

**VEGAS
ACES**

THE COACH
BOOK TWO

Play Call

LISA SUZANNE

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VEGAS ACES: THE COACH
BOOK TWO
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DEDICATION

To my 3Ms.

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CHAPTER 1: JOLENE

I'm shaking as I drive toward Sam's place.

I'd go home, but I don't want to be alone.

He didn't physically threaten me, yet there was something sinister in the way Ryan Rivera was acting. Add on top of that the kiss I shared with Lincoln before he stormed off, and I just need my friend.

I call her to let her know I'm on my way, and thankfully she lets me know she's already at home and in her pajamas.

I draw in a shaky breath as I knock on her door, and she's immediately there with a hug.

"What's going on?" she asks.

I follow her into the family room and collapse on the couch. "Lincoln kissed me and then he said something about how it's out of our systems now and it's not and somehow Rivera got a picture of us and he's using it to threaten me." The words tumble out in one long, mashed up sentence.

"Jesus, that's a lot to unpack," she mutters. "Start at the beginning." She squeals and breaks into a grin. "Lincoln kissed you?"

I blow out a breath. "Yeah. He showed up at the Gridiron with some girl and kissed her right in front of me, so I went to the Complex and confronted him about it. He claims she's just an old friend. Whatever. An old friend he's felt on the inside."

She laughs. "Wow, okay, so how did we move from feeling some other girl on the inside to his mouth planting one on yours?"

"It's complicated. We were fighting and he sort of just went for it and God, it was hot. But then I pushed him away because honestly reality set in. If any of this gets out, both our careers are at stake."

"Can you remind me why that would be so bad?" she asks.

“He’s the new head coach. He’s trying to make an impression on this town before the season even starts, and he’s already tangled up with a reporter?” I shake my head. “It’s bad news all around. He’ll cause drama for the team ahead of the season, I’ll be slut-shamed and people will believe I got this job because of my vagina.”

“Don’t people already believe that?” she points out. “I mean, you’ve said so yourself.”

“Right. And I’ll only be proving those naysayers right if the pictures Rivera took of me making out with Lincoln in the lobby of the Complex hit the media.” I purse my lips pointedly at the end.

“Point made,” she concedes. “So what are you going to do?”

“Wait it out for now. It was just a threat, and maybe he won’t do anything. At the worst, maybe he’ll test the waters and report it to Marcus, who’ll give me a slap on the wrist. But there was something off about Rivera, and I don’t like it.”

She twists her lips. “Why don’t you and Jonah move in here with us for a while? I know how busy you’re going to get once team shit gets underway, and it’ll be easier than carting him back and forth to your place,” she says. “Plus then you don’t have to worry about Rivera confronting you when you’re alone.”

I wrinkle my nose at the thought. “I hate to impose.”

“Shut up. You know you’re not. We can take turns with the boys and split rent. It just makes more sense since we spend all our time together anyway.”

I twist my lips as I contemplate it. “My parents will help out, too, and I know Jonah would *love* living with his best friend.”

“Cade would love it, too. Let’s do it.”

I nod. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

She nods resolutely, and then she says, “Now give me all the details on that kiss.”

I give her a half-hearted chuckle, but the truth is I'm not really sure I want to talk about it. She knows about the sordid history between Lincoln and me. She knows about our family feud. She also knows me well enough to know that I still have deep feelings for the guy, and as much as I hate him, I also love him.

“It was a one-time thing I'd rather not relive,” I finally say.

But, God, he still smells like the same cologne—exactly the way he smelled all those years ago.

He still holds me like our bodies were made to fit together.

He still causes feelings to pulse in me the likes of which have not been met since him.

I've tried. Over the years, I've sampled enough of the menu to know that what we had was once in a lifetime.

But just because it was special doesn't mean it was meant to last.

I try to convince myself it was nothing more than a teenage crush getting the guy. Deep down I know it was far more than that, but thinking about it that way allows me to pretend like it didn't mean as much as it did. It allows me to bury those feelings down deep.

It allows me to move forward and live my life, focusing on my son and my career.

“Fine,” she huffs.

“I should go home and start packing. I'll have to give my notice to my landlord, and there's a million things to do with the season starting soon, and don't forget about the—”

“Take a breath, girl.” She shakes her head. “Listen, all that other stuff will work out. If you want to revel in the feel of his lips on yours with your best friend for a minute, it's okay. It's not like I'm going to run and tell your parents on you.”

Right.

My parents.

How would my dad feel if he saw the photos Rivera took of us?

He'd feel betrayed. He'd feel hurt. He'd feel like I'm sleeping with the enemy.

But at what point do I give into my own needs and set aside my family's feelings?

If I had the answer to that question, I might have a better idea of how to move forward.

But I don't, and so the only option at this point is complete and total avoidance.

Except that's not possible given our jobs.

I am so fucked.

CHAPTER 2: LINCOLN

“Do whatever it takes to get him here,” Jack says at our meeting on Monday morning. “We’ve got huge shoes to fill with Ben Olson’s retirement and while I know Austin Graham is solid out there, I’ve seen what your brother can do. Let’s get it done. I just need your assurance you can coach him the same way you coach the rest of your players.”

“Of course,” I say flippantly, a little insulted he’d even mention that.

“Be prepared to answer that question a thousand times over,” he warns me, and he turns to Steve. “Can you get on it?”

Steve nods his agreement. “I’ll get in touch with his agent this morning.”

“I think we need Ben Olson on our staff for tight ends, too,” Jack adds. “Imagine what he’d do with your brother.”

“Would he want to coach?” I ask.

Jack shrugs. “I know he wants to focus on his girls and his health clubs for the next year or so, but I don’t think it’s out of the question for next year, and I imagine he’ll work like Luke does—as a consultant with this team’s best interests in mind.”

Hell of a way to stay connected to the game—to be a consultant who doesn’t have to travel to every away game and can work more of a normal schedule than what we put in. But if it means having guys like Luke and Ben and their expertise around, it’s well worth it.

“Anything else?” Jack asks.

“I do have one more thing. Potentially.” I nearly say *this stays between us*, but I’m confident that anything spoken inside the walls of this office stays between the three men sitting here.

Both Jack and Steve turn toward me.

“My brother Grayson is toying with retirement. I think he’d be a great fit for our coaching staff.”

“Is this the Vegas Aces or the Vegas Nashes?” Steve quips, but he’s got a point.

Jack studies me for a beat. “What would make him a great fit? I need this to be a strategic business decision, not the first step in the Nash family taking over Vegas.”

“The Daltons have the lock on that,” I joke.

He raises his brows pointedly rather than laughing.

“It’s not nepotism,” I say. “Grayson is all business when it comes to the game, and I think his attitude would be an incredible addition to our coaching staff.”

“But you’re not sure he wants to retire?” Steve asks.

I shrug. “We had a good talk this weekend and he’s not sure he wants to keep playing, but he’s also not sure he’s ready to let our father down.”

“Why would that be letting him down?” Steve asks.

“Everybody retires at some point,” Jack points out a bit defensively given the fact that he just retired a couple months ago. “There’s only one other way to get taken out of the game, as you’re well aware, and if your body’s telling you to stop, you stop.”

A beat of quiet passes through the room, and then finally Steve says, “I’ll defer to you since it’s your staff and I trust you’d be placing the best man for the job in each position.”

“Thanks, Steve.” I shoot him a tight smile. “As you know, I’ve retained the majority of the staff that was here. I don’t want to attempt to fix something that isn’t broken, but I also want everyone to know I have a different way of coaching than Mitch did.”

Jack nods and glances down at the tablet in front of him. “I agree it’s important to set the tone early that this is new leadership. And to that end, Lily and our charitable contributions director, Erin, have been working around the clock behind the scenes to organize a huge kickoff charity

event set to take place mid-June, the weekend after mandatory minicamp so everyone is back in town. I'm hoping it'll be an annual event, but this year it'll be a great place to introduce our new staff and players to the community. We'll have performances, speeches, meet and greets, an auction. Things like that. I'd like you to be an honorary chair to help promote the event, and we'll get our news correspondents an inside track to cover it."

News correspondents.

I know he means Jolene, and my chest tightens as I think of our kiss last night.

I push it down. Far, far down. Now is not the time to be thinking about what it felt like to have her body pressed to mine. What it was like to feel her lips moving beneath mine. The sweet orange blossoms twisting their way into my senses and hooking back on like they never let go.

One kiss and I'm already back in the thick of it.

This doesn't happen to me. I don't get attached *because* of everything I lost when I lost her.

I know I hurt her when I ended things between us all those years ago.

But I was hurt, too, and I'm not sure she looked past the blame far enough to see that. The day I ended things with her because of what my father did to her father, I became somebody else.

And I've never been that kid again. The one that was full of hope for the future. The one that openly shared himself with somebody else. The one who got attached and never wanted to let go.

It's not who I am, and I've been *this* man now longer than I was that guy. This is who I am now. The guy who played pro football for a few years before he got taken out of the game and had to take the back-up route to coaching.

The past catching up with the present isn't going to change that.

Except...

She knows.

She's been digging.

I can't have her digging.

Nobody ever questioned the story. It happened at a time when there wasn't a crowd full of amateur videographers constantly on their smart phones catching every play on film to study it from every angle.

There were two angles, and when I had to have another surgery done thanks to the infection, it was my out. My dad questioned the doctors, but I was old enough to tell them they couldn't tell my father a damn word.

I gave it to him straight.

The infection's too severe. They're either cutting my leg off or my career off.

It wasn't the first time I lied to my father.

Nor was it the last.

"Does that sound good, Coach?"

I nod as Jack's voice pulls me out of the haze where I find myself. "Sounds great, boss. Thanks."

"Good, because I've got some stuff lined up for this week already to start getting the word out. We'll take early donations, and a few journalists will be stopping by for exclusives talking about the event. I've had Lily put together a packet of information on the event for you, so study it hard because we'll be answering questions starting tomorrow."

"Great," I say, but there's little enthusiasm behind my tone as my fear is that this will only serve as a distraction when I need to be getting the roster and my coaching staff set.

And by *this*...I definitely mean Jolene.

CHAPTER 3: JOLENE

My hands are shaking as I pull into the parking lot at the Complex.

This is ridiculous.

I've *never* been nervous to interview someone before except maybe the last time I interviewed Lincoln Nash.

But we kissed two nights ago, and two things are true:

I haven't seen him since.

And I haven't stopped thinking about him.

I got a call from Jack's secretary arranging press interviews for an upcoming charity event, so here I am. I know the major details from the press packet, but I'll grab a few sound bites with Dave's help so I can produce a feature on it. I spot the VG03 news van in the parking lot, so I know he's already here setting up.

It'll be helpful to have a smiling face in the room with me, but Dave doesn't quite know the extent of my history with Linc.

Nobody does. Well, except Sam. And whoever Lincoln told, which I'd assume is exactly nobody.

All Dave knows is that there was tension between us the last time I interviewed him, and maybe that's why I'm nervous about doing it again.

Or maybe I'm nervous I won't be able to look anywhere else except his lips as I recall what it felt like when they were moving over mine, that hard body pressed against me as I gave into what's always been there between us even though we both firmly planted it in the past.

I guess it's not planted as firmly in the past as I was hoping.

When I walk into the building, Lily is standing in the lobby. She hands me a sheet of paper with my interview itinerary then directs me to the conference rooms on the right rather than to the media room on the left.

I head into the one with VG03 marked on a sign on the door, and I find Dave ready to go. I set my bag with my laptop on the table and clip on the mic pack, and then I look over the itinerary.

I'll have this room for the next hour, and in that time, I'll be interviewing six people. I read through their roles on the team and for this charity event.

Jack Dalton, current Aces team owner and event chairperson of the first annual Wild Aces Charity Ball.

Luke Dalton, former Aces player, current coach's consultant, brother of the owner, and honorary chairperson for the event.

Erin McMahon, director of charitable contributions for the Aces and fundraising chairperson for the event.

Travis Woods, current starting wide receiver and honorary chairperson for the event.

Ben Olson, former starting tight end and entertainment chairperson for the event.

Last on my list is Lincoln Nash, current head coach and another honorary chairperson for the event.

It'll be a ten-minute round robin to ask whatever questions I want to ask regarding the charity event, and I'll have to keep it on topic with such short windows. I'll need a variety of different things from each person so I can create several feature stories over the next couple months to get buzz going as we get closer to the event.

I'm ready.

The first interview with Jack goes well, as do the next four. Everyone is friendly and excited as we discuss various aspects of the event. Three former players and a current player all well-loved by the Aces fanbase make for incredibly interesting interviews, and my only wish is that I had more than ten minutes with each of them.

Ben Olson in particular. I've never had the pleasure of interviewing him, and he's hilarious with his stories of antics

from his playing days. I find myself laughing with him and wishing we had more time.

But we don't, and as he walks out of the conference room, Lincoln Nash walks in.

He looks...uncomfortable.

Sexy as hell, of course, as if there was ever any question about that, but he definitely looks stiff—as if he wants to be anywhere but here.

It's just making me even more nervous.

“Coach Nash, how lovely to see you again,” I say, doing my best to be friendly even though the tension in here is palpable.

He nods without returning the greeting.

“Tell us about your role in the charity ball,” I say.

He clears his throat. “I've been tasked as an honorary chairperson, so I will be promoting the event and raising awareness for the Aces Foundation.”

“Can you tell me a little about what the Aces Foundation does?” I ask.

He looks annoyed, as if I'm quizzing him on his new team, and maybe I am a little.

“Our mission statement is to empower our future leaders and work toward bettering the community through youth development and education. We support a variety of charities here in Las Vegas, including youth football programs and scholarships.”

My eyes flick to his lips as he speaks. The memory of his hands on my body flashes through my mind, and I'm finding it difficult to focus on what I'm asking him next.

I suck in a shaky breath.

“And, um...” I clear my throat and look at my notes as I finally remember what I'm doing here. “How will you support these community endeavors in your new position as head coach?”

“I will always encourage my players to get involved and give back. We’re very fortunate to play a game we all love, and we want to share that love with this community that has always been so supportive to us. We’re hopeful we can continue making a difference.”

It’s a generic answer, but I’m not sure what I was expecting.

Maybe being able to break down those walls a little. Something to try to let the viewers see the side of Lincoln Nash I saw last night just for a glimmer of a second before it was gone again.

Our time is too short. Ten minutes passes in a flash, and he thanks me before he stands to pull off his mic pack.

“Can I, uh...can I talk to you for a moment before you go?” I ask him. I glance over at Dave. “Alone?” I pull off my own mic pack, too, to clearly indicate that this will be off the record, and I click off the power before setting it on the table.

Dave gives me a sideways glance before he exits the room. I’m sure he’ll have questions, but I need Lincoln to know what happened two nights ago.

“What?” he says once the door clicks shut behind Dave.

“Another reporter at VG-oh-three, Ryan Rivera, wants my job,” I blurt.

He folds his arms across his chest and quirks an eyebrow. “And this affects me...how, exactly?”

“He was standing outside the Complex when I left Sunday night. He got pictures of us...” I lower my voice to a whisper. “Kissing.”

“Fuck.” He closes his eyes for a beat.

“He threatened to turn them into my boss.”

“Do you think he’ll post them anywhere?” he asks, unfolding his arms and placing his palms on the table in front of us.

I shrug. "I don't know, but I think he likes having something over me for now."

He presses his lips together and nods. "I knew it was a fucking mistake," he mutters. "God dammit."

And with those words, he shatters my heart all over again as he walks out of the room.

CHAPTER 4: LINCOLN

I mean...yeah. I should've known better than to kiss her in the lobby. If not for Rivera, then because there are cameras all over the damn place in there.

But I'm nothing more than a weak man who gave into the temptation that's been dangling in front of me since I got to town.

Truth be told, I want so much more than a kiss.

The first thing that hit me when she said some douchebag threatened to expose our kiss was this surge of protectiveness. I wanted to find him and murder him. Maybe not literally, but the way she said it made me think there's more to the story than just a simple threat. She seemed scared over it, and I knew if I didn't say something nasty and get the fuck out of there, I would've taken her into my arms to comfort her.

There are windows in this conference room. I can't afford that.

I know those feelings I hold for her run deep, but on the other hand, I don't know who the fuck she is now. She doesn't know who I am, either, and even if she did, it wouldn't matter.

Except...it *does* matter.

I don't know how much longer I can fight against this when I already know I'll be with her a good portion of the upcoming season. She's covering *everything*. There will be no escape.

And maybe the perfect solution is to get her fired. I could get this Rivera guy to get more pictures of us at the most opportune moments and convince him to turn them into their boss. She'd be fired and I wouldn't have to deal with her when I'm trying to focus on the new season and my new position.

But...

I can't do that.

I'm not like my father.

I can't hurt someone just because it fits my own agenda.

It would be easier. But it would also be wrong, and most often in life, the harder thing is the right thing.

At least that's what I've always told myself. It's what I convinced myself was true when I ended things with her the first time.

The harder thing here isn't avoiding her and getting her out of the picture. The harder thing is having her present at every Aces event and knowing I can't be with her when my chest lights up just at the mere sight of that blonde hair swirling in its chaotic madness.

I blow out a breath as I make my way to my office. Jack peeks his head in the doorway, and he asks me how everything went. It was fine. Six reporters, ten minutes each, and a fucking bulldozer to the stomach at the end. Perfect.

And then he tells me Ben Olson is on his way up for a chat.

I blow out a breath as I put my salesman cap back on. I have one job, and it's to get him on my coaching staff.

I hear him before I see him. "Megan!" he yells, greeting my secretary by first name as he approaches. "Is Nash in there?"

"He is, and he's expecting you, Mr. Olson," Megan says, and I sit up a little straighter in my chair.

"Hey Coach," he says as his large frame fills my doorway.

"Come on in," I say, standing to greet my guest. "Have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"I'm good." He holds up a can of some energy drink. "Free samples from some company trying to get into my health clubs, but I gotta be honest, it tastes like shit." He laughs but takes another sip anyway, and I chuckle along with him.

"Listen, I'll cut to the chase since I know you're a busy man. I think you'd be an incredible fit on our coaching staff working with our tight ends, and I'm prepared to offer you a full-time position with us."

He laughs. "Dude, I just retired so I could spend more time with my girls. I can't put in the hours I did when I was a

player, but get me one of those deals like Luke has and I'll think about it."

"You're open to working as a team consultant?" I press, hoping that I can hook him in with a consulting gig that turns to a permanent position down the line.

He nods. "I'm down for showing up to practices a few days a week. I'd be happy to help draft up new plays. But I can't commit to the team schedule. I need a year to figure out what my life is going to look like now that I'm not on my football routine."

"I get that, and I appreciate your honesty. I'll talk with Jack and we'll draft up a consulting contract."

He nods and takes another sip of his drink, and he makes a face. "Seriously, this is trash. Okay, Coach. Thanks for the chat." He heads out, leaving me to my work, and I finally get a minute to decompress after what Jolene shared with me.

I manage to avoid her for the next week, and suddenly we're at the first official day of the new season. Since I've already been working here nearly a month, the day comes and goes with business as usual. I set the final schedule for our voluntary minicamp early next week with Jack and Steve, and we finalize plans for the draft which takes place at the end of next week.

It'll be the busiest week since I started here, and it'll be my debut as head coach. Most of the players will come in for the voluntary minicamp if nothing else to get a look at what the team is going to look like without so many veteran players along with the new additions we've made this off-season.

Including Asher Nash, my little brother, who I'm calling now with the good news.

"What?" he answers.

"Welcome to the Aces," I say dryly. "I'm excited to have you and see what you can do for us."

"Thanks, Coach." I can hear the laughter in his voice. "I'm excited, too."

“We can discuss your role once you get here, and you’re welcome to stay with me if you need a place.”

“I appreciate that, bruh, but I’m gonna pass. Can’t allow all my new teammates to think you’re favoring your little brother.” He makes a good point.

“Let me know if you need help getting here. Otherwise, I’ll see you for minicamp next week.”

“I’m good. See ya, Coach,” he says, and he cuts the call.

That’s Asher for you. Unpredictable except when it comes to making great plays on the field.

There’s a knock on my office door, and I turn my attention in that direction and find my secretary standing there holding onto a package.

“What’s that?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Just arrived for you. It has a Melissa Nash as the return address.”

She hands it to me, and I rip it open to find a framed photo from the anniversary weekend. It’s got all six of us—my parents and my four brothers—and we’re all smiling and happy in it despite the secrets we were all keeping.

My lips lift a bit at it as the memories of the nice weekend we had together wash over me. It felt like things were simpler only a few days ago. I blow out a breath and set the photo on my credenza. I’m certain my mother sent it here rather than to my home with intention—she wanted a piece of the family in my office, and who am I to let her down?

“Thanks, Meg,” I say, and then Austin Graham shows up behind Megan.

I wave him in. “Come on in,” I say.

He takes a seat across from me. “I heard the news about your brother,” he says, and I’m not surprised how fast word travels in this industry. “Can we talk about what this might mean for me?”

“Right now we don’t know what it means, Austin. We’ll take a hard look during camp, but you know my style is to keep the defense on their toes. That could mean anywhere from zero to three tight ends on the field for any given play, and I know your strengths. We’ll utilize them and push you to success.”

He nods. “I was hoping I’d be the one to step in Ben Olson’s shoes,” he admits. “I’ve been waiting my turn, and I thought this was it.”

“Nobody’s saying it isn’t right now except for you. Don’t worry. You’re a valuable player on this team, and I will need you to bring your A-game every time you step foot on that field.”

He nods, still not looking any less deflated than when he walked in here. “Look, Coach. I know you’re aggressive and you’re a risk-taker. I just need to know I’m not getting benched because you’re giving your brother a chance instead.”

I expected the accusation at some point, but I didn’t think it would be literally five seconds after the paperwork was signed, and I didn’t expect a player to confront me over it. “This is a business, Graham, and it would serve you well to remember that.” My tone is icy as I say it. “I will be making decisions based on what’s best for this team, and I’ll thank you in advance to trust that I know what I’m doing. If you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

“Yes, sir.” He mumbles his words and stands to leave, and I wonder for a beat if I was too harsh.

It’s a fine line here. I’m a coach, and part of my job is to support and motivate my players.

But I won’t stand here and be questioned over my decisions, and bringing Asher in wasn’t solely my decision. It was a group effort, and frankly I’m angry that Austin thinks he can just walk in here and tell me how it’s going to be.

Fuck that.

He’s not in charge here, and if that’s how he wants to play it, he *will* be spending more time riding the pine because in all

honesty, Asher is the stronger player. It's why I wanted him here.

And if Austin was really honest with himself, he'd know that, too. It's likely why he came to talk to me today, and he walked out of here knowing that questioning the way I do things won't yield the results he's hoping for.

A small part of me hopes he'll tell his teammates about our encounter so they don't question me next. But another part of me feels just the smallest sense of guilt that I was so firm with him when the truth of the matter is that I'm still all twisted up over Jolene and the photos some other reporter has of us.

She's already affecting the way I coach, and the season is still months from starting.

I can't imagine what that's going to mean once it actually gets underway.

CHAPTER 5: JOLENE

“Can you get Cade and me into this?” Jonah asks me on Wednesday morning over breakfast. We haven’t officially moved into Sam’s place yet, but it’s the plan for this weekend since my rental company wants me out by the end of the month.

He hands me a flyer, and I read it out loud.

“Youth football camp hosted by Cory Marshall and Austin Graham of the Vegas Aces. One day only. Register by...” I trail off and scan through the details. “It’s this Saturday. You want me to sign you up?”

He nods. “A kid at school said it’s full but I figured you can get us in. It’s so cool that you know real football players, Mom.”

Well I can’t not be cool in my seven-year-old’s eyes, right?

“I’ll see what I can do, but I can’t make any promises.”

He grins. “Thanks, Mom.” He leaps up from the table to hug me. “You’re the best.”

Now I really have to make it work.

As it turns out, the event is being put together by Ellie Dalton—the publicist who manages many Aces players. I haven’t formally met her yet, but I’ve heard great things.

I look her up and give her a call after Jonah catches the bus.

“Prince Charming Public Relations,” a voice answers.

“Hi there. My name is Jolene Bailey, and I’m the Vegas Aces correspondent with VG-oh-three. I’m looking for Ellie Dalton.”

“This is Ellie, and hi, Jolene! I’m a big fan and I am so excited to talk to you.” She’s bubbly and sweet and she already feels like a friend.

“You’re so kind,” I say, trying to maintain some semblance of modesty.

“What can I do for you?”

“My son just told me about the camp Marshall and Graham are hosting this weekend and I was wondering if you could snag me a couple spots for it. I’d be happy to cover the event for VG-oh-three,” I offer.

“News coverage? That’s a definite yes. I do know the camp has been filled for weeks, though, and we have space limitations due to fire codes,” she says. “Let me see what I can do and I’ll get back to you in a bit.”

“Thanks, Ellie. I appreciate it.”

True to her word, Ellie calls me back about an hour later when I’m deep into editing the interviews from the other day for the charity event.

“Great news. We had twin boys drop just last night because apparently they’re into baseball now instead of football, so we have two spots open.”

I laugh. “I will take them, and I’ll get my camera crew out there with me.”

“This is great. I’ll send over the waivers and information.”

I give her my email address, and it looks like I have some weekend plans now. As does Sam...who can meet two hot, single football players and, you know, maybe score with one of them.

And maybe I could score with the other, though that would look about as good as it would look for me to score with the coach. Especially because both of them are significantly younger than me.

Maybe Sam can get really lucky and score with both.

And I can sit over here on the sidelines pretending like I’m not obsessed with Lincoln.

I blow out a breath. This is hard.

Reporting on his team is hard.

He’s never far from my thoughts as it is, but usually work serves as my distraction. He’s involved in every aspect of my

job now, though, making that an impossible feat.

And what's worse is I just found out this morning that Marcus scored me a ticket to the graduation ceremony at Lincoln's alma mater so I can watch him give the commencement address.

Lincoln Nash giving a motivational speech and I'm supposed to cover it and pretend like my fucking ovaries aren't exploding. Fun.

Saturday rolls around, and to my surprise, both Austin and Cory are the ones checking kids in for the camp. It's actually their camp, not just some camp run by someone else that they make an appearance at, and I'm impressed from the word *go*.

The event is taking place at a high school starting at eight in the morning and running until four, and Sam and I plan to be here all day for it. Dave is stopping by around ten to grab some footage, and I'll get more on my phone if I need it.

It's a little before ten when Austin jogs over toward me. I'm standing near the fence with Sam, and we were just about to head over to the bleachers to sit for a bit.

"You're Jolene Bailey from VG-oh-three," he says.

"That's me. And you're Austin Graham, tight end of the Vegas Aces." I flash him a smile, and he grins back.

"I'm a huge fan," he says.

"Back at you. I can't wait to watch what you've got in store this season."

"Thanks," he says. "Are you just here reporting?"

I shake my head. "The kid in the neon orange is mine."

He chuckles. "Jonah? He's really good. He's got natural ability."

"What about Cade in the Minecraft shirt?" Sam asks, hopping into our conversation.

"Yeah, he's doing great too."

Sam preens and turns her attention back to the boys, and I giggle at her.

“I can see natural defensive abilities in Jonah. Your father played, right?”

I nod and feel myself flush a little. Is he flirting with me? He knows my dad played, he thinks my son is doing well. And if he *is* flirting...am I kind of flattered?

Yes. Very.

He’s a hot football player with a tight end.

I mean...he’s got a hot tight end.

I mean...

Yeah. I said what I said.

I clear my throat. “He was a cornerback for the Giants for many years.”

“And he taught you everything you know about football?”

I laugh. “Something like that. I’ve done a fair bit of research over the years, too, but I did grow up around the game.”

“Well your knowledge is second to none. I always tune into VG-oh-three first before the ESPN highlights.”

He’s definitely flirting.

“Well, you know, that was all my predecessor. But I’m so excited to take it over, and I’d love to do a player profile on you if you’re up for it.”

“Fuck yeah I’m up for it. We can talk about the other youth camps I run or, you know, whatever. Maybe over dinner?” he suggests.

I don’t want to decline since I want the interview, but it’s also probably wrong to lead him on when it would be a conflict of interest for me to date a player, but I don’t actually get the chance to decline.

Someone else steps in to do it for me.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

We both whip around at the sound of his voice, and there stands Lincoln Fucking Nash, black Aces t-shirt stretched over strong biceps and mirrored sunglasses covering his eyes to give me even fewer clues as to what he might be thinking.

God, he's hot. It's not fair.

"Coach, I'm so glad you showed up," Austin says, stiffening a little at the sight of his coach.

I, on the other hand, feel venom freeze my veins.

"You don't think *what* is a good idea?" I ask him.

"Graham taking you out on a date. It's a conflict of interest, never mind the age difference."

"The age difference?" I ask, and I swear to God, this asshole just loves to get a rise out of me.

"Graham, what are you...twenty-five?" He asks. He jerks a thumb at me. "She's thirty-four."

"Age is just a number," I sniff haughtily, but how fucking dare he?

"Oh, I wasn't asking her out," Austin says, but he totally was, and seeing him cower under the presence of his coach is a total turn-off anyway. "I should get back to the players. Thanks, Ms. Bailey."

"It was lovely chatting with you, Austin," I say, my voice all low and raspy just to push Lincoln's buttons a little more.

"You too." He scampers back to the field.

"Uh, excuse me," Sam says. "Just going to run over to..." She trails off as she walks away from us, not hiding the fact at all that she's giving Lincoln and me a moment alone.

"What the fuck was that?" I demand.

"You're welcome. I'm sure that was uncomfortable for you." He chuckles a little. He knows *exactly* what he just did, and he thinks this is funny.

"It wasn't. He's a nice guy."

"He's a child, Jolene. You deserve a man." His voice is low.

“Like you?” I challenge.

“Oh no. Definitely not me.”

“So what...you can't have me and nobody else can, either?” I hiss.

“That's not what that was. He should be on the field with those kids, not flirting with a reporter.” He's so casual about it, and I want to slap him. Hard.

But I also want him to rail me. Hard.

“But it's fine for you?” I ask.

“I'm not flirting with you.”

“Bullshit.”

“There are children around, Ms. Bailey. You should watch your language.”

“I hate you,” I mutter.

“That's the thing. I don't really believe you when you say that.”

I huff. “What are you even doing here?”

“I heard you'd be here.”

A traitorous butterfly flaps wildly around my chest.

“Kidding. Graham and Marshall invited me to stop by and check out what they do for their kids camps. I had a free minute this morning and it's a beautiful spring Vegas day, so I stopped by. But I have to be honest, Bailey. I didn't like seeing him flirting with you.”

“What difference does it make to you?” I practically spit at him.

“Maybe you're right,” he murmurs.

“About what?” I demand.

“I can't have you, but nobody else can, either.” Those are the last words spoken between us before he runs out onto the field to jump into helping coach the boys in the camp.

And for some reason, when I see Lincoln talking to my son about a big play he just made, the hot threat of tears pinch behind my eyes.

That should've been *our* boy.

It should have worked between us.

But it didn't, and now it can't.

CHAPTER 6: LINCOLN

Voluntary minicamp starts Monday, so I spend the rest of my weekend working on my speech and doing some volunteer work in the community as arranged for me by my new publicist.

I was invited to give the commencement address at my alma mater, and I have a few ideas of what I want to say, but I haven't written any of it out yet.

I get started on that so it's ready to go since it's coming up the weekend after the draft. Life is about to get real busy real fast.

Minicamp gets underway and it's a whirlwind three days filled with meetings and playbook reviews and running drills and setting goals.

It's fucking magic, and it's my first look at what this season will look like.

And above all else, I'm having *fun*.

Sure, Bailey is here covering shit, but I'm too busy running drills to be distracted by her. We execute plays I've had in my back pocket for years. We make plans as I work hard to motivate these players. I make lists of strengths and lists of concerns.

It's our first real look at what our team is going to be, and we'll add a few more players with the draft at the end of the week.

There's just one sore spot through minicamp, and it's Austin Graham.

I don't know if I'm still angry with him for confronting me in my office or if it has something to do with finding him hitting on Jolene, but either way...I don't like him.

I can't allow my personal feelings about him to cloud the way I coach him, though—as much as I'm tempted to.

It's three days filled with football, my favorite thing in the world, and I'm at the Complex from sunrise to well past sundown.

And once minicamp is over and players return to their homes, it's time for the draft.

Jack and I head to Steve's house bright and early the first morning. We've gone over our plans a thousand different ways, and we're confident we'll get our first pick.

We watch each pick carefully, and of course the best of the best players are chosen first. By the time our pick comes at the end of the first round, some of our top choices have already been taken. But we need a quarterback, and that's what we go for with our first pick.

Brandon Fletcher—Jack's back-up who was the starter before Jack was traded to the Aces—is strong. But he didn't win any rings at the helm, and we want to score a champion to put in there.

And to that end, we take the rookie out of Northwestern, Miles Hudson. He's been an incredible leader for the university, and I can't wait to see what he does on our team.

Over the next couple days, we end up filling the rest of the holes on the roster, and I can't wait for our next minicamp so I can get to know these new players and start acclimating them to our culture here.

It's an exciting time for any team when new players are added to the roster, and we're just a few weeks away from seeing what these guys are capable of with the rest of our team.

The next week passes in a blur, and I find myself catching a plane to Ohio for the graduation ceremony. I book first class since my six-foot-four former pro football playing frame rarely has enough space in economy, and I slide into my aisle seat in the first group of passengers to board the plane, hoping against hope that nobody snags the open window seat.

My plane plan is to go over my speech then study film of the rookies we just added to the team.

I pull out my tablet as the rest of the passengers load the plane. Since first class typically boards first, I feel like I'm safe, so I stretch out my knee and slip it under the seat in front of the seat beside me. I slip in my earbuds and find the podcast on leadership I downloaded to listen to on the plane while I work, and I crank up the volume.

I pull up my speech on the tablet, and I'm still on the first paragraph when a pair of legs in sexy black heels stops beside me. She attempts to shove her small suitcase into the overhead bin but seems to struggle a little before she gets it where she wants it, and my eyes are on the legs the entire time.

I didn't *want* someone sitting beside me, but the legs sticking out of a tight tan skirt aren't the worst part of my day. My eyes travel up the legs to the tits, which also seem lovely as they stretch the buttons of her black shirt, until they land on the strands of blonde swirling in chaos.

"Oh you have *got* to be kidding me." Jolene's words paired with the sour look on her face when my eyes finally meet hers tell me she's about as happy about this as I am.

"I assume your seat is somewhere in the back and you're just stopping by to say hello?"

"Like either of us would get that lucky. Scooch it, Coach. That's my seat." She nods toward the one beside me.

Of fucking course it is.

"What are you doing here?" I ask as I stand from my seat to allow her in.

It's a tight squeeze, and those lovely tits brush against my chest as she moves past me. Instant erection. Instant.

Fuck.

I sit back in my own seat.

"Marcus booked me a last-minute ticket to Ohio to watch some boring commencement ceremony," she says, and she shoots me a smirk.

"You're going?" I'm not sure why the thought of her there watching me makes me a little...nervous.

It throws me off my game.

“My boss told me in no uncertain terms that I am to become your new best friend. I think he and I have different visions as to how this is going to play out, but here I am, ready to cover your speech. And for the record, this was the only open seat left. This plane is completely sold out. Trust me when I say this was not intentional.” She waves her hand between the two of us to indicate that she didn’t plan on sitting next to me.

“Sure,” I say, my voice filled with sarcasm.

“Believe what you want.” She shrugs, and then she slips in her own earbuds and pulls out her tablet. She’s doing some work, too, and I glance over at her screen.

I read the headline of the article she’s working on. “Austin Graham? You got a thing for that kid?”

She pulls out the earbud on my side. “What?”

I clear my throat. “Nothing.”

She raises a brow. “Are you jealous?”

I knew she heard me. “Of a kid nine years younger than you? No.”

“Part of my job is to profile players on the team, and part of the reason why I got this position is my ability to get the kind of details our viewers want. Is there a sound bite you’d like to give about Graham? Or would you prefer I just mention how you’re jealous of all the pussy he must get?”

I nearly choke on her use of the word pussy.

And, naturally, just hearing it out of her mouth makes me want to taste hers.

When her words pair with the softest scent of orange blossoms, I know I’m fucked.

This is going to be a tough weekend. The two of us alone in the same city fighting what’s clearly evident between us? I’m not sure how we’re going to get through the next couple days unscathed.

CHAPTER 7: JOLENE

The second the words are out of my mouth, I regret them.

Mostly because I don't want to think about any of the pussy Lincoln must get. The thought of him being with some other woman actually tears at my soul a little.

But I can't take it back, and he turns to his tablet rather than dignifying me with a response.

I turn toward the window rather than toward him. When I face him, I get little whiffs of bergamot every so often, and it causes more harm than good.

I should be working. It was my plan all along, and if nothing else, I should be interviewing Lincoln or something. But he's busy doing his own thing, and I should be too.

Still...his leg brushes mine when he shifts.

His arm is planted firmly on that middle armrest as he asserts his dominance, and when he lifts it to reach down to rub his knee, I claim it myself.

That's just us now. A nonverbal fight over something as insignificant as a plane armrest.

At least once we land, we can go our separate ways to our own hotels and the only time I'll need to see him again is at the commencement address tomorrow morning.

Then it's one more night in Ohio before I head back to Vegas.

Not that it's any safer there. We're a few weeks out from the organized team activities, many of which I'll need to cover. It's four weeks of that with the charity ball capping the end, and then a month later, we're back for training camp and the official kickoff of the new season.

It's going to be a whole lot of Lincoln Nash over the next year, and if he proves himself, likely beyond that.

Coaches can come and go at any time. No one is safe, and if Lincoln doesn't keep up the winning culture here in Vegas,

he'll be on the chopping block no matter how tight he and Jack become over the next year.

A part of me hopes he doesn't make the cut. I want him out of my town.

But the other part of me wants him to succeed with everything I have inside. Not just because I love the Aces and they're my home team, but—and it's hard to admit this even to myself—because this is Lincoln. Despite the sordid history between us, deep down I still care about him. Deep down I still want him to succeed.

Even though I hate him.

It's confusing.

We spend the flight ignoring each other, but I can't ignore the way he smells. I can't ignore the heat I feel coming off him. I can't ignore the way my stomach flips knowing he's so close to me.

But he's still so, so far.

When the plane lands, he grabs his suitcase out of the overhead and bolts, which is probably for the best. I take my time and get my suitcase down with the help of a flight attendant, and I reserve a Lyft close by. I spot Lincoln as a chauffeur ushers him toward a limo, and they take off toward whatever hotel he's staying in.

My own ride shows up a few minutes later, and my driver confirms my destination—the hotel closest to where the graduation ceremony is taking place.

And when we get there, the lobby is absolute madness.

Graduation is tomorrow, and the line to check in is at least thirty people deep. I'm not shocked when I spot Lincoln in line only a few spots ahead of me, but if he sees me, he pretends he doesn't. It makes sense he'd be staying here since it's so close to the stadium, but I'm sort of surprised he doesn't get some VIP check-in service given his importance.

I'm sure he is, too.

The person in front of him in line seems to recognize him, and they strike up a conversation.

I, on the other hand, am just a lowly reporter, and nobody here even knows me.

I can't help but study Lincoln's profile when he shifts just a bit in the line. Once upon a time, he was mine.

And now...this. We're three people away from each other and ignoring the other's presence.

It's sad where we've landed. I wish things could be different, but I know they can't.

The line moves quickly, and I watch as Lincoln walks up to check in. The three in front of me are apparently sharing a room, and they get called up next. The agent beside Lincoln opens up, and she calls me up.

"Jolene Bailey checking in," I say, and I hand over my license and credit card.

She taps away at her keyboard, and I feel his gaze on my profile. I finally turn and look at him. "What?"

He raises his brows and shakes his head with a bit of a smirk as if to say he had a feeling I'd end up in the same place as him.

Yeah, well. Me too.

I blow out a breath and return my attention to my agent.

"I'm so sorry, Ms. Bailey, but it looks like we don't have a room for you."

"I'm sorry? Maybe it's under my boss's name since his secretary booked it. Marcus Dean?"

She shakes her head. "No, your reservation is in here, but your boss booked via our quick book option which is sort of like standby for hotels. We're overbooked this weekend, so I don't have anything available. You can try the Hilton down the street, but this late in the game, I can assure you everything nearby is sold out."

"Are you kidding me?" I ask. "What am I supposed to do?"

“We have a sister hotel about thirty minutes away if you’d like me to check if they have any availability.”

I blow out a frustrated breath. “Fine. Sure.”

She gets on the phone and says some things, and when she’s done, she glances up at me and makes an apologetic face. I know it’s coming before she says the words. “I’m so sorry, but they’re sold out, too.”

“What else is nearby?”

“You can look into an AirBNB maybe?” she suggests.

I pull out my phone to start looking up somewhere, anywhere where I can get a bed tonight.

“I’m so sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you to get out of line so I can check in our next guest,” she says. She’s friendly enough, but that doesn’t mean her words don’t piss me the fuck off.

“Are you kidding me?” I practically roar at her. “You screwed me over and now you’re asking me to get out of your line? I’m not moving until I have a room!”

“She can stay with me,” a voice beside me says.

I freeze, and then I slowly turn toward the voice, my eyes about to fall out of my head. “What?”

“I’ve got a suite. We know each other. It’s fine.” He turns back toward his agent. “I’ll take another key.”

“Lincoln, we can’t—”

He holds up a hand to cut me off. “I know it’s a terrible idea, but there aren’t any rooms available anywhere. Mine is comped because of my role in the ceremony, so just...stay with me. It’ll give me a good critic to practice my speech on anyway.”

I laugh. “Oh, I can definitely be a good critic. Are you sure?”

“Don’t ask again or I’m rescinding the offer.” He raises his brows pointedly.

“I don’t want to be in your debt.”

“You won’t. You’re covering this story. It’s just a place to sleep, okay?” He shrugs.

I nod. “Thank you.”

We head up to his suite, and we find a nice corner room with a wraparound window...but I’m not sure why it’s called a suite other than the window. It’s a regular hotel room—a little on the small side, actually, and it has only one bed, a small desk with a rolling chair, and a sitting chair in the corner.

That’s it.

No couch—not even a comfy chair to try to sleep in.

I stare at the bed as I try to come up with something to say. “Lincoln, I—”

He shakes his head. “This is strictly business, Jolene. I don’t want this any more than you do.”

“Then why’d you offer it?”

He shrugs. “You were yelling at that poor agent, and I felt bad for her.”

I purse my lips and offer a glare.

He chuckles. “Let’s just make the best of it, okay? I have work to do.” He grabs his tablet and sits on the bed. He shifts the pillows until he gets them just how he wants them, kicks off his shoes, and swings his legs up onto the bed. He leans against the pillows and taps away on his tablet.

I sigh, and then I get my own laptop out and sit at the desk to get some work done myself after firing off a text to Marcus to let him know I didn’t get a room but Nash invited me to stay with him.

This is going to be a long, hard weekend where I fight against my feelings even more than I have been since he was hired.

With only one bed.

CHAPTER 8: JOLENE

I can't take the tension in this room.

It's some strange combination of hate and sex. Maybe we should just have hate sex to get it out of our systems.

Now there's an idea...

I just need to get out of here a while, so I decide to head down to the lobby bar to grab a drink and maybe something to eat.

I'm not sure if I'm supposed to invite him or ask him to come with me or not say a word at all. We're not friends, but we're not *just* acquaintances, either. I don't want to share a room with him, and I certainly don't want to share a meal with him either.

All I know is I need to get away from him, and inviting him to come with me would defeat that.

"I'm going to find something to eat," I finally announce, and I bolt from the room without waiting for a response.

The lobby is still packed with people, and I wade through a crowd of people to get to the bar. There's nowhere to sit, but it's fine. I'll order a drink, wait for some food, and take it somewhere else.

It takes a solid few minutes before the bartender even looks at me. "Vodka cranberry, please. Light cranberry, heavy vodka, and a lime."

The bartender nods, and the guy sitting on the stool beside me starts to laugh. I can smell the stale beer on his breath the second I turn to glance in his direction.

"Heavy vodka? This girl likes to par-tay!" He's slurring, and the glassy eyes are a pretty good clue that he's already wasted. He's on the younger side, maybe mid-twenties, and he looks like he's having a great time. But I can't tell whether he's here with other people or not, which feels like a red flag.

"Just having a rough day," I admit.

“Well allow me to make it better, pretty lady.”

Pretty lady?

I offer a tight smile. “I’m good, but thanks for the offer.”

He links an arm around my shoulders, and his hand accidentally brushes against my breast.

At least...I think it’s accidental. He seems pretty far gone.

“Please don’t touch me,” I say firmly.

“Oh, come on. Let’s have a little fun!” He leans down and tries to kiss me, but I swerve out of his grasp so his lips find my neck instead.

Fear grips onto me.

Ice fills my veins.

We’re alone in a crowd. It’s too loud in here for anyone to hear me if I scream, and everyone around us is wrapped up in laughter and drinks and conversation. Nobody’s paying attention to the guy trying to assault me, and maybe it’s just a kiss, but it’s his hands on me when I’ve told him no.

It’s his lips on me when I’m trying to get away.

Who knows what else he’s capable of, and the thought makes my heart race as shivers climb down my spine.

It isn’t the first time I’ve been in a situation like this, and the reminder of the last time makes me freeze for a beat in fear.

I will not be taken advantage of again.

Last time, he was my fiancé. He was the man who was supposed to love me most, and instead, he used emotional manipulation to get me to do things when I didn’t always want to do them. It’s not the same as being assaulted in a bar by a stranger, but the rising feeling of panic is the same.

I push him as hard as I can in the chest, but he’s too strong for me. The guy’s grip tightens on my arm, and I yell, “Let me go!”

I yank my arm as hard as I can from his grip, and as I turn to run from him, I smack right into the solid chest standing behind me.

“I’m sorry,” I yell, panic still pulsing in my chest, and I back up as bergamot flitters through the air to my senses.

I glance up to find Lincoln Nash staring down the guy who just tried to assault me, and written on his face is absolute and total rage.

“What the fuck just happened?” he demands.

“It’s fine,” I plead. I can’t have him getting in trouble on my account.

“What happened?” he repeats, his voice cold and deadly.

“He tried to kiss me,” I blurt.

“And you told him no?”

I nod.

He walks over to the guy.

“Stop!” I scream at Lincoln. I have no idea what he’s about to do.

He grabs the guy by gathering the collar of his shirt in his fist and pulls him back to a stand. “When a woman tells you no, it means no.” His voice is filled with venom, and despite the loud and chaotic volume in this place, somehow it comes out loud and clear. He turns to the bartender. “This asshole tried to assault a woman in here. Take care of him.”

Lincoln lets go of the guy’s shirt and grabs my hand. He ushers me through the crowded room and through the front door of the hotel.

As soon as we’re on the sidewalk outside, where I feel like I can breathe again, I burst into tears.

“Jesus,” he murmurs. He pulls me into him and wraps one of his arms around my waist while his other hand goes to the back of my head. It’s soothing there as he sort of pets my hair, and I tremble as I rest my cheek to his chest for a beat. “Are you okay?” he murmurs.

“I’m okay. It was just...” Scary. Horrifying. Lonely. “It was just a kiss.”

“But you said no. He had no right to touch you in any way, and if I wasn’t in town to give the commencement address, I would’ve fucking killed that guy.”

I’m not sure why that makes my heart squeeze in my chest. He defended me. He took care of me. He’s making sure I’m okay. I’m trying to play it off like it’s not a big deal, and he’s assuring me it is.

And something about that makes me snap...but not in the way I’m expecting it to.

Why does *he* of all people have to be my other half?

I’m not sure, but I’m also not sure I can fight against it any longer.

I draw in a deep breath, ready to confess my thoughts, when he pulls back.

“You okay?” he asks.

I nod, but I find myself unable to speak.

And then my phone starts to ring. I check my watch and see it’s Sam calling.

“I need to take this.” I dig through my purse to find my phone and answer. “Sam?”

I turn away from Lincoln as I take the call, but I sense that he hasn’t moved.

“Hey, JoJo. Listen, everything is fine and I’m starting with that. Let me repeat, everything is fine.”

“What happened?” I ask, a new feeling of panic taking the old panic’s place.

“Jonah was climbing on some monkey bars and fell off. He landed funny on his arm and it looked like a break to me, so we’re at the ER.”

“Oh my God!” I practically scream. “I’m coming home right now.”

“Stop it. You have work to do, and he’s going to be fine. There’s nothing you can do anyway, and you know nobody will take better care of him than me.”

“Except me! I’m his mother! I need to be there!”

“He’s fine. Okay? He’s fine, and you have to cover that speech. It’ll build character for you both. The doctor will be in any minute and I need your consent for treatment.”

“Of course! Yes, treat him. And we have to inform Jeremy. Oh, and call my parents!”

“Already on it. He’ll be fine. Promise,” she says.

She sounds like she’s about to hang up. Oh *hell* no.

“Don’t you dare hang up, Samantha Reynolds! At least let me talk to him!”

“Of course, hang on.” I hear some rustling, and then I hear my baby’s voice.

“Mom?”

“Jonah! Are you okay, baby?”

“Yeah. It hurts but Sam’s taking good care of me and promised me ice cream.”

I laugh even though tears are pulsing behind my eyes. “You’re such a brave boy. I’ll be there in a few hours, okay? I just need to book a plane ride back.”

“Sam’s right, Mom. There’s nothing you can do, and making you miss your work thing would just make me feel worse.” His little voice sounds more like a big boy than the little one I’ve been raising.

“But I could kiss you and hug you and see for myself that you’re okay,” I protest.

“You can do all that when you get back in two days, too.”

I giggle as tears actually start to fall. I brush them away. “When did you get so smart?”

“I was born with it on my mom’s side.”

“I love you, Jonah. You call me if you need anything at all, you hear me? I will hop the next flight I can get on any time of the day or night,” I promise.

“It’s fine, Mom. I’ll get a cool cast and all my friends can sign it and I’ll be as good as new in a few weeks.”

“That sounds like something Sam said.”

“It is,” he says, and I picture his cute little shrug. “The doctor just walked in. I better go. Love you!”

“I love you, baby!” I say into the phone again as it disconnects.

And as soon as I hear that sound of a call ending, I burst into tears.

He sounded fine, really. He told me not to come home.

Still, my first instinct is to pull up flights home.

I don’t *need* to be here covering this speech. I should be home with my son, and it’s one of the things that hurts the most about being a career-driven single mom.

I want to be there for my son. I feel guilty when I’m not.

But I just got this promotion, and I already have someone else trying to take it from me.

I feel a hand on my shoulder.

“Is your son okay?”

I can’t force myself to turn around to face Lincoln. Not when the tears are rushing down my cheeks. Not when it feels like my world is caving in on me after nearly being assaulted in the bar and then being saved and then finding out my boy is hurting and I’m not there with him. “They think he broke his arm and I’m not there because I’m here.”

I feel his body move in behind mine as he wraps his arms around me. “He’s in good hands.”

“You don’t know that,” I hiss, spinning in his arms to face him.

He looks surprised when our eyes meet, and I'm not sure if he's surprised at my sudden turn, my words, or the fact that I'm practically sobbing while still trying to hold it together by a thread.

But the thread is frayed and I'm close to giving in.

He tightens his hold on me but reaches a thumb up to my cheek to wipe away a tear. His eyes search mine for a few beats, and the tears continue to fall.

His eyes flick to my lips before returning to my eyes, and when they land on mine again, they're cloudy.

Unsure.

Confused.

I feel it, too.

Cloudy, unsure, and confused.

I have no business feeling what I'm feeling, yet I also know I have exactly zero ways to stop it.

CHAPTER 9: LINCOLN

I'm not sure what to do.

My instinct is to kiss her.

To wipe away her tears and find some way to help her understand that everything's going to be okay. To help her find a flight back home if that's what she really wants.

But I also find that I don't want her to go.

This is our one chance to reconnect.

I'm not exactly sure what made me speak up when I heard the agent tell her there were no rooms available—other than the fact that I wanted to get her alone again.

I figured the suite I'm being treated to would be big enough for the two of us.

I was shocked it's a small room with one bed.

I'm sure she thinks it's a setup, that I'm hitting on her and I'm not any better than that asshole at the bar.

But I *am* better than him...only I can't show her why.

Not publicly, at least.

The truth of the matter is we need to be careful, but when feelings run as deep as they do between the two of us, it's impossible to ignore.

So maybe we just...stop ignoring them.

Maybe it's time to sit down and have an honest conversation.

Off the record, of course.

Can I trust her?

I don't know.

My father would say no. She's a reporter for the team I'm coaching. She's got ulterior motives. She has reasons to benefit from being close to me.

But it's Jolene.

My gut says yes, and I've spent enough of my life either ignoring or listening to my gut to know that it's right more often than it's wrong.

I do know one thing, though.

As much as I want to kiss her right now, I can't do it out here in the middle of the sidewalk where either one of us could be recognized at any given moment.

To that end, I set my hand on the small of her back and usher her back into the hotel. Regardless of whether I end up kissing her, out here is not the place, and it's not just because of the history between our families. It's her job. It's my job. It's being in the spotlight. It's being here to give a commencement address. The last thing I should be doing is making out with a hot reporter in the middle of the sidewalk. Even if the reason I so badly want to kiss her is to comfort her when she's terrified because her son is hurt and she's away from him.

We take the elevator back up to the suite. Neither of us has food. The drink she ordered is abandoned on the bar.

The tension is thick in the elevator, but we're not alone. I think about holding her hand—squeezing it and letting her know I'm right here for her.

I don't.

We get off the elevator on my floor and head toward my suite, neither of us saying a word.

I'm not sure if we're back to hating each other or if there's something else at play here, and I can't help but wonder what she's thinking right now.

"Are you okay?" I ask a little tentatively once we're back in the privacy of my room.

She nods, and she walks over to the window, where she folds her arms over her chest and stares out at the buildings surrounding us. She draws in an audible breath before slowly exhaling.

“I’ll order us some food. Anything in particular you want?”

She shakes her head, still not talking, and I’m not sure if she’s avoiding talking to me because of our own history, if it’s because she’s worried about her son, or if it’s because she’s still affected by what went down in the bar.

I would know these things about her if I knew her at all now.

But I don’t, and this is a clear reminder that she’s a different person than she was two decades ago...just like I am.

I walk up behind her, and I think about wrapping my arms around her, but I don’t. It would’ve been the most natural thing in the world for us if we were still fifteen and seventeen, but we’re not.

“Talk to me,” I murmur.

She shakes her head, and she turns to face me. Her eyes are filled with unshed tears, and one tips over. “I can’t do this,” she whispers.

“Can’t do what?”

“I can’t fight against this when I’m trying to hold it together for Jonah.” Her words come out on a sob, and my chest aches for her.

“Then stop fighting,” I say, and I take the opportunity to comfort her in the only way I know how.

I reach across the small distance spanning between us and thumb away the tear, and then I cup her neck with my palm, my fingers wrapping under her hair and around her neck. She closes her eyes as she leans into my touch, and I can’t help but study every feature of her beautiful face this close to me.

A few freckles dot her nose and cheeks, freckles I remember kissing when we were young. Her eyes are closed, so I can’t see the golden flecks there, but I see the shimmer of the shadow she wears on her lids.

I lean forward and press my lips to her forehead, and then to the freckles on the tip of her nose. I land another kiss on one

cheek, and then the other, and it's a sweet reminder of a simpler time.

It's exactly how I kissed her the first time I kissed her. We were on her parents' back patio, and it was a freezing winter night as we stared up at the clear sky right after a blizzard passed through. Snow surrounded us, and we could see the stars between the trees up in the sky.

It felt like the most romantic moment of my life. Maybe it still is.

It was the moment we both knew we were officially together, and I wanted to build the anticipation between us. I wanted to kiss her lips, but I wanted to kiss her everywhere, and somehow beginning with her forehead and traveling down to her lips seemed like a good place to start.

Eventually I did kiss her everywhere, but not as many times as I wanted. There wasn't enough time in one single lifetime for us to ever say it would have been enough, never mind the fact that we were cut far shorter than we deserved.

I pull back after I kiss her cheek, not sure she wants this.

Her eyes open, and those golden flecks practically glow at me under the hazel irises. It's lust or need, warmth maybe with a little love still peppered in there, but that's all just a mask for the confusion she must feel as strongly as I do.

We can't change the past.

But we can sure as hell make a better future.

I finally close my eyes and lean down. I catch her lips with mine, and she slips her arms around my waist.

I open my mouth to hers, and this kiss is so much sweeter than the one stolen in the lobby of the Complex. This one is private, for one thing. There are no cameras in here catching our move, no sinister enemies waiting outside to capture what we're doing.

But the feelings here are wrapped in warmth and love. Neither of us moves tentatively, but we both move slowly. We

have all the time in the world tonight, and whether or not this kiss is leading anywhere remains to be seen.

I want it to lead somewhere, but I want to make sure she wants it to lead there, too.

My tongue brushes hers, and she moans softly as her body melts into mine.

God, I love her.

I still love her.

Those feelings are still strong. They never went away. Never faded. Never dimmed.

And with her back in my life, the light between us burns as brightly as ever.

There's just one problem.

It's a light that's only meant for the two of us. There are too many complications for it to be any other way.

My phone starts to ring—loudly.

She halts, but I don't.

I ignore it until it stops and goes to voicemail, but it starts up again almost immediately.

She pulls back first. "You should get that."

My eyes open, and I feel a little insulted. I shouldn't. She's just trying to be polite.

I grab my phone to shut it off when I see it's my father calling.

My gut tells me not to do it, but I answer anyway. "Hello."

"Care to explain why I just got a notification that my son is shacking up with the enemy at THE Ohio State?" he asks.

Jesus. Word travels fast.

I glance up at Jolene. Clearly she heard what my father just said, and I watch as she shifts from slightly flushed with lips swollen from our kiss to this retreating figure moving toward the window to give me privacy.

We were close. So goddamn close.

And I feel the divide firmly back between us already.

I'm not sure what I can say in this situation that will appease both my father and her. If I deny it, I'm hurting her. If I admit it, I'm hurting him.

Nobody wins...least of all me.

To that end, I keep it vague. "What an honor for my alma mater to invite me to give tomorrow's commencement address. I'm certain scores of reporters will be covering it, none more essential than my very own local news correspondents."

"Keep your distance, son. Don't be stupid."

Or what?

I don't need to ask. I already know the answer, and there's even more at stake now that my brother is going to be playing for my team and another brother is potentially joining my coaching staff.

There's nothing more important than family, and sleeping with the enemy would do nothing more than cause everyone to choose sides.

It might not be fair, but I learned early on that life isn't fair.

"Thanks. I'll be sure to do that." I cut the call without waiting for his response.

And when I turn to glance up at Jolene, there's no reaction.

I'm certain I've already lost her before I ever really had a chance to win.

CHAPTER 10: JOLENE

I blow out a breath.

He didn't stand up to his father, but I didn't expect him to.

Either way, that phone ringing was the healthy dose of reality we both needed. We shouldn't be doing this.

Sure, the lust is still ever-present between us. How can it not be? Have you seen this guy?

He's basically walking sex on a stick.

But just because he has that gorgeous light brown hair and just because he has those beautiful dark eyes that hold an air of mystery when they pin me to my place and just because he has that scruff on his jawline that screams of masculinity doesn't mean we should risk so much just to explore it.

We shouldn't.

I know that. I know better.

I'm already issuing excuses in my brain to justify the kiss. I'm worried about Jonah. It was merely a distraction. He defended me after that man tried to assault me.

It's all silly excuses when the truth of the matter is that I kissed him because I wanted to kiss him. It felt right and natural.

I never wanted it to end.

But just like all good things, it *had* to end, and I'm not sure I can think of anyone better to instigate the end than his father...the same man who was the reason for our end the first time around.

He called me the enemy. He told Lincoln not to be stupid.

It was a good reminder for me, too.

I'd be risking so much more than just my father's anger if we got involved and word got out. Sure, it would be a betrayal to my family.

But one of the reasons I wanted this job was to prove women have a place reporting on men's sports. If I got caught in a compromising position with the head coach of the team I'm reporting on, it would add further fuel to the fire that people already are thinking anyway—that the only reason I got this job was because I slept with the right person to get there, or maybe that the only reason I'm keeping it is because I'm sleeping with the coach.

It's more than just the wrong man at the wrong time.

Everything about us is wrong, and it would serve me well to stay the hell away from him.

“Do, uh...are you—”

I glance up at the sound of his voice, surprised he's stuttering to find his words.

He clears his throat. “Would you like to get some dinner?”

I shake my head and offer a tight smile. “I'll just order something in. You go ahead.”

He presses his lips together and nods. “That kiss—” He stops short, and I take the moment to speak before he gets the chance to.

“It was a mistake. We don't need to dissect it.” I turn my attention to my phone to figure out where I can order dinner from even though I feel his gaze on me, and eventually he gives up.

He heads out the door without another word, and regret fills my chest. We were so close to giving in to more than kissing. I was, anyway. I was ready to start rediscovering each other.

But all it took was one phone call to snap me right back to reality.

I order dinner, and when I see it'll be at least an hour before it gets here, I hop in the shower to get the airplane funk off me then slide into my pajamas—a shorts and shirt set that's not very sexy, but I didn't pack thinking I'd need anything sexy.

I don't.

I need zero sexy things.

My phone starts to ring, and I spot Sam's name.

"How's Jonah?" I answer.

"I'm fine, Mom. We're on our way home and Sam made me call you."

I laugh. "Thanks, Sam!" I yell, knowing she can hear me just like I could hear every word Eddie Nash said to his son a short while ago.

"Welcome!" she yells back from the driver's seat.

"Are you sure I shouldn't come home? I can take you out for ice cream..." I'm scrambling to figure out what bribe I can deliver that will work with him.

"Sam already promised ice cream, and no, Mom. I know this is a big deal for your job, and there's nothing you can do anyway."

"What kind of cast did you get?" I ask.

"It's Minecraft green." He says it proudly, and I can't help my giggle.

"Of course it is. I'm proud of you for being so brave." I want to ask if it hurts, but I also don't want to know. Poor kid. My heart breaks that so many miles separate us, but at the same time...he sounds fine. "I hate not being there with you, honey." I look up at the ceiling as the threat of tears pinches behind my eyes. I know he can't see me, but I don't want to break down over the phone when I need to be strong for him.

"I know, Mom. I love you."

"I love you more. I'll call you before I go to bed, okay? Video this time so I can see your arm."

"Okay. Bye." He hangs up, and I set my phone beside me on the bed as I let a few tears tip over.

My dinner arrives, and I eat in the room as I wonder where Lincoln went and whether he's with some other woman since clearly this isn't going to work between the two of us.

I wonder if he'll come back at all tonight or if he'll just sleep over at her place.

The thought claws at my very soul.

It's masochistic and I'm not sure why I'm thinking that way at all. But just because *he* is the only one *I* want to be with doesn't mean that works the same in reverse.

We didn't talk about who is sleeping where, but there's nowhere for either of us to go aside from the bed or the floor.

So after I'm done eating, I take some sleep medicine, call Jonah, slip onto one side of the bed, turn on trashy reality television, and fall asleep before he even gets back.

CHAPTER 11: LINCOLN

I should get back to my hotel room.

I've got an early morning tomorrow, and I need to get a good night's sleep ahead of my big speech.

But I don't want to go back. I don't want to face her when all I want to do is take her in my arms and remind her why we were once so good together.

So instead I'm sitting in the lobby bar with my agent, Sean Ryan, listening to him drone on and on about different potential business ventures that really don't interest me, and this is *after* I spent the last hour schmoozing with the current coach and some players here at the university.

It's got my mind wandering to what *does* interest me, though.

I've never needed to give much thought to what I want to do after all this.

I make a good living. The offer that came from the Aces was more than generous.

But still, when the time comes and I no longer want to do this anymore, or if I *can't*...what comes next?

I'm not going to coach until I die. It's a huge commitment to coach at all, and at some point I'll want to do something else. I'll want to retire and maybe travel the world. I'll want some side hustle to keep me busy. Coaches don't get the same kind of time off players do, but we don't put our bodies through what players do, either—and still, most of the players I know have side hustles and other interests.

I've never had a side hustle. What are my other interests?

It's always been football first and football only. I never really had any other interests, hobbies, or talents aside from sports.

I have a degree in business, which is a good background to have as a coach, though I often think psychology would've

been a better fit.

Still, neither of those interests really narrow down the field of what comes next.

Broadcasting, consulting, analysis, commentary, executive roles...they're all possibilities.

At thirty-six, I should know the answer to this, shouldn't I?

Instead, I feel like I'm floundering a little.

The goal was always head coaching, and here I am. I've hit the goal. So now what? What comes next?

I have no idea.

Sean has been with me for my entire career. I've known him a long time, and I know he's offering ideas based on what he thinks might interest me.

But the only thing interesting me at the moment is the blonde up in my hotel room.

I can't think about anything else except how her lips felt when they were moving under mine.

"Do you need to practice your speech on me?" Sean finally asks.

I shake my head. I probably should. I haven't shared any of it with anybody yet.

But I don't really want to.

I just want to end this conversation so I can get back upstairs to her before she goes to sleep and it's too late.

Even my own thoughts are confusing where she's concerned. One minute I want to stay down here and avoid her, and the next I want the chance to talk to her to try to figure out what she's thinking.

It's a mystery.

She is a mystery.

"Speaking of the speech, I should head up to bed. I've got an early morning and need to go over everything one more time," I tell Sean. I drain the rest of my whiskey.

“Of course. Thanks for meeting with me. It’s always a pleasure.”

I nod and shake his hand, and then I stand and head toward the elevators.

My heart races as the car carries me closer to her, and it’s downright thundering by the time I unlock the door and open it.

I find a television flashing over a dark room, and when I glance at the bed, I see her snuggled under the covers fast asleep.

On my side of the bed.

I missed my window.

I take a quick shower, resolved to the fact that I’ll be sleeping on the wrong side of the bed tonight, and I slip into bed beside her after throwing on a t-shirt and pair of shorts even though my preference is to sleep in just my boxer briefs.

I lie on my right side, facing away from her, but I find I can’t fall asleep.

I turn so I’m lying on my left, and the scent of orange blossoms drifts to my nose.

Looks like it’s going to be a restless night here in my hotel room.

I guess I fall asleep eventually because my alarm wakes me bright and early at six.

And my arms are around her.

Shit.

She’s snuggled into me, her back against my front, my hard cock trying to slip into the sweet nook between her ass cheeks.

Down, boy. I nearly mutter the words aloud.

Instead of gently shifting so I can turn off the offensively loud alarm on my phone, she wakes, feels my cock in her ass, and practically jumps out of bed.

“What the fuck, Lincoln!?” she screams at me.

“What?” I ask, sitting up and rubbing my eyes as I grab my phone to silence the offending alarm.

Her eyes fall to my abs.

Oh, right.

Last night, I got in bed with a shirt on. About an hour later, I ripped the shirt off and threw it on the ground. I was hot. It was restrictive. Boom, sleep.

I glance down, too, and I can't help my smirk when I catch her gaze.

She rolls her eyes. “Please God, don't ask me something cheesy about how I like what I see.”

I lift a shoulder. “I wasn't going to ask. The way your jaw dropped tells the whole story.”

“You just walk around with those things locked and loaded?”

My brows draw together. “I wouldn't say that, exactly, but I do try to lead my team by example, which means healthy eating and regular workouts during the season.”

“You're not in season,” she spits at me.

She's got a point, and I'm not sure why we're fighting over my abs. Maybe because it's covering the real thing she wants to fight over, which is my cock seeking entrance to her body. Any hole. I'm not picky.

She wants it, too.

It's futile to pretend she doesn't, to pretend I don't, to act like neither one of us is curious about how it would feel *now* after years apart, years filled with different experiences for each of us.

But it doesn't matter—not right now, anyway.

I need to get ready for my commencement address.

I hop out of bed and practically run into the shower. My cock is throbbing now between being so close to her and then her getting all feisty on me with those eyes lusting after my

abs, and I need to take care of it in the shower. Speaking of locked and loaded, I can't walk around with this thing raring to go all day.

So I give myself a moment of release in the shower. I grab my cock and stroke it, forcing myself not to moan as I pretend it's *her* hand fisting me in the shower.

I think of her gorgeous eyes, those golden flecks. I think about what it felt like to have her tongue brushing against mine and how it would feel if it was my cock in her mouth instead of my tongue.

I think about sex with her.

I think about all the things, but when the idea of a future where we could freely be together enters my mind, I force it out just as I start to come.

I whisper her name as white come pulses out onto my fist, and just as I'm finishing up and ready to wash it all down the drain the bathroom door opens.

I freeze.

"Did you call me?" her voice asks.

Shit. I whispered it, didn't I?

Apparently not.

"Nope!" I yell, my voice definitely an octave higher than usual as I make sure to face away from the door just in case she can see me with my hand still on my cock, and that's when her eyes meet mine in the mirror.

There's *no way* in hell she doesn't know what I was just doing to myself.

And maybe I should be embarrassed about that.

Or maybe it's time to finally admit the truth to her—the one that I've finally come to terms with.

I want Jolene Bailey.

Any way I can get her.

CHAPTER 12: JOLENE

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.

Was he *touching himself* in there?

Did he just jerk off and say my name when he was coming?

I swear I heard him yell my name, and I thought maybe he needed a towel or something.

Instead I saw him with his dick in his hand and I could've sworn I saw semen on his fist.

Maybe it was soap bubbles.

It had to be soap bubbles.

It was definitely soap bubbles.

Right?

He was just washing himself...while calling out my name.

And those abs? What the hell were those?

Ridiculous.

They're carved out of fucking marble and I'm over here with child-bearing hips rather than the narrow ones he drove against back when we were both virgins.

We've both changed.

He got hotter.

I got softer.

But the truth remains...we still can't be together, no matter how much we both want it.

Even if he's in the shower touching himself while thinking about me.

Even if the thought of that sends an aching pulse squarely between my thighs.

He finishes his shower, and even though I took one last night, I've already decided I'll take another one—mostly because I need a cold one at this point.

I'm not dumb enough to touch myself and call out his name, though. Not when we're sharing a hotel room.

He doesn't make eye contact when he exits the bathroom.

He is, however, wearing just a towel wrapped around that narrow waist, and once the image is implanted in my mind, I know it'll never leave. I still don't allow myself more than a glance.

"Are you done in there so I can shower?" I ask.

"Yeah," he grunts.

I race in there before he can address the whole calling my name thing, and I take the fastest—and coldest—shower of my life.

I was smart enough to bring my clothes in, so I toss a simple black dress over my head, run a comb through my hair, and apply a little make-up before I exit the bathroom.

He's wearing a suit and sitting at the desk looking at his tablet.

Let me repeat that.

He's. Wearing. A. Suit.

He's not standing, so I can't take in the full view, but *hot damn*.

Even from this angle, he looks fine as all fuck in that suit.

There's just something about a powerful man in a suit that speaks directly to my vagina.

I clear my throat as I walk by him to grab my hair dryer out of my suitcase. "You ready for today?" I ask.

"Ready." He's grunting again.

"Do you need to practice your speech or anything?" I'm trying to make conversation as I set my make-up bag in my suitcase and trade it for my dryer and curling iron.

"No. Thanks."

I straighten and stare at him, but he won't look at me. "What about breakfast? Do you have plans, or can we do a

working breakfast where I ask you a few questions?”

“They have a continental for me at the stadium.” He’s still not looking at me.

“Right. Well, okay then. Best wishes on your speech.”

“Thanks.”

I head to the bathroom to do my hair and assume he’ll be out of the room when I return, but I’m wrong. He’s still there.

“Let’s do the working breakfast,” he says suddenly when I exit, and it’s like he pulled himself together while I was doing my hair. His eyes lift to mine. “You look lovely, by the way.”

“Thanks.” My cheeks redden at the compliment. It’s just another day at the office for me. “Sure, let me just grab my purse.”

“I found a little hole in the wall diner a few blocks away. Are you okay to walk there?”

I nod, and as we head down the hallway toward the elevator, I push away the thought that this sort of feels like a date.

It’s not.

It’s more of a working breakfast than anything else, and I try to remind myself of that.

Still, walking out of the same hotel room together with this mad sexual tension simmering between us...it doesn’t *feel* like it’s just a working breakfast.

He takes me to Buddy’s Diner, and when I get a look at the breakfast menu, I’m in heaven. I order the Buddy Special, two eggs my way with bacon, hash browns, and toast, and he orders an egg white omelet with all sorts of vegetables.

No hash browns.

No coffee.

No coffee.

Who even is this man?

And is it any wonder that we're incompatible and our families are enemies?

"I don't trust anybody who doesn't eat hash browns," I say.

He laughs. "Season starts soon. Time to start avoiding carbs."

"And no coffee?"

He lifts a shoulder. "I had a cup in the room. I don't want to overdo it and speed through my speech because I had too much caffeine."

"Okay, I can let that one slide, I guess," I mutter.

"Is the hash brown thing going in your story?" he asks.

I shrug. "Maybe. Depends if you've got anything more interesting to say."

"About what?"

I take out my phone and press the record button, and then I start firing off questions. "How did it feel to be invited to give this commencement address?"

"It's an honor. Being back in Columbus brings back some incredible memories of my own time here."

"That was a long time ago," I say, and he chuckles.

"Not *that* long."

I think back to his senior year. We both knew he was going to Ohio, but I suppose I thought we'd ride out the storm together for two years before I ended up there, too. I figured it was only two years of long-distance. We could manage that. I thought we'd end up together. It just seemed so natural.

And then it was all shot to hell.

I ended up at UNLV, a great school but not where I'd planned.

I thought about Ohio again for a hot minute my senior year.

I thought maybe I'd track him down and find a way to make it work without the pressures of our fathers nearby, hovering over every decision we made.

But I didn't. I couldn't. Not when our fathers were in the midst of the fight over the bar...not when I knew it was truly over between us because he'd somehow become the enemy.

"Tell me about your time here," I say.

He shrugs. "It was all about football. I earned a degree in business while having the time of my life on the field."

"And the women?" I'm not sure why I ask. It's not like it'll go in any story I write about this weekend. Call it morbid curiosity, I suppose.

"Banging down my door." He grins, but it fades as he shifts his eyes down to the table. "But I was heartbroken, so I didn't answer." His voice is subdued as he says it, and I have a feeling I'll listen to this part of our conversation far more than the parts I'll actually need for the story.

"You were heartbroken?" I press.

His eyes lift to mine, and the pain and uncertainty is clear in them. "Of course I was. I was just a kid doing what I thought I had to do."

I shouldn't press this line of questioning, but I do. "Would you do the same thing now?"

His gaze rests on mine a few beats before his eyes shift toward the window. "Turn off the recorder if you want an honest answer."

I turn it off and slide my phone across the table toward him to show him that this portion of our conversation won't be recorded. "I always want an honest answer from you, Lincoln." I hear the desperation in my own voice, the bitter need to know that he didn't want to end it but for some reason he did anyway.

He leans forward and lowers his voice so this is just for me. "This is off the record, obviously. My father didn't trust anybody. Including you. He made it clear that I'd be risking my entire future staying with you once I turned eighteen."

I'm taken aback by his words. The thought never even crossed my mind. "How?"

He clears his throat, and our waitress comes by to drop my coffee and his water. He waits until she's out of earshot to answer that. "He found the condom, Jo. He was concerned about my future. He didn't want me to give up football to raise a kid, and he was afraid that once I turned eighteen and you were still fifteen, one little fight between us would send you to the cops to have me hauled off."

I gasp. "I never would have!"

"I know that. But he didn't, and his distrust of your entire family was only compounded by your father's actions where Rivalry was concerned. Up until that point, I thought maybe, just *maybe* there was some shred of hope left. That we'd find our way back. But after that, I knew it was really over." He chugs down half his water, and I watch his throat as it moves around the liquid.

Even his freaking throat is sexy.

"You didn't answer my question," I remind him.

He nods as he sets his water down and fixes his eyes on the glass. "No. I wouldn't do the same thing now."

I wait for him to add more to that—to explain why, or maybe to defend why he did it in the first place, but he remains quiet.

"Why not?" I finally ask.

He shakes his head a little before his eyes lift to mine again. "Because I was wrong to let someone else dictate my actions. If we weren't meant to end up together, I should've been able to discover that on my own terms. But I was a dumb kid who allowed my father to run my life, and now I'm a dumb adult who still does everything to seek the kind of approval he'll never give." He mutters the words, almost as if he's saying it to himself as much as he's saying it to me, and for a beat, I'm not sure what to say.

I don't have to say anything, though, because he continues. "So maybe it's time I stop trying." His eyes lift to mine, and fire burns between us. "Maybe it's time to take the risk and go after what *I* want instead of what I think *he* wants for me."

“What do you want?” I whisper.

His gaze is so intense, so full of fire, that he doesn't need to answer.

I know what he wants.

And I know what I want.

We're two consenting adults now sharing a hotel room thanks to a total fluke, and maybe this is the only time we'll have to lay it all out on the table.

The waitress drops our food, breaking up the intensity between us.

“Whoa, that was fast,” he says to her with a quick smile, and we dig into our food.

The moment is lost. For now.

It's not forgotten, though.

CHAPTER 13: LINCOLN

What the fuck am I doing?

Aside from, you know, walking into a lion's den.

I've never admitted *any* of that out loud to anyone before, but Jolene somehow has this ability to pull things out of me in a way nobody else can.

Maybe I'm just nervous to give this speech.

I've spoken in front of large crowds before, and I typically maintain my cool. But this is different. I'm speaking from the heart today as I share something I've written with the large crowd who will be gathered here today. Some people here love me because I'm a hometown hero while others hate me because I've coached or played on a rival team.

And maybe the worst thing of all is that I'm talking about overcoming struggles and creating the type of future you want for yourself...but I can't say I've done that myself.

Is this the future I dreamed of?

I nailed down the dream job at thirty-six. I have money in the bank.

But I also have nobody to share it with.

I don't even really have a group of friends to rally around. Jack is my boss. Steve is a colleague. I don't fraternize with players since there needs to be a different level of respect between us. Coaches I've worked with on previous teams are rivals now.

I don't know if I've ever felt such a sting of loneliness, and the woman sitting across from me seems like she could be the answer to all of it.

Yet she can't be the answer to any of it.

How do I give fair interviews to the press if I'm involved with a rival reporter?

How do I ensure the things I'm telling her that are meant to stay between us actually will?

How do I trust that she doesn't always have an ulterior motive?

How do I get past the feelings of distrust I have because of how her father treated mine...and likewise, how does she get past those same feelings?

I'm not sure what the answer to any of that is other than jumping in feet first and taking the goddamn risk.

All I know for sure right now is I need to haul ass over to the stadium. I've spent too much time with her this morning already, and if I don't get moving, I'm going to be late.

I toss two twenties on the table. "I need to go," I say after I wolf down my omelet.

She glances at my empty plate then back at hers, still half-filled with her food. "Oh, okay." Her eyes rise to meet mine, and she looks a little startled by my sudden pronouncement.

"I'm sorry. I need to get over to the stadium. I hadn't realized the time. Thanks for breakfast." I bolt out of there as fast as my legs will carry me in this goddamn suit.

I walk to the stadium. It's a pleasant morning, and it's early enough that the sidewalks around here are mostly empty. It's a short walk, and I pull out my phone to check the directions for where I'm supposed to go once I arrive.

I get to where I need to be, and I spot the continental spread.

I should've just eaten here. It would've been safer.

Instead, I'm going into this speech a nervous wreck that I said the wrong thing, or that somehow my feelings will be plastered all over the media later today.

I need to focus on my speech. I know it well, and I'm ready to go.

It's still a couple hours until showtime, and the current head coach here at the university greets me. We chat football a

while, and he fills me in on some promising prospects. I know this program, and I know I'd love to have some of these kids on the Aces.

The media starts to show up, and when it's a mere fifteen minutes until the ceremony begins, I spot her. She walks in with another reporter—identified only by the color-coded credentials they're both wearing—and she's laughing.

The other reporter is male, and my hackles rise.

I'm already on edge with this speech, but seeing her laughing with another man tips me right over that edge.

Ignore her, Nash.

I close my eyes and suck in a deep breath, and when I open them again, I spot her grabbing a bottle of water from a table.

"You all ready, Coach?" a voice nearby says, and I turn to see Hank Elkins, my old tight end coach from when I attended school here.

"Coach Elk!" I say genially, and we shake hands before I give him a quick hug. "How've you been?"

"Living the dream."

"Still coaching?"

He nods. "You bet. I'll be on that field until the day I die." He grins. "Congratulations on your new position, Lincoln. I just couldn't be prouder of the man you've become. I always saw bright things for your future, and I knew you'd make the big time."

"I appreciate that, Coach." We chat a few minutes, and I can't help when my eyes edge over to Jolene as we talk. I want to be here in the moment with a man I've known a long, long time—a man who's saying things I wish my own father would say to me—but I can't. Not when she's here being the sort of distraction I don't need right now.

The media is called out to take their seats, and a few minutes later I'm called to line up with the rest of the bigwigs for the procession so we can take the stage for this ceremony.

And then it begins. The music, the pomp, the circumstance.

The president gives his opening remarks, the graduates promise to contribute to society, a couple students give speeches...and then I'm up. I try not to fidget as I listen to the president speak to the rather large crowd assembled here. I'm told there are around twelve thousand graduates along with their family and friends, bringing the total number here at the stadium to over fifty thousand people...all listening to what I have to say.

“It is my great honor to introduce our distinguished guest speaker, Mr. Lincoln Nash. Mr. Nash is the current head coach of the NFL's Vegas Aces football team as well as a former professional football player, and he is an Ohio State graduate. Mr. Nash is passionate about football, and he is highly respected in his field for his coaching style where he's known for taking risks on the field. We are honored to have him here today to share some inspiring words with our graduates. Please join me in welcoming Lincoln Nash to the podium.”

The president steps aside as the crowd cheers, and I smile and nod as I move toward the podium. I shake his hand before I take my place, and I glance out at the crowd before I begin. I draw in a breath, and that's when my eyes land on hers.

She's in the front row on the side of the stadium in a small press box.

She's clapping and smiling, and as our eyes meet, a strange sense of calmness washes over me. It centers me in a way I wasn't expecting.

He's known for taking risks on the field.

I can do it on the field.

But I don't do it when it comes to my personal life.

“Good morning, graduates, distinguished faculty and staff, and guests. It is my honor to be here today to celebrate this momentous occasion you've all worked so hard for, and I'll be honest. I wrote an entire speech, but something happened this morning that changed my entire perspective, and rather than give you the speech I wrote from memory, I want to speak

from my heart. You're all at the precipice of the start of your lives, and when I was in your shoes, I was recently drafted into the NFL. I thought I'd play for many years before I retired, but an injury sidelined me, and my life took a different direction. I got into coaching, and I worked my way through the ranks until I landed this new head coaching position. I'm known for taking risks on the field." I pause, and I glance over at her again. "But in my personal life, I tend to play it safe. I've made strategic decisions that have led me to where I am today, and I'm thankful for that. But this morning, someone reminded me that life *should* be about taking risks. It's about stepping out of your comfort zone and chasing what you want, no matter how scary it seems. So today I urge you all to take risks. Don't be afraid to fail, because success isn't a compilation of your achievements but rather the foundation of the failures you've overcome. The biggest risks can lead to our greatest rewards, and don't let anyone or anything hold you back from reaching for everything you deserve. Congratulations, graduates, and best wishes for a future filled with success."

My eyes find hers one last time before I step down from the podium to thunderous applause, and she's swiping away a tear.

My words hit home for her as much as they did for me. Maybe it's time for the two of us to step out of our comfort zones and take the risk.

Either it'll lead to a failure that we can add to the foundation of our individual successes...or it'll lead to the greatest reward of either of our lives.

CHAPTER 14: JOLENE

Was it me?

Was I the person that reminded him life should be about taking risks?

I feel like he arrived at that conclusion himself—maybe because of our conversation.

It wouldn't just be risky for us to give this another try.

It would have to be a secret. There is literally no other way we could make it work. He'd face the wrath of other members of the press, I'd face the judgment of an entire nation, and together we'd both be betraying our fathers.

It's stupid to even consider it.

And yet...

The way he makes me feel is the same way I felt when I was fifteen. Those feelings didn't fade in time. They didn't dim.

I don't know him now, but I do know his soul, just as he knows mine. Those imprints don't change no matter how much time has passed, no matter how much bitterness spans the distance between us.

When he said the bit about not letting anyone hold you back from reaching for everything you deserve...was he talking about our fathers?

Because we *are* letting them hold us back.

Would my dad understand? I have no idea. Not likely.

Would his? Absolutely not.

Is what we could potentially have together worth risking that?

I don't have that answer yet.

But I have a feeling that sharing a hotel room with Mr. Nash tonight is going to help me figure it out.

The ceremony ends, and we all disperse. I head back to the area where the press was allowed in to say goodbye to some familiar faces, and that's when I spot Lincoln.

Others are standing around him, congratulating him on a job well done, and I stand to the side and wait my turn. Eventually the crowd parts, and he spots me.

Someone is still talking to him, but I watch his mouth form the words, "Excuse me."

And then he strides across the room toward me.

I give him a quick hug—nothing inappropriate for public consumption, and I say quietly in his ear, "That was incredible, Linc."

He pulls back, and he looks a little dazed at my words as he draws in a sharp breath.

The look on his face reminds me that it's the *exact* phrasing I used after the first time we had sex.

I'll take *things that can be said after sex and after a commencement address* for two hundred.

"We need to talk," he murmurs. His eyes are hot on mine, and if we keep looking at each other like this, it *will* become inappropriate for public consumption.

"I know." I swallow thickly as I realize how much we need this.

"I've got a luncheon and then drinks with some old friends. But tonight...we talk."

I nod even though part of me was thinking about heading home a little early to check on Jonah. He's fine, though—in his words, anyway—and this will give me the entire afternoon to write up a story to send to Marcus. "Go. Enjoy your afternoon."

He nods, but his gaze doesn't leave mine until someone is tugging at him to get his attention. I finally turn to leave, and I run back into William Webb, an old acquaintance who used to be a teacher's assistant at UNLV and happens to work here at Ohio State as a journalism professor now. We caught up for a

few minutes before the ceremony, and now here he is afterward, too.

“Are you free this afternoon?” he asks.

I nod. “I’ve got a story to write up, but I don’t have any lunch plans.”

“I’d love to chat about your career. I’ve been admiring you for years and I couldn’t have been more thrilled when I saw you snagged the correspondent position. Well deserved, Jolene.”

I try not to blush. “Thank you, Mr. Webb.”

“Please. It’s Will, though I’m impressed you remember my name.” He reaches over to touch my arm good-naturedly...and a little playfully, too, with a touch of flirtation.

“Likewise.” I offer a small giggle. The truth is I always had a tiny bit of a crush on Will Webb. I never acted on it—he was basically a teacher, four years older than me and a graduate student, but I always thought he was that rare combination of attractive and nice.

I head with Will toward the exit, but not before casing a backward glance toward where I last saw Lincoln standing.

And there he stands, gazing after us, his jaw clenched and his eyes full of fire.

A man and a woman can go out to lunch together without it meaning anything, but clearly Coach Nash disagrees with that sentiment.

I reach over and touch Will’s elbow—just a light touch, but enough to make the man gazing after us go absolutely postal.

Will glances over at me and smiles, and I ask, “Where would you like to go eat?”

“There’s a great sandwich shop a few blocks away,” he says.

“Won’t it be packed with everyone leaving the graduation at the same time?”

“Most certainly, but I know the owners. Come on.” He leads me out of a private exit and we hurry down the sidewalk to beat some of the crowd still exiting the stadium. Some students are outside taking photos while others are still inside, and when we arrive at the sandwich shop, there’s only a small line.

“William!” An older woman behind the counter offers a wide smile and waves him over, and we cut around the line to get to her. She grabs him into an enormous hug.

“Hey, Mom,” he says a little sheepishly, and I can’t help a heartwarming smile.

“This is your mom?” I ask.

“I am. And you are?”

“My name is Jolene. Will and I used to attend UNLV together. He was in the graduate program when I was an undergrad,” I tell her.

“Welcome to our little sandwich shop,” she says, and she offers Will a private little smile that tells me she’s been waiting for him to bring a lady in someday. “What can I get for you?”

I shrug. “Whatever you recommend.”

She winks at me. “I’ve got you covered. You two take a seat in the back and I’ll bring Will’s favorites right over.”

“Thank you,” I say as she tackles me with the same kind of hug she just gave her son. “It was lovely to meet you.”

“And you, my dear.”

I follow Will toward the table in the back, which is actually what appears to be some sort of break room. It oddly reminds me a bit of the break room at the Gridiron, which reminds me of Lincoln pressing me up against the wall that night, which reminds me of...

Well, the conversation we need to have tonight.

And we’ll get there.

First, though, I don't want to be rude to an old acquaintance, so I pull my focus back to Will.

"Are you from here originally?" I ask.

He nods. "Born and raised just outside Columbus. My parents have owned this place for as long as I can remember."

"It must've been fun growing up so close to a college campus."

"It had its plusses and minuses. What about you? Did you like growing up the kid of a pro football player?"

"It had its plusses and minuses," I echo.

He chuckles. "I'm sure. And aside from the big correspondent promotion, what is Jolene Bailey up to these days?"

Fighting my feelings for the enemy. Worrying about betraying that pro football player father of mine. Trying not to fall back in love with someone who is likely to just break my heart all over again, something I haven't spent much time considering as I find myself thinking about him pretty much constantly.

I don't say any of that. Instead, I settle on, "Raising a seven-year-old son."

His brows raise. "A son," he echoes.

"Do you have any children?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Much to my mother's chagrin."

I smile a little tightly.

"Are you, uh..." he begins, and I wouldn't expect someone who's typically poised to stutter over his words.

My brows pinch as I *think* I know where he's going but I don't want to make assumptions.

Eventually he blurts it out. "Are you with his father?"

I shake my head. "His father cheated on me while I was pregnant with my son, and he ended up marrying the woman

he cheated on me with.” I shrug. “He’s got his own family now and doesn’t try too hard to make time for Jonah.”

“Jonah? That’s his name?”

I nod as I smile. “Had to continue the *Jo* tradition in my family.” I dig through my purse to pull out my phone so I can show him a photo, and when I finally locate my phone, I see a series of missed text messages from an unknown number.

Unknown: *Who was that?*

Unknown: *Where are you?*

Unknown: *Answer me.*

Unknown: *I’m not kidding around here, Jolene. Tell me who that was. Tell me you’re okay.*

“You okay?” Will asks as I scan the texts.

“Yeah. I just missed a bunch of messages.” I ignore the texts for now and pull up a photo to show Will. I flash the screen at him rather than handing him the phone just in case Mr. Unknown decides to text again, though truth be told I didn’t even know he had my number.

I suppose it’s somewhere at the Complex so the team can contact the media at any given moment.

“He’s a cute kid. Looks just like you,” he says.

I’m not sure if that’s his way of saying I’m cute or if he’s just complimenting my kid. “Thanks,” I murmur.

His mom brings over our lunches—ham and Swiss on sourdough along with a cup of broccoli cheddar soup, and we dig in as we catch up. We shift to work topics as I fill him in on what I’ve done over the course of my career, and he tells me how he’d love for me to come speak in his classroom one day. I agree to set up a date in March once the season is over, and then we’re done eating.

“I better get back to my hotel so I can get this story to my editor,” I say.

He looks a little disappointed. “When do you head back to Vegas?”

“Tomorrow.”

“And tonight? Are you free?” he asks, the hope in his tone evident.

“Unfortunately I’ve got plans with an old friend, but thanks so much for asking.”

He nods, accepting the rejection with grace even though he definitely seems disappointed. It’s not like we’re going to start up something long-distance. I don’t even have time for a relationship right now, to be honest. I barely have enough time to see my own kid.

But somehow...it seems like I can make an exception for Lincoln.

Maybe Lincoln has *always* been my exception.

I guess I’ll find out tonight.

CHAPTER 15: LINCOLN

She's not answering my texts, and I'm not sure how to take that.

I know I shouldn't be worried about her. She can handle herself, and it seemed like she knew that guy.

Still, what happened last night is fresh in my mind. She was scared as some asshole manhandled her, and I refuse to standby while another asshole hits on her.

I realize it isn't my place to protect her, but that doesn't make my feelings any less intense.

So rather than participating in the conversation around me with the current and some former coaching staff of the university I attended, I'm tapping my foot impatiently as I wait for her to text me back.

I think about texting one more time, but five unanswered texts seems like one too many. I sent four, and a fifth isn't going to be the one she finally answers.

Patience, Nash. Patience.

I thought I had some, but it appears the moment Jolene Bailey walked back into my life, she stole it away the same way she stole my breath.

This is fucking ridiculous.

I should not be hung up on some woman.

I have neither the time nor the inclination for these types of distractions, but knowing we're having some sort of conversation tonight has me on edge.

That was incredible, Linc.

Her voice was breathless and full of emotion as she murmured the words in my ear, and it took me back nearly two decades.

Twenty years, and somehow I remember it like it was yesterday.

Ask me some mundane detail from my day yesterday and I won't be able to answer.

But ask me what it felt like to be inside her twenty years ago, and I can still feel it like I'm there now.

Fuck.

I need to get out of here.

It feels like the walls are closing in on me, like I can't breathe until I know where she is and what she's doing. I'm not sure how I was able to set these feelings aside for the last twenty years, but they've come back with a vengeance.

I can't deny it any longer.

I need to know who she is now. I've gotten tiny bits and pieces over the last two months, but I want it all. I don't want her laughing with some other guy while she walks away from me when it should be me.

I realize the implications and the consequences thereof, but I'm starting to feel determined to figure out how we can make this work.

We have to keep it a secret. There's no other way around it.

We have to be careful. Vigilant.

But I need to explore these feelings as much as I know she needs to, and right now it feels as if I can't go another second without doing it.

Everyone's done eating. Can I bolt?

I'm not sure.

I'm supposed to meet a few guys I played with after lunch. We'll drink and catch up.

But they understand I'm a busy guy. Something came up.

My dick. For Jolene.

I won't say that, obviously.

I say my goodbyes to the coaching staff after we wrap up the meal. I head toward the bar I told my buddies I'd meet them at, prepared to ditch them so I can be with her.

And just as I pull open the door to the bar, a text comes through.

Jolene: *Calm down, Coach. I'm back at the hotel working. I'll see you tonight.*

I breathe out a sigh of relief as I allow those words to bring me back down.

I don't know what the hell that was filtering through me, but it was intense.

But that's us. It was always intense between us, even back then.

I shake it off as I head inside the bar and find my buddies. She's back at the hotel. She's in my suite waiting for me.

She needs time to get her work done, so I take my time. I have a few drinks as I catch up with guys I've known almost as long as I've known her. We bring up our old inside jokes, and we laugh and have a great time as we talk about the key plays we made way back when, each play somehow getting bigger and bolder like the old cliched fish stories grandfathers tell where the fish he caught gets bigger and bigger with every telling of the story.

None of these guys are still in the game, and everyone wants to know what it's like working with Jack Dalton.

Eventually I note that it's starting to get dark outside, and I'm ready to get back to my hotel. We all clear out together, and I walk the block toward my hotel. I take the elevator up to my suite, and I walk down the hallway with a thundering heart as it feels like our moment is finally, *finally* upon us.

I draw in a deep breath as I unlock the door, and when I walk in, there she is.

She's typing something on her laptop, and her head swings over toward me as I walk in.

I let the door slam shut behind me, and then I stalk toward her.

She pauses her typing with her fingers resting on the keys as her eyes fall to mine. She looks...unaffected as she sits

there typing while I'm a mass of exposed nerves ready to burst. I hear music playing, and I'm pretty sure it's coming from her laptop.

"Welcome back," she says.

"Who was that man?" I demand as I take my suit jacket off and toss it beside the television that's currently turned off.

Her brows pinch together. "An old friend. Nobody."

"Better be nobody," I say gruffly.

She slams the lid of her laptop shut a little aggressively, and the music shuts off. We're enveloped in silence. "And why better it be nobody, Mr. Nash?" Her voice is an accusation I'm not sure I like, and she pushes to her feet.

I don't answer. I can't.

I can't say that it's because she's *mine*. She isn't. I don't even know if I *want* her to be. It's too complicated, yet I can't seem to force myself to stay away. I can't seem to make myself stop wanting her with everything inside.

"What do you want from me?" She whispers the question, but somehow it sounds like she's begging.

When my voice comes out, it's gruff but firm and direct. "I want to fuck you so hard you forget every man's name but mine."

Her eyes darken. I've got her right where I want her. She wants this, too.

"I hate you," she reminds me. "Why would I possibly consent to that?"

I can't help a smirk at her words. It hurts when she says she hates me, but I also don't think she really means it.

We've been conditioned to hate each other for two decades.

Does she drive me up the wall? Absolutely.

Do I want to shut that mouth up with my dick? You bet.

Do I want to tie her hands above her head and suck on her tits until she begs me to fuck her? Of course.

But there's something else at play here, something I'm powerless against, and no other woman has ever had that sort of effect on me.

“Because a good hate fuck is better than nothing, and neither of us has anywhere to go tonight.”

She rolls her eyes as she crosses her arms over her chest. Her breathing quickens a little which only tells me this is turning her on as much as it is me.

“You said we needed to talk,” she reminds me.

I take a step toward her. She stands firm, so I take another step and another until I'm standing directly in front of her—until the orange blossoms float to my senses and I can feel her heat in front of me.

I run a fingertip along her collarbone, and her breath hitches.

I move in a little closer to her. “I think I've said everything I need to say.”

Her eyes edge over to mine, and I drag my finger up her neck to her lips, tracing them with the pad of my finger before pushing it into her mouth. She doesn't react for a beat, and then she sucks lightly on the tip of my finger.

I draw in a sharp breath. She knows what she's doing.

She lifts her hand to pull my finger out of her mouth. “You haven't said anything.”

She grabs a fistful of my shirt, and I think she means to shove me away, but instead she only pulls us closer until my hips are up against hers. I thrust my erection against her stomach, and she glares at me as I drop both my hands to her hips. I slide them up her waist until they're brushing against the sides of her breasts, and she lets out a soft moan that tells me to keep going.

I don't. Instead, I lift her up by her hips, and she immediately links her legs around my waist, hiking her dress up so her black panties are rubbing against the fabric of my slacks.

I thrust up toward her. “Do you still hate me when I do that?” I demand.

She growls out a little noise that’s halfway between need and frustration, and I carry her over to the desk where she was just working. I sit her on it next to her laptop, and she doesn’t unlink her legs from around me. I thrust toward her, my dick lined up with her pussy only separated by far too many clothes, and I drop my lips to her neck as she squeaks out a protest.

She’s about to say something, but I put my hand over her mouth as I thrust against her again.

“We talk later,” I say.

She shudders at the pressure of my hand on her mouth.

“Unless you’d like to tell me how you hate me when I’m shoving my dick against you.” I move my hand from her mouth, and her nostrils flare as she sets her palms behind her on the desk, which only has the effect of pushing her tits out toward me.

She isn’t pushing me away.

She wants this, too.

And I’m going to give it to her.

CHAPTER 16: JOLENE

Of course I want it. Of course I want *him*.

But that doesn't make any of this easier.

I don't want to just have sex in this hotel room and then return to Las Vegas as if nothing happened.

Something *big* is about to happen, and I'm pretty sure I hate him as much as I love him.

It's not just the hate between our families. It's the fact that he's already hurt me once, and I'm terrified to give him the power to do it again.

So if I pretend like I'm not in love with him...maybe that'll make it easier.

If I allow the hate to rule us, then it won't matter if we give in this one time.

"Tell me to fuck you," he demands.

Good Lord, he's hot when he gets all dominating on me.

I don't say a word, and his lips drop to my neck as he continues driving his hips against me.

I've felt him inside me before, but it was one time decades ago. It was our first time. We were less focused on how it felt and more focused on the mechanics of how it all worked.

I'm not leaving this room without feeling him again... without focusing on how it feels this time. Without seeing what moves he's picked up over time even if the mere thought of him with someone else sends me into a fit of rage.

Maybe sort of like he felt when I walked out of the stadium with another man today.

His mouth crashes down to mine. He kisses me aggressively, his tongue shoving into my mouth and battering against mine with urgency as his hips continue to push against mine. His cock is hard for me, and each time he pushes against me, I feel him against my clit.

He's sending me into a frenzy of need and want, and I'm not going to be able to hold out much longer.

I don't want to.

I kiss him back, matching his need with my own urgency, and I moan into him when his hand drops down to cup my breast.

I unlink my legs from around him and push his chest hard to get him to back up, and I pull my dress over my head and drop it beside me.

A tiny voice flits into my subconscious reminding me that I have curves that weren't there the last time he saw me naked. It's been a while since I've had sex, if I'm being honest, and even longer since I've had sex with lights on.

But somehow, knowing how much he wants me...none of that seems to matter right now.

He said we'll talk later.

Right now is the sex. Words will come later...after *we* come. Hopefully.

He told me to tell him to fuck me, and taking my dress off is my way of saying it. I'm not going to beg.

I could always hop in the shower and take care of myself the way he did just this morning.

The second my dress drops to the floor, he's lifting me off the desk and into his arms. He turns and tosses me on the bed before he stares down at me in my black bra and panty set. He slowly loosens his tie, and I'm hit with the fact that this man spoke in front of a stadium with over fifty thousand people in attendance today. He's the head coach of an NFL team.

He was my first love.

And he's looking at me like I'm the only thing that exists in his entire universe right now.

He starts the slow process of unbuttoning his dress shirt one button at a time, and I sit up. I bat his hand away and finish the

job, and I slide the shirt open to reveal the hot six pack of abs that I first laid eyes on just this morning.

I run my fingertips along the ridges, and when I glance up at him, his eyes are closed as he tips his head back, his neck corded. I stand and run my hands along his torso until I'm up to where his shirt still hangs on him, and I push it down his arms to help him out of it.

I unbuckle his belt as he unbuttons the cuffs and his shirt drops to the floor, and before I unbutton his pants, I run my hand along the outside of his pants, grabbing his cock in my fist as I turn to look up at him.

His eyes are dark and hooded with lust as they meet mine. He clenches his jaw and it works back and forth a little.

And then he sweeps me up and tosses me back on the bed. "I didn't give you permission to stand."

"And yet I did it anyway since I don't need some man to tell me what I can or can't do."

"You certainly don't, do you?" He gazes down at me with admiration for a beat, and the way he's looking at me nearly makes me preen. "But tonight, here and now between the two of us, you beg for it."

"Fat chance, asshole."

He lets out a wicked little laugh. "We'll see."

He unbuttons his pants and steps out of them. He's standing in front of me in his boxer briefs.

I'm waiting for him to remove those things when he climbs on top of the bed and hovers over me. I lay back because it feels like the natural thing to do, and he thrusts his hips to mine.

It's big and hard and *God* do I want it even more than I did a few seconds ago. I can feel his cock nearly pushing into me through the thin fabric of his briefs and the thin fabric of my panties, and my eyes roll back at the mere suggestion of it.

He stops moving so his hard cock stays pressed right against my begging, greedy pussy. There's no friction yet, and

I fist a handful of the comforter in each hand to keep myself from reaching out for him. His lips hover over mine for a beat before they drop down, and this kiss is frenzied and rough even though the rest of his body isn't moving.

I push my hips against his, desperate for him to move, to give me what I need as an ache pulses inside me, but he remains still.

He's trying to get into my head, and with the unpredictability of it all, he's succeeding.

Eventually he moves his hips, and he trails his lips down my neck and into my cleavage. He pulls aside my bra and sucks my nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it until it forms into a peak.

"Fuck, that's sweet," he murmurs against my skin.

I reach a hand between us and into his boxer briefs, and I grab his cock into my fist.

I don't start jerking him off yet, though. Instead, if he's going to still against my pussy, I'm going to still with his cock in my hand.

Two can play that game.

He reaches down between my legs and feels how damp my panties are.

"Your cunt is certainly begging for it," he says, his voice low and raspy and sexy as fuck. "Now you beg me for it."

"Never." I glare at him.

"Never is a pretty long time, Jo." He's grunting out the words, and I know I've got him where I want him. He wants this. He wants *me*.

Now the question is what I do with this since that frenzy of need is pulsing through me.

I'm not strong enough to take us both to the edge without allowing us both to tip over it.

He pulls my hand out of his boxer briefs and guides it up until it's over my head, and he holds it there as he moves in so

his dick is up against my pussy again. He thrusts a few times before he moves his thumb down to press it against my clit, rubbing back and forth through my panties and teasing me while the ache inside me continues to grow.

He stops. “Beg me.”

“Not a chance,” I snarl.

He pulls up off me, and before I know what’s happening, he yanks at my panties, and they tear right from my body.

Not once in my entire life has a man actually ripped the panties from my body, and it is most definitely the single hottest moment of my life.

He wastes no time. His mouth lands on my pussy before my brain registers what’s happening. His hands push on my thighs to give himself more room, and his tongue explores the flesh of my pussy. He dips it into my entrance before moving it up to flick against my clit, and my entire body quivers at each flick of his tongue.

He’s got me right where he wants me, and he knows it. The bastard.

He adds a finger into my entrance as he sucks on my clit, and I feel the hot heat of an orgasm building.

I’m close. So damn close.

He adds another finger and pumps the two in and out of me, his tongue doing something magical on my clit like I’ve never felt before.

I’m right there at the edge.

I need this release like I need to breathe.

I let out some sound between a moan and a cry as I feel the edges start to creep in on me, and that’s when it all stops.

His fingers. His mouth.

It all stops.

“What the fuck?” I practically scream at him.

He sits up and smirks again as he narrows his eyes. “Beg for it.”

“I fucking hate you.” I reach down to finish the job myself, drunk with need, but he bats my hand away.

“That’s my orgasm,” he says casually. “You don’t get to have it without me.”

“Fuck you,” I practically spit at him.

“I will when you beg me for it.” He smiles down at me as he traces a finger around my breast, avoiding brushing my nipples in the process.

“No!” I practically scream at him, but the truth is I can’t take it anymore.

I need this release. He knows it, too.

I surge forward with all my might, knocking him back onto his ass on the bed, and I take the moment of surprise to shove forward so I’m straddling his waist. He shoves his cock up toward me, and I need to get him out of those boxer briefs.

Instead, I reach between us and pull his cock out. I tug at it a few times, and then I line up my entrance with it and sit down on top him until I feel him sliding into me.

It’s glorious. A sense of relief filters through me that soon the ache will subside, but this feeling right here, right now, of him being back inside is a strange sense of belonging, like I’m home again where I’m meant to be after far too long away.

It can’t just be tonight. It can’t be.

It’s too powerful. Too much.

“Oh fuck, yes,” he mutters as I slowly start to slide myself up and down.

He reaches to grab my hips, shifting us so he’s guiding my body up and down his shaft harder and faster.

I link my arms around his neck, and he leans down a little awkwardly to bury his face between my breasts as he continues to top from the bottom.

I pull his face into my chest, and he peppers me with kisses. I squeeze tightly to him while my body does what it was made to do over his.

He keeps moving us faster and closer, and the full feeling of it is too much. The climax I've been chasing looms ahead of me as I ride him and our bodies rock together. It's so close I can practically taste it.

And that's when he stops again. He stills inside me.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I practically screech at him.

"Beg," he demands, his face still buried in my chest.

"No!" I push off him, but he's still buried deep. I feel his cock twitch again, and it's nearly enough to tip me over the edge. "You beg me for it," I challenge.

His cock twitches again as he pulls back to look up at me.

Something passes between the two of us in that moment.

It's hot and intimate, and it's already addictive. I know I won't be able to let this go with just this one time.

If I thought it was good all those years ago when we took each other's virginity, it's got absolutely nothing on this.

Fuck, this is good. It's hot and sexy, it's erotic and carnal. It's two souls connecting despite the bitter fight we're both unsure whether we need to keep up.

"Come on, baby. Give it to me," he pants.

Part of me wants to resist. For one, I don't want it to end. For another thing, I don't want to give it to him just because he's asking for it.

But the other part of me needs this—needs him. I need the intimacy of a shared orgasm. *Give it to me* is good enough for me.

The ache throbs inside me, and it's too much. "Please," I whimper. "Please let me come."

His eyes light up with desire, and he starts to move again.

But this time he really moves, and he holds on tight to me as he pushes me right into an intense orgasm.

“Oh God...yes! Yes! Yes!” I moan as my body finally gives way to the intensity between us. My body convulses with each wave of pleasure that surges through me, my pussy clenching onto his cock over and over again as the overwhelming bliss steps in and takes me down from the high.

He gnashes his teeth and grunts as he continues to pump into me, and he stiffens a beat before he guides me so I'm lying on my back. He pulls out of me as his own peak hits him, and he finishes the job by hand to the sweet sound of his groans as the jets of his come stream down onto my stomach. He fists his dick and runs the head of it through the come on my skin. Something about it is so erotic and forbidden as he marks me as his, and it only adds to the sensations and feelings surrounding us.

I'm so fucked.

I'm ruined for anybody else after one night with Lincoln Nash.

CHAPTER 17: LINCOLN

“Jesus,” I murmur. “That was...” I pause as I try to settle on a word, and I can’t really seem to land on the right one. “Unexpected.”

Her lids are heavy, and I lean down and press a soft kiss to her mouth—a contrast to the way I just fucked her, but I do think I might’ve been successful in my endeavor to fuck any other man’s name right out of her brain.

As much as she just fucked any other woman’s name from mine.

“I was expecting it,” she murmurs. Her cheeks are flushed and she closes her eyes as a slight smile plays on her lips.

I chuckle as I climb off her and off the bed to grab a washcloth from the bathroom, and I clean the mess I made on her stomach. I wasn’t planning to jerk it on top of her, but she slid onto my cock before I had a chance to grab a condom.

Not that I’m complaining.

I just...I’ve never done it without one.

Ever.

The thought of just breaking past the forbidden territory into actually kissing her was one thing. Sex was another. Sex with no condom?

It was something else. It opened up a whole new world.

But...what if I knocked her up?

It’s out of the question, and I don’t need to consider all the reasons why.

We didn’t exactly have the whole *are you on birth control* talk.

We didn’t exactly have *any* talk other than the one where she told me she hated me and I told her she had to beg for it.

And despite that animosity between us, it was still intimate and sexy. I felt connected to her in a way I’ve never felt with

anyone else.

It sure as fuck didn't *feel* like hatred.

But I'm also not sure it would be smart to categorize exactly what it *did* feel like.

"Are you hungry?" I ask after I toss the washcloth into the bathroom.

She nods. "I could eat."

We agree on pizza, and I place an order with the restaurant downstairs since they'll deliver it right to our room and I'm not exactly in the mood to head downstairs and grab it.

I pull on a pair of shorts and slide onto the bed beside her. I think about touching her. I think about pulling her into me.

But I'm not sure we're there despite what we just shared.

She finally forces herself out of bed, and she escapes to the bathroom for a minute without a word. When she returns, she pulls on a t-shirt.

A Giants shirt.

It's the team her dad played for—so I let it slide even though it's not a Vegas Aces shirt.

I only want to see her repping the team I coach.

But, as a small voice in the back of my brain reminds me... it's not my place to make that request.

Even if she *is* a team correspondent.

And then she slips onto the bed beside me wearing just a t-shirt. She leans on the headboard, and she links one of her legs over one of mine. I can nearly feel the heat of her bare pussy on my leg even though it's not actually anywhere close right now.

"Now what?" she asks.

I chuckle. "We wait for the pizza?"

"You wanted to talk, so talk."

I blow out a breath. “I’m not sure I have more to say.” Or, at least, I’m not sure how to say it. My guard is back up. I’m anxious about how this conversation might go, so to that end, I stand and grab the bottle of whiskey that’s sitting on the desk next to where I just had her perched a short while ago. Two glasses sit beside it, and I pour us each a few fingers of the liquid.

She thanks me as I hand her the glass, and I hold mine up.

“To the unexpected.”

She offers a little smile as she taps her glass to mine, and we each take a healthy sip before she asks, “What affected you today?”

My brows pinch together as I try to figure that out. “You. Just having you there. I was nervous going into it, speaking in front of that huge crowd...but seeing you somehow centered me. And I wasn’t sure how to feel about that. I mean, I’ve been conditioned to hate you for longer than I was able to love you.”

Her fingertips move to my arm and trail down until she links her fingers through mine, her glass in her other hand. She takes a sip. “So how do we overcome that? Because I’m in the same boat, Linc. It’s not like we’d ever be able to have a normal relationship.”

I blow out a breath. “Fuck normal. We do whatever works for us.”

“But what would that look like? It’s not like you can take me to the next charity event. It’s not like I can sit in the owner’s box and watch you from up there. It’s not like—”

I hold up my glass to stop her. “I know what it is and isn’t like, okay? I know you’re right. And I don’t know how we navigate that. Maybe we’re doomed from the start. Maybe we’re only ever supposed to feel animosity toward each other. Maybe hate sex is all we can ever have.” I shrug, and I drain the rest of the liquid and set the glass on the nightstand beside me.

“But maybe not. Maybe somewhere in the midst of all that, we could have it all.”

I press my lips together, and that thought floats between us for a few beats. “Maybe,” I eventually agree. “So, for now, we figure this out together in secret. We make a pact today that nobody knows.”

“Nobody?” she asks.

“Nobody,” I confirm, and then I pause a beat. “Wait. Your friend already knows, doesn’t she?”

She guiltily sips her whiskey before she answers, and she sets her glass on the nightstand, too. “I *may* have called her earlier when you were out and told her about the chemistry between us, and I *might* have texted her when you were in the bathroom to let her know I sealed the deal.”

I roll my eyes. “Jolene,” I groan.

“That sounds a lot like how you said my name when you were inside me,” she says, and then she slaps a hand over her mouth like she can’t believe she just said that.

My jaw drops as I turn to look at her, and I can’t help the gleam in my eye as I take the pillow I’m leaning on and hit her with it right in the stomach.

Her eyes widen. “Did you just...hit me with a pillow?”

I raise a shoulder as I arch a brow.

“Oh, it’s on, Nash,” she says, and quick as a flash, she grabs the pillow she’s leaning on and she perches on her knees as she smacks me right in the chest with her pillow.

I make some sort of *oof* sound that makes her giggle, and I laugh, too, as I get her back near her hip.

Somehow it erupts into an epic pillow fight—not our first, naturally, but one where we’re laughing as we let go of some of the aggression that spans between us. It ends as I wrestle her down, and I hover over her with my lips just inches from hers.

“I haven’t had a pillow fight in twenty years,” I murmur close to her mouth.

Her eyes are merry as they fall onto mine, and she leans up to catch my lips with hers for just a quick peck. “Neither have I.”

I lower my mouth back to hers for a longer kiss, but it’s interrupted by a knock at the door before it gets too far.

“Pizza must be here,” I mutter. I’m hungry, but I think I’m hungrier to be back inside her than I am to eat actual food.

I can only hope that time comes again.

Sooner than later.

CHAPTER 18: JOLENE

He answers the door while I stay in bed and finish my whiskey, and when he returns, he tosses the pizza box in the middle of the bed. I've never actually eaten in a hotel bed before, but I go with it.

We each grab a slice, and after he takes his first bite, he says, "Do you have any confessions?"

I can't help a little chuckle as I think back to the first time he asked the same question.

It was the night he first kissed me.

I didn't have one I was ready to give to him, but he did.

He wanted me to say it first, but I didn't. I was too scared to ruin the friendship we had.

He wasn't.

I want to kiss you.

That's what started it, and from then on, any time either of us knew the other one had something to say, we'd ask the question. Sometimes one of us would say it when we had something to confess, too—like the time I told him I was *ready*.

The reminder causes my chuckle to turn serious pretty quickly. "A lot of time has passed, Lincoln," I say quietly. "I probably have quite a few."

"Yeah," he murmurs. "So do I." He's quiet as he chews a few more bites of pizza. "What's it like having a kid?"

"Starting with the big guns." I'm quiet a beat as I contemplate how to answer. "It's both the best and hardest thing I've ever done."

"In what ways?"

"It's amazing to watch this little person who is a literal part of you grow and turn from a baby into a kid into a little person with his own personality. But it's also all-consuming. I love

him in a way I didn't know existed. He brings me more joy than I've ever felt before. But there are days when I've got nothing left to give. There are days when I feel like I'm either *mom* or *journalist* and there's no Jolene left." I shrug. "Then I look into the eyes that are an exact replica of my own, and this overwhelming feeling of love just washes over me. But other times, I feel guilty because I'm pawning him off on my parents or my friend while I'm trying to advance my career. It's just...hard."

"You're not pawning him off," he says softly. "That must be really difficult."

"It's impossible. And the worst is when he goes to his dad's." I roll my eyes.

"Tell me about his dad."

"I'd rather not," I mutter. But when I glance over at him and see the earnestness in his eyes, I get the sense he truly wants to know more. He truly cares.

I clear my throat. "We were engaged. I got pregnant. He cheated." I shrug. "End of story. Now he's married to the girl he cheated on me with, and they have two little girls. They're where he spends his time, and he doesn't give his first child the same attention."

He wrinkles his nose. "What a douchebag."

"You don't know the half of it," I agree.

"Then tell me."

I shake my head. "You first. Confession."

"What do you want to know? I'm an open book."

I snort at that as I grab a second piece of pizza. "Okay. Why'd you quit playing?"

"And you thought I went for the big guns," he mutters.

I shrug. "This was your idea. Total honesty. Go."

"I plead the fifth." He takes a bite of his slice.

"I don't think so, pal. Confess."

“Am I speaking with JoLo, the girl who once held my heart in her hands? Or is this Jolene Bailey, team correspondent?”

I clear my throat as my cheeks flush. “Anything we say when I’m not wearing underwear stays between us.”

He laughs, but it fades quickly. He gets up and pours us both more whiskey, and he hands me mine before he answers. He doesn’t sit. “Not even your friend can know.”

“She’s a nurse. She’s the one who told me that you could’ve recovered.”

“Fine. Still, nobody knows. You never confirm or deny your suspicions to her.”

I nod. “I swear.”

He stares at me for a few beats, and then, to my complete and utter shock, he tells me. “It was a bad injury. There was an infection. I had to have additional surgeries. There was talk that I might not make it back to the field at first, and that was the story that my publicity team released.” He shakes his head a little as he’s transported back to that time. “I made peace with that, and a small part of me had this strange sense of relief I wasn’t expecting when I was told I might not get back to the field. I thought maybe it was just the drugs helping me cope. The mere thought of a career-ending injury for an NFL player would be devastating, but instead my thoughts immediately turned to coaching. It turned to what came after playing. I didn’t want to keep beating the hell out of my body. I was tired of blocking defensive linemen and getting plowed down for it. I was just...tired of playing. I’d been doing it since I was old enough to join my first pee-wee league, and I didn’t want to do it anymore even though I still wanted to be connected to the game. I wanted to strategize. I wanted to be in charge. But there was literally nobody I could admit that to. Literally nobody.” He stops, and his eyes meet mine. “My father...I couldn’t disappoint him.”

“That must’ve been impossible,” I say, offering my sympathy.

He drains the whiskey in his glass. “I couldn’t just opt out of the game. So I asked the doctor not to speak to anyone about the injury, and since he had to follow confidentiality laws, I used the knee as my out and rewrote my own narrative.” He shrugs at the end and sits on the edge of the bed. “So go ahead and judge me however you want, but that’s my story, and you’re the only one who knows it aside from my doctor and myself, so if you publish it, I go to the press and let them know you’re just a bitter ex making up stories.”

I gasp a little at the end of his diatribe. It’s not the fact that he lied to the world about his injury—something I already suspected.

It’s the fact that he feels like he needs to threaten me to ensure I won’t tell anyone.

It hurts.

Far worse than I ever imagined it would.

“Lincoln, I won’t tell a soul. I swear. You can trust me.”

He glances over at me, and I finish my whiskey and slam the glass on the nightstand.

“But if you ever threaten me again, you will not like the results.”

He clenches his jaw, and he sets his empty glass on the dresser. “Understood.”

“Thank you for sharing that with me, but I have to ask. What made you confess?”

He shakes his head. “I have no fucking clue. Your magical pussy, maybe.”

Despite the gravity in this room, I can’t help when I break into a fit of giggles at that.

“Want more?” he asks, holding up the whiskey bottle.

“If I have anymore, I’ll be drunk.”

He grins and pours us each a little more before he perches back at the foot of the bed. “Then drink up, JoLo.”

JoLo. I haven't been called that since...well, since the last time he called me that.

My first and middle name. Jolene Lorraine. He's the only one who has ever called me that.

"What are you going to do with me once I'm drunk?" I ask.

He smirks. "I've never seen a drunk Jolene Bailey. Remember how adamantly you were against alcohol when you were fifteen?"

I laugh. "Yeah. Times have changed."

"But you're still as stubborn as you ever were."

I take a sip. "I don't know about that. I *did* just let you fuck me, after all."

"I think *you* were the one fucking *me* there, Bailey."

I laugh as I take another sip. "You sound like you're ready for round two."

"I can't tell if that's an invitation or a threat."

"Maybe both." I set my glass down and get up on my knees. I grab the nearly empty pizza box and set it on my nightstand, and then I crawl over to where he's sitting. I press my lips to the back of his neck. He's still not wearing a shirt, and it's kind of not fair that he can just sit there eating pizza and drinking whiskey sans shirt and those six-pack abs just ripple in the moonlight.

His scent is overwhelming as I breathe him in.

He leans down to set his glass on the floor, and he spins so quickly I nearly fall off balance. "Jolene Bailey crawling on her knees for me. Now that's a sight for my dreams tonight."

"Be a good boy and it won't have to just be in your dreams."

"I think I can get behind a drunk JoLo." He moves in behind me so we're in the doggy style position, the only thing between us his shorts. I feel the hard length of his cock as he aligns it to my slit, and the feeling is absolutely glorious.

“Literally.” He leans forward and reaches around under my shirt to cup my breast, and he plays with my nipple a bit.

I moan, and he chuckles softly as he massages my breast. I feel his lips against my neck, the scruff on his jaw that was absent when we were seventeen rough and sexy against my sensitive skin. He lets go of my breast and reaches between my legs to plunge a finger into me.

“Oh God,” I moan as he drives his finger into me. He adds another finger as his lips drag along my neck.

“Fuck, Jolene. I love how wet you are for me. How ready. How much you want this.”

I try to come up with some witty response, but words fail me as incoherent sounds escape from my lips. I’m close, so close, and he can tell. He gets rougher and more aggressive as his fingers pick up the pace, driving into me again and again as I push my hips back against him. I still feel his cock through his shorts cradled near my ass, and while that’s still virgin territory, I can’t help but feel like I want to give it to him. I want to give him *everything*.

The impending climax has my body aching everywhere for him just as he pulls his fingers out of me. I grind back against his cock, desperate for friction, desperate for him, but he flips me over so I’m lying on my back and he’s still on his knees between my legs.

“Are you on the pill?” he demands.

“A little late to be ask—” I begin with a whopping dose of sass, but he leans down and cuts me off with his lips on mine.

He pulls back to talk, his words hot against my mouth.
“Tell me you’re on the fucking pill.”

“I get the shot,” I say against his lips, and the second the words are out, he leans up, reaches into his shorts, pulls out his cock, and plunges it into me.

“Oh my God!” I cry out as my back arches off the bed at the feel of his length inside me again. I clutch fistfuls of the white hotel sheets while he fucks me fast and rough, his hips slamming against mine over and over as he hovers above me.

I was already chasing an orgasm, but it's really on now as it builds and tightens inside me. He leans forward to kiss me but detours for my neck, where he grunts hotly against my skin. He thrusts harder, faster, furiously, as if he can't get far enough inside me, and all it does is push me completely over the edge.

My body seizes with pleasure that ricochets through me as I tighten my grip on the sheets. I scream his name through it as he keeps grinding violently against me, and all I can do is ride out the pleasure he's giving me as I nearly black out from how insanely good he feels, how incredibly hot this moment is.

Just as the jolts start to wane, he stiffens over me with his own release, his lips still on my neck as he grunts out a string of curses. He fills my pussy with every last drop he has to give, and then he collapses on top of me for a few beats.

I let go of the sheets where I'm still clutching them, not realizing how tightly I was holding onto them until I flex my fingers a little, and I wrap my arms around his back. He lifts his head and drops his lips to mine lazily. He's still inside me, and I feel his cock twitch like it's not quite ready to let go.

I'm not ready for him to let go, either.

I'm not sure I ever want him on the outside again, not when I've felt him twice tonight, not when I know how good we could be together.

Except we can't, and the reminder hits me as he eventually pulls out. His come leaks from my pussy and onto the hotel sheets, seemingly a symbol of the messiness of our entire relationship, and a deep sadness seems to creep into its void.

I'm not sure how we go back to Vegas and live our lives again without each other...not after the night we've shared.

Because it only took one night, and I'm in as deep as I was when I was fifteen.

The mere thought of it is terrifying.

CHAPTER 19: LINCOLN

Of course we're on the same flight on the way back home, but this time we're not seated beside each other.

It's unfortunate since this is the time I would've preferred that, but it's likely better this way given that if we *were* sitting together I wouldn't be able to keep my hands off her, and I can't touch her in public spaces. Even on a plane. Under a blanket.

God, last night was...unexpected, as I told her, and I can't stop seeing her face as I plowed her cunt last night.

Her eyes heavy, her lips parted, her chest heaving.

I want it again. And again.

And again.

I want more.

I don't want to lose her again.

And yet, as we checked out of the hotel and shared a ride to the airport, I couldn't help but think how there's already a divide between us.

There's already a wedge that's only going to widen as we go back to reality in Vegas.

We're not in some hotel suite anymore.

It's not just the two of us sealed into privacy anymore.

But still...I want to find a way to make it work. I want to see her again. I just don't know how when we're both in the spotlight. We both have people watching. And if anyone finds out, it's not just our jobs, our livelihoods. It's our very families.

Is it worth it?

That's a tough call. But I'm known for making tough calls.

We land, and she's a few people behind me as we get off the plane. I slow my pace once I'm in the terminal so she can

catch up, and we walk together toward the ride share area even though we'll be taking separate rides home.

Just as we get to the airport exit, I hear someone calling my name. "Lincoln Nash?"

I glance up, as does Jolene, and some guy I don't know approaches us.

"I thought that was you. Don't fuck up my team, man," he says, and he laughs a little as he says it.

"I'll do my best." I try to be polite, but you never know what you're getting when you're dealing with the public. Some people hate my coaching style, and others love it. Regardless, I don't really care about their opinions. I was hired to do my job the way I want to do it, so here I am.

They're armchair experts, and it's pretty easy to coach that way. Making the actual decisions on the fly is a little more complex.

I know I have a lot to prove this season, and I'm up to the task.

As I walk away from the stranger, though, and Jolene walks a few paces in front of me, I can't help when my eyes fall to her ass.

That sweet, sweet ass that I will claim as mine someday.

Fuck.

Now I'm hard *and* distracted, a combination I don't need as I have two weeks filled with events from meeting with my coaching staff and getting a game plan together for OTAs, planning for the upcoming season, finalizing the playbook, scouting opponents, making appearances, giving interviews... the list is endless, and I saw a text before my flight from my agent about some new sponsorship opportunities he wants to discuss.

But all of it feels like it could wait if I could just get another night with Jolene.

I just don't know when that's supposed to happen.

I'm about to ask her as we walk toward the ride share line when the dude from inside follows me out. "Who are you putting at QB? That rookie? Or Fletch?"

I ignore him, but he gains on me.

"I asked you a question, man," he says.

"We're finalizing the roster this month. Thanks for being a fan." I offer a tight smile as I keep walking, my head down.

"You better play Fletch, you stupid fucker," he says.

I turn to look at him as my hackles rise. I won't get into a public fight, but one of the things I hate most about being in this position is the fact that people think they can hurl shit at me and it doesn't affect me.

It does.

"Listen, man. I don't want any trouble. I'll do the best I can for the Aces. Have a good night."

I start to walk away when I hear him mutter, "Pussy."

My nostrils flare, and I'm about to turn around and put this asshole in his place when I glance up and my eyes meet Jolene's. She's watching me, gauging my reaction and seeing what I'm about to do, and somehow knowing she's here watching me makes me want to step up and do the right thing.

I draw in a deep breath, and instead of turning around, I ignore him.

I keep walking until I arrive at the ride share, and the car I reserved shows up nearly as soon as I walk up to the area. I hop in, and I glance up at Jolene. She offers a small wave and a tight smile, but we didn't say goodbye.

Because we can't.

My chest feels heavy at the thought, but there's not much else I can do.

My driver tries to make conversation, but I ignore him as I type out a text to Jolene. I contemplate what to say a while before I settle on something vague.

Me: *I didn't get a chance to say this to you, but this weekend told me everything I needed to know.*

I'm nearly home when her reply comes through.

Jolene: *Could you be any more unclear?*

I chuckle as I read her words, and I wait to reply until I'm inside my house. I set my suitcase in my bedroom and unpack it in the silence of my house.

It's *too* quiet.

I've never noticed how quiet.

Me: *It all came back but it's stronger than it used to be.*

She doesn't reply, and I worry I overstepped as I unpack my toiletries and start a load of laundry before setting my empty suitcase on the top shelf of my closet.

I turn on ESPN while I search my refrigerator for something to eat, and I settle on my favorite comfort food: mac and cheese. I'm not a culinary genius, but that I can do. Especially the microwave ones, which I keep a stock of in the freezer.

Did I drink black coffee and skip the hash browns at breakfast yesterday before my speech? You bet. Am I home now and the nerves of speaking in front of fifty thousand people are gone? Absolutely, and now I face different obstacles as I try to figure out what went down this weekend.

I give up pretty quickly. Women are virtually impossible to figure out.

I don't hear from Jolene until nearly ten, and I've spent the hours waiting anxiously when it felt like I sort of put my heart on the line in my last text.

Jolene: *Sorry, had to get J to bed. It all came back for me, too, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do with that.*

My chest tightens at her words, and I flip off the television so I can focus on this conversation.

Me: *Don't be sorry. How was it getting home to him?*

Jolene: *Perfect. He stayed with my friend Sam. We're actually living with her for the time being.*

I think about asking why, but it's not really my place. I don't think.

I wonder for a beat what it would be like for her to live *here*. I realize it's a stupid thought to have considering she has a son, but I can't seem to banish the thought of fucking her on the enormous black couch where I'm sitting or on the white quartz countertops or against my shower walls or in my bed.

Jesus, just the thought of it has my cock begging for another round with her.

Me: *I miss you. Already. I miss everything we had this weekend. I miss pizza on the bed and drunk JoLo.*

I send it before I lose my nerve.

Jolene: *I miss you, too. I miss what we had when we were teenagers, and I felt it this weekend...only somehow more intense than it was back then.*

Me: *So did I.*

So where do we go from here?

I want to ask...but I'm afraid to know the answer.

So instead, I take the sex route.

Me: *What are you wearing?*

Jolene: *Wouldn't you like to know? [smirk face emoji]*

Me: *I would. It's why I asked. I keep picturing you in a t-shirt and nothing else.*

Jolene: *Well I do have bottoms on this time.*

Me: *Send me a pic.*

Jolene: *No.*

Me: *Text sex?*

Jolene: *I have to be honest. I have no idea how to have text sex.*

Me: *It's easy. I say dirty shit, you say dirty shit, we both get off and end the conversation with smiles.*

Jolene: *Okay. I've got a few minutes.*

A surge of heat pulses in my balls.

Me: *Start by getting naked.*

Her reply takes a few beats.

Jolene: *Done. Take your cock out. Feel free to send me a dick pic. Or a pic of those abs of yours.*

Me: *No pics. Then I can't run for president someday.*

Jolene: *Do you want to run for president someday?*

Me: *No. It's just a saying.*

Jolene: *I'd be happy to put you in touch with some friends who could help run your campaign.*

Me: *We're getting off track here.*

Jolene: *Fine. What are you wearing since you won't send me a pic?*

Me: *I haven't changed since I got home, but you told me to take my cock out, so it's out.*

Jolene: *I wish I was there to suck it.*

Me: *Fuck, Jo. Sometimes you say things that catch me completely off guard.*

Jolene: *That's the goal. Are you hard?*

Me: *Yes.*

Jolene: *What are you thinking about?*

Me: *You. What it felt like to be inside you with nothing between us this weekend. How much I want to feel you again. How I know that no matter how much I jerk off it'll never feel as good as your sweet cunt.*

Jolene: *[sweating emoji] Damn, dude.*

Me: *Tell me how wet you are for me right now.*

Jolene: *I feel weird typing it out. IDK. Super wet.*

Me: *You can give me more than that.*

Jolene: *Remember the sound when I slid down over your hot dick because I was so wet for you? About that wet.*

Me: *That's more like it. Slide your finger into that wet pussy and pretend it's mine.*

Jolene: *I won't be able to text you if I'm doing that.*

She's right, and I want to listen to her voice as she comes with me anyway.

So I click the call button.

She's a little breathless, and her voice is low when she answers. "What are you doing?"

"Maybe you can't touch and text, but you can touch and talk, right?" My voice is gravelly, only proving how goddamn turned on I am right now.

"I'm not doing this over the phone with you, and especially not when I'm in someone else's house!" She's whisper-yelling and somehow I find it both sexy and adorable.

"You live there now, don't you?" I point out.

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Then no buts. Slide your finger into that wet pussy. I want to hear you moan the same way you did for me."

"Lincoln!" she whisper yells.

"You know you want to." I reach into my shorts and pump my shaft a few times. "Oh, fuck," I murmur. It feels good, but even better when I think of her and what we did this weekend together. "Come on. One last way to cap this weekend."

"And then what?" she asks, and her question is a cold shower on my hot cock.

"And then...I don't know," I say honestly, still palming my cock. "We figure it out."

She's quiet a beat, and then I hear her readjust the phone followed by a soft gasp. "Oh, God. I'm wetter than I thought I was."

“That’s so goddamn hot, Jo,” I groan as I start pumping up and down my shaft a little faster.

“Are you, uh...what are you doing right now?” she asks.

“I’m jerking off while I’m listening to the sound of your voice. Push your fingers in and pull them out for me, and let me listen to how hot you sound.”

She does it, and I hear her soft little moans.

I want to hear the loud ones she gave me in the hotel when it was just the two of us, and I will hear them again.

I will.

I start pumping faster, and my balls start to tighten as I listen to her moans. My breath starts coming in ragged grunts at the erotic sounds coming over the phone, and I close my eyes as I listen to her.

“Touch your tits,” I demand, wishing I was there beside her to suck them into my mouth.

“Oh, Lincoln!” she cries, still softer than in the hotel but louder than the rest of this conversation has been as she starts to let go.

“Fuck yes. Say my name again. I want you to close your eyes as you picture me grinding into you on that bed in Ohio, giving you the kind of fuck you deserve.”

Instead of saying my name, she lets out a sound that’s nearly a sob as short little gasps come through the line and into my ear. “I’m coming,” she cries quietly. “I’m coming so fucking hard, Lincoln, and it’s all because of you.”

Her words push me over the edge. My balls contract uncontrollably in an unbearably intense wave of pleasure. I moan something—her name, maybe, or a string of curses, I’m not really sure as all coherence leaves. I’m home alone, and I don’t need to be quiet as my grunts of pleasure keep pace with each pump of come that spills onto my hand.

We’re both quiet as we live in the afterglow for a few beats.

“Holy shit, Linc. I think that might be the most erotic thing I’ve ever done,” she murmurs.

Indeed.

I hope we get to do that again...but I have even higher hopes that we’ll get to recreate this past weekend again and again.

I’m just not sure how it’s going to be possible.

CHAPTER 20: JOLENE

I guess I'm just supposed to go on living my life like I didn't have the singular best weekend ever followed by the most erotically sexy phone call of my life. How does one recover from all that, exactly?

She talks to her best friend about it, obviously.

I clean myself up in the bathroom connected to the guest room I'm staying in, and when I emerge, I find Sam in the kitchen making lunches for the boys for tomorrow.

I feel guilty that she's making my kid lunch after caring for him all weekend, and meanwhile I'm in her guest room masturbating over the phone with my secret lover.

Is that what he even is? How do I refer to him?

My ex? My boyfriend? My enemy? My lover?

It's complicated.

"All unpacked?" she asks absently since that's what I told her I was going to go do after we got the boys to sleep.

"Yeah."

She glances up at me. "You okay? Your face is all flushed."

It's probably even more flushed after she calls me out on it. "Fine," I mutter. "What can I do?"

"Grab some chips or crackers from the pantry," she says, nodding that way. "And some granola bars, and while you're at it, were you just talking to Linc again?"

I disappear into the pantry for a beat as I try to come up with some excuse, but I fail. "Yeah. He texted me earlier, and we got involved in a whole text conversation, and then he called in the middle of it."

"And that's why you're flushed?"

"Something like that."

She gasps dramatically. "Liar!"

“What?” I ask innocently.

“You’re going to have to wake up a little earlier in the morning if you’re going to pull a fast one on old Sammy,” she says.

I giggle. “That might be the single dorkiest thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

She shrugs and gives me a pointed look as she picks up a slice of bread to slather jelly all over it.

“Okay, fine. He was sex-texting me, and then he called and made me come over the phone.”

“Whoa. That guy’s got some magic if he could make you come over the phone.” She slathers jelly on another slice before closing the jar and opening the peanut butter.

“Well...you know what I mean. I did it with his instructions, and he did it, and it was probably the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced, and here are the chips and granola bars.” I slide them onto the counter.

“Please tell me you washed your hands first before manhandling the kids’ food.”

I roll my eyes. “Knock it off. I knew I shouldn’t have told you.”

“I’m teasing you. You know you can—and *should*—tell me anything and everything. So what are you gonna do? It’s not like you two can just hop onto the scene as Vegas’s newest power couple,” she says. She slaps one peanut butter bread on top of one jelly bread and starts to slide it into a baggie.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “We both felt something strong—”

“So strong you couldn’t stay off the phone for a night after you just spent the weekend together,” she interrupts.

“Exactly. It’s all still there, and I think we might try exploring what we can in private. I just don’t know how to navigate it with Rivera up my ass.” I sigh as I grab the jelly jar and place it back in the fridge.

“Hm.” She thinks for a few beats as she finishes up the lunches, and I perch on the stool on the opposite side of the counter from where she stands. “I wish I had advice. I wish I could help. I want you to be happy, and honestly, seeing the way you’re glowing after a weekend with him makes me want this for you. So bad. And can you imagine how good he’d be with Jonah?” She shakes her head a little as we both imagine it.

“He’d be incredible. But you’re taking leaps down a road I’m pretty sure we won’t be able to navigate.” I feel subdued even as I say the words aloud.

“What makes you say that?” she asks.

“There’s too much in our way. Too many obstacles. It’s not just career suicide. It’s family betrayal. The roots are too deep, so what’s our choice? To be together in secret?” I shrug. “We can’t live that way forever.”

“No, you’re right. But just because you can’t live that way *forever* doesn’t mean you can’t try it out that way *for now*.”

It’s a solid point, one that I’ve arrived at myself a time or two.

She gasps as her eyes widen. “Oh my God! I’ve got it!”

“Got what?” I ask, my brows creasing together in total confusion.

“This is bananas, Jo. Are you ready for it?” she asks.

“Ready for what?”

She wrinkles her nose. “No, never mind. It’s stupid.”

“What’s stupid? What’s your idea?”

“What if *I* start dating him?” she suggests.

I freeze as I stare at her for a few beats. “I tell you I think I want to be with him and your solution is for *you* to be with him? What the fuck, Sam?”

“No!” She laughs. “Well, maybe not a hard *no* after the way you described his sexual prowess...” She trails off, but then she sees my intense glare and shakes it off. “I’m kidding.

What I mean is what if *publicly* he's with me. He takes *me* to events you'll also be at. He's spotted coming here to *my house*. *My car* is spotted in his driveway. But really...it's you. He sneaks off with you to bang your brains out in a secret room at the charity ball or in the back room at the Gridiron or in the bathroom at the Complex. I can head everyone else off and throw off suspicion, and you just look like you're doing your job while I help orchestrate all the secret sex."

I tilt my head as I stare at her. It might be the single dumbest idea I've ever heard, or it might be the most genius plan I could ever imagine.

"Why would you do that?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Two reasons. One, I open the door to throw the scent off my best friend so she can explore whatever this is and find a way to be happy because that's exactly everything I want for you. And two, I get the benefit of publicly dating Vegas's newest eligible bachelor. Our photo will be splashed all over the media to really lay it on thick, and it'll give Devin something to obsess over," she says, naming her ex and Cade's dad. "Win-win."

I laugh at her reasoning. "I guess I can't argue with that. Let me talk to Lincoln and see what he thinks, but...who will watch the boys while you're galivanting with Linc and I'm busy doing my job?"

"I'm positive either your parents or mine would step in to help. And once this is all over and you two get your happy ending, make sure he can set me up with some hot player or something so I can have my own happily ever after," she says.

I laugh, but the truth is that I'm already worried we *won't* get our happy ending no matter how hard we try.

I'm terrified there's just way too much standing in our way.

CHAPTER 21: JOLENE

I meet with Marcus pretty much daily if not more often, but Monday mornings are the time when the entire sports team meets to discuss our coverage plans for the week. This meeting is when Marcus assigns stories and gives feedback, and it's the time when he gives us his vision for what VG03 sports news will look like to ensure we're covering Vegas sports the way our viewers deserve.

But it also means I have to sit in the meeting with the entire sports department, and as I get ready for work on Monday morning, I feel a bit on edge.

It only gets worse as my phone starts ringing a few minutes before I need to leave for work.

It's my father.

"Hi, Dad," I answer.

"Hey, pumpkin," he says. "What's the scoop?"

"You called me, buddy. You tell me."

"Rumor has it you stayed the weekend with a Nash in Ohio. That true?"

I heave out a breath. "It was a work event, Dad. Nothing more." I hate lying to him.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." More than fine. More satisfied than I've been since...well, since the first time he did that to me all those years ago. Obviously I refrain from mentioning that to my father.

"You couldn't stay anywhere else?"

"No, actually, I couldn't. Marcus booked me on some standby reservation, and he happened to be checking in at the same time as me, heard me yelling at the poor desk agent, and offered for me to stay in his room as a gesture of goodwill toward the media. That's it." That's not it, but that's how it

started. “I said no at first, the agent let me know all the rooms in the area were booked, and I had basically no other choice.”

“And?” he asks.

I’m not sure what he’s getting at. And we had sex? Is that really why my father called? “And what?”

“You were spotted out at breakfast.”

“It was a working breakfast,” I say. “I had to interview him ahead of his commencement address.” I hate having to defend my actions. “Might I remind you that I’m a grown adult now who is capable of making these sorts of decisions for myself?”

“I’m aware of that, pumpkin. But they’re bad people and I’m just trying to protect you. It doesn’t matter if you’re fourteen, thirty-four, or eighty-four. You’ll always be my little girl, and I will always do what I can to protect you from the bad guys.”

“I know, Dad. And when I’m eighty-four, you’ll be...” I trail off as I let him do the math.

“Dead, probably.”

“Dad! Don’t talk like that!” The mere thought of losing him sometime in the next fifty years springs tears to my eyes even though it’s likely a morbid reality. “I have to get to work. Is there anything else?”

“Just be careful with him, JoJo. I know you once had a thing for him, and I’d hate to see him manipulate you the way his father manipulated me. It runs in families, you know. That stuff gets passed down.”

“I know, Dad. Thank you for the reminder.”

“Love you,” he says, and I say it back before I hang up.

That call only made me even more anxious about this morning’s meeting.

It’s been over a month since Ryan Rivera caught Lincoln and me kissing in the lobby. He hasn’t done anything with the photo he took of the two of us, but after the weekend with Lincoln I just shared, I feel like the guilt will be written all

over my face. I'm nervous he's going to see it, too, and he's going to out me in front of the entire sports department, and then it'll become public news, and then my dad will find out what I've been doing behind his back, and then who knows what sort of destruction we'll cause.

The sports department is a relatively small department—just seven of us that include the editor, two anchors, and four reporters. But I still don't need the scandal.

And that's why I text Lincoln before I leave for work.

Me: *Sam had an idea to help us out. Call me if you have a sec.*

My phone rings on my way into the office, and an ache throbs between my legs as his name pops up on my screen.

"Good morning," I answer.

"Hey," he says, and his voice is all sexy and low. "What's going on?"

"I'm heading into the office and just wanted to run something by you. Did I wake you?"

He chuckles. "No. I've been at the office two hours already."

I glance at the clock. "Did you sleep at all last night?"

"Not well," he admits. "It was cold and lonely without you there."

Jeez. I'm in trouble here...in particular because I felt it, too. I clear my throat. "I, uh..." I don't know what to say. We can't exactly share a bed—even with Sam's brilliant plan.

"Sorry. Was that too forward?" he asks. Before I get a chance to answer, he says, "What's this idea of your friend's?"

Now that I'm about to say it out loud, I'm afraid it sounds stupid.

But as I think about the call I just had with my father combined with the fear that Rivera is going to spread around those photos, I make a snap decision.

Even if it's crazy.

“What if you date Sam?” I blurt.

Okay, that's not *exactly* the plan.

“Uh...what?”

“I mean...publicly. You're with Sam. My best friend. So when people see you and me together, they think nothing of it. It throws them off our scent, and you don't have to deal with the throngs of women throwing themselves at you since you're publicly in a relationship. We don't have to worry about our families as we try to navigate whatever this is together. But *privately*, you come home to me. Or whatever that means since you can't *really* come home to me since I have a seven-year-old son, but you know what I mean, you and me—”

“Jo,” he interrupts, and I stop short from my excessive rambling. After I'm quiet a beat and he mulls it over for a minute, he says, “I think...” He trails off, and I wait a little nervously. “I think it could actually work. Nobody would question why I'm going over to Sam's place if I'm dating Sam. I take her with me to events I'm expected to bring a date to, events you'll be at, too, and you'll know you have nothing to worry about since I'm there with someone you trust. But whose ass do I need to kick if you bring a date?”

“I don't bring dates with me when I attend events I'm covering. It's too messy and I need to focus.”

“But you'll have time for, you know, a quick and dirty fuck in a bathroom stall, right?”

Why does my pulse start racing at the thought? “Excuse me. I'm a lady. I'll take a quick and dirty fuck in an alley behind an event, not in a bathroom stall.”

His laugh is music to my ears. I love eliciting *any* emotion from him, whether it's the lust his eyes burned with as he looked at me in a hotel room or even when it was the anger he directed at me before that. We pulse things in each other nobody else has ever had the power to pulse, and it's both rare and exquisite. Not to mention a little terrifying.

“Do you really think it could work?” I ask.

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

We’re both quiet as we contemplate that, and I really hope those aren’t just famous last words.

I pull into my parking spot. “I’m at the office. I better go.”

“I miss you,” he says softly, and quite frankly I’m shocked at the vulnerability he’s showing. I’m even more shocked that he just agreed to fake date Sam.

“Right back at you, Coach. Listen, can I drop word that you’re dating my bestie at my Monday morning meeting?” I ask.

“You think Rivera’s going to fall for it?” he asks.

I wrinkle my nose. “Yeah, maybe I better hold off and just let you be seen with her.”

“Can I come by and chat with her sometime before I start dating her?”

I laugh. “Sure. She’s off today, and I can swing by the house anytime to introduce you. The boys get home from school around three-thirty.”

“I have a working lunch but I have an open window from one to two. Does that work?” he asks.

I open my calendar app to check. “Yep. I’ll see you then.”

“And, hey, if your best friend needs to, you know, go to the store or something while I’m there...”

“Did this just become a booty call?”

“Excuse me, ma’am,” he scoffs. “I’m a gentleman.”

“Yeah, a gentleman who likes the booty.”

“*Your* booty. Nobody else’s will do.”

My cheeks grow warm at that. “I’m gonna be late for my meeting.”

“I need to run, too. I’ll see you around one.”

We say goodbye, and my chest aches a little as we end the call.

I wish it could just be easy for us, but I've also learned over my thirty-four years on this planet that the things in life most worth fighting for usually don't come easy.

CHAPTER 22: JOLENE

I walk into the meeting after everybody else, unsurprisingly, but I'm right on time. "Sorry," I apologize anyway. "I was chatting with someone I'll be interviewing later."

It's not a lie, exactly.

"Great," Marcus says, and he gets started talking about his vision for this week.

I glance up when I feel Rivera's eyes on me, and his are narrowed as he studies me. I let my brows dip when my eyes meet his as if to say *what are you looking at* or maybe *go fuck yourself*, but I don't say anything out loud.

"Bailey, how was Nash's speech?"

I focus on the question and not on Rivera as the attention in the room lands squarely on me. "The speech was incredible. He talked about taking risks on and off the field, and I've already pulled up the footage from his time as OC where we see him taking risks. I snagged some sound bites and even scored a breakfast with the guy, so I have plenty of material to carry through a few different angles."

"Amazing work as usual, Jolene. Rivera, where are we at on the high school recaps? Graduation is right around the corner." Marcus keeps talking, but I lose interest as I jot down notes about additional stories and features I can create out of the speech I listened to over the weekend.

Who else on the team takes risks both on and off the field? I could do an entire spin-off series if that's the coach's game plan.

And I know his brother Asher is a risk-taker. Obviously he avoids anything that could get him in trouble with his team, but he's an extreme sport enthusiast.

Having siblings on the same team is rare in the league, but having a brother coach his younger brother is almost unheard of. What a great dynamic to talk about as we head into a new

season. Just like the Kelce brothers were the talk of the big game when they faced off against each other, the Nash brothers will be the talk of the season here in Vegas, and I could not be more excited to feature brothers in my stories all season.

I just wish the pairing wasn't two brothers from the *Nash* family.

It's a tough pill to swallow, but as much as my parents have conditioned me against them...I have to admit, a large part of the open wound I felt where he was concerned was healed this weekend. I think I'll always have something against his father, but that doesn't mean I have to punish the sons forever...does it?

I just pray it doesn't all come unraveled once again. If it does, I fear this time I'll be left with scars that'll never heal.

The meeting ends, and to my extreme relief, Rivera doesn't say a word. We each head out to our own cubicles to get some work done, and I text Sam to let her know the plan.

She's in for meeting her new boyfriend.

It's a little before lunch time when Rivera approaches my cube.

"I heard you went into Nash's hotel room this weekend," he accuses.

My brows dip together. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Did you stay the weekend with the guy?"

I blow out a breath. "I don't need to defend myself to you. Marcus already knows I had to stay with him, so you can kindly go fuck yourself."

"Hell of a way to talk to someone who has shit on you. You should really watch your back, Bailey."

"Why? To keep you from stabbing me in it?" I hiss.

He laughs, and it's a little sinister.

I glare at him. "You don't have anything on me."

“I have pictures,” he says.

“Pictures can be manipulated. Everybody knows that. It’s not proof of anything.” I’m bluffing, but he doesn’t have to know that.

“We’ll see who everyone believes when I publish them, then.”

I roll my eyes at his empty threat. He won’t use them because if he does...then he has nothing on me anymore. No other way to threaten me. “What do you want from me? I’m sorry I was promoted over you, but I got this job fair and square.”

“Because you’re female. That’s the only reason you got it. Not because you’re a better reporter than me,” he hisses.

I let the insult roll off my shoulders because I have to. I can’t let it affect me every time someone says I got the job because of my vagina or I’ll spend my entire life affected. “You believe what you want to believe. The fact remains, I’m the correspondent. You aren’t. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” I turn away from him and back to my desk.

“We’ll see for how long,” he says, and the threat feels like much, much more than just a guy who didn’t get the job he wanted.

Rivera and I go back further than our time here at the station as colleagues. He and my ex—Jonah’s father—are close friends.

I’ve never trusted Ryan Rivera, and I never really liked him...but I was never *scared* of him. Until now.

I head home for lunch so I can chat with Sam ahead of Lincoln coming over, and I tell her about my run-in with my scorned colleague.

“He’s just jealous,” she assures me. “You got the job because you’re better at what you do than he is. Plain and simple.”

“I know that. You know that. Rivera, however, does *not* know that. His threats scare me. I don’t know what he’s

capable of, but I don't trust him as far as I can throw him."

"Good thing you don't have to throw him, then," she murmurs.

I twist my lips. "I guess. On a totally different topic, Lincoln will be here soon, so fire away any questions you may have."

She glances up at me. "I just have one. How's it going to look to your parents when your best friend is supposedly sleeping with the enemy?"

"That's a great question, and one I hadn't really thought of the answer to just yet. I guess we just...see what happens?"

"Or we have a public falling out." She shrugs.

"Then where will Jonah and I live?"

"Stay here. It'll make it all that much more of a story, right?"

I wrinkle my nose. I'm not sure whether she's right or not. I don't necessarily want *that* to be the story.

I blow out a breath. "Fine."

"Hey, are you really okay with this?" she asks quietly.

"For the sake of my career and my family, I don't think I have a choice but to be okay with it."

She smiles sympathetically, but it doesn't change the fact that the thought of her so freely being able to attend events with the man I spent a secret weekend with hurts a little more than I thought it would.

CHAPTER 23: LINCOLN

I'm not looking forward to the working lunch I have today.

I haven't spent much time alone with my offensive coordinator, but I kept him around because something about firing the OC after winning the championship last season felt like it would be a stupid move on my part.

Instead, I think keeping him around might've been the stupid move.

I've been studying his playbook, and it's too conservative. Too predictable. I like his focus on minimizing mistakes, but there's no focus at all on surprising our opponent—something that I've found wins games, too. Instead, the focus is on complex plays that'll only serve to confuse our players, particularly rookies coming in.

I already know we're going to butt heads over this, and my approach is to take chances that will push this team to the limits of what it's capable of where his approach seems to be avoiding mistakes.

Sometimes those mistakes turn out to be the best thing that could happen. Other times they don't pan out. But if we play it safe, we'll never know.

He walks into my office, and Megan brings the food in a minute later. I've been in and out quite a bit, but she's already proven to be a valuable asset to me, so much so that I've already considered confiding in her about the whole Jolene thing.

I feel like Megan is the type of person who not only would understand, but would work to help protect what we have.

I'm not sure *why* I think that, but some people just give you that gut feeling that they can be trusted, and Megan is one of those people.

Mike Sharp, however, falls somewhere on the other end of the spectrum. I know he and Mitch Thompson were tight, but he doesn't seem like the kind of guy that *I* am going to be tight

with—which is unfortunate given the fact that this new position limits the pool I have for making friends here in town.

But that's been a pain point my entire life.

When I was a kid, I assumed anyone who wanted to spend time with me just wanted to get to my father. When I got a little older, I assumed it was because I was good at football, too. When I played in college and professionally and even when I transitioned to coaching, I assumed they just wanted tickets to a game.

I've let very few people in because I trust basically no one, and I've gotten by just fine up to this point. I think Mike *could have* become a friend since we're in similar positions and we're going to be forced together a lot over the next year, but rather than being friendly with him, my guard is firmly in place.

"Thanks for meeting with me," I begin as we both dig into the fajita spread.

"Of course," he says, and it's easy to see that his guard is up, too.

"Look, man. We have to trust each other if we're going to work together this season, so let me begin by saying I really respect your playbook and your ideas, but I have a few ideas I want to include in this year's book."

"Such as?" he asks, refusing to meet my eyes as he grabs some sour cream for the top of his fajita.

"Playing it safe isn't really my style, and I think the conservative nature of many of your plays just won't work with my vision."

He glances up to meet my eyes. "What's your vision?"

I shrug. "Winning games. Surprising the opponent. Not complex and confusing plays, but simple things nobody will be expecting."

"But we won the Super Bowl last year, Lincoln. It makes exactly zero sense to change everything."

I figured he'd play that card, but the truth is that it was his first year as OC, and he got lucky that he worked with a team that meshed as well together as last year's Aces did.

"I realize that, but we lost big names along with that win. We're training the next generation, so this is the time to go big if we want to prove we've still got the same culture of winning even though so much of our team turned over." I shove a forkful of chicken and peppers in my mouth, foregoing the tortilla and sour cream in favor of the healthy choices.

"Exactly," he says with a curt nod. "I think it's smarter to play it safe and minimize mistakes as we train this new generation."

"Play it safe?" I repeat. "That's not my style."

"I know, Coach, but hear me out. Playing it safer last season paid off for us, but we could've cleaned up a lot of costly mistakes. If we minimize those, we'll show a more consistent performance this season." He's staying calm and cool, but his words only have the effect of drawing the anger rising in me.

I throw down my fork. "How can you know that when half our team is new players? You think throwing a hundred fifty complex plays at them is the way to do it?"

"No, but I do think maintaining a playbook the majority of our boys already know is the way to do it. A *winning* playbook, might I add." He gives me a smug look, but I don't necessarily agree with him.

The truth is that I went through his playbook. I compared it to the calls that Mitch made on the field.

Most of the plays Mike brought in with him when he showed up stayed in the playbook. The ones that were used over and over were the ones Mitch had in the previous playbook.

"You can add whatever the fuck you want, but I'm a firm believer we need to take risks if we want to win. And as much as I appreciate your input, I'll remind you that I was hired to make these sorts of decisions. We will continue taking risks,

and you will add the plays I've drafted to the playbook. I'll also let you know which plays I want out. Any questions?" My voice is firm, direct, and final.

"Can I finish my lunch? Or are you going to make that decision for me, too?"

"Finish your lunch." My tone is clipped, and I see the resentment in his eyes when his gaze lifts defiantly to mine. Despite the look he gives me, he finishes lunch without another word.

He gets up and walks out, and I don't like leaving things on that sort of note between the two of us.

But I also know he's a professional, and part of his job is to defer to me.

He wanted this position. He didn't get it, and I know he will fight me every step of the way because of that.

But I *did* get the position. Jack trusts me to do what's best for the team—for *my* team—and my gut tells me that it isn't using the same plays they used last year. We've got a new quarterback, a new tight end, and a new starting wide receiver. We *can't* use the same plays we used last year because it's just not the same team.

I push the anger I feel toward Mike to the back of my mind for now. I have a fake girlfriend to go chat with, after all.

And maybe a little rendezvous with my secret girlfriend, too.

Is that what she is?

I try to define it to myself on the way over to the address she texted me.

She's not my girlfriend. Even back when we were actually together, we didn't use those kinds of juvenile labels. We just simply *were*.

We were friends, and then we were together.

We were in love.

We were a lot of things. We were a step beyond the typical boyfriend and girlfriend relationships our friends had. And I think that's why the end was so hard on both of us. It blindsided both of us, but because I was the one who broke it off, I wasn't allowed a mourning period.

Especially not in front of my father.

And as I pull into the driveway of my destination, I can't help but feel the pulse of excitement that I'm about to see her again.

I pray things end differently this time, but I'm just not sure how they can.

CHAPTER 24: JOLENE

Three short raps at the door and I know he's here.

I'm ready to see him again, and it's the sort of butterflies battering around my stomach that tell me this is more than just a weekend fling revisited.

It's everything we had twenty years ago but amplified by the fact that we're adults now and we're keeping this huge secret from everyone dear to us because the people dear to *me* are not the people dear to *him*.

It's a mess.

And it will remain a mess until we decide what to do. I don't think either of us sees this ending well, but at the same time, I can't seem to stay away...and apparently, neither can he.

I answer the door and usher him in toward Sam in the kitchen. "Samantha Reynolds, meet your new boyfriend, Coach Lincoln Nash."

"I mean, we've met. But it's a pleasure to be dating you, Coach," Sam says, sticking her hand out across the counter to shake his.

He smiles as he sets down a manila folder onto the counter and shakes her hand. "This is...well, it's interesting. I appreciate the effort and I'm happy to make your ex jealous in the name of hiding our relationship while we figure our shit out." He nods toward me.

She laughs and glances over at me. "He's funny, Jo."

I lift a shoulder. "He's all right."

He smirks at me then grabs me by my waist and hauls me into him. "I'll show you funny."

Sam fans herself on the other side of the counter. "Okay, okay. This well is dry over here, so kindly take it to your own bedroom if you're going to PDA all over the house."

“Apologies,” Lincoln says with a grin, and he lets me go—much to my dismay. “What do I need to know about you?”

He slides out one of the stools at the counter and sits. I lean forward on the counter beside him, and Sam mirrors the way I’m standing.

“I’ve got a seven-year-old son named Cade. He’s classmates with Jonah, and they’re best friends. Jolene and I met in a mom’s group when the boys were babies. We both left the mom’s group years ago but keep up on the gossip of our peers. I’m an ER nurse but I get to make my own schedule, so I usually do three-tens a week and Jo picks up the slack with the boys when I’m on—unless Cade is at his dad’s, in which event I pick up weekend shifts so I’m not sitting at home missing my kid.” She shrugs. “That pretty much sums me up. What about you?”

He glances at me. “Uh...I’m a head coach in the NFL. I played three years and an injury sidelined me.” If he catches Sam’s narrowed eyes at that, he ignores it. “I took the coaching route and it’ll benefit me greatly to have someone consistent on my arm at events, which tells me what we’re doing will be a mutually beneficial arrangement. But I still think we should lay out some terms before we attend any events together. To that end, I’ve put together a contract.” He slides the folder across the counter toward Sam and nods at her as if to say *go ahead*.

“Before I look, can I ask why having a consistent date would be to your benefit?” she asks.

“Well, it’ll fend off at least half the women who see me as Vegas’s newest bachelor.”

“And the other half?” she asks.

He shrugs. “No moral code. They won’t care if I’m seeing someone. They wouldn’t even care if I was married. But I can handle them, and if it cuts the crowd in half, I’ll take it. It’ll open the door for the focus to shift to the season rather than my personal life.”

She narrows her eyes at him a beat, but then she flips open the folder and scans the front page before she glances up at me. “Did you do this?” she asks.

“Do what?” I ask, completely dumbfounded as to what she’s asking.

“Put him up to paying me. I don’t want your money, Lincoln. I said I’d do it to help out my friend, and I’d prefer to leave it at that.” She folds her arms over her chest emphatically.

He shakes his head. “Consider it an advance on the things you’ll need to date someone like me. You’ll need designer clothing for events and expensive jewelry. Sometimes you’ll want to hit up a salon before the event. And to be perfectly honest, I will occasionally need you on weekends, and I’ll need you at games, which could put a wrench into your working hours. This will make up for the loss of work while also giving you the means to purchase whatever you might need for events.”

“I didn’t realize dating someone like you meant I had to spend so much money.” She shrugs as she purses her lips.

“You don’t. Well, not your money, anyway. And if there’s any left over, consider it payment for your time.”

“We agreed this was mutually beneficial. I don’t like the idea of taking your money if I’m benefitting in other ways.” She gives him a pointed gaze.

“Please, Samantha. If you don’t want to spend it, put it in a college fund for Cade.”

“It’s Sam,” she grits out, and I reach over to touch her arm. She glances at me and must remember that this was her idea in the first place. I get that she’s been working hard to make a life for herself and her son, but this could be a nice boost to give her some breathing room, too. She heaves out a heavy sigh. “Fine.”

“Thank you,” he says curtly. “There’s other information in that folder, including a nondisclosure agreement, a calendar of upcoming events, and additional terms.”

She nods as she flips through the papers, scanning them, and she digs through the drawer beside her, finds a pen, and signs at the end without thinking twice about it.

I didn't see the number on the top page, but it must've been pretty decent if she's signing off so easily.

She glances up at him. "Are there, like, any exes I can interview or anything so I have a better idea of what I'm getting into?"

He chuckles and nods at me. "You're looking at her."

She rolls her eyes. "You can't be serious. It's been like... what, twenty years? You can't honestly tell me you haven't been with anybody in that time."

"That's not what you asked. I don't have any real exes because I never took the time to get involved," he says a little flippantly.

I watch the two of them like I'm watching a tennis match.

"So how do you have time now?" Sam points out, clearly coming to my defense.

I nearly jump in to say I can fend for myself, but I also sort of want to hear the answer to that.

He blows out a breath and stands from the stool. He leans on the counter like we both are, too. "I should rephrase that. There was never anybody I *wanted* to get involved with because the heart that was broken twenty years ago remained shattered until I shared a hotel room with Jolene Bailey this past weekend." His eyes move to mine, and they're all hot and sexy like they get when he's propositioning me—a look I memorized in a hotel room in Ohio over the weekend.

"Right, then. Listen, I need to run to the, uh...I have an Amazon return to drop off. I'll be back in, oh, a half hour?"

"Forty-five minutes," Lincoln says, his eyes never leaving mine.

"You got it, boyfriend."

He cuts his gaze from mine as his head whips over to Sam. He wrinkles his nose. “None of that boyfriend-girlfriend shit. We’re seeing each other. In the press, you will be Samantha. I will be Lincoln.”

She holds up both hands a little defensively. “Fine, fine. You got it, Coach. You two kids have fun, and use protection. This place ain’t big enough for another kid. Bye!” She waves as she heads out the door, leaving Lincoln and me alone in her kitchen.

“Another kid?” he echoes.

I smile tightly. “She’s just being silly.”

“Do you *want* more kids?” he asks.

“I figured this would be a quick romp, not a serious chat, Linc.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

I shrug. “You’re right. I didn’t. I don’t know if I do. I don’t know if I don’t, either. Do you?”

He glances away from me out the window. “I’m not sure, either.”

“Maybe that’s why we’re right together.”

He shrugs and turns to look out the window fully rather than looking at me with his next words. “Or maybe it’s why we’re all wrong. I don’t know, Jo. What are we doing here?”

I move in beside him. We’re staring at the backyard that’s virtually empty. It’s rock and some bushes, a little patch of grass, and plenty of room for the kids to run around—except no equipment for them to play on. No swing set, no trampoline, no slide. Sam always says *someday*. Maybe someday is now.

I’m not sure why my mind wanders there as I contemplate how to answer Lincoln.

“I don’t know. I think that’s what we’re both trying to figure out.” My voice is soft when the answer finally comes.

“Yeah,” he murmurs. “I guess you’re right. I just...I’m not used to hiding and lying. I’m not used to these feelings.” He reaches over and slings an arm around my shoulders. “I’m not used to having you back in my life, and I don’t know how to navigate any of it with all the other changes in my life right now. I’m thirty-six. I should have my shit together by now.”

I lean into him, resting my head on his shoulder, and I blow out a sigh. “I don’t know that there’s ever an age where you feel like you have your shit together. We all sort of just... fumble our way through life and hope we’re good people doing the right thing, you know? Sometimes I think that’s what life is all about.”

He leans down to press a kiss to my temple. “You were always so smart, Jo. So much smarter than me.”

I laugh a little as I straighten. “I don’t know about that. We all have our strengths.”

He pulls me into a hug and lowers his lips to mine. We share a sweet kiss here in the kitchen, and whether or not it leads to more remains to be seen.

Whether it does or not, though, this feels like a breakthrough.

I can only hope there are many more of those to come.

CHAPTER 25: LINCOLN

I close the divider between the driver and the two of us in the backseat of the limousine. “Are you ready for this?” I ask.

Sam grins. “You know, when I was little, I wanted to be an actress. I feel like I was born to play this part.”

“And what part is that, exactly?”

“The girlfriend—” she changes her word at my glare, “—uh, the person an NFL bachelor coach is sleeping with. Er, seeing.”

“Right. Do you realize all you’re getting into?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at her.

“I read the paperwork.” She shrugs. “I’m good. I’m looking at it as the adventure of a lifetime with a few perks.” She smooths down the fabric of her expensive dress.

“How’s Jolene doing?” I ask. For some reason, I feel compelled to say her name, and suddenly I’m not sure why I thought this was a good idea.

It’s really not my style. Lying, manipulating, throwing off the scent...it’s not me.

But I’m fighting for a cause here, and that’s why I say her name. I’m reminding us both why we’re here.

“She was a little nervous, but since she basically owns the territory on the Aces, she’s confident she can spin the tale however you both agree to spin it.”

The driver pulls up to the curb, and I spot the red carpet. “This is it. No turning back now.”

“Even if I wanted to. I’m committed, Coach.”

I nod once as I try to figure out why the fuck I agreed to this. This isn’t even an event that Jolene is covering since it’s not an Aces event. It’s a corporate function, an afternoon product launch event that I was invited to since a new smartwatch company is interested in partnering with the Aces. I’ll get to meet the company executives and learn about the

product, and there's a happy hour before introductions and a reception at the end. I'll be photographed arriving at the event, and that's why I chose to debut the woman I'm seeing tonight.

There's one other reason.

I saw a list of which media members will be attending, and Ryan Rivera from Jolene's news station was on the list.

It was a no-brainer.

But it's a little uncomfortable since I don't really know Sam all that well. I suppose we'll get to know one another as we start attending more events together, and for now, I'm pretending like she's Jolene.

Well, sort of. If I go all in on that pretense, I'll end up kissing her, and we're definitely not there yet. This is a professional event, anyway.

Though that would definitely throw Rivera off the scent of Jolene and me together.

"Show time," I say, and I get out first. I hold out a hand to help her out next, and the cameras are already snapping at us.

"Who's the date?" a voice yells.

"This is Samantha Reynolds."

"Is she your girlfriend?" someone else yells.

"We're seeing each other exclusively." I give a short smile, and I offer her my arm. She slips hers through mine, and we head to the backdrop of the product for additional photo ops.

This is it. Our first time photographed in public together.

It came together quickly. She signed the contract a week ago, and here we are already.

I guess we'll see where it leads us.

We head inside and mill around. I avoid the bar for fear the truth serum might give me away, but we mingle with a few local athletes and celebrities in attendance. I spot Troy Bodine, the manager of the Vegas Heat, and I decide to approach him since we haven't had the chance to meet yet.

Given that he's basically the head coach of the Vegas baseball team and I'm the head coach of the Vegas football team, it seems like a no brainer in terms of a budding friendship.

"Troy Bodine," I say, my voice holding an air of confidence I'm not sure I fully feel once I'm standing in front of him.

"Coach Nash, what a pleasure," he says, sticking out a hand for me to shake. His handshake is firm and confident, so I do my best to project the same demeanor. "Congratulations on the new position."

"Thank you, sir. Congratulations on all your success with the expansion team. I've been watching your boys this season and I think you're going to make another run for the gold."

"It's early days yet, but we're playing hard. How are your boys looking so far?" He tosses the ball back in my court.

"OTAs start a week from today, so I'll have a better picture then," I admit. "But so far, the team is looking solid. We've got three weeks of workouts and mandatory minicamp coming up, and then in July we'll really start the hard work at training camp. But so far the transition has felt seamless."

He nods as he raises his brows. "Between you and me, without Dalton, Olson, and Nolan, I was curious what was in store this season."

I chuckle. "You and me both."

We're interrupted by a loud voice over the public address system. "We'll be starting introductions in five minutes. Please find your seats."

"Listen, man," Troy says. "I'd love to meet up again and talk Vegas sports, maybe over dinner with my wife and your..." he trails off.

"Samantha," I fill in. "The woman I'm seeing."

"Right. Nice to meet you." He smiles at my date then turns his attention back to me. "I think you and I could make a helluva team together. Interested?"

“Absolutely.” I try to rein in the enthusiasm I actually feel, but Troy Bodine just asked me to dinner. I hand him a business card with my details as well as my secretary’s. “Let me know when you’ve got the time since I know how busy the season can get for you.”

“I always make time when it’s important.” He grins, and then he offers his hand for me to shake again.

And just like that, I feel like I’ve made a friend. And Troy will be a *good* friend to have. He’ll be the kind of guy I can talk to about things few other people on my *friends* list might understand.

“I look forward to it,” I say, and then he heads off to find his seat while I direct Sam toward ours.

CHAPTER 26: JOLENE

I head home from the studio a little early since I don't know what time Sam will be getting home from the afternoon product launch event and I want to make sure one of us is home when the boys arrive. They have their after-school Lego building club today, but the late bus will drop them at home around four-thirty.

It's nearly three-thirty when I get home, and I sit on the couch with my laptop to get some more work done. It's constant, and with a roster of fifty-three players plus the coaching staff numbering somewhere around twenty and a front office staff with over a hundred employees...I have plenty of content to keep me busy for the rest of the year.

But I can't focus.

Instead, I'm thinking about Lincoln and Sam and what the fuck have I done?

Why would I possibly have thought this was a good idea?

What if he kisses her? What if she falls for him? We've just introduced a complication to our already complicated relationship. And for what?

I don't have any of those answers, but I do know that I don't like how I feel right now.

I never should've brought it up to Lincoln. I had no idea he'd think it was a good idea, too—a way to get the focus off his personal life and onto the game. I had no idea that he wanted one woman to attend events with so nobody would bother him.

It *seems* like a win-win, and it is...for the two of them.

I, however, feel like a big old loser as I sit by myself on the couch trying to work.

Instead of working, I search his name to see if I can find any photos of him and Sam. Nothing's out yet, but the event isn't over yet.

I blow out a breath.

This is dumb.

And no sooner do I think that than I hear the front door unlocking and the door opening. I slam the lid of my laptop shut and leap up from the couch.

Sam is laughing as they walk in together, further pushing the knife into my spine.

Okay, so that's dramatic. She's just putting on the act.

But he's laughing, too, and he doesn't need to act as the door shuts behind them.

They look like a perfect pair together. Sam is gorgeous in a red dress and heels, and Lincoln wears a suit that I want to peel off of him one layer at a time.

"How'd it go?" I ask, feeling left out as I interrupt their laughter.

He turns serious when he sees me. "Hey."

Sam looks from him to me and must assess that I'm angry even though I have no reason to be. "I'll, uh...give you two a minute. I need to get out of these heels, anyway." She scurries down the hall to her room.

"How'd it go?" I repeat.

"Fine. Everyone seemed to buy it. Are you okay?"

"I'm wondering why I thought it was a good idea," I answer honestly.

"Wait a minute. Are you...jealous?" he asks, and his lips quirk up a little as he says the word.

"No. Of course not. Don't be silly."

He draws in a dramatic gasp. "You *are*!" he accuses.

I fold my arms over my chest and glare at him.

"Jolene. Come on. You have exactly zero reason to be jealous. We had fun, but Sam is nothing more than your friend. Okay?" He walks over and pulls me into his arms, but I don't unfold my arms so it's sort of just an awkward, one-sided hug.

“I may be seen publicly with her, but I’m coming home to you.” He presses his lips to my forehead.

“Fine,” I mutter.

“I’ll cut it off with her right now if you think it’ll make you feel better,” he offers. “But you should know that Rivera was there, and he totally bought it.”

“He did?” I ask, and he’s piqued my interest.

He nods. “Everyone did, and not because we were putting on a show, but because you don’t take random women to afternoon product launches. It meant a lot to have her there—that it’s more serious than a flashy show at a charity ball. You know? It was the right time to debut this thing, and might I remind you of the reason we’re doing this?”

I finally unfold my arms and let them drop to my sides, and his arms tighten around me. I can’t resist. I wrap my arms around his waist, and it feels good here.

It feels *right* here.

“I know,” I say softly.

“Do you? Or do you need me to take you into your bedroom and remind you?”

“Can I say both?” I squeak, and he laughs.

But the laughter fades quickly as he sweeps me up into his arms. He carries me to the bedroom and he shuts and locks the door behind him.

“What time is your son getting back?” His voice is a demand, and it’s hot.

“Four-thirty.”

He glances at his watch. “Not nearly enough time for what I want to do with you, but it’ll have to do.”

And then he gets to work. He shoves my jeans down my legs, and I kick them the rest of the way off. He pulls his cock out and strokes it a few times. “Bend over the bed,” he commands, and I do as I’m told.

He slams into me from behind, and the feeling of ecstasy is nearly immediate.

He's driving against the ache I've felt since the last time we did this—a full week ago after Sam signed the paperwork then left the two of us alone. We haven't seen each other since. He's been busy planning OTAs and I've been busy putting together stories and turning what I have into Marcus.

I've missed this, and it's a type of relief I didn't know I could feel.

And I already know why.

I'm addicted, and I'm not sure I'll ever get enough of Lincoln Nash.

The second the thought hits my brain, he reaches down and brushes my clit.

I fall apart as he continues pumping into me, and it's just a few beats later that he hisses out his own release. He pulls out of me and tucks himself back into his slacks, and I feel his semen as it drips from my pussy onto my leg. He rolls my panties back up my legs, catching his own moisture on the way, and when he gets them firmly into place, he slaps my ass.

He stands and moves his mouth close to my ear.

“Don't take these off,” he murmurs softly. “I want you walking around with my come rubbing wetly against your cunt for the rest of the day, and I want you to feel it and think of me.”

I gasp a little at his words.

Well then.

Jeez.

I certainly don't remember that sort of dirty talk from my teenage years.

We head out to the kitchen, and the boys aren't back yet—thankfully at the moment given that I'm still recovering from the wreckage he just made of my pussy and I'm wearing wet panties.

It's an open floor plan, and Sam is sitting on the couch in the family room just a few yards away from us scrolling her phone. She has the television volume turned up louder than usual—probably to drown out the sound of him railing me a few minutes ago.

“You should go,” I say. I press a soft kiss to his mouth. “The boys will be home any minute and there will probably be more questions than we’re prepared to answer.”

And just as I finish saying the words, we hear the front door open. We jump apart, and I rush over to the pantry since I know the boys will ask for a snack first thing.

As Cade walks into the kitchen, he freezes when he spots Lincoln Nash standing there. Jonah stops short when he crashes into Cade’s frozen back.

“Coach Nash is standing in my house,” Cade says.

Jonah peers around him at the man standing there in a suit. His hair is slightly ruffled after our bang session, but otherwise he looks deliciously put together while I’m still basically a quivering mess in the pantry.

“What are you doing here?” Cade asks.

“Oh, uh...” he starts. He glances at me with wide eyes and then over to Sam. “I’m seeing your mom.”

He says it generally, as if he might be saying it to Jonah, which is the truth, or to Cade, who asked the question.

I feel like shit for lying to the boys. We weren’t planning for it to come out this way...in fact, we weren’t planning anything at all.

Cade gasps. “Are you serious?”

He nods. “Sorry you had to find out this way, kid.”

Sam leaps up from the couch for damage control, but instead of controlling any damage, she slips her arm around Lincoln’s waist. “Better for you to find out now since you’ll see photos of us in the news soon.” She smiles tightly, and it’s the clear signal that she’s going to keep up the ruse even to her child—which is probably a smart move given the loose lips

seven-year-olds tend to have, but it still feels all sorts of wrong to even be in this position.

I guess if her goal is to make her ex jealous, though, then making sure her kid believes the performance is an important part of that.

Still, none of this sits right with me, and I hate the feelings of jealousy blooming in my chest as I watch Lincoln toss a casual arm around my best friend's shoulders in front of our kids.

Particularly when I see the look of disappointment my own kid is trying to hide.

CHAPTER 27: LINCOLN

I glance at my phone screen and click to decline the incoming call from my father.

I'm in another pointless meeting with Mike where we're clashing over the playbook again. Andy's here, too, but he knows his defense is solid. He didn't lose as many players on defense as Mike lost on offense.

I've lost count of how many times I've had to play the *I'm the head coach* card in the last week, but our first Organized Team Activities start Monday, and we have just a few more days to finalize our playbook ahead of that. Given that the playbook is a living document, we can add and take away plays as we work through them, but my goal is to have the majority of the creation completed ahead of OTAs.

Next week will be filled with meetings, drills, and walking through the plays, but the real fun of it is seeing our team dynamic for the first time. The first week is voluntary, but the whole point of OTAs is for players to get to know the playbook as they prepare for the upcoming season.

And since we've made some changes to the playbook, there are some new things our guys will need to learn.

I'm particularly excited for our walkthroughs to give me the chance to see what each play will look like in real time. It's one thing to imagine these plays in my mind as I draft them up. It's another to see them played out by real people, even if OTAs are non-contact.

"I know you're the head coach, man, but my playbook last year was proven. How can you keep questioning that?" Mike whines.

Maybe he's not whining. It sounds like whining to me, though.

"It worked with the players you had last year. It's as simple as that." I shrug at the end a little flippantly, waiting for him to shut the fuck up.

“But you’re not on top of Andy the way you’re on top of me,” he points out.

“Right. Because Andy didn’t lose his key players. We know the defensive plays will work, and we’re constantly adding and updating.” I really shouldn’t have to defend myself nor my decisions to Mike.

“Then let’s keep both,” he suggests. “A compromise. We keep my plays and you add new ones.”

“So our rookies are forced to learn over six hundred new plays?” I shake my head. “No. Absolutely not. How’s this for a compromise? You cut yours in half, and we add mine.”

“That’s fucking ridiculous, man,” Mike says, shaking his head with disgust.

I blow out a breath and turn my attention back to my tablet. “I don’t have time for arguments. I’ve sent you the list of the ones I think are outdated or won’t work for our offense this year.” I can’t help but think that if he’s giving me a hard time about the playbook, he’s going to give me a hard time on every other aspect of play, too. Once we’re on the field, he’s going to have strong opinions about play calling and strategy, and when it’s time to make a snap decision on the field, I’ll have to go with my gut. Not his.

“Fine,” he eventually mutters, and he storms out of my office.

I glance over at Andy. “Anything else?”

He shakes his head and raises his brows.

“What?” I ask.

“You sure cutting all those plays is a good move?” he asks.

“I’m not sure keeping Mike around was a good move,” I admit.

He twists his lips and nods a little. “You know, butting heads with him might be a good thing. It’s only showing you’re both passionate about winning even if you have different ideas on how you’re going to get to that goal.”

“Yeah, I know you’re right. It’s still frustrating as fuck, though.” I glance up at Andy. “Thanks, man. I appreciate the pep talk. You ready for Monday?”

He nods. “I’ve got my coaches all lined up and ready for their position meetings.”

I mutter something about how that’s great and dismiss him, and on his way out, I ask him to shut the door.

And then I call my father back.

I suck in a deep breath before I click the button, reminding myself I can do this.

I can lie to him.

I just hope he doesn’t bring up Jolene. I’m not prepared to handle questions about her, particularly not from my father and particularly not when it’s been four days since I last saw her.

“Hey, Dad,” I answer.

“Lincoln, what a surprise. You actually called me back.”

I chuckle at the dig even though I don’t find it funny. “I’m a busy guy. What can I do for you?”

“With the exciting news of your brother and you landing on the same team at the same time, your mother and I have decided to get a place in Vegas. We’ll be coming out this weekend to look at houses and would love to see you while we’re in town.”

Oh fuck.

Fuck no.

No no no.

I shake my head. Could things get any worse? I’m already hiding my relationship with Jolene and fearing he’ll find out when he’s a solid twenty-five hundred miles away. I can’t imagine the anxiety I’ll feel having him in the same damn town as the two of us.

It’s only going to make it harder for us.

And maybe that'll be the test that proves whether we belong together or not.

I pull open my calendar on my tablet. "Yeah, I have an event Saturday evening but I can get together around lunchtime."

"Sounds great. And if we find something by lunchtime, we'll take you to see it."

Great. Just don't get one too close to my place.

We exchange more pleasantries before we end the call, and I call my little brother next.

"What's up, Coach?" he answers.

"You know Mom and Dad are buying a place here in Vegas?"

"Fuck," he mutters.

I laugh. "You don't want them to?"

"Cramping my style? No thanks. But Mom always said if two of her boys landed in the same place, she'd do it. I just didn't believe she'd actually follow through."

"Neither did I," I admit.

"Well, thanks for the warning, I guess. We can work together to fend them off."

I suppose he's right. But I may need more help with that than he'd ever imagine.

CHAPTER 28: JOLENE

My breath catches in my throat as he steps out onto the small platform. He stands—like he always does at press conferences—giving an impression of power.

I can't help but think of when he's on top of *me* powering into *me*.

God, there's something so illicit about doing it in secret.

Would I love to shout to the world that he's mine? Yes, of course. But we both know that's just not possible.

Unless...

I've considered talking to my mom about it.

Maybe it's not as big a deal as I've made it out to be in my head.

But I always stop short whenever I open my mouth to say something.

I'm fucking the son of dad's enemy just doesn't sit right. It's not like I'd say it that way to my *mother* anyway, but the mere thought of my father finding out feels like a betrayal of the worst kind.

And so here we are, weeks after our beautiful weekend in Ohio holding onto a secret for the sake of everyone we love.

We've had a hard time finding time this week to be together. The boys are out of school for the summer, and they were home this week, so Sam and I were balancing and trading duties. They start camp at their school next week, so it'll be like they're still in school, but this week has been tough. On top of that, Lincoln had OTAs, and this is the first press conference he's held regarding how the week went.

He hasn't even taken Sam anywhere in the last few days. At least when he picks her up and drops her off, I get to see him for a minute. I get to steal a kiss. But he's been busy here at the Complex.

I've stopped by to watch OTAs and take notes, but there are restrictions in place for the media, so I'm only allowed to attend one practice, I can't film anything, and I can't ask players questions during practice.

Head coaches can choose whether or not to open additional practices to the media, but Coach Nash has elected not to... for now. I get it. He's trying to keep his new playbook private, and he's trying to protect his players.

Still, I was hoping the fact that he's fucking someone in the media might help change his mind. Apparently not.

"Good afternoon, and thank you for coming," he begins. "OTAs have exceeded my expectations this week, and as we gear up for a brand-new season, I can't help but feel incredibly privileged to be part of such an incredible organization. I'll take a few questions."

"We're hearing conflicting reports about the playbook," Kyle Broderick from the *Vegas Sun* says. "Care to comment on that?"

"The playbook is a living document, as you well know. Players are starting to get a feel for what my expectations are, and our walkthroughs this week have shown me that this team is smart and ready to learn."

"What about the reported clashes you're having with your OC?" Kyle presses.

Lincoln tilts his head and looks confused for a beat. "There have been reported clashes?" He shrugs. "News to me."

"Tell us about the competition for QB," another reporter asks.

"We've got a healthy competition going for many of our positions. There's a ton of talent on this team, and I'm watching for many different factors as we progress through OTAs and into camp season," he says.

I raise my hand, and Jack, the mediator of this press conference, points to me. "Coach, talk to us about how you're going to keep a winning culture around here with so many new, young players."

He grins at me. He didn't grin at any of the other reporters, and I get the sinking feeling that everyone will be onto us.

"We've got a lot of leaders on our team. A few key players retired, sure, but we still have many of our starters from last season. Bryant, Woods, Higgins, Garrett, Harris...the list is endless. We've filled those spots over this offseason, and I'm excited about the young talent we're working with. In addition, we retained several key members of the coaching staff, and Jack Dalton is neither gone nor forgotten." He nods at his boss standing beside him. "I don't think this culture knows anything except winning, and we will maintain that at all costs."

At all costs.

I wonder what that means.

I wonder what the expense will be if it all comes down to it.

I wonder what he's willing to sacrifice to win.

And I also wonder whether this is just lip service. He wants those sound bites floating around, and he's smart enough to say the things he knows he has to in order to set the tone.

It's quite a tone he's already setting, and I'm excited to attend another practice next week to learn more.

The press conference comes to an end, and I wait for the press area to clear out before I use my keycard and head toward the back elevators.

I spot Jack talking to him. I can't quite make out what they're saying, but Jack is nodding and I get the sense that he's happy with how Lincoln handled the press.

"Coach, a word?" I ask when both their heads swing in my direction.

"Of course, Ms. Bailey. In my office?"

I nod and take the elevator up with the two men as an ache presses between my legs.

Not for both men, though I'm not opposed to a threesome with *the* Jack Dalton, but he's happily married.

No, this ache is purely for Lincoln, and I'm about to ensure he soothes it before I walk out the front doors...maybe with his come brushing wetly against my cunt again.

God, just the mere thought of it sends a shudder right through me.

The doors glide open and Jack heads to his office while Lincoln and I head toward his.

"No interruptions, please," Lincoln says to his secretary, and she smiles politely and nods as I wave to her then follow Lincoln into his office.

He shuts the door behind him, sealing us into privacy, and no sooner is it shut than he's pinning me up against it as his lips crash down to mine.

"Jesus Christ," he murmurs against the skin of my neck as his lips drag across. "Do you have any idea how fucking hard it is to listen to you ask me a question in a press conference?"

"Mm, no," I manage on a moan.

"This hard," he says, and he takes my hand and presses it to the outside of his pants.

Whoa.

Yeah, that's hard.

I moan again. "Oh my God, Lincoln. I want—no, I *need* you inside me."

"You don't even have to ask," he murmurs, and he reaches in to yank his cock out of his pants. I yank my panties down, glad I wore a dress today, and I step out of them. He lifts me up and braces me against the door as he slides into me, no foreplay needed because if me asking questions makes him hot for me, him standing on that stage with all that power as he smiles down at me makes me equally hot for him.

"You're so fucking wet," he hisses. "Always so wet for me."

"Do you feel what you do to me?" I murmur, trying to keep my moans soft but failing since all I can think about is coming

right here, right now.

I realize his secretary is on the other side of the door. I realize this building is not soundproof.

But I can't really focus on caring about either of those things when he's pumping into me. All I can focus on is controlling my body for a beat so I don't come too early because I never, ever want this pleasure to end.

I squeak as he hits a particularly beautiful place inside me, and he grunts as he starts to pump a little harder. He moves me up and down that beautiful cock of his, and it's mere seconds later when his body seems to tighten up and he lets out a louder groan.

Knowing I did this to him, that I'm the one who made him fall apart in his office, sends me into my own climax. I stay as quiet as I can as I fight through the brutal and beautiful moment with him as bliss overtakes both of us at the same time.

I've never felt like this. I've never had it like this. I've never come at the same time as my partner, and it feels somehow even more meaningful that the first man who ever made love to me is the one who can also do it best all these years later.

I just wish there weren't so many damn obstacles in our way.

Once our clothes are back in place, he says quietly, "Have a seat."

"Excuse me?" I say, confused. I just came up here for a private moment with the Coach. I wasn't expecting an *actual* meeting.

He nods toward the seat opposite his desk as he slides in behind it.

My brows knit together as I take a seat.

He draws in a deep breath and exhales loudly. "We have a little wrinkle."

"A little wrinkle?" I repeat.

He levels his gaze at me. “My parents are moving to Vegas.”

“Fuck,” I mutter.

He can’t seem to help a little chuckle at that. “My thoughts exactly.”

“It’s hard enough hiding this with them in New York, but we haven’t really had to test it yet. We haven’t attended any of the same events yet. But we will, and your parents will be at some. My parents will be at some. What do we do then?” My voice is gaining in both volume and hysteria.

“I don’t know,” he says quietly.

I say the first thing that comes to mind rather than what might be the right thing. “Is it worth all this trouble?” As soon as the words are out, I regret them.

He glances at the door he just banged me up against before his eyes return to mine. “If I didn’t just prove to you that it is, then I didn’t do my job very well.”

I squirm a little, those wet panties reminding me just how well he did, in fact, do his job. “You’re excellent at your job.”

He brushes his knuckles on his shoulder as his lips quirk up a little. “It’s just a wrinkle, Jo. It’s not the end.”

I press my lips together. “I hope you’re right.”

As it turns out, he isn’t.

CHAPTER 29: LINCOLN

It's been such a whirlwind that I've barely had two seconds to think.

But as I lay in bed alone on Friday night after the first week of OTAs, I can't help but feel a stab of guilt.

As lies build on top of lies, I'm not sure what I feel most guilty about.

I'm lying to my entire family as I find myself falling hard and fast for the enemy. I'm lying to Jolene as I know a key piece of information regarding her father's injury that has never actually been confirmed.

If she were ever to find out I knew and didn't tell her, she'd be devastated.

But she'll never find out. As far as I know, the only people who know are my father and me. He'd never tell anyone at this point, and neither will I.

Still, the thought that there will *always* be a secret between us is more than a little unsettling. And if I'm keeping a secret this big, I wonder if she is, too.

We haven't said the whole *no secrets* thing to each other. We can't. It would be hypocrisy to sit here saying we can't tell secrets when we're both living one.

Hell, we're even lying to her *kid*. I hate all of it, and if somehow we get past all these hurdles and find ourselves together in the end, what sort of long-term scars are we leaving on him?

It's all wrong.

Yet when she asked me yesterday if it's worth it, the answer in my head was immediate and confident.

Of course it's worth it. When I'm with her, nothing else seems to matter anymore. It's the two of us, and we deserve the sort of happiness we have when we're together.

I think back to how good I slept in that bed beside her in Ohio and how awful I've been sleeping since I returned.

It was easy to keep my father's secret when she was my enemy. As soon as we turned a corner, though, things changed.

I toss and turn all night, and when I wake, I have work to do in the morning followed by the lunch I'm already dreading.

I think about inviting them to the Gridiron since I'm at the Complex anyway, but I know what a terrible idea that would be. Still, something about knowing it's owned by Joseph Bailey makes me *want* to take my dad there. I want him to eat the wings and declare them the best in the west, and then I want to tell him he's eating Joe's wings as he puts coins in Joe's bank account.

I'm not stupid, though. If somehow he already knows, actually taking him there would be a real dick move.

And so I don't.

We end up meeting at a fancier place a few miles away from the Complex. It's a little too upscale for lunch, but my mother chose it and so here we are. It's storming today, a rare occurrence in the desert, and I wonder if it'll warn them off moving here.

Somehow I doubt it.

I spot them as soon as I shake the rain from my hair in the entry. They're sitting at a table near the front, naturally, so we can be seen by anyone who happens to walk into the place.

Despite the loss of the majority of their money thanks to the legal battle over Rivalry, my mother's tastes never changed.

Which is why my dad is past retirement age and still working as a scout, but that's another matter entirely. I'll be footing the bill today anyway, not that it matters.

"There he is," my mom says, and she leaps up to give me a warm hug. My father stands and offers a handshake, and then I slide into the chair beside my mom.

"How's house hunting?" I ask, crossing my fingers they came up blank and decided not to move here after all.

My mom glances at my dad and she grins, and for just a beat I wonder how she ended up with him. She's more on the bubbly and sweet side while he's more on the selfish side. "We found a place this morning," she squeals. "The first place we looked at. We still looked at two more just to be sure, but I'm sure. Aren't you, Eddie?" she presses.

"Gorgeous mountain views," he grunts without bothering to look up from his menu.

"Well, when it's not storming, anyway," my mom adds.

"Where's it located?"

"Spring Valley," she says, my heart sinking as she gives me the cross streets.

"Great," I lie. "That's not far from me."

I was hoping for a little more distance than that.

I guess that means it's time to escalate things with my fake girlfriend. It's the only way I'm going to throw the scent off what I'm really doing.

We place our orders, and then my mom asks, "So what's new with you, honey bear?"

I chuckle at the term of endearment. When there were four boys running around the house, my mom took to calling us all honey, honey bear, or sweet cheeks or else inevitably she'd say the wrong name. I may be thirty-six, but that doesn't stop her from calling me that now anyway.

"I started seeing someone." That's not a lie.

My mom's eyes light up as she sits up a little straighter, and then she leans forward and says conspiratorially, "Tell me *everything*."

Even my dad looks sort of interested.

"Her name's Samantha." That *is* a lie. "She's got black hair, blue eyes, and she's a single mom and a nurse." All of that's true of the woman named Samantha.

"A single mom?" my mom repeats, ignoring the rest of the stuff I said.

“She’s doing an incredible job raising her seven-year-old son virtually on her own since her son only goes to his dad’s place every other weekend.” That could be either Sam *or* Jolene.

“Have you met the kid?” my dad asks.

I nod. “He did a camp with one of my tight ends and I happened to show up there.”

“Is that how you met her?” my mom asks.

Oh.

We haven’t discussed how we *met*, so I offer the truth instead of fabricating something else. I don’t want to pile lies on top of lies. “I actually first met her at a restaurant across the street from our practice facility.”

“How long have you been seeing her?” My mom is on point with the grilling today, and it’s another question I should’ve been prepared to answer.

“A few weeks. We just attended our first event together this past week.” I shrug. “It’s new, but it’s powerful.”

My mom rubs her hands together. “Ooh! Is this *the one*? Am I finally going to get grandbabies?”

“A seven-year-old isn’t exactly a *baby*, Missy,” my dad points out.

Jesus. This is heavy. I wasn’t expecting to have to field quite all this from my parents, though I’m not quite sure *why* I wasn’t expecting it. It’s natural they’d be curious about the new woman in my life, and I wish I had better answers than what I’m giving.

I guess it’s better to play it vague.

“I’ll plead the fifth on that front, Mom.”

She makes a sour face, but I’m not mentally prepared to answer these questions.

I shift topics to the upcoming season, something that feels much easier to talk about, and after lunch, they show me the new place.

It's an eight-minute drive to my place, and I'm positive that's what my mom liked about it.

I don't want them that close. New York felt too close given what I'm doing behind their backs with the enemy, but I can't exactly craft a reason to stop them from buying the place if it's what they want.

I guess I just have to figure out a way to keep throwing them off the scent.

Maybe that means Sam and I need to get serious fast.

CHAPTER 30: JOLENE

“I have some news,” he tells me.

God, he’s handsome when he wears a suit.

He’s handsome all the time, if I’m being honest, but there’s something about him in a suit that’s just extra delicious.

He’s taking my best friend to another event tonight, and I can’t help but wonder why I agreed to any of this. He’s here at Sam’s house waiting for her so they can leave.

He should be waiting for *me* so *we* could leave. Instead, it’s all lies, and I’m dressed in a demure and professional black dress rather than in the glittery silver gown I should be wearing as his date. Instead, Sam is wearing it. Sam will be holding his hand when they walk in. Sam will be in his arms while they dance.

And I’ll be capturing every bitter moment.

I’ve barely seen him since he’s been so wrapped up with OTAs, but we’ve texted back and forth every day, and we try to talk before bed if it works into both our schedules.

Sometimes it doesn’t, and those are the nights that feel most lonely.

Honestly it feels like he’s spent more time with Sam than me lately, and I hate the feeling of jealousy that comes along with that. This was something I agreed to even if it wasn’t my idea, and I know that in the long run, it’s for our own good.

Still, it hurts.

The boys are at their dads’ houses this weekend, and as the third week of OTAs comes to a close, the only time I’ve gotten to see him is during my media attendance at practices. It’s not exactly like we’ve had time for stolen moments for the two of us there.

But tonight, I’ll be attending the same event he and Sam are. I’m covering it since it’s an Aces function, a VIP meet and

greet with some members of the coaching staff and some players—something to give loyal fans an exciting experience.

Under normal circumstances, I'd be thrilled for an experience like this.

Tonight, however, I'm dreading it.

"What is it?" I ask.

"My parents are here this weekend house hunting. They, uh, found something and their offer was already accepted. They took me by it this morning. It's only a few minutes from my place."

"Only a few minutes," I echo.

"Yeah," he murmurs.

Sam chooses that moment to emerge in that glittery gown, and I press my lips together, unable to formulate any sort of witty response as it feels like one more *big* thing stacked against us.

It was one thing to know they were thinking about it. It's another to know they found a house and they're actually going through with it.

What will it be like to have Eddie and Missy Nash in town?

Who knows, but the rare storms that haven't let up all day seem to be some indication that even the heavens think this is a bad plan.

"Did I hear that right?" Sam asks, not bothering to wait for the compliments on how gorgeous she looks. She really does. She looks like a little pixie princess, and I'm over here trying to maintain my professionalism since I'm working the event. "Your parents are moving to town?"

"Yes," Lincoln says, his tone more clipped with her than it was with me. "Which is why I think we need to take this to the next level."

My brows draw together, and Sam's jaw drops a little.

"Meaning what, exactly?" Sam asks.

“Meaning we stage a meet the parents.” He doesn’t shrug or ask it like a question. Instead, it’s a confident answer that leaves me feeling a little sick to my stomach.

“You want me to meet your parents?” she squeaks.

He presses his lips together and nods. “And I also think it would be a good idea for the two of you to have a public falling out. It’ll make *this* more believable to people like Rivera, who already have some inside intelligence on you.” He motions between himself and Sam with the word *this*, and he turns toward me at the end.

I know he’s right.

But that doesn’t mean there’s a single part of me that likes it.

“What if we have a public falling out because you two get engaged?” I ask. The words slip out as a ridiculous suggestion. A joke. A way to poke fun at this utterly ludicrous situation.

But to my complete shock, Lincoln turns slowly in my direction. He pins me to my place with his gaze for a beat, and then he says, “Now *there* is an idea.”

“What?” Sam gasps.

My eyes widen as I just stare at him.

“Do we want this to be believable?” he asks. “I just said I need to escalate things with Sam. That would be escalating them.”

“I was kidding!” I protest.

“I thought *escalate* meant, like, making more appearances together,” Sam says. “Not getting *engaged*. I can’t get engaged to you. What would Cade think? I feel guilty for leading him to believe we’re together in the first place.” She shakes her head. “Forget it. It’s a no from me.”

“Okay,” Lincoln says, holding up his hands. “I’ll drop it. But the offer is on the table if you change your mind.”

Maybe he’s right.

Regardless, as for my part, well...I need to have a very public fight with my best friend just to ensure nobody puts two and two together.

And after the event, I'll go home. I'll put on a hoodie and take Sam's car to Lincoln's place, where I'll get to spend the night with him. Alone.

That part I'm looking forward to.

The rest? Not so much.

"I need to go," I say, and I turn to leave.

Lincoln grabs my arm on the way by and somehow spins me so I fall against his chest. "Hey, Jo. We're doing this so we can be together. Don't forget that."

I blink my eyes a few times to try to ward off the tears, and then I nod. He presses a soft kiss to my lips before I head out the door.

And as I make my way toward the hotel on the Strip where the event is located tonight, I can't help but think this is all wrong.

It's silly to hide what the two of us have. It's putting more strain on us when we're adults who can make these decisions for ourselves.

Maybe I should just come clean to my parents. Maybe it won't really be so bad.

But as I navigate through the crowded streets toward my destination and walk into the event where some of the coaches, players, guests, and members of the media—including Ryan Rivera—are already starting to gather ahead of tonight's event, the rest of the reality grips me. It's not just the fact that our families will feel the harsh sense of betrayal.

It's my job as a reporter representing women in a field that doesn't have enough women in it.

It's Lincoln's job as a coach who's new to this city trying to navigate his first season with the press on his side.

I'm reminded for the millionth time why we can't be together, and I'm left with a sharp sense of despair that only worsens when the man I love walks in with his date...my best friend.

CHAPTER 31: JOLENE

I pay no attention to the couple who just walked in the room, instead forcing myself to focus on the conversation I'm having with Mike Sharp, the offensive coordinator.

But everyone else's attention seems to have turned that way. They're Vegas's newest power couple or something like that. At least that's what I hear some woman close by murmur under her breath.

My stomach turns over as I think about it.

We're doing this for a reason. This is right for us.

Even if it feels so, so wrong.

"We have slightly different visions of what we're expecting on the field this year, but players have already proven at OTAs that they're ready for whatever we throw at them," he says, and it takes everything in my power to focus on what he's saying rather than allowing my eyes to edge over toward the coach himself.

"What are the two visions?" I ask, doing my best to dig into what our viewers will want to know as I feel his eyes on me from across the room.

"I think it'll become clear as you watch our practices." He winks at me, and I hate the gross feeling that leaves with me.

I hate how it makes me feel like he's kind of hitting on me. I know he isn't. I know it's just my own mind playing tricks on me. Maybe I'm less confident in this position than I should be, but dammit, I deserve to be here.

But would he wink at a male reporter?

Likely not.

And I'm nervous ahead of our plan for tonight.

Is throwing in a fake bestie break-up over the top? Is it out of style for me? Am I causing more drama than is necessary?

Absolutely—on all fronts.

We theoretically could have this out at our own home, and yet...I have to do this here. Tonight.

This was Lincoln's idea, and I'm only doing it to give us more time to figure out how we're going to make this work. To figure out if we even *can* make this work.

I glance over toward the bar. One drink wouldn't hurt to help me get through this event, but if I ever want to be taken seriously in my career, even one drink is sending the wrong message.

Still, I spot Ryan Rivera over by the bar.

He gets to drink at this event because he has a dick.

I blow out a breath, but I force myself to focus. Rivera glances at me as if he feels me looking at him, and I don't miss the look of suspicion on his face as he looks back toward the door.

I know who's over there, and I don't have to turn my gaze to see.

I know he has spotted Sam and Lincoln, and I'm pretty sure he probably knows I'm living with Sam now.

I guess that means it's time for our public fight to break off our friendship. I spot Sam and Lincoln headed toward the bar, so I excuse myself from the conversation with Mike and stride confidently in that direction so as to make sure as hell Rivera overhears this.

"We need to talk," I spit out at Sam.

"Excuse me?" she asks, either playing the part well or genuinely confused as to why I'm confronting her.

"What did I say to you about him at home?" I ask, jerking my thumb toward the coach. I keep talking before she gets the chance to answer. "You know how I feel about you dating him, and to parade around with him at an event I'm covering...It's just wrong, Sam. I can't believe you'd be willing to risk our friendship over someone like him."

"Someone like him?" she repeats. "He's a wonderful man, and if you'd give him the chance—"

“Stop,” I say, cutting her off.

“Ladies, let’s take this somewhere private,” Lincoln suggests as Rivera moves in a little closer to catch every last detail.

“I’m not going anywhere private with you,” I hiss. “We all know what went down between our fathers years ago, and I will remain civil with you because it’s my job.” I turn to Sam. “But *you*...you’re supposed to be my friend, and now you’re doing God knows what with *him*.”

“I can date whoever I want,” she says smugly, and for a split second, I almost forget that this is fake. It *feels* real. Painfully real. So painfully real that tears spring to my eyes, and my cheeks burn as heat fires up my spine. My body is preparing for battle, and my hands start to tremble.

“But you know how I feel about him. Are you trying to go out of your way to sabotage my career?”

“I would never!” she says, her hand flying to her chest.

“I just...I can’t live with you anymore. I know our boys are best friends, but you and I...” I let that trail off because I can’t physically bring myself to say it.

This hurts more than I thought it would.

“Fine. When the boys aren’t home, I’ll stay with Linc,” she says, pursing her lips. “You can start finding somewhere else to live.” She leans in toward Lincoln, who tightens his arm around her. “Don’t make me choose between friendship and love, Jolene. You won’t win.”

I purse my lips and spin on my heel. I run toward the ladies’ room to take a minute to collect myself as her words echo around my brain.

Don’t make me choose between friendship and love.

She was leaning into him.

I believed the act, so I’m sure everyone around us did, too. I hate it, and I get this strange sense that Sam *likes* it. I’m not exactly sure how to deal with that.

And I have a feeling it's not going to get any easier.

I draw in a few deep breaths. We didn't have the big fake fight in front of a large audience, but it was definitely the right audience. Rivera saw it all, and he's waiting for me outside the bathroom.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Stop pretending like you give a fuck," I hiss.

"Okay. I don't. But I know what I saw where you and Nash are concerned. So how did the friend get involved?"

"I'd rather not discuss that at all, least of all with you. What you saw was nothing. Sam and Lincoln are together now, and it appears there's nothing I can do about that."

"So you kissing him was...what? Using your body to get a story the way you used it to get this job?" he presses.

"Fuck you," I spit, and I raise a hand to slap him clean across the face.

He looks surprised by my outburst, and he grabs my wrist in his fist. He spins us around so he has me pinned up against the wall, and I freeze as fear grips onto me.

"Oh, that's something I've *always* wanted, Jolene," he says, his voice low and slimy as hell in this hallway that's way too small for the two of us. "Come on. You gave it to Marcus. You gave it to Lincoln. Isn't it my turn now?"

I will not let him hurt me. I will not let him take something from me I'm not willing to give. There's enough people around here tonight that I know he can't do anything to me in this hallway. But that doesn't mean he's harmless, and it certainly doesn't mean I'd want to run into him in a deserted alley.

Some force beyond my control kicks in, as if my gut is acting on instinct.

"That's never going to happen." I lift my knee and connect solidly with his groin, and then I run the hell out of the hallway to the sound of his *oof* as he doubles over in pain.

Good. The fucker deserves it.

I've never been prouder of my gut.

What an awful night, and it's just getting underway. I still have to cover this event as I try to shake off everything that has happened in the first ten minutes since I arrived at this shit show.

I'm not sure what's worse tonight: fighting with my best friend publicly so people will believe she's fucking the man I love or getting hit on by a slimy asshole who's trying to take my job away from me.

CHAPTER 32: LINCOLN

I could see it in her eyes. The public fight with Sam was rough on her, and when she returns from the bathroom, she doesn't look any more settled.

If anything, she looks frazzled.

I have to do something. I have to make sure she's okay. And so I send her a covert text since I can't exactly walk over to her and see what's going on.

Me: *Are you okay?*

She doesn't check her phone right away, and I realize she might not check it at all until later since she's working this event.

I can't help but continually look in her direction, studying her for any sign that she's okay with all this.

"Dude," Sam hisses beside me when we have an incredibly rare moment to ourselves. It's been a constant barrage of people trying to make conversation with the new head coach, and frankly, it's been exhausting.

"What?" I snip at her.

"Stop staring at her. You're not fooling anybody. She's fine, just playing the part," Sam says.

I take her at her word. They're best friends, and theoretically Sam knows adult Jolene better than I do. Even though I sense there's something else at play, I can't do anything about it right this second anyway.

Time slows to a crawl as I try my best to focus on the reason why I'm here. I'm meeting some of the top fans of the Vegas Aces for the first time tonight, and my only goal is to schmooze them and make them feel like I know what the fuck I'm doing. They all want to know whether I'll do things the same way Thompson would have, but the truth is that I won't. I'm not him, and I have my own coaching style that Jack Dalton believed was a good fit for this team. And if there's

anybody who has the best interests of this team at his core, it's Jack Dalton.

Instead of schmoozing, though, I'm looking across the room at my girlfriend like a lovesick little puppy.

She seems to have shaken it off. She's interviewing people, recording sound bites, taking names. She's beautiful as I watch her do her thing—something she's clearly very passionate about from the way she intently listens to whoever she's talking to and from the questions she poses to dig a little deeper.

Meanwhile I'm over here trying to pull myself together and put on an act I no longer think is a very good idea.

Maybe Sam and I should have a public falling out, too.

I have to keep reminding myself why we're doing this. I have to play nice with *all* members of the media, and if I'm fucking one of them and the rest find out, they'll assume she's getting special treatment. That will only fuck her over harder since she's the woman vying for a position in a male-dominated field. She deserves better than that.

She deserves respect for how hard she worked to earn that position.

I spot Rivera out of the corner of my eye, and I see him watching her, too.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand right up. I don't trust that guy, and I fear for what he might be capable of.

There's something in his eyes that I can see even from where I stand as he watches her, but I can't quite put my finger on what it is. He's jealous she got the job over him, for sure. But it seems like something else might be at play, and I make a mental note to ask her about it—along with their history—later.

Eventually the evening comes to a close, thankfully. Jolene and I weren't able to steal away a moment for the two of us, but with Rivera here, there were two too many eyes watching our every move. Maybe at the next event.

If I'm lucky enough to still have her in my life at that point.

The driver takes us back to Sam's place, but Jolene isn't back yet. I check my phone a few times only to find there's still no reply from her.

I feel a little sick as I make my way home. We had a plan. She's supposed to take Sam's car to my place. It'll stay parked in the driveway all night so it looks like Sam is spending the night here.

But it'll really be her, and it'll give us a chance to talk through what went down tonight.

It'll give us the chance to decide together if we're going to keep up the ruse or if there's some other way that would make more sense.

I know one thing, though. I'm not giving up on her anytime soon.

I'm in way too deep for that.

Eventually a text comes through from her a full hour after I arrive back home.

I made sure to change her contact name just in case anyone happens to catch a glance when she's messaging me.

Lorraine: *I'm okay. On my way in Sam's car.*

I had her in there as *Gridiron Blonde* for a minute, but eventually I changed it to her middle name. Nobody here knows her by JoLo anyway, so this feels safe.

I wait by the door, and she has a hood pulled up over her hair as she exits the car. I keep my front lights off to make sure nobody can get a clear shot of her, but nobody's parked across the street tonight anyway.

It's her first time in my house, but I don't give her the chance to look around. Not when I need her mouth on mine. To that end, I usher her into the dark entry, and the second the door closes behind her, I pin her up against it with my hips. "God, I missed you." My lips fall to hers, and she lets out a little moan before she gathers my shirt in her fists and pushes me back a bit.

“I need a minute,” she murmurs, and I back immediately off as alarm bells ring in my head.

“What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head a little. “Nothing. Well, I mean, not *nothing*, but nothing that concerns you.”

“Not nothing?” I repeat.

She lifts a shoulder, I take her hand in mine. I bring it to my lips and press a soft kiss to the back of her hand, and that’s when she starts to cry.

“Whoa,” I say softly. “What’s going on?”

She draws in a shaky breath, and I tug her hand and pull her into the family room. It’s quiet in here, the rather large room dimly lit by only a lamp on a side table.

I sit on the couch and pull her down beside me. “What happened?”

“After the fight with Sam, I felt...off. I hated it. I hated fighting with her just to divert attention from us. Everything about it felt wrong, and I went to the bathroom to pull myself back together. Only, when I came out, Rivera was there waiting for me. He...he...” She bursts into tears.

“Jesus, Jo. What happened? What the fuck did that motherfucker do to you?” I demand darkly.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she says, her voice a quiet plea.

“Jolene. Talk to me.”

She draws in a shaky breath as she paws at her cheeks to wipe away the tears. Her hood is still up over her hair, and her face is scrubbed clean of the make-up she wore tonight, as if she went home and showered before she came here. Something about her appearance right now reminds me of the vulnerable fifteen-year-old I fell in love with all those years ago.

“Please,” I beg.

She nods a little, and when she starts talking, it sounds like reporter Jolene—as if she’s detached herself from the emotions of what happened, and it scares me that she’s so easily able to pull away.

“He asked if I was okay, and I said you and Sam are together now, and he indicated that when he caught me kissing you I was using my body to get a story. I said fuck you to him and slapped him across the face. He grabbed my wrist and then he pinned me up against the wall and he said I gave it to Marcus and you and now it’s his turn.”

My blood boils as the need to protect this woman at all costs kicks in. I jump to my feet and start pacing as I feel like a caged animal in my own home. “Fuck, Jolene! That’s fucking assault!”

“It wasn’t assault,” she says. “It was harassment. He didn’t hurt me. He didn’t try to kiss me or touch me anywhere private. Clothes never came off.”

“So what did you do?” I ask rather than pressing the issue. Maybe it’s not technically assault, but I still want to rip that fucker’s head off and shove it up his own ass.

“And then I kned him in the balls and ran the hell out of there.”

I stop my pacing as my jaw drops. “You kned him in the balls?”

She raises a brow and nods. “Let that be noted for any man who chooses to cross me.”

I raise both brows back at her. “Duly noted. But talk to me, Jo. Are you really okay?”

She purses her lips for a beat, and then she shrugs. “Yes and no. I knew he wasn’t going to actually hurt me in that hallway. He was just trying to scare me, but I’m a female sports reporter. It’s hardly the first time some asshole has come onto me and made insinuations that I’ve slept my way to the top. I can’t let him get to me.”

“No, but you could report what he did to your boss,” I suggest.

“I could. And he could show Marcus those pictures he took of us.” She shrugs.

“Babe, it’s not the same. At all.”

“I know it’s not. And trust me, I’ll keep an eye on him.”

I shake my head. “That’s not enough. We need that fucker fired.”

“And risk giving him even more fuel to come after me? No. Hard no. Do not get involved, Lincoln. Promise me.” Her voice is a clear warning, but it’s not a promise I can make.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

I don’t make the promise.

But I do make a vow to myself that I will do whatever it takes to protect her.

And I never break my promises to myself.

CHAPTER 33: JOLENE

“I won’t let him hurt you,” he says quietly. His voice is low and venomous, and I instantly regret telling him about what happened with Rivera. “I need to find a way to protect you.”

I see the sincerity in his eyes. The love. The fear and the concern.

He’s right to be concerned, but I’m also concerned. I’m concerned he’s going to press this issue and he’s going to expose the two of us.

“Come live here with me while we figure this out,” he finally says. “That way I can protect you when you’re with me.”

“You know I can’t,” I protest. “And it’s ridiculous to think you can protect me every moment of every day anyway. I’ve got a son to care for. I’ve got my own responsibilities, and the season is just around the corner. You won’t be able to be with me all the time. I’m fine. I’m an adult, and I can handle myself.”

He stills as he stares at me for a few beats, and I can almost see the moment when reality plows back into him.

“Fuck, Jo. What are we doing?”

I shake my head as tears spring to my eyes. “I don’t know. We keep saying we’re figuring things out, but this has an end date, Linc. It just does. It doesn’t matter how we feel. It doesn’t matter whether we were meant for each other. Between our families and careers, we were doomed from the start, and having Rivera digging into us doesn’t make things any easier.”

“So that’s it?” he asks quietly, his voice clearly pained as he tries to come to terms with what I’m saying. “We just...call it quits?”

“What other choice do we have? We’re already stumbling and we’ve barely reconnected. Are you really going to tell your dad about us? Are you really going to choose me in the end when both our families have made it clear *they* are our

only choice?” I sound hysterical, and I’m aware of that. But maybe what happened with Rivera tonight happened for a reason. Maybe it’s the catalyst to force us to stop living in this dream world where we think we’re being so smart sneaking around with this little secret.

There’s too much at stake, and it’s time to come to grips with reality.

Before he gets the chance to respond, my phone starts ringing.

It’s Jonah.

A glance at the top of the phone tells me it’s after eleven.

Jonah is literally the only person I’d interrupt this conversation for, especially since a call from your kid after eleven at night when he’s not at home with you is perhaps one of the most anxiety-inducing feelings a mother can have.

“Everything okay, baby?” I answer.

I hear a snuffle, and his voice is a soft cry when he murmurs. “No.”

I leap up from Lincoln’s oversized black couch, my own worries forgotten as my son takes center stage. “What’s wrong?”

“Dad and Alyssa are fighting and I don’t know what to do.”

“They’re fighting?” I repeat. “Like yelling at each other or physically?”

“I’m supposed to be sleeping but they’re yelling at each other and I just heard a loud bang, like someone threw something and it broke. And now I hear Luna and Lily crying in their room. I just want to come home, Mom.” His voice is low and tearful, and my chest grows immediately heavy as I listen to his words and try to process what’s going on here after this heavy conversation with Lincoln.

I definitely hear a ruckus in the background, but I can’t make anything out. And then I hear another loud bang and some yelling. My heart stops for a second.

I don't think my son is in danger. Jeremy wouldn't hurt him.

But I also didn't think Jeremy was capable of cheating on me when I was pregnant, yet he did—with the woman he's fighting with right now. And I don't know Alyssa well enough to be sure she wouldn't say something nasty to my son since he isn't *her* son.

I hate this. I hate that he's dealing with this. I just want to protect him for everyone and everything.

All I know is I need to get my son the fuck out of there before he gets hurt—physically or emotionally.

"I'll be right there," I say, keeping my tone soothing as I estimate how long it'll take me to drive there from Lincoln's place. "Give me ten minutes. Stay in your room, okay, buddy?" My heart breaks that I have to tell him that—that he doesn't feel safe where he is right at this moment. I always want him to feel safe, and I will escalate things with my lawyer and do whatever it takes to get a court order that ensures he doesn't ever have to go to Jeremy's again.

"Okay. Thanks, Mom."

Tears spring to my eyes, but I force control into my voice as I say, "I love you, honey. I'll be there soon." I cut the call. I never took my shoes off when I got here, so I grab my purse and look at Lincoln. "I have to go."

"What's going on?" he asks, clearly alarmed.

"I guess Jeremy and his wife are fighting loudly and Jonah's scared. I need to go get him. I know we're in the middle of—"

He holds up a hand. "Stop. It doesn't matter what we're in the middle of. He comes first. We'll talk soon."

Will we, though? It took a lot of pre-scheduling and arranging to make *this* meeting work. And now I'm ducking out on us. More cards stacked against us.

More reasons for us to quit this.

And yet, as he presses a soft kiss to my cheek and ushers me out the door, I already know how very much I can't quit this. Especially not when he already understands that my son has to come first.

I forgot I have Sam's car, but I'm too worried about my son and what sort of situation he's in right now to go home and switch cars. I hop in and race over to Jeremy's...not even noticing the car that's following me the whole way there.

TO BE CONTINUED IN BOOK 3, GAME PLAY



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When the family feud seems to worsen overnight at a charity event where our fathers get into a public argument, we need a solution. That's when Lincoln's publicist comes up with a way we can work together, and it's brilliant.

But when my father sees who I'm partnering with for my new project, he couldn't be more disappointed. It's further proof that there's too much stacked against us to ever come clean with our families.

Secret trysts in his office, in the media room after a game, and at his house after I sneak over there have been exciting. But we're both feeling the frustrations of seeing each other in

secret. While we both admit we can't live without the other, we also can't hide our relationship much longer.

The game play is fun for now...but we both know it won't last forever.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'll save my acknowledgments for the final book! I can't wait for you to see what's coming next...

*xoxo,
Lisa Suzanne*

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Lisa Suzanne is a romance author who resides in Arizona with her husband and two kids. She's a former high school English teacher and college composition instructor. When she's not chasing or cuddling her kids, she can be found working on her latest book or watching reruns of *Friends*.

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