanted to be around our friends... I worked with them and hung out with them. I would definitely forget if I let myself be with him the way I wanted, the way he deserved.... Because loving Cooper, being with him was like breathing for me. I didn’t have to think about it. It just was. It took everything not to hold his hands, kiss him when he said something in the aisle at the grocery store or run up to where he sat after the game or when we scored, like Alex sometimes did Christian.

And all it would take was one picture in the media to destroy us.



When we'd said goodbye to everyone, we walked out to my truck. I didn't touch him again until we were behind closed doors at my place after dropping off Callum's things.

"Baby," I said as I held my arms open to him.

Cooper walked to me and held me as tightly as I did him.

"I've never been so scared. All I could think about were the things I'd never said to you."

His hands went to my face as he wrapped me in his arms.

"What haven't you said?" he whispered.

I looked into his eyes as he rubbed his thumbs across my cheeks. "I haven't told you how you make every day a thousand times better just by being in my life. How I love your laugh and the way you take care of me without even knowing you do it. I haven't told you that for the first time in my life, because of you, I feel at home in my skin. I know I don't deserve your heart or your patience for putting up with all this hiding, but I want it. I shouldn't ask, but I'm asking, because you have no idea how much I love you, Cooper."

He looked at me with so much love in his eyes. I never wanted to lose this.

"I think I've loved you from the first night you sat beside me at the bar." I cupped his cheeks, holding his gaze, "I tried to ignore my feelings for you because I wanted you in my life, even if it was just as a friend. I'd do anything for you, sweetheart, and if waiting is what we have to do, I can do it, as long as I have you."

I brought my lips to his and made love to his mouth. The only thing left was the rest of him. And I needed all of him.

Pulling away, I looked into his eyes. "I want to make love with you, babe. I need you to teach me how to make you feel good. I need to be inside of you."

Cooper studied me for a moment. "I want that too. But there's no going back from that. I need to know you want it for you, not just for me."

I smiled. "I want it for both of us." I kissed his cheek and his neck.

Cooper nodded and turned his head so I had better access to his neck. "Okay, babe. But I need to shower off the stable and the hospital from my skin."

After one last kiss to this collarbone, I smiled at him.

"Okay," I said, "you go do that, and I'll be waiting for you when you're finished."

I stole one more kiss before he pulled out of my arms and padded off to my bathroom. When I heard the shower water running, I stripped out of my clothes and took out the lube and condoms I'd bought. Next, I lit all the candles I'd gotten for this very occasion and pulled down the covers.

I wanted the most intimate experience of my life with the man I loved to be perfect.

I settled onto the bed, naked as the day I was born. My anxiety about our first time was beginning to get the best of me when I heard the water turn off.

When Cooper came out of the bathroom with a towel around his hips, his eyes went wide with the scene I'd set. I knew he might tease me, but I was a romantic at heart. I wanted to remember our first time for the rest of my life.

"BABE," HE WHISPERED IN AWE AS HE LOOKED AROUND THE room. "This is beautiful."

I looked around, taking in what he saw. "I wanted us to remember it forever."

Cooper let the towel drop to the floor and crawled to me on the bed. He lowered his mouth and body onto mine, tangling our tongues as my hands roamed his body.

Holding him tightly, I flipped him onto his back and kissed my way down his throat, over his chest, and down his happy trail. I took his cock into my mouth and sucked gently, coaxing his pre-cum to the surface.

Coop moaned under me as I drank him down. My own cock was hard and throbbing, and I had to be careful not to blow too quickly.

“Babe, lube,” he said, panting.

I let his cock drop from my mouth while I reached for it. “Tell me what to do to get you ready.”

Cooper squirmed. “I can do it.”

“No, I want to do it. I want to learn.”

Coop sat up on his elbows and instructed me. “Lube up your fingers, yep like that, then circle my entrance.”

He laid back and let me go to work. I memorized what he liked and what drew out the most pleasure from him.

“Now, use more lube and press in with one finger until you feel the muscle give way. Then in and out, in and out, until you can add another. When you’re up to three, I’m gonna need that cock of yours.”

I had researched how to find his prostate and I watched his reactions. When he least expected it, I crooked my finger and rubbed over the gland. When his moan turned low at guttural, I knew I was doing it correctly.

“Babe, more,” he moaned. “I can take three.”

My cock was leaking again like earlier, and every time he moaned it pulsed. He was going to undo me with his noises alone.

When he grabbed for his shaft, I knew my time had come. I pulled my fingers from him and wiped them on a towel I’d placed nearby. Reaching for the condom, I tore the wrapper and slid it down my shaft. Cooper watched with a hooded gaze and heavy panting breaths.

“I need you,” he moaned.

“I know. Almost there, babe.” I stopped and looked at him. “How do you want to do this?”

Cooper smiled. “Missionary. I want to see your face when you take my ass the first time.”

God damn, he was gonna make me blow.

Lining up my cock at his hole, I pushed and pushed until the muscle gave in.

“Holy shit,” I panted as his ass squeezed the life out of my cock.

“I know, right? But you gotta move.”

I did as I was told and slowly worked my way in and out of him. Watching him watch me was heady. I’d read about changing the angle to hit the prostate, so I shifted my hips around to find it. He knew what I was doing.

“Babe, you don’t have to do that now. I’m so turned on, a couple more and I’ll blow.”

So I gradually sped up and moved in and out of him until he grabbed his shaft again. This time I let him and watched as his cum shot from his dick while his asshole simultaneously clinched around my cock.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I chanted as I worked my cum into the condom.

Spent and sated, I looked down at my boyfriend, all hot and sweaty. He’d never been more beautiful. I now understood what the great poets had been writing about.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Cooper ran his fingers down my cheek.

I smiled at him. “I just had an epiphany.”

“Really? Do tell.” The softness in his gaze melted me.

“I just came to a deeper understanding of some of the love poems I studied in college. I get them now.”

His lovesick expression encouraged me to go on.

I dropped down on my elbows over him and whispered to him. “*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach.*”

His hands came to my face, and I relished his touch. “You quoted Elizabeth Barrett Browning to me.”

I nodded. "It's because I love you."

Cooper smiled. "I love you, too, Captain."

I knew hearing that would never get old.

\* \* \*

THE WEEK AFTER CALLUM'S ACCIDENT, COOPER WAS scheduled to take his licensing exam in Nevada. He wanted to take it early so he and Callum could start the therapy program during the upcoming summer.

Declan had called me to see if I could go with him when he went to take the test. Callum was worried about him and thought he could use the support.

"Tell him not to worry. I was planning to go with him, anyway."

"Really?" Declan asked.

"Yeah, he asked me to go so he could study on the way."

"Great! I'm sure that will put Callum's mind to ease."

"Tell him I've got it under control, and not to worry."

Declan chuckled. "I'll tell him."

"How's he doing?"

He sighed. "As well as could be expected. Simon checked him out again today."

"That's good. Give him my best. And if you need any help over there with the stables, let me know. I'll be happy to help."

I didn't know a damn thing about horses, but I could learn.

"Thanks, man. I appreciate it. I'm actually interviewing some guys who can permanently take over the upkeep and care."

"That's great! I bet that makes Callum happy."

"He, uh, doesn't know about it yet," he said. "So don't tell Cooper yet. It's a surprise."

I frowned. “Why not?”

“Because I’m going to be paying them, and he’ll flip his lid and bust my balls.”

I laughed. “Yeah, okay.”

“You take care of Coop, and I’ll handle Callum.”

I smiled. “That’s the plan.”

After Cooper finished his two-day exam, he was fried. So I took it upon myself to arrange a couple of days in San Francisco of fun and rest for us.

He needed to relax after studying like a madman for so long. So when we left Reno, I drove in the other direction.

“Where are we going?”

I smiled. “I’m Cooper-napping you for a couple of days of forced relaxation.”

He laughed. “What?”

I reached over and took his hand. “I’m taking you to San Francisco for a couple of days. We’ll relax and see the sights.”

“Are we going clubbing?” He was too excited for me to say no.

“Sure.” My lack of enthusiasm made him laugh again. It was my favorite sound on earth.

“Okay, Captain! Lead the way! I’m all yours!”

## ***CHAPTER 11***

***COOPER***



## ***JULY 4TH COOKOUT***

SOMEHOW, we'd kept our relationship to ourselves for almost six months. Even though our friends suspected we were together, we'd never confirmed anything. We let them think whatever they wanted and hoped they would get tired of asking.

Callum worried that I was in over my head with Greg. He knew I couldn't just walk away from him, but had no idea why. If I knew him, he probably thought Greg was using me to satisfy his bi-curiosity. But now that he was with Declan, his attention was on his own boyfriend, instead of what I did when we weren't at work.

Since the accident in March, Greg had become more invested in us as a couple. His fear had him seeing us in a different light.

One morning, Greg picked up my phone to answer a call from Callum. When I asked what they talked about, both of them refused to give details about their conversation. Whatever was said had Callum even more convinced that Greg was going to hurt me.

Our biggest challenge to date would be Jackson and Simon's Fourth of July Cookout. It was a day-long event. All our friends were coming with their kids, even Christian and Alex. They'd booked their anniversary trip to Hawaii for the following week.

"Are you ready to go? Your hair doesn't move, so I know you're not primping."

We'd spent many nights at the stable apartments since I had so much work to do to get ready for the opening of Portland Equine Therapy, or PET. After the spring fundraiser with the Pirates, I'd handed my dog-walking clients off to another friend. So staying in the apartment out here made

more sense than driving back and forth to the city. And Callum didn't mind. He was with Declan all the time, anyway.

"Ha ha, very funny. I was putting on sunscreen," he said, walking out of the bedroom wearing nothing but his shorts. His chest was bare and muscled, and his board shorts hung low on his hips. My insatiable need to be plastered to him had to wear off soon, or I'd get nothing done.

I cleared my throat and looked away. "We don't want to be late."

He caught me staring and grinned. "We won't be if you can keep your hands to yourself. I just need to get a t-shirt and my shoes." He ran his hand down his sculpted torso and down to adjust himself.

"Right," I scoffed and rolled my eyes. "I'm the handsy one." I really was. And the closer he got, the harder it was to keep them off him.

"It's okay," he crooned. The sexy grin on his face wasn't helping the situation. "I understand. You just can't help yourself, babe." He leaned in and kissed me.

I wrapped my arm around his waist. "Where did this cocky asshole come from? You act so shy and quiet around everyone."

He wrapped me in his arms and looked down at me. "I learned long ago the best way to keep my business to myself was to keep my mouth shut."

"Sage advice from such a young one," I teased, before letting the humor fade away. "But these guys are our friends. If we fuck up around them, it'll be okay. They won't out us."

The light, playful banter of the morning was slipping away the closer we got to the time to leave the sanctuary of the stables. "I know, but if someone slipped up and accidentally said something around the wrong people..."

I nodded and kissed him on the chest. "Okay, I understand. But we gotta go now or we're gonna be late."

“Who’s going first?” Greg trailed kisses down my neck, causing goosebumps to spread across my body.

“You,” I moaned, tilting my head to give him better access. “I’ll ... lock up and be right... behind you.” He’d made me hard, and we had no time to take care of it. Asshole.

With one last kiss on my forehead, he pulled away. “Got it. And babe, try to keep your eyes off me today. I know it’ll be hard, but you can do it.” He patted me on the ass.

I just shook my head at my snarky boyfriend. “You too. If we get outed, it’ll be because of the way *you* look at *me*.” I ran my hands down my chest. I wasn’t as defined as he was, but I was no slacker.

“And how is that exactly?” he teased.

“Like I’m a hamburger and you’ve been juice-fasting for ten days,” I replied blandly.

He snorted. “Yeah, that might be right. Love ya, babe,” he called as he walked his fine ass out the door. I was a lucky man.

We’d mastered arriving separately when we were meeting up with friends. I couldn’t wait until the day came when we could take one vehicle instead of two.

WHEN I WALKED IN THE FRONT DOOR AT JACKSON’S, I WAS met by my main man Parker. “Hey, buddy!”

“Cooper Dooper,” he laughed, giving me a high five. “You ready to get into the pool?”

“Yep, lead the way. Where are your dads?” Neither one was in sight.

“Outside by the pool talking to Aidan.”

“Cool!” I was itching to see Greg since it had been like thirty minutes. I rolled my eyes at myself. I understood Christian’s reactions to Alex so much more now.

Walking out the patio doors, I took in the beautiful pool Jackson had put in for Simon and Parker, and the even more

beautiful sight of my boyfriend, laying on a lounge chair talking to Alex. His tanned skin glistened in the sun and when he caught me staring, he raised an eyebrow. *Fuck.*

I tore my gaze from his amused face and said hello to our friends. Parker wanted to swim, so I put my towel down on a lounge chair and took off my shirt to get in the water.

This time I caught *him* staring, so I returned that raised brow expression before giving Parker my full attention for a while. I loved that kid.

Marcus was playing with Trent in the water, while Zach, Megan, and Meredith dove for coins and saw who could stay under the longest. Park and I moved to the side and swam some laps together.

An hour later, I sat with Christian and Nora watching Dominick pester the fuck out of the kids with his dad jokes when Simon interrupted our amusement.

“Okay, everyone, time to eat,” he hollered. “Kiddos, I’ve got towels spread out for you over here in the sun to sit on while you eat.”

Christian got up and walked over to Alex, who held out a towel for him. I glanced at Greg, who was still stretched out on the lounge.

I ran my hands through my damp hair, then got up from my spot and walked over to him. “You hungry, Captain?”

Greg looked up at me and tried to keep the lust off his face. “You have no idea how hungry I am.”

I looked down at his cock and chuckled. I couldn’t get over how much he’d changed since we started sleeping together. It was difficult not to show every emotion on my face.

“Well, then, we better get in line.”

I dried off and went to the table where Simon and Magda had an enormous spread laid out. Once the kids were done, it was our turn.

We got our burgers with all the sides we could fit on our plates and headed to the long table on the patio. Greg sat down and I pulled my chair closer to him to leave plenty of room for everyone. I knew I was probably too close, but I didn't care. Fuck it.

When they had their food, Marcus and Aidan came and sat beside us. Declan and Callum and Alex and Christian sat directly across the big wrought-iron table. Jackson and Simon each took an end. Magda, Nora, and Dominick ate at the other table closest to the kids out of the sun.

Half a burger later, Declan wiped his mouth with his napkin, then looked at Greg. "I'm going to address the elephant around the pool."

Callum snorted as we looked at Dec, waiting for whatever he was going to say. You never knew with him.

"What are you talking about?" Greg asked, before taking another large bite of his burger.

"I'm just gonna come right out and ask. Everyone here wants to know." Declan waved his arm at all the guys. "Because we're confused as fuck."

Here it comes. But we'd prepared for this line of questioning. I'd follow his lead, but I hoped he would tell them a little about us.

"Okay?" Greg's tone was cautious now. He put down his burger to take a swallow of his beer.

"Are you two together or not?" Declan looked between us, "You've been dancing around one another for over a year—"

"Two years," Marcus corrected with a grin.

"Right. What he said." Declan repeated it. "Two years."

We looked at each other. I knew he wasn't ready, and he wasn't going to admit to anything. He was hoping they'd let it go.

"We're your friends. There's no one in the world you could trust more than the eight of us." Okay, so Declan wasn't letting it go.

Greg was hunched over his plate as he looked down the table at everyone. He wiped his mouth and put his napkin down before replying.

“What makes you think that we’re more than friends?”

Declan’s eyes went wide, and his brows flew up. Unfortunately for us, there was some damning evidence.

“Oh, I can answer that,” Jackson piped up, putting his beer down. “You told these losers after the conference championship game that you had a date. With a guy. Boom!” He mimed a mic drop.

I curled my lips in to keep from laughing at Jackson playing detective. Simon just shook his head at him.

But my guy was ready. “Doesn’t mean it was him.” He casually took another bite of his burger, like their questions meant nothing.

I sat there trying not to look amused by them attempting to put the pieces together. We’d given them some cause for suspicion and, knowing how loquacious our group was, they’d been talking about it. But they hadn’t pushed.

“Doesn’t mean it *wasn’t* Cooper either,” Alex pointed out. “Look, the point is you can trust us, man. Just know we’re here to support you whenever you need it.”

I couldn’t make him field all the questions. They needed to hear from me, too. “Fine, assholes. For the record, it’s none of your business.”

Callum looked at me. “You’re right, and you don’t have to say a word. But we all care a fuck ton about both of you. You of all people should know that, Coop.”

“And we would support you, however you need us to,” Christian chimed in as if they’d rehearsed it. “You know we’ve got your back on everything. You don’t even have to go public with it if you don’t want. But there are three married same-sex couples here. And you don’t have to feel ashamed —”

“I’m not ashamed,” Greg snapped. “I’m a cautious person. I have to be.”

Alex put his arm around Christian. “It’s okay. You have all our numbers if you need us. Just know we’re here.”

I really hoped he would give them something, but it looked like he was sticking to his guns.

“You can’t blame us for asking after what happened in the waiting room, dude,” Declan said. “It was pretty obvious you feel something for him.”

I looked at him, and Greg stared back. We knew they’d bring that up, but it was okay. I had a prepared statement to give like a PR rep. “We care about each other and like spending time together. We’ve become close friends over the last two years, and I’m helping him work through some personal things.”

Greg leaned closer to me and looked over at everyone. “I know you guys want more, and I trust you more than you know, but it’s just not the right time. I’ll explain it one day, I promise. Please, just drop it for now.”

They all went quiet, but nodded their heads. It looked like they were going to accept it.

Declan extended his hand to Greg. “Just remember, we’re a team and have your back,” he said. “If you need to hold on to him, you can do it in front of us without any more questions. You’re our little brother.”

Greg hung his head and nodded. A small, relaxed smile took over his face before he reached for my hand. I laced my fingers through his and gave him my best comforting smile.

I knew he was grateful they’d dropped it. And I knew they would. But no one created a diversion like Marcus.

“So,” he said, “who wants to bet on how long it takes Declan and Callum to get married?”

Declan groaned and Callum laughed. “No. No bets.”

As the conversation changed from Declan and Callum getting married, to Marcus and Aidan’s anniversary, and

finally to Alex and Christian's trip to Hawaii, Greg visibly relaxed the further the spotlight got from us. And he didn't let go of my hand. This was the first time he'd done this in public. And it gave me hope for the future.

"We dodged that bullet," he whispered to me.

"Yeah, we did," I said, feeling a little melancholy. I wanted to claim him in front of them, but he wasn't ready for that. Even though our friends had said it'd be no big deal, Greg still wasn't comfortable with it.

"You okay, babe?" He gave my hand a couple of little squeezes.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine." I tried to put on a convincing smile.

Greg knew I wanted to tell them, but he was terrified it would get out and back to his parents. I wasn't completely sure why, but I didn't push him on it.

I had a choice. Be with him secretly or be nothing at all. I chose him.

We had dessert and lots of Magda's cookies after we played the craziest game of pool basketball I'd ever seen. Marcus had appointed Dom as the referee, but as it turned out, he knew nothing about basketball. He only knew how to play soccer. So in the end, Dom selected Jackson and Simon as the winners, much to Marcus's protest. It was funny as hell.

When the sun began to set, we all went out front into the street to watch the fireworks. Their neighborhood had its own display. Lots of families were out on their lawns enjoying the holiday. I longed for a life like this with Greg. But a small part of me knew there was a chance we'd never have it.

Standing there with all our friends, holding each other, I wanted Greg to wrap me up in his arms and hold me.

Instead, we stood side by side with our arms crossed, holding each other's hidden hand. I was thankful to be able to touch him, and I guess it was enough for now. We only had a month before football took over our lives again, so I was determined to enjoy every minute I had with him until then.



## ***CHAPTER 12***

***COOPER***

## ***MEETING BROCK***

IT WAS GAME DAY, and Greg was in the kitchen making his first protein shake. I lounged in bed a few minutes longer, enjoying the warm sunshine that filled the window of his bedroom.

“Hey, babe? What time does Brock’s flight get in again?”

“Eleven-thirty.”

It had taken a lot to convince their parents to allow Brock to come to the game.

Greg had put the call on speakerphone so I could hear the conversation. I got up to give them privacy when his parents came on, but Greg stopped me by wrapping his hand around my wrist. I think he wanted me to hear what he and Brock had to deal with. Whatever his reason, it made me thankful for my own parents.

In the end, they’d reluctantly agreed but asked him to make sure Brock stayed clear of those *gay players* on the team.

“I don’t know why the league allowed those men to flaunt their sexuality on national TV. They should have been fined,” his father had said.

“Dad, he’ll be fine, I promise.”

He worked really hard to control his tone of voice. If he lost it with them, Brock wouldn’t be allowed to come.

Greg had never elaborated on the situation when we’d talked about it, but I knew their anti-gay rhetoric was the reason he felt the need to protect him. And ultimately why our relationship would remain a secret for who knows how long.

I got out of bed and slipped on a pair of athletic shorts before heading into the kitchen for coffee. I needed to see him before he left for the stadium for their one o’clock kickoff.

The whir of the blender prevented him from hearing me enter the room, so I accidentally scared the shit out of him

“Oh, fuck!” he yelled when I ran my hands around his naked, muscled torso.

I chuckled and squeezed him harder. “Sorry, baby. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Uh-huh.”

I playfully bit him on the shoulder, making him groan. “Don’t do that now. I’ve gotta be at the stadium in an hour.”

I laughed at his whining. “Sorry, didn’t mean to bone you up before a game.”

Greg turned in my arms and leaned against the counter. He seemed even taller like this. “Are you still growing?”

“Uh, yeah, I think so. Some men grow until their mid-twenties. I started the season last year at six-six, now I’m six-eight, almost six-nine.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I forget sometimes that you’re still a baby,” I teased.

He grinned. “This baby can fuck you into next week.” The feel of his hard cock against mine made me needy.

“That you can. But right now, you need to tell me more about your brother. How much does he know about us?”

“He knows everything, except the intimate stuff.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“Okay. Is there anything I shouldn’t say?”

Greg thought about it for a minute. “You can answer anything he asks.” He leaned down to kiss me, then pulled back.

“Before I forget, I left your passes on the table by the door. You know where the family entrance is, right?”

“Yep, I’ve been there with Christian.”

“Yeah, okay good. I’ll look for you during warm-ups. Maybe stand by the roped area.”

I nodded, a tiny bit of disappointment seeping in. “I’ve got to remember not to kiss you. And that’s going to be difficult.”

Greg held me in his arms and kissed the top of my head. “I know, babe. I’m sorry.”

I knew this was the beginning of even more secrecy, so I had to remind myself I agreed to every bit of this because the choice was simple. I’d do whatever he needed me to do to stay with him. And I couldn’t make him feel bad about it.

“It’s okay. I’ll survive,” I said, pasting a smile on my face.

\* \* \*

AT ELEVEN-FIFTEEN, I STOOD BY BAGGAGE CLAIM IN MY Pirates jersey, waiting for Brock. According to the board, his flight would land in four minutes. I realized I’d be running late, so I sent a text to Christian to let him know.

Me: Hey. Going to be late. I’ll be there a little after twelve.

Christian: Okay, what’s the delay?

Me: Picking up Greg’s brother from the airport for him.

Christian: Oh cool!

Me: Yeah. It’s the first time he will have seen Greg play.

Christian: Oh wow! See you when you get here.

Looking up from my phone, I checked the board again to see his flight had landed. I quickly sent Greg a text.

Me: Flight’s arrived-waiting at baggage claim.

Greg: Good. Thanks for picking him up, babe. I’ll owe you.

Me: I'll collect later.

Pocketing my phone, I focused on the people coming down the escalator. It wasn't long before I spotted a tall young man with a shock of blond hair moving down the escalator. Even if Greg hadn't shown me his picture, I would've picked him out. He looked just like his brother, just not as tall or muscled. And the Pirates jersey was a dead giveaway.

I walked toward him with a smile on my face, hoping he'd see me. When he spotted my jersey, his eyes went wide. I wonder what that was about?

"Hey, I'm Cooper. You have to be Brock unless you just have an uncanny resemblance to the name on the back of that jersey."

He smiled shyly, and I could see even more of his brother in him. "Hey. Yeah, that's me. Nice to meet you."

"You too. Ready to head to the stadium?"

"Sure." He matched my steps as we headed in the direction of the parking deck.

When we reached my blue Honda Accord, Brock looked over at me as he buckled his seatbelt. His gaze lingered, and it made me wonder what he saw.

"You're my brother's boyfriend, right?" It was impossible to miss the hopeful tone of his voice.

I smiled as I started the car. "What makes you think that?"

Brock was hesitant to answer.

"He told me about you. And about Las Vegas."

I nodded slowly, glancing in his direction as I backed out of the parking space. "Does that upset you?"

"No," he replied. "I'm happy for him. And you. He talks about you all the time."

I furrowed my brow, even as a small smile curved my lips. "He does?"

“Yeah, he says you’re great, and you don’t mind keeping everything a secret.”

I sighed because I did mind, but that was selfish of me. “I don’t mind it for now. I hope one day we can be out like our friends.”

Brock looked out the window as we headed onto the interstate. “I have another two years until I’m out of the house. Our parents would never allow me to be gay. They’d send me away.”

Fuck, this kid was going through some hell. “Have they come right out and said that?”

He thought for a minute. “I’ve heard them talking about it. Our church supports it. Makes me want to run away.”

As Brock took in the city, I thought about my own family. Both of my parents had been supportive when I came out, and when Jesse announced he was bi, it was no big deal. So I tried to give him the advice I would want someone to give to me if I’d been in his position.

“Can I give you some advice?”

“Sure.” His tone implied he was just being polite.

“I don’t know you, but what I do know is your brother loves you very much. Even though your life isn’t how you want it to be right now, please talk to Greg or someone you trust before you resort to that. I’ll even give you my number if you want. Just don’t do something that would jeopardize your safety.”

I knew his brother would take him in, but it wasn’t my place to say so.

Brock sat quietly and continued to peer out the window. We couldn’t go to the game like this. He’d come to have fun, and I didn’t want Greg to see his brother anything but excited. He was ecstatic Brock was here.

“But,” I said, “while you’re here, we’re going to have a good time. You can look at all the boys you want, and I may even point out a few. We’ve got primo seats, and all our

friends' husbands and kids will be there. Except for Callum. He's a boyfriend like me."

A smile began to bloom on his face. Maybe I'd gotten through to him, but if I didn't, at least I tried.

"I can see why my brother loves you."

I grinned. "Why's that?"

"You're like this ray of sunshine that refuses to be dimmed," he snarked.

I already liked this kid.

"That's me. You can call me Ray," I joked.

When we arrived at the stadium, I used my parking pass to pull into the player's parking lot. Luckily, I found a spot near Greg's *Tacoma*.

"I can't believe he's still driving a truck."

I smiled. "Why? You think he needs something more flashy?"

Brock smiled. "Not flashy, just a little more than a pickup truck. Maybe a Porsche or a BMW."

"You really think he'd buy a Porsche?" There was no way he'd do that.

Brock looked over at me as we walked to the friends and family entrance.

"He would if it would make you happy."

I pulled our passes out of my back pocket and handed one to Brock. We slipped the lanyards over our heads as we walked to the gate.

"Yeah, well, I couldn't care less about a Porsche. I just want him."

When we reached the gate, an older gentleman was talking to the people in front of us as he scanned them in. When he turned to us, he must have seen what I did in Brock.

"Well, well, who do we have here? You have to be Mr. Foster's brothers."



Before I could answer, Brock piped up, “Yes, sir, that’s me. This is his b—”

I elbowed him, then took over. “Best friend, I’m Greg’s best friend. Nice to meet you.”

The man smiled at us. “It’s nice to see Mr. Greg finally has someone using his seats. I think you all just might be the first ones since he started here last year.”

“Well, we’re not letting those seats go to waste anymore!” From now on, I’d be here every time they played at home.

The man grinned. “Excellent. Enjoy the game, gentlemen.”

“Thank you,” Brock answered.

As he followed me through the thinning crowd, I realized that this could be my new Sunday routine. Morning sex, a shower, late breakfast, attend my man’s game. I could get used to that.

Exiting the tunnel, I could see the Pirates on the field for their pre-game warm-up.

Marcus was running down the sideline, while Alex was under center taking a few snaps. Searching the sea of purple performance wear, there he was. My tight end. A grin split my face, and I had to get it together and not look so love-sick. Fat chance of that. I was a terrible actor.

Greg spotted us and came jogging over. He went in for a long hug from his brother. I pulled out my phone and took a picture of the two of them. When they pulled apart, Greg looked at me and held out his hand to shake. What the fuck?

My hand in his, he pulled me in for a bro-hug and whispered in my ear. “Love you, babe.”

I returned my half of the hug and pulled back. This wasn’t so bad. Maybe I could handle the limited affection.

“Come down on the field after the game. I want to introduce you to our friends.”

“Wait,” I said. “Let me get one more picture of the two of you.”

Greg put his arm around Brock, and the two of them grinned at me. I could see how happy he was to have his brother here.

“Okay, gotta go back to the locker room. See you after the game, ba... boys.” I laughed at his faux pas.

“Go,” I said. I tried to school my expression, but God, I loved him so much. Put him in a tight spandex uniform, and hello Mr. Woodie.

Climbing the stairs to our seats, Brock put his hand on my shoulder. When I turned around, he smiled at me. “You’re good for him. Don’t let my parents keep you apart.”

I nodded, then sobered at the thought. “I’ll try. But it’s not up to me.”

Brock sighed. “I know. Just don’t give up on him.”

When we finally reached our seats and sat down, Callum turned to us, introducing himself to Brock. He had Meredith with him. “Hi, I’m Callum, Cooper’s friend.”

“I’m Brock. Nice to meet you.”

“You too.” Callum grinned at me like the cat who ate the canary. I’d have to fill him in eventually, but not right now.

We had a game to win.

And I had a man to cheer on.

## ***CHAPTER 13***

***GREG***

## ***OUR FIRST CHRISTMAS***

COOP and I essentially shared two residences. Three if you counted the apartment at the stables. I kept some clothes at his place, and he kept some at mine. It made things so much better than one of us doing the walk of shame every morning.

We were kicking ass in the conference, and our last home game this year was in two days on Christmas Day. I wouldn't be spending Christmas with my family as usual. But I would be spending it with my love. And I needed to show him some special attention.

I was beginning to notice little things that told me the secrecy was wearing thin on Cooper. He was such a happy person and always saw the good side of things. But lately, I'd noticed he wasn't his happy-go-lucky, sometimes over-the-top self. I'd catch him watching Christian and Alex, and Marcus and Aidan wistfully. Jackson and Simon were rock solid, and Callum was in a relationship with Declan, leaving him and me as the two oddballs. We'd given up trying to deny anything, and they eventually stopped asking, so that made things easier in a way. But I could see the longing in his eyes for the kind of relationships our friends had. And I wanted to give it to him more than anything.

Since I wasn't able to tell the world what he meant to me, I planned to spoil him in the ways I could.

We decided to start our holiday early on Christmas Eve and pick up again where we left off after the game.

Because of our crazy schedules and gearing up for the playoffs, we hadn't had time to do all the things that made Christmas special. We'd only managed a small tree, and I wanted more than that with him. It was our first Christmas as an 'us'. I wanted it to be memorable.

Coop was making cookies for the LGBTQ Youth Center Holiday Party being held tomorrow and I was packing the

personal care bags. It was something he and Christian started doing when they moved to Portland after college.

He set the oven timer on the last tray. “Where are we staying Christmas Eve?”

“As long as I’m with you, I’m happy. But I’d rather stay here if you’re okay with it. The bed is bigger, and I learned the hard way that I don’t sleep well when you’re not with me.”

Cooper shifted his gaze to me, and in that one look, I saw how much he loved me. “I don’t either,” he said quietly.

He’d gone home to Idaho for Thanksgiving, while I went to see my family. Each of us had only stayed two nights, but it had been the most miserable two nights of my life. I couldn’t sleep without him. The bed didn’t feel right, and every time I turned over to put my arms around him, he wasn’t there. Even though we texted and FaceTime’d every night, it hadn’t been the same.

I stopped what I was doing and got up to go to him. I needed my hands on him. Cooper slipped his arms around me as I cradled his face before bringing my lips to his. I gave him a kiss that I hoped showed him how much I loved him, too. But just in case, I had to make sure he knew.

“I love you so much, babe. Hang in there with me. Next Christmas, we’ll be able to do whatever we want to do. Okay?”

Cooper looked at me, and I could see the sparkle in his eyes. “Are you saying we’ll be out this time next year?”

“I’m afraid to jinx it, but I hope so.”

To make up for all the bullshit I’d put him through, I had planned a Christmas Eve surprise he wouldn’t forget. When Coach announced we’d have the day off, it gave me time to put my plan into action.

Christmas Eve morning, we started the day by going out for breakfast to his favorite spot. The Diner wasn’t busy this morning, so we easily found a booth in the middle. After checking out the holiday fare, we ordered Red Velvet pancakes and bacon.

“Oh my God, these are so good.” He moaned after the rich pancakes drenched in butter and warm maple syrup hit his tongue. It reminded me of the sounds he made when he sucked my dick.

I stared at him across the booth. I reached under the table and pressed on my quickly inflating cock.

Coop looked up at me, bit his lip, then smiled.

“You know exactly what you’re doing to me, don’t you?”

He pinched his thumb and index finger together to indicate an inch. “Maybe a little.”

I leaned across the table and whispered to him. “Just wait until I get you home. I’m gonna edge you until you beg me to let you come.”

His eyes went wide, then he fluttered his lashes and smiled. “Oh Captain, do you promise?”

I shook my head and went back to my breakfast. “Smartass,” I muttered.

After we finished eating, we dropped off the cookies and care bags for the party, then finished up some last-minute shopping for the Children in Need Program the Pirates sponsored every year. I signed up for two families so Coop and I could do it together. We’d already purchased all the toys, but we wanted to get something for the parents. Throwing in everything they might need for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day meals was just something I wanted to do.

After doing all the shopping and making all our deliveries around town, I was running out of things to do. I needed to keep him away from my apartment until I got a text from Mary-Ann, my decorator.

“What do you want for dinner? I’m sure all the delivery places will close early for the holiday, so we’d probably better decide.”

I shrugged. “I’m good with anything. Whatever you want is fine with me,” I lied.

Cooper looked at me like I'd lost my mind. He knew my food preferences, especially as a professional athlete. "Really? You want a big greasy burger for Christmas dinner?"

Before I had to answer him, my phone pinged with an incoming text. I scooped it up, and read the message:

Mary-Ann: All done! Have a Merry Christmas.

I smiled at the text and closed the app.

"Good news?" he asked, his brow raised with curiosity.

I smiled and took his hand. "The best."

When we arrived back at my apartment, I grabbed the bags from the backseat before we went up. I was so excited for him to see what had been done in the five hours we'd been gone.

"Hey, can you open the door for us?"

Cooper nodded. "Yeah, sure." He fished his keys out of his pocket and looked over at me. "Are you okay?"

I grinned. "Yeah, why?"

"You just seem so..." he waved at my whole body, "giddy."

Laughing, I bumped his shoulder. "I'm just excited for Christmas, that's all. And if we weren't in this public elevator, I'd kiss the fuck out of you."

Cooper looked at the ascending floor numbers over the elevator door. "Hold that thought, baby. Only a few more floors to go."

Hearing him call me baby with affection in his tone warmed me inside. And he wasn't wrong. Giddy was the right word to describe how I was feeling.

When we finally reached my door, Cooper put his key in the lock and opened it. Two steps inside and he stopped.

"Babe? What have you done?"

I sat the bags down and closed the door to keep the unmistakable scent of fresh Christmas trees inside. I wrapped



him up in my arms and put my chin on his shoulder. “Merry Christmas, babe.”

I beamed at him. “I called my decorator and asked if she could help me decorate my apartment for the holiday. I wanted it magazine cover-worthy and over the top.”

“How did she pull this off so quickly?”

“I don’t know, but she’s amazing.”

I beamed at the gorgeous display of the two fully decorated Christmas trees that could be seen from the front door. One stood in the dining room, and the other in the family room. The floor was lined with battery-operated candles that flickered all throughout the house to give a romantic glow.

In the dining room, a narrow pencil tree was decorated in white lights and handmade glass ornaments made up primarily of horses and dogs. It was a tribute to his love of animals.

In the family room, the gas fireplace was lit with a low burning flame a few feet from where a fifteen-foot Frasier Fir stood dressed in multi-colored lights and classic ornaments. Accents of music notes, books, and footballs were scattered through, as well as ornaments of places we’d visited. White twinkling lights were strung through, giving it a warm and cozy feeling. Under the tree, the gifts we’d bought for each other sat on a tree skirt.

Cooper walked around, looking at all the special touches I had Mary-Ann find for me. It was romantic as fuck, and I couldn’t wait for him to see the bedroom.

“There’s more to see,” I said to him, breaking him out of his awed gaze.

“How? Why?” He spun around, trying to take it all in.

The smile on his handsome face told me I’d pulled off my surprise.

I walked over to him. “I wanted this Christmas to be memorable for us. And when we didn’t have time to do all the things to make it this way ourselves, I called in some help.”

He looked around, taking in the scene that could have been out of a holiday movie. “It’s beautiful, babe. You didn’t have to do this for me. Just being with you is enough, but I’m really happy you did.”

I shook my head no. “See, that’s just it. It’s not enough, not for me, anyway. You’ve kept us a secret from your best friends for almost a year. I wanted to give you a beautiful space to match your beautiful heart.” I put my hand over it. “I love you, Cooper Evans, and I’m thankful every day you pestered me to be your friend.”

He gazed at the room and smiled up at me. “It’s spectacular.”

“It is,” I said, “but you haven’t seen the rest.”

I took him by the hand and led him to my room. Another fir tree stood draped in white lights and decorated with different ornaments that represented love. This was our tree in our room. Every surface held flickering tea lights, including the bathroom.

Cooper was speechless. “I can’t believe you did all this for me. It’s so romantic.”

I put my hands on his shoulders and pulled him back to my chest. I wrapped my arms around him and placed sweet kisses on his neck. “I would do anything for you, my love. I don’t think you realize how much I love thee. Let me count the ways.”

His head rolled back onto my shoulder. “Oh god, you’re breaking out that literature degree on me again,” he sighed.

I chuckled, then took his earlobe between my lips. Sliding my hands down his arms, I laced our fingers together. “We have dinner waiting in the oven. But it’s your choice.”

Cooper turned in my arms and ran his hands over my shoulders. Looking into my eyes, he made his choice. “I’ll always choose you over anything else.”

He ran his fingers through my hair and pulled my mouth to his. I let him lead and willingly followed. Wordlessly, we

undressed and dropped the clothes to the floor. Coop took me by the hand and led me to the shower.

When the water was warm, he stepped in, and I followed. We didn't need words to communicate how we felt about each other. We'd developed our own love language with a single look, the brush of a hand, or a smile that melted the heart.

I was acutely aware that the threat we lived under could break us into a million pieces, but somehow, all the secrecy brought us closer. There was nothing in the world I wanted more than a life with Cooper Evans, but I knew I couldn't keep him and keep my family, too. But right now, in the solitary world he and I lived in, I had them all.

Under the running water, I massaged his shoulders and neck, then laid soft kisses on his skin. Coop reached for my body wash and poured some into his hand. He worked them into a lather, ready to get us clean.

I adjusted the water flow to the lower spray head, while Coop massaged my scalp and neck with his nimble fingers. "That feels so good, babe. I didn't realize how tense I was this morning."

"I know. That's why I wanted to do this for you."

The corner of my mouth hitched as I looked down at him. "You always know what I need, even before I do."

Gliding his hands down my body, he thoroughly covered every inch of my skin. "Not always, but I've learned to read you pretty well."

Cooper reached for my aching cock and stroked me gently. "Hold on to me," he said. I did as he asked and braced my hands on his shoulders. With one hand, he stroked my shaft, while the other moved around to my ass. I kept my eyes on him as his slippery fingers moved closer to my hole.

My heart beat faster at the anticipation of where he was going. I'd only ever topped him, and we'd never explored this option for me.

"Do you trust me?" He waited for my approval.

“Implicitly.”

He leaned in and kissed the skin over my heart. “If you don’t like it, just say so, and I’ll stop.”

I bend down to kiss his forehead. “I know you’d never hurt me.”

My breathing sped up as he brought me closer to the reality of who I was. I craved his touch where I’d been raised to believe it was wrong, and when his finger circled and circled, then finally breached me, I released what felt like a breath I’d held since I met this beautiful man.

I moaned and dropped my head to his shoulder as he used gentle pressure on my cock and my ass to bring me so much pleasure. When he finally pushed inside me, I let go and lived in the moment with him. My orgasm rolled through me like a tidal wave, building slowly before cresting over me.

“Kiss,” I panted as I fused my mouth to his. My release erupted from me gently in what felt like endless waves as he played my body like a finely tuned instrument.

It was slow.

It was beautiful.

And it was my moment of clarity.

I’d never wanted anything with a man before him. I was his, and only his. I knew myself well enough to know I’d never want or need another person the way I did him.

How could loving someone this deeply be wrong?

My breathing slowly returned to normal as I clutched Cooper to me. Our bodies met like puzzle pieces that only fit each other.

“That was amazing,” I whispered to him. “Now it’s your turn.”

Cooper looked up at me. “No need, babe. I went hands free just from watching you.”

My love for him ran so deep that it stole my breath. Tears pooled in my eyes when my emotions took me over. Staring at

him, he reached up and cupped the side of my face.

“You okay, baby?”

I dipped my forehead to his. “You mean everything to me, and I’m terrified I’m going to lose you. Please don’t let my fear tear us apart. Be stronger than me. Have faith that our love can overcome anything.”

Cooper pulled back and looked me in the eye. “I’ve got you, sweetheart. You’re the love of my life. And if anyone can weather a storm of hatred and bigotry, it’s us.”

I clung to his words and needed to bring back the celebratory mood. It was Christmas, after all.

“Let’s get out and go eat. We have a holiday to celebrate.”

The heartfelt smile on his face lifted my mood.

“I’m ready.”

I still said a small prayer that I didn’t destroy us.

*Please don’t let me fuck this up.*

*Please.*

## ***CHAPTER 14***

***COOPER***

## ***THE SUPER BOWL IN SAN DIEGO***

I'D ALMOST LOST my voice from cheering during the game. Simon stood next to me, holding Ava in his arms. He'd fitted her with a set of infant headphones, and she even had a baby shirt with her dad's number on it.

"I know she'll never remember this," he said, "but I wanted both of our children to be here when he played his last game and retired from football."

I nodded. "I get it, Simon. They're big moments, and you and Jackson deserve a life of your own."

Simon had become one of my closest friends and had no problem saying exactly what he thought about my life. So when he gave me that look, I knew he had something to say. "You know we want nothing but happiness for you, Coop, and if Greg gives that to you, we're happy for you. We're here for you, good or bad, no matter what."

All I could do was nod. "I know, Si, and it's not my story to tell. We're both in a good place, so don't worry."

"Alright," he sighed, "Just remember, I'll be here if you need me."

I smiled at him. "I know. You're the best."

Here we were, a year later, and not even our closest friends really knew about us. But I wasn't sure how much longer I could do it because it was slowly eating away at me.

Why couldn't we openly share our lives with our friends?

"Hey, Coop," Callum called, "ready to go down on the field?"

I smiled at him and tried to shake the melancholy trying to hijack my day. "Yeah, I'm ready."

With all the kids and Magda in tow, we made our way down to the field level with the help of stadium security. As



we stood at the designated spot for family, Magda looped her arm through mine. I looked down at the sweet lady who'd become the grandmother to all these kids and smiled.

“Everything will be okay, Cooper. Have faith in him.” She patted my arm.

There was no need to deny anything any longer. My friends and Magda, evidently, knew about us without ever having it confirmed.

“Thanks, Magda. I'll try.”

When the game ended, both teams met in the middle to shake hands. It was fascinating to watch the ground crew roll in the trophy presentation stage from down here. In the five minutes it took for them to get it in place, the gates had been opened to us, and we made our way onto the field.

My friends found their husbands as I stood on the field looking for Greg, lost in a sea of people. I searched through the masses congratulating their player and kids bouncing up and down around them. The feeling down here was electric.

“Cooper!” I heard him call over all the noise. I turned to see him coming to me. Somehow, Greg found me in all the organized chaos on the field. I reminded myself not to kiss him or give him more than a bro hug. This wasn't about me. This was his day.

So I gave him the biggest grin I could muster as he approached me. As he drew closer, I saw what he couldn't say aloud in his eyes. *I love you, babe, and I'll make this up to you.*

I nodded. “Congratulations, man!”

I held my hand out to pull him into a bro-hug and slapped his back.

“Thanks, ba—” Greg stopped himself, and blew out a breath, followed by a deep sigh.

Laughing was all I could do, so I teased him. “Just about blew it, dude.”

“Not yet,” he grinned, “but definitely later. Where are the others?”

I shrugged and looked around. “Around here somewhere. Looks like you’re needed up there.” I motioned toward the stage. Greg turned to look, then nodded.

“Yeah, I gotta go.”

He reached out to shake my hand. This was the only way we could touch each other with all the cameras around. I knew why he wasn’t with Alex and the guys, but they didn’t. It would kill him if they knew what his parents had said about them. And his homophobic parents were probably watching.

“Remember what to do?” he asked.

I nodded as he walked away. “As if I could forget,” I scoffed.

Greg nodded, then disappeared into the sea of people, only to resurface on the stage. Even at six-eight, I couldn’t really lose him in a crowd.

Our eyes met, and he tilted his head to indicate where the others were. So I made my way over and stood by Magda for the presentation. I draped my arm around her shoulders, and she smiled at me.

“You’re doing good, sweetheart.” She patted my arm, and it made me feel better.

All the starters had taken the stage for the awards before the presentation. After the trophy was presented, Coach thanked the team for an outstanding season, and Greer Rowan, a sexy silver fox dressed in dark gray slacks and a purple button-down, couldn’t say enough good things about his team. He highlighted how impressed he was with the family-first mentality of the team, and how far it had carried them.

After the cheers and the purple confetti was dropped, the announcer then moved on to the individual awards. First up was the defensive player.

“The outstanding defensive player of the game made three quarterback sacks and fourteen tackles. It is none other than

Jackson Kincaid,” he announced to the cheering crowd.

Pride swelled in me for my friend, and I looked over at Simon, who was beaming and holding their baby. Parker was bouncing up and down with the other kids.

Jackson smiled from ear to ear as he took the trophy.

“Thank you,” he said, “but this award is a group effort. My defensive guys played their hearts out all season, and when I wasn’t sure I’d make it back from the ACL injury, they never gave up on me. So this is for the entire brotherhood of the Pirates’ defense.”

We all applauded for him as the presenter asked the question we knew was coming.

“So Jackson, rumor has it that this is your last season. Are you in fact retiring?”

Jackson’s swallowed and his eyes became glassy, and he took a second drawing in a deep breath. “Yes, Brett, I’m retiring. After the injury, my life completely changed. I married the best man in the world, and now I have two beautiful kids that I want to spend time with. I’m ready to be a full-time dad and husband.”

Simon looked at him with so much love on his face and gave him a single tip of his head before leaning down to kiss a sleeping Ava.

I was lost in the sweet moment and almost missed the other award.

“The MVP of the game scored three touchdowns, rushed for one hundred eighty-two yards, and gave the Pirates the lead with a sixty-two yard touchdown run... Heisman Trophy runner-up, Declan Miller.”

I immediately swung my gaze to Callum. Meredith was celebrating, and he was applauding with his *I told you so* look on his face.

“Congratulations Declan. After your second season with the Pirates, and your player rating has continued to move up. It looks like you’re happy to be in Portland.”

I rolled my eyes at the announcer's dumb question, but Declan took it in stride. I could see him answering with *duh*, and it made me chuckle.

“Yeah, Brett, it was the best decision of my career. This team is a family from the top down. Every one of us feels it. And I wouldn't want to play anywhere else.”

*Good answer, Declan.*

“You're a free agent after next season. Do you want to continue to play in Portland in the future?”

I furrowed my brow. Where did they unearth this guy from? Did he have a clue how stupid that one was? I looked at Callum, who just shook his head.

“I'd love that. My daughter loves it in Portland, and my boyfriend is a veterinarian in the city. So Portland is home for us.”

I was happy for my friends. It was validating and all the haters could go fuck off. Including my boyfriend's parents.

Greg talked to the guys around him, but found my gaze often. I smiled and forced all my doubts away. I wouldn't ruin this night for him.

After the presentation, I met back up with Simon and Callum. Magda was talking with Christian and coordinating the swimming at the hotel. Marcus had a laughing Trent thrown over his shoulder, as Aidan looked on with pride and joy written all over his face for his family.

I wanted that with Greg, and he said we'd get there. I just needed to be patient with him.

After the presentation wrapped up, we all went back to the hotel to wait for our men. I walked in and tossed my wallet and keycard on the table of the suite I was sharing with him.

I headed to the bedroom and flopped onto the bed. I stared at the ceiling, thinking about how this Super Bowl experience was so much different from the one in Miami. I closed my eyes for just a moment, but I must have fallen asleep while waiting.

The bed dipped and stirred me. I slowly opened my eyes to find my boyfriend hovering over me with the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen. Greg cupped my face with his right hand, rubbing his thumb back and forth across my cheek.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” he teased. “Ready to go celebrate?”

I lifted my hand to his face and leaned up to kiss him. A look of concern washed over his handsome face.

“What’s wrong, babe?”

“Nothing,” I replied, forcing a smile. “Just tired.”

Greg narrowed his gaze. “Are you sure? I know you better than anyone, Coop. I know when you’re not full tilt Cooper.”

I snickered. “Full tilt Cooper? What the fuck is that?”

He lowered his face closer to mine. “It’s when I know you’re 100% happy. It shows on your face, in your eyes, in the way you talk, and in how you interact with people. You’re snarky and funny, tell terrible jokes, and just radiate happiness like the sun.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Interesting assessment. Where do you think I am right now on that tilt scale you have?”

Greg looked at me, the humor fading away. “I think you’re at about 75% tilt. I can tell something is bothering you.” He sighed, hanging his head, “And I’m pretty sure I’m the one causing it.”

I pulled him down and he buried his face in my neck as he lowered his body to mine. I loved the feel of his weight on me and rubbed his back.

“I’m sorry, babe. I don’t mean to be that way.” I didn’t mean to make him worry about me on his big night.

Greg raised up onto his elbows to look at me. “I’m the one who should be saying that. But I promise, I’m going to make it up to you very, very soon.”

I smiled. “How soon?”

Kissing my cheek, he told me his plan. “In two weeks, I’m whisking you away for two weeks of vacation. And don’t argue. I’ve already talked to Callum about the therapy program. He’s got it covered.”

I didn’t think I could smile any bigger. “Really? Another epic surprise like Christmas?”

He grinned at me. “There’s my full-tilt Cooper. And to answer your question, I hope it will be.”

I ran my hands through his hair and pulled his mouth to mine for a quick kiss.

“You know, just being with you is all I need.”

“I know,” he said, “but I have so much fun planning them. Don’t take that away from me, babe.”

I held his face in my hands. “Fine! If I have to go on a vacation, can you make it somewhere warm and sunny like this place?”

Greg grinned. “I can so do that. But you gotta get up. We gotta celebrate with the guys.”

“Okay,” I groaned, “if you insist. I’m not sure I’m cut out for this life of luxury.”

Greg laughed. “Too bad, Coop. You’re stuck with me.”

I could only hope.

## ***CHAPTER 15***

***GREG***



## ***MARCH - VACATION***

THE SECOND WEEK OF MARCH, Cooper and I flew to the Keys. I wanted to take him somewhere that we could go out and have fun without worrying about people recognizing me. I was no Alex Hayes, but vacationing in the small chain of islands was the perfect choice since it was the furthest place away from Portland.

I'd booked a private beachfront villa that offered complete privacy when we needed it, and we'd chosen to do some cool things. The in-ground saltwater pool with a tanning ledge was great to relax in when the sun got too warm. The nightlife was just enough to keep us interested in going out and allowed us to do things we couldn't do at home in public without raising questions.

"Oh. My. God. How did you find this place?" Cooper was enamored with the villa. The queen-sized bed in our room was outfitted with brand-new premier bedding. Coop had a thing about sheets, so I paid a little extra for them to get the bedding we wanted.

"One of the guys on the team was here with his wife, and when I mentioned I was going, he told me about this place. So I found a realtor who knew something about it, and Voila!"

Coop's smile lit me up. "I may never want to leave."

*Me neither, sweetheart.*

We spent the first two days laying on the beach and lounging in the pool, soaking up the warm March sun. Our little stretch of beach was relatively private, so when I wanted to kiss him, I could without fear of being spotted, or recognized.

Spending the day in the warm sunshine swimming, snorkeling, or kiteboarding with Cooper was the most relaxing fun I'd had in a long time. We had dinner at a different place

every night and found some bars we both enjoyed. At the end of the night, we walked on our strip of beach or stretched out on the sand to look at the stars. I held him close and breathed in the salt air. It was incredible being here with him like this, and it made me long for a life with him, one where I didn't force him to hide.

It felt like a time out of time. We were just Greg and Cooper. And the usual weight I carried about disappointing him took a back burner.

The second Tuesday, we ended up back at Banger's, our favorite bar, getting a buzz from ordering what felt like every rum-based drink imaginable from Jack, the bartender. And of course, with multiple drinks made of rum, came dancing.

Tipsy Cooper was totally uninhibited. He danced to whatever music was playing and with whomever he chose. I was a reluctant dancer, but he managed to talk me into a slow song a couple of times. When Khalid's "Better" played, it struck me how much the song could have been written about us. I held him close and moved to the music as his hands roamed all over my body, making me hard as a post.

As we moved to the beat, I was caught up in the music, the man, and the love I was feeling for him. I leaned in and sang the words, *nothing feels better than this*. I felt his smile against my cheek, and I had to kiss him.

Normally I would never have made such a public display, but as it turned out, Banger's was a gay-friendly bar. Not sure how we missed the rainbow flags and same-sex couples, but inside its walls, we felt safe to be in love out here in the open.

When the music changed, I went back to the bar while Cooper danced to the 80's classic *Whip It* by Devo. I sat at the bar watching him with what had to be the most love-sick expression on my face. He was unintentionally funny and loving life. He was Full-Tilt Cooper.

"Are you two honeymooning?" Jack had obviously noticed our affection for one another.

I snorted and looked at Coop swaying to the music. “No, but I wish we were.” When I heard those words come out of my mouth, my eyes widened. I shut up before I gave up any more of my secrets.

Jack laughed. “It’s okay, mate, you’re among friends here.” He paused, shifting his gaze to Cooper, then chuckled. “Does he know you feel that way?”

I looked back at the dance floor. Cooper was feeling no pain and blowing kisses at me. I snorted again and turned back around.

I looked down, grateful for the water Jack placed in front of me, as my vision had already started swirling. Lifting my head, I peered into the understanding gaze of the bartender.

“I think so. But no one knows about us,” I mumbled. I crooked my finger at the friendly older man to lean forward. “But I’m gonna ask him to marry me.”

Jack smiled. “That’s great! You should get married here in the Keys.”

I looked at him in confusion. “Why?”

“There’s no better time than the present. Why wait if he’s the one?”

Jack told me about some friends of his here in the Keys, and it gave me an idea I hoped I wouldn’t forget when I sobered up.

“Drink up, buddy,” he said, pushing the water toward me. “You’re gonna need to have your wits about ya to get him home.” He snickered at Cooper’s free-form dancing.

I smiled. “Yeah, he’s a handful, but I love him so damn much.”

“It shows. And he looks at you the same way.”

My eyes went back to Coop, who was now singing the lyrics to *Vogue* with all the hand motions. I snorted. God, he made my heart happy.

“Hey, Jack?” I said, turning around. “Can you tell me how to get in touch with those friends of yours?”

The bartender grinned at me, pulled out a pad of paper, and wrote down the name of the website for me. I folded it and put it in my wallet, then pulled out my credit card to pay for our tab.

Jack waved me off. “Consider it a wedding gift.”

I blushed, then chuckled. The thought of marrying Coop sounded better and better.

When we left the bar an hour later, I took Cooper by the hand. He looked up at me and smiled, then leaned his head against my shoulder. I shifted and put my arm around him.

“I wish we could live here,” he sighed, the buzz now mostly worn off.

“Why, babe?”

“Because I can love you openly down here. Not like at home.”

And that was my fault. But I had a plan to fix it. And making plans was my thing.

As we neared the villa, he picked his head up. “Are we going to the beach?”

“Yeah, but let’s go in first. I wanna change clothes.”

After I changed, I opened the sliding door to the deck and walked down onto the beach. Needing a minute to get my thoughts together, I stood and looked at the sky. I weighed the consequences of what I was about to do. I knew all the secrecy was eating at him. But if he agreed, we’d have each other forever, no matter what.

The sound of the sliding door closing caught my attention. I turned to see him walking toward me with two bottles of water.

“Thanks, babe.” I took the bottle he handed me.

“Thought we both could use one.”

I sat down on the sand and parted my knees to pull him down between my legs. Coop sat with his back to my chest, and I wrapped my arms around him. My chin rested on his shoulder while his head reclined against me. The nighttime sky was clear and full of stars, and the moon was high overhead, lending its light to the beach.

“It’s so beautiful here,” he murmured.

I held him close and rocked us from side to side. “Yeah, it is.”

Cooper hummed and swayed with me. I was nervous and hopefully, I’d get this out the right way.

“I love holding you like this,” I whispered in his ear.

Coop smiled and I could feel it against my skin. “Me too. I can feel your heartbeat.”

That made me smile. I looked up at the stars after a minute, then I drew in a deep breath for courage and told him what I had on my mind.

“I’m sorry about all the hiding at home. I promise it won’t be much longer.”

He nodded and took a sip of his water. “I know, babe. It’s for Brock.”

I leaned in and kissed his cheek. “I never want you to question how much I love you. I know this situation is unusual and fucked up, but it has nothing to do with how I feel about you. I’ll deal with all of that when the time comes.”

“Okay?” He sounded confused, so I held him tighter.

“You’re the love of my life, Cooper. I didn’t know it when I met you that Sunday afternoon three years ago. But I do now.”

I paused and looked up at the sky. “*I would not wish for any other companion in the world but you’.*”

Cooper turned and crawled onto my lap so we were face to face. “I’ve heard that before,” he said, as his arms went around my neck.

I nodded. “It’s Shakespeare. From *The Tempest*.”

Cooper leaned in and whispered against my lips. “Say it again.”

I leaned back enough to see his eyes, then put my hand over his heart. “I would not wish any companion in the world but you. And if you’d marry me, I’d be the happiest man in the world.”

His eyes widened, and he was silent a moment before he spoke. His voice was barely above a whisper. “Are you serious?”

Tears filled my eyes as I confessed my love to him.

I nodded, a tear running down my face. I chuckled and wiped it away. “I’ve never been more serious. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, have kids with you, and be your husband until the end of time.”

Coop’s eyes filled with tears. “Ask me again.”

I nodded, smiled, and wiped my eyes. Choked up with emotion, I took his hands in mine and kissed them. Moving my gaze to his, I asked him again. “Cooper Evans, would you do me the honor of marrying me?”

He laughed, then hugged me fiercely. “Yes, baby. I’ll marry you.”

Coop smashed his mouth to mine. Our tongues met as he pushed me back into the sand. His hands came up to cradle my face as he pulled back.

“Thank you for loving me,” I whispered.

“Thank you for letting me.” He hugged me again, then I told him my plan.

“I’d like to marry you here in the Keys. I have something in mind, but I won’t know for sure until tomorrow morning when I can call.”

Cooper’s smile was breathtaking. “Yeah, okay. Are we going to buy rings?”

I could see him bracing to be disappointed. “Absolutely. One day, the world is going to know you’re my husband. And I promise it won’t be much longer.”

“Okay,” he breathed against my lips. “We can work it all out when we get back to Portland. Right now, all I wanna do is live in this moment with you. I don’t want to think about everything waiting for us to deal with at home.”

I nodded and gave him a quick kiss. “That sounds perfect, babe.”

The next morning, I snuck out of bed to make the call. A lady by the name of Barbara answered the phone. She told me her husband, Captain Bob, could marry us that evening if we were okay with a sunset cruise.

“Yes, ma’am. That would be perfect.”

“Wonderful. You’ll need to get a marriage license today and bring it with you, along with your rings. We’ll take care of a cake and champagne, and I’ll file your marriage certificate with the state tomorrow.”

I hesitated to ask, but I had to. “How confidential is this? I’m a professional athlete, and we don’t want it to hit the press before we tell our families.” That was a version of the truth.

“You should be fine, Mr. Foster. I won’t say a word about it to the clerk.”

I sighed with relief. “Thank you. We’ll be there at five p.m.”

After ending the call, I snuck back into bed and looked at him for a while. There was no way I’d go back to sleep. I had too much to think about and do today before making this man mine.

“Why are you staring at me like a creeper?” he asked without opening his eyes.

I burst out laughing at him. “I’m staring at you as your future husband, whom you shall marry at five p.m. tonight.”

Cooper grinned, then opened his eyes. “So I didn’t dream that?”

“Nope,” I said, kissing his forehead. “You agreed to marry me, and I’m holding you to it.”

“Gladly,” he sighed, “Mr. Evans.”

Smartass.

We arrived at the dock at precisely five p.m. The boat was easy to find, since it was strung with lights that glowed in the twilight sky.

I grabbed Cooper’s hand and walked toward it. Before we stepped on board, he pulled back and looked at me. “Are you sure you want to do this? Fooling around with a man is one thing, but marrying one is something else.”

I knew why he was asking. “Babe, there’s nothing more I want to do than spend the rest of my life with you. You’re it for me. But if you have doubts, we’ll wait. Notice I said wait, not cancel.”

Cooper looked at me, concern swimming in his eyes. “Am I about to marry a straight man?”

I kissed him and held him close. “I’m pretty sure you’re about to marry a bisexual man. The important thing is that I love you, and only you.”

My stomach was in knots. If he walked away from me, I didn’t know what I’d do. But when he looked into my eyes, he must have seen what he needed from me. “Okay, I’m ready.”

I looked him over. “Are you sure? I don’t want you to have any doubts about this.”

Cooper grabbed my face, forcing me to look him in the eye. “Am I nervous? Yes, but it’s not about you. Never about you. It’s our situation. So if you’re telling me our situation is eventually going to be okay, I believe you.”

I put my hands over the top of his. “I promise you it’s going to be okay. It might take some time, but we’ll figure it out together.”

He nodded. “Then marry me, babe.”

I smiled and held out my hand. “Let’s go start our forever.”



Twenty minutes later, we set sail on the relatively calm waters of the eastern side of the keys. White lights were strung around the boat and created a romantic ambiance.

I played with Cooper's fingers as he sat across from me, looking around and drinking everything in. I memorized him in this moment and the way the light sparkled in his blue eyes. He was happy, and I reveled in the fact that I was responsible for that.

When his eyes landed on me, the elated smile that broke out across his face made my heart skip a beat.

"Gentlemen, whenever you're ready, we can begin." Barbara patted my shoulder.

My heartbeat picked up as I squeezed his fingers. Coop nodded, never taking his eyes or his smile from me.

We stood hand in hand and moved the short distance toward Captain Bob. I raised our joined hands to my mouth for a kiss. When we reached the spot where we were to stand, I stood facing him, watching the breeze ruffle his hair and the soft smile on his face. It suddenly occurred to me that whatever happened with my family and the fucked up situation we lived in, I wouldn't have to say goodbye to him. He'd be my husband, and I'd love him for the rest of my life.

"Dearly beloved, we're here this evening to witness the marriage of Cooper and Greg." The captain continued with some words I was pretty sure I missed because I couldn't take my eyes off Coop.

We'd chosen to make up our own vows, so when it was my time to speak, I cleared my throat and spoke from my heart. "The day we met, I knew there was something about you that called to me. Maybe it was your smile or the way you made me feel at ease. Then when you interviewed me for the open best friend position—" Cooper snorted but never stopped grinning. "There has not been a day or a minute that I wanted to be separated from you. You are the love of my life, and even though it took me a while to figure it out, I have no doubts now. I'm meant to be with you, and you with me. I love you, babe, always and forever."

Cooper grinned at me, his eyes shimmering with tears, and he had to clear his throat twice before he could speak to start his own vows.

“The first time I met you, I couldn’t take my eyes off you. I never imagined that shy rookie who had my heart at hello would propose to me yesterday, then become my husband today. The rocky path we took to each other was worth it. You’re my best friend, my lover, the first person I want to see in the morning, and the last one I want to see at night. No matter how bumpy things get, I’ll always be by your side. I love you, baby, always will.”

The captain asked us to exchange rings, and when that was done, I looked at Cooper as the Captain made his proclamation.

“By the powers invested in me by the state of Florida, I pronounce you husband and husband. You may kiss your husband, Greg.”

Lost in the beauty of this moment, I stared into his blue eyes as I took his face in my hands. Cooper was smiling so widely at me. “I love you,” I whispered against his lips, then kissed him. My tongue slid into his mouth as Coop ran his hands around my waist to pull me closer. I wasn’t sure how long we stayed that way, but a chuckle broke into the love haze I was under.

I pulled back and rested my forehead against his. “Sorry about that. I got lost for a minute.”

Cooper ran his hands over my shoulders and up both sides of my neck. “I hope we stay lost like that for the rest of our lives.”

We signed our marriage certificate, shared a champagne toast with the captain and his wife, then cut a single tier of a wedding cake. After we returned to the dock, we thanked them and headed back to the villa.

We spent the rest of the week in heaven on our short honeymoon. The world looked different now that he was officially mine. We had a lot of things to figure out, and I had

a lot of things to tell him when we returned to Portland. But for now, I just needed him, and nothing more.

## ***CHAPTER 16***

***COOPER***

## ***AFTER KEY WEST***

ON THE FLIGHT back to Portland, I stared down at my left hand and the beautiful gold wedding band with engraved cresting waves. When we'd seen them in the window of the custom jewelry shop, we knew they were perfect for us. And they were. We'd also had our wedding date engraved on the inside.

I repeatedly turned the band around with my right index finger and thumb. We planned to take them off before we got off the plane. But as soon as we got home, we'd put them back on until we had to go out again.

Key West had been a fantastic escape from our reality, not that it was all bad. The secrecy still bothered me, and no matter how many times I tried to get him to tell me what was going on, he didn't want to. So I let it go. And it ate at me a little more each time.

"You okay?"

I smiled. "Yeah, I'm just bummed we had to leave paradise."

"I know," he said absent-mindedly, reaching for my hand. "But we'll go back. A lot. I was thinking we should buy a place there."

I started to say *he* could buy a place, but we were married now, and he'd insisted that his money was *our* money now. That was going to take some getting used to.

"I'd love that. The Keys are our place."

Greg bumped his shoulder into mine and let go of my hand. "Me too, babe. Let's go back later in the summer. We can look at places to buy."

I guess we could. "I'll have to see if I can get Dominick to cover for me. Or maybe Nora could do it. I hope we find a

place as perfect as the villa. Privacy, plenty of space, even for our friends.”

“Just an idea here, but would you consider using your salary to hire another person for PET? You don’t technically need the salary anymore.” He leaned closer to me and whispered in my ear, “Your husband makes enough money to take care of you. He’s a well-paid and talented tight end.”

“Yes, his tight end is very talented.”

Greg chuckled and blushed. “Not that way. At least not yet.”

He’d decided he wanted to try bottoming. After talking it over, we decided to wait until we got home to try anything new like that.

“What are we going to do about living arrangements?”

He grinned. “I assumed you’d move in with me considering I own my apartment, and you rent. Plus, it’s bigger and has more space.” He was right.

“Okay, but my lease isn’t up until next February. Maybe we should keep it as a backup in case we need it.” The thought made me sick now.

Greg thought about it for a minute. “You’re probably right. Remind me when we get home to add you to my bank account.”

My brows furrowed. “That might not be a good idea. At least not until you come out.”

I watched as some of the color in his face drained at my suggestion, and my stomach roiled. The nagging bubble of apprehension deep in my gut was back.

He looked down at his left hand and made a fist but said nothing. I turned to look out the window. I didn’t want us to have our first argument as a married couple sitting in first class.

I looked down at my ring again. Maybe those waves meant more than just a reminder of the Keys. I knew there was something he wasn’t telling me about his family. He knew he

could trust me, and it hurt that he still wouldn't explain what was going on. But I'd also kept my own family in the dark. My mama was going to be upset that she didn't know about or get to attend my wedding. I was her baby, after all. But hopefully, she'd understand and see the romance in it.

We were married now, so we wouldn't have to hide anymore, right? I guess we'd work it out when we got home.

\* \* \*

### **JULY -THREE MONTHS LATER**

"You ready to see the wild ponies?" I asked Parker as we waited to board our flight to North Carolina.

"Yeah, that's gonna be cool. Meredith has been talking about it non-stop."

"That girl loves her some horses," I said in my best Southern phraseology.

Declan had arranged for all of us, including all the kids and Magda, to come to the Outer Banks for his wedding to Callum. Except Callum didn't know he was getting married. I couldn't wait to see his face when he figured it out.

Jackson leaned over to Alex. "I'm surprised the cheapskate chartered a private plane for us."

Alex chuckled. "It's probably cheaper than booking fourteen first-class tickets."

"True," Jackson muttered.

"Here, hold your daughter," Simon said, handing Ava over to Jackson. "I'm going to get some coffee." Evidently, Ava was teething and had kept Simon up for part of the night.

Greg sat next to me as we watched our friends live out their domestic bliss. They were entertaining as hell sometimes.

"Where are you guys off to after the ceremony?" Jackson asked Greg.



He motioned to me. “We’re going back to the Keys to go kiteboarding and snorkeling. Figured since we were on this side of the country, might as well. It was fun as hell.”

I smiled. We were going to fuck like bunnies, wear our rings, and buy a house. And I couldn’t wait to get back to the one place other than our apartment where we could be a married couple, and no one gave a single fuck.

Our friends eventually stopped asking. They’d just accepted that we were whatever we were and left it alone. They knew we traveled together sometimes and spent a lot of time together. I definitely couldn’t wait for the day I could tell them we were married. They might get pissed that we’d kept it from them, but it couldn’t be helped.

The voice in my head that said these men here with us right now wouldn’t give a single fuck reared its ugly head. Followed by the nagging question of why wouldn’t Greg let us even tell our friends.

Everyone boarded the private plane thirty minutes later and settled in for the long cross-country trip. We’d arrive around six p.m., giving us time to check into the huge vacation rental that supposedly slept eighteen comfortably. We had a wedding arbor to put up, and we had to get it and everyone down to the beach in time to surprise Callum.

And surprise him, we did. With our help, Declan pulled off the wedding he’d planned. I stood by Callum as his best man when he said I do to a life with Declan Miller. It reminded me of my own wedding three months ago aboard the sailboat. I looked at Greg, who was trying to school his wistful expression, and I knew he was remembering it too. It made me eager to get back there as soon as possible.

Later that night, Greg had a surprise of his own for me. After we’d eaten dinner and had some cake and champagne, he pulled me aside.

“We need to go grab our bags.”

I frowned at him. “Why? We’re not supposed to leave until tomorrow.”

He grinned. “I talked to the pilot after we landed. He’s got time to fly us to the Keys, so I booked it, paid him, and now we’re going tonight instead.”

I wanted to kiss the fuck out of him, but that would have to wait. “Fuck yeah, okay.”

Bags in hand, we explained our change of plans to our friends and headed to the airstrip. I held his hand in the car and couldn’t wait to be back in the Keys.

Everything was simpler there.

A little after eleven, we touched down at Key West International for a week of fun in the sun. After taxiing to the private gate, we thanked the pilot and crew, then took off to get a car to our favorite villa. It was nothing short of a miracle that it was available for the week.

When the driver pulled up, I got out while Greg paid him. I stood on the small patch of grass and took in the villa, now lit up with new landscape lighting. All the anxiety I’d been feeling for the last three months melted away with a single breath of ocean air in the place we loved.

I heard the car pull away, then felt Greg as he wrapped his arms around my shoulders. I rested my head against him. “You love this place, don’t you?”

I sighed. “I really do. Not sure if it’s the place or the memories we made here. I hope we can find someplace as perfect as this.”

Greg hummed, then loosened his hold on me. “Let’s go in, babe.” He kissed my head, then reached for my hand. I loved it when he did that. It was mindless here, and I couldn’t wait until he could do that in Portland.

As I walked up the steps and surveyed my favorite place in the world, I noticed little things had changed or been upgraded. The owner had installed a gas fire pit, which was safer than a traditional one. The deck furniture was different, and now included a large hammock that I was looking forward to using this week.

“Did you notice all the new stuff?”

Greg took in the additions. “Oh, wow. I like it, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do. It really adds to the place.”

While I looked around, he unlocked the door. “What’s the code this time?”

“Oh, there’s no code anymore. Just the key.”

Frowning, I looked at him. “That’s odd. How’d you get the key?”

“The realtor overnighted it for me before we left.”

The last time we were here, there was a lockbox. Something was different, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

Walking in the door, we dropped our bags and turned on the lights.

“Want a beer?”

“Yes, please.” I loved the local brew we’d had at Bangers almost as much as our favorite IPA at home.

Greg went to the black stainless steel refrigerator, and that caught my eye. That was new. The old one was white. He pulled out two of our favorite IPAs and handed me one. Then he leaned back against the cabinet.

I looked at the label, then back up at him. “How did you get our beer from home?”

Narrowing my eyes at him, he fought the smile as long as he could before he gave up. “I ordered it and had it sent here. It’s just beer.”

I narrowed my eyes, okay something was definitely off. After three years, I could detect his sneaky side with ease. Not to mention the way he fought to keep the smug, proud smile off his face just told me he was up to something.

Time to ask some questions. “What time are we meeting the realtor tomorrow?”

The smile was back, and I knew I’d asked the right question.

He put the beer on the counter and walked over to me. Wrapping me in his arms, he whispered. “We don’t need the realtor anymore. I bought this place for you. It’s ours now.”

My eyes flew wide as my husband grinned down at me. “You bought this place for us?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I did. We got married so fast that I forgot to get you a wedding present. So I bought our villa for us. I know how much you loved it here, and it made no sense going to look at a bunch of houses that you’d never love as much as this one.”

I was stunned. “How did you buy it? I thought it belonged to a resort.”

“It did. But a local one. And when I had my real estate agent look into it, I told her I didn’t care what it cost as long as it was within \$100k of its value.”

This man. “God, I love you.”

“I love you, too, babe. Always and forever.”

We kissed, standing in our kitchen at our Key West Villa. I couldn’t believe we owned this place. It was perfect. When we were here the first time, it felt like a new start for us. And now it was ours.

“One thing, though,” I said, “Can we replace all the beds here with the ones like we have at home?”

Greg just grinned. “Already done, babe. All new bedding and linens. New everything, actually, if you haven’t noticed. Plus those extra soft 100% cotton sheets we love.”

My voice quivered, and I didn’t know where to look as I took in everything with new eyes. “When did you buy this place? Those are not spur-of-the-moment things to replace.” So I was a snob about my sheets. Sue me.

The overhead lighting made his eyes look emerald green when he tilted his head back. “I had plenty of time. While you were working with your clients at the stables, I was busy buying and refurnishing the villa. And as for when I bought it,” he said, “I made the first call the day after we got home.”

I was amazed at him. From the day we left here, he'd worked to make this place our own. Looking around, I saw more things from our apartment. The new sofas were just like the ones in our family room, and so was the giant TV. Everything was perfect.

“You amaze me. I can't believe you did all this for us.”

Greg hugged me back. “It's pretty simple, really. I adore you, Coop. You're my world.”

And he was mine.

## ***CHAPTER 17***

***GREG***

## **NOVEMBER**

MY PHONE RANG as I drove home after practice. My mother's ringtone caused a knot to form in my stomach. I knew what she wanted, and I dreaded it. But at least I was alone, so Cooper wouldn't overhear.

I accepted the call. Might as well get it over with.

"Hello?"

"Hello, darling. How are you?"

Carolyn Foster, my mother, was a fifty-two-year-old political socialite with a modern bob hairstyle. She attended church every Sunday, chaired all the right committees, and was my father's biggest supporter. And the worst part, she was no longer the mother who had lovingly raised me and Brock. So there was no chance of parental support for either of us there.

"Hi, Mom. I'm fine. Just leaving practice."

"Well, I'm glad I caught you. I'm planning Thanksgiving, and I checked your schedule. You don't have a game that week, so I am assuming you'll be home for the holiday. We haven't seen you in such a long time, sweetheart."

Bile rose in my throat. My life changed dramatically when I met Cooper. When I was younger, my family was everything to me. But now that I had him, he was where I wanted to be. And I knew if they knew about him and that we were married, it would be a disaster. All I wanted to do was be with him and head to the villa for the holidays.

Was that too much to ask?

"I'm not sure yet, Mom. Coach may schedule practice since we're gearing up for the playoffs. There's a lot of stress when the media picks you to win it all again. I might not be able to come."



If anyone understood expectations from the press, it was my mother. She ran my father's political career like a seasoned general. She intercepted calls and planned his days with military precision. And we were expected, no, demanded, to fall in line and serve when called upon. They didn't know that everything he stood for was the complete opposite of who me and Brock were. It was hard to stomach how my family went from being a regular family to this.

"Gregory, your father is counting on your presence. You can at least come home for the night. We're expecting some very important supporters, and it's imperative that you and your brother attend. These potential donors are big football fans, so we need you here."

I hated all the social bullshit that had taken over our family holidays, and I knew Brock did too. Holidays like the ones we had as kids were a thing of the past. Now they were all for show. Our happiness wasn't the goal any longer. It was getting my father re-elected.

When I didn't respond, she continued on. "You can fly in on Thursday morning, and at the very least stay the night."

While she talked, I ran through several scenarios in my head. I could call her back the Wednesday before and tell her that Coach had scheduled a last-minute mandatory practice. But that wasn't me. Still, I was keeping that in my back pocket for desperate times.

Sighing, I relented. "I'll be there, Mom. But I may have to leave early. Depends on what Coach schedules."

"I understand, but as long as you're here on Thursday, I can live with it."

I used to adore my mother, but she'd changed so much when my father started his political career. The mom I remembered from my childhood no longer existed. And I hated that more than I could say.

"I've gotta go, Mom. I'll call you when I know more."

"Okay, sweetheart. That will be fine."

When I ended the call, dread pooled in my stomach. This was going to be a problem, and I had no idea what I'd say to Coop. It was our first Thanksgiving as a married couple.

I wasn't sure he would understand us spending the holiday apart, not anymore. I didn't think he should have to, but I couldn't see a way around it.

\* \* \*

MY BREATHING SPED UP AS NEED AND PLEASURE COURSED through me. Cooper had me where he wanted me, back pressed against the shower wall, his body blanketing mine as he stroked both our cocks together in his right hand.

"I'm... close..." I rasped out against his lips. I loved it when his lips were that close, but he held back from the kiss we both wanted desperately.

My husband let go of our cocks and dropped to his knees on the tiled floor, leaving my aching hard cock red and angry, ready to blow.

I released a sigh of relief when my brain registered his warm mouth and the relentless suction on my dick. It wouldn't take him long to get me there, so I blocked everything out of my mind except for him.

My head rolled from side to side along the wall, the suction not quite enough to get me there. I needed more, and my whimpers dictated his actions. He was such an attentive lover, and I hoped I gave him what he needed when I was in charge.

Over the last nine months, Cooper had explored every erogenous zone in my body. We'd discovered what made me squirm, what made my legs shake uncontrollably, and what made me cum hard and fast.

Now I needed the latter.

"Babe..." I groaned. "I need it."

Cooper popped off my cock and ran his stubbled jaw along my sensitive skin, causing me to shiver at the sensation.

He tapped my left leg. "Put your foot up here," he panted as he patted the shower seat.

I did as he asked and was rewarded with the slow pressure of his finger against my hole as he rubbed my perineum with his thumb. He circled and pressed as I pushed out to give him access to me.

I groaned as he filled me, then moved it in and out. My eyes were closed as I worked to absorb every touch and fight off my thoughts from taking over. It was heaven.

My man was skilled and knew me well. Coop resumed sucking me, then fingered my prostate just enough to send me over the edge.

"Fuck... babe... so good..."

He groaned as he sucked me and jacked himself off, coming hard onto the floor.

Winded, I shifted forward and reached for him, pulling him to his feet. His blue eyes were heavy with drops of water clinging to his dark lashes. I looked him over and the love I felt for him still stole my breath.

How could I hurt the man who looked at me like I was his world? How could I make him understand?

"I love you," I murmured against his lips, then took his mouth. The taste of my cum in his mouth was heady.

I held him to me as tightly as I could, just hanging on as my anxiety ate me up.

"What's wrong, babe?"

"Nothing..." I lied.

"Greg." I didn't even have to look at him to know he was frowning. "I know something's wrong. Your body's still tense, and you should be relaxed as hell after that orgasm."

"I'm relaxed. But let's get out of here," I mumbled.

Coop didn't budge. He pressed his body to mine but held my face in his hands. Looking deep into my eyes, he was trying to figure out the puzzle I'd become in the last two weeks.

"I love you, but you're making me fucking crazy. Why won't you tell me? I know you, and there's something on your mind."

When I didn't answer, he blew out a frustrated breath and pushed away from me.

"Fine. Whatever," he muttered.

Coop went to leave, but I pulled him back to me. Selfishly, I couldn't stand to lose his touch on my skin.

*I'm about to hurt the one I love most in the world.*

"I'm sorry," I said, pressing my face into his neck. "I'll tell you... just give me a minute."

Cooper waited, then nodded. He soaped up again, then rinsed off before shifting so I could do the same. Without a word, he stepped out of the shower and reached for our towels, then handed me one.

We dried off in silence, the ball of dread growing in my gut. I was supposed to leave early in the morning, but I hadn't told him anything. He thought we were going to Jackson's. And God, I wished things could be different.

Coop walked into our closet, and I wrapped the towel around my waist. I knew he was irritated when he returned wearing sleep pants and a t-shirt.

I sat on the edge of the bed, slumped over, with my forearms on my knees. He took one look at me, then got on the floor to wrap me in his arms.

"Whatever it is, I've got you. Please let me help."

I'd do anything to avoid conflict. Ever since I was a kid, avoidance was how I handled things.

Cooper pulled back from my arms and looked at me. "Have you been traded? I'd hate that, and I'd miss our friends

and working with Callum, but of course, I'd go with you."

I shook my head no. "Haven't been traded."

"Then tell me! I can't take it when you shut me out. Holding in whatever's bothering you will not help solve the problem."

I wished it was one he could solve by being his usual amazing self.

I knew he was right. He was left in the dark while I suffered, and that was the one thing he couldn't take. We were both natural caregivers. He'd given me enough space in the last week, even though there were times he'd wanted to ask. I guess I couldn't avoid it anymore.

I had to tell him. There was no getting out of it. "I have to do something I don't want to do. And it's eating me up inside."

That was putting it mildly.

"Okay." He released a frustrated sigh at my lack of details. "What is it? I've never seen you like this."

I had to get this over with.

"My mother called," I blurted. "She's insisting I come home for Thanksgiving. I told her I might have practice, but she wouldn't let it go. So I agreed to one night. There are some influential people coming that my father works with, and my dad needs our support."

Cooper didn't say anything for a moment. The frown on his face told me he didn't understand why this was a problem.

"I'm sure Jackson will understand. I just wish I'd had time to prepare myself to meet them, but I can get packed pretty quickly."

I shook my head. "No, babe..."

His brows furrowed again. "What do you mean no? I'm confused."

My chest was pounding, and I could hear my heart hammering in my ears. I swallowed hard and looked at him.

“I... I’m... I have to go alone. You can’t go with me.”

Cooper stared at me, and I saw the moment my words hit, and watched as hurt took over. He pulled out of my arms and released a humorless laugh. He gritted his teeth together, drawing in a deep breath. I could tell he was doing everything not to lose it.

I reached for him, but he pulled away. “I’m sorry, babe...”

“NO!” he growled and held up his hand to stop me. “Don’t say you’re sorry one more goddamn time. You don’t get to say you’re sorry and think it’ll magically fix everything. I’m fucking tired of hearing it.”

He paced back and forth, running his hands through his hair. I watched, paralyzed with fear. I’d never seen him like this.

When he spoke, his voice was more hurt than angry. “I knew this was too good to be true. I’ve tried to convince myself for two years that you’d tell them about us. It’s pretty fucking clear you’re never going to do it.”

I jumped up. “Yes, I am. I just haven’t prepared to tell them right now. It’s not just about me. You know I’m protecting Brock.”

“Brock’s almost an adult, Greg. Why do you need to protect him?”

I shook my head and ran my hands over my head. “Baby, you don’t understand. You don’t have all the information.”

Cooper looked at me sardonically. “Really? That’s your excuse when you’ve been holding these secrets for almost two years? We’ve been married for eight months, and you still haven’t told me everything, nor have you told them about me. About us.” His voice cracked on the last word.

“Baby,” I pleaded, “please just give me some time to work all this out, and then I’ll tell you everything. I promise. There’s a reason the timing has to be right.”

“Will it ever be?” he whispered.

Cooper stared at me, and I saw my biggest fear happening right before my eyes. He'd given up on us, and it was going to kill me.

His tears now ran unchecked down his beautiful face, and I didn't want to hear what he was going to say. "I can't do this anymore, Greg," he whispered, his voice full of pain.

Panic was setting in. "Baby, please, I'm begging you not to give up on me."

Cooper tore his gaze from me and swiped at his face. "Two years, Greg. We've been together all this time and you still haven't opened up to me, and now you want even more time..."

I was losing him. "Please, I'll do anything, but I just can't tell them right now. Please, just give me some more time."

He shook his head, and I staggered back like someone had punched me. The gut-wrenching pain was ripping me apart.

"I can't. We've been living in the fucking closet for so long, and that's not me. We've pushed our friends away, and not one of them knows the truth about us. My own parents have no idea their son's been married for eight months! And now you're willing to spend the holiday without me."

He paused long enough to wipe his eyes again and shook his head.

"My parents wouldn't tell anyone. Neither would our friends, but you've insisted we keep it from them. Now, this. It's our first big holiday as husbands and..." He shook his head, swallowing hard. "I can't anymore. We can't." The last word was barely above a whisper.

Cooper rubbed his face with his hands and sighed. "You know I'm right."

My heart was being ripped apart, and if he left me, I'm not sure I'd ever be whole again. "Tell me what to do, and I'll do it. Anything. I love you so much, baby. I can't live without you."

I was dying to hold him, but I wasn't sure he'd let me.

Cooper steeled his spine and wiped his eyes and nose on his shirt. “If you truly love me, you need to let me go, Greg. We need to end this now before we’re both completely devastated.”

*Too late.*

“No, no, no, no,” I shook my head vehemently and dropped to my knees at his feet. I clutched him around the waist as the tears fell. After a moment, he gently ran his fingers over my hair to soothe me.

Cooper’s voice cracked and the heartbreaking emotion ripped through me further. “You have to, babe. It’s not fair to put either of us through all this agony. And I can’t keep hiding in plain sight like this.”

I hugged him tighter, willing him not to give up on us. *Please, God, don’t let him go.*

We were both crying when he gently pushed me away. I saw the love in his eyes. “If you love me... I need you to let me go.”

I shook my head defiantly. “This is our first fight. People don’t split up after one fight.” This was crazy.

Coop took my face in his hands and looked down at me. “Listen to me.” I stared into his reddened eyes as he broke our hearts. “Nothing has changed in almost two years. We’re still hiding. And not once have you mentioned letting our best friends know. I don’t see you going balls to the wall and telling your parents about us when you can’t stomach telling eight men who are rooting for us to be together. Can you see the problem there? Two years I’ve been waiting. I love you so much it hurts, but at the same time, I just can’t do it anymore. This is killing me. I want a complete life with friends and the opportunity to love openly. I can’t...” he swallowed, “I can’t take living this way anymore.”

He was really leaving me. “But I love you, Cooper. You can’t do this to us. Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” I was a blubbering mess on the floor.



He struggled to get the words out. “You have to decide how to handle your life. I can’t tell you how to fix it. But don’t you see, babe? I’m saving us from any more heartbreak. You can do what you need to do for your family, and I’ll go home. I can’t stay here.”

My heart was shattering, and I was helpless to stop it. Cooper walked out of my arms and into our closet. I didn’t know how long I sat there, trying to come up with something to keep him from walking out the door. But I knew there was nothing I could say that would make him stay.

When he finally came out, he had a bag tossed over his shoulder. As much as I loved him, I’d hurt him even more. He was right; I had to let him go. He deserved so much more than the life in hiding I’d given him.

He stopped in front of me and extended his hand. I took it and stood, my towel long fallen to the floor.

“Let’s just get through the holidays, and afterward we’ll decide how to handle this.”

I stood there, memorizing the face I loved more than life. Doing what was best for him was the hardest thing I’d ever do. Unable to speak, I barely nodded in agreement.

“I love you,” he said as the tears started again, “...always will.”

I lowered my head and tried to get control of myself. I had to say it back before he walked out the door. “I love you... now and forever. Don’t forget that. I’m going to fix this. I’m going to get you back. I don’t know how, but I will.”

He smiled, but it was sad. And I could see he didn’t believe me. With a visibly broken heart, my husband and the love of my life turned and walked away.

And it was all my fault.

## ***CHAPTER 18***

***COOPER***

## ***THE NEXT DAY - THANKSGIVING DAY***

Simon: Where are you? We'll be ready to eat soon.

What was I going to say? *Sorry, I left my husband last night and I don't quite feel like being social.*

Me: Sorry. I'm sick as a dog. Think Greg went home to see his family.

As the bubbles bounced it dawned on me that I'd claimed sickness to the wrong person.

Simon: What are your symptoms?

Simon: Do you have a fever?

Simon: I can come over after we eat. But I can send Jackson now to get you whatever you need.

*God. Why didn't I say I'd gone home to see my own family?*

Me: I'm okay. Just a miserable cold. Got everything I need here. Just gonna sleep.

Simon: You call me if you need anything. I'll have Callum bring you some food. You can't miss Thanksgiving.

There was no arguing with him. He wouldn't let me off the hook.

Me: Okay, thanks. Tell him to just leave it outside my door.

Simon: No.

Even though I was sad as fuck, I had to chuckle at him. It was going to be fun watching Ava work him and Jackson over when she grew up. What was it Jackson called him? Lieutenant Marshmallow or something.

Me: Fine. Going to sleep now.

Simon: Don't forget what I said.

Me: I won't.

I curled up on the sofa and tried to watch television. But everything here reminded me of Greg, and how things had gone last night. I replayed everything over and over in my mind, looking for a solution. But I couldn't find one.

There was no way I could stay in Portland over Christmas. I'd drown in my memories of last year. Coming home to his apartment decorated with the lights and the trees. We'd eaten dinner by the fireplace and laid on the sofa just looking at the tree. And Christmas Day after the game, we'd come home and watched *It's a Wonderful Life* for the last time.

But one look at me, and my parents would know something was terribly wrong if I didn't get my shit together. I'd allow myself the weekend to wallow in my pain and misery, then on Monday I had to get myself up and on my feet again.

I would concentrate on the therapy center, but the fucking apartment would remind me of all the nights we'd spent together out there. And I'd have to start all over again. Fuck. I rubbed my face with my hand and sighed.

Why couldn't he just — I shook my head. There was no point going down that road.

We'd gone to so many places around town that I wasn't sure I could go anywhere without thinking about him.

I just needed to sleep. The more I slept, the more I didn't have to think about all this pain. But before I could drift off, a text notification sounded from my phone.

When his name appeared on my screen, my pulse sped up and my chest ached like a weight had been dropped on it. I missed him so much, and the agony of being away from him was intolerable. How the fuck was I gonna do this?

Greg: I'm sorry, babe.

Greg: I love you ... always and forever.

The tears welled in my eyes, and I wanted to text him back. I wasn't sure it was the smart thing to do, but I did it anyway.

Me: Me too.

He could interpret that how he wanted, but it applied to both. I was sorry things had gone the way they did, and I loved him more than my own life. The romantic man who quoted me poetry the first time we'd made love, and again when he proposed, was everything I had ever wanted.

But what it came down to was he didn't trust me enough to confide in me, even though we lived secretly for almost two years. Even though... hadn't I proved to him I'd never betray him?

I didn't know how I was going to get over him, but I had to try.

People separated every day, and they made it through it. I just never thought I'd be one of them.

\* \* \*

THE WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS, I'D MANAGED TO STAY OUT OF the places that reminded me of us. I didn't go to Alejandro's or The Diner. I stayed away from the tv and my friends on game days. I just had to make it two more weeks to get through the hard part. Once the holidays were behind me, maybe the memories would stop assaulting me.

I could do it.

I hoped.

My phone vibrated with a message.

Christian: Hey. New Year's Eve – Alejandro's for a private party.

Me: Probably not. Might go home.

Christian: There is nothing to do in Idaho, and you know it. You're coming out with me and Alex.

Me: Sounds like fun. NOT.

Christian: Are you okay? I recognize your symptoms.

Me: I'm okay.

Christian: Hmm, not sure about that. The 'Okay Cooper' loves parties.

Christian: The 'Okay Cooper' loves to hang out with his friends.

Christian: The 'Okay Cooper' leaves his apartment.

Christian: But 'Heartbroken Cooper' hides like a turtle in his shell, licking his wounds. Please talk to me. Lord knows I talked your head off about Alex.

The asshole. Tears welled in my eyes, and I fought them back. This is why I'd ended my marriage. The secrecy and lack of trust. The keeping of things from people I love.

Me: I hate you. And I'm not sure turtles can lick their own wounds. Have to ask Callum.

Christian: LOL... Nah, you don't, and I have no idea. But I'm assuming all this has to do with Greg. Did you guys have a fight?

Me: Something like that. You know me too well.

Christian: Fuck that. It'll be fun. You can hang out with me and Alex.

Me: Oh boy. Third wheel alert. No thanks.

Christian: You can't be a third wheel at a party.

Christian: By the way, I'm coming over. You need to talk.

Me: No, I'm not home.

Christian: Liar, liar, pants on fire! Oh fuck, the first graders have invaded my brain.

Me: Fine... I might not let you in.

Christian: Oh, no worries. I still have my key. See you in two seconds.

Just like he promised, my best friend walked into my apartment with an overnight bag, a shopping bag that had at least six pints of Tillamook Ice Cream, and enough rum to make me talk or knock me out in the process.

The rum sent me back to the Keys and the night he proposed.

I laughed at him, and the next thing I knew, I was sobbing. Seeing my best friend had me breaking down. I'd held it in for so long. He and Callum were my people.

Christian pulled out his phone and sent a text. It wasn't long before Callum walked through the door.

"Hey, asshole," he said when I opened the door. He'd come bearing pizza and beer.

"Don't you two have husbands to take care of?"

"Nah," he said, coming over to the sofa. He dropped down and propped his feet up on the coffee table. "They're playing



football this weekend.”

I nodded. The playoffs started next weekend, and this was the last home game. And he was playing.

Christian grabbed some plates, and Callum handed me a beer. “So what’s going on with you and Foster?”

I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. “Nothing.”

And for the first time in three years, I’d told the honest truth.

“It’s okay, Callum. The rum will make him talk.”

Christian could be an asshole, and I loved him for it.

## ***CHAPTER 19***

## **COOPER**

HOW DID I let Christian talk me into this?

*It'll be fun, Coop, he said.*

*You can hang out with us, he said.*

*You're not a loser because you're alone on New Year's Eve, he said. Okay, maybe that one was me trying to be positive.*

Maybe if I got wasted and just sat in the corner watching the countdown on TV it would all pass quickly and I wouldn't feel a thing. But I knew that wouldn't happen.

And I also knew this wasn't like me. I was the happy one. I made everyone laugh. But ever since the day before Thanksgiving, my world had been turned upside down. All I knew was I missed Greg with every fiber of my being, and now I was left with a gaping hole in my chest where he'd taken up residence.

Sure, he was hot as fuck in his uniform and I'd been attracted to him the first time I saw him at the Pirates season opener with Christian. Then when I talked with him after the game, I knew he was going to be someone important to me. I had no one to blame but myself for what I was feeling. *Hey, Alex, introduce me to #88, and we'll be even.*

When I walked into the private party wearing my best black jeans and the camel-colored cashmere sweater Christian had given me for Christmas, I was fairly confident I could make it through an hour unscathed. Maybe he wouldn't even be here.

A man could hope.

But one scan around the room and there he was, looking as uncomfortable as I felt. He leaned against the bar as some girl talked his head off about who knows what. The half-smile on his face told me he wasn't interested in her. She was probably a jersey chaser looking for a way to become a WAG. And why the fuck did I care?

Because it hurt. And I felt like I'd lost everything I ever wanted. I'd lost him.

While our mutual friends were busy with their boyfriends and husbands, we'd spent the last three years getting to know each other. They had no idea that we'd been spending a lot of time together. We played video games at my place and bar-hopped our way through Portland. Back up, it was more like I dragged him along by force. And he was the only person who knew about Adam, the guy I'd met in Seattle. Greg never liked him. Guess I know why now.

Our friends thought we'd avoided each other since late November because we'd had a falling out. But they couldn't be more wrong. An argument would never keep me away from a friend. I simply refused to talk about what really happened. And until tonight, I'd only seen him once in seven weeks.

Before I could turn away, he looked up, and our eyes met. My blue to his green. A wave of heat and bone-deep pain from the loss flooded me, and I had to look away. Coming tonight was not a good idea. Where the fuck was Christian?

"Hey, there you are," came the familiar voice of my best friend and former roommate.

I turned to meet his gaze and tried to muster a smile that didn't show how miserable I really was. "Hey, yeah, I'm here." I ran my fingers through my hair.

Christian studied me with concern in his eyes. "You doing okay, Coop?" Then he confirmed what I already knew. "He's here. I saw him earlier."

I nodded quickly, then pasted on a smile I only half felt. "Yeah, of course, I'm fine. I just..." I trailed off, not quite

knowing what to say.

Christian was one of my best friends, and I knew I could tell him anything. But since he'd married Alex Hayes, the Pirates Quarterback, we'd grown apart. Our lives had gone in two different directions. Now Callum was my closest friend, and I really wished he was here.

Christian looked over my shoulder, and I knew who he was looking for. I steeled myself for the onslaught of questions I assumed he'd ask. But he only asked one.

“Are you guys still not talking?”

I shook my head no. Knowing I didn't want to talk about it, he just changed the subject before we even got started.

“Are Callum and Declan coming? I haven't seen them yet.”

“Uh, I don't think so. Callum said Meredith had the flu, and they don't want to leave her with Nora.”

Christian nodded, then his expression changed. “I'm sorry about all this. I don't know what to say, Coop. I know I haven't been around much, and I feel terrible about that. That's not how you treat your friends.” I knew he was sorry, but this was not his fault. No, that was all on me.

I shook my head. “Don't be sorry for getting married and living your life. I'm just down in the dumps, I guess. Just ignore me. Let's get a beer.”

Christian nodded his head. “Yeah, okay. Alex is actually holding mine, but you get one and meet me over there at our booth.” He gestured over his shoulder.

I looked around and spotted Alex talking to Aidan. Jackson and Simon weren't here, either. “Go ahead,” I motioned with a tilt of my head. “I'll be there in a minute.”

He watched me as if I might bolt... not that I hadn't considered it. I chuckled. “I swear, Mom, I'll be right over.” He knew me too well. I'd never been able to mask my feelings from him like I could with other people.

Christian punched me in the shoulder. “Shut up, asshole. Sue me for being concerned about you. I’m allowed to be, even though we don’t live together anymore.” He smiled, nudging me before leaving my side to weave through the crowded bar.

I watched as he walked toward his husband. Alex’s eyes lit up the moment he spotted Christian heading back to him. Those two had eyes for no one except each other. When Christian reached him, Alex pulled him in for a kiss but didn’t let go. His arms settled around Christian’s waist as he went back to his conversation with Aidan. I was happy for him, but terribly sad for me.

*Fuck. I was not going to feel sorry for myself tonight.* Coming tonight was a step toward making the effort to get back into my life. I’d just get the fuck out of here before the strike of midnight. I couldn’t watch him kiss someone else. Not after...

“Hey, babe.” The deep timbre of his voice caused my pulse to pick up. The familiar endearment hurt more than I ever imagined it would.

Why was he talking to me? Hadn’t I made that clear the last time I saw him? Didn’t this hurt him as much as it hurt me?

I took a deep breath and turned around to face him. The painfully familiar scent of his woody cologne mixed with our favorite body wash hit my nose and sent me hurtling back through all the memories. We had the same group of friends, and with each passing day, it got progressively more difficult to be around him.

Pasting on another fake smile—I’d become a master at them, I responded. “Hey, Greg. How’s it going?”

He swallowed, then allowed his gaze to travel up and down my body before he answered. “Surviving, I guess.” He hesitated for a moment before he continued. “You look good, babe.” His jaw tensed and he looked at the floor. “I know I have no right to ask, but are you here with a date?” His voice was low, but I heard the question as if he’d shouted it.

How could he ask me that? I may never date again after this was over.

This is what almost two years of secrecy and hiding had gotten us. Not one soul knew about us or what happened. We'd told no one we'd gotten married in the Keys nine months ago. Or that the day before Thanksgiving, I'd talked about ending it.

"No, I came alone," I muttered, glancing at the bar to see if it was my turn to order. "And only because Christian guilted me into it." It hurt to look at him.

Greg released a puff of air. "Yeah, I didn't want to come either. Didn't quite feel like there was anything to celebrate tonight." He ran his long fingers over his stubbly jaw, and I ached to reach out and touch it. To trail sensual kisses across his skin.

Thankfully, Nick called my name and drew my attention away.

"Hey, Coop, what can I get you?" Nick grinned at me wide enough to ensure I smiled back at him. I knew he was into me, but I only had eyes for the giant behind me.

"My usual IPA, thanks."

Nick nodded, then looked at Greg. "And what about you?"

I felt the warmth from his firm chest against my back as he leaned in to place his order. It was the sweetest torture but at the same time a balm to my battered heart. It was all I could do not to turn around and hold on to him. "I'll take one of those, too."

Thankfully, my sense of self-preservation kicked in, and I stepped forward to reach for my wallet. I had to put some space between us. But before I could move, Greg's hand went to my hip, causing me to shudder and close my eyes at his touch.

"I've got it," he hummed into my ear. He leaned back but left his hand glued to me.

“You don’t need to do that anymore. I can pay for my own beer.” I was irrationally angry at him, as I’m sure my tone conveyed. And I knew it was my own damn fault for standing too close to him. *Why the fuck was he still touching me?*

“I know,” he murmured. I could hear the pain in his voice, and I knew he was suffering as much as I was. But he’d left us with no other choice.

Nick sat the bottles in front of us, and I reached for my wallet. He shook his head and waved me off. “Alex told me to put it on his tab.” He shot me an empathetic smile.

I nodded and tried to curve my lips into something I hoped resembled one in return. “Thanks.”

As soon as I had my hand on that bottle, I took a long pull and swallowed before I turned to face him. I was met with sad green eyes that broke my heart again. “I gotta go.”

As I walked away from the only man I’d ever allowed into my heart, I felt his hands brush my body as if I were slipping through his fingers. I couldn’t give him a chance to say anything else. It would break me.

Resigned to make it at least an hour, I pushed down the emotions and made a plan. I’d have a few beers, then I’d bail on this night. I could say Callum needed me to check on something at the stables, and then I’d get the fuck out of here.

Hopefully, next year I wouldn’t have to see Greg Foster quite so much. It’s the only way my broken heart would heal.



## ***CHAPTER 20***

## **GREG**

I WAS PRETTY SURE every single woman in this bar had hit on me at least once tonight. And most of them were beautiful. But I couldn't tear my eyes away from Cooper as he sat in the far corner with Christian and Aidan.

I wanted to be over there, celebrating the New Year together, but I needed to give him space. He didn't have to draw me a picture to let me how he felt about me. He'd made it perfectly clear last week when I'd stopped by his apartment unannounced to drop off his Christmas presents.

And I didn't blame him for asking me to stay away. I couldn't give him the life he wanted, even though I thought I could. And I really wanted to. But there was only so much waiting I could ask for and only so many times I could tell him not right now. But fuck, I knew it was risky giving him space. What if someone else... I couldn't even think of it without wanting to punch something. Who wouldn't want Cooper? He was the best person I'd ever known. *And you're hurting him.* Maybe a divorce was best, but every time I thought about it, I felt like puking.

I pushed my hands over my head and groaned. Why did it have to be so damn complicated? All I wanted to do was hold him in my arms where he belonged. To kiss him and make love with him and go back to our villa in the Keys. Not only was I losing my husband, but also my best friend. And I was lonely as fuck.

I tipped back my third IPA in the last two hours. I was six-foot-eight and weighed in at two hundred thirty pounds;

drinking three beers was no concern. But I ordered a bottle of water, just to be on the safe side.

Nick smiled at me. “Anything else I can get you?”

*Yeah, Cooper.*

I shook my head. “Nah, I’m good.”

“Hello, brother.” The familiar lilt of Marcus’s voice made me smile as he leaned on the bar.

“Hey, man. How’s it going?” I glanced over his shoulder to see if Cooper was still over there with Christian and Marcus’s husband, Aidan.

He studied me, a small furrow in his brow. “A hell of a lot better than your sack of sad shit. Why aren’t you over there with us where you belong?”

I huffed humorlessly. “It’s a long story.” I ran my fingers over my unshaven face and tried to figure out a good excuse that wasn’t the truth.

Marcus nodded. “Still not talking to Evans, huh?”

My eyes flew up to his, and just like that, I was busted. The fucker just smiled at me. “You know you can’t keep shit like that from me. I busted Jackson and Simon in Atlanta.” He pointed to his temple, a knowing smirk on his handsome face. “I just have a sense about these things.”

I shook my head at him and narrowed my eyes. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Monroe.”

He cracked up. “Foster, I know more than you give me credit for.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s not hard to figure out, brother. Anyone with eyes can see it. Especially your best friends.”

I was so tired of denying how I felt about Cooper. But I wasn’t in a place to let all that shit out just yet. And I knew I was playing with fire the longer I held back.

“Foster,” Marcus said, lowering his voice, “we’ve got your back, no matter what.”

I nodded, refusing to meet his eyes cause I knew I'd see understanding and support there and I didn't deserve that.

“Just take it from me. Don't wait too long to act. I'm just lucky Aidan was as fucked up over me as I was over him.”

I couldn't say anything, even though I found myself hoping Cooper felt the same. I turned to my friend and just looked at him. Marcus was intuitive, and of course, he knew something was wrong without me saying a word. “We've got you. No matter what. We've got your back.”

My stomach rolled and suddenly three beers felt like a bad idea. Fuck, my emotions were all over the place. I needed to get out of here. “I'm gonna head out in a bit,” I said, glancing around for a clock. “I don't wanna be here at midnight. I'm not in the mood to fend off jersey chasers.” And the last thing I needed to see was Cooper locking lips with anyone. I would fucking lose it.

Marcus smirked. “Funny. Evans said the same thing. I think he might agree with your sentiment. Maybe you two should head out at the same time.”

The relief that washed through me damn near knocked me off my feet. My heart leaped into my throat, and my blood fizzed with excitement. Maybe I could kiss Cooper one last time. I glanced in his direction for maybe the thousandth time and saw he was on his feet. I went to pull my wallet out of my pocket.

Marcus glanced over his shoulder. “Go on. I've got this,” he said. “At least start the new year out better. Don't need your sad face in the locker room.”

What could I say to that? Nothing. Saying nothing was the story of my fucking life. Cooper deserved more... better. It was time to own up to my feelings for him publicly and beg him to give me a chance to make it up to him. We'd been dancing around each other for too long. And I'd hurt both of us so much. I'd hurt the person I loved more than my own damn self. And we'd both suffered long enough.

Nodding, I clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks, man.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cooper head out the door. I grabbed my jacket and followed him, weaving my way through the crowd. It was almost midnight, and I had to catch up to him.

Once I was out on the street, I looked both ways, trying to find him. I finally spotted him walking north toward his apartment and broke into a jog to catch him.

“Cooper!” I shouted, hoping he could hear me over the flow of traffic and the crowd on the street.

He kept going, and I ran faster. It was my job to run, so I had no trouble catching up with him.

“Coop, wait!” I yelled again. And this time, he heard me.

He froze and scrubbed his hands over his face. Turning, he met my gaze with confusion and hurt, then I saw it change to anger. Those blue eyes I adored turned stormy, and his fist clenched at his side. It was clear he was not better off than me.

“What the fuck do you want from me, Greg? I told you I couldn’t do this with you anymore. I can’t be your secret. It’s killing me....” Hearing him say that felt like salt in an open wound.

I stepped forward and took his face in my hands, then lowered my forehead to his. “I know, baby. It’s killing me, too,” I murmured across his lips.

I let my coat fall to the ground as he grabbed hold of my shirt. Our breathing was harsh as we struggled to control the feelings we both couldn’t seem to contain. As soon as the fireworks over the water exploded, I gave in. I brought my mouth to his and tasted Cooper, my husband, for the first time in over a month.

He whimpered and clung to my shirt, pulling me closer until not even air could come between us. Cooper’s arms wrapped around my waist, and I hung on for dear life. I could stay like this forever.

The agony we’d felt was too much, and we’d suffered long enough. When the flashes started going off, I reacted on

instinct. I pushed him back and away from me. The horror of being exposed took over my brain.

When I looked at him, the hurt that swirled in his eyes gutted me.

“Never do that again,” he gritted out before the emotions took over. “I fucking hate you right now. Just stay away from me, Greg. Leave me the fuck alone.”

Cooper turned and walked away as I stood there helplessly empty and alone on the street. It was right then, watching him walk away with his back held straight like it was all that kept him from falling apart, that I knew I’d never love anyone like I loved him. Cooper Evans. My husband. And I had to find a way to win him back.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m so sorry,” I whispered to myself as unshed tears filled my eyes.

If I had any hope of keeping him, I was going to have to take control of my life and protect my brother at the same time.

## ***CHAPTER 21***

## **COOPER**

I WIPED at the tears streaming down my face as I made my way home. Why the fuck did he have to come after me? Why couldn't he have just let me go?

And more importantly, why did I stop walking when he called my name? The answer was obvious. I've been waiting for weeks for him to say what I wanted to hear.

Thank God I was only two blocks from my apartment. The fireworks were going off overhead and people were celebrating. But for me, there wasn't anything to celebrate. The new year held a divorce in my future and immeasurable heartbreak.

Sometimes I wished I could forget him. Anything to stop the pain that threatened to send me to my knees every time I thought about him and what we had. I knew better than to get involved with a straight guy, much less fall in love with him. I happily agreed to marry him, and it had been the best eight months of my life.

I needed to have my head examined.

This level of pain was new to me. I'd never been deeply involved with anyone like this because I thought I knew myself pretty well. I was an incorrigible romantic who loved helping people, and the shy tight end checked all my boxes from the very beginning.

It was probably why I hadn't seen it coming. Falling in love with Greg wasn't like a storm; it had crept up on me one day at a time like the movement of the ocean smoothing a stone.



At times like this, I wished I could talk to Callum. Or maybe Jackson. I knew I could go over to either of their houses. But they had their own lives with their husbands and kids. The life I wanted and thought I could have with Greg.

If tonight had proven anything, it was he would never be ready for us in the real world. And my head was done with the shadows, but I still had to convince my heart. It wanted him.

When I reached my building, I climbed the stairs to my second-floor apartment. Since Christian had married Alex three years ago, I'd lived alone. It wasn't something I loved, but Greg had filled a lot of the space Christian had left behind.

After closing the door, I took off my jacket and threw it over the kitchen chair. Collapsing onto the sofa, I turned on the TV, trying to drown out my memories of us.

My memories were so vivid that I thought I could smell his cologne. That's when I realized it was all over my sweater. And it made me miss him even more.

*God damn it, I'd have to have it dry-cleaned.*

Staring blindly at the television as a few more tears trailed down my face, I wished the pain would go away.

\* \* \*

ON NEW YEAR'S DAY, I REACHED ROCK BOTTOM. I'D LAID ON the sofa and cried for everything I'd lost. I couldn't do this alone. There was no way I'd get past this without some support. And I knew who to ask. They'd already been here one time, and I was ready to spill it all to them.

It was a new year. I had to try to get over him and maybe saying it out loud to my friends was a good place to start putting it behind me.

It didn't hurt that I'd found a bottle of rum in the back of the cabinet in the kitchen. It had gone down easily and seemed to help me come to this decision.

Picking up my phone, I opened my text messages and typed out a group message to Christian and Callum.

Me: If you can over come, I'm ready to tell you everything. Except the sex stuff.

Christian: Are you drunk?

Callum: Oh yeah, he's drunk.

Me: I am not drunk. I'm just numbly all over.

Christian: Oh, fuck. On my way.

Christian: Bringing food.

Christian: And please don't take all your clothes off.

Callum: Me too. I'll get the coffee. The box this time.

Callum: And I second the clothes thing. Please.

Me: And I'll get the door! And not naked. I don't do that anymore.

I laughed at my own joke. It felt good to laugh again, but it didn't last long. My heart wasn't in it. And I had an overwhelming urge to text Greg. But I wasn't drunk enough for that. I was really just tipsy.

Just like the night in Key West when he proposed to me on the beach.

The tears started again, and I fell onto the sofa cushion with my sweater balled under my head. I'd been holding it all night next to my face, where I could smell his cologne and body wash. My fucking heart hurt so much without him. There was a Greg-sized hole in my chest, and I wasn't sure I'd make it through this. Or that I could ever fill it.

I was startled awake when the door opened, and Christian walked in. He put the bags he was carrying on the side table and came over to me. Callum walked in before he could close the door. They were here, and I could be okay after I told them everything.

Callum looked at me with compassion in his eyes. “At least he’s not naked. Only halfway there.”

“Hey, buddy. How are you?” Christian squatted down in front of me on the edge of the sofa. Callum was doing something I couldn’t see before he appeared and took a seat across from me.

“It hurts.” I rolled further back and patted my chest. A crease from my sweater pillow was pressed into my skin. He picked up the damp, balled-up Cashmere sweater and hung it over the back of the sofa.

He nodded and gave me a sympathetic smile. “I know it does. I remember it vividly when Alex and I broke up.”

“So do I,” Callum replied.

“And you know what’s worse? I think we were sappier and more lovey-dovey than you and Alex.”

Callum started laughing and Christian gave me his *I’m going to kick your ass* stare.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Pooper.”

That made me laugh. He only called me *Pooper* when I made him mad. It had started in college.

“Well, I think we should get some food into you. You’ve got a lot of splannin’ to do, Lucy!” Christian’s imitation of Ricky Ricardo was hilarious.

Laughing with them made me feel better, and more like my old self. Not the heartbroken mess I was now. I knew it wouldn’t last, but I could hold on to it for now.

Christian brought over the bag of food he’d picked up from The Diner. I prayed it wasn’t red velvet pancakes.

We didn't get shitfaced often, but when we did, food from my favorite place was the morning-after medicine. "I ordered you the hangover special," he said, handing me a bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit with extra greasy bacon. "Eat up. I got us one, too."

He handed Callum a biscuit, then poured coffee for the two of them. "I want coffee," I pouted like a little kid.

"After you eat, Coop. You need two ibuprofen and some water. The coffee isn't going anywhere."

I saluted him, then unwrapped the paper from my sandwich and pulled out a piece of extra-crispy bacon. We ate in silence for a minute before Callum asked the question that unleashed the dam in my mouth.

"How long were the two of you together?"

I held up three fingers.

"Three months?" Christian asked.

I swallowed the first bite, and it felt good on my stomach. Now I could answer. "Years."

Both of their mouths dropped open, and their eyes looked like softballs.

"What?" I mumbled around another mouthful of biscuit.

"Three years?" Callum repeated.

I swallowed another delicious bite. "Yeah, the first year we were just best friends, like us guys." I point to each of them, then to myself. "Then we got together and started fucking."

Christian looked at Callum. "Did we know Greg was gay?"

Callum started to say something, but I cut him off. "He's not. Only with me. He's bisexual."

Evidently, I'd shocked them again because they sat there like those fish with big mouths. But that was nothing.

"We got married in March."

Christian spit his coffee across the coffee table, and Callum almost choked on his food. *Damn, I wish I'd recorded that.*

When they could talk, they both turned to me. "What did you say? I don't think I heard you correctly." My best friend had heard me. He just wanted me to say it again. So I did. Slowly, so he couldn't pretend he hadn't.

"We. Got. Married. Last. March." I paused, then dropped the bomb. "And now we're getting a divorce." I stopped eating and stared at my food.

"Holy fucking shit," Callum muttered. "We might need Simon, no, Jackson on this one."

Christian's eyes were sympathetic. He put his arm around me. "I'm so sorry, Coop. You really love him, don't you?"

I nodded. "More than anyone or anything. Adam didn't hold a candle to him," I said, tears welling in my eyes again.

"Who's Adam?" Callum asked.

I waved him off. "Nobody. Old boyfriend. I met when we spent the weekend in Seattle. Went to see Fallen Angel. That's when he met Amanda."

"Wait," Callum said, crumpling up his paper. "I'm confused. You're gonna have to start from the beginning."

Christian held up a hand.

"Before we start over, can I ask why you broke up?" He handed me a napkin for my face.

I shook my head. It was so heavy, and I was sure I looked like Sunflower with my head bobbing up and down. "For the same reason, you guys didn't know. It was a secret. From you guys, my parents, his parents, the whole fucking world. And when he went home on Thanksgiving without me; I was done. I couldn't take it anymore. You know me, I can't live a secret life in the closet. I want what you guys have. And what I had for eight months. I just want to love him out in the open."

I heard the pain in my voice.

“Why doesn’t he want anyone to know? Is he afraid to come out?” Christian’s words were gentle, like he talked to his six-year-old students in school.

“It’s his family, and his younger brother, Brock. I don’t know what it’s about, but he has to protect Brock, whatever the fuck that means.”

Callum thought this through. “Wait, he went home for Thanksgiving, and you were here alone. And you’d just broken up.”

I nodded, cradling my head between my hands.

“Why the fuck did you stay here and suffer alone? Why didn’t you tell one of us, Cooper? God damn it. I brought you food, and you said nothing. We don’t suffer alone.” Callum was really upset with me.

Christian reached over and took my hand. “He’s right, Coop. You don’t have to suffer alone.”

“And it’s been six goddamn weeks. And I see you five days a week at the stables. Why didn’t you tell me? You, of all people, know it’s not healthy to hold that shit in. Especially for six goddamn weeks, Cooper.”

“I know,” I said. “But I couldn’t open that wound out there in front of everyone. If I did, it would never close. I had to stop the bleeding first. Except it hasn’t stopped yet,” I whispered.

Callum stalked over to me and pulled me up by my t-shirt. He hugged me in his arms, and I held on to him for dear life. It was the catalyst that exploded the dam, and I let it all out. I cried until I couldn’t cry anymore.

When I got it together, I took some ibuprofen and had some coffee to help with the headache. I didn’t know how long we sat there, but I told them everything. From the day we met until last night.

“Everywhere I go, I have memories of things we did together. We stayed here, at the stables, and at his place. Hell, we lived together for eight months. I can’t escape the memories long enough to figure out how to handle it.”

Callum leaned forward in his chair. “Do you actually want a divorce?”

I shook my head and swallowed. “No. I just want him. But not in the shadows. Not hiding away.”

He sighed. “You’ve got to talk to him, Coop. We could all see how you guys felt just by the way you looked at each other. But we had no idea it ran that deep. Declan was right.”

I furrowed my brow. “What do you mean?”

“He kept saying you guys were in love.”

“We are,” I replied, rubbing my temples. “But there are things in our way that can’t be ignored. And it hurts like hell that he couldn’t trust me with whatever is going on with his family.”

“I have an idea.” Christian smiled and rubbed my arm. “You could go out to Cannon to our beach house for a few days, or even a week. No memories in our house, so maybe that’ll help.”

I thought about that, then nodded. That was a good idea. “Alex won’t mind?”

He scoffed. “Not at all. He’s been worried about you. And Greg.”

Concern for him gripped me. “Why is Alex worried about him?”

Christian raised his brows. “Evidently, he’s not playing well. Missing passes, things that aren’t like him.”

I knew he was suffering, but I didn’t realize it was affecting his game.

“Go to Cannon,” Callum encouraged me. “It’ll be a nice getaway. And you can think.”

They were right. No memories there, so I could breathe and think. Figure out how to move forward.

“Yeah, okay.” I nodded. “That sounds good.”

By the time they left, I felt somewhat better knowing I'd let all that pent-up hurt and anger out. But I'd also learned not to shut out my friends. They had my back come hell or high water, and definitely rum.

So that afternoon, I packed a bag and headed out to Cannon Beach to think.



## ***CHAPTER 22***

## **GREG**

HOW HAD I allowed my life to come to this? I knew the answer, but I'd been in denial for so long that I couldn't see it clearly until he left me.

Thanksgiving Day had lived up to my disappointment. I should have stayed in Portland with Cooper instead of agreeing to come home. Heartbroken was too mild a word to describe how I was feeling. I was barely holding it together.

Brock took one look at me after I arrived and knew something wasn't right. "What's wrong?"

I knew if I told my brother the story, I'd never make it through dinner. "I'll tell you about the whole thing after today. I'll lose my shit if I try to tell you now."

My baby brother was obviously worried about me. "I'm here for you, Greg. You can always talk to me."

I hugged him. "I know, and I will. Just not today." I was like Pandora's box. If the lid opened, all the shit that couldn't be put back in would erupt and nothing would ever be the same.

Brock eyed me. "Okay. Maybe I can fly out for a visit."

That made me smile. "I'd love that. Maybe after Christmas."

I was determined not to allow my parents to see my pain. All of this was caused by the narrow-minded toxicity they'd so willingly adopted years ago. But allowing their bigotry and hatred to upend my life with Cooper was on me.

Hopefully, Brock and I wouldn't have to deal with it much longer. It still baffled me how they'd abandoned who they were for the politically-minded bigots they were now.

The disaster that had become my life continued into Christmas Day. I spent the day alone in our apartment. The memories of us last Christmas made me heartsick. All I wanted was to get him back here with me. I was twenty-six years old and still living my life according to what my parents thought was right.

That shit was going to stop.

It was ridiculous that my life wasn't my own. And why the fuck couldn't I have normal parents?

Our last regular season game was four days after Christmas. Being separated from Cooper for five weeks was a hell I wouldn't wish on my enemies. I was hollow inside, still couldn't eat, and my game was beginning to suffer. My only source of nutrition had become the body fuel protein shakes I forced down. Which, of course, meant my weight dropped.

I missed yet another play and Coach put in my backup when one of the trainers told him I was throwing up on the sidelines.

They whisked me into the blue tent and waited for Simon to come down to check on me. The moment he walked in and took a look at me, he took me to the locker room for an IV. My teammates, especially my friends, knew something was wrong. I was a mess, and I knew Cooper was as well.

Simon peered at me as he inserted the needle for the IV. "When was the last time you actually ate real food?"

"Uh, this morning?" It was a lie, and we both knew it.

He pierced me with his gaze. "Don't lie to me, Greg. I'll have you yanked from playing for as long as it takes."

I sighed and dropped my head. Football and Brock were all I had left. "It's been a few days."

Simon cursed under his breath and ran his hand over his unshaven jaw. "Have you had food poisoning or been ill?"

I simply shook my head, because Simon knew. All my friends knew without me having to say a word.

He put his hands on my knees and leaned in close to my face, ensuring I looked at him. “You two have got to do something. You’re in shit condition and he’s a hot mess. It doesn’t take a genius to figure it out. If you love each other, what’s the fucking problem? Both of you are wrecking your health and you know I won’t allow that.”

I stared at the IV line going into my arm. There was nothing I could do at this point. I’d begged and pleaded the night he left. I was at a loss.

Jackson came into the locker room, carrying one-year-old Ava. “How’s he doing, babe?”

*Babe.* That’s what I called Cooper. Hearing it caused a pain in my chest, and I tried to rub it away.

“He’s just like the other one,” he announced, but his tone had softened. “Both heartbroken.”

I looked up at them, expecting anger. But what I got was empathy.

“Can I give you some advice? No, forget I asked. You’re getting it, anyway. Do whatever it takes to work this out with Coop. Life is incredible when you have the person you love. I don’t know why you idiots never learn anything from Jackson.”

I wasn’t going to tell him the other idiot he referred to wasn’t around when and Jackson got together. It only seemed like Declan had been here from the start.

Ava babbled at Simon. “Da, da, da, da, da...” Jackson handed her over to him, then hung his big arm over Simon’s shoulders. They had what we wanted.

My chest ached. “I’ll try,” I replied, rubbing at it absently. “But it may be too late.”

Jackson huffed. “It’s never too late when you love someone. And don’t take no for an answer. He fucking loves you. Always has. Whatever it is, fix it.”

He kissed Simon on the cheek and reached for Ava. “Let’s go find Parker, big girl. Dada is working.” She squealed at Parker’s name, making both of her dads smile. She obviously loved her big brother.

“I’ll be back up there later. This may take a little while,” Simon told his husband, then kissed him and their daughter.

They were so easy together. Nothing kept them apart. And I knew they were right. I had to do something.

*But what?*

At the end of the game, I was stretched out on the table in the training room with another IV bag pumping fluids and nutrients back into my weakened body. Simon wasn’t playing around with me.

Simon went to update Coach on my condition. I draped my right arm over my face, blocking the light. The first one to check on me was Patrick Griffin, our linebacker from Seattle. He’d requested a trade from Seattle when word got out that Jackson was retiring. Greer Rowan wasted no time scooping him up.

“Hey man, you doing okay?”

Patrick was a nice guy off the field, but a terror to defend against when it counted. He’d chased Alex around the field for the last four seasons, so we knew the kind of impact player he could be.

“Yeah,” I said, sitting up, “feeling better now. The second bag of fluids.” I gestured to the bag hanging over my head.

He nodded. “Good. Was it something you ate?”

I huffed. “Nah. I wish it was that simple.” I looked down at my hands.

I could see Patrick in my peripheral vision as he studied me for a moment, then checked to make sure no one was in the room with us. “I don’t think I’ve told you this, but I saw you in Seattle at the Fallen Angel concert a couple of years ago. Your hair and height are hard to miss.”

My gaze shot to his, and my eyes widened, but I didn't reply. I had no idea what to say.

"It's none of my business, but you look like you're hurting. And not from a football injury." He patted his chest over his heart. "If the person you were with has anything to do with it, I understand how you feel."

He let that sit for a moment, giving me a chance to process what he'd just said. "Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Foster?"

I froze. Did we do something to give us away? "Why do you think this has anything to do with my friend?"

Patrick put his hand on my shoulder and spoke so low that only I could hear him, even though we were alone. "Because I recognize the symptoms. There was a distinct difference when you were talking to that chick, then when he handed you a beer. He gave you a minute before interrupting you. And he had the same look."

I frowned. "What look?"

He smiled. "The one that you can only give someone you love. He couldn't keep his eyes off you. It's also the way I look at my boyfriend."

Patrick Griffin was gay?

"Boyfriend?" I repeated in a whisper. I had no idea about his personal life.

He nodded. "Yeah. He's the lead singer, Cole Bradley."

Floored. Utterly floored and speechless. He could have pushed me off the table with no resistance at all. But then something triggered in my brain.

Adam. Adam was part of Fallen Angel.

"Is Adam still with the band?"

Patrick looked confused. "Yeah, why?"

I growled, and he widened his eyes. "Wait. Is your friend the guy he started dating after the Seattle tour?"

“Yes. But he’s not just my friend.” I couldn’t believe how easily I’d said that out loud.

He must have seen my reaction to admitting that about Cooper.

“Look, you don’t have to say anything. I know Monroe and Hayes are friends of yours, as well as Jackson Kincaid. But if you ever need to talk to someone who isn’t married and living a storybook life, I’m here. We’ve had our ups and downs, and we’re still not out. That’s part of the reason why I wanted to come here. Thought it would be easier.”

I gaped at him. “I had no idea.”

He nodded. “That’s my point. I get where you’re coming from. Just don’t give up. If he’s fucking up your game, he’s worth fighting for.”

Patrick held out his hand for a fist bump, then turned to leave.

“Hey, Patrick?” He stopped and turned around. “Thanks, man. Want to grab a beer sometime?”

He grinned and nodded. “Yeah, sounds good. I’ll get your number from Monroe or Hayes.”

I gave him a nod as the med tech came in to remove the empty bag.

It had been four days since I’d gotten advice from Patrick, Jackson, and Simon. I’d spent the last two either staring at the ceiling or working out while mulling over what they had said. Simon and Jackson were right. I couldn’t let things continue this way. We had to close this growing divide between us. When I’d seen him two days ago at Alejandro’s, I’d noticed how thin his face had become and the dark circles under his eyes. They’d only gotten worse since I’d stopped by his apartment to drop off his Christmas gift.

Divorce was out of the question for me. I loved him and he loved me. And after speaking to Patrick, it helped to know I wasn’t the only one. He wasn’t out yet either. Maybe that was why it had been so easy talking to him about Cooper. I loved my friends, but Patrick was right. They were living a

storybook life. I knew they'd had to decide to live openly, but it felt like I couldn't tell them my fears.

One thing was for sure: I planned to do whatever it took to get Cooper back. I couldn't tell him that over a text, though. I needed to see him, hold him in my arms, and tell him we were going to be okay. We needed to spend the offseason in the Keys at our villa. Callum could get someone to cover for him, and I'd pay for it all.

Six weeks of suffering was enough. For both of us. I didn't have to see him to know he wasn't doing any better than I was. Enough was enough.

I'd been mulling over a plan that would give both Brock and me the lives we wanted. It depended on me having some faith in all of our friends, even the new one who'd seen right through me. They had my back, no matter what. I guess living in fear was why I couldn't see that they'd proved themselves over and over.

I had to find Cooper and explain. It was time I came clean with him about my fucked up reasoning.

"No time like the present," I muttered to myself.

I picked my phone up and called his number. It went straight to voicemail.

Okay, I had to find him. That was probably better, anyway.

I ran to our bedroom and into the bathroom. I showered but didn't shave. I knew he couldn't resist touching my blond stubble, and I wasn't above using it. I was ready to do everything necessary to get him back.

Dressing quickly, I grabbed my wallet and keys and tucked them into my pocket with my phone. As I rode down on the elevator, I sent my brother a text.

Me: Going to get him back. This shit ends soon.

Me: For both of us.

Brock: Thank God. I'll be ready.



When I reached my truck, I clicked my key FOB to unlock my door and got in. Starting the engine, I let it run a minute before taking off in the cold January weather.

I started to text him but thought better of it. I needed to see him face-to-face. So I put down my phone and backed out of my parking space. I drove to his apartment and cruised the parking area. His Honda wasn't here, so I had to assume he wasn't either.

The next logical place was our third apartment at the stables. We loved it out there, so I made the fifteen-minute drive to check. When I pulled into the driveway, I saw Declan's truck, but no blue Honda.

My heart sank, but I knew someone had to know where he was. He wouldn't just disappear without telling his people. Even when we'd gone on vacation, he'd made sure to tell Callum where we were going.

I used to be his people. And if things went the way I hoped, I would be again real soon.

I pulled up to the barn as Declan rounded the corner. He looked up at me and waved. I bet he could figure out why I was there.

"Hey," I said, jumping out of my truck. "Is Callum around?"

He held out his hand for a fist bump. "Hey, Foster. No, he's at home with Mere. Why?"

I sighed and hung my head. "You know why. You're one of Simon's idiots, too."

Declan looked at me with a grin on his face, but I didn't have time to explain it all to him. That would take too long. "Nevermind. I just need to find him and fix this shit."

"Well, he's not here. I'm sure you tried his place before driving out here, right?"

"Yeah," I muttered irritably, my frustration beginning to show. "I figured Callum would know."

Declan sighed and rubbed his fingers across his bearded jaw. “I shouldn’t be telling you this, because my husband would probably make me pay,” he smiled, showing he didn’t mind one way or the other. Lucky bastard. “But you’re my friend too, and I know you’re hurting as badly as he is. We’ve all been there.”

I nodded, wanting him to hurry the fuck up.

“Callum knows where he is, but you’ll have to get him to tell you. Not me. He’d kill me or cut me off, and I can’t live with either of those.”

I smiled despite myself. “Fair enough. Do you think he’d tell me over the phone?”

Declan chuckled. “Maybe. He wants you guys to get this shit worked out, too. We all do.”

I pulled out my phone and dialed Callum’s number. I put it on speakerphone so Declan could hear. Callum picked up after the second ring.

“Hello, this is Dr. Miller.”

Declan smiled. “That never gets old,” he whispered.

Callum heard him anyway. “Declan, what are you doing?”

His eyes widened.

“Hey, baby, I’m out here at the stables with Greg. He’s looking for Coop.”

Callum drew in a deep breath, then let it out with a relieved sigh. “I knew — well, hoped — it wouldn’t be long before you called me Greg.”

My pulse picked up. “I need to find him, Callum. I want to make this right.”

He paused for a minute. “Why? Do you want to end it or get him back?”

“To get him back where he belongs. With me.”

I heard him sigh again. “Are you coming clean with him? Because if you’re not, you might as well forget it. But it’s also

not my place to stop you, and he didn't say it was a secret."

*Come on, Callum.*

"Please, man. I need to see him. I can't fix this if I can't find him. And I won't do it over the phone. He's gotta see how wrecked we both are."

Callum was quiet, clearly thinking it over. When he finally spoke, it was my turn to release the breath I'd been holding.

"Fine. But if you fuck this up, it'll destroy him." There was a warning note in his voice that said there'd be consequences if I did. "And you need to know there's a possibility he might not take you back."

"I know." And I did. Just the thought made me want to be sick. But maybe I could convince him. And if there was even a little hope of getting him back, I had to try.

He sighed one more time before telling me what I needed to know. "Fine. He's staying at Christian and Alex's beach house at Cannon."

The ocean. I should've known.

"Thank you."

"Greg," he called, "don't let him down. As I said before, it's not fair to drag him through your indecision. Just don't hurt him again."

"I won't. I promise. Can you text me the address?"

"Sure."

My phone pinged with a text, and there was the information I needed.

"Thank you. It means a lot. Everything really." Because Cooper was everything. My safe place. My free place. Where I felt most like myself.

Callum huffed. "Don't make me regret this, Greg. If he hadn't told me about the last three years, I wouldn't have given you the information. But you two belong together. So go try to make it right."

I smiled, my heart filling with hope for the first time in months. I blew out a breath. “I’ll do my best. Thanks again.”

Declan smiled, then leaned closer to my phone. “Babe, I’m going to check on the building site, but I’ll be home in less than an hour.”

Callum’s voice changed and softened completely. “I’ll be waiting.” Then he disconnected the call.

Declan wiggled his eyebrows at me. “See what you’ve got to look forward to?”

I smirked, guessing Callum hadn’t told him. “I already had everything for eight months. Now I have to get it back.”

“Wait,” he said. “What are you talking about?”

I smiled as I opened my door. “I married him last March.”

And just like that, I dropped the mic.

I climbed into my truck and watched Declan’s mouth open and close like a guppy. It felt good to say that to someone other than Brock.

For the first time in six weeks, I felt hopeful that we could work this out.

And I had so much more to say when I found him. I just prayed he’d listen.

## ***CHAPTER 23***

## **COOPER**

I'D BEEN HERE for two days watching the tide come in and out. I felt so much relief from telling Christian and Callum about us. I wished Greg knew how good it felt to open up and share your life with people who truly had your best interest at heart.

The knock on the door startled me. Christian hadn't said they were expecting anyone out here, and he and Callum were the only ones who knew where to find me. I was sure that list now included Alex and Declan. I wasn't hiding, per se. I just needed some time to think.

When I opened the door, my breath stalled. Greg stood on the porch with his hands deep in his pockets, reminding me it was cold as fuck out there.

"What are you doing here?" I opened the door wider to let him in.

"I came to see you, babe." He closed the door behind him, causing the air to stir.

I closed my eyes and breathed in the familiar scent of him as he stood close to me. It hurt to be this close. But it hurt more being apart.

"I'm here because we have some things to talk about. Things I should have told you a long time ago."

We were standing so close, like magnets to one another. We'd always been drawn together. Opposites attracted no matter what tried to get in the way.

I nodded. "We do have a lot to talk about."

It seemed like all the permission he needed to close the gap between us even more. Blue eyes held green and, like always, I got lost in those hazel-green eyes for a moment. I wanted to rub his blonde stubble, and that's when I remembered. This was what always happened with us, so I stepped away for my own self-preservation.

I walked over to the living room and lowered myself onto the sofa. Greg followed. I watched as he took his coat off and looked around the beach house, taking in everything Christian and Alex had put together. I knew he was taking a moment to get his thoughts together, so I stayed silent, giving it to him.

When his eyes came back to mine, I could see how much thinner he looked. "This is really nice. But I prefer our villa in the Keys."

I did too, but I didn't say it.

"What do you want from me? Why are you here, Greg?" Just saying his name aloud caused my heart to clench in my chest.

He sat on the edge of the sofa beside me. "I want to tell you everything. I should have done this long before now, but I need you to know it had nothing to do with not trusting you."

My heart pounded. I couldn't believe he was going to open up. And I swallowed twice before I could speak. "Okay, I'm listening."

Greg stood up and walked to the window.

"My father is James Foster, a newly-elected freshman U.S. Senator in Washington. He filled the seat vacated by an ultra-conservative who chose not to run again because of health issues. Dad was groomed for it, so he and my mother have fully embraced the beliefs of the constituents who voted him into office."

I ran this around in my brain, trying to figure out what it had to do with us. "Okay?" I said slowly, "Why's that a bad thing?"

Greg turned to look at me, then released a shaky breath. "Because he's against gay marriage and all trans rights. He's

okay with gay people in general, just not their right to marry. Or have kids. Or be public about it. And what's even worse, the church my parents attend supports conversion therapy. They believe you can pray the gay away."

Just hearing the words conversion therapy had my heart beating faster. Still, his revelation was as horrifying as it was illuminating. "But you're too old to be forced into something like that. You're a professional athlete, for god's sake."

He nodded. "Yeah, I am. But Brock isn't." His voice cracked when he said his brother's name. "He's got a boyfriend for the first time in his life, and I'm terrified he's going to be careless and get caught. I've tried to get him to lay low, but when he met Ryan, there was no going back."

Fear for Brock rose in my gut. "Do they know about him?"

He shook his head. "No. At least we don't think so. You know I've been begging him to wait to explore his sexuality until he could get away from home. But I know if he's fallen for someone like I fell for you, he'd never be able to hide his feelings. Evidently, I'm terrible at it. Patrick Griffin already pointed it out."

Wait. What? "What are you talking about?"

Greg gave me a look that felt like warm honey covering me. He reached for my hand but pulled back. It was difficult not to touch each other. "He knows I'm in love with you. He saw us at the concert in Seattle. And according to Patrick, when I looked at you, it said it all."

"Okay. But we weren't together," I said, still confused.

"No, but I guess I gave off that vibe. Maybe it was at the end, I don't know. But he was there because his boyfriend is Cole Bradley."

My eyes bugged out at that information. "I had no idea he was gay."

"I'm not worried about Patrick. He won't say anything to anyone. But if my brother slips up, it's going to be bad." He laughed humorlessly. "Can you imagine how fast my father would hide him away? He'd never be re-elected if his



constituent found out he had two kids who were the complete opposite of what he stood for?”

My heart sank and all hope I'd had that maybe this would work out was quickly dashed. All the progress I'd made had been erased. I was back at square one.

I didn't know what to say. It didn't change our reality.

“I understand why you've kept this a secret. But if anything, it makes it even more difficult for us. I can't imagine him changing his line of thinking.”

Greg agreed. “He won't, unless I give him a reason to change it.”

“Do you think they really feel that way? Politicians can say one thing but believe something else. Most will say anything to get elected.”

We both mulled it over before Greg stood and pulled his sweater over his head. That was when I noticed his real weight loss.

Frowning at him, I got up and pulled up his shirt to his even more defined abs and thinner waist. He sighed when my fingers grazed his warm skin.

“Why have you lost so much weight? Christian said Alex was worried about you.” I pulled his shirt back down, but he caught my hand before I pulled away.

“Losing your husband will do that to you.” He pulled up my t-shirt and noticed I'd dropped a few pounds too. “Looks like I'm not the only one.”

I huffed. “But you play football. You should be packing on the protein and upping your calories. You know you can't play without the fuel you need.”

He let out a weighted breath. “Guess you haven't been watching the games.”

I shook my head and looked away. “It's too hard to watch. What happened?”

He hesitated before answering. “Coach had to replace me last week when I started throwing up. Then Simon had me benched.”

Fuck. This was my fault. I’d wrecked his season. “I’m so sorry, Greg.”

He slipped his hands around my arms and pulled me to him. His arms encircled me, and I was exactly where I longed to be. “Don’t you dare blame yourself for this, babe. It’s my fucking fault for not being completely honest with you in the first place.”

His warm skin against mine made me want things I knew I couldn’t have. “I have to know something,” I said, still wrapped in his arms. “Why did you ask me to marry you when you knew the way things are? Why did you let us fall in love like that? Because this is so goddamn painful.”

He pulled back and gazed at me with his green eyes. “Babe, I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to. Trying to stop loving you is like stopping the wind from blowing. It’s impossible, Cooper. Don’t you see that? We’re no good without each other.” His voice cracked with all the emotion. “I can’t lose you.”

I cupped my hands around his face as tears leaked from his eyes. “Love was never the issue between us. Secrecy is the problem. I can’t do it anymore,” I whispered.

“I don’t want us to be a secret anymore. I’ve got a plan, but I need you not to give up on me.”

I smiled at his handsome, stubbled face. “I’ll never give up on you, Greg, but I can’t wait for it to happen. I’ve waited two years. Isn’t that long enough?”

He gazed into my eyes, and I could see what we both wanted. Only each other.

Could I go back into the closet? How long would we be waiting again?

I closed my eyes and said the hardest words I’ve ever said. “I’m sorry, babe. I won’t survive starting all over again. It all but killed me this time. Until something changes...”

I couldn't look at him, but the hitch in his breathing tore me wide open. His body jerked and shook as he cried in my arms. I'd never felt as raw as I did while we stood there holding each other and crying endless tears.

I cried for our future, for the deep love we had for each other, and for the ache in my chest I didn't think would ever heal.

When we finally pulled apart, his eyes were bloodshot. He was as wrecked as I felt.

"I'm going to fix this, Cooper Foster, and you're not getting a divorce from me. You remember our vows and keep them here until I get back." He put his big paw over my heart and kissed me softly.

"I love you, always and forever," he whispered.

Swallowing around the lump in my throat, I repeated my vow. "I love you, always will."

He kissed my forehead, then grabbed his sweater and jacket before walking out the door, taking my heart with him.

Before I fell apart, I picked up my phone and sent a text to Callum.

Me: He just left. Someone needs to be with him.

Callum: I'll send Declan. I'm on my way out there.

Me: Thanks. You coming alone?

Callum: Of course not.

I wasn't ashamed to say I needed my friends. Well I needed my husband but my friends would have to do.

## ***CHAPTER 24***

## **GREG**

THE ENTIRE DRIVE back from Cannon Beach, all I thought about was how I was going to make it through this alone. Nothing had ever hurt this much in my life, and there were times I could barely see the road for the tears.

When I reached my apartment ninety minutes later, I got my answer. Marcus and Declan sat on the floor outside my apartment. The emotion that swelled inside me was more than I could handle.

“God damn it,” I muttered, swiping away at my eyes that refused to stop watering.

Marcus got up and pulled me in for a hug while Declan took my keys and opened the door. I cried like a damn baby all over Monroe, and he was okay with it.

When I could speak, I clapped him on the back, and he let me go. “How’d you know?”

Declan gave me a sympathetic look. “Cooper sent us to you.”

I should have known it was him. He was so selfless, and even though he was hurting just as badly as I was, he thought of me first.

“Did Callum go to him?”

Declan nodded. “Yeah, he did. And he called Christian and Jackson. They headed out to Coop after he got the text.”

“And you’re stuck with us,” Marcus said.

“And us,” Aidan added, walking through the door with Alex.

My eyes welled even more when Simon showed up carrying a fifth of Fireball Whiskey.

I stood up and pulled each of them into a hug. “I’ve been such an idiot.”

“What do you mean?” Alex asked, concern written all over his kind face.

I shook my head, trying to shake off the sadness. “You guys have been more of a family to me than my own. I don’t know why I didn’t trust you. All I can say is I’m sorry.”

Marcus gently pushed me to sit on the sofa. Alex sat on one side, and Aidan sat on the coffee table facing me. “You were protecting him and yourself,” Aidan replied. “No one will ever fault you for that.”

“I told you we had your back,” Declan added. “Why was that so hard to believe?”

I shrugged.

“You need to talk, man. Let it out. What’s said in this apartment stays in this apartment.” Marcus was serious. And he was right. I needed to talk.

Simon raised the bottle and broke the seal. “Let’s have a shot first, then you can spill it all.”

Declan went into our kitchen for glasses. He lined them up and Simon poured. When each of us had a glass, Simon raised his.

“To friends and having each other’s backs.”

Each of us swallowed down the cinnamon alcohol that left a warm streak as it went down. I held out my glass, and Simon poured me another one. “That’s it for now.” His tone brooked no argument.

“Okay, story time.” Marcus put his glass on the table and sat back with his arm around his husband.

I owed them this. “Well,” I said, “the first thing you should know is Coop and I aren’t just friends.”

Marcus feigned shock. “No kidding, really?”

I gave him the finger.

“Stop being an asshole,” Aidan scolded him.

“Go ahead,” Alex said, nudging me. “We’re listening.”

I nodded, then drew in a big breath to calm myself. “Cooper and I got married last year.”

Another mic drop moment that left them all speechless. Well, except Declan.

I took another swallow of my whiskey and started at the beginning when we first met and told them everything until two hours ago. Hearing our story aloud, I’d never realized how intertwined all our lives had always been until tonight.

Marcus looked surprised. “How in the fuck did we not see all that?”

Aidan beat me to it. “We were all absorbed in our own lives.” He sounded sad.

“No,” I interrupted, “that’s not completely true. We hid our relationship from everyone. We started out as friends when he insisted on dragging me all over Portland.” I smiled at the memory. “Then Seattle changed everything for both of us. We didn’t mean to fall in love. It just kinda happened.”

I looked down at my left hand. My ring was in my pocket instead of on my finger the way it should have been. Should always be. So I reached inside and pulled it out, then put it on.

As I rolled the band between my fingers, I kept talking. “I told him I wouldn’t give him a divorce.”

“Good,” Marcus chimed in. “Now, how can we help you get him back?”

Declan rubbed his hand over his beard. “It’s obvious you need our help. Or at the very least, our advice.”

I nodded, his words giving me hope for a resolution. “Okay, give me your best advice.”

They all looked at Simon, who took the hint and spoke first. “It’s pretty simple. Life is hard and sometimes you have to make choices that are fuckin’ difficult. The ones that really matter usually are. But you have to remember one thing and you seem to have forgotten it. It’s your fucking life. You can’t live by someone else’s expectations. I’m not one to tell somebody what to do...”

Declan coughed up a “Bullshit...” making everyone laugh.

Simon stared at him. “Let me rephrase,” he replied. “I’m not one to tell *most* people what to do. Only Declan needs written directions with pictures like that.”

Dec threw his head back and laughed. “It’s true. I deserve that. And don’t follow my example. I’m just damn lucky Callum was hooked on me already.”

Simon scoffed. “I’m telling him you said that.”

We laughed, and the moment of levity allowed me to take a deep breath.

“We’ve all fucked up along the way,” Marcus added.

“Ya think?” Aidan deadpanned. “Only took you ten fucking years to fix it.” Then he looked at me. “For God sakes Greg, don’t follow his example. Be like Jackson.”

Simon grinned. “Gotta give it to him. When he makes a decision, he sticks with it.”

We all agreed. They were couple goals.

Alex nudged me. “You can always do what I did,” he added. “Beg and beg some more. Then pull out all the stops, including thin gray sweatpants while going commando.”

I snorted. God, laughing made me feel better. Knowing they hadn’t always gotten it right gave me hope that maybe I could fix this.

“I’ve decided what to do about my parents, and I’ve got a plan. But my brother is a different story.” I sighed, rubbing my



stubbled jaw.

Laying it all out for them, they listened and offered sincere input, and asked questions that I didn't immediately know the answer to. And I needed that. I knew they had my back, and I could trust them to guide me the right way. Because they wanted what was best for Cooper and me. They wanted us to be happy.

I couldn't say the same for my parents.

An hour or so later, they got up to leave.

"You gonna be okay?" Declan checked. "You're welcome to come to our house if you need some company." He held up his phone and checked his text messages. "He's going to be awhile."

I was thankful Cooper wasn't alone. I don't know what we did to get so lucky to have these friends.

"Or ours," Alex added. "Christian's probably going to stay with Cooper tonight unless he convinces him otherwise."

I appreciated the offers. "Thanks, but I'm okay. I promise."

Simon clapped me on the shoulder. "Keep showing him how much you love him. Prove to Cooper that he can trust in you and your relationship."

I nodded. "I will."

Aidan and Marcus were the last to leave. "If you need anything, just ask. I'll help in any way I can. Legal or otherwise." He extended his hand, and when I put mine in his, he pulled me in for a hug. "We've got you both."

I nodded, then Marcus put out his fist to bump into mine. "It's going to work out, brother. Just have some faith in the power of love."

Aidan rolled his eyes. "Come on, Casanova. Let's go home."

I laughed and closed the door after they stepped into the elevator.

Grabbing my phone, I hit the light switch and went to my bedroom. I was exhausted, but stripped out of my clothes and took a quick shower, anyway.

When I was in bed, I took a picture of my left hand with my ring on. I quickly edited the photo, then opened my text messages.

Me: I'm never taking this off again.

Me: \*\*photo\*\*

Me: I meant every word of my vows. I love you - always and forever.

Me: I'm going to fix this shit and win you back.

Me: BTW – thanks for sending them over. I needed them, and they know everything now.

I waited to see if he'd text back, but he didn't. I just needed a sign from him to keep me going.

Turning off the light, I laid in our bed and flipped through our pictures. I found my favorite one of him and propped it up to face me from his side of the bed. I stared at him until my eyes closed and I fell asleep.

## ***CHAPTER 25***

## **COOPER**

I WAS STARING out at the sunset over the ocean from the floor-to-ceiling window when Christian and Callum came in. The sudden noise in the quiet room snapped me out of my haze, and I turned to look at my friends.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt your weekend.” I walked over to the sofa and sat down.

Callum shook his head. “Don’t start.”

I chuckled at him. He was no nonsense.

“Hey, how are you doing?” Christian’s calm demeanor never failed to put me at ease.

I shrugged. “About the same. But I can’t get the pain to stop.”

Callum sat in front of me. “Did you guys talk?” He peered at me with concern in his eyes. “I had to tell him, Coop. He was desperate to find you.”

“Yeah, I know. You did the right thing, and we talked.” Exhaustion had set in, so I leaned my head back on the sofa. “He told me everything. But the situation with his family is so fucked up. Not sure how we’ll overcome it.” I cut myself off before I said anything I shouldn’t.

“Listen, you need—” a knock at the door cut Christian off. The doorknob turned and opened slowly. My heart gave a lurch when I saw Jackson standing there with Ava in his arms and a diaper bag slung over his shoulder.

Tears formed again, and I didn't fight them. I was thrilled to see him. So I got up and walked over to him.

"Hey, buddy," was all he said, then swept me into his big arms for a hug. Ava patted my head, which made me chuckle, so I was able to talk.

"What are you doing all the way out here?"

I kissed Ava on the head. When I looked at her, she reached for me. "Coo" she called to me. I was her favorite uncle.

"You're full of shitake if you thought I wouldn't come when you needed us. Especially when you dropped everything in your life to help me with Parker. I would have been pissed if Callum hadn't called."

"And that's exactly why I called," Callum joked. "It was really all about Jackson, not you, Coop."

I laughed for the first time in what felt like days, and it made me feel better.

"Before you ask, Parker is spending the night with Elliot, and Simon is with Greg. After the game situation, he wanted to make sure he was okay. Alex, Marcus, Dec, and Aidan are there too. So he's not alone."

The fucking tears were back on my never-ending emotional roller coaster. "Thanks. He shouldn't be alone."

Jackson draped his big arm around my shoulders. "Oh, Coop. You guys are going to work this out. Two people who love each other the way the two of you do can't stay apart."

I sniffed and wiped more tears away while Ava patted my face. My head hurt and I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten.

Christian came back into the room from his kitchen. "Have you eaten anything today?"

I shook my head. "No appetite."

He huffed. "I'm ordering pizza."

Callum reached into his pocket and pulled out some electrolyte packets. He handed them to Jackson. “Open these and I’ll get him some water.”

“I’ve got it,” Christian replied. He came back in with an open bottle of Fiji water. I raised my eyebrows at him as I took the tablets. “What? It reminds us of our anniversary trip.”

I smiled at my friend. “You buy bougie water.”

He was so fucking happy with Alex. And it reminded me of how happy we were in the Keys.

Stopping that thought, I turned. “How much do you know, Jackson?”

Ava continued to pat me on the cheek with her little hand. When she squirmed, I put her on the floor while her papa pulled out toys for her to play with.

“Pa pa pa pa,” she babbled, making Jackson light up like a Christmas tree.

He grinned at her and handed her a toy, then looked up at me. “Not much, so if you don’t mind catching me up, I’d appreciate it.”

“Okay,” I said, but Christian cut me off.

“Why don’t you go take a shower and change clothes? By the time you’re finished, the pizza should be here.”

That sounded really good to me. “Yeah, okay.”

So that’s what I did, and he was right. It did make me feel less like roadkill.

After the pizza arrived, I ate a slice, then told our story again. They all sat and listened, only Jackson asking questions this time. When I got to the part about his family, I glanced at my phone. I wanted to text him to see if it was okay, but Callum figured it out.

“Declan texted me to let me know how it was going. I’m assuming Greg told them everything because he said, and I quote, ‘The kid’s got super fucked up parents. I’d never have guessed Foster came from that.’”

I smiled. Declan had hit the nail on the head with his assessment.

“Okay, then. Well, his dad is a Senator. And he’s anti-gay marriage all the way.”

The fury that grew in Jackson was scary, and Christian and Callum just stared at me, eyes wide, mouths agape.

“That’s what he’s been dealing with? No wonder he didn’t want to tell us anything. God, we’re assholes for pushing him like we did.”

“No, you weren’t. We knew where it was coming from. You weren’t assholes, you were supportive. Or that’s how we took it.”

I finished the rest of the story and looked at them. I couldn’t make out their reactions.

“I don’t know how you two have managed to hide this for two years. I know I couldn’t hide my feelings for Alex.”

“It was the second hardest thing I’ve ever done. The first being when I told him we were over because that’s the last thing I want.” I pressed my hand against my chest.

I could see them running that around in their heads. But Jackson was the first to speak.

“One question, Coop. Why the fuck didn’t you tell me at Thanksgiving?”

Damn. I forgot about that part.

Callum put his hands up. “I already busted him for that.”

“He did,” Christian added with raised brows that conveyed it was rough.

I sighed and looked at Ava. “I’m sorry, but I knew if I showed up looking like I do now, there’d have been a million questions and I couldn’t handle that. I needed to be alone, to try to cry it out, and I refused to ruin the holidays for everyone. So please don’t lecture me. Like he said, I already got that from Callum.”

Jackson looked at me. “It’s not about finding out what happened, Cooper. It’s about the fact that we didn’t get the chance to return the kindness you constantly show us. You consoled and took care of every one of us when we were struggling, but you didn’t give us the opportunity when it was your turn. We all would have liked the opportunity to be there for you. That’s all I’m saying.”

I nodded, my eyes watering at the care in his voice.

“But,” he continued, “we’re here for you no matter what. And I have another question.”

Of course he did.

“Okay, ask it.” I had no idea what he was going to ask.

“You guys broke up almost seven weeks ago.”

“That’s not a question, but yes, that’s right.”

Jackson sighed. “I know, smarty pants, I was getting to it. My question. After the seven weeks, do you feel any better about your decision to let him go? Are you happier now than you were almost two months ago? Is your life just like it was three years ago?”

That was three questions, but I wasn’t going to point that out. The answer was easy. “No, to all three questions.”

“Then why the fudge are you not with him trying to work this out? Why are you torturing both of you when you want to be together? What’s the point of that? Life’s short, and you need to seize the opportunity to be with the one you love whenever you can get it. Allison’s death taught me that. I loved football, but I love Simon and my kids more.”

He was right. “But we lived in the closet for two years.”

“Again, are you happier now than you were those two years in the closet with Greg?”

The tears came again and confirmed I was an idiot. “No,” I grated out.

Jackson put his hand on my shoulder. “Then again, Coop, why are you doing this to yourself? I’m not saying the closet is



right, but sometimes waiting is the only option. We all know your story now, so why can't you be with him and be open when you're with us? Wouldn't being open part of the time be better than being without him?"

When did he get so insightful?

I nodded. "Yeah, it would."

Callum piped up. "You could help him get through this. He told them the whole story, Coop. He's coming out. You just gotta decide if you're going to wait until after he's been through the wringer with them, or if you're going to be by his side when he does it."

Christian pulled out his phone. "Alex said Greg's going to tell them about you and get his brother out, too."

My heart raced and hope bloomed inside my heart. There was no way I could let him go through this alone.

"Thanks, guys. I know what I need to do."

"What's that?" Christian asked hesitantly.

I smiled at my former college roommate. "I'm going home to my husband."

When I crawled into bed a couple of hours after they'd left to go home, I stared at my phone. I'd turned it off after Greg left, afraid I'd be tempted to call him to come back.

But that was exactly what I wanted. And Jackson was right. I wasn't happier now.

It was one a.m., and I powered it on to find several text messages from him. My pulse picked up and dread settled over me. What if he'd decided it wasn't worth it? I wasn't worth it.

I'd never know until I opened them.

Tapping to open the messages, I found what he'd sent several hours ago.

Greg: I'm never taking this off again.

Below was a photo of his left hand with his wedding ring in place. The balled fist made his point.

I grabbed mine from the nightstand and slid it back into place. A calm settled over me and I went back to reading.

Greg: I meant every word of my vows. I love you - always and forever.

Greg: I'm going to fix this shit and win you back.

Greg: BTW – thanks for sending them over. I needed them, and they know all of our story.

There were so many things I wanted to say, but just knowing he'd opened up and come out to our friends was more than enough for me. It was a huge step forward for us.

So I typed back what I knew he'd understand.

Me: I love you, too – always will.

I hit send and waited. No reply came back, and I had to hope it was because he was asleep. I'd have to wait until tomorrow for his reply.

But the longer I lay there, the more I detested the distance between us. I had to close that divide as soon as I could.

Scrambling up, I gathered my clothes and stuffed them into my bag. I hurriedly stripped off the sheets, remade the bed, and cleaned up after myself. I couldn't leave Christian's beach house a mess.

Half an hour later, I looked the place over. I wouldn't be able to sleep without him anyway, so I might as well go home tonight.

Making sure I had my keys and my phone, I grabbed my bag and locked up the house before I left. I double-checked the lock, then ran around to the deck to check the back door. I was good to go.

The extra running helped me burn off some anxiety, so when I got in the car, I pulled out my phone and sent him one more message before pulling out of the driveway.

Me: I love you – and I'm coming home.

## ***CHAPTER 26***

## **GREG**

THE INCESSANT RINGING of the doorbell woke me from a dead sleep. I looked over at the clock. It was three a.m. I groaned and yawned. Who in the fuck was here at this hour?

I got out of bed, found some workout shorts, and hurried to the door. Unlocking it, I opened it without bothering to look through the peephole.

It took me a few seconds to realize I wasn't dreaming. Coop was standing in the hallway with his bag over his shoulder.

“Did you get my text?”

I shook my head. “No, I was asleep. What did it say?”

Coop stepped closer to me, but still not inside. “I said I love you. And I'm coming home to you. If you still want me.”

I almost dropped to my knees in relief, but I needed him in my arms more than I needed my next breath. So, I grabbed his jacket and pulled him to me. I couldn't get my mouth on him fast enough.

Coop moaned and hung on for dear life as I picked him up and slammed the door. I turned and headed for our bedroom. After we'd bumped into a few things on the way, Coop pulled back and laughed. “Maybe you better look where you're going.”

I stopped in the hallway to press him against the wall. I covered him with my body as his hard cock ground into my belly, and mine fought its way out of my shorts. Coop reached down and unbuttoned his pants as I sucked at his skin.

“Bed,” he rasped, his breath coming in short pants. “Don’t wanna come like this. It’s been too long.”

I growled and pulled us away from the wall. Only a few steps further and I had him in our room. Setting him down on the floor, hurried to take his clothes off as he pushed down my shorts. When I started to tear them away, Cooper took a step back. “Calm down, caveman. I’m not going anywhere. Ever again.”

That only ramped me up. “I’ll buy you an entire store’s worth of clothes,” I said, “but I need them off.”

Cooper pushed me back onto the bed. My back hit the soft mattress and my cock bounced against my abs, flinging pre-cum over my chest. His eyes widened at the mess he was making of me. Finally naked, Coop crawled over me and licked up every drop he could find. My cock strained and continued to drip onto my lower abs.

I held on to him as he backed up and took my cock into his mouth. Seven weeks without him. Seven weeks of agony finally coming to an end.

He moaned as he sucked and tongued his way around my glans and frenulum. My hips jerked and I needed to be inside him.

“Babe, need inside you,” I choked out around my panting breaths, trying to stave off my orgasm.

Coop let my cock fall from his warm mouth, and he crawled back to mine. He leaned in to kiss me as I held him to me with my left hand. My right went to my cock and spread my pre-cum around for him. Coop pushed back against my tip, trying to take me like this.

He pushed, and I continued to smear it over the head and onto his hole.

“Let me open you up,” I whispered into his mouth as his tongue continued to seek refuge in my mouth.

“No, just keep going. I need the burn.” He was lost in the passion.

“I don’t want to hurt you, babe. I’m going to need you more than once.”

Coop hummed as he continued to thrust against my cock.

“Wait,” I said, then flipped us over. I got to my feet as Coop stretched out on his back, his dick an angry purple color. I reached down and pushed his legs back to expose his hole to me. When it wasn’t enough, I pushed them back more and widened them at the same time, giving me more access. Dipping down, I ran my tongue over his hole as I rimmed him, soaking it in my saliva. I licked and teased his hole until I had it relaxed enough to let my tongue fuck it.

Coop moaned and jacked his cock slowly. His eyes were slammed shut.

When he’d had enough, I pulled back but didn’t let his legs go. If I weren’t so close to the edge, I would ask him to suck my dick to get it wet. Instead, I grabbed my cock and pushed the slick head against his wet hole.

“Not. Gonna. Hurt. M—”

He stopped talking when the head of my cock slipped past the ring of muscle. His asshole had my glans in a death grip, and I almost blew right then. “Ahhh, fuck. You’re so tight.”

I held him and rolled to the side with him on top. Cooper slowly slid down on my shaft until I was fully seated deep inside him. The pressure and heat were incredible. And the love I felt for him was unlike anything I’d ever known. How could anyone think these feelings were wrong?

He lowered himself to my chest and kissed me while my cock was buried in his ass. Coop gasped and moaned around my tongue when I fucked up into him from the bottom.

I wasn’t gonna last long. He felt too good to me, and I was gonna blow too soon.

I cupped my hands around his face and moved him back enough to look at me. “I love you so fucking much, and I’d do anything you need to keep you with me. I’m never letting you go again.”

Coop smiled at me. "I'm never leaving you again. I can't live without you. Nothing's right without you."

I pulled him to me in a kiss, then rolled us over again. I need to be in charge now.

His eyes rolled to the back of his head and his mouth fell open as I shifted and worked over his prostate at various angles. "Come for me, babe. I need you, I love you, I love you," I chanted as his hole clenched around my cock, making me see stars once again.

Cooper covered us in his release, spurt after spurt, and I wanted it all.

Collapsing on top of him, I went to shift to the side, but he stopped me. "I need to feel you on me and in me. You own me, my love, heart, body, and soul."

I kissed my husband with all the pent-up emotion, love, and desire. Swirling my tongue all around his mouth, I needed to taste all of him again.

When the passion had waned, I held his head in my hands as I pressed him into the bed. "I need you to fuck me," I said to him. "I need to feel you deep inside me. I want you to crawl inside and never come out."

Cooper smiled at me, his eyes barely able to stay open. And I saw his love for me in them.

"Anything for you, but that sounds creepy as fuck."

I pinched him, making him squirm. "You know what I meant."

Cooper chuckled. "I did, but I had to say it."

I lowered my forehead to his, breathing in each other's air. "I was dying without you, babe."

"Me too. Nothing was right in my world without you."

Coop wrapped his arms around my neck as I held his body pressed to mine. "We should shower," he whispered.

"I know," I said. "But I'm afraid to move. Afraid this is a dream."



Cooper pushed my head back from his chest.

“This is no dream, babe. I’m here and not going anywhere ever again.” He placed soft kisses on my forehead, my eyes, my cheeks, and the tip of my nose before they made their way to my mouth.

Lost in him, I hardened again, then slipped back inside. My cum from the first time made it an easy glide. We didn’t stop kissing this time as he came, and I soon followed.

It was four-thirty before we crawled back into our bed, freshly showered and on clean sheets. I pulled Cooper to me, and he came willingly.

It was the best night’s sleep of my life.

## ***CHAPTER 27***

## **COOPER**

I WOKE up exactly where I'd longed to be for the last seven weeks. My head rested on Greg's chest over his heart while he hung on to me for dear life. I lifted my head to move, but his hold tightened.

"No." His eyes were closed, and I thought he was asleep.

"But I have to pee."

"Pee on me." Then he grinned.

"That's gross." I laughed at him while nudging him in his side. He finally let me go but gave me strict orders.

"You have one minute before I come get you." His eyes were still closed, and it made me wonder if he was fully awake.

I stood by the edge of the bed and watched him sleep. He looked so peaceful, stretched out in our bed, his big, muscled body and blonde hair against our gray cotton sheets.

"Forty-five seconds," he muttered, his eyes still closed.

"I'm going," I griped playfully.

I took care of business and climbed back into bed. This time, he opened those beautiful green orbs and stared into my blue ones as I settled back onto his chest. This time, I could look him in the face.

Greg smiled at me. "I'm so happy you came home. For a minute there, I thought I'd dreamed you were here. And I didn't want to wake up." He cupped my cheek and ran his thumb across my lips.

“We still have some things to talk about.”

“I know, and I’m ready. What changed your mind?”

Thinking back to last night, it was pretty easy. “Jackson.”

Greg’s eyes went wide, and he tilted his head to the side. “Really? What did he say?”

“He reminded me that life was short and being apart wasn’t helping either of us. We weren’t moving forward, we were actually going backward. I want this life with you, and I’ll help any way I can. I’m okay waiting until you think it’s safe for Brock.”

Greg continued to look into my eyes as he rubbed my face. “I don’t want to wait. I want them to know I’m married to you, and that you’re perfect for me. Before my dad got involved in politics, I’d like to think he would have been happy for me. Now, I’m almost positive they won’t be. But I don’t — can’t keep living my life for them. I love them, but this life is mine. And I’m yours.”

His lips found mine and were lost to each other again.

“What time do you have to leave for the game?”

“Two o’clock. Are you coming?”

“Of course, I wouldn’t miss it.” I’d never miss another game as long as he was playing.

At one-thirty, Greg zipped up his bag and left it on the bed. “I want to introduce you to Patrick if you’re up for it.”

If he was comfortable with it, I would never say no. “Yeah, that would be great. Is he as good as Jackson?”

Greg thought about it for a second. “I don’t know. There’s only one Jackson Kincaid, but Patrick is pretty impressive.”

I laughed. “I agree. And he’s turned out to be a great scout. Did you hear who he’s got working with the kicking coach?”

Greg’s brow furrowed. “No, who?”

I grinned. “Dominick. He can kick the shit out of a soccer ball.”

The smile that broke across his face was breathtaking. “He doesn’t give up, does he? He’s been kinda determined to get the kid going somewhere with all that speed.”

“Yeah, and he’s stealing my riding instructor,” I griped. “I had him in mind to replace me when we go to the Villa.”

Greg took a deep breath. His gaze changed from happiness to a look of contentment. “We need to go back as soon as possible. After the Super Bowl, we’re heading back there. I wasn’t kidding about your salary. Better yet, I’ll just make a big donation. How much do you need to hire someone full-time for a year?”

I laughed. “You’re crazy.”

Greg reached for me, and I went willingly. Dipping his lips to my neck, he placed dick-hardening kisses along my jaw. “Crazy in love with you,” he murmured against my skin.

I pulled back to kiss him. When we were both breathless, I broke the kiss but held him close to me, taking in the scent of his skin and our body wash. We needed this, just this, to reconnect.

“Do you think you’ll play tonight?” I asked, while rubbing my hands up and down his back.

“Yeah. Simon will clear me. But I need to get a couple protein shakes in me before I leave.”

I slipped from his arms. “I’m on it. Do you want bananas in it?”

“That would be great, babe.”

Padding into our kitchen, I got everything out to make his shakes. I loved doing this for him. Being back in our kitchen made me happy in a way I’d never paid attention to before.

My phone buzzed on the counter with an incoming text.

Christian: How are you doing?

Me: Much better.

Christian: Have you talked to him today? They've got a game tonight.

“Hey, babe? Can you come in here?”

“Sure.” He walked in, shirtless, and made my mouth water. “What do you need, babe?”

Grinning, I held up my phone. “I need a picture to send to everyone. Particularly Christian. You up for a photo shoot?”

He chuckled. “Fuck yeah.”

Greg moved in behind me and circled me in his arms. He lowered his chin to my shoulder, and I took several selfies before changing poses for more. We flipped through them and chose the one that showed our rings.

Me: Yeah, I talked to him.

Me: \*photo\*

We waited for him to respond. “What do you think he'll say?”

I shrugged. “He'll be happy for me.”

Christian: WTF. BTW You guys look HAWT together. Did you go home?

Me: Yep. At three a.m. I crawled into bed with my husband.

Christian: Hell yeah! I'm so happy for you guys, Coop!

Me: We're happy, too. I'll see you at the game tonight.

Christian: Can't wait. And that's saying something because you know how I feel about football.

Me: LOL – yes, I do. I remember. See you tonight.

Christian: Okay, Mr. Foster.

“I like the sound of that.” Greg squeezed me a little tighter. “Do you want to change your name? Or do you want me to change mine? I guess we could hyphenate them.”

Considering our current situation, maybe he needed to be an Evans. “I think we should wait to see how things go with your parents. If they go badly, then you could easily be Mr. Evans.”

Greg nodded. “That’s a good idea.” A smile bloomed on his face. “Actually, I kinda like that.”

So did I.

I quickly typed out a group text to everyone.

Me: Just wanted to thank everyone for your support. You helped make a very difficult decision much easier.

“Watch this,” I said. “Who do you think will be first?”

“Marcus.”

We watched the dots bounce and the winner was Jackson.

Jackson: Please tell me you listened to what I said.

Me: Does this answer your question?

I sent the picture we’d sent to Christian.

Marcus: Thank fuck! Maybe he’ll catch the damn ball this week.

Simon: About time! What took you so long?

Declan: It was my advice, wasn’t it? You can say it.

Callum: \*rolls eyes\* I'm sure it was, Dec.

Jackson: It's not a competition, Miller.

Alex: Everything is a competition to him.

Aidan: Congrats, guys. Let me know if you need me.

Marcus: I need you, babe.

Alex: Okay, I'm outta here and I haven't even said anything. Happy for you guys. Let's go kick some ass and meet at our house after we win.

Me: See you at the game, guys.

Greg chuckled behind me. "They're something."

I nodded. "Yeah, they're the best."



## ***CHAPTER 28***

## **GREG**

I PULLED into the player's parking lot at quarter to two. Having Cooper home elevated my mood back to before we broke up. Just thinking about those seven weeks made me want to throw up. Things were looking up, and no matter what happened with my parents, I knew I had Cooper and my friends as my family.

I parked in my space and grabbed my bag from the passenger seat. The team meal started at two, so I got out and locked my truck. As I rounded the front, I slung my bag over my shoulder just as Declan pulled up.

As I waited for him, I pulled out my phone to see if I had a message from Brock.

Brock: Good luck tonight. I'll be watching.

Me: Thanks, little brother.

Brock: I have news to tell you after the game.

Me: Good, I hope.

Brock: Good for me :-)

Me: I have good news, too. Chat later.

Brock: Later.

Declan met me by my truck as I pocketed my phone. I could see his teasing coming a mile away. He checked over his shoulder to make sure no one was around.

“Dude, you look relaxed and well fucked,” he teased.

I laughed, but still blushed. “Same to you, dude.”

He grinned. “My husband is quite talented.”

“I don’t want to know any of that. Hearing about that is like knowing about my brother’s sex life. Ewww.” I shivered for effect.

Declan clapped me on the shoulder as we started walking toward the door. “I get it. And I’m thrilled to see *you* so happy. When did he come back?”

“Three a.m. Rang the doorbell and got me out of bed. I thought I was dreaming.” Best dream ever.

“Damn. That’s fantastic. He wasted no time, did he? When are you going to tell them?”

I rubbed my hand over my head. “After we win the Super Bowl.”

Declan grinned. “I like your thinking! Let’s make sure you catch some passes tonight.”

“You won’t be able to keep my feet on the ground.”

Declan opened the door. “You just planning to float down the field, Foster?”

“I might. You never know.”

He laughed as we entered the locker room. Heading to our stalls, we dropped our bags off before I headed to the weight room.

“You going to lift now?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I just had body fuel. Need to put it to use.”

“Ah. I’m going to hit the treadmill. I think I can get in a mile or two pretty quickly.”

“Yeah okay. I’ll run later. See you at dinner.” I up-nodded at him and made my way to the weight room.

Patrick was lifting when I walked in. He was built like Jackson, but not as tall. He was focused and listening to something from his AirPods. When he saw me between sets, he took out an earbud.

“You look a lot better than the last time I saw you,” he mused.

I smiled. “Yeah, I feel better. Pretty fucking happy, actually.” I’m sure the smile on my face told him what he needed to know.

“I take it things have improved?”

“More than improved,” I declared as I took a quick look around. “Everything is back to normal.”

Patrick grinned. “Excellent. Glad to hear it.”

He put his earbud back in and went back to his weights. Something occurred to me, and I needed to ask.

“Hey, are you going to come out?” I whispered, even though we were the only ones at this end of the room.

“Not yet,” he sighed. “I was going to wait until the season was over. And I really need to think about a new agent. Not sure the one I have would be helpful to me.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I understand. You might want to think about Aidan Hayes.”

“Hayes?” he asked.

“Yeah, he’s Alex’s brother and married to Monroe.”

Patrick’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Sure thing. He’s sharp and a really nice guy.” I planned to talk to him about representing me tonight.

Nodding, Patrick looked impressed. “Yeah, I’ll have to give him a call.”

That gave me an idea. “We’re all going to Alex’s house after the game. You should come.”

He smiled. “Cole’s in town for a couple of days, so we’ll probably stay home tonight.”

“Well, if you change your mind, come on over. Let me see your phone and I’ll send myself a text so you have my number.”

He grinned. “I got it from Monroe last week.”

Oh, yeah. “Cool. Don’t be afraid to use it. And you could bring Cole with you. That’s kinda the point.”

He smiled, in understanding. “Okay, I’ll ask him.”

I nodded once. “Good enough.”

I went back to lifting and concentrated on getting back the edge I lost a few weeks ago.

\* \* \*

IF I HAD TO GUESS, EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THE 74,000 FANS IN attendance tonight were on their feet. The home crowd was rocking as usual and gave us a charge like nothing else.

The score was tied, and we’d just gotten the ball back. Patrick had forced the Denver quarterback to fumble, leaving it open for one of our cornerbacks to fall on the ball.

Marcus patted me on the shoulder. “Let’s go, rookie!”

It used to bother me when he called me that, but now I associated that nickname with Cooper. And it made me smile.

I grunted and popped him on the helmet. He laughed as we jogged up to the huddle. It was time to redeem myself for last week. I hadn’t missed a catch tonight, and Alex and I were on point.

When he finally heard the play from Coach, he leaned into the huddle.

“Foster, you still feeling it?”

“Fuck yeah,” I replied. This was going to be my play.

“Okay, here we go. Blue 17 on three. Blue 17 on three.”

We broke the huddle and lined up waiting for the snap. The outside linebacker covering me hadn't been able to stop me tonight, so they switched to their cornerback. But they weren't catching me now.

“Blue, 17,” Alex called, “Blue, 17.”

When the center snapped the ball, I took off down the sideline for ten yards, then turned toward the middle. I looked up to find the ball spiraling exactly where I needed it. Reaching out, I grabbed the ball, tucked it into my chest, and took off down the middle of the field.

The crowd was roaring and all I could think about was finishing this play with six points. I checked over my shoulder and saw a safety trying to run me down. He lunged to tackle me, but I shifted to the right and his hand grazed my uniform. But he couldn't hang on. I sailed into the end zone, followed by Marcus and Declan, hot on my heels.

I held the ball up into the air and let out a primal yell, releasing all the pain and frustration I'd been feeling for weeks.

I'm not sure why I did it, but I kept the ball and ran to the sidelines. Cooper was high-fiving Christian and Callum, then went wide-eyed when he looked back onto the field as I pointed at him. I really wanted him to have this ball. It was our new beginning, and we'd remember this game forever.

When he came home to me early this morning, he brought me back to life. Cooper gave me a spark in my soul I never knew was missing until I met him. And right now, I didn't give a single fuck who knew about us. I'd worry about it later.

I tossed the ball to him. After he caught it, he held it in the air as any elated fan would do. With his eyes on me, I pointed at him and patted my chest over my heart.

His eyes bugged out again, making me laugh as I jogged back to the sideline. I was sure the media would ask about that in the press conference, but right now I just couldn't be bothered to give a fuck.

I sat down on the bench, and Dominick brought water over to me. “Thanks, man!”

“No problem!” he shouted. “Great catch!”

I grinned and held my hand up for a high five. “Thanks. Hayes put it on the money.”

Marcus and Declan drew away my attention as they sat on either side of me and shoved me back and forth like a rag doll.

“You weren’t kidding,” Dec said. “I’m not sure your feet touched the ground.”

All I could do was grin. Nothing could touch the pure joy in my heart. “I told you! He does that to me.”

We laughed and guzzled more electrolytes until the noise of the crowd suddenly died down.

“Oh, shit!” Mike Duncan, one of our offensive linemen remarked. He was looking up at the scoreboard and our eyes followed his stare.

The extra point was usually automatic. Rarely did our placekicker, Zane Williams, miss a kick.

There on the screen, all we could see was the special team’s coach and one of the trainers were on the field. The team doctor, Mark O’Brien, sprinted out, too. When the replay was shown, we could see where Zane had set up for the extra point. When he went to stretch out his leg with a practice kick, his ankle on his plant leg went completely over. Zane went down in agony.

“God damn, that looks painful. You know it’s broken.” Marcus was probably right.

“Doesn’t he have a backup?”

“Yeah, but he’s injured, too. Happened at practice on Friday,” Declan added.

We watched as Coach turned toward the booth upstairs and spoke into the mic of his headset. The conversation was short as Coach went back to the sideline to talk to the head referee.

Meanwhile, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dominick run toward the Coach on the sideline. Coach turned and put his hand on Dom's shoulder. Dominick shook his head no repeatedly, but Coach managed to calm him down. He nodded, then left the sideline.

Coach signaled to the referee for a timeout while Zane was taken off the field in the cart.

“What the fuck is going on?” Declan asked. “Where is Dominick going?”

“Looks like the locker room,” Marcus mused.

We sat on the bench and watched the replay again. A few minutes later, Dominick came running out of the locker room wearing a Pirate's uniform to the cheers of the crowd. Jackson jogged out with him and talked to him before he took some warmup kicks.

The PA announcer came across the speaker. “In an unprecedented move, the Pirates have replaced injured kicker Zane Williams with...” He paused because they had no idea who he was.

“The fast fucker,” Marcus announced, making us crack up. “Holy fucking shit! Jackson's prodigy is going to kick our extra point.”

We watched the scene unfold both amused and with bated breath as Dominick jogged onto the field. He wore jersey number two with no name on the back.

“The new Pirates kicker is number two, Dominick Rossi.”

After they announced his name, the crowd started chanting. “Dom. Dom. Dom,” repeatedly.

“What the hell is going on?” Declan laughed. “This place is going to erupt if he makes it.”

We stood to watch as the referee blew his whistle and signaled for the clock to start. The long snapper, Rob Logan, snapped it to the punter, Evan Hughes, who caught the ball and spun the laces to the front. Dom watched the placement, then moved up and kicked the shit out of it.



We watched as the ball rose end over end through the air and traveled straight as an arrow down the middle of the uprights and into the net. The crowd erupted, and we were right there with them.

“Holy shit, he made it! Holy fuck!”

We ran over to Jackson, who waited for Dom to leave the field.

“Your boy did it!”

He laughed. “I told you fuckers he could do it! Now he’s just got to get through the kickoff, and he’ll be golden.”

“Does he know what to do if the kick returner breaks through the line?” I asked.

“Oh yeah,” Jackson chuckled, his face lit up with pride. “We watched lots of film on it and he ran down sims like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

It would really be interesting to see what would happen if Dom had to run someone down in front of a sellout home crowd.

“If he could catch a ball, you boys would have some competition out there,” he teased.

Dominick lined up with the special teams unit on the field. When the referee blew his whistle, Dominick moved forward and kicked the ball, sending it to the back edge of the field, and completely out of the end zone.

“Damn, that kid can kick.” I thought about Cooper. I think he just officially lost his riding instructor. So I turned to look at him and Callum, who were both shaking their heads in astonishment.

When the play was over, Dom ran over to Jackson, who gave him a huge hug and laughed. “How’d that feel?”

Dominick nodded. “Aside from the fact I thought I was going to shit myself, it was pretty good.”

The kid gave us a smile and was engulfed by the rest of the special teams unit.

We were two minutes away from heading to the Conference Championship.

Ready to shut this game down, Patrick and the defense took the field. They knew what had to be done.

“Times like this are when I miss the game,” Jackson said, looking out onto the field.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “I know, but you’ve got Simon and the kids, and what’s better than that?”

Jackson smiled and turned to me. “Nothing is better than that. And I’m fucking glad you found it.”

We watched from the sideline as the defense stopped San Diego on first down but allowed a fifteen-yard reception to start the four downs over.

One first and ten, our safety knocked a long pass away from their wide receiver. Second and ten, they ran the ball up the middle for a six-yard gain.

“Shit, we may not get it back.” Alex was watching the gameplay and talking with the offensive coordinator. He had a plan if they scored, and I hoped it included me.

As time wound down, San Diego wasn’t able to score again, sending us to the Conference Championship game the next week.

The crowd erupted at the end of the game. We high-fived each other and headed for the locker room. I turned to look at my husband in the stands. Cooper was cheering and talking to Callum and Aidan. He was happy with our life, and I’d never tire of seeing him there in the stands. With him behind me, there was no stopping us.

Thanks to Dominick’s heroics, not one reporter asked about my delivery of the ball to Cooper. It wasn’t unusual for players to give balls to the fans. For all they knew, he was my cousin. But I was grateful they didn’t ask.

As for Dominick, I didn’t know where he disappeared to after the game, but we’d definitely be celebrating with him at some point. My guess was Greer had him upstairs arranging

contract negotiations. And he was gonna need an agent. My bet was on Aidan.

After we'd finished answering a million obvious questions from the press, we finally showered and redressed before heading out to meet our men. As soon as Alex finished up, we'd be ready to celebrate. I grabbed my bag from my stall and headed out the locker room door.

Jackson stood in the hallway shoulder to shoulder with Simon, laughing and being coupley. No doubt they were discussing Dominick's success and instant fame. He looked like a proud father after watching his kid's first touchdown.

The man I was looking for stood a few feet away, looking down at his phone. I pulled mine out and sent him a text.

Me: You make me so fucking happy. Thank you for loving me. I love you more every day.

I knew when he got the text. The smile that overtook his face was radiant. He typed away at a reply, and I watched the dots bounce on my screen.

Cooper: Ditto, Mr. Evans.

I laughed out loud, and Cooper looked up at the sound. When he looked at me, I knew he didn't see anyone else in the corridor jammed with family and friends. He never took his eyes off me as he closed the short distance. There in his arms was the touchdown ball I'd given him.

I was so in love with this man. Going to Alex's was the last thing I wanted to do. As he approached me, I looked at him and wondered how long it would be before I could openly take him in my arms and kiss him right here in front of everyone. All I wanted right now was to be able to wear my wedding ring when I left the locker room.

The way he looked at me was dangerous because anyone who ventured a glance at me at that moment would have no doubt that we were head over ass in love with one another.

I didn't have to wait long for my questions about us to be answered. When I saw Brock's name flashing on the screen of my vibrating phone, deep down I knew it was going to be sooner than I'd anticipated. An inkling of dread crawled up my spine. I looked down at the screen and swiped to answer. Coop saw my expression change.

"Brock?" I answered, putting my finger in my ear to block out the noise.

"Greg! Oh shit. Thank God you answered. I fucked up. I fucked up!"

Panic bloomed in my gut at the distress in his voice.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Fuck, fuck. Mom caught me. With Ryan."

"What do you mean, she caught you?"

His breathing was choppy. "We were kissing goodbye at his car when she opened the door and started yelling. I tried to play it off, but it was no use. You know how she is now."

The blood drained from my face, and I felt dizzy.

"What's wrong?" Cooper asked, panic growing in him.

My greatest fear was becoming my reality. "Mom caught him kissing Ryan."

Cooper's eyes went wide. "Talk to him. Tell him to stay calm."

I nodded. "Brock, where are you?"

"In my room. She's gone to call Dad."

Fuck!

My heart sank, but I had to keep him calm. "Listen to me. I'm still at the stadium. I'll call you right back."

"Okay. I'm sorry," he murmured and ended the call before I could reassure him that I had his back. I just hoped they didn't take his phone away.

I looked at the phone as Cooper looked at me. Jackson and Simon must have noticed my stress and walked over as I

leaned against the cold wall.

“What’s wrong?” Simon asked. He was never out of doctor or dad mode.

I let out a heavy breath and looked at my friends. “My mother just caught my baby brother kissing his boyfriend. Looks like the shit is hitting the fan now.”

“What are we going to do?” Coop asked, but Jackson answered.

“You’re gonna talk to Aidan.”

## ***CHAPTER 29***

## **GREG**

MY FIRST INSTINCT was to go straight home to deal with this, but Simon and Jackson suggested otherwise. I knew I could trust them to give me sound advice, so I followed their suggestion.

“Go over to Alex’s house. Aidan just left with Marcus, so you might as well head that way. He can help you assess the situation and go from there.”

I looked at Cooper. “Things are getting ready to explode. You ready for this?”

His smile told me all I needed to know. “More than ready. Let’s go.”

My instinct was to reach for his hand. Hiding our relationship would not be an option if I took this step, but fuck what anyone else thought. So I held out my hand to him.

My husband looked up at me, confusion mingled with joy and hope in his eyes. “Are you sure you wanna do this?”

I smiled at him. “More than anything.”

Cooper looked down and slid his hand into mine as we followed Jackson and Simon out of the player’s entrance.

I was nervous about my brother and what might happen now. This situation could negatively impact my father’s political career, and it made me wonder what he might do to keep it from getting out. I tried to block out all the bullshit he had spouted during his campaign. Fuck how I wish I’d spoken up then and let my opinion be known.

I squeezed Cooper's hand as we made our way to my truck. He was all I needed to deal with this situation, and it took him walking away for me to figure that out.

When we reached my truck, I dug into my pocket and pulled out my key FOB. I unlocked the doors, and we climbed in, ready to go. We didn't speak until we cleared the stadium parking lot.

"Maybe you should call him back."

He was right. "Yeah, I probably should."

I handed my phone to Cooper. He found Brock's number, then handed it to me.

"Put it on speakerphone, baby."

It rang a couple of times before he picked it up. The sudden blast of my mother's voice was all I could hear.

"What were you thinking, Brock?"

My brother stayed silent, and I felt guilty as hell for not being there to protect him. He was just like me. He avoided conflict whenever possible.

But my husband was smart. He swiped down and hit record on my phone. Now we'd have everything she said to him recorded. He was a fucking pro at this.

"Your father is going to be so disappointed in you. You know how we feel about homosexuality. The Bible says it's a sin, not to mention what will happen if this gets out."

"I know, but..."

She cut him off, evidently not wanting to listen to anything he had to say. It hurt that the woman who raised me with such tender care and understanding had become this person on the other end of the phone.

"You're not gay, Brock. You're not!"

"But... I ...," he murmured.

The room went eerily quiet for a moment, and I looked down in a panic to see if the call had disconnected. Cooper



held it up so I could see the display.

Her tone was low, making me think she was gritting her teeth. “Brock Foster, you are not gay. No son of mine is gay. It’s not possible.”

“A person can’t help who they’re attracted to, Mom. Or who they love.”

She scoffed. “Well, it’s a good thing Reverend Malone knows of a place that can help misguided people get over it.”

“MOM! You can’t do that!” Brock’s voice rose. And I could hear the panic there. “It was a mistake! I won’t do it again!”

“Yes, I can do that, young man! Your father’s credibility would be destroyed if this got out. He’d be the laughingstock of Washington, not to mention his constituents! He’d never be re-elected.”

Anger boiled inside me as I drove and listened to this bullshit.

“Pull over,” Coop whispered, and pointed to an empty space on the street.

We listened to Brock try to reason with her as I parked.

“No one has to know. I’ll leave and go live with Greg. You can say I’ve gone off to college.”

I looked at Cooper, who shook his head yes.

“That’s not an option. Your brother has a career and doesn’t have time for that. The only option I see is therapy or moving to Washington.”

Brock was losing it. “I’m not going to therapy. I’ll run away before I let you send me there.”

“You will do no such thing! That would be even worse! What would people say?”

I heard Brock’s heavy breathing on the other side as he waited.

“How could you do this to me, Mom? You’re supposed to love me for who I am, not send me away. I’m going to college next fall.”

She didn’t respond immediately, but when she did, she was calmer.

“I do love you, son. That’s why I’m trying to help you get your life back on the right track.” She sighed before continuing. “You’ve already finished high school, so moving to Washington isn’t a problem. I’m going to book us a flight for tomorrow. We’ll go there and see your father. It will give us some time to think. Time away from that boy.”

I was horrified at the thought of either of those options. He was so close to being out of there.

“Pack a bag, and I’ll let you know what time we’re leaving.”

I heard the door closing before Brock picked up the phone.

“Did... did you hear that?” he asked, ready to break down.

“Yeah, I heard it all.”

“I can’t go to that place,” he whispered before a sob broke through.

“You won’t,” I said. “I’ll figure something out. I promise.”

Brock sobbed into the phone. “I’m so sorry. I should have listened to you.”

I didn’t know what to say to him. But fortunately, my husband did.

“Brock, it’s Cooper. We’re going to get you out of there. Just give us about an hour to talk to our attorney friend. And we’ll be back in touch.”

“Okay.”

“By any chance, do you have another phone? An old one, or anything?” Cooper asked.

“No.”

“Okay, this may be for nothing, but it’s worth being prepared. Here’s what I need you to do. Text me Ryan’s number. We’re going to get him to go buy you a Tracfone and bring it over. He’ll hide it where you can find it. Only use it to communicate with us. Do you understand?”

I looked at Cooper as he took charge of the situation. He was calm and collected, not a mess like me.

“Yes, sharing it now.”

“Good. I also want you to share your location with me and your brother. You can do that in our contact information. You can also send it in an iMessage. That’ll allow us to open maps. When you get the new phone, make sure to put three phone numbers in. Mine, Greg’s, and Ryan’s. Then share location again.”

He pulled his phone from his coat pocket and handed it to me. I looked at the screen to find a text from Brock. I opened the Find My app to see if he had shared his location. And there he was. An iMessage came through too.

“Got them,” I said. “I’m going to call him and have him put it on the ledge outside your window. Close the blinds. Cooper will text you when Ryan is at the house. Go into the kitchen and talk to Mom to give him time to get in and out. You’ll get another text when you’ve grabbed it. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I understand.” Brock sounded so defeated and that had my gut churning.

I tried to help. “Listen to me, it’s going to be okay. I promise. Tell Mom you’ll go to Washington.”

“No! What if that’s not where she’s taking me?”

Cooper took over again. “Brock, it’s important that you calm down so you can think. Just don’t run away. They’ll alert the authorities and they’ll be looking for you. Do what Greg said. Just tell your mom you’ll go to Washington, and we’ll pick you up from there.”

I looked at my husband, who was calm and collected like he did this every day. I was never more thankful for him.

“Okay, I trust you.” His voice was laced with hope.

I had to reassure him. “I promise I won’t let them take you there. You have to trust me. We just need to get some legal advice on how to proceed. We need to go, so look for a text from Cooper soon.”

“Okay. Love you, G,” he said, and ended the call.

“I love you too, little brother,” I said even though I knew he wouldn’t hear me.

I went to my text from Brock and made a quick call to Ryan. He was shocked to hear from me. I quickly informed him of the situation, and he was more than happy to get the phone and deliver it to our house.

“Text me as soon as you get to the house.”

“I will. Leaving right now. I’m sorry this happened, Greg,” Ryan whispered.

“It’s okay. It’s our family’s mess. We’ll clean it up.”

He hesitated, then asked, “Can I come to Portland to see him when he gets there?”

I smiled. “Of course. I’ll buy your ticket.”

“Thanks, that would be great. Broke college student here.”

“No worries. Text me when it’s in place.”

I looked at my husband, confused as to what he had planned. “You are a fucking badass. And recording that was brilliant. So how are you gonna pick him up without my parents knowing it? We can’t kidnap him.”

He smiled and squeezed my hand. “Don’t worry, I know who to call to help us.”

“Who?” I asked, my brow furrowed.

Coop grinned. “My brother,” he said. “Jesse can go get him.”

## ***CHAPTER 30***

## **COOPER**

WHEN GREG HAD CALMED DOWN, we drove to Alex's house. Marcus and Aidan were already there, and Jackson pulled in behind us. He and Simon quickly got out of his BMW.

As we walked to the door, Jackson began the questioning. "Did you talk to your brother?"

Greg nodded. "Yeah. It's a mess."

The concern on Jackson's face was obvious. He understood what it was like when parents turned on their children. "Do you know what happened?"

I put my arm around Greg's waist. "Yes, we heard it and recorded it. We'll tell you everything once we get inside. We're going to need some legal advice."

"I figured," Jackson replied.

Declan and Callum pulled in before we made it to the door, followed by Alex. Christian had driven separately, knowing Alex would be a while with the press. He was pulling out trays of deli meat and sandwich fixings from the back fridge when we walked in.

"Hey! Hope you guys are hungry." Christian's excitement waned when he saw my face. "What's going on?"

I looked at Greg. "It's my brother. We've got a situation to deal with," he announced to everyone.

Aidan put down the tray he was carrying. "Anything I can help with?"

I nodded. “Yes, actually. We could use some advice.”

Concern washed over his face as he walked toward us. “What happened? Start from the beginning.”

Greg filled everyone in on what had happened and played the recording so they could hear it. Aidan nodded and listened intently, asking a few questions along the way.

“Okay. Since he’s only seventeen, he’s still considered a minor. But under the circumstances, going to pick up your brother is not a crime. Taking him across state lines could be.”

“So what do should we do?” Greg asked. “If I go to Washington and get him, it’ll get blown out of proportion to the media. I could book him a flight, but they’d find him with my dad’s connections.”

Callum looked at me. “You’re calling Jesse, right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he was my first thought.”

Declan furrowed his brow. “Why Jesse?”

“My brother runs a security firm.” I was proud of the asshole.

“Why didn’t we know that?” Marcus asked.

Callum answered that one. “He’s only been up and running about a year. And he’d rather people think he’s a trust fund baby than a badass ex-military security specialist.”

Aidan took in all the information. “I’d like to talk to him before you move forward, just so I can make sure we’re on the same page.”

“Yeah, okay,” I nodded, pulling out my phone. I went to my contacts and pressed his name. It rang several times before he answered.

“Little Brother! What’s up? I saw you on TV tonight!”

WTF. “What are you talking about?” I knew it had to be the ball.

“The touchdown ball. They put the camera on you when he brought the ball to you.”

Oh shit. I looked at Greg. “Did the camera go to Greg?”

“Not until he jogged off. Why?”

“That’s partly why I’m calling. There’s a situation we need your help with. Is it okay if I put you on speakerphone?”

The humor faded from his tone, and the serious side I rarely saw came out. “Who’s we?”

“Well, all my friends. And my...” I quickly glanced at Greg.

He nodded. “Go ahead. It’s okay.”

I kept my eyes on him as I said it aloud. “And my husband, Greg.”

Jesse coughed. “What the fuck, Cooper? Mom’s gonna kill you.”

I huffed. “I don’t have time for that right now. Just answer the fucking question!”

He chuckled. “Yeah, go ahead. It’s fine.”

Exasperated at him, I pushed the button, and he was part of the room.

“Hey,” Callum called. “We need your help.”

“Hey, buddy. Okay, what’s going on?”

Everyone looked at each other, then at Greg.

“Hey Jesse, this is Greg. It’s about my brother.” Greg explained everything that was going on and Aidan asked his questions. We waited as Jesse mulled it over.

“If Brock doesn’t want to stay in DC, I can get him out. But he’s going to need to be under contract with me to do it legally. If he pays me, say ten bucks, I can get him.”

“You realize my father is a Senator, right?”

Jesse laughed. “Even better. He’s an asshole, and my brother-in-law needs me to pick up his little brother, since I’m technically closer to Washington than you.”

“How will you do it?” Jackson asked.



“I’ll need to coordinate with you guys. Greg, you and I need to get on the phone with him and make the arrangements. I’ll catch the first flight to Portland tomorrow, and we’ll work out the arrangement. Where should I meet you?”

I butted in. “I’ll pick you up from the airport. Just send me the flight details.” The least I could do was pick up my brother. I knew he’d give me hell, but it was okay. It was best if I talked to him alone before he met Greg in person.

“Sounds good, Coop. I look forward to seeing you.” I rolled my eyes and let my head fall back.

Callum chuckled. “Don’t be an asshole.”

Jesse laughed. “I’m not. I just want front-row seats when he tells Mom he got married without her there.”

“Shut up, asshole,” I muttered. “Book your flight and get your ass here.”

My brother chuckled. “I’m coming, Coop. I’ll text you in a little while.”

“Thanks,” I muttered and ended the call.

Greg put his arm over my shoulders and leaned in to kiss my head. “I need to call Brock back.”

Aidan spoke up. “It might be a good idea for him to retain me as his attorney. He needs to tell me directly that he wants to hire Jesse’s firm to pick him up in DC. That way, he’s making the arrangements, not you.”

Greg pulled out his phone to text Brock. “Ryan just got to the house.”

I took out my phone and texted Brock, then waited to send the second one.

Greg fidgeted while he kept his eyes on the screen. When the text came in, he looked at me.

“It’s on the window ledge.”

I nodded and sent Brock the second text and told him to call Greg.

Less than five minutes passed before the call came in from an unknown number.

Greg walked away from us and talked to him for a few minutes, then handed the phone to Aidan. He explained what he needed Brock to do in order for him to handle it. I reached into the pocket of my jeans and pulled out a twenty. I unfolded it and handed it to Aidan. He looked down, then smiled.

“Your brother-in-law just paid both retainer fees on your behalf. Is that acceptable to you, Mr. Foster?”

Aidan smiled and nodded after Brock gave his approval.

When they finished their conversation, there was nothing more to do but wait. Jesse would be here tomorrow, and Brock had a way to reach out if he needed us for anything.

“Everything will be fine,” Aidan said, then handed me the twenty back.

I frowned. “Why are you giving this back to me?”

“Oh, did I fail to mention the friends and family discount? It’s twenty dollars off right now.” He smiled, making us laugh.

If Aidan was confident it would be fine, so was I. My job was to get Greg to relax and take a breath.

When things settled down, and we’d gotten some food and a beer, we could finally relax a little.

“By the way,” Greg said to Aidan, “are you taking on new clients? I need new representation before I come out.”

Aidan grinned. “That’s becoming a thing around here. I think we can work something out.”

“Good, because I know a couple more people looking for representation.”

Marcus furrowed his brow. “Who?”

Greg smiled. “Patrick Griffin and Dominic Rossi. I should really get a commission for sending clients your way,” he teased.

I let out a breath. Teasing was good. A part of me had panicked when Brock called. I promised myself right then to trust my husband.

\* \* \*

TWO HOURS LATER, WE SHOWERED, CRAWLED INTO OUR BED, and collapsed in exhaustion. “We’ve had a hell of a twenty-four hours, babe. We’ve had the highest high of getting back together, only to swing to the shit with my parents.” Greg ran his fingers through my hair as I laid across his chest.

I hummed at his touch with my eyes closed. “Yeah, it seems longer than that.” I shifted to get comfortable, making him groan.

“Babe, I have a problem.” His dick was hard and pitching a tent in our sheets.

I looked up at him and feigned innocence. “Oh yeah, what’s that?”

“I’m tired as fuck, but I’m also wound up so tight I’ll never be able to sleep.”

I nodded, trying not to smile. “What can I do to help?”

He reached for my left hand resting on his chest and brought it to his mouth to kiss my palm. It was a sweet gesture until he licked my palm and placed it on his cock. My own perked up at the feel of his tongue on my palm, then the velvet smooth shaft in my hand.

“This.” He grunted as I gripped it firmly in my hand.

“I can do better than that,” I said, then moved to take his nipple in my mouth, sucking and tonguing the hard bud.

Greg squirmed beside me and rested his left hand on my hair.

I threw the sheet off us and let go of his dick. Kissing lower, I took my time to show some love to his navel and lower abs. Wet, open-mouthed kisses and nips at his skin had his pre-cum set on drizzle. I ignored his moans for more

attention to his cock and dropped lower to take his balls into my mouth. I loved working my tongue around them, gently sucking as I rubbed his taint.

I knew if I touched his hole, it would be over. So I avoided that hot spot for a little while. My cue to take him in my mouth came when his long shaft bounced up and down on his abs. He was panting and squirming while begging for release.

“Babe, gonna come,” he whined.

I allowed his balls to fall from my mouth and returned to take his cock. Just as I was about to put it in my mouth, he reached around me to grip my dick in his big footballer’s hand.

“Fuck,” I moaned as he ran his fingertips across the head of my cock, collecting my pre-cum on the tips. He stroked up my cock and I could feel the wet streaks when the cool air hit it, making me shiver.

“I want this in my mouth,” he said, urging me to shift into the sixty-nine position. Covering his long body had me stretched out as I laid on top of him, my head between his legs and mine between his.

The feel of his tongue on my asshole made me shiver and desperate to get his cock in my mouth. Need took over as I sucked him in the same rhythm as he lapped at my hole. Small bursts of pre-cum hit my tongue, making me hum in delight.

When he’d reached his breaking point, he took my leaking cock into his mouth and sucked hard on the mushroom head, making me groan. The erotic soundtrack we were making caused my balls to draw up and my orgasm to rip through my body. I filled his mouth with cum as he did the same.

We sucked and licked each other until we were spent. Greg’s cock fell from my lips as I licked away any stray drops that had escaped me. I rolled off him onto my back only to have my athletic husband climb back on top of me before pulling us onto our sides to face one another. Our mouths met as we shared our combined releases. Our hands roamed over

as much skin as they could reach. My leg found its way over his hip, opening me up for more.

Greg squeezed my ass cheek, then ran his fingertips along my crease. I don't know how he managed it, but he hardened again. The perks of being married to a younger man with a very short refractory period.

He resumed working on my hole as he continued to harden. I broke the kiss, needing to breathe yet needing more of him. I was so turned on I could barely think.

"Ride me, babe," he muttered as he thrust his hips toward mine before he pulled me on top of him.

I rose up on my knees and put my palms on his chest. I lifted myself just enough for Greg to get his long shaft under me. Teasing my hole with the tip of his dick, he smeared more pre-cum over me.

"Now, babe," he rasped.

I slid down his cock, taking it slowly until he was fully seated inside me.

"Holy fuck, you feel good," he moaned. "You gotta move."

I leaned forward while he propped himself on his elbows. We closed the distance as I got to my knees to fuck myself on his dick. The angle caused him to graze my prostate with each pass. I whimpered as he slowly and loosely jacked me.

When he'd had enough of my slow grind, he sat up and held onto me as he rolled me over. Now he was the one in charge of the tempo.

His hips moved quickly as he pounded into me, chasing his orgasm. The second one usually took longer, but I enjoyed every minute of it.

I forced my eyes to stay open as I absorbed the pleasure he gave me. The view of his flexing muscles brought my orgasm on like a freight train. I clenched and pulsed as a smaller stream left me, causing him to go over the edge as well.

Greg continued to fuck into me until he had no more to give. Both of us were sated and beyond exhausted, and we really didn't care about the mess right now. We just needed a nap before we showered.

“I love you, babe,” he whispered to me before he drifted off.

“Always will,” I said before giving in to sleep.

## ***CHAPTER 31***

## **COOPER**

I WAITED in baggage claim at PDX for Jesse's flight to arrive. The arrivals board showed his flight from Cheyenne had just landed. He traveled light, even though he looked like he belonged on the cover of GQ Magazine.

My brother was six-foot-four, with light blond hair similar to Greg's, and deep blue eyes. He looked like our mom, while I favored our dad. Jesse was big and had served six years in the military, the last two as a qualified Navy SEAL. Now he owned his own private security firm and did what he wanted to.

I spotted him the minute he came down the escalator from arrivals. He wore dark-washed designer jeans, an untucked designer shirt, and one of the many cashmere sweaters he had in his collection. His overnight bag was slung over his shoulder. My big brother was a handsome fucker, and why no one had managed to snag him was still a mystery to me.

Before he saw me, I held up a sign like the car services used. Except mine was a little different. I'd printed SEMEN EVANS in capital letters. He'd get it. I'd intentionally spelled it wrong for him.

Searching the crowd, I knew when he'd spotted it by the bark of laughter he released. When he finally closed the distance, he was grinning ear to ear.

"Touché, little brother. That was a good one."

Jesse grabbed me and pulled me in for a long hug before letting me go.



“How are you, Coop? I’ve missed you.”

I looked over at him out of the corner of my eye as we walked toward the parking deck. “You sure you’ve got the right brother?”

He laughed again. “Yeah, considering you’re my only brother, you’d be the one.”

I sighed. “I’m okay. Things were rocky for a while, but good now.”

“So you went and got married. What’s up with that? We didn’t even know you were dating anyone.”

“No one did.” I shrugged, feigning nonchalance I hadn’t felt until now. “It was a secret.”

I could see Jesse taking in the information and processing it. “That’s why you have this situation with the brother, right?”

“Pretty much. You know Greg hasn’t come out yet, but it seems like that’s going to happen pretty soon. It’s inevitable.”

Jesse’s brow furrowed. “Is that what he wants?”

I clicked the key FOB for Greg’s truck. “He says he does.”

After we’d climbed in and buckled up, Jesse put his hand on my arm. “Hey,” he said, waiting for my gaze.

I looked over at him. “I’m really happy for you, Coop. You’ve made a life for yourself and gotten a master’s degree. And if he’s the one, I’m really happy you found him.”

“He’s the only one for me,” I said simply. I waited for some joke or for him to pick on me, but I got nothing but a sincere look. I loved my brother, but we didn’t always get along. “Do you really mean that?”

“Yes, I do. I know Callum and I teased you a lot growing up, but you’re not that nosy little brother anymore, and I’m not that asshole big brother. I’d like to think I left most of that behind when I left the service. But I was serious when I said Mom’s gonna kill you for getting married without her.”

I groaned. “I know, don’t remind me.”

Jesse chuckled and looked around the truck. “When did you start driving a truck?”

“It’s Greg’s. Thought you’d fit better in here than in my Honda.”

He smiled. “I appreciate that.” He shifted in his seat. “So tell me about Brock.”

On the way to the apartment, we talked about what was going on and how this all started. I told him everything I knew about the situation and all about how Greg and I had met and fallen in love.

“Are you seeing anyone?” I asked.

Jesse looked over at me, aviators in place. “Nope. Haven’t found anyone who intrigued me enough to chance it. I just hook up whenever my dick needs more than my hand.”

I chuckled. “The seven weeks without Greg were enough for me.”

My brother looked at me. “You guys split?”

“Yeah,” I said as I drove through rush-hour traffic. “The secrecy was killing me.”

I made the turn onto the parking deck and parked in Greg’s space. My car was parked beside it.

“Have you told Mom and Dad?”

I shook my head. “No. We’re going to fly over there once the season is over. And now we have this situation. But I’m sure she saw the ball game. She’ll probably figure it out.”

“If that didn’t give it away, the look on your face would. Reminds me of how Callum looks now.”

I grinned. “Yeah, he’s gone for Declan.”

We chatted about Callum and Declan and the equine therapy we’d started until we reached our door. I went to put my key in, but Greg opened the door.

“Hey, babe,” I said, stepping up to him.

He leaned down to give me a quick kiss, then held out his hand to Jesse.

“Jesse, I’m Greg Foster. It’s nice to meet you.”

My brother shook hands with my husband. “Good to meet you. I guess we’re family now.”

Greg smiled at me. “That would be right. I’m going to toss the garbage down the chute,” he said, raising the bag. “I’ll be right back.”

He stepped into the hallway as I led Jesse inside. He sat down in the chair, and I landed on the sofa.

He nodded toward the door. “I didn’t realize he was so tall.”

I chuckled and my face heated thinking about how the six-inch height difference gave him room to rim me.

Jesse held up a finger and gestured toward my face. “You know, I never ever want to know what that’s about.”

“Good,” I quipped. “I wasn’t going to tell you.”

Greg came back in and sat down next to me. “Where do we start?”

Jesse pulled out his notes and went through all the details with us. Since Greg had confirmed that Brock and his mother were traveling to DC today, we were ready to plan.

“Do you know if they’ve arrived in DC yet?”

Greg nodded. “Yeah, about an hour ago. Brock texted me they were on the way to the apartment my dad rented.”

“Can you give me the address?”

“Sure.” Greg passed on the address that Brock had given him.

“So, now all we need is to coordinate with your brother. Do you have a picture of him for me?”

Greg pulled out his phone and texted him the picture I took of them at the season opener. Then he sent a text to Brock.

“Okay,” my brother nodded, “as soon as he calls, we’ll be ready to go.”

We waited in silence, although Greg kept shifting around, clearly anxious.

“Was Aidan coming over to meet with us?”

“Yeah,” he said, as the doorbell rang. “That should be him.”

Jesse smiled at me, then stood when Aidan and Marcus walked in.

“Hi, I’m Jesse. Nice to meet you.”

Aidan smiled. “I’m Aidan Hayes, and this is...”

“Monroe,” Marcus added. “You’re Aidan Hayes Monroe.”

Aidan looked at him and let out a labored sigh. “Next time, I’m leaving you the fuck at home.”

Turning to Jesse, he started over. “Let’s try this again. I’m Aidan Hayes Monroe, and this is my territorial caveman of a husband, Marcus.”

Evidently, Marcus loved that, since he grinned like the Cheshire Cat. “Nice to meet you, man.” He extended his hand to shake Jesse’s.

Jesse chuckled. “You too. Hell of a season you guys are having.”

Marcus and Greg high-fived each other. “Yeah, we’re trying to make it two in a row.”

“That’s awesome. I hope you make it. If we can get the kid here where he belongs, that will make it even better.”

Greg nodded, and Aidan and Jesse took over. By the time we were finished, they’d spoken to Brock, and everything was set to go down on Wednesday.

“Bring one bag. A backpack or whatever. Wipe your laptop clean of your data. Transfer all your phone contacts over to the new one. Log out of all social media accounts and turn them off. Leave your credit cards and any bank accounts

connected to your parents on the table, along with the letter you wrote.”

If my stomach was in knots just hearing all the details, I couldn't imagine how my husband was feeling.

We were about to blow this whole thing wide open. If things went the way we thought they would, Greg and Brock were about to be disowned by their parents. I had to make sure we surrounded them with love, and I knew our mother would love them both when they eventually met each other.

Now we had roughly forty-eight hours to kill before everything kicked into motion.

## ***CHAPTER 32***

## **GREG**

I FELT like I was going to be sick. My anxiety over everything that was going on was off the charts. I hoped my team workout would help, but it was only a temporary reprieve.

I must have checked my phone a hundred times, waiting for some word from Jesse, Brock, or Aidan. Nothing. No word at all and it made me crazy. I knew tonight was going to be explosive, and I wanted to be ready. Nothing like imploding your family over FaceTime.

After practice, I stopped by Coach's office and explained what was about to happen. As usual, he was understanding and said my personal life was my own business and as long as I played like I did last week, he'd be fine.

I knew what he was saying and promised to give it my best effort. When I stood to leave, something else occurred to me.

"Oh, there's one more thing, Coach," I said. "I'm thinking about taking my husband's last name at the end of the season."

He smiled. "That's no problem, Greg. Your contract is up at the end of the season, and we'll just make the name change when we write the new offer."

I smiled. "Thanks, Coach. That'll be great."

He stood and shook my hand. "Get out of here and go take care of your family."

I did exactly what he told me to do and went home.

When I walked in, Cooper was in the kitchen making a sandwich. “Hey, babe. Didn’t expect to find you here yet. You couldn’t handle work either?”

“No,” he sighed, “too nervous. I got Dominick to cover my afternoon riders so I could be here with you. And I wanted to make sure Brock’s room was ready.”

It made me smile. “Thanks, babe. Do you mind making me two of those?”

“Sure, babe, if you can grab the water.”

With our turkey, bacon, and avocado sandwiches in hand, we sat down to eat and talk. I’d just finished the first one when the doorbell rang. My pulse sped up, and I looked at Coop.

“Here we go.” I walked to the door, Coop right behind me. Yanking it open, a wave of relief washed over me.

“Thank fuck,” I muttered. I reached out and grabbed the straps of his backpack to pull my little brother into the apartment and into my arms for the big hug we both needed. Jesse stepped inside and Cooper closed the door behind us.

Brock held onto me and when he sagged in my arms, I knew the minute his adrenaline gave out. “Thank you,” he whispered, followed by tears. I pulled him back by his shoulders to look at him. Before I could ask, he answered my unspoken question.

Brock wiped his eyes and gave me a weak smile. “I’m fine. It’s just a lot, ya know?”

I nodded, then pulled him back to me. “I know, buddy. Just let it out. You’re safe now.”

Jesse patted him on the shoulder. “It’s an adrenaline drop. Completely normal reaction.” He must have seen it coming.

Cooper nudged Jesse, then hugged him. “Good job, big brother. Can’t thank you enough.”

“No, thanks needed. I was happy to help.”

When Brock’s tears subsided, I knew I needed to get some food in him. “Are you guys hungry? We were just having



sandwiches.”

Brock nodded. “Yeah, I could eat.”

“Jesse?” Coop looked at him. “We have plenty. He eats all the time, so I place big grocery orders.”

Jesse chuckled. “Yeah, if you’re sure.”

Cooper waved for them to follow him. “Come on. You guys can fix your own. We have every imaginable deli meat and cheese, but we’re having turkey, avocado, and bacon if you want that.”

Brock nodded. “Yeah, I love those. I’m going to put this in my room and text Ryan. I’ll be right back.”

I ruffled his hair before he retreated to his room. “Want me to make your sandwich?”

My little brother hitched up his mouth into half a smile. “Yeah, that’d be great.”

I knew he needed some time alone to get his bearings, so I wouldn’t press. I’d make him a sandwich and give him some space. He’d talk when he was ready.

I made his sandwich the way he liked it and put it in the fridge for him. Jesse sat down with us after making his sandwich. I was anxious to know what happened.

“So how did it go?”

He nodded as he swallowed. “It was good. Easy. Your mother went out this morning, so he came out as soon as I texted him.”

That was lucky. “Did he seem okay?”

“Yeah. We talked on the plane. Evidently, on the flight to DC, she’d brought up sending him to therapy again. He was pretty shaken.”

“God damn them for even threatening that.” The thought of my brother having to endure that infuriated me. And my fury just might be enough to push me out of my avoidance mode and get me through this confrontation today.

Cooper put his hand on my arm. “Babe, I can talk with him if he’s comfortable with it. Nothing like having a built-in therapist for a brother-in-law.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, that’d be great, but it’s up to him. Maybe he’ll talk to me.”

“I bet he’d enjoy meeting Nora and Dominick. They’re not too much older than him.”

Jesse furrowed his brow. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“He works part-time for us at the stables. Maybe Callum talked about him.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think it was Callum. Does he work somewhere else?”

Cooper snorted. “Yeah, for the Pirates. He’s the kid who kicked the extra point Sunday. Still can’t believe he did that.”

Recognition lit Jesse up. “I saw that! Is he going to stay on as the kicker?”

I grinned. “I have no idea, but he kicked the shit out of that ball. You didn’t get to see the best part. He’s fast. Even faster than Marcus.”

Jesse grinned and relaxed back into the chair. He folded his massive arms over his chest. “I bet Monroe loves that.”

I laughed. “Not even a little bit. Dom used to think Marcus was hot until he got to know him. Now he knows the real truth.”

Jesse smiled at us. “I’m curious about how you two met. Looks like you guys have a good life here.”

I nodded and took Cooper’s hand. “We do. I guess technically, Alex introduced us.”

Brock came back into the kitchen and looked around.

“It’s in the fridge,” I told him. “Grab something to drink, too.”

“What kind is it?” he asked.

“Turkey, just the way you like.”

“Cool,” he said. He grabbed his sandwich, then took the seat next to me. I wanted to ask him a million questions, but I started with one I knew would make him smile.

“Did you get in touch with Ryan?”

He blushed and nodded. “Yeah, he’s pretty relieved.”

“We all are, B. And we’re happy you’re here. You know how much I miss you, and now I get to see you every day.”

Brock looked at me with tears in his eyes. “Me too. Thanks for letting me stay with you. I couldn’t...” He dropped his chin and shook his head no.

I put my arm around him and held him close. “You’re not just staying here, you live here. This is your home. And now that you’ve graduated early from high school, you can take some time to live your life the way you want to.”

He nodded into my shoulder. “Ryan said you were okay with him coming out to visit.”

“Yeah, we are. It’s fine.” I glanced over at Cooper, who smiled at me.

“Hey, Cooper?” Brock said. “I’m really glad you guys worked it out.”

“Me too. We had to work through some things. But we’re good now.”

I stretched my arm out across the table, palm up, and he took my hand. Simply the touch of his hand in mine calmed me.

Brock nodded. “Sorry our parents are,” he sighed, “the way they are.”

“It’s not your fault,” I replied. “But it’s going to get ugly here this afternoon. If you want to skip out, I understand. But if you don’t mind, can you tell me what you wrote in the letter so we’re on the same page?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I just said I knew how they felt about my sexuality, and I was not going to therapy, no matter what. I

told them I was going to live with you and by leaving it would make it easier for them. Then I told them I loved them no matter how much they disliked who I was, but it wasn't a choice. This was just the way I was. Then I left my phone and laptop on the table like Jesse told me to."

"That's good, Brock. You did exactly the right thing." Cooper smiled at him. "Speaking of phones, we got you a new one on our plan."

Cooper got up and went to get the phone. When he returned, he placed the box in front of Brock. "It's got everyone's names and numbers in the contacts, including our friends, and even his." He nudged his brother, who just smiled.

Brock's face lit up. "Thanks, guys. I appreciate it."

"It's set up under Greg Evans for anonymity, just so you know." Coop winked at him.

"Was Aidan planning to come over?" Jesse asked. "It's going on five on the east coast."

My stomach rolled at the thought, but I knew we needed to do this. "Yeah, he should be here in a few minutes."

"Good. Listen, I'm prepared to have my guys keep tabs on your father for a while. Sometimes that kind of power goes to their heads."

I nodded. "I'd appreciate that. Just bill me for today and the surveillance."

He waved me off. "Consider it a wedding gift."

Cooper looked at me. "I thought we might call my parents today and tell them before everything goes off the rails later. Might be a good thing to see how parents are supposed to act."

I was suddenly nervous for other reasons. "Yeah, okay. Do you think they'll like me?"

"No," he said, cupping my face, "they'll love you. And Brock, too. You'll become the bonus sons, right Jesse?"

"He's right. You'll see." Jesse grinned, then picked up his phone and waved it at us. "No time like the present."

Cooper shook his head, but the smile was there. “Go ahead.”

I took a deep breath as Jesse dialed what I assumed would be my in-laws. When their mom answered, I knew I was going to love her.

“Hello, my sweet firstborn. How are you?”

He chuckled. “Hey Mom, I’m good. Is Dad around?”

“I think he’s in the garage. Do you need him?”

Jesse smiled. “Yeah, I’m here with Cooper.” He turned the phone toward Coop, who waved.

“Hey, Mom!”

She gasped and put her hand over her heart. “Well, this is a surprise! Hello my baby boy,” she said, making him laugh.

“Hey, can you grab Dad for us? I want to talk to both of you. There’s someone I want you to meet.”

She sucked in another big breath. “Oh, Cooper! Have you found someone?” Her excitement was hard to miss. It instantly put me at ease.

He looked at me. “Yeah, Mom. I have.”

She squealed into the phone and called for her husband. “Jason! Hurry, the boys are on the phone, and in the same place. It’s a Christmas Miracle in January!”

We all laughed at her enthusiasm and heard a door slam in the background. Cooper nudged me. “Told ya.”

I took a deep breath and ran my hand over my short hair.

He smirked at me. “It doesn’t move, babe. Your hair looks fine.”

Brock snorted at me, so I playfully elbowed him, making him laugh.

“Okay, baby, he’s here. Let’s meet him!”

Cooper glanced at me and smiled. He took my hand as I leaned in close. Then he turned the phone to include both of us on the screen.

“Mom, Dad, this is Greg Foster. He’s my husband.”

We watched as they blinked. Then she pulled the phone back and looked at the screen and started tapping on it. “I swear we’ve got to get new phones, Jason. It sounded like he said *husband*.”

We just grinned at them but said nothing. It didn’t take long for her to realize we were telling the truth.

“My baby wouldn’t get married without me?”

We just grinned at them more.

“You really said hus-band?” she enunciated. Then she gasped again. “Oh, my gosh! I just realized he’s the one you’ve been in love with since Christian met Alex!”

“MOM! I wasn’t *in love* with him,” Cooper groaned. “I just liked him... a lot.”

“Uh huh,” I whispered to him. “Now the truth comes out.”

“Well Cooper Eugene,” she said, “it was always *Greg did this*, and *Greg said that*. *Did you know Greg is blah blah blah?* If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.”

“That’s not even my middle name!”

Jesse was dying at his mother’s antics. I could imagine how much fun the holidays were going to be with them.

Coop groaned. “This is why I don’t come home more!”

“Liar,” she teased. “The reason is my beautiful son-in-law. Bow-chica-wow-wow!” she sang to him. Mrs. Evans was something else. And I knew where Cooper got his personality from.

Cooper covered his face and muttered, “Kill me now, please.”

“When my new son-in-law looks like that, I can’t blame you for wanting to keep him all to yourself, sweetheart.”

Cooper put his forehead down, then lightly banged it on the table.

I couldn't help but laugh at them. I wrapped my arm around him and pulled him up to kiss his head.

I looked at my mother-in-law on the screen. "It took me a bit longer to realize it, but I think somewhere deep down, I knew I loved him, too. That's why I hated the asshole from Seattle."

*Oh, fuck!*

"I apologize, Mrs. Evans, for my mouth. It's a football thing."

She chuckled. "Don't you worry about that, dear." She waved it off. "You can call me Melinda, or Mom. Whichever one you like." She winked at me.

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, Melinda." I'd save Mom for when I knew her better.

"When did you boys get married?" Jason asked.

"Last March in the Keys. It was the best spur-of-the-moment decision I ever made." Our eyes met, and I squeezed his hand in mine. It was really the best decision of my life.

Melinda had her hands clasped under her chin. "That is so romantic, honey."

Before Brock could get away, I pulled him into the frame. "Oh, and this is my little brother, Brock. He lives with us now."

Melinda squealed. "Oh, we get two more boys, Jason!" Her eyes lit up, and it was obvious she was truly happy for us. I didn't think I'd seen or felt this kind of motherly love in at least five years. It had my throat tightening.

"Welcome to the family, son," his dad said. "And you can call me Jason, or Dad. I'll answer to both."

"Thank you, sir. I really appreciate that. More than you know."

The doorbell rang, and I moved to get up. Brock put his hand on my shoulder.

“I’ll get it,” he said. “You keep on talking. This is hilarious!”

I swatted the air at him, then turned my attention back to Coop.

“Mom, Dad, before you lose all touch with reality, this isn’t public knowledge yet. So keep it under your hat, okay? It won’t be long before we tell everyone. But we’ve got an appointment right now, so we’ll call you back later in the week. I just wanted you to meet him.”

“Okay, Coop. Mums the word until we hear from you. I need to know the details!”

He chuckled. “We’ll tell you everything. Here’s Jesse.”

Cooper slid the phone to his brother, then looked at me. “See, I told you they’d love you.”

“Yeah, you did. And now I see where you get it from,” I teased, then leaned in to kiss him as Aidan walked into the kitchen with Brock.

“Am I too early?” he asked, grinning at us.

“No, your timing is perfect.” I looked past him. “Where’s your caveman?”

Aidan laughed. “I only take him with me when I have to. He’s at home with Trent. They’re doing homework together.”

Cooper snorted. “Did you leave him math problems to work on?”

The thought of Marcus doing homework made me chuckle, and I made a mental note to tease him later.

“No, just our son. Marcus is a wiz at math. That’s actually how we met in college.” The wistful smile on his face said it was a good memory. “He conned me into helping him with his calculus. Then things kinda went from there.”

“I could see him doing that! He’s so fucking smooth.” Definitely gonna bring it up sometime.

Cooper stood up. “Want something to drink, Aidan?”



“No thanks, I’m good. But I’m going to assume you haven’t heard anything from your parents because you guys look too happy.”

This time, my smile came from my heart. “I just met my in-laws. They’re great.”

Aidan smiled and put his hand on my shoulder. “You deserve that, Greg. Eventually, all this is going to be okay.” He looked at Brock. “For both of you.”

I nodded, less confident than Aidan. He had no idea what we had dealt with.

An hour later, we’d moved to the family room and mindlessly watched the replay of Sunday’s game. The looming call was weighing heavily on me. Brock seemed to be feeling it, too. He sat on the floor with his phone in his hand, alternating between looking at it and staring out the window.

I never dreamed our lives would ever come to this. They were great parents when we were growing up. They loved us, but over the last five years or so, their religious beliefs changed. And their paradigm change was more than my brother and I could handle. Especially since we both had recently discovered our sexuality didn’t match their expectations.

Jesse and Aidan were in deep conversation in the dining room, while Cooper sat close to me and held my hand. He knew I needed some time to get my thoughts together, even though we’d talked it out several times over the last forty-eight hours.

My phone rang at three-thirty on the dot. It was six-thirty in Washington, and that meant my dad was home. I would do almost anything to avoid this confrontation. I just wasn’t wired for it, but right now there was too much at stake not to face this head-on.

Brock looked at me with tears in his eyes, then got up to sit beside me. On the third ring, I accepted the FaceTime request from my iPad. I didn’t want to have to hold my phone. Before I could say hello, my father started.

Senator James Foster, also known as our father, appeared to be panicked. “Greg, is Brock with you?”

Our parents sat on the sofa in what I assumed was their Washington apartment. The concern on our father’s face and his tone threw me. He looked and sounded like the father we’d known before running for office had become his primary focus.

“Yeah, Dad, he’s right here. Just like what he told you in the letter.”

He let out a heavy sigh and reached for my mom’s hand. “Thank God! We’ve been so worried about him. I couldn’t get away from the Capital to get home any sooner. Where is he?”

I looked at Brock and turned the camera toward him. “Hi, Dad. Hi Mom.”

Tears came to my mother’s eyes when she saw her baby. “Honey, why in the world would you leave home like that? You had us scared to death!”

I felt a bubble of anger stirring in my gut. She had no idea we’d recorded her conversation with Brock.

“I wasn’t alone, Mom. I hired someone to travel with me.”

My father’s face crumpled in confusion. “Son, there was no reason for you to run away from home. I thought you wanted to be here in Washington.”

“Dad.” Brock didn’t sound like the almost college student he was, but more like my four-year-old brother that had always wanted me to read him his bedtime stories. “You were going to send me away to one of those camps. I couldn’t stay there and let that happen. I can’t help who I am or who I love. I’ve tried to ignore my feelings, but I can’t.”

“And I sure as hell wasn’t going to let that happen to him.” My protective side was kicking in.

My father truly appeared shocked. “What gave you that idea?”

We both looked at our mother. “Mom told me you wanted to send me away because of what I did.”

His eyes widened. “What did you do that was so terrible that you had to run away?” His brow furrowed, and he looked at my mother. “Carolyn, what are they talking about?”

I was having a hard time figuring out if this was really happening. My father appeared to know nothing of what she’d said to Brock. He looked genuinely confused.

“Carolyn,” he snapped, “what the hell are they talking about?”

My mother picked up her head and wiped at her eyes. She looked at my father with a trembling chin. “I caught Brock kissing a boy on Sunday.” She wiped her face again. “I was looking for him and his friend and found them outside. They were kissing.” She whispered like she was scared of anyone else hearing her.

Our father’s expression darkened. “Okay. Why does he think we’d send him away?”

She looked at him and curled her lips in to keep from crying. “I told him he had two options. Move to Washington or go into therapy.”

My father looked horrified. Was he that good of an actor? “Why would you threaten him with that?”

She let out a long sob, and through her tears, she finally confessed. “Because that’s what I thought you wanted. You preached it over and over during the campaign and every time you talked to someone at church. You stood in front of thousands of people and said you were against homosexuality and gay marriage.”

Mom swiped at her eyes. “You said trans people shouldn’t have rights of any kind. You stood in front of people and talked about how it was a choice to be gay, and you supported any means of therapy to help confused souls get back to God’s intended plan. Why wouldn’t I think you were serious and want that for our son?”

We watched as our dad ran his hands through his graying hair, obviously shocked at her words. When he snapped out of his shocked state, he floored us all.

“I had to say those things! If I hadn’t, they wouldn’t even consider me for the job. Why do you think I wanted to join the church all those years ago? The party wanted someone in Senator Wakefield’s seat that could take over his platform. I walked the walk and talked the talk, just like they wanted. Neither one of our boys was gay, so why did it matter what I said? It didn’t affect them.”

I was burning inside. Did he seriously think his words didn’t matter?

“STOP!” I shouted, making everyone jump. “Are you saying you don’t believe all that bullshit you’ve spouted all these years? That all the hate and bigotry you two raised us on in that church for almost ten years was a means of getting you elected?”

My father stared at me through the screen.

“Answer me!” I roared. When Cooper and my brother both flinched, I knew I had to calm down. But the anger was building, the tidal wave of emotion was almost at the breaking point.

My father looked down at his hands, then nodded. “Yes,” he murmured. “I didn’t think what I said mattered because it didn’t apply to you. I assumed all of you knew it wasn’t how I really felt about things.”

I got up from the sofa. I had to move around to vent the fury that was growing inside me. I paced and pulled at my hair. My parents saw a side of me they never knew existed. I avoided confrontation, never took part in it. Until right now.

“How the fuck would we know, Dad? Not once did you sit us down and tell us you were playing a fucking role! Your words and that god-forsaken hate factory you made us attend like the perfect family has fucked both of us up. Why would you even want to be associated with people like that? Why would you say those things, Dad? Words matter and hate spreads like wildfire.”

Fury continued to burn through me even though I’d vented some of it. All I wanted to do was put my fist through the wall

to make this pain stop. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I'd spent so much time agonizing and feeling guilty over how I felt about Cooper. And the worst part? I'd almost lost him and all for a role my father was playing. One my dad didn't even believe in. Why did that make it worse somehow?

I glared at the iPad. "You have no idea what your desire for political office has done to me and Brock, do you? How your choices have impacted our entire lives and influenced me enough that I kept my life a secret for the last two years." I couldn't stop the words now that I had gotten started. "Your words forced both of us into a closet stuffed with fear of being punished or disappointing you. I've hidden away the most important person in my life and forced him to hide with me because I thought I'd have to ultimately choose between you and him!"

My parents stared at me in shock. My father swallowed. "What do you mean, you've hidden *him* away?"

I looked at Cooper, who had tears in his eyes. He felt my pain as acutely as I did. "I'm so sorry, babe. I didn't know." My voice cracked as the anguish we felt for the last two years seeped in.

Cooper got up and came to me. He wrapped me in his arms as my parents watched. "It's okay. You didn't know. You just did what you thought was best to protect your brother."

He held my face between his hands and kissed my face and my lips.

"You and I are okay. But you need to finish this conversation."

He went to pull away, but I held him and shook my head no. "Stay with me," I whispered.

Cooper smiled at me. "Always will," he whispered.

The familiar words from his vows gave me the strength I needed to keep going. I glanced at my parents. Both of them appeared shocked, but I didn't care. Not one single, God damn fuck. There was a time when I would have done anything to

protect them from being upset. But that time had passed. The time to live my life for me and for my husband was now.

“This is the man I love more than anything in the world. And because of you, I almost lost my husband.”

I hugged him to me again and let that bomb sit with them a bit. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Brock smiling at me.

I looked up and saw Aidan smiling at me. “Another thing while I’m blowing this all to fucking hell. The comments you’ve made over the last three years about my teammates are despicable. Your influence kept me silent when I should have stood up and defended them. I will never forgive myself for that.” I closed my eyes and blew out a breath. “Those men and their husbands are the best people I’ve ever known.”

My father held up his hands. “We need to come out there and sit down to talk. I can fly out Friday...” I cut my dad off.

“No. Do not come here. There’s nothing to discuss.” The words were cathartic to me.

My father wrang his hands as he looked at us. “I’m so sorry, son. I didn’t know you were friends with...”

I shook my head. “Don’t. They are too good for the likes of you. I just want you to realize that every time you made a derogatory comment about LGBTQIA people, you were talking about me. You were talking about Brock. Your own children. Even if you didn’t mean the words, they hurt and they left a scar.”

My father hung his head, and for the first time, said nothing. I’d never spoken to my parents like this. Raising my voice to them wasn’t something I’d ever done, even as a teenager. But they needed something to snap them out of the life they were living.

I took a breath to calm down. “And as for Brock, he’s not coming back. I won’t allow it. He’s going to live with Cooper and I here in Portland. We’re going to support him and his boyfriend the way Coop’s parents support us. And if you fight me on that, I’ll have my attorney, who’s standing right over

there, file for an emergency order of custody. Wouldn't a recording of the Senator's wife threatening her own son be something juicy for the press to get wind of?"

My mother had her hands over her face, and her body shook as she sobbed. My father looked shell-shocked. "I heard every fucking word out of your mouth, Mom. We recorded your rant and threats to Brock. Who are you and what have you become? I worshiped the ground you walked on. You're supposed to feel safe telling your mom the things that scare you. You took that away from us."

She cried harder and my father looked like he'd aged ten years. "We're so sorry, son. I would never have agreed to send Brock away. You have to believe me. Please forgive us." I could see his pain and caught a faint glimpse of the man I'd adored at one point in my life.

"I'm sorry, too, Dad. I don't know what happened to the man who taught me to catch a football or the mother who made us feel so loved when we were growing up. That's what I'm sorry about. I hope your career is worth the damage you've caused your children."

I felt so betrayed for Brock and me.

I looked at my brother. "Do you want to say anything else, B?"

He shook his head. "No."

I looked at my parents again. "Unless you have something else to add, I think we're done here."

Cooper tightened his hold on me, giving me his strength. I was fucking exhausted.

My father looked at me. "I hope you both can forgive us in the future. No matter what, we love you boys."

I scoffed. "Don't say things you don't mean, because I sure as hell won't."

He nodded.

Brock reached over and ended the call.

I was numb.

I held on to Cooper and let the tears come from the guilt I felt for all of the emotional turmoil I'd caused with the hiding and secrecy over the last two years. I'd hidden away the best thing to ever happen to me. I'd hurt him. Made him feel like there was something wrong with us.

He held me close and whispered in my ear. "Babe, it's okay. Cry it out and then let it go."

I sucked in a breath. "I almost destroyed us. I love you so much, and I hurt you."

Cooper took my face in his hands. "You're traumatized right now. You and Brock both. Dealing with something so painful and feeling betrayed by the people you loved and trusted to take care of you is going to take some time. And you both have to decide whether you can forgive them."

He turned toward Brock and held his arm open for him to come over. We enveloped him in our arms as he cried his own tears.

"I love you both. Our family and our friends love us. What more could we need right now? Grieve for the people you used to know. But keep forgiveness somewhere in your heart."

Brock pulled out of the hug and wiped his eyes. "I'm going to go call Ryan. Is it okay if I invite him out here?"

I nodded and wiped my face on my sleeve. "Absolutely. And tell him to plan to go to the game on Sunday."

The grin that took over his tear-stained, seventeen-year-old face made me happy. "Really? You're okay with him coming to the game?"

I looked at the apprehension on my brother's face. Neither of us needed to live in fear anymore. "Of course. It's time for you to figure out who you are, Brock. And I'm going to live my life without worrying about what anyone else thinks."

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm ready. Thanks to all of you."

"We'll always have your back, B. Never doubt that."



He nodded and wiped away the last of his tears. “I know.” Then his stomach growled. “Is it okay if I go make another sandwich?”

Cooper laughed. “Of course. This is your home. You don’t need to ask permission to eat here. We try to keep the fridge stocked all the time.”

Brock nodded. “Okay. It’s gonna take me some time to get used to that.”

“Well, make it sooner rather than later. And if you want to add anything to the grocery list, just write it on a *Post-it* and stick it on the fridge. They’re in the drawer beside the sink.”

Brock nodded. “Thanks. I love you guys.”

“We love you, too, B.”

I watched my kind-hearted little brother walk up to both Jesse and Aidan. He gave each of them a hug and thanked them for the part they’d played in giving him a new life. He never had a problem showing his feelings, and it made me so happy that he hadn’t lost that about himself.

When Brock walked into the kitchen, they walked toward us.

“We’re going to give you guys some privacy. I’ve got to get home. Marcus needs to study film tonight. Let me know if you need me.”

I nodded. “I will.”

I walked him to the door. Aidan paused when he stepped outside, then turned back to me. “By the way, if you still want me to represent you, I’ll be happy to take you on as a client at the end of the season. I’m exploring some opportunities for the future as well. And it looks like I might have a new client if Jackson has anything to do with it.”

I smiled. “That’s fantastic news, man. Thank you, and I’m sure Dom will thank you, too.”

“Thanks. We’ll talk soon. Tell Coop and Brock I’ll see them Sunday, if not before.”

“I will. Thanks again for everything.”

“Happy to help.” Aidan gave me a wave as he got on the elevator.

I closed the door and went back into the family room where Cooper and Jesse were talking. I walked up and put my arm over Coop’s shoulders. He wrapped his arm around my waist.

“You going to stay in Portland, or are you going back?”

Jesse smiled. “I’m heading back, but I’m going to stop in and see Callum for a few minutes on the way. Apparently, their new house is almost finished.”

I held out my hand to him. “Thank you for everything.”

He shook my hand and smiled. “You’re family now, Greg. And if our mother doesn’t scare you off, I’ll see you again soon.”

I chuckled, thinking about their over-the-top mama. “Nah, she’s great.”

I kissed Coop on the forehead, then went to check on my brother. Having Brock here took a lot of worry off my shoulders. While I hated how my parents handled the last ten years, I didn’t hate them, but now they needed to live with what they’d done to us. It was going to take a hell of a lot of time to forgive them.

## ***CHAPTER 33***

## **COOPER**

WE WERE ready drop by the time crawled into bed. It felt like we'd been through the wringer and it had definitely caught up with both of us. After dinner, we spent the evening playing video games. It was a pleasant distraction from the emotional day. Greg assured me they would find time to talk. I was going to keep an eye on both of them.

“So where’s your head at?” I checked as he spooned me. I loved the feel of him pressed against me, but it seemed like he couldn’t get close enough. He tightened his hold, and I could feel the tension coursing through his body.

“I don’t know. Kinda numb, I guess.”

“That’s to be expected, babe. You had a very traumatic afternoon. But it’s good you got to tell them how you felt. Coming out on your terms was a big deal.”

Greg splayed his right hand on my bare chest and swiped his thumb back and forth mindlessly. “Yeah, it was a relief. Considering all the ways it could have gone, when I think about it, this was probably the best outcome. Whatever happens from now on is on our terms.”

I agreed. “Hey, how about a back rub to loosen you up?” I grazed his muscular biceps with my left hand. “I can feel how tense you are.”

The brush of his unshaven jaw along my skin had become very familiar to me. I didn’t have to look at him to know he was smiling.

“Is that your way of hinting you need sex, babe? Because you never need to hint. I’m always ready for you.” He thrust his hips forward to close the millimeters of space that separated us.

“Nooo,” I chuckled. “I can feel how tense your muscles are.” I skimmed my fingers over his arm again. “Just thought it might help you relax.”

He was smiling again.

“So, you don’t want me to sink my hard shaft into your sweet ass?” he purred into my ear as he skated his big hand down to my equally hard dick, then took me in hand.

Greg licked around my earlobe, sending violent shivers down my spine. “I... I didn’t say... that,” I managed to get out as he paid attention to my favorite erogenous zone.

More shivers. More strokes. More need.

“Baby,” I whined. “I was supposed to give you attention.” My hips pushed back involuntarily as he continued to drive me crazy.

“I’d rather do this,” he whispered. I could feel the slickness of his pre-cum on the small of my back. “Can you get the lube?”

Greg loosened his hold but didn’t take his hands off me as I reached for the drawer. His fingertips grazed my skin and tickled me, making the retrieval more difficult.

“Babe,” I chuckled, “you’re driving me crazy.”

He snickered when I finally grabbed the bottle and gave it to him.

“How do you want me?”

“Like you were. I wanna slip into you from behind while I hold you.”

We kicked the covers off and repositioned ourselves. Greg lubed his shaft and tossed the bottle further down the bed. He pulled me back against his chest as if he couldn’t wait for me to move back to him.

His lips went to my ear, where he whispered softly to me. “Where were we? Oh, yeah, right here.” Slippery fingers trailed down my ass to my entrance. He massaged me until he could slip one finger in easily. It wasn’t long before he was buried inside me.

Groans escaped from deep in my chest as I took all of him. Greg held me to his chest with his right arm. I could feel every beat of his heart.

Slowly, he worked in and out of me while leaving kisses on my neck and shoulders.

“More, babe. Harder,” I encouraged.

Greg picked up the pace, and I could feel my orgasm building slowly. He pushed me closer with every movement.

“Babe,” I whispered. “I’m close.”

“Don’t go without me,” he breathed.

I held off as long as I could. When I reached for my cock, he covered my hand with his. He worked my cock until I was coming all over his hand. Hitched breaths against my neck signaled his release.

When our breathing returned to normal, my husband held me in his arms and peppered me with kisses.

“You’re too sweet,” I mumbled, “but we need a shower and clean sheets.”

“We need to keep both nightstands full of towels and cleaning cloths so we don’t have to get out of bed.” He groaned and rolled onto his back.

“Good idea. We can work on that.” I elbowed him gently. “Shower, then sleep.”

“Go ahead, I’m right behind you,” he murmured sleepily.

“That’s how the whole mess got started. You right behind me,” I teased as I headed for the shower. “Come on, babe.”

Greg sighed. “I’m coming.”

“That’s what he said,” I snarked.

The mattress shifted, and I could almost hear his grin.

\* \* \*

THE NEXT MORNING, I GOT UP AND SHOWERED AGAIN. I WAS going to work this morning with a new lease on life. I loved my job, and my marriage was stronger than I ever thought it could be. We'd weathered a hurricane of a storm, but some clouds were still hanging around.

After I dressed, I went for coffee in the kitchen. Greg and Brock sat at the bar talking.

"Hey, babe?" Greg called as I put the pod into the machine and selected the brew strength. "I had an idea."

"Yeah? What's that?" When the coffee trickled out, I turned to look at them.

"I was thinking we should buy you a new car. Then Brock could drive yours."

Thinking about it, it made sense. "Yeah, okay. That works." I turned to get my coffee, then went back to the bar. Leaning toward him, I could see the change in him this morning. The worry lines that had been permanently etched on his face were relaxed now. I was so thankful for that.

"What kind of car are you thinking?" I took a sip of my coffee but kept my eyes on him.

"Anything you want. Money isn't an issue. You know that."

I scoffed. "I know. Even after more than nine months of marriage, I'm still not used to that."

"Well, babe, you're gonna have to just deal with it. And when the season is over, we're going back to the Villa."

"The Villa?" Brock asked.

I sighed an overly dramatic, dreamy sigh. "It's my happy place."

Greg smirked. “We bought a house in the Florida Keys. It’s where we got married.”

“That’s awesome. I’ve seen pictures online. It looks beautiful.”

I sighed. “The pictures don’t do it justice.” I closed my eyes so I could see it in my mind.

Greg cleared his throat, breaking me out of my daydream. His amusement was clear, and the smile on his beautiful face was all I needed.

“Pick a car, babe. What do you want?”

He leaned across the bar and extended his hand to take mine.

“Something I can drive to the stables and haul things in. Maybe an SUV of some kind.”

“How about a BMW like Jackson’s? He’s got plenty of room for the kids and Allie. Or an Escalade like Simon’s?”

My brows shot up. “Really? Okay. If Jackson fits in them, you should fit too.”

Brock snickered.

Greg had another idea. “So how about I surprise you? Would that be okay?”

I smiled. “I’d love that.” I leaned forward and kissed him.

Brock groaned. “I’ve gotta get used to that, don’t I?”

“Yes, and quickly.” Greg leaned back in for another kiss.

Pulling back, I patted his jaw, then glanced at Brock. “What are your plans for the day?”

“I was gonna work out with him, and then just hang out. Do you need me to do something?”

I grinned. “Yeah, actually. I wondered if you’d like to come out to the stables to meet my team. You’d like Dominick and Nora. They’re fun to hang out with.”

“Sure.” His eyes lit up as he turned toward his brother. “Can you take me there after our run?”



Greg nodded. “Absolutely. You’re gonna love it out there.”

“Perfect. I’ve got to go. Callum and I are going over the new applications today.”

I kissed my husband and fist-bumped my brother-in-law. “Later, bitches,” I teased, making them laugh. It was a sound I wanted to hear for the rest of my life.

\* \* \*

CALLUM AND I HAD JUST FINISHED GOING OVER THE NEW applications for riders when Dominick walked in. We’d been overrun with them last summer, and we wanted to accommodate as many kids as we could.

“Hey,” he called. “Sorry to interrupt. You guys got a minute?”

I looked up to see a new Dominick standing before me. He’d cut his hair and had it slicked back. He looked good.

“Hey, there’s the golden foot! And nope, not if you’re going to say what I think you’re about to.” I was teasing, and he knew it.

“Why’d you cut your hair?” Callum asked.

Dominick looked uncomfortable. “I like to change it up every once in a while.”

We nodded at him. “So, what do you wanna talk about?”

Dom laughed and ran his hand back through his hair. “Yeah, I’m sorry about this. It’s Jackson’s fault. All of it.”

“I feel bad for you,” Callum snarked. “It must be terrible.”

“It is! He’s relentless.”

Dom mimicked Jackson. “*Here Dom, catch this. Hey Dom, now see if you can run and catch it. Why didn’t you tell me you could kick the shit out of a ball?*”

We were howling at his imitation of our friend. He really had Jackson down pat.

He shook his head, but the affection was obviously there.

Callum wiped his eyes from laughing. “If you don’t enjoy it, why didn’t you tell him no?”

Dominick’s eyes went wide. “Have you ever tried to tell him no? Simon’s the only one who can do that. He just keeps trying to find my thing with the team. It’s like I’m his pet project or prodigy now, I guess!”

“You are!” I laughed.

He let out a sigh. “I know,” he muttered and shook his head like he just didn’t understand.

After a minute, he started again. “Anyway, it’s Jackson. And I don’t want to disappoint him.”

Callum tilted his head to look at him. “If you really don’t want to do it, you don’t have to. He’ll understand. They can get another kicker.”

He looked at the floor and leaned against the wall. “I like it, okay. I mean, the guys are nice and it’s just kicking the ball. And they’re paying me \$10k per game. How could I say no to that?”

“You’d be a fool to say no. They only have three games at most left to play, and that’s only if they win.” The kid made more money than me.

Dom nodded. “I know. I’ve got to practice with special teams. They’re trying to see how far I can kick a goal.”

“Field goal,” Callum corrected. “Might be good to get your terminology down.”

Dom rolled his eyes. “Same thing.”

We laughed again.

“Okay, so you need the next four weeks off. Or are you quitting?” I checked. We’d be sad to lose him.

“You’ll let me stay on?”

“Of course. The kids love you and you’re a good friend.”

He blushed a little at my words. “I love them, too. And I love it out here, away from the city.”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll ask Nora if she’s available. Meredith is in school, and she’s really only with her when Dec and I are tied up with work. Maybe she’d like to take on a few more. She could run the small group too.”

Dom looked relieved. “That would be great. Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“No problem, buddy.” I stood to shake his hand. “We really are proud of you, you know. You looked really calm out there.”

He scoffed. “I felt like jello inside. But yeah, I know. You guys are the best.”

Callum stood and gave him a bro-hug. “We’ll be there, Sunday. Are you kicking?”

“Yeah. As far as I know.”

Callum’s attention was drawn to the driveway. “Hey, Coop? You expecting your hu—” he cut off, eyes wide at what he almost said.

“Your what?” Dom’s eyes were like saucers.

I smiled. “My husband. But keep it to yourself. That’s privileged information.”

He grinned. “That’s great man! I didn’t know you were dating anyone. Who is it?”

Callum and I looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

Dom frowned. “What did I miss?”

The door opened and my six-foot-eight, tight-end husband, and Dom’s teammate, walked in.

“Oh fuck! I didn’t know it was him!”

That cracked us up even more. When I could breathe, I finally told him what I found so funny. “You might be the only person who didn’t know we were together.”

I walked over to my husband, decked out in Pirates gear from head to toe, and slipped my arm around him. He closed the distance and kissed me in front of them.

“Hey, Dom,” Greg said. “How’s it going? Ready to play Sunday?”

He groaned and we laughed.

“I’ll tell you later,” I said, then patted his stomach.

Brock came through the door, making Dom smile. “Finally! Someone closer to my age!”

“Hey,” we all said in unison.

“Brock, this is Dominick Rossi. He works here, and he’s our new kicker. Dom, this is Brock, my younger brother.”

Brock smiled and extended his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too. I gotta head out. Practice in an hour.” He moved to the door. “Nice ride, man. I thought you had a truck?”

“I do,” Greg confirmed. “I’m just here to deliver Coop’s new car.”

Now *my* eyes bugged out. “You already bought one?” I looked down at the watch I wasn’t wearing. “I’ve only been gone two hours.”

The hubs grinned. “I knew what I was buying before you left. I’ve been looking for a while. Brock needing a car just gave me a reason to pick it up.”

I walked out the door to find a very expensive SUV. “Is that a Range Rover?”

Brock and Dominick followed us out the door, waiting for my reaction. Greg held out the keys for me. “Yeah. Here ya go, babe.”

My mouth hung open as I took in the brand-new dark blue SUV. “This is not what I was expecting.”

Greg beamed. “This wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment purchase. I actually ordered it for you last fall.”

I ran my fingertips over the shiny paint, then opened the door. The butter-soft, gray leather seats were spectacular, and I was already worried about them getting dirty.

“The leather is easily cleaned. And it’s big enough for me to drive or ride comfortably. But the best part, well not the best, but one of the best parts is the back.”

He took my hand and pulled me out of the seat. He reached under and opened the back door. “See this rubber lining? I thought it would be the perfect way for you to haul things.”

I was still taking it in when he landed another surprise on me.

“It’s also the perfect place to transport a dog.”

My head whipped to him. “A dog?”

He nodded. “Yeah, every family with an overgrown kid needs a dog.”

Before I could say anything, Callum came out of the apartment with a beautiful black and white Australian Shepherd. He let go of the leash and I squatted down for the beauty to come to me. Big caramel brown eyes stared at me as she leaned into my touch.

“Maggie is a rescue,” Callum said as I ran my hand over her long, silky smooth coat. “She’s very energetic, just like you, and loves it out here in the open spaces. You can bring her to work with you every day. She loves to play fetch, too.”

I looked up at the love of my life. “Thank you,” I whispered as Maggie ran over to Brock and Dominick. I stood, and Greg wrapped me in his arms.

“You deserve so much more than this, babe. There’s nothing I wouldn’t give you.”

Tears pooled in my eyes. “All I need is you. I don’t need expensive cars, but I definitely need our dog.”

He laughed. “I’ve wanted to give you these things for a long time. I can never make up for what I put you through the last two years, but going forward, I can make sure you feel my love every day for the rest of our lives.”

I put my hand on his chest. “We’re moving forward, the past is where it belongs.” I didn’t want him to carry all that guilt. All I cared about was our family and friends. And now Maggie, too.

His kiss was slow and deep, and I got lost in it until I heard the surrounding voices.

“Are they always like that?” Dom asked Brock.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “But I’ve never seen my brother happier.”

“Hmph. Makes me want one of those,” Dom added.

“What? The car or the dog?”

Dom shook his head. “Nah, the man.”

Callum laughed. “Well, my friend. You’ve come to the right place.”

## ***CHAPTER 34***

## **GREG**

WITH EVERY DAY THAT PASSED, I felt more comfortable in my skin. And through it all, Cooper was right there, supporting Brock and me.

Today was a big day for the Pirates, but also for us as a couple. We'd decided that we wouldn't hide any longer, but we also didn't plan to make a big public display to announce our relationship. But if someone asked, we'd simply answer with the truth.

Ryan, Brock's boyfriend, had arrived on Friday morning. Brock drove to the airport to pick him up. They swung by the apartment to drop his things off and to meet me and Coop before heading out to explore Portland on foot. Coop had given them a list of places to check out, and it reminded me of when we'd first met. The memory had me smiling. We'd had so much fun together. There were times I couldn't believe it'd taken so long for us to get together. Looking back, it felt like we always had been.

I woke early for the game today, thanks to my internal clock, and found Coop wrapped around me like a spider monkey. Waking up next to him every day just made me smile.

I opened my eyes to find Maggie staring at me. She'd taken to sleeping in one of our rooms. My guess is she loved me best because I took her with me when I ran.

I stuck out my hand to her, and she immediately came to meet it with her head. She was so sweet and smart as fuck. We'd never had a dog growing up, and Maggie filled that void in me and Brock.



Coop stirred behind me, then kissed my shoulder before turning over. He slept like a rock, so waking him while I moved around wasn't a concern. Fucking him senseless also helped him sleep.

I got out of bed and walked into our bathroom. I scrubbed my hands over my face and looked at the clock. Seven a.m. I took care of business, then quietly dressed in compression shorts, sweats, and a hoodie before hunting down my running shoes.

Padding to the family room, Maggie followed with a spring in her step. She knew that when the running shoes came out, she got to go outside.

“Ready to go for a run, girl?” I rubbed her head.

She trotted over to where we kept her leash, picked it up in her mouth, and brought it to me. I hooked it to her collar and made sure a roll of doggie waste bags was still attached.

“You are such a smart girl,” I cooed at her. Her entire back end wiggled the more I rubbed her.

Grabbing a bottle of water for her from the fridge, I picked up my phone and my keys as she led the way to the door.

Quietly, we made it to the elevator and rode to the lobby. I held her leash in my hand as we walked out the front door to begin our run.

Stretching out a bit, I thought about how much my life had changed in the last week. I was happier than I'd ever been, thanks to Coop. Having Brock living with us was fantastic. I'd missed my brother so much since I'd left for college. My husband was truly happy having my brother live with us and went out of his way to make sure Brock felt at home.

Cooper was the best thing that ever happened to me. He never gave up on me, not until I'd given him reason to. I was a quick learner and didn't plan to ever make that mistake again.

\* \* \*

THE LOCKER ROOM HUMMED WITH THE VOICES AND LAUGHTER of my teammates. It was almost time to warm up, and I knew Brock and Ryan were out there with Cooper. Alex sat down beside me in Marcus's chair.

"How's it going?" Alex was the first person to befriend me three years ago, and because of him, I found Cooper. Well, Cooper found me.

"Good. How are you?"

"I'm great." He grinned. "I'm happily married to the man I love, and my kids are doing great. Not much more I need, except maybe another ring."

I high-fived him. "You said it, brother." I really had more to say to him, but I'd just say this. "I never thanked you for befriending me when I first got here. Your friendship means a lot to me."

"No thanks necessary, Greg. I'm glad I could help you get acclimated. When I signed with Portland, we were all green. It's hard being the new kid."

I couldn't keep the smile off my face. "For the first time in my life, I'm truly happy. If all this went away tomorrow, I'd be just fine. I have Cooper and my brother lives with us. I couldn't ask for more."

"I'm really happy for you." Alex clapped me on the shoulder. "Now let's go warm up. I wanna run that alternative route a couple more times to make sure we're on target."

WHEN WE WALKED OUT OF THE TUNNEL, THEY HAD SET THE ropes up to create a divide between the family and friends and the players. I looked up into the stadium. It was half full of our amazing fans. I wondered idly if my parents were watching it today.

Alex elbowed me. "Hey, there's Coop." He pointed over to the velvet ropes by the goalpost where my two biggest official fans stood wearing my jerseys along with Ryan and Jesse. I was glad my brother-in-law could make it to the game.

“Thanks. I’ll see you out there in a minute.”

He grinned. “Take your time. I’ll pester Monroe for a minute. God knows he pesters the fuck out of me.”

I chuckled as I jogged over to see my family.

“Hey, nice jersey,” I declared, pulling my brother into a hug.

“Thanks. My brother got it for me.”

I gave Ryan and Jesse a quick bro-hug before looking at my husband. For a moment, I was struck with fear, and the look of disappointment on his face pierced my heart. I stepped over to him.

“Hey, babe,” I said before I leaned down and placed a quick kiss on his lips. I was aware of the flashes going off around us, but it didn’t matter anymore. If I’d just outed us, then so be it. Cooper was mine, and I was his. No one would ever love me the way he did.

“I’m surprised you did that, Captain.”

“Why?” I asked, studying his expression.

He raised his brows. “It’s one thing to talk about doing it and another to actually follow through.”

I smiled. “I know.” I reached for his left hand, where my ring circled his third finger. I wished I could wear mine. “But I told you, I’m in this for life. Don’t give a fuck who knows.”

Cooper nodded. “Okay, then. We’re going to go to our seats so you can warm up.”

“Okay,” I said, fist-bumping my brother and Ryan. I leaned in and kissed Cooper one more time.

“Love you,” I said. I never wanted him to doubt my commitment to him ever again.

Cooper beamed up at me. “Love you, too.”

I gave him a wink, then turned and jogged onto the field to find Alex. It was time to win another game.

\* \* \*

LATE IN THE FOURTH QUARTER, WE TRAILED SAN FRANCISCO by nine points. They were on fire tonight, and our defense had its hands full.

As we jogged onto the field, Alex called my number. “You ready for our play?”

I nodded. “Hell yeah, let’s do it.”

He grinned at me and took a knee in the huddle to call the play.

I visualized the route in my mind as we broke the huddle. Blocking out the crowd and everything from my mind, I took my place on the line. Marcus and I were both lined up on the left side.

“Let’s do it, Rookie!” he yelled.

I smiled and listened to the snap count.

When the ball was snapped, I took off down the left sideline for ten yards before cutting across the field on a slant. Only one cornerback was covering me, the others all over Marcus. When Alex launched the ball, I dug down deep and sped up enough to get just beyond the defenders’ reach. He stumbled and went down, leaving me wide open to run to the end zone.

I didn’t look back. Sailing in for the touchdown, I thrust my hands in the air as Marcus came and jumped on me.

“Fuck yeah, man!”

Alex came over and tapped my helmet. “Nice, man! Coach is calling for a two-point conversion.”

We pulled it back together in the huddle, and Declan slapped my helmet. “Beautiful run, Foster,” he said, after looking at the replay on the JumboTron.

“Thanks.” I quickly glanced at Cooper in the stands. He was celebrating with our friends, and it made me feel ten feet

tall.

Back in the huddle, Alex called for Declan. “Okay, we’re going up the middle. Make a Declan-sized hole, gentlemen! On three.”

We broke the huddle, and I took my place alongside the left tackle. When the ball was snapped, I pushed up to my feet and barreled through my defensive opponent. Declan powered through and landed in the end zone.

The crowd went nuts as we made our way to the bench.

Dom and the special teams unit ran out for the kickoff as we took the bench. As expected, he kicked the shit out of the ball. If he kept that up, no one would ever return his kicks.

The offense huddled on the sideline while the defense took over. “We can do this,” Alex declared as we watched the time tick down. “We’ve done it before, and we’ll do it again tonight. Dec they’re going to try to shut you down, so we’re going to have to go through the air. Marcus, Greg, they’ll cover you like wallpaper. Shake them off with that speed. If we can’t punch it in, Dominick will kick for the win. But we’ve got to get him in range.”

“We’ve got it, brother,” Marcus chimed in. “Winning is what we do!”

I nodded my head in agreement.

Patrick and the defense delivered the ball back to us with 1:47 to play. Three years ago, this would have made me fucking nervous. But now, side by side with my teammates who were family to me, I felt relaxed and confident in my play.

But Alex was right. They double-teamed me and Marcus. Somehow, we’d fucked up and ended up with an ineligible receiver penalty on second down. One of our linemen was beyond the line of scrimmage with no one to block, and the refs called it every time.

“We’re going with a double left on three,” Alex yelled.

Marcus and I lined up on the left side. When the ball was snapped, Marcus took off. I pushed off my defender and took off after him. Alex let the ball fly, and Marcus cradled it in his arms. Right before the safety and cornerback took him down, he lateraled the ball to me. Just like we'd practiced.

I took off down the sideline, but their strong safety had no trouble catching up to me. He tackled me out of bounds at the thirty-two-yard line.

Looking up at the scoreboard, the time had run down to twelve seconds. Coach called a timeout to set up the next play while we got back to the huddle and rehydrated.

Alex came back onto the field and told us the plan. "Dec, we're gonna try to get a little closer. They're expecting another pass, so we're going to run the left end around. Try to get out of bounds. On two."

We were down by one on the San Francisco thirty-two-yard line with twelve seconds to play. When the ball was snapped, Alex handed off to Declan, who ran to the left. We blocked and Declan ran it to the twenty-three-yard line before getting out of bounds to stop the clock.

I checked the clock, and we were down to six seconds. When the kicking team trotted onto the field, I headed for Dominick. He was buckling his helmet when I ran up to him. His eyes widened when he saw me.

"You've got this dude. Just do what you do best, and we've got your back either way."

"Thanks," he muttered.

Alex had given me advice like that during my rookie year, and it gave me the confidence to do what I needed to do. If he missed it, it wouldn't be his fault that we lost. It would be on us for not scoring enough.

Marcus and I stood beside Alex and Coach as Dominick got ready. When the ball was snapped and set, we held our breath as he made the kick. We watched the ball sail up toward the goalpost and cleanly into the net.

The roar of the crowd was deafening as the referee lifted both arms, signaling the score.

Somehow we'd managed to pull off another last-second victory. I ran onto the field with my teammates as we celebrated and shook hands with our opponents. Now all I wanted was to hug my family. I'd never been able to do that before.

Looking toward the tunnel, the families were already lined up to come onto the field to celebrate. I stood along with Marcus as Trent came running to his dad.

"Daddy, that was great!" he yelled as he jumped into Marcus's waiting arms. Aidan wasn't far behind and gave him a kiss. I watched how at ease they were with loving each other publicly, and that's how I wanted to be.

Looking around, Brock and Ryan were headed my way, but Cooper lagged behind. I walked toward them as my brother hugged me.

"That was fucking fantastic!"

"It was!" I replied.

When Cooper walked up, I stepped from my brother and took a few steps toward him. I pulled him in my arms and hugged him to me.

"I'm gonna kiss you in front of the world, babe, so get ready," I whispered in his ear.

He chuckled and pulled back to look at me. "I was ready three years ago."

When I had Cooper in my arms, the world fell away until there was only us. I leaned down and gave him the kiss I'd seen Marcus give Aidan.

It was short and sweet, and let anyone who happened to be watching know Cooper Evans-Foster was mine.

## ***CHAPTER 35***



## **COOPER**

I WALKED AROUND, taking in Aidan and Marcus's new house, wondering what it would be like to own such an enormous place. They had Trent, but they also wanted more kids, so the space was about right.

“What are you thinking about, babe?”

I smiled and turned to look into his green eyes. “Just taking in this place. It's beautiful and huge,” I added.

Greg looked around at the two-story family room and the floor-to-ceiling windows that faced west. “Do you want a place like this?”

My husband was hell-bent on providing me... us with whatever I wanted. And that shit had to stop. “Babe, I think we're good in our apartment for now. My lease is up next month, and I'll need to move what's left out.”

Greg nodded. “Or you could sublet it to Ryan.”

“Really? You think he'll want it?”

Greg sat down on the arm of the sofa and pulled me to him.

“He's moving here and they're both staying in Portland for college this fall. They could eventually be roommates or more. As much as I want Brock to stay with us, eventually, he's gonna want his own life. The college experience and all that goes with it. I'll pay the first year of rent until they can afford to pay their own way.”

Hmm. “That could really work. I don’t have much left over there, but at least they won’t need to buy furniture.”

He nodded. “Yep. Super simple.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and leaned in to kiss him just as Aidan asked for everyone’s attention.

“Hey everybody,” Aidan called. “I have some announcements to make.”

Everyone was here tonight, including my brother. He’d come over with Callum and Declan after the game.

“So, Marcus and I want to thank everyone for coming over. I want to be the first to congratulate the Pirates on their win tonight. The last three seasons have been a dream to watch.”

“Here, here,” Jackson said, raising his IPA in the air. Everyone added to his sentiment.

“We also want to announce something a little different. Well, two things, actually.”

He looked at Marcus, who stood beside him, his arm wrapped around Aidan’s shoulder.

“We found a surrogate, and she’s sixteen weeks pregnant. We’re having two little girls in July.”

The room erupted in congratulations and excitement.

“That’s fantastic, brother.” Alex went over to Aidan and pulled him for a hug.

“What about me? Where’s my hug? I helped make those babies.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “You’ve turned into such a drama queen, Monroe.” But he hugged him too.

“‘Turned into’?” Jackson snorted. “Always been is more like it.”

Everyone laughed. “Fine assholes,” Marcus muttered with a smile on his face.

Aidan wrapped his arms around him. “It’s okay, babe. It’s good practice for the girls. You’re going to be an awesome girl-dad.”

“I guess we’ll be learning all that together.” Simon raised his beer in a toast. “To Aidan, Marcus and the babies!”

“So are you gonna tell us how all that went down?” Jackson asked.

Aidan waved him off. “That’s a story for another time. I have more to tell you.”

Everyone quieted down.

“I’ve been thinking about leaving my agency for a while now. And with the babies coming this summer, I want to be home more to raise our kids.”

I was happy but confused at the same time. He’d agreed to represent Greg.

“So, after a lot of thought, I’ve decided to take the plunge and open the EHM Talent Management and Security with my partner, Jesse Evans. He’s opening another branch of Evans Security here in Portland. We’re going to represent and protect an exclusive talent list of ten clients.”

Jesse walked to Aidan’s side and shook hands with him.

“Wait,” Alex said. “What does that mean for me?”

Aidan looked at his brother. “You’re coming with me, baby brother,” Aidan told him. “I wouldn’t be leaving if the managing partner hadn’t agreed to allow me to keep my clients. Alex, Jackson, Declan, and, of course, Marcus are going with me.”

Alex’s shoulders sagged with relief. “Good. Carry on.”

Aidan smiled. “We’ve also added four new clients to our agency, bringing that to eight.”

“Who are you signing?”

Aidan looked our way. “Greg will join our agency after the season ends, as will Patrick Griffin and Cole Bradley.”

Christian's eyes went wide. "You're representing Fallen Angel?"

Alex hugged him. "Calm down, baby. You're married to the quarterback, remember?"

We all burst out laughing at Alex's exaggerated insecurity. Anyone could see Christian was head over heels for Alex.

Christian looked up at him with that adoring, lovesick look we loved to make fun of. "I could never forget about you." He reached up and pulled Alex into a kiss.

As I watched them, I felt like I was looking in a mirror at Greg and me. And for the first time, I knew what that felt like and why my friend was such a goner for his husband.

Out of nowhere came an unfamiliar voice. "Yeah, that's me."

We turned to find Cole Bradley standing hand-in-hand with Patrick Griffin. *The Cole Bradley*. I was having a fanboy moment until my husband growled just loud enough for me to hear.

I looked up at him and shook my head. Like I wanted anyone but him.

"Guys, you know Patrick Griffin, but this is Cole Bradley, the founding member of Fallen Angel and Patrick's partner."

The guys turned to welcome them.

Declan looked at Patrick. "How did we miss that you had a boyfriend?"

Patrick looked at Cole. "It wasn't public knowledge. We've kept our relationship under wraps for..."

Cole finished Patrick's sentence. "Almost ten years."

I gaped at my husband, my mouth wide open, but I had no words. Ten years of hiding. Our two years were nothing compared to that.

Patrick wrapped his arm around Cole. "The only person here that I've told was Foster."

Greg smiled at him. “He left me with a riddle to figure out when Simon had me on the table for an IV. He saw Coop and me in Seattle more than two years ago at the Fallen Angel concert.”

Everyone got it now that they knew everything. We didn’t have to explain anything to anyone, and it felt so good having them in our lives for real this time.

“That’s why you’re branching into security as well.” Christian’s head tilted to the side as he put the pieces together.

“Yes.” Jesse nodded. “We’re not only representing sports talent, but entertainment as well. We can provide what Fallen Angel needs in terms of security and management they can trust.”

Callum frowned. “That’s only seven. Who else are you representing?”

Aidan grinned. “The new kicker. Dominick Rossi.”

Everyone clapped and whistled. Dominick tried to slink away, but Jackson wouldn’t let him. He held him in place with his enormous paw on Dom’s shoulder. “You deserve it, kid. You’re one hell of a talent.”

Dominick rolled his eyes and nodded. “Yeah, okay, relentless one!” he said, making everyone laugh. “You’re worse than my father.”

Jackson grabbed him around the head and pulled him in for a noogie.

“Don’t mess up my hair, asshole!” Dominick tried shoving the former linebacker off him with very little success, making us all laugh after Jackson released him.

“I want my cut of the scouting fee,” Jackson teased. Simon rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Take it up with my agent,” Dominick quipped.

“We might have to arrange security for Dominick. He’s already amassed quite a following on social media,” Aidan joked.

I glanced at my brother standing beside Aidan. He looked at Dominick with an intensely focused gaze I hadn't seen before.

"That could be easily arranged," Jesse added in a low, gravelly tone.

I looked at Dom standing across from him. He returned that intense look before his eyes dropped, roaming over Jesse's muscular physique.

*Oh, fuck.*

I looked over at Greg, and we stared at each other with wide eyes. Yeah, he'd picked up on that too. Funny how no one else seemed to see it, though.

"That's it for the announcements. Go back to eating all that food in there." Aidan gestured to the dining room that had enough food to feed half the team.

We all hung out for a while and enjoyed the food. Greg introduced Brock and Ryan to everyone. They gravitated to Dominick since Brock already knew him.

I watched my brother out of the corner of my eye. He was having a good time talking to Callum. So I took it upon myself to interrupt them.

"So what made you decide to move to Portland?" I knew I sounded like a brat, but he just brought that out in me.

Jesse glanced at me, then shrugged. "Feels like I'm missing everything living out there in Wyoming. Callum got married, then you got married and I missed it all."

"Well," Callum added, "I didn't know I was getting married until five minutes before."

"And I didn't either," I replied. "I had about 18 hours before we got married."

A smile tinged with regret played on my brother's face. "Yeah, see, I haven't heard the whole story yet. All these guys know everything, and I only know a few of the details."

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Do you really want to know or are you just saying that?”

The look of regret was more profound now than before. “Look, Cooper, I know I wasn’t the best to you when we were growing up, but I’d honestly like to put it behind us and start over. Not all of our memories were bad. But I’m sorry for being a dick to you when we were younger. I guess we see who ended up with the happier life.”

Right then, I realized, just like Greg, I had a choice to make. I could admit I’d missed my big brother. We were nothing like Greg was with Brock. And that kinda hurt. But he was trying. And he’d shown up for me when I’d asked. I either had to forgive and forget and give us a chance at a grown-up relationship, or let things stay as they were.

“Okay,” I said, extending my hand. “I can admit I wasn’t the easiest to live with, but I’d like to start over. I’d like to have what Greg has with Brock, but that’ll take time.”

Jesse gave me a genuine smile. Our eyes held as he took my hand, only to pull me in for a hug. “Thanks, Cooper. It means a lot to me.”

I nodded. “Do you need a place to stay while you’re here? I’ve got an empty apartment.”

Jesse thought about it. “Maybe. I’ll let you know.”

“Okay. I think I’m gonna grab Greg and go home. Maggie needs to go out for a walk, so we better head out now.”

Callum smiled. “Yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon. I’ll be out after my last patient.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “Did you talk to Nora?”

Callum nodded. “Yes. She was happy to help.”

“Perfect, see you tomorrow. Bye, Jesse.”

“Bye, Coop,” he said, as I walked away to find Greg.

Every aspect of my life was better now that Greg was in it.

## ***CHAPTER 36***



## **GREG**

UNFORTUNATELY, the Division Championship did not go our way. We'd fought hard against the Denver team, but we fell short, losing 34-31.

It had been a long season and as much as I wanted to go back to the Super Bowl for the fourth year in a row, I was really looking forward to the time off.

Over the last two weeks, Cooper and I had fallen into a routine of doing everyday tasks together, and I never realized I'd love it so much. Taking Maggie for a walk was a favorite of mine, as well as grocery shopping. Everything meant so much more now.

Every Saturday, Coop and I went grocery shopping. It was a basic everyday task, but somehow it held new meaning. Being able to hold his hand or put my arm around him without worrying was freeing. Occasionally, I was recognized, but most of the time, people just respected our downtime and left us alone to shop.

During one of our shopping trips, an idea popped into my head when Cooper asked me to get something.

"We need limes," he'd said.

I wanted to do something special for our anniversary, and I wanted to do it with our friends and our family. So as I bagged up the limes, I shared my idea with him.

"Hey, babe?"

"What?" he asked as he threw in three five-pound bags of carrots for the horses.

“I’ve been thinking about something.”

Coop eyed me. “About limes?”

“No,” I chuckled, “but yeah, kinda. They gave me an idea.”

He threw his hand up. “Stop right there. I’m not doing any freaky shit with limes, Captain. The juice burns like hell.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “No, that’s not what I was suggesting, but I would be interested in knowing what kind of *freaky shit* you’ve done with them.”

Coop blushed a little, then ignored my interest. “What’s on your mind, babe?”

As we stood in the middle of the grocery store in downtown Portland, I’d never been more in love with him than right now.

“Babe?” he asked, raising his brows.

“Oh, sorry. Our anniversary is coming up next month, and I want to go back to our villa and invite all our friends and your family down there.”

Cooper stared at me, eyes wide, before saying slowly, “You want to spend our first wedding anniversary with all our friends and my parents?”

I smiled, thinking about Jason and Melinda. “Yeah, because I want to renew our wedding vows, but with guests this time. I love that our ceremony was just us, but I want to include your parents and our friends who’ve had our backs the whole time. I’ve never had friends like that, and I want to show them we appreciate them. Plus, it would be fun.”

Coop’s grin gave me his answer. Although I knew what he’d say before I asked. I shared more of my idea with him.

“We can go back and rent the boat, or get a bigger one, and do it again on the open water. But this time, let’s make it an event; food, cake, champagne, the works. We’ve been to everyone else’s weddings, except for Marcus and Aidan’s, and I’d really like to do this with your parents. I kinda love them.”

I watched the array of facial expressions cross his face as I laid out my idea. The one he stopped on was my favorite. The one that said he had eyes for no one but me.

“It sounds perfect, babe. Have I told you how much I adore you today?”

I pretended to think about it, “Not in the last hour.”

He chuckled and I couldn’t help it. I stole a kiss right there in the middle of the store because I could. I would bet my expression matched his. We both needed this. And I wanted to give it to him. “Then let’s finish up and go home.”

“Deal. Hurry up, Captain, we have plans to make.”

\* \* \*

I PUT THE GROCERIES AWAY WHILE COOPER CONNECTED HIS laptop to the giant TV hanging on the wall. Grabbing two bottles of water and some pretzels, we met in the middle of the sofa.

“Where do we start first? Boat rental or our friends?”

Cooper typed in the name of the wedding cruise we’d used and pulled up their website. I took out my phone and called the number.

Barbara answered, and I told her who I was and what I wanted. She checked their schedule and confirmed the evening of our anniversary was open.

“Oh my goodness, Greg, that sounds so romantic. We have a larger boat that can hold more guests and would be more comfortable for you. I can give you some referrals for the things you mentioned unless you’d rather do it yourself.”

I glanced at Coop, who nodded in agreement.

“That will be perfect. And if you can email me that list, that would be great.”

“I’d be happy to. Let me know if I can help further,” she said.

“I will. Do you need my credit card number?”

She chuckled. “Oh no, I trust you, dear. And you’re a repeat customer.”

Chuckling, I thanked her. “Thanks for all your help, Barbara.”

“It’s my pleasure. We’ll see you boys soon!”

I ended the call and turned to him. “Friends now?”

“Yep. I’m on it.”

Cooper took out his phone and sent a group text to me and our friends, then to his family. A small part of me wished I could pick up my phone and invite my parents to our vow renewal. But those thoughts were for another day.

Cooper: Hey guys. Can you keep the week of March 20th open for me?

I wondered who would be the first to answer.

Callum: The whole week???

Me: Yes, the whole week. And you’ll need sunscreen.

Simon: What are we doing?

Cooper: We’re officially inviting everyone to the Keys for our first-anniversary vow renewal. Our house isn’t big enough for everyone, so I’ll make reservations. Our treat.

Christian: The sunny Florida Keys in March? Yes, please! Count us in!

Jackson: Got something else that week. Sorry.

My mouth hung open, stunned by his response. But Cooper just laughed.

Jackson: Kidding Coop, just kidding! We're good to go, right Daddy?

Simon: Smh... yes, JACKSON, we're good to go. And stop calling me that on here.

Callum: We're in.

Marcus: Count us in. What are we wearing? I'll need to get some new clothes.

Aidan: Oh God. More clothes to stuff in the closet.

I chuckled at Marcus. Of course, his wardrobe was his first thought. He was our resident Mr. GQ.

Dominick: Sounds cool. Did you mean to invite me?

Greg: YES Dom – you can bring a date if you like.

Dominick: For a week? No thanks. I'll just use an app if I need to scratch an itch.

Cooper: Okay then! We'll email more info. Later, guys!

I put my phone on the coffee table. “Okay, babe, let's keep going. What's next?”

He sighed. “Time to invite the rents, but I better hit up Jesse first.” He picked up his phone and texted his brother. Jesse replied immediately.

“He's got it on his calendar.” Cooper continued to stare at the screen.

I was confused. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing. He thanked me for the invite and said he wouldn't miss it.”

I put my arm around him and pulled him in to kiss his head. “Are you surprised by that?”

He slowly nodded. “Yeah. We’ve never been close, but when I see you with Brock, I realize I’d like to have that with Jesse.”

I placed another kiss on his head. “You’re the best person I know. If anyone can make that happen, it’s you, babe. Forgive and forget, right?”

It was odd how those words struck me in the chest. How long was it going to be before I could even consider forgiving my parents? Brock and I had so much to work through, but the freaking joy I felt just being with Cooper had me considering it.

“Are we choosing a best man? I have too many close friends to choose just one. Or I could give them numbers,” he mused. “You know, like BM#1, BM#2, Jackson,” he joked.

“You’re right. It must be terrible having that many friends to choose from,” I teased.

“Ha! You have a lot too, whether you realize it or not.”

He was right. I did. But I knew who mine would be. The kid who just walked in the door with our dog.

“Hey,” Brock called as he came in from his walk with Maggie and unhooked her leash. She came bounding over to Cooper.

Brock looked at the TV. “What are you two doing?”

“Planning a trip to renew our vows next month,” Coop said, as he loved on Maggie.

“Cool! That’ll be fun. I can keep her for you.”

“That won’t work,” I said. “You have to go, too. I need you to be my best man.”

My brother’s eyes began to fill before he came over and hugged me. “Yeah? I’d love that.”

My heart expanded a little more every time I saw Brock stepping outside of the closed-off world he’d lived in.

“Feel free to invite, Ryan,” Cooper added with a grin. “You guys are going to love kiteboarding.”

Brock’s face lit up with excitement. “I’m gonna go call Ryan. He’ll be stoked! Then I’m taking a long nap.”

Maggie stretched out on the cool hardwood floor with her favorite chew, and Coop turned back to me. He was relaxed and the contentment he radiated felt like the sun on my skin.

“Anyone else before we call my parents?”

“Actually, yeah there is. How would you feel about inviting Patrick?”

Coop’s eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t realize you guys were that close.”

“We aren’t, but he gave me some really good advice when I needed it. And I feel like I’ve got another opening on my friend list. I might need to interview him.”

My husband rolled his lips in to keep from smiling, but it didn’t work. He shifted and put his left hand on my shoulder. Getting to his knees, he threw his leg over my lap to straddle me. Cooper wrapped his arms around my neck. I pulled him closer until we were chest to chest without a millimeter of space between us.

His soft lips parted, and he pressed them to mine. Our tongues met in a warm, wet glide, causing my cock to pulse and harden.

Coop moaned into my mouth as I ran my hands over his jean-clad ass. I moved my right hand up to his waist and down the back of his jeans to squeeze his cheek. My fingers inched closer to where I knew he wanted me. Who was I to deny my baby what he needed?

Inching them closer to his entrance, he pulled back from our kiss and dropped his head back, eyes closed, and ground his hard cock into mine.

I was mesmerized by the bob of his Adam’s Apple, the flush of color creeping up his neck, and the pornographic

sounds he made when I pressed the pad of my finger to his hole.

“More,” he panted. “I need more, baby, please.”

I leaned in and put my mouth over his Adam’s Apple and sucked gently before pulling back to run my hands up under his shirt to remove it. When it was tossed aside, I looked at the only man I’d ever been attracted to.

“Do you want to come hard and fast here in your jeans?”

Cooper strangled a moan at my suggestion. But I wasn’t finished with the options.

I leaned in to tongue his throat. “Or would you rather I take you apart, piece by piece, in our bed?”

He lowered his gaze back to mine. His pupils were wide with desire, and what remained of his blue irises were swirling pools of need and lust. Bringing his lips close to mine, they grazed my own as he whispered what he wanted. “Take me apart.”

I pulled my hand from his jeans and wrapped my arms around his legs.

“Hold on,” I rasped as I used my strength and power to get to my feet. I’d never appreciated my workouts more than I did right at that moment.

His mouth met mine as I navigated the path back to our bedroom. Once inside, I reached out to close the door.

Cooper grabbed my T-shirt as I strode to the bed, pulling it over my head when I dropped him onto it.

The upper body I worked so fucking hard to sculpt flexed and muscles bunched as I worked open and removed my jeans and briefs. My love stared up at me in a lust-drunk haze of appreciation as he worked to rid himself of his clothes.

I stroked my bobbing cock with one hand while helping him remove the rest of his.

Once we were both naked, I leaned over and took his cock into my mouth. Coop ran his hands over my hair, arched his



back, then thrust gently into my mouth. I listened intently to the sounds he made and his breathing, waiting for my cue to pull off.

I released the suction and let him drop from my mouth as his pre-cum coated my tongue. My cock pulsed as my pre-cum rolled down the head and over my fingers.

Reaching for the lube, I let go of my shaft, only to have Cooper sit up and take my cock into his own hot mouth.

The chills that raced up and down my spine at the feel of the wet warmth made me shiver. Coop could get me off in a matter of seconds if I wasn't careful, so I gently pushed him off my cock before he put an end to this prematurely.

"Too good at that, babe," I panted.

He gave me the sexy smile I loved and took the lube from my hand. Eyes glued to me as he opened the cap, Coop reached for my cum-covered hand and slipped my fingers into his mouth, sucking away my pre-cum as he lubed up my shaft.

The dual sensations almost made me cum, and again I had to push him away.

"That's erotic as fuck, but you gotta stop," I whined.

Coop chuckled and kissed the tip of my dick. "Then give me what I need. I want the burn."

My skin heated and I swore I was going to pass out from his words alone.

Nodding, I squeezed my shaft painfully to stave off my orgasm as my husband scooted back onto our bed. When he settled, he widened his legs, making room for me between them.

I crawled after him, my cock leading the way, seeking him out. Staying on my knees, Coop put his thighs over mine so I could lift him up to meet my shaft.

When my tip met his hole, I pressed forward as his back arched off the bed. His fists clutched at the sheets, and I stopped.

“Babe?” I panted.

“No, don’t stop. I can take it. Just go slow,” he groaned as I pushed in a little more.

Cooper lifted his hips to take a little more of me. When the head breached the ring of muscle, he sighed and relaxed back onto the bed. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply as his muscles relaxed and accepted me into his body.

The sigh of pleasure at the fullness was my cue to proceed. Taking a few seconds to get myself under control, I inched in further until all eight plus inches of me were seated completely inside him.

“God, I love you and your dick,” he moaned, making me chuckle.

I leaned in to kiss him, then let my body and his lead the way. As we deepened our kiss, I pulled and pushed inside of him, working up to a rhythm that kept us just shy of exploding.

Coop pulled back to breathe and took his own dick in hand. Panting, I changed my angle and grazed his prostate a few times before changing once again to hit it like the target of a bullseye.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he chanted as I watched him fall apart for me.

My orgasm ripped through my balls and up my spine to my brain. I filled my husband’s ass full of my seed.

A strange thought came to me and made me chuckle. My still-hard cock nudged his prostate again, making him gasp.

“What’s so funny, Captain?”

I shook my head. “I think I know what Marcus meant when he used to talk about trying to get Aidan pregnant.”

Cooper laughed, tightening his muscle around my shaft again, making me shiver.

“Sorry,” he said, reaching for me. Our mouths met again, but for a different kind of kiss that told me how much he loved

and adored me.

My forehead pressed to his as I held myself over him in what I referred to as a Cooper plank. He ran his fingertips over my unshaven jaw and moved to press kisses to my face.

“I love you,” I whispered, lost in the tender moment.

“Love you, too.”

After we took a shower and a nap, we spent the rest of the afternoon making phone calls and choosing things we wanted for the ceremony. We booked four king suites and five king rooms in the hotel closest to us for everyone.

I called the pilot who’d flown us to Key West from the Outer Banks. We lucked out that he had a few days open, so we booked two of them. It was the least I could do for our guests.

To say Melinda was excited was an understatement, and I soaked in all her love for us. She and Jason were thrilled at the invitation to attend our vow renewal.

“I’m so excited, boys. What can we do to help?”

“Nothing, Mom,” I tried out, much to her delight. “We want you to come and enjoy the ceremony. We just want you there.”

She smiled and wiped at a tear, then nodded. “Okay,” she replied. “Are your parents coming?”

Cooper looked at me, then took my hand. “No, Mom,” he said. “It’s a long story for another time.”

Melinda nodded. “I understand. I will happily be a mom to both of you.”

I smiled. “I’d love that.”

We shared most of the details of what we’d arranged but left a few out as surprises.

I don’t know how I’d gotten so lucky to have Cooper walk into my life, but I’d never let him spend another second doubting how much I loved him and our life together.

## ***CHAPTER 37***

## **COOPER**

I WAS GOING to owe Nora big! That peach of a woman agreed to cover for me at PET for three weeks so I could go to the Keys. I really was lucky to have such wonderful people in my life.

Greg and I left a week before everyone else was supposed to arrive. Brock would bring Maggie on the private plane, and Callum would be there to help with her if she didn't fly well.

God, I was a lucky man.

As soon as our plane touched down at Key West International, we picked up our rental and headed for the villa. I rolled down the windows of the Tahoe and let the smell of salt water and the sea breeze fill the car for the short ride.

I hummed in happiness and reached over to take Greg's hand. The smile on my face had become my permanent expression again.

I reclined my head on the seat and turned it to look at my husband as he drove. His left hand was propped on the steering wheel, showing off his sexy as fuck biceps under the powder blue t-shirt he wore. His aviator sunglasses hid his beautiful green eyes, but there was no missing his own permanently fixed, happy expression.

"You happy, babe?" he asked, glancing at me.

"There's not a strong enough word to describe how happy I am."

He grinned. "I'm glad I chose this place for our vacation."

“It’s not the place that makes me feel like this. It’s being with you. I love it here, almost as much as I love our life in Portland. But if it all went away, I’d still be this happy because it’s you. Not the villa, the beaches, or the car. It’s you.”

Greg nodded and glanced at me. “I feel exactly the same way. You’re my happy place. You put a smile on my face, too.”

He lifted our joined hands and kissed the top of mine, never letting go until we pulled up to our villa.

I loved our private three-bedroom, three-bath home that sat oceanfront, with a saltwater pool we enjoyed when we were here. The lush tropical foliage provided privacy for us when we wanted to sunbathe in the nude.

I unlocked the door while Greg got our luggage from the car. Kicking off my shoes, I walked around and opened the sliding glass doors and all the windows that faced the beach.

The management company we contracted to look after the property for us had stocked the fridge with everything we’d put on the list. They’d also changed the bedding, given the place a thorough cleaning, and stocked lots of towels out by the pool.

“I’m getting in the pool,” he called as I checked out the selection of cold cuts.

“Okay. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Our plan was to relax and enjoy our place for a few days before starting the prep for everyone’s arrival. This was our first official trip as an out, married couple. I wanted to remember it forever.

I opened the fridge and took out two beers from one of the local breweries. Popping the caps off, I took a swig, then went to find my husband.

“Babe,” I said, “I have your...”

My brain stalled, just like a TV station cutting off in a storm. Greg was relaxed and floating in our pool, completely naked. He was half hard and made my mouth water.

Even though I'd seen him naked many, many times, it was something else to find him skinny dipping in our pool as the sun shone down on him, the shadows from the palms dancing along his skin.

He was my personal Greek god.

Sensing my stare, he lifted his head and opened his eyes, then let his feet drop to the bottom. I tracked the water that ran down his body from the chiseled jaw and neck, over the sculpted shoulders and chest, until it ended its journey back into the pool.

"See something you like?" he teased.

I nodded like a bobblehead. Pointing my finger at him, I grinned. "I married that. Aren't you impressed?"

The sexiest grin I'd ever seen crossed his face. He reached for our beers and set them to the side.

"New pool rules," he said, not taking his eyes off me. "No suits allowed."

I smirked at him, then stripped out of my clothes. I deposited them on the outdoor sofa as I retrieved our towels from the poolside cabinet.

"We won't need those. We can drip dry."

"You're feeling all kinds of hot and bothered, aren't you?"

"Uh huh."

Greg sat reclined in the three inches of water that lapped over the tanning ledge. He tipped back his beer and took a big swallow. Mesmerized by the movement of his throat, memories from the last time we were here crept into the front of my brain.

I walked down the steps into the pool, then dove under the water. The refreshing sensation of the cool water sluicing over my body was heavenly. I surfaced and swept my hand over my face to push my wet hair back.

Turning, I found Greg watching me as I waded through the water toward him. His cock was almost fully erect. I wanted it

in my mouth.

“Looks like you have a problem there.”

He looked down as I ran my hands from his knees to his thighs.

“I’ve never been one to shift the blame, but this is your fault.”

“Well,” I said, running one finger along his smooth skin, “I guess I should take care of that.”

Greg brushed his fingers over my cheek before threading his fingers through my hair. Keeping his eyes on mine, he slowly moved my head down toward his cock. “Open up,” he commanded, and my cock thickened.

I took my husband deep into my throat while I worked him with my hand. He returned to his reclined position on his elbows on the deck and lifted his face to the sun.

Small pulses of pre-cum hit my tongue, making me moan. I removed my hand from his shaft and ran my palms up his abs to his nipples. Rubbing and lightly pinching the erect buds, he panted and returned his gaze to what I was doing.

He was so turned on and needy, but what I was doing just wasn’t enough. Lifting his leg out of the water, he bent his knee and hung his foot off the edge of the tanning ledge. When he dropped the same leg to the side, opening himself to me, I knew what he wanted.

I let his cock fall from my mouth and sank into the water to take his smooth balls into my mouth. I rolled them around with my tongue.

I patted his leg, which was still down in the water. Greg quickly positioned it to match the other, splayed out like a frog before me. Resting my palms flat where his long legs met his pelvis, my thumbs slipped lower as I released his balls from my mouth.

“Baby, I need....” he panted.

“I know what you need, babe. Just relax and enjoy.”



Greg nodded, then tipped his head back for the sun to tan his face. I reached up and pulled his hard, leaking shaft back toward me. I licked the pre-cum from his tip like an ice cream cone before taking him into my mouth again.

My thumbs went to his taint and massaged it. His body jerked and the moans coming from him made my cock needy.

When I dropped my thumb to his hole, he let out a desperate whine and lifted his hips.

“Please, babe, please...” he begged.

I popped his dick out of my mouth, then dropped lower to lick his hole. He hissed, then moaned as I licked him more.

“Fuck, that feels so good,” he groaned. I watched his face and took my lead from his body. When it was good and slippery from my saliva, I sucked on my middle finger. His cock leaked, and I gathered that too.

With my left hand, I brought his shaft back to my mouth.

“Lift,” I said before taking him in my mouth. Greg raised his hips out of the water, and I positioned my finger at his entrance and circled his hole. When the muscles relaxed, I pushed my finger in and sucked hard at the same time.

Greg’s choppy breathing let me know he was close. I slid my finger in and out, as he followed his instinct to ride my finger.

“More,” he groaned, and I slid in number two, purposefully staying away from his gland. The building orgasm waned some as the discomfort from a second digit took hold.

It wasn’t long before he pleaded for more, and this time, I grazed his prostate. A low moan of pleasure poured from his throat.

“Babe,” he panted, his chest lifting and falling in the same rhythm with his thrusting hips before he filled my mouth with his salty release. His body jerked and twitched with the aftershocks. When his breathing returned to normal, I withdrew my fingers from him.

Exhausted, I rested my cheek on his muscular thigh. I closed my eyes as he ran his fingers through my damp hair.

“That was amazing, babe. If sex is going to be like *that*, I should marry you,” Greg teased.

I smiled but didn't lift my head. “That ship has already sailed, Captain. Literally.”

Our week together flew by as we relaxed in the sun and prepared for our family and friends to arrive. I couldn't wait for Brock to see what Greg had done for him. And my mother was going to lose her shit when she saw our villa.

We drove up to see Captain Bob to make sure the boat was large enough to accommodate all our friends and to go over our final plans. Bob hadn't exaggerated about the boat we'd use because it was more like a yacht.

“We'll make sure everything's ready, boys. Don't worry,” Barbara assured me after we'd gone over all the details.

“Thank you. We're not worried,” Greg assured her.

When we left the dock, I stopped on the way to the car and turned around. The yacht was unbelievable.

Saturday afternoon, the private plane we'd chartered for our friends arrived at a private runway by the airport. We watched as it landed and taxied up to the outdoor stairs at the gate. The airport ground staff secured the stairs and opened the door, while another man moved around to the cargo hold and started unloading their bags.

We walked over to greet our friends as they got off the plane. Brock was the first one off with my Maggie. Ryan and Dominick followed behind them.

I squatted down as Brock let go of the leash. “Hey, baby! Did you miss Daddy?” I cooed at her.

She barked and jumped around, doing the whole body wiggle Aussies do.

“How'd she do?”

“Good. But it was a good thing Callum was there. He calmed her down when we hit some turbulence.” I had no doubt. Callum was the best.

Greg pulled Dominick in for a bro-hug. “Thanks for coming, man.”

“Yeah, thanks for the invite. Looks like I’m the only single dude here.”

I smirked. “No, you’re not. Jesse’s single.”

Dominick made a face I couldn’t quite decipher but kept his thoughts to himself.

“Jess—” Before Brock could finish whatever he was going to say, Dom swiveled his head looking around. “Is he here?”

I tried not to smirk at the look on his face. It was somewhere between annoyance and excitement. “Not yet. He’s flying in with my parents in about thirty minutes.”

“Ah, cool,” he said. “Want me to take her to the bathroom?”

“Yes, please.” I handed him Maggie’s leash, and they followed Brock and Ryan.

Parker was next and carried the small stroller for Ava, along with his backpack. He was one of my favorite people in the entire world. I still spent time with him because I wanted to, not because I was paid to.

When Parker spotted me, he hurried down the stairs with the stroller.

“Hey! How’s it going, buddy?” I asked as he barreled into me and gave me a hug. I loved this kid so much. His dads had done a great job making him feel secure, and I was still so honored they’d let me be a part of it.

He sighed. “It was a long flight, but it was amazing too. I can’t wait to see the beach!”

Jackson descended with Ava in his arms, followed by Simon. “Hold on there, buddy. We need the stroller for your sister.”

Parker turned around to face them. “Oh, sorry Dad.” He grinned. “I had to talk to Cooper.”

“We know, bud. How about keeping an eye on your sister while we get the luggage?” Simon was such a wonderful dad.

“Okay, Daddy.”

I leaned into Greg. “We should probably back up so they can get off the plane.”

Christian was next, followed by Megan, Zach, and Alex. He was all smiles. “Hey! This place is great.”

I laughed at him. “You’ve been outside for all of thirty seconds.”

“It’s not cold, and it’s not raining. So Key West for the win!”

Greg greeted Alex, and they moved around to get their luggage.

Marcus and Aidan were next. Trent bound down the stairs and ran after Megan.

“Did you get your wardrobe straightened out, Monroe?” Greg teased.

Marcus gestured to his designer duds. “Don’t I look sharp?”

Aidan pushed him to move on. “Yes, babe. Just smashing. Now let’s get our son and the bags.”

Greg smiled and raised his hand. When I looked up, Patrick descended with Cole behind him. His guitar case was slung across his shoulder on his back, and it reminded me I had a rock star at my wedding.

“Hey, guys! Good to see you. Thanks for coming.” My husband beamed at his friend.

Patrick stuck his hand out to Greg. “We wouldn’t have missed it. Key West in March? Fucking fantastic.”

Cole smiled. “Hope you don’t mind that I brought my guitar. I need to work a little here and there.”

“No problem! We make a great audience.” I was fanboying again.

Cole grinned as Patrick reached for his hand. “Might take you up on that.”

My eyes went wide, and my husband shook his head at me. “Control your fandom, babe. It’s showing.”

I laughed and shoved him.

“Fighting already?” Declan smirked as he and Meredith climbed down the stairs.

“Not even close,” Greg replied, shaking his hand.

I looked up and saw Callum. “Hey! I thought you’d never get off the plane!”

“Missed me that much, Coop?” He had no idea.

“Yeah, asshole. I did. We haven’t spent much time together lately.” I pulled him to me for a hug.

“I know. It’s been crazy. Maybe we can find some time here to catch up.”

I nodded. “That would be good. I want to hear about the house.”

“That I can do.” Callum walked around to help Declan with their bags.

I looked at Greg and the mob of football royalty here in our special place.

“This might be the best idea you’ve ever had,” I said, snaking my arm around his waist. His arm took up residence in its normal place over my shoulders.

“Nah, babe. The best idea I’ve ever had was marrying you.” He leaned down and kissed my lips.

“Hey Alex,” Marcus called. “You and Christian might have just lost the title of sappiest couple to them!”

Alex grinned. “Can’t think of anyone better to take the crown.”

Greg showed everyone to the rental car pickup as I waited in baggage claim for my parents and Jesse to come down. Since they couldn't make the flight out of Portland, we bought their tickets and put them in first class.

My mom and dad tried to object, but Greg refused. "It's what we want to do. Plus, I get frequent flyer miles," said the man who made eight million a year, plus endorsements. It warmed my heart that he wanted to spoil my parents like that.

"Coop!" Jesse raised his hand to get my attention.

"Hey!" I met him halfway and hugged him. "Thanks for coming."

"Like I told you, wouldn't have missed it," he said, then let me go.

"Where are Mom and Dad?"

"Bathroom. I told them I'd find you. They'll be here soon."

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I took it out to find a text from Greg.

Greg: Just got a call from the hotel. They fucked up and only booked eight rooms for tonight.

Me: Shit.

Greg: Only two people are single.

I slowly panned up to look at my brother, wondering how he'd take this.

"What?" he asked.

"The hotel fucked up." If he said no, he'd have to stay with us. We were loud when we fucked, and nobody would want to hear that. Just ask Brock.

"Okay. What happened?"

I took a deep breath and just put it out there. "They only have eight of the nine rooms we booked for tonight."

Jesse nodded. “Okay.”

I sighed, then just asked him. “How do you feel about sharing a room with Dominick?”

## ***CHAPTER 38***



## **GREG**

I WAITED for Cooper to respond to my text while everyone picked up their rentals. The only thing that might work would be if Jesse and Dominick could share a room for a night.

My phone buzzed in my hand, and I looked down at the text.

Cooper: Jesse's fine with it for one night. You ask Dominick.

Oh god. I hated shit like this, but it couldn't be helped.

Me: Okay.

I pocketed my phone as I scanned our crowd for Dom. I strode over to him, dreading this.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?”

Dominick looked worried. “Sure, what's up?”

“We have an issue with the rooms for tonight. The hotel only has eight of the nine we booked. Do you think you could share a room with Jesse? It would only be for the night. They'll have the other one tomorrow.”

I watched Dominick as he ran it through his mind. He either had no problem with it or one hell of a poker face.

“Sure. Uh... no problem.” He ran his hand over his mouth and smiled.

“Are you sure?” I really couldn't read him.

“Yeah, it's fine. I have sleep apnea and I snore. That's all.”

I nodded. “Oh okay. I’m sure it’ll be fine. Jesse is a former SEAL, so I’m sure he’s used to snoring.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” Dominick fidgeted.

“Thanks, man. We really appreciate it.”

I let it go for now and texted Cooper.

Me: He’s fine with it. Just warn Jesse that he snores. Sleep issues.

Cooper: Ok, good. We’re on our way.

Crisis averted.

Melinda and Jason rode with us in the Tahoe, while Jesse rode with Callum and Declan. We showed them places we liked and recommended places to eat as we led our caravan to the Marriott. Coop and I waited in the lobby as everyone checked in and went upstairs. With them all safely out of sight, I went up to the counter to pay for all nine rooms.

When I asked to pay for all the rooms for the week, the desk clerk looked at me like I was insane. I asked for the manager.

A man in his mid-forties came out to greet me. “Hello, I’m the general manager. How can I help you?”

“Hi. My husband and I booked 9 rooms for six nights for our friends. I want to pay the bill before they come down.”

He coughed and went bug-eyed. “Sir, are you aware of how much that will be?”

I smiled. “Yes. I booked them.”

“Okay.” He said as he walked behind the counter.

Cooper must have noticed there was an issue because he walked up. “Problem babe?”

I shook my head. “Don’t think so. They’re worried about the bill being more than I’m expecting.”

“Oh,” he said. “Pull out your IDs, babe. Both of them.”

I did as he asked and pulled out my license and my Pirates ID. When the GM had the bill in hand, he looked at me. "I'll need to see some ID, please."

Cooper smiled as I passed them over to him, along with our Black American ExpressCard

We stood back and took in the scene as the manager figured out who I was. Normally, I hated being recognized, but this time, it came in handy.

The manager's eyes went wide, and we smiled at him.

"I'm sorry for the confusion, Mr. Foster. You just seemed so young. We just have to make sure, you know?"

Cooper smiled. "Thank you. We appreciate that, but just so you know, the people who just checked in are all players for the Portland Pirates, in addition to my husband here." He pointed at me. "We'd appreciate it if you could help us make their stay as pleasant as possible."

"Absolutely," he stammered. "We strive to make that the standard here."

"Perfect," Coop replied.

It was pretty obvious he recognized the names when he went through the guest list on the printout. "Your total is right here." He circled the amount and looked at me.

"That's good. Could you keep the card on file through their stay in case of incidental charges or anything they might need?"

"Yes, sir. I'll take care of it myself." He was overly friendly now.

"Thank you. We appreciate it."

The manager smiled. "And I want to apologize for the mistake with the room for tonight. I'm not sure how it happened."

"It's fine. We worked it out. Not a big deal."

The lobby noise grew in volume as everyone started coming down from their rooms.

The sudden intake of air behind us was a clear indication the manager recognized one of our friends. “Holy shit, that’s Alex Hayes.”

We both grinned but didn’t turn around.

“Who?” the desk attendant asked.

He tried to whisper to her but failed miserably. “He’s the quarterback for the Portland Pirates.”

Cooper and I laughed as we headed over to join our friends to wait for the others.

I couldn’t wait for Brock to get here to show him his room. When we started planning this week, Coop and I decided that we’d make a dedicated guest room for him in case he ever wanted to come down here without us. So I set it up for him, thanks to online shopping and some very helpful local carpenters.

“This place is incredible.”

Just like I thought, Brock loved everything about it, but I hadn’t shown him his room yet.

“There’s one more room Coop and I want to show you,” I said, then waved Cooper over. He’d been watching in the wings.

“I hope you like it, little brother. It’s for you.”

I opened the door and let Brock walk in ahead of us. He stood in the middle of the room and turned in circles, taking everything in.

“You did this for me?” The emotion in his voice was unmistakable.

“We did,” Cooper replied. “We wanted you to have a dedicated space for any time you wanted to come down. You can leave clothes here so you don’t have to pack them every time. We also had part of the closet made into a space for a fridge.”

I looked at him. “And we had a separate entrance put in for you. You can come and go as you please. And you have your

own private bathroom. That was already here when we bought the place.”

Brock turned and looked at me. “You didn’t have to do all this for me.”

“But I did. I asked you to hide who you were from the time you were fourteen. And the hell we all suffered thinking we were going to destroy them was the last straw. You knew more about yourself at that age than I did at twenty-three. I owe you this space and your freedom to explore.”

My brother crossed the room and threw himself into my arms. I felt the quiet sobs, but I hope they were tears of joy, not sadness.

“Thank you,” he whispered, then wiped his eyes. “You’re the best, big brother.”

I hugged him tighter. “And you’re the best friend I’ve ever had, little brother.”

Cooper stepped out and motioned for Ryan to come in. When he got a look at Brock, his concern was immediate. He went over to his boyfriend and cupped his cheek. “Babe, are you okay?”

Brock nodded, then wiped his eyes. “I’m great. Come look what Greg did.”

Cooper reached for my hand, and we left them to look around and tell Ryan all about it.

When we stopped in the hall, Coop pressed my back to the wall. I took him into my arms and kissed him. He broke our kiss before neither one of us would be able to face our friends.

“That was pretty amazing, babe. Great idea.”

Cooper shook his head. “You’re the one who made it happen. Not me.”

“Either way, it was the perfect thing. And you’re amazing.” I kissed him on the cheek this time. “Let’s go see what everyone is up to.”

I took his hand and led him outside. As far as I was concerned, we had a perfect life. We had love, we had friends, and we had family.

We had it all.

And it was more than I ever thought I'd have, and I'd never take it for granted.

## ***CHAPTER 39***

## **COOPER**

WEDNESDAY ARRIVED with much anticipation from everyone. Our plans were to meet at the dock where the yacht would be waiting at five p.m. We decided to wear what we'd worn the night we got married, and we left our friends to wear whatever they wanted. We knew Marcus would be dressed to the nines.

When everyone was present, we gathered on the dock. I was eager to see the yacht, but it was hidden from view from the position we were standing. We wanted it to be a surprise for everyone. Including us. We'd left it all in Barbara's capable hands.

Greg raised his hand to get everyone's attention, but it wasn't working.

A whistle pierced the air, causing everyone to get quiet.

"Sorry about that," Christian said. "But I work in crowd management, and that's the fastest way to get their attention. Right, Zach?"

"Yep," he nodded seriously, making everyone laugh. Christian was Zach's teacher the year he met Alex.

Greg took over now that we had everyone's attention. "Welcome to our vow renewal. Thank you for coming and sharing this night with us. It seems to be the thing to do in this group. Patrick, you'll learn all this the longer you hang around."

He smiled and nodded.



“The boat has been docked out of sight to be a surprise for everyone, including us. The couple that married us a year ago kindly set all this up for us so we could include you. So let’s go see what they came up with.”

My heart raced with excitement when Greg took my hand and led us to where the yacht was docked. When we rounded the corner, the most beautiful vision came into view.

I looked up at Greg. “Is this what you envisioned?”

He shook his head slowly, then a smile broke out across his face. “No. It’s better.”

They had decorated the small yacht with thousands of white lights. Both levels were easily distinguishable. As we walked closer, we could see the ramp that led to the boat lined with tealight candles that flickered in the waning light of the day.

When we stepped onto the boat, Barbara greeted us. “I hope this is what you meant.”

Greg leaned down and kissed her cheek. “It’s even better.”

She beamed as everyone boarded. They had tied enormous bouquets of white flowers and greenery around the rails of the yacht as far as you could see.

My mother gasped at the beauty before her. She grabbed my arm and pulled me down for a kiss on my cheek, making me smile. And, of course, she did the same to Greg, making him blush.

We led everyone to the upper deck where the ceremony would be held. The walls were lined with more flower arrangements as the fairy lights twinkled.

Greg stopped halfway down the aisle where Captain Bob stood.

“Good evening, everyone. Thank you for joining us for Greg and Cooper’s vow renewal. My wife and I were fortunate enough to marry this young couple one year ago tonight. Mr. and Mrs. Evans, please remain standing. Everyone else, you may find a seat and we’ll get started.”

When our friends were seated, Greg walked up to my mother and held out his arm for her to take. She looked up at him, and he bent down and kissed her cheek.

I walked to my father and held out my arm to him. He smiled at me with the love and warmth only a parent could feel for their child. And it made me hope there would be a day when Greg and Brock might have their parents in their lives. In all our lives.

We led them to their seats in the center of the aisle, then moved forward to where Bob stood smiling at us. When he took a seat, Barbara came forward with a boutonniere and one corsage.

Greg looked down at my parents sitting before us. “Melinda, Jason, you took Brock and me into your hearts and your family the minute we told you about us. I wanted these for you so I could say thank you for filling a huge void in our lives. It means more than you know.”

Barbara handed Greg the corsage made of four red roses. “Each of those roses symbolizes your sons: Jesse, Cooper, and now Brock and me.” He went to her and slipped it onto her wrist, then leaned down to kiss her cheek.

I stepped over and pinned the boutonniere to my father’s jacket. I hugged him and kissed his cheek.

“I didn’t think you’d like a flower arrangement pinned to your chest. So we settled on this.”

My dad laughed along with everyone else. “Yeah, this is good.”

I hugged him and stepped back beside Greg. That moment of levity helped me keep my composure.

I looked at Greg, and he nodded. He was ready for me to begin.

“This ceremony is going to be unique in a lot of ways. Kinda like us. When we arrived last week, we spent a lot of time talking about what we wanted. When we got married a year ago, it was perfect. We’d been living in secret for such a

long time that it kinda made sense to for us to get married alone.”

I took a deep breath to settle the growing emotion inside me. Greg squeezed my hand, and I nodded.

“But what we realized eight months later when you all came to our rescue, is that we wouldn’t be here without all of you. So one Saturday in the middle of the grocery store, Greg came up with the idea to renew our vows, but this time, including everyone we loved. That idea grew and became what you see tonight.”

Greg looked out at our friends and spoke from his heart. “When it came to deciding on our best men, there was no way to decide on one. How could we choose when we had the best friends a guy could ever ask for? So we decided on something different.”

Greg took my hand and looked at our friends. “So here’s where we stray from tradition. We couldn’t choose one, so we chose you all. When we call your name, please come up and stand beside us.”

Our friends stirred in their seats a bit and murmured to themselves. It was different, but it was our way of thanking them.

I went first. “Christian,” I said. I watched my friend rise from his seat and begin to walk toward me. That was my cue.

“This,” I said, waving my hand around at everything, including Greg, “is all your fault.” He and our friends laughed. It’s what they expected from me.

Christian nodded because he knew. He stopped when he got in front of me.

“We were roommates for six years, and we’ll be friends for life. If you hadn’t met Alex that summer on the beach, and hated football, I wouldn’t have met him, or all these people sitting here. So thank you for falling in love with your quarterback so I could meet my tight end.”

He laughed and reached out to hug me. “Love you, buddy,” he whispered, then stood beside me.

Greg cleared his throat and called the name of his first person. "Brock," he said.

His brother came forward and hugged him. They were both emotional. When he stepped back, Greg began. "You've been my best friend since you could talk. When I left for college, I was determined we'd talk every day on the phone. And we did. You've stood by me every minute, just like I'm going to do for you. I love you, baby brother."

"Love you." He took his place by Greg's side.

I smiled, then called the next one. "Callum"

When he stood and made his way to me, the smile on his face was priceless. "This is kinda like picking teams for kickball in elementary school." Everyone laughed. "But if this keeps up, we're gonna get our butts kicked by the pros."

That got another laugh out of everyone, and I was thankful for the humor. "I've known you since I was five, when you were Jesse's best friend, but you've been my best friend since moving to Portland. We've consoled one another and started something so incredibly important and beyond my imagination. You've had my back all along, and I can't thank you enough. I wish you and Dec nothing but happiness."

I hugged him and he stood beside Christian.

"Alex," Greg said, and waited for him to approach.

"You were my first friend when I was drafted by Portland. You took me under your wing and calmed my nerves. You encouraged me and stayed by my side that first year, and you haven't left. Thanks to you, I met Cooper, the love of my life. So thank you, my friend. I'm eternally grateful to you."

Alex hugged him and moved to his side.

I looked out at our friends and called the next name. "Parker."

He stood and walked up, surprise written all over his face. "I'm so proud of you, buddy. You never failed to brighten my day when I was down. You showed me that out of the most

horrible things in life, we can survive and continue to grow. You're one of my best friends, dude. And I love ya bunches."

I opened my arms, and he fell into them. "I love you too, Coop," he squeaked. Ava chose that moment to yell his name.

"PA! PA!" she called, and he waved. Simon handed her a toy to distract her.

"Marcus." He stood and came to stand in front of Greg.

"You may not know this, but you are the reason we got back together. You set me straight, no pun intended, and encouraged me to go after him on New Year's Eve. If I hadn't, we might not be here today. So thank you for always pushing me, all of us really. You saw a future for Cooper and me, even when I didn't know how we'd get there. Don't ever change."

They bro-hugged as I called my next name.

"Jackson."

The big man came and stood in front of me. "You've been my biggest supporter through everything. All your encouraging words, they've meant a lot. You and Simon didn't let anything stand in your way, and when I was falling apart and had given up on him, you made me see I was only happy with him. You saved my marriage, and without you, my life wouldn't be the same. Thank you for everything."

He wiped a tear away before pulling me in for a hug. "The kickball game is starting to even up. Sorta. Better get the kicker," he whispered for everyone to hear.

I looked at Dominick as he let his head fall back to stare at the ceiling, making everyone laugh.

"Declan," Greg called.

"You're the one who forced me to look at my life and what I wanted out of it. You called me out a couple times, and each time I wanted to tell you I was in love with him."

"We already knew it, Foster."

Laughter filled the room again, breaking the heavy moments.

“I know, but you also gave me the courage to try living the life I wanted desperately with him. And for that, I’ll forever be grateful.”

Declan took his place as I called my next one.

“Dominick,” I called. The shock on his face made me chuckle.

“You, my friend, have saved my ass more times than you know. Without you to take over at the stables, I wouldn’t have been able to come here last year. And I wouldn’t be married to him. You bring humor and deep friendship to our group. I know Jackson makes you crazy, but he’s got your back, no matter what. And so do I.”

I pulled him in for a hug.

“Aidan,” Greg called.

Emotion swelled in him. I could feel it. “You...” he stopped and took a breath before pushing on. “You helped me get my brother. You stuck by me and helped me see that my love for him was more important than anyone’s opinion or beliefs. And now you’re my agent. There’s no one I trust more with my professional future than you. Thank you.”

Aidan hugged him and took his place.

I looked out and found my brother looking down at his hands, feeling out of place. I hadn’t forgotten him, but we needed Simon first.

“We argued over you, Simon.”

He chuckled and stood with Ava. She wanted Parker, so he held her until Jackson needed to wrestle with her.

“You mean a lot to both of us. When you need advice, you go to Simon. You’re the voice of reason, the calm in the storm. There’s no lying to you because you see through all the B.S. You’re the one who holds us all together.”

Greg nodded. “And you pulled me from the game when I was being a dumbass by risking my health.”

“Welcome to the club,” Jackson muttered.

More laughter, just when we needed it.

“You gave me the courage to go after him, and you brought the whiskey. Thank you for saving me from myself.”

Simon hugged each of us, then took Ava back from Jackson. “We’ll sit here in the middle.”

Now it was time for my brother.

“Jesse, we argued over you as well.”

My brother stood and came forward. “I’ve always looked up to you, big brother. Even when you and Callum teased the fudge out of me when we were kids. I’ve missed you in my life and I’m so happy you’re going to be around more. I want what Greg has with Brock for you and me.”

He nodded and smiled.

Greg held out his hand to him. “When I needed help to get Brock, you came when you were called and didn’t hesitate to act on it. I’ll forever be grateful to you for that. I’d also like to get to know my brother-in-law better.”

Marcus chuckled and drew our attention to him. He elbowed Alex. “Foster has a BIL, too.”

Alex rolled his eyes and sighed. “We can’t take you anywhere.”

We all laughed at that one, and Greg and I turned to face one another. Captain Bob stood and smiled. We nodded, and he began the ceremony.

“Dearly beloved, which you all are to these men, we have come together to witness the recommitment of Cooper and Greg to each other. They’ve prepared their own vows.”

Greg held my hands and looked into my eyes. “Thank you for loving me when I didn’t. Thank you for pushing me out of my apartment and knowing me better than I knew myself. Thank you for not giving up on us, and for coming back to me at three a.m. I promise to stay by your side for the rest of my life. You’re my world, babe. I love you, always and forever.”

I drew in a deep breath, doing my best not to cry. I couldn't believe I was having this moment. For a second, I'd thought we were done. And now here we were in front of everyone in the world that mattered, and this man that I'd loved for what felt like forever was telling the world and our families he chose me. It was more than I could have ever dreamed.

“Thank you for loving me like I'm the most precious thing in your world. Thank you for coming along on bar hops and road trips, even though you'd rather stay home and read. And most of all, thank you for coming after me on New Year's Eve. Thank you for being relentless and the best husband in the world. I love you, baby, always will.”

We stood looking at each other, lost in the love we felt while surrounded by our family.

Bob spoke up. “It has been our pleasure to witness the loved shared by all of you. As someone looking in, it's obvious to see that you've created a bond closer than blood or DNA. You all are connected by the heart. So without any further ado, by the power vested in me, I pronounce you married again. You may kiss your husband.”

Greg leaned down and took my face like he did that night a year ago, but this time, our hearts were overflowing with love because the people who meant the world to us were here. And for them, I'd be forever grateful.

After the ceremony, we moved down to the lower level for our reception. They'd set a table for twenty-six people. The long table was decorated with flower arrangements and electric candles.

The wait staff served us dinner and champagne. We cut our wedding cake, and both Greg and I danced with my mother. It was important to us that Barbara and Bob be part of the celebration. Jack from Banger's served as our bartender and joined us for dinner as well. They were our Keys family.

At ten p.m., the boat docked back in the marina. We said goodnight to our friends but stayed behind to thank our new friends.



Greg pulled out several envelopes and looked at our new friends.

“Cooper and I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done for us. So we wanted to give you something.” He handed them out to Bob and Jack.

“Inside, you’ll find our thanks for your services tonight. Also, you’ll find an invitation. The Pirates are coming to Miami for a game this season. Tickets will be left for you at the Will Call ticket booth for all of you to attend. We’d love to treat you to a game and seats in a luxury box. Coop will fly down and host you as our guest.”

Needless to say, they were surprised. We’d make a point to stop in and see them or meet them for dinner whenever we came back. They’d quickly become our good friends and part of our extended family.

We hugged Barbara and shook hands with Bob and Jack.

“You’re family now,” Greg added. “If we can ever do anything for you, please don’t hesitate.”

Bob nodded. “Same for you. If you need us, we’re here.”

Jack put his hand on Greg’s shoulder. “You boys come by the bar one night, okay?”

He nodded. “You can count on it.”

\* \* \*

WHEN WE CRAWLED INTO BED A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, MY heart was so full.

“You know, when you retire from the NFL, maybe we should become wedding planners. We could get a boat, and you could be Captain America, and we could marry people like we were. Or we could open...”

Greg rolled over on top of me and shut me up with a kiss. He slipped his tongue into my mouth, and I was lost to him again.

I loved him with all my heart, and always will.

## ***EPILOGUE - GREG***

## ***THREE MONTHS LATER***

WHEN WE RETURNED from the Keys after our anniversary, I was ready to go back. Life was so different down there. Cooper felt the same way as I did, and we longed for the island that had become a second home to us.

We ended up making two more trips down there between March and June and planned to spend two weeks down there in July, provided no hurricanes were forming in the Atlantic.

Ryan had moved into Cooper's apartment the first week of April. I'd paid the rent for the year so he could concentrate on his studies. Even though Brock technically lived with us, he spent most of his time at Ryan's. When they started classes in the fall, I could see him moving in permanently. He hadn't decided on a major yet, but he would once he found something he loved.

We'd spent some time with Patrick and Cole after we returned. They were still in the closet after almost ten years together. I wasn't sure what they were waiting for. I hadn't formally come out and declared myself as one label or another. All I knew was that I was in love with Cooper and no other man or woman held a candle to him in my eyes.

That was enough for us. The rest was everyone else's problem.

Stephanie Taylor had offered to do an interview with us for the Sports Channel, and even though I knew we could trust her, I'd declined. We weren't looking for the spotlight. Right now, people accepted us as we were. If that changed, Aidan would arrange it.

We'd planned to go out today, but when the rain didn't let up, we stayed in bed all day. I'd taken Maggie out a couple of times to use the bathroom, but other than that, we stayed naked all day.

Most of the time, naked meant we were fucking or making love or something in between. And I wasn't complaining.

At all.

I had Cooper on his back and his cock in my mouth as I hovered over him on all fours. He teased my cock with a fleshlight sleeve as he sucked on the head. Sixty-nine had become one of my favorite numbers, and my hubs never failed to add some kind of twist to it that had me gasping. We had a growing collection of sex toys, and I loved every second we played with them.

Since I was the one who blew the fastest, Cooper had ordered a cock ring for me to help my endurance. I couldn't help it if his mouth felt like heaven around my dick. But I'd admit the ring kept me from blowing too quickly.

Just as I was about to cum, he doubled down and pressed a vibrating prostate massager into my hole.

I hummed as it lit me up. Mt. St. Helens had nothing on me when he'd edged me for so long. The taste of my cum had him exploding, too.

I let him fall from my mouth, then dropped to his side on our king-sized bed.

"I need a soda or Gatorade," I groaned.

"Yeah," he panted as his fingers traced the valleys in my abs. If I didn't get up, he'd be trying to get me hard again.

Heaving myself up off the bed, I flipped on the TV as Coop starfished in the middle of our bed, making me chuckle.

I padded off to the kitchen in my birthday suit in search of hydration. And a snack. Training camp was a little over a month away, so I had to be good.

I'd just fished out two blue Gatorade's and some grapes when I heard Coop calling my name.

"Greg! Come here!"

I hurried back to our room to find him sitting up on the bed with the remote in his hand. He'd paused whatever he was

watching.

“What’s wrong?”

He pointed at the TV. “Come here and sit down.”

I did as he asked and handed him a bottle before climbing on. He’d rewind the DVR to the report he’d been watching.

Cooper pushed play, and the blood drained from my face when I saw my father on the screen, with my mother standing behind him. Coop paused it.

“Are you okay?”

I bobbed my head, and he hit play.

The announcer read this story.

“Senator James Foster resigned from his Senate seat today. In a press conference, the Senator cited personal reasons for resigning, saying his heart was no longer in the political realm, and someone else would serve the state of Colorado much more efficiently than he could. When asked what the personal reasons entailed, the Senator commented he wanted to spend more time with his family in light of a recent health scare. The governor of Colorado will choose a candidate to fulfill the remaining year of his term in office.”

My heart pounded in my chest as my phone vibrated. Coop climbed over me to retrieve it when I didn’t move. He looked down at the screen.

“It’s Brock. He wants to know if you saw the announcement.”

He tried to hand it to me, but I shook my head. “Tell him yes, and I’ll call him back in a little while.”

Cooper texted my brother back and put my phone down.

“Are you okay, babe?” His concern was evident in his tone. “Should I call Simon?”

I shook my head no.

“It’s okay. I’m just shocked.”

Cooper nodded, then sat back down on the bed next to me. I didn't want to assume my father had finally seen the light, but I needed to know what was going on.

I picked up my phone and scrolled my contacts until I found the one I needed.

"Hey, it's me," I said. Jesse sounded out of breath.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"My father just resigned from the Senate. Think you can find out what's going on?"

"Sure. I'll check it out."

I nodded. "Thanks, Jesse. Let me know."

"I will," he said.

Before I ended the call, I heard Jesse talking to someone.

"Fuck, Dom, that mouth was made for my cock."

My eyes flew wide, and a smile broke across my face.

"Okay, you're acting weird as hell. First you're catatonic, then you call my brother to investigate your father. Now you're grinning like a loon. What the fuck is going on?"

I looked over at my husband and dropped a bomb.

"Jesse is fucking Dominick."

***SNEAK PEEK***

**Roughing The Kicker**

**This excerpt is unedited and subject to change**



## ***PROLOGUE - DOMINICK***

“Do you mind sharing a room with Jesse? It would only be for the night. They’ll have the other one tomorrow.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. *Think Dom, think.* Nothing was coming to mind. What was I supposed to say? No?

“Sure. Uh... no problem.”

“Are you sure?” Greg looked at me like he didn’t believe I was okay to spend the night with that hot fucker. But this week wasn’t about me. So I swallowed and just let the first thing I could think of fall out of my mouth.

“Yeah, it’s fine. I have sleep apnea and I snore. That’s all.”

Greg slumped, the look of relief on his face palpable. I knew I’d said the right thing. There was no way I’d burst his bubble. He and Cooper didn’t have to invite me, but they did. And I needed to be gracious.

“Oh okay. I’m sure it’ll be fine. Jesse was in the military, so I’m sure he’s used to snoring.”

I tried to control the squirming, but damn it, trying to tamp down my lust for the hot former Navy SEAL while spending a night together in the same room, for fuck’ sake, I was only human. Not that I said any of that. “Yeah, yeah, okay.”

Greg clapped me on the shoulder. “Thanks, man. We really appreciate it.” He said before walking away to talk to Marcus.

*I can do one night with Hottie McMuscle.*

Jesse Evans was the hottest man I’d ever seen. He had muscles for days. He was tall and everything about him was commanding.

Dropping my head back, I stared at the ceiling and prayed to Saint Rocco to protect me from myself tonight. I wanted to climb him like a tree and rub myself all over him while I was at it.

I bet he could make me cum just by looking at me with that piercing and smoldering *hold your ass still while I rim you* look he had.

And I would, too. I'd hold still and let him have his way with me. God, now I was hard.

*Fanculo la mia vita.* Fuck my life.

Running my hand through my short hair, I steeled my resolve to get through one night of close proximity to him. *All you have to do is get in bed and go the fuck to sleep.* I would wear myself out before going back to that room.

"You okay, man?" Ryan looked at me with raised brows.

I shook my head to snap out of it. "Yup. Yeah, I'm... fine."

He snorted, studying my face. "Uh, you don't look fine."

Hysterical laughter burst from me. I smiled and stuttered a bit. "It'll be fine... really." I rolled my shoulders to loosen up.

No one had ever seen me lose my shit, not even when I kicked the ball in front of a million screaming fans. And now was not the time to start. I had to get myself together.

I took a deep breath to calm myself and gave my new friend a smile. "I'll be fine."

Ryan nodded his head slowly, still assessing me.

"You guys ready to go check in?" Brock asked, also eyeing me a slight curl in his lips.

Ryan looked at him, then back to me, before finally asking Brock, "What's going on?"

Brock finally grinned. "The hotel messed up the reservations. We're one room short today. Greg and Cooper asked Jesse and Dom to share tonight."

It sounded so innocent coming out of his mouth. But it wasn't. It was filthy. And it had my heart racing and my dick pulsing just thinking about it.

Ryan looked at me, eyes wide. "Oh! Ah," he said. "Got a crush?"

*Something like that.* But I wasn't saying it out loud. He could be anywhere.

"Can we just go?" I skated my eye around looking for him. Not here yet.

"Sure. Let's go." Brock smiled like he knew something and took Ryan's hand. "I want to stop by a store and get some snacks and drinks for the room. Are you guys okay with that?"

I shrugged. "Sure. No problem."

As we made our way to pick up the rental car, I convinced myself I could do this. It was only one night. And he might not even remember me.

I wasn't sure if that made me feel better or worse.

After we checked in, we rode the elevator up to our floors. Ryan and Brock were on the tenth floor while I was on the twelfth.

Brock pulled out his phone when he got a text. "Greg says we're meeting downstairs in about forty minutes to go to their house."

I nodded. "Okay, sounds good. I'll meet you downstairs."

When they got off the elevator on their floor, I continued on to mine. The keycard in my hand felt like it was burning my skin. Of course it was just me and my lust boiling over.

I swiped into room 1224 and went inside. Closing the door behind me, I looked at the oceanfront view ahead of me.

My heart pounded in my chest as I walked around, before dropping my bag beside the wall.

This room only had one king-sized bed.

I rubbed my temples and tried to breathe. "Fuck me," I muttered to myself.

The bathroom door opened and out strode Jesse with damp blond hair and a towel hung low on his hips. I could see the imprint of his dick and the deep V that pointed like a road map at me. Fuck my whole life with a cactus.

“I plan to. Many times,” he said. “Just like in Milan.”

Jesse pulled me to him and crashed his mouth down on mine. My arms went around his neck as he pressed me against the sliding glass door. When he pulled back from the kiss, he smiled at me.

“I didn’t think you’d ever get here.”

My lips hovered close to his. “Did you cancel the other room?”

He grinned as he ran his stubbled jaw along mine and down to place filthy kisses along my jaw.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Sure he didn’t.

I grinned back. “Bullshit.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Baby, when I saw you kick that field goal, I knew I had to get myself to Portland. I wasn’t sure you’d remember me.”

Heat bloomed in my body as he pulled my shirt over my head and ran his hands down the back of my jeans.

I reached down and untucked the towel. Jesse’s thick cock was hot in my hand, and he moaned as I gave it a squeeze. I pushed him backward and onto the bed.

I stared at his naked body with his arms tucked under his head and his dick bouncing. He was leaving pre-cum all over himself, calling for me to take care of it. I stripped out of my clothes and crawled onto the bed to him.

I took hold of his cock and the pre-cum flowing down the side. Lowering my mouth to it, I took Jesse all the way to the back of my throat, making him moan the sexiest sound I’d ever heard.

And as I sucked him dry, all the memories of our hookup in Madrid two years ago came flooding back to me.

**[Click Here To Pre-Order Roughing The Kicker Today.](#)**

## ***A LETTER FROM RHELAND & EMERSON***

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Ineligible Receiver*. We love creating this wondrous world of *The Package Deal Series*, and we hope you enjoyed Cooper and Greg's story as much as we did. The opportunity to tell their story was like a family reunion with our men from Portland.

We would love it if you would take a few minutes to review *Ineligible Receiver* on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#), or [Bookbub](#).

Reader reviews really do make a difference, and we appreciate every single one of them.

We've been friends for over two years. After Emerson helped Rheland bring her guys to life in their stories by editing and beta reading. Many conversations revealed we had so much in common that one thing led to another, and a book series collaboration was born.

A special shout out and a big THANK YOU to our beta reader, proofreader, and Bookstagrammer, Jennifer Green (jenn\_reads\_books). Jenn has been with us through the entire story, and her input was invaluable. She's the best! You can find her on TikTok and Facebook as well.

Book 6 is our last planned story in this series. So be sure to Pre-Order *Roughing the Kicker*. This is the fast fucker's story! We fell in love with Dominick in *Unnecessary Roughness*, and now Jackson is determined to make him one of the Pirates! Dominick and Jesse have sparks flying all over

our computers right now, so make sure to pre-order their book. If you haven't read the series yet, visit *The Package Deal Series* page here on Amazon.

We are so excited to bring you their story. Grab *Roughing the Kicker* here.

If this is your first book by Rheland and you'd like to read more, we suggest you start with [Stranded With His Boss](#), book one in the Amber Falls series.

Emerson is planning her first solo release in the summer/fall of 2023, so follow her on Amazon for all the updates on new releases. See the link below.

There are plenty more stories to tell, so stay tuned!!!

Want more goodies?

Be sure to follow [Rheland](#) and [Emerson](#) on Amazon to be notified of new releases.

Feel free to sign up for our individual newsletters to get extra bonus scenes, insider information, and special sneak peeks. Just stop by <http://www.rhelanrichmond.com/> and [www.EmersonBeckett.com](http://www.EmersonBeckett.com).

For **Facebook**, visit [Richmond's Riders](#) and [Beckett's Book Brigade](#) to stay in touch.

On **TikTok**, follow us at [rhelandrichmondmmauthor](#) and [mmauthoremersonbeckett](#)

And on **Instagram**, follow us at [rhelandrichmondmm](#) and [mm.author.emerson.beckett](#)

Check out the [Pinterest Board](#) for *Ineligible Receiver* to see our inspirational photos (the hot guys) for this book.

Happy reading!

Rheland & Emerson

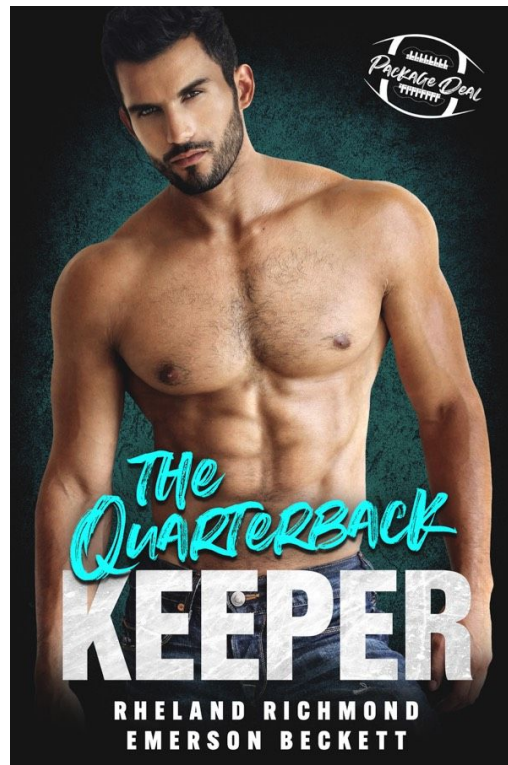
**UPCOMING IN THE PACKAGE DEAL  
SERIES**



Want to know the Fast Fuckers Story? Pre-Order Roughing The Kicker Today

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## **PREVIOUSLY IN THE PACKAGE DEAL SERIES**



### **Alex**

I'm the starting quarterback for the Portland Pirates, and I have a thing for my son's teacher. Except I didn't know the cute blond on the beach with the giant dog was, in fact, my kid's teacher until two months later at Open House.

Christian took my breath away during the second week of my two-week vacation at the beach and introduced me to things I never knew could feel so good and be so right. I think he just might be the one who inspires me to tell the world that this NFL quarterback is bisexual and in love with a man.

That is until I blew the best thing to happen to me since my kids were born. All I know is I have to get him back. I had to find a way to keep him.

### **Christian**

I never imagined I would meet the love of my life while being bowled over on the beach by the overeager Newfoundland I was dog-sitting. But that's exactly how I ended up on my back in the sand, wrapped in his arms and pressed into the sand by the six-foot-five dark-haired Adonis on the beach. Did I mention he had two beautiful children?

Our week together was worthy of a sexy modern-day fairytale full of promises about the future until he sent me the text that broke my heart. And how was I supposed to get over him when his adorable six-year-old son was in my class?

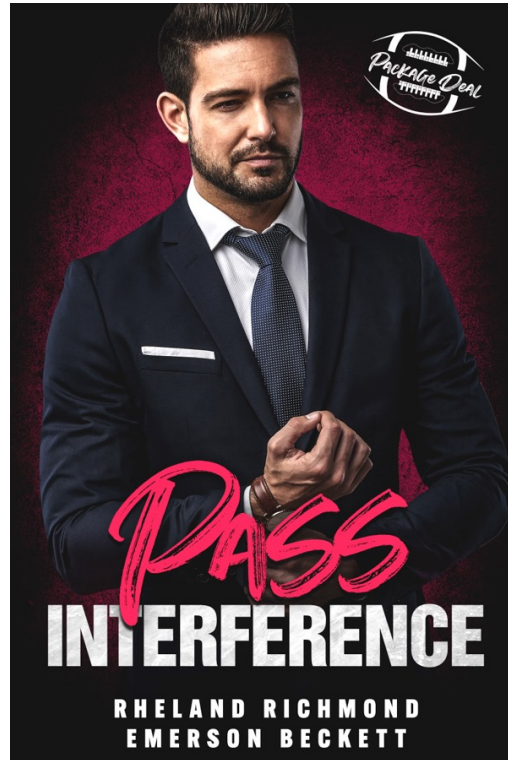
Find out how Alex and Christian ache to overcome some daunting complications to reunite in *The Quarterback Keeper*, Book One of *The Package Deal Series*.



**Tags: First Time Gay; Single Dad; Bisexual Experience; Sports Romance;  
Football Player and the Teacher**

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\* \* \*



**Aidan:**

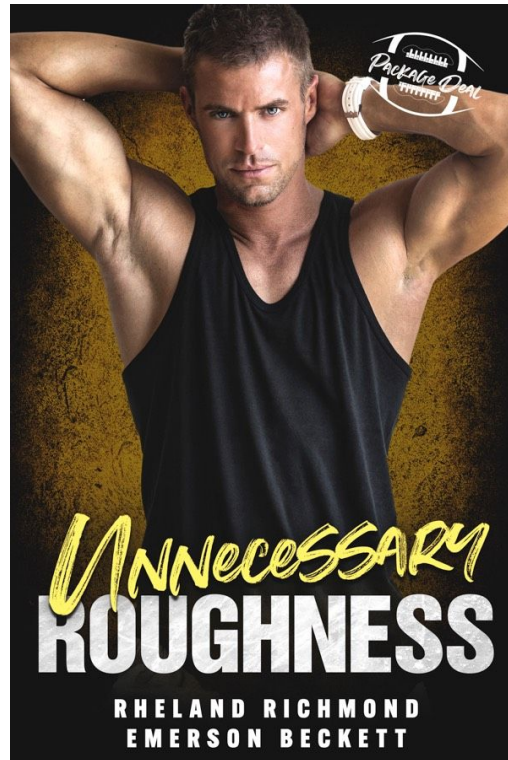
Ten years. It's been ten years since Marcus Monroe walked out of my life. Now he's back as my brother's #1 wide receiver. And he wants me back. We'll see about that.

**Marcus:**

Ten Years. It's been ten years since I made the biggest mistake of my life. I let him go, and I regret it every single day. I've been traded to the Portland Pirates, and his brother is my new quarterback. I'll stop at nothing to get him back. This time, there will be no interference.

[Click Here To Read Pass Interference Today.](#)

\* \* \*



**“I’m sorry, Mr. Kincaid, but Allison Finley was killed in a motor vehicle accident this afternoon. You are listed as the next of kin, and the minor Parker Finley has been left in your custody. How soon can you get here?”**

**Jackson Kincaid**

When my best friend Allison was killed in a car accident, I suddenly become the only parent to my ten-year-old godson. How would I play football for the Portland Pirates and be a full-time single dad?

Adjusting is the name of the game. And thanks to my friends, and the hardass team doctor I can’t stop thinking about, we’ll heal and make it through. Did I mention he’s my new best friend, and I can’t stop having dirty thoughts about him naked?

And keeping my feelings a secret isn’t easy or the only obstacle I’ll face.

**Simon Taylor**

As my new friends liked to say, I’m the hardass team doctor who lets nothing get by me. But somehow Jackson did.

While helping him adjust to his new reality after losing his friend, I wasn’t prepared for my feelings for him to surface. Especially when I didn’t know I had them. But Jackson and his godson stole my heart, and aren’t letting go.

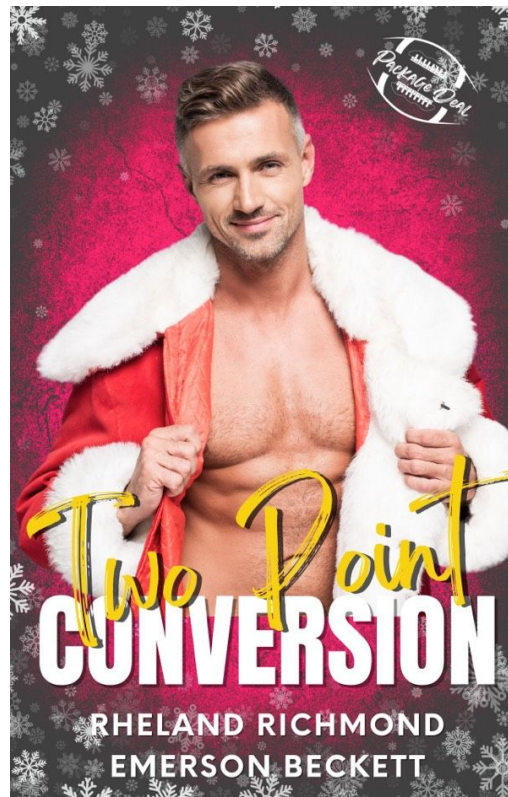
It doesn’t matter that they might consider our relationship forbidden, or that he’s fifteen years younger than me. I want things with him I’ve never wanted with anyone else. And never with a man.

Jackson and I deserve to be together, no matter how rough things get. Some things are just necessary.

***Unnecessary Roughness is a smokin’ hot friends-to-lovers and age-gap story, and the third book of the Package Deal Series.***

***[Click Here To Read Unnecessary Roughness Today.](#)***

\* \* \*



Deciding to spend the holidays in the tiny Colorado ski town of Amber Falls brings some Christmas magic to the lives of the Portland Pirates linebacker Jackson Kincaid and his former team doctor husband, Simon Taylor.

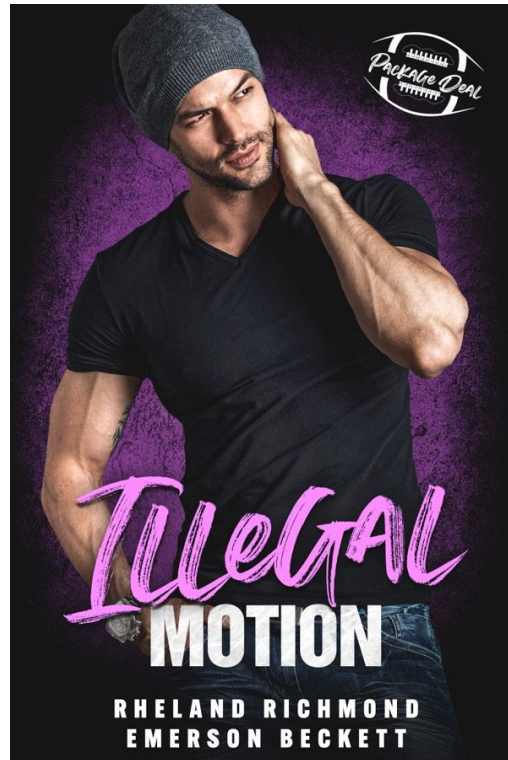
Family time, reconnecting with old friends, and some sexy nights by the fire with the husband is all a man could ask for, right? How could life get any better than what they have now with their son Parker?

But through a fortunate turn of events, the Kincaids just might get their Christmas wish.

*Two Point Conversion* is an *Unnecessary Roughness* holiday novella from *The Package Deal Series* and a crossover with the *Amber Falls Series* by Rheland Richmond.

[Click Here To Read Two Point Conversion Today](#)

\* \* \*



### **Callum Kennedy**

I should have known behind that deep sexy southern drawl, and beautiful face lived the world's biggest asshole.

I've tried my damndest to put him behind me. But it was hard to do when I saw his face every night in my dreams and couldn't forget how he worked my body over.

It was okay. I had my work as a vet, my equine rescue to manage, and my friends. I'd forget him or work myself to death trying.

Except there's one problem.

Turns out he's the new free-agent running back who just signed a one-year deal with the Portland Pirates. The infamous Declan Miller has turned my world upside down and reinserted his unforgettable self back into my life for the next year.

Declan is the last person I want help from, but it looks like I don't have a choice.

### **Declan Miller**

When I walked into Alejandro's Bar that night in late July, I never expected to meet someone my first night in town.

But the sexy guy with wavy dark blond hair and hazel-green eyes sitting alone at the bar caught my attention immediately. Or maybe it was the way he was sniffing his own shirt.

After a night of the best sex of my life, I knew I had to push him away. I wasn't doing relationships anymore, and this gorgeous, funny man had the power to break me.

But when I find out my unforgettable hookup is part of my new friend group, Dr. Callum Kennedy wants nothing to do with me until he has no choice but to let me help.

***Illegal Motion* is an MM sports romance and the fourth book in the Package Deal Series about the hot single dads of the Portland Pirates football team.**

**Tropes: enemies to lovers, close proximity, found family, one-night stand to forever, sports romance.**

**[Click Here To Read \*Illegal Motion\* Today.](#)**

## ***ALSO BY RHELAND RICHMOND***

### **Stories Of Us**

[A Family For Keeps](#)

[His Instant Family](#)

[Christmas For Keeps - A Stories Of Us Christmas](#)

[The Family We Make: A Valentine's Novella](#)

[A Family Of His Own](#)

### **Amber Falls**

[Stranded With His Boss](#)

[Forever With His Boss](#)

[Holding On To His Manny](#)

Sparks With The Fireman

Buttering Up The Baker

Unraveling His Soldier

Falling For His Neighbor

Claiming His Best Friend

### **Strictly Off Limits (With Skyler Snow)**

[Forbidden](#)

[Fragile](#)

### **Naughty Or Nice**

[Dear Daddy, Please Trust Me](#)

### **Naughty or Nice Season Two**

[His Boy To Heal](#)

### **Standalone**

[The Hardest Fall](#)

### **The Package Deal (With Emerson Beckett)**

[The Quarterback Keeper](#)

[Pass Interference](#)

[Unnecessary Roughness](#)

[Two Point Conversion \(MM Holiday Novella\)](#)

[Illegal Motion](#)

[Ineligible Receiver](#)

[Roughing The Kicker](#)

## ***ABOUT RHELAND RICHMOND***

For as long as she can remember Rheland's had her nose stuck in a book, getting lost in the world of someone else's creation (She still does). Her love for writing came from her love for reading. She could never have one without the other.

Writing has always been a hobby and a cathartic experience for her. There are many stories lost to the never to be completed or published pile but needed to be written at the time.

She's just a girl that loved stories so much she decided to write hers.

Rheland would love to hear from her readers and learn more about Y'all. So if you get a chance... Get in touch.

[www.rhelanrichmond.com/contact](http://www.rhelanrichmond.com/contact)

Would you like to get updates about future releases from Rheland Richmond?

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## ***ALSO BY EMERSON BECKETT***

**The Package Deal (With Rheland Richmond)**

[The Quarterback Keeper](#)

[Pass Interference](#)

[Unnecessary Roughness](#)

[Two - Point Conversion \(MM Holiday Novella\)](#)

[Illegal Motion](#)

[Ineligible Receiver](#)

[Roughing The Kicker](#)



## ***ABOUT EMERSON BECKETT.***

Emerson Beckett is new to the publishing world. As an avid sports fan and lover of well-written M/M romance books, Emerson loves her new career as an author of gay romance. It's even more fulfilling for her when she can combine the two.

The journey to becoming an author started with an idea while reading on the sofa. That idea became an email that ultimately resulted in Emerson using those teacher skills to edit novels for three phenomenal MM romance authors. The third referral led to an opportunity to co-write a book series with one of the most genuine and kindest people she's ever had the pleasure of knowing- Rheland Richmond.

Emerson is the co-author of *The Package Deal Series*, which includes *The Quarterback Keeper*, *Pass Interference*, *Unnecessary Roughness*, *Two-Point Conversion*, and three more upcoming books in the series. She will release her first solo novel in late spring 2023.

Besides being a retired teacher and author, Emerson lives in North Carolina and has been married to the same man for 32 years. She is the mother of three beautiful adults, one of whom is proudly part of the LGBTQ Community and completely responsible for her addiction to MM Romance. Even though the kids no longer live at home, they filled the empty nest with an Australian Shepherd, three cats, and a cute bunny rabbit.

Emerson would love to hear from her readers. So if you get a chance... Get in touch.

<https://www.emersonbeckett.com/contact>

Would you like to get updates about future releases from Emerson Beckett?

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