



MAGNOLIA CREEK BOOK TWO

West
Bound

Ryan Pharris

WEST BOUND

MAGNOLIA CREEK

BOOK 2

RYAN MARIE

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To the boys of summer.

*The ones that keep us on the edge of our seats and have us
root, root, rooting for the home team.*

Go 'Stros

*And for all the ladies who were told you couldn't do something
because you were a girl. They're right...because we can do
better.*

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A NOTE TO READERS

CONTENT & TRIGGER WARNING

The book you are about to read contains sexually explicit scenes including domination and degradation. If you find these topics emotionally triggering, please practice mindfulness and do not continue

MOOD MUSIC

Music plays a huge part in my writing process and character development. With that in mind, you will notice that some chapters have a song listed at the beginning. This is to help you get into the mind and mood of the characters. A full playlist will follow the epilogue.

PROLOGUE

VIVIAN



11 years ago

“POWER & CONTROL” - MARINA and the Diamonds

“CHUG, CHUG, CHUG!” Chants from rowdy frat boys and college athletes ring out across the backyard. Bodies are packed shoulder to shoulder as we celebrate the start of Spring Break.

My best friends Camille, CeCe and I are attempting to do something that resembles dancing while making sure we don’t spill a drop of beer, but it’s near almost impossible as we’re being bounced around like a steely ricocheting in a pinball machine.

“This is ridiculous. I can’t even hear what you’re saying. Let’s go.” I try shouting over the booming bass of the song, but I can tell that CeCe and Cami can’t hear me because all they say is, *“yeah. Totally.”*

I knew that a second attempt would fail, so I tugged on their arms and pulled them through the throng of drunk co-eds.

“Dude, why are you yanking my arm.” CeCe pulls her arm from my grip once we make it to the spot furthest from the speaker that’s blasting music.

“I am losing my damn voice from screaming at you two. And I’m tired of being bounced around by the Butabi brothers.” I spot a trash can and chuck my half full beer bottle. “Shit.” I miss.

“Then don’t scream,” CeCe shrugs and gives me that wide eyed head shake. “What’s your deal? Not even Cam is being mom tonight.”

“Hey!” Cami protests. “I take offense.”

CeCe shrugs her off and moves on to scanning the faces of the available men, surely looking for a willing victim.

I, on the other hand, am tired from our long drive to the beach house. My ears are ringing, my body is sticky from sweat, and my feet hurt from wearing these stupid wedges CeCe convinced me to wear. Earlier I slipped on some red, lacy thong underwear and matching bra in case I “got lucky” as Cami put it, but now I’m regretting it because one; I am in no mood to do anything other than sleep, and two; these things are riding so far up my ass crack that I’ll have to send in the troops to dig them out.

I try to wiggle the butt floss loose and get a nudge from Cami. “Looks like your reason to stay is here.” She nods her chin in the direction of the doors and there I see him, strolling in with the confidence of a god.

Phoenix West.

Baseball hottie.

Star of my every fantasy.

The guy I’m dying to give my v-card to.

I stare at him in a complete trance. His warm skin is like melted caramel, and his dark brown eyes are hypnotizing. He smacks backs and bro hugs people as he makes his way through the crowd and as if on queue, Jay-Z’s *Run This Town* comes blaring through the speakers. Seems like a fitting theme song since he and his crew definitely run their college town.

From the corner of my eye, I see Cami bounce happily on her toes before she lunges for Bishop as he strides up next to Phoenix.

“Cami girl! How ya doin’ beautiful?” Bishop wraps Cam in a tight hug and I see her eyes glisten with unshed happy tears.

It's been a few months since we last saw Bishop Michaels, and he and Cami were always closest. Well, they were until her high school boyfriend, Vaughan McCallan, decided to turn into a lying, cheating, no good dirtbag and break our girls heart.

It took the force of all things holy to convince her to join us this year. She missed out on our freshman year spring break because she was nursing her shattered heart and couldn't be bothered to do much more than attend classes and maybe eat a meal or two. The only reason she is with us this year is because Bishop pleaded and laid on the guilt trip thick when he said he missed his bestie, and couldn't stand to see her sad. That and he guaranteed Vaughan would be nowhere in the vicinity of this party town.

"I missed you, Bish," she sniffs into his shoulder.

"Aw, don't cry Cami girl. I'm here now." He gives her back a soothing rub, then shifts her to stand tucked under his arm. "What's up C? Red. You both look exceptionally hot today."

CeCe preens under the attention, having no problem accepting compliments. I mean, why would it be difficult when you're a five foot eight, supermodel looking, Indian Princess, almost twenty year old woman.

But me...not so much. There's a reason my nickname is squirt. And sprite. And Tink. I'm a five foot two—on my best day—red headed Irish girl with freckles and an affinity for turning the color of a ripe tomato in the summertime.

"You been working out, Bish?" CeCe squeezes his large bicep and he flexes.

Bishop throws us all a bright white smile and a wink. If it weren't for the fact that we have all been close friends for five years, I'd be melting under his blinding good looks. His deep brown skin is like smooth milk chocolate. I bet he tastes as sweet as he looks.

Wow! I've never thought of Bishop in that way. I guess this damn v-card of mine is a horny bitch who's desperate enough

to jump ship and onto anyone's dock. But there's only one dock I'm looking to board.

"Hey, Nix. Did you wanna grab a beer?" I'm forced out of my daydream and back to the present which smells like stale cigarettes, cheap alcohol, and sweat.

"Yeah. Ladies," Phoenix turns to meet each of us in the eye. "Would you like to join us?"

Cami and CeCe each take one of Bishop's arms and Phoenix holds his out for me.

Ohmigoshohmigosh! Act cool, Vivian. Not like a starstruck virgin.

"Uh, sure," I say, trying to go for nonchalance, and slip my trembling hand into the crook of his arm.

I am suddenly neither tired nor annoyed by this party. In fact, this could be the night that changes my life forever.

THE GIRLS and I spend the next four days hanging with our high school crew, and I spend time getting closer to Phoenix.

I can feel the attraction is mutual by the little signs he gives me. He stares a little too long. The telltale lip bite as his eyes roam up and down my body. The flirty touches and borderline overtly sexual jokes. He's feeling it, I'm feeling it, so why hasn't he made a move?

It's the second to last night here at the beach house, and I'm starting to get miffed about Phoenix's lack of groping and making out efforts.

A group of us have decided to forgo another night at one of the clubs and spend the evening hanging out in the hot tub and playing drinking games. Phoenix has stayed behind with Bishop and I'm crossing my fingers that tonight is the night. CeCe and Cam have already agreed to bunk with Bishop or one of the other girls should Phoenix *finally* come to his senses and decide to hit a homerun.

“You should definitely wear the green one.” CeCe holds up a green bikini that has barely enough fabric to cover the nips and vag.

Good thing I got a Brazilian before we left Texas.

“CeCe. Don’t you think that’s a bit...too little? I’ll be lucky if one of my damn lips doesn’t hang out. And I don’t mean the ones on my face.” I take the swimsuit from her and hold it up with two fingers because that is literally all it takes to hold up what looks like a fabric swatch.

“Viv...do you want to get laid or not?” CeCe arches a brow and gives me a pointed and slightly disappointed look.

“Don’t listen to our resident slut.” Cami snatches the bikini from my fingers and tosses it on the bed. “If it makes you uncomfortable then don’t wear it. Maybe one of us has a turtleneck and sweatpants you can wear.”

CeCe snorts and Cami rolls her lips between her teeth to stop the shit eating grin from spreading across her traitorous face.

“You guys suck. Give me that fucking thing.” Cami hands it back to me and I go to the bathroom to change.

“Why’re you going to the bathroom to change? We’ve all seen each other naked.” CeCe shouts.

“Because I’m gonna have to tuck in the lips and I can’t have y’all in there while I’m bent over with my head between my legs to check that everything is all good.”

I slam the door behind me and take another gander at the bikini and pray to goddess that my cookie doesn’t fall out of the jar in front of everyone.

“I THINK Cam and I will most definitely be sleeping in another room tonight.” CeCe leans over to whisper in my ear.

We’re sitting on the edge of the hot tub with our feet in the water, crammed shoulder to shoulder. Earlier, Phoenix nestled himself between my legs and has been running his hand with

those baseball calloused fingers up and down my leg. At one point, he leaned back and wrapped his arm under my knee and around my thigh. I took to running my fingers through the soft curls of his damp hair which caused him to tilt his head back and groan, “that feels so good”.

My fucking whore-y south mouth practically pushed its way from under my swimsuit to give him mouth to mouth.

I look at CeCe and bite the corner of my lip and nod. I can feel my face flushing and my nipples harden at the thought of what’s going to happen.

Phoenix pushes up from the bench seat and spins to face me. “I’ll be right back,” he says into my ear, his lips brushing my lobe and...

Did he just lick my earlobe? Queue panty melt.

“Okay,” I manage to choke out before he steps up and out of the hot tub.

I watch as his muscles flex deliciously and rivulets of water stream over each rippled muscle. He’s a freaking masterpiece created by horny goddesses to lure naive virgins to their deaths. But in my case there is no luring needed. I will gladly volunteer as the sacrificial lamb.

No arm twisting necessary.

“Jeezus, Viv. Did you see he has cum gutters?” CeCe says a little too loudly and I watch Cami snort her beer through her nose.

“Cecilia! My god. Be a lady,” I chastise her.

She swats at the air and lets out a “pfft. It’s too late for that.”

We joke for another ten minutes...then fifteen. And when Phoenix doesn’t return after the twenty minute mark, the girls and I decide to “get some snacks” from inside. A.K.A. recon mission.

The house is quiet, so we forage for some food then wander off through the rest of the house, looking to see who else is around.

The downstairs rooms are empty, so we make our way upstairs to see if we can “bump” into Phoenix.

As we approach one of the larger rooms, we hear voices coming from the other side of the closed door.

“Okay. So Briggs got the blonde chick from the house down the street,” an unfamiliar voice says. “Anyone make any progress with that Camille chick?”

Mine and CeCe’s heads swing to look at Cami whose face has gone stark white.

“Nah,” another deep voice replies. “I asked Bishop about her and he said back the fuck off. Apparently that’s like, his best friend and her boyfriend recently dumped her for some chick he got pregnant.”

Cami’s eyes fall and her chest deflates. I feel a mixture of sadness and pure rage on her behalf. Whoever those pricks are on the other side of this door are going to catch an epic knee to the nutsack from me.

“That gives Briggs a blonde, that black chick, and those two sorority girls who gave him a double hummy on the beach.”

CeCe’s lip curls and she mouths, “gross”.

“Nix. That leaves you. You got the doublemint twins at the bar the other night, the curvy girl from Buffets...you got Red locked down?” My jaw drops when I hear who they can only be referring to as me.

“She’s in the bag. Cross her off the list and add her to my collection. And with that, gentlemen, I believe that gives me a full house which means I’m the winner. I accept all major credit cards and cash. Pay me however you like.” Phoenix’s voice sounds nothing like it has every time he’s talked with me this week.

He comes across as a cocky asshole with an ego the size of Texas. One who, by the sound of it, has been collecting hookups all along the gulf coast this trip.

My heart feels like it's being squeezed by a vise. It constricts and a sharp pain burrows deep within. My nose stings and my lip trembles as tears threaten to fall when I put two and two together. I am simply another conquest. What we have—or rather had—isn't real. He may have been on his way to being my first, but I was just a redhead to add to his growing list of conquests.

These jerks were talking about girls like they were talking about collecting and trading baseball cards. Each one trying to build the perfect deck.

Seems like I was all Phoenix needed to garner the most valuable deck. And it wasn't the kind of need one feels when they simply can't go without the other for another second.

Before I can let my tears fall, I suck in a deep breath and clench my jaw tight. I stiffen my back until it's ramrod straight and lift my chin high. I may be feeling crushed at this moment, but I will fake being fierce 'til I make it.

I can't let this asshole think he got the better of me. I'd never let any guy get the best of me.

CeCe and Cam are still giving me sympathetic eyes and gentle rubs on my back when I resolve myself to confronting Phoenix. Let's see what his buddies have to say when they find out his lineup is about to crumble.

My palm presses flat against the door and I throw it open, like the fucking SWAT team bursting through. The guys all jump when it bangs against the wall with a resounding thwack.

“Well fellas. I'd put those wallets away if I were you, 'cause it looks like your boy doesn't quite have this redhead as locked down as he thought.”

Five sets of widened eyes and slacked jaws stare back at me with pure shock. When I meet Phoenix's eyes, I can practically see the backpedaling going on in his brain.

“Viv, let me—”

“SHUT. UP. Phoenix. I heard. All of it.” I slowly step further into the room, the support of my girls at my back. I walk to Phoenix, stopping when we're toe to toe.

Looking up into his stunned–yet still annoyingly handsome–face, I rise to my tippy toes and stab my finger in his chest. “You’re a pig, Phoenix West. A disgusting, pathetic, prick who I am so thankful I didn’t waste my virginity on.” His face falls and he has the audacity to look remorseful. “I will *ruin* you. I am making it my mission to let every girl, every woman, know what a sleazy scumbag you are. One day you’re going to regret every minute of the time you spent here. And when you do, I pray that I’m there to watch the king crash and burn.”

I spin on my heel and march towards the door. Just before I exit, I turn and give them my final words.

“And guys, if I were you, I’d start packing and get the hell outta here. Because when the girls find out about your spring break game, they won’t take too kindly to it. Run boys...*fast*.”

I watch as pained looks cross each and everyone of their faces and it fills me with great pleasure.

What started off as revenge on a guy who didn’t deserve the benefit of the doubt turned to a steeled confidence that would only grow harder as the years went by.

No one would ever make me, Vivian Kelley, feel small and immaterial again.

CHAPTER ONE

VIVIAN



Present Day

“BRAND NEW BITCH” - COBRAH

WHEN LIFE BREAKS you at an early age, one of two things happen. You either let the pain consume you, becoming a withering victim who cowers and hides from the world, or you let it fuel you. You let the rage and embarrassment of your naiveté spark a fire that destroys all evidence of that weak person who once existed. You burn it to ashes and welcome the emergence of a new you into the world.

You nurture this new person. You feed it the confidence that the old you never had. You vow to never let anyone push you over; that you’ll never be a doormat. And you bloom into the woman you were always destined to be.

Dare I say—ironically—a phoenix.

A rebirth.

A warrior, badass bitch who will step all over whoever she needs to in order to always rise above the flames.

And that is exactly who I, Vivian Kelley, became.

A no holds bar, sweet faced, bitch who takes no prisoners and leaves a wake of carcasses of those she chewed up and spit out. Particularly men.

So what if I’m known as Vixen Vivian. I wear that name like a fucking badge of honor. I *earned* it. I know what I want

and I know how to get it. Obstacles be damned.

So when a breaking development comes across my desk that rattles my very core, all I can do is scream at that meek little girl to stay gone because I'm in charge now, and I won't let anything or *anyone* hurt her again.

ESPN BREAKING NEWS:

Trade talks are buzzing with the news that NYC Bombers pitcher, Phoenix West, may be headed... West.

Will the MVP All-Star pitcher find a new home with the Houston Wranglers? Will West finally get that coveted World Series title that's alluded him? Will his return from Tommy John surgery slow him down? And will the Wranglers beat the trade deadline and steer themselves into a championship.

ESPN analysts will keep you updated on this and other breaking news.

NO. Fucking. Way!

No. It's not happening. Phoenix West cannot come to *my* town and take over *my* team. I won't allow him to bulldoze his way into my carefully crafted life and pull that hidden loose brick. It simply cannot happen.

I pick up my phone and my fingers speed across the screen. I pause when I'm ten sentences in and decide this text must be a phone call.

I tap CeCe's name and put the phone to my ear.

“Hey ho. Why are you bothering me? I’m busy,” is how my best friend of twenty years greets me.

“Is it true?” I feel out of breath like I ran here from home, yet I’ve not moved from my desk.

“Iis what true?” She draws out. “That you’re a crazy bitch calling me up before I walk into an important meeting to ask me some vague question while sounding like a fat kid tearing down a candy aisle?”

“Weird analogy, C. Is it true that Phoenix West is getting traded to the Wranglers?” I hear the rustling of papers on the other end go silent.

The sound of CeCe breathing is amplified through my phone’s speaker.

“Where did you hear that?” She finally asks.

“So it’s true then?” I flip back into my chair, letting the breath I was holding whoosh out of me like my soul exiting my body.

“I have no idea, Viv. This is the first I’m hearing of it, so I can’t verify. Listen,” I hear the clip of her heels as she walks the halls of Wrangler Stadium. “I’m heading into a meeting that apparently is of extreme importance. When I’m done, I’ll see what I can find out and call you as soon as I know anything. ‘K?’”

I nod my head knowing damn well she can’t see me, but somehow she knows.

“Chin up, buttercup. It’s just rumors. You know how those run rampant right before the trade deadline. Go do some online shopping and don’t think about he-who-shall-not-be-named. Love you, ho.”

“Love you too, hoochie.” I click end and slam my head on my desk.

Please don’t let it be true. Anyone but him.

I'VE FILLED my online shopping cart five times, and five times I have emptied it only to start over. I'm restless and I keep watching the clock as another minute passes and then the next.

CeCe has been in her meeting for over an hour and I feel like I've been stuffed into a cannon, ready to explode the minute the fuse is lit. The longer time passes without any update on the Wranglers and Phoenix, the worse the feeling in my stomach gets. What started as a sinking in my belly is now a full on coupe that has me hanging in peril.

I check my watch, again, and find that it's only been three and a half minutes since the last time I checked.

"Ugh!" I grunt and flop back into my chair.

"What's the matter, Polly Pocket? Someone piss in your cheerios?" Dan, my annoying co-worker, pops his head over the top of my cubicle and peers down at me.

Slamming my laptop shut, I stand so that I am almost face to face with him and give him my best "don't fuck with me" glare.

"No, but I'm about to punch you in the throat. That will make me feel better. So back off, dickwad."

Dan raises his hands in front of him and a smirk plays across his mouth. "Woah. Chillax little lady. No need to get your thong up your crack. I just heard you huffin' and puffin' over here and thought I'd check on ya."

I smack my hands on my desk and lean closer to him. "First off, jackass, no one says chillax anymore. Read urban dictionary or something. You need new comebacks. Second, don't worry about my mood or my thong. Both are just fine and not in any need of your concern or assistance. Go back to your hole and work on some riveting piece about the local senior night at the community center or one of those other journalistic masterpieces you claim to write." That last comment hits him right in the kisser. Just as I intended.

Dan is a middle-aged, two-bit reporter who has been relegated to pieces that usually only get assigned to the

newbies. But ever since he majorly screwed up an important assignment by fucking one of the witnesses, who happened to be the barely legal daughter of the owner of the Houston Heatwave basketball team, he's been assigned the bottom of the barrel reporting.

It was either that or be fired all together.

He pulled out an academy award winning performance when he groveled at the feet of our station manager. Lucky for him, the Heatwaves owner is a good friend of our managers and he was able to talk him off the ledge by promising that Dan would never report on any sporting events or priority Houston news again. That seemed to appease the owner. Now Dan's been stuck reporting on events such as the pig races of San Jacinto county and a scuffle that occurred at senior bingo night. That one was a real doozy. Nothing says journalistic excellence like two pink haired grannies stabbing each other with bingo markers and lost dentures.

Dan snarls at me and opens his mouth to give me what is no doubt a lackluster insult, but is stopped when my phone rings.

"Hold that mediocre thought," I tell him, holding up a finger and grabbing my phone from my desk.

It was CeCe and whatever she had to say, I wanted to hear it away from prying ears. The news she was going to spill would either get me the lead on a breaking story and be the cause of an ulcer, or simply be fodder for the tabloids.

"Please let this be good news," I beg when I answer her call once I'm in the stairwell.

CeCe exhales loudly into my phone's speaker and immediately I feel my pulse race. "I've got a huge scoop for you. Wanna meet for an early lunch and talk about it? I feel like this is face-to-face news."

Not at all what I wanted to hear on Monday morning.

"Not really, but it's probably best to be in public so I don't fly off the handle and hurl myself out of the fifth story window."

“I’m sorry, babe. Meet you at Anita’s in twenty?” She asks, figuring my favorite Tex-Mex joint will ease the blow that is coming my way.

“Yeah. See you then.” I end the call with an irritated goodbye and head back to my desk to gather my purse.

“Why so sad, little lady?” Dan chirps once I make it back to my desk.

“Shut it, Danny boy, and go back to your coloring book while you wait for the blue ribbon heifer to be crowned.” I snatch my purse by the strap and fling it, *accidentally*, in his direction, narrowly missing his smug face.

CHAPTER TWO

VIVIAN



I PUSH my way through the throngs of Houstonians as they move like fish swimming upstream in the underground tunnels. The city is so damn hot that instead of men and women crowding the streets of downtown, an entire network of underground tunnels lead to businesses like dentists and travel agents along with restaurants and boutiques.

I walk up to Anita's and spot CeCe already sitting at a table with drinks in hand. She must've taken the metro or an Uber to beat me here since the stadium was further from Anita's than I was.

"Alright. Let's get this over with," I whine, pulling out my chair and sitting down across from her.

She pushes my soda towards me with a sympathetic look on her face. "Drink this."

I pick up my cup and take a big swig. What I thought was plain soda burns its way down my throat causing me to choke and my eyes to water.

"What the hell, Cecilia?" I sputter.

CeCe reaches into her giant Louis and flashes me an empty bottle of Jack. "I might've added a splash to your coke."

"A splash?" My throat is still tingling from the first gulp, but it doesn't stop me from swallowing down another.

"The bottle wasn't full. It's all I had in my desk and I figured you could use a drink after what I'm about to tell you." I sigh and sip on my midday cocktail. "The early reports are

correct. The Bombers and Wranglers have worked out a trade for Phoenix. The contract is being finalized as we speak and he'll start at tomorrow's game."

My face pales and the alcohol in my stomach riots knowing that I am the on-field reporter which means I'll be giving Phoenix his first interview after the game.

"I am really regretting passing up the fashion reporter position with Made Magazine right about now." I sling the cup back and finish off the remnants of my drink.

"No you're not. You would've hated writing about fabrics and the seasons 'it' color. Although," she brings her finger to her lip and taps her long red nail against it. "Getting first dibs on clothing and purses and shoes that a designer sent your way would've been a key factor to making you my bestest of best friends."

I dig an ice cube out of my cup and chuck it at her, smacking her right in the nose.

"You bitch," she sneers and wipes the damp spot with her napkin

I just roll my eyes at her. "Is that all that was said in your long ass meeting?"

"No." Her response is quick and clipped.

"What?" I ask when her jaw grows tight and her eyes dilate.

"Seems the Wranglers have a new owner." My jaw drops and I slam my palm on the table.

"Shut the front door? Who is it?"

The sound of someone shouting, "Amanda Huginkiss, your order is ready" over the mass of patrons interrupts CeCe from continuing with her second shocking news of the day.

Our trays are placed in front of us and I don't waste any time digging into my tacos.

"Not anyone we've ever heard of." CeCe dips her chip into the bowl of queso and shoves the whole thing in her mouth.

“Is it a corporation?”

She shakes her head and sips her Sprite to clear her throat. “Nope. An individual. A rich as fuck, hotter than Hades, individual named Luca Amato.”

I chew my street taco that I smothered in salsa and scrunch my brows. The name is unfamiliar which, in the world of sports and journalism, is a rarity.

“He’s some tycoon from New York who decided he wasn’t rich enough and wanted to buy a professional sports team. Since none of the owners in New York were looking to sell, he found his way here. Apparently, unbeknownst to pretty much everyone in the Wranglers organization, Mr. Hewitt and his family were looking to sell the team. The word is he has some health problems, and his daughters aren’t interested in running the team.”

I nod and continue to eat, watching her reaction to all of this. For some reason, this all seems to bother her more than it should. I wonder if there is more to the story, like maybe her job is in jeopardy.

“Are you...is your position okay?”

“Oh yeah. Definitely. Nothing to worry about,” she replies and swats at the air.

“Then why so glum?” I ask her.

“You know how it is. New owner means there’s always a shake up. Positions are evaluated and some get the boot or reassigned. I was guaranteed I wouldn’t have to worry about that. It’s just...”

I wait for her to continue, but when she shoves three chips into her mouth at once, I know she’s stalling.

“Okay first, don’t think I missed the part where you said he was hot as Hades. You can explain later. But what do you mean ‘it’s just’?”

She gives me a half hearted, one shoulder shrug and washes down the bits of food in her mouth.

“I was given the special assignment of working closely with Mr. Amato on press releases and introducing him to the community.”

“Well that doesn’t sound bad, “ I admit.

Her big brown eyes lock on mine, unblinking. “I’ve basically been demoted to personal assistant, even though no one thinks so.”

“CeCe,” I start and place my hand on hers before she can avoid the topic by cramming more chips into her mouth. “You did a lot of that kind of stuff with the Hewitts. How is this any different? What aren’t you telling me?”

She taps her nails against the laminate surface of the table and works her lips back and forth. She’s wearing her large black framed glasses today, so she adjusts them before she goes on.

“He’s hot as hell, okay. Hotter than anyone I’ve ever seen before and now I have to work ‘*very closely*’ with him and somehow keep my hormones in check. And yes, it will be very difficult because I was practically cutting glass with my freaking nipples the moment I laid eyes on him. I’m in a damn drought because you took home that bartender again from Sipz, and even though y’all invited me to join, I just couldn’t do it. We haven’t shared a guy in years and I think we have matured beyond the point of threesomes. I mean, I love you, you’re my best friend, but I’ve seen enough of your cooch to last a lifetime. It’s a very pretty one, don’t get me wrong, but I prefer sausage to the taco. Not that I ever—”

“C. Stop,” I interrupt her mindless and nonsensical rambling. “Breathe. Rewind a bit because you got off on a tangent, and let’s try this again. You aren’t looking forward to working with Mr. Amato because you’re attracted to him and you haven’t been laid in a long time?”

CeCe takes a few calming breaths and nods her head while she blows air out through her pursed lips.

“Okay. And do you not think you can refrain yourself from ripping his clothes off?” She nods her head leaving me a bit

confused. “Yes you can refrain yourself, or no you can’t?”

“I can,” she replies, breathily.

“Then...I’m really not seeing the problem other than you’re attracted to him.” I lift my cup to my lips and realize it’s empty and I desperately need a refill.

“The problem is, he’s also an asshole. And you know how much I love sexy assholes. It’s my kryptonite, Viv. I’m a grown ass woman so I have self control. But it’ll be like telling a reformed stripper not to take off all of her clothes when someone throws a wad of cash at her. You know?”

Even though I do understand what she is telling me, her analogies never cease to baffle me. And make me chuckle. Which is what I do, earning me a growl.

“Sorry, babe. I’m not laughing at your situation, just your analogy. They’re always funny as shit. But, to answer the question you did not ask, the only way to handle this little conundrum you find yourself in is to fuck him. Easy.”

She pulls her glasses off her face and squeezes the bridge of her nose. “How does that solve my problem? And who’s to say he even wants to fuck me?”

I give her an incredulous look because honestly, that’s the dumbest fucking question to have ever been posed.

“That’s the dumbest fucking question,” I tell her, spilling my inner thoughts. “*Everyone* thinks you’re hot and wants to fuck you. Men, women, animals, aliens. Ev-er-y-one,” I exaggerate and draw out the word.

“I can’t do it, Viv. I can’t sleep with my boss. That’s totally unprofessional and I’d be mortified if anyone ever found out. I’d have to quit my job. There’d be no way I could face my colleagues knowing they’d heard all about how I rode our boss’s face in his office while people walked just on the other side of the wall.”

I snort and my damn nose burns from the salsa that gets trapped in it.

“Wow. Seems like you’ve really thought about it. I hadn’t realized you’d already planned a life with Mr. Amato but clearly...you have.” I wipe the snot that trickles from my nose.

“I haven’t. It just came to me. Whatever. Let’s stop talking about this. I’ll just need to find some hot boys to keep my mind off of him, or buy a new B.O.B. to keep me warm on my lonely nights.” She places her glasses back on her face and resumes scarfing down her chips and queso. “How did this conversation fall on me, anyhow? We were talking about you seeing Phoenix tomorrow.”

“Ugh. Don’t remind me,” I whine. “How the hell am I going to face him and not immediately kick him in the balls and stick a wet finger in his ear?”

Now it’s CeCe’s turn to snort.

“Why is that your default? Giving people a wet willy?” she asks.

“I dunno. It’s just fun to watch people squirm. Plus, think about it. Wet plus finger plus ear equals gross.”

She shakes her head slowly and motions to my empty cup.

“Need a refill?” she mumbles through a mouth full of cheesy perfection and I toggle my cup side to side to show her it’s empty.

“Let’s top off our sodas and we’ll see what flavor we can add to it with this.” She digs into her glorified, luxury shopping bag and produces a silver flask that I know has the initials C3V on it. A gift from Bishop one Christmas during college, the unofficial fifth girl to our gang.

The C3 represents Camille, Cecilia and Cathia. The V is for me, the lone oddball of the bunch.

While my girls are all drop dead gorgeous beauties with dark hair, tan bodies and long limbs, I’m just a tiny, pale faced redhead with freckles and a loud voice.

“What’s in it?” I ask.

She shrugs and quirks her lips. “I dunno. Guess we’ll see.”

“Yikes. Alcohol roulette. Haven’t played that in a while. But...I guess seeing Phoenix for the first time in years calls for something wild and crazy. Count me in, sister!”

CeCe holds up her hand and high fives me. “That’s the spirit, my little fireball. Let’s get sloshed,” she says in her best British accent.

And that’s just what we do. Drink...at eleven forty-five... on a Monday morning. Good thing our underground city has a CVS because breath mints and eye drops are a must on my way back to the office.

The last thing I want is to get caught buzzing at work and be the next Dan-fuckyerdaughter-Rendon.

CHAPTER THREE

PHOENIX



“HUMBLE” - Kendrick Lamar

MY PHONE VIBRATES in my hand and I see my agent’s name on the screen.

I swipe it and hold it up to my ear. “So...where am I going?”

“Congratulations, Nix. You are now a Wrangler.” Mauricio, my very non-Texan agent, says with the worst southern accent I’ve ever heard.

“And I got what I wanted?”

Mauricio had been negotiating my contract with a few different teams for the last two weeks. I had narrowed it down to three teams—the Houston Wranglers, the Louisiana Roughnecks, and the Mississippi Crawdads. I wanted to go back home but I wanted every penny that I was worth. Even after my Tommy John surgery, I was still one of the best damn pitchers in the league.

“Nope.” My jaw clenches and anger begins to pulse through my veins. “I got you *more*.”

“Say that again,” I say, more than a bit taken back.

“I got you—ready?...two hundred and eighty-one million for five years.”

I literally choke on my own saliva. I coughed, I sputtered and I damn near passed out. *Two hundred and eighty-one*

million. “I only wanted one seventy-five. How did you get me more than one hundred g’s?”

I hear his chair squeak on the other end and I can picture him sitting behind his big desk, scratching his pot belly and patting himself on the back. The guy reminded me a bit of an ice salesman in Alaska, but fuck was he a bulldog. I never had to worry about whether or not I was getting what I was worth with him. From day one, he’s had my best interest at heart.

“Seems there was a bidding war for you. The Roughnecks were battling with the Wranglers over you. Wranglers got a new owner and he was hellbent on acquiring you. No matter the cost.”

“Holy fuck,” I whisper and hear Mauricio laugh.

“I know you were hoping to land in Louisiana, being your home state and all, but I really think Houston is the better fit for you. They are definitely in the pennant race this year. And I think you can take them there.”

I’m speechless. It’s a kick to the gut, but not the bad kind.

I thought back to when I was just a kid, playing with a worn out glove and cheap bat with my friends in the streets of the Louisiana parish I grew up in. I was the poor biracial kid in a predominantly black neighborhood, and I stood out like a sore thumb. I was too black for the white kids, and too white for the black kids. But the one thing that stuffed all those prejudices down their throats was that I could play ball better than even the high school kids when I was just in elementary.

My dad spent hours with me in our postage stamp backyard with the overgrown grass and the copse of sassafras trees. He found an old punching bag from a boxing gym that was shutting down and painted a target on it.

He showed me how to hold the seams to throw a knuckleball, the perfect grip for a changeup, and how to spin a curveball that would have them swinging and missing every time. I worked everyday from the minute I got home from school until it was too dark to see my hand in front of my face, never thinking I was quite good enough.

When I got a baseball scholarship to LSU, my dad cheered right beside me. When our team won the college baseball world series, we celebrated for weeks. And when I was drafted to the New York City Bombers, my dad cried harder than anyone in the room. I only wish he could've seen me throw my first pitch in the majors.

A hard lump forms in my throat thinking back to all that my dad missed. I clear it away and take some solace knowing that he can see me and maybe had a hand in making my dreams come true.

“Thank you, Maury. Houston was actually my second choice and honestly, I couldn't be happier. I've got a buddy that lives down there, so it'll be good to be closer to him.”

“Oh yeah,” he drawls. “Bishop Michaels. He's the head coach at Rice, isn't he?”

I nod. “Yup. Doing pretty well, too. I mean, they aren't the twenty-twelve LSU team, but they're not too far behind.”

I think back to those college days with Bish. He was my closest friend, back then. We did pretty much everything together. Lived together, practiced, partied, drafted together. We saw each other through injuries and became as close as brothers.

We've drifted over the past few years—completely on my shoulders—and now I can't wait to rebuild that brotherhood we had. Party some, but of course not too much. We're older and our bones creak and pop more than they should. We'll probably do more sitting on the patio, drinking beers and reminiscing over college days.

Thinking of our party days reminds me of those crazy spring breaks we spent with his friends, which makes me think of her.

Vivian.

Now *that* memory is a kick in the balls. Fuck, I was such an asshole to her. Some days I wish I could hop in a time machine and kick my own ass for being such a douche. I liked her. I mean, I *really* liked her, and I fucked it all up playing

some goddamn game with the assholes on my team, just to show them I was better.

Thinking of that awful night has me wondering if she's still in Houston. I stalked her socials for a few years, but I stopped when I got caught up with all those thirsty cleat chasers. Who wouldn't? I was a twenty-three year old baseball stud and women were throwing pussy at me like they were beads on Fat Tuesday. I grabbed each and every one that was thrown my way.

But now that more than a few years have passed, the women just don't have the same appeal as they used to. It's the same damn thing in every city we stop in. The year away rehabbing after my surgery really helped me see that I needed to cut out all the sleeping around bullshit. My life had consisted of two things; baseball and pussy. And only one of those vices still held their appeal.

And recently, there was only one woman who still drifted in and out of my dreams.

"So you said the Wranglers have a new owner? Who is it, and why haven't I heard anything about it?"

The sound of crumpling was followed by Mauricio mumbling through a mouthful of his lunch. "Luca Amato. He's an Italian billionaire, apparently. Shipping, imports, exports. He's based out of New York and is a huge fan of yours. It's why he put up so much money to get you. And you haven't heard anything because it's been kept hush hush. The purchase went through last week and an announcement will come in the next day. In fact..."

He grew silent, aside from some more loud mouthed chewing. My phone buzzed and I pulled it away from my face to see an event added to my calendar.

"Did you get it?" he asked, sounding far away since I was still staring at my screen.

"Yeah," I replied. "What is it? I didn't open it."

"Mr. Amato wants to do a joint press conference tomorrow. The team just finished their three game series in

Seattle and have a home game on Tuesday, your debut.”

I put him on speaker and opened up my calendar and began reading the details.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Maury? I have to be on a plane in three hours?” I began calculating the time it would take me to pack and get my ass to Lagaardia in time for my three-thirty flight.

“Is it in three hours?” he asked, like he wasn’t the one who booked the fucking flight. “Huh. Well, get a bag packed and call your assistant to get your house boxed up for the move. I already booked you the penthouse at the Four Seasons. I told them you’d be there probably until the end of the season so you can focus on playing and not worry about house hunting. I’ll take care of that for you when you’re ready.”

I set the phone down on my bed and began stuffing my duffle with a few necessities I knew I would need for the couple of days it would take for Aric to send the rest of my things to me.

Fuck. Aric. I need to check if he even wants to move to Houston and if not, find a new PA. Replacing him will be a bitch.

“What about my gear?” I asked him.

“Already done. All you need to worry about is getting your ass on that plane. A car will be there in an hour to pick you up. I’ve gotta go so I can pack my bag, too. The car will come get me first and then you.”

“You’re coming with me?” I stop in my tracks, my favorite hoodie hanging halfway on the hanger.

“Of course I am. What kind of agent would I be if I let my favorite client fly off to meet his new team without me?”

I roll my eyes and yank the hoodie off the hanger, shoving it over my head and pulling it into place. “You mean the client who gets you the most money.”

“To-may-toe, to-mah-toe. Anyway, see you soon, kid. This is huge, Nix! You’re gonna get that ring this year. I just know

it.”

I click end and take a deep breath. *From his mouth to the baseball God's ears.*

“PHOENIX!” A tall man with a thick accent greets me when I walk through the doors of Wrangler Stadium.

The state of the art, multi-billion dollar facility was by far one of the best in the country. On the wall behind whom I assume is Mr. Amato, is a large painted mural of the Wranglers mascot in royal blue and scarlet red. A cowboy twirling a lasso above his head sits perched on a bucking bronco. The cowboy is decked out in stars and stripes and is the very definition of Texas.

Patriotic as fuck.

“Mr. Amato, sir. Nice to meet you.” I hold my hand out to him and he grabs it and pulls me into a back slapping hug.

We separate and he takes me by my biceps. I'm tall standing at six four, but this dude is no more than an inch shorter than me. His presence seems larger and he looks like a movie star with his jet black hair and olive skin. His face is dusted with a neatly trimmed beard and he has dark brown eyes. I'm a pretty confident guy, but standing in the shadow of this guy has me feeling like a bumbling kid tripping his way through puberty.

“No Mr. Amato or sir. Luca, please. We're the new kids on the block, as they say. We have to stick together,” he chuckles.

Just then, I see a woman take a step closer to him and I literally give her a double-take.

“CeCe?” I ask, completely flabbergasted that the girl I partied with back in college is standing in front of me, next to the new owner of my new team.

Fuck, she is sexy as sin. Long brown legs, dark hair and glasses that fulfilled every boy's naughty librarian fantasy. But no matter the fact that she was a walking wet dream, *my* dream girl was a fiery redhead.

“Hello, Mr. West. Nice to see you again?” she says in the most professional manner and holds out her hand.

“Mr. West?” I repeat when Luca says, “you know my Cecelia?”

Both mine and CeCe’s head jerk to look at him when he says that. I sneak a peek at CeCe and her face is frozen with shock, yet Luca has a huge smile on his face like he’s extremely proud of his statement.

“I will be assisting you and Mr. Amato with press conferences and news releases when announcing the new team ownership and your acquisition, Mr. West,” she recovers after a moment.

“CeCe...c’mon. I think we’re beyond last names. I’m Nix, remember?” I take the hand she proffered and pull her into a slight hug. She tenses but quickly pats my back before pulling away.

She passes me a tight smile and takes a couple of steps back. “Let’s stick with Phoenix, for now.” She turns to Luca and explains, “Phoenix and I knew each other in college. We have mutual friends.”

“Ah. Perfetto. She can be your guide, too. We are both new to the team.” Luca grips my shoulder with his strong hand, but I notice how he touches CeCe’s arm gently. She flinches like she’s been touched by fire and I quirk my brow at their slightly awkward behavior.

“What, exactly, is your role with the team, CeCe?” I wonder out loud.

“I run PR for the team and I’ll work closely with the press regarding the new developments.” She adjusts her glasses then folds her hands in front of her. “In fact, we should probably get you briefed and ready for the press conference. Reporters are already filing in, and they’re chomping at the bit to know what it’s about.”

“Has it not been made public? My signing and the new ownership?”

She opens her mouth to speak but then defers to Luca. He nods and proceeds to tell me, “There are speculations regarding your trade however, there has been no word to any press in regards to my purchasing of the team.” Luca’s voice is laced with a dark and menacing undertone that has the hairs standing up on the back of my neck.

“Well, actually...” CeCe holds up a finger then bit her lip nervously. “I did give the inside scoop to one reporter, but they’re the on field correspondent for the Wranglers.”

Luca tips his head to one side and eyes her with curiosity. “Who is this reporter?”

Her lips rub together furiously and she flits her eyes between Luca and me, then back to him.

She clears her throat and says, “She, uh...her name is Vivian Kelley, Mr. Amato, and I informed her this afternoon of both the signing of Mr. West and your purchase. She will be our direct correspondent for anything involving the team.”

My lip twitches at the mere mention of her name and CeCe notices my not-so-sly smirk. Her eyes narrow and I just know that the two of them have already had a heart-to-heart regarding my new status as a Wrangler.

“Will she be here today? I would love to meet her.” Luca begins walking towards a set of shiny elevator doors and we follow. Behind us trails Mauricio and a few other people I assume are execs for the team.

“She will—is here. She was hoping she could introduce herself to you, Mr. Amato, before the whirlwind of questions and cameras took over.” The doors open and Luca motions for CeCe to enter first and we pile in behind her.

“Fantastico. I look forward to speaking with her.” A bell chimes indicating we have reached our floor and the doors open.

Once again, CeCe moves first and the rest of us follow her like a pack of puppy dogs, trailing a juicy steak.

She walks towards a door and slowly pulls it open, like a host on a game show revealing what’s behind door number

one. “This way, Mr. Amato. Phoenix.”

We enter the room and there she is.

Her face lifts as we walk in and she immediately freezes, doing her best impression of a statue. Then she cracks and her jaw drops.

“You must be Ms. Kelley.” Luca’s steps are more like elegantly choreographed strides as he makes his way over to where she stands with a short, portly guy who is fidgeting with his camera.

“Yes. And you must be Mr. Amato. So lovely to meet you. Please, call me Vivian.” He clasps her hand then air kisses each cheek in greeting.

I watch as her wide green eyes find mine. Her pupils are so large you can barely see the magnificent color that draws men in like a siren.

That’s what she is. A fucking siren luring me in. And with the way she looks at me with fire in her eyes, I’d say she is definitely dreaming of beguiling me to my death.

“Bellissima,” he croons in a voice that must have women dropping their panties like he’s promising them immortality.

Vivian smiles shyly and her porcelain skin hues a beautiful shade of pink at the compliment.

Does she blush like that all over? God, I’d love to find out.

“Phoenix.” Luca calls my name and I finally take my eyes off of her. “Come in and meet Vivian.”

I try to hold back the smile that I know looks more smug than friendly, but my body has its own reaction to Vivian. Hers must have a reaction to me, as well since I watch her nostrils flare and jaw clench the closer I inch towards her.

“Hey Viv,” I rasp in my deepest voice.

I tug her into a hug much like I did with CeCe, except with this one I hold her a little too close and a little too tight. I may have also sniffed her hair which smelled like a gardenia bush in the summertime.

Her tiny body feels so good wrapped in my arms. I want to do more than just hug her and with the way my cock chooses this very moment to bang on my zipper, Vivian knows it too.

She pushes out of my arms and lifts her chin to me—because she’s like a sexy little fairy compared to me—and smooths out her silky blouse that only draws attention to her perky breasts and pebbled nipples.

Well, well, well. Her attitude may have put off *fuck you* vibes, but it appears her body is now in agreement with mine.

“Hello Phoenix. Congratulations on your trade. I know your presence will be well received by the city of Houston and the entire Wrangler organization.”

I watch her plump, pink pouty lips move with each word. When they form an O, all I can imagine is how fucking perfect they would look wrapped around my cock while I take a fist full of fire in my hand.

Wrong thing to think about, dumbshit.

“You know her, too?” Luca asks, surprised by our interactions.

“I do. But it’s been a long time. Now that I’m in Houston, I’m hoping we can get reacquainted.”

Vivian’s smile grows tight and she mutters from between clenched teeth, “I’ll reacquaint you with my fucking foot up your ass.”

I can’t help my grin because her attitude is as fiery as her hair. She’s nothing like the shy, meek, innocent twenty year old I met ten years ago. Oh no. Now she’s a spunky little temptress who looks ready to serve my balls to me on a platter.

“Well,” CeCe says, clapping her hands together. “Shall we get started? Mr. Amato-”

“Luca,” he growls.

“Right. Luca, if you would like to sit and answer a few questions with Vivian, she can get ahead of any speculations regarding the change in ownership. Phoenix,” she turns to look at me with a pointed stare.

“Yes, Cecelia.” I arch a sarcastic brow and let my lopsided smirk that I know wins over even the harshest critics play across my face.

CeCe, nor Viv, seem affected by it.

“If you can take a minute to meet with hair and makeup, you’ll be next to answer a *few* questions for Vivian.”

I bite my bottom lip, causing Viv to move her eyes to me and linger on that very spot. I swipe my tongue across where the small imprint of my teeth sits and watch as her chest rises with a deep inhale.

“It would be my pleasure.”

Vivian and CeCe both look at each other then proceed to give me a very obvious eye roll. They didn’t bother hiding it from Luca but I doubt he noticed since he seems to be preoccupied with memorizing the curve of CeCe’s hips.

Oh boy. Looks like we were all playing a new game. And I play to win.

Houston, we have lift off.

CHAPTER FOUR

VIVIAN



“HOW TO BE A HEARTBREAKER” - MARINA and the Diamonds

FUCK me sideways and call me Sally.

I was not expecting to see Phoenix today. I thought I had at least another twenty-four hours to prepare before I had to face him. At the very least I had hoped not to be buzzing from my boozy lunch with CeCe.

And goddammit! Why’d he have to look so good after all of these years? I’ve seen him on tv over the years—thankfully never having to interview him or get too close—but I always thought it was camera trickery or perhaps the hat. You know, how a hat pulled low over a man’s face can make him look mysterious and tempting as his eyes peek out from beneath the shadow of the bill.

But noooo. Phoenix is literally as good looking in person as he is on camera. Better, even! With his smoldering brown eyes shaded by dark and thick fringed lashes, a manicured brow that would make any woman jealous, and those god forsaken lips that look so plump and juicy I want to live off of them.

OH! Let’s not forget about his jaw and cheekbones that *somehow* grew more chiseled, more defined over the years. Add-in, of course, a perfectly trimmed scruff, tattoos and the body of Adonis and you have a lethal combination for spontaneous self combustion.

“Did you know he would be here today?” I whisper to CeCe as we follow behind the men.

Our heels click against the smooth concrete floors. The cadence of my steps is fast and erratic as I try to keep up with the long strides of CeCe—who is basically a supermodel—and the two men who are like gods amongst men.

“I had no idea,” she whispers back through a tight smile. “I was just as surprised as you when he walked through the doors. No one told me and you’d think I’d be one of the first, since I’m in charge of running this whole fucking circus. It seems pretty logical that the person heading press conferences, interviews and press releases would be damn close to the top of the list as to who should know.”

Her tone borders on the edge of annoyance and completely overwhelmed. I can’t even imagine the chaos that is raging in her brain. Not to mention she is absolutely, one hundred percent correct about her smoking hot, asshole boss.

Holy shitballs, batman. The man had me swiping my mouth a few times to be certain drool wasn’t dribbling down my chin. He was so sexy and smooth and debonaire, yet I could just tell he had an air of arrogance about him.

He was hot shit and the fucker knew it.

He was very professional when I did my brief interview. His answers to my questions were precise and adequate, never giving too much detail on any one thing. Most especially not his personal life. When I asked him about it, all I got was a “I am a self-made man who delves into the world of shipping. It has been very lucrative for me and now I get to live my dream of owning a professional sports team.”

That was it. He didn’t address my inquiry into his marital or dating status—not that it was necessary to the interview. But I didn’t miss the way his eyes wandered over to where CeCe stood more than once.

When he thought I wasn’t watching, simply gathering my notes, I witnessed him trail his eyes from the tips of her toes, lazily dragging up her long, toned legs, and admiring her jaw

dropping beautiful face. I could tell when he was affected by her laugh or smile because his nostrils would flare and he'd clench his fists.

I didn't see a wedding ring nor evidence of one by way of tan lines, so I assumed he was as free as a bird. And he was definitely looking to perch himself on my dear bestie.

I already know how she felt about him, so it's only a matter of time before she too joins the "I'm getting that good D" alongside Cami.

Not that I'm complaining, all that much. I get some satisfactory D on the regular. None of it includes a side of real intimacy, but it keeps me from drying up. Honestly, I'm not sure if I'm looking for more than a bang your brains out type of relationship.

I've got my career that I'm hyper-focused on and my amazing friends to keep me laughing, so I really don't have time to nurse a relationship with some dude who wants to make me his "girl" with hopes of moving me to suburbia one day and planting an ankle biter or two in my uterus. I'll leave the baby making to Cami who I just *know* is going to be popping out a few little McCallan babies once Vaughan finally gets her to say yes to marrying him. Which I know he will because that's been his whole plan from the time he was fifteen.

It's his whole life's purpose, to be honest.

But back to the situation at hand.

Phoenix fucking West.

I file in amongst the rest of the press-station and independent reporters—and sink down into my seat. The room is a buzz with curiosity and speculation as to why the conference has been called.

"Hey Viv," Jonathan, a reporter for the Houston sports magazine, says as I sit down. "How's it going? I haven't seen you in a while."

I wince and pray he doesn't notice it.

“Hi Jonathan. I’m great. Just been real busy.” I push my hair out of my face and hope that the movement is enough to distract him from the look of regret I’m currently wearing.

A few months ago, on a very drunk and desperate night, I gave in to the many advances of Jonathan when I saw him at an industry party. He’d been asking me out for what felt like years, and I always politely turned him down. Always having an excuse as to why the timing was just off.

Truth was, I’d heard rumors about him. Seems he’d made the rounds with reporters, writers, photographers...basically any female within the reporting/television/radio business that he could convince to sleep with him. But that wasn’t the reason why I’d pushed him off time and time again.

No, that reason lay solely on the fact that Tanisha, a friend and news anchor, informed me that Mr. Jonathan fucked like a construction worker pounding a jackhammer into concrete while hopped up on Red Bull. Fast. Hard. Destructively.

And until that night, I truly thought it was a silly rumor.

So, finding myself without a hook-up companion for over three weeks—I know. I was *dying*—I decided it would be okay to give his disco stick a twirl.

Shoulda listened to Tanisha and the other fifty women who blasted a warning to the female population in Houston.

The minute the words “sure, why not” were out of my mouth, Jonathan was dragging me by my freshly manicured hand down a hallway and into a dark closet. Before I could ask him what the fuck he thought he was doing, he slammed the door behind us and suctioned his mouth to mine.

The guy kissed like a damn guppy. Too much wet, sucking like I was giving him life, with a rhythmless cadence. It took a minute for me to figure out how the hell to respond to such a juvenile kiss. And when I did, he changed it up on me and started licking me. Not like, warm tongue trailing down your neck and flicking your taut nipple licking. It was like a cow tonguing a salt lick.

I was just about to call the whole damn thing off when I felt his *very* large bulge pushing up against my lower belly. *Eh*, I thought, figuring that I would tolerate his kissing—if you could even call it that—in order to take a ride on his huge cock.

My dress was bunched up around my waist in no time and he was pushing my panties to the side when I stopped him and pointed to my handbag that had been forgotten on the floor for a condom. He obliged, begrudgingly, and wrapped that third arm up.

The next moment I was being impaled by a damn steel rod, making my eyes roll back. Lord he was big. I swear that if he had pushed any harder, I would've been choking on the fucking thing.

He began to move and that is where the pleasure stopped.

How the hell do you own a horse schlong like his and not know how to use it? He was pumping short, staccato thrusts like, stab stab stab. My back was banging against the door with every pump of his hips but not in that way that has you moaning because it hurts so good. I just knew when we were finished that I'd have a contact burn all along my spine. My neck began to hurt from the shaking and I wondered if anyone I knew had a brace that I could borrow after this.

"I'm close, baby. You are too?" I was like WTF, when he grunted that in my ear.

I was nowhere near being done. Despite him jabbing at my uterus, the guy had completely missed my g-spot by a mile. *How*, I kept wondering. Before I could answer, his body grew stiff and his stabbing at my vagina slowed. He let out a low growl then moaned, *"oh yeah, baby girl."*

Huh? That was it?

He pulled out of me, which was like yanking a wooden post out of dried up dirt. He plopped out of me, still with an impressive length, and pulled off the full condom. Tying it up, he searched for a trashcan and when he didn't find one, he shrugged and stuck it in a mop bucket on the floor.

“Fucking phenomenal,” was what he murmured before kissing my lips and opening the door, walking out into the world with his head held high and his shoulders wide.

I stood there for another few minutes fixing my dress and rubbing out my neck that was aching from the whiplash I had just endured. Physically and metaphorically. I swiped under my eyes in case my tears of disappointment left any streaks, then I walked out, went straight to valet and called my girls to let them know about the worst sex of my life.

“Too busy to meet me at the Westin after this?” he whispers into my ear, bringing me out of my traumatizing flashback.

I shiver and I’m sure he thinks I’m turned on by the idea when in reality, I am utterly repulsed by the mere thought of having sex with him again.

I clear my throat and stare straight ahead. “I wish I could but I have an exclusive with Phoenix West after this.”

“You what?” he gasps. “But I’m the sports writer. How did *you* get an exclusive before me?”

The way he says ‘*you*’ has me snapping like a dead branch under a bear’s paw. “Okay, listen here Stabby McStaberson.” I turn my body to face him and feel my face turn pink from anger.

“Stabby McStaberson?” he repeats, like a fucking parrot.

“Yeah. You know. Jab jab, stab stab.” I jam two fingers into the hole I make with my other hand, mimicking what he did to my poor vagina.

The fucker actually looks pissed. Surely some woman along the way told him that he was going to town like a serial killer stabbing at his victims. Because that was what we are. Victims of a senseless crime against vaginas. Pussy stabbings, is what they are.

“Just because I’m a woman, “ I continue. “Doesn’t mean I play second fiddle to egotistical, chauvinistic men like you. I worked my damn ass off to get to where I am, and I’ll be

damned if you demean my success because I'm a woman. And unlike you, I didn't sleep my way to the top."

"Yeah. Right," he snorts.

I stick a finger in his face and feel eyes start to turn in our direction. "I have a strict no eating where I shit policy, and the men at my station are completely off-limits. I doubt you, on the other hand, can say the same. And I can only imagine that those women only passed you along for fear that you'd want to continue to defile their poor vaginas with your jackhammering. I got an exclusive because I know him from college. *Not* because I slept with him or any other person to get ahead, no pun intended. I earned it, goddammit."

I huff out a hot breath and spin in my seat, leaving him with his jaw hanging open. I witness a few men trying to quiet their laughter, and a couple women give me a small, standing ovation. Apparently there were some of Jonathan's victims amongst the crowd today.

My eyes flash up to the small stage and notice Phoenix staring at me with slightly miffed curiosity. I roll my eyes because the last thing I need is another man thinking a woman has no place in the sports world. Especially from someone like him.

"SO WHAT WAS ALL that about with you and Jonathan Meyers?" CeCe asked after the room had emptied out and it was just her and I.

"Ugh," I huffed. "He was trying to take another stab at me, literally, then got pissed when he found out I got the first exclusive with Phoenix instead of him. He had the nerve to think it was because I slept with that asshole."

"Jackass," she mumbles.

"Who? Phoenix or Jonathan?"

"Both of them. *All* of them." She throws her hands up and waves them around to indicate that no man is free from the assumption.

“Things not going so well with the Italian Stallion?”

“Shut up. Don’t call him that, and no. Things are not going well. He snapped his fingers at me, Viv. *Snapped*. Like I’m a fucking dog. And the worst part is that it made me tingle from my toes to my titties.”

I laugh then squeeze my lips together when she shoots me daggers with her eyes.

“Cecilia,” a deep, accented voice barks. “I need you to come with me.”

We look up and see Luca standing to the side of the stage that is being disassembled with Phoenix wearing an equally hard edged expression next to him.

“Yes sir,” CeCe replies and I watch as Luca’s pupils dilate and nostrils flare.

These two are totally bumping fuzzies by the end of the week.

I walk softly, trailing behind CeCe, until I stand shoulder to shoulder with her. Well, not shoulder to shoulder. It’s more like shoulder to boobs.

“Mr. Amato. Thank you, again, for the interview. I look forward to speaking to you in the future...once the Wranglers win the World Series.” I flash him my most winning journalistic smile.

“Ah, yes. Let’s hope. Nice meeting you as well, Vivian. I’m sure we will meet again.” He dips his chin then points his gaze at CeCe.

Without another word, he spins on his heel and walks out. CeCe scurries along, throwing me an irritated look over her shoulder.

“Who was that man you were speaking with before the press conference?”

I whip my head away from the exit where CeCe had just disappeared through and focus on Phoenix and his menacing look.

“A reporter. What’s it to you?”

His jaw clenches and the fire in his eyes grows intense. “What was he saying to you?”

I scoff and prod my hands on my hips. “I don’t think that’s any of your concern.”

I manage to get two steps away from him before I’m pulled back by my hand. “You looked angry. Did he do something to you?”

A sizzle of something I don’t want to admit to shoots up my arm. I snatch my hand out of his like it’s been held over fire and narrow my eyes at him.

“Again, not. Your. Concern. I can take care of myself and if you recall, I can handle assholes all on my own. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

In an instant, Phoenix goes from the cocky, confident professional athlete who could have any woman dropping her panties with a simple flash of his dimples, to looking like a little boy scolded. His shoulders round and he folds into himself. His eyes drop to the floor and he croaks, “I’m really sorry about that, Viv. I was a stupid punk kid. I never meant to—”

“Yeah, well you did!” I shout then take a calming breath because I will not let this man find the chink in my armor. “I have to go. Good luck, Phoenix. You are an asset to the team and I’m sure you will be successful.”

I turn away from him quickly and haul my ass out of the room like I’m being chased by the grim reaper himself. I don’t look back and I don’t let him see me crack.

I never will.

CHAPTER FIVE

PHOENIX



“SWEET SWEET” - Travis Scott

THE SWISH of her hips has me hypnotized and the tough exterior she’s acquired over the years has me yearning for her more than I thought possible.

I want her...*bad*. And I think she wants me, too. I saw the way her pupils dilated when our hands touched and her breathing hitched. I recognized all of it because my reaction mirrored hers.

I stifle a groan as I watch the round globes of her ass bounce from side to side. *Fuck*, she has an amazing ass. She’s a petite little thing from her head to her toes. Perky breasts that would fit perfectly in my large hands and delicate ones that wouldn’t be able to wrap around the girth of my cock. But that *ass*. She must run, bike, walk a million steps a day because I can tell it’s firm.

I imagine sinking my teeth into it as I fuck her from behind. Would it jiggle if I smacked it? My dick grows dangerously hard when I picture it sliding in and out between her pale cheeks.

“Fuck me,” I whisper to no one, but somehow the guys tearing down the stage must hear me because one of them mutters, “I hear ya, brother.”

I look over my shoulder at him and see him watching the same view that disappears from sight. My teeth grind

painfully. A deep inhale and exhale and the reminder that she isn't mine—*yet*—has my raging hard on deflating.

I turn around searching for Luca and CeCe but find them nowhere in sight. Just Maury and a few of the Wranglers staff are still hanging around. I take a few steps towards them when my phone buzzes in my back pocket.

I pull it out and smile when I see the name.

“Bish. What up, brotha?”

“Niiiixx!” He whoops on the other end. “My boy. You’re finally here.”

I quirk a crooked smile at the comfort hearing his voice brings me. I have an older sister Sierra, whom I love dearly, but our relationship is typical for siblings that didn't spend many years being raised in the same house. With her being twelve years older than me, our time together is locked in memories of her visiting during breaks and holidays when she was away at college.

We would do anything for each other, but we didn't have the type of relationship where we talked daily. Shit, we didn't even talk weekly. We had check-ins a couple times a month. Honestly, I'm closer with my niece, Anais, who just turned eighteen and is starting her senior year in high school than any other member of my family. I'm the cool uncle who she calls when she needs some advice that she can't go to her parents with, or to simply complain about how bad it sucks being a teenager in a house where she's treated like a child.

Typical teenager bullshit.

But Bishop is my brother in every sense of the word other than blood relation. I'm thankful to have him here in my new town. I could use some family time. And maybe a little advice on how to get in Viv's good graces.

“I'm here. Earlier than I thought I would be, but here and happy nonetheless.”

“I saw your press conference. Lookin' good man. That arm of yours still throwing hot?” He asks and I can hear the smile in his voice.

“Yeah. Feeling better than ever.” A pause that sounds like I’ve been disconnected is followed by Bishop’s voice again.

“What are you doing now? All done for the day?”

I look around at Maury who is still standing and talking shop with a few suits. “Not sure. I need to talk to Mauricio and see what we have slated for the rest of the afternoon. I’m assuming I need to get my ass to practice since I start tomorrow.”

“So does that mean you have a couple minutes for a friend?” I look at my watch just as I hear Bishop tell someone he’s here to see Cecelia Desai.

I walk out of the conference room and look right then left, searching for someone who can help me find my way through this maze of rooms and offices.

“CeCe,” I call out when I see her exit out of a room that I assume is Luca’s.

I jog over to her as she stands there holding a leather portfolio and adjusting her thick framed glasses.

“Hey. I think Bishop is here. I’m talking to him and—”

CeCe holds up a finger and digs out her phone from the waistband of her skirt. She begins typing furiously on her screen and a minute later, “follow me. He’s downstairs. Mr. Amato,” she calls, sticking her head into the room she just exited. “I’ll be back in a few moments. Phoenix has a visitor downstairs.”

He dips his chin in acknowledgment and she turns sharply, walking away.

“Bish. You still there?” I ask into the phone, having forgotten he was still on the line.

“Yup. Are you on your way down?”

“CeCe’s taking me to you right now. See you in a sec.” He mumbles and we disconnect right as we step into the steel elevator that brought us up here.

The doors close and there is an awkward silence that falls over us. I shove my hands in the back pockets of my jeans and rock back on my feet.

“How long have you worked for the Wranglers?”

Without looking at me, she replies, “eight years,” and that’s it.

I chew on my lip, wracking my brain to come up with something to say to have her engaging in actual conversation.

“So you and Vivian are still close friends?”

“Yup,” she says, popping the p at the end of the word.

Okay.

I try one more time. “She looked amazing.”

“Nuh uh, homie. Not happening. My girl is too good for you. Go find some hood rat to cross off your list.” She snaps at me and before I can even rehing my jaw that has fallen to the floor, the doors are opening and she’s stepping out into the corridor.

It takes me a moment to gather my wits and scramble to follow her before I’m shut in with my shock from her reaction.

Now I can understand why those two are best friends.

“I CAN’T WAIT to see you on the mound, here in your new home. You’re gonna kill it. I know it.” Bishop takes a huge bite out of the last taco that sits on his plate. I do the same then wash the remnants down with my water.

Bishop has welcomed me to Houston with lunch at his favorite restaurant. We’re lucky that very few locals know who I am and that I’m the Wranglers new star pitcher, so we’re lucky to be enjoying a paparazzi and fan free lunch. So far.

“I’ll set aside a couple tickets for you. You want two or three?” I wipe my mouth then drop the crumpled napkin onto my plate before finishing my water.

I spot the waitress and lift my glass to her when she makes eye contact, indicating I'd like a refill. She nods and holds up a finger letting me know she'll be with me soon.

"Thanks, Nix. That'd be awesome. I mean, C gets us into plenty of games with her passes, but I feel like I take advantage of her. We tend to pay for more than she comps. But since my bro is now a member of our beloved Wranglers, I will happily accept whatever freebies you want to throw my way." He gives me a crooked smile that is so Bishop just as the waitress approaches our table to refill our glasses.

"I'll take the check when you have a chance," I tell her.

"Of course. Is there anything else I can *help* you with?" She says, emphasizing the word help, an obvious twinkle in her eye.

"Nope. Just the check. Thanks, sweetheart." I effectively end any further discussion by turning my attention back to Bish. "Cool. I'll set aside three."

"Nice. I'll bring Vaughan and Hayes. Do you remember Vaughan? You met him years ago."

I think back to all of Bishop's friends whom I'd met over the years, recalling primarily the females. Camille. CeCe. Vivian.

"Is he the one who was dating your hot friend Camille?" I give him a smirk and a waggle of my brow.

"Yeah. That's him. And be sure to shut that shit down. He and Camille are back together and Vaughan'll kill you if you so much as smile at her." The waitress returns and sets the check down in between the two of us.

Bish is quick, but I'm quicker and I snatch the tab away before he can. "I got this. In case you didn't hear, I just signed a record breaking contract."

"I heard, asshole. How is it," he begins, adjusting himself so that he sits back against the booth and drapes his arms over the back. "That you come off from a year of rehab after major surgery, and you're throwing hotter and faster than ever. They fit you with bionic parts when they opened you up?"

I slip my wallet from my pocket and pull out more than enough cash to cover the bill and a nice tip for our waitress, not wanting to give her my name on my card if I can help it.

“I’m just that good.” I chuckle and stand from the booth, pocketing my wallet. “How did Vaughan and Camille get back together? I thought he did her dirty by knocking up another chick while they were together?”

Bishop grips my shoulder with his mit of a hand and speaks into my ear as we walk out of the restaurant.

“Long story but basically, what Camille thought happened really *didn’t*, and once she found out the truth they had a very happy reunion. We’re all very excited for the two of them. And I’m sure Vaughan will give you more details when we have a few drinks after what I know will be your first win as a Wrangler tomorrow night.”

“Sounds good to me. You pick the place and I’ll be there,” I tell him and open the passenger door of his truck.

“There’s this one bar that’s always crawling with chicks after the home games. We’re sure to find you someone to celebrate with.”

He starts the engine and pulls out of the parking lot and into traffic and back towards the stadium where my new team is waiting to meet me.

“Nah. I’d rather find a chill place where we can have some beers and talk. I’m not really looking to hook up.” The truck jerks and I notice Bishop coming to a hard stop at the red light.

“Come again,” he says, cupping his ear like he didn’t hear the first time.

“I said I’m not up for any cleat chasers. I just really want to focus on my game and my new team.”

The light turns green and he slowly—like a grandma who can barely see over the dashboard—accelerates through the intersection.

Bishop stays quiet for another few seconds, only the sound of old school Snoop fills the truck’s cabin.

“You got a girl you haven’t told me about?” he finally asks.

“No.”

“You decide to go celibate?”

“Again, no.”

“You...you gay? No biggie if you are, it’d just be a surprise.”

“What the fuck. No, I’m not gay. Why would you think I’m gay? You’ve seen the number of women I’ve hooked up with over the years.”

“Exactly!” He barks. “So if you’re not gay, and you’re not celibate and you don’t have a girl, why the hell wouldn’t you want to take advantage of all that new pussy that’s going to be coming at you like fastballs down the lane?”

I shrug, nervous to tell him the truth about my self discovery over the last year but figure if I can’t tell my closest friend, who can I tell?

With a sigh, I tell him, “I’m over one night stands of non-memorable women who just want to brag about screwing a ball player. That year of rehab showed me how truly alone I was, and what I would’ve given to have someone by my side, supporting me and helping me through it all. No chick I ever hooked up with would be the type of girl to put aside their social media influencer duties, or give up being the center of every man’s attention to support me.”

He slowly nods his head as he stares at the road in front of him. “I get you. And you’re right. Of all of the chicks I hooked up with during my time in the pros, there isn’t one that wasn’t looking out for her and her alone.”

“And that’s on me. I have never in my life thought I’d be the settling down type. Then my injury happened and I was stuck watching fucking movie after movie, and it had me wondering what it would be like to have someone there with me. Someone to lay next to, to laugh with and have meaningful conversations. Someone who cared about *me* and not my status or paycheck.”

“Damn, Nix. Were you watching chick flicks the entire time? Maybe those weren’t pain pills they gave you.”

“Fuck you,” I reply and he snort with laughter. “Here’s the thing...there is someone I’m interested in.”

“Now we’re talking,” Bishop smiles and rubs his hands together. “Where’d you meet her? Did y’all already shake them sheets?”

We pull into the parking lot at Wrangler Stadium and I spot some of my new teammates walking into the building. Guess practice is starting.

“Nah. We haven’t done anything yet. In fact, she kinda doesn’t know that I’m interested. I mean, she did at one time but now...well, let’s just say I fucked up and I need to make amends before she’ll give me a shot.”

Bishop pulls up the curb and scratches his short beard. “Please don’t tell me it’s who I think it is?”

“That depends,” I smirk and pull open the door. “Who do you think it is?”

His head tilts and he eyes me suspiciously. “Please don’t tell me it’s my favorite redhead.”

‘Okay. I won’t tell you it’s Viv.’ I step out of the truck and peek my head back in just before shutting the door and say, “but it’s Viv. Thanks for lunch. See ya.”

The door slams shut and he yells something at me, but I’m already running through the doors before he can chide me.

CHAPTER SIX

VIVIAN



“DEFINITION” - Mabel

I LOOK DOWN at the field from my perch high above Wrangler Stadium and watch as the players run through their warmups.

Guys I’ve known for years stretch and talk and laugh as if pre-game jitters don’t exist. A few guys are fielding balls from other players, another handful are swinging their bats at soft lobs that come their way, and the rest of the players are in various states of either getting help from one of the trainers, bullshitting while trying to look busy, or flat out standing around.

Phoenix West falls into the latter category.

His new teammates talk with him, though I’m sure most of them are already on friendly terms with one another. I watch as he flips his arm and runs his fingers along the inside of his elbow where I assume his scar from Tommy John surgery lays. He makes a few movements with the same arm and the guys exchange more words. They high five and give each back pats, then walk off in different directions.

Phoenix ambles over to where the other pitchers are congregating and they do the same as his other teammates by shaking, high fiving, laughing and smiling at him while they talk. Before too long, the pitching coach calls over to the group singling out Phoenix who gives a nod to the others then makes his way into the bullpen.

The coaches work with him on a few long tosses, warming him up and preparing him to throw his famous one hundred and one mile per hour fastballs. The ones that have even the best sluggers looking like they're swatting at flies.

If I were down on the field right now I'd be able to hear the sound of the baseball as it connects with the catcher's glove. *Thwap*. I know the sound by heart, having spent so much time in and around ballparks. The smell of the dirt after it's been sprayed down and painted. The whiffs of leather mitts and popcorn as vendors prepare for the gates to be opened swirl in the air.

"What are you still doing up here, Red?" The voice breaks me from my trance and I spin to see Hank walk into the booth.

"Hanky Poo," I sing. "How're you, big guy?"

He pulls me into his arms and wraps me up tight. Hank gives the best bear hugs and I always get at least two before my night at Wranglers Stadium is over.

"I'm great, dear. How are you?" Hank is the Wranglers senior Baseball Data Analyst. He's the guy—along with a few other members of the analytics team—that studies each player at each game and works all of his magic to produce reports to help player development.

He's been my constant source of everything and anything baseball. From the history of the game to the latest rule and play changes, Hank is my number one, go-to guy when I need help.

"Doin' pretty good. Just checking out the action from high above before I head down to my perch next to the dugout."

Being the new on field reporter means I get my own little piece of dugout heaven. I mean, it's not exactly *in* the dugout but rather dugout adjacent. Really, I'm separated from the boys by a couple of bars and a foot or two above them at field level. It's nice to look down on men who most consider larger than life.

"Shouldn't you be interviewin' the new guy? Get an exclusive, and all that."

“I got an exclusive yesterday before the press conference. CeCe filled me in on the trade before the rest of the world found out. You know, ‘cause she’s a bomb ass bestie.” I wink at Hank and he sets down a large canvas tote that was hanging from his shoulder. I have to fight to contain my smile.

The canvas tote is embroidered with a baseball and his name just below. It looks like a bag that a mom would send her kid off to playdates with, stuffed full of snacks, a change of clothes and instructions on what not to feed the little crotch goblin. This, however, was made for a fully grown man with a belly and beard by his sweet wife, Rosey. She is constantly finding new hobbies to occupy her time now that she’s retired. She’s ventured into baking, origami, knitting—not her finest hour—kickboxing and now embroidery.

I have been the lucky recipient of some of her best baked goods, an origami bird, what I guess you could call a scarf—although it looks more like a wonky potholder—and even got sent a video of her kicking some major ass in her boxing class. Seems like the only thing I have yet to receive is the gift of her—

“This is for you kiddo.”

I look up just as he tosses something at me. I catch it before it slams me in the face and unfold it. This time I don’t fight the shit eating grin that splits my face because in my hands, I hold my very own canvas tote with my name embroidered below a large red admiral butterfly.

“Is this from Rosey?” I ask Hank and he nods his head. “It’s beautiful.” I step up to him again, and wrap my arms around his neck and give him a kiss on the cheek.

His beard tickles my lips and I wiggle them. This man and his wife are the sweetest, cutest couple ever. I’ve had the pleasure of sharing meals with them, swapping stories, and listening to them talk about when they were young and the family they always wished they could’ve had but never got a chance to. Rosey had many difficulties and was never able to conceive. Instead, they fostered kids and took to being their neighborhood’s adopted grandparents.

And since my grandparents are either deceased or living in another country, I too have taken to them like my very own.

“I will give Rosey a call after the game to thank her for this. I absolutely love it.” I hold it out at arms length again and study all the little details of the butterfly’s wings. “She’s really great at this.”

“Yeah, I think this one is her favorite. Well, this and kickboxing.” He rolls his eyes and pulls out a small lunch box that Rosey packs full of healthy treats. “I think she may stick with this for a bit. God willing.” He pulls out another small bag and this one, I just know, contains Hank’s favorite junk foods.

I watch closely as he methodically pulls out small bag after small bag, lining them up on his desk. Baby carrots, chocolate cupcake, celery and peanut butter, cosmic brownie, pita chips and hummus, bag of gummy bears. One by one, they line the edge and he caps it off with a bottle of water and Dr. Pepper.

I clamp my lips between my teeth as I hold back the laughter. Hank looks up, his eyes peeking at me from behind his glasses, and narrows his gaze on me.

“You better not be tattling to my Rosey about my game time snacks, you little troublemaker.”

“Mums the word...if you give me that brownie.” I arch a menacing brow at him.

His eyes slant and his lips purse as he studies my face. He looks from me to his treats, then back to me. With a sigh, he plucks the brownie from his assembly line and hands it over to me. I snatch it from his hand, tear open one end, and break the brownie in half, handing the other portion back to him.

I pop it in my mouth then pretend to zip it, lock it and throw away the key.

“Gotta go,” I mumble through a mouth full of chewy fudge. “See you after the game.” I blow him a kiss and make my way out of the booth and down the stairs until I get to the field level.

I flash my badge at Rodney, who already knows me, and he moves aside for me to walk through the small corridor that leads past the teams clubhouse and locker rooms. I usually take my time passing through, chatting with any player I may see. Sometimes I'm able to set up a little rendezvous with one of my usual boys for after the game. But not tonight.

My heels click rapidly, like a writer's fingers flying across the keyboard, as I scurry down the hall. I pass an equipment manager, one of the trainers, and even one of the batting coaches. I can literally see that light at the end of the tunnel when my name is called.

"Vivian!" shouts a deep voice from just inside the locker room doorway.

I slow my steps then stop, taking a deep breath before plastering on a smile and spinning slowly to see who has halted my escape.

Ugh.

"Hey Kenrick. How's it going?" This asshole.

Yeah, I've slept with him a few times, but that was before I knew the dickhead was married.

"Looking damn sexy tonight, Red." His eyes roam up and down my body and he licks his lips.

I suppress the vomit that edges its way up my throat. This guy is a total slimeball.

A few more of the players make their way to where Kenrick is, coming up behind him and pushing him forward so they can walk out.

"Thanks," I say quickly. "Good luck tonight." I turn on my heel and take one step forward before I'm surrounded by hot AF baseball players in tight pants and even tighter asses.

A hand grips my forearm and I clench my jaw, trying desperately not to punch this creep in his face.

"You wanna get together after the game? I can get a suite at the Belvedere." His voice is low but still loud enough for the others to hear.

“I don’t know. It depends,” I lie.

“Depends on what?”

“Whether or not you still have the condition.” I tilt my chin up and steel my back.

He looks at me confused and the others grow deathly silent.

“What condition?” he asks.

“You know. The one called a WIFE!” My voice raises ten decibels and I practically spat the word in his face.

His face pales when I mention the poor, oblivious woman. Or maybe she’s not so oblivious. His douchebaggery shines bright for everyone to see, so it’s possible she already knows of all his cheating ways.

The guys let out laughs, a few snorts, someone says “burn” while another smacks his back...*hard*, causing him to jolt forward.

“Swing and a miss,” I hear one of them call out.

Kenrick glares at me but doesn’t respond because really, what could he say to that.

“That’s what I thought. Good luck tonight fellas,” I say to them over my shoulder as I make my way out into the dugout and over to my little area where I’ll watch the game, gather my notes, and try not to be affected by Phoenix West.

“FUCK YEAH,” one of the guys says when the team files back into the dugout after Phoenix throws another golden inning.

His debut has been phenomenal. And as much as I really wanted him to suck so I could delight in the wrath of karma that hit him over the head, I’m relieved to see that the Wranglers made a smart move by signing him.

Players throw down their gloves, and a few grab their bats and make their way out on the field to try to get some points on the board. It’s bottom of the sixth and the score is one zero, Wranglers.

“Did you see the smoke comin’ off that last one, Viv?” The catcher, Cisco Montoya, asks as he plops down on the bench closest to me. “My hand is still hurting.”

I smile down at him as he shakes out his catching hand. “I did. His arm’s looking good.”

“Is that all that’s looking good, Red?”

I look away from Cisco and look directly into the eyes of Phoenix as he walks over to where we stand and takes a seat right next to his new catcher.

“Good job tonight, Phoenix. Your pitching has been amazing...so far.” I try to keep the bite out of my words and don’t give him even an inch of a smile.

“So far? Don’t worry sweetheart. I’ve got the stamina to go all night and I never lose power.” The fucker throws me a wink and Cisco slaps his shoulder.

My jaw clenches and the poor microphone in my hand gets the ever loving life squeezed out of it.

“I bet, though I wouldn’t personally want to find out. With all of that ‘collecting’ you did in college, I’m sure it only got worse once you got into the pros. No doubt there’s a venereal disease or two floating around inside your body. I’d hate to be one of the many lucky recipients to walk away with a lasting parting gift from you.”

Cisco’s eyes widen and his gaze drops to the ground seeing as he’s stuck between the two of us. Phoenix has somehow moved closer to where I sit, sandwiching Cisco between the wall and him.

“No diseases here, Red. I’m clean as a whistle. I’d be happy to show you.”

“Thanks, but no way in fucking hell. I’d rather get frostbite on my nipples than get anywhere near you.” I flick my face back to the field, sending my hair flying over my shoulder.

“Didn’t I just hear that you slept with Kenrick? The very *married* Kenrick?” His voice drips with something that sounds like a mixture of contempt and jealousy.

“Alright. You wanna do this here? Let’s do it.” I stand up and lean over the railing, giving both of them a clear view of my cleavage when my blouse dips down but that’s the least of my concerns. “I didn’t know that fucktard was married when I slept with him. One. The second I found out, I ended that like a bad habit and took my ass to church to pray for forgiveness. Two. You are the last person I’d ever want to fuck. I may have been a naive girl once, but I’m a grown ass woman and I know a dirty, no good snake when I see one.”

Phoenix’s eyes fill with fire and rage and Cisco sinks further down, trying to become invisible. Doesn’t matter. Neither of us is really paying much attention to him.

“I am not nor have I ever been a snake. I may have been an asshole when I was younger, but I apologized for that. I’ve grown too, you know,” he argues back.

“Doubtful.”

“Hey guys, can I move?” Cisco asks, his very thick accented voice cutting in between ours.

“You don’t know shit about me, Red. People change but clearly you’re too hung up on old mistakes to see that.”

“Quit calling me Red, you asshat. And it wasn’t just a mistake, Phoenix. You fucking decimated me. And to your group of douchebag teammates, no less. So excuse me for not falling at your feet like all of your other cleat chasers just because you flashed me a smile. Go find some idiot bimbo to suck you off because I will *never* fall to my knees for someone like you.”

Twenty-four hours. I lasted twenty-four hours before losing my shit on Phoenix. I knew it was only a matter of time, but I was hoping I could keep my wits for more than a day.

“I’m gonna...” Cisco stands but Phoenix does also which effectively boxes him in.

“Someone like me? What the hell does that mean?” He rests his hands on his hips and I can see just over his shoulder that we are catching the attention of a few guys.

“It means,” I say, flipping my hair out of my face. “You are worth the chewed up gum on the bottom of my shoe. You may be hot shit now, but I bet in a year or two you’ll be an overworked, overrated, overpaid, used to be good, old ass nobody.”

I witness the brown of his eyes disappear as they turn black as night. I’ve hit a nerve and I have to admit...I’m shaking a little. The look he gives me is one that I can only equate to what a lion looks right before he tears his prey to shreds.

“Listen here, little girl. Why don’t you sit back down and stick to what you’re good at; asking questions that someone writes down on those little flashcards of yours. I’ll stick to what I’m good at and that’s throwing a fastball that could singe the hair off your ass.” His lip curls with a snarl.

We stand in a tense standoff, neither of us speaking a word, and I swallow back what feels like a sob climbing up my throat because I don’t cry. Not anymore.

“I’ve earned my fucking right to be where I am. I worked my ass off and I’ll be damned if I’ll allow yet another man to belittle me simply because I’m a woman. So why don’t you just sit your ass down and wait your turn to throw a ball. It’s only a matter of time before that elbow gives out again, so rest up buddy.”

I’m so tired of defending myself in this man’s world. I’m good and I know it. I don’t need anyone to tell me I am. But the constant “who’d she fuck to get here” attitude from men like Phoenix, Dan and Jonathan is really starting to wear on me. I don’t sleep with men to climb up the ladder. I sleep with them because, just like a man, I can. Simple as that.

Cheers explode throughout the stadium, and we both look to the field to see one of the guys hit a home run. The ball soars through the air and out of reach of the centerfielder, causing the sound of the Wranglers cannons to pierce through the screaming fans.

I sit back in my chair and immediately scribble down some notes about the play and focus on my job. Not Phoenix. He’s

nothing. He's not even here. Forget about that asshole.

When my notes are completed I can see movement in the corner of my eye and slowly turn my head to see Phoenix standing closer than ever.

“You better watch your mouth, little girl. Your bark is bigger than your bite and if you don't quit sassing me, I'm gonna put you over my fucking knee and spank that tight little ass of yours. I'll show you there's no problem with my throwing arm. Try me, Red. I dare you.”

He's so close I can feel the warmth of his words as his breath skates across my skin. I swallow and try to not show how affected I am by them. My mind races, searching for a witty comeback but for once in more years that I can remember, I am at a complete loss.

His eyes flick down and a cocky smirk graces his stupidly handsome face. My eyes drift down, following the direction of his gaze, and I find my traitorous nipples trying to claw their way out of my blouse.

Horny little bitches.

When I look up, I find him staring at me with an intensity that makes my legs quake and my vagina quiver. *Why can't he be as ugly as he is arrogant?*

The sound of cleats pounding the cement catches my attention and I see players run into the dugout.

The bottom of the inning is over which means seventh inning stretch will be coming soon and a loud rendition of *Deep In the Heart of Texas* will soon follow. I take the opportunity to slip away from Phoenix's stare and shuffle as quickly as possible to the bathroom, deciding to forgo the convenient one located behind the dugout.

Once inside, I rush over to a stall and lock the door behind me. My mind is racing, my hands are shaking, and my stupid body is reacting like it forgot the awful thing Phoenix did to us.

I reach for my phone that's hidden in the waist of my pants and type out a text to my girls with trembling fingers.

Me: SOS. Mud has been flung and shit has hit the fan. Necesita margaritas pronto. Meet at Ike's after the game. I WON'T TAKE NO FOR ANSWER.

Seconds pass when I see those lovely little dots appear just before the first text rolls through.

Cami: Oh shit. Phoenix?

Me:Yup!

Cat:You didn't even last a day!

I step out of the stall and wash my hands, letting the cool water run over my pulse point with hopes of cooling the fire burning through my body. It's a nasty one because it's been fueled by not only my rage but apparently a kick of lust on the side.

CeCe: Heads up, Bish already texted me and said to get y'all to meet them afterwards.

Cami: Yup. Just got the call from Vaughan. Guys headed to Ike's after the game. I'm dropping off Dagen at Maxine's and I'll be on my way.

Cat: Cam, come pick me up.

Me: Fucking great. I gotta go. See you later.

We all sign off and I brace myself to walk back out there. My steps are confident and strong and I hold my head high. That is, until I realize I have to do a post game interview with none other than the cocky jock who makes my body tingle.

Ugh! Fuck my life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PHOENIX



“GODZILLA” - Eminem (feat. Juice WRLD)

I CLOSED my debut by shutting out the last batter in the seventh and walked off the field to a standing ovation from my new home.

Down in the dugout, my teammates all slap my back with big ass smiles on their faces and cheers. My manager tells me to rest for the remainder of the game despite my protests that I can finish. I know he’s looking out for me and it has nothing to do with my performance, so I let it go and watch our closer tie up loose ends and celebrate with the rest of the team when we win, two to zero.

The team makes it back out on the field and we talk with a few guys from the opposing team who aren’t crying like a pack of bitches after the loss. I catch up with a couple ex-teammates who I’ve remained friends with, and we talk a little about what’s going on in their clubhouses. They congratulate me on the trade and the win and suggest we meet up some time.

Just as we’re passing off the last of the handshakes, one of the guys jerks his head to the side and is laser focused on something behind me.

“Fucking hell,” he groans. “That chick is a goddamn knockout.” I look over my shoulder and spot Vivian walking slowly towards me with her cameraman in tow. “What I

wouldn't give to find out what it sounds like when she screams. Fuck.”

The other guys follow his stare and all let out quiet curses at the smoke-show that draws closer to us. She finally reaches where we stand and sidles up next to me.

“Phoenix, good game,” she acknowledges with a curt tone then turns toward the guys. “Sorry fellas. Better luck next time. But hey, nice catch in the fifth Armand. You totally robbed Bernie of homerun.”

Armand, the player she referred to, stands tall and smiles. “Sorry about that, sweetheart. I couldn't let that asshole get one over me. I'm still sour about that out at first. I was safe and that fucking blue knew it. He just doesn't like me because I pissed on his shoes once when I was a rook.”

Vivian snorts the cutest laugh and she reaches up to muffle the sound.

“I hate to break it to ya, but I had a clear view from my perch,” she turns and points to the empty chair where she sat next to the dugout. “And you were out by a mile.”

Armand slaps his hand on his chest and fakes injury. “Ouch, beautiful. That cut me.” He winks at her and she blushes.

Bastard. His cheesy ass gets a smile and a blush, yet all I got from her was an icy glare and daggers thrown my way for the remainder of the game.

“Vivian Kelley. On field correspondent for KTHU.” She holds out her hand and makes introductions.

Armand, being the player he is, shakes her hand and brings it to his lips, kissing the back of it before releasing her.

“Got any plans for the rest of the night, Vivian?” He asks.

My blood is boiling as the two of them continue to flirt. She may not be mine right now, but she will be one day. And I'll be damned if I'm going to let this walking STD get his hands on her.

“Sorry, big guy. I’m meeting up with my girls for drinks after I interview this guy,” she responds and jerks her thumb in my direction.

“Your girls, huh? Well what do you say I bring my bros and we meet up with you all and—”

“Speaking of interviews,” I interrupt their banter. “We better get to it.” I grind my jaw and pass the guys a look that says *back the fuck off*.

Two of them catch my drift, but fucking Armand can’t take a hint. He opens his mouth to speak again, when her cameraman blessedly cuts in.

“Viv, we need to get set up.” He plops down a small stool that I didn’t notice him holding, right next to me.

I scrunch my brows and look at him with confusion written all over my face. He nods his head at Vivian and I look to see her stepping up onto it, bringing her gorgeous face and tight body several inches closer to me.

“Well goddamn. If that isn’t the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.” Armand shakes his head slowly and bites his lip.

This fucker is begging to eat a knuckle sandwich tonight.

“Time to go. See you later,” I growl and turn my body just enough to block her from their view.

They hustle off the field and I give one hundred percent of my attention to Vivian. I can smell her and just like earlier during our faceoff, her scent makes my cock jerk.

She runs her fingers through her hair, fixing a few stray strands, then picks up the mic. Her cameraman positions himself in front of us and they both press a finger against their ear, listening to what is being said through the earpiece.

I lean into her and lower my voice. “Heads up, Armand is an asshole and I know for a fact he isn’t packing what I am. Just thought I’d save you from a wasted night.”

She drops her hand to her side and throws me that glare from earlier. “I’m really not in the mood to continue this fight with you, so let’s pause this until tomorrow. As for Armand, or

any other guy for that matter, I fuck who I want to fuck and neither your concern nor advice is needed. Okay?”

I clench my fists and force myself to count backwards from ten to stop from grabbing her and planting my lips against her pillowy ones. This woman makes me fucking angry and turned on with her smart mouth. It makes me want to spank her ass red, then fuck her until she’s moaning my name.

“I meant to ask you earlier,” I whisper. “Are you a screamer?”

Her mouth drops open, eyes wide, and I realize that was a bad move because now I just want to put my hand on her head and push her to her knees to worship me from below.

“In four, three, two...” I blink out of my daze and watch Vivian transform from angry little tart, to professional mode in a snap.

“Thanks, Richard. It was a great night at the ballpark, and an even better debut for our newest Wrangler, Phoenix West.”

She stares straight into the camera and rattles off a few highlights of the game including my seven inning shutout.

“And now, the man of the evening. Phenomenal pitching tonight, Phoenix. How is your arm feeling after throwing an alarmingly low ninety-eight pitches?” Her fake smile is one perfected over years of being “on” when the camera is.

It isn’t the same flirty smile she was giving Armand just minutes ago, nor the joking ones she exchanged with the players in the dugout.

“I feel great. No pain at all, and the crowd tonight really sparked a fire in me.”

“Speaking of the crowd, you were very well received by the city of Houston. Has it been the same with your new teammates?” She points the microphone in my direction again.

“They’ve been really welcoming. The atmosphere of this club is something I haven’t experienced before. These guys are a full on support system and work seamlessly with one

another. It's only been a day and already I've been brought in like a family member and not a guy who's sent more than my share of strikes their way."

She continues to smile and blink and listen to the words I'm saying, looking completely unaffected by our close proximity. I want so badly to see her slip from this controlled demeanor, so I do the one thing that I think will do just that.

Out of view from the camera, I brush the back of my hand against her hip and feel her body tense. Her eyes flare and her smile quivers but to anyone watching on the other side of the lens, it's imperceivable.

I continue to talk about the game and answer her questions. When she speaks, I take to flicking my fingers against her thigh. I lick my lips then sink my teeth into them. I lean in closer when I speak into the microphone, and each time I do something I watch as she falters just slightly. Never anything anyone but me would notice, but I get the greatest satisfaction from watching her flub and knowing it's because of me.

When she thanks me for my time and ends the interview, the smile she kept in place falls and so do the niceties.

"You asshole. Don't fucking touch me, again. You're lucky I'm a goddamn professional or else I'd have stuck my Louboutin so far up your ass, you'd need search and rescue to dig it out."

I let the lopsided grin I've been holding back take over my face and it only spurs the heat in her eyes. "What's the matter, sweetheart? Can't handle a little challenge? I saw the way those perky little nipples of yours practically reached out for me every time I touched you."

"Fuck you, Phoenix," was all she said after I witnessed, yet again, the way her body reacted to me.

She hopped down from the stool and stomped off, not giving me a backwards glance. I smiled and gave myself a pat on the back for ruffling her feathers that are no doubt usually tucked tightly into place.

“Dude, she’s going to fucking ruin you.” I turn and see the cameraman rolling up his cables. “She’s a maneater, that one, and if you come away from this unscathed, you should thank your lucky stars. She’s destroyed a few guys for less than what just happened between you two.”

“I’m not worried about her. I can handle Red.”

He snorts and stands tall after tucking the wound up cables in his belt. “If you say so, man. Just don’t forget I warned you.” He dips his chin then walks away, leaving me standing on the field by myself.

I’m not afraid of her fiery attitude. In fact, it excites me even more to think of making her mine, sooner than later. No matter the consequence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

PHOENIX



“THING FOR YOU” - David Guetta & Martin Solveig

“THERE HE IS! The man of the hour!” Bishop throws his arms up and shouts as I come out of the press conference room having finished my interviews for the night. “Fucking amazing game, brotha.”

“Thanks, Bish.” I clasp his hand and we do the bro hug that’s reserved for just the two of us. The same one we established back in college and still use to greet each other as adults.

“Man. I thought for sure Rocky would let you close out the game.”

I shrug and adjust my duffle hanging on my shoulder. “I could’ve closed but he wanted me to rest. He wasn’t worried with Stokes as the closer and neither was I.”

We walk towards his truck and I spot two other guys standing there.

“Nix, I don’t think you’ve met Vaughan and his brother, Hayes.”

“Hey man. Nice to meet ya. That was one helluva game.” I shake the hand of the man Bishop pointed out as Vaughan.

“Nice to meet you, and thanks. It felt good out there on the mound. Kinda like I’ve belonged here all along.” I turn to the other guy and shake his hand. “Phoenix West.”

“Hayes McCallan. This guy’s better lookin’ younger brother.” He jabs his elbow at Vaughan. “I hear you’re joining us tonight? You sure you’re up for meeting our girls? They can be a rowdy bunch.”

Bishop unlocks the doors and we all climb in, Vaughan and Hayes immediately claiming the backseat so I can sit up front.

“Pssh. He can handle them. You forget, Nix knew the girls back in the day. You were too young to remember, H. You still had training wheels on when Nix was killing keg stands and workin’ his way through the line of women he had waiting for him.” Bishop throws his truck into drive and pulls away from his parking spot.

“You’ve met them?” Vaughan asks, an obvious irritation to his voice.

No doubt he thinks I flirted with his girl. Little does he know, Bishop threatened every guy with castration if we so much as looked at her.

“Yeah. I used to tag along for breaks and a few holidays. They also followed us to a few away games. But up until yesterday, I hadn’t seen any of them in a decade.”

I look back at Vaughan and see him nod and chew on his lip. I can tell he wants to ask me about his girl...

“I think I met your girl, Cameron?”

“Camille,” he corrects.

“Right. Sorry. I met her a couple of times. She wasn’t around as much as the other two.”

“Don’t worry, Vaughan. Every guy in a hundred mile radius knew Camille was off-limits.” Bishop looks in his rearview and meets Vaughan’s eyes. “Besides. Nix was too busy chasing after then pissing off Viv to even look at Cam.”

“Ooo,” Hayes and Vaughan hiss from the backseat.

“Oh yeah. I’ve heard that story. Sorry, Phoenix. You picked the wrong one of the bunch to fuck with. Be lucky your balls are still attached.” Hayes chuckles and Vaughan points at me then taps his finger to his nose.

“What did you hear about me?”

The cab falls silent with the three guys exchanging looks amongst each other while I wait for somebody to fucking tell me what was said.

“Well, here’s the thing Nix,” Bish begins. “The girls are like our sisters. I don’t want to say we take ownership of them but...they’re ours.”

“We sorta make it our mission to protect them at all costs,” Vaughan says, leaning forward and sticking his head between Bishop and me. “I was away for awhile and only recently was clued in on what happened between you and Viv. And I gotta say...you’re still alive, so be thankful for that.”

“If it had been any other guy who did what he did to our Red, you’d be a dead fucker. I guarantee. But because you’re Bishop’s brother from another mother, you’ve been spared.” Hayes reaches down and pulls a cowboy hat from I don’t know where, and situates it on his head before sitting back in his seat.

“I get that, but what did she say about me?” I ask again.

“Viv became a different person after that night. Our friends know that her change is all thanks to you. For better or worse. She went from a sweet, shy book nerd who secretly loved sports, to an outspoken, assertive woman who sucked in then spit out any man she wanted. She either used them for her own satisfaction then tossed them aside, or she ground out any poor sap who dared to threaten her place in the professional sports world. She has left a wake of bodies behind her. Many are still pining over our little vixen. ”

“Siren,” I mumble. “We were kids, Bish. You know how guys are. Especially athletes. She should, too. And I fucking apologized for my behavior. It was a long time ago and I would think that by now, she’d have let it go. But fuck no. That damn sexpot argued with me all night long.”

They chuckle and I proceed to give them a little rundown on what happened between us. In the dugout and on the field.

“Sounds like our girl,” Vaughan snorts from the backseat. “Red loves to argue for the sake of arguin’. She gave me a helluva time when I started pursuing Camille, again. The little thing literally threatened to spit roast my dick and serve it as an appetizer at my funeral if I hurt even a hair on Cami’s head. And I tell you what...I believe her.”

I can’t help but smile and get fucking turned on by that little spitfire.

“And you think she’ll be there tonight?” I ask the guys.

“Sure as fuck. Camille already told me that they were waiting for us and grabbed a table in the back.” Vaughan taps away on his phone as he speaks. “Told her we’re about five minutes out and she responded with a beer emoji and a question mark.”

Bishop and Hayes shout out their beer preference then look at me. I tell them I’ll have whatever they do, then Vaughan’s back to typing and smiling down at his phone.

“A word of advice,” Bishop says in a low, deep voice, while the other two have a separate conversation. “Don’t antagonize her. You’ll only make it worse for yourself. Just find someone else to hit on tonight, but let Viv be. Especially since it seems you two have already locked horns earlier tonight.”

I take a deep breath and nod in agreement. Whether or not I actually plan to live up to my agreement or not has yet to be determined.

“FOR FUCK’S SAKE,” is the greeting I get from Vivian when we walk up to the table. “You couldn’t have left the trash at home, could ya Bishop?”

“Awe. I missed you, too, Peaches,” I say back to her with a wink.

Her nose scrunches up and her lips curl. “Peaches?”

“Yeah. ‘Cause your ass looks so juicy and plump. Like a Georgia peach. I just want to take a b—”

“Oookay. That’s enough of you two. To your corners,” Bishop booms over the music and chatter of the bar. “Viv, back to your seat. Nix, opposite end.” He nods his head in the opposite direction of Vivian and I reluctantly go.

Vaughan sits down across from me and throws his arm over a stunner. Camille, just like CeCe and Viv, has definitely grown up to be a drop-dead gorgeous woman. But I quickly avert my eyes so as not to be on the receiving end of Vaughan’s wrath.

I may be bigger than him, but one should never underestimate the power of a man who’s either jealous or scorned. And Vaughan looks like he’s seen a little of both.

“Camille. Nice to see you again,” I say politely and extend my hand across the table.

“Nice to see you, too, Phoenix. And welcome. Great game tonight. I only caught a little bit of it since I was having a girls day with Dagen.”

“Is Dagen your...?”

“She’s my daughter,” Vaughan says.

Oh shit. Now I remember. Vaughan cheated on Camille back in college and knocked up the chick.

“Oh. Nice. She with you for the summer?” I ask and immediately regret it when Vaughan’s look hardens.

Camille rests her hand over his that sits on the table now closed into a fist. “Dagen’s...*mother*,” she says with malice dripping from every letter. “Passed away a few years ago. It’s just her and Vaughan.”

“And you,” Vaughan says to her with a look in his eyes that I assume is love. I can’t say for sure since it’s not an emotion I’ve ever felt for a woman myself.

“Shit. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” I apologize to Vaughan.

Bishop never told me that little tidbit of information.

“Don’t be,” he replies.

I scratch my brow at a loss for words since it seems there is no love lost there. I make a mental note to ask Bishop to fill in some blanks so I don't go shoving my foot in my mouth every time I'm with them.

"So, Phoenix. Are you excited to be here?" Camille asks, breaking the thick tension that suddenly arose at the table.

"I am. If I didn't end up in Louisiana, Houston was my next pick."

An arm wraps tightly around my neck and tugs me close. "This fucker wouldn't pass up a chance to be close to me," Bishop says with a jovial smile.

"True. This asshole has been bugging me for years to find a way down here. The opportunity finally came up, and I was fucking done with New York, so I jumped."

"I read about that. Pretty close to a record breaking deal, wasn't it?" Vaughan asks right before a cold glass of beer is set in front of him by a lady who eyes him up and down.

He's wearing Wranglers and a henley that hugs his body just enough to show off his muscles, making it easy for women to ogle. However, I don't think that was his intention since he doesn't even spare the girl a glance. He just picks up the glass and takes a drink.

Camille, on the other hand, is eyeing our waitress like she's one breath away from beating the ever lovin' shit out of her if she looks at him again. I'm sure Vaughan will be wearing the same look on his face the second some dude around here makes a double take at her. And they will.

"Hey guys," calls a sweet voice from behind me.

Thinking it's some cleat chaser who has found me, I stiffen at the sound. Turning slowly I see another stunning woman hugging Hayes then moving on to Bishop.

What is in the fucking water down here?

I swear to all that is holy that in the span of a day, I have seen four of the most beautiful women ever. And they all, somehow, are connected to this group of friends.

The sexy brunette makes her way to me and stops. I stand because there's a lady at the table and that's what my momma raised me to do, and notice she's short but still not as small as Vivian. She has a unique amber color to her eyes and plump pink lips. She definitely looks like my type because you know..she's a woman. But something tells me I need to stay far away from this one, too.

"You must be the infamous Phoenix West," she purrs.

"Yes ma'am," I drawl, my Louisiana bred accent seemingly making a reappearance at the mere sight of this woman.

"I'm Cathia Villalobos. You can call me Cat." Her teeth snap at the T and she bites her lip.

"Nice to meet you, Cat. You joining us?" I ask her as she stands smiling.

"I am. But here's the problem," she pops up on her toes and I lean down so she can whisper in my ear. "You're in my seat. So how's about I sit in your lap? Face to face, preferably."

Her fingernails skate down my arm and a tidal wave of chills runs over me. I'd like to say my dick doesn't respond to her, but it's been awhile since he's seen something other than my hand.

"I, uh...I mean, if...um, sure. I guess. Or I can, you know, I can move. I-I..."

I am at a fucking loss for words. I look around the table for help since I know they know her, but each and every one of them, minus Vivian, stare at me with wide eyes and muffled smiles.

Finally, Cat breaks down in a fit of laughter. "I'm messing with you. Relax."

Bishop stands and smacks my back. "Holy shit, you looked terrified."

I shake my head and laugh a little. "I was nervous to say anything. You three basically just told me you kick the asses of

any guy that fucks with your ‘girls’.”

“I’m sorry, Phoenix. I couldn’t resist. Bishop told us that one of us needed to take the lead on ‘initiating you into the crew’, and since Vivian peaced out the second she heard your name, and Vaughan would’ve worn your balls like a trophy after killing you for looking at Camille, I decided I’d better take it.”

I sit back down and Cat moves to sit in the empty chair next to Hayes, and everyone else returns to their drinks.

“What about CeCe? Are you excused from initiations?” I ask.

“No. I participate. But you never would’ve believed me since I just about hate your guts,” she tells me with an arched brow and flip of her hair.

“Ouch. Okay. Nice to know. I’ll be sure to stick to this end of the table.” I throw back a gulp of cold beer and it calms my nerves that were on shaky ground for a minute.

“I’m Cami’s sister, by the way,” Cat says. “I never had the chance to meet you before since I’m younger and these three bitches never let me tag along for Spring Break.”

“You were like, sixteen years old when we were slamming beers on the beach and sleeping in a house crammed with thirty people. Guys included. Mom and dad never would’ve let you come with us. I’m still surprised they didn’t send Dre as a chaperone,” Camille says to her sister and I notice she has taken to running her fingers through the hair on the nape of Vaughan’s neck.

He, in turn, is gliding his fingers up and down her neck and collarbone. I feel like my confession to Bishop yesterday about being lonely has sparked a sixth sense in me, making it so I notice all the little touches and looks passed between two people in love.

I fucking hate it.

What I don’t hate is how easily we all fall into conversations. I talk a lot more with Vaughan and find out he’s got a ranch in a small town north of here called Magnolia

Creek. Hayes is a partner of his, and Camille has started working with them.

CeCe lives not too far from them, while Vivian and Cat live closer to downtown Houston. Although, from the way it sounds, Cat is looking to move back to Magnolia Creek and willing to make a longer commute to work just to be closer to her sister who's been gone for several years.

When Camille and Vaughan excuse themselves to go dance, Bishop quickly leans over and tells me about Camille's husband passing away about a year ago. He also informs me that Vaughan's wife died four years ago and that the entire marriage was a sham. Something about her taking advantage of him in order to get pregnant so he'd leave Camille.

He doesn't get too specific but the whole thing sounds like the plot of one of those soap operas my mom used to watch. I'm just waiting for him to tell me that someone has an evil twin who is back from the dead and plotting their revenge.

After thirty minutes, Vaughan and Camille return to the table looking slightly disheveled. Far more than a couple should if they were just dancing.

Camille's cheeks are flushed and Vaughan has the beginnings of what looks like hickey on his neck. I decide that since I've been initiated into this group, I can fuck with them and not get it blown back in my face.

"Hey Vaughan," I call out, and he lifts his face to look at me. "D'you burn yourself with a curling iron, or something?" I ask and motion to the area of his neck where broken blood vessels have clustered.

"What?" He asks, blinking away the love fog he was clearly in.

"Your neck is all red and it kinda looks like when my sister would burn her neck with a curling iron. I thought that little flip to your hair was all natural."

Camille's eyes grow to the size of the coaster her beer sits on and she slaps her hand on his neck.

"Ow. Fuck, babe. What was that for?"

Camille leans in and says something into his ear. We all watch as his eyes grow bigger, and wider, and larger until they look like they might fall right out of his head.

“We’ve been here for one goddamn hour and you two couldn’t stop from fucking each other?” Vivian calls out. “Please tell me you didn’t do it in these nasty bathrooms? I’ve been in there before and had to fake an orgasm just so we could get out faster. They’re gross.”

My jaw tightens at the mention of Vivian having sex with some douche in the bathroom. What kind of asshole screws a girl in a public bathroom?

You, asshole. You do...like dozens of times.

I pretend to not hear my subconscious tapping his toes and crossing his arms over his chest.

“No, we did not...do it in the bathroom,” Camille says in a barely audible tone.

“Don’t say do it, Cam. Say fuck like the rest of the adults at the table,” CeCe chastises her.

Camille’s cheeks blush for an entirely different reason and Vaughan pulls her close to him.

“So then where’d you ‘do it’ if it wasn’t in the restroom?” Bishop asks with a mischievous smile.

He’s a pot stirrer so I know this’ll be good.

We all lean in expecting her to whisper, but it’s not necessary as Vaughan, loudly and proudly, shouts out, “in the Rover.”

“Goddammit, Camille,” Cat gripes and throws down a napkin. “Viv, can you take me home? I am not riding in their sex mobile smelling like Thai food and sweat.”

I bark out a loud laugh along with the rest of the table and watch as Camille sinks further into her seat.

“Do you have to be so loud, Cat? Jesus,” Camille scolds her.

“Do you two have to screw at every bar, every restaurant, every house we visit? I know you guys were fucking in Viv’s bathroom last weekend?” Cat throws that little snippet out there presumably to get a rise out of Vivian.

“I know they were, too. I figured it out when I saw Cam wiping down the counter with bleach wipes,” she says with a snort.

“At least you didn’t catch them in the kitchen. Right Cat?” CeCe adds.

“Oh shit. I forgot about that.” Bishop cracks up laughing as does everyone else. “Cat caught—”

“Bish.” Vaughan growls from across the table with an intimidating look, but it doesn’t deter Bishop.

“She walked into Cam’s and found Vaughan hiding out in the laundry room...in his underwear...and Cam’s silk robe.” Everyone is back to laughing and this time I join in.

“Why am I friends with you guys?” Vaughan groans and stands. “I’m getting another beer. Anyone want another?”

“If I say yes will you serve it to me wearing a German beer maid outfit?” Hayes asks.

“Fuck off.” Vaughan throws us all the finger and pulls Cami up from her seat, intertwining their hands and walking away.

I think I’m gonna like this group. Just like the team, it seems they have adopted me as one of their own.

Vivian...she’s another hurdle all together. But one I’m willing to jump at.

CHAPTER NINE

VIVIAN



“PLAYERS” - Coi Leray

ALL NIGHT long my friends roared with laughter at Phoenix’s stories about his life in New York. He told them about a fan in New York who chased him down a city street, carrying a sign that said “*Marry Me, Phoenix*” and wearing a wedding gown.

Phoenix said he was lucky to get away from her when an NYPD officer saw the commotion and ushered him inside a building, then stood guard at the door threatening to arrest the woman if she trespassed on private property. After several minutes and a dozen threats, the woman finally walked away with her veil between her legs.

If you ask me, I’d say bride-zilla was the lucky one. She probably would’ve wanted to throw herself in front of a speeding train if she ended up married to Phoenix. The arrogant bastard.

I did my best not to scowl the entire night, but my face had a mind of its own. So while everyone else was welcoming Phoenix into our circle, I was plotting various methods of murder and trying to estimate how much he weighed. Could I possibly drag his body—in a tarp, of course—by myself, or should I clue CeCe in on my plan so she can help me?

I decided I would let CeCe help me since she knows people in other countries and if push came to shove, we could flee. Cami would be too nervous and would spill her guts to

Vaughan who would tell Bishop and then, boom! Alibi shot and bail denied.

Lucky for me, I spotted the bartender that I hooked up with a few times and remembered it being quite memorable. And by memorable I mean I was walking side to side the next day.

When I approached Nate, he was quick to tell me he had a break in thirty minutes to which I responded, “*does that office have a couch?*”. Which it did. And might I add that it was a pretty comfortable couch. My knees were spared from scratchy fabric, and the leather was worn in so there was no worry of burn.

Nate’s moves were better than I remembered. He’s a tall and strong guy, so his repositioning and flipping skills were top notch. When I was riding him, his calloused fingers scraped deliciously over the globes of my ass. He stretched them wide and caressed the line from my ass to where we connected, causing ripples of pleasure and bringing on my first orgasm.

Once I had gotten off, he flipped me off of him and had me kneeling on the cushions and bracing my hands on the back of the couch while he railed into me from behind. With one hand fisting my hair, the other rolled over my swollen clit. The angle he had me in had his dick reaching depths where only few men have gone.

He pumped into me with a speed and force that had my eyes rolling back in my head and, no lie, drool pooling in my mouth. At one point, he did some move with his hips that had his thick cock rubbing my g-spot until I finally exploded into a million little pieces. Nate soon followed after five hard thrusts.

All of that in just twenty-five minutes which meant we had time to dress, make ourselves presentable, and be back out there in time for Nate to return to his shift. But greedy me, deciding that it wasn’t quite enough, invited Nate to come home with me.

When his shift was over, he drove us to my house—since he hadn’t been drinking—where he proceeded to make me scream God four more times before the sun came up. And in the

morning, he was quick to grab me a coffee and croissant from the bakery down the street before kissing me to the brink of insanity and telling me to call him whenever I was feeling lonely.

What started off as a day that I wanted to quickly erase from my memory, ended up being one I won't soon forget.

Now I'm sitting here in my box, game three of the series and thank the Lord, Phoenix is in the bullpen in case they need him to pitch. It has been a blissful evening at the ballpark without having to hear or see that asshole. And aside from Kenrick—yes, he hit on me again—the guys have been loads of fun tonight.

“Viv,” someone calls.

I look over to see Ramirez smiling at me. Damn, he's hot. Light brown skin that looks like he just stepped off the beach after a weeks long tropical vacation. Closely cropped hair that, I swear, always looks like he just had a fresh cut. Eyes that remind of rich chocolate, and a smile so bright it gleams.

I get all tingly just cataloging everything that sends my pulse racing.

“You coming out with us tonight?” he asks.

I shrug and answer, “not sure since this is the first time I'm hearing about it.”

He saunters over to where I sit and leans his forearms over the rail that separates us. “Well now that you know...what d'you say? A few of us are going over to Sipz. We've got a VIP reserved and just enough room for a pretty lady or two.” He smiles and those damn dimples pop.

I suppress a shiver that threatens to roll across my body. “I *guess* I could ask CeCe if she's free. I certainly don't want to be the lone female there.”

“I'm sure you won't be the only female,” he says.

“Yeah, but I mean the only female who didn't bribe her way into VIP by flashing tits and ass. I don't chase jerseys, honey. They chase me.”

He scans my face, focusing on my mouth, then bites his lip. "I bet they do."

Looks like my plans for tonight just got a whole lot more interesting.

"I'll text CeCe. If she's not busy, we'll see you over there later. 'K?'"

He reaches out and takes my chin between his thumb and index finger. "I'mma hold you to that."

He bites his lip once more and winks before walking back to the bench. I track his steps, admiring how his pants snugly hug his tight ass.

Taking out my phone I send CeCe a quick text to find out if she's free. She responds quickly with, "God yes! I need a drink. Limoncello is driving me nuts."

Limoncello is the nickname for her boss, Luca Amato. We needed a way to talk about him incognito in case he ever saw her texts.

The Wranglers pitcher makes quick work of closing out the last couple of innings and before you know it, my post game interviews are wrapped and I'm heading up to CeCe's office where I know she'll be waiting for me.

I knock lightly on her door that is slightly ajar, and peek my head in. She's holding her phone to her ear but waves me to come in and sit down. I carefully shut her door and take a seat in her cushy chair that I'm pretty certain she brought in just for me.

"Yes sir, Mr. Amato," she says and rolls her eyes. "I was just...I understand, but you see I...is this not something we can discuss tomorrow?...Where? Um, well, my friends and I are headed out for cocktails so....Sipz, sir....sure....okay. See you there."

She stabs the end call button on her phone and squeezes it in her fist.

"Aaaaaaaah," she screeches at the same time she stomps her feet, jumps a little, shakes her hands, and tosses her head

side to side.

Basically she's having a bitch fit.

"Uh oh. I take it Limoncello isn't quite done with you being done with work?" I ask her.

She stops pitching her fit and takes a few calming breaths. She straightens her blouse and skirt, then smooths the wayward strands of hair. Luckily she's not wearing her glasses because those definitely would've been a casualty.

"That...prick, has decided that I need to start accompanying him on away games. So he wants to go over the travel schedule for the next few weeks...tonight. Because apparently, waiting until the sun comes up is not soon enough." Her voice starts to ratchet up so she closes her eyes, and breathes in and out deeply. "Which means, limoncello has decided to meet us at Sipz to discuss travel arrangements. So while I'll be accompanying you to the bar, I don't know how long it will actually be before I can sit with you."

"Awe. I'm sorry, babes. But that's okay. Get it over and done with and then we can drink like fishies out of water and not have to worry about waking up early to talk with him."

CeCe pulls open a drawer in her desk and takes out her purse. "It's been four days, Viv. Four days! And I'm this close to quitting." She holds her thumb and index fingers mere millimeters apart.

"No you won't. You love your job. But why, all of a sudden, is he requiring you to travel with the team? You've only had to do so if there was some promo work with the home team."

She walks around her desk and towards the door and I follow her. I step out when she holds the door open, then she switches off her lights and closes and locks up before we walk down the hallway.

"I dunno. Guess he needs someone to wipe his ass for him after he takes a shit. Lord knows he wouldn't dare want to dirty his own hands by doing it himself." She slides her badge

through the scanner for us to take the employee's elevator, and we wait for it to reach us.

"I...I don't know what to say to that other than I'm sure that he has a spectacular derriere, so there's that." I flash her a smile that only serves to piss her off and we step inside the elevator.

"I'm going to tell him that I'll accompany him for two weeks. And during those two weeks, I will help him find a proper PA as I have a job to do here at home."

"Well sister, you let me know how that conversation goes. While you're doing that, I'll be finding out if Ramirez can play a double header." I nudge her with my elbow and wink and in return, she rolls hers and crosses her arms over her chest.

We walk out into the employee parking lot and to our individual vehicles. "I'll follow you to your place?" she asks me.

"Yup. And cheer up, buttercup. Maybe you two can work fucking into your travel schedule, 'cause you both seriously need to get laid." She flips me off and I make quick work of getting in my car and speeding towards my home.

IT ONLY TAKES us thirty minutes to get from the stadium to my house and over to the club where a line extending down the side of the building has already formed.

"Geez. It's only ten-fifteen. Why is it so damn packed already?" I ask no one in particular as we make our way to the front of the line.

"The guys are inside and someone was posting photos. Every single girl in a twenty mile radius is here," the bouncer answers me. "Go on in, ladies. Have fun."

"Thanks Teddy," we say and walk in to a chorus of women whining and complaining ringing out behind us.

We don't have to search for where the team is because we know exactly where the VIP area is. With waves and hellos

from the bouncers guarding the ropes, we're let in and are immediately spotted by the guys.

"Gorgeous, you made it," Ramirez says when I step up to the velvet benches that line the back wall.

The club is sleek and modern but not in a sterile way. Midnight blue velvet benches are positioned in a wide U shape with glass chrome tables in the middle. Each bench and table section sits on a slightly elevated platform that's lit up from beneath it and makes everything appear to be floating.

This section has four different seating areas, all occupied by Wranglers players and their entourage. And by entourage I mean the cleat chasers who have been flashing coochies and boobies to find their way onto a lap.

"I made it," I replied and sat where he pushed everyone aside for me. "You know CeCe don't you, Ramirez?"

"Rami, and how could I not know this beauty in front of me? Damn," he says, shaking his head slowly from side to side. "I have the two most beautiful women in this club here with me now. I am one lucky sonuvabitch. Have a seat, CeCe."

He pats the seat on the other side of him motioning for CeCe to sit.

"I can't. I just spotted limoncello and he's beckoning me."

She points her chin somewhere behind us, and I turn to find Luca standing there, snapping his fingers and pointing to the spot in front of him. It's much the same way you would call a bratty kid who is acting up in the store, or say a dog. Not at all how one invites a human being into their space.

"I hope you have bail money, Viv, because it's possible I murder him tonight. Be back as soon as I can." She pushes her shoulders back and elegantly and confidently walks over to where that beautiful asshole waits for her.

"What's up with that?" Rami asks me as he leans back and throws his arm on the back of the bench.

"They...are a work in progress. But let's not focus on that. I need a drink." I give him my flirtiest smile and smoldering

eyes that reels him in hook, line and sinker.

Rami flashes me those pearly whites that get my panties wet and lifts his hand, motioning for the hostess without taking his eyes off of me.

The music blares all around us as our bodies talk to one another. His fingers brush against my bare shoulder. My hand rests on his muscular thigh, nails lightly scraping against the fabric of his dress pants. His tongue peeks out and licks his full bottom lip and I bite mine. I arch a brow and his pupils grow larger.

Rami leans in close, his lips brushing the shell of my ear. Right before he speaks, another voice booms over the noise like a record scratch.

“The bartender from the other night busy so you’re hitching your wagon to another horse?”

The spot next to me dips and I grind my teeth before slowly turning my head to look at our intruder.

Phoenix.

“You’re like herpes, aren’t you. You just won’t go away,” I tell him, my voice just slightly above the people’s chatter around us.

“Why would you want me to go away when your body screams for me to stay?” He waves his finger up and down at my body and I smack at him. “If you’re looking for someone to erase the bad memory of that lackluster bartender, I’m sure I could help you out. Unless you’re working on building an all-star bartender team then I’m out.”

“Speak for yourself, asshat. I’m sure my number isn’t even in the same ‘ballpark’ as yours. You still trading them with your little fuck boys?” Just then a glass of water is set on the table in front of us and before I pick it up, Phoenix snatches it away. “Hey! That’s mine. Give it to me.”

The giant dick stands up and proceeds to gulp it down. I stand and jump on the balls of my feet, trying to...I don’t know. Take it away from him? Make him choke on it?

“Rami. Tell your girl to sit down,” he says with a smirk and then finishes off the last of the water.

I come to an abrupt stop and ball my hands into fists. “I. Am not. His girl. Or anyone’s girl! Ugh!” I screech then stomp my stiletto heel down on Phoenix’s toe.

“Fuck, Red. You stabbed my fucking foot!” The glass smacks down on the table and grabs his foot, hopping around like a cartoon character.

“Be lucky it wasn’t your dick. Rami, I’ll be back.”

I step around Phoenix who is still hobbling around and give him just the tiniest bump, causing him to tip over like a pine tree. Unfortunately, he only falls to the bench. But I’ll still take it.

A wins a win, no matter how small.

CHAPTER TEN

PHOENIX



“CAN’T TAME HER” - Zara Larsson

“THAT...” The words I want to blurt out die on my tongue, knowing that mom would kill me if she knew I’d called a woman a crass name.

I look over at Rami who’s laughing his ass off.

“Bro. Sh-she’s saucy. And she *really* doesn’t like you,” he chokes out. “How did you make an enemy so quickly? You’ve only been here for four days.”

The roll of his laughter grows louder and we start to draw a crowd.

“She has a chip on her shoulder,” I grunt out between my teeth, finally feeling relief from the pain shooting through my foot.

Cisco, Philo and Tuck make their way over to us and plop down on the empty benches.

“What’s so funny? We saw Vivian storm off. You piss her off again, Nix?” Philo asks.

“Oh bro. She stabbed his fucking foot with her heel and said he was like h-her-herpes.” Rami is back to laughing so hard, tears are rolling down his cheeks.

Cisco snorts and Philo wisely covers his mouth with his hand. Tuck, on the other hand, pats my shoulder and says, “at least it wasn’t your dick.”

“That’s what she said!” Rami’s cackles now have him folded over in hysterics and I want more than anything to punch his teeth in. But I gotta pitch in two nights and I can’t afford an injury because my first baseman is a jackass.

I watch the guys laugh as Rami gives them a detailed playback at what just happened between us. Apparently Rami was moments away from asking Vivian to go home with him when I interrupted their little tête-à-tête.

While they guys trade stories about Vivian and her feisty demeanor, I watch her push her way through the bodies packing the dance floor. Her dress clings to her body, really highlighting her petite frame and once again, that *ass*. And as much as I like to put on a show, her attitude is a total fucking turn on.

I don’t remember this version of Vivian back in college. Back then she was sweet and shy and maybe a little awkward when it came down to flirting. I now know it was because she was a virgin and not playing hard to get like most girls her age.

Vivan disappears down a darkened hallway that I assume leads to the restrooms, and something in me takes over.

“Be right back,” I say to the guys.

They give me a small acknowledgement but don’t stop swapping their thoughts on everything from Vivian’s perfect toes to the way her ass looks in a specific pair of jeans.

I move through the crowd, only getting stopped by a couple guys and narrowly missing a woman’s attempt to “bump” into my dick. I brush her off to her friend and push quickly by. There’s a line for the women’s restroom while the men’s allows them to flow in and out easily.

I tuck myself against the wall leading to an emergency exit, and wait for a flash of red to catch my eye.

I keep my head down and pretend to scroll through my phone in order to avoid making eye contact with any of the chicks waiting. I can feel the heat of eyes boring into me, but I don’t dare lift my head. My eyes are pointed downward, but

I'm focused on what's happening in my peripheral, just like I'm trained to do.

Minutes pass when I finally see a streak of long red hair move by me. Before she can get too far, I grab her hand and pull her behind me.

"Hey! What the—" she protests.

I push the exit door and just like I predicted, no alarm blares like it warns. I've got the door opened and her outside, leaning up against the wall faster than she can finish her sentence which I'm sure goes something like, "*what the fuck do you think you're doing*".

My foot is wedged between the door and the frame to keep from locking us out, but unless you're really looking, no one will notice we're out here.

I rest my arms on either side of her face and look down into blazing green eyes that stare up at me with fury roaring inside of them. Her hands lay flat against the cold exterior of the club and I can see her chest's rapid rise and fall with each frustrated breath she takes.

"How dare you grab me like that, you neanderthal. Now move so I can go back inside." She pushes on my stomach but her hand freezes when she feels my muscles flex.

The corner of my mouth ticks up, knowing she likes what she can't see. Her rough exterior drops for just a moment when the heat in her eyes turns from anger to desire.

"Why do you hate me?" My voice is deep with need.

If I can just find out why she's still holding on to a childish grudge, then I can figure out what I need to do to fix it. I want to fix this. Because more than the desire to have her give me a look that isn't filled with pure venom, I'm desperate to know what this beauty tastes like. The memory of what her tongue felt like moving against mine has faded and I think it's time for a reminder.

"Really? You have to ask why?" Her brow arches and curses me with a little spite of its own.

“I apologized.”

“And I never accepted. Now, unless you want that dick stabbing you escaped earlier, I’d step back if I were you.” Her hands find my chest. And while she pushes me back, her fingers curl into me.

I lean closer to her and take hold of her chin with one hand. “You have a smart mouth, little girl. Maybe we should find a better use for it.”

Her jaw falls open in shock as far as it can while in my grip.

“In case you forgot, I would *never* kiss or fuck you. And that includes everything in between.” Her voice is strong but her body does the exact opposite.

Through the thin fabric of her dress, I see the hardened points of her nipples. My nose runs a path up her neck and I inhale her sweet perfume that mixes with the sweat of her arousal. She tenses at my touch and a tiny gasp escapes.

“We’ll see about that, Peaches.”

“Wha-“ I don’t give her a chance to fire off her mouth and capture it with mine instead.

I crush my lips against hers, soft and warm. She tenses in my hold, trying to pull away from me, and those fingers that were curled now digging into my skin through the fabric of my shirt. But her chin is locked tightly in my grip and my body boxes her in. She mumbles her protests against my mouth and I swallow them whole, not easing up.

Slowly, I feel her give into me. The fingers that were clawing at me loosen and pull me closer. She stops using her mouth to argue and uses it to kiss me back. When her lips part, I slide my tongue inside. And when our tongues twist, a shot of lust burns through my veins and I moan.

The sound of my want sparks hers and she purrs her desire.

Fuck, she tastes so good.

I lower my arm that’s still braced against the wall and wrap it around her waist. Her hands slide up my chest and onto my

broad shoulders. Slowly she rises up on her toes, bringing us closer and my hand falls to her firm ass and I press my hard cock into her belly.

The response I was hoping for crashes and burns miserably. Instead, her body stills and her mouth slacks. Green eyes intensely stare at me and in an instant, my cheek stings from the hand that slapped it.

“How dare you!” She screeches. “Don’t touch me.”

“If you don’t want me touching you, then tell that sweet pussy of yours to quit weeping for me.” Another slap, another sting. “Keep fighting with me, Peaches. It only makes me harder.” I grind my dick against her and hear her breath hitch.

“Aargh!” Her little body vibrates with fury and even shrouded by darkness, I can see her pale, creamy skin tinge with red. “You are the biggest jackass I have *ever* known. Stay away from me,” she huffs then ducks under my arm to escape me.

She stomps on my foot—the same damn one—and pushes her way through the small crack in the door. While I’m tending to my poor abused foot, I don’t catch the door in time and it slams shut with a clang, the metal banging against the frame.

Dammit, she drives me mad. I want to smack that peachy ass of hers to teach her a lesson, then shove something in her mouth to keep her from talking back. Then when I’ve punished her, I want to fuck her ten ways to Sunday until she can’t walk.

That little siren is going to be the end of my sanity. And not just because she has a smart mouth, but because I’m dying to get my hands on her, get *in* her, and if I can’t do it soon I’m going to do something very stupid.

Like beg.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PHOENIX



“EAT U ALIVE” - Marian Hill (feat. Steve Davit)

CREAMY LEGS HANG over my shoulders and red heels dig into my back. My head is buried in her sweet pussy and she tastes like absolute heaven. I flick her swollen clit with my tongue and feel her thighs squeeze my head. Her breathy moans tell me exactly how she likes it and I give my girl everything. “Nix...yes. Fuck,” she purrs and digs her nails into my short curls. My thumbs spread her wide and I flatten my tongue, licking every inch of her dripping cunt. Jesus, I could feast on her all day and still not be satisfied. I want to live each minute of the day with my lips drenched in her juice. “Oh god!” she shouts when I hit the spot that sends her eyes rolling. I know she’s close so I push two fingers inside of her and groan when her walls tighten around me. I slide in and out, working her with my skillful and trained fingers until she’s coming. The strength of her orgasm vibrates through me and my dick twitches painfully, dying to get inside of her. But I know my girl. She can give me at least two orgasms before I sink into her, so there’s one more to go. I slip my fingers out and lick them clean, like a good boy. Her body is limp and her face has this far off dreamy look. Yeah. I take care of my girl first...always. While her soul returns to her body, I flip her over and yank up on her knees by her hips. This fucking peachy ass. It’s so perfect it almost feels wrong to mark it. Almost. I lick one firm globe then sink my teeth into it, making sure my teeth leave a nice indent. She mewls like I knew she

would, then I pull my hand back and slap her ass. It jiggles and I can't hold back, I do it again. Her porcelain skin turns pink and fuck, if that isn't the most beautiful sight. I dip down and lick her from her clit to her tight, puckered hole. She likes to act like she doesn't get turned on by it, but I know that the minute I push my finger in, she's going to shoot off like a bottle rocket. "No. Fuck me now. Please. I need you," she begs. Who am I to deny her when she asks so nicely. My cock stands tall and hard and has all but pushed me out of the damn way to find his way into the place he calls home. I grab the base of my cock and rub the head through her slick folds. "Hurry. I need to—" I slap her ass, silencing her. She knows better than to rush me when I'm feeding her greedy pussy my cock. Now I'm going to go agonizingly slow. It'll be torture for me, too, but the reward will be worth it. My heart races, just like it does each time right before I feel her warm, wet pussy welcome me in. She pushes her ass back, waiting for the moment I thrust into her. I inhale her sweet scent then I begin to inch my way in. My engorged head breaches her and—

My phone rings, shattering the most amazing dream I think I've ever had. The ringing continues and my hand searches the nightstand for it, flopping around like a dying fish. I connect with nothing but a bare surface. When the ringing stops, I bury my face into the pillow and try to fall back into the bliss that was my fantasy.

My dick is rock hard and I palm it, wondering if I should get up and finish myself off in the shower. I say fuck it and slide my hand inside of my boxer briefs right before the ringing starts up again.

"Fuck," I growl and kick the sheets off of me. I try to remember what I did with my phone last night but everything is foggy.

The last thing I remember was throwing back one too many shots after watching Rami continue to flirt with and touch Vivian. She ate it up, batting her eyelashes at him, sucking on her straw like it was his fucking dick. If I'd have had to watch her walk out the door with him, I probably would've thrown myself into speeding traffic. But luckily my

life was spared when CeCe came over to her, visibly upset. They spoke in hushed voices, then she hugged her friend before standing and saying goodbye to Rami and the rest of the guys.

Rami looked like someone had popped his balloon when she walked away. *Good*, I thought. There is no way in hell I'm going to let that asshole get that close to her again. How I'm going to keep him away is something I have yet to figure out. Especially since she hates me.

Or at least that's what she likes to tell me. The last shot I took did nothing in terms of spurring on any genius ideas of how to keep Rami's hands off of her. The one thing it did accomplish was thoroughly knocking me on my ass. I'm not even quite sure how I got to my room.

But I'm here, thankfully alone, and now I just need to find my goddamn phone so I can yell at whoever has pulled me from my dream of fucking Vivian.

I find my pants thrown in the corner and figure that that would be the most likely place for my phone. Digging through the pockets, I find it and turn the screen over just as the ringing stops and the screen goes black.

"Ugh." I tap the screen and it lights up, showing me I have five missed calls and several more texts.

Unlocking it, I see the calls and texts are from my niece and immediately dial her back.

"Uncle Nix," I hear her sniffle.

"Ana. What's the matter? Are you okay? Is your mom okay?" I'm frantic, spinning in a circle in my hotel room because there is only one reason why she'd be calling me so early and so many times.

"Yeah. I-I," she chokes on her sobs and now my chest feels tight with fear.

"You what, Ana? Please talk to me. I'm freaking out." I quit chasing my tail like a damn dog, and plop down on the edge of my bed.

“C-can I come visit you? Mom and me...we had a fight and I just really—” her words are cut off by her crying again, and I breathe a small sigh of relief now that I know she’s not physically hurt.

Wait. “Ana, are you hurt?”

She hiccups and I hear her blow her nose. “No. Not unless you count my broken heart.” Her crying picks up again and I throw myself back on the bed.

“Oh, Ana.” I can only imagine what the argument was about, but that clue gives me a pretty good idea. “I don’t think running away from your mom to another state is the best idea. Where’s your dad?”

My sister and her ex-husband divorced several years ago when he decided to pursue his lifelong dream of becoming a professional poker player. At first, my sister supported him. But then she realized he was a shit player and was losing all of their money at the tables every weekend. She gave him the ultimatum of going back to his good paying job as construction foreman, or continue pretending he was good at winning and lose her.

Obviously he chose poker. And he hasn’t improved one bit since he left that day, all those years ago.

“He’s in Vegas for some tournament.”

Of course he is.

“Well I still don’t know that you should be up and leaving right before school is set to start. You should be getting ready for the first day of your senior year.” I hear her huff out a breath. “Besides...the fight couldn’t have been that bad.”

“Your sister is a raging bitch,” she shouts.

“Hey. Watch your mouth, Anais. I may be your uncle, but she’s your mother and my sister and I’ll be damned if you disrespect her like that. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry.”

I scrub my hand over my face and wonder if Sierra would let her come for a few days to allow them both a cool down.

I sigh. “Look. I’ll talk to your mom and see if she’d be okay with you coming for a visit for a couple of days.”

“Really?” her chipper voice says, showing no sign of the distress she was in a moment ago.

“For a couple days, Ana. You have school to prepare for. And if she says yes, you’re going to tell me what the hell you two were fighting about. Then, you’re going to go home, apologize for being a brat to your mother, and get ready for your last first day of high school.”

I sit up then realize an immediate problem.

“Shiit,” I curse.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m living in a hotel room. There’s only one bed and a pull out sofa in the living room that I can guarantee isn’t as comfortable as this plush mattress I sleep on each night.”

“That’s okay,” she says quickly. “I don’t mind. Really.”

“No, Ana. It’s not just that. I have practice and another three game series at home before I’m on the road. I don’t mind you being here when I am, but you’ll be all alone in a city you’ve never been to, and it’s much bigger than Slidell.”

“Uncle Nix. That’s what GPS and Uber are for. I’ll be fine.”

I truly don’t have a problem with her coming. If anything, it’ll keep me from drinking the thoughts of Vivian out of me. But there is no way in hell my sister is going to just let her sit in a hotel room with carte blanche to room service and pay-per-view movies.

“Please, Uncle Nix? Just a couple days. I promise to be good and I’ll get to watch you play. I haven’t been to one of your games in a long time and I miss seeing you pitch. And—”

“Ana, stop. I’ll figure something out with the sleeping arrangement, then I’ll call your mother and talk to her,” I tell her.

“Oh thank you, thank you, thank you. I just really, like, need a break from her.”

“I’ll get you a ticket and text you the details once I clear it with your mom. In the meantime, go clean your room like Martha fucking Stewart is coming for dinner, and pack a bag.” No doubt my sister will be pissed that I’m giving her an out, so the least I can do is make sure Ana leaves with one less chore for her to do.

“Thank you, Uncle Nix. You’re the best,” I mumble my agreement and she laughs. “Love you. See you soon.”

“Love you, too, brat. I’ll text you in a bit.” We say goodbye and I fall back on the bed, again.

All I wanted to do is finish my dream about fucking Vivian, get rid of this hangover before practice, then come home after and sleep.

Now it looks like I’ll be playing doting uncle all weekend.

AFTER A LONG TALK with my sister—in which she informed me that the entire blowout was because of a boy who I am going to track down and tear his eyes out for looking at my niece—I booked a ticket for Anais to stay for the next three days then texted her the information. She responded with a screaming gif and told me she would text me as soon as she was on the plane.

Next, I called my trainer and asked him if we could meet this morning before practice as opposed to after due to a family emergency. If I planned it out correctly, I would get out of practice with just under an hour before she lands. Enough time for me to drive out to the airport and be waiting for her when she gets off the plane.

Now the only thing left to do is figure out if I should rent another room for her, rent a double suite for the two of us or beg my best friend to let us crash at his place for a few days, given that he’s not busy.

I tap Bishop's name on my phone and set it on speaker while I finish getting my bag for the stadium together.

"Nix. What up, brotha?"

"Hey Bish. Sorry to bother you so early," I start with.

"It's not early and you're not bugging me. You forget... I've got players too and they're already working out." I hear the clanging of metal and realize that he must be with his team.

"Shit. I'm sorry. I'll let you get back to work."

"Nah nah. It's no problem. I'm in my office now, so tell me what's up."

I blow out a breath and shove my slides into my bag. "I kinda have a huge favor to ask. And I feel really bad for asking but--"

"Nix," he says, interrupting me. "Just ask. Do you need a liver, 'cause I've gotta tell you...I wasn't very kind to mine in college."

"Nah man. Nothin' like that. My sister and niece got into a huge fight last night and Anais has asked to come visit for a few days to let the two of them cool off. This suite is just one room, so I was going to see about getting a double suite or just getting a separate room for her but--"

"Say no more. Don't waste money—even though I know you have a shitload—on another room. I have two extra bedrooms that are not being used that you two are welcome to. I'm close to campus so maybe she'd like a tour while you're at the stadium."

This is why he's not just my best friend, but my family.

"Man, that would be really great. I was planning to set tickets aside for her, so I'll just put some aside for you, too, if you want." I breathe a sigh of relief knowing that I won't have to worry about Ana being in a hotel room in a big, unfamiliar city alone. "In fact, call up Vaughan and Camille and Hayes."

"That sounds great. I'll ask Vaughan if they're free. In the meantime, I'll text you the code to the garage and the alarm so

you can get in if I'm not home yet. Just text me when you're headed over."

I zip up my bag and look around for my cap. "Thanks, brotha. I really appreciate it. Ana gets in around four-thirty, so we'll head over after that. You're the best."

He lets out a sigh as if he's dusting off his shoulder. "Yeah, that's what they all say. I better get back to make sure the freshmen don't hurt themselves trying to bench double their weight with those bony ass arms. See you later."

I say goodbye, grab my bag and keys to the car Maury got me, and head off to the stadium.

I have a feeling that staring down the lane at the hardest hitters will be easier than dealing with an emotional teenager.

Always a sucker, Nix.

CHAPTER TWELVE

VVIAN



“SAVAGE REMIX” - Megan Thee Stallion (feat Beyoncé)

AS ALWAYS, I find myself seated next to the dugout, jabbing with the guys as we watch today’s afternoon game. Thank my lucky stars that Phoenix is in the bullpen, sitting on standby in case he’s needed. I absolutely hate it when he sits in the dugout with the rest of the team. It’s difficult to concentrate on my job when that arrogant, egotistical, gorgeous asshole is nearby.

Wait! Did I just call Phoenix gorgeous? I mean, not that he isn’t but, ugh...I hate him. I can’t think of him above me, naked and grinding into me until he sends my body soaring. I will *not* imagine him licking my cunt and sucking on my clit. I *refuse* to picture the things his expert fingers can do to my nipples that would send my eyes rolling back in my head.

Nope. I won’t do it.

And most especially, I won’t replay the dream I had of him last night where he made me scream his name so loud that it woke me up. I will pay no attention to how I jack-knifed out of bed, soaked between my thighs and nipples fully erect. Only a masochist would relive that kind of torture.

Instead, I focus on the boys on the field and concentrate on the highlights of the game. Like the way that Manny’s butt doesn’t look nearly as firm as Phoenix’s does on the mound. Or the fact that Rami’s quads are seriously lacking in the bulge department.

“Goddammit!” I curse.

“What’s wrong, Red? Break a nail,” one of the guys asks.

“No pencil dick. I was thinking of what it would feel like to have to fuck you and it made me vomit a little in my mouth.” I look straight into his eyes, letting him know I won’t take his shit.

“Oh shit,” another guy laughs. “The lady speaks the truth.” I smile smugly and go back to watching the game when my phone buzzes with a text.

Cami: Vivi!! Will we get to see you after the game?

I can always count on my best girls to bring me out of a funk.

Me: Abso-fucking-lutely! I’ve got to do a couple post game interviews. Shouldn’t take long.

The crowd cheers and I look up just in time to see the outfielder catch a high pop fly for the last out of the inning. The guys hustle off the field and I write down the play.

Rami walks over to me and leans casually against the rail. “Hey beautiful.”

“Hi, Rami. Great catch in the fourth. That was a helluva stretch there. Alcón didn’t send it all the way to the bag.”

“No, that asshole. He’s pissed because I beat him at poker the other night and I refuse to let him weasel out of his bet.”

I lean forward, resting my chin on my hand. “What was the bet?”

Rami gives me a crooked smile and says, “that I’d get to ask you out first.”

I lick my bottom lip and give it a little tug with my teeth. “How do you know I’d agree to go out with either of you?”

“I’m confident you’d be interested in the night I have planned for us.” He winks and my thoughts wander to the fact

that his eyes are a dull brown, whereas Phoenix's are a silky brown that makes you want to lose track of time.

Fucking hell!

I open my mouth to tell him I'll think about when his name is shouted from behind him.

"Ramirez! Quit flirting with the pretty reporter and get your ass ready to hit," their batting coach yells.

"Catch up later." He throws me another wink and shuffles off.

Bases are stolen, strikes are swung, points are scored and outs are abundant. But the entire time that the game plays on, my thoughts are lost on Phoenix and how I really don't want to think of him...and how I really want to get under him.

Curse you, baseball gods.

"HEY-O. THERE'S RED." Bishop stands at the end of the hallway where he waits with Cami, Dagen, Vaughan and a drop dead gorgeous young woman.

I smile and make my way towards them, walking like I'm on a runway in case eyes are watching me from behind.

"Hi Miss Viv," Dagen says cheerily, waving her hand at me at the speed of a hummingbird's wings.

"Hey, Day. Did you enjoy the game?" I give her a hug and she squeezes me back.

"Yeah. Dad let me watch the live feed on his phone so I could listen to you. It's so cool that you get to sit by the players," she gushes.

"Eh. They're alright, I guess." I wink and bump her with my hip and she laughs. "Next time you come, I'll take you down to the dugout and you can meet some of the guys"

"Really!? Omigod that would be so amazing! Thank you, Miss Viv." She hugs me once again, constricting my lungs' ability to breathe.

“If you want to meet the players, I can take you into the clubhouse. Get ‘em all to sign a jersey,” a deep voice bursts my happy bubble and my lip automatically curls.

Phoenix walks out of the locker room, his leather designer duffle bag slung over his shoulder, and his soft curls wet from the shower he just took. The asshole has the nerve to look delicious in faded black jeans that fit just perfectly, giving the best view of his firm ass and thick quads. The white t-shirt he wears ghosts over his abs and defined biceps, and all that ink that drives me mad.

Is it weird to say I wanna lick each and every line that covers his body?

The little spoiled brat that lives inside of me stomps her feet and screeches when I think of how sexy he is. I feel a punch to my gut and I assume it’s her, telling me to quit being a horny idiot and toughen up. And to also *not* squeeze my thighs together to ease the aching in my core.

“Hey brotha. Glad you all won. Wish we could’ve seen you pitch tonight.” Bishop tells him as they exchange bro-hugs.

“I’m starting tomorrow so if you’re not busy, I’ll leave tickets again.” He greets Vaughan the same way he did Bishop, hugs Cami—traitor—and high five’s Dagen.

He turns to the young woman whom I have yet to be introduced to and she jumps into his arms. His large arms hug around her waist, the bare skin of her back exposed from her crop top coming into contact with his. Her teeny tiny denim shorts—if you can call them that—barely contain her booty cheeks. Her stupid, youthful butt that she probably doesn’t have to worry about taking the stairs or spend hours at spin class to keep high and tight.

Her feet dangle off the floor when Phoenix lifts her off the ground. I can’t help but notice her smooth brown skin that looks like it’s never seen a pimple. Her dark brown curly hair is streaked with golden strands and I can almost guarantee that this little hussy wakes up looking like she is now.

My gut sours and I feel this...this horrible sense of jealousy. It's a shock to me and I feel like I might throw up.

We don't like him, the little girl inside me says. Mentally, I agree. My body, on the other hand, elbows that whiny bitch out of the way and starts climbing Phoenix, rubbing her scent all over him and claiming him as hers.

“What'd you think Ana? Enjoy the game even though your favorite player wasn't throwing strikes?” Phoenix asks the girl then sets her down on her feet before kissing her cheek.

We hate him. We hate him. We hate her.

“It was awesome. Bishop made sure to fill me in on all your new teammates, and Dagen and I talked music. She's never heard of Kali Uchis, so I let her listen to some songs. All age appropriate, of course,” she adds and smiles with stupid, shiny, white teeth.

“Yeah, and we invited her over to the ranch to ride the horses.” Dagen, who two minutes ago was my favorite, tells Phoenix.

“Did you meet everyone?” Phoenix asks his chick whom he definitely wasn't thinking about a few nights ago when he had his tongue jammed down my throat and his dick knocking on my front door.

“Um, not everyone,” she replies and looks at me. “Hi. I'm Anais.”

Hi. I'm Anais, I mock...in my head, of course. Even her name is beautiful.

“Hi. Vivian,” I tell her and shake her hand. “I'm the on field reporter for KTHU.

“And my best friend,” Cami chimes in.

“Peaches,” Phoenix steps close to me and throws an arm over my shoulders. “Anais is my niece. She's visiting for a few days.”

Niece? Suddenly my eye stops twitching and I immediately quit planning ways to bury her body after I claw her eyes out.

“Oh. Hi,” I squeak. “Wow. I didn’t know Phoenix had a niece. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too, Vivian.”

Now that I look closer at her, she has a very lovely smile. And she’s cute. Probably not a hussy like I assumed.

“Where are you visiting from, Anais?” I ask her, my smile less strained.

“Louisiana. Slidell, to be exact. But I’m thinking of convincing Uncle Nix to let me move here with him.” She bats her eyelashes at him and gives him a look that must be difficult to turn down.

“Nice try, Tippy. There isn’t a chance in hell your mother would let you finish your senior year here. You’ll be back in Slidell by Monday.”

“Senior year? Of college?”

“No. High school,” she replies, glumly.

My jaw drops. This girl looks like a hot college co-ed. There is no way she’s in high school. And from the way Bishop’s eyes trail up and down her body, I’m guessing he wishes she was of legal drinking age.

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t attend college here. Bishop took me on a tour of Rice and I absolutely love the campus. I’ve already decided I’m going to meet with my counselor the second I’m back home and see if it’s too late to get my application in. Luckily I’m like, the top in my class, so hopefully my academics are good enough to get in.”

“That’s great,” I tell her. “I’m sure Bishop will have no problem writing you a letter of recommendation. An endorsement from the school’s hot shot baseball coach has to carry some weight with admissions.”

Bishop clears his throat and tears his eyes away from Anais’ legs. “Yeah. For sure. Whatever she needs...to help her get in.”

Phoenix squeezes his shoulder and passes him a thankful smile.

“Are we done yapping? I’m starving,” Phoenix groans and holds his stomach like he hasn’t eaten in days when in reality, he probably ate a snack the minute he walked into the locker room.

“Let’s roll, regulators. Anais and I drove my bike, but I’m assuming she’ll ride with you, Nix?” Bishop motions for Anais to pass in front of him and the rest of us ladies follow.

“You put my niece on the back of your fucking motorcycle? What the hell, Bishop?”

“Uncle Nix. Relax. It wasn’t a far ride and Bishop was a very cautious driver.” Anais lifts her chin and I see a little sparkle in her eyes when she says Bishop’s name.

Uh-oh. This could be trouble.

“Does it matter? Damn y’all. I need to eat. Cam didn’t let me eat a hot dog ‘cause she said we were havin’ dinner with y’all. And my stomach is literally trying to eat itself.” Vaughan whines.

Cami hugs him around his waist and looks up into his eyes. “Poor baby,” she coos. He sticks out his lip like he’s pouting and she kisses him.

We follow Phoenix out into the players lot and everyone but he and I start walking towards the gate.

“Anais,” he barks, stopping her mid step. “Over here. You’re coming with me.”

She rolls her eyes then turns to Bishop, giving him a smile and hug. I watch as Bishop hugs her back, but his hands are in fists and his jaw is clenched tight. Phoenix is too busy throwing his duffle bag in the backseat of his truck to see what is as obvious as the fucking chip on his shoulder.

I turn to walk to my car when I feel a hand wrap around my elbow. I look over my shoulder to see Phoenix giving me a look that’s somewhere between a glower and a smolder. It’s a glowder. A smolwer? Whatever. He’s giving me a look that I can’t quite decipher.

“Are you going out with Rami?” he asks and this time I can say with certainty that he is glowering.

“That is really none of your business, now is it?” I try tugging my arm free—not all that hard because the rough calluses of his fingers feel unwelcomingly good against my smooth skin—but stay locked in his grip.

“The guy’s an asshole.”

“HA!” I bark. “Says the dickhead. Why do you care anyway?” Anais walks closer but Phoenix’s grip on me doesn’t loosen.

“Don’t go out with him.”

Wha—” I blink and shake my head, totally confused over this man.

One minute he’s rude and condescending, the next he’s shoving his tongue down my throat and telling me who not to go out with. The independent woman in me wants to hurl insults and tell him I don’t need a man to tell me what to do. But there’s this small piece that lives inside of me that is waiting for him to order me to get on my knees and tell me what a good girl I am.

Stop it, stop it, stop it!

“Let go of me. And quit telling me what to do. I’m not yours to boss around.”

“We could certainly change that, Peaches.” His voice is a low timber and it rattles my core, making my nipples taut.

“In your dreams, asshole.” This time I use all my strength and yank my arm from his grip.

His niece ambles up to us with a bright smile. “Are we going?” she asks.

“I’m kinda tired. I think I’m going to call it a night and drink my dinner. It was nice meeting you, Anais. I’m sure I’ll see you again before you leave.” I don’t wait for either of them to answer and walk quickly to my car.

That night I do exactly as I said and drink my dinner in a very large glass that is refilled over and over again while soaking in a tub full of bubbles. And I don't dream about Phoenix running those rough fingers over my body or across my sensitive nipples. Nope. Nuh uh. It doesn't happen.

Sure, Red. Keep telling yourself that.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

VIVIAN



IT WAS Monday mid-morning and I was at my desk, still recovering from the fun weekend I spent with my girls. Dancing, drinking, laughing. It was just what I needed after those confusing signals Phoenix was sending me after last week.

I want more than anything to continue to hate the stupid jerk, but when he says things like, *“You have a smart mouth, little girl. Maybe we should find a better use for it”* and *“If you don’t want me touching you, then tell that sweet pussy to quit weeping for me”*, my body buzzes and I just want to hear more of what that bossy asshole has to say. I want to know if that alpha-tough guy exterior extends to the bedroom, or if it’s all a show and he’s really a cinnamon roll.

In all honesty, I wouldn’t mind either. But it’s attached to a man that I despise and is the last creature on earth I should be thinking about getting busy with. I mean...I think an ape is a much more suitable alternative if I needed to repopulate the earth. I guarantee an ape would be more intelligent. Or at the very least less of a jerk.

“Kelley,” someone barks at me, and I look up to see my station manager staring at me.

I should’ve known that since he’s the only one who calls me by my last name. He calls everyone by their last name, so I guess I would be offended if he didn’t.

“Yes, Mr. Harvey?” I shoot up out of my seat, a little guiltily, like I’ve been caught making out with a boy in my

room.

“My office.” His words are clipped and he doesn’t wait to see if I follow him. Just spins and stomps back, leaving me to scurry behind him.

My boss, Jarvis Harvey, is a strange character. On the outside he’s a portly looking old crank, whose shirt buttons look like they’re trying to hold the world together by a frayed string with how they strain against his round belly. His hair is thick and coarse and if you didn’t know any better, one might think it was a wig. It’s not...I tugged on it once. I was drunk and the staff dared me to. You can’t walk away from a double-dog dare. It’s the law.

To add insult to injury, Mr. Harvey is short. That coming from a woman whose friends call her a People McNugget. So when I say he looks like the grumpy dad of Victoria from *The Corpse Bride*, I am not exaggerating. Luckily for him, his wife is not tall and waif like the mother which would make them look like an unfortunate number ten. But that’s mainly because he does not have a wife. Mr. Harvey has a husband who is far too young to be sane. Rumors swirl around the newsroom as to what old Mr. Harvey has to hold over his young lover’s head. I say it’s a sordid affair with some type of celebrity or well-known official that he’s using as blackmail. It’s been years that they’ve been together so at this point, I’m pretty sure the young Mr. Harvey—yes, he took his name—is simply now suffering from Stockholm Syndrome.

So in contrast to the hard, grumpy shell that Mr. Harvey shows the world is his mushy inside. The man is literally a teddy bear. Very few people know this. Out in the office, everyone is barked at with equal disdain and authority. But behind his office doors where prying eyes can’t see, the man is a squishy, kind soul who has hearts in his eyes for his young hubby.

We cross the threshold into his office and I shut the door with a quiet snick.

“How are things goin’, kiddo,” he asks the moment my butt sinks into a chair.

“Pretty good, Harv. How’re things with you?”

He gives me a tight smile and says, “I mean with work, you airhead.”

His little pet name for me. We all have one.

“I know. I’m just razzing you, Harv.” I lean forward and swipe a candy from the dish he usually hides in his desk drawer. The bowl only comes out when he’s got something to spring on one of us. Usually not of the happy variety.

“So what’s the bad news you’re springing me with? Am I getting demoted? Are you switching me around with Rendon and I’ve got to do a piece on the best hemorrhoid creams?”

He grabs a few candies of his own before plopping into his leather chair. The poor thing creaks in agony, like it’s about to wave the white flag and beg for mercy.

“You know I’d never punish you with Rendon’s job. Not even if you snatched my Barrett from under me. That jackass is a special kind of stupid,” he says, but all I can picture is Jarvis’ husband under him and it sends a wave of nausea running up through my throat that I swallow down with another candy.

“So then what’s the bad news, Harvey-boy.” He gives me an annoyed look when I call him by the nickname I know he hates, but love to say anyway.

With a deep breath he pulls the candy bowl away from and places it back in his drawer.

“No bad news, kiddo. Just want to share your new assignment.” I sit up straight and swallow down the unchewed bits of candy that were still sitting in my mouth.

“New assignment? But Harv, I just got the on-field correspondent position at the start of the season. What are you talking about?”

“Calm down. It’s nothing like you’re thinking. I should’ve said that it is an additional assignment. A good one.”

He sits there as I wait for him to elaborate which he does not, and I crack.

“Well tell me, already. You’re torturing me just sittin’ there with the smug grin like Barrett is hiding under your desk, giving you your afternoon bj.”

With a roll of his eyes, he finally continues. “We’ve decided—and by we I mean myself and the Wranglers organization—that you will be reporting from away games for the remainder of the season.”

I cough and start to choke on the cherry flavored saliva that has pooled in my mouth.

“*All* of the away games? Harv...that means there will be times that I’m on the road for weeks. I can’t live out of my suitcase for weeks at a time. My shoes would never forgive me if I chose only a few to take with me. My hair, Harv. I have very picky hair and there is no way I can risk dulling my shiny locks with horrible, recycled hotel water. Imagine how that would look on camera.”

“Vivian, will you calm down. Jesus, you’re a drama queen.” He slides his drawer open and pulls out another candy, tossing it over to me. “You will not be going to every away game. Just one from each series. We’ve already figured out a schedule.”

He slides a printed schedule to me with a detailed itinerary for the remaining seven weeks of the regular season. They’ve made it so that I will report on the last game of one series, travel with the team, and report on the first game of the next series. It’s not as much travel as I originally assumed which has me breathing a sigh of relief.

“Now that you’re calmer, does this slight change sound okay?”

“Yes. It does. Sorry about the freak-out.”

His mouth forms a tight line and he shakes his head. “Your first away game is Wednesday and while I know this seems last minute, I promise that the final details were just hammered out this weekend. I assumed you were nursing a hangover yesterday, so I didn’t bother calling you.”

“You assumed correctly, fine sir,” I say in my best English accent.

Dammit CeCe, and all of her stupid BBC shows.

“Alright, kiddo. We’re done here. Finish up whatever you need to do today, and stay home tomorrow to pack.”

I stand slowly and give him my most annoying smirk. “Harv...are you giving me the day off?”

“Absolutely not. You know I don’t give days off.” His lips tug up slightly and he gives me a sly wink. “Now get outta here before I send you with Rendon to cover a mutton busting event.”

I give him a salute and quickly exit his office. I’d rather have my fingernails pulled off with pliers by a mafioso than do anything with Dan.

I AMBLE off the plane and out into the terminal, my carry-on rattling behind me. The flight from Texas to Ohio was the worst I’ve ever and probably will ever experience in my life.

Normally I can tune out lots of distractions. My job requires me to be hyper focused on the details. But today was not one of those days where I could just tune out static and zero in on what was important, which just happened to be catching up on highlights from last night’s game.

The family behind me, which consisted of a mom and dad and the cutest little boy, started off as normal. They settled into their seats, gave the little nugget a snack and put on a movie on his iPad. I was stuck in the middle seat, so that meant the little bugger was directly behind me. Which was fine because he was small, and seemed to be ready for a movie and a nap.

Where shall I start?

The mom quickly dozed off and the dad was so lost in work or whatever he was doing on his laptop, that he failed to notice that his kid had pulled the headphones out of the jack and the music to *Baby Shark* was blasting throughout the plane. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw that the dad had

what looked like noise canceling headphones, which explained why he wasn't shoving his fingers in his ears like the rest of us.

Next, the oblivious dad decided he needed to join his wife in the nap she was taking and shut down his laptop, replugged the little boy's headphones into his iPad—blessedly—then shut his eyes. When the snacks were passed out, the very kind flight attendant tried to gently wake one of the parents to see if she could give the little guy some pretzels. This prompted the mom to berate the flight attendant for daring to wake her. Meanwhile, the kid was sitting there crying because his sippy cup was empty and he was obviously hungry.

This caused the man next to me to stand up and defend the flight attendant who was doing a very good job of not ripping the head off of that nasty woman. The little boy only cried louder and harder and the dad slept through every wail with his noise canceling headphones probably blasting music to drown it all out. Or he was an award winning actor and was pretending he couldn't hear a thing.

I'd finally had enough and leaned over to the cart that held the snacks and pulled out a bag of pretzels. I crunched up the bag, breaking the large pieces into smaller ones, then opened the bag and leaned over my seat to hand it to the poor kid who had quite the lung capacity.

"Here little man," is what I told him when I handed him the snack. He took it from me, giant alligator tears in his eyes, and began shoveling fistfuls of food into his mouth. The calming of her son had the woman quieting her barking and turning to me. *"Did you just give my kid food?"* she asked and narrowed her eyes on me with a visible rage brewing in them. It was then I realized I screwed up. The poor kid could've had a gluten allergy or be allergic to salt. Although, based on the fact that it looked like he was drinking a very sugary, very carbonated soda in his sippy cup, my bet was on probably not.

"Sorry. He just looked like he needed something in his tummy." were the last words I got out before her shrills reached a new level. She batted the pretzels out of the little boy's hands, causing pieces to fly all over like confetti

popping out of a cannon. The next moments were a flurry of chaotic hands, arms, shouts and tears.

The mom yelled. The dad was jostled awake when the nice man who sat next to me blocked the crazed lady from hitting me. Then the dad was up and raring to go because he thought the guy was trying to assault his banshee of a wife. I decided it was my turn to come to the rescue and told the guy what a dickwad he was being, and that he needed to control his wench and pay attention to his kid.

Phones were out, recording every last second, and I just thank the man above that I had the foresight to put on my Wranglers baseball cap this morning. Yes, some friends and family would figure it was me based on the cap and my fiery red hair hanging down in a braid over one shoulder. But I had tugged the bill down, shading my eyes and features so that I was unrecognizable as an on-air reporter to anyone who didn't know me.

So, long story long, the two and a half hour flight ended up taking five hours as we were diverted to another airport while the whackadoo family was hauled off the plane. The look on the little boy's face had me wanting to hurdle over seats and snatch him out of his psycho mama's arms. But that would have definitely had my face plastered across every screen in America, and not in the usual way.

I descend the escalator, see the driver holding a card with my name on it, flop into the backseat, and zone out until he's pulling my luggage from the back trunk and I'm walking into the hotel. I have very little time to recharge, reset and be ready to head out to the game, and all I want to do is take a nice hot shower and eat something full of carbs.

So imagine my discontent when I step into a quiet elevator and a hand shoots out to stop the doors from encapsulating me in silence. They slide open to reveal a smug and ridiculously handsome Phoenix West, standing there like I've just fallen from heaven to be greeted by the devil himself.

"Ugh. Please, not today. I can't with you. You shouldn't even be here. You should be at the field!" My voice raises an

octave with each sentence I spit out.

“Chill, Peaches. I just forgot something in my room, then I’m headed back to the stadium,” he replies in a deep and smooth voice.

“What? You forget to leave money on the nightstand for the chick sleeping in your bed?” I snort.

He presses the button for the twentieth floor, just one above mine, and turns to face me, his back to the doors and mine backed up to the elevator wall.

“Nah. There’s only one feisty woman I plan to have in my bed. And now that I know we’ll be sharing a hotel,” he pauses and licks his lips as his eyes trail up and down my body. “I think I’ll ask housekeeping for extra towels since I plan to get her *extra* dirty.”

My jaw drops open as the bell dings and the doors open. I stand frozen while Phoenix looks awfully proud for having just shocked me.

“You getting off here, or should we go back to my room and I can put something in that mouth of yours? Can’t be teasing me like that, Peaches.”

I snap my mouth shut and straighten my shoulders before pushing past him, running over his foot with my suitcase as I go.

“See you tonight, Vivian. I suggest you stretch. I don’t want you pulling a hammy when I flip those gorgeous legs behind your head.” I spin around and watch him waggle his fingers at me as the doors close.

Outwardly, I curse him for being such an arrogant prick. Inside...my body is flushed and I’m grateful that I always pack too much underwear because the ones I’m wearing are drenched with desire.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PHOENIX



“POWER TRIP” - J. Cole (feat Miguel)

“GREAT PITCHING, WEST.”

“Way to shut ‘em out.”

“Fuck yeah, Nix. Awesome.”

My teammates praise me with words, elbow nudges and our own special handshakes after throwing a no hitter for seven innings. The last out was a close one when the batter got a hold of it, rocketing my curveball into right field. But I didn’t even have to worry if Tuck was going to catch it because that kid is clutch. He scales damn walls, robbing batters of home-runs night after night.

I toss my glove aside and grab a water bottle, squirting in a mouthful, then swallowing it down in one gulp. I walk over to the end of the bench and look up to where Vivian sits on her stool, pretending to not know I’m looking right at her.

I move closer, reach into my back pocket, and pull out a piece of bubblegum. The same brand and flavor I’ve been chewing since I was a kid. Never on the mound, but one piece after every inning I pitched.

“Need something to put in that mouth, Peaches?” I ask, and she flings her head with a wicked glare pointed at me.

“What did you say?” Her eyes are narrowed and her cheeks blush the sweetest shade of pink.

I present my hand to her and open my palm, face up, revealing the gum that lays inside. “Gum. Wanna piece?”

The sun is setting behind her and the glow lights up her hair like a halo of fire. It’s the perfect juxtaposition to describe her. A woman who looks like an angel but will set your world on fire and leave you begging for more.

“Did you do something to it?” Her voice is dripping with skepticism and I absolutely love that she doesn’t give in easily.

“Nope. Just thought I’d share.” I start to twist the ends of the gum wrapper slowly, watching it twirl between my fingers.

“What flavor is it?” she finally asks.

I lick my bottom lip and bite it to contain the smirk that’s growing. “Grape.”

“Grape? Who chews grape bubblegum?” Her eyes don’t move from the gum as it continues to spin while I twist it back and forth.

“If you don’t want it, Peaches, I’ll take it. Just tryin’ to be nice. That’s all.” I stop twirling it and pull open the wrapper revealing the purple goodness.

“I’ll take it,” she says before I can pop it in my mouth, and holds out her hand.

I step a little closer to her and hold the gum between two fingers. My arm stretches as if I’m about to place the gum in her hand, but I continue past her dainty palm and zero in on her mouth. Her eyes grow wide as she watches me move it towards those delectable lips. They stay tight when I touch the gum to them and her eyes flick to mine.

“Be a good girl and open your mouth, Vivian.” My voice is deep and commanding.

I don’t miss how her pupils dilate and the little gasp of air when I call her a good girl. The pulse in her neck jumps and beats rapidly in the delicate column. I arch a brow and see the moment she decides to give in.

Her plump pink lips part and I slowly slide the gum inside. Her tongue is wet and warm and when she closes her lips

around my fingers, all I can think of is what those pouty lips will look like sucking my cock while she stares up at me with tears in her eyes.

She pulls back and I watch as her lips slide over my fingers. She releases with a pop and it's a direct shot to my dick that twitches inside its protective cup. I bite my lip while she chews with a smile. The little temptress knows exactly what she's doing.

“Good?” I ask her.

She nods slowly and replies, “mhm. So juicy,” then blows a bubble.

Fuck!

Roars explode throughout the stadium as my guys strike out, moving the game along. I plop down on the bench and watch Vivian who continues to chew and blow, and chew and blow, never taking her eyes off the field. And I never take my eyes off of her.

“INCOMING,” someone yells just as I pull my slacks up and button them.

My belt is still hanging loose and when I look down to buckle it, I hear the whistles and catcalls. With my head cast downward, my eyes search the room for who is obviously a woman in the locker room.

“Are y'all decent?” a sweet voice asks.

“Decent is subjective but yes, we have clothes on,” one of the guys answers back, making us all laugh.

I slide the end of my belt through the loop and turn to grab my dress shirt that hangs in my visitor's locker. When I turn back around, the smell of grape gum infiltrates my nostrils, and a spicy little minx stands in front of me.

“Back for more, Peaches?” I ask and slide my arms into the sleeves but leave it open.

“Just a few questions to ask you, Phoenix. Think you can behave yourself for five minutes?” She pulls out her phone and holds it up, poised to press record when I give her the go ahead.

“Oh, c’mon Vivian. You don’t really want me to behave, do you? I like it when your claws come out.” She lets her head fall to one side and gives me a tiresome look. “Fine, fine. I’ll behave. Ask away.”

She clears her throat, presses record and begins. “Another great game, Phoenix, and another shutout for you. How does it feel to have the league record for the most shutouts this season?”

She asks me a series of questions about tonight’s game, my teammates and my predictions for the rest of the season. When she’s finished I turn to her and say, “now can I ask *you* a question?”

Her brows knit together and she lets her professional facade slip for only a moment before recovering.

“Uh, sure. What is it?”

“How did my gum taste in your mouth? Did you enjoy it?” The way I soften the word gum makes it sound like cum and her nostrils flare.

“You asshole,” she fumes. “We’ll edit that last bit out,” she says into the phone’s speakers. With a flip of her hair she spins to walk out but stops. “Oh Phoenix?”

“Yeah, Peaches?”

She reaches inside her mouth and extracts the chewed up wad of gum. “Thanks for sharing but,” she drops the gum into my palm. “You can have it back. I wasn’t impressed. Pretty bland and dull, if you ask me.”

She saunters off, her pert peachy ass swaying as she walks out of the door.

“Damn that girl is fine.” I look over my shoulder and see Manny standing behind me. “I wonder if the carpet matches

the drapes. Maybe she waxes her floors. Perfect for me to slide right into that tight, little pu—”

I don't know what comes over me, but in a flash I've got him pinned to the divider that separates the lockers with my forearm resting against his jugular.

“Say that shit again and the only ball you'll be seeing is your own when the doctors remove it from where I shoved it down your throat.”

His eyes are wide and I feel him trying to swallow against my arm.

“Woah, woah, woah. Let go, Nix. Back off.” Tuck grabs my shoulders and tries to pull me off of him, while Rami pries my forearm from Manny's neck.

The two of them finally wrestle me away from him and I shrug them off.

“What the fuck man,” Manny shouts. “I'm gonna kick your ass.”

“Talk about her like that one more time and I'll bury you.”

I yank my jacket from the hanger and shove it into my duffle. Snatching my phone and watch from the shelf and shoving them into my pocket, I don't bother with the buttons of my shirt and stomp out of the room and into the corridor.

Reporters are there, taking pictures and asking more questions. I hold up my hand apologetically and move quickly through the crowd, searching for which direction Vivian walked off. I run towards where the buses wait for us to load into and see her talking to a female trainer pack up her equipment.

My shoes clip against the pavement causing her to search for the sound. When she spots me her back stiffens and she ignores my presence, returning to talking and pretending I don't exist.

“Vivian, can I speak with you?” I ask but she doesn't respond. “Please?”

She exhales a long breath then says goodbye to the trainer.

“What do you want, Phoenix?” She sounds exhausted and so unlike her fiery self.

“I’m sorry I said that. I shouldn’t have.”

“Then why did you?” Her hands prop up on her hips and she tilts her head, trying to figure me out.

“Because it riles you up, Peaches, and I love it when you’re all feisty.”

“Phoenix,” she says with an exasperated sigh.

“Go out with me.”

“What? No. You’re crazy. Did a ball hit you in the head when I wasn’t looking?” She pretends to examine me by looking from one side of my head to the other.

“Go out with me. Tonight. Right now.”

“Can you ask me nicely?”

I swallow and give her a small smile. “Will you go out with me, Peaches?”

Her face lights up and my heart feels like it’s skipping rope inside my chest. She raises her hand and rests it on my cheek, her fingertips pressing into my stubble. Those perfect teeth of hers dig into her bottom lip and she rises up on her tiptoes. She’s nowhere near reaching my ear, so I bend down for her.

“Not a chance in hell, big guy.” She lowers herself back down and I take hold of her by her biceps before she can pull away.

I tug her body close to mine and she falls into me, her hands braced on my chest and staring up at me.

“Fine. No date. Your room or mine?”

She blinks her doe eyes up at me, the light from the moon making them shine like rare gems. Her breaths are heavy and each inhale has her fabric covered nipples rubbing against my bare chest.

“What’s it gonna be, Vivian?” I ask, running my hands over her shoulders and down her sides until I reach my

favorite place on her, squeezing her firm cheeks.

Her body turns pliant in my hands, like warm clay, and I begin smoothing up and down her back. My hand comes to rest at the base of her neck and I lean into her and place soft kisses along the column of her delicate neck.

“Vivian, you don’t even realize what you do to me, do you? I feel like a madman when I’m near you.”

“I hate you, too,” she rasps.

“Here’s the thing, Peaches,” I run my nose along her soft skin and inhale her delicious scent of something sweet and a bit spicy. Like a smoky apricot. “Your body does not agree with the words coming out of your mouth. Your words say you hate me but your body...”

My hand runs down her side, over her ribs and stopping at her small waist. I watch as her body begins to react to my touch. Her breath quickens and the pulse in her neck jumps. The smallest beads of sweat form along her hairline, and her fingers curl into my arm.

“Your body is begging for me to make you scream. Quit denying what we both know you want. Let me give you what you need.”

“How do you know what I need?” her voice trembles.

“Baby...your body tells me everything I need to know.” My tongue licks a line from the shell of her ear to her collarbone and a moan that she tries desperately to conceal spills from her lips.

“So I’m going to ask you one...more...time, Peaches,” I swipe my thumb across her bottom lip and her warm tongue licks the tip. A sweet feeling of satisfaction fills me. “Mine place or yours?”

Time freezes and I stand with bated breath until she finally says, “m-mine,” in that sexy rasp of hers, and that’s all it takes for me to snap.

I grab her hand and haul her to where the buses sit. There’s no way I can wait for the rest of the team to come out and pile

in. We'll lose the momentum if we sit piled into a seat next to twenty other guys.

I reach into my pocket and take my phone out. With a few swipes, I've got a car headed in our direction and I'm all but pulling Vivian behind me as we make our way to the side gate.

The security guard must sense my urgency because he slides the gate open quickly and moves aside without a word. When we clear the stadium gates, a car is idling at the curb waiting for us.

I open the back door and the driver says, "Phoe—holy shit. You're Phoenix West."

I help Vivian in and follow right behind her, slamming my door once I'm settled.

"I'll give you an extra one hundred dollars if you can get us to our hotel in under five minutes and without a word."

"You got it," he says and slams his foot down on the gas, jerking the car into traffic.

My body is desperate to feel hers against it, so I take her small face in my large hands and draw her to me. Her eyes still haven't shrunk from their enlarged size and her breathing has turned shallow and fast.

"Relax, Peaches. There's nothing to be afraid of." I lean in and slide my tongue across her lips and nip at the corner. "Well...maybe just a little."

I crush my mouth to hers and relish in the feel of her smooth pout against mine. I get lost in her taste, in her touch, in the little sounds she makes every time my tongue dances with hers. I'm so caught up in the best kiss of my life, that I don't notice we've arrived at the hotel until the driver clears his throat.

"Man, I'm really sorry. I know you said not to speak but you're here." He winces and sinks his ears to his shoulders like he's waiting for me to blow his hair back.

"No apologies," I spit out, fishing my wallet out of my pocket and throwing two hundred dollars down on his console.

“Thanks!” he calls out as I drag Vivian by the hand out of the car and rush into the hotel lobby.

We’re racing like our house is on fire, garnering stares from people as we pass. A few phones come out and a flash or two goes off, but I couldn’t give one shit. My only goal, my only thought, is getting Vivian upstairs and naked pronto.

“What floor?” I growl at her.

“N-nineteen,” she replies in a shaky voice.

I stab at the button like it did me wrong and don’t even wait for the doors to close before she’s hauled back into my arms.

I grip the back of her head and hold her still so I can ravage her mouth. I hear muffled protests spill from her, but I swallow them whole and keep right on with my exploration of her glorious mouth.

My memories don’t even compare to the real thing. The first time we did this we were just kids. Mind you, I was a very experienced kid, but one nonetheless. The second time was fast and ended in fury.

The bell dings and the doors slide open and Vivian tries to pry her lips from mouth, but I only tighten my grip and crack my eyes open to see where we’re going.

“Room?” I mumble into her mouth.

“Nine...nineteen thirty-two.”

I heft her up into my arms and start walking in the direction that the sign indicates. My duffle bag slides off my shoulder and hangs from the crook of my elbow, smacking my leg with each step. Vivian reaches down and returns it to where it sat without skipping a beat. I guide us down the hall, one eye open and searching for the room number, and a few people pass, watching with their mouths open and eyes wide.

I don’t give a fuck. They can follow us to the room and watch for all I care. Nothing is going to stop me from sinking into this beauty.

“My key,” she says in between tongue swipes.

“Where is it?”

“Put me down.”

“Not a chance, Peaches. Find it quick or I’m fucking you against the door in this hallway.”

I press her back against the door to her room and steady her as she searches through her purse for her key. She finds it and I snatch it from her. I lift her over my shoulder and scan the keycard then enter her darkened room. The only light comes from the window where the city shines below us.

“Phoenix, will you please put me down now?” Her voice is strained from hanging upside down.

I drop my bag at the foot of the bed and fling her over. Her petite body bounces on the mattress and I watch as she falls back, her hair fanning out like flames licking the black of night.

My shirt still hangs unbuttoned and I rip it off, toss it on the floor and do the same with my shoes, socks and pants. I’m in just my underwear before she can so much as remove a shoe and decide to help her out.

Her shoes are tossed over my shoulder and then land with a loud thunk.

“Hey! Those are expensive,” she shouts.

“I’ll buy you a hundred. Take off your fucking clothes, Peaches. I need to be inside of you right. Now.”

She freezes and I take it upon myself to rid her of the pesky clothes that keep me from touching her smooth, pale skin. Pants...gone. Blouse...toast. Panties...obliterated.

“Slow down, Phoenix.”

“I’ve been waiting ten years to know what you taste like. There isn’t a chance in hell I’m slowing this down. We’ll do that later. Right now, I’m going to make you scream my name while my mouth devours your pussy.”

She gasps and I sink to my knees and drag her to the edge of the bed. My tongue darts out and I lick her seam that’s

dripping with her desire.

“Ooh,” she cries when I moan, “fuuuuck.”

She tastes like heaven and I don't think I've ever had anything better in my mouth. Her dripping cunt fills my mouth and I drink her down. I lick and suck and bury my face between her soft thighs. My beard scratches the insides of them and I pray they're red tomorrow. I want her to not only feel me, but see that I've marked her as mine.

I pull her swollen clit into my mouth and her nails dig into my scalp.

“Shiiit. Phoenix...that feels so good. God, I hate you,” she pants.

I smile against her tight cunt. “If this is how you hate me, then never stop.”

My thumbs hold her open wide and I sink my tongue into her pussy. Her back arches off the bed and she mewls. I take advantage and slide my hands under her, gripping her firm ass in each palm.

“Jesus Christ, Peaches. This ass.” I squeeze each globe, my fingers digging into her pale skin.

I slip two fingers inside of her and her walls grip them like a vice. I move them in and out and suck her clit back into my mouth. The combination makes the most erotic sound and I can't wait to hear what her pussy will sound like swallowing my cock.

“Oh my God. Phoenix.” My name rolling off her tongue has my dick leaking precum in my boxers. “Pl-please. Now. You. Me.”

Her words come out in quick staccatos. They make no sense yet so much at the same time. I want to give her everything she wants, but I need to feel her come on my tongue before I sink inside.

“Not yet.” I go back to eating her, stroking her and curling my fingers, looking for that sweet spot.

I suck and rub and before long I hear her breathing turn heavy and just know she's close. I don't ease up and pull her closer and closer to the edge. I nip at her bud and suck it between my teeth.

"Fuck!" she shouts and clamps her thighs to my head.

She moans and cries and her body goes rigid. She's locked into her orgasm while I stay clamped onto her through it the entire time. She tries pushing me away from her sensitive clit, but she's just too good to stop. I keep sucking and in moments, she's falling into another mind blowing orgasm.

I finally give her relief and climb up her body. Hovering above her, I watch as her eyelids flutter. Her cheeks are flushed pink and teeth indents mar her perfect lips. My tongue licks them, soothing where she bit down, and she opens her mouth wide to invite me in. We kiss and she moans when she tastes herself on me.

I press up to my knees and slip my thumbs into the waistband of my boxers.

"Are you ready for this?" I ask her.

Her eyes open slowly and she lazily asks, "ready for what?"

With a cocksure smile on my face, I lower my boxers and watch her eyes double, triple, quadruple in size.

"Where the fuck are you going to put that?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VIVIAN



“NEED TO KNOW” - Doja Cat

HE SLIDES his underwear down his thick, muscular thighs and I see that his quads aren't the only things that are thick.

“Where the fuck are you going to put *that?*” I swallow down the lump of *oh shit* nerves that have suddenly formed in my throat.

So here's the thing. I'm no innocent prude. I've seen a lot of dick. Long, short. Thick, skinny. Curved, straight, light, dark. You name it and I've probably had it in the vicinity of my body. My friends call me the *Samantha Jones of Magnolia Creek*, and tell me I should write a book about penises. Solid backup plan if this broadcasting gig ever goes South.

What I'm saying is that seeing a naked man doesn't really shock me anymore. But Phoenix...If I were to write a book, his dick would be next to the words “holy perfection”.

My knees shake and my core clenches when I think about him pushing that monster in me. It stands proudly, thick and engorged and swinging side to side like a bat. The damn thing *is* a bat and it's about to go to town on batting practice. My poor vagina is going to be destroyed like a piñata at a five year old's birthday party.

“I...I-I,” I sound like a sailor saluting his captain.

“What's the matter, Peaches?” he growls and starts to climb his way up my body.

“Woah. Hold on a minute, pony boy.” I push up to my elbows and squirm backwards and up the bed. “That...looks like it could do some damage. I don’t know if I’m ready for my vagina to look like a blown out tire. I mean, that usually comes after like four or five kids. If I get on that thing, my poor cooch will never look the same.”

He’s chuckling like I just told him the best joke, but there is no joke about the fact that his dick is about to tear my shit up.

“A bit dramatic, don’t you think Peaches?”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“An asshole who’s about to fuck you into tomorrow.”

“Literally,” I snort. “That thing is going to break the space time continuum and propel me into the future.”

He stops his predator-like crawl towards me and rises to his knees again and swings his bat at me.

“You’re primed. I promise to take it slow until you’re ready for more.”

“Well seeing as I wasn’t expecting an inspection of my internal organs today, how about we reschedule.”

“Not a chance.”

Quick as lightning I’m underneath him, his dick laying between us like a third arm.

“I can’t wait anymore. I need to feel your pussy. So be a good girl and let me in.” His words rumble in his chest and vibrate through my body.

I close my eyes and take a deep, calming breath. I go to my happy place, my zen place, and imagine myself swimming in a sea of Jimmy’s and Manolo’s and Christian’s. Shoes, of course.

“Do you have a condom or maybe a...trash bag or something?”

He lifts his hand and flashes a condom wedged between two fingers. I’m not sure when he grabbed that. Probably in

the middle of my freakout over wondering how well I could do my job from a wheelchair.

He rips the wrapper open with his teeth and slides it down over his dick. And yep, it's the size of a pillowcase. I'm dying tonight.

"Breathe, Vivian," he orders and I exhale loudly. His lips brush against my ear and his warm breath whispers, "I'm going to make you scream the walls down. People back in Texas will hear you calling my name."

He pulls back with a crooked grin then takes hold of his cock at the base and rubs his tip up and down my slit. The sheets grow wet as I feel myself dripping with each swipe he makes. My body turns listless as the pleasure rolls through me. Phoenix's mouth clamps on to that dip between my neck and collarbone and he bites. I gasp and his tongue darts out to lick away the pain. And then the most mind blowing feeling overtakes me.

Phoenix pushes inside of me and my eyes fly open at the intrusion. "Oh-oh god," I think I say, but I'm not so sure because his dick is likely probing my brain making it impossible to think clearly.

Just when I think he's fully in, he pushes in another inch... and another. Stabby McStaberson has nothing on Phoenix West. I just pray that he knows how to use what he's been blessed with.

He seats himself to the hilt then stills. "Goddamn, Peaches. I hope you don't plan on walking tomorrow because with the way you feel, I don't ever want to leave."

He rolls his hips and begins moving, slowly at first. He reaches under my knee and holds it over his shoulder, opening me wider for him and I give myself willingly.

Each thrust moves me farther up the bed. Each bite on my skin makes my toes curl. Like the all-star ball player he is, he knows how to perfectly connect with the sweet spot. My nails are digging into his back as I try to keep myself from floating away on a cloud of bliss.

“Fuck yes. Dig those nails into me. Scratch me, make me bleed,” he growls.

“So...God, so good. I really hate you for making me feel like this,” I pant out between thrusts.

He laughs and its deep rumble causes chills to spread like wildfire over my heated skin. “I don’t think your pussy hates me, Peaches. I think your sweet pussy wants me to live here.”

Harder and harder he moves in and out and my eyes roll. If I could hold my lids open, my eyes would look like a slot machine on a winning jackpot. It’s all too good, and I moan my appreciation for how the god-like man makes me feel.

“I’m so cl-close, Phoenix. Don’t,” he pulls out abruptly. “Stop! Hey–,” I’m flipped over onto my stomach and feel a Phoenix sized blanket drape over me.

He smacks my ass, hard, and groans. “Firm. Just like I thought.” he says to himself.

His massive hands squeeze my thighs together and haul me up so that I’m on my knees and elbows in a bent over prayer position. And Lord, yes...I am praying. Praying he doesn’t stop. Praying he does, and praying that he doesn’t destroy me in more ways than one.

He presses his mouth to my butt and bites, letting out a pleasurable moan. With his hands holding my hips, he buries his face in between my spread ass cheeks and takes a long lick from end to end. I shiver from the delicious sensation of him savoring me like I’m a five star Michelin dinner.

His hand smooths up my spine, caressing my skin with a gentle touch. So opposite of the Phoenix I know. Then he shatters that vision when he fists my hair and pulls it until my neck is arched and I’m staring up at the ceiling.

“You keep these fucking legs closed, Peaches. Don’t move ‘em and I’ll let you have that orgasm you were begging for.”

“Let me?” Who the hell does he think he is?

He tugs my hair harder and growls into my ear. “I own every one of your orgasms and I’ll give them to you when I’m

good and goddamn ready. Now press your face into that pillow and scream my name like the dirty little cum slut you are.”

Heaven help me. No one has ever spoken to me like he does. Like I’m here for his satisfaction. And unfortunately...I think I like it. I feel a tingle when his words reach my ears. They travel through my body and spark to life every last burning ember, setting me on fire.

His fist loosens its grip on my hair and he gently pushes my head down until my face is pressed against the pillow. I have a deep feeling that housekeeping is going to be wondering how the hell an imprint of my face ended up on the pillowcase.

With my legs still clenched tightly together, I feel Phoenix spread my ass cheeks wide then impale me with his rock hard cock.

“Aaauuah,” I mumble into the fluffy pillow.

Phoenix plows into me and I seem impossibly tight. “Oh Jesus help me. This fucking woman,” he calls out to the sky.

His hips slam against my ass, the sound exploding through the otherwise silent room. Heavy balls swing and connect with my backside like a pendulum. Fingertips press into my hips and no doubt I will wear them for the days to come.

“You wanna come, baby girl?” he grunts.

I nod my head into the pillow, too overwhelmed with pleasure to lift my head.

“Answer me with words, Vivian. Do. You. Want. To come?” He takes a fistful of my hair and lifts my head up.

I gasp for air and feel sweat coating my face.

“Y-yes. Make me come.”

“Say please, Peaches.”

“P-pl...ooooh,” I moan as he continues to ram into me with a force that has my lids rolling open and closed. “Please make me come.”

“Mmmm. Good girl,” is the last thing I hear before my face is pushed back down and my ass is slapped.

I clench my teeth with the sting but I also absolutely love it. I don't know where this sub little bitch has been hiding, but it looks like Phoenix has found her.

He pumps into me and reaches around to pinch my clit in one hand, and uses his thumb on the other hand to probe my puckered hole. He hits a trifecta and my orgasm roars through me.

“Yes. Like tha-yes. Fuck! Phoenix!” My body begins to float and the world around me falls silent.

I'm completely blissed out. I think I've reached Nirvana because I have never experienced such a euphoric high like I am in right now. A sea of white light surrounds me and I feel lightheaded like I truly am levitating in another atmosphere.

Just as quickly as it came, color begins to fill the serene white and the sensation of my body being thrown around like a rag doll brings me back to life. I greedily suck in air and blink my eyes open to confirm that this is indeed real life.

“Oh fuck, Peaches,” Phoenix grits out between clenched teeth.

I find myself on my back now and my legs are held straight up in the air by one of his hands on each ankle. He holds them wide and pummels into me like a man wild and out of control. One more thrust and he's coming with a roar, powerful and beastlike. The fingers that previously dug into my ass grip my ankles with a strength that feels like he could snap them like the wishbone from Thanksgiving's turkey.

When we're both drained and heaving, our bodies coated with sweat, I let my head fall to the side and find Phoenix already staring at me with dreamy eyes.

“For the record, I still hate you.” My voice is raspy and my throat dry.

“No you don't, Peaches.” Phoenix reaches over and grips my jaw in his hand and kisses me hard. “Get up. Shower,” he

orders and slaps each of my breasts before leaping off the bed and racing to the bathroom.

“Jackass,” I shout after him.

And what an ass it is.

I’m gonna hate myself in the morning for this. I just know it. But for now, I’ll pretend that I’m simply lost in a dream.

“Get your ass in here! I’m not finished with you yet.”

Well okay then.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

VIVIAN



“BODY LANGUAGE” - Doja Cat

THE MORNING after my mind blowing night with Phoenix, I did in fact kick my own ass. It was good while I was in the moment, but when I remembered who he was and the reason behind my deep seated hate, I punished myself by running three miles. And I *hate* running.

That morning I decided I would avoid any interaction with Phoenix off the field, and stick to baseball only related conversations. I’ve ignored him plenty and in turn, pissed him off. CeCe has been glued to my side every minute that she hasn’t been glued to Luca’s.

Speaking of CeCe and Luca, those two are like gasoline and matches. Ready to combust with the slightest spark.

It’s mid August and the weather is as hot as the Wranglers winning streak. It’s the first game of a home series and I’m settling into my new routine of traveling three or so days with the team, then back home for a few. I’ve even patted myself on the back for not sleeping with any guys since Phoenix. If I’m really honest with myself, it’s because any man that comes after Phoenix will fail miserably and I’m not ready to give up the memory of that night. The one and *only* night I will allow myself to have with him.

It’s like I’ve scratched the itch from years ago and now I can’t move on knowing what I was missing. And damn was I missing a lot.

Phoenix is on the mound today, so I give myself a pregame pep talk to keep it cool, calm and collected while he's in the dugout. Like the other times he's either started or rested, I know he'll sit close by and poke and prod me with questions. Tease me with his filthy words that he says for only my ears. And that fucking gum.

I hate Phoenix West. I hate Phoenix West. I ha—

“Peaches!”

The word ricochets off the brick walls of the hallway that leads past the clubhouse and into the dugout. My body tenses and my steps falter slightly, but I recover and pick up the pace.

“Peaches, hold up a sec.” Phoenix comes jogging down the hallway and grabs my hand, halting my getaway.

“Howdy, Red.”

“Lookin’ sexy as always, Viv.”

“I’ve got a home-run with your name on it tonight.”

The guys file out of the clubhouse and greet me in their own special way. I don’t miss how Manny keeps his eyes down as he passes me, and Rami only offers me a shy smile. I try to talk to him, but he shuffles by without a second glance.

I watch him go with my brows knitted tight, wondering what I could’ve done to piss him off.

I don’t have much time to think about it because I’m being tugged backwards by a caveman.

“Why are you always tossing me around like I’m a rag doll? I’m sick of your bossy ass.” I practically trip over my feet as we stumble into the trainers room which sits off of the clubhouse.

“Why are you always ignoring me?” He shouts and slams the door behind us, and locks it with a flick of his wrist.

“Let me out of here. I have a job to do.”

“I do too, baby girl, but we have some things to discuss first.”

“We do *not* have anything to talk about. Now, if you will move your giant body out of the way, we can both go to the jobs we are paid to do.” I step forward and try to move around him, but the stupid jerk stops me with a hand on my forehead.

I slap at him until he releases me. “You animal! My makeup better not be ruined.”

He smiles at me and smooths a wayward hair from my forehead and I swat at him like he’s an annoying fly. “You don’t need any makeup, Peaches. You’re already gorgeous. Especially when the morning sun shines across your naked body.”

“Stop it, you mongrel. I told you that was a one time thing and we were never to mention it, ever again.” I remind him.

“Yes, but I never agreed. In fact, I specifically remember changing your mind when you sat on my face and I ate you into your fifth...or was it your sixth orgasm, Peaches.”

While he’s been talking, he’s advanced on me, backing me up to the therapy table. The table wobbles and I grip it with my hands to stop it from falling. Or maybe to stop me from falling.

“So if you’re not ready to talk, you can sit your pretty little ass right there and just listen.” I open my mouth to protest and he covers it with his warm, rough hand. “Save your breath, Vivian, and just. Listen.”

I nod my head with wide eyes and inhale his spicy scent, a mixture of cloves and something slightly sweet like oranges. It’s intoxicating and the bastard has me practically creaming in my panties.

“We are nowhere close to being finished, Vivian. That one night was just the tip of the iceberg. A big iceberg,” he says and grinds his hard cock into me.

“Isdaturickorurup?” I mumble.

“What did you say?” His hand falls away from my mouth allowing me to breathe.

“I said...is that your dick or your cup that’s trying to burrow into my belly button?”

Without saying a word, he grabs my hand and places it on his crotch that is clearly not protected by a cup.

“I’ll put it on soon. But first I want to remind you why we,” he waves a finger between the two of us. “Are definitely going to be repeating our night together many, *many* times.”

“No, Phoenix, we will not. I was dick drunk and agreed under duress.”

“Then I guess I gotta do what I gotta do to convince you otherwise.”

“Wha—”

Quick as a flash, he scoops me up under my arms and presses my back to the wall. My feet dangle as my hands grip on to his forearms that are roped with muscle.

“Put me down, you neanderthal. You’re going to mess up my hair and my dress, and I can’t go on live tv looking like I just woke up,” I say through gritted teeth.

“How about if you look like you’ve just been fucked? Is that better?”

My eyes narrow and I’m a full on pot of boiling rage. “No, it is not better. What’s *better* is if you let me down and we both walk out of here.”

Phoenix moves closer and presses his body against me, pinning me between him and the wall. Instinctively my legs wrap around his trim waist and I slap the stupid, horny bitch inside of me who has obviously taken control of my brain and body again.

“Oh we’ll walk out of here, but not before I have the taste of your sweet pussy dripping from my lips.”

I croak out something that sounds like a word but is rather close to the sound a mouse makes when it’s being gobbled up by a hungry lion.

“Do you know how fucking insane you have made me, ignoring me and pretending like I didn’t give you the best goddamn fucking of your life?” My wrists are pulled in one of his hands and he raises them above my head, trapping me. “I don’t like to be ignored, Vivian.”

His nose runs up the column of my neck to my ear and flicks it with his tongue.

“I’ve told you that fighting with me only makes me harder.”

He grinds his cock against my belly.

“Do you even understand how difficult it is to walk around with a hard dick, crammed inside of a jock cup?”

He pinches my nipple through my thin dress and twists, making me wince in pain and moan like a cat in heat.

“And your smell,” he leans in and inhales me from my neck down my chest and stops in my cleavage. “I can smell how wet you are, Peaches.”

His hand smooths up my leg, pushing my dress higher until he can see a hint of my panties.

“Baby girl,” he growls. “Are those...*peach* colored panties?” A devilish smirk splits his gorgeous face and I swallow down the hard lump that has lodged in my throat.

“I-I...I don’t...”

Did I subconsciously put them on today? When the hell did I even buy peach colored panties?

His calloused fingers crawl up my thigh and trace the edge of my lace panties.

“You’re dripping, baby girl. Fuck. Please say I can have a taste.”

His face is buried in my neck, peppering me with kisses and long licks. My eyes roll and my head hits the wall as I give into his touch.

“Say the words I need to hear,” he rasps into my ear, sending a wave of shivers racing over my body. “Tell me I can

feel you, that I can taste you.”

I must've been holding my breath because I grow lightheaded and feel foggy, like I'm stuck between reality and a dream.

How does he do this to me? My IQ plummets every time he touches me. I revert back to that naive girl who just wanted him to like her, and immediately I feel that same embarrassment I did years ago and chide myself for being so pathetic. But I just can't help myself when he's so close. I lose all sense of the strong, independent woman I am, the woman I created, when he uses that commanding voice of his like he does.

That's why, when he crushes his mouth to mine, I moan like a wanton woman. It's why I grind into him like a virgin riding a pommel horse. It's why I choke out the words, “taste me” when I should be yelling at him to stop.

He takes my lip between his teeth and stretches it to the point of pain. Then he licks my swollen lip and swallows me in a kiss. His strokes are long and deep, much like he fucks, and I feel myself turning to mush in his arms.

While his mouth caresses mine tenderly, his deft fingers slide into me, thick and strong. He moves and glides and saws in and out of me in the same way he did with his stupid magical dick.

“I hate you, Phoenix but fuuuck...that feels so...good,” I moan out breathily as his long fingers curl and rub and massage in the most glorious way imaginable.

His laugh in response to what I say is a deep rumble and so damn sexy.

“My dick is weeping just remembering how well your pussy took it. Like it was made just for me.”

I writhe against his hand, rolling my hips in sync with his ministrations. Little sparks begin igniting in my body and the coil of desire begins to thrum.

“Shit. You're gonna make me come.”

“Isn’t that the whole point of this, Peaches?” He drops my wrists so that he can tease my nipples while his other hand continues to strum my pussy.

His thumb rubs circles over my swollen clit and my spine goes stiff. I mewl and whimper and claw at his shoulders as I keen closer and closer to the edge. He must recognize the sounds of my incoming orgasm because just as he hits that delicious spot and flicks my clit, he slants his mouth over mine and swallows my cries.

Bright lights flash behind my lids and I swear I can hear colors and see sound. I dig my nails into Phoenix’s smooth skin and it spurs him to thrust a third finger in me, drawing out my orgasm and sending me into a vortex.

I’m heaving, my chest in a rapid rise and fall, and Phoenix kisses my neck with a sweet gentleness. My eyes flutter open and he draws his fingers from me, brings them to his lips, and licks them clean, pulling them from his mouth with a resounding pop.

With eyes closed and head back, his Adam’s apple bobs and a sensual moan rolls through the small room.

“Best fucking thing I’ve ever tasted.” His cocky grin has me snapping back to reality and once again, I loathe myself for feeling such satisfaction from a man who at one time, brought me so much pain.

Images flash and that little voice inside my head tells me this is all a joke and a man like him could never truly want a girl like me.

“Let me out,” I pant. “Now. Let me out now, Phoenix.”

He drops me to my feet with a rather stunned look on his face. My dress is a wrinkled mess and I’m sure my mascara is smudged. I push past him and go straight for the door.

“Vivian, wait. Don’t run away.”

“Stop doing this. Just stop...”

“Making you feel like no other man ever has or will? Not in a million years. Not until you’re mine.”

My jaw unhinges like a spring has broken and I have only a moment before he's advancing on me again. My feet stumble backwards and I smack the door that I was trying to escape through. He takes my chin in his hand and lowers his head until our eyes are so close that we can't see the world around us.

“Let go of all that past shit and open your eyes to see how fucking perfect we could be. You want me, I know you do. Quit all this bullshit ‘I hate you’ because we both know you don't. I think you might even love me. You love the way I fuck you. You love the way my dick makes you scream, the way it makes you cry. You love the filthy words I whisper to you. And you fucking *love* being my dirty little slut. You're already mine. The sooner you admit it to yourself, the sooner I can show what you've been missing. Because God Vivian, the nasty things I want to do to your body...should be criminal.”

He kisses me hard and fast. Just one quick kiss, not delving deeper, then releases me. I stand frozen, completely in shock and in complete denial. I can't open myself up to someone like Phoenix West. He's the type of man who could destroy me. And after all that I've done to become the woman who stands here today, it would only take a slight breeze to have me tumbling down like a house of flimsy cards.

Me: I need you...NOW!

I send CeCe a text knowing she's here, somewhere, probably holding Luca's phone while he pisses. But whatever she's doing, nothing is more important than the crisis I find myself in.

CeCe: Is this like, I broke a nail emergency, or I've fallen down a well and need Lassie situation?

Me: It's a, I let Phoenix West finger bang me in the trainer's room and now I'm freaking the fuck out.

CeCe: OMW

Images of CeCe running through the back hallways of Wrangler Stadium in her sky high heels and pencil skirt has me giggling a little. She's so tall, she probably looks like Wonder Woman or one of the Amazonian women running into battle.

Minutes pass when I hear the clipping for heels barreling down the stairs. I turn around to see CeCe pushing past fans and media to get to me.

Her feet barely come to a stop when she heaves out, "what the fuck do you mean you let Phoenix finger bang you?"

"Shhhh! Will you keep your voice down?" I scold. "Get in here so I can tell you. Jesus, loud mouth."

I stand up from my stool and open the gate that keeps me in and the riff-raff out.

"Spill, you little hoochie." She stands there with her arms crossed over her chest and a stern look on her face.

"Okay first, let's lose the attitude Judge Judy." She drops her arms and the look on her face softens...a little. "Second..." I pause and take a deep breath, then proceed to fill her in on all that happened from being manhandled and tossed into the trainers room like a prisoner—maybe I exaggerated a tad—to the mind blowing orgasm Phoenix gave me, to the words he said that had me re-thinking the meaning of life. Because really, if I'm considering another rendezvous with Phoenix, I must be in another dimension.

"He called you a dirty little slut?" she asks.

"Not a dirty little slut. *His* dirty little slut. And who cares about that. I need to know what to do."

She taps a long red nail against her matching lips and her eyes stare off into the distance. It's her thinking face so what she's about to say must be really good.

"So he fucked you stupid a couple weeks ago, then fingered you into oblivion just now and you're mad about that? I'm...really confused."

I punch her arm and slump back in my stool. “I’m mad because I don’t want to want him. I don’t want to like it. But goddammit every time that jerk is within twenty feet of me, my brain shuts down and my vagina kicks into high gear.”

“Hmm,” she murmurs, folding her arms across her chest. “That is a problem, seeing as he’s a giant dickhole. I mean, it’s one thing if you just wanna fuck him and chuck him. But it seems like maybe...there’s more?”

My jaw dropped and so did the feeling in my stomach. “How dare you make such ludicrous accusations. I should titty twist you for that but I won’t...because I’m a professional and because there are too many people watching.”

CeCe holds up her hands and I flip my head to focus on the field. An announcer is on the field talking about a group of kids that were there as part of a charity event. I try to focus on the kids but I’m hyper aware of CeCe staring at me, as well as the dugout that is filling with big bodies.

“What?” I finally ask her.

“Nothing. I completely agree that this is a bad position for you to be in. You hate him—completely justified—but your body wants him. I feel your pain. We are both kind of sitting in this same conundrum. Hating that we want what we want.” CeCe gets this far off look in her eyes, and I nod and stare out to the empty pitcher’s mound.

“And now. The starting line up for your Houston Wrrraanglers!” The announcer’s voice cuts through our moment and we bring our focus back to the game. The booming voice announces each player and their position while their walk-up song plays and the crowd goes wild.

“And your starting pitcher for tonight...Phoenix ‘Wild Wild’ West!” The stadium goes ballistic and I wonder when he got saddled with the new nickname.

His song starts to play and I feel my stomach churn. *Pony* by Ginuwine blasts, the bass bumping hard, and I watch as Phoenix makes his way out of the bullpen and towards the mound. As he draws closer, his eyes laser focus in on me and a

cocky, beautiful smirk spreads across his stupidly gorgeous face.

I can't help but think this is a tongue-in-cheek nod to when I called him pony boy our night together.

Of course it is, dimwit.

His eyes stay locked with mine and as he passes, gives me a wink then runs his fingers under his nose, inhaling deeply and closing his eyes like the scent that remains is the best he's ever experienced.

“Did he just—”

“Smell the fingers that were inside of me? Yup, he sure did.”

My nipples harden and my core tingles remembering how he felt inside of me. My body is already buzzing when he's near, like it knows he's the only one who can make it feel more than just satisfaction.

But I hate him!

CeCe was one hundred percent correct. My mind hates him, but my body sure doesn't. And more than anything, I hate that I want him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PHOENIX



“RODEO” - Lah Pat (feat. Big Jade)

VIVIAN’S TASTE rested on my tongue for the entire game. I didn’t chew my regular celebratory gum after a good inning. I didn’t eat anything passed to me, and I didn’t even dare drink water, despite the fact that it was hot as a muthafucka. I’d sweated it out for a couple hours just to keep her lingering a bit longer.

And I threw my best damn game ever. I’d only had my best games since coming to Houston. But tonight, the credit for my game was all because of a fiery redhead that has a feisty attitude and tastes like heaven.

We had a shutout, nine to zero, and we were lining up to give each other high five’s before heading in for press. Except me. I knew I’d be getting an interview with Viv tonight after the game I had.

So when I walked into the dugout and heard her say, “Phoenix, are you okay to talk to me for a few minutes?” I smiled wide to myself before turning around and nodding my head.

“Great. Thanks. If you can give me a few, I’m going to talk with Tuck first about his two-run homer in the sixth.” She spoke professionally like she hadn’t been riding my fingers like they were a fucking pogo stick just a couple of hours ago.

“Sure. See you out there.”

I wiped my face off, finally drank some water and pulled out two pieces of gum from my pocket.

I walked out to where she stood by third base, talking to Tuck and smiling. Jesus, she's beautiful. I was such an idiot for being a tool in college. But I was slowly repenting for my sins.

"Congrats on the home run and the win tonight, Tuck." She turned to look directly into the camera and said, "Stick around Wrangler fans. When we come back, I'll be speaking to red hot pitcher, Phoenix West."

The light on the camera faded and she relaxed her camera-practiced smile.

"That really was a great hit, Tuck. We'll see you tomorrow." She held up her hand and gave him a small wave as he said goodbye and jogged past me, giving me a fist bump as he went.

I sauntered up to her and she busied herself like she didn't know I was standing inches away. She looked everywhere but at me and it made my smirk turn to a full blown laugh.

Her beautiful face looked up at me and it was laced with anger. She looked like Tinkerbell when she was mad at Peter Pan. It was fucking adorable.

"What?" She spat.

"Nothin'. You're just cute." I hold my hand out to her and open it up, revealing the two pieces of grape gum.

She glares at me then at the gum sitting there.

"C'mon, Peaches. You know you want it." Her mouth opened to either yell or let me put the gum in her mouth when we were interrupted.

"Back in ten," the cameraman called out.

Vivian steps up on her little stool, tosses her hair back, straightens her shoulders and holds the mic up to her mouth.

"In five, four, three," the cameraman holds up two fingers then one, then motions that we were live.

“Welcome back, Wrangler fans. I’m here with Phoenix West, the man who keeps setting records and smashing them. Congrats on the win tonight and for once again, breaking your strike-out record.”

“Thanks, Pe-Vivian.” Her eyes widen then narrow when I almost called her peaches on live tv. “Tonight was a great win for the team, and I’m just happy I had a part in helping my guys pull in a W.”

“You went four straight innings with consecutive strike-outs. Was there anything about tonight, perhaps something new with your training, that you attribute tonight’s performance to?”

I smirk and think, *she threw the pitch, now hit it out of the park.*

“Training continues as always, but there was definitely something special about tonight. I don’t know what it was, but I could *smell* it in the air. There was an electricity in the stadium tonight. You know, the kind you can *taste*. It was there tonight and that’s what I fed off of. The energy. The *pulse*.”

The smile on her face never breaks, but her color turns flush and the look in her eyes tells me I’m gonna get it once the cameras are off.

I can’t fucking wait.

She clears her throat and blinks. “We’re heading into the final stretch of the regular season and the Wranglers are number one in the AL West division. How do you feel headed into the playoffs?”

“Great. This is a solid team with an all-star lineup. We’ve got the top power hitters right now, so as long as the guys keep making unbelievable plays and hitting home runs, and I keep throwing strikes, I think we’re poised to go *all the way*.”

I could see the frustration in her eyes as I continued to spill innuendos. Every question she asked, I met it with a cheeky response. Her cheeks grew pinker and pinker, and her jaw clenched with each word that made her uncomfortable. I just

know she's going to blow when this was all over and God, do I want to be alone with her when that happens.

She was winding down our interview, so I casually pulled out a piece of gum that I had stuffed back in my pocket, unwrapped it and slowly brought it to my mouth. She was facing the camera but I could see her eyes flicker between me and where she should have been focused.

She turned back to me right as I wrapped my tongue around the gum. A small, almost imperceptible wiggle rode up her spine and I fucking delighted.

“Thank you for talking to us tonight, Phoenix, and all of Wrangler nation can't wait to see what you do on the road.”

“Thank you, Peaches,” I said hurriedly then spin to walk off.

She recovered quickly and as she spoke I smacked her ass—like any good sportsman would do—then hauled *my* ass to the locker room. She would fester in her anger and be ready to blow a gasket by the time I re-emerged. She wouldn't dare leave without giving me a piece of her mind.

I just hope she's willing to give me a piece of her body, too.

JUST LIKE I PREDICTED, Vivian was waiting for me when I exited the clubhouse press room. I gave a brief interview with the remaining press, my answers were short and to the point. Only my Peaches got the best of me. When the press was tired of my curt responses, they quickly moved on to talk to coach and I jumped out of my seat.

Hustling to the exit, I saw that she was talking with an angry CeCe. I crept up slowly and listened in.

Yeah. I eavesdropped. Get over it.

“I'm so sick of him, Viv. I can't take anymore of his barking at me, snapping his fucking fingers all of the time... I'm quitting.” CeCe huffed and puffed while Vivian rubbed her arm.

“You’re not quitting, babe. If you quit then I give up baseball coverage. I mean, I’m not opposed to covering football. There are few players I wouldn’t mind getting reacquainted with.” *What the fuck?* “But we both know that we can’t turn our backs on what we love.”

With a defeated sigh, CeCe said, “I know. But Viv, I don’t know how much longer I can last before—”

“Before you snap and finally fuck him?” Vivian arched a brow and CeCe dropped her shoulders and nodded her head. “Yeah. Join the club. It’s the worst one to be a part of.”

“Do you think you’ll sleep with Phoenix, again?” My ears perk up when I hear that and I stop in my tracks, waiting to hear Vivian’s answer.

“I don’t know, C. I hate the guy. He’s arrogant and cocky and a player who probably has a woman in every city he plays in.”

She’s not completely wrong. I *did* have a woman in every city. Now it’s only her.

“Okay pot. Have you met kettle?” CeCe snorts.

“Shut it. The sex was freaking phenomenal. The best I’ve ever had.” I stand a little taller and hold my chin higher. “But I’m the expert at sex without attachment. With him...I’m not sure that’s possible, and I’m worried that he’ll break me again, and then I’ll be that sad little twenty year old virgin, waiting for a guy to validate me.”

I swallow down the huge rock in my throat and decide to make myself known. After hearing her say all of that, I know I need to fix her opinion of me. I need to change how she feels.

I step heavy and my dress shoes sound loudly down the sidewalk.

“Ladies,” I say, stepping up to them with a smile on my face and not a hint that I heard their very private conversation.

I’m an ass.

“Phoenix,” CeCe says tersely.

“Asshat,” greets Vivian.

“CeCe, you look beautiful tonight.” I move my eyes to Vivian and soften my face. “Peaches. You’re gorgeous as ever.”

“Don’t ‘peaches’ me, you douchebag. You tried to sabotage my interview!” Her hands fly up and I swerve to avoid a smack to the face. “Do you know how difficult it was not to Regina George your ass and choke the living shit out of you?”

My face contorts and I let out a small chuckle. “Who the hell is Regina George?”

“Aaargh! It doesn’t matter! You screwed me, dickhead.”

“Yes. Yes I did, Peaches.”

Her face turns red and her eyes burn with rage. Here she comes...angry Tink. “Uuurraaaaahhhhhh! I’m going to kill you, Phoenix West!”

She lunges at me but CeCe grabs hold of her by the waist and tugs her back into her tall body.

“Oh, Tink. Killing me is the last thing you want to do. And I’m sorry if you think I was trying to sabotage you. I wasn’t. Really. I was just trying to thank you for helping me throw my best game ever. I think it was your pus—”

“Oookay. That’s my queue to leave, party people. Viv, call me later.” CeCe backs away then turns and does a speed walk that could rival any granny mall walker.

“Cecilia Desai. Get your ass back over here and help me break his arm!” Vivian screams after her, but that only encourages her to walk faster until she has disappeared back into the building.

“Babe, please don’t say things like that. I don’t want to have to call the police and tell them you’re threatening a national treasure with such violence.”

“A national...you are unbelievable. First,” she says, ticking off a finger. “You man-doze me with your-your Sasquatch body and assault me.”

“Nuh uh uh. You *asked* me to. Don’t you remember?”

Her nostrils flare and she curls her lips, baring her clenched teeth to me. “Like I said before, that statement was made under duress and should not be allowed as evidence. Two—”

I step closer to her and run my fingers through her strands of fiery red hair, pushing some behind her ear.

“Come home with me tonight, Peaches. Let me make it up to you.”

“I...” I’ve stunned her and curbed her ability to speak as she just stands there with her mouth hanging open and a look on her face like she doesn’t understand the English language.

Her mouth finally closes and she cocks her head to the side, staring at me like a complex puzzle that just doesn’t make sense. And I’m staring at her like she’s the only woman who could fill my loneliness with joy.

My hand trails down her arm until I reach her hand and entwine our fingers. She doesn’t make a move to pull away, so I slowly start to walk her towards my truck.

“Wait,” she protests, freezing in her tracks. “No. No no no. Are you insane? This is *deja vu*.” She presses her palm into her forehead and lets out a sigh. “And I am not one for reliving my mistakes. I’m not going home with you, Phoenix, so just let me go.”

I shrug. “Okay. That’s cool. I’ll go home with you. Just FYI, I’m staying the night and I didn’t bring my jammies, so I hope you’re okay with me sleeping in the nude.”

“Phoenix! What is wrong with you? I. Hate. You. Leave. Me. Alone.” she says, clapping her hands between each word.

“Peaches! No. You. Don’t. I’ll. Never. Stop. Chasing. You.” I answer back in the same manner.

She grows quiet, breathing heavily in and out, while her eyes look deep into my soul doing what I assume is trying to read me. Deciphering the meaning behind my words. I hoped

and prayed that she would see the sincerity, the honesty, in my words and my actions.

I want this woman more than I've ever wanted anyone else. I wanted her the first time I saw her when I was that punk college kid who thought the world would worship at his feet. I wanted her even when I told myself I would never settle for one woman. I was a fucking professional athlete and the idea of having a different woman every night was a dream any man would pray for.

At least I thought it was the dream. Now, all I see is a future with a woman in my life who is there to stand by my side through the good and the bad. A woman who isn't in it for the money I have or the things I can buy her, but one who truly loves me and supports my successes. I want a woman who will kiss me with all the tenderness when I'm low and need help getting up off the floor. I want that same woman to know when I need something raw and animalistic. I want passion. I want desire. But most of all, I want love.

And I think Vivian Kelley is that woman. She is all of that and more in one fiery, feisty, smoking hot little package.

She lets out a breath and lets her arms hang at her side, like they're too heavy for her body.

"Why?" she asks. "Why are you insisting on pursuing me? Is this like, the second part of your plan? Get the virgin to fall for you then break her. Check. Next up, reel her back in and throw her out more broken than the last time."

I cup her face gently in my hands and lean in. "I was an idiot last time. I really did like you, but I let my ego and my reputation as a 'badass baller' get in the way of what I wanted. I'll forever regret the way I acted. It took me a lot of years, full of mistakes and regrets, to realize what I really want."

"And what's that?" she asks, timidly.

"You, Peaches. I want *you*."

Her eyes drop to the ground and I know this is my last chance to prove to her that I'm not a bunch of hot air.

I crouch down until we're eye level and force her to look at me. "You are beautiful, Vivian. Inside and out. And I want to get to know everything about you. I want to know if you prefer coffee or tea in the mornings. Do you still love that Dolly Parton song you and Cami and CeCe used to sing when we'd go to the beach? Do you wear glasses when you cuddle up to read at night? Do you sleep on the left or the right side of the bed? What your favorite cereal is. I want it all."

Her eyes search mine as she stands in silence. Her face softens and in a small voice she whispers, "Fruity Pebbles."

"What?"

She stands a little taller and clears her throat. "My favorite cereal. I like Fruity Pebbles."

I lick my lips and pull in my bottom one, biting back the smile. Well, trying to bite it back. It's then that I see it. *This* is the real Vivian. Yes she's tough and sassy and fierce but beneath that is the shy, somewhat unsure, book nerd I met years ago. The one who I fell for because of our shared love of baseball. And it wasn't just because she wanted to bag a ball player. She had a true love for the game and damn if it wasn't the sexiest thing. Especially to a horny twenty year old whose life revolved around baseball. Her appeal has grown over the years but when I look at her like she is right now, I see the young girl with the red hair that I couldn't take my eyes off of the first time Bishop brought me to Texas with him.

"What's it gonna be, Peaches? If you want to take sex off the table, fine. We both know what to look forward to, so we can set that aside for now. That's how serious I am about this. Us," I tell her, moving my finger between our bodies.

Another quiet moment passes before she speaks.

"I don't have my glasses with me, so we'll have to go to my place. Plus, there's probably fans waiting to mob you at your hotel."

My heart skips a beat then picks up double-time. I press my lips to hers in a soft kiss and she relaxes in my arms.

Pulling away, I watch her eyes flutter open and the light in her eyes shines.

“And sex is definitely *on* the table. You can’t offer up a four course meal but skip the main meal,” she says, her fire burning once more.

“Well then...let me feed you. I’m starved after only having a sample earlier, myself. I think we could both lick our plates clean.”

I take her hand and follow her to her car, then run to mine to follow her home where I make good on my promise to lick my plate clean. Then I went back for seconds...and thirds.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

VIVIAN



“SUPER FREAKY GIRL” - Nicki Minaj

THE TEAM HAS a rare two day break between series which means I do, too.

I’ve been working so much between games, traveling, and my desk duties, that I thought I deserved a little time off. Harv didn’t even bat an eye when I told him I needed a mental health day. Just said “see ya in a couple days, kiddo.” I took advantage of not having to be in to work that I slept in and missed my spin class. And I don’t feel guilty one bit.

I stretch my arms above my head, and my muscles groan. I spent another night being wrapped up, around, in, and by Phoenix after another Wranglers win. He didn’t pitch, but he was still keyed up by the fact that they pulled ahead by four games from the second place team. If they keep this up, they are shoe-ins for the AL West division champs. Then the ALCS then...World Series.

“Mmm. No wakey,” I hear a deep grumble and turn my head over my shoulder to see a sleepy Phoenix.

He nuzzles into my neck and kisses it before wrapping a thick leg around me and tugging me closer to his body. He may not be ready to wake up, but that baseball bat he’s hiding under the sheets sure is.

“It’s an off day. We can’t spend it in bed,” I tell him.

“Yes we can. That’s why it’s called a day off. Now, either go back to sleep or crawl under these sheets and give me a proper good morning.” His eyes stay closed but a smug smile greets me.

Without saying a word, I spin in his arms and lay a kiss on his scruffed jaw, then trail down his neck, over the hard ridges of his chest and the rippling muscles of abs until I reach his hardened cock. I flick the tip with my tongue and it twitches, eliciting a moan from its owner.

I run my nose down the length of him, then lick my way back up. Phoenix lifts his hips and I grab hold of him. My small hand looks even more minuscule as it wraps around his thick shaft. Slowly, I lower my mouth down his long length and take as much of him as I can until he hits the back of my throat.

He hisses as I work my way back up and down again. Once I’ve taken him as far as I can, I grip his base with my hands and move them in time with my mouth, opening my throat and trying not to gag.

His girth splits my mouth to the verge of pain, and moisture builds, dripping and puddling on his cock and my hands.

“Fuck, Peaches. I need to hear you.” He pulls me off of him with a pop and a slap as his dick smacks his hard abs.

He’s suddenly wide awake and spinning me so that I’m on my back with my head hanging off the edge of my bed.

“Bend your knees and open wide,” he orders.

I slide my feet up until my knees are peaking and spread them wide. Phoenix dips his thick fingers through my pussy lips, then brings his wet digits to his cock. He wraps his hand around it and strokes, long and slow, spreading me all over him.

He stands tall and looms over me, big and commanding. “Hang your head back and open your mouth.”

Slowly I use my feet to push me over a little more until my neck is bent back as far as it can go. The blood starts to rush to

my head and my eyes turn glossy, but I don't let it deter me. I open my mouth and watch an upside down Phoenix step closer to me.

“Wider,” he growls.

“Any wider and I'm going to have to crack my jaw open,” I tell him, my voice harsh and choked.

I open again, wider this time, and he slowly pushes inside of me. I breathe through my nose and close my eyes as he goes deeper and deeper. He hits the back of my throat but continues to push on as I gag and tears start forming in the corners of my eyes.

“Open your throat and swallow.”

I do just as he says and I suddenly feel like my airway has been constricted and I'm slowly being choked. My eyes fly open and I smack his leg, trying to get him to pull out.

“Shh. Relax and breathe through your nose baby.” I take slow deep breaths until the panic subsides. “Good girl. Keep breathing through your nose. And if it's too much for you, hit my thigh and I'll pull out. Okay?”

I try to nod but it's impossible when a steel pipe is impaling you. But still, he understands and begins a slow and careful thrust in and out of my mouth. My heart is racing but the muscles in my body begin to go slack as I relax into the bed and let him take over.

His hands grip the back of my head and my chin to keep me anchored to him, and I curl my lips over my teeth to keep from biting into him.

My jaw begins to ache just as I feel his hips thrust faster. “Shhhiit. You're doing so good, Peaches.”

One hand leaves my chin and he glides it over my body until he reaches my drenched core. He reaches for me, shoving his dick deeper and cutting off what little air I do have. But instead of tapping out, I focus on inhaling when he glides out. Momma didn't raise a quitter.

Phoenix plunges two fingers into me and I moan which comes out more like a choked plea. His fingers begin to work in time with his pumping and I reach my hands around to grip his firm ass. The heel of his hand rubs my swollen clit while he hits my g-spot, bringing me closer to my release.

“You ready?” he asks, and I do something that resembles a nod. “Fuck, I’m so close. There’s gonna be a lot. You swallow every fucking drop. Do you understand me?”

I stiffly nod again, and he drives in hard. My core tingles and I turn lightheaded, spots clouding my vision. Saliva is dribbling down my face, falling into my nose and eyes and those talented fingers flick my bud making my body ignite. My body seizes and I feel my nipples harden to the point of pain. I feel his cock swell in my mouth and then the dam breaks, sending a flood of cum into my mouth.

“Swallow it,” he grits between clenched teeth.

I can’t see him from my angle or with the saliva covering my eyes, but I know his eyes are closed and his head is thrown back. I’ve seen it before. Meanwhile, I’m swallowing like my life depends on it but I can feel my brain and my body start to turn fuzzy. My hands start to go limp and just before I slip into a sex induced coma, I smack his thigh a few times.

He pulls out immediately, cum still spurting from his cock and hitting my chin. I gasp for air and fill my lungs while Phoenix scoops me into his arms. He begins wiping off my face and I blink my eyes open to see his face marred with tension and worry.

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you? Shit, baby. You should’ve stopped me sooner.” He lays me down on the bed, my chest heaving and my head feeling foggy.

“I’m-I’m fine.” I rasp.

He takes off for my bathroom where I hear a few cabinet doors opening and closing. The water turns on then off, and he comes hurriedly back into the room. With gentle strokes, he cleans my face, swiping under my eyes and at the corners.

“I’m so sorry.”

Calloused fingers swipe over my forehead, the apples of my cheeks and my lips, before he lays kisses on the spots his fingers just touched. This soft side of Phoenix is such a juxtaposition to the rough one who had me choking on his dick just moments ago. He went from shooting cum in my face, to tending to me like an injured animal.

“Don’t be sorry. I’m serious.” My eyes search his.

His brow is scrunched and a crease sits between his deep brown eyes. Reaching up, I rub my finger along the crease until he begins to relax.

“I liked it,” I whisper. “Well...until I almost passed out. I literally got choked out by an anaconda.”

He laughs in his low timber and smiles. “That was so fucking hot, Peaches. Again, until I almost choked you out.”

I close my eyes and a big smile plays across my face. Strong arms pull me in close to a hard yet soft chest and I snuggle in.

“I want to take you somewhere today,” he says, kissing the top of my head.

“I hope it’s not jerky tasting because after that, I’m going to be drinking soup from a straw for a few days.”

“Brat,” he jokes, and begins tickling my ribs.

“Please, no. I’m gonna pee.” He slows his torture and feathers his fingers over my stomach. “Where do you want to take me?”

“It’s a surprise.” I crack open an eye and show him I’m skeptical of surprises. “It’ll be fun. I promise.”

“Don’t write checks your ass can’t cash.”

“Huh?” he asks.

“Making promises. If you make it, you better not break it.”

“I won’t,” he says and seals it with a kiss. “Now let’s go shower then we can find something to eat. I need to go back to my room and get a few things before we can go.”

“By food I hope you mean yogurt or porridge, because there will be no chewing for this girl.” He stands and pulls me up by my arms.

I feel like a soggy noodle with my limp limbs. “I don’t think I can stand. You’re going to have to play nurse and wash me.”

“Happily,” he agrees. “Do you need my help peeing?”

My eyes snap open and suddenly my worn body springs to life. “Absolutely not. In fact,” I push on him towards the door, smacking his bare ass. “Get out so I can pee. That’s too intimate.”

He snorts and looks at me with an arched brow. “Babe. You just choked on my cock and had cum dripping into your eyes and nose, but watching you pee is too intimate?”

“Yes. Now go. I need three minutes please.” I stand with my hands on my hips, my small breasts perky with my pink nipples slightly pebbled from the cold bathroom tile under my feet.

“Okay. Okay,” he backed away with his hands held up like I was a thief, trying to rob him of his keys and wallet. “I’m going to grab my toothbrush from my bag, then I’m coming in whether you’re done or not.”

“Fine,” I shout as I throw the door closed.

It slams shut and I rush to the toilet to relieve my full bladder before he comes back. As I sit down, I swallow and feel the scratchiness in my throat. I’ve never done anything like that before. Phoenix pushes me to the brink of heaven and hell...and I love it.

AFTER GRABBING whatever it is Phoenix needed from his hotel—he didn’t let me see, but rather had me wait in the lobby—we headed off towards my surprise. We only drive for about ten minutes when he turns into the parking lot of the Wranglers practice field

“You brought me to the ball field...on my day off...from reporting on baseball?” He looks over at me and smiles while still holding my hand.

Once we had exited the hotel, he immediately reached over and laced our fingers together, not even letting go to flip his blinker. I felt off kilter and didn't know what to say. I'd never really had a boyfriend to do the whole PDA thing with. My dating life in college consisted of making out in the library between studying. Hooking up in the bedroom of whoever's house we were partying at, and fucking in dorm rooms, backseats, and once in the back row of the movie theater.

Once college ended, my hook-ups became a little classier. That meant screwing each other's brains out in our apartments...or car...or storage closet. So maybe not classier, but there wasn't any sneaking around behind my parents' backs now that I was on my own.

However, with all of those hookups and booty calls, I never really 'dated'. I had a few dinners with guys here or there, but none of them would equate to a real relationship complete with hand holding and kisses in the park.

So when Phoenix—a guy who I would've thought was allergic to PDA—grabbed my hand like it was the most natural thing, my brain and my body froze, not knowing how to respond.

Phoenix parks the truck and pulls my hand to his lips for a kiss before opening the truck door. “Don't move,” he orders.

And like the good girl I am when he commands, I don't even flinch until he's opening my door and pulling me from my seat. When I'm standing on my own feet, he grabs my hand again and reaches into the back for his bag.

“C'mon Peaches. Let's go have some fun.”

He drags me along behind him and I whine, “but I thought that's what we did this morning. I don't wanna work.”

“We're not working. It's called having fun and you're gonna do it and like it. Now move that sweet ass before I

throw you over my shoulder and spank you for being a bad girl.”

My mouth snaps shut and that familiar tingle that only Phoenix can bring out rolls through my body.

As if he can read the language my body speaks, he says, “later,” then winks as he pulls me through the gate.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PHOENIX



“ALL THE TIME” - Jeremih (feat. Lil Wayne & Natasha Mosley)

THHHWAP!

The sound of the ball getting shot out of the pitching machine makes one of the sweetest sounds to my ears. It used to be *the* best sound, but now the number one spot goes to Vivian. The sound of her little mewls when I pinch her nipples. The way her S drags out and hisses when she screams ‘yes’ as I hit that spot that makes her eyes roll back. And I especially love the sound of my name rolling off her tongue when she’s coming.

“Argh! They’re too high. I told you, you need to adjust it, Phoenix.” She stomps her foot and it causes her batting helmet to tip to the side.

I grabbed her the smallest size I could find, but I should’ve known anything less than a child’s size wouldn’t fit her. Even with a ball cap on.

“Peaches, I did adjust it. If I move it any lower, you’re gonna catch a fifty mile per hour ball to the crotch.” I walk up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist.

She stiffens for a moment but then it’s like she remembers she’s trying not to hate me, and she relaxes back into me. I tilt my head so I can kiss the spot behind her ear and it makes her shiver.

“We definitely don’t want that happening. My poor vagina already looks like a hotdog bun. I told you that first night, the poor thing is never going to look the same again.”

I take her small waist in my hands and spin her to face me. The sudden jerking throws her off balance and she’s forced to grab on to me. Her hands find my chest with a smack, and when she looks up the helmet tips back. I grab it and toss it aside, then return my hand to her ass.

When I told her to dress casually, I didn’t expect her to come out wearing tiny cut-off denim shorts and a fitted white tank top with the Wranglers logo on it. Because if I had, I would’ve worn a steel trap to keep my dick from springing to life all damn day.

She’s wearing white Converse sneakers and it makes her look even shorter compared to when she’s at the field in her heels that she always wears. So when she rises up on her tiptoes but doesn’t quite reach me, I help her out and lift her until her feet dangle above the turf.

“It doesn’t matter what it looks like because it and you are mine, and no one else needs to know.” She gives me a hesitant smile and I kiss the tip of her nose to distract her from the words I blurted that obviously make her uncomfortable.

“Let me help you with your swing and then we’ll move on to the next part of my surprise.”

“Okay,” she whispers then goes in for a deeper kiss.

She moans and I add it to the list of sounds that send me soaring.

“I KNEW I was a power hitter. I just needed some time to warm-up,” Vivian says from the passenger seat of my truck.

I laugh at the memory of her swinging so hard she spun in a circle. It wasn’t until I encapsulated her in my arms and helped her that she finally started connecting with the ball. The girl may know everything there is to know about baseball, but play it she cannot.

“Sure thing, Peaches.” I’m driving us back to my hotel for a little surprise I set up for her before I left earlier.

I didn’t want to leave her waiting in the lobby like some kind of jerk, but I needed time alone to talk to the concierge desk to make sure they could have everything set up by the time we returned.

“You’re just salty because I haven’t been playing my whole life to just be okay. It must burn to see this woman step up to the plate and crush it right away.” Her lips quirk up on one side and I see the challenge in her eyes.

“Right away, huh? So the half hour before you finally hit the ball was you just trying to throw me off? Were you hustling me, Peaches?” I chuckle and pull into the circular drive in front of the hotel, putting the truck in park but leaving it running for the valet.

“Back to the hotel? And I don’t mean the N2Deep song.”

I freeze, halfway out the door, when she says that. “What do you know about N2Deep? We were toddlers when that song came out. Not to mention,” I look at her up and down with wide eyes. “You’re white.”

I hop out when the valet attendant comes to my door and I reach behind the driver’s seat to get my bag and walk over to where she stands with her arms folded over her chest.

“What?” I ask.

“I’m white? That’s kinda prejudicial, ya know. I suppose you’re going to say I’m too white to listen to Megan, or that I can’t fully appreciate Queen Nicki.”

My chest feels tight and I suddenly feel like a giant ass for making an assumption. Her face turns from upset to looking like a hurt kitten. Big eyes stare at me and her bottom lip quivers.

“I… I’m sorry, Peaches. I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just joking.” I come to a stop just inside the lobby doors and lean down to press my forehead to hers.

“I accept your apology. And for the record, I was just messing with you. I was the only white girl amongst our friend group. I’m used to the razzing.”

“You little,” I dig my fingers into her sides and she giggles.

Vivian tries to tear out of my arms but I grab her and toss her over my shoulder.

“Phoenix. Oh my God. Put me down. People are looking,” she grunts as she bounces with each of my heavy steps.

We step up to the elevators and the people who were about to step in, move aside to let us pass.

“I’m so sorry,” she tells them.

The doors close and I take the chance to smack her backside.

“Ouch!”

“Don’t act like that didn’t make you wet.” She harumphs but stays quiet. “This is what you’ll get every time you try to run from me. I was gentle this time. Next time...you won’t be as lucky. “

“There will be no next time. I’m not a child. You cannot spank me.”

“Oh I can and I will. I’ll spank this little peach ass of yours red and raw and you’ll be begging me for more.”

In the reflection of the shiny metal doors, I can see her jaw hanging open and her green eyes are wide with disbelief.

“I told you last time that if you left your mouth hanging open like that I’d find something to put in it.”

She snaps her jaw shut and tries to pout but her position over my shoulder doesn’t allow for it.

“Don’t stick anything in it that you don’t want me to bite off. I barely regained the ability to talk after this morning, so I’d appreciate it if you’d refrain from fucking my throat hoarse.” She lifts an arm and flings it back into my butt and makes me startle.

“Oh little girl. You just poked the bear.” I flip her over and cradle her in my arms wedding style. “Not. Smart.”

Her eyes shine with mischief. “Or was it?” She waggles her brows at me and I smile.

The elevator comes to a stop and we step out to my floor. I walk us to my door and set her on her feet.

“Are you changing ooorr..?”

“Nope. This is our next stop.” I open my phone and scan it, making the door beep and the lock slide open.

I push the door open and let her walk in first. She comes to a stop in the small foyer and looks at the living area that opens to a kitchen and small eating nook. There’s a hallway that leads to the only room in the suite and bathroom, and a balcony that runs the length of the living room to the bedroom.

“This is nice. I would’ve taken you for a lavish five thousand square foot penthouse type guy. This seems...”

“Humble? Meager? Lowly?” I ask.

“Normal. Nice,” she answers, spinning in my direction. “It’s nice.”

“It’s temporary,” I reply. “My personal assistant has been trying to help me find a new place, but he’s still in New York so it hasn’t been very easy for him. That’s another thing I need to find.”

“What’s that?” she asks as she walks to the windows and looks out over downtown.

The sun is still high in the sky, but the colors are changing to a soft peach. It’s like even the sun and sky know how perfect the color is to describe her.

“A new PA. My current guy, Aric, doesn’t want to move to Texas. He’s been great for the last five years, so it’s going to suck finding someone knew. He said he would still handle everything from New York, but I’d really like someone to be in my home base. He wasn’t too happy about that.”

I think back to the conversation I had with him just a week ago when I told him I think it was best if I had someone here locally. His tone immediately turned cold and I understood he was worried about his career, and I reassured him that I would help him find a job. I knew plenty of athletes in New York that would love to have an assistant as proficient and organized as him. He said he was fine, but I knew he wasn't. I've already put the word out to a few guys about Aric, and I know he'll have a job before the season is over.

"I can ask around, if you'd like."

"Yeah?"

She shrugs a shoulder and turns around, pressing her back against the glass. "Sure. I know lots of people in the sports world, and someone always knows someone who knows someone. Ya know?"

I walk over to her and frame her body with mine, my arms resting on either side of her head and my body looming over hers. "I know."

"Wh-what are we doing now?" Her voice is breathy when she speaks.

"I have one more surprise for you." I run my nose up the column of her neck, dragging my tongue as I go.

"Then what?"

"Then," I take her mouth with mine and suck on her bottom lip. "Then dessert."

I press my body into hers and her arms go around my neck. Her sneaker covered feet push her up until her mouth reaches mine, and I kiss her in a way that will have her forgetting every man that came before me.

I let my hands roam over her small, tight body, and savor every line and curve. I pull the hair band that's holding her hair in a ponytail out, and massage her scalp until her hair looks like wild flames.

I slip my hands into the back of her shorts just as the doorbell to the suite rings.

With a huff I release her lips and pull my hands from her shorts. “I’ll be right back. Stay here.”

I turn and move quickly to the door. Room service is waiting for me with a long cart with silver dome covered plates when I open it.

“Good evening, Mr. West. Where would you like us to set up?” The attendants push the cart past me and I direct them to the long island in the kitchen.

“Leave the domes on, please,” I tell them and they answer with a nod.

“What’s this?” Vivian asks, coming up behind me.

“I have arranged for us to have dinner here. Is that okay?”

She bites her lip and nods. “Yeah but...that’s an awful lot of food. Did you order the entire menu?”

The lopsided smile that rarely comes out takes over my face. “Not the entire menu. It’s actually a special menu that the chef prepared just for us.”

The attendants finish unloading the plates, then bend down to grab four silver carafes and set them down with the dishes. I pull out two fifty dollar bills, and hand one to each attendant and thank them for their help.

They exit, the door making a resounding thud when it closes, and I take Vivian’s hand in mine and walk her over to the table.

“I requested a special meal for the two of us,” I tell her.

She sits down in the chair at the small table and I tuck her in. “When did you do all of that?”

“When I had you waiting in the lobby this afternoon.”

She narrows her eyes and purses her lips. “Very sneaky, you are.”

“Well let’s see what you think of this very special meal I planned especially for you.” She bites her smile and I move to the counter to grab the dishes.

I stealthily lift the lid so that only I can see what's underneath, and grab the four that I have picked out for our first course. Setting them down carefully in front of her, I run back and grab the utensils wrapped in cloth napkins and place one in front of her.

“Are you ready?” I ask her and she nods enthusiastically. “Okay. One, two, three. Tada!”

I yank the domes off of two of the bowls and I watch as her expression goes from excited, to confusion, to humorous.

She begins laughing and I put the domes down on the counter behind me. Before her sits two bowls of cereal. Fruity Pebbles and Cinnamon Toast Crunch. Her favorite and mine. I reach for the carafe filled with milk and set it between us.

“In front of you, you will find a light and airy mini puffed crostini in various fruit flavors. Which flavors, I don't know, but I'm told they're fruit nonetheless.”

She's laughing with her hand over her mouth and I continue on.

“The other dish is a toasted wheat grain dusted in cinnamon and sugar for a sweet and spicy finish.” Her laughter grows louder and it's getting harder for me to keep a straight face. “Which one would you like to start with this evening?”

She wipes the corners of her eyes and takes deep breaths to slow her laughter.

“Wha-what is this? I thought you had some gourmet meal underneath those.”

I take the seat across from her and begin pouring milk into the bowls. “Any man can take you to a fancy—yet generic—dinner of steak and salmon and vegetables with creme brûlée. But only one man is going to spoil you with breakfast treats to your heart's delight. And what's better than cereal for breakfast?”

“What?”

“Cereal for dinner.” We wear matching smiles as we sit staring at each other.

Her eyes sparkle and her teeth play with her plump bottom lip. “What’s under the other ones, Casanova?”

“Ah,” I stand and grab two more plates. “I have our favorites here, but I thought we could expand our palettes and try something a bit more sophisticated.”

I pull off the domes to reveal a bowl of Apple Jacks and a bowl of Frosted Flakes. Going to the counter, I move the remaining dishes closer to the edge of the counter so she can see, and pull the domes off. Cheesecake, double chocolate ganache cake, carrot cake and apple pie all greet us.

“In case you’re not a cake kind of gal,” I tell her, eyeing the slice of apple pie.

“And those?” she asks, pointing at the carafes.

“Regular milk before you, chocolate milk, orange juice and water. The water is a palette cleanser.”

She stands, her smile never leaving, and walks over to me and wraps her arms around my waist.

“This is the best dinner date I’ve ever had. Who wants a basic steak when you can have diabetes for dinner?”

“Exactly,” I whisper and lean in for a soft kiss. “Let’s get hopped up on sugar then watch movies until we fall into a sugar coma.”

“Sounds perfect.”

We sit and begin taking bites from every bowl until only bits and flavored milk remain. We put off the desserts until our stomachs digest the cereal. When we’ve washed the sweat from the day off—together, of course—I give her a t-shirt of mine and pull on a pair of gray basketball shorts.

While she dries her hair, I order up a bottle of champagne and it’s delivered right as she walks into the living room. I’ve transferred the desserts to the cart that the attendants left and wheeled it to the bedroom along with the champagne, chocolate milk and water.

We settle into bed, four desserts spread out in front of us, and we start sampling each, talking about our favorite movies

until we decide on one. I flick through the catalog and luckily find it, hit order, and snuggle under the covers to watch *Any Given Sunday*.

I hold her close and as the movie draws to an end, I feel her breathing even out and a soft snore spilling from her mouth. Carefully turning off the tv, I roll her so that I'm the big spoon and nuzzle into her hair that smells like my shampoo. Her skin smells like my body wash and her shirt still has my cologne clinging to it.

It's a glorious smell because she smells like mine. And that sound becomes my new favorite.

The sound that says Vivian is mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY

VIVIAN



“CASUAL” - Doja Cat

I SPENT two amazing days off, wrapped up in Phoenix. He spoiled me with lunch for breakfast since apparently—just like breakfast for dinner—it tastes better that way. So the morning after our cereal and champagne dinner, we ate PB & J for breakfast with a side of fruit and bacon. When I asked why the bacon he said, “because it’s bacon. You don’t need any other reason,” and he was quite true.

That afternoon I sent out an email to a few people I know, informing them of Phoenix’s need for a personal assistant and if they knew someone who fit the description, to contact him or I. After that, Phoenix sent out a few follow-up emails of his own, putting more feelers out for a position for Aric. I think it was far too nice of him to do that since he gave Aric the opportunity to move then ample time to find a new position, but he insisted he wanted to help.

That was one thing I was quickly finding out that I was wrong about. Phoenix was a good guy. He was considerate and caring and wanted to help everyone in any way he could. He wanted to find Aric a new employer. The way he spoke of his niece I could tell that he adored her. He cared deeply for his mother and sister and I knew from the look in his eyes that he missed them. Seems he didn’t get to see them as often as he would’ve hoped while living in New York. But now that he was only a five hour drive, and an even shorter plane ride, he could spend more time once the season was over.

It wasn't like he couldn't afford to pay for them to fly all over the country to go to his games, and put them up in the fanciest of hotels. The problem was that his schedule didn't allow him much free time once the season started. And baseball players have a long season. From spring training in March, until the end of the regular season in September, there isn't much down time between practices and those one hundred and sixty-two games. Add in the postseason if your team makes it into the playoffs, and even longer if you end up in the World Series, and players get to spend a few winter months with their families before they are back to full-time training and preparing to start all over again.

Growing up watching games with my dad, then throwing myself into sports journalism in college and thereafter, I've seen the grueling schedule not only the players but their families have to endure during those seven to eight months out of the year. It takes a special kind of person to be understanding and accepting of such a demanding job like an athlete. And to make a relationship work. So many relationships fail in the sports world because of crazy schedules and most of all, because of infidelity.

I've seen it. Hell. I was an unwilling participant when that fucktard Kenrick talked me into sleeping with him while hiding the fact that he was married. I was sick to my stomach for weeks over it, but decided I had to forgive myself for something I didn't know. So many times I wanted to reach out to his wife and tell her, but CeCe warned against it saying it was best if I stayed away from that scumbag and not get any more involved in his personal life. That was not a problem for me since I could barely stand to look at the jerk.

So having Phoenix dote over me for two whole days was quite different than what I expected of him. Listening to him talk about how proud he was of his niece and his sister was endearing. I made a mental note to talk to CeCe and Bishop and see if they could help me get the three women in his life to Houston soon to surprise him at one of his games.

On the morning after our second wonderful day together, it was time to get back to the real world and that meant fessing

up to the girls about where I'd been and what I'd been doing.

It was Sunday morning and I had an evening game to report on, so we all met for brunch close to my place so I didn't have to make the thirty minute drive from Magnolia Creek. Plus, Cat and I lived close while Cami lived in Magnolia Creek with CeCe not too far. They could make the trip for us once in a while.

The four of us sat around at a cute bistro table in a building that looked like a greenhouse and was aptly named, The Greenhouse Bistro.

A delicious looking plate of Southern Eggs Benedict was set down in front of me, and my stomach yelled at me to start eating. It was a buttery southern biscuit topped with crispy bacon, a poached egg smothered in spicy hollandaise sauce and served with a side of country potatoes. Dear Lord, I was in brunch heaven.

I cut into my egg and watched as the gooey center oozed out and I began slicing it into bite size pieces. The first bite was euphoric and I closed my eyes with a moan. When I opened them back up, three sets of peepers were staring at me expectantly.

"What?" I asked through a mouth full of potatoes. "Why are y'all looking at me like a new animal at the zoo?"

"We're waiting," CeCe said, her tone annoyed and impatient.

"Yeah," Cami added. "You guys didn't even give Vaughan and me twenty-four hours before *someone* was walking in my door."

"Hey. It's not my fault you forgot that I was coming over," Cat protested.

"It was dick-brain, Cat. You can't blame the girl," CeCe told her. "Which is exactly why I wasn't banging down your door this morning at five a.m. You spent two whole days getting railed and we gave those to you. But now it's time to spill. So..."

I finished chewing my food then washed it down with my mimosa.

“Fine. But I am going to eat in between story time because I’m starving and Eggs Benedict cold is disgusting.”

With another bite, I mumbled through the details of our afternoon date at the practice field. I told them about the pitching lesson he gave me, and how he helped me with my hitting. I gave them the rundown on breakfast for dinner and falling asleep watching a movie. I told them all about our afternoon spent semi-working on the PA search and a little bit of house hunting, and then our evening sex fest. I even gave them the deets on the blowjob that I almost fell into a coma over.

“He choked you out with his dick?” CeCe asked in absolute amazement. “I’ve heard of eating a dick, but never like that.”

“And he cleaned you up?” Cami cooed.

I nodded as I took another drink. “Yup. Washed the cum right outta my eyes.”

“Eewww,” Cami groaned. “TMI, Viv.”

“Are you kidding me? TMI? Cami, I seem to remember you telling us about riding Vaughan’s face like a fucking cowgirl at her first rodeo in the back of his truck while Dagen was sleeping in the main house.”

“Let’s not forget the barn sex. Oooweee. She was picking hay out of her bum for days after.” Cat jokes and Cami smacks her arm.

“Oh and the butt stuff? Yowza.” CeCe shakes her hand like she just touched something hot and gives a low whistle.

“Okay, okay. I get it. I shared...a lot. But I did not talk about being choked and having,” she lowers her voice and looks around for I’m not sure what. “Cum in my eyes.”

“Grandma. We can’t hear you. Speak up,” I say, slowly, cupping my ear.

“Screw all of you,” she blushes and shoves a piece of french toast in her mouth.

“So when are you seeing him again?” CeCe wondered.

“Well,” I mumbled. “Tonight since he’s starting.”

CeCe rolled her eyes and gave me a shove. “I didn’t mean in a professional capacity.”

“I knew what you meant, Jolly Green Giant. I’m not sure. I’m not looking to make anything official, you know. I don’t do the relationship thing. And honestly, I don’t think he does either. For right now, I think we’re both good with casual hookups when we have the time.”

CeCe looks at me then at Cami and Cat. They both look at her then at me and down at their plates.

“What? I hate that ‘look’ shit. What?”

“Ha!” Cami shouts. “Now you know how it feels.”

“Do y’all look both ways before getting on my goddamn nerves?” I throw back at them.

“It’s just,” CeCe starts. “The date, the special dinner, falling asleep in each other’s arms *without* having sex...that doesn’t sound like a guy who wants to keep things casual.”

I wave my hand and then take one more heaping bite of my food. “That was just in private. I doubt he’s like that when people are around. It’s just a show to, you know, get in my pants.”

“Clearly he doesn’t know he wasted his time on that since you’d have slept with him for a piece of gum. Oh wait!” Cami slaps the table. “You did sleep with him for a piece of gum!”

She throws her head back in a fit of laughter and the girls join in. I may have let out a chuckle or two.

“I’m just going to not think too much about it, and we’ll just see where this all goes. No pressure.” I pop the last piece of biscuit into my mouth and shrug.

It’s not a thing. Just a hookup.

CECE AND I decided to drive to the stadium together and I told her I'd just wait in her office for her if she wasn't done when I was.

I walk through the stadium, stopping to say hello to Hank and find out the latest hobby his wife has taken up. I learned that she started making pot holders and walked out with a fab pair that looked like two hands, one holding a microphone. Totally impractical in terms of using them for their intended purpose, but cute nonetheless.

I stop at my favorite food stand and walk away with a bucket of popcorn and extra large water, then wind my way down the stairs to the clubhouse. With my custom Rosey pot holders tucked safely in my custom Rosey embroidered bag and hanging off my shoulder, I cradle my popcorn bucket and smile and wave to familiar faces.

I have a pre-game interview with one of the pitching coaches and an outfielder who was called up from the Wranglers AAA team, then I can park my pretty butt on my stool and wait for the game. No time to think or stress over whatever this thing with Phoenix is.

I slow as guys start filing out of the locker room to warm-up before the visiting team takes the field and wait for them all to pass. When the last guy shuffles out, I mosey down the corridor. I'm almost free and clear when a pair of strong arms bands around my waist and pulls me back into an equally strong and large body.

My popcorn bucket is jostled, and a handful falls to the floor.

“Hi Peaches,” a deep voice whispers in my ear and a gentle kiss is placed on my neck and a nose buries into my hair and inhales.

I look over my shoulder with a nervous energy—even though I know who it is—and see a smiling Phoenix looking at me.

“H-hey,” I stutter.

“Missed you today,” he says.

My stomach bottoms out and I’m shocked into silence. All I can manage is a half-hearted chuckle before I’m spun around in his arms and pressed against his chest.

“Coming home with me tonight?” he asks, and I don’t miss the hopefulness in his voice.

“Um…” my eyes flit around the hall to check for anyone who may see us but it’s empty. “I came with CeCe and we thought about grabbing a drink afterwards before she takes me home.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you there. I’m not drinking since I’m training in the morning, but I’ll take you home so it won’t be out of the way for CeCe.”

“Oh, that’s okay. You don’t—” I’m stopped when he takes me in a hard kiss.

His hand goes to the back of my head and I drop my popcorn when his other hand grips my ass and tugs me to him. He moans into my mouth and tiny sparks of electricity fire off in my body.

The sound of feet has my eyes snapping open and my hands pushing on Phoenix’s chest. With some effort, I finally disconnect from him and he looks at me with confusion all over his handsome face.

“People are coming,” I whisper.

“So. Let them watch. It’ll be good for them to see that you’re mine. Especially that pencil dick Manny and his minion Rami.”

As if he summoned them by whispering their names, Manny, Rami and one of the trainers come traipsing down the hall. Phoenix doesn’t loosen his grip on me, and I’m forced to stand there, bracing myself on his hard chest.

Rami’s face falls despite him ignoring me for several days, and Manny’s lip curls when he looks at Phoenix.

“What do we have here,” the trainer, whose name I don’t know, asks.

“Just getting a quick good luck kiss from my girl before I hit the bullpen.” My head swings to look at Phoenix and I swear I gasp.

His girl? Why the hell would he say that? Especially to these guys.

“Your girl?” Rami says with a slow nod of his head. “When did this happen?” His eyes flick from me to Phoenix who is still gripping me like one of them might snatch me away.

“Couple weeks ago, right Peaches.” I can’t say a word, don’t move a muscle. I’m stunned into silence and feeling a bit lightheaded as I continue to process his words.

“Right.” Manny remains glaring at Phoenix and Rami looks a bit crestfallen. “Well, see you out there. Bye, Red.”

Phoenix gives them a chin nod then turns his attention back to me. “I’ll get someone to bring you more popcorn and clean this up.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I do worry about it. I’ll have it delivered to you. Anything else you want, baby?” I shake my head no, still unable to speak. “K. See you after the game.” With another punishing kiss he says goodbye and hustles out to the field.

I stand there staring after him and I feel sick. He told people about us. And not just any people. Manny who is probably blabbing to everyone right now, and Rami with the sad puppy dog look on his face. By the end of the game, the entire stadium is sure to know that I’m Phoenix’s “girl”.

All I wanted was a nice, quiet, private hookup that included some laughs mixed in with mind-blowing sex and a mutual agreement that this was no one’s business. Now it looks like it will be everyone’s business. And I don’t know how to feel about that.

I can’t feel any way about it because if I think too hard, I’ll be able to hear the sound of my heart breaking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

VIVIAN



“BAD INTENTIONS” - Niykee Heaton (feat. Migos)

CECE AND I are in a corner booth at a small sports bar a couple blocks from the stadium and she goes on about another interaction with Luca that left her fuming and dripping between the legs. I’m only half paying attention because I’m more than just a little freaked out about Phoenix showing up and people seeing him. Seeing *us*.

I suck straight vodka through the skinny straw like it’s my first glass of water after completing a marathon. My nerves are running high and my eyes can’t stop searching the bar for Phoenix or anyone I may know who will spot us.

“What do you think? Should I?” CeCe asks, snapping me out of my mini panic attack.

“Oh...um, sure. Why not?” *Lord, let me have said the right thing.*

CeCe’s face is straight and gives nothing away. That right there tells me what I said is in fact wrong.

“Really? You don’t think I’ll look too much like Mike Tyson if I shave my head and get a face tattoo?”

I wince and with one eye open, “sorry,” I apologize. “I’m so in my head right now and I’m totally being a bad friend. Don’t hate me, C.”

I chuck the straw from my drink and toss back what's left in it.

“I'm gonna give you a pass this one time because being the new bae of professional baseball player Phoenix West is a much bigger deal than the disagreement Luca and I had.” She points a finger at me and sips her vodka cranberry.

“Ugh. Don't say that. I am nobody's bae. Especially not Phoenix.” I turn my head to look over my shoulder at the front door which hasn't opened in the last ten minutes. “Maybe he decided not to come. He's probably tired and just went back to his room. We should go.”

“Sit down, Usain Bolt. We aren't going anywhere until I've finished my drink. And you know damn well Phoenix is coming, so just relax.”

I roll my eyes, completely aggravated with my best friend, and rest my chin in my hand while I watch her drink like she's in slow motion. I can see a smug smirk on her face as she drinks and I just want to reach across the table and rip her eyelash extensions straight off.

As we sit, I feel a presence saddle up next to us and I turn my head, fully expecting to see Phoenix. What I see instead is a decent looking guy—maybe a six—and his buddy—a solid four—standing there with smiles on their faces.

“Hello ladies. How are you this evening?” I open my mouth to respond, but old dude here doesn't give either of us the chance. “My buddy and I were sitting over at the bar and thought you two looked familiar. Have we met before?”

“I don't think so. I would remember you,” I tell him and he smiles triumphantly. What he fails to realize is that I would remember meeting someone like him because I doubt there are too many men in Houston who wear a beanie in summer.

“Are you sure? Because you both look *very* familiar. I swear I've seen you somewhere.”

“He's made us, Viv.” CeCe looks at me and I just know she's about to knock their socks off.

If I am the queen of wet willies and name calling, then CeCe is the queen of coming up with stories that make the gullible fall at her feet.

“You got us, boys. You have seen us before. We do porn.”

The smart guy wearing the beanie inside of a bar in August stands frozen for a moment before a wide, excited smile grows. His buddy that stands behind him has his mouth hanging open and I see him cover his crotch with his hand.

Gross.

Beanie guy begins to sputter like an old car trying to chug its way up a hill when a large body pushes him aside. Make that three large bodies.

Phoenix slides into the booth next to me and throws his arm over my shoulder, whispering, “hi, Peaches,” before kissing me stupid.

Damn this stupid jerk and his gorgeous face and talented tongue.

“Holy shit! You’re Phoenix West. A-and Tuck Williams. Philomonte Rodriguez. You guys were freaking awesome tonight. Congrats on the win.” Mr. Beanie baby—sounds good to me—starts fangirling all over Phoenix and Tuck, totally forgetting about me and my porn co-star.

“Thanks,” Phoenix says, shaking the overly enthused guy’s hand.

The guy gives Phoenix’s hand two more hard shakes, then just stands there holding his hand like a high school girl and with hearts in his eyes. Tuck scoots next to CeCe, mirroring Phoenix, and Philo, the left fielder, grabs a chair from a nearby table and pulls it up to the end of ours and sits. And still, beanie man holds Phoenix’s hand.

Struggling a bit, he finally frees himself from the kidnapper grip the guy has on him. “We’re just here to celebrate with our girls, so...”

“Oh, yeah. Right. For sure. Um, so freaking cool to meet you. And you too, ladies. I’ll be on the lookout for your latest

movie,” he says with a wink then walks away with his crotch grabbing friend in tow.

“Your latest movie?” Tuck asks with a furrowed brow.

“The creeper said we looked familiar, so I told him it was because we do porn,” CeCe states very matter of factly.

Philo chokes, Tuck barks out a loud laugh, and Phoenix’s hand that rests on the table curls into a fist.

“Fucking brilliant,” Philo snorts. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard that one.”

“Good one, CeCe. I’m getting a drink. Anyone else?” Tuck asks and scoots out of the booth.

Philo stands and follows right behind him. “I’ll come with you. Nix, want anything?”

“Just water,” he grunts out like a caveman.

The men walk away and CeCe stares at me, then Phoenix, then me, then says, “I’m going to the restroom.”

“I’ll come wi-” I try to say, but a large hand keeps me planted right where I’m at.

“No. You stay. I’ll be right back.” CeCe walks away before I can climb over this mountain sitting next to me, and I’m left all alone with what appears to be an irate Phoenix.

My fingers tap on the table and I chew my lip, waiting for Sir Grumps-a-lot to speak. It doesn’t take long for him to cool down enough to open his mouth without fire blasting out of it.

“I’m ready to get outta here. Are we going back to your place?”

“Um, well...I kinda thought we’d just hang out here for a bit and then I’d go home and you’d...go..to yours.”

He tips his head to one side like he doesn’t understand what I said and is processing it. “Yeah, that’s not going to work for me. We’ll go to your place since we don’t have to worry about paps outside.”

“Phoenix, I-”

“Hey, sexy. It’s been a minute since I’ve seen you.” God must be sitting back with a bucket of popcorn and waiting for the train crash, because an old hookup comes walking up to the table like this giant baseball star isn’t sitting right next to me.

“Garrett...hey,” I say with a shaky voice. “How’s it going?”

“Good, now that I spotted you. You, uh, got any plans after this? Wanna come back to my place?”

Oh fuck.

Does this idiot not see the fire radiating off of Phoenix? Hell...does he not see Phoenix?

My hands start to tremble and if I were standing, my knees would be knocking. Running into an old hookup has never been a worry for me. I’ve never had to think about being with one and running into another because I don’t go out with the guys I sleep with. We literally only have sex. Never a meal or a movie or a walk in the park. Those are not the things a guy I’ve been with has ever wanted from me. And vice versa.

But when a guy claims you in front of his entire team, says he wants to go home then has to watch another dude ask “his girl” to go back to his place, I’m thinking that it is the kindling to a raging inferno.

“Yo, shithead,” Phoenix barks. “She’s not going anywhere with you. She’s mine.”

My blood boils hearing him talk like I’m his dog that he’s taken for a walk. But sadly, it also makes me squirm.

“Phoenix.”

“What, Peaches?” he asks, completely ignoring Garrett. “Was it not your pussy on my face last night? I could’ve sworn I heard *you* scream out *my* name when I fucked you up against the shower wall. You know, it was right after you gagged on my cock.”

I. Am. Speechless. Not by the things Phoenix said because if I’m being honest, it was a total fucking turn on to hear him

say those. What has me shooketh is the fact that Garrett is still standing a foot away, listening in on Phoenix talk like we're alone.

“Wow, Vivian. I didn't realize you were dating someone. You always told me you had a 'fucking only' policy. It's why I never asked you out, but if you're still willing...”

Oh God, Garrett. Shut up and get the hell outta here.

“Are you fucking deaf, man. She's with me. Mine. Not yours. And she has a no dating assholes policy, so that means you. Back the fuck off,” Phoenix growls.

And dumbshit Garrett must have a death wish because he does not, as Phoenix suggests, back off.

“What if I don't?” He asks with a smug grin.

Phoenix slowly rises to his full height which has Garrett at a great disadvantage since he only stands at about five-ten. Not to mention Phoenix has broad, muscular shoulders while Garrett is trim, like someone who runs or rides bicycles. I'm not really sure, but I know he is definitely not throwing baseballs at guys at speeds up to one hundred and one miles per hour.

“I will fucking end you, you piece of shit. Leave my girl alone and don't let me ever find out you so much as looked at her, again.”

“Phoenix, stop.” I place my hand on his forearm and turn to Garrett. “You should probably leave. Sorry.”

He eyes Phoenix up and down, gives me a crooked smile and saunters off. Phoenix's body instantly relaxes and now I'm the one left fuming.

“What the hell, Phoenix? How dare you talk to my friend that way.”

“Friend? Is that what you call all of your fuck buddies?” he scoffs.

I glare at him and retract my claws despite the fact that I seriously want to rip his face off. This guy has the nerve to come in here and boss me around like I'm his pet, swinging

his dick around to let other guys know that I'm *his*. It's been three fucking days, for Christ's sake.

"Don't go there, Phoenix. We both know about each other's past. And Jesus...why don't you just pee on me. Might be easier than having to act like a caveman every time someone looks at me. And speaking of," I angle my body towards his and straighten my spine, readying myself to give a piece of my mind. "Who ever said I was 'your girl'? That isn't something we've talked about. Who says I want to be your girl?"

Phoenix clenches his teeth and I see the muscle in his jaw clicking. I feel like I've just waved the red flag in front of an angry bull and now I'm about to regret my whole life.

"I said. That's who," he bellows, stabbing his finger into his hard chest. "I already told you to cut the bullshit. You know you want me, want *this*. Just quit playing these fucking games, Vivian. Now get your ass up and let's go so I can fuck some sense into that beautiful head of yours, because I don't have the patience for this conversation again."

He slams his fist down on the table and the empty glasses jostle and I flinch. I'm slightly terrified of what this man could do to me. To my body *and* my heart. And right now, he's giving off "my woman, my pussy" vibes.

"I can't deal with you always bossing me around, pounding on your chest like, 'me man, this woman, mine'," I say, grunting to imitate him. "It's been *three days*, Phoenix. Thi—"

"No, Vivian. This started years ago, and you know it. I may have been a dumb fuck boy back then, but I'm not now. You've seen the real me. You spent two days telling God how much you liked me. Or at least, it sounded like praise." I cross my arms over my chest to hide my hardening nipples and turn away from him. "What are you so afraid of?"

I feel a tightening in my chest and it has my breath catching. The slight tinge of pain is a reminder of the shy girl who let a boy stomp all over her heart. A heart that he didn't know she had already given him.

I was young and naive and foolishly thought if I gave myself to a boy, he'd protect my heart and love me the way I knew I could love him. But what I ended up with was a mile high brick wall that I built to protect myself. I haven't let any man scale that wall, and you better believe that not one of the men that have come and gone from my life has seen behind it.

"Vivian?" My face is slowly pulled in the opposite direction until my eyes meet Phoenix's. "What are you afraid of?" he asks again.

"You," I croak out.

His brown eyes flit between my green ones and I see so many emotions swirl through them. Pain, regret, remorse. But it's what I don't see in them that has me terrified to break down the wall. I don't see the promise that he'll never hurt me again. I don't see the promise that I can trust him with my heart because I know once I hand it over to him, I'll never get it back in one piece.

"Please, Vivian. Give me a chance to show you I'm not the guy you think I am. I don't beg women for anything...ever. But I'm *begging you*, don't throw in the towel before the match starts."

I really don't know him because the man that sits beside me is not the one I've made the villain in all of my stories. Maybe he started out as one, or maybe he was just misunderstood, but the man staring at me with hope in his eyes is more like Prince Charming than the bad guy.

I fill my lungs with air, letting it feed my body—my courage—and breathe out the doubt.

"Please don't break me, Phoenix."

"Never," he vows right before he takes my face in his hands and kisses me like I'm the key to all of his dreams coming true.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PHOENIX



“MOONLIGHT” - Kali Uchis

THE DOOR SLAMS against the wall when I throw it open the second Vivian flips the lock. My hands circle her tiny waist and I guide her in so quickly, her feet stumble and I grip her tight so she doesn't fall.

“Phoenix, I need to lock the door and turn off the lights,” she says as I push her further into her house and direct her towards her bedroom.

“I got it. Go take off those damn pants because if I'm not inside of you in the next five minutes, I'm going to lose my goddamn mind.”

I begin rushing around her house, turning off lamps—fuck, why does she have so many—and checking the locks on her front and back door. Once the lights are out and the house is secured, I rush to her bedroom where I pray she's waiting and ready.

I toe off my shoes before heading to her room, and kick them somewhere behind me. Climbing the stairs, I rip my shirt over my head and drop it. My belt and socks suffer the same fate and by the time I reach her bedroom, my pants are hanging open and my jaw is hitting the floor.

There, standing in front of her mirror, pulling off her shirt, stands Vivian in nothing more than a pair of green lacy panties and matching bra. I sneak up behind her just as her blouse falls

to the ground. Her hair floats down over her shoulders and cascades down her back.

“Fucking hell, Peaches. You’re trying to kill me.” My hands run up and down from her breasts to her small hips.

Her body shivers from the roughness of my fingers over her silky skin, and her eyes never leave mine as we stare at one another in the mirror. Slowly I caress her arm and reach for the straps of her bra, pulling one off her shoulder then the other. I keep my eyes locked on hers when I lay soft kisses down her neck and across her collarbone.

“Do you know how many times I imagined what you tasted like? The amount of times I held my hard cock in my hand wishing it was you?” I rasp into her ear.

“About as many times as I imagined you,” she confesses, and it sets my body on fire knowing that I haven’t been alone in my feelings.

Just the only one who wasn’t afraid to admit it.

Unclasping her bra, I slide it off her shoulders, letting it fall to the ground and giving me the most beautiful view of her breasts. I rub my fingers over her pink nipples and her head falls back against my chest. Her small, perky tits are the perfect handful as I cup them.

I spin her around and lift her up, her legs circling my waist and her arms wrapped around my neck. My mouth pulls on her taut nipple and a soft whimper leaves her lips.

“I think I’m going to take my time with you tonight, Peaches. I want to savor every inch of your delicious body and make sure you understand that you. Are. Mine.”

I walk us to the closest wall and push her against it. Slowly I drop to my knees until my face is buried in her beautiful pussy. I suck her clit through the lacy fabric and taste the evidence of her arousal.

“Mm. So good, baby.”

With her legs over my shoulders, I slowly rise to my feet, sliding her up the wall until I’m upright and she’s holding on

for dear life.

“Ph-Phoenix! I’m gonna fall,” she cries.

I look up at her, her red hair curtaining us in fire, and tell her, “I won’t ever let you fall, Vivian. I got you.”

I wrap my arms around her legs and reach for her panties, pushing my thumbs into the lace until it rips open, giving me enough space to lick her slit. Our moans combine to make the most erotic sound, causing me to dive deeper.

I suck, lick, blow and bite and all the while, Vivian’s nails dig into my scalp and her legs shake. I don’t ease up until she cries my name and her body is slumping forwards. Carefully, I slide her down until she’s safely in my arms and carry her to her bed, laying her down with a gentleness that I have only ever used with her.

“You-you’re still dressed. Take them off,” she pants.

I smirk and slide my thumbs beneath my pants and the band of my boxers, pushing them down and off. I stand tall and proud knowing my dick is doing the same. Vivian clambers to her knees and hands and crawls over to where I stand.

Without using her hands, she takes my engorged head into her mouth and teases, flicking and swirling her tongue. I hiss, my head falling back, and she continues to move up and down, taking me a little deeper each time. When I hit the back of her throat, she inhales deeply and pushes until her throat grows tighter.

“Vivian. Don’t...shiiit,” I curse when she swallows me over and over.

I can’t help it, my hands instinctively grip her hair and my hips thrust. I tell myself to go slow, but she blasts that by covering my hand with hers and showing me how she wants me. My hands hold her face and she opens up wide, relaxing her jaw, while I move in and out, and fuck her mouth until I start to see lights flashing.

If I don’t stop myself, I know I’ll be coming down her throat like a geyser finally exploding. So I pull her off and flip

her to her back. I push her knees to her chest and slide into her, so wet and warm, and spend the next hour, worshiping her body and making her scream two more times before I finally let myself go.

When she's pliant and complacent, I run my fingers through her hair and remind her, "we are happening, Peaches. No more fighting it."

Her eyes blink open and she gives me a shy smile and small nod. I take that little acknowledgment as a win and mark the moment with a punishing kiss.

MY ALARM BLARES and I reach over to turn it off. Only it's not my alarm and I'm not in my bed.

Vivian's body is wrapped around mine and her warm breath tickles my chest. The alarm continues to sound, but Vivian is out cold, not so much as a flinch from her.

"Baby," I whisper into her ear, but it does nothing to rouse her.

Rubbing my eyes I squint and spot her phone on her nightstand. Gripping her tight, I carefully roll over her and touch the screen, silencing the wretched sound.

It's when the room grows quiet that she finally starts to wake. Her little body rolls and stretches, like a kitten waking from slumber.

"Morning, Peaches."

She blinks her eyes open and gives me a sleepy smile. "Morning," she rasps. "What time is it?"

I crane my neck to read the time on her phone. "Six-fifteen."

"Crap. I've gotta get up. If I'm not out of here in fifteen minutes, I'll be late for spin." She moves to get up and I yank her back down, locking her to my chest. "Phoenix."

"Nope. No spin today. You did plenty riding last night. I'm giving you the day off."

She laughs and pushes on my chest, raising her head to look at me.

“You can’t just decide for me when I can or can’t workout. Besides, if I don’t then things will start sagging, and you don’t want that, do you?”

“Baby, your body is a goddamn wonder. I think you’ll be okay missing one day.” My fingers run lazily up and down her spine and she wiggles against me.

Inhaling and exhaling she says, “fine. But I only have an hour before I have to get ready for work. I really can’t be late for that. I’ve got to prep for tonight’s game.”

“I have training so I’ll leave when you do. But first,” I roll her onto her back and hover above her, my forearms resting on either side of her head. “I need breakfast,” I growl and slide down her body and under the sheets until my face is nestled in its favorite place to be.

“GREAT JOB TODAY, Nix. Your arm looks good. Go see the PT and then we’ll catch you tonight,” my trainer says after a grueling workout.

“Thanks, man.” I bump his fist and make my way over to the trainer’s rooms just like he said. My shoes squeak against the floors but when I hear voices, I stop mid step.

“I don’t know who the fuck he thinks he is, but he can’t just walk in and take her from right under my nose,” a voice booms from the locker room.

“From *our* noses. We already agreed we’d finger cuff that shit.” I pause recognizing the voices as Rami and Manny and flatten myself against the wall to continue eavesdropping.

“Whatever man. All I know is that I had her locked down when that asshole came walking in and stole her away. And to say that’s *his girl*.”

I was afraid they were talking about Vivian, and now I’m even more curious to listen to what else they have to say.

“We both know Red can’t be locked down. Hell...how many men has she slept with from this team alone only to say it’s just sex. I don’t even want to know how much dick she’s been getting from the football and basketball players.” Manny smarts and I want to put my fist through his ugly face.

“Shit, you’re right. He probably saved us from gonorrhea and a loose cunt,” Rami snickers.

“Nah man,” a third voice joins in. “Kenrick said she’s *tight*. Slick and tight, are the words he used to describe her.”

“Well all I can say now is fuck that bitch. Maybe I’ll let her take a ride if she begs once Nix drops her.”

My temper has surpassed boiling point and those three cunt rags better hope someone is there to stop me from killing them.

I stomp into the room, practically running, and slam my fist into Rami’s face without saying a word.

“Phoenix. No!” I hear someone yell, but it’s too late. I’ve straddled him on the ground and pummel my fist into his face over and over.

He squirms beneath and tries to free himself, but nothing can stop a man’s rage when it comes to defending the woman he’s on his way to loving.

Rami’s hands fly up to cover his face and he tries to get some hits in, succeeding in a gut punch or two. Then suddenly, I’m being knocked sideways by a body. I barely get a look before Manny’s fist connects with my jaw.

“You motherfucker. I’m going to kill you!” I roar and push Manny with all my strength, sending him flying backwards.

I scramble over to him and do the same to his face as I did to Rami’s. Arms pull at me but they’re no match for the fury that rages through my body. Manny’s fist flies out and lands on my cheek. The pain should jolt me to a stop, but it’s like a soft wind blowing across my face because all I can feel is the power of my anger.

“What the fuck is going on?” Coach’s voice rises above the shouts of everyone and I’m finally stopped with my attack when it feels like an octopus wraps me in its tentacles. “West! Stop!”

My chest is heaving and I feel a trickle of something slide down my face. My body is vibrating with fury and I just want to rip myself out of the arms that hold me back and finish the job I was so determined to do on Rami and Manny.

“Don’t you ever fucking talk about my girl again. I’m going to murder you two sons of bitches. Let me go!” I start pushing again while the arms pull tighter and tighter.

Someone helps Manny to his feet and I see blood dripping from his nose and lip. His left eye is already swelling shut and he looks like he got roughed up in a dark alley. Rami isn’t much better, but at least he can stand on his own whereas Manny needs two guys to help him stand.

“You’re finished. I’ll make sure of it,” Rami wheezes between sucking in air.

“Watch your fucking back, Ramirez. I heard every goddamn thing you said about Vivian and you’re a dead man the second they let me GO!”

“West! Calm the fuck down now before I send your ass to AAA!” coach bellows in my ear, finally getting me to stop resisting.

Rami spits out a mouth full of blood at my feet and it enrages me all over again.

“Get those two out of here,” coach yells at some of the guys. “Tuck. Philo. Take West to my office. Now!”

“C’mon, man. Chill out. You’re going to get your ass kicked out of here.” Tuck grips me by one bicep with Philo holding on to the other and together they pull me to coach’s office.

They drop me into a chair, then remain flanking me on either side until coach bursts in, slamming the door shut behind him.

“What the hell is wrong with you, West? Manny’s goddamn face looks like a busted mit. I should send your ass down for this shit.” His hand slams against his desk and a picture falls face down.

“I’m not sorry, coach. I’ll apologize to you for bringing this into the clubhouse but if I see those two on the streets, I’m going to finish the job.” I can hear my voice shake as the adrenaline starts to dwindle.

“I don’t want to fucking hear that, West. Just tell me what the hell happened.”

Philo and Tuck stand by me as I rehash the things those two douchebags said about Vivian. I repeat every damn word they say and when asked, Philo and Tuck confirm it all. When I’m done, coach drops his head into his hands looking exhausted and wanting to be anywhere but here.

“I’m sorry you heard them saying those things but you know I’m going to have to suspend you without pay.”

“Yes, coach,” I tell him. “What about them?”

“Well unfortunately, it looks like they’ll be on the disabled list until they can be seen out on the field. Seven to ten days.” He sighs and gives me a small shake of his head. “You’ve put me in a bad spot, West. This is going to hurt our lineup. Especially not having you. We’re leading in the standings, but that could all change without you pitching for ten games.”

“Ten games?” I shout. “Coach...c’mon.”

“You’re lucky I’m not replacing you on the active roster. Take your fucking suspension and stay away from the field. Workout with your trainer and take care of that million dollar hand.” He drops his head back against his chair and looks up at the ceiling. “Jesus Christ. I can’t believe my star pitcher was using his pitching hand to beat the tar out of his teammates.”

Tuck clamps a hand down on my shoulder as my head slumps down and my body finally releases the fight in it. A ten game suspension. I don’t care about losing money. I could not make a penny for the remainder of the season and not give a damn. But ten games sitting on the bench-no, scratch that—ten

games away from the field when we're first is going to hurt my team.

"Tuck. Walk West to his car and Philo, get his stuff. I don't want him going back there. Fuck," he yells and kicks the trashcan beside his desk, sending papers and wrappers flying across the room. "I gotta go check on those two. See how bad it is. You better hope you didn't break anything, West."

I nod and stand then walk out, both Philo and Tuck close behind me. I appreciate them being here with me, but appreciate it even more that neither of them tries to console or chide me. I know I fucked up, but I'm not some chump who's just going to sit there and let someone talk about his girlfriend that way.

I reach my truck and turn to Tuck while we wait for Philo to return with my bag.

"Tuck, I'm sorry. I really fucked you guys over."

He smacks my arms and I look at him. "Don't apologize, Nix. I would've done the same damn thing if I had a girl and they were talking about her like that."

"Yeah, well I don't know if the rest of the team shares your sentiments. I pray to God the rest of the pitching lineup can pull extra weight without me. Fuck!" I screech and throw my fist towards my window, but I don't connect.

Tuck grabs hold of me and shakes his head. "Don't. You'll for sure end up watching from the bench when you bust your hand."

I nod and blow out a deep breath, slumping against the truck. "I gotta call Vivian," I mutter just as Philo comes running out with my bag.

"Hey man," he says and passes me my stuff. "Just thought you'd like to know that team isn't mad at you. Most of them said they wouldn't have let those two walk out on their own if they'd been talking about their wives. Even Kenrick, the douchenozzle that he is, said it wasn't cool the way they were talking. Don't worry, okay. We'll be fine."

“Yeah, Nix. The team will pick up the slack. And now that you know the rest of the team isn’t pissed, you can focus on training and ten days will fly by.”

“Thanks, guys. I’m sorry. I still want to kill those fucking pricks, but I’ll wait until the season is over before I do it.” I chuckle and they laugh with me.

I say goodbye, hop in my truck and dial Vivian as I pull out of the lot.

“Phoenix? Why are you calling me?” She answers

“I fucked up, Peaches. Can you meet me for lunch?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

VIVIAN



“WOMAN” - Doja Cat

“I FUCKED UP, Peaches. Can you meet me for lunch?” Phoenix sounds distant and disengaged and it has my heart plummeting to the pit of my stomach.

“I...what did you...” I don’t know if I want to hear what he has to say because I feel like it’s just going to be a knife to the heart right when I’m starting to let myself feel.

“It’s nothing bad. Well, it is, but it’s not what you’re probably thinking.” I let out a little breath and my heart that stopped for a moment, begins to beat again.

“Uh, sure. Now?” I ask.

“Can you? I’ll come get you and we’ll go somewhere quiet.”

I look at my watch and note the time and then survey the office for activity. Most people are either caught up in their work or out to lunch, and I decide I can sneak away for a while.

“Okay. Give me ten minutes to shut down and I’ll meet you out front.”

“Thanks, Peaches. See you in a few.” Phoenix hangs up and I stare at the blank screen, very confused and very concerned as to what could be so bad to have him calling me when he should be at the field.

I type out a quick response to an email I received just before Phoenix called, then set my computer to sleep mode before grabbing my purse and walking towards the elevators.

I stand in the metal box as it descends and worry my lip, running different scenarios through my mind.

He said it's bad but not in the way I'm thinking, so I'm assuming he didn't cheat on me. He was a pretty big player so maybe a chick he hooked up with ended up pregnant and now has a child with him.

Oh God. Is that worse or better than him cheating? A kid would mean he'd be tied to another woman for a lifetime. She'd probably be the type to try and lure him away from me, claiming that it would be best for their child to have a complete family. Then I'd be right where I started; broken by Phoenix and festering in my heartbreak and anger.

Wait. Why am I even thinking that way? I just barely agreed to try this whole...relationship thing with Phoenix and somehow I've already conjured up our demise.

The doors open and I step out with the rest of the cattle and come to an abrupt stop when I see Phoenix waiting for me in the lobby. I walk slowly towards him, people gawking at the mega star in their building, and notice a gash on his cheekbone.

"Phoenix. What happened?" I step up to him and reach to touch the cut that has already begun to scab up.

Without answering, he scoops me up and kisses me like a soldier returning from war. It's so unlike other kisses he's given me that it takes me a minute to put an emotion to it. He's kissed me hard and punishingly, ravenous and hurried. But the way he's kissing me now is tender and loving, almost grateful.

When he releases me, his forehead rests against mine and I can hear his heart pounding in his chest.

"Let's go," he whispers, uncharacteristically. "We'll find somewhere quiet to go." I nod and he laces our fingers together, leading me out to his waiting truck.

AFTER PICKING up a couple of sandwiches, we make our way to a quiet park that I direct him to. With school about to start, most parks are packed with parents and kids, getting in those last few moments of playtime. But being the kind of person I am, where one minute I want to be the center of attention, and the next I want to pretend like I'm the only person on the planet, I knew the perfect little spot for us to hide away from prying eyes.

"It's not really much of a park, is it?" Phoenix asks as we pull up to the small grassy area occupied by one bench under a large crepe myrtle tree that is lit up with vivid blooms of pink.

"It's not a park, per se. But if you go by the technical definition which is a grassy area in a town used for recreation, then it is," I tell him, unbuckling my seatbelt and looking out over the small, quiet space.

"And what recreation does one do in a space the size of a postage stamp?" Phoenix hangs his hand over the steering wheel and turns to look at me.

"The recreation of zen-ing."

He laughs with a slight shake of his shoulders. "Should we eat out there?" he asks, nudging his chin in the direction of the empty bench.

I turn my wrist over to check the temperature on my watch and tell him, "it's about a hundred degrees out. How about we eat in here but stare at the bench and imagine ourselves sitting on it?"

"Sounds like a solid plan."

I open up the brown paper bag from Wenchel's, and Phoenix slides straws into our drinks. I pass him his sandwich, he hands me a napkin, and we take a couple of bites before he finally speaks.

"I got a ten game suspension," he says, his voice laced with remorse.

“Come again? I thought you just said you got a ten game suspension.”

He nods while chewing. “I did,” he mumbles.

I set my sandwich down on my lap and stare at him in utter shock. “Why? How? Phoenix...ten games is a long time. Does this suspension have anything to do with the cut on your handsome face?”

“I know and yes,” he sulks and wipes his mouth. “I got in a fight...with Ramirez and Manny.”

“What?”

“I...I kind of beat the shit out of them. They’re on seven to ten day disabled, given that they don’t have a concussion or anything broken.”

“Phoenix,” I study the look on his face while he talks and it is decidedly blank. “Why would you do that?”

He sets his sandwich down on the center console and reaches over to take my hand. I gulp down a ball of nerves and listen to him explain how he heard Rami and Manny saying disgusting things about me. I watch him with tears pooling in my eyes and blink rapidly to push them back to where they came from.

I don’t cry. Not anymore. It’s a sign of weakness and I am anything but weak. I’m a strong, independent, bad ass bitch who won’t let even the most hurtful words get her down.

“And I just snapped,” he goes on. “I couldn’t stand there and listen to those assholes talk about you like that in front of everyone. I’m paying for it, of course, but I don’t care. I’d do it again if it meant protecting you.”

I continue to blink away those pesky tears, but I can’t stop my heart from absolutely melting for him. Can someone say major book boyfriend moment? The fluttering of my heart is something that I haven’t felt in a long time...and I kinda like it.

Phoenix’s Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows down what looks like a whole boulder full of nerves while I sit here

silently studying him. I place my sandwich next to his, and carefully lean over and take his face in my hands before planting a big kiss on his soft lips. He slowly reaches out and places his hands on my waist. His mouth opens to me and I feel him relax, his worries melting away.

“Thank you,” I whisper against his lips.

When I pull away, his eyes are closed and the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen rests on his gorgeous face. I just can’t help but run my hand down his cheek, loving the way his stubble scratches my fingers.

“I’ll do anything for you, Peaches. Don’t forget that. Including chasing you down when you’re being a brat. I would threaten you with putting you over my knee and spanking you, but that’s a reward not a punishment for you.” He chuckles when I playfully smack him.

“So I guess we won’t be sneaking into each other’s rooms during away games now, huh.”

“Shiiit! I didn’t think about that. You’re going to be there all alone.” He pulls off his cap and runs his hair through his soft curls.

“Well, I won’t be all alone. I’m sure the guys will watch out for me.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” he blanches.

“I’m a big girl, Phoenix. I can take care of myself. I’ve been doing a pretty bang up job until you came along.”

He turns his hat backwards and sets it back on his head—oh lawd, that’s an aphrodisiac—and furrows his brow in deep consternation.

“I’ll fly out and not tell the team. I’ll get a room, you can stay with me, and I’ll just hang out and watch the game and wait for you to return. Then we’ll fly to the next city and I’ll go home with you.” He shrugs like a kid who just concocted the most ingenious plan, and in his mind I’m sure it is.

“That’s a tad much, don’t you think? It’s literally four or five days. We can manage.” I pick up my sandwich and start

eating while he continues to stress out.

“I can’t! Four or five days is too long. Two or three...it sucks, but I’ll survive. Four and beyond...life support required. That’s you, in case you were wondering.”

“Phoenix, up until three weeks ago we hadn’t even seen or thought about one another in ten years. It’s ten games. You’ve got tonight’s game, travel day, then three away, another travel day and a four game series. I’ll be here for two more days then gone for four. It is unnecessary for you to waste money to spend four days with me. Just keep your fine ass home and then I can make it up to you when I’m back. Okay?”

I watch him pout and it’s the cutest damn thing ever. He’s seriously acting like I’m going off to war and he may never see me again.

“Sounds like a stupid plan to me, but whatever.” His shoulders slump and he takes to eating again.

This continues—I eat, he complains—for another thirty minutes, then I’m being dropped off at the station to get ready for tonight’s game.

“Do you want me to ask CeCe if she can let you sit in the owner’s box? Although, I’m not sure how Mr. Amato is going to feel about hosting his star pitcher who beat the crud out of two of his players.” I give him a little wince.

“I should probably call Luca myself. I owe him an explanation. I’ll let you know if they allow me into the stadium. If not,” he looks at his fingers as he readjusts them on the steering wheel. “Can I...want me to pick you up?”

I bite my lip while hiding my smile. The smile that says I’m a fifteen year old girl with a crush and not a grown ass, bad bitch woman.

“I have my car and I don’t want to leave it here or at the stadium.” Phoenix’s chest deflates and I feel like a huge turd for crushing his dreams. “But...you can wait at my place for me.” I pull my keys from my purse and unclip the key to my backdoor. “So long as you don’t rob me blind. I know you’re

hurting for money, but leave my shoes and purses alone. I'll gut you like a fish if you touch them."

I hold my hand out with the key in my palm and he takes it, carefully, like it's a bomb and it might go off.

Who the fuck am I, right now? Fucking Anastasia Steele. Falling for a guy two hours after I meet him and ready to burn down the world just to have him?

I mean...I guess it's more than two hours. We have a history. A semi-shitty one, but one nonetheless. And I'm not an educated college graduate moonlighting as a naive virgin. We all know I blew purity right the fuck out the door years ago, *and* made up for lost time. And I'm not in love with Phoenix. We enjoy each other's company, he calls me his girl—which still freaks me out—and we have mind blowing, earth shattering, talk to angels sex. But I'm not going to follow him around like a sad shadow.

So giving him a key to use *one* time to wait for me is not that big of a deal.

It's not!

"Don't worry, Peaches Your shoes and purses are safe with me. Your underwear though...I can't promise you anything," he laughs. "I'll text you when I get there."

I lean over and kiss him chastely before throwing open the door and stepping out. "You better be waiting naked. I better not come home from a hard night at work to find you chillin' and binging *Bridgerton*. Naked...you...in my bed. Got it?"

"Got it, baby. Have a good day at work." He winks and blows me a kiss.

I shut the door and strut my ass back to my desk, not at all concerned with the level of happiness I have right now, thinking of him waiting for me...at home.

Shut up, Ana, you fool.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

PHOENIX



“WOW” - Zara Larsson

AFTER A LONG TALK with Luca where I explained to him—in great detail—what happened this afternoon, he agreed with the suspension but also sided with me on the matter.

“Those stronzos would not be eating if they talked about my woman. You are a good man, Phoenix West. But keep your hands clean for the rest of the season, eh. I need my MVP ready to stand on that podium when they present the trophy,” was what he told me.

I apologized, again, for putting the team in a bad way but definitely not for putting those assholes in their place. We hung up with the promise I’d sit in the owner’s box with him at the next home game, which will be my last suspension game.

Once apologies had been made, and laughs were had at the expense of Manny and Rami—yes, even Luca laughed—I headed over to the hotel and packed an overnight bag and drove over to Vivian’s.

She texted me the code to her alarm and told me to erase it from my memory once I was in the house, so I did the opposite and made sure to save the code in my phone. There isn’t much I could do about the key that I needed to get in, but I’m sure I could find a way to convince her to give me a copy.

I decided to pull out all the stops for Vivian and planned a surprise for her. She was warming up to me, that was for sure, but I had a long way to go. With that in mind, I texted Vaughan and asked him to help me out. The guy is a freaking lovesick fool because when I told him what my plan was, he jumped at the chance to help me.

I know I could've called Bish, but this seemed like a time to call a guy who had a woman by his side and was doing all that he could to keep her.

I made a list of what I would need and made two stops before going to Viv's. I didn't text her when I got there like I told her I would, because I needed time to prepare everything and I couldn't have her wondering why I was at her house much earlier than I originally planned.

With my overnight bag propped on my shoulder, four overly stuffed grocery bags hanging from the crook of my arm, and my phone in hand to be certain I had the right code, I entered her house and got myself set up.

Having spent a couple nights here already helped in that I didn't have to wonder where the things that I needed would be. I made myself right at home and got to work. After a couple hours had passed, I texted Vivian.

Me: Got to your house a few minutes ago. I'll be waiting.

I knew she was still covering the game, so I wasn't expecting her to respond so quickly.

Peaches: Bottom of the eighth. Be done soon.

And a second text immediately following that one.

Peaches: I'm sure you know that. If you're watching the game. But now that I think about it, I forgot to tell you how to use the tv. You're smart-ish. I'm sure you can figure it out.

Peaches: I'm rambling. Sorry. See you soon.

Peaches: BTW, Tuck and Philo have been taking care of me. They told me to tell you that.

Peaches: Okay. I'm done. I swear I'm not one of those needy girls who texts all the time.

Peaches: Bye!

I chuckle to myself reading each message and get to putting the finishing touches on her surprise. When she texts that she's on her way home, I fly around her house, turning off all of her damn lamps, and leave only a trail of tea lights for her to follow.

THE DOOR CLOSES and I hear, "oh my gosh. Phoenix?"

"Upstairs," I shout from my spot as best as I can and wait as she climbs the stairs.

"Wha—" Her voice carries when she steps into her room and sees all of the small candles lighting a path, and bouquets of white lilies scattered around the room.

"In here, sweetheart," I call out in a very saccharine voice.

She steps into the doorway of the bathroom and practically trips when she sees me.

And here I sit, all six foot four of me, crammed into her small tub full of peach scented bubbles, surrounded by candles, more flowers and a special treat.

"Welcome home, honey. Have a nice night?" I ask with a smile.

"What is all of this?" Her brows are knit tight together as her eyes wander around her small bathroom, taking in the scene.

"It's a bath and a treat," I tell her.

"Is my treat you?"

With a smirk, I say, "Always. But there's a little extra something sweet for you." I waggle my brows and nod

towards the vanity counter where a hot and gooey-

“Is that a cobbler? Holy shit, that looks so good.” She walks over to where it sits and dunks her finger straight in, extracting it and quickly popping it into her mouth. “Mmm. Oh my God. Where did you get this?”

I sit up in the tub and water sloshes over the sides. I may have filled it a little too high, underestimating just how much my giant ass body would raise the water level.

“I made it,” I tell her.

Her head whips to look at me. “Shut up. You did not.”

With a small nod, “but I did. Why don’t you strip all those pesky clothes off, hand me the cobbler, and get that sweet ass of yours in here with me.”

A shy smile lights up her face and she passes me the dessert then strips down until her naked body is shining under the candlelit bathroom.

“SO I KNOW you like sports movies, obviously, but what’s another favorite? There’s gotta be something girly on your list somewhere.” Vivian is propped with her back to my chest in the tub that is quickly growing cold.

I feed her another spoonful of cobbler then wait for her to answer.

“Dirty Dancing. I freaking love that movie. When I was little-”

“What do you mean *when*? You still are little.” I joke and she gives me the biggest eye roll I’ve ever seen.

“When I was *younger*, my cousin and I used to watch the dance scenes over and over, trying to learn all of the steps. She was always mad because I got to be Baby since I was smaller than she was.” She laughs as she reminisces. “I swear, I thought I was going to grow up and marry Patrick Swayze.”

“Babe. You weren’t even born when that movie came out.”

“I *know*. But a girl can dream, can’t she.” She pops a shoulder then pops another bite into her mouth. “What’s your favorite movie,” she mumbles.

“Hm. I guess I’d have to say Field of Dreams.”

“Booo. You can’t pick that or any other sports movie. I already know those are givens. Give me your dirty little secret movie.”

I close my eyes and drop my head back because I just know she’s going to give me shit when I tell her.

“You better not laugh at me, Vivian, if I tell you.” She crosses her heart and holds her hand up like a girl scout would. “I mean it.”

“Okay. I promise. Zip it up and throw away the key.”

I take a deep breath and close my eyes again. “I’ve always liked *The Little Mermaid*.”

Vivian has a major spit take moment and pieces of cobbler go flying out of her mouth and into the sudsy water. She chokes, pounding on her chest, to clear the food lodged in her throat.

“I told you not to laugh,” I whine, patting her back to help her along.

“I-I’m not,” she laughs. “You just surprised me. That’s all.” She reaches out and scoops up the bubbles that have bits of food in them and tosses them onto the bathmat on the side of the tub. “Curious, though. How did a cartoon mermaid with red hair, nonetheless, become your favorite movie?”

Her growing smile is getting harder for her to hide as she bites down on her lips.

“It was Anais’ favorite movie when she was little, so I used to watch it with her on repeat anytime I visited. I may know all the words to *Kiss the Girl*, but I can neither confirm nor deny.”

She turns completely around and moves closer until she’s straddling my lap causing my dick to twitch with excitement.

“So redhead mermaids do it for you, huh?” Her voice is low and breathy and I grow harder.

I nod, “mhm. That shell bra and big green eyes really did it for me.” I kiss her pert little nose as she wraps her arms around my neck.

“Well I don’t have a tail, but I bet I have a purple bikini top somewhere. How about we get out of here and you can be Prince Eric and rescue me from the evil witch.”

My lips quirk on one side and I tug her closer, bringing her breasts to my hard chest, and bringing my dick closer to sliding between her sweet pussy.

“I like the way that sounds. But let’s reenact the naughty version. Prince Eric needs to fuck the voice back into her body.”

“Oh Prince Eric, you dirty boy. Let’s see if it’s the motion of the ocean that really...*floats your boat*,” she laughed playfully and proceeded to lure this fisherman in...over and over again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

VIVIAN



“YOU KNOW, you really didn’t have to bring me. I could’ve just Ubered like I usually do.”

Phoenix parked his truck in the garage at the airport after insisting on not only bringing me, but walking me in.

It’s been three days since receiving his ten game suspension, and he has spent all of his time either at my place, with his trainer, or interviewing for a new P.A. *at* my place. I know he hates living in a hotel room, so I told him he was free to use my place for zoom meetings and to basically relax in a way that he really can’t in a hotel.

When I first offered, I had to fight against a roll of nausea when the words, “*you can stay at my place*” came out of my mouth. In all of the times I’ve spent with men, they were never welcome beyond a “good morning, now get the fuck out” if that at all. So this was a huge step not only in the relationship department—which is apparently what Phoenix and I were in—but in the trusting people sector. Aside from my girls, trust is not handed out easily. Actually...it’s not handed out at all. If you’re in my circle, it’s ride or die time.

So even though Phoenix was easily welcomed into our crew by everyone else almost instantly, I can now say with one hundred percent certainty that he is now my fourth ride or die. Sorry but CeCe, Cami and Cat still rank above him. For now.

“Well it’s not like I was busy or anything. Plus, if I didn’t bring you then how were we supposed to do the whole airport

goodbye scene like in the movies?” He helps me out of his truck, then opens the back door to get my luggage.

Holding my hand in one of his, and my suitcase in the other, he walks us across the lanes of traffic and into the terminal.

“I’m afraid to ask but...what airport goodbye scene?” He escorts me to the kiosk where I scan my reservation and get my boarding pass.

“Any airport scene. You know, it’s always the couple saying a heartfelt goodbye, tears flowing, arms wrapped tight because they don’t want to let go. *That* airport scene.”

I jerk to a halt which causes him to tug my arm when he keeps moving. When he turns to look at me, I say, “okay, you’re kind of freaking me out. First it’s Ariel and now, mushy airport scenes?”

“What? Did you not like Prince Eric’s rescue mission? I thought he resuscitated his little mermaid well beyond what was needed. I mean, she screamed over and over again ‘yes, God, again. Don’t stop’. But it was kinda hard to hear when her newly gained human legs were clamped so tightly around my head.”

I smack his chest and he feigns hurt before continuing to walk with me through the main concourse.

“Alright, you got me there. Prince Eric did a more than sufficient job bringing his mermaid back to life. She was very satisfied with her happy ending.”

The line to get through TSA is a short one, and I have plenty of time before my flight leaves. We decide to find an open bench and have a seat for a few more minutes before I have to say goodbye for four days.

“So then what’s the problem?” He asks. “Did you want to try other fairy tales? Beauty and the Beast? Perhaps Peter Pan and Tinkerbell?”

“Peter Pan was never into Tinkerbell. They were besties.”

“Not in my version. You’re like a fiery little Tink, and Peter would love the challenge of taming that little firecracker.”

I snort then cover my mouth, embarrassed. “That’s gross. Peter Pan is a whole person and Tinkerbell is the size of a thimble. He’d destroy her. Kind of like Superman and Lois Lane. And while we’re talking about it, Belle and the Beast. His name is *Beast*. I’m sure he’d do to Belle what your monster cock did to my poor vagina.”

A family passing by hears me and the mom gives me a look that could singe the hair off a cat. I give her a small apologetic wave and say, “sorry”, while Phoenix laughs his ass off.

“You jerk. That was all your fault.” I push him and he topples to one side, almost clear off the bench.

“That was amazing. I’m going to have to tell the guys about that one.” I shake my head at him and laugh at the ridiculousness of our conversation. “But in all seriousness... would you wear the little green dress and wings if I bought them for you?”

“Phoenix,” I scold and stand up. “You are horrible. And to answer your question, yes I would. So long as you wear those green tights.”

When I say his name a little too loudly, people begin to look our way, no doubt recognizing the mega superstar amongst them.

“Shit. Sorry. Looks like you’re about to be mobbed by fans. You better get out of here before women start ripping off your clothes and proposing marriage.” I look around and pretend to be searching for something. “But I don’t see any wedding dress wearing women, so you may be safe on that front.”

“You little brat. Come here.” He yanks me to him and lifts me in his arms. “I’ll be counting down the days until you’re home. Now give me a kiss, my sassy little mermaid, soon to be my feisty fairy.”

I can't help the big goofy smile on my face and against my better judgment, I kiss him like I won't see for four years and not four days.

"Now *this* is the epic airport scene I was talking about," he whispers against my mouth. "Kiss me again, Peaches, before I have to say goodbye."

"You're ridiculous," I say, but give him exactly what he asks for.

"Hi, I'm checking in. Vivian Kelley," I tell the front desk clerk when I step up to the counter of my hotel.

"Hello, Ms. Kelley." The desk clerk begins typing into his computer while I wait. "It looks like we got your upgrade request and your room is ready. Here is your key..." the clerk continues to give me instructions while I try to process what he said.

"Just a moment. Did you say you got my upgrade request? I didn't make one. There must be a mistake."

The clerk types away on his keyboard and his eyes fly across the screen.

"No, it's correct. Mr. West called earlier and said you'd be needing an upgraded room and switched cards for incidentals and room charge." He slides the card over to me once again, but I stare at him like he's an alien whose language I don't understand.

"Mr. West called? And changed my reservation? And y'all just let him?" Can someone actually do that?

"Uh, yes ma'am. He said he was your companion and asked that he be the one charged for your stay here with us. Would you...like to speak to a manager? I wasn't the one who made the changes, but you can certainly speak to someone who can help you."

I pick up the keycard and adjust my purse. "No, it's okay. I'm sorry to come down on you..." I squint in order to read the name on his name tag. "Ethan. I'm just a little surprised. Mr.

West didn't inform me of the changes he requested. Thank you for your help. Have a nice day."

I grab the handle to my suitcase and make for the elevators. "You have a wonderful evening as well, Ms. Kelley. Please call the concierge if there is anything you need."

I give him a nod and a wave then pull out my phone to send a seething, yet appreciative, text to Mr. West.

Me: WTF Phoenix! You changed my reservation?

Phoenix: You're welcome, Peaches. <winking kiss emoji>

This asshole thinks he can just bulldoze his way into every facet of my life. And the dummy probably forgot that I don't have to pay for my room. The station reimburses me afterwards, so I hope he doesn't think I'll be handing over my per diem to him.

I reach my room and open it up and immediately drop my suitcase. Okay. So maybe I jumped the gun berating Phoenix. This room is *tight*.

Beautiful marble floors spread as far as I can see. A small sitting area greets me with a sofa, two chairs, a coffee table and a long credenza looking thing. Just beyond that is the biggest damn bed I think I've ever seen. The bed looks out at the city through the floor to ceiling windows that extend across an entire wall. I step in and let the door slam shut behind me. My suitcase is propped against what must be a large closet and I continue to look around.

I first plop down on the bed and realize that was a bad decision. It feels like I'm laying on a fluffy cloud and with the way the lights shine from the windows, I really do get the sense that I'm floating high above. There's a gorgeous teak wood paneled wall that looks like it separates the main living area from the bathroom.

I mosey into the ensuite and, "holy shit!" My eyes can hardly take in all of the wonders it is seeing right now.

The wall of windows continues into the bathroom where a giant soaker tub sits on a raised platform and has the same view as the bedroom does. Behind me is a walk-in shower that could fit ten, and double vanities with sleek marble counters in white and gray sit on opposite ends.

“Is this real life right now?” I ask myself, then decide to thank Phoenix for the *major* upgrade.

Me: I guess this room is okay. It'll do.

I chuckle to myself and pocket my phone, making my way back into the bedroom and grabbing a remote that sits on one of the nightstands. I press a few buttons and a shade begins to close across the windows. Another couple of clicks and a whirring noise catches my attention.

I look to where the sound is coming from and see a television rising out of the credenza against the wall.

“Okay, Tony Stark.” I place the remote back on the nightstand and feel my phone buzz.

Phoenix: Okay? Peaches...I asked them for the best room they still had available on short notice. It must be better than “Okay”.

It is by far one of the nicest rooms I've ever stayed in, but I'll be damned if I admit that to him.

Me: I mean...it's nice, but I've seen nicer.

That will surely ruffle his feathers. So instead of continuing the back and forth with him, I toss my phone on the bed and decide I am in desperate need of a steam shower to wipe away the airplane smell.

I WAS SURPRISED to see that I only had one text and one missed call from Phoenix when I finally re-emerged from my long ass shower. I assumed he decided to work out with his trainer, so I got cozy in a fluffy robe with the remote and selected a chick flick to watch before I ordered dinner.

Two movies and one cheeseburger with fries and coke later, and a knock sounds at the door. I pause the movie and stare at the door like my x-ray vision will suddenly kick in and I'll be able to see who's standing on the other side. I don't move for about thirty seconds but when a second knock sounds, I decide to check out who is interrupting my RomCom marathon.

I step to the door and of course I can't see through the peephole—door manufacturers must not know anyone who is vertically challenged—so I keep the top slide lock on and open the door as far as I can, peeking out between the small crack.

“Phoenix?” I squawk.

“Hey, Peaches. Surprise!”

Phoenix is standing at my door...with a suitcase...and a goofy ass smile like I missed something.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I ask, still looking out through a three inch slit.

“Well, if you let me in I can explain.” I contemplate whether or not to let him in when he says, “I have the other key. I'll just wait you out if I have to.” He arches a cocky brow and I resign because...what other choice do I have?

I can't leave a baseball god waiting in the hallway. And if he stays in the lobby, he'll get mobbed and every news outlet will know he's here, and eventually why.

I stand on my tip toes and flip the latch and open the door to let him in.

“Hey, baby,” he says in a low, gravelly voice before his bag drops to the floor and he scoops me up in his arms, laying a bruising kiss on my mouth.

Okay. Maybe Phoenix being here won't be so bad, after all.

He walks in, still holding me, and closes and locks the door, never parting his lips from mine. The guy doesn't even look where he's going or take a minute to admire the room. He simply moves to the bed, drops me down, and rips open the robe.

“Oh, Peaches. It’s like you knew I was coming.” He takes in my naked form, slick from lotion and drenched between my legs.

“Maybe this wasn’t for you,” I joke and bite my lip.

He growls and pounces on me, throwing my back to the bed and hovering over me. “Don’t you fucking dare. I will rip the heart out of any man who looks at what’s mine.” His hand cups my pussy and I whimper–fucking *whimper*–with need. “That’s what I thought.”

He drops his head and clamps his teeth on my nipple and I cry out. He soothes the sting with a swipe of his tongue, then repeats it all on the other breast. Kisses trail down my body and he stops to dip his tongue into my belly button before making his way up, again. Suckles and licks and kisses are placed up and down my neck. It’s that delicious sting followed by sweet, sweet rapture.

His tongue invades my mouth and I push him back. “Phoenix, wait. I just ate a hamburger. Let me brush my teeth.”

He scoffs and knits his brow tightly together. “Are you for real, right now? I don’t care if you just ate a bowl full of dirt. You’re not leaving this bed until you’ve screamed my name at least twice.”

I can’t object because he quickly resumes where he left off, so I just give in to him and enjoy the fact that I won’t have to use that vibrator I packed in my bag.

Phoenix reaches behind his neck and pulls his shirt off, disconnecting from my mouth only long enough to toss it aside. I work on his belt while he pushes his shoes off. When we both have accomplished our tasks, he stands and rips his jeans and boxers down his legs, revealing his beautiful cock.

“Jesus. Every...time,” I whisper, in awe of him no less than the time before.

Not acknowledging what I said, Phoenix drops to his knees and grabs my ankle. He places open mouth kisses on it and slowly moves towards the place I need him most. When I

wiggle my butt, urging him to go faster, he looks up at me through his thick lashes and smiles like the arrogant jerk he is.

“Patience, Peaches,” he says.

I stick out my bottom lip with a pout and say, “I don’t have any. She flew out the window the minute you stepped in this room.”

He rises to his feet and leans over, holding himself with his hands on the bed. “Is that right?” he asks and I nod. “I think I can make an exception this time. But I need something from you, first.”

“Anything,” I rush out. I’ll do a damn handstand while I sing Yankee Doodle if he just hurries.

He lifts off the bed and looks down at me. He steps backwards until his back hits the glass windows. If only the world below knew they were staring at the ass of a future Hall of Famer.

“Get up,” he commands and as if it has a mind all its own, my body obeys. “On your knees.” My quaking knees bend and my body lowers until I sit on my knees just feet away. “Now slowly crawl to me.”

Dropping to my hands, I start to crawl. He takes his dick in his large hand and strokes himself from root to tip. I mewl in anticipation and continue moving closer and closer to where he wants me.

“Stop,” he demands when I reach his feet.

Why does every inch of this man have to be perfect?

“Sit,” he barks and I do, resting back on my haunches. “Touch yourself. Like you used to do before I claimed that pussy as mine.”

My hand glides over my breasts and down my stomach until I reach my bare pussy. It leaks for him, just like he said it did on that night only weeks ago. My fingers play with my folds and I feel myself dripping down my hand.

“Two fingers, Peaches. Now.” I push two inside and my body tingles. “Is it tight?”

“Y-yes.”

“Does that pussy belong to me?” Still moving my fingers inside of me, I close my eyes and nod. “Tell me.”

“This pussy belongs to you,” I breathe out, my fingers continuing to work me over.

“Stop touching it then.” His words have bite and it makes my eyes fly open and fingers stop. “You don’t touch it unless I say you can. Tell me you understand.”

I gulp down the cry that wants to crawl from within. “I understand.”

One side of his mouth tips up, and he looks like the devil in the flesh. Sinful. Tempting. Dangerous.

“What else is mine, Vivian?” I squint my eyes, really unsure of what he’s asking me.

“Um...”

“*You*. You, Vivian Kelley, are mine. I own every smile, every laugh. Your smart mouth, your fiery spirit. They’re all mine. Eventually I’ll have your heart, too.” He pauses and I feel said heart do a little skip. “But right now...I own each and every one of your orgasms.”

He reaches down and grabs a fistful of my hair, snapping my neck back and angling down, bringing his face to mine. With my hair in his hand, he turns my head to the side and bites my neck. I shudder and my pussy quivers, screaming to be fed.

“And you’ll own every one of mine, too.” He tugs on my hair until I’m kneeling. “Open up. Let me in.”

I drop my jaw and look up at him from beneath the cover of my lashes. He slowly pushes his way in, moving past my lips and driving forward until he hits the back of my throat. I try not to gag but with his length and girth, it’s impossible. My eyes water and I remind myself to relax.

“Good girl. Now...I’m going to fuck this smart mouth of yours and I won’t stop until I know my pussy is aching to come. You know what to do if it’s too much. Yes?”

I mumble out a 'yes' and he thrusts forward, harsh and deep. The sheer force of his thrusts and the size of him elicits tears like a dam bursting. He pushes to the back of my throat, constricting my breathing, and holds still. I can't breathe, I can't swallow, I can't even open my eyes. The pressure he puts on my throat is almost suffocating. And when he finally pulls out, I fall to the floor, my hands slapping the tile with a cough and sputter.

Still trying to clear the fog from my head, he reaches down and picks me up under my arms and instinctively, my legs wrap around his waist. I rest my head on his shoulder, heaving and gasping, and he strokes my hair and places a kiss on my forehead.

“Good girl, Peaches. You did so good. Now it's time for your reward.”

Never in my life have I had a man talk to me the way Phoenix does. If any of them had, I would've kneed them in the balls right before tossing their ass out on the street. But with Phoenix, I long to hear him growl his commands. I crave his harsh touch and love to hear him praise me as his good girl. He's found something hiding in me that I didn't know I needed.

Kink level unlocked, and Phoenix holds the key.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

PHOENIX



“ELECTRIC (RYAN RIBACK REMIX)” - Alina Baraz feat Khalid

“LET ME GUESS,” Vivian says as the driver pulls up to the hotel. “I got an upgrade here, too?”

I give her a smile full of teeth and reply, “Yup. You guessed correctly, Peaches.” Her eyes do that wonderful rolling thing that she and her friends wrote the book on, and I open my door when the car comes to a stop. “Don’t move,” I tell her.

I don’t even have to wonder if she’s going to obey when I tell her something. After the other night, I can guarantee that her smart mouth is doing less arguing and a lot more—

“Here you are, sir.” The driver pulls out our luggage and I hand him a fifty, then go to open the door for my girl.

“C’mon, Peaches. Let’s get you into the tub.” I toss my leather bag over my shoulder, grab the handle of her suitcase, and take her hand in mine to lead us inside.

The last two nights we were lucky enough to be staying at a different hotel than the team, but this time didn’t work in our favor.

We enter the lobby to see a few of my teammates waiting at the counter. Tuck turns just as we walk in and waves.

“Nix! What’re you doing here, man?” We step up to him and he gives me a back pat then turns to give Vivian a hug.

A very quick hug.

“Uh, just here with my girl. Did she not tell you I was here?” I look at Vivian and she shrugs while Tuck shakes his head.

“I wasn’t sure if I should say anything,” she whispers almost like an apology.

“It’s okay, baby. Nothing to worry about.” I tap her chin with my finger and kiss her forehead. “Let’s get checked in.”

“Hey. You guys free for dinner tonight? Philo, Cisco and I were going to leave in about an hour,” Tuck asks.

“What do you say, Peaches? Hungry?”

“Always,” she purrs with a wink.

“Uuuh, nevermind. You two clearly have other plans.” Tuck start to back away but Vivian reaches out and grabs his arm to stop him

“We’d love to join y’all for dinner. We’ll meet you down here in an hour?” He nods at Vivian then walks off.

As we reach the counter we have the unfortunate luck of running straight into Manny. The dude still looks like ground up meat, so I’m surprised he even showed up. Philo told me he and Rami are on the disabled for eight games. They may have gotten a couple of extra days for being jackasses.

“What are you doing here, *West*?” My name drips from his mouth with disdain. Honestly, I hold nothing but a deep seated hatred for him, so it doesn’t bother me in the least.

“Excuse us.” Vivian pushes past him to the front desk and doesn’t even give him a backwards glance.

“Don’t worry, asshole. I’ll stay far away from you and you stay far away from my girl. Simple as that.” If I could see his eyes from behind the sunglasses he wears inside, I’m positive he’d be shooting fire at me.

His lip curls with a snarl and he’s yanked away by one of our teammates. I’ve come to learn that Manny isn’t well liked

by everyone, and Rami quickly landed himself a spot on the shit list when they heard what he said about Vivian.

Apparently, she was made an honorary teammate years ago when she was first assigned to report on the games. She's cool as shit—and ridiculously hot—so the guys all took to her spunky personality and sassy mouth. So when Rami and Manny made those nasty comments about her, the guys took it upon themselves to let them know where they ranked in the clubhouse; just below the ball boys.

“Hello,” Vivian greets the clerk. “Reservation for Vivian Kel—”

“Actually,” I interrupt. “The reservation should be under Arizona East.”

She scrunches her face and looks at me with a *WTF* written all over it. I may have forgotten to tell her that I registered under a different name to avoid stalker fans. After the bride-to-be in New York, I make sure to give them my alias and inform them that only people who ask for that name can have access to me. Besides the team, my sister, mom and Anais, no one else knows.

It may seem like a lot, but most of the guys have an alias they list. Especially if they have family traveling with them. The paps always find out where we're staying, but the name is a deterrent when overzealous reporters try to weasel their way into our suites. And trust me, it's happened before.

The clerk types away at her computer and I say to Vivian, “I'll explain when we get to the room. But remember that name and share it with no one.”

She gives me a confused nod and we take our cardkeys and head off for our room. I check my watch and note that we may have just enough time for a quick round of shower sex.

“Nuh uh. I know exactly what you're thinking,” Vivian says, cutting into my thoughts. “We do not have time for that.”

“We'll see,” I tell her with a wink.

And wouldn't you know, fifty-eight minutes later, we're running into the elevator to meet the guys downstairs.

“THANKS FOR DINNER, guys. It was fun.” Vivian gives Cisco, Tuck and Philo a small hug to thank them for inviting us to dinner as we reach the lobby.

“Anytime, Red. You know you’re part of the team.” Philo tells her and stops himself right as he’s about to place a small kiss on her cheek.

He looks at me—already giving him a death glare—and backs away.

“That may be, but make sure there’s no good game butt pats. Got it?” I remind them.

Vivian playfully slaps at my chest. “Ignore him. He’s a caveman. Y’all sleep well and we’ll see you tomorrow.”

We all wave goodbye and head to separate elevator cars. Just as the doors to ours are about to close, a hand slams in between them, causing them to open back up. When they do, they reveal a worried looking Rami and a very drunk Manny.

“Shhhit,” Vivian whispers.

Instinctively, I stand in front of her and push her behind me. My arm stays wrapped around her and her dainty hand grips my right bicep.

“Well if it isn’t the two lovebirds,” Manny slurs.

“Don’t, Manny,” Rami warns.

Vivian steps even closer to me, her nose pressing into my back and her fingers curling tighter around me.

Manny takes a step and stumbles. “Does coach know you’re here just to bang the pretty reporter?” Spittle flies out of his mouth and I lunge for him.

“Phoenix. No.”

“Yeah, Phoenix. Listen to your *bitch*,” Manny spats, and before I can react, Vivian is stepping out from behind me.

A loud slap echoes in the small space and Manny goes stumbling backwards, slamming against the doors.

“I may be a bitch, but you’re a lousy ball playing, piece of shit. I never thought very much of you, but now it’s even less. Think twice before you mention my name again.”

Manny stands holding his cheek, no doubt hot from her hand, and Rami is stunned, completely silent and motionless. As for me, my arms are folded over my chest and my stance is wide as I lift my chin, proud of how fucking amazing she is.

With a smile on my face, I wait to see how the two of these assholes respond. The bell chimes and the car slows, putting a stop to our encounter and our ascension.

“Welp, fellas. This is us.” Rami shuffles Manny to the side so we can pass and they both track us. “Hope you choke on a dick. G’night.”

She turns around and waggles her fingers and watches them fade into nothing.

“Oh, baby. I don’t think they’re the ones who will be choking tonight.” I wrap my arm around her waist and tug her close.

She pulls the cardkey from her purse as we approach the door and shakes that perfect peachy ass with each step.

“Nice try, big guy, but I think I deserve a break after the last couple of days *and* after the steak tonight. No tonsil hockey for you. You’re gonna have to do it the old fashioned way.” The door beeps and we enter our room, me waddling behind her with my hands gripped tight to her waist.

“I’ll show you old fashioned.”

In the blink of an eye, I’m pressing her against the glass and ripping her shirt open.

“That was Chanel,” she pants out as I bite the juncture of her neck and collarbone.

“Now it’s nothing. Turn around and put your hands on the glass.” She does as I tell her and I unclasp her lavender lace bra. “Bend.”

Her hips jut out and her back is flat, arms stretched and palms pressing on the cool glass. She looks gorgeous and I’m

aching to be inside of her. Slowly I run my hand from her shoulder, down her spine, over the globes of her ass, and down her legs until I reach her stiletto clad feet.

“Lift,” I say, and tap her right foot.

I slide off her shoe then repeat on the other side leaving her in only her jeans. I reach around her and unbutton them and begin the process of rolling them over her ass and down her legs.

I stand back and admire her beautiful body in just her lavender thong. The fabric rests between her cheeks, right where I want to be.

Taking her panties in my fist, I pull on them until they are painfully splitting her ass in two. She moans and I pull tighter. I keep tugging on them until she’s on her tiptoes and her panties part her pussy lips.

“Jesus. This ass of yours is perfection. It seems such a shame to mark it. But...” with one hand still gripping her panties, my other one swings out and connects with her pale skin.

“Ooh,” she cries out. “What was...what was that for?”

“For flirting with Rami all those weeks ago in front of me. I know it was to make me jealous and baby, you succeeded.” Another slap rings out, matching handprints marring her creamy flesh. “You’re lucky I didn’t take you over my knee in that fucking club, Peaches. God, how I wanted to.”

One more slap on each cheek and her head falls between her shaking arms that are barely holding her up at this point. Her legs are trembling and only one toe from each foot touches the floor. I hold her weight up by only the flimsy piece of material covering her sweet, sweet cunt.

“Are you going to do that again?” I growl into her ear then clamp down on her earlobe.

“N-no.” Her voice shakes and I can’t tell if she wants to cry or let the orgasm that I know is edging take over.

“Be sure that you don’t because Vivian...” her chest is heaving as she tries to get a grip on her pounding heart. “Look at me.” I bark.

Slowly, and painfully, she turns her head to look at me over her shoulder. Tears pool in her eyes but there’s something else there.

Desire.

Need.

Hunger.

“If I find out you so much as bat an eyelash at another man, I’ll rip his heart out and feed it to him. Then I tear this ass up until you can’t sit. And I don’t mean with a spanking.” Her eyes go wide and round, startled by the thought of me fucking her tight hole. “If you want to know what it feels like to be split in half...try me, Peaches.”

“You’re an asshole,” she pants.

“Yet you love it.” She bites her bottom lip, confirming what I already know to be true.

With one more tug I rip her panties from her body and her feet slam down, her cries filling the room. My hand wraps gently around her neck, just enough to tether her to me, and I quickly unbutton and unzip my jeans, pulling them open to free my cock.

I run my fingers through her slit and find her soaked. “Oh, you naughty girl.” I slam into her with one hard thrust and it propels her forward, her head connecting with glass.

I tighten my grip on her throat and slam into her again while simultaneously pulling her back to meet me. She calls out for God, but she has to know that He can’t help her now. Again and again, I drive into her, hard and unforgiving.

“Ph-Phoenix. You forgot a condom,” she protests.

“Not happening. I saw you take your pill. I’m not ever fucking wearing one of those again.”

I slam into her again, rolling my hips to hit that little spot that makes her purr.

“Please! I need to c-come. Oh God.” The words sound like they’re being squeezed out of her. Maybe they are.

“You’ve been such a good girl, Peaches. Taking my cock so well,” I say between thrusts. “You scream, do you hear me? Let’s make sure those prick holes know who fucks you best.”

I let go of her throat and slide my hand down her taut stomach, stopping at her wet pussy and squeezing her clit.

“Holy motherfucking shit, Oh my....” The words get lost when her head falls back and her breath gets caught in her lungs.

I keep working her through the most intense orgasm I’ve ever seen. Eyes closed, breath held, body rigid and mouth slack. It makes the list of the most beautiful visions.

A loud gasp finally spills from her mouth and she sucks in air like she’s been without it for days and not seconds. The sight of her sends an electric shock through my body and my own orgasm fires off like a bullet.

“Fuuuck,” I roar, feeling the same elation and breath constricting force brought on by the best feeling in the world.

My cum fills her pussy and by the time I’m done and pull out, it’s dripping down her legs. She goes limp and I wrap my arm around her waist, hugging her close to me.

“So good. So *fucking* good, Peaches.” I let my fingers wander down to her cunt and slide between her lips.

She hisses when I swipe that cum leaking from her and push it back inside her, where it belongs. I kiss her head as she hangs almost lifeless in my arms. Like a sexy ragdoll.

“I’ll never get tired of fucking you, Vivian. *Never.*” My fingers trail up and down her arm and she shivers. “Let’s get you in a tub to soak.”

“Y-yes,” her breathy voice says.

I cradle her in my arms and she weakly throws hers around me. Nuzzling into her neck I whisper in her ear, “I’m falling hard, Peaches. Say you’ll be there when I land.”

Her eyes blink open and she slowly cups my face. “I’m already there.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

VIVIAN



PHOENIX and I fell into a pattern over the next two weeks and the routine of it made me...surprisingly not freak out. If you would've told me three months ago that I'd be in a relationship with the boy who destroyed my poor little virgin heart, I'd have twisted your titty and smacked you across the face.

Even my friends have already shipped us. "*You and Nix meeting us after the game?*" or "*Do you and Nix want to come to the ranch and barbecue tonight?*" and "*Are you sad that Nix is out of town and you won't see him for two more days?*" And the answer to all of those questions my friends is yes.

Yes we met them after the game. Yes we had a BBQ at the ranch. And yes, I missed him more than I should have for someone who was literally in my bed just hours ago.

So when my phone beeped with an incoming text, I practically hurdled over my chair to get to my phone that was sitting next to my keyboard.

Phoenix: Hey Peaches. Just landed. Already missing you. Send me a pic to help me get through the day. And make it sexy. <winking kiss emoji>

A smile claims proprietorship over my face and I flit my eyes around the news desks to see if anyone is watching. I don't usually smile and giggle when I get a text or phone call, and fucking Dan would be all over me if he saw me right now.

Me: Glad you're back on solid ground. If you want a pic, you know it's one for one. Show me yours and I'll show you mine. <smug face emoji>

I bite my lip, pocket my phone and make a retreat for the ladies room. If I go to one of the upper level restrooms, I can avoid running into all of the interns and lowly staff. Typically the executive floors are quieter, so I'll just sneak up, take a few pics, then stop and say hello to Harv like I was there for purposes other than sending my boyfriend naughty pics.

Boyfriend. Jesus. I'm still having a hard time saying that. Is it weird that I'm almost thirty one years old and Phoenix is my first boyfriend? I mean, there have been guys I've seen more than twice, but never for things like lunch or dinner or just midday texts.

So weird.

Deciding it's best to see as few people as possible, I use the stairwell and sprint up the stairs to the next floor. When I reach the door, I open it slowly and peek out. Seeing no one around, I make fast for the ladies' room and lock myself in a stall in the empty bathroom.

I should've worn a dress today because it would make undressing a lot easier and a lot less awkward should someone walk in. But, I'll make do.

Something told me this morning to slip on some sexy panties and bra when I was getting dressed. Maybe Phoenix had a tape of subliminal messages playing while we slept, but when I got out of the shower, I slipped on a black lace bra with demi cups that had boning, making them look like seashells. It's sheer, so my pink nipples can be seen through the fabric and they hardened when the cold refrigerated air hits them. My panties are the same sheer, black and lacey that the bra is, and the dark fabric pops off my pale skin.

I leave my red heels on because...c'mon. Black lace and red stilettos? Every man's teenage fantasy.

I prop my phone on the small shelf that sits on one side of the stall and set the timer. I fluff my hair, pose my heart out

and snap away.

Foot on the toilet. Hands over my center. Hands propping up my small boobs. A finger in the mouth. Looking over my shoulder. Fuck, I do an entire boudoir spread. When I feel I have enough pics, I quickly dress and grab my phone. When I exit the stall, I'm happy to see that it's still empty.

I run through the photos and pick three that are perfect and fire them off.

Me: Tag. You're it.<image> <image> <image>

I stick my phone back in my pocket and walk over to visit Harv. When I get to his office he's on the phone, yelling at some poor sap, but he motions me to come in and sit.

“Well I saw the entire interview and it was complete horse shit. There's nothing usable...well figure it the fuck out and have it to me by end of day.” He slams the phone down and takes a deep breath in and out.

“A newbie?” I ask.

He nods and reaches inside his desk, pulling out his candy bowl and setting it in front of me. “Of course, who else? It's the new correspondent for the ten o'clock segment. Poor thing is as useless as tits on a boar.”

I snort and grab a handful of candy. I've heard that phrase from him more than I can even count over the years. I'm sure he used it for me at some point, but being awesome means I moved through that phase quickly.

“So how's it going, Harv? Aside from dealing with idiots.”

“Not too bad kiddo.” He pops a few candies in his mouth and chews like he's cutting through tar. “How about yourself? That new boy toy of yours still hanging around?”

I roll my eyes at his smirk. He knows all about my personal dating habits and he too was shocked into speechlessness when I told him that Phoenix and I were a couple.

“Yes, he’s still around. And who are you to talk about boy toys? You are the original around here with your young man. How is the second Mr. Harvey? He still a pampered housewife?”

He tosses a candy and pings me in the forehead. The candy lands in my lap and I pick it up and eat it with the rest.

“I take that as a yes.”

“Is there something you needed or did you come in here solely to annoy me?” He rests his chin in his hands and stares at me with a bored expression.

My phone begins to buzz in my pocket and I just know Phoenix got my text. And before I can speak, it buzzes again..and again...and again.

“You need to get that? Seems like someone is trying to get a hold of you.” Harvey’s eyes point at my pocket where my still buzzing phone sits.

I wave my hand out in front of my face. “It’s probably a group text with the girls. You know how they get. Anyway,” I say and stand up. “I need to get back to work. I can’t sit around shootin’ the shit with you all day, Harv. Geez. Bye, love you.”

I speed out of his office and hear him mumble, “motherfucking heart attack.” I’m assuming the first part of his sentence had to do with me.

When I make it back to my desk and take my phone out of my pocket, I’m shocked to see *six* text messages. All from Phoenix.

Phoenix: Peaches! Holy fuck!

Phoenix: OMGod I want to bite that ass.

Phoenix: Booking a flight home. I need to fuck you right now. Can’t wait 2 more days.

Phoenix: Fuck Vivian. I am so hard right now picturing you on your hands and knees getting ready to take my dick.

Phoenix: I'm going to stick my cock so far down that slender throat of yours.

Phoenix: You wet, baby? Stick your fingers in my pussy and show me.

By the time I'm done reading the last text, I am wet. Soaked. And if it weren't for the fact that it would look suspicious if I headed off to the restroom again, I would do exactly as he's told me.

Phoenix: I said show me Vivian. <image>

"Oh...my...lanta." The picture that comes through has me squeezing my thighs.

Staring at me from my screen is the most gorgeous man I have ever laid my eyes on, his ball cap pulled low and his eyes almost black with intensity. He doesn't have to be standing next to me for me to hear the bite in his tone for not having obeyed his command.

He looks like he's sitting in the back of a car and I imagine him fisting his dick while he looks at the pictures I sent him.

I type out a quick response that I know will have his hand itching to tan my back porch red.

Me: Sorry, Nixy. Can't. I'm back at my desk. And you owe me a better picture than a growly face.

I set my phone aside and get to working on a few reports about the looming playoffs and the Wranglers toughest competition. I get lost in my work, not paying attention to the noises around me as I am so good at blocking them out, that it's only when my phone begins to ring that I stop.

I check the time and see that I've been buried in my work for an hour. I flip my phone over and see the caller id and wince. It's Phoenix and I know I'm in trouble.

“H-hello,” I answer, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Vivian. I told you to do something and you ignored me,” he growls, his voice low and menacing.

“I’m at work. I was lucky to get away to send you the pictures that I did. Which, by the way, I only got one grumpy face picture in return.” I prop my phone between my shoulder and jaw and go back to finishing my story.

“I don’t give a flying *fuck* if you were having lunch with the President. And obviously you haven’t checked your phone in some time because if you had, you’d have seen what I sent you.”

My hands freeze above the keyboard and I pull the phone off my shoulder. “You did? Hold on.”

I touch the screen and scroll to my text messages and see I have several unread from Phoenix, but only two of them have images attached. I ignore the texts that are no doubt him barking at me for not replying, and go straight to the pictures.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

The first picture I see is of Phoenix standing in front of a fogged up mirror in his hotel bathroom, gripping a towel to cover the good stuff. The next photo...

I gasp and feel my heart do the same. If it could talk, it would’ve said, “I’m out bitch. Good luck with your life.”

It’s the same pose—foggy mirror, hot guy—but this time instead of a towel that he’s holding, it’s his hard dick. Large and imposing. I take two fingers and zoom in and just about drop my phone when I see that a bead of pre-cum sits at the tip.

“Were you jacking off?” I ask quickly.

“Guess you’ll never know now, will you. See...if you would’ve been a good girl and done as I told you, we could’ve had some fun.”

“But I’m at work,” I protest. “I can take a lunch and-and—”

“No,” he snaps. “Now you’re going to be punished, Peaches.” I gulp at his gravelly voice.

“What are you going to do?” I ask, my nerves rising up my throat and out of my mouth.

He lets out a deep chuckle that warns of impending danger. “Oh, Peaches. You’ll just have to wait and see.”

The line goes dead and my knees turn weak. Whatever Phoenix has planned for me, I have a feeling that I won’t be sitting or walking straight for days.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

VIVIAN



THE PLANE'S wheels touchdown and immediately, passengers begin turning their phones back on. When my own reconnects with WiFi, I get a flurry of emails, texts from the girls—one from CeCe complaining about Luca and telling me she'll meet me for lunch in the hotel restaurant—and one from Phoenix. Six words...he sent a six word text and that has me quaking.

Phoenix: Black Mercedes. Driver's name is Richard.

I stare at the text, wondering if I should respond. I note the time and wonder if he's still at the hotel, or if he's left with the team. I decide to just leave it be and look for Richard after I collect my luggage.

I walk out into the warm California afternoon. Or rather, morning since Texas time is two hours ahead. With that it definitely means Phoenix is at the hotel and there is no chance I'm getting away with not getting my "punishment" before the game.

I look at the cars parked along the curb and see a black Mercedes further down the line. As I get closer, the driver steps out and moves towards me.

"Ms. Kelley?" he asks.

"Yes. Hi. Are you Richard?"

He gives me a small nod and a matching small smile. "Yes, ma'am. If you'll let me take your bag from here and please

have a seat,” he opens the back passenger door and I slip inside. “We’ll be on our way in a moment.”

He closes my door, places my suitcase in the trunk, steps back inside the driver’s seat and zooms off.

We made pleasant conversation on the rather long drive to the hotel—thanks California traffic—and pulled up to the hotel forty-five minutes later.

“Thank you so much, Richard. I hope the rest of your day goes well. And congratulations on the new baby,” I tell him as he hands me my luggage.

“Thank you, Ms. Kelley. And I would wish your team good luck but...” he holds out his hands and shrugs.

Laughing I reply, “I understand. I’d feel the same way if the number one team stepped into my city.” I smile and wink and he laughs, gets in his car and drives off.

Stepping into the lobby I see it’s unusually quiet but then again, it is a Wednesday mid-morning. Guests have probably either gone off to their meetings or are already out, exploring the city.

“Good morning. How can I help you?” The greeter at the check-in desk says.

“Hello. There should be a key waiting for me. Vivian Kelley.”

She types a few keys on her computer then asks, “and the name of the guest?”

“Arizona East,” I reply.

She smiles then pulls out a card key and an envelope and slides them both to me.

“Mr. East asked that I give you this as well and for you to be sure to read it before entering the room.” Her smile never falters but mine does.

“O-kaay. Thank you.” I take the key and envelope warily, and begin backing away.

“Have a wonderful day, Ms. Kelley.”

“Thanks. Same...to you.”

I rush to the elevator and press the twentieth floor once I'm inside, knowing that he always requests that floor, for some odd reason, and look at the card that rests in a small case for the room number.

As I start to ascend, I rip open the envelope and pull out a letter to read whatever it is that is so important that I must read it now.

Peaches-

When you enter the room, go straight for the closet and put on what is hanging in it. Leave everything else there. Only wear what I have picked out. There will be another envelope for you to read after you've changed. Follow it to a T.

Nix

THE LETTER BEGINS to shake and I realize it's because my hand is furiously trembling, but it's not from fright. In fact, it's the anticipation of what's to come that has my adrenaline spiking and my body tingling.

I fold the letter and step off the elevator and stride down the hall. As I pass each door, I feel the flutter in my stomach build until it seems there is a swarm of butterflies and wasps swirling inside of me.

Stepping up the to door, I swipe my card key and it beeps. I walk through and go straight for the closet, just as he said. I don't even take a minute to enjoy the luxurious room he's gotten for us.

Abandoning my suitcase, I slide the closet door open slowly like something evil is waiting inside for me. Light from the windows pours in and illuminates the dark, foreboding closet to showcase...

One lacey red thong and a pair of strappy red stilettos. The panties are clipped on a hanger and another envelope is stuck with it. I carefully pull both off the hanger and pocket the panties in my jeans while I read the second list of instructions.

You're such a good girl, doing as I say. Slip on the panties and ONLY the panties. Don't put on any other clothes. Grab that hair tie that I know you keep in your purse and put your hair in a high ponytail. Then, my juicy peach, slip on those fuck hot heels and lace them as high as they will go. When you're done text me "ready", then kneel by the end of the bed and put your hands on it like you're praying. Because baby...what I have planned for you is going to have you begging God for mercy.

~P

MY GULP IS loud and that swarm that was in my belly...it's a full on party with spiders and bees and anything else you can think of that makes me shiver and clench with a premonition that I done fucked up when I ignored his texts.

With quivering hands, I slowly undress and slip on the panties, then step into the heels and lace them up. The straps are so long they reach my knees.

My heels click across the floor as I step slowly to the edge of the bed and kneel as he has said. Remembering I needed to text him, I shuffle back to my purse, tell him I'm ready, then quickly return to my position.

Minutes pass that feel like hours when I hear the door click open. Slow heavy steps make their way in and I turn my head to witness the power that is Phoenix West.

"Don't look at me," he growls. "Keep your eyes on the bed and don't...move them."

I give him a slight nod, too afraid to talk, and stare at my hands that are now convulsing on their own accord.

The sound of his steps comes closer and I can see him in my peripheral. His hands are fisted at his sides so tight I can see the white of his knuckles. If the heat radiating off of his body is any indication of his mood, I am facing the right way for a brutal smack bottom.

He steps behind me and leans in. "You were a very bad girl, Peaches. I don't like when I'm disobeyed. And I *know* you like being my good girl." He runs a finger down my neck, eliciting an eruption of chills to spread across my body. "You like to act tough but baby...you fucking love when I treat you like my own personal toy. Don't you?"

I nod and open my mouth, but words won't come out.

My hair is fisted and my head jerked back. "Say it, Vivian."

"I-I'm your toy. I love it when you tell me what to do. I love it when you won't take no for an answer. And I love that I don't want to say no."

I can feel the devious grin that marks his face. I don't have to see it to know exactly what he looks like.

"Put your hands behind your back, my good girl."

My hands slowly wrap behind me and my fists meet in the middle. His hand smooths over my shoulder and down my arm and a shiver runs up my spine when his calloused finger traces each vertebrae. His face draws closer to me and I feel him place a soft kiss on the juncture of my neck and collarbone.

A hand runs up my leg and begins untying one shoe, then the other. I'm pulled backward, my back arching, and he begins wrapping my hand and leg together with the laces.

“Phoenix. What are you—”

A big hand clamps over my mouth, forcing the words back down my throat.

“This isn't a discussion, Vivian. If I need you to talk, I'll tell you. Got it?” I nod my head and try desperately to squeeze my legs together to ease the throbbing.

He returns to tying me until both arms are fastened tightly to my ankles. My body is bowed back, tits pushed to the sky and my ponytail brushing against my bare ass. My breathing begins to quicken and my heart pounds the beat of a thousand drums.

I blink my eyes and see Phoenix looming above me, now shirtless and wearing just his black boxer briefs. His tattoos are vibrant and the colors pop off of his smooth brown skin. He breathes heavily and his chest expands with each inhale. My body delights with what's about to come.

Phoenix runs a hand down my neck and chest and palms my breast...*hard*. His fingers roll and pinch my nipple until I hiss. He releases my breast and trickles his fingers down my stomach until he reaches my hot, wet core.

His hand covers it gently and then...*smack!* His hand smacks my throbbing pussy and swollen clit. My body wants to fold in half, but the way I'm tied up will only allow for my head to make movements. Another slap and I moan.

Slap...slap...slap.

I'm panting, eyes watering and a fierce hunger for him to finish the job.

“Your pussy is dripping down those creamy thighs of yours. I think I should clean you up.” In a flash, I’m gripped by my arms and tossed onto the bed, face down.

If I were in yoga class right now, I’d be getting praise for my ability to hold a perfect Dhanurasana pose.

I rock side to side on the soft mattress and begin to tip over when a warm hand steadies me.

“Jesus, Peaches. I can smell you.” His nose buries itself between my thighs and rubs all along my wet center. “I crave you, Vivian. I crave your smell, your taste, the way you smile and laugh, and I even crave what a brat you are. Every time you sass me with that mouth of yours, my dick grows harder. Fuck, I love it.”

I close my eyes and press my forehead into the mattress. He’s torturing me with his slight touches and slow pace. I feel like I’m dangling on the edge of a cliff. All I need is a slight push to send me careening into bliss.

Phoenix’s tongue licks up the inside of my thigh, slowly yet voraciously at once. He repeats his tonguing up my other thigh then presses it against no man’s land.

“Phoenix. I–”

“Don’t worry, baby. I know you can’t take me there...yet.”

He kisses each cheek before smacking it. One smack for every kiss. He’s not hard or rough. Just a small pat with a smaller bite. The kind that sends a delicious vibration straight to my pussy.

“Listen to me carefully, Vivian,” he whispers in my ear. “Things are going to get intense. I’m only doing this because I know you can handle it...and because you like it. But if it gets to be too much you tell me. I never want to hurt you, only bring you pleasure. Okay?” I nod my head. “Let me hear the words.”

I turn my head to the side so he can hear me. “I’ll yell *enough* if I need you to stop. But I won’t.”

His face comes into view, and God is it beautiful. “That’s my girl.” He presses his lips to mine in the first real kiss since he walked in the room.

My eyes flutter open when he pulls back, a serene smile on his face, I mark it as the moment I fell head over ass for Phoenix West.

With one last kiss on my nose, he rises from the bed and stands behind me. I wait for a moment then see his boxers go flying across the room. The next few moments are a shock to my entire system. My brain, my body, my knowledge of what is or isn’t reality. It’s a total mind and body fuck.

Phoenix uses his god-like hands to tug and rip the thin lace panties from my body. The scraps are tossed aside and I’m pulled to the edge of the bed.

The muscles in my arms and shoulders are beginning to sting with pain, but I won’t dare tell him or true to his word, he will stop.

“Tell me if I hurt you,” he growls, and before I can say ‘ok’, he wraps my hair around his fist and impales me to the hilt.

“Oh fuuuck!” I cry, the intrusion a surprise but not unwelcome.

“Goddammit, Peaches. Your pussy is fucking heaven.” His thrusts come hard and slow.

He pulls out until just his head rests inside of me and then, with the force of freaking freight train, he slams back in, catapulting me forward only to be dragged back. Push and pull, hard and slow, his body punishes mine. Every time we connect, my clit pulses, that beautiful orgasm sitting just out of reach. I can see it. I can hear it.

I want it.

Like the mind reader he’s become, he reaches a hand under my stomach until he finds my aching clit and begins rubbing it in time with his thrusts. Slow, then faster and faster, until he hits the perfect note that makes me sing like I’m goddamn Billie Holiday.

“Phoenix. OH..MY..GOD! Keep, yes. Don’t—” my words cut off as does the air I’m breathing in when my body takes flight.

No other man has ever made me feel like I’ve reached the highest peak. I feel the best elation, see the most beautiful sights, and it literally takes my breath away. For a few moments, my soul leaves my body and soars in another atmosphere. It can see my physical body, but my consciousness is on a whole other plane.

I begin to awaken from my blissful state as the sounds and frantic movements of Phoenix working towards his climax fill the space like a soundtrack.

“Peaches. Fuck fuck fuck!” He jerks in time with his wails and right before he explodes, he wraps a hand around my throat and anchors me to him.

He roars his release into the otherwise silent room like a beast crying out his victory. He’s my beast. The hero and the villain in my fucked up fairytale.

He finally frees my neck from his firm grip and falls to the bed, heaving and dripping with sweat.

I try to adjust myself to a more comfortable position, but the way he’s hog tied me makes it impossible.

“Oh shit, baby. I’m sorry,” he says, and quickly unties me.

My arms and legs flop like lifeless noodles that were cooked too long and are now utter mush. I can only imagine what I must look like with my face pressed into the bed, my body flushed from being used, and shoes hanging on by my toes. At least I think they’re still on. The blood begins to circulate and I wait for the feeling to return.

Phoenix immediately straddles me, his still very impressive dick laying heavily on my ass, and starts to rub my aching body. Shoulders, arms, hands, fingers. Then he moves down my body and pays the same attention to my legs, ankles and feet. When he’s finished, he lays on his side once again and tucks me into him. I bury my head into his chest and curl my legs up, my knees touching my stomach.

“Damn, that was amazing.”

“Mhm,” I mumble, barely able to get that small sound out.

“Hey, Peaches. Remember when I said I was falling?”

I blink my eyes open and look up at him. “Yeah.” The words are raspy and my throat burns from drought.

He works his fingers through my ponytail and carefully removes the rubberband. “Well, I fell and I hit the ground hard. What I want to know is...are you there, too?”

The vulnerability in his eyes has me confessing my truths. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

His arms band around me tighter and I wrap mine around his hard body.

“I love you, Vivian. I’ve never said that to another woman, and I don’t plan to say it to anyone but you.”

I rub my head against his chest like a cat seeking affection. “I love you too, Phoenix. You have me. I’m bound to you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

PHOENIX



I PITCHED another amazing game the night I told Vivian I loved her. It was a euphoric, almost freeing, feeling. I'd never told a woman I loved her other than my mom, sister and niece, and it was most definitely not the same way I tell Vivian. I never felt even an inkling of love for anyone. But when I felt something that was akin to a gut punch, I knew it was the realization that I was in love with Vivian.

I wasn't scared when it hit me. I wasn't even worried that she wouldn't feel the same way because I think we were both experiencing these new emotions at the same time. I recognized the same confusion and epiphany on her face.

That euphoria took me straight into September where the team was sitting on the top of the standings, earning us a first-round bye. With my lucky charm by my side, I had no doubt that we'd be celebrating a championship come October.

It was Friday and a day off for the team between series and after my training session and a little film review, I had plans to spend the evening with Viv and the rest of the crew. We were meeting at Camille's house tonight, to take advantage of getting in some pool time.

I was getting ready to walk out the door when I got a text from Aric.

Aric: Got the job! Thanks so much for referring me. I'm sorry I was so cranky about it all. I just really hated the ideal of not working with you anymore.

I had found an ex-teammate who was no longer playing, but was now deep into running a foundation with his wife. They were in desperate need of an assistant to help them organize things and obtain donors, and I knew this would be a perfect fit for Aric. It would allow him to utilize his great skills and stay in the city he loved.

Me: I'm really glad you got it. I knew you would.
Please keep in touch and if you ever find yourself
in Texas, HMU.

I pocketed my phone and headed off to my training session with my duffle stuffed to the brim with clothes for a weekend at Vivian's.

I had already started leaving certain things at her place and less and less in my suite. I basically came here to pack more things and check in for mail or messages.

I needed to find my own place, but I just didn't have the time, still not having found an assistant. I wasn't putting too much priority on it since the two most important things right now were baseball and Vivian. That's all that mattered until the season was over.

But right now, I needed to get my ass to the practice field.

I HOLD Vivian's hand in mine as we walk up to Camille's front door. I have a large bouquet of flowers for Camille and Vivian carries a bag with beer for Vaughan and stuff for drinks for her and the girls that I can't even remember the names of.

I go to ring the doorbell but Vivian gives me a side glance. "We don't ring doorbells. That's like knocking at your mom's house."

She shakes her head and opens the door, walking right in without announcing our arrival.

"Hellooo," Vivian calls out.

The sound of feet pounding on the tile grows louder until a small figure comes sliding into view.

“Miss Vivian!” Dagen shouts and runs to us.

She wraps her arms around Vivian’s waist like they’re long lost friends and squeeze each other with equal force.

“Hi Mr. Phoenix,” she says, turning to me when she releases Vivian.

“You don’t have to call me Mr. Just Nix. Yeah?” I hold up my hand for a high five and she pulls back and connects with as much heat as an eleven year old can muster.

“Okay, Nix. Cami and dad are in the backyard arguin’ over who’s better on the grill, and Uncle Bishop is laughing at ‘em. Come on!”

We laugh and follow behind Dagen and I get a quick look around.

“I’ll show you around later. But the real star is the backyard. It’s a damn oasis. I asked if she would adopt me but apparently it’s too weird.” Vivian rolls her eyes and smirks as she tugs me through the entry and into the family room and kitchen.

She places the bag down on the island but I keep the flowers in my hand, and we walk out the large glass doors to the back patio where, just as Dagen said, Camille and Vaughan bicker over the grill while Bishop laughs his ass off.

“Babe. I’m the man. Please at least give me that.” Vaughan holds his hand out to Camille who holds a large pair of BBQ tongs in her hand.

“Vaughan, honey. I love you. You are amazing at so many things. But cooking, in any capacity, is not your forte. You stick to tossing bales of hay and showing off that sexy body of yours, and I’ll cook. ‘K?” She pops up on her toes and kisses him on the lips before spinning around and coming face to face with Vivian and me. “You’re here,” she shouts and wraps her arms around Vivian.

Bishop stands up and joins us. Vaughan shakes my hand, and Bish pulls me in for a hug.

“Are these for me, Nixy? You shouldn’t have.” Bishop bats his eyelashes and pretends to smitten when he sees the flowers in my hand.

“Nice try, asshole. Your mug is too ugly to earn you flowers. These are for Camille.” I release Bishop and extend my arm to hug Camille. “Hello beautiful. How are you?”

“Oh wow. These are gorgeous. Thank you, Phoenix. I absolutely love peonies,” she beams.

“You know, I may have heard that somewhere.” I wink at Bishop and Vaughan who told me that when I texted them yesterday.

“Here, Sunshine. I’ll take those and put them in water. You and Red talk.”

Vaughan takes the flowers from her and walks inside, and Bishop and I follow.

He sees the beer we brought and thanks me, then proceeds to find a vase and set the flowers in.

“This is a great house. It’s exactly what I’m looking for. I’m tired of living in that damn hotel.” My eyes wander around the amazing kitchen and in all of the beautiful details.

“It is. And if I can convince Cam to move in with me well, you can buy it,” Vaughan says.

“How’s that going?” Bishop asks, twisting the top on a beer, the hissing echoing through the vast kitchen.

Vaughan scrunches an eye and teeters his hand back and forth. “Not well, but you know me. I’m not givin’ up until we’re loading up her stuff in my truck.”

I take a beer for myself and we continue to talk about baseball and various other shit that guys talk about.

The rest of the evening is full of laughter and great conversation as it always is with this group. Even CeCe, who lately has been in a rather uptight mood, is all smiles. Women get tossed in the pool, games of chicken are played, and Dagen gets rocket launched by all of us until our arms are weak.

At one point in the night, I sit back and look around at this new found family and realize I want this all the time. I want Vivian by my side, and I want us making memories with our friends. An idea hits me and I'm quickly reaching for my phone.

"Bish," I call out. When he looks at me I wave him over. "You know a good tattoo parlor?"

"Yeah. A couple. You looking to add more ink?"

"I am. Tomorrow, hopefully."

He tilts his head and pulls his brows together. "Why the rush?"

I shrug and tell him, "just want to get it done before the season gets even more hectic. It's a good luck symbol," I explain.

He tells me the name of two places and I excuse myself to make a call.

I'm able to convince the one Bishop told me to try first to open the shop early for a private session. It really wasn't all that hard, actually. I told them who I was and then promised some pics for their social media and a mention of the studio on mine.

With a satisfied smile, I go back to enjoying the evening then take my girl home where I fuck her into a comatose sleep.

I WAKE to Vivian snoring and sleeping off the sex and booze hangover. Her hair is a mess, looking like wild flames spread across her white sheets. She's nude with the sheet covering only her sweet cunt while leaving her gorgeous tits on full display. One arm is thrown over her head, and the other is draped over her stomach.

I want so badly to crawl under the sheets and lick her into oblivion, but I need to get to the tattoo studio soon.

I carefully get off the bed and do my morning routine. When I'm dressed with a change of clothes for after the game

in my duffle, I make my way quietly into the room and kneel beside her.

Kissing her forehead I whisper, “Peaches. I have to go.”

Her eyes flutter and one of them cracks open. “Wha-what?” she rasps, her voice thick with sleep.

“I have an appointment before I head to the field. Call you later?” she closes her eyes again, and nods. “Okay, baby. Love you.” She mumbles something that faintly sounds like ‘*I love you, too*’ then falls back to sleep.

Her snores grow louder as I walk out of the room and leave for the day.

“AND YOU’RE ALL DONE,” Jax, the tattoo artist tells me. “Let me grab you a mirror.”

He swipes at the mixture of blood and ink that is left on my chest and grabs a handheld mirror for me.

I hold it up and see the lifelike tattoo popping against my dark skin and the other black ink.

“It’s perfect. Thanks, man. I really appreciate it.” I hand him back the mirror and he covers my tattoo with cream and plastic wrap.

He gives me the usual instructions on care and what not to do, then I put my shirt back on and we take some pictures. He got a few of the tattoo before he covered it up, but I asked him to wait to post them until tomorrow. I didn’t want the person this is for to see it before I had the chance to show them.

We say goodbye and I promise to make him my go-to tattooist, then head off to the field. Luckily, I’m not set to pitch tonight so I’ll have time to heal up a bit before my next start. But even if I do get called on, I’ll be fine.

I drive away with a shit eating grin on my face and a content feeling. It’s a feeling of completeness, of being whole. And that’s what Vivian has done for me.

She’s made me whole.

CHAPTER THIRTY

VIVIAN



THE WRANGLERS LOST THEIR GAME, but only barely. They definitely should have had Phoenix on the mound. He would never let those four guys get a hold of his pitches. But it's just one game and it doesn't even make a dent in their wins over the other teams in their division.

I do my usual post game interviews then wait for Phoenix by his truck in the players lot. I grabbed an Uber to the station and came over with my camera guy knowing that I'd just be going home with Phoenix.

He was playful this evening in the dugout, and it had the entire team in good spirits despite the loss. Something changed in him within the span of twenty-four hours and I couldn't figure out what it was. It wasn't anything that I think anyone else would notice, but I did.

He smiled wider, stared at me longer, and when no one was looking his kiss was gentle as was his touch.

I'm scrolling through my phone when I feel his presence. Looking up, I spot him walking out the door with a few other players, their mood jovial. He shakes their hands then sets his sights straight at me.

"Hey, baby," he says and pulls me into his arms.

"Well hello there, stud." I take his face in my hands and lay a big kiss on his lips.

I feel myself falling deeper and deeper into his stratosphere. I just want to be consumed by him and it scares

me how much I lose myself when he's near. Hell, I feel the same when he isn't near.

If I'm not with him, I'm thinking of him or watching videos of him or reading an article about him. It's like I've reverted back to that naive college girl who cut out articles about him and his team and saved them. Those quickly met the burn pile after the fateful night on spring break.

Now I don't have to hide my secret obsession. I can take a picture of him whenever I want, and even daydream about a life beyond today. It may be a silly young girl's dream, but I can't stop it either way.

"Let's get outta here. I have something to show you," he whispers against my lips.

He opens the door and picks me, tossing me inside and buckling me in like a child.

"I can do that, you know." He shrugs and kisses my nose before running around the front and hopping in the drivers and peeling off.

"OKAY, what's this surprise you have to show me?" I ask, the moment we walk in the door.

He takes my hand and pulls me towards my bedroom. We walk in the lowly lit room and he sits me on the edge of my bed, then proceeds to unbutton his dress shirt.

"Babe. I've seen your body. It's a work of art, okay. I've got it memorized, so this is not a surprise," I joke.

He doesn't say anything, just continues to unbutton this shirt, then his cuffs. He lets it drop from his body and that's when I see a bandage on his chest.

"What happened?" I ask, quickly jumping from the bed.

"Nothing bad." He takes my hand in his and guides my fingers to work the tape off.

Piece by piece I peel it away until it's all gone and he pulls the gauze away, to reveal a new tattoo.

“Phoenix...” my hand flies up to cover my mouth.

“Like it?” He asks, looking down at the brightly colored peach that rests amongst his other ink.

“Why’d you...this...this isn’t for me, right?”

“Of course it is, Peaches.”

“But that’s permanent!” I screech, suddenly smacked with the realization that he essentially has me branded onto him forever.

“Wow. You’re quick, Sherlock.” His hoists me up into his arms, my butt perched on his forearms, and I’m careful not to touch the tender flesh.

“But why, Phoenix? Why would you do that?” My eyes search his deep brown ones, and I immediately get lost in them.

“Cause I love you, baby. What I feel for you is something that I have never experienced before in my life, and I don’t think I ever will. If we were to end tomorrow, I wouldn’t regret it because I won’t ever be able to erase you from my memory, and this makes it so I can’t ever erase you from my life.”

Tears start to form in my eyes and I tell myself not to let them fall. I don’t cry over men. There was only one boy I cried over, and he’s the very man that’s bringing me to the edge of tears again.

“But-but...” I choke out.

“Just tell me you love me. That’s all I want to hear.”

I swallow down the ball of thick emotion and breathe deep. “I love you, Phoenix.”

His smile spreads like wildfire across his handsome face, and his chocolate eyes shine. He buries his face in my neck and says, “my girl.”

He kisses my cheeks, my lips, my neck, and slowly peels my clothes off. He cherishes me all night with a slow, sweet

fuck complete with eye contact and whispered “I love you’s” said between us.

Talk about a never before experience. I’m so glad my heart waited for Phoenix.

“I NEED ADVICE,” I tell the girls as we sit down to a long postponed brunch.

Mine and CeCe’s schedules have been so crazy that it’s now been three weeks since we had our weekly girls lunch. Before she and I were traveling, this was a non-negotiable and only varied on day or time depending on our baseball schedule.

“What about?” CeCe asks.

“Definitely not from you. Or you either, Cat. Sorry.” I point my eyes to Cami and say, “you. I need to know what the hell I’m supposed to do with this...relationship thing. Like, we said I love you, he got a tattoo for me—”

“He got a tattoo of you?!” the three of them somehow shout collectively.

“Not *of* me. Just...a symbol.” I flip open my menu and browse the drinks because what I’m about to spill requires alcohol.

CeCe leans forward, resting her chin on the back of her hand, and asks, “what symbol? An eggplant splitting a peach in two?”

Cami and Cat laugh but I don’t.

“Shut the fuck up,” Cami blanches.

“Nooo. Not exactly Just a peach...because he calls me Peaches.”

“Blech,” CeCe says and pretends to gag.

“Peaches?” Cat asks.

And Cami coos, “awwwww. So sweet.”

I continue to scan the drinks and avoid making eye contact with them. “He said I have an ass like a juicy peach and it makes him want to eat it,” I rush out.

“Vivian Rhona...are you embarrassed?” Cat’s voice is teasing and yes, my cheeks blush.

“I wouldn’t say I’m embarrassed. It’s just...I’ve never had a guy say that to me when he wasn’t actively fucking me. And no one has ever said my ass was like a juicy peach. The closest anyone ever got was ‘*damn baby, I could squeeze these melons all day*’ while a guy titty fucked me,” I tell them, using my lowest octave.

CeCe snorts, then asks, “well, did he?”

I finally put the menu down and find all three of them staring at me like a science experiment.

“No. When he was done, he pulled up his pants, said thanks and then I left.”

“Not titty fucker. *Phoenix*. Did he eat your ass like a juicy peach?”

Wow. Cami wasn’t kidding. When you’re the one in a relationship, having your personal details shouted across a restaurant is quite humiliating.

“I...he...,” I stutter.

“He did. He *so* did,” Cat laughs. “Was it good? I’ve never had a guy do that to me. Kinda grosses me out, if I’m being honest. I mean, if it’s planned in advance, you have time to flush and clean and make sure your plate is sparkling. But a spontaneous ass eating...that could get tricky if you’ve had too much coffee or, God forbid, are bloated.”

“Eww,” Cami cringes.

“Okay, that’s enough of that. I’m refusing to answer that question on the grounds that this is just too gross for brunch. Dick, pussy...okay. Ass eating...that’s a girls night discussion.”

The waitress chokes that very moment to walk up to our table for our order.

“So sorry,” Camille apologizes. “Can we have one more minute?” The poor traumatized waitress nods and walks off.

“Okay, now that the poor girl’s ears are bleeding, can I ask my question?”

“Yes. Please proceed,” Cami rolls her hand for me to continue.

I huff and close my eyes. “I’m-thinking-of-asking-Phoenix-to-move-in-with-me,” I rush out.

I crack an eyelid and see three faces much like those monkey’s people have as tchotchkes on their bookshelves. CeCe has her head hanging and her hand covering her eyes like she has a headache. Cat’s mouth is hanging open wide enough that, well...Phoenix could probably fit his dick inside. And Cami is staring at me like I’ve dropped down from another planet.

“You’re...you’re serious?” Cami asks and I nod my head. “You know you can take it slow. You don’t have to jump from first kiss to living together all in one leap. There are several steps between the two.”

“I know. I mean, I don’t since I’ve never had a boyfriend before, but I know I don’t have to ask him to move in. But he lives in a hotel and spends pretty much every minute he’s not at the field or on the road at my place. And yes, we haven’t been together that long, but I feel like our relationship has been fast tracked because of the amount of time we spend together. At work, at home, on the road. It’s a lot and—”

“Slow down Rambling Rita and take a breath.” CeCe breathes in and out until I’m mimicking her and finally chill. “Okay, babe. Listen. Relationships are like buttholes; no two are the same. If you are ready to take the next step with Phoenix, then you take it. Just because Cam is giving poor Vaughan metaphorical blue balls by not moving in with him, doesn’t mean you have to move at a grandma driving to church on Sunday speed.”

“But what if he freaks out and says no? How embarrassing would that be.” My panic starts to rise and I can feel the color

of my chest turning red and splotchy.

“Viv...the guy got a fucking tattoo of your ass on his chest. He’ll say yes.” Cat lifts her hand to get the waitresses attention. “Ask him to move in, eat ass, choke on a dick, and live happily ever after. Can we order now? I am so hungry.”

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is why my friends are the best of the best.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



“PEACHES & CREAM” - 112

VIVIAN SIGNS off from her broadcast after our interview, and the red light on the camera turns off.

“Good job, baby,” I tell her, with a kiss to the cheek and a hard slap on her ass that ends with a squeeze.

Her little body jolts and she practically falls right off her stool. I reach out to grab her and she steadies herself with a hand on my chest which she immediately pulls away like it’s been burnt by a fire.

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry. Did I hurt you? Is it okay?”

“Peaches, I’m fine. You didn’t hurt me. Relax.”

She’s been jittery and off all night. In between innings, I’d sit close by and share a piece of gum with her, but her banter was off. She’s usually so witty and quick on her comebacks, but she was definitely off her game. And now I’m worried there’s more to it.

“Okay. Good. It’s only been a few days and I don’t know how long it takes for tattoos to heal.” She steps down and now I’m looking down at the top of her head instead of looking down into her eyes.

“C’mere,” I tell her and pull her to me. “What’s going on? You seem like something’s bothering you. Are we okay?”

Yes, I sound like a needy bitch but maybe I am. It took me so long to break down her walls and get her to go from “I hate you” to “I love you”. I don’t want to imagine what it’ll feel like to have her pulling back now. I assume it would feel like having my heart cut out with a rusty spoon and emulsified until it’s goop.

A bit graphic, but totally necessary and accurate.

“Um, well. I just...I need to talk to you for a second, if you can.” She weaves her fingers together nervously and I gulp.

This is it. She’s going to end it. And right after I got a fucking tattoo for her.

“Sure,” I tell her through gritted teeth and a stiff jaw.

“Okay. Here it goes.” She takes a few quick breaths in and out then closes her eyes and rattles off, “doyouwanttomoveinwithme? I know you’re living in the hotel but not, because you’re always at my place and most of your stuff is there and you said you were going to start looking for your own place but maybe you just live with me or at least stay there until you find your own and quit wasting money even though I know you have a shit load but even rich peop—” I grip her jaw in my hand and tug her to me until my lips are clamped tightly to hers.

Just a second ago I was feeling sick to my stomach thinking that we were over. And now I’m standing, kissing my girl who just asked me to move in with her. What a fucking day.

Her dainty arms wind their way around my neck and I lift her off the ground squeezing tight around her waist. I hear some whistles and catcalls from around us, but I’m so lost in my girl that I can’t bring myself to care about anything else.

My hand moves to hold the back of her head and I begin walking us towards the dugout.

“Hey, um, guy. Viv is still holding the mic,” her cameraman says.

I reach behind me and grab the mic cord and snap it out of her hands, tossing it to him and never breaking our connection.

“Phoenix, you need to put me down. I need to help Luis,” she mumbles and I eat her words.

“Nope. We’re going to the showers. I need to fuck you now.” She pushes on my chest and begins to wiggle her legs. “Okay, okay.”

I stop and put her down and see that we’re halfway between home plate and first base, and plenty of fans are still around, filming us with their ever ready phones.

She straightens her blouse and runs her fingers through her stands of fire, and I run my thumb across her lips that are smudged with lipstick.

“Red’s your color, Nixy,” she winks.

I swipe the back of my hand across my mouth and come away with streaks of red from Vivian’s lipstick. She laughs and pulls out a napkin from her pocket and begins wiping my face clean.

I stare at her face as her eyes concentrate on cleaning me, and I can’t help the smile that grows.

“Did you really just ask me to move in with you?” My question halts her movements and her eyes freeze on my mouth.

“It’s...so you don’t have to pay for a hotel room. It’s silly since you’re always at my place, ya know,” she says and goes back to wiping my face.

“Only to help me save money, huh?”

“Mhm.”

“Okay, Peaches. I’ll move in with you, but only so I can save money.” I watch her bite her lip to hold back a smile and my heart does a victory lap.

“Good.” She makes one last swipe then drops her arms. “Now. Go shower ‘cause you stink and let’s go home. I need food.”

I kiss her cute little pixie nose and repeat, “let’s go home.”

“HOW ARE you so good at making cobbler?” Vivian scoops a heaping spoon of peach cobbler and vanilla ice cream into her mouth.

She looks like a dream sitting here on the couch in nothing more than a sports bra and a pair of too big sweatpants rolled at the waist, making her small waist appear to be even slimmer. Her red hair is piled on top of her head in a big, floppy bun, and her eyelashes have been washed of their mascara and shine the same bright red as her hair. In the glow of her lamps, she’s like my little firefly. Freckles, bright eyes and a spitfire attitude.

I stick my tongue out and lick the ice cream that’s dribbled onto her lip. “You forget where I was raised? Momma wouldn’t allow me or Sierra to move out until we both knew how to cook some basic meals and her cobbler. She said it would help Sierra keep a man, and help me hook a gal. Her words, not mine.”

She chuckles and licks the spoon. “Well please thank your momma then ‘cause I’m hooked.” I smile and steal the bite before she can pop it in her mouth. “Hey!”

“Share, baby. Sharing is caring,” I say with a pout.

“This is me caring. I care that you stay in tip-top shape so you can lead the team to a pennant so much that I’m eating all of this for you so as not to be tempted by it. You. Are. Welcome.” She does a bow of her head and scoops another spoonful into her mouth.

“You little brat.” I surge and she falls back onto the couch, cobbler and cold ice cream spilling over her bare stomach.

“Oh shit! That’s cold!” she shouts.

I grip her waist and hold her in place as she tries to wiggle away. Instead of letting her go, I dip my face and suck the sweet cream from the concave of her stomach. Her breath hitches and I can only imagine it’s from the mixture of the cool ice cream and warmth of my tongue as I lap her up.

“Mmm. This is almost as good as you,” I tell her and look up through my lashes.

Her hands are gripped tight to the arm of the couch above her head, and she stares down at me, watching every swipe across her flesh. I curl my fingers into the waistband of her sweats and slowly tug them over her hips.

She pushes up, allowing me to slip them over her perfect ass and inch by inch, her perfection is revealed. Smooth, pale flesh, her pussy waxed bare and her pink lips juicy and glistening.

I slide one leg out then the other, and drop her pants on the floor. My fingers swirl in the mixture of sticky sweet cobbler, and I drag a handful down her body. I smear it all over her slick cunt and stare at my masterpiece.

“Look at my beautiful pussy. So sweet,” I growl, then glide my tongue through her folds. “Fuck, baby.”

She moans when I suck on her swollen clit, the medley of tastes exploding in my mouth. I sink into the couch and prop the backs of her thighs over my shoulders, then bury my face where it belongs.

I eat my sweet Peaches covered in peaches and cream and feel like I’ve fallen into a blissful dream. My tongue circles her clit and my fingers sink inside her heat. Every flick, every curl and twist of my fingers elicits a new sound, each more glorious than the last.

Her nails dig into my scalp and tug at my short strands. “Phoenix,” she cries and lifts her hips, begging me to go deeper and faster.

I give my girl what she needs and use my fingers to work her g-spot while my mouth sucks her clit.

“Oh, yes. Yes. Nix...” she wails.

I feel her drench my mouth when she comes and it spurs my own moaning. I grind my rock hard dick into the cushions, searching for the smallest relief. Vivian’s legs begin to quake as her orgasm continues to thunder through her until she’s panting and her grip loosens on my hair.

I rise from between her legs and see her laying back with one arm thrown over her eyes and a huge smile on her

gorgeous face.

“Best...cobbler...ever,” she rasps.

I quickly stand and scoop her up into my arms. We’re both a delicious mess and I stride us straight for the shower.

“Yes it was. But now it’s time for you to be a good girl and get on your knees.” I reach into the glass enclosed shower and flip the water on, and slide my boxers down my legs.

My dick is solid and standing tall and already leaking precum from the tip.

“Want me to suck you dry, Nixy?” she purrs and she peels her bra off, freeing her perky tits.

I shake my head. “No, baby girl. I want you to choke on my dick until I’m ready to bend you over and fuck the holy Jesus out of you.”

She giggles a nervous laughter and I love that teensy bit of fear. Peaches like to play mouse to my lion and tonight... tonight I’m devouring her whole.

WE LAY IN BED, her head resting on my chest and her fingers circling her tattoo in a soft, soothing caress. My fingers work through her long strands and I feel full, content, with a peace I haven’t known before.

“So do you think the thrill of meeting up in the hotels in other cities will lose their appeal now that you’re moving in?” Her voice is tender and affectionate, so unlike the Vivian I first met when I arrived here.

“Peaches, nothing that involves you will ever lose its appeal. We’ll just have to be...creative.”

“Oooh. Role playing. I like it,” she jokes.

Or maybe it’s not a joke. *God, I hope it’s not a joke.*

“We’ll be in Oklahoma next week. How about finding me a sweet cowgirl who’s looking to learn how to ride?” I waggle my brows, making her laugh.

“I think I can do that.” She props her chin on my chest and stares up at me. “I never thought in a million years that I’d be here with you. Not even my young foolish heart imagined it.”

I smooth her hair away from her beautiful face and rub my thumb across her cheek. “Neither did I, baby. But damn am I grateful.”

Her big smile shines in the moonlight that streams in and she kisses me.

“Love you, Phoenix West.”

“I love you, Peaches,” I tell her before I drift off to sleep and dream of our future.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

VIVIAN



“HEARTBURN” – *Wafia*

I WALK through the hotel lobby with sunglasses and a cowboy hat on like I’m the western version of Carmen SanDiego.

I texted Phoenix earlier that my flight was delayed and I’d just grab an Uber when I got in. I wasn’t delayed and obviously he never checked.

Instead, I got here on time, locked myself into a stall at the airport, and made a quick costume change. From everyday passenger, to sultry cowgirl in a snap.

I wait in line behind a woman who’s bleach blonde hair is in desperate need of a root touch-up, and who should rethink her outfit choice. It’s slightly warm in Oklahoma, but not warm enough for a spaghetti strapped, silky mini dress and heeled sandals. It’s September for God’s sake.

Not to mention, it’s eleven o’clock in the morning. Definitely not brunch attire. That means she’s here for an “afternoon delight” with someone.

I pull out my phone to scroll through messages when I hear something I wish I never had.

“Hi. I’m checking in. The reservation is under Arizona East.”

Arizona East.

The name Phoenix uses when we make reservations so that he doesn't have to worry about crazy fans tracking him down. But the name is so unusual that there's no way this woman could be some rabid fan who happens to be good at the guessing game.

The guy at the front desk types away on his keyboard, then looks up and smiles at the woman.

"Here you go," he says, handing her a keycard. "Enjoy your stay."

Before blondie can turn around, I make fast for the elevator bank and wait for the doors to slide open.

When they do, I step in with the woman on my heels, and press the button for the twentieth floor. It's the floor we always stay on.

The Wranglers, of course, have rooms for the team when they travel. But I'm able to make my own reservations and the station reimburses me for it. Phoenix refuses to let me pay for the room, always making reservations himself, and he never takes the money I try to send him after each stay. He said this was for us and he wasn't about to let the station pay for it. Meanwhile, my per diem account is sitting with a hefty balance. Phoenix told me to spoil myself and spend it on shoes and more panties he can appreciate.

Well homeboy is about to be on the receiving end of my shoe when I stab him with it if this hoochie ends up where I think she's going.

"What floor?" I ask her when she steps in.

"Twenty, please." Her voice is nasally and too high pitched.

"Love your dress," I say in fake admiration.

She runs her hand over her giant boobs and down her body and over the soft pink material.

"Thanks. It's for my man. I'm surprising him and he loves when I wear this color."

"Hm," I reply and bite the inside of my cheek.

I grab my phone and pretend to be occupied with what was on the screen. I want her to walk ahead of me when we get to our floor so that I can follow behind.

The elevator stops, the doors open, and she walks out. I follow her with my heart in my throat, choking me with nervousness.

Please don't let it be him.

I stay a few paces behind her and when she looks over her shoulder, I pretend to be searching my purse for my keycard.

She stops in front of door twenty-thirteen and I go to the one just across the hall. I keep my head down, focusing on every sound that comes from behind me.

The door makes a beeping sound when she scans her card, then I hear the lock click. She pushes the door open and a voice carries through it.

“Baby? Is that you?” the voice says, and I spin around to grab the door before it slams shut. “Get over here so I can fu-who are you?”

“Hey babe. Did you miss me?” she says, purring like a porn star.

I keep my steps soft and walk up behind her. Phoenix stands there, naked as the day he was born and holding a baseball hat to cover his junk.

“Yeah, *babe*. Did you miss her?” I step into view and Phoenix looks like he’s seen the ghost of Christmas past.

“Oh my God. Did you follow me here?” Blondie asks.

“Viv. This isn’t-who are you and why are you in my room?”

“What do you mean? You gave me your travel schedule and said you couldn’t wait to see me.” She walks closer to him and rakes her nails over his chest.

I watch with bile in my throat as her long, fake pink nails scratch over the skin, over *my* tattoo, of the man I love.

I stare blankly at him, waiting to see how he's going to play this one.

"Nice. Couldn't get rid of your collection, huh?"

"I'm his girlfriend," she snarls at me. "Who are you anyway, stalker?"

"Shut the fuck up, lady!" He bellows. "You've never been my... Just get out of here before I call security."

"Happily," I say and begin to retreat.

"Vivian, no. Come back. I swear I don't know her."

"Phoenix," she calls after him.

I don't hear the rest of their conversation because I let the door slam behind me and start to walk back to the elevators.

When they open, I move quickly to get inside. Rapid thuds barrel down the hall, and I jam my finger into the lobby button, trying to get the doors to close before he reaches me.

"Vivan. Please. Wait."

Phoenix comes into view, wearing only a pair of basketball shorts. The doors begin to close and he runs faster, but not fast enough. I watch as Phoenix grows smaller and smaller before he's out of sight completely.

My heart is beating at such a rapid pace I worry for a moment that I might have a heart attack. That or a massive panic attack is about to hit me with the force of a tsunami.

I need to get out of this hotel and to the airport immediately.

I can tell Harvey that I've come down with horrible stomach flu. Or food poisoning. Anything that will get me out of this state and as far away from Phoenix as possible. I pull out my phone and begin searching for the next available flight, and find one leaving in two hours. That's plenty of time to get to the airport, drown my sorrows in alcohol, and get on the plane to be home before the summer sun goes down.

My descent stops and the doors spring open. People are crowded in the lobby, including many of the Wranglers

players. With my bag still hanging from my shoulder, I step between bodies and keep my head down. I doubt I'll go unnoticed in tight jeans, a cowboy hat and my red hair hanging over my shoulders.

“Cuse me,” I murmur, moving past a family dressed like they're off to spend a day at the waterpark.

I spot the team but they have yet to notice me, so I move faster towards the entrance.

“Vivian!”

The shout is loud and it brings everything in the lobby to a hard stop.

The guys from the team all turn to look at the man running in only shorts with bare chest and feet, then look in the direction he's headed and notice me standing there.

“Don't leave. Please. I don't know who that woman is.” Phoenix skids to a stop, his chest heaving like he ran down twenty flights of stairs. “I did not invite her here. I've never seen her before in my life. I swear it.”

“It must be hard to keep your collection in order. You know, hoes in different area codes and all that. Plus, She seems to think you're her boyfriend, *Arizona*.”

His shoulders slump and the look on his face falters.

“Yeah. She knew exactly what name to tell the front desk. Maybe you don't remember her but she clearly remembers you and that you'd be here. I need to go.” I spin on my heels, looking around at everyone who has stopped whatever they were doing, the conversations they were having, to watch the soap opera unfolding before them.

“You have to believe me. I have no idea who she is,” he pleaded.

“It's obvious you were surprised, but I don't believe—not for one minute—that you don't know her.” I take a deep, shuddering breath and remind myself of who I am. “I refuse to be just another face in your collection. I was an idiot to think I

was different, for falling for you. I can't sit around and wait for you to destroy me again."

"You're not just another face. Dammit, Vivian. Don't you see that you're the only woman I want? No one else even exists when you're around. You're all I see. How can *you* not see it? Please...can we go back up to our room and talk about this in private?"

He reaches out to take my hand and I pull away like fire has scorched my skin.

"Everything okay?" Tuck walks up at that very moment with a few other guys trailing behind.

"We're fine," Phoenix growls while I say, "No. I was just leaving."

"Vivian. Please." Phoenix's voice is firm and steady, but his eyes waver with so much emotion.

But I can't do it. I can't stay here and wait for him to hurt me, because I know he will. He's done it once before, and if that supposed "unknown woman" is any indication of his life, it's only a matter of time.

"NOW BOARDING FLIGHT 2917, nonstop to Houston at gate C6." The announcement sounds through the terminal and I grab my bag and wheel it behind me as I walk toward the gate.

On the drive to the airport, I texted Harv and let him know that I was extremely sick—like both ends sick—and I needed to come home. He was very understanding considering I've never pulled "I'm too sick to work" before, and figured I must really be unwell if I was calling in to the job I love so much.

Once I'm in my seat, I pop in my earbuds, select a playlist, and close my eyes until I hear the captain welcoming us to Houston.

I ward off all thoughts or feelings of tears until I'm in the back seat of the Uber when I decide I need my girls.

“Hi, Vivi. You and CeCe in Oklahoma?” Cami asks cheerily when she answers the phone.

“Cam,” I choke out. “I-I need you. It hurts, Cami,” I cry, my chest heaving with pain.

“Where are you?” The urgency in her voice is perilous.

“I-I’m almost home.”

“On my way, babes. I’ll be there as soon as I can, ok.” I nod, words failing me. “Crawl into bed and I’ll use my key. I love you, Viv.”

“I l-ove you, too, Cam. Th-thank you.” I hang up, feeling like I can’t breathe.

When the Uber drops me at home, I do exactly as Cami said and crawl into bed after stripping off my clothes and putting on one of Phoenix’s t-shirts.

If this is the last time I’ll have him in my bed, I want to be covered in him.

“SWEETHEART, I’M SO SORRY,” Cami says.

We’re in my bed, my head in her lap, and she’s running her fingers through my strands. The second she got here, she kicked off her shoes and pulled me into her lap where I laid crying, telling her what happened just a few hours ago.

“Do you think maybe you should hear him out? I mean, look at me and Vaughan. You don’t want to spend twelve years apart from your soulmate because you were too stubborn to just listen. I’m pretty sure a spunky redhead told me that.”

I use the back of my hand to wipe away more tears that just won’t stop falling.

“I don’t truly believe that he knew this woman was showing up to his room. I could see it in his face. It was the look of a shocked man, not a guilty one. But,” I push myself up and turn to face her. “Cam, how can I truly trust him? The guy was a player. You heard him just like I did on the other side of that door. I have no doubt he’s been hooking up with

women in every city he's ever visited for the last ten years. I can't possibly think that this was a one off and won't happen again. Because it will. And I can't be here, standing there with my heart in my hand, all over again."

She looks at me quizzically, like she's trying to put together a puzzle that's missing pieces.

"Viv...didn't you have one of your old hookups confront you and Phoenix at the bar when you had just discussed a relationship?"

"Yes, but...that was different! *He* was the one who wanted a relationship, and there had definitely been no I love you's exchanged. It's a whole new ballgame, now. Shit! It's not even the same game. We're playing two different sports and he's the pitcher and I'm the quarterback and our games just don't align."

Cami tips her head to one side like you'd see a puppy do. "You lost me on the pitcher and quarterback thing."

I wince. "Yeah, that was a bad analogy. CeCe's better with those than I am. But that doesn't matter. What is important is that it was only a matter of time before Phoenix broke me again. Time expired. Game over."

Cami lets out a deep sigh but stays quiet knowing there isn't much more she can say to change my mind.

Phoenix and I are over. It was all a silly dream that, once again, has turned into a nightmare.

I WATCHED the game from my bed that night, a gallon of ice cream and the last of Phoenix's cobbler sitting on my lap.

The Wranglers lost and Phoenix pitched the worst game I've ever seen. He hit two guys—one I think on purpose— and almost got into a fight over it. Tuck flew in from the outfield to hold him back, while Cisco got in front of the opposing player with a calm hand. His coach sent him to the locker room after that and I turned off the tv and cried myself to sleep.

I took one extra day off before returning to work to make it really seem like I was deathly ill, then went in the following. I still looked like shit since I'd only eaten ice cream and cried for the last two nights, so it wasn't hard to convince everyone that I was truly sick.

I just didn't tell them I was lovesick.

The team moved on to their second series and now are on their way back home after a disappointing back to back loss. Phoenix has definitely hurt their game and is looking like anyone but himself, but I can't worry too much about it. I'll just end up giving into him when I should be building my wall back up.

I spent the day packing Phoenix's things—nicely, I might add—and have them waiting by the front door. I sit nervously on the edge of the couch, waiting to pop up the moment I hear the door open.

It isn't long after I gulp down some medicine for my headache when I hear the locks clicking. I walk over to stand at the end of the entryway and wait.

The door pushes open and Phoenix's face comes into view. He looks tired and worn out like he hasn't slept much more than me. His clothes are a ruffled mess and his beard is overgrown.

He steps in and freezes at seeing the bags I've packed.

"Vivian," he says, his voice thick with emotion. "Please don't do this. You have to believe me."

I swallow and steady my shaking voice. "I believe you Phoenix, bu—"

"Then why?" he thunders and it echoes in the small foyer.

"Because I think eventually you will tire of me. And I don't want to resent you later when I'm too far in that I'll drown when you leave me."

He drops his bag to the floor and takes two large strides towards me. I hold out my hand to stop him from coming any

further but Phoenix being Phoenix, pushes past and uses my outstretched arm to pull me to him.

“Dammit, Vivian. That’s not going to happen. For fuck’s sake, I have you tattooed on my body.”

“Those can be removed,” I say, flatly.

“But what about the one on my heart?” Tears begin to swim in his eyes and I feel everything I’ve been holding back rise up in my throat. “That can’t be removed because my heart isn’t even my own. I gave it to you. And I thought you gave me yours.”

I flatten my hands on his chest and pry myself out of his arms. “I did, but I’m taking it back before you crush it.” My legs move backward as I put distance between us. “I made sure to pack everything for you. I didn’t do anything to your stuff, and I labeled the breakables.” I point to the bags sitting against the wall.

He looks down at them, neatly in a row and labeled, and picks up the one that says ‘cologne and stuff’. He looks inside then fast as lightning, he hurls the bag against the wall, smashing its contents to bits.

I flinch, startled by his sudden anger, and jump back. He’s seething and his eyes are full of fire. A low rumble starts deep in his chest before it shoots itself out of his mouth just as he throws his fist through the wall.

My gasp surprises him and he blinks out of whatever daze he’s in.

“Vivian. I’m...I’m sorry.”

“You need to leave, Phoenix. Please?”

He sags in defeat and picks up only the bag he brought with him.

“I’ll send Bishop to get this stuff tomorrow,” he says, then opens the door and walks out.

Better now than later, I tell myself. Again and again and again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

PHOENIX



“LOVE” - Kendrick Lamar (feat. Zacari)

IT'S BEEN two and a half days since I walked out of Vivian's door and even longer since that horrible day at the hotel. I look like shit, I feel like shit, and I am most definitely playing like shit.

I couldn't get out of my head the entire road series, and ended up throwing my worst game ever. I couldn't see the batters box or even Cisco throwing counts. The only thing that stayed on repeat was the look on Vivian's face when she walked into the room behind whomever that crazy ass bitch was, and saw me naked while the stalker talked to me like we knew one another.

I swear I had never seen that woman in my life. I may have slept around quite a bit, but if I were friendly enough to give a chick the name Arizona East, I would remember her. Especially since Vivian is the only woman to ever know about that.

Coach really ripped me a new one after that game. I didn't tell him anything other than it was an off night, and luckily none of my teammates did either. They knew better than to rat out of your own, even if it was to coach. It also helped that Tuck and Philo put everyone on blast not to say a word about what happened.

Those two really cared about Vivian, and me I suppose, so I really owe it to them for helping me keep this all under

wraps. But after my second shitty game, coach is bound to get to the bottom of it.

And I'd like to get to the bottom of who and how that chick got into my room. What fucking timing. I don't think she knew about Vivian coming at that exact moment since I was under the impression she'd be late, so someone had to have known either Vivian's or my whereabouts to tip this woman off. And I'm going to find out who...then rip their fucking spine out.

Bishop was kind enough to help me get my few things from Vivian's the next day while I waited outside, staring at the door that I thought I'd be going in through every night. I know Bish felt bad for me. He'd never seen me looking like a lost puppy dog. He'd seen me upset and angry when my pops died, but this heartbroken and lost version of Phoenix West is one that has never appeared before.

“Brotha, I believe you. I’ve never known you to be a liar. You just gotta give Viv a little time to cool off, then we’ll help you smooth things over. You’ll be calling my ass to help you hang a giant tv in no time.”

I'm not quite as confident as Bish is. He wasn't at the hotel. He wasn't at her house to see the look of finality in her eyes. He didn't see her fear when I punched a hole through the wall. He didn't see my heart crumble to dust.

I've been sitting on a text for the last twenty-four hours, wavering between sending and erasing it. I suck down the last of my bourbon and before I can talk myself out of it, I hit send.

Me: Viv, baby. I need you to listen to me. Please. Whatever you think happened, didn't. I swear to you, I had no idea who that woman was. I still don't. But I know for sure that I did not invite her to our room. I would never hurt you that way. I love you, Peaches. Please talk to me so we can fix this. I miss you. I need you. I'm miserable without you. Vivian...please.

I sit and stare at the screen for the next thirty minutes until the text shows 'read'. Then I wait for the godforsaken text

bubbles to appear to tell me she's responding...but they never come.

So I continue to stare and wait, and stare and wait, until the clock strikes two a.m. and I give into the drunken stupor and sleep.

"WEST. IN HERE. NOW!" Coach yells into the locker room after batting practice and I take a deep breath before dragging my feet to his office.

I come to stand in the doorway, like a kid standing at the threshold of the principal's office, and ready myself for whatever is headed my way.

"Come in and shut the door," he instructs.

I do as he says and sink down slowly into my seat. I flatten my hands on my thighs and flex my fingers into the skin.

Coach looks up at me, disappointment in his eyes, and says, "what the fuck is going on with you, West."

"Coach, I—"

"That wasn't a question," he says and I scratch my head because I could've sworn that it was. "You look like dog shit when you walk in every day, your pitching is off, you're starting fights with other teams—I get the one with Manny and Rami—but what's your excuse for the others?" I sit in silence wondering if this is another one of those 'not a question' questions. "That *was* a question."

Okay, then.

"I know I've been off, coach, and I'm sorry. It's just...my girlfriend and I broke up and there's a huge clusterfuck over the events that led up to it and to be honest...it fucking hurts." My nose begins to sting and, oh shit, are those tears in the back of my eyes?

Is this what love does to you? Brings your feelings to the surface?

Coach steepled his hands on his desk. “Are you fucking kidding me right now? The little reporter broke up with you and now you’re flushing your season down the drain because of it? Man the fuck up, West, and move on. Find someone else to get under you and get your head in the game.”

“It’s not that easy. I don’t want anyone else. This shit has fucked with my head and I-I don’t know how it happened. One minute she’s asking me to move in with her and the next, some crazy ass chick breaks into my room and says I invited her with Vivian right on her heels! But I didn’t. Someone set me up and—”

“Shut the fuck up. I’m not your goddamn therapist and I really don’t care if you nursing your broken fucking heart. Cry into your pillow on your own time. When you’re here, your ass belongs to me. So unless you want to find yourself pitching to a bunch of AAA rookies, get your act together and pitch the way I know you can. Got it?”

I swallow down the lump in my throat and nod. “Yes sir.” I push on the arms of the chair to stand and suck back these damn emotions that want to pour out of my eyes.

“And West,” coach says right before I walk out the door.

“Yes sir?”

“I’m sorry this happened. But if you say it was a mix-up, then you need to do whatever you can to prove to her this doesn’t fall on your shoulders. My wife and I lost ourselves to a similar...miscommunication, I guess you can call it. But I groveled my ass off and now we’ve been married for twenty-six years. Fix it.”

I nod my head in thanks and leave his office, reliving that day in the room and try to put the pieces of this puzzle together.

Someone set me up. I just know it. No one knows about the name aside from Vivian and teammat—

“I’m going to fucking murder them.”

“HOW CAN you be sure they did that? I don’t know that they’d have it in them to go to the lengths for it. Plus...why would they want to hurt, Red? Everyone loves her.”

I look at Tuck from across the table we sit at in the back of our favorite mom and pop eatery.

“Who else would know the name I check-in with? And those two are the only ones pissed at me. Remember...I kicked their asses for talking about Viv? It’s gotta be them.”

I invited Tuck and Philo to lunch after batting practice to talk to them about my suspicions of Manny and Rami and their possible involvement with this whole break-up with Vivian.

Tuck lifts his hand and I turn around to see Philo walk in the door.

“Hey guys. Sorry I’m late. Cassie had a little tiff with her co-worker and I’m her designated bitch partner.” Philo plops down in the seat next to Tuck with a huff.

“That sucks, man. Sorry,” Tuck tells him.

“I’d give anything to listen to my girl complain about a hangnail. You should thank your lucky stars she’s talking to you.”

Philo gives me a sad smile and I fill him in on my theory.

He moves his mouth from side to side in thought, as I’ve witnessed him do, and says, “I agree with you, Nix. It wouldn’t surprise me to find out they set this all up. Rami’s always been a good guy, but it seems like he’s pretty butt hurt about you and Vivian. And Manny, well...that guy is a snake. I wouldn’t trust him to hold my place in line.”

“So what do I do? How can I prove this? I have no real evidence, and even though Vivian says she believes I didn’t know that batshit crazy women, she’s not willing to give me another chance. If I can prove that I’m not the scumbag she assumes me to be, then maybe...” I shrug my shoulders and let them fill in the rest.

Tuck leans forward and whispers, “if we want to find out if it was them, then we have to think like them. What if we...”

Tuck, Philo and I devise a plan to catch them in their lies over cubans and sweet tea, and I pray to God that it works. Because if we can pull it off. I'll have Vivian back in my arms in time to celebrate our championship.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

PHOENIX



“SIMPLE THINGS” - Miguel

I STARE at Vivian from my place in the dugout and watch as she smiles and talks with everyone but me. Her beautiful hair is pulled back in a sleek ponytail, and it reminds me of the night in the hotel when I pressed her against the windows in our room and tied her up.

“Any luck?” Cisco asks.

“Nah man. She still hasn’t talked to me. It’s been two weeks and she won’t even look my way unless it’s an on camera interview. And even then she focuses over my shoulder, never really making eye contact.” My eyes are fixed on her creamy legs that peak out from her purple skirt.

All I can think about is how good it feels to be buried between those legs and how long it’s been since I’ve tasted her.

“Well that could all change tonight.” My head whips to look at him. “Tuck and Philo told me what was up. I’m down to help. Especially because that fucker Manny has it coming.”

“What’s he done to you?” I ask.

Cisco looks over to where Manny sits reviewing his last play on the iPad.

“Something I’ll never forget,” he whispers. “If he really did what you think he did, I want to pulverize his ass and

make him pay not just for you and me, but for Red. She doesn't deserve that shit."

I gulp, taking my grape gum with it, and give Cisco a small nod of my head. "Thanks, man. It means a lot to me."

He claps my shoulder and squeezes. "No problem, man. And don't worry. We'll help you get your girl back."

The last batter strikes out and I pop up from the bench and grab my glove. Just before I exit the dugout, I look over at Vivian to find her staring at me. Our eyes connect and for a moment I think she's going to smile and say she loves me, but she quickly turns to look back at the field and my hope falters a little.

"SO WE'VE GOT ME, you and Philo at one table," Tucker rehashes as we drive to the bar where the team usually celebrates.

I haven't gone in a few weeks because I did my celebrating between Vivian's thighs. I didn't need to be surrounded by guys and cleat chasers when I had the most beautiful woman waiting for me at home.

"And Cis is going to move his way into sit with Manny and Rami once Brianna gets there," he finishes.

"Are you sure Manny won't be suspicious?"

"Yeah. Don't worry about it. Rami will be with him and we've talked to a couple other guys who are on your side. It'll just seem like Cis is talking with them."

I twist in my seat to look in the back at Cisco and ask him, "and you're sure your friend isn't going to spill the beans?"

"Positive, man. I've done a lot for her and her son ever since her deadbeat boyfriend took off, so she said that if this is all I'm asking for in return, she'll gladly play the part."

I close my eyes and rest my head against the seat of Tuck's truck and get lost in the images of Vivian that have been burned into my mind.

WE'VE BEEN at this bar for two hours and I can say without a doubt, I hate the bar scene and I just want to be in bed with my Peaches. Instead, I'm watching that prick Manny slam one shot after the other that is offered to him. The other guys helping us out said Manny gets loose lips when he starts slamming shots. So I gave the bartender my card, told her to give the guys whatever they wanted, and to not tell dickhead Manny that I'm the one picking up the tab.

Cisco stands from his seat next to another teammate and I follow his line of sight to see a gorgeous blonde woman sauntering her way over to him. I assume this is his "friend" Brianna and she's ready to get this thing started.

I sit back with Tuck and Philo and watch it all play out.

She walks over to their section and says something to Cisco. He nods and tells the bouncer to let her in. He moves the rope and she steps up to where they sit, one sexy leg after the other.

She hugs Cisco and I see Manny rake his eyes up and down her body, licking his lips as he does. He looks over at Rami and smacks his chest, nodding for him to look at her. Brianna pretends to be oblivious to their blatantly obvious perusal of her body in the tight red dress, and laughs at something Cisco says.

He holds out his hand and offers a seat. She moves in to sit right next to Manny and shakes his hand when he introduces himself.

I continue to watch it all play out, sipping on my soda and lime to make it look like I'm also drinking.

"I'm gonna go over there. Seems like we might be getting closer to the big moment." Philo stands and makes his way to their table that has grown increasingly more crowded.

"Don't forget," Tuck calls out, reminding him to turn on the voice recorder on his phone.

Philo gives him a thumbs up and goes to sit near the guys.

“It’s gonna work, Nix. I know it. Even more so after I heard him talking about how he wanted to ‘comfort Red’ after you cheated on her.”

“But I didn’t ch—“

“I know, man. We all do. But we’re playing a role so we’re just going with it.”

Tuck informed me a couple days ago that he heard Manny talking to Rami about making a move on Vivian now that I was out of the picture. I wanted so badly to drive to his house and burn the damn thing down with him inside. But all that would get me is jail time and I definitely don’t think Vivian would be open to conjugal visits.

Philo makes eye contact with us and then down to his phone. I feel mine begin to buzz and pull it out of my pocket to see a text telling me to answer but not say anything.

A second later my phone lights up with a call from Philo and I answer it and hear the conversation of everyone at the table.

“So Cisco,” Brianna says. “I hear you’re friends with Phoenix West.”

“I am. Why?”

I see Manny move in just a little closer to Brianna and throw his arm around her, resting on the bench behind them.

“Well, I was hoping you could introduce me. Maybe see if um...he’s looking to have some fun tonight.” Brianna bites her lip and bats her eyelashes.

“I don’t think he’d be up for it. He and his girl just broke up and he’s actually hoping they get back together,” Cisco tells her and it has Manny perking up.

“Phoenix is trying to win back Red, huh? That’s gonna be a tough hill to climb.” Manny laughs and takes a pull of his beer.

“I don’t think so,” Philo interjects. “I talked with Red the other day and she said she was willing to give him another shot.”

Manny shakes his head with a look of befuddlement on his face.

“That’s bullshit. Red’s not gonna give him a second shot. Not after she caught Sheila in his room.”

I sit up tall and flash my eyes to Tuck who waits for me to say something, but I keep listening instead.

“What are you talking about? Who’s Sheila?” Cisco asks.

“Listen baby doll,” Manny slurs and moves his face far too close to Brianna’s. “I’ve got a little secret. If you want to get into Phoenix’s bed, I can help you with that. First you should know he’s an asshole.”

“Aren’t you all?” Brianna purrs and it pulls a cocky smirk from Manny.

“Yes, well, Phoenix takes the cake. So here’s the thing. This chick, Red is what we call her, we can’t let him have her. Simple as that. Not having her makes him crazy which in turn turns his pitching to shit,” he says. “And I want that fucker to suffer. He screwed me out of what should’ve been mine, so I’m here to make sure I keep him from getting what he wants.”

What is he talking about I took what’s his?

Brianna turns in her seat and drapes an arm over his shoulder. “And how are you going to do that?”

“Well, step one is to keep Red out of his clutches and keep her in mine. And two, let’s get *you* into Nix’s bed and make sure Red knows about it. I know for a fact that he’s still at the Seasons. So if you go to the front desk, bat those pretty eyes at the clerk and tell him you’re there to see Arizona East and forgot your keycard, they’ll give you one. As long as you give them the name *Arizona East*,” he repeats, emphasizing the alias that I use. “Then you’re golden. You can wait for him to arrive and you just have yourself wrapped up like a fucking present for him to unwrap.”

I see red, and not my girl. Like a goddamn bull who’s been given the go ahead to attack the matador, I lose my cool.

I jump up from my seat and charge over to where they sit.

“You motherfucker. I’m going to murder you!” I shout and lunge over the table.

Brianna shouts and Cisco pulls her out of the way while Philo and two of the other guys spring into action, grabbing me and tugging Manny away.

“I knew it was you! You piece of shit! You’re done. Got me? Done!” I shout and the bar grows quiet as people hush their conversations to listen to mine.

“You better back the fuck off, West. You’re already riding on thin ice. One more fuck up and you’re on a one way train to the minors,” he laughs, still unaware of what I heard.

“Hey Manny, if I were you I’d shut up right about now,” Philo tells him.

He squints his eyes and studies Philo then Cisco then me.

“I heard every damn word you said. All of it! You fucked me over and hurt Vivian just so you could have your shot? Guess what asshole. She wouldn’t touch your pencil dick with his,” I say and point to Rami.

“Fuck you, West. She should’ve been mine. Just like *I* should’ve been the star on the mound. This is my team.”

I jerk back like he punched me right in the jaw. “Are you delusional? You would never and will never be the star on any mound. You’ll never be as good as me and you will *never* have Vivian.” I get closer, one arm still being gripped tight by Philo and point straight in his slimy face. “Stay away from her or I will rip your beating heart straight out of your chest. And before you ask, yes that’s a threat. I’m dead fucking serious.”

I back up and notice a crowd still gathered near us with their phones out. No doubt Maury will be working with my PR to contain this mess. And by morning, I’ll be in coach’s crosshairs explaining all of this. But if this gets me sent down to minors, it’s all worth it to get the truth to Vivian and her, hopefully, back where she should be.

With me.

Me: Peaches, I need to talk to you. Please. I just need five minutes.

Dozens of texts just like this one have been sent over the last twenty-four hours, trying to get Vivian to just meet with me for a few minutes. But she refuses to reply so I've had to resort to other means in which to get her alone.

I walk through the quiet halls of the Wranglers executive offices, looking for the door Bishop told me was CeCe's office. I find it and see it slightly ajar, voices coming from inside.

"I don't understand why we couldn't just wait for her in the parking lot like we always do?" I recognize Vivian's voice and let out a sigh of relief.

"I told you. I needed to make a phone call and it's too difficult to hear when thousands of rowdy fans are walking around. Geez, mom. Get off my back," Bishop jokes and I stop just outside of the door, listening for the perfect time to make my presence known.

"Well then, when are you going to make this very important phone call? We've been sitting here for fifteen minutes and you still haven't even looked at your phone."

I move stealthily to peer through the small crack in the door and see Vivian sitting in one chair with her back to me. Bishop is leaning against CeCe's desk and looks up to see me standing here and gives me a crooked smile.

"I think now is the perfect time for me to make that phone call," he says and stands from where he leans.

I take that moment to push the door open and walk in. Vivian turns to see me and before she can protest, Bishop hauls ass out of the room and closes the door behind him.

"Bishop, you're no longer my favorite!" she yells and I hear him laugh from the other side. "What are you doing here, Phoenix? If I wanted to see you, I would've responded to one of your hundreds of texts." She crosses her arms and the move makes her small breasts push higher in her low-cut white

blouse and I just want to rip it from her body like I'm the fucking Hulk.

"I'm sorry I had to be sneaky like this, but it's really important you listen to me. Just give me five minutes and then I'll leave you alone if you want me to. Please?" I look at her with some much hope in my eyes that she's got to see how much I need her.

She studies me for a moment then relents, "fine. But five minutes and then I have to go give Bishop a double wet willy because it's either that or I murder him, and I don't look good in orange. Stripes, yes, but orange clashes with my hair." She flips her hair over her shoulder and gives me a stern face.

"I have something for you to listen to. Just don't say anything until you've heard it all. Okay?" I ask and she nods, skeptically. "Here," I tell her, handing my phone over and pressing play on the voice recording.

I watch as her face runs through a myriad of emotions the longer she listens to the recording. Boredom, thinking this isn't going to make her change her mind. Confusion when she hears Manny talking about wanting to keep her away from me. And unbridled rage when he tells me that she should've been his along with my pitching position.

When the recording shuts off, I pocket my phone and wait for her to say something. She stands, then sits, then stands and walks to the other side of CeCe's desk. Her hands rest flat against the table and her head drops between her slumped shoulders.

I can tell this news is sending her into a tailspin. I want so badly to reach out and pull her into my arms, but I know I have to give her some space to process. But how long do I need to wait is what I want to know.

"I'm sorry he did this to you," she says, her voice hoarse with emotion.

I take a few steps towards her then slow as I inch closer like I'm approaching a skittish animal.

“I’m sorry that he did this to us. But now that we know we can move on.” I reach out—finally—and pull her into my arms, but she’s stiff and unreceptive.

“I don’t know that this changes much,” she tells me.

My heart stops and I swear the world around me stops, too. She can’t possibly think that this isn’t a total game changer for us. This changes everything.

“Of course it does, Vivian. How can you say that?”

She pushes away from me and sinks down into the chair. “Because eventually we would’ve ended, one way or another. Something would have torn us apart. This sucked but at least it was sooner than later before we were both in over our heads.”

“Before we were over our heads? Are you kidding me, Vivian? I tattooed you on my fucking body. You asked me to move in with you. I told you I love you! I’ve never said that to anyone. I am so beyond being in over my head. Right now I’m drowning without you.” I’ve pulled her up from the chair and have taken to holding her in my arms like she’s the buoy keeping my head above water.

I rest my head in the crook of her neck and hear the smallest snuffle. I kiss her neck, her chin, her jaw, until my lips are pressed tightly against hers. A mixture of the sweetness that is only Vivian and the saltiness from her tears coats our lips. She moans and I melt remembering how she sounded, how she felt, the last time I had her in my arms.

I take her face in my hands and deepen our kiss, and pour everything I have into her. “God, I missed you,” I murmur against her lips.

Her hands cover mine and she slowly pulls away. Her bright eyes blink and stare back at me, but I don’t see what I so long to see in them.

Vivian’s demeanor begins to change and I know this is my last opportunity to push the door open before she closes it. “Don’t say it,” I plead.

“I don’t know that I’m built for a relationship, Phoenix. This, us, just happened so fast. You just bulldozed your way

into my heart and I don't even know if that's what I want."

I release her and step away. "We're back to this bullshit, again? You're seriously going to stand there and tell me that you weren't the happiest you've ever been when we were wrapped up in each other every night? That the worst nights were the ones we spent apart. Look at me and tell me you were happier running through a string of forgettable men than with me, the man who worships your mind, body, and soul. Tell me some other man can love you better, because I'll call you a liar if you do."

Tears fall from her eyes and she bats them away like they've wronged her. "I need to think. Can you just give me some time?"

My anger begins to spike. All that I've laid out on the line for her, the fights with my teammates, a third reprimand from my coach because of my behavior which is a direct result of the fallout with her, and she asks for *time*. I didn't need time to know she was endgame. But it's obvious her hangups go deeper than what happened a few weeks ago.

"Fine. Take all the time you need, Vivian. But I can't promise that I'll be waiting whenever you decide to come around. I'm not some pathetic sap who will just sit around until you decide to give me the time. Don't mistake my love for you as a weakness. Because as much as I would move mountains for you, I won't sit around waiting only to be made a fool of."

I spin around and march towards the door when I hear her call my name.

"I do love you. I just..." I look over my shoulder and see her shrug.

"Don't know if it's enough. Yeah. Got that." My annoyance with her fickleness is at a breaking point, and I can't stand around here for one more second.

I open the door and stomp out, slamming it behind me and rattling the name plate. I take a minute to calm myself and hear the whimpers of Vivian's sobs from the other side of the

door. Instead of running back in there and soothing her, I jog as far away as I can.

If Vivian needs time, I need distance to give myself some perspective.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“YOUR LOVE” - Nicki Minaj

THE TEAM WAS HEADED out of town for their road series tomorrow, which meant I had two days before I had to be on a plane to meet them. CeCe was also leaving in the morning, so that meant we had one evening together before things got really crazy heading into Divisional playoffs.

Houston already got a bye the first round and will be working to beat the first team on their schedule. Because of their standings, Harvey informed me that after this week, I will be attending every road and home game.

This night out is definitely a necessity for not just CeCe and myself, but Cami could also really use the distraction after the giant ass Vaughan was the other day.

“I am so ready for this season to be over. I’ve already put in a request to cover football when this is over.” I swipe mascara across my lashes at Cami’s house as we get ready for a girls night.

“Just temporarily, right?” CeCe asks.

I shake my head, looking at her through the mirror. “No. Permanently. I don’t want anything to do with baseball as long as Phoenix is on the team. It’s hard enough going to the games and feeling his eyes on me every chance he gets. He looks like a sad puppy dog. I can’t stand it.”

Cami pops her head into the bathroom, her long, dark hair falling in shiny waves. “Then why are you torturing both you and him? You heard the recording. He didn’t even know the woman. It should have been an easy forgive, forget and move on. Yet, here you are, still wallowing.”

“I need time to think this all through. Yes, I believe he had nothing to do with that woman showing up at his hotel room. But being in a relationship with someone like Phoenix means constantly wondering if some woman is around the corner, waiting to pop out as say ‘hey. I forgot to tell you that I was pregnant and now you’re a daddy’. Where does that leave me? I’ll tell you where. Sitting on the curb with my heart in my hand.” I close up the tube of mascara and set it back in my makeup bag.

CeCe and Cami look at each other in the mirror and give “the look”.

“Wow. That sounds eerily similar to someone else I know. And look how well being a stubborn heifer turned out for her. Plus, Phoenix would never leave you even if something like that did happen.” Cat yells from the bedroom.

I step out of the bathroom and look at her. “And why not?”

She slips her foot into her metallic pink boots and adjusts her Dolly Parton crop top.

“Because I’ve seen the way that man looks at you. He’s head over freaking heels in love with you. And, my God Viv, he tattooed your ass—basically—on his chest...over his heart. That’s like, Vaughan level love.”

Cami smiles, thinking of the flower and butterfly tattoo Vaughan has on his chest for her and his daughter. The tattoo he got when they weren’t even together. I told Cam that it was like a talisman. Eventually she would’ve found her way back to him.

“I can’t overlook the fact that he’s whored around so much that at any given moment, he can decide that one woman isn’t enough for him. And then poof...he’s gone.” I adjust my mini

skirt in the mirror and wait for CeCe to slip on her knee-high boots and watch Cami change into the outfit we forced on her.

“Bitch. Who’re you calling a whore? You have a conquered list a mile long. Is there a single athlete on a Houston team that you haven’t slept with? You’re being a hypocrite with a double-standard that, honestly, is pretty chauvinistic.” CeCe arches her brow at me and I pick up the nearest thing to me and throw it at her.

A tube of lipstick sails through the air and she moves her head just in time to miss it. The damn thing smacks Cat at the moment she rights herself after slipping on her boot.

“Ow! What the hell was that for?” She asks, rubbing her cheek where the tube smacked her.

“Sorry. That was meant for CeCe.” I pickup my lipstick and place it into my clutch before slipping on my boots. “Listen. I don’t want to talk about Phoenix anymore than Cam wants to talk about Vaughan, or CeCe wants to talk about Limoncello. Let’s just drop all of the guy talk and go have a good time. Life is about to get real crazy for me and CeCe and I just want to have some fun with our main bitches tonight. Yeah?”

Cami walks over to me and slings her arm over my shoulders and rests her cheek next to mine. “Agreed. No talking about boys and how stinky they are and how all they do is break our hearts. Tonight we drink, we laugh, we dance and we focus on just us girls.”

The others agree and we quickly make our way to our favorite hangout, Billy’s Long Bar, for a night of no boys allowed.

“WOW. That lumber-hottie Cam is dancing with looks like a sexy grizzly bear. Vaughan would lose his freaking mind if he was here right now.”

We arrived at Billy’s and immediately fell into our good times. I saw Brady whom I had a fun romp in the sack with before Phoenix, Cami and Cat got pulled onto the dance floor

by the two guys who look like they walked off the set of Sons of Anarchy, and CeCe is getting talked up by a third member of their gang.

“Well, it looks like we’re about to find out.” CeCe mutters and points towards the dance floor where we see an irate Vaughan, pushing his way through the masses and grabbing Camille.

I hiss. “Yikes. That has the makings of a shit storm. I’m gonna go get a refill. Wanna come?” I ask CeCe, holding up my empty glass.

She says no and I head to the bar for some flirting and a beer.

Brady slides me a cold bottle and I lean over the bar, waiting for him to finish with another customer before returning to me like he promised.

“So beautiful. Are you looking for a repeat tonight? I came in first, so I don’t have to close. We could leave as soon as I’m off.” Brady runs his hand from my wrist to my shoulder and leaves a quake of goosebumps.

Only these aren’t the same ones I get when Phoenix touches me. They are not the chills of excitement. Not the kind I get when he bosses me around and tells me I’m a good girl. And they are definitely not the kind of goosebumps I get when he calls me Peaches and tells me he loves me.

“I, um—” I’m interrupted by the buzzing of my phone in my purse. “Can you give me a second?”

I reach into my purse and pull it out to see a text from Phoenix. There are no words, only a selfie of him in the mirror, shirtless and with my peach tattoo displayed proudly.

A tightness pinches in my chest and I rub it, trying to ease the horrible feeling that has come over me. I look up at Brady who is doing the same flirt routine with another woman. Same practiced smile that gets him the big tips. Same wink that has the ladies coming back for more. A familiarity I’ve grown accustomed to over the years from different men. It’s the act they all use to get what they want. It’s the act I used.

I never realized how much of it was exactly that; an act. Does anyone really, truly love sleeping with one stranger after another? Never really getting to know anything about them other than what's on the surface and their favorite sex position? That's all I ever needed to know. But now I know that Phoenix loves watching cheesy comedies while eating almost an entire bag of chocolate peanut butter cups. The miniature ones with the foil wrapper that he wads up and builds on until it's large enough to toss around like he's warming up for the mound.

I know he loves PB&J for breakfast with the crust cut off and the edges pressed together like a little pocket. I know that he loves a good bubble bath after a tough game, and his new favorite scent is peach. I love how he takes any opportunity he can find to kiss me like it might be the last time. He can be gentle and sweet, and handle me with such care that you wouldn't think possible for a man like him. But give him a second and he'll turn into a beast who loves to pull my hair and treat me like his personal sex toy, which I never thought in a million years would be something that makes my body sing with delight.

All of those things that I could never imagine myself wanting are now the *only* things I want in my life.

I walk away and take a little time alone to think about my mistakes, his mistakes, our pasts...our possible future. I dance and wonder what it would be like to have a man, *my* man, spin me around only to be pulled back into his arms and held like the most precious thing in the world. I think about Cami and Vaughan and how I've never seen either of them smile the way they do when they're together. Or the heartache they feel when they're not.

Then my mind spins the opposite direction and I wonder if Phoenix can truly give up the life of excess he lived before me. I can say without a doubt that I would give up everything for him. Other men didn't even register on my radar when I was with him. I didn't think of anyone but Phoenix. I didn't long for anyone but him. He gave me his words, but that is all I really had to go off of.

I've seen all of the cheating athletes and how they practice, "what they don't know won't hurt them" attitude. I don't want to be the oblivious wife, waiting at home for her husband to return. Not that I want to be the one who knows what he is up to when he's not home.

My mind continues the push and pull of what-if this and what-if that when CeCe comes running up to me.

"Viv. We've gotta go. It's Vaughan." I barely have time to put my drink down and I'm following right behind her as we run out of the bar, chasing a very drunk Vaughan and a hysterical Cami.

Then it all happens so fast yet so slow.

Vaughan on his motorcycle. The red light. The car. The screeching of tires. The crunching of metal. The agonizing screams of a woman who's heart is breaking in real time.

I watch on as my best friend holds the man she loves in her arms, not knowing if he'll ever wake to see her face again.

Tears pour from my eyes and I ache to have Phoenix next to me, holding him close and knowing that everything will be okay.

WE RAN into the hospital on the heels of the ambulance that brought Vaughan in, our eyes constantly spouting tears and our hearts in our throats. We surround Cami and Hayes until Dagen and his parents arrive, then we give them space to comfort one another.

An eerie silence stretches through the sterile hospital waiting room and it claws at my nerves.

"I need a minute," I whisper to Bishop who sits next to me, clutching my hand in a death grip.

"Are you okay?" he asks, concern lacing his voice.

"Yeah...no. No I'm not, Bish. I messed up and I need to fix it." He nods, wraps his giant arm around me and hugs me.

“I’m here if you need me, Red.” Bishop kisses the top of my head and I grab my purse and walk outside.

I get two feet outside of the sliding doors and pull my phone out. My fingers slide across the screen and I bring it to my ear with a shaky hand.

“Vivian? What time is it? Are you okay?” His voice is raspy with sleep and I look at my watch to see it’s one-thirty in the morning.

“Phoenix,” I barely choke out. “I’m sorry.”

“Baby, you’re scaring me. What happened? Are you hurt?”

I take the next twenty minutes to tell him what happened tonight—to Vaughan and my realization—and when I’m done he says, “what do you need, Peaches? Anything, just ask.”

“I-I need you.” My body slumps down and I very unladylike sit on the curb and cry into my hands. “I just want your arms around me and I want to feel safe. You’re the only one who makes me feel safe and loved and I don’t want to lose you. I can’t lose you. Phoenix, I-I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I...”

Sobs wrack my body, loud and uncontrollable. There’s a pain so deep, so visceral, that it threatens to destroy my very being. There’s only one person who can keep me from dissolving into nothingness.

“I’ll be there soon, Peaches. It’s all going to be okay. I’ve got you.” I sniffle an okay and sit there on the curb of the hospital emergency entrance, waiting for my lifeline to rescue me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

PHOENIX



“WEST, I am going to rip you nose to toes if you don’t get your ass back in that hotel room right now!” coach yells at me and I hold the phone away from my ear as I stand at the end of the sidewalk that leads up to Vivian’s front door.

After I got off the phone with her this morning, I immediately began looking for flights to get back to Houston. Unfortunately, the earliest I could catch one was five-thirty this morning. But with the time difference, it’s just coming up on seven a.m. and the sun has yet to fully rise.

I also did not tell coach what was going on until this very moment. To say he isn’t happy about it is quite the understatement of the year.

“Coach, I’m really sorry. But my friend was in a horrible accident and the doctors aren’t sure if he’s going to recover. I don’t pitch until tomorrow, and today is my rest day. I promise to be back by the time you wake up tomorrow. You’ll never even know I was gone,” I tell him.

He lets out a string of curse words and has a few choice names for me. I stand there and take it because honestly, nothing he can say will make me turn around and go back to Tennessee. *Nothing*.

When Vivian told me what happened to Vaughan, I could hear the pain in her voice. Her friends are her extended family and I just know that they were all in indescribable pain. I texted Bishop and he said it was hard to breathe. That right there told me everything I needed to know. There was no way

I wasn't going to get my ass back to Houston as soon as possible.

So if that means I miss out on the rest of the season because I get benched for this, then that's the way it'll be. I need to be here for my friends who have taken me in so quickly and completely. And most of all, I need to be here for my girl.

After the words 'I need you' left her mouth, there was nothing more she needed to say or do. All was forgiven and forgotten and the only thought I had was getting home to her.

Coach yells some more, tells me he hopes my friend pulls through and to get my ass back before he digests his morning coffee, then hangs up. I pocket my phone and take the last few steps to her door. My fist barely connects with the large wooden door when it flies open.

In the doorway stands my beauty. Her red hair like a ball of fire piled on top of her head, and she's wearing a shirt of mine that is so large I can't tell if she's wearing anything underneath it. Her green eyes are swollen and red rimmed from all of the crying she's been doing and she hiccups, "y-you're h-he-here."

I step across the threshold and she jumps into my arms, wrapping her tiny body all around mine. She clings to me like a koala hugging a tree in a hurricane. I don't think there is anything that could pry her away with how tight her grip is on me.

I walk inside and kick the door shut behind me and drop my bag on the entry floor. I let her cry into the crook of my neck, soaking my sweatshirt, and walk us straight towards the bedroom.

Her soft cries turn to soft kisses on my neck and my cock immediately jolts to life thinking he's about to get lucky.

"I want you to get some sleep, Peaches. Then we can talk later," I tell her as I close the bedroom door and try placing her on the bed.

She refuses to let go, so I pull back the sheets and try to lay down with her.

“I don’t need sleep. I need you,” she murmurs against my neck.

I close my eyes and drop my head back, breathing deep and attempting to get myself under control. “You’ve got me, baby. But you also need rest. Let’s—”

“No,” she clips. “I need you to fuck me, Phoenix. I need to feel you and know that you’re alive and safe and mine. And I need you to know that I’m yours and there is nothing that will tear me away from you, again.”

“Vivian. There will be plenty of time for that later,” I try to soothe.

“No, Phoenix. That’s just it. We don’t know if there’s plenty of time. I’m sure Cami thought she and Vaughan would have plenty of time to make up for what they lost, and now she may never know what their future holds. Don’t you get it? We’re only guaranteed right here, right now, and I don’t want to waste one more moment without you in it. So please, Nix... make love to me, fuck me, hurt me, worship me, make me beg or make me cry. I don’t care how you do it so long as you do.”

I stare at her and let every word soak in. Her lips tremble and her eyes are flooded with unshed tears. Her dainty body shakes against mine and I hold her tighter to me. The vulnerability in her eyes is something I’ve never seen before. She’s usually so strong and so confident, so sure of herself. But right now she looks so afraid. Like she’s expecting the big bad wolf to come in and blow her reality away. Or maybe that’s the problem. Her reality *is* the big bad wolf and she needs something to take her away from the harsh reminders of how cruel life can be.

“You can have anything you want, Peaches. Ask me for anything and I’ll give it to you. Always,” I tell her, then take her mouth with mine.

I know I should go slow and tender with her, but that isn’t what my girl needs. I know her heart and her mind as well as

she does. And right now, her mind needs me to distract it by making her body soar to new heights.

“Stand up, Vivian,” I growl.

Her body tenses for only a moment, then she just lets go. She releases her hold on me and drops her feet to the ground. When her lips stop moving against mine and her eyes blink open, I can see that she’s closed the door on the outside world and now it’s just her and I.

“Good girl, Peaches. Are you wearing anything underneath this shirt, dirty girl?” I slowly drag the hem of my shirt up to reveal a small pair of boy shorts, clinging to that perfect peachy ass of hers. “I like these,” I say and snap the band.

I walk around her until I have a full view of her plump ass and run my hand over the cotton covered globes. I make small circles over each one then give it a firm squeeze. Her breath hitches and I can tell the anticipation is bubbling.

“Did you miss me, baby? Because I missed you *so fucking much*. I missed the feel of your lips on mine,” I whisper and touch my lips tenderly to hers. “I missed the feel of your soft skin under my rough fingers.” My calloused tips skate over her silky skin. “I missed hearing your cries when my cock makes that pussy weep.”

I pry her mouth open and stick my thumb inside. She immediately closes her plump lips around it and visions of her on her knees, gagging on my dick have him leaking with excitement.

“You know what else I missed?”

She shakes her head then releases her suction on my thumb. “What else did you miss?” she asks.

My hand slides down her neck, through the valley between her breasts and inside of her boy shorts where I find her cunt, hot and wet.

“I missed being away from that sweet pussy. I missed tasting it and licking it and making it come over and over and over...” I slide my fingers between her already swollen lips and let her coat my fingers. “I think it missed me, too.”

She nods her head and I push two fingers inside of her, forcing a gasp from within. Those beautiful eyes of hers close and her head drops back when I begin to slowly pump in and out of her. Vivian moans and it's like a siren's song to my dick that grows more impatient by the second.

Sliding my fingers in and out one more time, I pull them out, soaked, and bring them to her mouth. I paint her lips with her pussy juice like it's her favorite designer lipstick. Pushing both fingers inside her mouth, she wraps her tongue around them and sucks and licks them clean.

“How does my pussy taste?” I ask her.

She releases me with a pop and her breathy voice replies, “why don't you find out for yourself.”

I grab the back of her head and tug her to me, crushing my mouth to hers. My tongue glides across her puffy lips and taste the musky sweetness that is only my girl. I place my hand in between her breasts and push her until she falls back onto the bed. Her body bounces before she's spread out for me, like my favorite buffet.

And feast on her I will.

“Take that hair tie out,” I order, and she obeys, twisting and turning until her long mane is free from its constraints.

I lean over, bracing one hand on the mattress and running my fingers of the other through her strands. She closes her eyes and purrs like a kitten. I can smell how much she wants me.

“You're so beautiful, Vivian.” Her eyes open and her pupils flare.

They turn glassy and she blinks faster and faster to ward off the tears. “I love you, Phoenix. I'm sorry.”

“I'm sorry, too. I'm sorry that I ever gave you a reason to doubt me, in the first place. If I had just listened to my heart in college instead of my stupid friends, we'd be living our happily ever after.”

She gives me a small smile that melts my heart. “We still have time.”

I nod then kiss her like the world might end tonight if I don't. My hands lift her shirt up over her taut belly and perky breasts, and I release my kiss to pull it off her head. Her nipples harden under the breeze of the ceiling fan that whirs above us, and I take one between my teeth.

I so desperately want to give Vivian what she needs to take her away from the misery that plagues her right now. I love dominating her and pushing her to the limits of pleasure and pain. But today...today *I* need something different.

I swipe my tongue over her nipple to soothe the sting and kiss gently down her body. My fingers hook inside of her little boy shorts and I take them with me as I stand. Her body lays naked, smooth and glistening for me. My eyes trail over the parts of her I have memorized but still want to catalog.

The cluster of freckles on her left shoulder. The little pierced hole in her belly button from when she had a ring through it. The birthmark in the shape of a crooked heart on her hip bone. The scar on the inside of her knee from when it got caught on a chain link fence when she was seven. The tiny beauty mark on the tip of her cupid's bow.

Every line, every dip, every inch of her body I have memorized. But I'll never get enough of it.

I rip off my clothes and crawl onto the bed until my body blankets hers. “We're going to try something a little different today. Okay?”

She nods and whispers, “okay.”

I raise her hands above her head and lace our fingers together. Staring into her eyes I maneuver myself to fit between her legs, and she wraps them around my waist. I roll my hips and she wiggles hers until the head of my cock sits perfectly at her entrance. I thrust forward until I'm fully seated inside of her and the hitch in her breath has me losing mine.

But I don't rush or fuck her raw like I would after so much time apart. Instead, I make love to her slow and deep. Never

once do I look away. I barely blink. And when she falls apart with my name on her tongue, I watch as tears fall from the corners of her eyes. The emotion that spilled from her poured into me and spurred on my own impassioned orgasm.

When we were both emptied, emotionally and physically, Vivian rolled her tiny body into mine and I held her in my arms until she fell asleep.

She clung to me for hours while she slept and when she woke that afternoon, her first words to me were, “can you be mine for always?”

I guess she hadn't realized that I already was.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

VIVIAN



“SUMMERTIME MAGIC” - Childish Gambino

OVER THE NEXT TWO WEEKS, life went on. CeCe and I went back to traveling with the team as they continued to win. Phoenix went back to showing everyone why he was the most vicious pitcher in the game. But Cami sat vigil by Vaughan’s hospital bed.

There wasn’t a free moment in my day that I wasn’t checking in with her or Dagen or Vaughan’s family. We prayed, we cried, and we held on to hope that he would be okay. We started the day with a group text from one of us, telling each other how much we loved them and reminding everyone that Vaughan was going to be just fine. And at night, we did the same, wishing each other sweet dreams and promising tomorrow would be better and brighter.

These texts didn’t just get exchanged between the girls. Bishop—our unofficial fifth chick—got in on it, and then Hayes and before I knew it, Phoenix was whining because he wanted to be part of the group text, too. Us girls still had our own special thread going, but for the most part we communicated everything with everyone.

In between work and games and time with Phoenix, we visited Cami and Vaughan as much as possible. CeCe, Cat and I were able to get Dagen away from the hospital one day when we picked her up straight from school and spent the day doing nails and hair and makeup and just trying to make her smile.

That sweet girl was enduring too much heartache for such a young age, and we would do anything to just see that pretty smile of hers.

Phoenix had moved his stuff back into my place and I spent every night showing him just how sorry I was for not believing him when he told me the truth. And then spent every morning showing him I was sorry for being an idiot and thinking I could live without him.

When week three started, the crew moved Cami into Vaughan's place so that Dagen wouldn't have to continue to be shuffled between her grandparents and Cami and her parents' homes. It was just easier to have her there, and it's not like Vaughan hadn't been begging her to move in with him prior to his accident.

Poor Dagen cried when she moved in. That in turn made Cami cry and the two of them became glued at the hip every moment they were together.

We were all in pain, but leaned on one another for strength and hope. Phoenix was my strong and steady rock, there to hold me up whenever I felt like I could fall. He never let me hit the ground, and for that I was so grateful.

The team was unstoppable which also helped to keep me from crashing, and I just knew they would clinch the ALCS and move on to the World Series. They were headed into game four of the ALCS and led the Bombers—of all teams—three to one. We weren't at home, but even a win in New York would be sweet.

Phoenix finished up on the mound in the seventh inning and then his coach pulled him to rest in the event they went to game six and seven. It was now bottom of the ninth and the Wranglers were up by one. The Bombers heavy hitter was up with a full count, two outs and a runner on second. This next pitch would either end the Bombers season or push the game further along.

Our pitcher watched the signs Cisco threw his way, nodding off three until he got the one he wanted. His body went through the motions that were like breathing for him and

threw a change-up that should've been an easy strike. But the batter got a hold of it and sent it soaring above the shortstops head and found the perfect hole to drop.

Philo sprinted to get the ball while the runner began to round third. The Bombers third base coach was flagging the other runner on and Philo launched the ball to home plate. Cisco readied himself in front of the plate and braced for an incoming collision.

The next few moments played out in slow motion and I would replay them in my mind for days and weeks, and maybe months, after.

The Bombers runner dove for home plate right as the ball landed snug in Cisco's glove. Cisco swiped his hand down to tag the runner who stretched his fingers for home plate and we all held our breath until the umpire gave the signal that he was out.

Every Wranglers player and fan in that stadium erupted into cheers and tears of elation. The guys all jumped the rail and ran out onto the field. The dogpiled Philo then pulled Cisco in. I stood there cheering with tears swimming in my eyes.

This was the first ALCS the Wranglers had won in sixteen years. I was a teenager the last time they were here. My dad had taken me to the game and while I was already a fan of just about every sport, that day I fell hopelessly devoted to baseball.

I was so caught up in the emotion of the win that I didn't notice Phoenix barreling towards me until I was in his arms and being pulled over the railing from where I sat.

"Phoenix," I gasped, but there wasn't any way he'd let me fall.

"We did it, baby!" He spun me around, my legs flailing and flying behind me.

When he stopped he kept his tight hold on me and kissed the tar out of me. On instinct, I wrapped my legs around his

waist, no longer caring who saw us, and kissed him with equal passion.

Cheers became hoots and hollers from the guys, but that didn't stop us. I had interviews to do, but they were the last thing on my mind. Cameras caught our every move and all I could think was that every woman who saw this would know Phoenix West was mine.

When we finally pulled apart, we smiled stupidly at one another.

"I love you Vivian Kelley," he yelled over the chaos.

"I love you too, Phoenix West."

"Marry me!"

The smile that had been plastered on my face fell and the jubilant celebration around us felt like it dulled to a whisper.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

He gave me his classic cocky Phoenix West grin and repeated, "marry me."

I shook my head and looked at him through slanted eyes. "That's a horrible proposal. You don't even have a ring!"

"Peaches," he began and turned me in a slow circle. "We're standing in the middle of the biggest diamond there is. What more could you want?"

I smacked his chest and rolled my eyes. "How about a proper proposal with a ring when you're thinking clearly and not high off the win. We've been back together for two minutes. Quit messing around."

"You think I'm joking, but I'm not. But if a proper proposal is what you want, then that's what my girl will get." He kissed my nose then set me on my feet with a smile and a wink.

That night, we tumbled into our hotel room after a long night of celebrating when we were interrupted by both of our phones ringing. We figured it was our friends calling to congratulate Phoenix and that we'd call them back come

morning. Well, afternoon since it was three a.m. But when they both rang again, we stopped—begrudgingly—and answered.

And thank God we did because the news we got sent us into another torrent of extreme high.

Vaughan was awake from his coma. That's all that anyone knew, but he was responding and that was a good sign.

I cried, Phoenix woohooed, and when we hung up, we hugged and kissed for a whole new reason.

Two weeks later we were standing under a stream of confetti while fireworks exploded at Wrangler Stadium, celebrating the first World Series win in franchise history. Phoenix and I kissed and hugged and then I shoed him away to celebrate with his teammates.

The stage was erected at lightning speed as t-shirts and hats were handed out to every player and every coach. I stood watching when Rami walked up to me, shirt and hat in hand and said, “this is yours, Red. You're a part of this team, too. And Vivian...I'm sorry. I let Manny get in my head and I...I just feel awful. Nix is a great guy and you deserve the best.”

I took the shirt and hat from him, still in stunned silence, and placed the hat on my head. When I finally found the words, I told him, “thank you, Rami. And all is forgiven and forgotten. It's a little something Phoenix taught me and I think he'd agree.”

I held my arms open for a hug, but Rami shook his head and held out his hand. “You may think Nix has forgiven me, but I'm not about to risk getting my eyes shoved up my ass if I hug you. Let's keep it to hand shakes.”

I laughed and shook his hand, then he ran off when someone called his name.

The rest of the team found their way onto the stage while camera crews got into place. I ran over to grab my mic and make my way up for questions and the presentation of the trophies. I had a feeling that Phoenix was going to get the MVP award, and I wanted the best shot possible.

I took my place beside the podium that held the series and MVP trophies and waited with my questions ready when it cut to me. I asked the usual “how does it feel” and “tell me what that moment was like for you”. When it came to presenting the MVP trophy, my heart dropped into my stomach and my legs began to tremble.

“And now, the award for the Most Valuable Player for twenty-twenty three...” Luca bellowed into the microphone. “Phoenix West!”

The crowd went wild once more and this time, I couldn’t hold back the tears. Phoenix held that trophy high and everyone on that stage applauded him. Cameras flashed as thousands of pictures were taken of him and his trophy.

It was finally my turn to talk to him and for some reason, I was more nervous than the first time.

“Congratulations, Phoenix. You have had an amazing career and an amazing journey to get to this point from battling back after a gruesome injury, to a trade late in the season. With all of that, how sweet is this moment?”

I held my mic out to him, my hand shaking and remnants of tears in the corners of my eyes.

He looked at me and said, “After my injury, I never really saw myself standing here. It wasn’t until I was traded to the greatest team on earth,” he shouted and fans erupted. “That I finally felt like it was my time. But what would make this moment all the better is if...”

Phoenix reached into the back pocket of his pants and knelt before me, in front of thousands of people still in the stadium, and millions watching at home.

“Many years ago I met this sweet girl who I didn’t deserve. When she came back into my life, she was a fiery redhead who wanted nothing more than to see me fail. It took a lot of charm to win her over but when I did, I knew nothing could compare to having her love. Vivian Kelley, you are the fire in my life, the siren song I will always answer to. You drive me crazy and make me laugh and I fall more in love with

you each and every day. I would be the happiest man to ever walk the face of this earth if you would agree to be mine. Will you marry me, Peaches?”

He flipped open the blue velvet case to show off a dazzling diamond ring that just about knocked me on my ass.

“Holy shit,” I mumbled.

In the center of a halo setting, in a gold band with cushion cut diamonds all around it, sat an enormous orangy pink radiant cut diamond. It shined under the bright lights of the stadium and it had everyone within a five foot radius gasping.

“Was that a holy shit yes, oorr...”

I tore my eyes away from the hope diamond’s cousin sitting in Phoenix’s hand, and looked into his. Tears started falling all over again and I bit my lip to stop the stupid things, but they didn’t listen to me like they usually did. They hadn’t been ever since Phoenix reappeared in my life.

I nodded my head and squeaked out a “yes”.

“We didn’t hear you,” someone shouted.

I gulped down the lump in my throat and choked out louder, “yes, Phoenix West! I’ll marry you!”

He jumped to his feet and scooped me into his arms while everyone went crazy. He kissed me then set me down and quickly pulled the ring from its pillow. His hands shook as much as mine as he placed the ring on my left finger. And when it was snug in its place, he stared at with more happiness than he did his trophy that sat nearby.

“Was that to your liking, Peaches? Is this diamond real enough for you?” he asked with a smirk.

I smacked his chest and laughed. “I hate you.”

“No you don’t. You love the hell outta me. And I am madly, truly and deeply in love with you,” he mumbled against my lips.

Someone had taken over asking questions while Phoenix and I sat in our own little bubble. An alien ship could have

landed and beamed everyone up to space and I wouldn't have noticed. All I saw, all that mattered, was the man standing in front of me.

“I love you, Nixy. I'm bound to you. From here until forever.”

EPILOGUE

“CRY TO ME” - Solomon Burke

“CECE, my days of wearing a whore’s uniform are over,” I tell her as I stare at myself in the mirror.

It’s my bachelorette party and I’m standing here in a green, shimmery scrap of fabric that could honestly pass more as a dust rag than a dress. When I say this dress is tiny, I mean this shit is teeny tiny.

Okay, so I’m not a totally reformed bad girl. I would most definitely wear this if it were just Phoenix and I. But he’s not with me and despite the bar being reserved for a private party, male bartenders and staff will still be present. Phoenix would have an absolute conniption if he saw me in this. I’m lucky that he’s already left to play poker with the guys, otherwise this dress really would end up as a dust rag after he ripped it off of me.

“Payback for all of those times you guys made me wear stuff that looked like fabric swatches,” Camille sassied from her place where she sat on my bed.

“Vivian. Half the shit in your closet looks like it came out of a Frederick’s of Hollywood catalog. Shut up about that sexy dress and wear it.” CeCe pokes her head in the closet and snatches a pair of sky high Louboutin’s for me to wear.

“Yes, but *those* are whore uniforms that I only wear for Nix. Like this one,” I say, reaching out and pulling a red satin

dress. “This is for when I play firefighter and rescue him from a dangerous building. I give him mouth to mouth, only I don’t use the mouth on my face.” I waggle my eyebrows and give the girls a wicked look.

“Gross,” Cami whines when CeCe says, “nice!”

I brace my hand on the nearest wall and bring my foot up to clip the ankle buckle. “All I’m saying is that the things I used to wear to get men’s attention are no longer needed. Phoenix says I could walk out in a girl scout uniform and he’d still find me sexy. In fact, if you move that billowy robe, behind it is—”

“We get it!” CeCe interrupts and holds out a hand. “You guys play dress up... a *lot*. I don’t need the IMBD summary.”

I step into the bathroom and smooth my favorite lipstick across my lips and pop them. “Why doesn’t Cami have to dress like a slut?”

“Seriously, Viv?” Cami comes waddling into the bathroom and props her hands on her hips. “I’m seven months pregnant. Do you know how difficult it was to just put shoes on today, much less slip on a teensy dress and heels? My days of wearing too short skirts and shirts you can barely call tops are over.”

I shrug and turn off the bathroom light. “Some men have a preggo fetish. Vaughan does, right? He told Phoenix and Bish about how you two got all nasty in the barn again. He said the horses thought there was a hurricane blowing through with how loud you were.”

“Oh my God. I’m going to castrate him!” She walks off, grabbing her phone from her purse, and steps out of the room right as we hear her say, “Vaughan Asa McCallan. I’m going to kick your ass!”

“Yikes. Pregnancy hormones must be a bitch.” CeCe shakes her head and hooks her arm in mine. “C’mon my fiery little redhead. Time to drink a lot and laugh too much.”

We walk out of my room and find Cat and Cami waiting for us. Like we’ve done many times before, we pile into the

car and journey off to Billy's for a party that won't soon be forgotten.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you and Phoenix waited so long to get married. This is amazing," Cat calls out from her seat where she's getting a lap dance from a very scantily clad man.

I've been fortunate enough to avoid any random balls to the face tonight. CeCe gave the men a warning—even though she said Phoenix would never find out—to keep three feet between them and me at all times. I told her it was best to advise them of it. Phoenix may not be in the building, but I guarantee he can tell when another man gets too close to me. He's like a bloodhound. He'll sniff the guy out and rip his spine right out of his back.

I've been present one too many times when Phoenix blew the skin back of another player when he got too close during interviews. He almost ripped the arms off of one guy when he hugged me and his hand was "too low" to be appropriate. I had to remind Phoenix of who he was and that any beating or killing of men would have to wait until he was retired.

"Well first," I say, ticking off a finger. "I wasn't ready to run down the aisle day two like this bitch." I hitch my thumb at the very pregnant Camille. "Two, someone else had to go and beat everyone to the punch with popping out little crotch goblins and stealing my thunder. Three, we had to wait until Nix won his second title. And four, we only have a few months between end of season and spring training to pull off this extravaganza. You know I prefer peaches and pinks to fall colors. Plus, I didn't want to have my wedding overshadowed by Halloween and Thanksgiving and Christmas. So...March fifth it was. We'll get exactly one week on our honeymoon before he has to report to Florida for training. And I'll be right behind him for the station, so basically it'll turn into another three weeks of being newlyweds in between training and games."

Cat has blocked me out and is back to staring at Office Booty Cheeks bend over for her. CeCe, however, says, "a

simple ‘we wanted to wait’ would have sufficed. We didn’t need your whole fucking itinerary.”

I stick my tongue out and throw her the bird. She grows more and more like Luca each day. And by that I mean a cranky, salty bitch.

But I still love her. She loved my ass when I was being a stubborn, stupid bitch. And she loved Cam when she was being a blind, self-righteous bitch. It’s kind of our thing.

“I guess it was too much to ask for you to wait to get married until *after* I had this giant kid?” Cami says, waddling over to where we sit.

“Bitch. You’re the one who got knocked up before you and Vaughan even walked down the aisle. Plus, we had already booked the hotel. I couldn’t delay it anymore,” I tell her.

“How have you not gotten pregnant, by the way? You and Phoenix go at it every minute you’re not working or sleeping. Scratch that. I’m sure you two do it in your sleep.” Cam slowly lowers herself into the chair and places her hand over the bump that is my godson, Sloane.

She may not realize I’m his godmother, yet, but I’ll tell her as soon as he’s born.

“Well it’s simple, actually.”

“Oh God. Here goes another ten minute explanation that could’ve been summarized in three words,” CeCe moans.

“Shut up,” I chide her and punch her arm. “Phoenix’s dick is so huge that when he comes, it completely bypasses my ovaries and lands straight in my mouth. The problem is swallowing it back down aft—”

“Gag!”

“Oh my God! Stop! I can’t take it. I need to go bleach my brain. You two are gross.”

Cami tries once, then twice and on the third try, pushes herself out of her seat and walks over to refill her water at the bar.

“Like the song says,” I shout after her. “I get gnarly, I get gross. Wait ‘til you see what I can do with my toes.”

She turns around and puts her finger in her mouth like she’s gagging. I laugh and relish in the fact that I can still shock my friends.

The song playing ends and Cat waves a sad goodbye to her police officer as he grabs his uniform and big stick and walks off. Before a new song can start, CeCe jumps from her seat and rushes over to the DJ stand.

She grabs the mic and the DJ hushes the background music. “I need everyone’s attention, please.” The thirty or so friends who are joining us this evening quiet down and begin to move closer to our makeshift dance stage. “We have a special surprise for our bride-to-be, and we want all eyes on her.”

The women all cheer and I grow incredibly nervous.

“C,” I try shouting, but she holds up her hand and shushes me.

“Now, Vivi. We will have no arguments about it. Phoenix is not here to kill anyone, so you are going to sit there like a good girl and *take it!*” The girls scream again, and I slink further down into my chair.

I immediately stick my hand in the waistband of my skirt to grab my phone that I tucked in it before my purse was taken away. I stealthily unlock my phone and fire off a text to Phoenix before CeCe can snatch it away like the cellphone police.

Me: Baby, I just want you to know that I fought CeCe on the events of this evening. Please know I was forced against my will. Don’t kill anyone.

I stare at the screen waiting for the text bubbles to appear so I know he read it, but they never come. Nervously, I tuck my phone back in its place and pray to God whatever is about to happen doesn’t land Phoenix in jail by tomorrow.

“Vivi...this one’s for you.” CeCe purrs into the mic and the lights drop.

Soft notes play over the speakers and *Cry To Me* by Solomon Burke begins playing. My favorite song from my favorite movie.

I already don’t like this.

A light shines across the stage and a man in a baseball uniform steps out. I gulp down the “STOP” I want to yell and try to be a mature adult. But I really want to run away and hide.

The song plays on, getting more sensual when the crooner sings and the guy on stage starts to move. He has on white baseball pants with a long sleeved shirt that has a picture of a peach and a baseball on it, and a ball cap pulled low.

“Real funny with the peaches and baseball, guys,” I tell my ridiculous friends who are gonna get vagina punched. Well, not Cam. Poor girl is so close to having her perfect little kitty blown out like an over inflated Macy’s day balloon.

The light is dim on his face, so I can’t quite see what he looks like but if I were a single lady, I’d be all up on this man. He’s tall and built and looks like a piece of man meat I would’ve chewed up and spit out back in the day.

He dances closer but still too far for me to get a good look at. Hips roll, legs muscles flex through his pants, a gloved hand slides down the front of his body, and Mr. Burke sings “*don’t you feel like cryin’*”.

Yes. Yes I do.

In a move that only a professional could pull off, he lowers himself to the floor and starts gyrating. *Damn, he knows how to move his hips.* He starts a slow crawl towards me and I wiggle in my seat. I can only see the top of his ball cap as he keeps his head down and now I just want to see what this guy looks like.

He’ll be nothing compared to my man, but still...a girl can be curious.

He reaches the edge of the stage where I sit and rises to his knees, head still down, and spreads his legs. Woah! This player is carrying a bat.

Oh my God! Don't look!

I watch as he pops the button of his pants open and beads of sweat form at my hairline. He uses nimble fingers to slide the zipper down and he slowly pushes his pants over his hips to reveal a pair of baseball printed boxer briefs. Not the underwear I was expecting, but fitting given the theme.

He brings his hand to his mouth and pulls off one glove then the other. His hands are large and veiny and manly, and look a tiny bit familiar. But before I can think too much, he jumps off the stage and slides right to me. He places his hand on my ankle and I quickly yank it away. He doesn't make a second attempt and proceeds to stand up and yank his hat even further down to conceal his face.

This must be self preservation because if I can't identify him, then Phoenix can't track him down and strangle him.

Another roll of his hips brings his crotch closer to my face and I have to turn my head to avoid having it touch me. Sweat is now pouring down the back of my neck, and my heart is racing. Mr. Baseball turns so that his back is to me and I finally breathe a sigh of relief. That is until he grabs hold of his pants and rips them clean off.

Holy balls! He's getting naked.

His cleats follow leaving him in his underwear, shirt and hat. In a flash, the hat is thrown away and he's lifting off his shirt. He spins quickly just as his shirt clears his chest and that's when I see it.

"Phoenix!" I yell, standing to my feet.

The women, who just seconds ago were cat calling and making lewd propositions to him, all go silent and the music seems impossibly loud.

"Hey Peaches," he growls and takes me in his arms.

“Oh gross! That’s my uncle and I was whistling at him. I’m gonna be sick.” I hear Anais calling from somewhere behind me then a chorus of laughter.

“What are you doing?” I ask him.

A crooked grin tilts one side of his mouth and he says, “making sure you were being a good girl.”

Oh Lord, this man.

“I don’t like that all my friends got a peek at what’s mine. Your dick is big enough that I’m sure the ladies in the back got an eyeful.” He gives me one of his lady killer smiles and I melt.

I press my lips to his and moan when I feel his tongue meet mine. His hand glides down my back and squeezes my ass.

“Mm. So juicy,” he groans.

My skirt is tight as hell, but I manage to wrap my legs around him. By now, I’ve grown wet and no doubt he can feel me on his hard abs.

“That’s not all that’s juicy,” I breathe into his ear.

“Fuuuuck, Peaches. I need to be inside of you.”

I pull back to look at him and bite my lip while giving him a nod.

He moves his head so that he can see over my shoulder and yells out to everyone, “Vivian has to go home now and get her reward for being so good tonight. I hope you all were equally as good ‘cause if not...” He shrugs with one shoulder then looks back at the darkened doorway.

There I see a tall, brooding billionaire followed by a cranky cowboy and an ex-pro baller who looks about ready to crush some skulls.

“Yikes,” I wince then laugh. “They can handle themselves. Let’s go have some fun. Show me some more of those exceptional dance moves.”

He winks with a full blown smile. “You liked that.”

“So much,” I nod. “Now take me home big guy. I wanna see what you can do with that bat you’ve got in your pants.”

He throws his head back and laughs, then swings me into his arms and carries me out An Officer and A Gentleman style.

I am forever grateful that Phoenix West bulldozed his way back into my life and into my heart.

He must have known I was bound to love him.

THE END

PLAYLIST

- “Power & Control” - MARINA and the Diamonds
- “Brand New Bitch” - COBRAH
- “HUMBLE” - Kendrick Lamar
- “How To Be a Heartbreaker” - MARINA and the Diamonds
- “Sweet Sweet” - Travis Scott
- “Definition” - Mabel
- “Godzilla” - Eminem (feat. Juice WRLD)
- “Thing For You” - David Guetta & Martin Solveig
- “Players” - Coi Leray
- “Can’t Tame Her” - Zara Larsson
- “Eat U Alive” - Marian Hill (feat. Steve Davit)
- “Savage Remix” - Megan Thee Stallion (feat. Beyoncé)
- “Power Trip” - J. Cole (feat. Miguel)
- “Need To Know” - Doja Cat
- “Body Language” - Doja Cat
- “Rodeo” - Law Pat (feat. Big Jade)
- “Super Freaky Girl” - Nicki Minaj
- “All The Time” - Jeremih (feat. Lil Wayne & Natasha Mosley)
- “Casual” - Doja Cat
- “Bad Intentions” - Niykee Heaton (feat. Migos)
- “Moonlight” - Kali Uchis
- “Woman” - Doja Cat
- “WOW” - Zara Larsson
- “Electric (Ryan Riback Remix)” - Alina Baraz (feat. Khalid)
- “Peaches & Cream” - 112
- “Heartburn” - Wafia
- “LOVE” - Kendrick Lamar (feat. Zacari)
- “Simple Things” - Miguel
- “Your Love” - Nicki Minaj
- “Summertime Magic” - Childish Gambino
- “Cry to Me” - Solomon Burke

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This seems like an absolute dream to me right, to be writing this part of my second book just months after releasing my first.

When I started the process of writing *West Bound*, I assumed it would be a story that I'd take many months to complete and release within a year of *The Pieces Left Behind*. What I didn't expect was the overwhelming support and love from readers that helped encourage and motivate me to get this one out to you all faster than I anticipated.

It also helps that I had readers banging down my door saying, "gimme gimme gimme more. I need it now!" Well, here you go.

I have so many people I want to thank, but first I'd like to start with a little story about what brought me to write about Vivian and Phoenix.

When I was a young girl, fresh out of high school and trying to figure out where I wanted to go in life, I sat down and thought of all of the things that interested me and what I was good at. The list wasn't long because I felt that there was so little that I was good at and so little that I was interested in doing for the rest of my life. But one thing I was good at was talking in front of people and engaging them in conversations.

Immediately I thought mass communications. That's what I'll do. Well jokes on me because that did not mean I could talk with groups of people all day. But it did lead me to broadcast journalism. That was the moment it clicked. *I'll be on television.*

I was well into my fifth year of Spanish so I thought, let's combine them! I had stars in my eyes and a vision that I would be an on air reporter for Univision and thought I had finally figured it out.

Then along came sports.

I was already a fan of many sports having grown up watching boxing and football with my grandfather, and baseball and basketball with my dad. My boyfriend at the time (now husband) was an avid sports enthusiast and the more I sat and watched games with him, the more the thrill of it got to me.

So I made a slight detour and decided I'd be a sports journalist on ESPN and be on the small list of female sports reporters.

But a funny thing happened. A funny thing called life that came in the form of a husband and a baby. Being a young mother, it was most important to me that I give my son all of the time and attention that I could, so I put finishing school on the back burner and focused on raising my son and being a good wife.

Then baby number two came along, and a big move to Texas and the realization that going back to school and being a journalist wasn't going to be in my future. And I was perfectly fine with that. I had my wonderful family and couldn't be happier being there for my kids when they got home from school, and having dinner on the table for my husband.

But underneath the fulfilling duties as a mother and wife, the desire to write simmered. I don't know where it is sparked from, but after the birth of our surprise baby (12 years after our first) the stories that would pop in and out of my head became clearer and more vivid.

It started with writing down an idea. Then came the visions of what these people looked like and their "universe". Names would jump up at me and I'd have to rush to put them down on paper. Before I knew it, I had notebooks with half written stories, ideas for others, and poorly planned plot lines.

The journalist in me pushed her way through the tangled mess of chores and after school practices and PTO meetings and play dates and said, "hey! I'm still here!". So I let her out.

And once I gave her the green light, there was no stopping that little spit fire.

One day, she came up with the brilliant idea to combine my long lost dream of broadcast journalism and my love of sports into one amazing story. Thus, Vivian and Phoenix were born.

I was able to live out my dream of reporting on my favorite sports—baseball and football—through Vivian. So thank you Vivian Kelley, for elbowing your way to the top and demanding I listen to you.

Now that story time is over, let me get to the part where I start thanking some peeps for their support and pure awesomeness.

First, as always, is a huge thank you to my husband. He's not a romance fan, per se, but he's a fan of mine and I couldn't be more thankful for the support he gives me day in and day out. Without him, none of this would be possible.

To my dear, sweet, amazing daughter...I love you sweet girl and I am so very grateful for your love and your patience when listening to me talk and talk about books and characters and future worlds that I continue to build. You're my best friend and just like your father, I couldn't do this without you.

Next, my PIC, my soul sister, my book bestie, my sister-wife, Alisha Shipley. I don't know how the world knew we needed one another, but I thank the big guy for dropping you in to my life at the exact moment I was needing someone just like you.

You have been a constant source of laughter, support and insane story telling. You keep my head above water and talk me off the edge when I start to lose my marbles.

Thank you will never be enough to say just how appreciative I am for you, but I'll say it anyway. Thank you. A million times over, to the moon and back, with a cherry on top.

I'll keep the car running.

To my beta reader, Megan (preferably paperback) you are freaking PHENOMENAL! You helped me see my story with a

new set of eyes and made it truly amazing. I hope you'll stick around for another one because your brain and your keen eye is my secret weapon.

To the ladies of Ryan Marie's Hype Crew...I love y'all! Just like Alisha, I am so very grateful you all were dropped into my lap. Or was I dropped in yours? Either way, thank you. This stressful and scary journey through the literary world has been a thousand times more fun with you all by my side.

Don't forget; Cami's got bail money, Tammie's got the alibi, Gabby's on distraction detail, Joleigh is still making her way in from across the pond, and Kaz is just being crazy. Alisha and I know what to do. <high fives> Girls trip is going to be lit!

And to the readers (that's you). Thank you for taking time out of your busy life to get lost in the ones I create with you in mind. With the simple flip of a page, you help make my wildest and craziest dreams come true. Without you, I couldn't call myself an author. And for that, I thank you.

I hope you come back to see what else my crowded mind comes up with because nothing brings me more joy than knowing my stories bring fun and laughter and tears and adventure to your lives.

It's an honor to write for you. Because at the end of the day...

I'm just a mom...who loves to write...standing in front of the world...asking them to love her.

XO

Ryan Marie

ALSO BY RYAN MARIE

The Pieces Left Behind, Magnolia Creek Book 1

CeCe and Luca

A billionaire boss and employee romance

Magnolia Creek Book 3, coming January 2024

Bishop and Anais

A taboo, age gap romance

Magnolia Creek Book 4, coming June 2024

Cathia and Hayes

A reverse age gap, friends to lovers romance

Magnolia Creek Novella 4.5 coming late 2024

Dagen and Hendrix

Magnolia Creek/Dare Bros crossover, coming October 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ryan Marie is an indie author who is living out her dream. An avid reader of all things romance, Ryan enjoys cuddling up in bed with her favorite authors. In her downtime, you can find her embarrassing her kids with her superior dance moves, telling herself she's exercising, and spending hours dreaming up everyone's next book boyfriend. But during football season, you can find her on the couch, screaming at the television and rooting for her beloved San Francisco 49ers.

Ryan lives in a suburb of Houston where she's killing it at the mom gig to three awesome kids, laughing far too much with her husband and high school sweetheart (a man with the patience of a saint), and her two giant dogs.

