



**VEGAS
ACES**

THE WIDE RECEIVER
BOOK ONE

Rookie

MISTAKE

LISA SUZANNE

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ROOKIE MISTAKE
VEGAS ACES: THE WIDE RECEIVER
BOOK ONE
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DEDICATION

For my three favorite people.

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CHAPTER 1: TESSA

“Four pokes today, Mr. Liam,” I say in the baby voice that annoys even me after I’ve administered the oral vaccine for today’s visit. Liam’s mom looks nervous as I scrub his thigh with the alcohol swab. “He did great at his two-month well visit, so he’ll be fine,” I remind her.

She nods.

I pull the caps off all four shots so I can give them as quickly as possible, and then the poking commences. The baby lets out a healthy scream and mom gathers baby Liam up in her arms, covering his bald head with kisses.

Maybe working as a nurse in a pediatrician’s office given my history paired with the tiny case of baby fever I have and no prospects on the horizon wasn’t such a good idea. I want to snuggle baby Liam and dry those tears, but it’s his mom’s job.

At twenty-five, I’m in prime wedding season. Most of the women in my extended circle are either engaged or close, and two of them are pregnant. Meanwhile I’m hung up on my high school sweetheart and haven’t had sex in nine months...and that last time was after a third date. The guy turned out to be nothing to write home about.

“Thank you, Nurse Tessa,” Liam’s mom says to me after Liam quiets down in her arms.

I try not to giggle at her formality. “Of course. We’ll see you for his six-month appointment.”

Liam and his mom leave, and I head back to my station to finish up some paperwork. My phone buzzes with a notification, and when I check it, the screen says, “NFL Roster Alert: Aces wide receiver T. Higgins changed to questionable ahead of Sunday’s game.”

“Shit,” I whisper under my breath. I’m not supposed to be on my phone at work, but I click the link anyway as my heart thumps loudly.

“Higgins (hamstring) was limited at Wednesday’s practice. His status is questionable for Sunday’s game against the Bears.”

I blow out a breath and open a browser to see if I can find another article that explains more.

“Put the phone away, Taylor.”

I glance up guiltily at Cam Foster. He’s one of the newer doctors on the marquee of the office. He only comes in on Mondays and Thursdays since he also works at the hospital, where he’s a surgeon, but he uses our practice to meet with patients in a setting outside of but within walking distance to the hospital. He’s a total dick, which is a real shame since he’s got one of those strong jawlines always covered with the sexiest stubble.

“Sorry, Dr. Foster.” I don’t mention that I prefer to be called by my first name, not my last.

“Don’t be sorry. Just don’t do it.”

I open my mouth to explain what I was looking at, but I stop myself short and wave my hand in the air instead. “You’re right. I apologize.”

“Send me your notes on your last few visits with Logan Wesley,” he demands.

I click a few buttons on my tablet to send them over despite the fact that he has access to all the files in the office and can easily do it himself. “Done.”

“I’ll be looking these over in my office. Get me a cup of coffee.” He spins and heads toward his office, and I stop working on the paperwork I’m filling out so I can be his bitch.

With extreme reluctance given the fact that I have my own work to do, I head toward the break room to get him his coffee, mumbling to myself the entire time about what bullshit this is and what a royal asshole he is.

But I do it anyway.

I'm a good employee, and my boss really respects Dr. Foster. He *is* a great doctor. Too bad he's such a jerk.

"Dr. Foster?" I ask a short while later, knocking on the doorframe as I peek into his office with the cup of coffee he requested.

He's alone, sitting behind his desk studying some paperwork. He slips off a pair of black framed glasses that make him look like a sexy nerd. He massages the bridge of his nose with two long fingers before he looks up at me. "What?"

I step into the office and set the coffee on his desk, and he doesn't even acknowledge I did it.

"I have three forms for you to sign. You have a two o'clock with Logan Wesley, but you're free until then. Can you take one of Paul's patients for a sick visit before then? He's overbooked."

He blows out a chuckle. "Free. Like I'm ever *free*."

It's so weird how he's such a douche to me, yet he's so kind when I watch him with kids...like as in *so kind* that sometimes I get a little tingle in my tummy when I see him kneel down and talk to kids on their level.

A ring is noticeably absent from the third finger of his left hand, but we've never shared anything about our personal lives. He only comes in twice a week, and he's all business. He doesn't seem like the type of guy who has time for a relationship, and I can't really imagine him with a woman. Not when I think about how belittling he can be toward women in general. Or maybe it's just me. Maybe he looks down at me because he considers me his subordinate.

He narrows his eyes and tilts his head for a moment as he gazes at me, and then he shakes his head. "Can Marsha take the sick visit?"

"I'll ask Sara," I say, referring to one of Marsha's nurses, a girl who happens to be my best friend and my roommate.

He nods once and returns his attention to the paperwork, and I gaze at him for a beat. As much as I hate him, he's also the only man I've had even an inkling of a crush on in years. There's one boy who holds my heart, but something about Cameron Foster makes me think there's possibilities of moving forward.

March will mark seven years since everything happened. I *should* have moved on at this point.

It wasn't just a break-up or some teenage heartbreak. It was a complete metamorphosis. I'm different than I was back then. My life is split in two now: before him and after him.

I shake him out of my head as I focus on Cam for a beat. It's not just his strong, healing hands or his lush, medium-brown locks. It's not his ice blue eyes or the way he treats children so tenderly that I know he'd be the most amazing father in the world. It's something inexplicable, particularly strange given the fact that he routinely talks down to me and treats me like I'm less of a person because I don't hold the same degree he does.

I make excuses for his behavior. Oh, he's just busy. Oh, he didn't mean it. Oh, he doesn't even know he's doing it. I shouldn't allow it, but I also have no way of standing up for myself. This job and its paycheck mean everything to me—they're the means that allowed me to stay away from my parents' house in a place of my own after I graduated from college.

A place away from the bedroom that looks out over *his* bedroom.

Staying away from my hometown didn't just mean getting away from my parents or leaving the past behind me. It also meant I could stop jumping every time I heard a tree branch hit my window, thinking by some miracle he came back for me, thinking he's tossing a stone near my window like he used to. Thinking maybe I could finally tell him what really happened.

It meant I could move forward.

Except I haven't.

Part of me wonders if I'll ever be able to move forward.

CHAPTER 2: TRISTAN

“Rice it or you’ll be sitting,” Adrian tells me. “Rest, ice—”

“Yeah, yeah. Compression, elevation,” I say, repeating the same medical advice that has been given to me by countless trainers and other medical professionals since the beginning of time.

“And the stretches—”

I interrupt him again. “Got it. Active stretches, hip lifts, all the other shit I’ve done twenty thousand times.”

“Take it seriously, Tristan. You know you hurt your ankle your rookie season because of the hammy.”

“That’s not *exactly* true,” I argue, and it’s not normally like me to be argumentative with Adrian, but I’m tired of what feels like constant injury. It takes its toll after a while.

The hamstring has been an issue on and off for me since high school. I strained it a little in practice the week before my injury my rookie season, so I wasn’t playing at a hundred percent.

Nobody in this league is playing at a hundred percent.

I got tangled up with a defender when I was trying to make a catch, and my ankle got caught the wrong way under him. End of story.

Except Adrian is sort of right. If I’d have properly stretched my hamstring that day, it’s possible I wouldn’t have had to stretch to make the catch, and then the defender would’ve taken a different angle coming at me and my ankle would’ve been fine.

If should’ve and could’ve were worth money, I’d be richer than that Tesla guy.

Instead, I missed the rest of my rookie season and part of my second season. It took eight months and rigorous rehab to get it right again, and now I'm in my third season with the Vegas Aces with four seasons guaranteed and an option to add on a fifth—except my rookie contract is fairly small, and the way I've been playing makes me worth more money than what I've been making.

A lot more than I've been making.

Still...none of that was the biggest mistake I made my rookie year.

Sometimes I wish I could turn back the clock and start over, but I don't even know how far I'd actually turn it back. Maybe all the way to middle school. I never would've kissed the girl who holds my heart and my life would've taken a completely different route.

Instead, I find myself married to the wrong woman and living in misery because of it.

My teammates tried to warn me. One in particular, Luke Dalton, a former Aces wide receiver, was married to my wife before me. He told me she was the devil in disguise, but when you're young and stupid and someone's making you promises when everyone else around you is trying to take something from you...well, sometimes you make the wrong decisions.

I was too trusting. I won't make that mistake again.

And now I'm stuck in a marriage she won't let me out of. She doesn't give a shit about me—she only cares about the big three Fs: fortune, fame, and football. And with me in her back pocket, she gets all three along with a final f: fucking me. And not in the fun way.

I cut off as much as I can, but she's got shit on me that I'm unwilling to allow in the public eye. And now that Luke retired...I'm thrust center square into the media.

We've been married almost two years now, but I filed for divorce a little less than a month after we were married. It didn't take long to see the writing on the wall.

She has done everything in her power to stop the divorce from going through. Between blackmail, switching lawyers, and fighting over division of assets, she's beyond unbelievable.

I told my lawyer to just give her what she wants, and when it seemed as though we finally settled the division of assets, she changed lawyers. Again.

Then the whole process started over. Again.

So why did I marry her?

It's complicated, but the simplest explanation is that she blackmailed me into it. She got me drunk and we tied the knot at a Vegas chapel on New Year's Eve.

The complicated answer is that I thought the girl I loved had moved on, and so I wanted to move on, too. My mother filled me in on all the ways the only girl I loved was living her best life, and too much whiskey propelled the competitive side of me to want a victory of my own.

It was a rookie mistake. I know that now.

Throughout my life, that old phrase *fix your mistakes* has been ingrained into me first from my father then from my high school coach, my college coaches, and now my coaches in the league. I've spent almost two years trying to correct mine.

There's little else she can do to drag this shit out, though the fact that she was arrested last year wasn't good for her case. I'm laying low, and one more little slip up from her should be enough to push through the final papers.

Every time I think I'm about to make progress, she finds some new shit on me that causes me to back down.

But I've been laying low since I married her, and I'm ready for a change.

My mother informed me that Tessa is in Chicago and hasn't been back to Fallon Ridge in years, so I've been debating the option to get out of Vegas to spend a couple months in the off-season in the small town where I was born and raised.

It's strange to be thinking of the off-season when we just wrapped up week one. We still have seventeen regular season games to play along with playoffs, and, fingers crossed, the *big game* at the end. We won last season, and we've got a great shot at a repeat.

Still, I look forward to the off-season this year. I look forward to heading back to Fallon Ridge and returning to Vegas after a finalized divorce as a free man. Hopefully this shit with Savannah will be tied up in a nice little bow by the time I come back for workouts ten months from now, and then my buddy Ben Olson, the biggest partier in the NFL, will throw me the most epic celebration ever and I'll finally be able to move on with my life.

That's the goal, anyway.

I've always worked hard to achieve my goals. This is no different.

I head home to the kickass house I'm renting near the Complex, our team practice facility. A pit forms in my gut as I navigate that direction.

Home would be perfect if I could just get Savannah to leave. It's another reason I'm ready to skip town when the season's over. The lease to this place is in my name, so I'm just waiting it out another few months and not renewing even though I don't really want to move. But if I have to vacate the property, she will, too, and maybe the divorce will be finalized by then.

I've been saying on repeat that for almost two years. Sometimes it feels like it'll *never* be finalized.

I pull my truck into the driveway and open the garage, which is blessedly empty of her white BMW. I don't know where she is, and frankly, I don't give a fuck. I'm just glad she isn't here.

I sit on my couch watching film on a tablet with ice on my hamstring and a plate of chicken, vegetables, and rice on my lap—the same thing I eat for dinner every night. I'm a creature of habit, I guess.

We're facing the Bears this weekend for the second game of the regular season. The Bears were the team I cheered for growing up. They were geographically the closest team to the tiny town in Iowa where I was raised, and I love playing against them. I love *winning* against them.

I watch the defense and how they pair up against wide receivers. I rewind and repeat. I zoom in. I study.

I feel it deep in my soul. The Aces are going back to try for another ring this year.

It's the only mindset I can have right now, and in some ways, it feels like all I have left right now. I can't date. I can't party. I'm barely having any fun right now. I live for the game, and so I'm pouring every fucking ounce of myself into it because it's the one thing that's consistently been there for me my entire life.

At some point, maybe that'll change. But right now, the game is my only priority. And it's with that in mind that I finish my plate of chicken, pull off the ice pack, and start the stretches Adrian recommended even though I'm exhausted.

I'm midway through my first round of stretches when I hear the garage open, and my heart sinks as a dart of anxiety shoots through my abdomen.

She's back.

I hate her with a fiery passion...which is why it's so ironic that she's only the *second* biggest mistake of my life.

CHAPTER 3: TESSA

It might just be the beer, but the cheers around me are deafening at the ruling on the field. I join in, though it's less than half-hearted. Would that be a quarter-hearted? An eighth-hearted?

Everyone around me is toasting, and we're in the fourth quarter now, so beer splashes over the sides of glasses as we celebrate. They're all drunk enough that they won't notice I'm not cheering as loudly as they are. Maybe they won't notice I'm not as drunk as they are, either.

The pass was intended for number eleven on the Vegas Aces, and instead, some defender on the Bears got it before eleven did.

Eleven.

Chicken legs, as Coach Beatty used to call him. Not because he had skinny legs, but because the one and the one on the back of his uniform looked like chicken legs, I guess.

My Tristan.

I twist the ring I wear on my right-hand ring finger. It's a simple silver band with the infinity symbol wrapped around it in glittering cubic zirconia—the gem of choice for high school promise rings.

I realize whatever promises were made back when we were sixteen are null and void at this point, yet I like the ring. I never take it off.

I can tell myself all day it's not because I'm still in love with him, that it's just because it's a pretty ring that goes with everything...but I'm only fooling myself with that line of thinking.

He's playing today through whatever's going on with his hamstring, and I can't help but focus on it as I watch the game.

Every wince, grimace, and extra second it takes for him to get up once he's tackled to the ground might mean something else. Whether or not he was going to play today was a game time decision, and I'm sure fantasy team owners everywhere were struggling with whether or not to play him.

Tristan was literally the boy next door. I knew big things were in his future. We all did. It's not often to find a kid from Fallon Ridge, Iowa, population twenty-six hundred, with so much natural talent, let alone one who makes it all the way to the NFL.

Nobody in this bar knows that I know Tristan Higgins—including Sara.

Nobody knows that he's responsible for every single one of my firsts. First kiss. First love. First sex. First heartbreak.

When I moved to Chicago, I vowed I wouldn't tell a soul. The last thing I wanted was for history to follow me here, to relive the painful memories day after day. I do that already, anyway. I don't need more reminders.

I started a new life for myself—one separate from the one I lived in another lifetime. My parents still live in Fallon Ridge, less than a three-hour drive from where I reside now in Chicago, and I haven't been back to visit in the six-and-a-half years since I left.

I can't. It's too painful.

I talk to my mom a few times a week, but I haven't spoken to my father since the day he put me in the backseat, shut the door, and stood there as the car drove off.

I can't even think about my childhood bedroom anymore without a million memories plowing into me. All the nights Tristan and I stayed up too late talking—not on the phone, but through our bedroom windows since they faced each other. When we got a little older, he'd climb out his window and into mine, narrowly avoiding the lilac bushes underneath my window, and we'd lie together on my bed dreaming about our future.

Our *future*. Not our *futures*. Neither of us ever imagined we'd be planning separate futures, and then suddenly we were.

The last time I spoke to him was the day I was forced to leave, the last day of school before spring break began. I wasn't even allowed a goodbye.

I shake out the memories. I'm here to have fun today, not to dwell on the past.

The Bears score on the first play of their drive after that interception that should've fallen into Tristan's hands. Melissa slaps my hand in a high-five. We're the two single ladies here at the bar watching the game. Across the table from me, Shane dips Sara and plants a kiss on her mouth in celebration.

I sigh as my eyes edge back to the screen.

I'm glad my best friend is happy. Really.

But that doesn't mean I want to have her happy ending shoved in my face when I don't even have any prospects on the horizon.

Just as that thought flashes through my brain, the camera pans to Tristan on the bench. It was Jack Dalton who threw the interception, but it was Tristan who missed the catch. He purses his lips angrily and shakes his head that the other team scored off his miss, and then the guy next to him says something as the game cuts to commercial.

A glint of light catches my eye as the door opens and someone walks in. At first I can't tell who it is from the bright light behind him in this dimly lit sports bar decorated with all things Chicago sports teams, but when the door shuts and the brightness dissipates, I can more clearly make out his lean form and the dark hair that is always perfectly groomed and the ice blue eyes that fall onto me with indignation most of the time.

My heart sinks.

Why would Cam show up here?

I glance around, and granted, the bar is full of colleagues. The husband and wife team who started our practice sit a few

tables away. It was their idea to have a weekly reservation at the bar a few blocks from our office for *teambuilding* during football season...and then baseball season was added on, too. And basketball, and hockey. We meet every Sunday, actually, and almost everyone from the office shows up from the physician's assistants to nurses to the medical technicians to the front office staff. Even our child psychologist is here today.

Cam is new. He's only been with us a couple weeks, and in those couple weeks, he's never shown up to Teambuilding Sunday.

But he's here today, and my heart starts racing because I'm a *little* tipsy after a couple drinks and I don't know how to deal with this guy on a normal day-to-day basis let alone when my filter has been misplaced by beer.

I don't even work with him. My provider is Paul, half of the team who owns the practice, and yet somehow I keep ending up as Cam's punching bag.

He seems nice to everyone else...but he's got something against me, I guess. He gives wide smiles to patients' moms. He harmlessly flirts with the other nurses at the office.

I haven't said anything to Paul. Sometimes I think it's just my imagination, so I let the little things go.

So he demands a cup of coffee or he throws charts in my direction a little aggressively or he's condescending because he doesn't see us as colleagues but rather as my superior. So he's taken to calling me *nurse* in that snide tone of his instead of my actual name just to be rude.

These are dumb little things I can move past.

What I can't move past, however, is him doing any of this in front of the people who are like family to me here at Teambuilding Sunday. This is our break, our getaway, our retreat together. The one hard and fast rule is no office talk.

And somehow it seems like Cam is going to break that rule.

He glances around, surveying the tables and who's here, and then his eyes slide to mine.

I hold his gaze confidently, refusing to be the one to back down first, and a glimmer of something passes through his eyes and his eyebrow twitches before he looks away.

I've taken enough psychology courses in my lifetime to know that the fact that he looked away first means I might make him uncomfortable.

Is that why he's such a dick?

Maybe an afternoon at the bar is exactly what we need to knock down whatever wall is between us.

Sara looks toward the door and sees Cam standing there, and she looks over at me. She widens her eyes meaningfully in the way that says *oh shit what the hell is he doing here* without any words at all. She's the only one I've mentioned his behavior to.

I roll my eyes back at her, and she laughs. Paul sees Cam at that moment, and he waves him over.

A pulse of disappointment throbs in my chest.

I'm a little surprised at it as I realize a tiny part of me was hoping he'd come over and start flirting with me. What if he's a jerk to me because he's attracted to me the way I am to him? We work together, and it would certainly be complicated, but it's not like I have a hundred other prospects banging down my door.

It's my own fault. I've tried, but I always back out because even after all these years, I'm still broken over what happened.

But I can't keep pining away for the boy who holds my heart. Tristan is in Vegas living his dream. He's married now. He's part of my past, and it's time to move forward. He sure did...but he doesn't even fully know what he moved on *from*.

I think about calling him and telling him all the time, but no good will come of it. It's buried in the past, and as has been drilled into me, that's where it should stay.

It doesn't matter that it changed who I am as a person. What's done is done, and it's more than time to move on.

Maybe a little beer and some flirting with the newest doc
on the block will help push me in that direction.

Or maybe I'll wake up tomorrow with regrets.

I won't know unless I give it a try.

CHAPTER 4: TESSA

Regrets.

Yep, as Monday dawns, I wake with regrets.

Not because of Cam...because of beer.

I didn't speak a single word to him yesterday, in fact. Instead, we kept making eye contact across the bar, and I have no idea what any of it means but now it's Monday morning and I'm a little terrified to go into the office.

And it isn't just regrets I wake with. It's also a pit of nervousness in my stomach. Monday mornings are our weekly staff meetings, and this morning both Paul and Marsha will be out until noon, so today's meeting will be run by none other than Dr. Cam Foster.

One of the things I love about this job is that I get to help children and still mostly maintain regular nine-to-five hours. I walk in a few minutes early, and Sara greets me with my Starbucks order. She knew I'd need the fuel for this meeting, and she came through in the clutch. She's another thing I love about this job.

But the hours, Sara, and my sweet little patients tend to be where my love ends, and as I walk into the small conference room where we hold our staff meetings, I'm reminded of everything I hate about my job.

He sits by himself at the head of the table. Sara and I are the first to arrive, and we both set our coffee cups down on the table. Dr. Foster's brows are turned down as he studies some papers in front of him. He glances up at us, and I don't know if he's actually glaring at me or if his forehead is lined because he was just deep in concentration over whatever's in the file he's reviewing.

He grunts, which I think is his way of saying good morning. Sara excuses herself to the restroom, and even though I give her a look that clearly begs her not to leave me alone with the good doctor, she goes anyway.

Traitor.

He takes off his glasses and I watch as he taps the part of the frame that hugs his ear against his tooth. I listen to its soft click, and I can't help as my eyes settle on his mouth. I wonder if his lips are soft and if they firm up when he's using them. I wonder what it's like to kiss him.

"What do you know about Logan Wesley?" he asks.

My brows furrow as I try to regain my focus. Daydreaming about Dr. Foster's lips is dangerous territory.

"His mom brought him for flulike symptoms twice in the past month or so," I say.

"I read that much in the file. What else?"

"His favorite sucker flavor is cherry and he always takes a superhero sticker even though we have Paw Patrol." I lift a shoulder and sit. "That's it. Paul diagnosed his symptoms as a virus both times."

He shakes his head. "I don't think it's a virus. I'm recommending we run some more tests at Children's."

I blow out a breath. "What do you think it is?" I can't finish the thought that forms in my head.

"I don't know," he says quietly. "We'll run the tests. Could be something as simple as a UTI, or maybe it's juvenile rheumatoid arthritis." His tone is hard to read, but I get the sense he isn't sure it's either of those. He's a doctor, though. While a lot of what he does is based on instinct, he won't believe the worst until the test results prove it.

My whole day darkens as his words settle around me. I got into this profession because I love children and I want to do what I can to help them. I get to wear Mickey Mouse scrubs to work, I get to cuddle babies, and I get to help guide parents

when they move into the scary new territory of parenthood when it comes to the healthcare of their kids.

Logan is only six years old. If it's a urinary tract infection, that's an easy fix. It can't be something more serious because I don't know how to make it better, and fatigue and flulike symptoms over the course of the last month or longer could mean something as serious as leukemia. I know the prognosis is good these days, but it doesn't change the fact that Logan and his family's life might be completely flipped upside down when Dr. Foster calls them today.

I can't fix that, either.

And it's not just that. I have a special soft spot for every single six-year-old boy who enters into this office. I can't help but wonder *what if*.

The meeting starts, but I'm still stuck in the conversation that happened before it started. As a general rule, I try to leave my feelings out of my work, but it's impossible right now as worry fills me. We find ourselves connected to our patients, and Logan is a special little kid.

"Taylor, a word with you before you go," Dr. Foster says, calling me by my last name again once he dismisses us from the meeting.

I stay behind, twisting my ring around my finger as the rest of the staff files out of the room.

He blows out a breath when it's just the two of us. He rubs his forehead before he glances up at me. "It's clear our conversation before the meeting started is already affecting your performance. Don't let it."

"I'm sorry?" I say it like a question, like surely I didn't hear him correctly. Of course it's affecting me, but I'm a professional. I can keep my feelings in check.

I do it every Monday and Thursday when I have to deal with this asshole.

"You have a job to do today and kids and parents who are depending on you." He shoots me a small glare.

My brows squeeze together as I try my very hardest not to glare back at him. “I’m well aware of that.”

“Focus ahead. That’s all I’m asking.”

I barely refrain from saluting my drill sergeant as I walk out of the room without a reply. I don’t know what else to say. It’s not my fault Dr. Foster has zero emotions.

Or maybe he does. Maybe he’s upset about Logan, too, and he’s using me to take out the anxiety he feels that we might not have the capacity to cure one of the kids in our care in this office.

Despite the rough start to the morning, I’m a complete professional. I’ve had my share of hard days, but Gabby Westchester in room three with a fever deserves a happy nurse. Aidan Smith in room fourteen deserves a nurse who is ready to provide the answers to the thousands of questions his mom has about how to care for a toddler. Jamie Gregory in room six deserves a nurse who is fully present when I have to administer her Tdap vaccination.

And that’s just the first three kids, never mind the fact that I’m the nurse on triage calls today.

When I return from lunch, there’s a handwritten note on my desk from Dr. Foster. *Come see me before your lunch hour ends.*

That’s never good. It feels an awful lot like getting called into the principal’s office.

I knock on his doorframe, and he glances up from some paperwork. He pulls off his glasses and sets them on the desk in front of him, and then he rubs his eyes as if he’s exhausted. “Close the door.”

I do as I’m told.

“I spoke with Logan Wesley’s mother.” He keeps his eyes down on the papers. “They got him an appointment this evening at Children’s. I don’t have rounds there tonight, but I’d like to stop in and check on him in person. Mrs. Wesley specifically asked for you to be there.”

“She did?”

He nods. “She said you always make Logan feel safe.”

My heart swells and a lump forms in my throat.

“I’m heading over there at five.” He still doesn’t look up at me.

I nod and turn to leave.

“Focus on your patients this afternoon, Taylor,” he says to my back. “You’ve got to toughen up.”

I turn around and face him again. I’m so damn sick of his lack of empathy. “Maybe you need to loosen up a little. It wouldn’t hurt to show some emotion once in a while.”

He lifts to a stand behind his desk, leaning forward in combat mode as he faces off with me. “Don’t you dare talk to me like that.”

I set a hand on my hip. “I will kindly remind you that you aren’t my boss, Dr. Foster. I’m not sure why you treat me differently than every other person who works in this office, but I’m not your subordinate and I would appreciate it if you stopped treating me like I am.”

His brows shoot up as he straightens. “Let’s see...you’re twenty-five, right? A four-year degree and a couple years of experience.” He moves around his desk and leans on it, crossing his arms over his chest. “It took me nine years of school to earn my degree, and I’ve been practicing on my own now for over five years. I’d say that makes you subordinate to me.”

“You’re maybe ten years older than me and because you have higher student loan bills you think that means you’re better than me?” I counter, my voice rising a little.

He moves from his leaning position and drops his arms to his sides as he takes a step toward me. “I don’t *think* that, Nurse Taylor.” He takes another step. “It’s what I *know*.”

My stomach twists as my brain seems to focus on what he’s doing here. It’s the art of seduction...I think. In a twisted way,

anyway. He takes another step toward me, and my breathing labors as heat creeps up my neck.

I want it. I want this. I want *him*, and none of it makes any sense because I freaking hate him.

I think for a second how he probably likes pulling the subordinate card. I can picture him standing over me as I lie naked and trembling beneath him, wanting and needing as he issues his commands and I submit to every last one of them.

The image causes my chest to rise and fall with anticipation, but I won't give into him. I will stand up for myself.

"You don't know me at all, *Mr.* Foster." I emphasize the *mister* since I know he hates it when his official title of *doctor* isn't used.

His eyes darken as he stalks a little closer to me, and I back up until my backside bumps into the door. It very much feels like he's the hunter and I'm the prey as his ice blue eyes pin me to where I stand.

"Are you always this mouthy?" he murmurs.

"I will always stand up for myself when I feel like I'm not being treated fairly." My words come out in a hushed whisper as all these feelings pulse through me—need, want, desire—things I've rarely felt at all in the last few years, things every woman my age deserves to feel. Lust takes hold in my chest.

He's a whisper away now, and it's like the heat in this room has turned up about ten thousand degrees.

"There's something insanely hot about that." He's so close that I can feel his breath against my lips, smell his spicy scent, feel his heat.

My brain seems to malfunction at his proximity and his words. A deep ache pulses low in my belly as the anger between us seems to transition into something new, something dark and sexy and intimate.

I get the sense my hunch was right and the reason he's been such a dick *to* me is because, well, he wants to stick his dick *in*

me.

His fingertips move to my jaw, and I close my eyes as I lean into his touch. Nerves zip up and down my spine. He's really going to kiss me. I tip my chin up as I wait for those plushy pillows to land on mine.

“Oh sweet little nurse,” he whispers. He angles his head so his lips are a mere whisper away, and he presses the front of his body to the front of mine. This feels so good—so intimate. So hot. It's been months since I've been with a man, and I need this. I need to feel wanted again.

He's hard against me. He wants this, too.

Just when I think he's about to kiss me, he murmurs, “This can't happen. It will *never* happen. You are too many years younger than me, you are a nurse, and you need to step into line and get your feelings under control. *That* is the difference between a twenty-five-year-old nurse and a thirty-six-year-old doctor.”

With those words, he reaches around me, pressing his body further against mine, and then he turns the doorknob. I have to push him to get out of the way as he opens it.

“I'll see you at the hospital at five,” he says, and he walks through the door, leaving me a panting, wanting mess who hates him a little more after that exchange.

CHAPTER 5: TESSA

I held Logan's hand while they drew blood. I gave him that cherry sucker and brought him three superhero stickers. And now, I'm sitting at the bar closest to the hospital drinking a glass of rosé much faster than I should.

I love this job, but it can be *hard*.

I guess I just need a little something after the day I've had. First was Cam coming onto me before he made me feel like a total idiot and then I had to watch little Logan as his brave façade slipped into tears. My own eyes fill as I think back to how scared he was. How scared his *mother* was.

It takes me back to my senior year of high school.

I take another sip of my wine and I try to forget, but I can't. I've never been able to just forget.

I'm still so angry. I'm still so hurt. I'm still so sad.

I was seventeen, and now every little boy who walks into Lakeshore Pediatrics takes me back in time.

I had already been accepted to University of Illinois at Chicago, less than three hours from home and not too far from my aunt's house. I'd chosen it because of its proximity to Fallon Ridge. I wanted to pave my way to my own future, and with Tristan signing on to attend college at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, we'd only be a little over two hours apart.

But none of it mattered after I was plucked from everything I knew...after I was forced to leave.

After I graduated college, I still stayed away from the small town where I grew up. If my parents wanted to keep my little secret, well, I guess I made it easier for them.

I'm so lost in thought of the past that I don't even pay any attention when the stool beside mine scrapes against the floor and someone slides into it. And maybe that's why I gasp when I hear my name.

"Taylor," the voice says, deep and rich and dark. "Making quick work of that rosé." The bartender glances at Cam, who orders a glass of whiskey neat.

Neat.

Like he's some eighty-year-old man instead of the thirty-six-year-old he is.

I roll my eyes as I glance over at him. "It's outside office hours, Dr. Foster."

"I realize that, *nurse*, but rosé? Really?"

"Rosé all day, sir." I inject as much sarcasm into my cliché as I possibly can.

He chuckles. "I prefer whiskey."

"Less risky?" I ask as I try to make a rhyme like I did with my drink of choice.

He shakes his head, and he turns toward me. When his eyes meet mine, they positively burn, branding me to the spot where I sit. "Makes me frisky."

Oh.

Well then.

The bartender drops off his whiskey. Neat.

I draw in a deep breath. "But a twenty-five-year-old nurse has no shot with a *much* older, much wiser doctor, right?"

He lifts a shoulder as one side of his mouth lifts in a smile. "Maybe I jumped the gun with what I said earlier." He lowers his voice and leans in toward me, and when his voice purrs hot against my ear, I nearly have a little orgasm right where I'm sitting. Does he know what he's doing to me? Of course he does. He must. "I can't pretend like I wasn't hard as fuck watching you go above and beyond today, Taylor."

“My name is Tessa,” I manage to retort.

He laughs, but it fades quickly as he tilts his head and studies me for a beat. “It’s been a long time since a woman could make me laugh. I like that about you.”

“That’s nice. I’m not so sure I like you.”

He drops the whiskey down his throat in one long gulp. My eyes move to his throat as I watch him swallow, and I don’t know that I’ve ever found a throat attractive before, but Cam’s is pretty freaking hot.

He slams his glass on the counter. “Then I’ve got you right where I want you.”

With those words, he stands, pulls out his wallet, drops a hundred dollar bill beside me, nods toward my glass to indicate that he’s covering it along with his drink and presumably whatever else I want, and then he saunters out of the bar without another word.

I wanted to talk to him about Logan, to ask what he thinks the real issue is, to get some reassurance...and instead, he left me with more questions. What the hell was his last line supposed to mean?

And why do I already know I’m going to lose sleep over it?

When I get home with the food I ordered to go, Sara is sitting solo at the table eating a sandwich.

“Where’s Shane?” I ask.

“Working late.” She rolls her eyes. “It seems like he’s *always* working late.”

“Maybe he’s saving up for a ring,” I counter as I slide across the table from her.

She laughs. “One can dream. What did you bring home?” She nods toward my bag of food.

“Quesadillas courtesy of Dr. Cameron Foster.”

“He treated you to dinner?” she asks.

I shake my head. “I ran into him at the bar where I had a quick glass of wine after the hospital visit, and he left a hundred dollar bill next to me, so I used it to pay for our drinks and my dinner plus a fat tip for the bartender.”

“*Our* drinks? You were out drinking with Dr. Cameron Foster?” she practically shrieks.

I laugh. “It wasn’t like that. We didn’t go together. He showed up, said some things, and left.”

“Said some things?” she asks, and before I can respond, she adds, “How’d it go with Logan?”

“He was scared, but more of the needles than of the why.” I shrug. “We’ll know more soon.”

“I’ll send up a prayer that it’s an easy fix,” she says.

I press my lips together. “You and me both.”

“Now back to this *said some things* business.” She takes a bite of her sandwich. “What, exactly, did he say?”

“Nothing important. He teased me about drinking rosé and I told him I wasn’t sure I liked him.” I don’t know why, but I leave out the part about making him hard and how he said he’s got me where he wants me. Flirting with a colleague makes muddy waters, I guess, and since Sara is a colleague, too, it’s probably better to keep it to myself. If it turns into something, of course I’ll spill it to my bestie. But if it’s nothing, a little harmless flirting here and there, then I’ll just be embarrassed that I said anything at all.

“Do you?” she asks.

I shake my head as I pick up a triangle of my quesadilla. “Nope.”

She giggles and takes another bite of her sandwich.

I don’t like him. That’s true. But I also don’t hate him. He’s intriguing, and he’s a little mysterious, and he makes my pulse race in a way that nobody has in a long, long time.

So maybe I don’t like him, but maybe I don’t have to.

I'm starting to think maybe we can just have a little fun together. If it leads somewhere beyond that...well, then maybe I'll start to like him.

CHAPTER 6: TRISTAN

I sit on the windowsill and stare across the small space separating my window from hers. Our houses are the same single-story model by the same builder, just flipped—so her bedroom mirrors mine, and this is where we meet every single night at nine fifty-seven. Sometimes it's just to talk, while other times I jump out my window and enter through hers. Rain beats against my window, and a bolt of lightning illuminates the night sky as a loud crack of thunder follows.

I can relate.

The storm is violent and aggressive, a match to the feelings raging inside me.

I glance at the clock.

Nine fifty-eight.

She's not there.

Nine fifty-nine.

Still not there.

Ten fifteen.

Nothing.

My heart cracks to the sound of another clap of thunder.

I wake with a jolt, sweat pouring off me and my heart racing as I sit up with a gasp.

It was as real in that dream as the day it happened, and I can't believe it was nearly seven years ago. Time has flown at the same time it has crawled.

I left for college two months later, and I never heard from her again. I poured every ounce of my energy into working out and becoming the best physical version of myself I could

possibly be as I tried as hard as I could to keep the man inside from escaping.

He's still in there...but he's different.

He's indifferent where he should care. He's quiet when he should use his voice. He lost too much. She took too much.

She took so much more than just a piece of me with her, and the only time I feel like I have it back is when I dream of the time we shared.

Except when I dream of the end of that time.

Then the crack in my chest seems to stretch wider even all these years later.

I glance at the clock. It's four fifty-two. Too early to get up, but trying to go back to sleep after that dream is useless. I head across the hall to the home gym I've created for myself here, tie my shoes, and hop onto the treadmill. The real bonus is that my workout room is directly next to the guest bedroom my *wife* is currently sleeping in, and as I fire up the machine, I run as fast as I can—not to purposely try to wake her; if I wanted to do that, I'd simply blare the music on the sound system in here rather than through my AirPods, but to try to put some distance from myself and that dream.

In a way, it feels like I'm running away from it as my shoes slap against the belt with every step I take.

It feels like I'm always running. It used to be that I was running from Fallon Ridge. Now I'm running from Savannah. I long for the time in my life when I just feel...still.

I see the older guys on my team settling down, having kids, getting engaged or married...and I find that I want those things. Maybe that was part of my motivation in marrying Savannah. I always imagined I'd be a young husband and father. I guess that's the kind of dream you have when you meet your other half when you're a teenager. You dream together about the future. You imagine you'll stay together forever.

It just didn't exactly pan out that way.

Instead, I still have unanswered questions and I'm still broken over the mysteries of my past.

I keep thinking if I could just legally distance myself from Savannah, that'll be the key. But I thought marrying her would be the key to something else. Look how great that worked out.

My gut instincts when it comes to my love life seem to be wrong pretty much always. At least I still trust myself on the field. At least I still have football.

It has saved me more times than I can count.

The physical exercise is the one thing that has allowed me not to fall into a deep, dark place. Having that bond with teammates—even when I don't speak a word about my past—gives me the sense of family I crave even if it isn't exactly the type of family I crave. They're the brothers I always wanted but never had.

We can only play the hand we're dealt, right?

That's the thought lingering in my mind when Savannah appears as if from out of nowhere. She has a sour look on her face, sort of like she just sucked on a lemon—but she sort of always has that sour look. I asked her once if she made that face because she thinks it makes her look younger.

She didn't appreciate that particular comment.

Oops.

So maybe I play on the fact that she's a decade older than me. Maybe I rub that nugget in when I think it'll hurt the most. Lord knows she's done enough to hurt me in the last two years since we met.

I pull one of my AirPods out and raise my brows as I continue running, my shoes still smacking loudly against the treadmill. "What?"

"Do you have to run this early?" she whines.

"Yeah," I grunt, and I stick my AirPod back in. Her mouth moves, and I pull it out again. "Huh?"

"Move your treadmill to a different room," she demands.

“Move your ass to a different house,” I counter.

Here’s the thing. In the beginning, an argument like this with her would have ended with her spread out naked on the treadmill while I pounded into her. Now, it only serves as ammunition to speed along the divorce proceedings. It started out fiery, and then it went down in flames.

Live and learn. Fix your mistakes. The mantras that I’ve repeated over and over to myself.

How do you get out of a marriage when the other person won’t let you out? Common sense says the court won’t make me stay married to her forever. And yet...somehow this has gone on far longer than it should have.

She folds her arms over her chest. “Oh, my darling husband, what message would that send to the entire world if I moved out?”

“It would say this marriage is over,” I say pointedly.

“Right. But it isn’t.” Her lips curl up in a wicked smile.

“Yet.”

She laughs, and it’s maniacal and, to be perfectly honest, it’s a little terrifying. She knows things. She’s *done* things, things I can’t prove but things that make *me* look like the guilty party.

Things I have to hide.

Things that keep me married to her when I’m just trying to find a way out.

When I first met her, I thought she was gorgeous. But now that I know her, all I can see is the ugliness that resides within. She chose me because I was young and vulnerable and dumb. She said all the right things. She made promises how she could do things for me that nobody else could do at a time in my life when everybody was taking things from me. They wanted my money or my fame or my access, and she just seemed to want *me*. She wanted what was best for me.

I’ll make you a household name.

I saw your college tape and you've got real talent. I know people and I can make you a star.

Let me feature you in a column. Let me grow your social media. Let me suck your dick.

My vulnerability and my youth allowed me to fall for all of it when she was just another person trying to take something from me, and now I'm a slightly older man with a high wall I wear as armor and a wife I can't seem to make go away.

"That's cute, Tristan. But just know this reporter is always digging. You may reconsider your attitude." She smirks as she turns to walk away, but I can't let her go without one final retort.

"Reporter?" I snort. "Didn't they fire your ass for your involvement in criminal activity?"

She glares at me before she slams the door behind her.

I have to find a way out of this marriage... I just don't know how.

CHAPTER 7: TESSA

It's raining when I wake on Tuesday morning, and the weather takes me back to the first time Tristan kissed me just like storms always seem to do.

We moved to town when my dad was appointed as pastor of the United Methodist Church in Fallon Ridge the summer before I started seventh grade. I was anxious about moving to a town like Fallon Ridge. We were coming from a bigger town located in the Chicago suburbs, and to move to a town that didn't even have a stoplight was quite the change for me.

And worse, I knew what happened in small towns. The kids at the middle school had all known each other since they were in kindergarten. I would immediately be labeled *the new girl*, and I was also a pastor's daughter. That came with its own set of stereotypes that I'd worked hard to prove weren't true back in Maple Park, and now I'd be starting from scratch.

And nothing proved stereotypes false about being the sweet and innocent preacher's daughter more than befriending the cute boy next door.

He was playing basketball in his driveway when we pulled into our new driveway, and I still remember the first time I saw him.

He wore black shorts and a Fallon Ridge Middle School t-shirt with a baseball cap on his head...turned *backward*.

The boys in Maple Park didn't wear their hats backwards.

It was different and *hot*. Butterflies didn't just flap around my belly—no, they flapped a little lower. He was the first boy who did that to me, who made my body respond in a new and different way, and it made me feel at twelve like I was growing up.

He stopped shooting the ball when we got out of our cars, and he walked right up to my dad with the ball tucked between his left arm and his torso.

“Hi, I’m Tristan. Are you moving in here?”

My dad nodded as he eyed the boy. “We’re the Taylors.” He nodded toward the house next door. “You live here?”

Tristan nodded.

“How old are you?” my dad asked.

“Twelve,” he told my dad.

My dad nodded. “Thought you were about the same age as my little girl. Tessa?” he called, and I hopped out of the car and over to his side. “This boy is our neighbor, Tristan. He’s your age.”

Tristan’s eyes held mine for a beat, and it felt like heat was surging between us. It had to just be my nerves about starting a new school and meeting my first potential friend.

“Nice to meet you, Tessa. I’ll show you around and introduce you to everybody,” he promised.

And he did.

He introduced me to every friend who came over to his house during the summer. He invited me to come along with him to the park, or to walk downtown, or to go on a bike ride. He showed me around town and took me everywhere he went. We walked into the market together. We rode swings at the park together. We walked past the scenic overlook together. We walked past all the little shops downtown—the ones our parents liked to shop in but us preteens wouldn’t be caught dead in. We rode bikes from one end of town to the other.

It was magic. Pure and simple.

He didn’t leave my side on the first day of school even though it felt like I already knew everybody since I’d spent all summer with them. He made sure I felt comfortable. He was popular, and instead of walking in as the weird new girl, I was walking in as a popular boy’s best friend.

It made a world of difference, and from the moment we met, well, we became inseparable.

After we made our way into our new house and my mom showed me to what would be my new bedroom, I glanced out the window once I was alone. He was standing there in his window, and our eyes connected across the space for the very first time. I waved, and he waved back with his lopsided smile—a smile he grew into, eventually, and that straightened with a couple years of braces.

His mom invited us to dinner the night we moved in. Our moms hit it off right away.

A few nights later, I walked over to close my blinds before I went to bed, and I saw Tristan motioning for me to open my window.

I glanced at the clock. It was nine fifty-seven.

I knew I needed to get some rest, but I ignored that little thought as a thrill of excitement pulsed up my spine. He was sitting on his windowsill, leaning on the wall and stretching his legs out in front of him. I opened my window and mirrored his position on my own windowsill, but I sat in the opposite direction so we could look at each other while we talked.

“What’s it like moving to a new town?” he asked me, and that was the start of our nightly meetings before bed.

Our first kiss wasn’t that summer. It wasn’t the next summer, either.

It wasn’t until our sophomore year of high school. We weren’t officially a couple until he asked me to the homecoming dance our sophomore year as we sat on a bench at the scenic overlook on the east side of town. The Mississippi River flowed gently along as his voice trembled when he asked.

He tried asking me my freshman year, but my dad said I was too young to go despite my respectful yet rage-fueled tears. I was terrified Tristan was going to find someone else and ditch me. It was the worst case of FOMO I’ve ever

experienced, but I should have known he wouldn't just ditch me. We were too close for that.

My mom must've talked my dad into letting me go sophomore year because, well, I went.

The dance was underwhelming as those types of high school events tend to be. It was midway through the dance when Tristan took my hand and pulled me out a side door when the chaperones weren't watching. It was raining outside, and he took me down to the football field—the place where he felt most at home.

He had taken me there before, and we'd even held hands... but it was never anything more than that. The night of our sophomore year homecoming, something changed. Something felt different, and I knew going forward our relationship wasn't going to be the same anymore.

I was right.

That was the night when friendship transcended everything we thought we built over the prior few years. It was the first time I felt like this was the boy I was going to marry.

You hear it all the time in these small towns, right? Boy meets girl. Boy and girl fall for each other at a young age. Boy and girl end up together forever.

It's a dream or, in my case, a fantasy—but it was a fantasy I felt with every fiber of my being. I was sure it was going to become our reality.

He walked me to the middle of the field, and we stood over the Fallon Falcons logo. Neither of us cared that it was raining. For some reason that only intensified the romance of it. Even at fifteen, I knew that there was something inherently magical about kissing in the rain.

He stared into my eyes for a beat and then his palm came up to cup my cheek.

"I think I fell in love with you the moment you moved in next door to me," he whispered.

The tears that fell from my eyes at his words mingled with the rain. I didn't know where my tears ended and the rain began.

His lips dropped down to mine, and it was so tender and sweet that my first kiss with a boy was also my first kiss with Tristan. The butterflies that always seem to flap around in my stomach around him seemed to be flying everywhere in that moment. Buzzing around my chest. Down between my legs. Even my knees were shaky.

I pulled my lips from his only to say, "I love you, too," and then my mouth collided with his again.

I felt his tongue at the seam of my lips. At first it tickled and felt a little funny that he was using his tongue to kiss me, but because I had seen it in movies or at Jennifer Blakely's house when Jen and Chris made out, I knew this was how it was done. I'd just never experienced it for myself until that moment.

I always thought it would be kind of weird or gross, but it was none of those things. It was sweet and it was romantic and it was intimate and it was sexy and it was the first of countless times we would do this.

We did it so many times, in fact, that I never thought there would be an end to the number of kisses we shared.

And then, one day...there was.

I blow out a breath as I walk into Lakeshore Pediatrics, glad it's Tuesday as the rain mingles with the lone tear that escaped my lid.

I'm glad Dr. Foster is not in today. The last thing I want today is his strange flirtations that only confuse me when I am feeling a little down and nostalgic because it's raining today.

I play off the tear like it's the rainwater, deep down knowing the truth that it's that memory of his lips on mine. I need to remember that it's just a part of my past—a part I'll never get back.

Imagine my surprise when I walk past Dr. Foster's office and find the door open and the light on. He sits behind the

desk studying some papers as he sees me walk by.

“A little late this morning,” he comments.

I blow out a breath and don't respond. Chicago traffic without rain is a beast, but with rain it's unbearable.

I left in plenty of time so I won't be late for my patients, though I am a little late for grabbing a cup of coffee for myself from the break room. That feels extra unfortunate since for some reason Cam is in today.

I see my first two patients of the day before I run into him again.

“Do you have a minute?” he asks, surprising me as I'm filling out some charts.

I glance up at him, and I'm about to reply with something snarky when I stop myself. Maybe this is about Logan.

I follow him into his office. “Aren't you supposed to be at the hospital today?” I ask.

“My first appointment is at nine-thirty, so I decided to stop by here first and review Logan's test results.”

“And?” I ask, my heart leaping up into my throat as I await the answer.

He closes the door behind me and draws in a deep breath. “It's not leukemia. I need more results, but my gut says it's anemia,” he says, and relief courses through me.

“Oh thank God,” I breathe, and without even thinking about it, I toss my arms around Dr. Foster's neck.

I realize what I'm doing a moment too late, but as I move to pull back, he shocks me by slipping an arm around my waist and drawing me in a little closer. It's almost as if he needs the hug, too, after the fear that it was going to be something much worse for our sweet little patient.

More tears slip down my cheeks, and he pulls back to look me in the eyes.

“Are you okay?” he asks softly. He runs a knuckle along my jawline as he looks at me with something akin to

tenderness.

I nod. I'm about to whisper, "Yeah, I'm fine," or something along those lines when his lips drop down to mine.

I stand rooted to the spot, unable to move as his lips press to mine. He smells of the spicy cologne he uses, and it's strong and deep and really, really sexy at this proximity. It's soft and tender and wrong.

So, so wrong even though it feels right. I tighten my arms around his neck, and his arm tightens around my waist at the same time.

It's when I feel his lips parting that I realize we shouldn't be doing this right now. I have patients waiting, and intensifying this kiss right here, right now...it's just wrong.

I force myself away first even though it's the last thing I want to do in this moment. "I...I..." I stammer as I try to come up with some words—any words—in this alternate reality. "I thought you hated me."

"Oh, sweet, sweet nurse," he says, his voice low and sexy. "I never hated you."

"Then why are you always so mean to me?"

He chuckles. "The attraction between us is strong, Tessa," he murmurs, marking the first time he's ever used my first name in a conversation. The way he says it in that deep, sultry tone causes an ache to pulse between my legs. "I knew it would be wrong to make a move, so I was trying to keep my distance. But I just don't think I can do that anymore."

I open my mouth to reply when a knock sounds at the door beside us.

My eyes widen as I feel like we're caught. He chuckles and lets me go, nodding toward the chairs by his desk as if to tell me to sit in one of them so we don't look guilty. I practically run around him to get to one and slide into the chair, and he opens the door.

"Paul, what can I do for you?" he says, and my face burns as my *boss* stands there, nearly having caught me kissing Dr.

Foster during work hours.

Oh my God.

I just kissed Dr. Foster.

And I want to do it again.

CHAPTER 8: TESSA

Dr. Foster leaves without saying goodbye.

It shouldn't affect me. He's never once sought me out for a goodbye.

But something changed in there today, and it feels a little like it's okay to expect a goodbye. He kissed me and now I won't see him until Thursday, so I get to live with the confusion and muddled feelings until then.

I make it through my day, but I can't stop thinking about his lips on mine. For the first time since I was twelve, my thoughts are consumed throughout the day by a man who isn't Tristan Higgins.

And it feels good. It feels nice. It feels like after all this time...maybe I can find it in me to move forward.

I've held myself back a long time as I clung to hope that we'd somehow find our way back to one another, but he's married. He *has* been married for two whole years, and even though I want to believe the tabloids when I see reports that his marriage is in trouble, I think we all have a pretty good understanding that celebrity marriages are *always* under the microscope and tabloids tend to exaggerate.

I push Tristan out of my mind, and I allow Cam's tender, firm lips to wander around in his absence.

It's nice to be thinking about somebody else for a change... even though he didn't bother with that goodbye.

I'm finishing up some notes from my afternoon appointments as Sara bids me goodbye.

"Shane and I are going out with some people he works with for dinner, so don't wait up," she says with a grin.

I laugh. "Remember to keep safety in mind!"

“It’ll save my behind!” she finishes, laughing along with me at our safe sex slogan on her way out.

I’m still typing a little later when I hear Paul’s voice behind me. “You’re still here?” he asks. I glance around and realize everyone is gone for the day except the two bosses.

I shrug. “Sara and Shane are going out to dinner, so I figured I’d catch up on today’s charts and get a head start on tomorrow.”

“Marsha and I are heading out to a charity dinner in a bit. Care to lock up?” he asks. I nod, and he tosses me a key. “Thanks, Tessa.”

I shoot him a smile as I catch it and hold it up. “No problem, boss.”

“Don’t stay too late,” Marsha says, sauntering up behind Paul. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

The office is quiet once they’re gone, and I finish up what I’m working on. Like most jobs, it always feels like there’s more I can do, but as I stretch my arms over my head, that feels like it’s good for today.

I stand to leave, and when I turn toward the door, Cam Foster is standing there.

I jump, my hand flying to my chest as I gasp. “Oh my God, you scared me,” I say.

He tilts his head and lowers his brows. “Why are you still here?”

I shrug. “Just getting caught up on things. What are you doing here?”

His eyes dart to the security camera just to the left above my head. “I saw your car in the otherwise empty lot when I was leaving the hospital.” His voice is low.

I didn’t even know he paid attention to such a minute detail as what car I drive. “Oh. You came to see me?” Surprise doesn’t quite cover it, though maybe I can get that goodbye I was missing earlier.

He motions with his head for me to follow him as he starts walking down the hallway toward his office. I follow him in, and he shuts the door behind me. I'm about to move toward the chair so we can talk, but in a half a second he has me pinned between his body and the door. The powerful surgeon hides a hard body beneath the suits he wears to the office—and not just a hard *body*, but other hard things as evidenced by the way he thrusts his hips toward mine.

For some reason my mind pictures him in scrubs, his hands in the air and sterilized just before he heads in to save some child's life, and this fantasy of him as a powerful man who saves lives just seems to do it for me. I moan as his lips drop to my neck.

"I came to finish what I started earlier," he says against my skin, the heat of his breath sending pulses of need through my core.

I'm all in.

His lips trail from my neck down to my cleavage—of which there isn't much today in my Spongebob scrubs—and then his mouth lands on mine. I cling onto him with one arm around his bicep, and I allow my other hand to wander to his thick, dark locks. It's soft to the touch as I twist my fingers through the short strands, and when he moves to deepen our kiss this time, I don't step away as I did earlier.

There aren't any patients waiting for me.

In fact, the office is empty but for the two of us.

There's no reason to stop this freight train now.

I give in as he opens his mouth, his tongue sweet as it brushes mine. I moan into him, and he pushes his hips toward me again. He wants to take this to the next level, and he proves it as he trails his fingertips along my thigh, toward my torso, and up to my breast before moving back down in an agonizingly slow path.

And then suddenly it's not slow as he reaches down the front of my pants and shoves his hand right into my panties. He uses one of those long, skilled fingers to brush through my

center before he drives one finger in. “Mm,” he moans as he feels how wet he’s making me.

Something about hating him this morning and wanting this now is making me hot and needy. I cling onto both his arms as I widen my stance for him, our mouths still joined as he moves his finger in and out of me. He pulls it all the way out to brush against my clit, and my knees practically knock together at the neediness I feel as he pulls his hands out of my pants. He breaks off the kiss, too, and a miserable ache pulses between my legs.

“You want it, don’t you, dirty nurse?” he demands quietly.

“Mm yes,” I moan, trying—but failing—not to sound too needy.

“Take your pants off and bend over my desk,” he commands, and something about how he just takes charge over me is hot. I find I like being told what to do by him. I have the sudden urge to please him, to surrender to his every request.

I’ve never been with an older man.

I’ve sampled mostly boys my age. First Tristan, then a couple boyfriends in college and a couple more after college... but never a *man* like Cam Foster.

I scramble from my spot against the door and kick off my shoes. I drop my pants and panties along with them, and I bend down over his desk, sticking my ass up in the air as I fold my arms on his desk and rest my head in their cradle.

I should feel vulnerable, maybe. I’m opening myself up to him—literally, for now, but maybe figuratively, too—and he can do what he wants with me. But I can’t feel anything in this moment except pure, unadulterated *lust*.

He moves in behind me, and I hear the zip of his pants, the only sound in the room before the soft rub of skin against skin hits my ears. I picture him stroking himself before he aligns himself with my body, and I want to turn around, to take a peek, but I dare not move from where I stand. His heat moves

in behind me, and I wish I was facing him, that I could look into his eyes as he slides into me.

Instead, I close my eyes and let out a long, low groan as he thrusts in. He's big, stretching me in a way that hurts so good.

"Oh fuck, that's tight," he mutters.

He moves slowly at first, seating himself as deeply as he can go, and he pauses there a beat. My body throbs around his thick cock, and we both moan at the pleasure we're taking from the other.

He pulls back before he thrusts in again, and then he picks up speed. He moves in and out over and over and over, the only sounds in his office the slap of skin on skin to the symphony of our grunts and groans and his muttered curses. "Fuck, little nurse, you're so wet and tight for me."

I can't think coherently enough to form words of reply, so I simply offer another moan.

"Jesus, Tessa," he groans, and I know the sentiment.

Good God, does this feel good.

It feels...right.

Like I need to do this again and again and again.

He leans forward over me and reaches around to brush my clit as he pumps into me.

I feel myself falling apart as he pushes all the *right* buttons for a change, and he must feel my body tightening over him because both his moans and his pace increase. He slams into me just as I hit my peak, my body contracting with bliss over and over in my first orgasm with a man in far too long.

Just as I start to come down from my high, he hits his climax. He hammers into me through the wave of pleasure, and he pulls slowly out when he's done.

My eyes widen with a bit of horror as I feel something start to drip down there.

I was wet, sure...but not *that* wet.

He kisses my back as he leans over me again, reaching down to my pussy with his fingers. He spreads the moisture around, stroking my clit, and it's all too much. There's something forbidden and hot and intimate all at the same time about him spreading what just came out of his body all over me, like he's marking his territory in the sexiest way he can.

I fall apart under his touch again, my body betraying me because I don't want to let this man that I hated until this morning control me like this but I can't help it.

Still, as I come down from the wild pulses racking my body, I can't help but worry. Maybe he's had a vasectomy and we have nothing to worry about.

He backs up and presumably tucks himself back into his pants while I straighten and search for mine. I start with my panties and pull them back on.

I glance over at him as I dress. "Can I ask you a question?"

I feel awkward as I ask even that, let alone what I really want to ask.

He nods as he straightens his shirt.

"Are you, uh...have you had a vasectomy?"

His brows dip. "No." And then his eyes widen.

Shit.

"Wait. You're not on anything?" he asks.

I shake my head. "Why would you assume I am?"

"Because you're young and gorgeous. You're not having regular sex?"

My cheeks warm. "Not that it's any of your business, but I guess I'm going through what you could call a dry spell."

His eyes harden a little as they flick away from mine. "Okay. I suppose we just..." He trails off, and it's not like this very confident man to be at a loss for words.

"Wait and pray?" I suggest.

His eyes edge back to mine. "There are other options."

My brows crinkle. “What are you suggesting?”

“Plan B.”

I don’t reply to that, and it’s not just because of my strict religious upbringing. I guess I just don’t know what to say. He’s a pediatrician. Surely he knows what other options are available.

“And we use protection next time, obviously.” I say it lightly, but when I look at him, I see that old familiar mask firmly back in place. He let it slip for a few rough and hot minutes just now, but it’s back.

“Next time?” he repeats, disbelief evident in his tone that I’d even suggest such a thing. “There won’t be a next time, nurse.” He turns to walk out of his office, and before he exits, he tosses some final words over his shoulder. “And nobody will ever find out about this.”

I stand there staring after him long after he’s gone as the overwhelming feeling of being used washes over me.

I fight the heat behind my eyes as I lock up the office—mostly because if he happens to be in the parking lot still, I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of my tears.

I slip into my car and start the quick drive home, and once I see that Sara isn’t home, I finally give in.

I don’t allow it to go on very long, though. Instead, I draw in a shaky breath. This is more about my embarrassment than actually being sad about the fact that there isn’t a future for Cam and me. I’ll get over it. I’ll move on.

In fact, I already have. He’s always been a jerk, and now I know he’s just a jerk who’s good at sex.

Except the last time I had sex without a condom...well, my entire world blew up.

As I said to Cam earlier, now we just wait and pray.

And I’m going to have to face him the day after tomorrow.

Tomorrow will be okay. I can do this. I can go to the office knowing I won’t have to see him.

But Thursday...I'm not sure how I'll handle facing him. Especially considering how much I love Paul and Marsha and how I disrespected them by having sex with a doctor in the office.

I feel disgusted as my stomach rolls, and I can't keep my lunch down. I run to the bathroom and throw up, and then I sink down to the floor as I start to cry again.

I stare at the ring on the third finger of my right hand. Life was so much easier when Tristan gave me that ring, and sometimes I wish I was still sixteen and we were in love and the complications didn't push us so far apart that *years* have passed and we haven't spoken.

You know when you feel like you've hit rock bottom and it feels like there's nowhere left to fall...but somehow there *is* still some room left and out of the blue you can sort of feel it coming?

My phone starts to ring where I left it in the family room.

I run across the apartment and just miss the call, but I see who it was just before it stops ringing.

It's my mother, and I get the immediate feeling that something is wrong.

I dial her right back as I draw in a shaky breath, tears still freefalling down my cheeks at the situation I find myself in.

"Mama?" I answer, my voice small.

"Hi, honey." She sounds like she's crying, too, and my chest races.

It's my dad. I know before she even says a single word.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, my voice sounding faraway even to my own ears.

"No, sweetie," she says. "It's your dad. He's, um...he had a heart attack this afternoon and he's...he's..." she trails off. "He didn't survive it," she whispers.

I let out a choked sob. "He...he didn't?" I ask. A slideshow of memories crashes into my brain, and it feels like all the

happy times are represented. Vacations and when we moved to Fallon Ridge and Uno tournaments at the kitchen table.

Not the hard times. Not the times I've dwelled on over the last seven years.

"No," she whispers.

The dark times are always there, sliding in and out of my thoughts, but it seems like I mostly wrote off the happy times. I held onto the anger for too long, and now it's too late.

Too late.

It feels an awful lot like that's the theme of my life.

CHAPTER 9: TRISTAN

I dreamed of her again last night.

It's been happening more and more. Maybe because the end of my marriage is in sight—another ending that doesn't seem to make its way into my dreams the way the end with Tessa does.

I didn't think there was much more of me to break, but Savannah is trying her hardest.

When my phone notifies me that my mother is calling early Wednesday morning before I even leave for practice, I have a feeling it's bad news.

“Good morning, Mother,” I answer sleepily, and she chuckles at my tone.

“Hey baby boy. You doing okay?” she asks.

“Yeah, I'm doing okay. You?”

“Dad and I are fine here. But listen, I have some bad news. Mr. Taylor had a fatal heart attack yesterday. The funeral is Tuesday. I just wanted to let you know.” She clears her throat and adds one more thing as an afterthought. “Janet said Tessa will be coming in.”

My chest tightens at the mention of her name.

I haven't seen her since the day she left.

It's been a long time. Last I heard, she had moved on with her life, too.

She was dating some guy and was a nurse practicing in Chicago—things my mother told me that were part of what pushed me into marrying my horrible wife.

I wonder if she's still seeing the same guy.

I wonder if she and her dad were close or not when he passed. Whether she'll need a shoulder to lean on or if she'll have that guy with her, holding her hand and comforting her when it should be me. It always should have been me, but then she disappeared and I moved in the only direction I knew how.

"Oh," I say quietly.

"Isn't Tuesday your day off?"

"Yeah," I admit. I could fly in for the funeral and fly right back. I don't even need to stay the whole day—just a few hours on a plane to O'Hare, two and a half hours in the car, an hour or two visiting, and then reverse it all back to Vegas. It'll be a lot and could affect my performance Sunday, or maybe it won't and going home is exactly what I need. I could spend the entire time reviewing film and nobody will even know I left town...except I'm sure I'll tell Coach. Surely he'd understand the need to attend the funeral of a close family friend.

My mom and Tessa's mom are close. Our dads were close, too. I think about how tough this will be on him. Bill Taylor was his golfing buddy. I want to be there for my dad. If I had time, I'd even hit the greens with him...but I won't have time until the season is over. Maybe a good reason to head home for the off season, I guess.

And if I'm being perfectly honest, I want to be there for *her*, too. I want to see her. I want to give her a hug and let her know I'm thinking about her. Still. All these years later.

That she still holds my heart.

Although her father's funeral hardly seems like the right time to make that particular confession.

Still, I should be there, even if it's just a few hours. Bill was practically like a second father to me back in the day, and even though I haven't seen him since I left Fallon Ridge, he deserves my final respects.

"I'll talk to Coach, but I'll do what I can to be there," I say.

"Thanks, kiddo. I can't wait to see you."

I'd considered heading home for the off-season, but that's still five months away. There weren't any guarantees I'd see her, anyway. But this time...it's likely I will.

And I'm not exactly sure how to feel about that. We won't have time, and it won't be the right setting...but there's always the possibility. Doors that were closed too many years ago might open again, and right now that feels like quite a comfort.

Still, as I hang up the call with my mom, a conversation I had with Bill Taylor flashes through my mind.

To this day, something feels off about the whole thing. Hindsight tells me I should have dug deeper. I should have gotten to the truth. So much time has passed now, surely I deserve to know what really happened.

I wonder if I'll finally get some answers—maybe not this weekend, but if we can exchange numbers and find time to have a conversation...

Because the story they told me just doesn't hold up. I was too young, too dumb, too scared to ask more questions when I was eighteen. I was heading to college where my life would become the game. I didn't have many options spread out in front of me.

It's not like I have options now, either, but at least I'm not as young. I'm not as dumb. And I'm certainly not scared anymore. What's there to be scared of when I've already lost everything?

Her parents had surprised her with a trip to visit her aunt over spring break.

She didn't return when the week was over.

"It's over, Tristan. She loves you, but we found a great high school that introduces the nursing program she'll be attending near her aunt in Chicago and she decided to finish her high school credits there," Bill said.

"But she didn't say goodbye," I protested. I knew her better than anybody else. We'd pledged our love to one another. She wore a promise ring that said we were committed to each other and someday in the future, we'd vow forever to only each

other. They weren't empty promises. Not to me. "There's no way she would have left without saying goodbye." Tears spilled down my cheeks as I showed my age. Did I blow it? Did I say something or do something that pushed her away? I needed answers, but I had no one to ask those questions to.

"I'm sorry, son, but she did." His eyes were hard, and he had this intimidating presence about him that told me it wasn't okay to ask questions.

And so I didn't ask questions.

Instead, I sat in my room and listened to nineties grunge since she always had a strange affinity for it, and while REM and Stone Temple Pilots and Pearl Jam played on shuffle, I lifted weights. I did sit-ups and push-ups.

I got fucking ripped.

And then I left for college all the while wondering whether Mr. Taylor was telling me the truth and when she'd come back home or try to get in touch.

I'm still wondering that nearly seven long years later. And maybe this Tuesday I'll finally learn what really happened.

CHAPTER 10: TESSA

Soundgarden pumps through my speakers as I travel the I-88 west toward Fallon Ridge. It's an unfamiliar drive since I haven't ever had to make it, but it's a quick and easy three hours to home.

Paul and Marsha were beyond understanding when I told them I needed to take the rest of the week off to go home for my father's funeral.

Except the thing is...I don't want to go home.

I don't want to face my mother's best friend...the woman who I once thought would be my mother-in-law. I don't want to face the man who played golf with my dad every Thursday afternoon, the man I thought would be my father-in-law.

I don't want to keep telling the lie my dad fabricated in my absence.

I don't want the looks of sympathy as I mourn the loss of a man who I never really knew...a man who did everything he could to turn me against him. A man I haven't missed for seven years, who I won't start missing now.

But I do want to be there for my mom. As much bad blood as there ended up being between my dad and me, I'm not going to let her go through this alone. She's my mom, and she has always been by my side—even when she couldn't stop what was happening.

She tried. She failed.

And he was still my dad even though he forced choices on me that I didn't want, choices that changed the trajectory of my entire life.

But in going back home, most of all, I don't want to face *him*.

He's in season, so I doubt he'll show up. But what if he does?

Is it too late to share the truth with him?

Or is this one of those situations where it's never too late to share the truth?

I couldn't tell him back then. I couldn't get in touch with him.

I was under lock and key, resigned to my fate without so much as a phone.

My dad didn't allow me to have one, and at the time, I didn't drive—I didn't need to in Fallon Ridge since everything we could ever need was within walking distance. I didn't even know Tristan's phone number since any time we needed to talk, we'd just meet at our bedroom windows.

These aren't things I want to be worrying about as I make my way toward the town where I grew up. I don't want to think about the most horrifically painful part of my past as I prepare to bury my father.

And I can't help the little voice in my mind that keeps reminding me who caused all that pain.

"You're the pastor's daughter," he'd told me. As if my lot in life was fully dependent on who *he* was. As it turned out, it was. There were certain expectations for the way I was supposed to live my life, and my dad didn't understand the definition of a happy accident.

All he saw was one big mistake.

And so he took matters into his own hands. If I'd have had an earlier birthday instead of a later one, the decision would've been mine to make. But I was seventeen, still a minor, and back then...I didn't have a choice. Dad made the choice for me.

"Black Hole Sun" pumps through my speakers, and I turn it up as I try to drown out the thoughts. I've gotten good about just putting it out of my mind, but then there are times when it sneaks up on me and hits me out of the blue.

I wish I wasn't thinking about this right now. I wish I wasn't as resentful of him as I still am all these years later.

I wish I could attend his funeral without this at the forefront of my mind...but I can't.

It's why I've stayed away.

It was his fault.

And now it's too late.

There's something tragic in that, something sad, along with the fact that he'll never work for my forgiveness again and I'll never be able to give it to him in this lifetime. And maybe as I look into the casket to say my goodbyes, I'll find some way to make peace with that.

I know I was young, but I was old enough to make that decision for myself.

As much as I've tried to move on, I keep picking losers who can't offer me any sort of future. Losers like Cam who dress in winners' clothes but who end up being nothing but assholes.

Maybe I'm better off alone. Maybe it's the punishment for my sins.

It's Wednesday evening by the time I drive over the Mississippi River, crossing from Illinois into Iowa.

I think about all the time we spent by the river. It borders our town, and the scenic overlook on the east side of town beyond the cornfields is where Tristan and I spent a lot of time in our teenage years. Someone built the overlook a long time ago, a wooden dock that led out to a wooden platform with benches looking over the river.

Sometimes we'd go there to hang out with friends. Sometimes we'd go to talk. Sometimes it was a place to go make out. There were even nights we'd go there to do our homework.

It always felt like *our spot*.

It was romantic, but it wasn't sexual. Except for the Fourth of July, when it was packed with people wanting to check out the fireworks from neighboring towns, if there were any, it was almost always deserted. It was a ten-minute walk from home, and we could watch the water as it rushed along its path, or we could stare up at the sky and dream.

Memories are already plowing into me, and I haven't even crossed into Fallon Ridge yet.

Fifteen minutes after I make it over the bridge, I'm pulling into my parents' familiar driveway. I sit in the car and stare at the front of the house a while without getting out. My eyes edge next door as memories plow into me, and then I focus on my parents' house.

My *mom's* house.

My mom came to visit me every few weeks after he sent me away.

We cried together over the loss.

I knew it wasn't her idea. I knew my dad was concerned with appearances.

And that was why she was still with him all the way until the day he died despite his best kept secrets.

She hated him for what he did to me—to our family. Yet she stayed married to him all these years, so there had to be some reason. I guess over the next few days, I might find the answers to that...along with a host of other questions that'll come up.

She must've heard my car pull in because the door swings open and my mother stands in the doorway. She offers a sad smile, and the heat of tears pinches behind my eyes.

I cut the engine and exit the car, moving toward my mom, who pulls me into her arms.

"Hi, my Tessi-cat," she greets me.

"Hey, Mama."

She squeezes me tighter, and I glance over her shoulder into the house.

It's like looking into a time capsule.

Everything's the same, and I can see Tristan in every nook and cranny of the house from the front stoop. I'm supposed to be here remembering my father, but all I can think of is Tristan. He's in the family room where we cuddled on the couch. The kitchen table where we shared meals. Down the hall in my bedroom.

It's all so familiar, and yet...it's all so different than the last time I was here, when my father smiled as the car carrying his problematic daughter drove away. He wiped his hands of the problem.

"You doing okay?" I ask, pulling back to get a good look at her.

"Yeah," she says, knuckling away a tear from her cheek. "It's good to see you. It's been too long. Are you eating enough? You're too skinny."

I chuckle. "I'm eating fine," I say. "Work's just been busy."

She nods, and for the first time, I wonder what life is going to look like for her now that my dad is gone. She always worked at the church in some capacity. Will she still? Or will the new head pastor bring in new people? Will she even *want* to work there? Did she *ever* want to?

"Come on in," she says, opening the door wider. "I made some lemonade."

"Oh yes," I cheer, and she offers a small laugh. "It's been way too long since I've had your famous lemonade."

"Are you hungry?" she asks.

I nod.

"Well good news. I fixed the buttery noodles you always liked. And brownies. And cheesecake."

I giggle. She always found solace in baking, and her love language has to be food.

I have a feeling by the time the next week is over, she won't be calling me *too skinny* anymore.

I begin to follow her toward the kitchen, but the doorbell rings before we've even cleared the entry. I turn back to answer it, and she's a few paces behind me.

A woman a little younger than me stands on the stoop. She has dark hair and blue eyes and...well, she looks a lot like me. "Is this the Taylor residence?"

I nod as my brows draw in together.

"I'm so sorry for your loss," she says.

My mom moves in behind me. "And who are you?" she asks.

She clears her throat as she looks nervously between my mom and me. "My name is Stephanie. Um, Stephanie Taylor. Bill was my father."

My mom and I exchange a glance.

Her *father*?

As in...my *sister*?

CHAPTER 11: TRISTAN

I didn't say anything to Coach at practice today. I never found a good time, and I almost wonder if I shouldn't say anything at all. What I do on my day off is my business.

But still.

Part of being a team player is keeping Coach in the loop with what's going on in my life, and so once I'm home and I've eaten my usual chicken and veggies and rinsed my dishes, I decide to give him a call.

"Higs, how's the hammy?" he asks, always primarily concerned with his players and their physical ability to play.

"Doing fine, Coach. I did all the stretches Adrian recommended and I'm icing as we speak."

I hear the garage door from where I sit, and my stomach twists like it does every time. The devil is home, so I better make this quick. I certainly don't want *her* to know my plans.

"Listen, I need to head home to Iowa for a close family friend's funeral on Tuesday. I just wanted to let you know. I'm planning to fly out either late Monday night or early Tuesday, drive two and a half hours from O'Hare, attend the funeral, drive back, and fly back to Vegas. Nobody will even miss me, but I figured I should fill you in on my plans since we're in-season."

"I'm sorry for your loss," he says formally.

"Thank you." It's not really my loss, especially not all these years later, but it's still hitting me that the man who I thought would be my father-in-law is just...gone.

"And I appreciate you filling me in. Of course, family first. Always," Coach says.

"Thanks, Coach," I say.

“Keep me in the loop, okay, kid? Text me your flight details and let me know when you’re in Iowa. The last thing I need is to spend the entire day Tuesday worrying about you while you travel.”

“You got it, Coach.” I can’t help a small smile at his concern. I got lucky as fuck that he drafted me onto the Aces in the first round, and I’m forever grateful to him. But it’s more than that. He’s not just a decent guy. He’s created a family in our team, and I know when he says *family first*, the Aces are an extension of that. He’s built that for our entire team. A lot of us are out here on our own, away from families and it helps to have a brotherhood where we never feel lonely or isolated.

We hang up just before the door opens and my wife appears. She opens her mouth to say something, and I take that as my cue, bolting from the room and up the stairs toward my bedroom.

It might not be time for bed yet, but the silence is sure as fuck better than spending a second in conversation with the woman actively trying to ruin my life.

I flip to ESPN on the television in my bedroom, and I collapse on my bed.

My door opens a minute later.

I should’ve locked the goddamn thing.

Rookie mistake, Tristan.

“You ever learn how to fucking knock?” I demand.

She rolls her eyes. “We’re married, dear. No secrets between husbands and wives, am I right?”

“Wrong. Get out.”

She brings out the worst in me, and I hate it. I hate who I am with her.

I miss who I was when I was with Tessa. Now that was a guy I liked.

This version of me...it’s not me.

She laughs a little maniacally. “You know things have been quiet for me since I was reassigned,” she begins.

“You mean since you were *fired*,” I interrupt flatly. She wasn’t *reassigned*. She was part of a scheme to plant a dangerous chemical on some land to make it look like the soil was contaminated, and she was arrested. She pled her way out of jail time, but she lost her job as a sports reporter in the process.

More ammunition for her to cling onto me since I’m her only doorway into the league now.

She clears her throat. “Anyway, I’ve been doing a little research. It seems this funeral you’re going to next week—Bill Taylor? It seems he had a whole lot of secrets he didn’t want anyone finding out.”

How the *fuck* does she know I’m going to a funeral next week, and what’s more...how does she know who it’s for?

This woman never ceases to amaze me, and I don’t mean that in a good way.

My eyes edge to my phone. Does she have me bugged? Has she been listening in on my calls or tracking my texts? It’s the only way she’d know, unless she has cameras or microphones hidden around the house that might clue her in.

“What secrets?” I ask.

“Oh, there’s a whole laundry list,” she says, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “The affairs, the other children...and, of course, the whole Tessa situation.”

My chest tightens at the mention of Tessa. What does she know about Tessa? What did Mr. Taylor do to her?

“Don’t you fucking dare speak her name to me,” I hiss. She doesn’t know jack shit.

Bill Taylor was a good man. He was a pastor, for fuck’s sake. He was a man of God, and he taught those same values to his *only* daughter.

If he wasn’t the man I thought he was, then he had *everybody* fooled. My dad wouldn’t be best friends with a guy

who did the shit Savannah's saying he did.

She simply laughs that maniacal laugh again as she shrugs and walks out of the room.

She doesn't know what the fuck she's talking about.

Does she?

CHAPTER 12: TESSA

“I knew about the affairs,” my mom says quietly. She clears her throat as her gaze lifts to mine. “He never mentioned other children.”

My first thought when that girl introduced herself as my sister was denial. Disbelief. There’s no way my father had a second family.

Then anger hit.

And now...now I feel like I’m just not all that surprised given what I knew about him.

I reach across the table to squeeze her hand. I’m trying to be there for my mother as I process the news myself. “So he was just...living another life? Or what?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know, to be honest. There’s Stephanie, so he kept at least one big secret from me. Who does that? Who just keeps secrets of this magnitude from everyone around them?”

Her eyes lift to mine as we both ponder those words. We’re holding onto secrets of our own—ones my dad forced us to make in the first place.

“Well...it tracks, right?” I murmur.

Her brows knit together. “Yes, I suppose it does. He always put the image of the perfect family first. He had the act down pat, this act like he was this God-fearing man who upheld family values.” She shakes her head, but she doesn’t let any tears fall. “Couldn’t have been further from the truth.”

“How are you feeling about all this?” I ask. I lost a father, and she lost a husband...but I don’t feel the real sense of that loss, and I suspect she doesn’t, either. I lost him the second he put me in the back of that car. I wrote off our relationship way

back then, and I'm home right now for my mother. Not for him.

I wasn't close to him, and by all accounts, even though she was married to him and lived in the same house as him... neither was she.

She lifts a shoulder. "I feel like I need to go through the motions and say all the right things and be the strong one."

My eyes soften as I shake my head. "Not for me, Mama," I say quietly. "You can break down if you want. Lord knows I've done it enough times, and you've always been there to catch me."

She shakes her head. "What he did to you, to us...to our family." She lowers her voice to a whisper. "I never forgave him, and even in death, I don't know if I can."

I press my lips together as I try to keep it together. She doesn't have to be strong for me, but maybe I can be strong for her. "I never did, either. I don't think I'm strong enough to do it."

We both stare at our hands where they're joined, both of us feeling shame and guilt over our confessions. The church we've spent so much of our lives at teaches us to forgive...yet neither of us can find it within ourselves to actually extend that forgiveness.

"You know what he used to say to me?" she asks, and our eyes lock as I shake my head. "He used to say that if the families of murder victims could grant forgiveness, surely I could give him mine."

I catch my bottom lip between my teeth. "Did he really?"

She nods.

Our situation was different. There were no murders, but there was a family torn apart. There was a relationship cut short that never should have been. There was a ripple effect because of his actions. He made decisions that weren't his to make, and he left the rest of us to deal with the consequences.

And, according to the woman two years younger than me who just left my mother's house...we weren't the only ones he did that to.

"He doesn't deserve it, Mama."

"Everyone deserves forgiveness. Don't you think?"

I sigh. "We're riding a line here I'm not sure I want to get into given my upbringing, but I firmly believe if someone repents for what they did, then they deserve forgiveness. He never did that. No repentance. No apologies. No remorse. Instead, he stood on firm ground that he made the right choice for me. For us...for *all* of us."

I always thought he'd just been a royal asshole to me because I was dumb enough to get pregnant. I didn't realize he was a royal asshole to everybody.

Add the way Cam treated me after he bent me over his desk on top of that, and I'm not sure how I move forward without trust issues. I'm not sure how I overcome betrayal after betrayal. I'm not sure how I escape this week without deep emotional wounds, and furthermore...I'm not sure how I heal those wounds.

Random sex with a colleague doesn't really seem like the way to solve that issue, but like he told me, it's never going to happen again anyway.

"I can't argue with that," she says softly, and then she stands and moves toward the sink. The dishes are done. Stephanie declined my mother's invitation to stay for dinner. She wanted to introduce herself before the funeral. According to her, my father visited her twice a month and sent her and her mother money. He put her through college.

She had proof.

Photos with him—with her and her mother, too. Family pictures, like he was living another life with them then returned home to his *real* family.

How did I not know? How did my *mother* not know?

It doesn't make any sense.

This Stephanie girl—she was nice enough given this very strange situation, but something felt...off. I don't think she really has any reason to lie about the fact that we're half-sisters, but showing up out of the blue right after his death feels strange, like she was waiting for him to die before she revealed herself.

And that makes me wonder what he did to her. How he kept her quiet until he wasn't around to keep her quiet any longer.

How she feels given the fact that she was his second family. Does she fear rejection since he chose us? Or did he choose us by default because he'd married my mother?

Did he even want to be with us?

And I have other questions, too.

How many more Stephanies are out there? How many more half-siblings do I have?

Will I find out over the next few days, or is this something I'll *never* have the answer to?

My phone dings with a notification, and I glance absently at the screen.

New text message.

I open the notification from a number I don't recognize, my heart racing as I wonder if it's another sibling.

Unknown Number: *My condolences, Nurse. You are in my thoughts.*

The *Nurse* jab is a pretty big clue as to who it's from since there's only one person on God's green Earth who calls me that, and after the way we left things, I'm frankly shocked he texted me and even more shocked he just admitted he's thinking about me.

I don't know what to say as my heartrate picks up speed.

I must stare at the message for a long time because eventually my mother breaks into my thoughts. "Everything okay?"

I sigh as I glance up at her. "Yeah."

She slides into the chair across from me. “That heavy sigh tells me it’s not. What’s going on?”

I shrug. “It’s just...there’s this new doctor at our practice and he’s such a jerk, but then the other day we kissed and then...” I trail off. I’m not about to admit to my mother that he fucked me from behind over his desk yesterday just moments before she called me to tell me about my father.

“And then?” she asks.

“He basically told me nobody could ever find out,” I finish weakly. “But he just texted me sending his condolences and he said he’s thinking about me. I didn’t even know he had my number, and I never expected him to admit he’s actually thinking about me.”

She raises her brows. “Do you think this could turn into something?”

I lift both shoulders as I shake my head and avert my gaze to my phone. “I think we’re just from two different worlds. He thinks he’s superior to me because he’s a little older and paid more for his degree.”

She chuckles. “Or maybe he’s the boy pulling your pigtails because he likes you. Ever think of that?”

My gut tells me that isn’t what this is, but maybe she’s right.

“What are you going to say to him?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I murmur, my eyes back on his message.

I type a response.

Thank you.

It doesn’t seem like enough.

Thank you. I’m thinking of you too.

That seems like *too* much.

I try one last time.

Thanks, Cam. I appreciate it.

I click send before I can stop myself.

A reply comes at lightning speed.

Cam: *It's Dr. Foster. [wink emoji] Are you holding up okay?*

I let out a small giggle despite the thoughts I just had about him and how hurt and betrayed I feel over how he treated me. Maybe he was just embarrassed that we did it at the office. There has to be some explanation.

“What?” my mom asks.

“I called him by his first name and look at his reply.” I slide my phone over to her.

She reads the text, and her brows shoot up as she smiles at me. “See, honey? He likes you.”

I can't help when my cheeks heat at the thought of it. “I like him, too. I think. Sometimes I think I hate him, though.”

She giggles. “All the more fun for a fiery, passionate romance.”

“Mama!” I scold, and she just laughs again.

“Despite the reason, it's nice having you home,” she says, squeezing my arm.

“It's nice being here, too.”

Neither my mother nor I mention the fact that my dad isn't here, or that Tristan isn't here...but it's something unspoken hanging in the air inside the kitchen. I finally reply to the doctor.

Me: *I'm okay. Thanks for checking.*

“Have you spoken with Sue lately?” I ask, wondering if my mom has any intel on Tristan from his mother.

She presses her lips together and shakes her head. “We aren't as close as we used to be.”

“Oh, Mama. What happened?” They were inseparable, but then I was forced to move away and my dad didn't want the truth getting out. I'm sure having to lie to her best friend didn't help matters.

“Honestly? I suspect your father did something to upset the balance. I don’t know if he came onto her or what, but a year or so ago, something shifted between us.”

“How come you didn’t tell me?” I ask.

She sighs. “I kept thinking she was just busy jetting back and forth to Vegas, but it seems like more than that. Besides, I didn’t want to bother you with the reminders of your past.”

I press my lips together. In a strange way, I think I can understand that...but at the same time, it’s not a *reminder* when my mind is continually tormented by what happened.

“I’m here now, Mama,” I say softly. “It’s just you and me. No more secrets between us, okay?”

She closes her eyes and nods, and I have a feeling that I’m going to learn a lot over the next week.

CHAPTER 13: TESSA

The line today has been seemingly never-ending, but in another hour, we'll move from the chapel where we're currently having the visitation over to the church for the funeral. It's hard to feel at peace with his passing given everything I've learned about him recently, yet here we are, putting on the act in front of family, friends, and, of course, members of the congregations he's led over his many years as pastor.

Maybe this act is my final service to him. To the church. To this former life of mine.

"Oh, honey," Sue Higgins says to me, pulling me into a hug. "You've grown into such a gorgeous young woman. I can't believe how many years it's been."

I squeeze her tightly. "How's Tristan?" I ask softly.

She offers a small smile. "He's doing well." I want her to tell me more, I want to *ask* her more—like whether Tristan will be here today, whether we'll have a meeting nearly seven long years in the making after far too many years apart...but the line behind the Higgins family is long. My father was a cornerstone of not just Fallon Ridge but also of the surrounding towns.

"Tessa Taylor," Russ Higgins booms in that way he has where he has the uncanny ability to make you feel special just by saying your name. He's one of the nicest people I've ever met, and so is his wife. Tristan's parents are good, salt of the Earth type people, and they raised their boy to be the same way. "How have you been, young lady?"

I shake my head and offer a smile. "Living the dream in Chicago."

"That's what I hear from your parents," he says, taking my hand and squeezing it. "I'm so happy for you."

I can't help but wonder what, exactly, he's heard from my parents...and how much of what he's heard is actually true. I'd venture to guess not much of it is accurate given the fact that he's *so happy* for me.

The line keeps moving, my time with Tristan's parents painfully short, and when I glance at who's coming up next after we greet some long-distance cousins of my mother's, I murmur in shock, "Oh my God."

Cameron Foster wraps an arm around me as he pulls me into a hug.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper.

"Just making sure you're okay." His voice is rich and velvety in my ear, and he keeps his poker face firmly in place as I look beyond him at the next person in line.

"Paul," I whisper, my eyes filling with tears as I let go of Cam to hug my boss.

Now if there's anybody who's been a father figure to me since I moved from Fallon Ridge to Chicago, it's Paul.

I think he's been more of a father to me than the man whose life we're celebrating today.

"Marsha and Sara both wanted to be here today, but someone had to stay back and keep things afloat at Lakeshore. Both send their condolences," Paul says.

"Thank you." I squeeze him a little tighter before I let him go. I know what a sacrifice it is for him to be here for me today. He doesn't know anything about my relationship with my father, yet he came all this way to be by my side today.

And Cam.

My heart races as I think about what sort of schedule rearranging Cam had to have made to be here today. I don't know much about him personally, but I know he's a damn good pediatric surgeon and he always has a full schedule at the hospital.

"Thank you both so much for being here," I say. "I can't express how much it means." It means very different things

that they're each here—for Paul, it means he cares about me as his employee, that he wants to make sure I'm okay. And for Cam... well, I'm not sure what it means, exactly. Maybe he tagged along with Paul. Maybe it means more. Maybe it means that thing over his desk really *could* happen again.

I want to get him alone to find out.

The visitation ends, and immediate family only gets to say our final goodbyes.

I don't know what to say to him, so instead, I say a prayer in my mind for peace.

Peace for both of us.

We move into the church, and my mom and I take our seats in the first row. A pastor from a nearby Methodist church is handling the ceremony, someone my dad was good friends with, and from the way things went at the visitation today, the more I see that he was *good friends* with practically everyone he ever met.

I'm surprised when I see Paul and Cam standing at the end of my row, and I nod for them to join us. Cam moves into the pew first, which means he'll be sitting next to me at my father's funeral.

The pinch of tears heats behind my eyes as I remember his words after he ravaged me in his office. I think about how *used* he made me feel.

And now he's here beside me, and I'm so epically confused.

The service begins with a hymn, and I guess Cam assumes the tears are because of the reason we're here. I glance up at him as I wipe away a tear, and he presses his lips together in sympathy before he reaches down for my hand. He squeezes it, and then he puts his arm around my waist to give me a little side hug.

I sigh.

Part of me wants it to be like this—for him to be the man I turn to in my grief, to confess the sins of my past, to tell him

everything my dad put me through, to talk through my very confusing feelings as I attend this funeral with a woman who claims to be my half-sister sitting a few rows back.

The other part of me still hates him.

Why is *he* the one sitting beside me at my father's funeral?

Just because he's the last guy I slept with doesn't give him the right to be here. We hardly know each other.

And yet...that little hand squeeze? That little side hug?

They were far more comforting than I care to admit.

Still, though, something about it feels off.

And I know what it is.

It doesn't matter that almost seven years have passed. It won't matter if a hundred more years pass. When you meet your soul mate and he's ripped away from you, nobody can ever take his place.

The problem with having Cam beside me today is that he's not Tristan.

CHAPTER 14: TRISTAN

My eyes edge down to her left hand.

The man beside her clutches it in his when it should be my hand sliding into hers.

I was late.

I missed the entire visitation, and I slipped into the back of the church during the first song. It's better this way, anyway. It's always a circus when I come back home. Everyone wants to know everything about my life in the NFL, but that's not why I'm here today.

I'm here to support a family who still means a lot to me...to a woman who still means a lot to me. Truth be told, she still means *everything* to me, and it took all of one second looking at the back of her head from the back of this church to realize how stupid I've been.

I should have fought for her. I should have tried harder. I didn't know what to do or how to get in touch with her as time marched forward, but hindsight tells me that was just an excuse.

As my parents reminded me, I had college to attend. I had a future to think about.

I had big dreams ahead of me, and while she'd always been the star of many of those dreams, there were other things I'd planned to achieve on my own that didn't involve her.

And now her fingers are linked through someone else's. Another man sits beside her at her father's funeral.

She moved on. I wasn't just late to the funeral. I'm also *too late*.

By all accounts, I've moved on, too.

Except I haven't. Not even a little.

My mom stands to my right. She squeezes my hand. My dad stands to my left. He's staring blankly ahead, probably keeping his feelings about today buried deep like he does about everything. He's the kind of guy who can make everyone feel like they're his best friend, but I often wonder who *his* best friend is. Was it Bill? He's not the type to share his feelings, but he manages to elicit them from everyone around him.

Still, I've been careful not to overshare details about my personal life with them. They're my parents, and I'm as honest with them as I can be, but it's all within the set filter of knowing who lives next door to them.

I beat myself up for a long time after she left. Was it something I said? Something I did? Some way I made her feel? Eventually I had to move on, new abandonment issues firmly in place as I found myself unable to grow close to anybody for fear that they'd leave, too.

And so when my mom told me on one of our weekly phone calls that Janet mentioned Tessa was dating some guy in the city, that he was going to propose to her, I saw it as my sign to move on. I was hurting, and I was vulnerable, and fucking Savannah swooped in. She eats vulnerability for breakfast, and she preyed on me.

Another example of how fucking stupid I am.

Live and learn, and then fix it.

My eyes are still trained on the hand holding Tessa's sixteen rows in front of me.

I don't think I can fix *that*. It's not my problem to fix anymore, anyway.

It's fine. I slipped in late, I'll slip out early, and nobody ever has to know I was here.

Except Kristen Jacobs, the chick who was always after me starting in middle school, is in the next pew over, and I can feel her gaze on me.

Shannon Saunders is behind me.

Lauren Matthews is a couple pews ahead of me.

Wendy Jennings. Kayla Price. Nicole Tucker. Jamie Fitch. Tiffany Gable. Jennifer Blakely.

And it isn't just the females who were in our class here supporting Tessa. All the guys from the team are here. They loved her, too—not as much as I did, but she was friends with everybody back then.

Until the day she disappeared.

I can't help but wonder if some of them are here today because they're curious about *her*. As far as I know, she hasn't been back. She doesn't keep in touch with anybody from this town. And now she's here holding hands with some guy I don't know.

My chest feels heavy, like my heart is breaking all over again. Like I had hope in my heart until this very moment.

The song ends and the congregation sits. A few different people speak to the man Bill was, but I don't hear any of it because I'm lost in thought about the past as I stare at the back of her head.

I glance at my watch. The preacher has been droning on and on for the last thirty-six minutes, and I have a plane to catch in just under five hours with a nearly three-hour drive in between. I can't miss my flight, and that doesn't account for potential traffic or issues getting to the airport.

But I can't leave without her knowing I was here. Without looking into her eyes. Without...something.

I don't know what.

She must sense someone is staring at her because she turns to the side and glances a few rows back—not far enough to make eye contact with me, though.

Eventually the service ends, and the first row leaves first behind the casket. Her eyes are down as she exits her pew, and she glances up, offering small waves to familiar faces. My chest tightens as I stare at her.

God damn, she's beautiful.

She looks like she did back then, only a little older. A little more jaded. A little more...I don't know. Womanly? It sounds so stupid, but she was a seventeen-year-old girl the last time I saw her. This woman here...she's different than the girl I knew.

And I have the sudden overwhelming urge to get to know who she is...to fall in love with her.

Except she's here with someone else. You don't just take a random date to your father's funeral.

And suddenly she's upon my row, and she's too far away but she's close enough that I can smell the familiar jasmine scent she always wore—the same scent I'd pick up at Bath and Body Works at the mall for every holiday, an addictively fresh scent with a little bit of sweet fruitiness. Maybe it's my imagination. A sense of comfort washes over me like a wave as I take it in, and it's like I'm taking something *from* her that's far more meaningful than just her smell. She must feel it, too, because her head turns in my direction and her eyes lift to mine.

Shock is clear as day in hers, but the shock shifts swiftly to something else. Warmth, maybe. Our shared history passes between us in that single beat, and all the love I felt for her when I was eighteen and ready to take on the world with her still courses through my blood.

Hope lights a fire within me.

It's more than a shared history. It's two halves of the same soul reconnecting for the first time since they were ripped apart, and something tells me it would all still be there for us if we could just have a second to figure it out.

She snags her toe on the ground as our eyes connect for nothing more than a split second, and she trips a little, breaking our eye contact. The man who held her hand at the beginning of the service quickly grabs onto her elbow to steady her, and my heart cracks as the trance between us breaks and the hope is snuffed out as quickly as it came.

She moves toward the back of the church to the narthex, where she'll stand in a line with her mother and her aunt and all of Bill's closest relatives to greet the many people who attended the service. Then they'll move over toward the cemetery for the burial.

The second row files out next, and then the third. They're going in order from the front of the church to the back, and the line jams up once the third row starts making their exit as the churchgoers greet and mingle with Bill's family.

It's going to be a long, long time before my row gets to exit, and today...I just don't have the time. Not after the service took longer than I expected it to.

I need to see her.

I need to talk to her.

But I can't.

I lean over toward my mother. "Do you have a piece of paper and a pen?"

Her brows knit together as she starts digging through her purse. "I think so." She hands me a receipt, and I glance down at it.

"Why do you keep receipts for items you bought with cash?" I ask.

She laughs. "What if I need to return something?"

"Are you going to return a pack of gum or vitamin E tablets? What are you taking vitamin E for?"

Her cheeks turn pink. "Hot flashes."

"Oh Jesus. Sorry for asking."

Her eyes widen as she glances at me and then at the front of the church where the cross hangs. "Watch your mouth, Tristan Matthew!" she hisses at me.

My dad elbows me in the ribs. "Did your mother just middle name you?"

At least they're hilariously distracting at this rather frantic time.

CHAPTER 15: TESSA

He's here.

I can't believe he's actually here.

I imagined our eyes meeting for the first time again after so many years apart a million different ways, but never did I imagine it would be at my father's funeral.

And never did I imagine I wouldn't actually get to talk to him as the line of people waiting to express their condolences seemed to grow longer and longer as the division between Tristan and me grew wider and wider.

Yet somehow I always knew that even with no words spoken between us, I'd still feel the fire burning as brightly between the two of us as it burned the last time I saw him. Some fires rage too brightly to be snuffed out, I guess.

I glance down the line for the thousandth time. I need to see him again. I need to talk to him.

I can't see into the church from where I stand, so I have no idea how much longer I'll have to wait. I spot Wendy Jennings in line. She was just a few rows ahead of him, wasn't she?

I can't remember. There were so many familiar faces, but it's been too many years since I've seen most of them. I barely even remember some of their names at this point, let alone where they were sitting in the church.

I sigh as I hug a second cousin twice removed—I think. Or maybe it was a third cousin twice removed. I don't even know what that means, but somehow this person is related to me even though we've never met, and there are people in that church who I *have* met that I want to talk to but my good manners prevent me from moving the line along.

I wonder how long he's here. I wonder what his schedule's like.

I wonder if his wife is here with him. He was planted between his parents. I didn't see another woman with him, but I've seen her in the tabloids and gossip websites. She's gorgeous, and of course he married some gorgeous woman. He's hot as hell. He always was, and he only got better with age. Like wine or chocolate, I guess.

And then there's me. My body is softer than it was back then. My hair is longer, and my eyes are sprouting little wrinkles that tell me I should have listened when my mother told me to use face lotion twice a day, once in the morning and once before bed. Bags line my eyes now, too, and those didn't used to be there.

We're different people now, but he showed up today.

I glance down the line again. Still no sign of him, and I feel like I've been greeting people for hours.

"Tessa?" a boy no more than fifteen or so asks.

My brows draw together. "Yes?"

"I'm Michael." He glances at the woman beside him, and she nods encouragingly at him. "I'm...uh...I knew your dad."

"He's your half-brother," Michael's mother blurts.

My chest tightens as I close my eyes.

This is all just...too much.

I suck in a breath as I feel like the wind just got knocked out of me, and when I glance up, I finally spot Mr. Higgins, and then just behind him, I see Tristan as he leans in to say something to his mom.

I stare at him as I feel a familiar calmness descend over me.

Looking at Tristan now, there in line, not far from me now...it's like taking a hit of my favorite drug.

He didn't used to sport a five o'clock shadow, but he does now, and good Lord does it do wonders for his hot factor. I was always attracted to him, of course, but he grew from a boy into this *man* who is here today, this man who is ridiculously *sexy*.

This man who I realize I know nothing about. It goes both ways, though. He doesn't know the woman I am today, either. I want him to know me, though. I want to know who he is now, too. I want to fall in love with the man he's become since I always loved the boy he was before. But life moves forward. His life is in Vegas.

Mine is in Chicago. It's not much. An apartment I rent with my best friend. A job that for the most part I enjoy. A boss who's supportive enough to make the nearly three-hour drive from Chicago to Fallon Ridge.

And a new doctor who bangs like a beast and has certainly piqued my interest.

Since they were sitting in my row, they've already been through. I can't glance over at Cam to my left as a way to allow my mind to determine how I feel about him versus the man who's slowly approaching to my right.

There's no contest, though.

Tristan holds my heart, no matter how twisted or dark or secretive or broken it is. He always will.

But he's not in my future, and a fatal heart attack may have been the very thing to signal to me that life isn't just preciously short, but we only get one of them.

Michael is proof of that, along with Stephanie and whoever else might show up. They're all proof that my father really messed up during the one life he got.

He was married to my mother, and he had multiple affairs over their marriage. The two half-siblings I've met since last Wednesday aged fifteen and twenty-three are the products of those affairs, but my father made them promises he couldn't keep. Instead he sent checks, visited when he could, and lied to everyone.

How do you mourn that?

How do you not feel resentment when you find out the truth in death? How do you not feel anger and rage and a healthy dose of self-doubt, of wondering how you missed all the clues

and signs all this time, of trying to move forward without trust issues?

I don't have the answer to that, so while the preacher droned on today during the service, I prayed for some way to find peace. Maybe his final gift was giving me the siblings I always longed for.

Two of them so far. Maybe more.

As it turns out, my mother couldn't do that. She experienced something called secondary infertility, where she was able to have one baby but became infertile afterward. Apparently my father wanted a bunch of kids, and rather than divorcing my mother, he screwed around with women enough towns over that nobody caught wind of it.

Or maybe everybody around here was just too kind to say anything.

I wonder if Tristan knew. I wonder if *his parents* knew.

What do I say to Michael to move this line along, to get past him to Tristan without seeming like a jerk to this vulnerable child?

I don't know. I have nothing to say.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I say softly to Michael. I try to be kind. I hope he knows we're sharing a strange type of loss while we're gaining something, too, though it's not the type of gain I plan to do anything about.

I was fine all this time in ignorance, and I'm not planning to suddenly head up some huge family reunion.

I don't want to see these people again, these reminders that there's more of my father's blood running the Earth. Not after what he did to me. Not after the things he took away from me, and not now that I'm learning how much more he took from other people.

I don't know how this will affect me moving forward, but I can't dwell on that now because the line of people continues to inch forward, and he continues to get closer to me. I force myself not to look. I force myself to be present for all the nice

people offering words of sympathy and comfort for a man I'm certain I won't miss.

The longer I have to wait knowing he's coming, the more my chest thunders with anxiety.

And finally, the Higgins family approaches.

Mrs. Higgins hugs me first. "Oh Tessa, it's just so wonderful to see you back in town." Her words are soft in my ear as she squeezes me, and it's so familiar and warm that I find tears filling my eyes. She pulls back and looks at me, really *studies* me, and she shakes her head with a sad little smile. "You've grown into such a darling young woman. I'm so proud of you."

I swipe away at a stray tear. "Thank you, Mrs. Higgins. That means a lot." It's the first time I've said those words today and actually meant them.

"I'm so sorry about your dad," she says, and she takes both my hands in hers and squeezes. She leans in for another hug. "I'll stall with your mom so you can get an extra minute with Tristan."

I press my lips together as I give her a grateful look. "Thank you," I murmur, and then he's next.

My heart thunders in my chest, and I glance at the pulse in his neck, wondering if it's flapping as wildly as mine. I watch his throat lift as he swallows, and we simply stare at each other a few seconds, both of us taking in the changes of the other over the years that have gone by.

He's bigger now. A little taller, a little leaner, and a lot more muscular. The planes of his chest are expansive, and I want him to wrap those biceps around me and never let go.

But that's where the differences seem to end.

He's still so handsome it hurts. A little older now, sure, but the age looks incredible on him. He still has one eyebrow that quirks up just a little higher than the other. He still has a freckle just below his left eye. His lips are still full, lips that tasted every inch of my much firmer body once upon a time. His hair is still a perfect mess in that effortless way he has

where I know the truth of the matter—that he spent at least fifteen minutes getting it just right. It's a little longer than I've seen it in the team photographs, not that I've scoured the Aces website studying every image of him, and looks like it could use a trim.

And most of all, his chocolate eyes still tell me everything. They still fall upon me with emotions that range from adoration to love to need to desire to friendship and everything in between.

It's the same way I look at him...except there's new things in his, too—things that weren't there before.

Lust is one of them.

Concern is another.

Fear is the final one.

I'm scared, too.

We were forced apart once, and it broke me.

There's no way I'd ever be able to live through that again.

CHAPTER 16: TRISTAN

God, she's beautiful.

She's the same girl who would skip down to the river hand-in-hand with me. It's the same girl whose hand I held when my grandmother died, the same girl whose arms were the most comforting place I could find, the one who would cheer the loudest at every Falcons game—home or away.

The same girl who holds all of my most important firsts.

But she's a woman now. Her hair is longer than she wore it back then, and it's a slightly different color, too, streaked with something lighter than the darker tones underneath. I can't stop staring at her. I can't stop noting everything that's exactly the same while new differences hit me.

And the ring. My eyes zeroed in on her right hand when she hugged my mother. She's wearing the promise ring I gave her, and I can't help but wonder whether she still wears it all the time or if she slipped it on for the occasion today.

I haven't had a chance to stop at my parents' house yet—the home where I lived from the time I was born until the time I left for college. But somehow I doubt I'd feel any more at home there than I do staring into Tessa Taylor's eyes for the first time in nearly seven years.

I lean toward her and slip my arm around her waist as I draw her in closer to me and it's like a fucking sensory overload. She still smells of jasmine mixed with crisp autumn air, and my chest aches with regret.

What the fuck happened between us that so much time has gone by without this?

She links her arms around my neck the same way she did when we were teenagers, and I hold her a beat longer than I should.

I bury my face in her neck as I cling on a little more tightly to her. I can practically taste her skin, the delicate porcelain that always beckoned to me.

There's so much I want to say, so much I *need* to say, and yet...

I can't seem to form the words.

This hug, it's getting too long. I know it is. But time seems to be standing still as I hold her in my arms. The world tilts back on its axis after it's been out of sync for far too long.

I feel someone's hand on my bicep, a gentle tap, and I realize it's my dad trying to move me along. I finally pull back.

I clear my throat as I try to force away the emotion lumped there. "It's good to see you." My voice is hoarse. "Sorry about your dad."

She shakes her head a little and snags her bottom lip between her teeth for a second. Her eyes glisten, and she brushes away a tear that spills onto her cheek. "It's good to see you, too," she murmurs with a tremble to her voice. "Are you in town long?"

I shake my head. "I need to get back to Vegas tonight. I have a plane to catch in a few hours."

She nods as she averts her gaze to the ground.

I duck down to try to catch her eye again, and hers soften when they fall upon me. "I'm sorry. I wish I could stay."

"Thank you for coming. It means..." She lifts a shoulder as she clears her throat. "It means a lot."

I reach down and squeeze her hand. "I wouldn't have missed it."

Another tear escapes her lid, and I brush it away with my thumb. My heart breaks for what she's going through right now even though we don't have the time to talk about it.

I still love her.

God, those feelings still burn bright. They never went away, and seeing her standing here in front of me only reminds me of how some things in this life never fade away.

My dad taps my arm again, and we both look at the line behind me.

“I need to let you get to everybody else, but...well, here.” I hand her my mother’s receipt, and I close her hand over the paper. “Use it.”

Her brows dip in confusion. I lean in and press my lips to her cheek. I have to. I need to taste her again, to feel my mouth on her any way I can get it, and a harmless kiss on the cheek seems most appropriate for a church funeral.

Except it’s not harmless.

It does me far more harm than good to have that simple little taste, and as I move past her, I can still taste her on my lips, still smell her in my nostrils, still feel her body as it pressed to mine in what was far too short an embrace.

“Tristan, thank you for coming,” Janet says next, and I hug Tessa’s mother as I express my condolences.

And that’s it. My parents trail behind me as we exit the church. They’ll go to the cemetery for the burial in another hour, and I’ll go back to Chicago to catch my flight back home to Vegas and my career and my *wife*, and then Tessa and I will be separated once again by seventeen hundred miles and secrets, lies, and misunderstandings.

It’s a fight to get back to my rental truck in the parking lot.

Lauren Matthews gets to me first. Kayla Price isn’t far behind. Then Tiffany and Nicole, Jamie, Jen, Shannon...it’s everyone I left behind when I said goodbye to this small town, all the girls who tried but never had a shot with me before I left because only one of them ever held even an ounce of my interest—even the one I had a brief encounter with that I’d rather keep buried in the past.

All the girls who think I can get them out of here, like because we went to high school together they have some stake in me that will give them their happily ever after.

But none of these will do.

My dad rides with me in the truck back to their house, and my mom fixes us her famous walnut chicken salad sandwiches before I have to hit the road.

“How’s everything going with Savannah?” my mom asks as I dig into my first bite.

“Still awful,” I say.

She squeezes my arm with sympathy. “I’m so sorry, honey. What’s she doing now?”

“She switched lawyers again,” I say. “Did I tell you that?”

My dad snorts. “So the proceedings begin completely over again?”

I nod. “And it’s not just that. I didn’t want to mention this over the phone, but she’s got some stuff on me that I can’t allow to get out.”

“What stuff?” my dad asks.

I blow out a breath. “It’s a long story. But suffice it to say I’d be dealing with a fine and a suspension if it got out, so I’m stuck.”

“She’s blackmailing you?” my mom asks, her voice incredulous. “But that’s illegal!”

“She’s not exactly known for taking the moral high ground, Mom.” I take another bite of my sandwich.

My mom shakes her head. “They don’t make them like that around here, right, Russ?”

I laugh. No, they don’t. Instead, they make them like Shannon and Lauren and Wendy. Tiffany and Jamie and Kayla. Girls who still live in Fallon Ridge, who waitress or bartend at one of the few watering holes in town or who work for the town in some other capacity. Girls who never left to spread their wings and are stuck in the same mentality we were all stuck in ten years ago.

And then there’s the girls like Tessa Taylor—not those who disappeared without a trace, but those who did take flight and

who escaped this small town for something more. Something better.

I wound up in the NFL. My situation is certainly better... for the most part. Minus the whole Savannah debacle.

But is Tessa's situation better?

I wish I had a minute to talk to her to find out...and maybe that time will come.

CHAPTER 17: TESSA

I stare at the receipt Tristan handed me as I stand in the church bathroom after we finish greeting all the people in line.

What a day.

I'm alone for the first time today.

I brush away a tear...and it isn't because of the funeral I just attended.

Use it, he'd said to me in an exchange that was far, far too brief.

He was bigger than I remembered. He was always tall, but he tops out at six-five now...something I'm very familiar with since I've stalked him online for years. He's lean and fit like always, but his chest is more expansive than I remember and his biceps are freaking barrels.

God, I want to lick them.

I want to see his abs. I want to see what's a little south of his abs. I bet he's got the sort of V-cut hips that make women drool.

Okay, fine...I know he does, also because of the internet stalking. I mean *searching*.

I sigh.

A phone number is scrawled on the paper in his familiar penmanship. I'd never forget that handwriting. Locked in a little box in my bedroom back at Mom and Dad's house are all the notes he wrote me when we were together. All the silly hopes and dreams we had together that just—*poof!*—vanished when I did.

I slide the receipt into the pocket of my dress and smooth down the skirt. I glance in the mirror and fix some flyaway hairs.

And then I draw in a deep breath and head outside so we can get to the cemetery to bury my father.

Paul and Cam stand in the narthex, the only people still waiting inside. “I’m so sorry, Tessa, but we need to get back to Chicago,” Paul says.

“Of course.” I nod and move toward Paul for another hug. “Thank you both for coming. It means a lot.”

I hug Cam next, trying to keep it casual since Paul is standing right beside us. His fingers press into my back where Paul can’t see. It’s like a silent message of solidarity, like he’s letting me know he’s here for me despite the way we left things last week. It’s confusing, especially as Tristan plays in my mind. Especially as his phone number burns a hole in my pocket.

Paul turns to leave, and Cam gives me one last lingering glance before he follows behind. I take a few extra beats by myself in the quiet narthex as I glance over at the spot where Tristan Higgins hugged me less than an hour ago. The way he held me, the feelings that rushed through my entire being, the way butterflies flapped low in my belly and an ache pressed between my thighs...the way I felt like I was back home even though I’ve *been* home for the last few days—it’s all so confusing.

I didn’t feel those same things when Cam hugged me, and yet Cam seems to be the more likely candidate of who will appear in my future.

I shake it off. I’ll worry about it later.

My mom and I ride to the cemetery together in the back of a limo, and we say our final goodbyes. Neither of us cries.

We attend a banquet back in the church rec hall. My mom and I stick together as people come up to us to tell us stories about my father, and the more I hear, the more I realize he was the type of person who could be many different people all in one. He was my daddy as I grew up, but he was an absentee father to at least two other kids. He was the respected pastor of

our church, but he was having affairs with women a few towns over.

I'm even starting to wonder why he was transferred out of Maple Park to Fallon Ridge, but I suspect it had something to do with all the details I'm learning about who he really was.

After the reception, I head back home with my mom. I offer to help her clean out some of my dad's items, but she assures me she can take care of it.

"How long are you staying?" she asks me over dinner—just a can of soup split between the two of us since neither of us feels very hungry.

I glance out the window toward the Higgins's house. "I should get back to Chicago. It's hard on all of us when someone's out of the office, so I know others are working hard to pick up the slack since I've been gone."

"I'll sure miss having you around here," she says softly.

"I'll try to get back here more often, Mom." I press my lips together. I think subconsciously part of why I stayed away was because of my father.

"Can I ask you something?"

I glance up at her, my brows knit together. "What?"

"Do you ever think about what happened?"

I lift a shoulder and offer a sad smile. "Only every second of every day."

"I suspected as much," she murmurs. She shakes her head. "I don't want to speak ill of him, honey, but I want you to know that I fought for you. I told him it was your right to decide. I told him he was only severing his relationship with you."

"Why aren't you and Sue close anymore?" I ask, ignoring her confession of what I already knew to be true in favor of getting to the bottom of why she isn't as close to Tristan's mom as she used to be.

She glances away from me in the same direction I was just looking. She lifts a shoulder. “She started pulling back. First she bowed out of book club. Then she left our pinochle group. But when she stopped coming to bingo, I knew something was going on.”

“Did you ask her?”

She nods. “Of course. She said she and Russell were traveling back and forth quite a bit to Vegas and she just didn’t have time. Around the same time, Russ told your father he wasn’t able to continue being part of their weekly foursome... again because of the travel. But I have my suspicions about what really happened.”

My brows dip. “What do you think it was?”

She sighs. “I think Bill got too close to Sue, and I think Sue and Russ have the sort of relationship where they tell each other those things. Easier to cut ties than to break up a decades-long marriage between the town pastor and his wife.”

I reach over and squeeze my mom’s hand. “Oh, Mom. I’m so sorry. What now?”

She shakes her head a little sadly. “I don’t know. I still have my job at the church as the children’s program director for now, but when they hire in a new pastor, I have no idea whether I’ll be replaced. I still have book club and pinochle and bingo, and starting next month I’ll help facilitate bingo on Wednesday nights.” She shrugs. “And my baking. I have plenty of things to keep me busy.”

“Will you be okay?” I ask quietly.

She lets out a little snort. “Yeah, baby girl. I’ll be fine. I’d never wish ill on him. He gave me you. But I finally feel...I don’t know. *Free.*”

I nod. I get it. It’s hard to admit it given the circumstances, but I feel it, too. Maybe it’s better to let history stay buried with him.

CHAPTER 18: TRISTAN

The house was blissfully quiet when I arrived back home after my short trip back to Fallon Ridge, and I'm grateful given the fact that the quick trip was mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausting.

I have a few messages from teammates checking in on me. I'm close to the younger guys on the team, the next generation if you will, and all six rostered wide receivers are like brothers to me. We usually get together for dinner at least once a week in-season.

The group chat I'm in with my buddies who regularly go out together has been hopping today. We've affectionately named ourselves the Thursday Night Crew since we usually go out on Thursday nights ahead of a lighter Friday practice. But we're not picky—we'll go out any night of the week, including Tuesdays.

The group consists of Cory Marshall and Travis Woods, two wide receivers, along with tight end Austin Graham, running back Jaxon Bryant, defensive end Deon Miller, and cornerback Patrick Harris.

I mute the chat. I'm not in the mood to go out tonight.

Cory texts me separate from the group just after I sit down to chicken and rice on the couch with the film *Jeff*, my wide receiver coach, asked me to review. I didn't review it on the plane ride back like I promised I would. Instead, I closed my eyes and thought about everything I should have said to Tessa.

Cory: *Dude, did you mute us or something? We're going out and I know you're back.*

Of course he knows I'm back. He lives down the block from me, and he probably saw my truck in the driveway.

I sigh.

Me: *Yes, you're muted. It's been a long day. I'll see you at practice tomorrow.*

Cory: *You know that's not good enough. Don't you want to find some P?*

I know Capital P is his incredibly sophisticated code for *pussy*, and truth be told...no. I don't want to go find some P.

I'm not the type to go out hunting for a different woman every night of the week. It's never been my style. I'll admit I could go for a few rounds beneath the sheets with some warm body right about now, but I don't just want *any* woman to warm my bed, and I certainly don't want some stranger.

I want Tessa.

Nobody else will do.

I hear the garage start to open.

Fuck.

You know who I *don't* want?

The wife who just arrived home.

"Hi honey, I'm home," she says sweetly. "How was the funeral?"

I don't respond. I hate that she knows so much about my life, but as she loves to remind me, her background is in investigative reporting.

"I take it everything went as well as could be given the circumstances. I brought you a present." She tosses a magazine down onto the counter. She's waiting for a reply. She's waiting for me to act like I care.

I don't.

She picks it up, walks over to me, and drops it onto my lap—just narrowly avoiding my plate still filled with food.

I glance down and my eyes latch onto the photograph on the front of the gossip rag.

It's Savannah and me. It was taken before we were married—obviously, since I'm still smiling.

And then there's the headline. *From a troubled marriage to baby news.*

"Are you telling me you're pregnant?" I ask snidely. It ain't mine, that's for damn sure.

She grins. "Once upon a time I promised you headlines. Just trying to make good on those promises."

"You're an asshole."

She laughs a little wickedly.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Oh, darling. Because I love you?" She says it like a question, and I snort.

I realize it's the first time I've point-blank asked her why. I toss the magazine aside and glance up at her. "Tell me the truth, Savannah. Why are you doing this to me?"

She sighs and looks away, and for just the briefest split second, I spot the tiniest glimmer of vulnerability. She masks it quickly, though.

"Some women are just meant to live certain lives. I'm meant for greater things in this life. Money. Football games. My career. I'm meant to be married to an NFL player."

"Even if it's the wrong one?" I challenge.

She lifts a shoulder. "There isn't a wrong one, Tristan."

"Don't you see how it's all falling apart, though? Why won't you just let me out?"

"Because I love you," she says, her tone a little more believable this time.

I shake my head. "You love the idea of a football player. You love the lifestyle. The games, the fame, the money. You don't love me."

She sighs. "I just always envisioned my life a certain way, and being with you seems to check all the boxes. There are reasons to get married, to *stay* married, aside from love."

"You're fucked up."

“I never said I wasn’t,” she says softly.

I hold up the magazine. “But this? Seriously?” It’s further proof that all she cares about is money and fame. That’s why she won’t let me out. That’s why she married me in the first place. She wanted revenge on her ex-husband, Luke Dalton, a former teammate of mine who tried to warn me off her. She wanted access to the locker room while I was blinded by her promises and stupidity, and I did the damn thing despite his warnings.

Sometimes I think the only way out of this is to quit playing, but football is the one thing I have left. It’s not an option.

“You’re fading, Tristan.” She sets a hand on her hip. “I needed to get people talking.”

I throw the magazine across the room. “I’m *fading*? What the hell does that even mean?”

“You’re washed up. Nobody cares.”

I laugh. “Do you really believe that? Or are you self-projecting?”

“I’m sorry?” she asks, clearly confused by my insinuation.

I stand to my full height. I’m six-five, tall by normal standards, and I’m a healthy and muscular two twenty. It’s not an intimidation tactic, not against a woman—even a woman as awful as Savannah—but I feel more in control as I tower over her five-ten frame.

“I’m one of two starting receivers on the Vegas Aces. I’d hardly call that washed up.” I fold my arms over my chest. “People care, Savannah. Maybe not in your circle, but you don’t need to invent gossip to get people talking about us. A divorce would have the same effect, only it’s the truth.”

“The truth? Pfft. Boring,” she says, rolling her eyes.

I take my plate and walk it over to the sink. I have nothing else to say to her...except one more thing. “If you don’t get that retracted, I’ll call them myself and do it.”

“Oh? How interesting because I’m sure they’d *love* to hear all about the PEDs you took last season.” She taps her chin. “Or was it this season?” She raises a challenging brow as I realize what she means.

“Did you fucking drug me *again*?”

“You make it so easy to keep that insurance policy, baby. Ordering the same chicken, rice, and vegetables from the same restaurant three times a week...it’s just easy to intercept a package, you know? Easy to text you from a burner phone to let you know you’re needed at a specific facility for a random drug test. Easy to get that sample and hold onto the test results.” She shrugs. “I know it’s sort of my MO since I did it with Lukey-Luke, too, but gosh, men are so dumb sometimes.”

“You’re the goddamn devil,” I hiss.

She presses her lips to her palm and blows a kiss toward me. If it was real, it would fizzle into smoke mid-air. “I love you too, honeybunch. Ta ta!”

She sashays out of the room, and I’m left reeling by her actions once again.

I hit back on the group chat.

Me: *I’m in.*

CHAPTER 19: TRISTAN

“Do you all want to try a new club tonight?” Jaxon asks.

We’re meeting at his place to pre-party ahead of a night out, and getting drunk tonight is a really shitty idea given the fact we have practice tomorrow, but fuck it. I’m not in the mood to make good decisions.

There’s too much weighing on my mind. Tessa, Savannah, all of it. I just want to escape the loudness in my brain for a while with a distraction. Maybe I shouldn’t find a hook-up tonight since on a technicality and thanks to blackmail I’m still married...or maybe that’s exactly what I need. A new club, a new place, new women...for a different Tristan.

A Tristan who was reminded today how broken he still is over an event that happened almost seven years ago. A Tristan who saw the only girl he ever loved with a *date* at her father’s funeral.

Fuck it. I need a drink.

“Where?” Austin asks.

Jaxon looks around at Cory, Travis, and myself. Usually Austin comes out with us, too, but he had some charity event today. Patrick and Deon declined going out on a Tuesday, so it’s just the four of us. “This is exclusive and private, and you all have to sign NDAs before I can even mention the club name.”

He looks so serious that I burst out laughing. When his eyes edge over to mine, though, the laughter dies. “I’m serious, dude. You either agree to the terms or we go somewhere else.”

“What kind of club is so exclusive and private we need to sign nondisclosures?” I ask.

“Will you sign the agreement?” he asks before he answers my question.

He's piqued my curiosity enough that I nod. He glances at Cory and Travis, too, and they both nod their consent as well.

"It's called Coax," he begins. "Some say the letters stand for Celebrities Or Athletes Exclusively, since those are the only clients allowed in. Others say it stands for Cunt Or Ass since it's your choice where you want to put it. And you can probably guess what the X stands for."

"X-rated?" Cory guesses, and at the same time, I ask, "It's a sex club?"

Jaxon shakes his head. "No, it's not. The first floor is half standard nightclub and half sort of a business level—a place for members of a certain economic status to hang out, party, do business, get drunk, dance, whatever. The second floor is basically your high-rent gentlemen's club. But the third floor...yeah, that's definitely the sex floor up there."

"So you just walk up there and the fuckery begins?" Cory asks.

Jaxon chuckles. "It's not exactly like that. It's a place to *explore* sex in all its forms. It's a place where there's a mutual understanding, but where everything is still consensual and safe."

"And you've been there?" Travis asks. "On the third floor?"

He nods. "Several times."

"Why are we just hearing about it?" Cory asks.

"Membership was closed, but I spoke with the owners and told them I had a few teammates who might be interested. They agreed to a preview night—a night where you can explore the place and the owners can see if you're a good fit," he explains.

"Let's do it," Travis says, standing as if he's ready to go right now.

"Don't you have more questions?" I ask.

I have about a million. What does *a good fit* even mean? Will I have to have sex tonight? Do I *want* to have sex

tonight? Do I have to go to the third floor? Will there be whips and chains and bondage shit? I'm not into any of that, but I'm not opposed to seeing it in action. It's not a sex club...but it sounds sort of like a sex club.

This is a whole new world to me, and the fact remains... I'm supposed to be laying low. Heading to a sex club or whatever the hell this is while I'm still married isn't exactly laying low.

Travis shrugs. "Nothing that can't be answered by immersing myself in the experience."

I want to laugh, but I find myself suddenly nervous. I'm more cautious than him, I suppose, but maybe just for tonight, this could be the answer to silencing the warring noise in my head.

A new, immersive experience.

I'm just drunk enough that the next words come out of my mouth. "Let's do it."

We all glance at Cory, who nods and stands. "Fuck yeah! Let's go."

Jaxon issues the NDAs for us to review and sign, and I glance through the club rules. There aren't many of them.

Discretion is mandatory.

No always means no.

Always ask first and assume nothing.

Practice safety.

Clean up after yourself.

The following are not permitted: drugs, intoxication, prostitution, phones, cameras, video recording devices.

As this is a private, upscale nightclub, please dress accordingly.

There's more stuff about how you can't contact members outside of the club without mutual agreement, but that's about the extent of it.

“Are we dressed appropriately?” I ask Jaxon as I glance down at my jeans and black shirt.

“You’re fine. You’d wear whatever you’d wear on a date. Nobody’s going to kick you out for wearing jeans.”

Four football players piling into an Uber isn’t exactly discreet, so Jaxon drives. That alone tells me this isn’t like the usual night out with the boys. We aren’t going out to get drunk. This is something else entirely, though the more I think about it, I realize that getting drunk at a sex club would only lead to violations of the club’s few rules. Plus, you know, whiskey dick.

He drives us from his place through town, well past the Strip, and out into the desert. For nearly twenty-five minutes, we drive, and we’re all silent as we imagine what this night has in store for us.

I’m not sure my imagination would’ve conjured up the truth.

I assumed we’d be going somewhere just off the Strip, but I guess an exclusive, members only club like this has to be discreet.

There’s a mansion situated on the lot directly in front of us with no other buildings in at least a mile radius. Seclusion at its finest, I suppose. It’s a large, intimidating building that looks like a house built into the foothills of a mountain. It’s a three-story complex with lush landscaping out front, and I’d never in a million years guess this is an exclusive, members-only sex—or not sex?—club.

“It’s at a *house*?” Cory asks as Jaxon pulls in front and puts the car in park.

“Where did you expect it to be?” he asks.

“I dunno,” he mutters. “In some basement under a nightclub?”

Jaxon chuckles. “Nah. The owners pooled their money and bought this place. They gutted the inside and it’s pretty fucking rad.”

The four of us get out of the car and move toward the house.

“I’m sure we’ll all go our separate ways to explore, so meet me by the front door at midnight if you want a ride home,” Jaxon suggests, and I appreciate knowing that we have an end-stamp to the night since we have no idea what we’re getting ourselves into.

We all agree then follow him up to the house. A bouncer sits in a hidden little alcove near the front door. I don’t even see him until we’re upon him. “Welcome back, Mr. Bryant.” He nods at Jaxon, and then he glances at the three of us. “Preview night?” he asks.

Jaxon nods and hands him our NDAs, and he turns to the three of us.

“I’m Rodney. Your host tonight is one of our owners, Mr. Bancroft. I need to see your driver’s license to match it to your paperwork.” The three of us pull out our wallets and show off our licenses, and then he clicks a button, and the front door opens.

He hands the papers back to Jaxon. “Give these to Heidi inside and enjoy your evening.”

Jaxon nods his thanks, and he leads us through the doors. We enter into a foyer with a reception desk directly in front of us and doors on either side. The walls and doors are all painted black, but the countertop Jaxon sets our NDAs upon is a white quartz, and a glow of light is positioned beneath the countertop—the only light in the room save for a desktop lamp behind the tall counter. My first impression is sleek elegance as the door behind us closes with an ominous click.

“Mr. Bryant, welcome back,” the woman I assume is Heidi says. She takes the NDAs off the counter and sets them on her desk without looking at them—as if she trusts Rodney already checked us. “And welcome, friends. Mr. Bancroft is on his way down now. I just need to collect and label your cell phones and then you’ll be able to go on in.”

I didn't realize she'd be taking our phones, but I guess it makes sense. Wouldn't want random people snapping photos here at the club, particularly not with the NDA. Recordings and photographs are not a great idea at a place like this.

The door to the right opens just after Heidi labels my phone in a bag, and I try to get a peek back there but it's dark. Victor Bancroft walks through the doors—the same Victor Bancroft who starred in the action film I saw in theaters last summer.

Victor Bancroft is one of the owners of this club?

I guess it makes sense. You probably wouldn't open a celebrity-slash-athlete exclusive club if you weren't a celebrity or athlete yourself, right?

I can't help but wonder who else has a stake in this place.

“Good evening, gentlemen, and welcome back, Mr. Bryant. And a warm welcome to you, too, Mr. Woods, Mr. Higgins, and Mr. Marshall,” Victor says.

Does he know who we are? Or did Rodney somehow send him our names?

Victor Bancroft knows my name.

I'm not starstruck, exactly, but...okay, fine.

I might be a little starstruck.

“I'm a huge Aces fan. Well done so far this season. I see you going for the big game this year,” he says.

“I'm a huge fan of *Battle Road*,” I blurt.

He chuckles. “Thank you. Let me take you on the grand tour, and then I'll give you some time to play. If you're enjoying yourself and want to come back, we'll get you started on the application process for membership before you leave. You must submit a clean bill of health including blood test results before we can issue your membership.”

Travis, Cory, and I stare at him as he speaks, mesmerized, and then he nods at Heidi before he walks over to the door on the left.

Have they fucked?

“Our entire first floor is the lounge. A place to socialize, if you will. A standard sort of night club but broken into different areas—one with a dance floor and a bar, another that’s a study with places to sit and relax or conduct business. The second floor is gentlemen’s club, complete with dancers and hot wings if you so desire,” Victor says. “And our third floor is our exploration area. Let’s start in here.”

He opens the door.

I draw in a deep breath.

This is it. My first experience at a sex club is well underway, and my tour guide is none other than mega-movie star Victor Bancroft.

If someone would’ve told me this was how my night would go...I’m not sure I would’ve believed them.

CHAPTER 20: TRISTAN

The walls are all covered with heavy, dark curtains, and the first room has the feel of a nightclub. It's a large space with loud music and flashing lights.

The floor is crowded with people dancing, but it's too dark to get a good look at who else I might recognize. The music is so loud in here there's no chance at conversation without yelling. The soundproofing must be on point in this place because I couldn't hear the music that's pumping loudly through the speakers in here when we stood in the lobby.

It's not like I can run home and call my mom and tell her who I saw at the exclusive, private NDA club, anyway.

We go through one set of doors into a hallway with restrooms on either end and then enter through another set of doors to get to the second room. It takes up the other half of the first floor, and it's much quieter with the double sets of doors separating it from the nightclub. Pool tables are taken as people conduct business over a game, and leather couches with women laughing together are set up around the room. It's a relaxed atmosphere. People sip drinks, and unlike what I thought when Jaxon first mentioned this club, nobody's naked.

I feel eyes on us as we move through the rooms—likely people are trying to recognize the new guys in the dim lighting, and some woman catches my eye and smiles at me.

She's young and fit and wears the kind of dress that leaves very little to the imagination, and she's not hiding her interest. She winks at me and seems to laugh, and then she turns her attention back to her friends, so I turn my attention back to Victor.

I can't say I'm not intrigued by it all.

The next floor looks pretty much like a high-rent strip club. It's a little nicer than Honeys, the place a lot of guys on the

Aces frequent, but much of it is the same. There's a stage, poles, and naked women gyrating to the music. In the middle of the room sit tables and chairs where people watch the dancers, sip drinks, or sit with plates full of food in front of them. Others wave money in the air, but unlike Honeys, the dancers here are completely naked. There are no G-strings to tuck the dollar bills into, and when they spread their legs, my eyes laser in on every sweet detail between them.

Along the back of the room is a bar, and Victor encourages us all to get a drink. It's on the house, apparently, or included with membership if we're so inclined. We watch the dancers while we wait for our drinks, and then he leads us through another door to continue the tour.

He takes us to the back wall and opens the slider door there to the backyard, and I find oasis back there. Palm trees and mystical lights and soft music set the ambiance, and it's brighter out here with the dim pool lighting and the stars in the sky than the darkness inside.

“Because the house is built on a hill, the pool area is here on our second floor. It's a place for relaxing and lounging.” Victor angles his head toward the third floor of the house. “Our exploration floor is divided into private rooms, though there are four rooms available for viewing. Two feature a two-way mirror so you can watch but the performers in the rooms don't know they're being watched. The other two rooms have windows so they can see you and you can see them. There are six other private bedrooms up there that have beds and various equipment you're welcome to use if you're a member. Some rooms have a time limit to accommodate more guests, but we have a sign-up sheet at reception that's first-come, first served.”

I spot a couple ascending a staircase and going into a door at the top, so I assume that's how you get to the third floor.

“Our club mission is to provide a place of entertainment for those who both seek privacy and can afford it,” he says, and we all continue to survey the pool area as he talks. “There are plenty of clubs in the area for the general public, and my partners and I wanted a new, exclusive kind of experience for

Las Vegas. A place where people of stature could conduct business or explore whatever they wanted in privacy, without fear or concern that their preferences for pleasure might hit the tabloids. You're welcome to bring a significant other if you have one, though they'll need to submit the same paperwork upon your membership approval. If you're unattached, this pool area is a great place to find someone to play with. We often bring in special acts or have themed party nights, and it's really up to you how much or how little you want to participate. We work hard to ensure there's genuinely something for everyone. I'm going to leave you to explore as I have a gift awaiting me upstairs, but if you have any questions at all, feel free to ask Heidi at the reception desk to track me down."

I can't help but wonder what, exactly, his gift is. Or who his *partners* are.

"Thanks, Victor," Jaxon says.

"My pleasure. Enjoy your first night at Coax, and we hope to see you back." He walks away with those words.

"So...can we have sex here tonight or no since it's a preview night?" Travis asks Jaxon the second Victor walks away, like he's been waiting to ask that question since we walked in the doors.

Jaxon laughs. "You can do whatever you want, man, but the club requests those clean bills of health before you fuck anybody. All the other stuff is fair game, though."

Travis smiles gleefully, and Cory looks interested, too.

As for me...I'm not sure *how* to feel about all this.

I'm definitely intrigued. I don't know if I'm really a *sex club* kind of guy, but this also really *isn't* a sex club. It's a place for four pro football players to go for a night out where we won't have tourists hanging off us or paparazzi scrambling to get our photos.

But there's a certain stigma attached to a place like this, the third floor anyway, and a strange sense of guilt pervades me

even though I haven't done anything more than enter the premises. I haven't even been up there yet.

I'm only here because I wanted a night out with my friends. I'm not here to actually join this club. It's a night out with friends at a new place, and that's it.

Since there's slightly more light out here thanks to the pool reflections bouncing all around us, it's a little easier to make out who everybody is.

I recognize some more big name actors—likely friends of Victor's since they've starred in movies together. I see a few basketball players I recognize, and I spot a hockey player or two. I'm guessing the baseball guys will start coming next week when the regular season ends, though I do spot a retired player across the way talking to a pair of women.

I see James McKinney, the bassist for the band Vail, with his wife. They look to be having a conversation that's leading them to one of those rooms upstairs. Maybe they're waiting their turn and he's telling her everything he's going to do to her up there.

I spot Sebastian Cresswell, a wild rock star who fronts the band Noteworthy, with a bevy of women surrounding him. My guess is he'll have his dick in a few of them before the night's over.

My curiosity is piqued. I want to go upstairs and see what happens in the rooms up there. I should go inside, grab a drink, and either hang by the pool tables on the first floor or watch the show on the second floor while I wait for the clock to tick toward midnight so we can get the fuck out of here...but my curiosity burns too strongly.

Cory asks Jaxon another question, and it breaks up my thoughts. "Where do you tend to hang out the most?"

"Depends," he says. "I usually go to second floor and find a dancer to bring up to one of the private rooms. It's one of the main differences between this place and a place like Honeys."

"You mean the strippers actually want to fuck the clients?" Cory deadpans, and I can't help a small chuckle.

“Oh yeah,” Jaxon says with a wide grin, and I feel like I’m learning things about Jaxon I never knew before.

Maybe I’ll learn a few things about myself while we’re here tonight, too.

CHAPTER 21: TRISTAN

A woman approaches Jaxon. “Back for more, cowboy?” she purrs.

Cowboy?

I try not to think too much about why she’d call him that, and he grins at her. She grabs his hand and pulls him up, and while I’m curious what they’re going to go do, I’m not about to watch my friend have sex.

Or am I?

This place is so confusing.

Cory’s making eyes at some blonde across the way.

Travis nods toward the door we came out of earlier. “I want to go back to the stripper room.”

“The *gentlemen’s club*,” I correct him, and he laughs.

“Who are you kidding, man? It’s a stripper room.”

He’s not wrong.

I think about going with him, but I still want to check the rest of the place out. “You go ahead,” I say. “I’m going to see what’s upstairs.”

I climb the outdoor staircase. I glance down at the pool as I try to reconcile what the fuck I’m actually doing here, and then I open the door.

I find myself in a dark hallway. There are closed doors to my left and to my right, and muffled noises come out of some of them. I walk quietly down the hall. There aren’t as many people up here as downstairs—or so I think. I spot an open door, and I glance in and see a few rows of black leather loveseats pointed at a room. This must be one of the viewing areas, and it’s crowded in the small area with fifteen or twenty

people. I walk in and slip behind the back row to check out what's going on.

This must be one of the two-way mirror rooms, and I look into the room we're watching.

There's a bed in the middle on a rotating platform. The room seems to be safari themed, and while it's dark, I still see the theme clearly, from the cheetah-patterned sheets to the rather tall stuffed giraffe in the corner. A woman is tied to the bed—spread out with her hands cuffed to the headboard and her ankles cuffed to the footboard, and she lies there naked as she watches the two men in the room with her. They're having sex, one behind the other, and the one getting fucked dips his head between the woman's legs.

There are more closed doors, and another two-way mirror room that's empty. At the end of the hallway, I find two more viewing areas. One has a crowd of people watching with standing room only, and I find myself too intimidated to walk into that viewing room since it's so packed—but from what I can see, the room is decorated in dark red and there are a lot of mirrors.

The other has just a smattering of people, so I slip behind the back row in that room to see what's going on. This room appears to have some sort of Parisian theme, and it looks like I just missed the big show.

The evidence of their *good time* is all over the woman's stomach, and the man is gently wiping her clean. He leans down to kiss her, and she grabs the back of his head to deepen the kiss. He chuckles and looks into her eyes, and a certain intimacy seems to pass between them. A couple gets up and walks out of the viewing room, and I take the moment to slide onto another black leather couch—there must be a dozen or so black leather loveseats for two jammed into this small space.

This is more my pace, I think. At least for my first time here.

I wonder what went down in the room. Was she chained to the bed? Were those whips and crops hanging on the wall used? At least one might've been because I see it on the floor.

I spot a dresser, too, and I imagine each drawer is filled with different toys and objects to be used to enhance whatever acts went down in here. A smattering of toys rest on the table beside the bed.

I can't really imagine myself doing this stuff.

I'd never whip a woman. I'm more into caring for those injuries than giving them.

It's all just so unfamiliar to me, though I cast no judgment on whatever gets anybody off.

I watch as the man in this room says some stuff to the woman. She smiles a soft smile up at him as she looks into his eyes, and he rubs her back gently.

A few more people leave the room, like the good part's over now...but as I watch, I feel like *this* is the good part. This is where two souls are connecting. This is where they show how much they love each other after they just did whatever wild acts they did.

This is the caring, nurturing, loving part that comes after the physical act.

This is the part I find myself most intrigued by. The others want to leave, but this is where I want to stay to watch.

"Aftercare," someone mutters as he leaves, as if it's the boring part.

I'm intrigued by the word, and I make a mental note to learn more about it later.

The couple's time in here apparently ends, and they get dressed and leave the room. I stay in here a minute as I process everything I just watched.

The man and woman walk out the front door of their room and peek into the viewing room, where I still sit. I wave awkwardly, and the woman chuckles. "Like what you saw?" she asks.

"I missed most of it," I admit. "Just saw the last part."

“You stayed for aftercare?” the man asks. “Must be new here.”

I chuckle. “It’s a preview night. I don’t know much about this stuff. What’s aftercare?”

“In a BDSM relationship, it’s the part after the scene ends where we connect in a different way...where we make sure everyone’s emotional and mental needs are met after the physicality of whatever we just did in the scene,” the man explains.

“It’s the part where he takes care of me after being rough with me,” the woman says, and her eyes are all tender as she looks upon the man. Is she his submissive? Is he a dominant? What does that stuff even mean? “I get into this subspace and it’s when he brings me back.”

Subspace. I don’t know what that is, either.

I can’t help but wonder whether this sort of thing is required for membership or if this is just what these two people like to do. I don’t want to be part of a dom-sub thing... or maybe I do. Who knows? Maybe this is what I’m here to explore, but the longer I’m here, the more I know deep in my heart there’s still only one girl I want.

There’s only ever been the one.

“Aftercare is vital to any relationship,” the man says, as if he can see into my thoughts about this BDSM stuff. “Some doms skip over it, but I find it important to take care of the woman after an intense experience.” He gazes down at her with love, and despite the outdated idea that maybe he holds authority over her because he’s dominant and she’s submissive, it really doesn’t seem like that. They look happy, and in love, and like this is a mutual understanding in a relationship where they both want to be.

I had that once.

Maybe someday I’ll have it again...but I just don’t see myself finding it in here.

CHAPTER 22: TESSA

For the entire two hours and forty-two minutes it takes me to get from Fallon Ridge back to Chicago on Wednesday, my thoughts are scattered.

Mostly I'm thinking about Tristan.

But my father, Cam, and my brand-new half-siblings creep their way in, and it's a confusing whirlwind of swirling thoughts.

Blasting Stone Temple Pilots didn't help.

Should I call him?

I stuck the receipt with his number on it in my wallet. I'm gathering up the courage to use it, as he told me to.

Should I get in touch with Stephanie or Michael?

I didn't know they existed until a few days ago. I'm not quite sure where I stand on any of it. It feels like something I *don't* want to explore. I've spent my entire life up to this point not knowing, and even though my liar of a father never fessed up, that doesn't mean I want to hop into sisterhood with virtual strangers.

And he'll never be able to give me the answers. I think that's what hurts most of all.

I hated him because of the way he betrayed me, and I didn't even know the half of it. I wrote him off seven years ago. We didn't have a relationship—sort of like he didn't have a relationship with Stephanie or Michael or whoever else is out there.

I preferred living in ignorance, I guess.

And it's within my rights to continue to ignore this. If my career as a nurse paired with my history has taught me anything, it's how to compartmentalize. I'll lock up dear old

daddy in a box with my half-siblings and leave them in a far corner of my mind. I'll toss away the key.

I have other things to focus on.

Like the fact that Cam showed up to the funeral.

I stop for gas a few blocks away from my apartment. As I get out of the car, the stench of a gas station fills my nostrils, and it oddly reminds me that this is home now. Chicago is my home, not Fallon Ridge.

And it's with new resolve that I choose to leave my father and all his lies back in Fallon Ridge.

I don't want to think about what he did. I wrote him off seven years ago, and I said my final goodbyes over the last week. Part of me feels some vindication in the fact that he wasn't just an asshole to *me*. He was that way with *everybody*. All his kids. The wife he lied to. The women he left behind, his congregation...hell, his entire life was a lie.

I just want to leave Fallon Ridge behind me even though I know I'll never fully be able to put Tristan out of my mind. I guess that's the difference between the boy I thought was the love of my life and the father I already said goodbye to.

Maybe I should dial the number on the back of that receipt Tristan handed me after all.

As my tank fills, I stop inside the convenience mart to pick up a few things. I grab a frozen macaroni for lunch, a couple of different flavored seltzers for tonight, and a pack of gum, and it's when I'm standing in line at the register that I see it.

Tristan Higgins. On the cover of some tabloid photographed next to his wife.

The caption below it makes my heart stop for a beat.

From a troubled marriage to baby news?

Baby news? My chest feels tight, like someone's pressing a heavy weight on it.

I grab the magazine and toss it onto the counter at the last second beside the pack of gum the cashier will pick up next to

scan. It's masochistic, but it's also necessary. I need to see what's inside that magazine. I need to study the photographs, need to read the article...need to know if Tristan's wife is pregnant.

On second thought, I pick up the magazine and place it back on the rack.

For one thing, those magazines only get the truth right about half the time.

But beyond that, I shouldn't do this to myself.

It's in that moment I make a decision. I take my bag of stuff out to my car, rifle around in my wallet for the receipt with his number on it, tear it in two, and toss it in the trash can.

Texting him or calling him—getting in touch with him—it'll only hurt us both in the end.

It's impulsive, but it's the right thing to do.

I slip into my car and cry the remainder of my ride home.

Sara is still at work, and the office is open a few more hours. I debate going in just to get my mind off Tristan, and thoughts of Cam slip back in.

Despite what he said after we had sex, he could be right for me if I'd just give him a chance. It's time to stop letting the past blind me. It's time to move forward. Tristan sure did, so why can't I?

And maybe, just maybe, Cam is the key to that.

Cam, who showed up for me.

Cam, who held my hand at my father's funeral.

Cam, who must've said it would never happen again with me after we did it in his office out of fear of getting close to someone.

Maybe I need to take matters into my own hands. I can't help but wonder whether the reason it hurt so much when he told me it wouldn't happen again wasn't because he hurt my pride. It was because there's something deeper between us, and it was the first time I felt that way since Tristan.

That might be something worth exploring.

He wouldn't have shown up in Fallon Ridge to hold my hand if he didn't think so, too.

Rather than stopping into the office with the hope of running into him, I send him a text.

Me: *I'm back in Chicago. Can I see you?*

His reply doesn't come right away, but maybe he's in surgery or with a patient. He's a busy man, and it's not like he has time to just drop everything and text me.

I turn on the television and leave reruns of *Friends* on as background noise as I unpack my duffel bag. I put away my toiletries. I microwave my macaroni. I start a load of laundry.

None of it is enough to distract me.

I stand near the window and stare out at the "view" comprised of a CVS and other apartments too close. Having gone back home to Fallon Ridge makes me realize how much I miss small town living. I miss space and fresh air and friendly hellos. In the big city I have none of that. People stare at the ground in an attempt to avoid eye contact.

Although I suppose having everyone up in your business twenty-four seven is a major disadvantage to small town life.

I sigh as I think about what I really want out of life. A husband. Kids, three or four. I was an only child, or at least I *thought* I was. I grew up one, anyway, and I always wanted a sibling. Little did I know I *had* them, they were just secret.

I shake my head. Life is messy and complicated and ugly. I want to get to a place where that mindset changes. I want it to be messy and complicated and beautiful, and right now, it's hard to see the beauty in much of anything.

I want a house with a big backyard for my children to play. I always pictured the big white house on Main Street in Fallon Ridge as my dream home. I want the wraparound white porch with the swing and the six bedrooms that I can fill with kids and hobbies and the pool in the backyard. I want to be a soccer mom driving a minivan.

Who dreams of owning a minivan? Me...the girl who grew up an only child and fit into the back of my dad's Lincoln just fine by herself.

I like my career, but my true dream is to be a stay-at-home mom to my kids. I went into nursing because I wanted to be a caretaker, and I always imagined I'd use those same skills with my own children. And then, when they're grown and off to school, I imagined I'd go back to work to fill the hours of my days.

Someone knocks on my door, interrupting my thoughts, and my brows dip as I wonder whether some delivery person has the wrong apartment. It happens all the time.

I ignore it as I stare out at the CVS sign, hoping the person will check the address and figure it out, but there's another knock.

I blow out a breath as I make my way over, and I peek through the peephole. My breath catches with a gasp, and then I open the door.

"What are you doing here?"

The man standing on the other side wears a suit, and he moves his gaze from the floor up to my eyes. His burn with heat.

"I got your message," Cam says. "I figured rather than wasting time with trivial matters like arranging a time and a place to meet, I'd just stop by."

"How do you know where I live?" I ask.

"Staff records." He chuckles, and his tone is cautious with his next question. "Are you doing okay?"

"I'm okay," I lie.

I'm not okay, but somehow the fact that he showed up today is helping with that.

He showed up.

And not just today.

Is he playing games? Or am I just naïve? Maybe it's some combination of both.

What the hell am I doing? I can't be so fixated on the past that I miss what's right in front of me.

I open the door wider to allow him in, and he glances around our modest apartment as he takes it in. I close the door behind him, and I lean against it.

"You wanted to see me?" he asks.

I don't move, and I don't respond, either. "Don't you have patients to see? Surgeries to perform?"

He nods. "I do. But I also have a thirty-minute window from a cancellation and you're not far from the hospital."

"So you just...show up?" I don't know why I'm pressing. I'm fishing for something, maybe. Playing games.

"Don't play games with me," he warns. "You won't win."

Strange that he knew that's what I was doing...but he seems like the experienced sort of guy who can read women well.

It seems like it's okay for *him* to play, but not for *me* to play.

Maybe it's his secret kink.

"I'm not playing games," I say.

He takes a step toward me where I still stand with my back pressed to the door. He brushes a stray strand of hair from near my eye, and then he says quietly, "Then tell me what you want."

What I want...

I want to stop thinking about Tristan.

I want to be less confused about my father and the things that were uncovered over the last week.

I want to be sated and I want Cam rocking my body with pleasure.

I want him to make me come the way he did in his office.

I want *him*.

“I want you,” I finally answer.

He presses his body to mine and his lips move to my neck. “A half hour isn’t enough time for everything I want to do to you.” His scruff of his chin is raw and scratchy, a beautiful reminder that this is real.

This moment isn’t just in my imagination. He’s real and he’s here with me, ready to give me everything I’m asking for.

I lean my head back against the door to give him better access to my neck and he peppers kisses along my skin up toward my mouth. His mouth covers mine, and our tongues dance and tangle as we give into the hot need and lust that flies between us.

He kisses me with abandon, yet he’s leisurely, too—like he doesn’t need to leave in the next thirty minutes to get back to his patients. I kiss him back with all the same abandon and leisure because I actually have nowhere I need to be, and meeting him beat for beat, step for step is exactly what I need right now.

There’s nowhere else I would rather be.

The moment when Tristan held me after the funeral flashes through my mind, but I push it away. I can’t do anything about it anyway.

It’s time to move forward.

And with that thought in mind I reach down over his pants. I cup his hard length in my hand as he thrusts his hips toward me. He moans and the sound presses a needy ache between my legs.

I break my mouth from his long enough to say, “Come on in.”

I don’t know if I’m talking about my apartment or my body, but it doesn’t matter. Both, I guess.

I take his hand and we walk down the hall toward my bedroom. I’m not expecting Sara to come home anytime soon, but considering we haven’t had any talks about sharing this

news with anybody, it's best not to screw in the entryway where anybody could walk in on us.

"I need to be quick," he murmurs.

I rip my shirt over my head in response, and a soft smile quirks his lips.

I unhook my bra and pull it off, dangling it from my fingertips as my eyes burn into his where he stands a yard or so away from me.

"I have condoms," I say a little stupidly.

He raises a brow. "I thought you were going through a dry spell."

"Always good to be prepared."

"You weren't prepared last week at the office," he points out.

"I wasn't expecting to be screwed in the office last week," I counter.

He purses his lips. "You and that smartass mouth of yours are going to get you into some serious trouble."

It's my turn to raise a brow. "Are you going to punish me, sir?"

His eyes take on a needy fire I haven't seen in him before. "Would you like me to?"

I'm not sure what we're talking about anymore. I was sort of joking. I've never actually been with someone *kinky*, but if being dominating is his thing and I'm determined to move forward, well, I guess I'll try anything once.

I drop my jeans to the floor along with my panties, and I bend over my bed as if to give him permission to do his thing.

He licks his lips as I glance over my shoulder at him, and he steps toward me. He grips my hips in his hands and bumps his very hard cock still trapped in his pants against my ass, and then without warning, he shoves three fingers into me.

“Ah,” I cry out, and as I get used to the feel of his fingers, he cracks his other palm against my ass cheek.

Hard.

It hurts, but it also does something to my traitorous body. His fingers are suddenly comfortable inside me as wetness drenches his hand, and then he takes another crack at my ass with his open palm.

I gasp and cry out again.

He’s still fingering me, and he leans over me so his body is pressed into my back. He reaches around me to cup my breast in his hand then pinches a finger over my nipple, and it’s more pain that somehow delivers pleasure. My knees feel weak as the ascent into climax starts to wash over me, and I moan my encouragement for him to keep doing what he’s doing.

God, this feels good.

I’m close, *so damn close*, when his voice cuts sharply into the silence of my room. “Where are the condoms?”

He stops the thing he’s doing with my nipple and pulls his fingers out at the same time.

I can’t seem to form words through the ache of need racking my body, so I point to my nightstand as I collapse my front side onto the bed and close my eyes. I give everything over to my other senses as I feel the chill in his absence, as I listen to him open the drawer and locate the box, as his spicy scent that’s warm and wrong fills my nose. He returns, the heat back behind me, and I listen to the rip of the condom packet and the hiss of his zipper. And then a moment later, his fingertips grip onto my hip as he positions himself and slides into me.

I’m drenched for him as he starts pumping, and my body picks up right where he left it as it screams for release. It hits me too fast. I want to enjoy the moment, to forget everything else awhile as he fucks me, but I can’t. It’s too good.

I scream through my orgasm as he hammers into me, each thrust deep as it hits the place of pleasure. I come *hard* as I allow the pleasure to wash over me.

He continues pumping into me even after I collapse down, spent from what he just did to me. It's not long before he hits his peak, too, a curse falling from his lips as he gives in and pleasure rips through him.

He falls on top of me for a beat when he's done, the two of us lying there in exhaustion, but then he pulls out, gets rid of the condom using a Kleenex on my dresser and the small garbage can by my door, and zips his pants back up.

I force myself up, too. He has to leave. I have to let him out. I can take a nap when he's gone.

He doesn't say anything as I get dressed. Instead, he checks his phone.

"I have to get back," he says quietly.

I nod as I pull my shirt back over my head. "I'll walk you out."

When can I see you again?

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but I find I can't ask them. I don't want to seem too needy, don't want to force this to be anything other than what it is. I hate myself for a second that I'm not being exactly who I am, that I'm putting on some sort of act to seem a certain way for him, but he's a confusing creature.

I don't know what this is.

I don't know how to define it, but I also don't know if I need to.

He's the only man I've ever had sex with who I haven't formed some sort of commitment with, and maybe that's what makes it so damn hot with him.

It's a little forbidden since we work together, a little illicit since we're not really supposed to be doing it. It's hot and wrong.

And I want to keep doing it.

I wonder how he feels...but it feels so *immature* to ask, like I'm showing my age by even wondering these things. So I

won't. I won't ask. I won't embarrass myself.

He pauses by the door and gazes at me a beat. "I, um—" he cuts himself off, and it's odd to see the always polished and professional Cameron Foster stutter over his words. "I want you to know up front that this can't be anything other than two people meeting in secret to have sex. It's just us, okay? Nobody can know." He glances at the mantle in the apartment where a photograph of Sara and me cheesing at the camera sits displayed prominently. "*Nobody.*"

I wince at his description, but I mask it quickly. *Why not? Why can't we have more?* The words cross through my mind, but they sound so childish. They sound like they'd only be proving the age gap between us means something when I don't want to prove that at all.

He answers the question before I get a chance to ask it.

"I just...I don't want to disrespect Paul. He's an incredible physician and I respect the hell out of him. On our drive to Iowa, he admitted he thinks of you like a daughter, and I wouldn't want to do anything to tarnish your relationship with him or mine."

I nod. "I understand." *I'm not so young and immature that I can't understand that.*

"Thanks," he mutters. He leans in and presses a soft kiss to my cheek, a heady contrast to the way he just ravaged me in my bedroom and a tender contrast to his words that this is just sex. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," I echo, and then he leaves and I'm left alone to wonder whether I can really handle secret sex with Dr. Foster.

CHAPTER 23: TESSA

A month later, sex with Cam is still dynamite and nobody knows we're doing it in secret.

Every time he leaves, he kisses me like he's taking what he needs until we can be together again, and every time he leaves, I think about telling him that we should just be honest with Paul about what's been going on between the two of us.

He was clear from the start...but I don't know how much longer I can do this. I want to be with him. I want him to take me out to dinner. I want to go on dates. I want to post our picture together to Instagram. I don't want to hide it because I'm starting to fall for him.

I'm not quite sure how we've managed to keep it from everybody—especially from Sara, and especially given the fact that Cam has come to our apartment on more than one occasion for sex.

Actually, I've never seen Cam's place.

I'd think it's a red flag if we were doing anything more than dirty deeds, but he made it clear what I could expect from him and I made it clear that I understood.

I've buried myself in work, and I've avoided going to the Sunday football games at the bar as one measure of banishing my history with Tristan. In fact, Sundays are the perfect time for Cam to swing by for sex, so Sunday afternoons have become the ideal time of the week when we have sex then we lie together for a half hour or so before he has to go. I've never really been a nap kind of person, but the things he does to me are physically exhausting, and I need one after a session with the good doctor.

And that's where I am right now—in that blissful thirty minute stretch. He just ran to the bathroom to take care of the

condom, and I decide to be silly by sending him a text while he's in the bathroom.

Me: *Thanks for the sex. Ready for the nap.*

His phone buzzes on my nightstand on what's become his side of the bed for our naps, and out of sheer curiosity, I lean over to look at my message.

New message from Ridge Fallon.

Ridge Fallon? As in...Fallon Ridge backwards?

Why doesn't he have me in his phone as *Tessa*? Or even *Nurse*, as he still likes to call me at the office or sometimes when he's banging into me?

I gather up the nerve to ask. "Why am I in your phone as Ridge Fallon?" I ask when he returns from the bathroom. His eyes darken a little as they edge over to his phone where it rests on my nightstand.

"Why are you looking at my phone?" he asks, his voice steady.

"I just sent you a message and I was curious whether you had me in there as *Tessa* or *Nurse*," I admit.

"You know I'm just trying to keep it from Paul," he says. "Now let's nap." He slides onto the bed beside me and pulls me against his chest.

I drop it because I'm so comfortable and exhausted after what he just did to me.

But still...I get the sense he's lying to me.

If he was trying to keep what's happening between us from Paul, why would he program me in as Ridge Fallon when Paul attended my father's funeral in *Fallon Ridge* with Cam?

It doesn't hold up, but as I drift to sleep in his arms, I let it go.

When his thirty-minute timer goes off, we both get up. I'm still exhausted, but I have to pee bad enough that I get up and run there first before I walk him out. My stomach rolls with

nausea as we walk toward the door, and a little frisson of fear races up my spine as the symptoms start to add up.

I've been exhausted lately—exhausted in a way I've never experienced before. Bone tired when I'm not doing anything out of the ordinary apart from sex with Cam.

I've been dealing with bouts of nausea at random.

I've been urinating more frequently.

I know the early symptoms of pregnancy, and those are definitely three of them.

Shit.

I don't say anything to Cam about my suspicions as we walk toward the door together. "I'll see you tomorrow," he says quietly, and his mouth collides with mine for one more passionate kiss before he leaves.

Don't go. Stay with me.

I want more than sex with you.

I keep the thoughts planted firmly in my head where they belong even though I want to shout them.

Stay with me while I take a pregnancy test.

Now there's one he's probably not expecting.

I sigh as I give him one last hug, and then he leaves.

As soon as he's gone, I run to the bathroom. I check the cabinet under the sink, and I find a box of tests under there. They're Sara's—she and Shane had a scare a while back, and she stuck the extras under there as insurance.

I suppose I'm included in her coverage.

I read the directions as my chest races with nerves. I'm really doing this.

Alone.

It's not my first scare.

It won't even be my first positive, if that's what it is.

Nor will it be my first pregnancy.

My eyes fill with tears as I rip the package open, thoughts swirling around my brain of the last time I did this. I was alone then, too. I was terrified.

I was stupid.

I tossed the test in the garbage can where my dad obviously found it what seemed like seconds after I saw the two pink lines. Wrapping it in toilet paper wasn't enough when the box was still sitting on the bathroom counter.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. If I'd have just had time to put the box away, maybe my life would've been completely different. Maybe I'd have a six-year-old boy. Maybe I'd be with Tristan.

But I freaked out. I ran to my bedroom to cry, leaving the evidence in plain view.

I'm not sure what was more terrifying...actually finding out I was pregnant or my father's reaction to the pregnancy test box sitting on the counter in my bathroom.

I'm terrified now, too, but for different reasons. I'm older. I can handle this.

I can make my own decisions this time around.

If it's positive, everything will be okay. I tell myself that as I do my thing and take the test.

I think about setting a timer when I'm done. Maybe I should leave the stick face down and check it when it's cooked, so to speak.

But that's not me.

Instead, I stare at the little rectangle that will either show one pink line if I'm not pregnant or two pink lines if I am.

A part of me *wants* it to be positive. Sure, I didn't expect this with Cam—my fuck buddy—of all people, but we'll face it together. I may not know as much about him as I'd like, but I do know that he cares about children. He takes care of them for a living. He'd make a great father.

On the other hand, whether he'd make a great husband... that I'm not so sure about. We'll cross that bridge if we need

to.

It doesn't take the full five minutes the directions said it would.

Two bright lines stand there loud and proud after a few seconds pass.

I blow out a breath as reality hits me.

I'm pregnant, and the guy I'm just supposed to be having casual sex with is the baby's daddy.

CHAPTER 24: TRISTAN

Our bye week occurs on week eight, and it's been over a month since I held Tessa in my arms but she hasn't left my mind.

That means it's also been over a month since I went to that sex club with Jaxon, Travis, and Cory.

Cory signed up right away for membership. Travis and I are both still thinking it over. We haven't had a night out in a while, but just a regular club seems more appealing... especially given the rather steep membership price. I get that they're trying to keep their client list at a certain elite level, but it's also potentially turning those who are on the fence away.

Bye week is when we can finally rest up and start to allow our battered bodies to heal. I prefer to have it a little later in the season than week eight, but we don't get a say in the matter.

I'm grateful Savannah chose this week to go out of town. She told me where she was going but my brain didn't seem to care enough to retain that particular detail.

And so I'm doing shit around the house, shit I watched my dad do as a homeowner even though I don't own this place. I still take pride in it. I sweep out the garage. I change the air filters. I change the batteries in the smoke detectors. I pull weeds. I fix a faucet that drips.

That's all in the first few hours I'm off on Monday morning.

I'm used to having every minute of my time prescribed to me in season, and as much as I enjoy a little time off, now's not ideal for me.

Not when I can't stop thinking about her.

I think about going to Chicago and trying to find her. Would it really be that hard?

But then I think about the fact that I gave her my number and she hasn't used it.

Why hasn't she used it?

I've thought about asking my mom to get her number for me from her mom, but there's too much gossip in small towns. I don't need Janet blabbing to the whole town that I'm trying to get in touch with her daughter. The next thing you know, TMZ will be floating around hitting up the entire population of Fallon Ridge for any tidbit on Tristan Higgins.

I'm still the same kid I was back then. For the most part, I'm a wholesome guy. I just got mixed up with the wrong woman, and it's giving me a bad rap instead of the things she promised before I married her.

Maybe I don't want to be wholesome anymore.

I don't know what to do with myself, but I'm friends with a bunch of famous athletes and we're in Vegas. We'll find something...even if it is an exclusive club where sex takes place on the third floor.

I've got a meeting with Coach Jeff scheduled in an hour, but after that...I'm sure we can find something to get up to.

I shoot off a message to my group of buddies.

Me: *Anyone around for going out?*

I get hits back almost immediately from several of the guys.

Cory: *Getting on a plane to visit home. Don't get arrested.*

Travis: *I'm down.*

Jaxon: *I'm in.*

I don't hear from Deon, Austin, or Patrick, but it's our week off. They might've muted our chat, too. Some guys like a week *completely* off from everything to do with football on the bye, and sometimes I really do understand that mentality. It's not usually Austin's mode, but I think he said he had a meeting with his position coach this morning, too.

I start up a group chat with just Travis and Jaxon.

Me: *Want to meet at London's off-Strip?*

It's usually quieter than the clubs and bars on-Strip, and it's filled with locals rather than tourists.

Not that tourists are a bad thing...it's just that more often than not, they fall into one of two categories: either they're cougars or they're horny younger women in town for bachelorette parties who are already too drunk to have fun with.

And I'm married, as Savannah loves to remind me, so I don't get to partake in the drunk bachelorettes *nor* in the cougars.

At least not publicly.

Tough choice there, anyway. I'd take either at the moment.

Jaxon: *You two made up your minds on Coax yet? That's always a possibility...*

He's not wrong.

It's a definite possibility. Cory talked Travis and me into getting physicals after our first visit *just in case*. I have the results showing my clean bill of health.

Jaxon's been after us to make a decision.

All I need to do is tell him I want in, provide my credit card number to the club along with the rest of my paperwork, and voila...I'm a member of an exclusive, elite club I didn't even know existed a month ago.

It's been too damn long since I've had sex. A man has needs, and being stuck where I am for as long as I have been with a wife I'm trying to escape means those needs are not being met in any capacity.

I have to keep my nose clean to get through to the end of this divorce despite her threats and her digging...*publicly*.

But what about a place where everyone who walks through the doors promises not to tell anyone outside of the doors what went on?

Travis: *It's a little too rich for my blood.*

I think about the cost of the club versus our current contracts. We can afford it. One good endorsement deal would cover the annual fee.

It could be fun. I learned something new about myself the first time I was there, and it might be the perfect solution to my...*problem* that goes by the name Savannah.

Me: *I'll sign on for one year if you can talk Woods into it.*

I slide my phone into my pocket to head toward the Complex, and it's as I'm driving to see Coach Jeff that a thought hits me from out of nowhere.

Where is my wife right now?

Is she digging into something from my past? Is she trying to find more things she can use against me?

Or is she just off visiting a friend somewhere? Does she even have any friends?

Can she even leave town? I'm pretty sure her probation forbids her to leave Vegas, but I could be wrong.

My meeting with Coach is meant to be a session where we review this season and what I'm doing well in addition to what I can improve upon.

But maybe I need to add more to our agenda.

He might be the guy I can trust with the things Savannah is doing to me. He's on my side, and maybe he can help me figure out how to untangle our entanglement.

When I walk into his office, he nods toward the chair across from him. "It's been a good seven weeks so far. How's the hamstring?"

"Tolerable."

"Not quite the answer I was looking for," he mutters. He glances at the screen on the wall beside us where he already has footage from the season pulled up to review. "Anything you want to talk about before we get started?"

I suck in a breath. This is my chance.

And then it hits me from out of nowhere.

Coach Jeff could run to our head coach with this news even if I vow him to secrecy. There's way too much on the line here with my extension hanging in the balance.

No, I'm not going to talk to him about it today.

But I do have a good idea of who I *can* talk to about it.

As soon as my meeting with Coach Jeff is over, I make the call.

"What's going on, Higs?" Luke Dalton answers.

He's a former player for the Vegas Aces, and he happens to be married to my publicist. And maybe most important of all—the true motivation behind calling *him* rather than anybody else—is that he was married to Savannah before I was.

"Can we talk?" I ask.

"Of course. I can meet you or you can swing by here," he says.

"Is now good?"

"Sure." There's a little reticence in his tone, but I appreciate that he's willing to talk to me.

"I'm just leaving the Complex. I'll be there in ten minutes." True to my word, I pull up in front of Luke's place a few minutes later.

"Come on in," he says, and he leads me to the kitchen, where he tosses me a Gatorade. "What's going on?"

I make an easy catch, open the bottle, and chug down half of it. "This stays between us, right?"

His brows draw together. "What's going on?"

"I need your word."

"Can I tell Ellie?" he asks, naming his wife...and my publicist.

“I’ll tell her eventually, but I really need your advice right now.”

He nods, probably already knowing it has something to do with his ex-wife, and he takes me out to the patio. We sit, and he waits expectantly for me to talk.

I clear my throat, and then I dive in. “Shortly after I married Savannah, she drugged me. She obtained my urine, sent it into a lab, and has evidence that makes it look like I took HGH,” I say, mentioning the performance enhancing drug Human Growth Hormone. “She’s been blackmailing me to stay married to her with those results ever since.”

“Fucking Savannah,” he mutters. He closes his eyes and shakes his head. “You’ve seen the proof? Or she’s just threatening?”

“I’ve seen it. She loves to leave copies of it all over the house for me to find.”

“God, that woman really has a thing for this shit,” he mutters. “Listen, you have two choices. You either tell your story first and risk the consequences, or you stay married.”

“What are the consequences?”

He folds his hands in front of him and leans forward a little. “Human Growth Hormone is an automatic four-game suspension.” He shrugs. “Here’s the thing, though. For one, you weren’t caught taking it by the league. For another, it happened shortly after you married her?”

I nod.

“Then it wasn’t this season. And we all know Savannah’s history with this shit after what she did to me. You can always appeal and see if the men upstairs are feeling generous.”

I stare over his pool as I think over his words.

It’s not fair, but if sitting out a few games and allowing my rep to get a little tarnished means I can finally escape her hold, then maybe it’s worth it.

“It isn’t right, and I’m guessing you’re scared, but weigh your consequences. Is it worth staying married to her for four

games?” He shrugs as his gaze falls on the pool. “If you play your cards right, you might be able to orchestrate it so you’re not missing a division game or playoffs.”

The man makes a good point, but the responsible competitor in me doesn’t want to just give up so easily. It’s giving into her demands and it’s allowing her to win.

She doesn’t deserve to win...and yet, she’s still married to me, which is another win for her.

“Yeah,” I mutter.

Maybe the league will go easy on me. It wasn’t my fault... but that’s a fairly common defense when it comes to this kind of thing, and Savannah has the means and connections to blow this story up given her history as a journalist.

She won’t just make it look bad for me. She’ll make it look bad for the entire league that’s already under a microscope when it comes to performance enhancers, which tells me that even if the *men upstairs* are feeling generous, as Luke suggested, they’ll uphold the automatic four game suspension.

I feel like Luke gave me one perspective. My parents gave me another. Maybe I should talk to Ellie about this, too. Or my agent, Jimmy Segal.

Except the more people who know, the better the chance of it getting out. While I trust everyone in my circle, it’s embarrassing as fuck that I let her do this to me, and worse that I’ve let her get away with it as long as I have.

I guess that’s why I chose Luke as the person to talk to about it. He knows Savannah as well as I do, and while I didn’t take his advice before I married her, it might be worth my time to listen this time around.

But rather than deal with it today, I find a text message from Jaxon when I leave Luke’s place.

Jaxon: *Talked Woods into it. Meet at my house at eight.*

I guess it’s time to start taking advantage of my new membership.

CHAPTER 25: TRISTAN

Once we've turned in our paperwork and handed over our credit cards, the fun is set to begin.

"Mr. Bodine is your host this evening," Heidi tells us, and I wonder for a second whether Heidi is a member here or if she's just the face of reception.

Does this mean I can have sex with her up on the third floor so long as she consents to it?

Do I even *want* to have sex with anybody?

I'm not sure, but I'm leaning toward no.

For one thing, I like the idea of an exclusive place to hang with my buddies where the others in attendance share a similar mindset. I want to play pool without feeling like every shot I take is going to end up on social media. And *that* is what convinced me to submit my membership...not the sex club part. The sex club is only one-third of the action that takes place here.

And aside from that, I sort of enjoyed just watching last time, and after doing a little research, I discovered I might be a voyeur. I also looked a little more into aftercare. I'm not sure what it says about me that watching *that* part of it hit me in a different way than the actual act of a cock sliding into a pussy or a face eating one out, but it is what it is.

I guess what it comes down to is that everybody likes different things, and that diversity is what makes life exciting. But what's also exciting is when you find your match—the one who complements your preferences with the opposite.

If I like aftercare, she should like being cared for.

If I like watching, she should like performing.

If I like cramming my cock in her mouth, she should be thirsty for it.

As it turns out, Mr. Bodine happens to be Troy Bodine—the legendary baseball player who played shortstop for the Rockies for fourteen years.

Football was always my sport, but I played baseball in the spring during my high school years. I love the game, and even though I'm five hours from Minneapolis, I was raised a Twins fan—mostly because my dad was born and raised near Minneapolis.

He greets us and welcomes Travis and me as new members, and then he leaves us to our own devices. We follow Jaxon into the nightclub and then the lounge, and it's much the same as last time, except this time there are some couples dancing on the stage, and it seems more crowded than last time. We head to the second floor, and we each grab a drink, sit at one of the tables, and watch.

A woman plops onto Jaxon's lap, and he runs his fingertips up her spine.

I can't help but wonder what he's like with her. Has he been with her before? Why meet here? Why not at a regular club without a steep membership fee, or at a hotel...or even at his house?

I try to keep an open mind.

Two women walk over toward our table. One kneels beside Travis while the other slides into the chair beside mine.

"Tristan Higgins," she says, and she shakes her head a little like she's in awe of the fact that I'm sitting here.

My eyes meet hers. She's gorgeous—there's no doubt about that. Silvery blonde hair that frames her face. High cheekbones, full lips. Tits that are pushed up over the top of her short, tight dress.

"I saw you here a few weeks ago and was hoping you'd come back." She giggles a little, and the rum on her breath tells me she had a drink or two of liquid confidence before approaching me.

She's hot.

But...

She's not my type.

My heart sinks a little.

She's not Tessa.

But Tessa isn't mine.

It's time I move on.

"I'm back," I say with a grin. "Tell me your name."

"Brandi," she says.

"Tristan," I say awkwardly. "But you already knew that."

She giggles and touches my arm, and my eyes go to where her hand is.

None of this feels natural. None of this feels *right*.

I'm technically still legally married, even if it's in name only and I hate my wife and we're only married because she's blackmailing me. But from everything I've heard, Nevada is a no-fault divorce state, which means the judge will not listen to information about bad behavior from either party within the marriage. So if I do something here tonight, and it gets out, or it's publicized, or whatever...it shouldn't really matter.

Still, my lawyers have advised me to stay out of trouble, to lay low, to keep my name out of the media. I should be fine here...right?

"What do you do, Brandi?" I ask, trying to get to know her before I decide if I'm going to...*explore* her upstairs when in my heart, I already know the right answer.

"I'm a local singer-songwriter. I work in a show on Fremont Street," she says. She raises a brow. "And I'm trained in acrobatics, so I'm extremely flexible."

Okay, then. So we're going right for it.

"I do a lot of agility drills myself." Jesus Christ, I sound stupid.

Have I ever spoken to a woman before? It's not clear based on the words coming out of my mouth.

She leans in close to my ear as she starts stroking my thigh. "I bet you're pretty flexible, too," she murmurs, and her hand travels from my thigh slightly upward. "I'd love to find out." She brushes my cock with the side of her hand, and my eyes meet hers.

Hers widen just a little as she feels my length, and I grab her wrist in my fist, halting her progress.

I'm hard, of course. I'm talking to a beautiful woman, there are naked dancers up on the stage in front of me, and I haven't had sex in nearly two years. I think I've been hard for the last six months.

But also...one of the rules of this place is being able to explore sexuality in a safe space, and every act must be consensual. Having Brandi here feel me up before I've even finished my first drink doesn't feel very consensual.

Even in the very few one-night stands I've had, I've gotten to know a little something about the girl first. One was a friend from college, and we got a little drunk, slept together, and realized we'd be better off as friends.

Sex effectively ruined our friendship.

Another was a random girl at a bar, but we talked for hours before we went back to her place.

This...this just feels weird.

I know her name and what she does for a living, and that's it. I don't know if she's an Aces fan or what kind of music she likes or if she's my age or just really good at covering up aging skin beneath all that make-up.

It feels like I should be here *with* someone, like if I had my girl with me and we were going through the rooms, she'd get turned on watching the different acts and I'd lean into her and whisper dirty things in her ear, maybe slip a finger under her skirt or let her palm my cock in a dark corner, and then we'd take it to a private room and do what we wanted or we'd wait until we got back home to unleash the dirty beasts inside.

I'm just not a sex in public sort of guy, I guess.

Come to think of it...I've never actually *had* sex in public. Houses, bedrooms, hotel rooms, even in a pool, sure—but it was in a private backyard, not in the middle of a sex club. I've never done it in a club bathroom. Never in a darkened alley. Never anywhere someone might catch us in the act.

Brandi starts licking the skin just below my ear. "Want to go upstairs and get a room?" Her voice is warm against my ear.

I raise my brows at her boldness then offer her a smile that I hope comes off as sly as I shake my head. "I'll go upstairs with you," I rush to say before she feels rejected. I don't want that, but I'm not sure I want to give her false hope, either. "But I want to watch."

"Watch...me?" she asks, not hiding the hope in her tone.

"Maybe the night will lead us there. But first I want to go to the viewing rooms."

She tilts her head as if she's studying me. "You're a voyeur?"

I shrug. "I'm new to all this. I'm more of a first and second floor kind of guy, and I guess...I'm not sure *what* I am yet when it comes to the third floor."

"Allow me to help you on the path toward discovery," she says, standing. She grabs my hand, and I try to shoot Travis a helpless look as she drags me away, but he's busy making out with Brandi's friend as he palms her tits for anyone in the room to see.

I think he might be just a little braver than me.

Brandi opens a door leading to a stairwell, and we make our way to the top. She leads me to one of the viewing rooms. She moves quietly to an empty loveseat in the back, and she pulls me down with her.

It's the same viewing room that was overly crowded last time with all the dark red décor and mirrors, but this time I can see in. I spot Troy Bodine in the room. He wears a suit and

stands at the foot of the plush king-sized bed, and he appears to be calling out orders to three naked women on the bed who seem to be enjoying themselves. We're clearly coming into the party mid-scene, and I wonder what we missed.

"This is the owners' suite. If they're here and want to play, they automatically get first dibs," she whispers.

I bet that's why there was standing room only the first time I came here. Victor Bancroft was here that night.

I can't help but wonder what he did in here and who he was with.

I also can't help but wonder who else owns the place, so I ask. "Troy, Victor...are there any other owners?"

She nods. "James McKinney—the bassist for Vail. He owns a bar, too, which is why Victor wanted him to be involved."

So a movie star, a rock star, and a retired baseball player?

"Troy's a voyeur—maybe like you," she whispers. She sets her hand on my thigh again, and it doesn't feel as threatening in here. It's darker than the second floor in here, and everyone's so focused on watching what's happening in front of us that nobody's looking over the arms of each loveseat to see what's going on beside them.

I allow my fingertips to find Brandi's leg, too, and she settles in a little closer to me. I rest my hand on her thigh, and she slides her hand up mine.

My eyes are on the three women on the bed. One is crawling in circles around the other two, who are kissing and touching each other. All three are in different states of undress. The crawling woman wears some sort of leather contraption, and I can't quite figure out its purpose since her tits and pussy are on display. It doesn't seem very functional. The two on the bed have some lingerie on but it looks like one is in a very slow process of undressing the other.

"Jazz, suck Amber's pussy," Troy says, and it's almost as if there's no glass between our room and theirs since his voice comes out loud and clear despite the soft music playing in here to drown out the whispers.

I get in my head again.

It's weird being here.

It's weird that I'm watching a live porn right in front of me.

It's weird that I'm sitting on a couch, and I have no idea who was doing what on it before I sat on it, though I spot a hand sanitizer dispenser in the corner and I see someone wiping down the loveseats in the room across the hall.

It's awkward that a girl I don't know at all is touching me, that she wants to fuck me. I'm starting to think I can make it weird-awkward or fun-awkward, and I'm not sure which way I'm leaning. I paid for my membership, but my expectation was that I'd spend most of my time on the first two floors. I'm starting to wonder if I might as well find a way to embrace it all.

I lean in toward Brandi. "What do you like to do here?"

She looks a little too excited as she turns toward me. "I like being submissive. I like being told what to do. And most of all, I like to be punished when I've been naughty." She catches her lip between her teeth.

"What do you do that's naughty?" I ask.

She chooses that moment to slide her hand a little higher, and she squeezes my cock. She moves her hand down until she has me literally by the balls.

My eyes are wide as they move to meet hers. "I think I get the idea now," I manage to choke out in a whisper as she lets go. "So how would you be punished for that?"

She shrugs. "Depends on the dom. Some will tie me up and blindfold me. Others will whip me. Sometimes it's just a spanking, or sometimes they'll choke me with their cock."

"Oh." Maybe I should stop asking questions.

My eyes are on the scene in front of us, and my mind starts to wander.

How will Troy provide aftercare when he's with three different women? Is there even a way to do that?

His voice is loud, pulling my attention from our conversation. “Sapphire, on your knees,” he demands.

She does it. Eagerly.

She sits back on her heels, her head down and her hands on her thighs as she awaits her next instruction.

“Good girl,” he says, and he brings his fingertips gently to her jaw, as if touching her confirms his words.

Something shifts in my chest as I watch them. The other two women are doing things to each other on the bed...but my eyes are glued to what’s happening closer to the window.

“Take it out,” he demands.

Sapphire scrambles to unzip his pants, and she pulls his cock out of his pants. My instinct is to look away, but I force my eyes on them as I study the way he is with her.

It seems counterintuitive given everything I’ve ever learned about being equal in a relationship, but somehow they’re both getting what they need from this arrangement.

“Did you behave this week?” he asks Sapphire.

She looks up into his eyes, and I can see a touch of regret in them as she shakes her head and looks away.

“Eyes on mine,” he demands, and her head jerks up to meet his eyes again. “Should you be punished for what you’ve done?”

She nods again, this time keeping her eyes on his.

He moves his fingertips to her chin, and he taps once. “Open your mouth.”

She does.

“Put my cock in your mouth and suck it,” he demands. “Drop your hands.”

She does.

This is a punishment? She seems to be enjoying it as much as he is.

He thrusts his hips into her mouth as he places his hands on the back of her head to hold her in place, and then he starts to hammer away, fucking her mouth. She sits there and takes it, which is my first clue that she's done this before.

He pulls out of her mouth and jerks off onto her tits. A little shoots off near her mouth, too, and she's frozen into position as he finishes, his grunts filling our small viewing area.

"You may taste it," he says, and she does. "That's enough. You will not pleasure yourself until you are back in this room with me next week."

He tucks himself in and zips his pants back up, and then he walks out of the room.

The two women are still on the bed doing things to each other, but he leaves Sapphire alone there on the floor.

The room goes dark, signaling that the scene is over. The viewers in our room stand to leave, but I don't move.

"What about the aftercare?" I ask.

Brandi shrugs. "Some doms do it, some don't. He chose that as his form of punishment for whatever Sapphire did. Well that *and* withholding her pleasure." She tsks under her breath. "For an entire week. Damn. I can barely go half a day without an orgasm." She laughs.

My brows dip. Withholding aftercare just seems...wrong. "But the aftercare—isn't that the most important part?" From what I've learned during my very brief research, it's the part that makes everyone feel good about what just happened. I wonder how Sapphire feels right now—if she feels left alone or tossed aside, or if she knows he did it because he's punishing her.

I mean...she'd *have* to know that, right? It's a mutual understanding between two people, of course.

"For some couples, sure. But for many, the scene is the important part, or the physical act of sex is the important part. It's different for everybody."

"What about you?" I ask.

“As long as I get mine, I walk away a happy girl.” She winks at me, and I think this is the part where she expects me to *give her hers*, so to speak.

But I’m more concerned about the women in the scene we just watched and whether they’re going to get the care they need after what they just did.

CHAPTER 26: TESSA

Cam wasn't in yesterday, and he's not answering my calls. It's like he senses I have something important to tell him and so he's avoiding me. He's not in on Wednesday, either, but he never is so it's not like I was expecting him.

I last texted him Monday night to see if he was available for a quick romp—but really so I could tell him our news, and he never wrote back.

At this point, it just seems a little desperate to text again. The ball is in his court.

He's finally back in his office on Thursday morning. I stop in to talk to him before I see my first patient.

“Can we talk?”

He glances up at me over the black frames he wears when he's studying paperwork. “Close the door,” he grunts.

I do and I walk over to the seat across from him. “What's going on with you? We haven't talked since Sunday, and that's not like you.”

“My apologies. A, uh, family member passed away and I've been helping with the estate. It's why I was out Monday. And I have a lot to catch up on in my absence.” He says it thickly, like he's trying to drop a hint...but he also asked me to close the door, so I'm confused.

His eyes return to his paperwork, and I feel like we're back to that old dynamic where I'm the subordinate nurse and he's the high and mighty doctor.

“Oh my God. I'm so sorry,” I murmur. “You should have told me. Then I could have shown up for you the same way you showed up for me.”

I'm carrying his baby now. He deserves to know that, deserves the happy news, but maybe now isn't the best time. He's clearly stressed, overwhelmed by losing this family member and then returning to mountains of work.

Maybe telling him right now he's got a baby on the way isn't ideal timing.

"Do you want to come over tonight?" I ask. Maybe I can tell him then.

"I can't." His eyes aren't on me. They're down on the file again, and I wish he'd study me the way he's studying the papers. I wish he'd give me that same attention.

"Oh. Okay. I'll let you get back to work." I stand and move to walk out of his office when his voice stops me cold.

"I think we should stop seeing each other."

I turn slowly around to face him. "You...you what?"

"I never should have gotten tangled up with you in the first place." He shakes his head but continues to avoid eye contact.

"Do you really believe that?" I ask, my voice trembling as I stare him down.

We're having a freaking baby together.

Granted, he doesn't know...and with the words he just spoke to me, I sort of feel like he doesn't *deserve* to know. Maybe I'll never tell him at all.

This must be because of whoever just passed away. There must be *some* motivation behind him just suddenly cutting me off out of the blue.

It feels like a break-up even though we never committed to anything at all. For all I know, he's been doing this on Saturday afternoons with somebody else.

He finally glances up at me. When his eyes connect with mine, they're hard and cold. They're not the warm, tender eyes that look upon me when we wake together from our Sunday sex naps. They belong to someone else. Someone who's going

through something, someone who is confused and unclear about what direction to head in next. “Yes, I do.”

I press my lips together and nod, and then I walk out of his office, that sweet little declaration of his the last words spoken between us. I stride straight to the bathroom where I break down in a stall for approximately thirty seconds, and then I blow my nose, draw in a shaky breath, and head to room one where Sienna Sorkin awaits her happy nurse. I pass Sara in the hallway. Her brows dip when she sees me.

Okay, so Sienna might not be getting the *happy* nurse. I might not have masked the fact that I was just crying in the bathroom as well as I thought I did.

And I might have to face Sara in a bit to explain why I look like a trainwreck.

Because I am.

Because I’m pregnant and the father just told me it was a mistake to be with me in the first place.

I blow out a breath as I push Cam from my mind and knock on the door to room one.

It isn’t until an hour before lunch that I run into Sara again.

“Are you okay?” she asks quietly.

I shake my head without a word. Maybe it’s time to let someone in on this. I’ve been going through it alone since I found out, and frankly I’m tired of feeling alone. Who better to unload it all onto than my best friend?

“Let’s grab lunch together, okay?” she suggests.

I nod as I look up at the ceiling in an attempt to ward off the tears heating behind my eyes. I take care of two more patients fill out their charts and notes, and then meet Sara in the breakroom.

“Sandwich?” she asks, indicating the sub shop located a few doors down from our office.

I shake my head since pregnant women aren’t supposed to eat lunchmeat. “Salad place?” I suggest, and she nods. We

grab our purses and head out.

“What’s going on, Tessa?” she asks as we walk the two blocks to the restaurant. “You’ve been acting strange for weeks.”

I sigh. “I’ve been sleeping with Cam.”

Her eyes grow wide. “Foster?”

As if it needs clarification.

“And you didn’t tell me?” she screeches.

“I’m sorry.” I duck my head. “We didn’t want anyone at work to find out, and he just broke it off with me.”

She tosses an arm around my shoulder and squeezes me in a side hug. “Oh no. I’m so sorry. What an asshole.” She shakes her head as she lets up her grip, and I appreciate the solidarity. “But Cam Foster? Dang girl, that’s a score and a half.”

“There’s more,” I say.

She stops walking. “What is it?”

I clear my throat. “I’m pregnant.”

Her eyes bug out. “You’re...you’re...”

I nod. “Pregnant.”

“And it’s...it’s...”

“His.” I press my lips together at the confession, and then I sigh as we both start walking again. “What do I do?”

“Have you told him?”

I shake my head. “I’m only about six weeks along. I haven’t even gone to the doctor yet to check, and then he broke it off out of nowhere.”

“Oh man. And now, if you tell him...”

“It’ll just look like some desperate attempt to win him back,” I say flatly.

“Right. We need to come up with a plan.” We stop outside the salad place.

I knew talking to her about this was the right thing to do. It feels good to have somebody in my corner to help me figure this out.

CHAPTER 27: TESSA

We didn't really come up with a plan. Sara's big plan was for me to dress sexy...hard to do when our uniform is scrubs. She also suggested going to the doctor to be sure.

That's probably a better start.

I make my appointment. It's still three weeks away.

I don't go to the Sunday football teambuilder—not because I'm hoping Cam will stop by for our usual Sunday afternoon fun, but because I don't want to watch football and I don't want to think about Tristan. I don't want to be at the bar in case Cam shows up there. I don't want to explain why I'm not drinking when I always drink at the teambuilder.

I guess I'm just not in the partying mood.

Instead, I sleep the afternoon away. I'm exhausted all the time—a symptom I remember well from the first time around. It's like your body is warning you that sleepless nights are ahead...not that I ever had those after my pregnancy the last time.

At least not because I had a baby's cries waking me.

I shake off the thought.

Weeks go by, and I find myself celebrating Thanksgiving with Sara and Shane at Sara's parents' house shortly after my confirmation appointment.

I'm due in the middle of June. Thanksgiving marks slightly over nine weeks of pregnancy.

I can't keep this secret much longer.

I have to figure out what the hell to do.

My mom declined my invitation to travel to Chicago to give thanks with us, and instead she said she and Sue had a

long talk and she was spending the holiday with them watching Tristan play at a sports bar near Davenport.

The thought of watching Tristan play with his parents nearby is the main reason why I opted to stay in Chicago rather than heading to see my mom for the holiday, but I told her it was because I had to work on Friday.

Cam has ignored me at work, and I've avoided him at all costs. I've avoided all mention of him. I've tried to avoid even thinking about him, but that hasn't been quite as successful, particularly because he has added additional office hours and is now meeting with patients for consultations every morning except Fridays in our office.

I haven't figured out how to tell him, but as the first weekend in December hits and my pants start to feel tighter and tighter, I know I'm running out of time.

On a snowy Sunday afternoon, I sit in the recliner in the family room staring out at the soft snowfall with a blanket draped over my shoulders and a fire crackling in the fireplace. Sara went to the bar with Shane to watch football, so I'm by myself.

I'm going to tell him this week.

I have to.

It doesn't matter that it's half his. It's also half mine, and no matter what happens when I tell Cam, I will love this baby with my whole heart.

Well, the pieces that are left of my heart, anyway.

I will work up the nerve to tell him tomorrow morning at the office.

I have no other choice.

Just as I make that decision, a knock sounds at my door.

I get up and move across the room to answer it, pulling the blanket a little more tightly around my shoulders.

I peek out the peephole, and I gasp.

I open the door. “What are you doing here?” I ask, and it’s reminiscent of the day I got back into town after my father’s funeral.

“I can’t put on this act anymore, Tessa,” Cam says. “I can’t keep ignoring you. I should, I really, really should, but I just can’t.”

“Thank God,” I breathe, and I fall into his arms. I shouldn’t. I should make him grovel. I should make him beg.

But it’s such a relief that I’m not going to have to do this alone...that I can finally unload the secret I’ve been carrying around for weeks. I’m just glad he’s here.

He catches me and we cling to each other for a beat, relief settling onto my shoulders. He wants to be with me.

Maybe he’ll want this baby, too.

He pulls back just enough to prompt me to look up at him, and his gaze burns hotly at me. He breaks the stare, and his lips fall to mine in a messy, wet, sexy kiss.

I should warn him before he strips me naked.

I pull back.

“Can we talk first?” I ask softly.

He doesn’t hide his disappointment as he lets me go and walks into the apartment. I close and lock the door behind him, and he settles onto the chair where I was sitting a moment ago.

I think about sitting on the couch across from him, but I’m too antsy to sit right now. I need to get this secret out in the open.

“Why’d you change your mind?” I ask.

He draws in a deep breath. “What we have, Tessa...it’s special. I see you at work and I force myself to stay away, but I can’t do it anymore. I can’t stop thinking about you. About us. About being with you.”

“I have something I need to tell you. I wasn’t sure how to bring it up after you, uh...broke things off.”

“Go ahead.” He leans forward, clasping his hands in front of him while he waits for my words.

I glance out the window. The snow is falling a little harder now, blanketing everything in soft white. I hate driving in it, but it’s beautiful. What tends to be dark and dingy turns bright and clean with just the tiniest bit of snowfall. Soon the cars will turn that fresh blanket into dirty slush, making both walking and driving dangerous, but right in this moment, I see beauty.

And maybe that’s my signal that it’s time to tell Cam about the thing of beauty we created.

“I’m pregnant,” I say softly.

All the color seems to drain from his face, but he doesn’t otherwise react for a beat. “You’re what?”

“Pregnant.”

He shakes his head. “No. No, you can’t be.”

“I am.”

“But we’ve been careful.” He stands and paces in front of the fireplace. “We’ve worn a condom every time but the first. If you were pregnant, hell, you’d be two...almost three months along.”

I nod and press my lips together. “Ten weeks five days today.”

He shakes his head as the warmth that has been in his eyes since he walked in today slips. “You can’t have my baby.”

I snort. “Well I am. You’re going to be a daddy, Cam.”

He stops pacing and gives me a sideways smile that’s more hysterical than happy. “I already am.”

My brows dip, and it hits me in that moment how little I know about the man who knocked me up. I’ve been so enraptured by his seduction that I didn’t really bother to get to know anything about him.

“I have four children,” he says, his tone flat. “Charlotte, Carter, Colton, and Caroline. They range in age from twelve to

six.”

“Oh,” I manage on a grunt as if I’ve been punched in the stomach. “How come you never told me?”

He grunts out a mirthless chuckle. “Because that’s what you do when you’re having an affair, isn’t it? You keep secrets and you tell lies.”

“An...an *affair*?”

He takes a few steps closer to me, his eyes hard and unforgiving. “You cannot have my child. You need to take care of it.”

“Excuse me?” I say, my hand moving protectively to my stomach.

“You heard what I said. I’m up for an award from the United States Medical Association that recognizes, among many things, dedication to family. What we do in our private time cannot be made public. Nobody can know that you’re pregnant with my child, which is why I need you to *take care of it*.” He repeats those same words again, and nausea clamps onto my stomach.

“Dedication to family?” I repeat. “Wait a second,” I say, trying to come to terms with what the hell I’m hearing. I feel sicker and sicker as the truth dawns on me.

I’m the other woman.

I’ve been the other woman this whole time, and I didn’t even know it.

“Are you *married*?”

He glances away from me and at the fire. “Yes.”

“How long?” I ask, not that it matters.

His brows dip. “Thirteen years.”

“Jesus, Cam! And you’re just...fucking around with a twenty-five-year-old? Like that’s okay?” I can’t seem to control my voice as I yell at him.

He lifts a shoulder. “You didn’t seem to mind it when I had you bent over my desk, did you?”

Guilt creeps over me. “Fuck you,” I spit.

“I tried to stay away. I tried to treat you like shit so you wouldn’t be interested. And you know what happened? It made you want me more. It made me want you more, too. I’m weak, Tessa. I’m only human. I make mistakes.” He glances down at my stomach.

“This baby is *not* a mistake,” I hiss, defending the little peanut I already love. “But being with you sure as hell was.” I point to the door. “Get out.” There is no tremble to my voice as I protect this little life growing inside of me, and it marks the first moment in this pregnancy when I actually *feel* like a mother. I will do whatever it takes to protect this baby.

Even if it means protecting it from its father.

He shakes his head in disgust, but he doesn’t move toward the door despite my warning. “Think about what making a scandal like this public would do to Lakeshore Pediatrics. What it would do to Paul and Marsha.”

“Don’t you dare bring them into this,” I say, pointing my finger at him as I glare.

“The award I’m up for is prestigious. I’ve worked hard to get where I am, and receiving the award comes with grant money. It comes with recognition. If you tarnish my name by going public, you’re not hurting me. You’re hurting Paul, the man who’s been like a father to you since you’ve worked for him. Consider that as you stand on your moral high ground, *Nurse.*”

With those words, he turns to leave.

“I hate you,” I say.

He shrugs. “You’re not the first, and you won’t be the last.”

He walks out my door with those words, and I can’t help but wonder whether he means I’m not the first to hate him...or I’m not the first woman he’s put into this exact same situation.

CHAPTER 28: TESSA

My phone rings shortly after he walks out, but I'm shaking now and sobs have started to rack my body, so I don't pick up.

A text comes through a second later from Sara.

Sara: *I need to talk to you. Call me.*

I can't call. I can't form words right now, so I wait it out.

The door opens ten minutes later. The bar isn't far from our place, so she must've walked home to tell me whatever it is she needs to tell me.

She's alone, which means she left Shane at the bar while she walked home by herself in the snow to get to me.

She spots me on the floor in front of the fire crying, a blanket wrapped around my shoulders. She runs over to me and sinks down to the ground, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. "What's going on, Tessa?"

"He's married," I sob. "He has four kids."

She sucks in a breath. "That's what I needed to tell you. At the bar, everyone was talking about some award he's up for. There's a whole article."

I try to suck in a breath, try to stop crying, but it's like trying to stop a freight train barreling down the tracks. "He told me about the award. I'm not allowed to tell anyone about the baby, or it could hurt Paul."

She looks confused. "How would it hurt Paul?"

"Because this award is a prestigious honor, and it comes with grant money," I say, my voice shaky as I force the words out. "Even just having him in contention will mean attention on our little practice."

"Like enough attention that it could even turn Lakeshore from a little practice to a huge and successful one?" she asks.

I nod. “And I want that for Paul and Marsha. They’ve been so good to me.”

“He doesn’t deserve it,” she says quietly, tightening her arms around me in solidarity. “The award, I mean. Cameron Foster does not deserve that award.”

She’s right. The man deserves exactly zero awards after the way he treated me today...the way he’s treated me for the last three months, really. Unless it’s an award for Douchiest Doctor. *That* he might win.

“He told me to *take care of it*.” Just saying the words presses a fresh bout of tears behind my eyes. How could someone who takes care of kids for a living—who *saves kids’ lives* for a living—suggest I just get rid of what he deems to be a problem?

I don’t want to take care of it...not in the way he means. I want this baby. I want to be a mother.

Sometimes I think it’s *all* I’ve ever wanted.

And I want to figure out how to take care of it in a different way than he suggested. I want to hold it in my arms as I care for it. To love it. To mother it.

“Oh God. Are you serious?”

I nod. “Send me a link to the article.”

She lets go of me to link the article in a text, and I click it once it comes through.

Chicago United Hospital is proud to announce that Dr. Cameron Foster, pediatric surgeon, is one of three doctors across the United States in contention for this year’s United States Medical Association’s Doctor of the Year award. Foster will be recognized for demonstrating the highest values of leadership, dedication to patient care, community engagement, and family values. The father of four spends countless hours off the clock volunteering around the Chicagoland area with his wife, Christine.

Ice claws at my chest as I look at the photograph below the first paragraph. I study the six people in the photograph, and

there's no mistaking that the four children look like a mixture of the man who knocked me up ten weeks, five days ago and the woman smiling beside him as he draws her in close.

My eyes move down to the caption.

Foster with his wife Christine and their four children: Charlotte, Carter, Colton, and Caroline.

How absolu-fucking-lutely adorable. Cam Foster and his wife Christine and their four kids who all have names that start with a C.

He's *married*, a detail he conveniently left out. He doesn't wear a ring. He doesn't have photos of his kids around his office. He fucks nurses in the late hours after everyone leaves.

He's *cheating* on his wife. I'm the other woman, and I had no idea.

God, after everything I learned about my father just a couple months ago...

I feel sick. I feel violated. I feel like I'll never be able to trust another man ever again.

How many other nurses has he screwed over the years? Does his wife know? Do his kids?

I toss my phone aside. I can't continue reading the article praising the man who screwed me every Sunday over the last month for being a *family man*.

He's trash. A flaming hot pile of shit trash.

His wife should know who she's married to.

His boss should know what sort of *family values* he upholds.

I wish I could shout it from the rooftops.

But that would only hurt the people I care about.

"What are you going to do?" she asks quietly.

I shake my head. "I don't know. I'm going to start showing soon. All my clothes are getting tight. And with a sec—" I cut myself off.

I was about to say I read that with second pregnancies, mothers often show sooner than with the first.

I've never told anybody about the first baby.

Apart from the hospital staff and adoption agency, my parents and Auntie Jane are the only ones who know what happened.

"Um, with a, uh, *second* to think about it, I might come up with some answer," I finish feebly. Luckily she chalks up my sentence to the general confusion at everything that's gone down today.

"Just say it's somebody else's," she suggests.

"And walk into the office every Monday through Thursday hoping I don't bump into him?" I ask, and the realization hits me.

I don't want to quit my job...but I also don't know if I have much of a choice.

I'll give it a little time.

I'll think about it.

But I'm not going to be able to hide the fact that I'm pregnant very much longer. I can wear big dresses and sweaters, sure, but in the next three or four months...a sweater isn't going to cover up the truth, and given the fact that I'm supposed to wear scrubs to work, it's going to be even harder to hide it.

I'll figure it out. I'm not alone anymore now that Sara knows.

And maybe the next person I should tell is my mother... except the last time my parents discovered that I was pregnant, well, my entire life was flipped on its head mere moments later.

CHAPTER 29: TRISTAN

Practice was light today thanks to winning our game yesterday, and tomorrow's our day off...which means the Thursday Night Crew has broken off into a smaller private group I refer to as the Monday Night Coax Crew. Patrick, Austin, and Deon have yet to ask about our Monday night plans or why Jaxon, Travis, Cory, and I are suddenly closer than ever, but I'm sure it won't be long before they catch on.

The four of us just pulled up out front of the mansion, and a new feeling pulses through me as we get out of the car.

It's a strange feeling now that I'm an actual member of this place. I belong here.

We all do.

I like this place, yet I haven't told a soul about it. I don't want anybody to know I come here, yet I can't stop thinking about it. I can't stop myself from getting in the car when Jaxon suggests a visit.

And it's not about the third floor. It's interesting up there, sure. It's intriguing. But I like the first floor the best. I've met some other local athletes, I've been invited to charity events. It's a new community where I feel like I belong.

I've been through this a time or two now, and I wore black dress pants with a dark shirt tonight. My buddies are dressed similarly, and we're four single guys ready for a night of fun.

I'm just not quite sure what that means for me yet.

The other three have all admitted to having sex at this place.

I haven't.

I don't know if I ever will.

I've only been to the third floor twice. I spend most of my time in the first floor lounge, though I occasionally partake in a snack on the second floor while I watch the dancers.

I doubt I'll find someone who I connect with on a deeper level here of all places, and further, I can't imagine introducing her to my parents if I did.

Hey, Mom, this is Brandi. We met at Coax. It's a sex club in the middle of the desert run by celebrities, and you'll never guess who else I saw there.

Yeah...that doesn't sound like me.

Brandi beelines straight for me when I walk into the lounge. "You're back," she says, and she rubs her tits on me. At least that's what it feels like. I guess it could also be a hug.

"Good to see you again," I say, opting for a friendly tone. I sling an arm around her back to hug her casually, and then I step back.

"Are you voyeur Tristan again or are you ready to get down and dirty?" she asks, cutting right to the chase.

I chuckle. "I'm not sure yet." It's as honest an answer as I can come up with.

"Do you want to watch *me*?" she asks.

I shrug. "Sure." Watching her will get the heat off me, anyway.

"Alone or with somebody else?" she asks.

"I want to see you with someone else." The words are out before I can stop them, and even I am surprised by them.

It's another thing that tells me Brandi isn't the girl meant for me. If I want to watch her with another man rather than participating in the act in the same room as her, clearly she's not the one for me.

The thought of Tessa holding another man's hand pops uninvited into my mind, and a sliver of jealousy tears down my spine.

She held another man's hand and I can't stop thinking about it.

Brandi's about to find another guy to bang in front of me and I'm interested to watch it.

There's a clear difference there—one clear enough that it tells me Brandi isn't ever going to be anything more than a friend to me...if that, even.

I wish things could be different. I wish I could find it in me to have some interest in someone who isn't Tessa, and I still feel like there's a possibility that someday I will. I married Savannah, after all. There was *some* interest there, some *feelings*, even if it all came from manipulations and alcohol.

But the day I find that connection again isn't today, and I still don't see it happening here at Coax.

This is just something to do to pass the time. A place to go where I can find pleasure and learn a trick or two.

My dirty little secret.

That might be all this ever is.

That *will* be all this ever is. I make a vow to myself as Brandi grabs my hand and leads me out toward the pool. Nobody barring other members of this club will ever know about my time here.

She walks up to Graham Campbell, the country singer, who's talking with a group of men, and she interrupts his conversation. He glances down at her, and just that one little second of attention is enough for her. She stands on her tiptoes, whispers something in his ear, then crushes her mouth to his.

And that's it. I have no idea what she said, but the two of them make their way upstairs. I follow behind. They slide into one of the viewing rooms as they wait for a scene to end, and once a worker has cleaned the room and changed out the sheets—something they pull a curtain over the window to do, by the way—Graham leads Brandi toward the hallway and into the room.

A little thrill of excitement rushes through me. I've watched people I know *of*, like Troy Bodine, but I have yet to watch someone I *know*. I feel like I *know* Brandi now, and sitting in a dark room behind a window watching what's going on in there feels like I unlocked a whole new level of the sex club.

It's wrong. It's unnatural to be sitting in a room watching as Graham pulls Brandi's dress over her head and tosses it to the floor.

It's wrong to watch her standing there in her silky bra and panty set. Wrong to watch as his hands roam over her skin as he leans down to kiss her.

Wrong to watch as he frees her tits from their bra prison. Wrong to watch as he sucks one into his mouth, as he bites one between his teeth, as she arches back and cries out with the pain-lined pleasure over what he's doing to her.

It's wrong to watch as his fingers slide into her panties, and as her hands trail down toward his cock, and as he bats her hands away because he must have other plans for her.

My own cock fights for escape from my pants as it grows harder watching the scene unfold before me. There's something about watching two people like this directly in front of me that's totally different from watching porn. It's two real people, and there's some sort of power in knowing they're doing something I'm not supposed to be watching.

It's all legal here—welcome, even, considering they're doing this in a room with windows so they know people are watching them—but it still feels like I'm doing something I shouldn't be, and I think that's the thrill of it all.

I've lived my life mostly on the straight and narrow. For the most part, I've followed the rules. I've gone off course, sure—who hasn't?—but I've never done anything overtly criminal. Normally watching two people having sex through a window would be a criminal act, but doing it in a sex club where everyone has consented to the act makes it legal.

I'm still confused by it all, still sure I shouldn't be here, and yet I can't seem to look away.

I have access in here to something that should be hidden. I'm watching a scene unfold before me that's normally done in the privacy of one's own home.

Instead of being private, I sit in a room with a few others as I watch Graham rip Brandi's panties directly from her body. I see him roughly shove her over to the bed, pushing her down to bend her over the side so her cheek meets the mattress.

He unbuckles his belt, pulls his cock out, and secures a condom, and then he shoves into her without warning. His two second finger-bang must've told him she was ready, and he hammers away at her, his grunts filling the room.

Her face is toward the window, and I watch her expression for a beat as I try to get a read on what she's feeling. Her eyes are a little blank where I'd expect to see some excitement, and I'm surprised by that. She's always so...animated when we've spoken, but I'm not sensing that now.

I'm sensing that she's only doing this for me. She doesn't want to be with Graham, but it's what I told her I wanted tonight.

My chest tightens.

She asked him, though. She agreed to all this.

He keeps driving into her, and she moves up so her palms are resting on the bed. Her perky tits bounce with his rough drives, and she turns toward the window again.

He slows a little before he slams in again, and her eyes seem to pick up a little excitement. He leans on her back and reaches around to touch her clit as he fucks her, and she closes her eyes with a low moan.

He's getting closer and closer, and maybe it's just me feeling like I couldn't be the man in one of these rooms. I'd be way too in my head about it—not necessarily about how I look, because I've never been self-conscious about that, but about how long I'm lasting or how well I'm pleasuring the woman or what her expression says as I'm fucking her.

Maybe that's what makes me a voyeur. I want to watch rather than be watched.

I want to have sex, of course. But I want it to be in privacy, and above all, I want it to be with the right woman.

Graham's close—obvious by the way his body tenses, and he pulls out of her, rips the condom off, and finishes right on her back.

He pants for a few beats as she just lies there, waiting to get hers, and then he tucks himself into his pants. He grabs a tissue from the nightstand, wipes her back, and tosses it in the trash.

“Thanks, darling. That was great,” he says, and he walks out of the room.

And that's it. It wasn't an intense scene with whips and cuffs and plugs and lube. It was just a quick fuck over the side of the bed, and he didn't even bother to get her off.

He walks past the viewing room as people start to exit, like this is all normal, but I can't seem to take my eyes off Brandi.

She's slowly gathering her clothes, and there's a new despondency about her. I wonder if she's been with Graham before—if he treated her this way or if there's something about his reputation that told her he'd be a good choice tonight. I wonder if she's happy with the way that just went down or if she's throbbing and needy since she didn't get to climax herself.

I remember her words from the first night we met—that as long as she got hers, she's a happy girl. She *didn't* get hers, and she didn't get any aftercare, either, and maybe someone should give those things to her.

Maybe it should be me. I don't want to touch her, don't want to fuck her, but I do have an idea.

She's picking her dress up off the floor when I open the door.

She looks surprised the door is opening, and I don't know all the rules on etiquette or how these rooms work, but I don't want to do this in here.

“Come with me,” I say softly.

I find an empty room and slip in, locking the door behind me. There's a couch in one corner, and I motion to it. "Lie down," I demand as I walk through the room.

I open the top drawer of the dresser in here, and I find a range of butt plugs. At least that's what I think they are.

I close that drawer and try another one.

I find a selection of vibrators, and I pick one up. I toss it to Brandi, and then I slide into a chair in the corner of the room. It's dark in here, and the chair is in the shadows so I'm basically hidden from sight.

"Use it to make yourself come," I demand.

She opens the nightstand drawer and pulls out a bottle of lube, and she squirts some on the toy.

And then I watch as she powers it on and slides it down into her pussy.

My cock is rock-hard now, painfully so. He wants to play. He wants escape. He wants to come.

But he's going to have to wait.

"Touch your tits," I say.

One of her hands slides up her body to grip onto her nipple, and her hips lift off the bed as she moves the toy in and out of her body.

It's hot.

Real fucking hot.

She starts to shudder, and then she cries out, "Oh God, I'm coming!"

She thrashes around as she fights through her climax, and when it's over, she pulls the toy out and powers it off before setting it on the table beside her. She settles back into the cushions, a satisfied smile on her lips, and the tightness in my chest dissipates at the sight of that smile.

I walk over toward her. "Are you okay?" I ask softly.

She nods with a quiet hum.

I find a package of baby wipes in the nightstand between the lube and some massage oil. I hand her a few wipes, and I look away while she cleans up.

“You don’t have to take care of me,” she says quietly.

“Someone should,” I say.

She doesn’t smile, but something changes in her eyes—and it’s a little terrifying.

I think she’s starting to catch feelings for me.

But it’s not mutual, and I need to make that clear.

I’m only stepping in right now because a weight of guilt presses on me that someone didn’t treat her the way she deserved to be treated when I’m the one who encouraged her to do this in the first place.

She’s a grown woman with the ability to make her own decisions, but I still feel like she picked Graham because she knew he’d be an easy *yes* for me to watch her with.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, and I can’t help but wonder if I’ve found a new place in this club as the guy who provides aftercare when others can’t be bothered with it.

CHAPTER 30: TRISTAN

I stare at the phone in my hand, the contact information of my head coach, Mitch Thompson, pulled up on the screen.

We have film this morning and practice this afternoon, and I feel like I need to get this off my chest. I can't stay married to Savannah a moment longer, particularly not after the few times I've visited Coax.

I haven't been in this business long, but it gets lonely feeling like people only want me for what I can do for them. But everyone at Coax has those same sorts of advantages—and disadvantages—and I find myself with new friends because of that bond. I've made plans outside of this place with some of them, whether it's charity events or golf games or workouts.

And even though I haven't really taken advantage of all the club has to offer, I find myself a little less lonely when I get to go. It's better than the nightclubs filled with gold-digging, celebrity-chasing tourists...like my wife.

I sigh as I force myself back to the moment at the thought of her. If I confess my side of the story to Coach first before Savannah blows it up, I have the best odds of coming out of this whole thing fairly unscathed.

My finger is millimeters away from clicking the call button when Savannah saunters into the room.

I blow out a breath as I click off my phone.

"Good morning, my sweet husband," she says, her voice syrupy and gross this early.

I don't respond.

"I have *the best* gossip. Want to hear it?"

"No, I don't," I admit.

“It’s about your little ex-girlfriend,” she singsongs.

My brows dip. I won’t admit she’s piqued my interest, but I’m curious to know which ex she’s dangling in front of me right now.

“Tessa,” she clarifies.

“Leave her the fuck alone,” I mutter.

“I *have* left her alone, Tristan.” She sets a hand on her hip. “But I’ve done a little digging—okay, a *lot* of digging—and I found some very interesting information that I think you of all people would want to know.”

I’ve told Savannah exactly nothing about Tessa, so the fact that she knows her name is still a mystery to me. But that’s what Savannah does. Her investigative superpowers could be used for good or evil, and since she’s the devil incarnate, she chooses evil. Every time.

“I don’t care what you found,” I lie. It doesn’t matter. Tessa is my past, my history, and you can’t change the past. So why bother giving Savannah the satisfaction of thinking she found something that I care about?

“I’m just saying this is the type of thing you *really* won’t want getting out in the media. You’ve already got the HGH issue, and if I toss this news on top, you’ll have a hard time coming back from the label, you know?”

What the fuck is she talking about?

How could something that happened to Tessa affect me in any way? I haven’t even talked to the girl since my senior year of high school. It’s been seven years. Life moves on, and every day Savannah proves to me that I took the wrong goddamn path when I married her.

I stand up. “Leave Tessa alone, all right?” I walk out of the room, but not before I hear her parting shot.

“Okay. I’ll just hold onto it for a rainy day. But if you think a four-game suspension would be bad, you might want to think twice before you run to Coach and tell him about the test

results I have in my possession given all the things I've recently learned."

She's bluffing.

She *has to* be bluffing.

But all the same, she's got me wondering what the fuck she's talking about, and her threats are enough to make me think twice about pressing that call button...for now, at least.

I feel this strange need to protect Tessa at all costs. If she's holding onto some secret that includes me, that's her choice. If she wanted me to know it, she would've told me.

I respect her choice not to tell me, and knowing that Savannah is digging around her makes me physically ill.

I need to get the fuck away from Savannah, but where do I go?

I can't go anywhere right now. I'm in season.

But depending on our post-season schedule, I have less than two months left. Less than two months where every minute of every day is planned for me. Less than two months of getting my ass kicked on the field and hoping it's not kicked hard enough that I won't be able to perform the following week.

Less than two months until freedom. But that also means less than two months until I feel that familiar sense of not knowing who the fuck I am without the game...until my next identity crisis.

The more I think about it, the more I want to get out of Vegas a while. I want to go back to Fallon Ridge, where I felt at peace for the first time in a long time.

She won't be there, and maybe that's okay. Maybe I don't want her to be.

I just want to stay with my parents and leave my responsibilities behind me a while. I'd been avoiding Fallon Ridge for far too long, but Tessa didn't define the town. Sure, she's wrapped up in a lot of my memories there, but she moved in when I was twelve. That means for twelve years before her, it was my home.

I'm starting to wonder if I should just get back to my roots...if that'll be the thing that helps me figure out how to get out of Savannah's grasp. There's always that possibility, and being away from her while also being with my parents—the two people who love me more than anybody, who want the best for me more than anybody—might be exactly what I need in the off-season. It won't just give me a chance to reset. It'll give me a chance to talk about my future. My parents might even be able to help me formulate a plan that will allow me to move ahead with the divorce.

And if not, well...at least I'll get some breathing room.

I'm not banking on it, but with Tessa's mother being in Fallon Ridge all alone, there's always the possibility that Tessa will come back home to visit.

And that would lead to the possibility of talking, of reconnecting...of her telling me whatever Savannah seems to know about her before Savannah gets the chance to.

CHAPTER 31: TESSA

“Can you tell?” I ask. I squint as I stare into the full-length mirror in my bedroom. I chose a long-sleeve red dress with a billowing skirt and a wide black belt around the waist, a perfect holiday party dress even though I’m not much in the partying mood these days.

And I won’t even have the opportunity to get drunk tonight given my *condition*.

Sara shakes her head. “Not at all.”

I can’t tell if she’s being honest or just saying that to make me feel better. I feel bloated and huge all the time, but Sara tries to convince me nobody can tell except me. I probably wouldn’t be quite as self-conscious about it if I wasn’t heading to a party the man who knocked me up will also be attending...with his wife.

Meanwhile, I don’t even have a date.

“Maybe I should just stay home,” I suggest. “I could fake an illness.”

“You’re coming with, and you’re rocking the hell out of it. Okay?” She looks at me pointedly in the mirror, but the effect is lost considering only one eye has shadow on it. She turns back to the mirror to do the other eye. “Shane and I will be there right by your side.”

“Right,” I say flatly. “I’ll be right beside you two. The pregnant third wheel.”

“Stop it, Tessa. You are not a third wheel.”

I press my lips together. I hate feeling sorry for myself. There were two people involved in getting me to the place where I am today, and I was definitely one of them. I made the choice not to “take care of it,” as Dr. Foster demanded, and so I’m alone and feeling this way because of my own actions.

Still...I think it might be okay to feel a *little* sorry for myself once in a while, particularly given the extreme range of emotions that continue to plow into me.

“Have you decided what you’re doing for Christmas yet?” I ask, changing the subject.

She sighs. I guess it’s still a sore subject.

“Shane wants to take me to dinner Christmas Eve but my family has Christmas Eve traditions.” She shrugs. “It’s just hard making everyone happy.”

My eyes edge over to hers in the mirror. “You don’t think...” I trail off.

“What?” she asks, setting down her eye shadow.

“Do you think he’s going to propose?” I pick up some lipstick and inspect the color.

She stares at me in the mirror for a beat. “Oh my God. He’s going to propose!”

“You seriously didn’t piece that one together?” I ask. “I feel like you’ve been expecting it at every momentous occasion for the last year and a half.”

She giggles and shakes her head. “I’ve been so busy trying to get everyone’s presents ordered and wrapped and with work being busy and then worrying about you...it just didn’t dawn on me, I guess.”

“Don’t worry about me, Sara. Seriously. I’ve got this.” I reach over and squeeze her arm.

“I know you do,” she says softly.

We finish getting ready just in time for Shane’s arrival, and then we head to the Historia Ristorante for the holiday party. When we arrive, we’re led back to a private banquet room. The narrow side of the room features bookcases filled with wine bottles and a large bay window with a table big enough to seat everyone who will be attending tonight’s party. The other side of the room is wider and holds a dance floor and an open bar.

Paul and Marsha stand by the door greeting their guests and directing us toward the bar. The waitstaff moves around the room holding trays filled with appetizers. Sara and I greet everyone with hugs, and a bubble of sadness forms in the pit of my stomach.

The further along in this pregnancy I move, the more I realize I can't stay here. I can't keep working at Lakeshore with these people who have become family to me.

Not when the man who knocked me up walks through that office four days a week. Not when I have to lie to everyone about who the father of this baby is.

It isn't fair. I've been working there longer, but he's the one who gets to stay.

I glance over at the doorway where Paul and Marsha are both laughing at something Gayle, one of the medical techs, is saying at their greeting.

I'm giving up too easily, maybe, but I'm doing it for them. They deserve all the success in the world, and Cam winning this award and sharing his grant money with Lakeshore Pediatrics is a key to that success.

I'll step aside for them. For myself.

For this baby.

But not for Cameron Foster.

And speak of the devil, he walks in behind Gayle and her husband.

On his arm is a beautiful blonde woman. She smiles in a way that tells me she's happy to be here with her husband with the kids back at home, probably with a babysitter or maybe a grandparent or aunt or uncle.

It also tells me she's oblivious to who her husband really is, and my stomach twists. I feel guilty for something I had no knowledge of. Is it still wrong if I didn't know?

Of course it is.

I can't be here. I can't stay at this party watching Cam introduce Paul and Marsha to his *wife* as I stand across the room growing his baby.

He glances away from Paul, and his eyes meet mine across the room. His harden, almost as a warning, while mine fill with tears.

Sara follows my gaze. She reaches over and squeezes my arm, and his eyes drop to her hand. Recognition dawns, and he knows I told her.

Good.

I hope he's worried his little secret is going to get out.

I hope he loses sleep at night.

I still think his wife deserves to know...but not at the expense of Paul getting everything he deserves first.

I think of my own mother. She was cheated on. She deserved to know, and she said that she *did* know. I'm sure Christine has some intrinsic knowledge about what her husband is doing. She couldn't really be *that* blind to it, could she?

Stupid question coming from the girl who didn't even know he was married.

I don't want to hurt Cam's wife. She's the innocent bystander in all of this. He's the one who should be honest with her.

Besides, I have my own focus. I already love this baby fiercely, and I will do whatever it takes to protect it—even if it means I need to protect it from its own father.

I turn toward the bar. "Sprite, please."

"With a lime," Sara adds. She glances at me. "It looks more alcoholic that way."

We avoid Cam as we mingle, and just before we take our seats for dinner, the baby seems to kick my bladder. I head to the bathroom to take care of things, and as I'm exiting the

bathroom to wash my hands, the door opens. I glance in the mirror to see who it is, and to my surprise...it's Cam's wife.

I keep my eyes down on my hands, scrubbing them like I'm heading into surgery.

"Tessa, is it?" she says.

My eyes widen as my chest races. I look over at her while I rinse my hands. "Yes?" I play dumb, like I don't know *exactly* who the fuck she is, like I haven't had her husband inside me, like I'm not pregnant with his child.

"Christine Foster. Cameron's wife. It's so lovely to finally meet you. Cameron has told me so much about you."

I turn back to my hands, my eyes widening in horror.

He has?

What, exactly, has he said about me? That he likes sliding his cock into my tight body? Or were those words reserved just for me?

"Oh?" I say, trying hard to hide the tremble from my voice. *He hasn't said a word about you or your four children, I think to myself.*

"That whole situation with Logan Wesley," she clarifies. "He's such a sweet boy. He goes to school with my seven-year-old, Colton, and Logan's mom and Cameron both said how great you were with him when he went in for testing."

"Thanks," I mumble, more than a little uncomfortable to be having a conversation at all, let alone discussing a patient.

"My husband speaks very highly of you," she says.

I finally look up at her, and when our eyes meet, I get the sense that she knows.

"Thank you," I say a little louder. I'm confused what I'm supposed to do here as her eyes move back to mine and an awkward beat of silence engulfs the room.

She clears her throat as she glances toward the bathroom, and she sees we're alone. She raises a brow at me. "I'll thank you kindly to keep your hands off him."

“Excuse me?” I say.

I’m not about to argue with Cam’s *wife* about what happened, but he came onto me first. It sounds so childish as the words dart through my mind, but it’s the truth. I was attracted to him, sure, but he made the first move, and he never once mentioned his wife or kids.

“I’m not stupid, Tessa,” she says, her voice a clear warning. “I know he’s an attractive man, but he’s married. He has children.”

What exactly has he told her about me?

I’m about to ask when the door opens, cutting off our conversation. She gives me a fake smile. “Nice chatting with you, honey.”

She heads toward one of the bathroom stalls, and I stare after her for a beat before I draw in a deep breath and head back out to the party.

CHAPTER 32: TRISTAN

“Where’s the wife?” my dad asks when I open the door.

I grunt out some noise resembling a laugh. “Not here,” I say as I lean in and hug both my parents.

She said she was going to California to spend the holiday at the beach, but I don’t trust her. For all I know she’s back in Chicago digging more shit up on my ex.

It’s Monday night, and I’m off tonight and tomorrow. Usually that would mean a visit to Coax, but given that my parents are in town, I’ll be skipping my attendance this week.

Saturday is Christmas day, and the Aces play home on Sunday, so my parents decided to come into town for the week.

My mom glances around after I lead her into the family room. “You don’t even have a tree. Tristan, what is the matter with you?”

I laugh. “I’m a twenty-five-year-old guy who has pretty much every minute prescribed for him. I get one day a week off, and I have too much shit to take care of to worry about a tree.”

“Thank goodness your mother’s here to worry about it for you,” my dad teases.

I reach over and squeeze her hand. “I’m glad you’re both here.”

And with that, we head out to a local home improvement store that sells trees, lights, and decorations. A few hours later, I have a dead fir tree in my family room sitting in a water dish with lights twinkling and glass globes glowing while traditional Christmas tunes play in the background and I sip hot chocolate with my parents.

It takes me back to simpler times, that's for sure.

I'm not thinking about Coax or Brandi or my new buddy Troy Bodine. Instead, I'm dwelling in the memories of Tessa. Our first Christmas as friends. Our first Christmas as something more than that. Our first Christmas apart.

But one specific memory stands out. My parents went out to bingo with her parents the weekend before Christmas, which meant we were both home alone. We turned on the fireplace in my house, turned off all the lights, and laid together on the rug in front of the Christmas tree. We were drinking hot chocolate as *A Christmas Story* played on the television. Neither of us were paying attention to it as we talked. Our conversation started with Christmas traditions and memories, but it ended when the two of us made love right there on the floor—creating a new memory of our own together.

It's hard to admit even to myself, but it's a big reason why I didn't run out to get a tree. I guess I'm just not in the jolliest mood this season, especially not as I wish I'd never married Savannah and especially not after seeing Tessa a few months ago, giving her my number, and never hearing from her.

It's depressing to think that I held onto something while she didn't.

And yet, even months later, I'm still hopeful the phone will ring.

My dad's voice interrupts my thoughts. "Do we have time for eighteen holes tomorrow?"

I nod, but I'm already trying to guess my dad's ulterior motive. We used to golf together all the time, and out on the course was always the place where we had our deepest talks. I get the feeling he isn't asking to go tomorrow because he wants to play as much as because he wants to talk to his son. "I don't have anything planned. Figured you two would want to hit the casinos."

My mom giggles. "What do you think I'll be doing while you two are golfing?"

We both laugh, and then I set up a tee time at one of my favorite courses in Sin City for bright and early the next morning.

I'm used to getting up early, so it's no big deal when my alarm rings before the sun is even up yet. My dad is already in the kitchen where we each grab a cup of coffee from the pot before we head out. After I throw two sets of golf clubs in the back of my truck, I navigate toward the golf course. Once we get checked in, it's off to the course in a cart with my dad.

He lets me drive the cart, and he lets me tee off first per our golfing traditions. After he tees off, we hop back in the cart and locate our balls. The inevitable discussion hasn't started yet, but I know it's coming, and it's as we're waiting for the fourth tee that he starts the conversation.

"Is everything okay, kiddo?" he asks.

I chuckle at the term both my parents have called me since I was a child. It doesn't matter that I'm in my twenties now... I'm still their kiddo.

"I'm doing okay, Dad," I say.

"You just seem..." He trails off as a little anxiety bubbles in my chest about what he's about to say. "You seem unhappy. Do you need help getting out of this marriage?"

I grunt out a chuckle. "Yes, but every time I feel like I'm getting close it seems like she finds another way to keep me. First it was the drug test, and I was about to tell coach everything when she came walking in claiming to know something about someone who used to mean a lot to me."

"Who?" he asks. When I don't respond right away, he quietly says, "Tessa?"

I nod.

"What could she possibly know about Tessa?"

"I told her I didn't want to know. If she had secrets, that's her business. If she wants to tell me, she has ways to get in touch with me." I think of the number I gave her that she hasn't used.

“Your mother and I always thought it was strange that she just disappeared, but both of the Taylors held tight to the story that she went to finish school in Chicago,” he says. Even after all these years, we never discussed what happened with Tessa. It was always too hard.

“Yeah,” I say. “It never made much sense to me either. And it really never made sense that she would just completely cut off all contact with me. Not when we were as close as we were, and not when we both talked about our future together literally the day before she disappeared.”

“Do you think whatever Savannah is claiming to know about her has to do with her disappearance?” he asks.

The group in front of us clears the green, so I climb out of the cart and tee up my ball. “I have no idea, but either way, I don’t want her digging around Tessa. All that is dead and gone at this point.”

“Is it, though?”

I glance over at my dad. “It’s been seven years, Dad. Yeah. It is.” My voice doesn’t quite hold the conviction I want it to.

“It didn’t seem like it was when I saw the way you held onto her at her father’s funeral,” he says.

I smack my ball with brute force, and it slices off to the right. “Fuck,” I mutter. I was winning the game until he brought up Tessa. “You bringing up this shit just to throw me off my game or something?” I ask.

He chuckles. “Nah. I’m bringing it up to soften the blow of what I really want to talk to you about.”

My chest tightens. “What do you really want to talk to me about?” I ask the question before he gets a chance to tee up.

“I think you should come home for the off-season,” he says. He brushes past me and sticks a wooden tee into the ground, balancing his ball on top of it.

“Why?” I ask.

He hits the ball, and it flies straight ahead.

“For one thing, to get away from Savannah. Might give you the distance and the perspective you need.”

I nod. I can’t deny him that one. “Just the one thing?” I press.

He shrugs. “You never know if our neighbor will have summer visitors.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You know something I don’t?”

He laughs and holds his hands up innocently. “I don’t. Really. But with Bill gone now, I’d imagine Tessa will stop home at some point to visit with her mother.”

“Maybe. What else are you hiding?”

The merriment dissipates from his eyes, and nerves fly around my chest as I feel the impact of his words before he even says them. “It might be the last summer we can golf like this, kiddo.”

“Why?” I ask, my voice small. I suddenly feel like a child again, not like a strong athlete in my twenties who plays professional football.

He presses his lips together and looks out over the course ahead of us. “The doctor called it metastatic melanoma.”

The blood drains from my face. The word feels heavy in the air between us, and I don’t know what to say as a lump forms in my throat.

“The good news is that the five-year survival rate for it is over sixty-six percent. The not as good news is that this has been fairly aggressive. The doctor gave me a treatment plan that begins with surgery the first week of January. We’ll reassess after that but it’s likely I’ll also need radiation.”

“When did you find out?” I ask, not that it matters.

He turns to look at me. “Last week.”

We both climb into the cart. “Is there anything I can do?” I stare out the windshield ahead of us without starting up the cart, and I suddenly get the feeling I won’t ever play this course again—at least not without my dad. I’ll never be able to

hit the ball on the fourth tee without thinking of this moment, without feeling all the fear I'm feeling right now, without choking up as I think about my life without my dad in it.

He elbows my arm. "Don't treat me like I'm dying."

"Alright, old man. Then let's play some golf." I force a laugh, but he must know how fake it is. Still, it's moments like these where I can show him what I'm made of, where I can step up and allow him to be proud of the man he created. I've done plenty of things to disappoint him over the years, but how I react today in giving him what he needs in these precious moments won't be one of them.

CHAPTER 33: TESSA

It's the day before Christmas Eve and my last day at work for the next four days. I feel like I can't go on this little Christmas break without asking Cam exactly what he told his wife.

It's been busy today as we get in all the appointments that we can before the office basically shuts down for the holiday. Cam's light is still on as the day winds down, and I'm hoping to get some time to walk into his office and confront him before he leaves.

Most of the staff has left by five, and Paul is in with his last patient of the day. I grab onto my one slim chance with both hands even though I need to head out myself since my mom will be pulling into my apartment complex any minute.

I begin by knocking on the door frame. Cam glances up from the file he's studying, and when he sees who it is at the door, he says, "Shut the door."

Gladly.

I slam it behind me with more force than necessary, and he looks surprised. "What did you tell your wife about me?"

He glances at me with such innocence that I almost want to barf. "Why do you ask?"

"She confronted me at the Christmas party. She told me to keep my hands to myself." I cross my arms over my chest, and he glances down at my growing stomach. "As I recall, it was your hands that were on me first."

"As I recall, you weren't exactly complaining about that," he says pointedly.

"Be that as it may, you're married, and you never told me. I never would've slept with you if I would've known that."

“Right,” he says, rolling his eyes as he nods with exaggerated sarcasm.

“You think this is what I wanted?” I hiss, pointing to my stomach.

“I told you what to do about it.” His tone is flippant, and I want to slug him.

I grit my teeth as I draw in a breath. “You’re an asshole.”

“Okay,” he says, and he picks up the file. “I have work to do before I get home to my family to celebrate Christmas. Anything else?”

“I hate you.” I’ve said it to him before, and it had zero effect on him. “I feel sorry for your wife. I feel sorry for your children. *All* of them.”

He presses his lips together and raises his brows. Those words might have some effect on him, but he’ll never show it. “Merry Christmas, Nurse.”

“Fuck you, Doctor.” I walk out of his office with those words even though my question about what he said to his wife about me was never answered. I slip into my car and make the trip home, my hands trembling the entire way as I try to draw in deep breaths after that encounter with Dr. Douchebag.

My mom and I pull into the parking lot of my apartment building at the same time.

“Merry Christmas!” she says, her tone cheerful as she leaps out of her car for a hug. “Look at that timing! All the way from Iowa and I pull in at the same time as you.”

I laugh. “It’s good to have you here, Mom. Thanks for driving out.” I help her with one suitcase, and she has another one that she pulls out of the trunk. “Two suitcases?”

“One is filled with presents, of course,” she says. “And that reminds me, I need some wrapping paper, tape, and scissors.”

“You didn’t have to go to all that trouble,” I scold.

“Of course I did.” She bumps into me as we walk toward my apartment. “You’re my baby girl.”

Her *baby girl* has some big news to share with her this weekend...if she doesn't guess it as soon as I take off my winter coat.

For the record, she doesn't. Or she's polite enough not to mention that I look like I've packed on a few pounds. She makes me dinner, and after we eat, she disappears a while with the tape and scissors. She's staying here with me—Sara offered to stay with Shane for the next couple nights so my mom could use her room. When she emerges an hour later, I'm lying across the couch and she's carrying a stack of at least ten boxes. She places them beneath the tree with a wide smile, and I notice not for the first time since she pulled into the parking lot that she seems a little different.

Lighter, maybe. Like she's spent the last couple months letting go of the past while I've spent the last couple months dwelling on it for very different reasons.

"How have you been doing, Mom?" I ask as I sit up and curl my legs beneath me.

She plops down beside me. "I'm doing really well." She smiles as she reaches over and squeezes my hand. "Sometimes you don't know you need your freedom until you have it."

I don't know how to respond to that. Telling her I'm happy for her feels like saying I'm happy my father passed away, which isn't true at all. Even though he made mistakes, even though he forced me into decisions I should have been allowed to make on my own...he was still my father.

But on the other hand, I'm happy my mom is coming into her own.

Before I get the chance to say anything, she asks, "How are you doing, Tessi-cat?"

This is my moment. I draw in a deep breath. "I'm pregnant."

A beat of silence passes between us as she processes my words. "You're..."

I nod, and I brace myself for the worst. I'm a twenty-five-year-old pregnant, unmarried daughter of a pastor who is

knocked up out of wedlock for the second time. “Pregnant,” I repeat.

“I’m gonna be a grammy?” Tears fill her eyes as relief rushes through my chest.

“Again,” I whisper.

“But this time I’ll actually get to hold the baby?”

I nod. “This time you’ll get to *be* the grammy.”

Her tears spill over as her hand flies to her mouth. She sobs for a beat, and I toss an arm around her shoulder as tears fill my eyes, too. I’ve spent so many years thinking how what happened affected *me*, but I never gave much thought to how it might’ve affected *her*.

“Who’s the father? Are you dating someone you didn’t tell me about?” she asks once she takes a deep breath and composes herself.

I draw in a breath of my own. “He, uh...he won’t be involved.”

“Why not?”

“We’re not together. He doesn’t want any part of this baby’s life,” I say.

She tilts her head with sympathy. “Are you sure about that? Don’t you need him to sign some papers or something?”

She’s probably right. The last thing I need is for him to come after me for parental rights down the road, but I just don’t see Cam doing that. Not when he was so adamant about me keeping it a secret, and not when I’ve respected his wishes in doing so.

“He told me to take care of it,” I admit, and I feel sick just saying the words out loud at this point. “Trust me when I say he wants nothing to do with this baby.”

She nods. “Okay, then. And your plan is to actually take care of it?”

“I’ll take care of him or her forever. I love this baby with everything I have already, Mama.”

A soft smile graces her lips as she reaches over to squeeze my hand. “When are you due?”

“June fourteenth. I’m almost fourteen weeks along,” I say.

She nods, and I can tell she’s trying to think rationally and also be sympathetic to my situation.

I reach over and squeeze her arm. “It’s okay, Mom. You can ask the hard questions.”

She presses her lips together and nods. “What are you going to do?”

I lift both shoulders. “I don’t know yet. The father...I work with him. He’s in a prestigious position, and I found out after we were, um, *together*—that he’s married.”

“Oh,” she gasps.

“I can’t keep working there, and I can’t afford not to. I can’t afford to raise a baby on my own here in the city, but I don’t know where else to go,” I admit, and even though I’ve told Sara this stuff, too, it feels good to share it with my mom. It feels like she’ll be able to help me figure out the answers.

“You’re always welcome to come home, Tessa. I’m happy to help with the baby. Diapers, middle of the night feedings, you name it.” The way she looks at me with such hope in her eyes tells me these aren’t just words. She means it. She will do whatever she can to help me. She *wants* to. “You always have a space in my house, and my grandbaby will, too. Always.” Her voice trembles with her vehemence, and I get the sense that she fought for me the first time around and lost. This time, there’s nobody to fight. This time, we’re in it together instead of being pit against each other.

I almost feel like I don’t have any choice in the matter at all.

But instead of accepting her very generous offer, I say, “I appreciate that, Mom. Let me think about it a while, okay? I can’t just duck out on Paul and Marsha, either. I’d need to give them some notice.”

She glances at my stomach. “You’ll start showing soon. If you don’t want people at the office to find out, you’re running short on time.”

“I know.” I glance down at my stomach, too, and then I rest a protective hand over the baby. “We’ll figure this out.” I reach over and grab my mom’s hand. “The three of us.”

“The three of us,” she echoes, and no matter what happens next, I know I’ve got her in my corner...and that’s enough for now.

* * *

I’m not waiting for Santa the way I used to when I was a kid, but my mom and I are relaxing with *A Christmas Story* and cookies on Christmas Eve. We ate our traditional lasagna and garlic bread dinner, baked cookies, and finished wrapping gifts, and now my eyes are getting heavy on the couch. I glance at the clock and realize it isn’t even nine o’clock yet.

A few minutes later, the door bursts open, and a grinning Sara walks in with Shane right behind her.

“Hey! What are you doing home?” I ask. My mom gets up to greet Sara with a hug.

“Guess what?” she squeals, and I grin as I stand, too.

“What?” I ask even though I think I already know.

“We’re engaged!” she screams, and Shane laughs.

“Congratulations!” I squeal, too, and then we’re all hugging and dancing and it’s a little chaotic for a few minutes as celebrations abound.

Once everyone calms down and the squealing ceases, I ask, “So how’d he ask you?”

“Well,” she says, her eyes edging merrily over to her new *fiancé*, “he drove me out to the suburbs to this house, and he entered the code on the keypad and we walked in, and I had *no idea* what he was doing. There’s no furniture in this place, but

it's huge and gorgeous and then he gets down on his knee in the middle of the kitchen, and he says, 'I want to start our happily ever after right here with you. I want to cook dinner in this kitchen and buy a couch we can sit on to watch movies,' and blah blah blah more romantic stuff, and then he asked me to marry him in the house that he put an offer on last night pending my stamp of approval!"

"Oh my God!" I squeal, because of course you squeal when your best friend tells you somebody bought her a house and proposed to her in the same breath.

I'm happy for her. Really.

But this makes it real. It means I'm going to have to move out of this apartment because I can't afford the rent on my own, and certainly not with the expense of taking care of another person.

My mom's offer to live with her a while and figure things out seems like my only option right now.

CHAPTER 34: TRISTAN

We have light practice on Christmas Day not because of the holiday but because Saturdays are always light ahead of the game on Sunday. When I get home from practice, we celebrate Christmas...sort of.

We open presents, and my mom cooks a big meal but I stick to my chicken, rice, and veggies diet so I'm game ready. I don't drink any of the traditional eggnog my dad spikes with bourbon, and the three of us act like nothing's wrong.

We don't talk about the elephant in the room, and I pretend like I'm not trying to memorize every moment that we're sharing because it might be the last Christmas I share with my dad.

I try not to think that way, but I can't help it when those thoughts creep in anyway.

I got my dad some sweaters, a new winter coat, and a new putter.

If I would've known when I was shopping that this could be our last Christmas together, I would've put in more effort.

We don't need more things.

We need more time.

These are the thoughts swirling in my head as I take the field on Sunday, and I proceed to play like absolute dog shit.

I miss catches that literally hit me in the hands.

My parents are in the stands cheering me on, and I can't catch a single fucking ball out on this field today.

It's so bad that Coach benches me at the start of the second half. We go on to win, but not because of any of my contributions.

It's downright embarrassing.

“What happened out there, man?” Travis asks me once the locker room starts to clear out after the game. His locker is right beside mine, which is part of the reason why we’ve gotten close.

I blow out a breath. “My head wasn’t in it.”

“Where was it?”

“My dad told me earlier this week he’s sick.”

“Oh, man. I’m sorry, dude,” Travis says, slapping me on the back. “That’s rough.” He knows how close we are.

I clear my throat. “He’s here today. I should’ve played my ass off for him, and instead I couldn’t catch a fucking cold out there.”

“We all have shit games,” he concedes. “You’ll pick up the slack in the next one.”

“Easy to say since we won. But if we would’ve lost...” I trail off as we both consider that. Neither of us mentions the fact that he got more playing time since I was riding the pine. He may be one of my best friends, but we’re still pitted against each other every single time we take that field.

Playing this game is such a weird dynamic at times. I don’t want to feel like I’m up against my closest allies, especially since we rely on each other to win the game. We’re team players. We’re brothers.

But we’re also fighting each other for the chance to play every week.

“Yeah, I get it. Anything else going on with you?” he asks.

I sit on the bench in my locker, and he sits in his, too.

“There’s this girl,” I begin, and I think twice about how much to say here.

“Someone from Coax?” he whispers, and I shake my head.

“A girl aside from your wife?” he teases. He knows I can’t stand Savannah. He knows I can’t get rid of her, too, but he doesn’t exactly know why.

I grunt out a chuckle. “Yeah, aside from her. A girl I used to love. We broke up toward the end of senior year of high school, and I’ve been thinking about her a lot lately.”

“She still back home?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Nah. She moved to Chicago senior year and stayed there. Her father passed away a few months ago and I went to the funeral. I only saw her for thirty seconds, but there was still something there.” I lean forward on my knees and clasp my hands in front of me.

“Then get in touch with her. What girl wouldn’t want an NFL star ringing her bell?” he asks, and his tone tells me he’s only partially teasing with his total lack of modesty.

I laugh. “Her, I guess. I slipped her my number and she never used it.”

“Life gets complicated, you know? You ever think about calling her?” He pulls on a fresh pair of socks.

“I don’t know how to get in touch.” I stare down at my hands.

“Sounds like a pretty shitty excuse considering you’re from the same small town,” he points out.

I know he’s right, and they’re the same thoughts that I’ve had myself. Yet something stops me every time—namely, the fact that I gave her my number and she didn’t use it. If she wanted to get in touch, she had the opportunity. She didn’t take it.

She’s moved on.

I’m stuck in the past.

He stands and packs his duffel bag. I do the same.

“Look, we’ve got two more regular season games then playoffs,” he says, pulling his bag onto his shoulder with a wince. He took a hard fall during the game, but it’s just a bruise. “Whatever happens, we have a tiny bit of freedom after that. Go home. Heal. Rest. Spend time with your dad while you can. See if you can get that girl’s digits. Get out of here. Get away from Savannah and the house you share with her and

get your head on right. Get some perspective. Figure out how to get out of your marriage and come back ready to play next season.”

“But who will you get fucked up with every night if I leave town?” I joke. I know the truth—he’ll just head to Coax with Jaxon and Cory.

He laughs. “I’ll find somebody, but you know whoever it is won’t replace you.”

We’re ribbing each other, but we both know there’s truth behind the jokes. Somehow he’s become my best friend over the last year. He’s a few years older than me, and he was traded here from Cincinnati last season. We work out together, we practice together, and we’re shoved together pretty much twenty-four-seven in season. But it’s the fact that we continue to hang outside of our prescribed time that tells me this is a lasting friendship. We aren’t just teammates. We’ve bonded beyond that, and he’ll be a brother for life now.

I grab my bag, too. My family is waiting for me just on the other side of the locker room, and since we won today, we’ll have tomorrow off, too. More time to spend with my parents avoiding the topic before they go home Tuesday night.

I slap Travis on the back. “I guess I have some decisions to make, but let’s get fucked up a few times before I head to wherever the off-season is taking me.”

“Deal,” he says, clapping me on the shoulder.

On our way out of the locker room, Coach stops me. “Higgins, can we talk?”

“I’ll wait here,” Travis says, and I follow Coach into his office, feeling an awful lot like I’m about to get my ass handed to me.

“That game was shit,” he begins. “I don’t know what the fuck you were doing out there, but it was ugly, which makes the reason I need to talk to you really strange timing.”

“I’m sorry, Coach. I know I fucked up. I just...my head wasn’t in it. I found out my dad is sick.”

“I’m sorry, kid.” He shakes his head. “You tell me these things before the game. We work together through it. You understand me?”

I nod sullenly.

“Look, I have some good news. It won’t be announced for a few more days, but I got word you were selected for the Pro Bowl.”

My hand moves to my chest. “Me?”

He nods. “It’s an honor, kid. You’ve proven your worth, which means more than likely we’re going to pick up your fifth-year option. You’ll make bank having been selected for two Pro Bowls within your first three years. It’s up to you whether or not you want to play if we don’t make it past the conference championship. We can see how the rest of the season plays out, but with that hamstring giving you issues on and off, I’m hesitant to say you should do it.”

I nod. “I’ll think about it. Thanks, Coach. This is the good news I needed.”

He presses his lips together and nods. “Merry Christmas, kid.”

“Merry Christmas, Coach.”

I return to Travis, who gives me a curious look, but I don’t say anything yet. We exit the locker room. He doesn’t have anybody waiting in the post-game room, so I bring him over to my parents. They’ve met before after other games, and my mom squeezes him before she hands him a medium-sized gift bag.

“What’s this?” he asks.

She just smiles, and he peeks inside. “You didn’t,” he says, and he tosses his arms around her again. “Thanks, Mrs. Higgins.”

She kisses his cheek. “You just keep playing nice with my boy and I’ll keep bringing it for you.”

He laughs as he leans in to give her a hug. “You’re the best.”

My brows dip as I try to peek into the bag, but he pulls it back and cradles it closely to his chest so I can't see.

"What is it?" I ask.

"It's a secret between your mom and me," he says.

My mom giggles and playfully squeezes his arm as she looks at me and winks.

He opens the bag and pulls out a ziplock gallon bag practically bursting open because it's so stuffed full.

"Puppy chow?" I ask, staring at the bag. I turn and glare a little at my mother. "Did you save me any?" I may be a twenty-five-year-old man, but I would do pretty much anything for the chocolately-peanut buttery-sugary goodness that is puppy chow.

She winks at me. "Do you really think I'd make it for your friend and not you? I made a double batch last night."

"You're the best," I say, repeating Travis's line from a minute ago. I squeeze her so tightly that she taps my arm in surrender.

She laughs as she catches her breath. "Boy, if a girl is ever looking for the way to either of your hearts, I feel like I hold all the secrets."

The four of us laugh, but she's not wrong.

CHAPTER 35: TESSA

My hands tremble as I walk toward Paul's office. I asked him for a meeting the first Monday morning of the new year. New year, new me, I guess...mostly because last Thursday, Dr. Cameron Foster was awarded the Doctor of the Year honor from the United States Medical Association, and I can no longer work with a man who's being honored for his family values after knocking me up on the side.

In his acceptance speech, he pledged to use the grant money for medical research in the field of childhood leukemia, a matter close to Paul's heart since he lost a sister to the disease as a child. He named Paul as one of the leading doctors on his research team.

It's more important now than ever that I don't allow my news to get out.

My clothes are more and more uncomfortable every day. I have maybe a month at best where I can still hide this.

The office doesn't open for another half hour, but Paul met me here early. We're the only two here as I set the cup of coffee I picked up for him on his desk, and he greets me with a smile. "Good morning. Battering me up for something?"

I wrinkle my nose as I sit in the chair opposite him. "Am I that obvious?"

"You've brought me coffee twice in your career here with me. The first was on the day you started, so I suspect I already know what this meeting is about."

I press my lips together as tears press hotly against the back of my eyes. I promised myself I wasn't going to cry today... but it's just another promise made to be broken.

I sniffle. "I don't want to do this, but I have to. I'm officially giving you my notice."

“Oh, Tessa. Can I ask why?” His tone is truly disappointed, and maybe that’s the hardest part of this whole thing. I love Paul, and the last thing I want to do is upset him.

Because Cam knocked me up.

“I’m moving home to spend some time with my mother,” I say instead. It isn’t a lie even though it’s not the *whole* truth. He’ll understand since my father just passed away last year.

He nods. “Of course. Family comes first. I’m so sorry to see you go, but I’m happy to provide the highest of recommendations to you. The hospital in Davenport is only thirty minutes from you?” he asks.

I nod.

“I believe Dr. Foster knows the chief of staff over there. I’ll see what I can do.”

I hold up a hand. “That’s not necessary.”

He looks surprised. “You won’t be working?”

I lift a shoulder. “I’m not sure what I’m doing yet. I just know I need to go back to Fallon Ridge.”

He nods. “Well the offer is on the table. Anything I can do to help you secure a position somewhere...just say the word.”

“I appreciate that, Dr. Williams.”

He smiles a little sadly. “We’ll need to hire a new nurse. Any chance you could stick around a while to help the transition since our current schedule is thirty days out?”

I nod. “That’s fine,” I say. Thirty days out is a little too far for comfort, but I can make it work.

We chat a while longer before the rest of the staff starts to arrive, and then it’s a normal workday.

Except it isn’t.

Because of the holiday, we didn’t work on Friday, so today’s the day we’re celebrating Dr. Foster’s achievement.

A cake sits in the lounge.

Lunch is provided.

We're all supposed to sign a card congratulating him.

When it lands on my desk, I bring it to Sara.

I can't sign it. I can't offer my congratulations. I can't stand everyone who walks around this office praising him like he's some god when he has treated me the way he has.

I duck into the bathroom while Paul gives a speech about what a great guy Cam is.

I don't eat the cake even though it looks delicious. No part of me can celebrate this man who won an award for freaking *family values*.

I hate him with a vengeance, and maybe it's the pregnancy hormones speaking, but I don't have a clue how I'll get through the next four weeks.

Paul allows me to sit in on the interviewing process for my replacement, and together we choose a nurse fresh out of school who's enthusiastic and ready for the job. She shadows me with my patients, and I introduce her as I let everyone know I'll be leaving.

There are some goodbyes I don't get to say since I don't see all my patients in a month's time, but I send notices via email to all the families who have been in my care over the years.

Sweet little Logan Wesley cries when I tell him I'm leaving. I hug him and his mom, and my heart breaks with sadness that I won't see them again. He's doing okay since his anemia diagnosis, but he's in today with another virus.

Sara put in to take a few days off to pack up the apartment with me, since she's moving out at the same time as me.

I'm preparing to say all my goodbyes, but it still feels like nothing can really prepare you for saying goodbye to the life you've become accustomed to. I've been working at Lakeshore for the last few years. Sara is like a sister to me—and one of the only people who knows the truth about why I'm leaving. My mother is waiting in Iowa with open arms, and I know it'll be different this time.

But I'm stepping away from my comfort zone. I'm heading into the unknown, and it's terrifying. I have no job, no place to call my own, and I'm moving back in with my mom after I didn't even visit for years and years.

I just pray in another six months when the baby is here, I will know I made all the right decisions.

CHAPTER 36: TRISTAN

I ran my ass off, but it wasn't enough.

I've always been fast, but today it didn't get the job done. It's a team sport, of course. I realize this. But as I stand on the sideline watching the defense as they try to stop the Titans, I know it's a losing battle at this point.

It's heartbreaking to watch all the hard work we put in over the course of the season come to a screeching halt. I thought we had another game left. We were the favorites to win, and yet...we're going to lose. As the other team's quarterback tosses the ball down field, we collectively hold our breath on our side. When the ball lands in a receiver's arms and he carries it enough yards to secure the first down, that collective breath is exhaled in disappointment and frustration.

It wasn't enough.

They wanted it more.

We didn't play as hard as we should have.

That's the criticism we'll hear over the next couple weeks, and then it'll quiet as the Titans play some other team in the Super Bowl.

The competitor in me would like to see the Titans win. At least that way we were beat by the best.

The bitter part of me hopes the other team wins.

There's a timeout and then the quarterback takes a knee. It's over.

We move onto the field to congratulate the victors. It should've been us. We should be pulling our AFC Champion shirts over our heads with smiles on our faces. Instead we'll face a quiet locker room and an even quieter flight home as we individually review the mistakes we made that could've

changed the course of the game, as we consider the things we could've done differently that would've led to a completely different atmosphere on the ride home.

I wish it had been a home game. Even with a loss, to be in our own locker room would be so much more meaningful in this moment.

Coach says a few words, ending it with, "There's always next year," but that's the thing.

There *isn't* next year for some of the guys in here, and that's the one thing that sticks out to me most. This is the last time this locker room will look this exact way.

Players will retire.

Others will be traded.

We'll acquire new guys.

Things will change, and I'm grateful for the dynamic we have in this locker room right now—even though this dynamic wasn't good enough to make it all the way this year.

It's still been a hell of a season, and it feels so strange that it's over. We'll start fresh in a few months, and for now, we can enjoy life outside of the game. Unofficial workouts start in April, but for the next two months, I'm free. This is when some players spend time with their families or take vacations or party it up.

I'm just ready to get the hell out of town. My hamstring is fine, but I'm declining the Pro Bowl.

I don't want to be around the woman who drains every ounce of energy from me any longer.

I think about just getting a hotel room for the night so I don't have to be in the same house as her, but I don't.

Another mistake.

She's waiting up for me even though it's late when I walk in the door after our flight from Tennessee.

"If you would've caught that ball at the end of the third quarter, the Aces would have won," she says in greeting.

“Why are you such a terrible person?” I ask rather than responding to her accusation. Does she really think I haven’t been over that play thirty-five thousand times in my own head?

If I would’ve caught that ball, I had an opening to run it in to score.

But if Josh Nolan would’ve caught the ball that was intercepted in the first quarter, that would’ve changed the game, too. If Jack Dalton hadn’t been sacked because Patrick Harris didn’t miss the block, the game would’ve changed again.

We all made mistakes.

The Titans came out stronger. The Aces will sit until next season, when we can try it all over again.

I head upstairs to my bedroom and sleep.

Morning comes too early, but today is clean out and exit meetings at the Complex before we’re released for break.

I pull into the parking lot just behind Ben Olson, our star tight end and resident party guy who recently settled down, and we both nod a hello before we head inside together.

“Heard your girl is having your kids soon,” I say, referring to the twins expected to arrive via C-section any day now.

He nods, and he looks a little nervous. “Three more days.”

“Good luck, man. That’s exciting.” I don’t mention how it feels like it’s everything I want, too. I want a woman I love, not a woman like Savannah. I want to be planning a future with her as we think about kids and building a family and making memories. Instead it feels like I’m stuck in quicksand with no way out.

“Thanks. You got any big plans for the off-season?” he asks.

I shrug. “Not like you do. I’ll be pushing hard to legally separate from Savannah. I’m going to duck out of town a while, I think. Go back home, stay with my parents...” I think

about mentioning *why* I'm going back home, about my dad, about Tessa, but I decide to keep it to myself.

"Where's home?" he asks.

We walk down the hallway toward the locker room. "A tiny town in Iowa."

"Midwestern boy?"

I chuckle and nod. "Born on corn and bred for football. Lifting haybales from the time I was nine."

He laughs. "So what will you do at your parents' place aside from lifting haybales?"

I sigh. "I don't know. I just dream of escaping the media and everything Savannah's doing to make my life miserable."

"I'm sorry man. The right girl is out there, and it ain't Savannah. Believe me, I never thought I'd be the old man giving out that advice." He shakes his head, and I can't help but agree. This is the dude known for throwing the biggest parties out of anyone in the league, and he just fell into settling down. Meanwhile, those of us who *want* that can't seem to find it in the right place.

"I know she is." I exhale loudly. "But I blew it with her a long time ago." It's minimizing what really happened between us, but I don't want to get into it on a day like today.

"Her?" he asks, his tone friendly rather than prodding.

"The only girl I ever really loved." I turn toward Ben. "The girl next door. Literally."

"Ah. So that's why you're heading home for the off-season," he says as if he cracked my code.

"Maybe." I lift a shoulder. "She's not there anymore. I keep telling myself it's all the other stuff, but I think just going back to Iowa a while will give me that sense of home I've been missing."

He claps me on the shoulder as we arrive at the locker room. "Good luck to you, man. I hope everything goes well

with the divorce, and I hope you get what you need back home.”

“Thanks.” I offer a small smile. “And I’m still expecting a rager the minute I get my finalized divorce papers. I know you’re about to have two kids and you’ll be busy, but you can help a brother out, right?”

“You got it man,” he says, and we both chuckle quietly as we walk into the somber locker room to begin today’s tasks. We head our separate ways, and I find Travis already cleaning out his locker. We’re given a ton of gear throughout the season, and we’re welcome to keep whatever we want. I hold onto a few of my favorite shirts, shorts, and shoes and put the rest into the donation bin. It’s not a difficult task to accomplish, but it’s also not the mood any of us were expecting in here on clean out day. We were expecting a victory. We were expecting triumphant joy.

Instead, we choked one game too early.

And every man in this locker room blames himself in one way or another. It was a team loss, but we’re all thinking the same thing: what could I have done differently that might’ve led us to a W?

I’m lucky enough to have a wife who already pointed out my flaws.

But none of it matters.

Maybe the most depressing thought of all of this is that *none* of this really matters.

If I sat out a season, would that give me more time to spend with my dad?

Because *that* matters.

Or would he rather watch me play my heart out every week knowing he’s the man who gave me the hunger for competition and the healthy work ethic we share?

Which would cure his disease and wipe away the anxiety I feel now that I might lose him at any moment?

Neither option, I guess.

Life is short, and it's best spent living rather than regretting.

I head into my exit meeting with Coach Jeff first. "You take care of that wife of yours yet?" he begins our meeting.

I huff out a laugh. "No, sir." I think about confessing the truth about what she's been doing to me, but I keep my mouth shut. The Aces have to decide by the beginning of May if they want to keep me for a fifth year, and that's when I might start seeing some real money. The terms of my rookie contract were good for a rookie since I was drafted in the first round, but what comes next could be fucking incredible.

But if I'm in trouble or in a position where I'm making the team look bad, they may decide against keeping me for a fifth year. I don't want to go into free agency. I want to keep playing for the Aces.

"Maybe in the off-season," he suggests. "And hopefully bright things coming for you in May, kid."

"Yeah," I mutter. "I love it here, barring my wife, of course, and I love this team." I shrug as I hold up both hands. Staying married to her seems to be my only option, at least until the statute of limitations runs out on the test results she's holding onto.

We review my performance this season, he asks about my dad's surgery, which went well, and then I meet with Coach Thompson and the team owner, Calvin Bennett. And that's that on that. I head home in the late afternoon.

I shoot off an email to my landlord explaining that I won't be renewing my lease in April. I pack up what I want to take with me to Fallon Ridge for the next two months, and I figure I'll hire a moving company to pack up the rest once I figure out where I want to settle. Maybe Travis and I can get a place together, a nice bachelor pad.

In the morning, I pack up my truck and head out without so much as a goodbye to my wife.

She doesn't need to know where I'm going, but something tells me she already knows. I wouldn't put it past her to outfit

my truck with a tracking device. She's just crazy enough that it seems right up her alley.

Which is why I'm not surprised when I'm nearly to Denver, where I'll be spending the night, and my phone starts ringing.

I pick up against my better judgment. "What the fuck do you want?"

"What are you doing in Denver?" she demands.

"Are you serious right now?" I ask. "Why are you tracking me? Why won't you just leave me alone?"

"Because I love you, baby. You know that."

I roll my eyes even though she can't see me. "You're delusional."

"Come on. You know we were happy once. We could find that again."

"We were happy for about eleven seconds before I knew the real you, Savannah." I'm so tired of this game she's playing, and my fatigued tone conveys that sentiment.

"I've always been the same person. You were just...let's say *blinded by love* at the beginning. Look, Tris." She knows I fucking hate it when she calls me that. "Believe what you want, but I'm still on your side. These things I'm doing...I'm doing them for you. I'm looking out for you."

"Bullshit." My foot presses a little more aggressively down on the gas pedal. I should hang up before she causes an accident. "Just give it a rest already. You don't do anything for anyone but yourself. Ever."

"That's not true. I looked into your ex's history for you." Her tone holds a desperate plea to it, like she's trying just a little too hard to sell it.

I snort. "Oh, come off it. You did that to make sure she isn't your competitor."

"Potato, po-tah-toe," she says, as if we're saying the same thing in two different ways. Except...we're not. Not even

close. In her delusions, I think maybe she really believes what she's saying.

So how do you untangle yourself from that sort of web? She's got her claws in deep, and I'm afraid escaping to Iowa won't give me the space I need.

When it comes to Savannah, I'm not sure anything will ever give me the space I need.

CHAPTER 37: TESSA

I'm lost in thought on the drive back to Fallon Ridge.

It feels strange to be leaving behind a life I was forced into. I made it mine. I stayed in Chicago because going back home just wasn't an option. I fulfilled my dream of becoming a nurse while I mourned my losses. I moved forward in some aspects of my life while others were stuck in neutral. And other times, of course, I find myself slipping into reverse.

Oftentimes, in fact, I find myself slipping into reverse.

And so heading home pregnant seven years later feels an awful lot like I'm circling back, like I've somehow reversed the clock and I'm course-correcting. It's too late, of course, and it's with the wrong man, but I'm coming back home in much the same way I left all those years ago.

My father sent me away so nobody would know that the daughter of the pastor got knocked up at the tender age of seventeen, that not only was she having premarital sex with her boyfriend, she was stupid enough to get pregnant.

When you sign away your rights, I guess you're just expected to sign away all the feelings that go with it, too.

I didn't. I couldn't.

My mom would've helped me. Tristan would've helped me.

But my dad had the final say in the matter. Growing up in a religious family wasn't without its challenges, but no challenge was bigger than being forced to give up the precious baby that was created out of pure love between Tristan and me.

This is why I don't go back to Fallon Ridge. I prefer to keep the hardest time in my life in the past. Going back only brings all those tragedies back to the surface.

I've thought a million different times of telling Tristan what really happened, why I really went away, but I can't think of a single good thing that would come from it.

Oh by the way, you have a son out there who's around six years old now, and I know so many years have passed but we had a closed adoption so there's no chance you'll ever get to meet him. I wanted to reach out and tell you, but clearly you moved on with your life after my dad ripped us apart and forced me to move to Chicago. You excelled at football in college and you didn't need me finding you and tearing your life apart when we couldn't do anything about it anyway. And then you were drafted into the NFL and you got married and you've moved on with your life now so let me come in and fuck it all up for you.

Somehow that just doesn't have the right ring to it.

But just because I'm going home doesn't mean I'll see him. From all accounts, he left Fallon Ridge and never looked back much in the same way I did. He wanted to bury what we had in the past. He had to have been confused about what happened, about why I suddenly disappeared without saying goodbye. My dad knew I would've told him if I'd have been given the chance, and so he made sure I had zero contact with Tristan once he found out that I was pregnant.

I kept telling myself that at least he wasn't hurting the baby. At least I was allowed to hang onto it, to allow it to grow inside me, to bond with it in this way. At least I'd know there was a living, breathing manifestation of the love I shared with Tristan somewhere out there.

The day I gave birth should have been the happiest day of my life. Instead, it was the most tragic. I wasn't even allowed to hold him. I pushed him out of my body, and that ended the connection I shared with him.

I've never felt a love like I felt for that little boy. It was the last day of school before spring break when I took the test, when my dad found the positive test, when he sent me away.

And each year as winter starts to fade into nicer weather, that feeling of dread washes over me again. I was already nine

weeks along when I took that test. What did a seventeen-year-old know about pregnancy anyway? I just figured I was stressed over my math test and that's why my period was late. I didn't think I was pregnant. I felt fine—a little tired, but what teenager in her senior year wasn't tired all the time?

Until I missed a second period. Then I got nervous.

And sure enough, the two bright pink lines told me the truth.

A baby boy was born a few weeks early on September twenty-seventh...two days before my eighteenth birthday. If he would've waited two days, I might've gotten to take him home.

Instead, the nurses didn't tell me the weight or the height. They snatched him from my body, wrapped him in a swaddle, and took him out of the room.

They said he was adopted by a couple who had been trying to have a baby for years. They assured me he was loved and cared for.

But to go into a hospital, birth a child, and leave without that child because of somebody else's orders...it was some step far beyond heartbreaking, and I'm not the same person I was when I stepped foot into that hospital.

I think about that boy every day. I think about Tristan every day.

And I'm not quite sure how I'm supposed to go back home to Fallon Ridge and live there like it wasn't the stem of the worst tragedy of my life.

I exit the highway and drive down the country roads toward home. I take a left and drive through the small downtown boasting a gas station, a bed and breakfast, a market, a tavern, a diner, a few shops, and Fallon Ridge's pride and joy, the Pizza Joint.

I spot Fallon Ridge High School off to the south, the only large building in town. The elementary school and middle school are on the other side of town, closer to our neighboring

town with whom we share our school district, and the church is on the west side of town.

I turn down Oak Tree Lane, and I pass the first three houses without really noticing them. I can't notice them when my eyes are on the fourth house. I was just here a few months ago, but it was for my father's funeral. With random siblings popping up as if from out of nowhere and learning about the secret life my father lived, my focus shifted to different things. But this time, I'm coming home with no real plan. I don't have a job. I'm pregnant. The father isn't in the picture.

And every day, it seems like Tristan and our baby boy plant themselves closer and closer to the forefront of my mind.

What would life be like with Tristan today?

If my dad hadn't forced me to leave, would we still be together? Would he be playing in the NFL? What would our lives look like?

There's no way of knowing, of course.

The driveway is empty—unsurprising since it's a Wednesday early afternoon. Sue and Russ are probably both at work, or volunteering, or whatever it is they do these days. Sue used to park her car in the garage, and Russ's truck would sit on the left side of the driveway. Tristan got a car when he turned sixteen, and he'd park it in the street in front of the house most of the time, but sometimes in the driveway next to his dad's truck.

The street is empty, too, and it leaves a little bit of an ache in the pit of my stomach.

Everything is different now.

I pull into my mom's driveway. This is home now...again.

My car is packed full of my belongings, but I left behind any furniture I had. Sara offered to either sell it or donate it for me, and I took her up on that. All I really had was a bedroom set and a couch, anyway.

I grab my purse and one of the suitcases and head up to the front door. I draw in a deep breath, and the air smells sweet.

It's just different here—the air. Chicago was always bustling and busy. Things are calm here. Quiet. The air was crowded there. Dirty. Here it's uncongested and fresh.

I ring the bell, and my mom is smiling when she opens the door.

She wraps me into a hug. “You can just walk in, you know. This is home.”

I smile back as I squeeze her. “Thanks, Mom.”

“How are you feeling?” she asks, and she takes the handle of my suitcase from me.

“Good,” I say, setting my purse on the counter. “The baby is starting to punch my bladder now, so that's fun, and he or she is the size of an artichoke.”

“Two more weeks until we know if it's a he or a she?” she asks.

I nod. “The anatomy scan is at twenty weeks and you are definitely coming with me.”

She gets a little misty at that. “Happy to, Tessi-cat. Can I make you anything?”

“Just some water would be great,” I say. “I'll grab my other suitcase and start unpacking.”

“Okay,” she says. “Lunch? Food? I can make you my famous grilled cheese...” she hints, and I giggle.

“I would love one of your famous grilled cheeses,” I say as I head back to the car. I grab the other suitcase and set it in the hallway leading down toward the bedrooms next to my other one. I guess I've got all the time in the world to unpack.

She makes herself a sandwich, too, and she heats up some tomato soup. She serves a bowl of Cheez-its on the side, and the combination is everything I remember about home.

It feels warm and inviting and good to be here. I know why I've stayed away so long, but part of me wishes I hadn't. I wish I would've had more time with my mom over the last few years.

“Go ahead and get settled,” she says as she picks up our empty plates to take them to the sink. “I know you’re itching to get unpacked.”

I laugh. She knows me well despite the time that has stood between us. I prefer organization in my life, and I’m the type to unpack my suitcase the minute I walk in the door after a trip as opposed to the type who lets it sit for days.

I’ve been glancing at my suitcases sitting in the hallway like they’re mocking me the entire time I’ve been eating lunch. I’m already uncomfortable with being here having no direction moving forward, so unpacking those bags feels like the first step in getting my life on track.

I pull one of them down the hallway toward my room, and then I go back and drag the other one. I flip on the light in the room darkened by the closed shades, and I glance around my room.

It’s exactly the same as it was when I left it almost seven years ago, and it’s the same as it was when I was here a couple months ago for my father’s funeral. I couldn’t bring myself to open the shades when I was here last time, but this is my life now. I’m turning over a new leaf, and opening the shades to let the sunshine in just feels right.

I move over toward them, and with trembling hands, I grasp the rod in my hand. I pull it along, sliding the drapes open, and as I do, I glance out the window.

It looks exactly the same.

The same lilac bushes are slightly overgrown and I spot purple flowers edging around the bottom of my window.

The same white paint colors the Higgins’ house.

The same wood frames the window.

The same rhododendron bushes sit beneath his window.

The same blinds are open in his room.

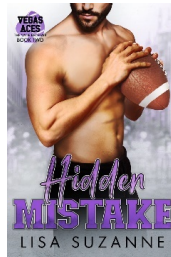
And the same boy stands across the small space separating our rooms.

His eyes lift to mine across our bedroom windows the same way they did for years and years before we were forced apart.

The only difference?

He's not a boy anymore, and I'm not the girl I once was.

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The boy next door is back, and so am I.

He's spending his NFL off-season in our small Midwestern town after seven long years away, and I'm in town for different reasons.

Memories shift to reality as we find ourselves in the place where we first fell in love. We're different people now, but I'm falling fast and hard for the man he is now.

But he's married. He's working to fix his mistakes as I'm hiding a few of my own.

As we grow closer, I know I won't be able to keep these hidden mistakes a secret much longer. But if I tell him, I'm afraid I'll lose him all over again.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'll save my acknowledgments for the final book since I know you're ready to get to *Hidden Mistake*... and I can't wait for you to see what's 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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