

*a popstar x football player romance*

# LOVE'S A GAME



KAIDEN HOWELL

# Love's A Game

Kaiden Howell

Love's A Game © Copyright 2023 Kaiden Howell

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher/author.

Love's a Game is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, businesses, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design: Kaiden Howell

Interior & Formatting: Kaiden Howell

# Contents

1. Chapter One
2. Chapter Two
3. Chapter Three
4. Chapter Four
5. Chapter Five
6. Chapter Six
7. Chapter Seven
8. Chapter Eight
9. Chapter Nine
10. Chapter Ten
11. Four Months Later
12. Author Note

# Chapter One

## *Kenzie*

“**K**EN-ZIE! KEN-ZIE!”

The chant exploded through the sold-out stadium, making my painted red lips curl into a smile. Ending a concert was always the hardest part of touring. I hated walking away from fans who were still screaming at the tops of their lungs, begging for more.

Despite the two encore songs I'd already performed, my heart wanted to give it to them.

My fucking schedule said otherwise.

If I was going to wake up at the ass crack of dawn and hop on a plane to Seattle, I had to get moving. There was still the after party to swing by before heading to my hotel room for the night, and my feet were killing me from stomping around the stage in five-inch boots. I couldn't wait to change into flats backstage.

“Thank you, my loves, for everything,” I said into the microphone, my voice echoing out over the cheers. “For your

kindness, support, and love. Until next time, Los Angeles!”

Behind me, a cannon exploded, launching sparkling confetti into the air over the stage, and even though I knew it was coming, I still flinched. The crowd erupted again, louder than before, as the confetti drifted out over them, and I waved a final time before turning and heading offstage.

The second I was backstage and out of sight from the hundreds of cameras recording inside the arena, relief washed over me. My chest was lighter, and the tension between my shoulders relaxed. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths, reveling in the moment.

Another concert in the books.

No mishaps, no slip ups, no technical difficulties.

No strained vocals, no sound issues, no injuries.

All in all, it had been a nearly flawless performance, and I couldn't be happier.

A hand on my shoulder snapped me out of my reverie, and I glanced over to find my guitarist with a smile on his face, still holding his hot pink electric guitar. “You killed it out there. Fantastic job, as always.”

The compliment put a smile on my face. “Thanks, Trace. You were incredible too. Flawless solo.”

He chuckled, patting me affectionately on the shoulder. “Can't wait to rock out with you in Seattle.”

“Me either,” I said, even though Washington still felt years away. There was so much shit to do before then, I could hardly focus on the next concert. Besides, I was still reeling from this one; I needed at least a few hours to unwind. “Where is Paige?”

“Here, Ms. Tyler,” a voice piped, and I turned to see my assistant hurrying over with a bag hanging from her shoulder, my favorite pair of silver flats in her hand. “Sorry, I forgot my badge and got held up by security.”

*Poor Paige.* She was the sweetest assistant I’d ever had, and she worked harder than anyone I knew, but she was a terribly forgetful thing. She would have forgotten her head if it wasn’t attached to her shoulders.

I sighed, already bending to unzip my boots, and Paige squatted to help me out of them. She folded the boots over one of her arms after I kicked them off, and I slid on the flats.

*Much better.*

“Can I get you anything else, Ms. Tyler? I brought you some water, pain killers, and your phone...”

“Just my phone, thanks,” I said. I’d worry about the rest later.

Right now, I needed to check all my missed messages and post a post-concert selfie, as was tradition. I’d been doing it for so many years now that it was muscle memory at this point.

I snapped a quick picture of me in my glittery silver vest, ignoring the glistening beads of sweat on my forehead and my mussed blonde hair. I threw up a peace sign for good measure and posted the picture before Paige could offer to take it for me.

Then, it was time to get ready for the after party.

After parties weren't typically my scene, at least they hadn't been for several years, but it wasn't often that I traveled to Los Angeles. There were several people I wanted to see while I was in town, especially my friend, Selene, who was throwing the party. We'd sung a few duets together in the past, but she preferred interviewing people on the red carpet to being behind the microphone.

Selene had connections everywhere, all over the country, and even though she promised it would be a small, quaint party, I didn't believe her. Nothing Selene ever did was half-assed.

As my driver, Tom, pulled into the gated community and rounded the corner to her modest mansion, my gaze fell on dozens of cars parked in the pull-thru driveway. I could see bodies shifting through the curtains of the first floor windows, too many to count, and I groaned.

*Small my ass.* This was probably the biggest party we'd had at her place.

Unfortunately for me, I'd already let her know I was on my way, so there was no backing out. I'd have to summon the patience I had left to be around people a little while longer, before I headed back to my hotel to crash for the night.



“Should I be back at midnight?” Tom asked, meeting my eyes in the rear-view mirror as he put the car in park. After several bad experiences, he was the only person I trusted to drive me around. He was ex-military, so he doubled as a bodyguard when there weren’t any others around.

My eyes bounced between his and the front of the mansion, debating on how few hours of sleep I wanted. It was an early flight, but I could sleep on the plane. I’d also have a few hours to nap before sound check tomorrow night.

“Better make it one o’clock,” I said thoughtfully. I might have been hesitant sitting in the driveway, but I knew once Selene and I started talking, I wouldn’t want to cut it short.

“Alright, Ms. Tyler.” He nodded in the mirror. “One it is.”

I smiled at him before stepping out of the car, turning to look up at the mansion. One more brief performance, pretending I wasn’t bone tired and ready for bed, and I’d be home free. Well, hotel free, then I could actually get some rest.

Forcing a smile across my face, I headed up the paved driveway toward the front door and jammed my thumb into the doorbell.

## Chapter Two

### *Kenzie*

I'd traded my concert outfit for a short blue dress flecked with rhinestones and a black waistcoat, but I still wore my silver flats. Nothing in the world could have forced me to wear heels again, so I felt oddly short standing on the front stoop, waiting for the door to open.

A burly security guard I'd seen several times before pulled the door open a moment later. He had short, cropped hair and wore a gray polo with black pants. Casual enough to blend in with the crowd, terrifying enough to keep everyone in line. I'd seen him break up a fight once and throw two guys out this same front door simultaneously, but when he wasn't cracking heads together, he was a teddy bear.

"Hey, Julian." I smiled at him and could have sworn I saw the faintest hint of a smirk on his face.

"Welcome, Miss Tyler. Miss Rivera is in the den." He stepped back to let me in. "Can I take your coat?"

I thought about keeping it on, but inside the house was warm enough that I'd start sweating soon if I didn't take it off.

"Sure, thank you." I shrugged it off and handed it to him.

With a nod, I made my way through the mansion like I'd done several times before; I knew the layout of the place almost as well as I knew my own.

People littered the hallways and filled the rooms. Several shot me welcoming smiles and a few waved, which I returned in my haste. Most of them I recognized as the elite of Los Angeles. Pretty faces, tanned skin, designer clothes to let everyone know they were dripping in money. There were a few faces I'd never seen before, but I assumed they were up-and-coming influencers or hookups for the attending celebrities.

There was music playing through the mansion's intercom system, just loud enough to hear amongst the conversations floating by. Nearly everyone had a drink or plate in hand, so I assumed there were snacks in the kitchen, but I'd eaten on the way over. Besides, if I drank tonight, there would be no getting up before the sun rose in the morning.

As Julian had said, I found Selene in the den, surrounded by a tight cluster of our mutual friends. They were laughing at something, but I couldn't tell if the laughter was real or forced, and when her eyes landed on me across the room she squealed.

"Kenzie!"

She barreled toward me, her dark hair flying along behind her, disturbing the otherwise peaceful ambience of the room, and threw her arms around me with a giggle. “I’m so glad you made it. I wasn’t sure, since the concert ran long.”

“I wouldn’t miss seeing you for the world,” I told her, squeezing her tightly before she stepped away. “I probably can’t stay long because I have an early flight, but I wasn’t going to leave without saying hey.”

“You really are the best,” she said, her eyes softening with appreciation.

I waved a hand dismissively. “No, that’s just what friends do.”

Selene dragged me back to our group of friends and I exchanged pleasantries with everyone. Rick, a country singer, gave me a one-armed hug, and Tanya, a Victoria’s Secret model, gushed about tonight’s concert.

“You were perfection, as always.” She smiled, flipping her red hair over her shoulder. She was in a skin-tight white dress and cherry red heels. “We watched it live while we were getting ready.”

I never streamed my concerts live, which meant a fan had probably shared it somewhere on social media. Normally, that wouldn’t bother me—my fans streamed the concert all the time—but in the three years we’d been friends, Tanya hadn’t been to a single live concert. I’d at least shown up to a few of her fashion shows for support.

It's not even like I expected them to shell out the ticket money—even though none of them had a problem affording it. I reserved a few seats every concert for my friends who wanted to go.

Now that I thought about it, Selene was the only one of my friends from Los Angeles who had ever gone to one of my concerts. If anyone else had, they hadn't mentioned it.

The realization left a bad taste in my mouth.

“Thanks.” I forced a smile, hoping it was convincing. “It was a good one.”

Joseph, a late-night talk show host, jumped in to bring up a new segment they were introducing, and Karina, another pop singer who focused more on playing the music than singing, inched her way closer to him, batting her impossibly long eyelashes. Either she was planning on going home with him after the party, or she wanted a spot on their new show segment.

Probably both.

I nodded and half-listened, my mind spiraling as the conversation went on, thinking about everything I needed to do before flying out tomorrow. Exhaustion was slowly settling on my shoulders, seeping into my sore muscles, but I tried to fight the tiredness.

After several minutes, an arm slipped through mine, someone dragging me back across the room. I looked over to see Selene with an amused look on her face.

“What the hell are we doing?” I asked, craning my head to look at our group of friends. They were still deep in conversation, hardly noticing our absence.

“Your eyes were starting to glaze over,” she said. “You can fake interest with them, but I can tell when you’re bored out of your mind.”

I breathed a small sigh of relief. Thank fuck for Selene. Now that I was moving, I’d regained a little bit of energy.

“Thanks,” I muttered, feeling guilty for my disinterest in our friends’ convo.

“No need to thank me, girl.” She laughed. “This is your party. We don’t need you being bored at it.”

*My party.* Sure, it was a party happening after my concert, but it didn’t feel like *my* party. Half these people had probably never listened to my music, or pretended to like it for the sake of appearances. For them, it was just a chance to brush elbows with one another and get some juicy shots for social media.

At least Selene had good intentions.

We stopped in the kitchen where a small group of people were gathered and Selene handed me a bottle of raspberry lemonade from the fridge.

“Unless you want something stronger,” she said, gesturing to the drink in my hand.

I shook my head. “No, no, this is perfect. You know me better than anyone else.”

Her eyes lit up at that, but I wasn't sure why. I knew it. She knew it. As far as friends went, Selene was the best I could ask for.

“I do, don't I?” she asked, a cocky smile curling her lips before her voice dropped to a whisper. “Then, as your best friend, I'm obligated to tell you there's a tall, dark, and handsome someone in the dining room who can't take his eyes off you.”

Normally, I wouldn't care about guys checking me out. I'd taken myself off the market permanently after my last relationship ended in horrible heartbreak, but something in the way Selene's eyes sparkled made my stomach flutter. I turned a little, trying to keep myself from being too obvious, and looked through the doorway into the dining room where another cluster of people were chatting and swaying to the music.

My eyes settled on him immediately. He was, in fact, tall, dark, and handsome, his presence somehow taking up the entire room. He had brown hair, crystal-blue eyes, a stubble-covered chin, and muscles that threatened to rip apart the navy T-shirt he wore.

He was standing with another guy—shorter and broader with dark skin and braids—flashing perfectly white teeth as he smiled, and a few seconds later, his eyes flicked in my direction, locking with mine. It was a fraction of a second, a pinprick of time, that sent electricity shooting through every part of my body, and I tore my eyes away immediately.

“Who is that?” I whispered, looking back at Selene who was waving in the direction I’d just turned from. I glared at her. “What are you doing?”

“His name is Nic,” she answered without missing a beat. “He’s an NFL football player. Hot, isn’t he?”

“He’s alright.” I shrugged one shoulder, trying to appear indifferent.

He was attractive—there was no denying that—but he wasn’t my type at all. I tended to go for broody, self-centered assholes with lots of tattoos and little to no fashion sense. Nic was nothing like that at all. Plus, athletes didn’t frequent these kinds of parties. He was probably someone else’s intended catch for the night, maybe one of the Los Angeles socialites or influencers.

Besides, I didn’t have time to talk to anyone. I was only here to see Selene, then I had to head back to my hotel.

I sighed, realizing I was spiraling.

“He can stare all he wants,” I finally said with another shrug. “I don’t have time for a man in any capacity.”

She chuckled and gestured behind me. “Well, I guess you can tell him yourself, because he’s coming over here.”



## Chapter Three

### *Kenzie*

*S*<sup>hit.</sup> I hardly had time to prepare myself before a massive figure appeared in the corner of my eye. I turned my head slowly and found myself staring squarely at a broad chest, and my eyes climbed up to see his crystal-blue ones staring down at me. I wasn't sure why, but his towering form, coupled with his sudden appearance, had warmth swimming through my veins and pooling in my belly.

I swallowed hard. "Hi."

"Kenzie, this is Nic Bennett," Selene said, like she hadn't just told me his name seconds ago. "Nic, this is my best friend, Kenzie Tyler."

One corner of his mouth quirked up in a smile, turning my knees to water, but I immediately scolded myself. This was not the place for a meet cute.

"Oh, I know exactly who you are," he said, the deep timbre of his voice vibrating through me, causing goosebumps to race

up my arms. “My sister has every word of Calico memorized. She’s a huge fan.”

“The whole album?” I asked, nerves melting away instantly. This massive football player might have put me on edge, but fans always managed to soothe my soul.

He nodded. “She has them all, but that one’s her favorite. She’d probably flip if she knew I got to meet you.”

A genuine smile crossed my face, and a wave of relief washed over me. Maybe he wasn’t making a pass after all. He probably wanted an autograph for his sister or something, which wasn’t too crazy of a request. It happened to me often enough that I wasn’t fazed by it anymore.

“Oh, how sweet. Did you want me to sign something for her?” I asked, knowing I’d left my purse in the car. Maybe Selene had a marker somewhere.

To my surprise, his expression softened, his ears turning red. Suddenly, the flutters were back in full force, and I knew without a response that this had nothing to do with his sister.

“I actually just wanted to meet you in person,” he admitted, running a hand through his brown hair.

Selene stifled a laugh and I wanted to strangle her for being an accomplice to whatever this was. I hoped she’d sweep me away again, the way she’d saved me from our friends earlier, but to my horror, her phone went off at that exact moment.

“Oh no,” she said, exaggerating the vowels. “Looks like I’ve got a call. I’ll be back to check on you two in a minute.”

I opened my mouth to object as she dragged her phone out from between her boobs and put it to her ear, turning and heading out of the kitchen. My heart pounded hard as I looked back at Nic, who was standing there patiently.

For a horribly awkward moment, time stood still, but as much as I wanted to look away from him, I couldn't.

“So,” I said, nervously plucking at one of the rhinestones on my dress. “Is meeting me everything you thought it would be?”

He laughed, the melodic noise rolling through me, making my skin prickle with something foreign. Embarrassment? Hives? I had no idea.

“I didn't think it would be here, that's for sure,” he said. “You're way prettier in person, though.”

Heat scorched my cheeks, and for a moment I was speechless. Even after a decade in the spotlight, I still wasn't used to compliments, but I was even less used to men being so charming and straightforward.

“Thank you,” I finally forced out, my eyes darting around to the people lingering nearby. Had any of them heard Nic's words? Were they eavesdropping on our conversation right now?

Something about their closeness made me uneasy, and I suddenly wanted to hide. I wanted to make sure none of them could hear the rest of our conversation, regardless of which

direction it headed. Not to mention the temperature in the room had somehow jacked up ten degrees and I was sweating.

“It’s kind of crowded in here,” I said, looking back at him. “Do you want to go outside for a bit? They have a nice deck.”

“Sure. I can appreciate a nice, big deck.”

I fought the urge to laugh, but the corners of my mouth still managed to curl upward.

*Damn it.* He was kind of funny.

A part of me wanted to take back the offer. I didn’t have time for this. I needed to track down Selene, yell at her for leaving me alone with the hunk, and call Tom to pick me up. I needed sleep.

Another part was eager to get outside. There were too many people in the house, no room for privacy. Literally anyone could overhear us, and even if it was just friendly conversation, being away from them to figure out what I was even feeling was a good thing.

And a third, tiny, insane part of me wanted to drag him off to a dark corner and run my hands over every inch of his muscular frame. I wanted him to pin me to a wall, kiss me until I was breathless, and leave me begging for more...

Yep, I was definitely fucking tired.

I let out a tiny sigh, hoping I didn’t regret this in a few minutes.

“This way,” I said, my eyes darting to the wide glass-paned doors across from us. They led to a gorgeous deck with a projector screen, tiki bar, and several pieces of patio furniture for lounging. There was also an enormous in-ground pool we indulged in during warmer weather—we were a few months late for that—and a jacuzzi.

To my surprise and relief, there was no one outside, but there was a slight bite to the air that had the hair on my arms standing up. Now, I wished I hadn’t given my jacket to Julian.

I knew this whole thing was crazy and super awkward. It had been so long since I’d talked to a guy, I wasn’t even sure what to talk about. My music? His sister? Football? The latter would be a dull conversation, because I’d never been into sports.

My eyes settled on an outdoor couch, and I made a beeline for the far end, taking a seat as he followed suit, leaving plenty of room between us. The soft thrum of the music inside could still be heard out here, but it was mostly quiet. The dark sky stretched out overhead, pinpricks of white light flecked across it with a crescent moon stuck directly in the middle.

It was familiar in that I’d been here, in this exact spot, dozens of times, but it also felt strangely new considering who I was with.

“So, I’m here.” I said nervously, crossing my legs and carefully curling them up on the seat beside me. “What are your other two wishes?”

I knew it was a lame line, but when I was nervous I normally reverted to my dorky sense of humor. At least I normally thought I was funny. I tucked a strand of blonde hair behind my ear and avoided eye contact, looking everywhere but at Nic. He, on the other hand, couldn't keep his eyes off me, which only had my skin heating more.

“Three wishes, huh?” he asked with a chuckle. I looked over to see him rubbing the stubble on his chin in thought, and I couldn't help but wonder if it would tickle when he kissed me. When it trailed to other parts of my body... “I wouldn't mind a pizza. Extra pepperoni with pineapples. The snacks here are a little too fancy for me.”

His answer cut off my dirty train of thought, and I laughed softly. He was a jock and a dork all in one. It was charming, endearing in a way that men typically weren't, and I hated how easy it was to talk to him.

“Unfortunately, I don't have any of those, but I can order you one if you want,” I said, heat prickling my cheeks as I tried not to look in his direction.

He laughed. “No, that's okay. Brandon and I are going out to eat after this. There are some nice twenty-four hour diners downtown.”

I couldn't argue with him there. I'd gone with Selene to a few of them, and they never disappointed.

“Okay then,” I said. “What about your third wish?”

“Something I’d rather not ask for yet.” My mind immediately jumped back in the gutter, and heat swirled low in my belly. Was he insinuating what I thought he was? Was he really bold enough to just come out and hint at getting in my pants?

“How long have you and Selene known each other?” he asked instead, changing the subject.

“At least a decade,” I said, counting back the years. “We met at a red carpet event when we were young and told our managers we wanted to work together. The rest is kind of history. What about you?”

I looked over in time to see him shrug. “I actually only met her tonight. My friend Brandon is inside; he got invited by an influencer and dragged me along. Looks like it worked out in my favor.”

I fought the heat creeping across my cheeks and looked away again, letting my gaze fall to the glass-paned doors leading inside. I expected to see a couple of curious faces peeking through the curtains, but I didn’t see any. That was good at least.

“Do you live in L.A.?” I asked.

“No, actually.” He shook his head. “I’m just here for a few days before we head to Pittsburgh.”

I shifted in my seat. What were the chances that we were both in L.A. for the weekend, but neither of us lived there?

Slim, I knew that. Thoughts of a meet cute came bubbling back up, but I squashed them down immediately.

*It's just a coincidence*, I told myself. A really hot coincidence.

“For a game?” I asked. If he started talking in depth about football, I’d be lost instantly.

“Yeah, we’re playing the Wildcats there next week.”

I nodded without having a clue who the Wildcats were. Hell, I didn’t even know what team Nic played for, but it felt weird asking. I could look him up later if I remembered.

“Oh nice. Where do you live?” I asked.

“So you can stalk me?” He smirked in my direction and I fought the urge to laugh. “I live in Utah.”

“Utah?” It felt like such a random place for a professional athlete to live. I’d expected somewhere like Miami or New York, somewhere glamorous. Not out in the middle of nowhere. “I don’t think I’ve ever been there.”

“You’re not missing much.” He laughed, shaking his head. “I stay because my family lives there; they all own farms. Plus, I’m pretty close with my grandparents.”

“Aw.” As someone with a tight-knit family, I adored the fact that he was close to his grandparents. Mine had died before I was born, but my parents made up for it every chance they could. They spoiled and loved me like no one else.

“I live in...”



“New York,” he cuts me off with a smile. “Right?”

“Now who’s the stalker?” I cocked an eyebrow at him. I probably should have been a little unnerved that he knew where I lived, but it wasn’t exactly private information. Anyone with a smartphone could figure it out in three seconds, but something told me it had to do with his little sister. “Do you know where my vacation homes are too?”

He laughed. “No. I only know about New York because I read about it yesterday. I promise I’m not a creep.”

I narrowed my eyes at him jokingly. “*Sure* you’re not.”

We laughed together.

At some point the nerves had vanished, along with the cold. I was hardly aware of anything besides Nic and how comfortable I was hiding away with him while there was a full-blown party happening feet away.

The comfort terrified me.

It had been so long since I’d tried to date, and my last relationship had gone up in flames on national television. It wasn’t something I wanted to repeat again, and the thought of having another heartbreak smeared across every magazine in the country had my heart pounding hard.

I couldn’t do it again.

“What was your third wish?” I asked, shifting on the cushion, trying to avoid the tight feeling in my chest.

He smirked, working his jaw back and forth like he was debating asking the question at all. What could possibly have him so nervous?

“I was going to ask for your number,” he finally admitted, and nerves zipped up my back.

Of all the things I’d been expecting, that wasn’t one of them. My insides swam as I tried to come up with a response. I didn’t want to give him my number, did I?

Truthfully, I had no idea what I wanted. I wished Selene would show back up and save me, but she was probably enjoying watching my misery on her security cameras. That, or she really was tied up on that phone call. There was no telling with her.

I was too tired to think straight, and I wanted more time before I gave this random man my phone number.

“Looks like I’m not a very good genie,” I finally said after an agonizing moment of silence. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll give you my number the next time I see you.”

It was a polite decline that left my conscience clear. With any luck, I’d never see him again and he’d have moved on to the next girl. I didn’t like the idea of anyone else hanging on his arm, but it was better than having my heart broken again.

And at the very least, it would buy me time to decide if I even wanted to talk to him again.

“Alright, deal,” he said. He didn’t sound disappointed. Maybe he knew it was a long shot to begin with. Or maybe he

was already trying to figure out when we'd seen each other again so he could hold me to my word.

Before either of us could say anything else, the door to the kitchen popped open and Selene stuck her head outside, a smile painted across her face.

“Sorry, Nic, I gotta steal my girl back,” she said with a wink, gesturing for me to follow her. The timing couldn't have been more perfect, and I wondered if she had been watching the cameras after all.

## Chapter Four

### *Kenzie*

I managed to avoid Nic until Tom came back to pick me up, and I was already dozing in the back of the car by the time we pulled up in front of my hotel. Somehow, I managed to make it to my room before crashing completely, just to be woken up by my alarm a few hours later.

Exhausted, my body ached from the intense dance numbers from last night's concert, but my thoughts were still swimming with images from the after party. *With images of Nic Bennett.* I attributed my persistent thoughts about him to my lack of sleep, but even as I napped on my private plane to Seattle, he plagued my dreams.

When I woke up again and realized I'd spent the better part of the flight dreaming about Nic doing filthy, unforgivable things to me, I was embarrassed. I'd never spent so much time thinking about a stranger before, and I knew Selene would find it hilarious. She'd essentially tried to play matchmaker last night, and she'd almost succeeded. I was even regretting not giving the man my number.

*I should have at least ordered him a pizza.* If I ever saw him again, I'd have to make that up to him.

Despite trying to get him off my mind, I pulled out my phone and typed his name into the search bar, my stomach fluttering when countless images of him popped up. His piercing blue eyes stared back at me from the phone screen, and my eyes roved over his sharp jawline and perfect lips. I scrolled, trying to find out what I could about him, halfway hoping I'd find something terrible, a deal breaker that would nip this attraction in the bud.

However, I didn't find any major red flags.

He was a six-foot-three wide receiver—whatever that meant—for the Lexington Elks, and he looked incredible in their navy and green uniform. His biography said he'd grown up in Utah, just like he'd told me, but there were a million other things Nic hadn't bothered to mention, like the non-profit he ran to support foster families or the way he'd funded at least three soup kitchens so far.

The man was an absolute catch, a compassionate gentleman with looks to match.

Now, I was really regretting not giving him my number, but it didn't matter. There was a chance he'd picked up another girl at Selene's party after I left and that he'd already forgotten about me. It was best not to dwell on hypotheticals and focus on reality, like the concert coming up. I needed to focus, be ready. Seattle was always a fantastic crowd, and I couldn't give them less than my best.

When we touched down in Washington, it was the same old song and dance: get a rental car, pop over to the hotel, arrive at the stadium in time for wardrobe and sound check. Thankfully, I managed to sneak in another nap before lunch before my alarm was screaming at me to get moving again.

It was constant chaos, running from one place to the other, changing into fifteen different outfits along the way. Hair, makeup, sound check. Stretching and doing vocal warm-ups backstage while the stadium filled. It was a never-ending, hectic whirlwind, and sometimes I barely felt in control of any of it, even though this was all my doing.

I'd picked the tour dates, the locations. I'd picked the set list and costume changes. It was a lot, but it was my passion. I loved performing, even if I ran myself ragged in the process. But as I readied myself to step out onstage, already a little out of breath from all the rushing I'd done to get to that point, it was just another blatant reminder that I couldn't drag anyone else into this.

My crazy schedule and demanding job had been the downfall of my last relationship. I wasn't there enough, I wasn't emotionally available enough. I couldn't drag Nic, or anyone else for that matter, into this.

Maybe, eventually, when the tour ended things would be different, but right now, this was my life. The fans were my life. Everything I did, I did for them, and I was perfectly okay with that.

Plastering an untroubled smile on my face for the moment the cameras landed on me, I stepped into position on the rising platform and listened to the countdown in my ear. The platform began to shift, rising slowly toward the stage, and a few seconds later I was engulfed in an explosion of cheers.

### *Nic*

Kenzie was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, draped in a swathe of pink crystals as she appeared onstage. I only wished I was there to admire her in person, rather than watching her on my phone in a pizzeria with Brandon sitting across the booth from me.

“You've got it bad, don't you?”

I glanced up from the phone screen and shot him a look as he laughed. “No.”

That only made him laugh harder. “Yeah, and I'm an Elk cheerleader. Face it, brother. She's got you hooked.”

I rolled my eyes before looking back at the screen. She was back-to-back with her guitarist, singing with a cocky smirk as she stared out over the crowd.

What I wouldn't give to kiss that smirk off her face.

“I shot my shot,” I grumbled, watching as she spun around and glistened beneath the spotlight. “She didn't give me her number.”

“*Yet,*” Brandon emphasized as the waitress walked up and placed a large supreme pizza between us on the table.

“Can I get you boys anything else?” she asked, winking in my direction.

“No, thanks.” I ignored her, going back to watching the concert on my phone.

When the waitress disappeared again, Brandon reached for a slice of pizza, groaning at the string of cheese that stretched as he pulled it free. My stomach growled and I joined him with a sigh, propping my phone up against the napkin dispenser so I could watch hands-free.

“You’re ridiculous,” he said, rolling his eyes at my makeshift phone stand. “You said it yourself, when you see her again, she’ll give you her number.”

“I doubt she was serious.” I shook my head. “She was just being polite.”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe she just wants you to put in some effort. She doesn’t want to be the girl you picked up at a party, you know?”

I considered that for a moment, wondering what she would do if I showed up to one of her concerts unannounced. Could I even get in? Could I get backstage somehow? I’d only ever been to a few concerts, and none of them were as big as the sold-out arenas Kenzie played at.

It was a huge risk not knowing whether I’d even get to see her, but Brandon had a point. She had to have countless men



throwing themselves at her on a daily basis. If I wanted to make a better impression, I'd have to prove that I wasn't like those mindless fucks who only wanted her for her body or her money.

The money I couldn't have cared less about, even though one of her dogs was worth more than my Bentley. And even though I wanted to devour every inch of her perfect, petite body, it wasn't about her looks either.

She had an infectious personality, like a shining light that brightened every room she walked into. It was evident on the stage and in interviews, and I'd gotten a glimpse of it at the party. She was such a kind, caring soul. Business-minded, selfless, and entertaining. In my eyes, she was the whole package.

I wanted her, and if I had to track her down to shoot my shot one more time, that's just what I would have to do.

"Alright, fine," I finally said, turning off the concert to focus on dinner. I would have been content sitting there watching her for hours, but there would be plenty of time for that later.

Besides, if things went according to plan, I wouldn't have to watch her through a phone screen. I'd be seeing her perform in person.

"Atta boy." Brandon grinned and held his slice of pizza up in a toast. "Go sweep her off her feet."

## Chapter Five

*Nic*

As much as I wanted to fly to Seattle and catch Kenzie before she headed to the next stop on her tour, I couldn't drop everything and go. The team had practice in the days leading up to our game against the Wildcats, and I couldn't risk running late because of a pipe dream. I still had no idea if she'd want to see me at all, much less give me her number. The whole trip I was planning might be for nothing.

No, I would bide my time and wait for a better opportunity to see her. It would give me more time to work out a plan, or talk myself out of the ludicrously.

We played our game in Pittsburgh and won, a huge victory to continue our winning streak, and we celebrated with a night on the town. I still hadn't forgotten about that stolen moment with Kenzie at the party, nor had I abandoned my determination to go to her. Seeing the guys with their wives and girlfriends at our celebration dinner was just another blatant reminder of how single I was, of how badly I wanted to find someone to take to events like that.

It wasn't that I couldn't get a girlfriend—there were enough bachelorettes throwing themselves in my direction to keep me occupied for several lifetimes—but there was only one woman I was interested in, and until I knew her answer for certain, I wouldn't be able to shake her from my mind.

Brandon was right.

I had it bad.

Kenzie had unintentionally wrapped me around one of her dainty fingers and wasn't letting me go.

The next week was excruciatingly slow, and we lost our game at Everbank Stadium, which put a damper on the team's morale. We'd gone six straight wins, so it was bound to happen sooner or later, but it still sucked. It also marked the start of a three-week break between games, which was the gap I'd been waiting for. With the extra time, I could work out a way to one of Kenzie's concerts.

I wasn't sure what I'd do when I got there, especially considering all her concerts for the tour were completely sold out—I knew because I'd checked every one of them online—but I wasn't losing hope. If there was one person I knew who could help me figure it out, it was Selene.

It was easy enough to track her down on Instagram, and within an hour, we were on the phone.

“So you're wanting to surprise Kenzie at one of her concerts?” Selene asked, amusement in her voice. She didn't

sound surprised at all to hear from me; if anything, she probably expected me to message her eventually.

“Yeah.” I paced across my hotel room and ran my fingers through my hair.

I shouldn't have been nervous—after all, it wasn't like Kenzie and I had never met before—but I was planning to fly across the country to her concert in Detroit. All this for a girl I wasn't dating, who I wasn't even sure wanted to see me again.

My gut swirled with nerves. This was probably the craziest thing I'd ever done to get a woman's attention, and I'd done some pretty dumb shit in my teenage years.

But I knew it was worth it.

*She* was worth it.

“If you're just wanting to go to the concert, that's easy enough. She always saves seats at every concert for her friends that want to go,” Selene explained while the rumble of chatter carried on behind her. It sounded like she was out to eat with a group of people. That, or the TV was turned up loud. “But if you're wanting to get backstage, that's a whole different ball game.”

I hesitated, even though I'd given the scenario a lot of thought already. I would have loved to watch Kenzie dance across the stage from the front row and admire her performance—which truly was a work of art—but my goal was to see her in person. With the thousands of people in the

stadium, I highly doubted I would get a chance to be close to her if I was in the crowd.

She'd never see me, and getting through security would be impossible. Getting backstage would be ideal, I just had no idea how I'd accomplish it.

"I really just want to see her," I admitted, ignoring the way my ears burned hot.

Since when had I turned into some love-sick boy who got nervous talking about women?

Since now, apparently.

"So I'd like to get backstage, if possible."

"Hmm," Selene hummed in response, dragging out the moment and my agony. "Let me make a few calls, and I'll see what I can do."

I exhaled a small sigh of relief, nodding even though she couldn't see me. "Thanks, Selene. I owe you one."

She giggled. "You only owe me if you hurt my friend, and the price is steep, Mr. Bennett."

I smirked. "Understood."

"I'll call you back." The line went quiet and I tossed the phone on the bed, wondering how long it would take to hear back from her.

I had no idea who she could be calling, but I hoped it wasn't Kenzie. Though, it would have been much simpler and straightforward to ask her if she wanted me there, I was

enchanted by the element of surprise. I wanted to see the sparkle in her eye when the realization dawned on her, the way her cherry red lips would fall open in surprise.

I paced the hotel room for what felt like forever, my nervous energy making it impossible to rest, or even sit down. A thousand scenarios were playing in my mind on repeat, from what I would do if Selene said she couldn't get me backstage to what I would do when I finally saw Kenzie again. It was an agonizing wait, and by the time my phone rang, I had halfway convinced myself that this was all a terrible idea and I just needed to forget about it.

“Good news,” Selene said, her voice more upbeat than before. The background noise had been replaced by a high-pitched whirring noise, and I couldn't have guessed what she was doing. “I spoke to Kenzie's assistant, Paige, and she said she can make it happen. She'll find you during the set and get you backstage before the concert ends. Sound good?”

A weight disappeared from my shoulders and I punched the air. It was more than good; this was exactly what I needed. I didn't know who Paige was, but I'd be forever grateful for her.

“Perfect. Can you tell her to text me or something—”

“I already did,” she cut me off. “You're welcome. They're traveling right now, but you should hear from her in a bit.”

“I appreciate your help, Selene.”

She giggled on the other end of the line. “Nic?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t fuck this up.”

## Chapter Six

### *Kenzie*

Everything at the Detroit concert was going perfectly. The lights, the music, and the backup dancers were all flawless. The crowd was amazing, as always.

It had been a performance for the books, possibly my best show to date...until the heel of my boot snapped, and my ankle rolled on the next to last song. I didn't think it was sprained, but it hurt like a bitch, and I had to lean on Trace for support while I figured out what to do.

Options limited, I unzipped the knee-high boots and kicked them to the edge of the stage while the crowd sang the chorus in my stead, and I finished the rest of the show barefoot. A first for me, but not close to the worst thing that had ever happened at a show. One time, five years ago, a speaker had caught on fire and caused a panic.

This was nothing some ice and pain meds wouldn't fix, but belting out those last notes was hard while I was fighting to stand.



Somehow, I made it through two encore songs before bowing and slipping offstage to a group of concerned crew members. They were all talking at once, trying to hand me things, offering to help me walk, but I waved them away.

“I’m fine,” I said, taking slow steps. “I promise.”

“Are you sure, Kenz?” Trace asked, holding out a hand like I might fall over at any moment.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, I’m sure. It’s not broken; it just stings a little, but thank you.”

Even as I argued, it felt a little better, but I wasn’t sure if it was from walking on it or the adrenaline. Once I got to my backstage dressing room, I could take my weight off it and rest for a while, at least until Tom came to usher me to the hotel.

I was so distracted by my sore ankle that it took me several minutes to notice Paige wasn’t there waiting with my flats. I swiveled my head around, combing through the crowd for any sign of her, but came up short.

*Maybe there was an emergency.*

It wasn’t like her to not be waiting for me after the show.

With a grimace, I made my way to the dressing room with my wardrobe trunk inside and settled into a folding chair in front of a wide mirror. Bulbs ran around the perimeter of the glass, and I stared at my frazzled reflection, drinking in the calming silence.

My hair was frizzy, my face dotted with sweat. My silver vest shimmered in the dim light every time I shifted, and I

realized with a frown I'd forgotten to post a selfie. *Because Paige still has my phone.*

I sighed, wiggling my foot to test it. It still throbbed, but it was tolerable.

I needed pain meds and water, both of which Paige had. I knew I could ask someone else to bring them to me, or at least hunt her down, but I was so tired I didn't care at the moment. I just wanted to sit here for a minute, enjoying the peace of the dressing room, and hoping she turned up sooner than later.

A knock at the door snapped my senses to attention, and the handle twisted before I could call for the person to come in.

"Miss Tyler," Paige said as she poked her head inside.

"I'm in here," I answered.

She pushed the door open wider and slipped inside, my flats in one hand and my bag thrown over her shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Tyler," she said, hurrying over and dropping my shoes on the floor next to me. She dug around in the bag for my phone, handing it to me, before producing a bottle of water. "I was just... there was..."

"An issue with security?" I mused, unlocking my phone and checking my notifications.

She forced a weak chuckle. "Well, yes, but not because of my badge again. There's someone here to see you."

My gaze snapped up from the phone screen, my heart skipping an excited beat. Who could have possibly come to

see me that security let through? It had to be someone I knew well.

“Is it Selene?” I asked hopefully, even though she would have told me if she planned to show up.

Paige shook her head. “He’s standing in the hall. I wanted to make sure it was okay, before I let him in.”

“*Him?*” My jaw dropped. I didn’t know what to say. “Who is it?”

“It’s me,” a deep voice said from the doorway, and I craned my head around Paige’s thin frame to see Nic Bennett standing there.

I nearly fell out of my chair.

He was wearing a dark suit with a white button-up, a mixed bouquet of flowers clutched in one hand. He’d trimmed his stubble into a neat goatee, and he’d gotten a haircut since I saw him last.

He looked so fucking hot I could barely stand it.

For a moment, all I could do was stare with my mouth hanging open unattractively. “H-how are you here?”

Paige stepped aside silently as Nic approached, offering me the flowers in his hand, which I took.

“They have these big flying things called planes.” His cocky smirk set fire to my blood. I wanted to slap it off his face and also kiss him until it hurt.

“Okay, smartass,” I said, straightening up in the chair. “How about, *why* are you here?”

He smiled and leaned against the vanity, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “I came to see you.”

“So, you’re stalking me now?” I cocked an eyebrow at him.

“I’d call it *surprising* you.”

“And security just let you walk in?”

“No.” He looked across the room. “Paige let me in.”

“Don’t blame this on me,” she piped somewhere behind me. “Selene told me to.”

“*Selene* did this?” I glared up at him before massaging my temple with two fingers. Of course, she had. This is exactly the kind of thing she would do. “I’m going to kill her.”

“If you don’t want me here, I’ll leave,” he said gently, uncrossing his arms and taking a step closer to my chair. He stared down at me with a soft, sincere look in his eyes. “Say the word and you’ll never see me again, but I wanted to see you one more time.”

My throat tightened at his words, and I was suddenly uncomfortable with Paige in the room. An invisible string was pulling me toward Nic, more as the seconds ticked by, and I wanted to be alone with him.

For what, I wasn’t sure, but I needed her to leave to find out for myself.

“Paige can you give us some privacy so I can tell Mr. Bennett exactly how I feel about his little surprise,” I said without breaking eye contact with him. His gaze was burning through me, making my heart race.

“Yes, Miss Tyler,” she said and slipped toward the door, closing it behind her with a soft click.

The second we were alone, my stomach pitched toward the floor.

“Well, we’re alone,” he said, his smirk widening into a grin. “What are your other two wishes?”

## Chapter Seven

*Nic*

The smile that appeared on Kenzie's red lips relieved some of the nerves knotted inside me, but I still wasn't entirely convinced she wouldn't kick me out of her dressing room. At least she hadn't started yelling for security; that was reassuring.

"You brought me flowers," she said, dropping her gaze to the bouquet in her lap. She gently traced one of the rose petals between her fingers. "That was sweet."

"Does it make up for showing up unannounced?" I joked.

She rolled her gorgeous eyes and smirked up at me. "I guess. It helps that I kind of like surprises."

I exhaled a tiny sigh of relief. She wasn't kicking me out. If anything, she was happy I'd shown up. "That's good to know. I was a little worried you'd throw me out." I chuckled nervously.

"Not yet, anyway." She shook her head and brought the flowers to her nose, inhaling the floral perfume. "But I could

always change my mind.”

It was an empty threat, more flirtatious banter, and it didn't scare me. If anything, it made me want to scoop her up in my arms and kiss her until neither of us could breathe. She looked so stunning, even covered in sweat with her hair a mess, and I let my gaze slowly fall over the rest of her.

“What happened to your boots?” I asked, glancing at her bare feet.

“Well, one broke,” she sighed, “and I hurt my ankle. Hence why I'm hiding out here rather than my trailer or catching a ride to my hotel.”

My stomach dropped violently.

“You're hurt?” I asked, looking her over again. How had I not realized sooner? She didn't act like she was in pain, but shouldn't I have known somehow? “Do you want me to get someone to look at it? Or get you some ice?”

She waved a hand at me. “No, I'm not *that* hurt. In fact, it feels a lot better now. I'll ice it when I get back to the hotel.”

I narrowed my eyes at her stubbornness. Either she was lying because she was afraid to look weak, or she really was fine. If she was lying, I'd make it a point to ice her ankle myself, regardless of how much she argued.

“Let's see you walk on it then,” I said, taking the bouquet from her and placing it on the vanity. I offered her my hand, which she eyed skeptically for a moment, and when she slid hers into it, I helped her to her feet.

She moved gracefully, standing in front of me with ease, but I didn't miss the way her face pinched with pain.

“You're a bold-faced liar, Miss Tyler,” I said, slipping an arm around her to help keep her weight off the foot. She melted into me, as if this had been her plan all along, and stared up at me with those blue gray eyes I'd come to memorize from watching her concert on repeat.

For a moment, time stood still, the way it did in those romcom movies when the main characters finally met. A tug in my chest urged me to draw her closer yet, eliminating all the space between us, but I froze. As much as I'd imagined this moment, the pull between us felt ten times stronger. Ten times more right.

I was completely stunned by the feeling of her against me, the way she molded perfectly to me, and even though it wasn't how I imagined—probably way too soon to make any sense—I kissed her.

### ***Kenzie***

I'd barely wrapped my mind around Nic showing up in Detroit to surprise me, and now we were making out in my dressing room.

I hadn't seen that one coming.

His lips on mine shouldn't have felt so right. They shouldn't have made me forget about my ankle or the concert or anything else for that matter, but the way they moved against



mine, leading them in a carefully curated slow dance, had me seeing stars.

I parted my lips and his tongue danced into my mouth, teasing mine and stealing all the air from my lungs. I was light-headed, finding it hard to breathe, but harder still to pull away.

This was everything I'd hoped it would be and more.

Then, it was gone.

My eyes flew open, my lips aching to feel more of him, and I found him staring at me with furrowed brows.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I should have asked. I—"

"The only thing you should apologize for is stopping," I said, fisting the lapels of his suit jacket.

A flash of realization brightened his gaze, and when he kissed me again, it wasn't as slow or careful. His lips crashed into mine, one of his hands tangling in my hair and tugging affectionately, tearing a gasp from my lips. Heat erupted through my body, sinking low in my stomach and settling in my core, a heartbeat thrumming to life between my thighs.

I'd been kissed before, but never like this.

Nic kissed me like it was his one and only chance to sear this moment into my memory forever, and damn it if it wasn't working. I was sure I'd be thinking about this kiss for weeks, even months, to come. I'd probably compare every kiss for the rest of my life to this one, and I didn't care.

His free hand dropped to my waist, pulling me against him and the bulge in the front of his pants. The needy throb between my legs intensified, a deep-seated ache forming that only his touch could soothe. I hated how much I wanted him.

No, I hated how much I didn't want to want him.

I'd been so hurt, so let down in the past that getting close to anyone new was terrifying.

What if Nic turned out to be the same as my ex? What if he got tired of endless tour dates, prying paparazzi, and the hectic, difficult life of a celebrity? He was famous in his own right, but my life as an international popstar was a lot for most people. Hell, it was a lot for *me* sometimes.

I kissed him harder, trying to drown out the questions and doubt swirling through my mind, and I moaned when he sucked on my bottom lips. Shivers spilled down my back, despite the temperature of the room skyrocketing. It was stifling, and there was too much clothing separating us.

I broke our kiss this time, gasping for air.

"Are you okay?" he asked, brushing his fingers gently along my cheek.

Fuck, why was this man so charming?

"I'm fine," I whispered, not moving to step away. "But they're going to come looking for me soon. Maybe we should continue this...somewhere else?"

One of his dark brows raised. "Like where?"

It sounded so cliché to invite him back to my hotel, not to mention presumptuous, but it really was the easiest place for us to get privacy. As far as I knew, no one knew he was here. The paparazzi would have no idea that we were together, but if they caught wind of it, pictures would be everywhere.

Anytime they thought I was dating someone new, they blew up the internet with photos and wild stories. I didn't want to risk any of that, especially not yet. If this was just a one night thing that fizzled by morning, I didn't want to give the tabloids anything juicy to smear across their headlines.

Besides, I needed a shower and I needed to rest my sore ankle. Hitting the town and trying to keep from being seen would be a pain—*literally*.

“My hotel room, but we can't leave together,” I said. There would be at least a dozen photographers waiting to capture pictures of me leaving the venue. “I just don't feel like going out anywhere tonight.”

“No, I get it. You're tired.” He nodded in agreement. “We can order takeout and watch movies or something...as long as you ice that ankle.”

“You're not going to let that go are you?” I asked.

“No, Kenzie. I'm a professional athlete, so I know injuries. It might not seem like much now, but it'll hurt like hell in the morning.” His expression turned more serious and he wrapped his arms around me, holding me in place. “Promise me you'll take some medicine and ice it until I get there.”

“Fine.” I couldn’t fight the smile his affection put on my face. “I guess that means I have to give you my number, doesn’t it?”

He nodded. “I guess it does.”

## Chapter Eight

### *Kenzie*

**A**s much as I hated to admit Nic was right, by the time I got to my hotel room, I could hardly put any weight on my ankle. It would definitely hurt more in the morning.

I took some pain meds and hopped in the bath for a quick soak, the warm water doing wonders for my sore muscles, drawing out the tension and aches from another successful concert. I dried my hair, running a flat iron over it quickly so it looked decent enough. I didn't bother reapplying makeup or trying to look cute aside from my powder-blue pajamas; if PJs and a bare face bothered him, he could turn around and leave as soon as he got there.

As instructed, I wrapped an ice pack around my ankle and crawled into the pile of down pillows and the stark white down comforter, checking my phone at least twice a minute as I waited for him to call, feeling ridiculous the entire time.

Why was I suddenly so eager to hear from him? I'd lost countless hours thinking about him over the past few weeks, but not to this extent. Now, my heart was pounding hard at the

thought of him showing up to my hotel room, of seeing where the night took us.

Despite the countless concerts, interviews, red carpet events, nominations, and award wins, I couldn't remember ever being so nervous, feeling like my heart would beat out of my chest at any moment. It nearly shot through my ribcage when my phone finally lit up and his name flashed across the screen.

"Hello?" I answered, trying and failing to keep my excitement reeled in.

"Hey. You said room four fifteen, right?" His rich voice sounded even deeper on the phone.

"Yes."

"Alright. I'm here."

My chest seized and I threw back the blanket, hurrying across the room. I didn't even pause to collect myself before wrenching it open to find Nic standing in the hall. Instead of the suit from earlier, he wore a pair of gray sweatpants and a black T-shirt that hugged every inch of his muscular torso. Comfort had clearly been on his mind, too.

In one hand, he still held his phone to his ear, and in the other was a plastic takeout bag filled with to-go boxes.

"Selene said you like Chinese food, so that's what I got," he said, gesturing to the bag.

I huffed a laugh, shaking my head as I stepped aside to let him in. "What else did she tell you?"

He admired the room for a second before setting the food down on the little table in the corner. It wasn't the fanciest hotel room I'd stayed in, but it had all the necessities: a couch, a kitchen, a dining area. There was a king-sized bed, a large dresser for storage, and a flat-screen TV. Contemporary paintings hung on all the walls, and it had a stunning view of downtown Detroit when the blinds were pulled back.

"Oh, you know. Typical best friend things," he said, spinning to face me. "She said I'd pay dearly if I hurt you."

Yep, that sounded exactly like something she'd say.

"Do you plan to hurt me, Nic Bennett?" I cocked my head to the side, perching my hands on my hips.

He shook his head and walked toward me, stopping a few inches away. His closeness made my skin tingle, and I wanted his hands on me. I wanted his lips on mine, for him to kiss me the way he had in the dressing room.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he said, his voice soft. "Now, in bed. You're supposed to be icing your ankle."

My jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

"Dead serious." He jerked a thumb toward the bed. "Get comfortable and I'll get the food."

I stared at him in disbelief as he turned back toward the table and set to unpacking the containers. Pouting, I headed for the bed and grabbed the ice pack again, putting it on my semi-swollen ankle.

I hadn't expected Nic to walk through the door and tear my clothes off, but I also hadn't expected him to be so fucking sweet by bringing me dinner and taking care of me.

This man really was something else.

"All she said was sushi, so I got a few different ones," he said, handing me a plastic box filled with gorgeous rolls of sushi. My mouth instantly watered.

"This is perfect, thank you," I said, my stomach growling defiantly as I tried to wait for him to get settled before I dug in. "I'm surprised you didn't bring pizza."

He laughed, joining me on the bed with his food. He produced a bottle of water from each of his pockets, tossing me one.

"I thought about it, but then I decided you owed me that one." He winked in my direction. "So, Chinese it is."

"That's fair." I grinned. If he wanted me to buy him a pizza, I definitely would. If he stuck around, that could be what we did for our second date. "I can do that."

We settled in and I flipped mindlessly through the television stations until I found a movie starring some of my favorite actors. Nic seemed to approve, so I tossed the remote aside, and we ate in almost silence, making small talk between the scenes.

It might have been a boring, casual first date for a lot of people, but I couldn't think of a better way to spend my time.



Pajamas, my favorite food, a movie, and an impossibly hot guy who'd flown across the country to see me.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but something told me this was special.

There weren't any forced moments, any awkwardness like when we'd first met. We were fine in the silence, or cracking jokes about the movie as we watched. He fed me some of his fried rice, and I let him try one of my sushi rolls, amazed by how easy things were with him.

It was like we'd known each other forever, our souls perfectly comfortable with one another. I'd never felt anything like it.

A tiny ripple of anxiety rolled through me as I dwelled on how perfect things seemed—surely they were too good to be true. But for the first time, I wasn't completely terrified of what would happen if I fell for Nic and it went downhill.

He made me want to forget the things that had jaded me to relationships.

He made me want to try.

The only thing I didn't know was how he felt. Was this just a fling for him? Something fun to do in his free time? Or did he see the potential for something more, something long-term?

It felt strange to bring up so soon, but curiosity was eating at me. I didn't want to waste my time or emotional energy on something if he didn't feel the same way, or if there was no chance he ever could.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, snapping me out of my spiraling thoughts.

I’d finished my sushi, and the empty container sat discarded next to me. I’d been staring blankly at the TV without seeing what was happening on the screen for several minutes.

“Nothing,” I said, looking in his direction. “Why?”

He shook his head. “You don’t have to lie to me, Kenzie. Whenever you’re deep in thought, your eyebrows draw together, and you worry your bottom lip.”

Shit. Did I really?

“If you don’t want to tell me, that’s fine,” he went on. “But I’d prefer honesty.”

I sighed. He was right. If I wanted this to go anywhere, I had to let down the walls I’d built so high and start being open with him. It was the only way to really see if we were compatible, to see if what I was feeling was real or an illusion of infatuation.

“I was wondering why you flew all this way,” I finally said after a long moment of silence. “Why are you doing all this?”

“I told you, I wanted to see you,” he said.

“I know, but just for a day. Or two?” Heat prickled across my cheeks. “Is this just a one-night thing for you, or are you looking for something long-term?”

One of his brows arched, the hint of a smirk threatening to appear. “You think I’d do all this just to sleep with you and

then disappear?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. It sounded like I was accusing him when he said it that way, but he'd asked for honesty.

“Maybe,” I said, “and if that’s the truth, I wouldn’t fault you for it. I just want the same honesty in return.”

My heart leaped into my throat as I realized I was afraid of his answer, afraid he would say this was just something he wanted to enjoy for a moment, a night of unbridled passion and nothing more. I already knew I’d be disappointed when he left, and I wasn’t looking forward to it.

I waited with bated breath for his answer.

“The truth is,” he said, exhaling deeply, “I spend every day thinking about you, Kenzie, wondering what you’re doing, and if you’re thinking about me too. I feel this unexplainable attraction to you, like an addiction that I can’t shake, and I don’t want to. At first, I thought I was crazy. Who feels so intensely for someone they’ve only met once, you know? But after weeks of not being able to get you out of my head, I don’t think I’m crazy anymore.”

He reached over and grazed his fingers along my jawline, sending electric sparks shooting through every nerve ending in my body.

“I want any and every part of you that you’ll give me, for as long as you’ll have me,” he said, his eyes boring into mine like

hot pokers. “You decide when and where this ends. All I’m asking for is a shot.”

My lungs constricted, making it impossible to get air into them. “And if things end badly? If we try and things don’t work?”

“The greatest things in life often come with the biggest risks.” He dropped his hand to lace his fingers with mine, squeezing reassuringly. “I’ll never have anything but the utmost respect for you. If it doesn’t work, we go our separate ways, and that’s it. There won’t be any bad blood between us, unless it’s on your end.”

I fought to find my voice, and it came out in a whisper. “And if I never want this to end? If I fall hopelessly in love with you and want to keep you forever? What then?”

He brought the back of my hand to his lips and kissed it, reassuring me. “There’s only one way to find out.”

## Chapter Nine

*Nic*

I laid down and pulled Kenzie against my chest, running my fingers through her blonde hair and admiring the way she conformed perfectly to my body. I'd stopped watching the movie a long time ago, my mind consumed by thoughts of the woman next to me and where we should go from here.

Was she flying out early in the morning, or would she be in Detroit another day? If she was leaving, would I fly home tomorrow? Or would I be crazy enough to follow her to her next tour stop?

Nothing was out of the question; it just depended on what Kenzie wanted me to do.

I'd do whatever she wanted me to, stay as long as she asked me to. I just wanted to put that gorgeous smile on her face and make her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world, which she was.

Kenzie Tyler was stunning in every capacity, and I was still amazed she wanted me the way I wanted her.

This felt like a fever dream, something so incredible that it couldn't be reality, but the warmth of her body against mine and the way her fingers slowly trailed across my chest said otherwise. This was very real, and I was very much wrapped up in this woman, ready to risk it all for her at any moment.

She looked up at me suddenly, catching me by surprise, and her eyes locked with mine.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"For what?"

"Everything." The hint of a smile curled her lips. "Showing up, taking care of me, showing you care."

"You don't have to thank me," I said, my arm tightening around her. "Thanks for not having security throw me out, or telling me to shove the flowers up my ass."

She burst into laughter, her chest shaking against my ribcage, and I pressed my lips to her forehead. Her laughter was music to my ears.

"I'm serious. That would have been a little disappointing." I ran my free hand through my hair.

"You aren't disappointed at all, are you?"

I shook my head. "Not at all. Why?"

"Just making sure." She stretched her neck up to brush her lips faintly against mine, but the brief contact only made my lips ache for more. I wanted to kiss her, taste every inch of her.

I leaned down to catch her lips with mine experimentally, my tongue sweeping into her mouth to tangle with hers. The sigh that escaped her had my blood rushing straight to my cock, and I kissed her deeper still.

I moved slowly, giving her plenty of time to stop me, but she didn't make an effort to. She followed my lead, her hand slipping up to curl behind my neck, tugging playfully at my hair as I sucked on her bottom lip. With a groan, I pulled her on top of me, reveling in the little gasp that escaped.

"You can tell me to stop if you want to," I said between kisses, my hands settling on her hips, afraid to take things further. The last thing I wanted was to overstep any boundaries, even though the only thing I wanted to do was tear off her pajama bottoms with my teeth and fuck her into this plush mattress.

"I won't," she said, meeting my eyes for a brief moment before her eyelids fluttered closed again.

I bucked my hips up, pressing my rock-hard cock against her heat, making her shudder.

"Are you sure?" I was clinging to my last shred of self-restraint, desperate to kiss her from head to toe, to taste every inch of her. To bury myself inside, fuck her until she begged to come.

She nodded against me and rolled her hips, the friction against my cock making my balls tingle. In a swift motion, I flipped us over, pressing her into the mattress, pinning her wrists above her head.

“Do you want me to fuck you rough and hard?” I asked, grazing my lips along her jawline and peppering kisses around her pale throat. “Or do you want it soft and slow? Tell me what you like.”

“Fuck me however you want me,” she said, making my head spin. “Just touch me, please.”

Still pinning her wrists with one hand, my other hand skirted over her chest as I teased my way to her waist. I dipped my fingers beneath the waistband of her pants, finding nothing but smooth, hairless skin as I dove lower toward her slippery folds. She was already dripping wet for me, which proved to me how badly she wanted this.

Not just wanted. She *needed* someone to worship her body, to love every inch of her and make her shatter apart over and over again. I planned to give that to her.

I gently pressed two fingers inside her, cutting off her moan as I pressed my lips against hers again. I pumped them in and out slowly, letting her pussy stretch around me, and slowly picked up speed until she was rocking her hips up to meet me with every thrust.

“Fuck, you’re so wet,” I groaned, my cock straining against my boxers, desperate for attention. I wouldn’t let her touch me, not until she’d come at least once on my hand. Maybe another time in my mouth.

“Harder,” she whispered, fighting against my grip on her wrists. She wanted to touch me, to touch herself, and I knew it. “Please, I need more.”



I picked up speed, slipping a third finger inside and stretching her even more. She whimpered, but I could feel her walls tightening around me, the muscles tensing as she chased her climax.

“That’s it babygirl,” I muttered in her ear. “I want you to come hard for me, can you do that?”

She nodded, and I brushed my thumb over her swollen nub. The sexiest whine I’d ever heard spilled from her lips as I drew circles around her clit and fucked into her with my fingers until her pussy clenched hard around the digits.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she whispered as the orgasm rocked her, squeezing her eyes closed until it passed. Then, I finally released her hands.

Her arms flew around my neck, pulling me into a bruising kiss, and I worked to slide her pants off. Once she’d kicked them to the floor, I pulled back and teased my fingers along her naked skin.

“I’m going to taste you now,” I told her. “Is that okay?”

She nodded. “Yes, please, but I want to touch you too—”

“After this,” I said, sliding down her body and settling between her thighs. “Then, you can touch me all you want.”

## Chapter Ten

### *Kenzie*

**N**ic rolled his tongue over my sensitive clit, making my back arch up off the bed. I'd come so fast the first time, a reminder of just how long it had been since I'd gotten laid, but I could already feel a second building as he worked his mouth over me slowly.

I slid a hand beneath my shirt, squeezing one of my pebbled nipples, while my other hand fisted his air. He groaned, the vibrations sending delicious waves of pleasure rolling through me, and picked up his pace, sucking tenderly on my swollen clit until I was coming again.

I cried out, bucking my hips up against his mouth, but his hands pushed me back onto the mattress. His tongue teased my hyper-sensitive skin until I was trembling, my legs shaking. Finally, he climbed back up my body and pressed his lips against mine.

“Did you like that?” he asked, though he already knew the answer. As if my cries weren't enough proof, the bed beneath me was soaked.

I nodded, my hand already reaching for the waistband of his sweats. I wanted to feel him, taste him. I wanted him to fill every hole I had. Nothing mattered except eliminating the space between us, and I tried to hide my surprise when my fingers wrapped around his thick girth.

“Holy hell,” I whispered. My hand couldn’t wrap all the way around his thick, veiny shaft, which made me a little nervous about it fitting anywhere else. “What am I supposed to do with that?”

“Whatever you want.” He laughed. “You can suck it, ride it, or I can bend you over and fuck you until you’re screaming my name.”

My eyes lit up at the thought of him behind me, slamming into me while I bit a pillow to avoid the whole hotel floor overhearing. At the same time, I didn’t care whether they heard or not. I was too turned on, too eager for Nic’s cock, to care.

I slid my hand up the shaft and over the head, wetting my fingers with precum before sliding them back down. He kissed me, a growl rumbling in his chest as I worked my hand over him, and I decided there were too many articles of clothing in the way.

I needed him naked, *now*.

He pulled his shirt off over his head, tossing it to the floor, and kicked out of his sweatpants while I tore my own shirt off. When there was nothing left between us, I slipped down the

mattress and grabbed his cock, running my tongue around the head to tease him.

“Fuck, babygirl, I bet you look gorgeous with a fat cock in your mouth,” he said, his words making my pussy throb. I loved the way he called me babygirl, and the filthy words that came out of his mouth. They only made me wetter.

I took the head of his cock in my mouth, sucking on it slowly until his eyes were rolling into the back of his head. He cursed under his breath as I took more of him in, moving my hand in time with my mouth as I sucked. There was no way I could fit him all down my throat, even if I tried. He was too big, or so I thought.

After a few minutes, he stopped me, easing his cock out of my mouth and getting to his feet.

“Lay with your head off the side of the bed,” he urged.

I followed his instructions, dangling my head off the mattress, waiting for him to position himself perfectly.

“This will make it easier for you to take,” he explained. “Now open that pretty mouth.”

He slid his shaft into my mouth slowly, easing every thick inch down my throat until he was buried to the hilt. I could feel my throat expanding with every thrust, my gag reflex struggling for its life as he throat fucked me. When I did gag, he moaned and cursed as though it was the sexiest thing he’d ever heard.

He moved faster, his groans and grunts filling the room as he got closer to coming, but before he spilled his seed down my throat, he pulled out quickly and urged me to turn around.

“I don’t want to finish anywhere aside from your tight, wet pussy, Kenzie,” he said as I spread my legs for him. He lined the weeping head of his cock up with my slit, not even pausing for a condom—thankfully, I was on the pill—and with a thrust of his hips he was inside.

“Fuck,” I cried as he filled me, stretching me more than I’d ever been stretched before.

I felt so good, so full.

He pulled back and slammed inside again, forcing a whimper out of me as he lifted my legs and rested my feet on his shoulders. Picking up speed, he leaned forward to squeeze my breasts, pinching my nipples as he pistoned into me. I could feel another orgasm building as my pussy tightened around him, and before I knew it I was falling over the cliff again, crying out his name as he slammed into me mercilessly.

With a final thrust, he came, filling me to the brim with his hot cum until it was spilling down my ass and soaking the bed.

He gently let my legs down, leaning forward to catch my mouth with his.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous, Kenzie,” he muttered, kissing his way around my throat while we were still connected. “And you’re all mine, for as long as you want me.”

I knew it was the post-orgasm afterglow talking, but if he promised to fuck me like that forever, I don't know that I'd ever let him go.

After cleaning me up with a warm towel, Nic crawled back into bed without bothering to find his clothes, and pulled me against him. I nestled into the crook of his arms, loving the way we fit perfectly together.

Fuck, if this wasn't absolute perfection.

"Do you want me to go back to my hotel for the night?" he asked, running his fingers through my hair again.

"No." My eyelids were getting heavy, but I looked up at him anyway. "Do you want to leave?"

He shook his head. "No, I'd much rather let you take a nap and go for round two in the shower. What do you say?"

I smiled. I liked that plan a lot.

"I want you to stay," I said, resting my head against his chest and closing my eyes. "We can go get breakfast or something in the morning."

"Aren't you worried about people seeing us?" he asked.

"Oh yeah." I had to admit, I cared a little less now that I knew he was serious about a relationship, but it was probably best to keep things under wraps for a bit. "We can order breakfast then."

He laughed beneath me and his arm curled up behind my back. "Deal. Then round three can be dessert."

I slapped his chest playfully. “You’re a mess.”

“I’m just kidding,” he said, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “I just want you any way I can have you, for as long as I can have you. The rest is up to you, babygirl.”

The nickname put another smile on my face. “You might come to regret that. I can get pretty attached.”

His lips pressed against my forehead as sleep threatened to pull me under, and he huffed out a laugh. “I think I can deal with that.”

## Four Months Later

### *Kenzie*

All it took was Nic Bennett attending one of my concerts with his sister in the front row for the paparazzi to lose their minds, and before we knew it, our faces were plastered on every magazine and social media news page. It was no secret that we were dating, spending time together between concerts and games whenever we could. We'd even taken a trip to the mountains over Christmas, just the two of us.

The news outlets had a field day.

We brought in the new year at my place in New York, and we were both relieved when the NFL season ended. That meant we had more time to spend together, more time to travel. He took me to Utah to meet his grandparents, but I quickly learned I wasn't cut out for farm life.

I was a big city girl, but Nic didn't make me feel bad about it. In fact, he started spending more nights at my place, gradually bringing over a few things at a time until he had a full nightstand drawer full of his belongings.



“You know what it means if you have a toothbrush here, right?” I asked one morning while we were getting ready. There was a new ballet in town, and I’d begged him into going with me to see it, even though it wasn’t his cup of tea.

“That I have fresh breath every morning?” He laughed and pulled on a crimson dress shirt, staring at his reflection in the full-length mirror as he buttoned the front.

I was in the en suite with the door open, fixing my hair, attacking it with a curling rod and hairspray. “It means you’re basically moved in already.”

He chuckled again. “Oh, does it?”

“I mean, you stay here enough,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant, even though adrenaline was racing through my veins. “What’s this? Day five?”

“Six,” he corrected, stepping into the doorway fully dressed and leaning against the doorframe. “I see your point.”

“I wouldn’t really be opposed,” I went on, trying not to look at him as I continued curling my hair, but my eyes kept bouncing between my reflection and his in the mirror. “To you living here, I mean. If you wanted to.”

A heavy moment of silence weighed between us, seeming to stretch on forever. Maybe now hadn’t been the best time to bring up moving in together, but we’d made a few jokes about it over the last few weeks.

My pug, Roxie, slipped past Nic into the bathroom and squatted beside me, looking up with big, sad eyes like I’d

neglected her all morning.

“I’ll feed you in just a second, Roxie Rox,” I promised.

Nic still didn’t say anything, just stood there watching me get ready.

“Or not,” I finally said, setting the curling iron aside and turning to face him. “It was just a thought.”

He was staring at me with one eyebrow raised, an amused look on his face. “A serious one?”

The heat in my cheeks cranked up, scorching across my face. “I mean...yeah. I think it makes sense, don’t you?”

He pushed off the doorframe and stepped into the bathroom, closing the space between us and wrapping his arms around my waist, pulling me against his chest. His closeness had my knees turning to water, the way it always did, and I stared up into his ice-blue eyes.

“You want to live with me?” he asked, still avoiding my question.

I hesitated, but not because I didn’t already know the answer. It was because I knew what saying it out loud would mean. Up until then we’d only joked about taking the next step, but I was dangerously close to taking the leap. Then, there wouldn’t be any turning back.

But Nic was everything I’d ever wanted. I hadn’t doubted him or our relationship for a single second since the night he flew to Detroit for me. Things were too perfect, they worked too well, and I’d given up on being scared a long time ago.

Still, the nerves regarding the unknown were there.

“Yes,” I finally said. “I want to live with you. I’ve been all in since day one, Nic. I’m still all in.”

He leaned down and pressed his lips against mine. Thankfully, I hadn’t put on lipstick yet or he’d have ruined it. He kissed me slowly, his lips moving carefully and gently against mine, before he pulled back again.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

He nodded. “If that’s what you want, I’ll move in.”

“Really?” My heart was beating in my throat, the excitement overwhelming. Were we really doing this?

He nodded again. “Anything for you, Kenzie Tyler. I love you, and I just want to spend every day making you happy, giving you everything you deserve.”

The corners of my eyes stung, but I refused to cry. Nic was a dream come true, one that I wanted to consume every day for the rest of my life.

“I love you, too.”

He kissed me again, the trace of a smile on his lips, and then he grabbed my ass with both hands, making me squeal.

“Now, hurry up and get ready before plans change and we miss the ballet.” He turned and headed for the door. “I’ll feed Rox.”

She toddled after him through the doorway and I finished getting dressed, pulling on a sleek black dress and red heels. I slapped on my statement red lipstick, gave my reflection a final sweeping glance, and hurried to catch up with Nic who was waiting in the living room. *Our* living room.

I giggled.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, taking me by the hand and leading me toward the door.

“Nothing,” I assured him. “Just happy, that’s all.”

He squeezed my hand gently. “Good. I’ll do my best to make you happy every day forever. As long as you’ll have me.”

*Forever.* An awfully long time, longer than I’d ever imagined loving anyone before, but I knew it wouldn’t be nearly long enough with Nic by my side. I’d love him until my last breath, until my heart gave out, and even then, his name would be branded on my soul.

THE END

## Author Note

**T**hank you so much for reading Love's a Game!

This was such a short, sweet, fun piece to write, and I loved every second of it. These characters have a special place in my heart, and I hope you enjoyed Kenzie and Nic's love story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

If this story made you smile at all, please consider leaving a review on all your favorite platforms. Reviews (even star ratings) help more readers discover my work, and I would love to introduce more people to Kenzie and Nic's love story.

Follow me on social media so you don't miss any new releases or updates.