



Baby for My
BILLIONAIRE

BALLER

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BABY FOR MY BILLIONAIRE BALLER

A ENEMIES TO LOVERS SECRET PREGNANCY ROMANCE



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CHAPTER 1 - STONE



“*A*re you kidding me?” Eddie grumbles at the coach. “Not a single damn flight is available out of the entire airport?”

“*Watch it,*” Coach Rex says as he gives Eddie a look of warning. “There are *ladies* present.”

Eddie scoffs and turns on his heels before starting to pace the lobby of the Hilton Hotel. I’ve noticed in my time as quarterback—not just now on the Austin Wranglers NFL team, but even before when I used to play for the Longhorns back in college—that running backs always seem to have the least amount of patience. I wonder if they’re just wired like that.

“Could be worse,” I shrug, feeling pretty good about being able to spend a night put-up in a nice hotel, even if it’s in Minneapolis. “We could be stuck here with just the guys and not surrounded by all these pretty faces.”

Half of the cheerleading team starts to break into smiles and giggles. Travelling to away games definitely has its perks, one of which is that the cheerleading team usually travels with us on the road. Being stranded in Minnesota following a Monday night game would be a lot less fun if there wasn’t a posh hotel and a bunch of girls to occupy our time.

Coach Rex gives me a warning look too, likely to remind me of the *rules* without needing to reiterate them here in the hotel lobby.

The fast-moving blizzard that hit right as we were winning yet another game, has grounded all of our red-eye flights back to Austin until the weather clears. And while Coach Rex is busy taking care of our accommodations for the night, my teammate and sole confidant amidst this crew of overpaid muscle, is stressing the fuck out.

“Eddie, come on,” I say as I walk up to him and toss a collegial arm

around his shoulder. I lower my voice to a whisper so that the coach can't hear. "I'll buy you a drink at the lobby bar after Coach heads up to his room for the night."

That makes him loosen up. We aren't supposed to drink during the season, and especially not when we're on the road. But what Coach doesn't know won't hurt anyone. And besides, it works to make Eddie stop pacing around like a caged animal.

"Alright, good news and bad news," Coach says when he comes back to where the team is slouched over the hotel lobby chairs. Everyone is tired after a well-played game. Even the cheerleaders, who pride themselves on their excessive perkiness, are starting to fade. "The good news is that we've got everyone nice rooms that include breakfast in the morning. And so far, it looks like the weather will clear in time for morning flights back home."

"What's the bad news?" the cheerleading coach asks as she tosses a team jacket to one of the cheerleaders who's shivering so much her teeth are chattering. One would think that they would've packed for November weather in Minnesota, and not as if they're heading to the beach in a crop top with no coat.

"Well, the *bad news*..." Coach Rex says as if he knows he's about to get a verbal lashing. The girls' coach is a hard ass, definitely not the warm and fuzzy kind. "Is that some of us are going to have to double-up, and there just really isn't any way to keep the girls and guys separated tonight."

Coach Margo looks at him with daggers in her eyes. It's the rule that the cheerleaders and football players are kept strictly separated when we're on the road. But no one could have anticipated being stuck here overnight, and it's impossible to avoid a bit of interaction since we're all stuck here together.

"Well, we'll just have to make the best of it," Coach Margo says as she grabs a stack of room keys from his hand. "My girls are all tired anyway, so I'm *sure* that everyone will be heading straight to their rooms to shower and get some rest."

Even as she says it, some of the girls are making eyes at a few of the players. It feels like a high school trip, and I feel a bit like I'm eighteen instead of thirty-four.

"Here," Coach Rex says as he hands me my room key. "The star quarterback gets his own room."

"Alright, big shot," Eddie teases after the coach is out of earshot. "You owe me *two* drinks now instead."

Everyone takes their keys and goes up to their respective rooms to get settled. And as soon as I step into mine, I go straight to take a hot shower. My muscles are sore after the game, and tight due to the cold weather, and the shower feels *great*.

Since I'm not at all tired yet, I decide to throw on some jeans and a muscle tee and go down to the bar to get Eddie that drink. I have a feeling he's already down there waiting on me, and as soon as I step back off the elevator into the lobby, I'm proven right.

"This hotel is *swank*," Eddie says as he flags down the bartender as soon as I sit down on the stool beside him. "And since you're buying, I'll have a double."

"You act like you don't make a healthy salary yourself," I laugh as I point at the bottle of Macallan 25 behind the bar. The bartender nods and asks me how I want my whiskey. "*Neat*."

"Not compared to you, Mister Fancy Pants," he teases.

It's no secret that I'm not only paid more than almost everyone else on the team, but also that I'm a billionaire in my own right. Investing well over the last decade or so has ensured that I can forge a life that's rich in wealth and security. I have my reasons for wanting to ensure that I never have to struggle through daily life the way my parents did.

When our drinks arrive, Eddie and I clink our glasses together, eager to enjoy a night of reprieve after a hard-won victory over the Minneapolis Mavericks.

It doesn't take long before the lobby bar starts to fill up. So much for all the cheerleaders being 'too tired.' I laugh when I see how some of them have dolled themselves up and come out to sneak in a drink and a bit of *fraternization* with the players. Thankfully, the coaches are always beat after games and chances are high that they won't emerge from their rooms until morning.

"Man, that one sure is pretty," Eddie smiles as he points to a redhead with striking green eyes. "And so is that one—wait, didn't you sleep with her already?"

I look over at the woman he's pointing at—Heather Jamie. *Yep, sure did*. Although, to be fair, I've slept with a *lot* of them.

"Brown hair, blue eyes, and breasts that fill your hands," he muses as he takes a large swig of his drink.

Eddie is a good guy, if not a bit *too* in need of a good lay.

I get ready to open my mouth and tell him that he would be wise to steer clear of Heather and go for the redhead instead, but before I can get a word out, he already spots a different girl that he likes even better and leaves me at the bar alone to pursue her.

I chuckle at his antics and finish my drink.

“Another?” the bartender asks as soon as he spies my empty glass.

“When in Rome,” I grin.

“Stone?” a voice calls from behind me.

I turn around to see none other than little Violet Dawson, although she’s definitely not *little* anymore. At least not as little as I remember her being when she always used to tag along with her older brother, and my best friend, Del.

I know she cheers for the Wranglers, but I haven’t really crossed paths with her outside of games until now. And to be quite honest, it’s difficult to recognize her.

Violet was in kindergarten when I was a junior in high school and considering that I’ve only seen her cheering at a distance from the field, I hadn’t really noticed what a gorgeous woman she’s grown into. *What is she now, like twenty-two or so?*

Her older brother, Del, has been my best friend since preschool. And even though I haven’t caught up with him in a while, he’s still my best bud. Friendships like that never age out. I thought it was pretty hilarious when he told me his kid sister ended up cheering for my NFL team, but I haven’t thought much of it since then. At least not until *now*.

“Hey, it’s great to see you,” I say with a smile as I pull out the barstool next to me for Violet to sit down. “How’s your brother doing?”

Violet shrugs and sits down beside me, ordering a drink from the bartender, and then turns toward me to talk. Her blonde hair cascades in waves over her shoulders, and I can’t help but notice the way the tendrils fall against the top of her breasts in her tightly fitting sweater. At least she’s dressed more sensibly than some of the other girls. But *Jesus*, when did she get so hot?

“I mean, Del is fine. As fine as you can be when you’re married with three small children,” she laughs.

For a while, we hang out at the lobby bar together talking over the good old days back home in Brook Downs, Texas. I don’t miss that small town at all.

“Do you still live there?” I ask, not willing to trade my luxury penthouse apartment in Austin for any amount of land in Brook Downs.

“Yeah, I rent a townhome there, unless I’m on the road with the Wranglers. You?”

For some reason, I don’t want to brag about my wealth and status to Violet, like I do with most of the women I come across. It’s probably because she’s Del’s little sister and not one of the usual bimbos I seduce into my bed.

“Nah, I live in the city,” I answer without getting into how I own not only my penthouse but the entire building. “Downtown Austin.”

Her eyes widen as she leans in and asks me to tell her what city life is like. I’ve been so far removed from my small-town upbringing that I almost forget what it was like not to know about all the things the city has to offer. So, I order us both another round of drinks and start telling her about Austin.

We sit and talk as the lobby bar grows more and more crowded with loud and restless team members and giddy cheerleaders, all of whom are happy to have a night of fun together. As the lounge gets more packed with people, and the conversations get more alcohol-fueled, Violet and I wind up leaning in close just to hear what the other is saying. Pretty soon, I can feel her breath on my cheek when she talks, and something about being so close to her shoots jolts of electricity through the seam of my pants.

I tell her about how I studied finance at the University of Texas with a full-ride sports scholarship before being drafted by the Wranglers. And she tells me how she got her Associate of Applied Science Degree and worked as a vet tech before trying out for the Wrangler’s cheerleading squad on a whim. When she mentions her lifetime love of dance and cheer, I remember how her brother used to vent to me about getting dragged along to watch her dance recitals as a kid. It’s funny how it all feels like it was a million years ago.

“Hey, do you want to go somewhere quieter to talk?” I ask when a group of players with some of the girls sitting in their laps begin to erupt into laughter that makes it almost impossible to hear her.

“Sure,” Violet smiles.

I flag down the bartender to close out the tab and then lean over to ask him to have a bottle of champagne sent to my room. What the hell—it’s a victory game night celebration, so I toss him an extra hundred-dollar bill and ask him to make the bottle a nice one and charge it to my room.

By the time that Violet and I are stumbling into the elevator, we’ve probably already had a few too many. The bad thing about being on a

regimented no-alcohol diet most of the time, is that my tolerance is pretty low whenever I do indulge.

The bottle of champagne reaches the room just minutes after we do, and I pop the cork with great fanfare, much to Violet's delight.

"It's nice seeing this side of you," she says with an inebriated grin.

"What, the drunken side?" I joke.

"No, the *fun* side that isn't all cold and grumpy all the time."

"Cold and grumpy?" I'm surprised by those descriptors. "Maybe you just didn't really know me that well. I mean, there's quite an age gap between us."

"I don't think that was as much the issue as the fact that you were an *untouchable* sports star," she says as I fill our champagne flutes to the rim.

"I wasn't *untouchable*," I laugh as we sit down on the small hotel couch together, drinks in hand. "I was at your house almost every weekend hanging out with Del."

"You were to *me*," she says.

It's at that moment, it seems like I'm seeing Violet for the very first time. She turned into this ridiculously gorgeous woman, and I hadn't even noticed. Maybe not *everything* about Brook Downs is that bad after all.

Between the intoxication setting in and a very unexpected bout of homesickness that I *never* thought I would feel, I'm suddenly prompted to do something reckless.

I lean forward and kiss Violet Dawson, not caring that she's my best friend's little sister, not caring that she's a solid decade younger than me, and not even caring that this is against Wrangler rules. I push my tongue between her slightly parted lips until it meets with hers. And from the reaction of her body pressing suddenly against mine, I know that it's too late to turn back from crossing this line.

I lift her tiny frame up with me as I stand up from the couch and my body has an instant visceral reaction when Violet wraps her legs around my waist as I carry her into the hotel bedroom.

Are we drunk? Yes. Are we about to do something entirely stupid and reckless? Yes again. But at that moment, all I can think about is enjoying a passionate night of unbelievably good sex with Violet. And that turns out to be a *major* understatement.

CHAPTER 2 - VIOLET



*I*t's not like I'm a virgin or anything, but *holy shit*, the sex with Stone is the hottest thing I have *ever* experienced in my entire life.

Not only is he built like a muscular Adonis and hung like the gods themselves, but when he pushes his throbbing, swollen cock inside me, staring right through me with those steely blue eyes of his, I feel like I'm going to die from an overload of pleasure.

Sure, I remembered how handsome he was—I had a crush on him throughout most of my pubescent years every time that he came over to spend time with my brother. He was handsome, entirely off-limits for me, and mostly just a fantasy until tonight. I hadn't even really thought about him again until I saw him on the field. And I sure as hell never thought that I would wind up in Stone Clark's bed beneath his naked body, writhing in ecstasy while he moves within me.

I'm definitely too buzzed to use my better judgment and to exert any modicum of self-restraint. But I'm not too buzzed to enjoy every freaking minute of it.

He slips the tip of his cock into my waiting slit, and groans in pleasure as I tighten around him. I grunt, struggling to take his substantial girth, but it doesn't hurt. I'm so ready for him. When he gives me a questioning look, I respond by hooking my feet around the back of his ankles and grabbing his muscular ass, beckoning him deeper, flashing him a look of desire *years* in the making.

He responds by lapping at my nipples causing me to moan and tremor in pleasure. It has the desired effect of relaxing my pussy even more and allowing him to push into me deeper. I've never been filled up so thoroughly,

and he's only about halfway in. I don't know what comes over me, but I've never had this intense reaction to a man before.

He raises his face from my breasts, looking me dead in the eye. I kiss him feverishly and bite his lip. He moans appreciatively, then pauses momentarily and pulls away.

I look at him pouting in protest, but he simply flashes me a devilish smile, raises my legs above his shoulders and pushes into me fully. He's so experienced. I tremor and have my first orgasm with his cock buried into my pussy to the hilt. I've never experienced anything like it, and I feel small repetitive pops of pleasure as my pussy twitches around him. I barely notice my nails digging into his ass as I convulse in sweet euphoria.

"Damn, you're having a good time aren't you?" he quips with that same sexy smile.

I respond by merely nodding my head, wanting more. He begins fucking me feverishly, my pussy conforming to the shape of his beautiful manhood. I never imagined, even in my fantasies, that this could feel so good.

We're both screaming now, and I can feel his balls slapping against my thighs as he pounds me. My hand snakes down to cup them, rubbing and marveling at how large they feel in my petite hand as he continues to fuck me. I can tell he likes it. I've never done something like this before, but the way he feels inside of me awakens something primal. I'm operating off of pure intuition.

When Stone tips me over the edge of climax again, I quiver into a fit of satiated tremors that are so intense I can feel them in my *teeth*. He follows almost immediately, and I lean my face up to kiss him again before he climbs off me. Truth be told, I don't *want* him to climb off me.

But to my surprise, instead of pulling himself out of my body and laying down beside me on the bed, Stone starts to move *again*.

I feel my heart race in my chest at the idea of being able to climax a third time, something that I've never experienced before. Not only is he a football star, but this guy is an absolute *legend* in bed as well. And after a full night of sex that results in not one, not two, but *three* explosions of pleasure before we both finally collapse into a heap of limbs on the bed, we finally fall asleep somewhere in the witching hours.

In the morning, I wake up before the alarm, which is surprising considering the brutal hangover that I have. I chalk it up to a mix of fear and anxiety over being caught here in Stone's hotel room. I try not to wake up

Stone and simply slide out from the sheets to make a graceful exit before he notices I'm gone. But it doesn't work at all. As soon as I move to put a foot on the floor, he's awake.

"Coffee?" he says as he yawns and sits up in the bed beside me.

In truth, I would practically *kill* for a cup of coffee to ease the hazy throbbing in my head. But I need to get out of here.

"No, thanks anyway," I say, reaching for my bra and panties and feeling a sudden flush of embarrassment that I try not to reveal.

I don't know whether I'm embarrassed about the fact that I got drunk and slept with my brother's best friend or that I enjoyed it *way* too much. Either way, sleeping with Stone is strictly against the Wrangler's team policies. Cheerleaders and players aren't allowed to be romantically involved, even though everyone knows that rule gets broken more often than not. Still, *I* don't want to be the one to get caught and punished for it. I could get kicked off the squad.

Not that cheerleading is my ultimate career goal—at some point, maybe after a couple more years of being on the cheer team, I want to go back and finish my degree to become a veterinarian. But at the moment, *this* is what I want to do, and I don't want to fuck it up over one drunken night of mistakes. *Amazing* mistakes, but still mistakes.

I get dressed quickly, watching Stone pull his pants over his hips from the corner of my eye. *God, he's so hot.* A part of me desperately wants to climb back in bed with him, and my mind instantly flashes with memories of last night.

We used every inch of that bed—his body over mine, my body straddling his, and at one point I think I remember being half-propped up against the headboard. It was *incredible* and now I need to pretend like it never happened.

"Thank you for last night," I say, stumbling clumsily over my words and feeling like a fool. What kind of fool *thanks* a guy for fucking her? "For the drinks, I mean."

Stone chuckles at my failed attempt to not act awkward. I don't wait for him to say anything in return. Instead, I grab my room key and purse, and make a quick exit so I can hightail it back to my own room before my roommate wakes up.

Thankfully, I'm bunking with Sara Phillips, my closest friend on the team. She's a notoriously late sleeper, and rarely ever wakes up before her

alarm. I'm able to slip inside and dive under my covers before she opens an eye.

I lay in bed, trying to get a few more minutes of sleep in hopes of taming my hangover, but all I can think about is Stone. I toss and turn, reliving the sensations from last night with my eyes wide open until the alarm goes off.

"Morning," Sara says as she gets out of bed and walks over to the in-room coffee maker. Those machines are always crap and even with this banging headache, I'm still going to tough it out until I can get a decent coffee at the airport rather than drink the muddied water that comes out of those ten-dollar machines.

"Morning," I smile in return.

"What time did you get in?" she asks. "I must have been sound asleep because I didn't hear when you got back."

"Not sure," I answer brushing off her question as though it wasn't important. "But I'm ready to head back to Austin."

Sara eyes me suspiciously for a second and I wonder if she had seen me sitting at the lobby bar with Stone. The lounge area last night was filled to the brim, so obviously some of the players and girls on the cheer team saw us together. I only hope that none of them saw us *leave* together. Regardless, it's not like anyone could *prove* we slept together. Especially since Stone has a hotel room all to himself.

I open up the mini fridge and take out a bottle of water.

"Those things are like five bucks a bottle in the hotel room," Sara warns.

I couldn't care any less as I chug it down to try and fight my hangover. Thankfully, it's a mild one and the room isn't spinning at least.

When we get to the airport, I keep my sunglasses on inside the terminal—not because I'm *that* hungover but simply because I don't want to face Stone again.

I left his room so quickly this morning that everything felt rather rushed and unresolved. It's not like I expected a romantic morning together, lazing around in bed, or even for him to say he'd call me later. I would have been happy with anything other than me *thanking* him for a night of sex before running out the door.

At least I know he isn't likely going to tell anyone about it since *he* would get in trouble too. Granted, the star quarterback is a lot less likely to get kicked off the team for sleeping with a cheerleader. And, in fact, Stone's reputation for getting women into his bed is rather notorious. But if the threat

of getting slapped on the wrist isn't enough of a deterrent, then having word get around that he slept with his best friend's little sister would probably do it.

My brother isn't exactly a guy to be feared, especially not as an elementary school gym teacher and married father of three. But he *is* still my older brother and that means he's protective of me and my reputation. I'm sure Stone wouldn't want to cause a rift between them over me.

"Boarding pass?" a voice asks as I'm completely lost in my thoughts about Stone.

"Sorry," I mumble, handing over the tickets to the gate attendant.

"You must have slept like crap," Sara says from behind me. "You're a hot mess this morning."

"Yeah," I laugh it off. "Hotel beds aren't the most comfortable."

"Really? Mine felt like sleeping in a *cloud*."

Her voice drifts into the recesses of my head as I see Stone walking down the loading bridge to the plane up ahead. He turns his head to talk to the guy next to him, and I get a clear view of his side profile. All I can think about is the way my hand held onto his jaw while he kissed me last night, and suddenly I start to get major electric butterflies in my stomach.

I'm a fool for thinking I could just get away with last night. For thinking that as long as Stone doesn't tell anyone—and *I* don't tell anyone, and no one saw us—that this could all just be chalked up to being a drunken, one-night fiasco of amazing sex and nothing more. The problem with that whole idea is if it truly *is* nothing more than just a stupid, drunken mistake that we can both just put behind us, then I wouldn't be having a complete crisis before I even get to my airplane seat.

My face feels hot, my chest feels tight, and my thighs are shaking almost as much as they were last night every time Stone brought me to the point of euphoric eruption.

"Violet, let's go!" Coach Margo calls from the back of the line. I hadn't even realized that I stopped walking.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Sara asks as we step onto the plane and start to look for our seats.

"Yeah," I nod. "I'm fine. I'm just not keen on flying."

"Really? You didn't seem to mind it on the way to Minneapolis."

That's the other thing about Sara, aside from being a sound sleeper, she remembers *everything*.

I pretend like I don't hear her and keep walking until I find my seat. A window seat—*good*. After shoving my bag under the seat in front of me, I sit down and turn my head to the window so I don't chance seeing Stone again. A few of the guys are walking up and down the aisle looking for a place in the overhead bin to put their gear on a nearly full flight. I know if I see Stone again, I run the risk of flushing fifty shades of red.

In my defense, it's not as if I *planned* to sleep with him. And I certainly didn't expect *these* kinds of feelings if I did. I put my hand over my stomach to try and calm the butterflies, but it doesn't work.

When the plane finally takes off, I look out the window to watch as Minnesota gets farther and farther away, wishing I could leave these intensely growing feelings for Stone Clark back there on the ground.

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CHAPTER 3 - STONE



First class is just another one of the many perks that I get on every flight traveling with the team. Of course, when I travel for personal reasons, I simply pay for first class since I can afford to *buy* a plane if I want to. But it's nice to be treated to it. I especially appreciate it today since I need a distraction. I need to try and think about *anything* other than Violet on the flight back to Austin.

Honestly, it's odd that I'm still thinking about her at all. It's not like she's the first cheerleader I've ever banged after a game. Usually, I barely give a girl a second thought after a night with her. I don't consider myself to be an asshole about it or anything, but I need to stay focused on my training and keep my head in the game. I don't have time to think about women the next day. I have too many other things that occupy my time and mind. But this time, it feels *different*. For some reason, Violet Dawson *won't* get out of my head.

"In-flight cocktail?" the stewardess asks as she flashes me a smile.

It's the kind of flirtatious smile that most women give me, the kind that I normally lean into with a bit of banter just for fun. But this time, I'm not feeling flirtatious at all—at least not with *her*.

"Do you have any—" I stop myself mid-sentence noticing the coach is turned around from the seat in front of me. I almost forget that I'm still on a team trip and not on my own time. Too bad. A little *hair of the dog* may have helped things.

"No thank you," I correct myself. "Just a water please."

When the plane takes off, I lean my head back against my seat and close my eyes, thinking maybe I can fall asleep to pass the time. I didn't get that

much sleep last night, so it's not a stretch to think that I might doze off on the plane.

But no sooner do my eyes close, than images of Violet's naked body beneath me pop into my head. I've had plenty of sex but none like *that*. Who would have guessed that Violet had blossomed into such a sexy, sensual woman who knows *exactly* how to grind against my cock in a way that no other woman has ever seemed to get quite right.

My eyes fly open as I try to shake the thoughts from my head. *Damn it*, this is my best friend's little sister that I just had sex with—repeatedly. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

It's one thing that it happened. I mean, we were both drunk, and stuck in a hotel together after a great game and a huge win. That part is all easy enough to explain away as merely getting *caught up in the moment* or some bullshit like that. But the part that's *really* disarming, is that I still can't stop thinking about her.

Even the clumsy yet adorable way that she stumbled over her words this morning when she left my room has me chuckling to myself and unable to sit still thanks to the tightening in my chest. *What the hell is it about her that's driving me so crazy?*

"Dude, what is wrong with you?" Eddie asks from beside me.

For a split second, I feel as though I've been caught. It's impossible that Eddie would know I slept with Violet though. He wasn't in my room and wasn't even at the lobby bar when I left to go upstairs with her.

"You can't seem to sit still in your seat. Are you on uppers or something?"

I'm instantly relieved to find out he's only talking about my fidgeting.

There are only a few of us up here in first class—me, Eddie, the coaches, and a linebacker. Everyone else is back in economy. Thanks to an overbooked plane, there are more than a few disgruntled players. But at least that's less people for me to deal with.

"Obviously I'm not on uppers," I say quietly. Coach Rex is already losing patience with some of the players, and I doubt that joking around about prohibited drug use is going to help. "I just—"

I fumble trying to reach for an excuse that would be believable. Eddie knows me well enough to know when something's off, and I hate lying to my only real friend on the team. Despite that, I'm not ready to tell him that I brought Violet Dawson back to my room last night either. It's better that no

one ever finds out about that little transgression.

“Okay, spill it,” Eddie grins. “I was literally in the room next to yours. I heard some *noises* coming from your room in the wee hours of the morning. You had a *woman* in there, didn’t you?”

He lowers his voice to a whisper so that Coach doesn’t hear us. I want to ask him what he was even doing awake in the *wee hours*, but I withhold because there’s a way to use this to my advantage.

“Yeah, you got me,” I say as I force a small laugh, which hopefully sounds convincing. “I had sex with one of the cheerleaders, so what? No big deal.”

Eddie gives me a congenial smack on the shoulder and nods his head in approval.

“Which one was it?” he asks quietly.

Coach Rex turns around to ask us a question about the playbook and inadvertently saves me from having to answer Rex’s question. By the time I finish talking with the coach, a new distraction appears.

Heather Jamie, with her thick waves of auburn hair and her sky-blue eyes, has somehow managed to sneak her way into first class. When you’re as attractive a girl as she is, there probably isn’t anywhere you can’t weasel your way into. On top of being good looking, Heather is also *bold*.

“Hey, handsome,” she says as she parks her rear on the thin little armrest of my seat. Half of her round ass-cheek hangs over the side of it as if she’s begging for me to grab it.

I glance up at Coach’s seat to make sure I’m not about to get yelled at. Technically, none of this is my fault. It’s not as if I can control where on the plane Heather decides to prance around. Thankfully, the coach has his nose buried in the playbook now, and I can see that his earbuds are in, probably listening to one of those military strategy podcasts he swears by.

“I was hoping I could spend some *quality* time with you once we get back to Austin,” she says, purposefully leaning into me and grazing her lips along my ear as she softly speaks.

This is the kind of stuff Heather is always doing—trying to flirt her way back into bed with me. It worked a couple of times, and I slept with her more than once over the years. But for the most part, I’m just not interested in her. And I have no idea why she keeps on coming back to try and get with me when there are plenty of other guys on the team who would love a piece of her.

But just as I'm about to turn her away and tell her to go back to her seat, I catch Eddie waiting for my reaction out of the corner of my eye. This opportunity is presenting itself to me perfectly. Heather is going to be my alibi and my excuse for being so preoccupied and out of sorts this morning.

"Sure thing," I say with my signature smile. "Can't wait."

I don't think Heather is prepared for it to be quite so easy. We both know she's looking for a booty call, and I have essentially just accepted in order to prove my point to Eddie that this morning's *noises* coming from my room were nothing more than a girl I'd previously slept with. No new news.

Heather smiles and dusts her hand against my crotch as she stands up, and then walks back to her seat filled with visible satisfaction.

"You dog!" Eddie laughs. At least he's now fully convinced that it was all just more of the same. "I'm going to start calling you *Stone the Playboy*—you and your shenanigans are legendary, my friend."

On any other day, I might have felt like that was some sort of compliment. But right now, it felt more like a derogatory dig.

"Seriously man, how do you do it?"

"I'm not the only guy on the team who's gotten a cheerleader or two in his bed, Eddie."

"Yeah, but you're the only one who seems to be able to land them and leave, and they *still* don't hate you for it," he exclaims. "It's like this superpower you have. The rest of us wind up having to call the girl the next day or risk the cold shoulder from the whole squad, but you just saunter around without caring one bit and the girls flock to you. What's your secret? How do you make it seem like nothing fazes you?"

"No secret, it's just nothing *does* faze me," I answer with a nonchalant stare at the stewardess walking past smiling at me again. "I simply don't care about things like romance, and I have no interest in a committed relationship. I learned from my own parents that believing in things like love and marriage is a waste of energy because those things don't last anyway."

"*Ouch*," Eddie remarks as he feigns an injury to his chest. "Bad childhood?"

"Nah, nothing bad. I just grew up in a household where my parents lived paycheck to paycheck and were at each other's throats. They were perpetually stressed out. And they always seemed to struggle no matter how hard they worked," I explain. "They never just *enjoyed* anything, including each other. I'd rather *not* have that happen to me. I want to have a lot of

money, a lot of women, and a lot of fun living my life without stress and controversy. And I've learned that not caring too much about anyone other than myself is the solution."

"If you say so," Eddie nods. "Seems to be working for you. You're wealthy, getting hot girls, and at the top of your game in football. I guess being a playboy sports star is where it's at."

"Absolutely," I agree. But when Eddie goes back to scrolling through his phone, and I lean my head back against the seat, I start to realize that I'm not quite convinced of it myself.

If I truly don't care about anyone, and if I truly don't let any of the women I'm with get to me, then why the hell am I still thinking about Violet Dawson? And of all the women I've been with, how is it possible that this *much* younger woman who stared at me through deep brown eyes as I made love to her last night, is the one who managed to hijack my head the following day?

Jesus, even the way I'm thinking about this is all wrong. *Made love*? No—we had sex. That's all it was. Hot, heavy, mind-bogglingly good sex.

But the more I try to convince myself *not* to think about Violet, the more it backfires until she is literally the only thing I can think about during the whole flight. This has to stop. I need to get a grip and forget that last night ever happened. I'm *always* in control of every aspect of my life, and I'm not about to let a girl I saw go through her braces phase tear down my expertly crafted defenses.

Violet Dawson is still a small-town girl. Sure, she might be traveling on the road with the Wranglers, but she still belongs back in Brook Downs, where everyone knows everyone else, and the streets are lined with quaint locally owned businesses instead of skyscrapers. She's the complete opposite of me and everything that I surround myself with, and last night was just a crazy fluke.

I just need to get back to Austin, back to my top-floor penthouse with its floor-to-ceiling windows that allow me to look out at the city skyline. Once I get back home, get back on my training regimen, and start prepping for my next game, the thoughts of last night will vanish and I'll feel like my old self again. Violet is just a blip in my football career; she won't last long on the cheerleading team before she gets overwhelmed with being on the road for away games and goes back home.

Which reminds me that I should probably reach out to Del and catch up.

It's been a while. We're still close, but we rarely see each other anymore thanks to both of our schedules. That, and the fact that he never moved out of Brook Downs, and I never have any desire to go back there to visit.

I'm due for a visit to my parents though, as much as I dread it. I love my parents; it's just always *uncomfortable* trying to relate to them. It feels like I'm under attack any time I try to talk to them about my life in the city, and I never felt like they understood me or even supported me for that matter.

But it's been too long since the last time I paid them a visit, and somehow, seeing Violet last night made me start to feel a little bit uncharacteristically homesick. Violet makes me feel a little bit out of character about *many* things. She makes me feel things I haven't felt before, things I'm not sure I *want* to be feeling.

Unfortunately, she's *off limits* for more reasons than I can count on one hand, and maybe that's a good thing.

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CHAPTER 4 - VIOLET



The flight from Minneapolis back to Austin isn't that long, just over three hours. But it *feels* like an eternity.

All I can think about is Stone sitting up in the first-class cabin with the coaches and a few of the other *VIP* players, likely not giving a second thought to last night. While here I sit, completely obsessed and unable to think about anything else. It's like I'm a fourteen-year-old having her first crush. It's absurd.

God, if my brother knew what I did, he would probably wring Stone's neck *and* give me the lecture of a lifetime—something along the lines of how I should have *known better than to sleep with the town playboy*. Del and Stone are best buddies, but even my brother recognizes the fact that Stone has a reputation.

Back when they were both in high school, I remember hearing the two of them talking about senior prom. My brother was taking Beth to the prom, the girl he ended up marrying, and Stone was literally writing names of the cheerleading team down on slips of paper and planning to draw one out of a hat. His lack of ability to stay focused on one girl for even a month was notable, even back then.

What was I thinking?

If Coach Margo knew that I got drunk last night, she would chew me out in front of the whole squad, and I would *never* hear the end of it. I can't even imagine what the other girls would think if they knew I slept with Stone Clark. Half of them have probably done the same thing. I would never be able to live down the embarrassment of having *joined the ranks* of all the women Stone is rumored to have taken to bed. Sara, in particular, would

likely give me shit about it for as long as I remain on the cheer squad.

Speaking of Sara, she has her nose buried in a book in the seat next to me, but every several minutes or so, she keeps looking over as if she can tell that something's wrong and is just waiting for me to fess up.

"What?" I reply in a slightly annoyed tone at her latest glance. She just looks at me knowingly, shakes her head and goes back to her book.

Sara was my first friend as soon as I started cheering for the Wranglers, and she is practically the only one on the squad I would trust to keep a secret. And as much as I know that I should probably keep what happened last night to myself, I feel like if I don't tell someone, I'll end up driving myself crazy overthinking the whole situation.

"Hey," I whisper to her as I nudge the side of the book that she is holding to get her attention. "Can we talk?"

"About time," she sighs in exasperation. "I've been waiting *all morning* to find out what's going on with you."

That's a bit of an exaggeration considering that we've only been on this flight for less than an hour already.

I look around to make sure no one is listening. Everyone in the nearby seats seems pretty occupied. A few of the girls have their earbuds in, one of them is rambling on to her seatmate about the new fade she's going to do to her hair when we get back to Austin, and none of the guys are in seats anywhere close to us. Still, I decide to whisper because the entire thing is still too embarrassing to risk anyone overhearing.

"I didn't *actually* come back to the room last night," I confess.

Sara snaps her book closed and pushes it down into her lap now that her appetite for the juicy details has been whet.

"Oh my god, I knew it!" she says in an excited whisper. "You were with a *guy*, weren't you? Tell me *everything!*"

"Well, I drank too much at the lobby bar," I admit, knowing this sort of thing could get me kicked off the squad and swearing Sara to secrecy. "And then I ran into someone I used to know—*Stone Clark.*"

Even saying his name makes my tongue feel restless, as if it should be tracing the edge of his lips instead of simply formulating words.

"*Oh... my... God,*" she exclaims with no shortage of dramatic flair. "Tell me that you didn't sleep with the Wranglers' quarterback. Violet, *please* tell me that you didn't fuck *Stone.*"

"Be quiet!" I scold even though her voice remains in a whisper. I have no

choice now but to tell her all the sordid details of my night with Stone. And by the time I'm finished, Sara is both rolling her eyes and shaking her head at me simultaneously.

"He's definitely hot, I'll give you that much," she says as she rolls her green eyes at me for a second time. I never really noticed before how much her eyes pop with a flash of color against her crimson red hair, until she started staring at me in disapproval. "But from what I've heard, Stone keeps *regular* company with cheerleaders—and never the same one."

"That doesn't even make sense," I scoff at her. "Logistically, there are only so many girls on the squad. If the rumors that you are talking about are true, then eventually he would run out of girls to sleep with."

Sara laughs quietly. "You're giving the guy way too much credit. There are thirty-six girls on the squad, not including replacement understudies, the new girls who are brought in when someone leaves, and the *friends* of the cheerleaders who aren't on the NFL teams but are *still* cheerleaders in their own right."

Shit, that's a lot of women. There's no way that Stone could have been with that many women.

"Those are just rumors," I say, feeling less sure of myself than I did a moment ago.

"Maybe. But maybe not."

"Besides, it isn't allowed. The players are strictly forbidden from having relationships with girls on the squad. I could see if it happened once, but if Stone is really getting around *that* much, then the coaches would have kicked him off the team by now."

"Okay, now I *know* you're just trying to make yourself feel better," she laughs again. "Do you honestly think that they would kick the star quarterback off the team? Come on, Violet. They don't reprimand him for *anything*. Coach Rex practically looks away because they need him. And Coach Margo doesn't dare say a word because then it would implicate her cheerleaders in the same sort of trashy behavior."

I frown because I don't like it when rules aren't followed. Although, I guess I'm a hypocrite since I just broke the rules myself by getting wasted and sleeping with the quarterback after a game.

"Stone looks away because he seemingly can't sleep with a woman more than once before growing bored with her," Sara continues. "Honestly, I'm surprised that it took him so long to land you. Not that you're easy—that's

not what I mean. Just that you're really pretty, and he's basically slept with all the prettiest girls."

I think there is a compliment in there for me somewhere, but I feel as if I *definitely* don't deserve it after how I've behaved on this trip. Plus, I already know why Stone didn't try to get me in bed before last night—because he's my brother's *best friend*. This is all such a mess.

"He tried to flirt with me once, but Coach Margo caught him and ran him off," she laughs. "After that, he moved on to one of the other girls."

Speak of the devil—Heather Jamie walks by at that exact moment.

Heather is one of my *least* favorite teammates. She's snotty, entitled, and shallow—essentially a classic *mean girl* wrapped up in brown hair, blue eyes, and boobs that are most definitely *not* real. Plus, she is *always* trying to flirt with Stone.

I wonder what she was doing up in first class. Her seat is behind us and definitely not up in the luxury cabin where Stone and the coaches are.

"She has *definitely* slept with Stone," Sara whispers to me as Heather prances by.

It's like she purposefully walks in a way that makes her boobs bounce.

I am just getting ready to ask Sara how she knows that, but then I hear Heather running her mouth to one of the other girls as she plops down in her seat a couple rows back.

"He's such a *player*," Heather giggles, obviously unable to keep her mouth shut about her escapades. "But he knows a good thing when he sees it. One time isn't enough for him—Stone's going to be a frequent flier."

Sara makes a gagging sound and pretends to stick her finger in her throat, and I know that Heather isn't talking about the plane. She's talking about Stone having sex with her, and from the sounds of it he's planning on doing it again. So much for Sara's theory that he only sleeps with a girl once. Apparently, there's an exception for truly slutty girls with big boobs and the propensity to throw themselves at him repeatedly. *Gross*.

"See? What did I say?" Sara says this time with a bit of empathy in her tone. "Stone Clark is a total player, and he doesn't give a shit about any of the women he sticks his cock in. You'd be better off forgetting about it completely and pretend that it never happened. I wouldn't worry about anyone finding out. He doesn't kiss and tell. It's usually the blabbermouths like Heather who pass the rumors around, not Stone."

I suppose I should at least be grateful for that, and for the fact that I won't

have a stained reputation now. But I am *crushed* to know that last night meant nothing to Stone. It's silly of me to have thought it might have, I realize that. But still, I thought maybe it was something different.

"Yeah, of course," I say as I pretend not to care at all and go back to looking out the window. "It's not like I actually *like* the guy or anything. I just needed to vent and get it off my chest, that's all."

I can feel Sara looking at me from the side.

"Didn't you say you used to *know* him?" she asks, remembering what I'd said earlier and probably shouldn't have. "Did you know him before joining the Wranglers squad?"

"Not really," I answer, trying to play the whole thing down. "I mean, he's from the same hometown as I am, that's all. We never really ran into each other though, and he's quite a bit older than me."

"He's quite a bit older than Heather, too," she laughs. "But that doesn't seem to stop him. He must be *epic* in bed."

I feel a pinch in my heart at that remark as I remember the moment I threw my head back and moaned in an overwhelming rush of ecstasy last night. *Epic* doesn't even begin to describe it.

I ignore what she said and put my earbuds in to try and drown out the thoughts that are erupting in my head. I need to forget about Stone. My reputation is intact, word won't get out or reach my brother, and it's *very* obvious that last night was nothing more than an alcohol induced lack of judgment. There's nothing more to it than that and certainly nothing more that is going to come of it.

As much as I feel like my whole world was rocked and tipped on its side last night, I simply need to get over it and forget about Stone altogether. He isn't worth it.

And as good as it was, one night isn't going to change my life.

CHAPTER 5 - STONE



As soon as I get back home to Austin, I get a call from my mother.

“We saw the tail end of the game on television. Looks like you won, congratulations,” she says, sounding entirely unenthusiastic about it.

I know she’s trying to be supportive, and that somewhere deep down inside of her she is proud of me in her own way. But she’s never really been able to show it in any sort of meaningful way. It’s as if she and my dad just can’t figure out how to fit into my high-profile adult life.

“Are you still coming home for Thanksgiving?” she asks.

Shit. I almost forgot it was this week. Between the game and the unexpected night with Violet, my brain has been a bit frazzled.

“Yeah, sure. Planning on it,” I say, really wishing that I could just stay here in the confines of my comfortable penthouse.

I don’t *hate* going back to Brook Downs to visit, it’s just not a comfortable situation spending time with my parents. Still, I follow through with my promise to visit them for the holiday.

The drive is only two hours, and my black Lamborghini makes quick work of it with a smooth ride. I’m sure I’ll get another earful from my father about how I should have invested in a more *practical* car instead of being so *flashy*. My dad is a full-time carpenter and has been ever since he was eighteen. It was the family business, and still would be if I’d decided to follow in his footsteps. He learned the trade from his father and was eager to have me step into the same shoes and join him in the family business, but I just couldn’t. My heart and talent were in sports, and I had the even more important desire to ensure that I would have a lucrative career and never struggle financially.

My father sees things differently. He always told me that life *wasn't about the money* but I beg to differ. To this day, he refuses any offer I make to help him and mom out with money or to give them any gifts they deem too *extravagant*. I wish he saw things differently because sometimes, even with all of my football fame and monetary successes, I feel like I'm a disappointment as his only son.

When I pull into town and see the *Welcome to Brook Downs—We Hope You'll Stay* sign on the side of the road, I let out a long exhale. It feels strange being home.

This place is surrounded by ranches and fields, and filled with small, locally owned businesses. It's the polar opposite of the big city scene that I *now* call home. And between the lack of things to do here and the instant altercations that hit me almost as soon as I walk through the door of my parents' house, the first few minutes back in Brook Downs already feel as if they are dragging on for *days*.

"Stone!" my mother says as she reaches out to pull me into a hug.

The scent of yams and salted meat streams out in thick wafts from the open door of the house. No doubt, she's been cooking for a solid day already, even though there are only three of us to feed for Thanksgiving.

"Hi, Mom," I say as I hug her back. I can see my father looking right over the top of my shoulder as he stands next to her. He's eyeing my car again with the same, tired disapproval as always.

"I see that you still haven't come to your senses yet," my father says as he reaches out a hand for me to shake once my mom finally lets me go. "Cars like that are the reason we have air pollution."

I roll my eyes at him, not even wanting to get into the ludicrous nature of his remark as I shake his hand.

"Dad, seriously. With all the diesel trucks and farm equipment in this town, do you really think it's my Lamborghini causing global warming?"

He scoffs and then turns to walk back into the house while my mother reaches for my bag to bring inside. *This is off to a great start, as always.*

Over dinner on my first night back home, the real fun begins. My dad picks a fight just as my mom is scooping homemade mashed potatoes into the bowl at the center of the table.

"My secret is adding milk, butter, and *sour cream*," she says, forgetting that she's already told us her 'secret' recipe at least a dozen times over. I don't mind—the familiarity is one of the few endearing things about being

home. “It makes the potatoes so creamy.”

“I doubt Stone even eats mashed potatoes anymore out there in Austin, do you son?” he asks as he looks across the table at me.

“Why wouldn’t I eat mashed potatoes?”

“I mean, with the kind of money that you make, I’m sure you’re eating much fancier root vegetables than good ‘ole russet potatoes.”

“Root vegetables and the word *fancy* don’t really go together, now do they?” I snicker sarcastically.

My father doesn’t find my humor at *all* amusing.

“The ridiculousness of professional athletes’ paychecks is *obscene*,” he says.

I can see my mom shifting in her seat. She never comes to my defense in these types of arguments, but she also doesn’t like when they happen.

“Just think of how many more *deserving* people there are who could use money like that to do actually valuable things.”

“I just want to be clear, are you saying I’m not deserving of a wage,” I ask, feeling my bristles start to raise, “or that I don’t do anything valuable?”

My dad shrugs and makes a face that gives away his answer—it’s both.

“I’m just saying, it’s not like you’re a doctor saving lives or a teacher educating the world’s young people. You’re running around on a field tossing a ball back and forth. If it’s what you like to do, then fine. But you shouldn’t get paid more than people who actually *work* for a living,” he says, putting the last nail in the coffin of this discussion.

“What, you mean carpenters like you? Is that what this is really all about? Still?” I am used to my parents showing little to no interest in my success, but this feels like a pointed attack.

“I’m not saying you had to be a carpenter. I came to terms with you turning your back on the family business a *long* time ago,” my father continues with a raised voice. “All I’m saying is that some of us work hard for every single dollar we make, and it’s not right when others get handed piles of money on a silver platter.”

“There are so many things wrong with what you just said that I don’t even know where to start,” I growl at him.

“Please, feel free to enlighten me.”

“Okay boys, that’s enough,” my mother interjects. “How about we just eat dinner and save this conversation for a later time?”

“I’m not hungry anymore,” I grumble, slamming my fist against the table

as I stand up to leave. I don't usually have such a flair for the dramatic, but my father really pushed my buttons this time. I didn't even want to come back to Brook Downs to begin with, and I would have been perfectly content spending the Thanksgiving holiday in my penthouse with some delicious Chinese takeout from the new Asian restaurant down the block. But no, here I am rehashing the same shit again with my dad.

I go to bed, wishing I had just stayed in Austin and avoided all of this family drama. It's not worth it for me to make visits home if it just upsets everyone. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving, and I'm honestly *not* thankful for quite a few things at the moment.

I lay in the bed, looking up at the ceiling and trying not to think about anything in particular other than getting back home to my apartment and back to my training regimen. But despite my efforts not to think about anything, thoughts of Violet pop straight into my head. And once the image of her is there in my mind, I really don't want to force it away. It's certainly better than the previous subject matter.

I find myself laying there, replaying the events of the other night and reliving every tantalizing moment that I spent with Violet Dawson.

She is far from the first gorgeous woman I've slept with, but something about her keeps haunting me and won't let go.

She is different—*sweeter*.

My father would probably say that guys like me should stay away from sweet, small-town girls like Violet Dawson. In his mind, famous billionaires are akin to the monsters in children's fairytales. And who knows, maybe he's right. Maybe I should stay away from Violet, if not because it's against the NFL rules but because she is Del's little sister. *What kind of man sleeps with his best friend's sister?*

Then again, it's not like I planned it. And Violet *is* an adult.

As for being the small-town, innocent cherub—I'm not so sure that description fits her anymore. Not when I think about how she ground down against my hips while my cock was inside her. Damn, thinking about it now makes me erect all over again. Whatever kind of *witchy* hold she has on me; I find myself leaning into it instead of pulling away. Pulling away would be the smart thing to do, but I guess this kind of thing just proves my dad right when he says that my head is in the clouds.

Instead of indulging in my more carnal pleasures, as I am tempted to do while my hand trails down the front of my pants, I decide to try to push

thoughts of her out of my head again and get some sleep. I chalk this up to being nothing more than some sort of sentimentality for a girl who reminds me of easier times back home. Times before my father was so disapproving, and before the stress of professional football wasn't heavy on my shoulders.

I close my eyes and try to go to sleep, listening to the sounds my mother is still making in the kitchen as she cleans up from an unsuccessful dinner. I know my parents both mean well, they just don't seem to understand me. Never have.

Maybe I *am* the odd one, not wanting to settle down, start a family, and submit to some boring job that I would grind away at until my retirement just like my father. Maybe there's a point to be made that the equality of the world is lacking.

But that's not *my* fault.

I will do what I need to do in order to have control over my own life, over my finances, over my sex life, and over my career. I don't really owe anyone an explanation for the way I choose to live, not even my father.

The only problem is that I thought I had it all figured out, but something about being with Violet has caused my internal compass to have a bit of a hiccup. It made me question whether I'm really going in the right direction with things or not, which is ridiculous. It's not like I could ever be happy living a life like Del's.

Don't get me wrong, he's my best friend and I love the guy to death, but teaching at a small-town elementary school and having a wife and kids? It's just not me, and I don't think it ever will be.

All the more reason to stop thinking about his sister.

No doubt, Violet has visions of some happily ever after with a husband and a family and a life doing something other than being on the road. Not that I'll be on the road forever either, but I've ensured I can keep up my fancy lifestyle even when I duck out of professional football.

Violet deserves someone who can play house, someone like my father who is just an overall good guy with moderate ambition. Someone who doesn't flirt with stewardesses and sleep with the entire cheerleading squad.

But as I close my eyes and drift off to sleep, the last image in my head is that of looking up into Violet's sweet brown eyes, as she is riding on top of me. And somehow, she makes me question everything I thought I knew about myself.

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CHAPTER 6 - VIOLET



“*Y*ou look happy,” I say to my brother as he comes to sit down on the couch at my parents’ house.

It’s nice to have a few days off for the holidays and to be able to spend it at home with my family. Even though my brother and I both still live here in Brook Downs, I’ve been away for a bit while traveling with the Wranglers and this is the first time in months that we’ve all been gathered in the same room.

Del is normally pretty chipper, although being a gym teacher sometimes seems to be taking years off his life. But today he seems *extra* happy. Even his wife, Beth, notices as she tries to entertain all three of their kids—Abigail, Lucy, and Marcus with a single pack of crayons and paper. Marcus is so little that he keeps trying to put the crayon in his mouth and Beth keeps having to swat it away from him.

Honestly, I don’t know how they do it. I’m not sure I could be so sleep-deprived and still function like a normal human being.

My mother looks over at him with her blue eyes that I always wish I’d inherited. I was only lucky enough to get her blonde hair, but I got stuck with my father’s brown eyes. At least I didn’t inherit his premature balding.

“Have some good news to share?” she asks him. “I could use some after today. Why is it always the day right *before* a holiday when all the natives seem to get restless?”

“Natives?” Beth asks, clearly still not accustomed to my mother’s colorful analogies.

“Yes, the students,” she says, referencing the first graders that she teaches.

My mom has taught first grade in Brook Downs for the past thirty-five years, well before I was even born. I suppose that's where she gets her tough-as-nails personality. You have to have a thick skin to deal with not only the neediness of seven-year-olds but also their helicopter parents. Del and I take after our father more. We're both soft-hearted and our mother seems to worry over us constantly because of it. She is always getting on him for being too protective of us. And maybe he is. But being the old-school accountant type, my dad is constantly worrying over the small details. In fact, as soon as I got here, the very first thing he asked was whether I had new tires on my silver Honda Civic. I think it makes him feel better to feel as if he is constantly looking out for us.

"Actually, yes," Del says with a wide smile. "My best buddy Stone is in town for a few days and might be stopping by at some point if he has a chance."

Instantly, my breath freezes in my chest.

"Oh, how wonderful!" my mother gushes. "I haven't seen Stone in *years*. I heard he's a big hotshot in Austin now."

"Yes, a big football star," our father chimes in.

"When is he stopping by?" I ask. I don't notice how terrified my tone of voice sounds until everyone turns to look at me in surprise.

"You okay?" Beth asks from beside me.

I nod because I don't know what to say to explain away the fact that I probably look like I've seen a ghost.

"Maybe tonight," Del answers.

"On *Thanksgiving*?" I'm taken aback. Doesn't he have his own family to mooch food off of?

"That's great news! It'll be great to get the boys back together again," Dad says as he reaches for his car keys. It sounds like he's talking about a boy band from the nineties. "I'll go grab another small turkey. I know how those athletes can pack away some food."

"Everything is closed right now," Beth reminds him.

She's right. It's Thanksgiving Day and it's not like we live in the big city where there are tons of businesses and restaurants that buck tradition and keep their doors open to make money when all the other places are closed. In Brook Downs, there's literally only a few markets, and I can guarantee they are *all* closed today.

"Well, the gas station is open at least," he laughs as he heads to the door.

“You’re going to buy a turkey at the gas station?” my mother asks. She’s always trying to talk him back down to reality. I think it’s sweet the way my father always sees possibility where other people see obstacles.

“Well, *no*, obviously not a turkey, but maybe some of those beef jerky meat sticks?”

Everyone else in the room laughs, even the kids. But I continue to sit there feeling horrified. My heart is beating out of control at the very thought of being close to Stone again.

After having a talking with myself when I got back to my own apartment following the Wranglers trip, I decided that I wasn’t going to think about, look at, or ever cross paths with Stone outside of games again. And now, here I am sitting in my parents’ house hearing that the guy I just had the best sex of my life with is coming to dinner! Not to mention the fact that Del and Stone will undoubtedly be acting like best buds the whole night and all the while I will be choking down a sordid secret over what we *did*.

I wish I could melt into the wallpaper.

Sure enough, almost as soon as my mother closes the oven door later that evening, *Stone arrives*.

“Glad you could make it, man!” my brother says as he hugs his friend and gives him a pat on the back. “Wasn’t sure if you’d show or not. I know you’re living in the fast lane these days.”

“And miss this?” Stone smiles as he kisses my mother on the side of the cheek. “Not for a million bucks.”

“From what I’ve been reading up about you, you don’t need a million bucks.” My dad laughs as he shakes Stone’s hand. “Sounds like you’ve been doing pretty well for yourself, kid.”

Everyone gushes over Stone’s arrival as if there’s a celebrity appearance. I mean, technically that’s the case, but I think they forget that Stone grew up here just like the rest of us. In a way, I wish I could turn back time a bit back to when we were all just Brook Downs locals and *well* before I had slept with the local sports celebrity.

I watch as Stone greets Beth and gives each of my brother’s kids a pat on the head, and then comes the dreaded moment when he turns and looks at *me*.

“You remember my sister, Violet, right?” Del asks as he motions toward me. I seriously feel like I might be sick.

“Of course, I do,” Stone smiles as he walks up to me and reaches to take my hand. I stand there paralyzed as he kisses the top of my fingertips. He’s

being theatrical and I *hate* it. “How could I forget little Violet Dawson?”

Is he *kidding* me right now with this? I am both angry at his attempt to play a game with me here in front of my family, and also happy to see him despite myself. He is making a point to be incredibly friendly toward me, and I don’t know whether to hate it or love it.

We hadn’t really said much after having woken up together in his hotel bed, but the general consensus was that we were simply going to forget that the little tryst had happened and move on. After all, there was alcohol involved and that made it all in good fun, nothing serious.

But something about seeing him here on a holiday in my family home and knowing that I am just another cheerleader notch in his bedpost, makes me absolutely furious.

It was one thing when we were both back in Austin and it was easier for me to think of him as some cocky NFL quarterback. But now that he’s here with my family, back in our hometown, and standing so close to me, I have a hard time shoving all of my emotions back down.

My mom and brother sit down in the living room and Stone joins them while my dad grabs beers for everyone. I stand awkwardly in the corner of the room where one of Del’s kids has resorted to trying to color on the wall with her crayon.

I don’t trust myself to get close to Stone. I don’t have any logical reasoning for it—it’s not like I’m going to jump his bones in front of my entire family.

I guess I just don’t want my eyes to betray me, and I don’t want anyone in my family to pick up on any sort of awkward feelings that I might show outwardly. *Especially* not Del.

As angry as I am at the thought of being added to Stone’s *girls I’ve fucked* list, I also don’t want to be responsible for a rift between him and my brother.

So, I stay out of it as much as I can and try to detach myself.

I color on white paper with Del and Beth’s kids while I halfheartedly listen to Stone catch up with my family. I don’t give him the satisfaction of even glancing over in his direction. I listen to him talk about the Wranglers’ season and his stats, and about the trip we just got back from in Minneapolis. My mom asks about his parents, and Stone answers rather coldly, sticking to the facts and not really giving any explanation as to why he isn’t spending time with them right now.

I'm doing a fairly decent job of tuning out my emotions until Del asks Stone what the best part of the Minneapolis trip was.

"I've never been to Minnesota," my brother says as they hang out like old pals again. "But I've heard it's cold as balls! And Violet was telling us that the flight back to Austin got delayed because of the storm. Too bad you guys didn't recognize each other."

Stone gives my brother a curious look, and all the sudden it seems to dawn on him why Del introduced us again when he first arrived. I told my brother that the players and cheerleaders never really cross paths, and that I didn't really remember what Stone looked like anymore.

My heart skips a beat while I wait for Stone to out me.

"Yeah, it *is* too bad," Stone says as he plays along. "We might have even been able to hang out a bit."

"You probably wouldn't have recognized how grown up she looks now," my mother smiles as she thinks she's giving me a compliment instead of making me mortified with embarrassment.

"Plus, aren't there rules about that sort of thing?" my dad chimes in. "Football players and cheerleaders spending time together?"

Stone nods. "Indeed, there are."

"Seems silly to me," my brother says. "It's not as if you guys couldn't be *friends*. Hell, you two could have passed the time telling old stories about some of the antics that you and I used to get ourselves into. I bet Violet would have liked to hear about some of those, wouldn't you, Vi?"

For a second, I feel like I'm on the spot. Only Beth seems to notice and give me a small look of pity, although I doubt that she knows why or the extent to which I deserve it.

Before I can think of anything to say, Stone interjects. It's almost like he's trying to throw me a bone, but I don't want him to. I want to go back to *not* thinking about him at all, but he's making it so damn difficult. It was a lot easier to deal with when I didn't give a shit about Stone Clark. But now that I do, it makes it *really* hard to sit here and watch him acting all nice while also knowing that my name is on some sexual conquest ledger of his. *You weren't so prim and proper when you were telling me to grind your cock.*

It's all just too much. I'm with my family for fuck's sake.

"Violet would have been bored by my monologuing," Stone chuckles as he draws the attention back to himself and off of me. "I think most people start to glaze over when I start talking about football plays."

My dad laughs and my mom offers him another beer.

“I’ll get it,” I say quickly once Stone accepts her offer. It’s a good excuse for me to get out of this room because I simply can’t stand to listen to anymore *catching up*. I rush out to the kitchen, and then out the back door to the porch to escape for a while. No sooner do I get outside than I start to feel the tears sting at the corners of my eyes.

I don’t want to cry. Stone Clark doesn’t deserve my tears. He doesn’t deserve anything from me at all.

He and his playboy reputation can go right back to banging the entire cheerleading squad for all I care, as long as I don’t have to hear about it.

But the more I tell myself that I don’t care and that I don’t want to see him again, the more the tears threaten to come.

It’s cold out, and I’ve forgotten my jacket. But I would rather stand out here all night shivering until Stone leaves than go back inside and have to pretend like everything is fine.

Everything is definitely *not* fine because instead of a relaxing Thanksgiving with my family to try and *forget* about the severe lack of judgment that I had in sleeping with Stone, I am having to stand outside here in the cold as I try to run away from the feelings that I have for him.

Sara is right—he’s bad news, and I need to get over it.

CHAPTER 7 - STONE



I am shocked at how happy I am to see Violet again. It's definitely not something I expected, especially not since she's giving me the cold shoulder. I can understand her being upset that I'm here in her family home on Thanksgiving Day, especially since the last time I talked to her was the morning after our blisteringly passionate night of sexual escapades.

But it wasn't like she could have expected me to call her the next day. Even though it wasn't said in so many words, we both knew that what happened between us was a fluke and not something either of us would want, or *could* want, to continue. Although, considering how I've been feeling about her ever since that night, it sounds a bit hypocritical of me to say that now.

When I touched base with Del to let him know that I'd be in town for a few days in case he wanted to get together for a beer, I hadn't planned on him inviting me over for Thanksgiving.

Things with my own parents were awkward, and it had been a while since I'd had a chance to catch up with my best friend, so of course I accepted. Seeing Violet here was just icing on the cake.

I knew it would be awkward, but I guess I didn't expect her to be *quite* so cold to me. It's hard to imagine Violet being cold to anyone, her personality is always so happy-go-lucky. Ever since she was a kid, Violet was always the smart, sweet, shy kind. I hadn't even realized how dedicated, driven, and insightful she actually was until she opened up while we were sitting at the lobby bar together and told me about pursuing her veterinary degree.

"Did Violet get lost on her way to the kitchen?" Martin Dawson asks with a chuckle as he strains his neck to see if his daughter is coming back yet.

Violet went to get me a beer on her way to the kitchen, but that was more than fifteen minutes ago.

“I’ll go grab it,” Lisa Dawson says as she starts to get up.

“Allow me,” I say, quickly jumping to my feet. “Between all the sitting on airplanes and in cars, I could use a good stretch of the legs.”

“Don’t go making a move on my sister out there,” Del teases as I head toward the kitchen.

For a moment, I stop dead in my tracks. Then, I hear him start to laugh.

It’s a joke.

I laugh too, pretending that it was funny before walking back to the kitchen. Little does Del know how spot-on his joke really is.

I know I have a reputation among the cheerleaders as being a player. But honestly, I think it’s largely blown out of proportion. I’ve heard word going around that I’ve slept with *every* girl on the team and that just simply isn’t true. I suppose I could’ve set the record straight, but it struck me as rather impressive and funny, so I let it slide. I mean, if they want to think I’m some rich playboy that all the girls want, then let them. The guys on the team consider me a god with the women and the cheer squad bats their eyes at me every time I walk by. I can only imagine what they’ve heard from some of the girls I *have* slept with, like Heather. That woman runs her mouth like a faucet.

But when I get to the kitchen and see that Violet isn’t there, I start to think about how quiet she’s been this entire time, hiding out in the corner of the room with her brother’s kids and barely looking over at me at all.

Something is *wrong*.

Maybe some of those rumors got into her ear and she actually *believed* them. Maybe Heather went back to her seat and started spewing gossip about hooking up again, something that I *don’t* actually intend to do with her.

And suddenly, I find myself actually caring about the rumors for the very first time.

I stand there in the kitchen staring out the window and the dimming light of dusk outside, realizing that I have *never* cared about what a woman I slept with thinks of me until now. But now, Violet, who has been icy cold to me since I set foot in her parents’ house today, and who has strangely disappeared from the kitchen under the guise of getting me a beer, might actually be upset by something she heard about me, and I *care*.

I can’t believe that I care. I feel uncomfortable caring because it makes

me feel like I'm not in control of things. As long as *I* was the only one I cared about, that made things easy. I could let the rumors roll off my back, or laugh at them, or even embrace them. But it's much harder to worry about what someone else thinks of them. For all I know, Violet might think I've had sex with every girl on her cheerleading team, and she might be upset over it.

As if on cue, I catch a glimpse of something moving outside the window and when I walk over to see what it is, I see Violet standing out there on the patio shivering her ass off.

"Hey," I say as I walk up to her and hand her my coat. "Did you forget about the beer?"

She looks up at me, and I feel like an absolute asshole for asking that question as if she is my barmaid. I can see the slight glint of tears in her eyes.

Shit, she really is upset about something, and I have a bad feeling that it's *me*.

She doesn't answer me, and she also doesn't take the coat I'm holding in my outstretched hand.

"What's up with the icy treatment that you've been giving me ever since I got here?"

"Oh please, like you actually give a shit about what's wrong," she snaps back at me.

I wasn't really expecting that, and I can't come up with a quick response that *doesn't* make me sound like a callous ass.

"What if I do?"

Violet looks at me puzzled.

"What if I cared about whether or not there's something wrong?" I press. "You look upset. And you are obviously freezing standing out here without a coat."

"I don't want your damn coat," she says as she pushes my hand away. "I guess you figure that a nice gesture here or there will make everything great. I suppose you've had a lot of practice at smoothing things over with women after one-night stands. Well, you don't need to bother with me. I don't want your charm or your coat. And I certainly don't want you to pretend like you care."

I am literally dumbstruck. Not only have I never cared about a woman's feelings after sleeping with her, but I've also never had one get so pissed off with me before.

"Look, Violet," I say, navigating uncharted territory as I try to be

sensitive to the feelings she is obviously having, although I'm still pretty confused. "I don't know what you've heard about me but—"

"You can save the part where you try to tell me that I'm not just a notch on your bedpost. Trust me, I'm not stupid. And I'm also not just going to stand here in the cold and eat up your attempts to charm me like some of the *other* women you have wrapped around your finger."

I kind of want to point out that she was standing out here in the cold *before* I came out. But I know that arguing semantics with her right now is a bad idea. She already has her defenses up.

"I don't have any notches on my bedpost," I say. "And even if I did, I wouldn't put you on that list."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she says as her voice begins to break. "That our drunken night of sex together didn't even make your usual cut?"

"No, that's not at all what I meant."

My head is literally spinning as I try to figure out what to say. I don't want her to think I'm some womanizing jackass who sticks his cock in every warm hole belonging to a pretty face. But I also don't want to tell her the truth—that I haven't been able to stop thinking about her since our night together.

I freeze, searching for words to comfort her and to assure her that she's not just another girl to me. But before I can get anything out, Violet abruptly pushes past me to go back inside her parents' house.

I follow her into the kitchen, not wanting to make a scene here especially not in front of her parents and brother. But I also don't just want to let this go. The longer that she acts like she somehow *knows* I don't care about her, the more it makes me feel the need to prove to her that she's wrong. But I can't.

"Violet, wait," I say as she grabs her own coat from the back of a chair and looks around for her keys, which she finds on the kitchen counter. "Where are you going?"

"*Home.*"

She storms out of the kitchen, avoiding the living room where the rest of her family is gathered, and right out the front door. I can hear her mother calling from the other room and asking if everything is okay, and I don't know what to do.

"Hey, where did Violet go?" Del asks as he walks into the hallway to see what's going on and finds me standing there alone.

I try to quickly come up with an answer that doesn't sound like a lie.

"I think she needed to get back to her apartment, something about having forgotten to lock up before she left," I say. It's a weak answer, but thankfully Del trusts me enough to buy into it. He shouldn't.

He looks at me and frowns. "But it's Thanksgiving and we didn't cut the pie yet."

"I'd be happy to run some of it over to her if you'd like," I offer, trying not to sound too eager. "I mean, since you have the kids to take care of and your parents are probably not too keen on driving at night. I need to head back to my parents' house anyway, so I can drop Violet off some pie on my way."

"Thanks," Del smiles as he gives me a brotherly pat on the back. "That would be awesome. I know how much she loves our mom's pumpkin pie. I'd hate for her to miss out on it."

"No problem. I'll just need her address."

It works like a charm and within the span of five minutes or so, Del has texted me the address of Violet's apartment, and their mom has wrapped up half a pie for me to deliver.

"It was really good seeing you, Stone," Lisa Dawson says to me as she gives me a hug. Violet is lucky to have a mom who oozes with joy at the prospect of spending time with her kids. I wish my own mother did that.

"You too, Mrs. Dawson," I say.

"Don't be a stranger!" she calls out the door behind me as I leave.

I get in my car and head straight to Violet's apartment. And when I get there, I totally forget about the pie and leave it on the front passenger seat as I walk up to knock on her door.

It's getting dark now, and I know for a fact that she doesn't expect me to be here. The last thing I want to do is make Violet even *more* upset. But I need to talk to her. I can't let her keep on thinking that I slept with her and then discarded her like she was just another girl in my bed. I have to set the record straight.

I walk up and knock on the door, then I remember the pie that I left in the car. Maybe it's not a bad idea to come bearing gifts.

I turn around to get it from the car quickly. Just as I'm reaching in to grab the pie, I hear the front door open. It's definitely not at all like the city where there are tall buildings with buzzers to let you in and a lobby with an elevator. Here, there's only a handful of apartments in one small building—

no lobby, no elevator, and no time for me to get the pie out of the car before Violet asks me what the hell I'm doing here.

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CHAPTER 8 - VIOLET



I took off from my parents' house quickly before anyone could see me break down. The last thing I wanted was to ruin my family's Thanksgiving and pit my brother against his best friend. Besides, I wasn't even sure how to handle my emotions about Stone yet. So, the best thing for me to do was get out of there fast before anyone started to question me.

I'll call my mom in the morning and apologize for my rapid departure. I can make up something about a stomach ache or forgetting to lock up the apartment, and she'll be fine with it.

I *had* wished to stay a little longer and hang out with my brother a bit more since I'll be back on the road soon, but it wasn't worth the risk that I might inadvertently make a scene.

It wasn't like I was trying to be theatrical about it. I just literally couldn't take any more. I need to put some space between me and Stone so that I can try to think straight. I haven't been able to think straight at all since that night at the hotel.

I walk in and set my things down inside my apartment and head straight to pour myself a glass of wine to help me calm my nerves a bit.

I am *angry* at Stone. And the fact that he was trying to be nice and act like he cared about me makes me even angrier. If he would just be a complete jerk *all* the time, it would be easier for me to hate him and move on. But these little glimpses of a great guy keep popping through his exterior and that makes me even more upset because it makes me like him.

I slump down onto the couch and sigh. Not only did Stone crash my Thanksgiving dinner with my family, but I didn't even get any pie.

My apartment door has barely been slammed closed for a full five

minutes before there's a knock. When I go to answer it, I see Stone, heading back to his car in the driveway.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I shout at him. His back is turned, and he has one hand in his car as if he's trying to reach for something. As soon as he hears me, he drops the pie in the process of pulling it out of his Lamborghini. My mother's famous pumpkin pie crushed all over the ground. *Great.* I suddenly feel a pang of guilt. Being this angry is so out of character for me. I can't seem to control myself around Stone—he makes me crazy.

"Violet, we need to talk," he says as he ignores the pie and rushes back up to my door. He's probably afraid I'm going to close it on him again and that wouldn't be an incorrect assumption.

"Go away, Stone," I frown at him. "You shouldn't be here."

"Wait," he says, reaching my doorway in time to jam his foot there and stop me from closing the door on him again. I am *furious* that he has the balls to follow me here and demand to be let inside. This is *my* apartment, not the locker room at the Wranglers' training facility.

"Get out of here!" I say, starting to scream at him in outrage. "I can't believe that you have followed me to the one place I can be at peace and *away* from you. Go back to your own parents' house and leave me alone. Or better yet, go back to Austin to your fancy apartment and line up your girls for the week."

I feel bad saying that to him, but I feel even worse thinking about the fact that it's probably an accurate assessment. I feel duped. Part of me knows I have no right to be. It was a drunken one-night stand—it's not like he proposed to me. I should've known what I was getting into, but his very presence makes me feel an intensity I can't handle. I want to jump his bones, but I can't do that, so I decide to yell at him instead.

"Is that what you think I do?" he asks, still not moving his foot from my doorframe. "You think I sit in my penthouse above the city and reach down to pluck women off the street to sleep with?"

"*Isn't it?*" I sound purposefully sharp with that question, even though it's probably a rhetorical one at this point.

I've heard enough about Stone Clark now to know that he's nothing more than a player—a player who just so happens to be from my hometown and who I just so happened to have fallen into bed with. *Oh well, live and learn.*

"No," he answers unwaveringly. "That is *not* what I do. I don't know what you've heard about me Violet, but I can guarantee that *at least* half of it

is fabricated.”

I scoff in disbelief. He’s just trying to save himself now and not seem like a womanizing asshole while he’s back here in Brook Downs.

“I don’t want to go back to my parents’ house or even my apartment in Austin right now. I want to be right here with you, and I want you to let me inside.”

“Not a chance,” I hiss at him. “I don’t fraternize with football players. It’s against the rules. Go back to one of the dozens of other girls you’ve fucked on the team.”

“Damn it, Violet,” he says, getting clearly agitated. “Whatever bullshit you heard from some jealous or attention-seeking girl after our night together doesn’t mean anything. I don’t want any of those other girls—*I want you.*”

His words hang in my head like a tease. I hate the fact that it makes my heart fill with hope.

He can’t possibly mean it. I don’t know what game he’s playing but there is no way he would actually want to be with me, rather than Heather and the entire rest of the squad. I’m nothing like them. They’re all flirtatious, fun, and probably willing to do anything at any time. Most of those girls have a single goal in life—to be the prettiest, perkiest cheerleader on the field, and to be the one who nails the quarterback.

I just want to finish up my contract and go back to vet school. And at this rate with Stone sabotaging my every thought, I am pretty much ready to throw in my pom-poms right now.

“Violet, did you hear me?” he asks.

I realize that I’ve been standing there in a silent stupor ever since he said that he wanted me.

“I said I want *you*, and I want you right *now.*”

Before I can ask him what that is even supposed to mean, he pushes the partially closed door wide open. I let him, offering no resistance, my eyes conveying what my mouth is unable to.

He reaches forward, wraps one arm around my back and the other hand behind the nape of my neck, and kisses me. All thoughts of trying to get him to leave fade away as my mind is consumed by the three words he said—*I want you.*

I would be lying to myself if I tried to deny that I want him too, and *badly*. In fact, I can’t remember a time I have ever wanted anything more. His touch electrifies my body, and suddenly I’m possessed by something deep

within myself I've never felt before.

I throw my hands up to his head and twist my fingers in his messy brown hair. Most of the players have short cuts, but not Stone. His hair falls in his eyes if you muss with it just the right way, making him look even more incredibly desirable than he already is. There's something a little rebellious about Stone—something that hints at not wanting to follow the rules when he really wants something. I guess that's how he gets away with breaking so many of them. But who am I to judge when I'm standing here right now doing the exact same thing.

For a split second, I try to convince myself that I will *not* make this same mistake twice.

Sleeping with him at the hotel was a complete lapse in judgment but at least I could blame it on the alcohol. If I fall into the same trap right now, I will have nothing to blame but myself.

My attempt at infusing solid judgment into this moment fails instantly as I pull Stone further into my apartment and let the door slam shut behind us. My heart starts to soar as he lifts my shirt over my head, and I drop my hands down to his pants to pull the zipper down and release his swelling desire. When I see how turned on Stone is by me, I get giddy with the anticipation of feeling him inside me again. We don't even make it to the bedroom before dropping down onto the carpeted floor where he climbs over me and pushes between my thighs.

It's like our bodies were *made* to fit together. He teases me at first, putting the head of his manhood at the entrance to my pussy. He teases my clit, rubbing his erect member up and down my slit, poking into my nub with just the right amount of pressure. His muscular arms hold him above me as he kisses and nips at my neck. It's enough to drive me insane.

He puts his cock into me an inch, then retracts it. I moan in protest, my hands snaking down to his muscular ass to push him deeper. He resists, my desire alone not able to overcome the strength of his powerful hips. He smirks in amusement as he dips himself into me and pulls out yet again. *Smug bastard*. I change tactics, grabbing the back of his neck, and pull his mouth to mine, plunging my tongue into it, tasting him while breathing heavily. It has the desired effect and he pushes himself into me fully causing me to gasp against him. *It feels. So. Good.*

He fills me so completely and touches places that didn't exist to anyone else before him. I have no control in his hands. My body leans into every

place he touches me and quivers in response to the rising sensation that slowly builds.

Everything seems more real this time, perhaps because there isn't alcohol at play, and I feel everything with an intensity that nearly tips me over the edge within moments. But Stone is drawing it out—he's drawing *me* out, as if he wants to keep me here right on this brink of explosion, and *I let him*.

I wrap my legs tightly around his waist as he slowly pushes in and out of me, driving me wild when he slows in response to my clenching muscles. He's testing me, seeing how far he can go before he sends me over the edge. It's a delicious torture that has me shaking right down to my toes.

"I told you I want you, Violet," he whispers in my ear as his tongue traces the tip of my earlobe. "Now I'm going to show you *how much*."

Waves of pleasure rise and fall as Stone drives into me with a force that hedges me nearer and nearer toward release. Finally, when I can't take it any longer, I cascade into climax. With a satisfied moan, Stone does too.

I feel the extreme, momentary engorgement just before he erupts within me, and a tremor runs throughout his entire body, making his muscles flex beneath my hands.

Afterward, he lays over me as we both try to catch our breath, keeping his weight supported on his forearms so he doesn't crush me beneath all that bulging muscle that is now clearly defined and shimmering with a hard-earned sweat.

The last time we had sex, we were both so drunk and so tired afterward that we essentially collapsed into bed without a single word until morning. But this time, Stone lays there, staring into my eyes as if he's searching for something. After a minute or two, he carefully slides out from me and lays beside me on the floor. When he starts to stand up, I get a sinking feeling that he's going to leave. After all, he just got what he came for.

"Do you have a bedroom in this place?" he asks as he stands over me, looking around with his cock dangling in the air, already hard again, and extending a hand down to me.

I reach up my hand and nod. To my surprise and delight, we walk back to my bedroom and climb into bed beside each other. *He's not leaving*.

Stone wraps an arm around me as I lay beside him, and the quiet between us feels unnecessarily awkward now.

"Why did you *really* come over here tonight?" I ask, not even sure what kind of answer I'm hoping for, and suddenly feeling feel self-conscious.

“Was it just to have sex with me again? Answer me honestly.”

He chuckles as if he’s amused that I needed to remind him to be honest. I feel bad believing so many of the rumors that I’ve heard about him, but honestly, it’s hard not to when there are so many that all seem to paint the same picture of Stone.

“You were upset at your parents’ house,” he says. “And I had a feeling that a lot of it had to do with me. I felt bad, and I wanted to make it right. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I feel something inside me melt when Stone acts like he actually *does* care about me. I try not to let myself read into it too much.

“Thanks,” I say with a smile, feeling slightly embarrassed. *Smooth Violet.*

“And also, because I wanted to have sex with you,” he grins.

I punch him playfully in the shoulder laughing, then lay my head on his chest. Before I know it, I’m fast asleep.

The next morning, we wake up together and it feels *nice*. I lay in his arms for a few minutes, thinking about getting up and enjoying a cup of coffee together and maybe even spending the morning hanging around before we both need to head back to Austin and start practicing for the next game coming up.

But when we get up, instead of a relaxed morning together, maybe even one with another romp in bed, Stone puts on his clothes *and* his jacket and gets ready to leave.

“I’ll see you soon,” he says as he leans forward and gives me a simple kiss that barely grazes my lips.

I watch as he opens the door and leaves, barely managing a rather pitiful sounding *bye* before Stone is gone. If I thought I was confused before, now I’m *really* lost.

What the hell is going on between me and Stone Clark?

CHAPTER 9 - STONE



When I left Violet's apartment, I wanted to tell her that I would call her. I even wanted to ask her on a real date, maybe something like a movie and a fancy dinner that I know she probably couldn't afford on her salary.

I found myself wanting to do something that I never wanted to do with any of the women I slept with before. I wanted to wine and dine her, use my billionaire clout to treat her to an experience of a lifetime. Most of the women I've been with have been shallow enough to be verified gold-diggers if I gave them the chance. But not Violet. She is warmhearted and good-natured, and exactly the kind of person who would appreciate being courted appropriately.

But after a few early-morning moments of thinking it over as I laid beside her, I realized that was *exactly* the reason I couldn't ask her out.

The team's official rules are strict, and even though I might have been able to avoid the consequences of breaking them so far, Violet probably couldn't. The only reason I haven't gotten kicked off the team is because I'm the star quarterback. But Violet is one of *many* cheerleaders—not the head cheerleader, not the one who is getting in good with all the players either. Neither Coach Margo nor Coach Rex would hesitate to cut her from the team if they thought she was starting up a relationship and distracting me from the game. Besides, breaking official NFL rules isn't a good look for either of us and it would stain her reputation permanently. I can't do that to Violet.

And to be honest, I need to start toeing the line myself. Even though I know how valuable I am to the Wranglers, there is still a point at which broken rules can't be overlooked anymore. I have a feeling that this situation, the kind that would make great front-page news and locker-room gossip of a

playboy sports star corrupting an innocent small-town cheerleader, would be exactly the kind of thing that would get me into some serious trouble.

To make matters worse, I don't need to engage in any sort of behavior that would further strain the already sad relationship I have with my parents. I can already hear my dad accusing me of using my billionaire status to seduce one of the local girls. And I can envision my mother's disapproving look if she found out I slept with my best friend's little sister. Everything about it reeks of the kind of drama I don't need in my life.

So, I make the quick executive decision to leave Violet's apartment first thing in the morning with nothing but a small kiss and a generic *see you soon* kind of line. I walk away before she has a chance to say anything to the contrary.

But after two days since being back in Austin, and trying once again to forget about Violet Dawson, I find myself regretting the decision to leave her with just a kiss more and more with each passing moment.

I'd gone over to her apartment to make sure she was okay, and to show her I wasn't just using her for sex back at the hotel in Minneapolis. I wanted her to know she wasn't just like all the other girls to me. But then what did I do? I went ahead and treated her just like all the rest of them anyways, leaving her without so much as a few words and a peck on the lips.

And now I feel like shit about it.

I decide to head down to the condo building's gym to work it off. Being owner of the whole building, I had the whole thing renovated into a state-of-the-art facility, taking up a decent chunk of the first floor.

"Hey, Mr. Clark," says Cynthia, the cute front desk attendant at the gym. Contrary to my reputation, I haven't slept with her. I would never try to pull something like that on someone who is technically my employee, even though I can tell she's attracted to me. Despite that, she never makes obnoxious overtures, which I appreciate.

My face must betray my mood, because her normally perky expression fades into one of quizzical concern.

"Is everything okay?" she asks.

"Hey, Cynthia. I'm fine, just a bit preoccupied," I say quickly, not in the mood for conversation.

I make my way over to the bench press and load up the bar with three forty-five pound plates on each side. I hope the strain distracts me from my thoughts, but as soon as I rack it and rest for the next set, my brain is

occupied by thoughts of the beautiful, blonde forbidden fruit once again.

What if I'm not capable of giving a girl like Violet Dawson the kind of love and attention she deserves—the kind of respect and care that a woman like her should have, and undoubtedly desires? What if I'm incapable of a serious relationship at all? Maybe all the rumors are true, and all I can do is simply screw the whole cheerleading team until I eventually age-out of being able to do it all together.

For as much as I have criticized my father and his life, at least he has a partner to love and grow old with. It's something I never thought I would want, or even want to *consider*, until I met up with Violet at the hotel. Ever since then, it's like all of my priorities have been tipped over and shaken up.

Now I find myself thinking about what Violet thinks about me and wondering if I'm not quite as good a guy as I thought I was. *Damn*, I would hate to prove my father right.

Deep down in my heart, I like to think I'm a good man. Maybe not a relationship kind of man, but a good one at least. But the way I've treated Violet has felt like nothing short of emotional whiplash for the both of us. Sometimes I feel like I need to run right over to her, take care of her, make love to her, and say a whole bunch of crazy things that I've never thought about saying to a woman before. But then the next minute I feel like I need to steer clear of her and pretend that none of this ever happened.

A smarter man would simply shut off his feelings like a faucet, realizing that nothing good can come from breaking NFL rules and ruining a relationship with their best friend. But either I'm not as smart as I thought I was, or Violet has a strange hold on me than no other woman ever has.

I've just finished my workout, and I'm vacillating between being good and making a protein shake or pouring myself a short glass of top-shelf scotch that I've been saving for a special occasion after the season is over, just to try and dull the invasive thoughts of Violet's stunningly beautiful naked body laying on top of my own. I shake my head and make my way back up to the penthouse.

Before I can decide whether to go the path of righteousness or not, there's a knock at my door. The distraction is probably for the best, because there's a practice in the morning and a game this week. I need to be able to think clearly and be in my best physical shape. Coach Rex would have my ass if he smelled even a drop of alcohol on my breath or noticed a moment of foggy haze in my eyes.

When I go to open the door, not having the first clue who it might be, I am shocked to find Heather Jamie standing there.

I'm surprised to see her at my apartment at all, especially since I've never brought her back here—the times I slept with her were always at her apartment, not mine. But I am even more stunned to see that she's standing in an overcoat and smiling wildly at me without saying a single thing when I open the door.

"Heather, what are you doing here?" I ask, getting a weird feeling about the whole thing.

She takes a single step closer so that one foot is in the door before opening her overcoat wide to reveal that she is entirely *naked* underneath. *Where the fuck does she think she is, one of those creepy porn theatres?*

"What the—"

"No need to thank me," she grins as she shakes her tits in my face. "I know you've been training hard and are under a lot of pressure. So, I thought I'd come help relieve some of that pressure for you—*my treat*."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I scold her, looking down the hall to make sure none of none of my apartment building neighbors are seeing this. Fortunately, she is too far into my doorway for anyone passing by to get a peek. "Just because we slept together once or twice, doesn't mean you can just show up at my apartment like some sort of sexual predator in an overcoat."

The smile immediately drops from her face.

"This is my *home*. How the hell did you even get past the doorman?"

"I told him I was your girlfriend," she hisses at me. "What the hell, Stone? It's not like you haven't wanted me before."

I make a mental note to talk to the doorman. The whole reason I pay a small fortune to live in this building is so that I can be left in privacy.

"Well, I don't want you now, Heather," I say. I'm not trying to be mean to the girl, but she definitely has the wrong idea, and I need to make it crystal clear that I don't want her showing up at my penthouse apartment for sex in the middle of the evening when people are just getting home from work and likely to see her here. This is wildly inappropriate. Heather's usually in the front of the cheer formations, with her face plastered all over the livestreams of the games. I don't need someone spilling that she made a booty call to my apartment during happy hour.

"You're an asshole," she yells, raising her voice loud enough for other

people in the building to hear. The last thing I want is some sort of scandalous scene, especially not with one of the Wranglers' cheerleaders standing mostly naked outside my apartment door.

"Do you think you can just sleep with all of us and then toss us away? Do you think everyone on the cheer squad is just disposable for your pleasure? Here I am, trying to do something nice for you, something that probably none of those other girls would do. And this is how you treat me?"

She's making it pretty clear that her running mouth is likely responsible for a lot of the rumors about my sexual prowess and behavior. I can see she's furious at being rejected. I would guess that Heather Jamie doesn't get rejected often, not only because she's beautiful, but also because she pretty much does anything in bed. For some guys, that's an attractive attribute.

And maybe it would have been for me a while ago, too. But not anymore.

Now, I can't bring myself to think or care about anything other than Violet. And I certainly am not going to engage with anyone else until I can figure out my feelings for Violet and untangle my emotions.

"Go home, Heather," I say sternly.

As soon as I turn her away, Heather whips her overcoat closed around her and makes a loud huffing noise before stomping off down the hallway toward the elevator. I can hear the clicking of her red stilettos halfway down the hall.

When I close the door and go back inside my apartment, I opt to say *the hell with it* and pour myself that small glass of scotch.

The small altercation with Heather jarred me a bit—it unnerved me more than it should have. Not because she showed up here dressed like a flasher wanting sex, but because she had a *point*. My reputation precedes me, and this is probably how most of the girls on the squad think of me. It might even be how Violet thinks of me. And I find myself caring way more than I ever have about how it might have hurt Violet that I've had sex with her twice now and haven't hung around long afterward.

I can only imagine what she must think of me, probably the same thing Heather just made explicitly clear to me. The difference is that I don't want to hurt Violet.

I sit down on the couch with my drink, wrestling with my thoughts and feelings for a little while before they're completely tangled up in a knot that becomes impossible to untangle. None of this is good. It's all going to lead to me being distracted from my game, and to Violet feeling crushed.

After I finish the glass of scotch, I decide that I really don't know how to

be in an actual relationship. Maybe it's because my parents' relationship was always so strained. Or maybe it's just because I find that acting like an asshole comes naturally to me. Either way, I keep coming back to the fact that staying away from Violet Dawson is the best thing for both of us.

Of course, that doesn't mean it's the easiest thing.

I try to look over some of the new plays that Coach Rex sent me, and then I message back and forth with Eddie for a bit—all with the intention of *not* thinking about Violet. None of it works.

No matter what I try to focus on, thoughts of her creep into my head like weeds.

For a split second, I hold my cell phone in my hand and think about texting her. I even type out a few words before deleting them because I don't really know what to say.

This is exactly the sort of reason I don't believe in love. If caring about someone makes you feel this conflicted, why would anyone want to do it?

I get up to go get ready for bed since I have an early morning tomorrow, still trying to convince myself that none of this is worth it, and that staying away from Violet is for the best. The only problem is that when I look in the mirror to brush my teeth, the eyes that stare back at me know I'm just *lying* to myself.

CHAPTER 10 - VIOLET



He hasn't called in two days.

He said that he would *see me soon* and yet two days have gone by without a single word from him. No phone call, no text, no stopping by the dorm where I'm staying in Austin with the squad—nothing.

It's not *soon* anymore, and it's obvious he was just saying that to make an exit with no intention of actually doing it. I was a fool—*again*.

"Hey, are you coming?" Sara asks as all the girls grab their poms and get ready to head out to the field.

Today's game is another big one. The crowd is packed, and everyone is energized. Everyone except me.

I know I'm going to see Stone out there on the field, and I know that I need to go out there and cheer for him and the rest of the Wranglers alongside my squad. But the thought of cheering for the guy who said *see you soon* and never called after yet another night of amazing sex, kind of makes my stomach turn.

"Yeah, I'm coming," I say with a forced smile as I pull my ponytail back and grab my poms to run out alongside Sara.

Heather is in front of us in the lineup, smiling so big for the fans that all of her perfectly white teeth are showing, and when the squad runs out onto the field, I instantly go into performance mode.

The good thing about cheerleading is that it's so similar to dance. And dance is something I can get lost in no matter how I'm feeling about other things. I've loved dancing ever since I was a kid, and it has allowed me to get outside myself and outside my head. Instead of being reserved, soft-spoken, or shy, I can loosen up and get lost in putting on a good show when I dance.

The same holds true for cheer.

It definitely works in my favor right now to keep anyone from seeing that I'm actually miserable on the inside. But as soon as my feet hit the field and the music starts to play, I decide that being miserable is only making things worse. It's not like *me* being miserable is going to change anything or make Stone feel or act differently. He probably hasn't even given the other night a single moment of thought after leaving and returning to Austin. And it's time I start to do the same. I am *determined* to stop obsessing over him once and for all.

That conviction lasts all of about five minutes, until I see Stone come out onto the field. Then, I start obsessing about him all over again. When he runs, I can see the muscles of his perfectly shaped ass move rhythmically. Just like they did when my nails were digging into them, feeling them clench as he pushed himself deeper inside me, filling me with his orgasm. Despite myself, the thought makes me tingle between my legs. *I've got it bad.*

I can't take my eyes off him for the entire game, even though Stone seems to have forgotten that I exist at all. He doesn't glance over at me once.

"Get your head on straight," Heather barks at me when I almost move out of sync for a split second. "You're going to make us look bad."

She's right, and I can see Coach Margo looking over this way with resting disappointment on her face. I haven't messed up *yet*, but I'm not as focused as I need to be, and it's going to start to show.

The squad performs our routine during the water break, and I manage not to screw it up at least. If there is one thing I can always count on being great at, even when I'm distracted, it's dance and cheer. But it doesn't go unnoticed that I am preoccupied. After being scolded several times by Heather, and given a few damning looks by some of the other girls, Coach Margo walks over to me.

"Everything alright, Violet?" she asks. "Are you feeling out of sorts?"

"Sorry, no, I'm fine. Just didn't sleep well last night."

The Coach looks at me skeptically, and I can hear some of the other girls whispering around me.

"Well, get over it and get more rest tonight. We've got a game to finish, and you still have two routines left."

I nod in compliance and look down at my feet as Coach Margo walks over to talk with the other girls.

The rest of the game I try harder to stay focused and *not* stare at Stone the

entire time. He once again seals the win for the Wranglers, and it's hard not to get caught up in the exciting moment. But after the big win, he walks right past me as he heads off the field and doesn't even so much as smile my way. He smiles at *other* people as he walks by, but not me.

I just don't get it. It's not like I've done anything wrong to him. *Why is he going out of his way to ignore me?* I feel like I'm being punished for something even though I have no idea what I could have possibly done to deserve it.

"He's only treating you the way that he treats every other girl he sleeps with," Sara says as she walks up beside me and wraps an arm around my shoulder. "Don't take it personally, Violet. The guy has issues."

I look over at where Stone is receiving a congratulatory pat on the back from Coach Rex, and I try not to stare at him longingly like a fool. But I can't stop the butterflies that plague my stomach, even when I break my gaze.

"He's definitely not relationship material," Sara reiterates as we walk past him toward the women's locker room. "Honestly, I don't even think he's *two-night* material."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that Stone Clark never sleeps with a girl more than once—*ever*. So, pining away after him isn't a good idea. You'd be better off going with literally anyone else on the football team, not that I'm endorsing the breaking of any rules." She winks at me and then walks off to shower.

I take one look back at where the guys are standing before I go inside the locker room. Stone is standing there next to his friend, Eddie, now. Even Eddie manages to look over and toss me a smile, but Stone acts as if he can't even see me.

Eddie isn't bad looking with his jet-black hair that he shakes around after removing his helmet. But he also isn't *Stone*. It's not as if I'm searching for a boyfriend; I wasn't even trying to find a guy when the thing with Stone happened. I have too much of my own stuff to do right now to date. I'd be embarrassed if Stone knew how long it had been for me before we hooked up.

I need to finish up this season with the Wranglers cheer squad, and then maybe try to squeeze in a few more classes toward finishing my vet training before next season. I don't have the time or the desire to hunt for a boyfriend. Sure, one day maybe, after I become a veterinarian and am ready to start a family. Maybe that's when I would have started thinking about finding a

man. But this thing with Stone came out of nowhere and completely blindsided me. I wasn't on the prowl like some of the girls on the team are—constantly batting their eyes at the players. I'd never even had a one-night stand before this. I didn't identify with women like Heather who just want to land a wealthy football player so they can be taken care of for the rest of their lives and not have to find another career after cheer.

Of course, not all the girls on the squad are like that. Sara has a good head on her shoulders, and she has ambitions to be a pediatric nurse in the future. But I have a feeling that we're the exceptions.

When I think about what Sara said though, it gives me pause. I step into a hot shower and think about her *two-night material* comment. She seems to think that Stone would *never* sleep with the same girl twice, but yet he did.

Me.

And he's the one who pursued a second night with me. I didn't have to bat my eyes at him, or shove my boobs in his face, or any of the antics Heather is constantly up to. Stone practically chased me down to my apartment just to tell me that he *wanted* me, even when I tried to shut him out. Then he followed it with an amazing *second* night of sex. According to Sara, and everything that I've heard about Stone's reputation, that's uncharacteristic of him. And the way he did it... so tenderly and passionately.

Maybe that means I'm the exception to the rule.

Or maybe it means I'm an idiot for being such a naïve, hopeless romantic, and for ignoring all the glaring red flags that keep popping up about Stone Clark. I mean, he fucked me twice. *Great. So what?* It just means I'm twice the fool the other girls are. Still, if I'm being honest with myself, it's unlikely the one-night rule was *their* idea. Any of them would surely jump at the chance to bed Stone twice, thrice, however many times he was willing.

I finish my shower and get dressed. The locker room is mostly cleared out now, with several of the girls getting dressed to go out and celebrate the win.

"Want to come out with us?" Sara asks as she and a few other girls wait by the door. "We're going to go catch a movie and get dinner."

"A movie and dinner?" Heather sneers as she walks past them and out into the cold air. "How sweet. What are we like sixteen?" The girls traveling in her snooty little posse all chortle with laughter.

"Well, not *all* of us need to take our coochies for a test drive every night, Heather," Sara bites back at her. "Some of us like to be able to sit down in the morning."

Heather glares at her in mortification before motioning for her gaggle of mean girls to follow her out the door. *God, I love Sara so much sometimes.*

I laugh a little to myself but then politely decline Sara's invite.

"I think I just feel like being alone tonight," I sigh.

"Alright," she says as she rolls her eyes at me. "But no more thinking about *you know who*. It's bad for your brain cells."

The other girls look like they want to know who we're talking about, but I know I can trust Sara to keep my secret.

I grab my bag and head out, catching a glimpse of Stone and Eddie as they both get into Stone's fancy black car.

"Lamborghinis are for old guys," one of the girls says as she rolls her eyes at Stone's car speeding away.

"He is *kind of* an older guy," another girl says. "Isn't he like in his thirties or something?"

"That's not old," the first girl laughs. "And besides, he's so hot that it makes up for it. I bet he's super experienced when it comes to pleasing a woman, too."

They both giggle and head back to the squad dormitory together while I decide to take a longer, slower walk back in the cool weather. Listening to them instantly evokes memories of my nights with Stone and starts to make me feel hot all over. The late November chill in the air feels good against my damp hair.

I wonder where Stone and Eddie are going tonight to celebrate another win. I wonder if there will be some of the other cheerleaders there, possibly Heather and her batting forest of eyelashes. *Slut.*

When I get back to my room, I think about my apartment sitting empty back home in Brook Downs, and I start to wonder whether being here and traveling with the team is really what I want to be doing now that this whole debacle with Stone has occurred. I can't really keep up with girls like Heather, and I honestly don't even want to.

I make myself a cup of tea, plop down on my bed and stare out the window, feeling like I miss my little apartment at home and wondering if any part of Stone could ever really be interested in a girl like me. Even though we both came from Brook Downs, it's clear to see that he belongs here where life is faster and flashier.

I curl up with my tea and plunge my head into a book to stop thinking about Stone for the night. But even after I fall asleep, I have a dream about

him turning around on the field and smiling at me with those big, blue eyes. Getting Stone out of my system is starting to feel like a futile mission. Even my subconscious is obsessed with him.

Apparently, it doesn't realize that Stone Clark isn't thinking about me at all.

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CHAPTER 11 - STONE



Last night's win was a great one, but practice today *sucks*.

"Clark!" Coach Rex yells at me as I fumble the ball in my hands. "What the hell was that? Where's your head today because it sure isn't here at practice with the rest of us."

"Sorry, Coach," I grumble, internally reprimanding myself for not being able to stay focused *at all*.

I've been trying so hard all morning to stay alert in practice, but I can't.

My performance at the game was epic, but now I look like a novice fool who can't do my job right. And it's all because wholesome little Violet Dawson won't get out of my freaking head. I spent a sleepless night, tossing and turning in my bed and woke up with my first thought being of her big, brown eyes staring back at me. Her lips parting in sultry innocence as I thrust into her. *God dammit*.

I have a responsibility to this team to play and act my best. I've been carrying this team through wins, and they've come to expect nothing but peak performance from their star quarterback. I can't be dropping the ball—*literally*.

I also feel like staying away from Violet is protecting her in a sense. She'll get kicked from the squad if anyone finds out about us, and it's not like her parents have a lot of money for her to fall back on, nor does her brother on a teacher's salary. Violet has ambitions of putting herself through vet school and starting her own practice, and for that she needs money. The kind of money that the squad will pay her for traveling with the team this season. And also, the kind of money that she will *lose* if she gets kicked off the squad dishonorably.

Maybe I'm just telling myself all of this to make it easier for me to act like a jerk or to try and move on from Violet without having to get into a heart to heart. Regardless, I'm still convinced it's the right thing to do.

"So, are you going to be joining us today here, Clark?" the coach yells at me. I can see the steam practically coming out of his ears as he loses his temper with me again. "Quit spacing out, Stone."

"Hey man, time to get your head in the game," Eddie says as he runs by and gives me a smack on the back. I'm actually grateful for the hard slap since it jolts me back into the moment.

But just when I think I might be able to regain my focus, the cheer squad comes onto the other side of the field to practice a new routine they're working on for the next game. There she is, Violet Dawson, walking right by me, not even needing to strut to get my attention. On the contrary, her body language looks like she's trying to avoid attention. I briefly wonder if it has something to do with me, and my heart breaks a little. *Of course it does, jackass.*

Heather is there too, giving me a not-so-subtle glare as she tosses her hair over her shoulder and whispers to the girl beside her while staring at me with piercing eyes. She's still pissed.

I can't pay Violet any attention at all.

I have to force myself not to look over at her. If the wrong people pick up on any interactions between us, it's bad news. Once the cat's out of the bag, you can't get that sucker shoved back in. I do feel like I'm protecting Violet by not showing her even the slightest bit of attention in public.

She, on the other hand, probably thinks I'm just being a douchebag.

I start doing drills with Eddie, thankful I'm paired with my best friend at the moment because at least he'll cut me some slack if I start to fuck up again. Maybe it's not a good thing though because my thoughts immediately drift back to Violet again.

Over the years, Violet is one of the few people I know who has remained sweet and kind and unjaded by the world. And her innocence makes her exceptionally sensitive. That's why it caught me so off guard when she got angry at me. Our night of passion really must have screwed her up. Normally, I wouldn't have let anyone talk to me the way she did, but it was so out of character, I couldn't find it in myself to blame her.

Del used to tell me stories about how his sister would get her heart broken over one thing or another all through middle school and high school.

Honestly, the stories happened several times a week. And it wasn't even all about boys either. She'd feel bad for the girl sitting alone in the lunchroom or upset if she saw someone getting bullied after class. She even brought the old librarian a Christmas present, because the woman seemed so miserable. Not only is Violet softhearted, but she's empathetic to the point of taking everything deeply personal.

Thinking about it makes me frown because I know my attempts to protect Violet from the repercussions of anyone finding out we slept together are probably just hurting her all over again.

And if Thanksgiving Day was any indication of how she felt, it's that she thinks I'm blowing her off because I don't like her, or because I don't want her in the way that I want some of the other cheerleaders.

She's right about one thing—I don't want her like I want the other cheerleaders, I want Violet even *more*.

I shouldn't have had sex with her a second time. That was the biggest mistake of all. The first time at least could have been chalked-up to my reputation as a playboy asshole, but doing it a second time just makes me seem cruel. I honestly intended to go over there just to smooth things over. Maybe give her some peace of mind. What happened after that was pure carnal attraction. I know in her heart, she probably hoped I would call her the next day, or at least send a text. But I didn't.

And I could tell by her face on the field during the game that she was heartbroken I wasn't paying her any attention. I made sure I only glanced at her out of the corner of my eye when she wasn't looking, just to see how she was doing—and how good she looked cheering on the field. But as far as Violet is concerned, it surely looked like I was ignoring her completely.

And knowing her, she's taking that straight to heart. But I'm just not sure what else to do.

I don't know what the right thing to do is in this situation because I've never *been* in a situation like this before.

I like her—a *lot*. To the point where it's freaking me out. It's a vulnerability I'm not used to.

I'm thinking about her constantly and worrying about how she is and what she thinks of me. I also know that being involved with her is a terrible idea. And I know it will hurt us both if anyone finds out about it. So technically, ignoring her does feel like the right thing to do.

But if it is, then why do I still feel so *shitty* about it? Why am I up at night

worrying about how upset she is or the fact that she might be beating herself up over me not calling her as if *she* has done something wrong? If this is the right way to go about it, then why does it feel so *wrong*?

The ball smacks me in the side of the head as Eddie purposefully pitches it at my cranium.

“Dude, come on. You’re gonna be the reason Coach causes us to do extra laps and makes us stay late at practice today. I don’t know what the hell is going on with you, but you’ve got to snap out of it. I’m telling you that as your friend.”

“I know, thanks, you’re right,” I say. I shake my head, letting my hair fall as I take my helmet off and take a deep breath. Then I look across the field and see Violet. My eyes lock with hers for a second, and I freeze.

“Get your head in the game or get off the practice field, dipshit!” Coach Rex barks at me from across the field.

This is precisely the reason I need to get over this. It’s affecting everything. And now Coach is even threatening to kick me off the field. This is ridiculous.

I don’t even glance back over to where the cheerleaders are again. I spend the rest of the practice time focusing, or at least trying to focus, without making an ass of myself.

Nothing more can happen with Violet. It just won’t work.

It can’t.

But then, when I hear a shrill scream coming from the other side of the field, I stop what I’m doing and turn around to see what happened.

The girls have been practicing some jumps, and all of a sudden they all seem to be huddled around one of their teammates. My heart starts to pound fast in my chest as I sprint across the field, not even thinking before starting to run.

What if it’s Violet? What if she’s been as distracted as I’ve been? What if it’s all my fault for having ignored her? What if she got hurt, really hurt—enough, that it ruins her chances of being on the squad for the rest of the season? But as I get closer and the girls start to dissipate a little bit, I see Heather getting up from the ground and brushing off her scraped up knees. I look around, searching the girls’ faces until I find Violet standing off to the side. *It wasn’t her.* Relief washes over me.

Heather looks furious and instantly marches up to Coach Margo, seemingly to lodge her complaint against whichever girl dropped her. I

definitely wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of Heather's fury. That woman can be a cyclone when she wants to be.

At least it wasn't Violet who got hurt. And a part of me, an evil part I'm sure, gets a little bit of satisfaction over the fact that Heather is walking with a slight limp. Serves her right for showing up in nothing but an overcoat at my apartment yesterday and making a scene.

I turn and head back toward practice, not even realizing that the entire football team has stopped to watch me race across the field toward the girls.

"What the hell was that about?" Eddie asks, his jaw dropped wide open.

I panic but try to play it cool.

"Didn't you hear the scream?" I ask. "I thought maybe someone got hurt."

"And you're somehow a medic now?" he asks.

Good point. If there were any serious injuries, the cheer coach would have handled it, not a rogue football player.

"I don't know man, I just thought I would help if I could."

We both turn around and see Coach Rex and half of the other guys still staring at me. Coach looks as if he is going to march over and knock some sense into me himself. Thankfully, Eddie quickly grabs me by the arm and resumes practice before anybody thinks to come and interrupt.

"Dude, if you're hung up on a girl, you need to let me know. And when you do let me know, I'm going to tell you that whoever she is, she's not worth it."

I look at his raised eyebrows, scanning to see my reaction to what he has said, and waiting to be shocked at the fact that Stone Clark is distracted by a girl.

"No, of course not," I say dismissively. "When have I ever been distracted by a girl?"

"That's what I'm saying, but you have to admit you've been acting pretty weird the past couple days. Actually, you've been acting kind of weird ever since our game in Minneapolis. What's up with that? Is this really all about Heather?" he asks, eyeing me skeptically.

I find myself wanting to tell Eddie about Violet, simply because I feel like getting it off my chest. But even though I trust that Eddie would keep my secret, I'm not ready to admit to any feelings yet, not even to myself.

I have a hard time coming up with any sort of believable answer though. So, I take the opportunity to change the subject.

“Hey, speaking of our time in Minneapolis, whatever happened to that girl you went off to talk to at the bar? She was pretty hot.”

Eddie shrugs and chuckles a bit.

“Yeah, Sara Phillips? She’s a real beauty. Nice girl, too. Unfortunately, too nice for the likes of me because she turned me down.”

“*Ouch*,” I laugh.

“Yeah, she said something about not wanting to break the rules or get into any trouble. And honestly, as cute as I think she is, I agree with her. Not all of us get the special treatment you do.”

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous,” I banter with him, still trying to keep the conversation off of me until practice is over.

“Jealous? Of a knucklehead like you? Not a chance. You may get all the girls, but I’ve got all the brains.” We both immediately burst into laughter.

The rest of the practice goes slightly better because Eddie does a decent job of keeping my attention on our training exercises. By the time we’re ready to practice the plays, I still have Violet in the back of my head, but I’m able to get through it without further incident or further trouble from the coach.

In fact, I start to think that maybe I’ve finally gotten Violet out of my system. Maybe all I needed was a good day of practice and hanging out with the guys.

But no sooner does the day end and I head back to my apartment, than everything I had tried to push out comes storming right back in.

“What are you doing to me Violet?” I whisper as I look out at the city. “Whatever it is, it’s getting wildly out of hand.”

CHAPTER 12 - VIOLET



All through practice, I can't pull off a proper jump to save my life.

I thought, albeit foolishly, that just *maybe* Stone would miss me and break down and call me. I thought that maybe this time I might get a quick single-line text sometime between our second intimate night together and now.

But nothing—*crickets*.

To add salt to the wound and make matters even worse, I overhear Heather again.

I'm not sure if *overhear* is the right choice of words because she purposefully talks loud enough that she's hard to ignore.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe how gorgeous that man's apartment is," she boasts. "Of course, not *everyone* gets to see inside of it, but I have my own *womanly* ways of getting through to Stone. It's all about stripping down his willpower."

Ew.

As much as I want to walk away, I can't help but keep listening to Heather's chatter.

"I mean what better way to spend a Saturday night than at Stone Clark's apartment?" she laughs. "*Obviously*, I slept in late Sunday morning to recuperate."

By the time Coach Margo calls us for warm-ups, I've been able to piece together enough of what Heather was saying to understand that she spent the night at Stone's apartment on Saturday. And that means Stone was sleeping with someone else less than forty-eight hours after he slept with me. Possibly even sooner, I just don't have confirmation of it. It also means that having a

second rendezvous with him wasn't anything special at all. I feel like an idiot all over again.

Women like Heather disgust me, bragging about their sexual escapades as if it's something to be proud of. But this time, it did enlighten me as to why Stone hadn't bothered to call or text—because he was with *her*. My stomach drops, and I couldn't be more heartbroken. And upset at myself that I fell for it not once, but twice. You'd think I would've learned my lesson the first time.

All throughout warm-ups, all I can think about is Stone lying naked with Heather Jamie. The thought of it makes my stomach curdle.

Sara tells me several times to pay attention to what I'm doing because I almost mess up the configuration of the rest of the squad. But I am so hurt right now that I'm not really thinking straight.

I don't know why I'm angry at Stone to be honest. I knew exactly what kind of reputation he has, so it's not as if I should have expected him to act outside his character. I went ahead and had sex with him on two separate occasions. I'm a grown ass woman, and I made the decision to do it. So, if I should be mad at anybody, it should be myself.

Still, I can't get over how much it *hurts*. Like, *actually* physically hurts. It's like someone dropkicked me in the stomach.

Maybe I thought there was something different between me and Stone. Maybe I thought that since I've known him for years, or since he was like a friend of the family, or since he'd come to check on how I was feeling after the Thanksgiving debacle, that he actually cared about me.

But according to Heather's account of Saturday's activities, it sounds like the only thing he cares about is getting his fix of pretty women.

When we start jumps, I try to get Stone out of my head. Jumps require focus, otherwise there's a risk of not only screwing up the team's routine, but also getting injured.

I've never done such shitty jumps since joining the team. My balance is all off, my focus is muddled, and nothing that I'm trying to do today is working. I try not to keep looking over at the Stone, but it doesn't matter, because even if I'm not looking at him, I'm still *thinking* about him.

When we go to do the tripod jump, I'm one of the anchors at the bottom. I really do try to focus, and I think that I *am* focused, but as soon as Heather gets tossed up in the air, and I see her back arched against the sky, all I can think about is her spine curling in orgasm as Stone fucks her.

For one split second, it's enough to make me hesitate, and when one of the anchors hesitates, it throws everybody off.

The next thing I know, Heather is face-first on the ground and there is a bloodcurdling scream shooting off through the air.

I didn't mean to drop her. Technically, I wasn't the *only* one supposed to catch her, even though I know it's entirely my fault that she fell. I didn't do it on purpose. God, I hope nobody saw me space out in that split second it took to lose formation.

For the next few seconds, everything is chaos.

All of the girls gather around Heather, who is *of course* milking this as dramatically as possible. Coach Margo walks over to assess the damage and is relieved to see that Heather isn't actually injured, just humiliated and a little bit scuffed up.

I try to step back a bit from the whole scene, not wanting anyone to place the blame on me. But I do feel terrible about what happened.

"Are you okay?" several of the girls ask Heather at once.

Consistent with her usual character, Heather exaggerates.

"No! Of course, I'm not *okay*. What kind of *losers* are at the bottom of the throw and don't catch their teammate?"

I wait for the inevitable to happen, and then it does. Heather looks right over at me and glares straight through me. But instead of coming over to chew me out, she marches straight up to Coach Margo to bend her ear.

"Did you see that?" Heather asks. "Did you see how Violet broke formation? She's the one who caused everyone to drop me—she's responsible for my injury. And if you don't do something about it, I can tell you that my father is a lawyer and—"

"That won't be necessary, Miss Jamie," Coach Margo interrupts, clearly annoyed with both of us now.

I don't think I've ever seen the coach look so mad before. She turns and walks away from Heather and makes a beeline straight to me.

But before I deal with her, I catch a slight glimpse of Stone, standing just a few feet away from where we're all gathered.

It's odd because he was across the field a few minutes ago before this incident happened, so why in the world is he standing here now? Especially with the rest of his team back on their end of the field looking like they're waiting for him to return.

For a moment, my heart skips a bit, thinking that maybe he came over to

make sure I was okay. But then reality kicks in and I realize he was probably just coming to check on Heather. At the very same time that he turns to walk away, Coach Margo walks up to me.

“Get out of here, you’re done with practice for today,” she hisses at me.

“I’m really sorry,” I say, “I didn’t mean for—”

“Save your sad excuses,” she says. Her face contorts with anger. “You’re getting kicked from practice because you failed to ensure a teammate’s safety. If you girls don’t work together then you don’t work at all. You’re done.”

I lower my head and start to walk away.

“And Violet,” she calls after me. “I am nothing short of *pissed* at your horrible performance throughout the entire day. You look like you aren’t even trying. If you want to stay on this team, you had better get your act together.”

I turn to grab my bag and leave, humiliated, and not wanting to talk to anyone, not even Sara who calls after me to make sure I’m alright.

I just want to go back to my room and forget about everything that happened.

But when I get back to my place, I find that I’m only sitting here still dwelling on Stone and Heather, and my failed cheer practice. I need to get out of here and do *something* to take my mind off things.

So, I uncharacteristically decide to text Sara and ask if she wants to meet up at one of the local bars with some friends.

“Sure!” she messages me back within seconds. “But you know how much the coach is against us having even a sip of alcohol while we’re training. So, this all needs to stay on the down low and only one drink, okay?”

I don’t answer her, I just message her back telling her I’ll meet her at the bar in an hour. When I get there, Sara and a few of the other girls are already there waiting for me. All three of them are nursing their drinks, as if they’re made out of liquid gold. I, on the other hand, am recklessly feeling like not giving a fuck.

I’m sick of always trying to follow the rules and behave. I’m sick of being the one who’s left behind while Stone goes off to screw girls like Heather. So, I have one drink, and another, and then another.

Truly, I just want to get stupid drunk and forget about everything. That would make all of this a lot easier.

The other girls, including Sara, keep up with me only for the first couple

drinks or so and then they bow out. Following the squad's sober rule means that everyone is a lightweight now.

At first, we're all having an absolute blast. We even start laughing about how ridiculous Heather looked all sprawled out on the ground after she fell. It's funny how a little bit of alcohol loosens lips and inhibitions.

At some point, I unintentionally make eye contact with a guy at the end of the bar. He looks about my age, maybe a little older. He's not exactly cute, but he wags his eyebrows at me. I smile awkwardly in return. He's not my type. He kind of looks like a frat boy with his baseball cap turned backward indoors, but it's good to see at least *someone* is paying attention to me.

I think little of it, and am having a blast. But after a little while, one of the girls starts to get uncomfortable.

"You guys do know that we're going to get ratted out to the coach about this right?" she asks in a slurred voice. "It's likely we're going to be suspended for at least two games. We're not supposed to be out drinking. We'll be lucky if we don't get kicked off the team."

"I think you need to lighten up," I say, giggling from the intoxication and not wanting anyone to be a downer.

But then one of the other girls starts to get nervous as well.

"I don't want to get kicked off the team—I can't. I need this money, and I'm planning to cheer for at least a few more years," she says.

Both girls get up and start to leave the bar.

I don't even care about it until I see Sara start to get up too.

"Wait, where are you going?" I ask, trying not to slur all my words together in one long sound.

"I'm sorry, Violet," she says. "But I don't want to get into any trouble. It was fun having a drink or two, but I think we've reached our limit now. Do you want to come back with us? Or do you want me to call you a ride?"

"No. I don't want to go home. I want to stay and have another drink."

My head is spinning and suddenly the bar starts doing loops around me. Maybe Sara's right. It's too much, and it's suddenly catching up with me. I think I just want to go home too.

But then, I see *Stone*.

Are you fucking kidding me? What is he doing here?

I yank Sara's sleeve to pull her back down to sit beside me. At first, she tries to pull away from me, thinking I'm just being drunk and obstinate, but then she looks over and sees Stone, too.

“*Oh geez,*” she says with a roll of her eyes. “Violet, we should all go. Come on.”

“No,” I protest again, wagging my finger in the air for the bartender to come back around with another drink.

“Violet, you’ve had enough,” Sara says.

But before I can say anything in return, Stone has walked up to our table and is standing right in front of me. Sara gives him a look as she waits to see what he’s going to do.

“You can leave,” he tells her. “I’ll make sure she gets home safe.”

“Uh, are you sure?” Sara asks as she looks between the two of us. “Because I can call someone to—”

“I’m sure,” Stone interrupts. “You and your friends have all seen me here with her right now, and I’ve told you that I’ll get her home safe. If anything to the contrary were to happen, then you could all corroborate your story and report me to Coach. You have my word—she’ll be safe with me.”

I give Sara a glare at leaving me here alone with Stone Clark after all the trouble he has already caused me, but she simply smiles at me before turning to leave.

CHAPTER 13 - STONE



“Come on, a drink or two might help you get rid of that grumpy old man attitude you’ve been wearing for the past couple of days,” Eddie teases as he twists my arm.

I really didn’t want to go out with the guys tonight. I just wanted to go home, sit on my couch, break some more rules with a glass of scotch, and look out at the city below my penthouse while I try *not* to think about Violet Dawson.

But getting out with the guys stands a much better chance of helping me get Violet out of my head than sitting in my apartment alone. So, I concede.

When we get to the bar, the place is packed. So packed that I need to drive around for a solid five minutes before I can find a parking space.

“With this fancy car, you should be the designated driver every time we go out,” Eddie says with a laugh.

“Who says I’m not going to drink a few too?”

“What, and then drive this fine specimen home?” he asks. “It’s not like you want to leave a car like this parked on the street.”

“Eh, I’m fine with one or two drinks,” I say, thinking about the five or six I had with Violet at the hotel bar in Minneapolis.

The second I step foot into the bar, even though it’s packed with people, I see Violet there. A very *wasted* Violet. I spot her instantly, even through the crowd of people.

I turn to Eddie, not sure what I’m even going to say, but before I can utter a word he jumps in. “I’ll leave you to it,” he says with a wink as he walks off to meet some of the other guys at the bar.

And even though I know I shouldn’t, I walk up to her immediately.

That redhead Eddie thinks is cute, Sara, I think her name is, is standing next to Violet. A few of the other girls on the cheerleading squad are there also, looking as though they're getting ready to leave.

"You can leave," I say, turning to Sara. "I'll make sure she gets home safe."

"Uh, are you sure?" Sara asks, raising an eyebrow at me—rightfully so. Most of the girls I take home wind up in my bed and not their own. "Because I can call someone to—"

"I'm sure," I reassure her. After I explain that there are multiple witnesses and that Violet will be perfectly safe with me, Sara seems comfortable enough to leave with the other girls.

She exchanges a quick look with Violet before she heads out the door, leaving us alone at a bar—*again*.

Violet, innocent little play-by-the-rules Violet, is sitting here at the bar where she can be easily spotted while getting blasted. I can't really blame her for it, since it was kind of my plan as well. But again, I have protection on the team that she does not. A cheerleader is a lot easier to replace than their star quarterback.

"You shouldn't be here drinking."

"Neither should you," she fires back. "But if memory serves, you didn't seem too concerned with the team's rules when you slept with me after the bar in Minneapolis. In fact, you didn't seem too concerned about the rules when you slept with me the second time in my apartment either, did you?"

I don't say anything because I'm not sure what kind of answer I could possibly give that won't incriminate me further. It definitely feels like she's baiting me.

"You're in here chastising me about breaking a rule because I'm out drinking at a bar. But if we were going to list the rules in order of importance, I'm pretty sure the first one would be the one about not fraternizing with the cheerleaders. Wouldn't you think so?"

If she wants to play this game, I'm in.

"Well, it seems that we've both broken both of those rules," I say. "So what do we do about it now?"

"I don't know, you tell me," her voice is edgy and sarcastic now. "You seem to care a lot less about the rules than I do."

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't know, maybe the fact that you weren't at all concerned with the

rules when you slept with Heather on Saturday night either.”

“What?” Suddenly I find myself in defensive mode. “What are you even talking about?”

“Oh, please, don’t try to deny it. And if you swore Heather to secrecy, then you can kiss that goodbye also. She’s definitely a *kiss and tell* kind of girl. She could barely keep it to herself for the first three seconds at practice today.”

I am *furious*. I am furious that Heather made up lies and ran her mouth, and I am furious that my infamous reputation seems to be more believable than the words coming out of my mouth.

“I haven’t touched Heather,” I say, immediately realizing that isn’t entirely true and having to backpedal a little bit. “Okay, well, I *have* touched her. But not in a *very* long time. And I certainly didn’t touch her on Saturday. We had sex once, over a year ago—maybe twice. But it’s been quite a while.”

“Not according to Heather.”

“Heather is a *liar*,” I say angrily.

“And you aren’t?” Violet asks. Even slurring and teetering on her stool, she manages to stare me straight in the eyes and hold my gaze for the time being.

“No, I’m not. I may be a lot of things, but a liar is not one of them, and I will prove it.”

“Really? How exactly are you going to prove to me that you *didn’t* sleep with Heather on Saturday? Seems to me that it would be your word against hers. And considering your reputation isn’t exactly *squeaky clean*, I wouldn’t bet on many people believing it.”

“I’m telling you, I didn’t touch her on Saturday. She showed up at my apartment and—”

Violet interrupts me with her laughter. It’s strange because her laugh sounds a lot less like amusement and a lot more like anger.

“You’re telling me that Heather came to your apartment, and you *didn’t* have sex with her?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m telling you. I turned her away.”

“Well, that honestly doesn’t sound believable at all, for either one of you.”

“Because you know us so well?” I ask, with intended sarcasm.

“Because I know that you like to sleep with cheerleaders and that she

likes to sleep with football players. Seems like a perfect match to me.”

“I don’t do that anymore,” I say. I’m starting to feel the need to take Violet out of here and talk to her somewhere more private, somewhere where we won’t make a scene and where I can control more of the factors of conversation.

“Anymore? And what exactly is it that made you change your disposition toward fucking everyone on the cheerleading squad?” Violet looks up at me with innocent, hurt eyes.

“*You.*”

For a moment, she looks startled, and I use the opportunity as our chance to leave.

I push the chair out from beneath me with the back of my thighs and stand up. Then I reach across and grab Violet, picking her up in my arms and half tossing her over my shoulder in order to carry her out of the bar.

“What the hell?” she asks as she slams her fist against the back of my shoulder. She has so little muscle on her that no hit she could muster would dent me in the slightest.

“Put me down!”

“I’ll put you down when we get to my car.”

I garner a few strange looks from the bouncer and the bartender but thankfully I’m completely sober and Violet is very visibly drunk, so I’m able to explain it all off as taking her home and putting her drunk self to bed. Honestly, the fact that they let me walk out with her like that makes me feel all the more justified in doing so. Clearly the security here doesn’t care what happens so long as it’s not in their establishment.

When I get to my car, I open the door, set her in on the passenger seat and strap her inside with the seatbelt. Thankfully she’s too drunk to have quick reflexes. Snapping the remote lock closed gives me enough time to get around to the driver’s side without her getting out of the car.

“This is kidnapping you know,” she says adamantly.

I laugh because it’s funny.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Back to my apartment.”

“You liar! You told Sara you were going to get me home safely.”

“And I will, just not yet. I still have something to prove to you, remember?” I ask. “But if you want me to take you home, just say the word.”

I can see her blurred thoughts trying to remember what we discussed at

the bar. She says nothing in response to my offer to take her home. She really did drink too much. Violet doesn't have enough body mass or fat on her bones to offset the amount of alcohol she likely downed at the bar.

I reach into my glove compartment and pull out a bottle of water.

"Ooh, your fancy car has a minibar," she giggles.

"You're drunk," I say. "And it's only a bottle of water. Drink it."

"Don't boss me around."

"Well, you can either voluntarily drink it, or I can take you to my friend who works at the hospital, and he can hook you up to I.V. fluids in order to flush all that alcohol out of your system." *Come to think of it, that's not actually a bad idea.*

"You can't do that," she says, looking worried.

"Sure I can. I'm a billionaire, and most people do as I ask when I toss a few grand their way."

Without further protest, Violet opens the water bottle and downs the entire thing. She was obviously dehydrated. She reaches into the glove compartment for another bottle and starts to sip it.

"You know, you're going to be lucky if no one reports seeing you out drinking tonight to your coach. Are you *trying* to get yourself kicked off the squad?"

"No. I just needed a night out to forget about things."

Her answer makes me feel instantly guilty. "I can relate to that."

"Oh, can you? Because you seem to be doing just fine forgetting about *me*."

"That's not true, I just..." I don't finish my sentence because I'm not sure how much I want to say right now, especially with the state she's in.

"Did you eat anything tonight?" I ask, changing the subject quickly.

"No, why? Are you the food police, too? Is not eating dinner breaking another *rule*?"

I've never seen this sassy, defiant side of Violet before. The last time I saw her drunk was in Minneapolis, but we were both buzzed and having a good time. This time, she seems rather hell-bent on vexing me, and I find it more intriguing than off-putting.

"You need to eat something to soak up the alcohol you drank or you'll have a wicked hangover," I say. It comes out sounding more like a command than a request.

"You're pretty used to getting your way, aren't you?" she asks as she

eyes me from the passenger seat.

Instead of giving her an answer, I stop at a local Italian late-night deli and get her a sandwich. I figure between the sandwich and the water, she should be feeling less inebriated soon. And despite her initial protests, she *is* hungry.

At least the second half of the ride back to my apartment is more docile than the first.

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CHAPTER 14 - VIOLET



The ride to Stone's apartment is mostly a blur. Things get a little more coherent after the bottle of water and the sandwich, even though I resisted them both at first.

Mostly, I just didn't want to give Stone the satisfaction of being able to tell me what to do. But in truth, I really *did* need some food and water to combat all the alcohol I took in at the bar. By the time we get to his building, I'm still feeling a little buzzed, but I've pretty much sobered up.

I'm honestly relieved to have left the bar. Sara was right—it was time to go. I shouldn't have been there getting drunk anyways, and I'm going to feel terribly if we all wind up getting in trouble for it since it was my idea.

The whole point of going out to the bar was to take my mind off Stone, and yet there he came, swaggering in like he owned the place. He seems to do that a lot.

I *want* to believe that he's telling me the truth about not sleeping with Heather two nights ago, but I'm just not sure what to think of it. To my knowledge, Stone hasn't given me any reason to think he would lie to me. But then again, he also hasn't given me any reason to believe I can trust him either. So far, the pattern has been that he has sex with me and then drops off the face of the planet and doesn't talk to me for a few days—not exactly a *trust building* scenario.

When he tells me he's taking me back to his apartment, I know I *should* insist that he drive me to my own place instead, but I'm much too curious to see what type of fancy place he lives in to argue the point.

“Isn't this breaking another rule by taking me home with you?” I ask as he pulls his Lamborghini into its parking spot in the covered private garage at

his apartment building.

“Not sure,” Stone says casually. “I mean, I’m technically helping keep you safe since you’re inebriated and can’t drive.”

“Yeah, and you’re *technically* breaking a rule by bringing me back to your apartment instead of just taking me home like you told Sara you would,” I say with a snort of laughter as I step out of the car. I’m still a little less inhibited than normal, but my coordination seems normal, so there’s that.

“Eh, it’s all semantics. Plus I offered to take you home.”

“True.”

Stone surprises me by taking my hand as we walk into the building. I’m not sure if he’s trying to steady me, and doesn’t trust that I’ve sobered up enough to walk on my own, or if he’s trying to make it look more like we’re a couple to his doorman so as not to garner any unwanted attention.

I wonder how much attention it raised when Heather was here the other night. I do still believe that she was here. How else would she be able to describe his apartment in detail to the small group of followers who hang on her every word?

When we get into the elevator, I almost feel like I’m in a movie—the kind of movie with doormen and penthouse apartments that look like billionaires live in them... *oh wait.* It’s becoming increasingly apparent that Stone *does* live a life worthy of the movies. I wonder for a moment which part I play in his cast of characters.

I am still pondering whether it was a good idea for me to let him bring me here or not when he puts his key in the lock and opens the door to his penthouse. As soon as I step inside, I am nothing short of *awestruck*.

“Holy shit, this place is *amazing!*” I exclaim, unable to contain my shock at how absolutely stunning Stone’s apartment is.

If Heather actually *was* inside this place, she definitely didn’t do it justice with her description. Hell, I’ve never been anywhere as fancy and luxurious as this high-rise apartment.

I walk further inside and start to take a look around. As long as I’m here, I might as well take it all in.

Considering the small-town life where both Stone and I originated, this is seriously impressive.

It’s a lot to process at once. The ceilings are so tall that it looks like the penthouse takes up the top two floors of the building, and the windows looking out over the city stretch from the floor to the ceiling. It’s as if I’m

looking down on the entire city of Austin from the clouds.

Everything is modernized. When we step inside, the lights go on automatically. The decor is nothing like anything you would see back in Brook Downs; it's all black leather furniture and stainless steel appliances.

I know that Stone has a lot of money between his NFL salary and his billionaire status, which I think he attributes to some sort of investing. But I guess I've never really seen what *billionaire status* looks like up close.

For the first few moments, I just stand there trying to absorb all the luxury. At least my head isn't spinning now and I can see it all clearly.

Stone walks to the kitchen to get me more water, and this time I drink it without putting up a fuss. It feels much better to be nearing sobriety than completely drunk. Although the buzz is still definitely there.

"Why did you bring me here instead of taking me back to my apartment?" I ask again. "You could've just as easily sobered me up there."

"I brought you here to my place because I have something to prove, according to you," he answers with a slow grin.

"What do you mean?"

"Drink your water and then I'll show you."

I finish the glass he gave me and then ask for directions to the bathroom because I have to pee.

Even the bathroom is stunning. *Who knew that faucets came in gold?* I take my time in the bathroom, drying my hands on the white and fluffy monogrammed towels and smelling all the soaps as if I've just crashed some fancy resort. But when I open the door to come out, Stone is standing right there.

I was planning on exploring his place a bit more, but I have little time to do that before he takes my hand and leads me down the hallway toward his bedroom.

In the middle of the room is a giant four-poster bed—like *porn star* sized giant. You could fit five or six people on it easy. The red silk sheets look like molten lava, and I'm pretty sure the sprawling fireplace in the corner of the room is a working one. I have visions of grandeur of being curled up in that bed reading a book in front of the roaring fireplace. If my apartment looked like this, I would quite possibly never leave it.

I open my mouth to make a remark about how stunning this room is, but before any words can come out, Stone pushes his tongue *in*.

All at once, our tongues are wrapped around each other again, and I

suddenly feel entirely sober and alive. I want to enjoy every second of this. Now, if only I could convince my brain to let me.

“What are you doing?” I ask, trying to get the question out between our pressing lips.

Stone pulls his face away for a moment to look in my eyes as he answers. “Proving that all the shit you heard spewing from Heather’s mouth is lies.”

“I fail to see how seducing me in your bedroom proves anything other than that you’re always horny,” I giggle at my own clever retort.

But Stone’s eyes darken as if he wants to put me in my place—not in a mean, punitive sort of way, but in more of an exertion of sexual dominance that makes my head spin just thinking about it.

“*It proves,*” Stone says with a sultry tone, “that you are not like all the other girls to me, Violet. I’ve never slept with any other woman more than once.”

Well, I guess that rumor is true then.

“I’ve already had sex with you twice, and I intend to do it a third time—and a fourth, and fifth, and hell maybe a sixth and seventh time too, if you’re lucky.”

“If *I’m* lucky?” I ask, trying to sound coy but failing at stopping my thighs from shaking as I press them together in an excited anticipation at the thought of another sex-filled night with Stone.

He steps forward, pushing his whole body against me until I can feel that his cock is hard and ready. I reach for his pants, but he grabs me and lifts me up before I can get them undone. He carries me over to the bed, laying me down in what feels like a silky pool of luxury, and then takes off his own clothes for me.

I watch excitedly as each part of his muscular physique is revealed in the amber-lit room. It’s nearly impossible for me to keep still when his erect desire is freed from his pants. I find myself wanting to strip down naked as fast as I can, but Stone takes care of that, too. He peels my layers of clothing off as if he is unwrapping a present until finally, we are skin-to-skin.

I question this for only a moment, when my brain gives me a *here we go again* internal eye roll. But the temptation is much too great, and I want him *bad*.

Stone lays me back against the soft, satiny sheets on the bed and doesn’t hesitate before he moving between my thighs and putting my legs on his shoulders. He kisses his way to my belly button, teasing his way down,

playing with his prey like a lion. When he puts his mouth on my pussy I gasp as he makes love to me with his tongue. *He's fucking good.* He brings me to the edge, and pulls away just before I climax, kissing his way back up to my mouth. He gives me a cocky smirk and looks me in the eye before he fills me up once again.

He begins thrusting himself into my waiting body. I let out a moan that I swear could be heard throughout the city if the windows were open. The steady rhythm of his movement is slow and intentional, as if my body is a fine instrument that he's keeping in tune.

There is something different about sex with Stone this time—it's more intimate, more passionate. His lips never leave mine unless they are trailing down to kiss my collarbone or the top of my breasts. One of his hands tangles in my hair to bring my face to his while the other grips my hip as he digs into me. It's hard to imagine experiencing something like this *without* strong emotions involved, as I feel myself falling head over heels for him with every passing second.

To my sheer delight, he isn't kidding about spending the entire night *proving himself* to me. After the first orgasm, there's another. And after that, *yet another.* The night is filled with heady breaths and undulating bodies, and very little sleep. I can taste the sweet sweat on his lips as he works to pleasure me into the wee hours.

By early dawn, we are both physically spent and completely satiated, and I fall asleep in his arms. It's nice—laying on his chest and listening to his heartbeat as his breathing slows and we both drift off to sleep for a while. But in the morning, almost as soon as my eyes open, I worry that he's simply going to disappear again. Since I'm in his apartment this time, it's not like he can just get up and leave. Instead, he'll probably just usher me out under the guise of having work to do or training to get to.

But to my surprise, he doesn't.

In fact, as soon as Stone wakes up, he rolls over on top of me, swollen and throbbing and ready to go again. My heart races at the thought of it. And not only does he want me all over again, but he doesn't seem to want me to leave.

All throughout the entire morning, and almost into the afternoon, I enjoy a repeat performance of last night.

"Are you getting hungry?" he asks well into the day when I know I should probably be getting ready to leave. "I'm going to order us food."

“Don’t you want me to go home?” I ask, afraid of his answer. “Don’t you have practice today?”

“No, and I don’t think you do either. So, stay with me again tonight.”

I look into his eyes to make sure he’s serious. And when I can see he is, I feel my heart doing a little dance in triumph over my brain.

He wants me to stay.

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CHAPTER 15 - STONE



“Okay, I’ll see you later tonight at the game,” I say to Violet as I get ready to leave.

I give her a kiss before she gets out of my car. Giving her a ride to her apartment gave me plenty of time to think about what to say instead of a simple *goodbye* after just having spent the last thirty-six hours together. Somehow, all that I could still manage to come up with was a rendition of *see you later*. But at least this time I really *was* planning on seeing her later at tonight’s game.

She gives me a slightly raised brow because she’s probably thinking the same thing, but it’s quickly followed by a smile. We both know that we’ll see each other at the game tonight, and I think we’re both feeling pretty good about it. There’s no rushing off, no wondering whether there will be a call or text, only the promise of seeing each other again in a few hours. Everything that happened prior to bringing her back to my apartment is nothing but a faded memory at this point. And that’s okay since the best things happened *after* she came back home with me.

I head straight to pre-game warm-ups, wanting to get a little extra practice time in before the game. I’m amped-up and ready to play. After having barely slept at all, I’m feeling happy and excited, and that’s fueling my adrenaline in a positive way.

The past three days were by far the best three days of my life. Instead of being consumed by thoughts of Violet and worrying about what she was thinking and how she was feeling, I spent hours making love to her and *days* talking to her and soaking up what it would be like to be in her presence for an extended period of time. And to be honest, it was *wonderful*.

Violet is not only beautiful, but also smart and funny and she radiates the kind of sweet, good vibes that make everyone around her feel at ease. Not to mention the fact that sex with her is *sensational*.

I'm feeling happier than I've felt in a very long time. And I'm starting to think that maybe things with Violet could actually work out. I'm not sure yet how to get around the NFL rules that govern us both, but since no one knows we've been together, I have some time to think about that one still.

At the very least, I've been able to convince her that I'm not a liar and that I haven't plowed the entire cheerleading squad, or Heather on Saturday.

That's a nice start.

It feels like we can at least start from a place that isn't defensive with each other now. Even though I'm still pretty fucking confused about things, I'm starting to realize that the feelings growing inside me for Violet are the *least* confusing of all. I might actually be starting to *more than like* her.

"Hey, ready to win this thing?" Eddie asks, running his fingers through his hair and shaking the water off like a wet dog.

"Aren't you supposed to shower *after* the game?" I tease.

"Eh, I like to feel fresh before getting ready to smash my opponents," he laughs.

Warm-ups go great because I finally have my head on straight, and I'm not obsessing over Violet. The cheer squad will be here soon, and I'll get to glance at her intermittently throughout the game. I feel like I have a renewed motivation to win—to show off in front of Violet as if she's going to be cheering just for me.

But when the squad arrives, I search through the faces of all the girls and don't see hers there. I give it a few minutes—*maybe she's in the bathroom or running late from the showers*. But as the minutes pass and the time starts edging closer to kickoff, I start to worry.

She *never* misses a game.

My mind starts to race with all of the things I can imagine might have happened to her, none of which are good. But before I can grab my phone to send her a text, Coach pushes us all onto the field and the game starts.

The cheer squad does their opening routine, but I can tell instantly that it's been modified. Violet isn't the only girl missing.

As soon as the game starts, my mind catapults into Violetland, and I can't concentrate on *anything*. I'm so worried about her that I can't even see straight.

I don't step into my throws, I abandon the pocket too fast, and I hold onto the ball too long rather than taking my check-downs. All novice mistakes that I've *never* made throughout my entire professional career. And yet here I am practically blowing the game.

The players are all confused, and the team is in disarray due to my shitty performance. No one can figure out what the hell I'm doing, and all of the coach's attempts to pull me back into the game are failing.

I'm blowing it—big time.

And even though I keep trying to enact damage control, at least enough to win the game, all I can think about again is Violet. I'm worried sick and entirely distracted. By the time the game wraps, we haven't just *lost*, we've been massacred. We lose by such a wide margin that it almost looks like I've thrown the game. Even Eddie is looking at me like I've sprouted a second head, and all the guys are stupefied and furious at my performance. None more so than Coach Rex, though.

He walks over to me after the game with a vein popping out so prominently on his forehead that it looks like it might actually explode.

I am fully expecting to have my head torn off.

"Stone," he says as he stands in front of me stone-faced. The rest of the team dissipates to go change and take showers, most likely wanting to save me from the embarrassing ass-chewing that I'm about to receive. "Be in my office first thing in the morning, eight o'clock sharp."

"What for?" I blurt out before realizing I should probably just nod and keep my mouth shut.

"A *meeting*," is all that Coach Rex says before he turns and leaves the locker room.

This is bad, *really* bad.

Usually, Coach Rex would just let me have it, but he is so visibly furious over the loss that he doesn't even say a word about it. A morning meeting means a consequence, a reprimand or punishment of some sort. And if his tone is any indication, then it's going to be a bad one.

I turn to grab my stuff, not even worrying about a shower until I find out where the hell Violet is and what's going on. But before I even reach my locker, the gossip is already flying back and forth across the locker room about a *situation* regarding some of the cheerleaders.

"Yeah, I heard they're suspended for two weeks," one of the guys says. "And on thin ice after that. You know Coach Margo; she doesn't tolerate that

kind of shit at all.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised she didn’t kick them off the squad,” another guy says.

“What are they talking about?” I ask Eddie as he walks past me to grab a towel. I swear that guy showers more than anyone else I know.

He makes a wincing face, which instantly causes alarm.

“I think they’re talking about the girls who were at the bar the other night,” he says. “Rumor has it that one of the other girls who was there ratted them out. Someone sent Coach Margo pictures of the girls getting wasted and everything. They’re in a *whole* lot of trouble.”

Shit.

That explains why Violet wasn’t at the game tonight and why there were a few girls missing. Her career with the Wranglers is already in jeopardy, and it doesn’t even have to do with the fact that she’s sleeping with me. This is *bad*.

“It doesn’t seem right that the girls get suspended for going out drinking, but we don’t,” I say angry at the hypocrisy of it all.

“*Shh!*” Eddie says as he looks around us to make sure that Coach hasn’t slipped back into the locker room. “Are you trying to get us in trouble too?”

“No, it’s just that—”

“Honestly, you should be thankful no one ratted you out.”

“I didn’t do any drinking the other night,” I say matter of fact.

“Okay, but it’s not like we don’t go out for drinks on multiple occasions throughout the season,” Eddie reminds me quietly. “And before tonight, I was never worried about it because you’re the *golden child* of the Wranglers, the star quarterback who can do no wrong. But after tonight’s performance, I don’t think it would take much for Coach to put you on suspension either. What even was that tonight?”

“I don’t know,” I say as I shake my head. “I was just really *off* tonight.”

“Off?” Eddie says. I can tell that he’s trying to go easy on me because we’re friends, but he’s not happy about tonight’s loss either. “Most of the guys on the team are ready to *off* your head. We were on a winning streak and tonight blew it. It didn’t just blow it a little either—it blew it up with a cataclysmic, volcanic eruption-sized loss. It was *embarrassing*, man.”

“Yeah, I know, and I’m really sorry,” I apologize feeling truly bad about it. It wasn’t like I intentionally *tried* to play a shit game tonight. I just couldn’t stop worrying about Violet. And it turns out I was right to be

worried about her because she's in a whole lot of hot water.

"We don't need you to be sorry, Stone. We need you to keep your head in the game." Eddie gives me a hearty pat on the shoulder and leaves to go get dressed.

He's right, and I need to be on my best behavior from now on or I'm going to be on the chopping block. Being the star of the team only gives you protection if you *remain* the star of the team. And with performances like tonight's game, that is now tossed into question.

But for right now, I'm still here and Violet is the one suspended. I need to make sure she's okay.

I grab my stuff from my locker, head to my car, and pull out my phone to call her on my drive back to my apartment.

She doesn't pick up, so I send a text instead.

Hey, I heard what happened. Are you alright? Call me.

I glance down at the phone repeatedly while I'm driving to see if the bouncing text bubbles appear, but they don't. She might be in the shower or sleeping off our rousing few nights of nonstop sex. I give it until I get to my apartment before texting her again. When there is still no response after I've gotten home and poured myself a *non-regulation* drink, I try to call her again.

Still no answer.

I shower, make something to eat, and pour myself another drink.

Violet, I need to know if you're okay. I know you're suspended, and I was worried when I didn't see you at the game. Answer me please.

I set my phone down on the coffee table so I stop looking at it and resort to pacing the perimeter of my apartment instead.

I have to meet with the coach tomorrow for what is bound to be a shitshow, Violet is suspended for at least two weeks, and she isn't answering any of my messages.

When my phone dings, I practically dive on it. I'm disappointed when I see it's only Eddie.

Good luck tomorrow. You're gonna need it.

I roll my eyes at his text and toss my phone back onto the couch without answering it. I know Eddie means well, but the only person I want to hear from right now is Violet. And if it takes her much longer to answer me, I might very well pop a vein in my own forehead before Coach Rex does.

Just when I was starting to think that things were going great, and that Violet and I might have a chance at making things work, this had to go and

happen.

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CHAPTER 16 - VIOLET



I know that something is wrong as soon as I walk into the locker room before the pre-game routine run-through. Coach Margo is already standing in front of my locker waiting for me, and Sara and the other girls who went out to the bar with me are already sitting on the benches hanging their heads.

A pit forms instantly inside my stomach.

“A word?” Coach Margo says as she glares at me over the bridge of her nose.

I step into her office and try not to panic. I’m just about to ask her what this is all about when she closes the door and turns around to yell at me.

“Honestly, Violet, what could you have *possibly* been thinking? I’d be more inclined to expect this sort of behavior from some of your *teammates*,” she says, implying Heather and her posse without naming anyone specifically. “But you? I thought I could expect more from you. I *at least* thought I could count on you to follow the rules.”

“I’m sorry, Coach, but I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” I say. It’s the truth. I know I’ve broken the rules, but I don’t know *which* rule she’s calling me out on. And I definitely don’t want to offer up anything that she doesn’t yet know about. I have a feeling I’m in enough trouble as it is.

Instead of answering me, she holds up her cell phone and shows me a video. I stare at my drunken face on her screen as I watch myself try to keep from sliding off my stool at the bar. I am *mortified* and humiliated at my behavior, but I’m also still on cloud nine because of everything that’s transpired between me and Stone. Honestly, I’d put the whole scene at the bar behind me and locked it away in the *to be forgotten about* compartment of

my brain.

But apparently someone else didn't want me to be able to forget about my transgression at all.

"Who took that video?" I ask.

"Really? That's the first question you want to ask me?" Coach scowls. "I'd rethink that if I were you."

I stand there, not really knowing what to say, and feeling that anything I try to ask or explain is just going to dig me into a deeper hole.

"Violet, you're a good cheerleader and a *great* dancer. You're an asset to the squad and for the most part, up until now at least, you're low drama, which is a definite plus. I'd hate to see you ruin your career with the Wranglers. But you're one of the faces of the team, and I can't have you going around town drunk as a skunk and acting like a fool. You have blatantly broken the rules, and I will *not* tolerate it."

I nod my head, my cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and wait to hear what my punishment is going to be. I also feel a growing sense of wanting to ring the neck of whoever sent that video to the coach. I'm betting it was Heather or one of her little minions. This is probably payback for the fall she took the other day at practice while I was distracted.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself?" she asks as she puts both hands on her hips and glares at me. "You've stained the image of the squad and lived up to the stereotype of bimbo cheerleaders that we work so hard to tear down. And you've caused all of your teammates to have to all put in extra hours to learn a modified routine."

"What do you mean? What modified routine?"

"You're suspended from the squad for a *minimum* of two weeks."

That's when it hits me how truly terribly I've fucked up. *Two weeks without pay?* And just when I was feeling as if my heart was soaring because I would get to see Stone at the game tonight after the wonderful time we had together. This is all a hot mess now.

"I'm sorry," I say, apologizing too little too late. "I had a terrible day, and I was just going to go out for one drink to take some of the stress off, but I got carried away. I know I broke the rules, but everyone is human, right? Maybe you can just let me off with a warning this time? And Sara and the other girls, too?"

"Oh, *they* aren't suspended," she says to my surprise. "I have no doubt they were all there, breaking the rules right alongside you, which is why I've

given them a stern talking to as well. But the only video proof I have is of *you*. The other girls are going to sit out of tonight's game and then they're back in. Not you."

I can't argue that, and actually I'm glad that Sara and the other girls aren't getting a suspension. I was the only one who got sloppy drunk.

"A suspension goes on your permanent record with the team," Coach Margo reminds me. "And when your suspension is over, you'll still be on probation. One wrong move, anything that even *looks* like you might be close to breaking another rule, and you're off the team permanently. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," I answer, feeling like complete shit about the whole thing.

"Okay, now that the formal part is over, let's get the real issue out in the open."

"What real issue?"

"You don't need to talk to me about it if you don't want to, Violet," she says. "But I will tell you that you would not be the *first* girl on the team to have ever gotten involved with a playboy who's notorious for breaking young women's hearts"

I feel all the color drain out of my face when I realize that she must have heard rumors about me and Stone. At this point, I literally want to crawl under a rock and die. And when she directly mentions him by name, I absolutely freeze.

"This isn't the first time I've watched Stone Clark destroy a bright young woman's career with the squad," she says. "And I'm sure it won't be the last. But whatever he's told you to try and convince you that he's *serious* about you... well, it just isn't true."

I shift uncomfortably on my feet as she continues. This is perhaps the most awkward and upsetting conversation of my life.

I stand there in shock as she lists off the names of a handful of girls who either quit the squad or were let go because of their involvement with Stone.

"All of those girls had a lot of serious potential. Some of them were excellent dancers like you. Others were on the course to becoming cheer coaches themselves. They all came here to the Wranglers full of goals and ambitions and dreams, and the sad part is that every single one of them could have achieved all that they set out to do—if it hadn't been for Stone Clark. By the time he was done with them, they were all just broken little lambs. And their careers in cheer were over."

I am horrified at the thought of Stone being responsible for ruining someone's life. Maybe Coach Margo is wrong. Maybe she just doesn't know all the details. Maybe there's more to it than what seems to be on the surface.

But it's almost as if she can tell that I'm trying to mentally cut him some slack in these accusations.

"What you do here matters," she says while I'm still trying to process everything I've just heard. "Being kicked off an NFL cheer squad follows you forever. This isn't college sports. If you're removed from the team, you'll never do anything in the world of cheer or dance again."

I am angry and embarrassed beyond measure. I'm mad at myself for my lapse in judgment, and at whoever took that video and sent it to the coach. I want to be mad at Stone, too, but I'm not sure what to be mad at him about yet. I just don't know what to think.

All I know is that I need to fix this and do better. I need this job on the squad. I need the money to help finish my path toward becoming a veterinarian, and I like being able to cheer and dance. Being on the Wranglers' cheer squad is an opportunity that most girls don't get, and I am not going to blow it.

"I am really, *really* sorry," I apologize again. "I can assure you that whatever I've been *dealing with* is over, and I won't let anyone ruin my chances of success here. My performance is going to be exemplary from here on out. You have my word."

Coach Margo looks at me skeptically. "I'll believe it when I see it," she says sternly. "But I hope that you're right."

She's a firm coach but also a fair one. I don't want to let her, my squad, or myself down.

Coach Margo hands me a written reprimand to sign and gives me a discharge paper for a two-week suspension. I take the paper and start to walk out of her office. I can hear the players starting to filter in to get ready for their pre-game warm-ups, and I know that Stone will likely be here any minute.

I don't want to see him. I don't want to have to explain what happened and how I'm now suspended. He needs to focus on the game, and I need to focus on making better choices.

"I'll see you back here in two weeks," Coach calls to me as I leave. "And I look forward to seeing you live up to the expectations you've set for yourself."

I don't say anything. I just give her a nod and walk quickly out to my car, avoiding everyone that is starting to come into the locker rooms.

I see Eddie, the running back who is also one of Stone's closest friends on the team, and I quicken my pace toward my car. Just as my Civic comes into sight, I catch a glimpse of a black Lamborghini pulling into the lot and hightail it out of the lot before Stone sees me.

I am not willing to ruin my life for Stone Clark, I tell myself as I drive in shame back toward the dorms. I've already embarrassed myself in front of my squad, and I'm sure that the girls will be battling rumors about why I've gotten suspended back and forth like a badminton game. The best thing I can do at this point is keep my head down during my suspension, use the time to practice my jumps and the routine, and be ready to hold my head high and walk back onto the team in two weeks.

And what I *shouldn't* do is spend my time pining over Stone.

I'm sure he'll be looking for me tonight and wondering why I'm not at the game. Word will reach him eventually. Part of me wants to text him and spill a million feelings, but I know it would just muddy the waters.

When I get back to the dorms, I head straight to my room and take off my cheer outfit to hang in the closet for a two-week retirement.

"I will *not* talk to, obsess over, or let myself be distracted by Stone Clark anymore," I say as I pause to look in the mirror and take my ponytail down.

But even as I tell myself that, all I can do is picture his face and know that I am willing to do just about anything for Stone, and just about anything to be with him.

I sigh, grab my half-read book, and sit down on my bed beside the window. It's the beginning of December, and even though there is no snow in sight yet, I can *smell* the crisp chill in the air when I crack the window open a little. I glance at the clock and see that soon it will be time for kickoff. Sadly, I open my book to try and take my mind off of things for tonight.

Since there wasn't a whole lot of sleep the past few days with Stone, I make it only a couple of pages before my eyes close.

When I wake up it's already dark. I reach for my phone to check the time and see if the game's over yet. I'm sure that if it is, someone will have posted on social media who won, and probably even all the highlights of the game, which undoubtably will include a collection of great plays by Stone, like always.

But the first thing I see on my phone is a missed call from Stone.

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CHAPTER 17 - STONE



I spend the *entire* night trying to call and text Violet, but she never answers me. The last few messages I send sound increasingly worried, until I finally flat-out tell her that I'm worried about her and that she needs to answer me so I don't think the worst.

In my mind, she could be out drunk as hell somewhere and needing my help. She could very well be reeling from her suspension and have decided to drown her sorrows by making the same mistake twice. I *need* to know that she's okay, and I'm going crazy playing through worst case scenarios in my mind.

Violet, if you don't answer me, I'm going to come looking for you.

Finally, after an entire night of pacing a divot into my wood flooring, she answers me. Although her long awaited response leaves a lot to be desired.

I'm fine.

I'm fine? That's seriously all she's going to say?

I've been reaching out to her all fucking night, and she responds with the bare minimum to keep me from coming to track her down and cause a scene.

I know she's not fine. She's been *suspended*. Her career with the Wranglers cheer team is in jeopardy. *Obviously*, she isn't okay. And a two-word text isn't going to appease me.

Everything was so good. It was going so well and now it has all come crashing down. And this time, it's not even because of anything I've done. I don't want it to end like this. I worked so hard to prove to her that I wasn't the big bad wolf, the promiscuous playboy everyone told her I was. For the first time in my life, I wanted to show someone I was a better man. Hell, I actually wanted to *be* a better man. And this is what I get for trying?

My time with Violet was too good for me to just let go. I know there are a million reasons we *shouldn't* be together but that doesn't stop me from wanting to be with her almost more than I can stand.

I pace around some more, trying to think of what I can possibly do to rectify the situation or at least to get Violet to talk to me. *God, I wish she would just talk to me.*

She *has* to know how I feel at this point—how could she not?

I know I can't go anywhere near the gated cheerleaders' dormitory without getting both of us in a whole lot more trouble than we're already in.

I thought that hearing from her and being assured that she was at least not out making another stupid decision, would ease my frustrations for the night. But now I am even more filled with nerves as I simmer and grow more and more frustrated. *Why is she shutting me out like this?*

I try to call again, but it goes straight to her voicemail. She's *purposefully* ignoring me. And after the days we just spent together, how could she not know that she matters to me? How could she not know how this would make me feel?

Once again, I have a sleepless night, tossing and turning in my bed until my sheets are twisted around my ankles, all because of Violet Dawson. She is driving me *crazy*.

The next morning, I head to my meeting with the coach in a foul mood. When I walk through the doors, I see that it's not just Coach Rex but also the assistant coach and the *team owner* of the Wranglers. This is definitely not good.

"Have a seat, Stone," Coach Rex says as he motions toward a chair sitting empty across from his desk. All the rest of them are standing.

Back when I was studying finance in college, I read somewhere that in meetings of grave importance, the people who were about to levy the damage always stood while their targeted *issues* were asked to take a seat. None of this bodes well for me. I haven't even seen the team owner at a meeting *ever*. He usually only shows up to meet the head coaches when there's some big victory to celebrate or a PR event to show his face at.

The fact that he's here now means trouble.

"Your performance at last night's game was *despicable*," Coach Rex starts. His voice is even and cool, and so calm that it's almost scary. "You've been carrying this team to a win for so long now that everyone has come to expect it of you. But what none of us *ever* expect is for you to make a fool

out of the Wranglers. Last night, we didn't look like a professional football team. Hell, we didn't even look like a college team."

"We looked like backyard shmucks," the owner interjects.

The assistant coach just stands there shaking his head and rubbing his brow with his thumb.

"Everyone in this room knows you're good," the owner says. "*Really* good. But no matter how good you are, you are *not* irreplaceable."

Ouch.

That message is received loud and clear. It's not even just a warning—it's a *threat*. He's basically saying *perform or you're out*. My name doesn't matter. My money doesn't matter. Even my record doesn't matter. What matters is that I win games. If I don't perform, I get cut. Just as easily as any other player or any other *cheerleader*. The goal is to win, and as soon as you're not helping the team win, you become a liability.

"Your pitiful performance last night will not be tolerated again," Coach Rex says with finality.

There's no asking about what was going on with me or why I botched the game. No one here cares because it doesn't matter. I'm a grown-ass man, and I fucked up. At least I don't need to try and come up with some fabricated explanation to explain away my behavior or the fact that I've been completely checked out ever since the Minneapolis trip.

"The point of this meeting is to tell you that you need to get your head in the game and not humiliate the entire city of Austin," the owner of the Wranglers growls at me before storming out of Coach's office to catch a flight somewhere.

Point taken.

I leave the meeting after a few more words of scolding from my two coaches, feeling even more infuriated with myself than they do. *This isn't who I am.*

I'm a successful billionaire. I'm the star quarterback who scores touchdowns and wins games for my team. I'm a grown man who people look up to and want to be like. I'm practically a God in the NFL world. But lately I've been acting like some newbie rookie, and it's tanking my credibility.

I've let myself get distracted by something as ridiculous as *feelings*. Feelings come and go, and I vowed from very early on that I wasn't going to get sucked in by warm and fuzzy emotions or the illusion of *love*. If I let myself fall for shit like that, I'll wind up exactly like my father—living

paycheck to paycheck, arguing with my wife, and stuck in a perpetual state of mediocrity.

I've worked too hard for too long to do better than that—*be* better than that. I know better than to let myself get caught up in emotions. And if I need even more proof, Violet is providing it by her complete lack of responsiveness. I just spent two days making love to her and now she won't even speak to me. Here I am worrying myself sick over her, and she answers with the bare minimum. *What the hell is that about?*

I get it—she's in trouble. But shit, so am I. Yet here I was up all night worrying over her and for what? She's obviously too wrapped up in her own drama to care about mine. If I get reprimanded or kicked off the team, she won't bat an eye. And *that* is what I get for following my feelings.

I'm done.

I'm going to lock away all of my emotions for a very, *very* long time so I can concentrate on the one person who is always looking out for me—*myself*. I refuse to jeopardize my career in the NFL for a girl. And now that the coaches and even the Wranglers' owner is watching to make sure I don't fuck anything else up, I need to shoot straight for a while.

Besides, it's best for Violet this way too. She deserves someone who knows how to be in love, and I sure as hell don't. I can't even make sense of my own emotions half the time, so I definitely shouldn't be trusted with anyone else's. Even if I *have* started to develop feelings for her and find myself caring about someone for the first time in my life, I will never be the kind of man a woman like Violet Dawson needs.

She needs stability—not just the financial kind that I could give her but the emotional kind that she can always depend on. And obviously, she doesn't think I'm capable of that. If she did, then she wouldn't be ignoring my calls when something bad has happened and she needs a shoulder to cry on or someone to be in her corner. And she's not wrong—I suck at emotions.

But even as I head to morning practice, preparing to meet the disgruntled looks and snide remarks from some of my teammates after last night's loss, I realize that *this* time, I can't just say I'm going to move on from Violet. I actually need to make myself do it. I need to throw everything I've got back into football and keep myself so busy with training and other distractions that I don't even have time to think about her. I'll just pack my schedule so full that I'll be too busy to notice her absence or worry about how she's doing. And I'll train so hard that I'll be too exhausted to toss and turn at night.

Maybe I'll even be too tired to dream.

That's the plan. Focus on football, not on Violet.

I run the words through my head over and over again until it becomes a mantra. Ever since Minneapolis, I haven't been able to go a single day without thinking about her, but this time is going to be different. This time, I'm going to treat it like a playbook, making myself go through the necessary motions to win the game without distractions. And the game is to forget about Violet and get myself back to the top.

I head into the locker rooms and grab my gear.

This time, when I hit the field, I am focused on nothing but my performance. The assistant coach is running the practice today, while Coach Rex sits back and watches. He is overseeing the team, looking for weaknesses and strengths and keeping an eagle's eye locked on me. After last night's epic loss, we can't afford another. He's likely going to come up with a few new plays for us to go over, and this is my chance to show him that it's game on. No more *head in the clouds Clark*. The next team we face is going to have the unfortunate pleasure of being on the receiving end of my comeback. I need to show Coach Rex, the team's owner, and *myself* that I won't let anything shake my goals.

When the cheer squad comes onto the other side of the field to run drills, I don't even glance in their direction. It helps knowing Violet isn't with them. Maybe that's all I need—a *break* from having her in my field of vision every day.

"There's my boy," Coach says with a pat on my shoulder as we wrap up our practice session.

I want to roll my eyes at him, since I am definitely not a *boy* anymore, and I haven't been for the greater part of a few decades, but I refrain simply because I'm glad he isn't pissed-off at me anymore.

"Now we just need to keep you moving like *that* from here on out, okay?"

"You got it, Coach," I nod.

I hit the showers and am pleased to find that the other guys are no longer upset with me either.

"Everyone has an off day," Eddie says as he smacks a towel at my back. "Yours was just *gloriously* off."

A few of the other players howl in laughter, and I know I deserve it. It's all in good fun now, as opposed to how seriously mad they were last night.

A good practice showed everyone that I'm *back*, and now all I have to do

is stay in the zone.

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CHAPTER 18 - VIOLET



I've been busting my ass for two weeks straight. Being suspended from the squad hasn't meant a break in cheer practice. Instead of going to the team's official practices, I've just been conditioning on my own. Sara has been helping me with jumps and learning the new modified routine, which Coach Margot decided to keep. And the rest of the time, I've been working out and practicing cheer formations nonstop.

It's been good for me in more ways than one. On top of being in the best physical shape of my life and having all of the squad's routines committed to memory, it's also giving me no time to think about Stone.

By the end of each night, I am so exhausted from all my hard work that I practically fall into my bed. My eyes close almost instantly, and I drift off into a dreamless slumber. I haven't had a single problem falling asleep throughout the course of the entire two weeks. That means I haven't had any chance to think about how close Stone Clark came to ruining my life.

And plus, all of the physical exertion is great stress relief too. At the beginning of my suspension, I found my thoughts wandering off about all those passionate nights with Stone. The physical angst and frustration were making my skin crawl. But all of the conditioning and practice has helped to ease that.

And after two weeks of nothing but focus and hard work, I am finally back in the coach's good graces. Things are back on track.

"Good to see that you listened to what I told you," Coach Margo says after I finish the first practice since returning from my two-week suspension. "You've been working, and it looks good, and I can see the difference. I just hope it stays."

“It will,” I say confidently. “You don’t need to worry about me making any more foolish mistakes or breaking any more rules. I’m not going to let anything, or *anyone*, mess up my chances here.”

“Good,” Coach smiles. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Practice is a bit uneasy since some of the girls whisper behind my back, and Heather utilizes every second that the coach isn’t looking to glare at me. But I try to ignore it all. I’m here to prove that I belong and to get paid so that I can further my goals. I couldn’t care less about what Heather Jamie and her gaggle of goosenecking girls think of me.

The first game since my return from suspension is happening tomorrow, and I am more than ready for it. Aside from a mild bout of nausea that has plagued me the last few days—I’m feeling great being able to return to the field with the rest of the squad.

But pre-game practices the following day don’t go quite as well. I need to leave the field not once but *twice* in the middle of practice to go hurl my guts out in the bathroom. Apparently, the nausea that I was chalking up to nerves, must be some sort of stomach bug or something.

I try to return to practice but need to sit down halfway through because I start feeling lightheaded and sick to my stomach again. Coach Margo asks me to sit out for the rest of the practice and talk to her privately afterward.

Great. She probably thinks that I’m not even trying, or that I went out drinking again and am hungover. I’ve been working so hard that I’m not about to let a little flu virus get me kicked off the team. There’s a game tonight, and I *need* to cheer at it. I can’t afford to miss any more games, or I’ll be in breach of my contract and won’t get my full pay this season.

I sit and wait for the coach to come, and when she does, she looks more concerned than angry with me.

“How long have you been feeling sick for?” she asks.

I try to think about how many days it’s been. To be fair, I haven’t really been paying attention to it until today when I actually threw up.

“I guess off and on for about four or five days,” I answer. “Maybe longer. I haven’t really been counting.”

“And have you been throwing up the whole time?”

“No, not until today. The nausea has been growing increasingly worse. I guess whatever kind of bug this is, it’s finally coming to a head right in time for tonight’s game,” I frown.

“What if it’s not a *bug* at all?” she asks.

“Coach Margo, I *swear*, I haven’t had a single sip of alcohol since that night prior to my suspension. I wouldn’t break the rules again, I promise. I’m not hungover.”

“I don’t think you’re hungover, Violet,” she says, looking as if there is some sort of secret that I’m not privy to. “You know, it’s been about a month or so since you were going through some *personal turmoil*.”

“Personal turmoil?” I ask. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Do I really need to spell it out for you?”

I stop and think for a moment, putting together the days and timespan in my head. About a month ago was when we were stuck in Minneapolis, the night I spent at the hotel with Stone.

Coach Margo doesn’t wait for me to answer before she simply continues.

“Based on the timeline of when you started feeling ill, the fact that it has been coming and going and lingering for days without any other symptoms, and the fact that it has gotten worse to the point of actually vomiting,” she pauses and inhales a deep breath. “I think it might be prudent for you to take a *pregnancy test*.”

I am instantly mortified.

“What? No! Jesus, I’m not pregnant. I would *know* if I was pregnant, and besides, it’s impossible.”

“Oh? So, you haven’t had sex with anyone within the last month?”

I feel weird talking to Coach Margo about my sex life.

“Well... I have,” I say as I lower my eyes to my feet and hope to God she doesn’t ask with *who*. “But I can assure you that I am most certainly *not* pregnant. I’m on the pill. I’ve been on birth control since I was eighteen and haven’t missed a day. I would never be *that* stupid.”

“I’m not accusing you of being stupid, Violet. On the contrary, I think you are highly intelligent, and I’ve heard that you want to become a veterinarian, which is very admirable. But being that you *are* intelligent, then I am sure you know that birth control is not a hundred percent effective. The chances are *small*, yet there’s always still a chance.”

I don’t even want to think about what she’s suggesting. Not only is it *highly* unlikely, but it also throws me instantly into a panic.

“I’m not pregnant,” I repeat defiantly. “And I’ll be fine to cheer in tonight’s game.”

She shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

I have a couple hours before I need to be back here for the game, and I

don't want to chance running into Stone. So, I decide to run a few errands and then take a hot shower before getting ready for the game. I'm excited to be back on the squad and put on a good show for tonight's crowd.

I stop at the store to get a snack and a new water bottle, and just as I am about to head to the checkout, the thought in the back of my head starts to grow.

Maybe Coach Margo has a point. I mean, even if there is like *zero* chance that I'm pregnant, wouldn't it be better to rule it out right now so I don't have any lingering doubt in my mind? My stomach does a few flips just thinking about it.

But, since I'm a responsible, level-headed, and pragmatic woman, I grab a pregnancy test off the shelf and set it down on the conveyer belt with the rest of my purchases.

"Awe, wow," the cashier smiles at me through her typical high school *rite of passage* braces. "Good luck! I hope you get the result you want."

I don't even know what she's saying for a moment until I look down and see that she's putting the pregnancy test in the bag.

I give her an awkward smile and briefly think about what a weird ass thing that is to say. And as soon as I get back to my dorm, I don't hesitate to pull the test out of the box, hide it under my shirt, and head to the bathrooms to take the test and be reassured that I am *not* pregnant.

"Hey!" Sara says as she intercepts me on the way there. "Are you feeling better now? You seemed pretty sick at practice earlier. And what did Coach Margo want to talk to you about? Are you in trouble again?"

"No," I say with a smile to reassure her that everything is fine, even though I'm feeling a sense of impending doom at the moment. "And yeah, I'm feeling fine now. Just excited about being able to get back to cheering in games tonight."

Sara smiles and walks off to go and get ready. I'm running out of time; I need to get ready for the game. The sooner I get this done, the sooner I can forget about it and focus on doing a great job tonight.

I know Stone will be at the game, *obviously*, and it'll be impossible for me *not* to look at the star quarterback. I get nervous butterflies in my stomach when I think about seeing him again, but I promised myself I wasn't going to pay him any attention or lose my focus, and I intend to keep that promise.

I get into the bathroom and close the stall door, just in time to hear Heather and her minions come in. They're standing in front of the mirrors

putting mascara on because apparently they're all too cool to put their makeup on alone in their rooms. They need to swarm together like a bunch of busybody bees.

"You should have *seen* the way he was staring at me during cheer practice," Heather says, obviously boasting about her incessant need for attention from the guys. *I wonder which one it is this time.* Ten bucks says she's slept with at least fifty percent of the football team by now.

"He really must have a thing for you," one of the other girls says. It's clear in her voice that she's just trying to butter Heather up and gain her favor. Isn't that a thing in cults—the need to constantly praise the leader?

I try to quietly open the pregnancy test strip and hold it steady while I pee. Heather doesn't care one bit who else is in the bathroom stalls listening to her. The more the merrier as far as her gossip reach is concerned.

"Oh, he *does*," Heather gloats. "And even if he doesn't admit it to anyone else, Stone simply *can't* get enough of me."

I freeze, sitting there after hearing his name and setting the test on top of the toilet paper holder to wait the allotted five minutes for it to show a reading. The thought of whether or not she's sleeping with Stone shouldn't bother me in the least. After all, I'm not allowing myself to even think about him, so what does it matter who he has in his bed? It's not as if we're *together* or even talking to each other for that matter. I haven't seen nor heard from him in over two weeks now. I'm sure he's been able to bed at least one or two cheerleaders in that amount of time.

But something about the way Heather *brags* about Stone, as if she has him on a leash and he belongs to her, just sets me off. For all I know, she's just making it up and Stone hasn't even looked in her direction. Still, it's annoying how she thinks she can lie all the time and expect everyone around her to just eat it up as truth. I wish there was a way to put Heather Jamie in her place.

My phone vibrates in my hand as the five-minute timer goes off. I hadn't even been paying attention since I'd been sitting there listening to Heather rambling on and getting lost in my head again. But when I glance over to look at the test window, expecting to find nothing at all there, I see the one thing in the world that would outshine Heather's gossip—*I'm pregnant.*

CHAPTER 19 - STONE



Two weeks of busting my ass and being completely on point, and I absolutely *dominate* the Sunday night game.

This is probably my best game yet. I score eight touchdowns, setting my new record, and play flawlessly during the entire game. The key to it all is making sure I never glance around for Violet even once during the entire game. Not one single time. I can't lose my focus again, and I can't miss Violet if I never allow myself to see her or think about her.

Every time the team has a few minutes' break, and every time the cheerleading squad does a routine, I look the other way. I chug water, talk to the other players, and even pan the crowd and wave at a few fans. But I never let myself look over to where the cheerleaders are standing.

For only a second in the middle of halftime, I wonder whether Violet will feel the same way she felt the last time she thought I was ignoring her, and I feel a pang of guilt in my chest. But then I remember that *she* is the one who didn't take my calls and ignored all of my messages when she got suspended. And so, the moment passes, and I get back to playing a great game.

"Fantastic job tonight!" Coach Rex says as he comes over to congratulate me with a pat on the back. "Glad to see you're back with the team now instead of off in your own head. Meet me in my office tomorrow morning."

I nod and the coach walks off to show some good sportsmanship to the coach of the losing team. At least I know that this time, the morning meeting will be a congratulatory one instead of a punitive one. Maybe I'll even get a bonus, or a car thrown my way. Not that I need any of those things when I can buy myself whatever I want already. But it's nice to be recognized.

"Now we're talking!" Eddie laughs as he comes over and tosses his arm

over my shoulder. “Dude, you were on *fire* tonight! Maybe you need to get called to the principal’s office more often.”

I laugh and shake my head. “No thanks, I’m good with staying out of trouble for a while. Besides, I think I’m on the coach’s good side again.”

“Thank God,” he laughs. “Coach Rex gets grumpy with everyone when he’s pissed at you.”

We all head to the locker room to change. I hear a few female voices shouting congratulations from behind us and a few of the guys turn around to go and cash in on congratulatory kisses and hugs from the pretty girls. I, however, *do not*. I don’t even turn around. I think that I hear Heather call my name and that just makes me pick up the pace to the lockers.

“Hey, a bunch of us are going out to celebrate tonight, you wanna come?” Eddie asks as he pulls a t-shirt over his head.

“Nah, I’m done going to bars until after the season’s over. I can read between the lines with Coach, and I know I’m on probation still. I can’t break any more rules.”

“We aren’t going to the bar, just out to dinner. Gotta grab some fuel to replenish all that spent energy from the game.”

I think it over for a second and then accept. “What the hell,” I grin. “I’m starving.”

When we get to the restaurant, I tell the guys how Coach Rex wants to see me in his office again in the morning, likely to give me another pat on the back for an awesome game.

“Hey, did you guys hear about that cheerleader who quit the squad right before the game tonight? It was like less than an hour before they went out on the field, too,” one of the guys says. “I heard that Coach Margo was so flustered she had to ask Heather to start the routine so that she could take a minute to compose herself.”

“No way,” someone else says. “Who leaves their team hanging like that?”

“Violet Dawson, I think it was,” he says.

No way.

I’ve been so good about not letting a single thought about Violet creep into my head, but the universe seems hell-bent on making sure I can’t ignore her forever.

“Apparently, she moved back home to whatever small town she came from *permanently*. Guess she didn’t need the money anymore.”

I feel as if my face is being twisted through one of those playdough

spaghetti makers as I try to keep my expression even. I feel a rush of confusion and worry, but I also remind myself that I am *not* giving in to thoughts about her. Still, I can't help but wonder what's going on with her. It's not like her at all to have quit the team. And I don't think that she would throw away her career with the Wranglers' squad just to get away from seeing *me*. That's too egocentric to even consider.

But she did her time with her two-week suspension, and she was back in good standing, so why the hell would she just drop out and quit?

"Do you know anything about this?" Eddie whispers as he leans over to me.

"Why would *I* know why Violet Dawson quit the squad?" I say, trying to feign ignorance.

Eddie gives me his signature look when he is trying to call someone's bluff—one raised eyebrow and his lips puckered together with his chin stuck out.

"Come on, Stone. I'm your closest friend here. Plus, I have *eyes*. It wasn't hard to tell you had a *thing* for Violet. I was honestly just waiting for you to tell me about it. I enjoy hearing about your conquests and escapades, and I would have liked to hear about that one—small-town, innocent girl with big brown eyes. You were holding out on me, man"

I guess I didn't do as good a job of hiding my distractions as I thought I did. Regardless, it doesn't matter now. And it hasn't mattered for the past two weeks. I'm over Violet.

"No, I don't know anything about it, and to tell you the truth—*I don't care*," I say as I pick up another piece of steak with my fork and pop it into my mouth. "Cheerleaders are a pain in the ass."

The other guys pick up on that last remark.

"Maybe," one guy says. "But with asses like theirs, I'll suck it up and deal with a little drama just to get some action."

The guys sitting next to him start to hoot and holler. I just roll my eyes and pretend to be above such things now. I'll let my reputation as the team playboy carry me for a while longer. I don't want to think about a girl now—*any* girl.

The conversation shifts to other things like the next game and picks for next season. It's nice to have a night out with the guys. Normally, I don't. Aside from Eddie and a few random occasions of grabbing a beer here and there, I don't really socialize with the guys much outside of practices and

games. Hell, we are *always* at practice or on the road or prepping for a home game, so the free time that I do have, I usually take to myself back at my apartment. Of course, there's the occasional trip back home to Brook Downs to visit my parents and best friend, but those have been happening less and less. So, this is a refreshing change and exactly what I needed tonight.

In the back of my mind, thoughts and questions about why Violet quit the team roll around, but I try to ignore them and just hang with the guys. After all, Violet is an adult. If she wanted to quit the team, then that's her decision. Maybe she just got tired of dealing with Heather's little clique and decided she'd had enough. Violet was never like any of those other girls anyway, and it's possible that she just got sick of not fitting in.

It almost makes me think of what Del used to say when we were teenagers about how his little sister was just *too sensitive* to live in the real world. If that's the case, then it's best for everyone that she went home. And I still stand by my statement—cheerleaders *are* a pain in the ass.

But as the evening goes on, and more stories get told, some of the cheerleaders start to filter into the restaurant to grab a bite to eat too. A few of them come to sit with us, and everyone talks about what a great game it was and what a great night it's been. Pretty soon, the restaurant is filled with mostly Wranglers. Everyone is talking and laughing and having a genuinely good time. It's the kind of scene that would make anyone feel as if the excitement and camaraderie are contagious. But somehow, despite being surrounded by all of these people and the restaurant practically bursting at the seams, the city of Austin starts to feel very cold and empty.

Literally, I could not be in a more boisterous and congenial place right now, with everyone singing my praises and wanting to hang out longer. I *know* that pushing Violet out of my head is what led to such a great game on my part and what put me back on track. And whatever Violet decided to do, I'm sure that her reasons behind it have nothing to do with me. She probably just realized that cheering for the Wranglers wasn't what she really wanted to do. Maybe she decided to speed track her focus on being a vet. And I'm pretty sure if there had been any sort of family emergency that caused her to quit and move back home, I would have heard about it from Del.

So, I know I need to stop thinking about it and let it go.

But even after my success with trying to purge her from my system these past two weeks, I find that I can't stop thinking about her now.

There's something about knowing that Violet isn't in Austin anymore that

makes the city feel starkly cold, even for the middle of December. And even though I'm smiling and talking to everyone around me, I feel entirely *alone*.

When everyone heads home, I go back to my apartment and sit down on the couch with my phone in my lap. I *could* call her or send her a message, but what's the point? She doesn't want to talk to me. She didn't even tell me she was leaving.

I stare out at the city below and watch the flickering lights. It's about to snow—I could practically taste it in the air during the game tonight. After a while of sitting there, staring at the unsleeping city, I simply stand up and go to bed.

When I lay down, the sheets are cold, and I pull an extra blanket up around me. I've been sleeping like a champ the past couple of weeks after training so hard, but now I'm back to being restless and unable to get comfortable.

I find myself laying there and reliving the nights that Violet was in my bed. I can almost *feel* her body curled up beside me and her head resting on my chest as I wrapped my arm around her. For a second, I can almost feel warmth emanating from beside me as if she's actually there.

But then, when I shake the fantasy away and close my eyes to go to sleep, I feel not only ridiculous for letting myself get caught up in thoughts of her again, but also colder than I've ever been laying in this bed.

It's not the lack of a woman there that's chilling, it's the lack of *Violet*. It didn't really hit me until I heard that she wasn't in the city anymore. I guess I thought that even though I was making a point *not* to look at her, that I still *knew* that she was there and that made it okay.

Now, she is gone. And I feel as if a part of me is gone too.

CHAPTER 20 - VIOLET



*B*rook Downs doesn't feel like home anymore. I don't even know where home *is* anymore. It feels like I've screwed everything up.

I sit alone on the floor of my apartment, sobbing off and on as I pull a blanket around me. I don't even know what to do with myself.

How can this be happening? And what the hell am I supposed to do now?

When I called Coach Margo and quit the squad, less than an hour before the start of the game, she didn't even sound angry. She just sounded *sad*.

I've never heard Coach Margo sound sad before. I didn't even know that she could *do* sad. I tried, as I choked back tears, to tell her that I just needed to leave the team for personal reasons and that I needed to go home and be with family for a while. I apologized for leaving her in a pinch right before the game and told her that I really did want to fulfill my goals there but that I needed to deal with some family stuff now instead.

I fully expected her to grill me about what was going on and why I was leaving, and to convince me to come to the game or at least come in person to meet with her. But she didn't do any of that. Instead, she told me that she was sorry to see another *broken little lamb* go.

As soon as I hung up the phone, I started to cry.

I packed my stuff and got in my car and drove home within the hour, barely seeing the road through my tears as I went.

Sara texted me a million times, and she still is. I haven't answered a single one of them yet.

I called my parents to tell them I wasn't going to be cheering in tonight's game just so that they didn't freak out when they saw on television that I was missing. I told them something had come up and that I would explain it all to

them in a day or two.

When my phone rang as soon as I got back to my apartment in Brook Downs, I foolishly thought it might be Stone, even though I hadn't heard from him in weeks. My heart skipped a little when I went to look at the call. But it was only my brother, who was also probably wondering why I wasn't at the game.

For tonight, I just want to be left alone and not answer anyone.

I'm going to sit right here in the middle of my apartment floor and try to figure out how in the hell I'm going to piece my life together now. Starting with considering all of my options.

I can start back at my vet tech position any time. That will at least give me some income, although not anywhere *near* as much money as my contract with the Wranglers' cheer squad paid. Or, I could go back to school and finish my degree. I could take out a few student loans and maybe work part time to help cover things. Getting my degree and becoming a veterinarian *was* my goal after all. Now, I just won't have cheer getting in the way of it.

But the only problem with trying to convince myself that this can still all work out, is that I really *wanted* to finish cheerleading. I want to cheer and dance, and I wanted to do at least another year or two with the Wranglers.

But I can't cheer pregnant.

I made the instantaneous decision back in Austin as soon as I left the bathrooms and ran back to my dormitory with the positive pregnancy test in my pocket, that it would be much better to quit the team and leave before anyone found out what happened and pinned me as *just another knocked-up cheerleader*.

I don't want to have that reputation follow me, and I don't want to be questioned about who the father is. This sort of thing could ruin Stone's career. And despite the way Coach Margo made it sound as if Stone was the big, bad wolf preying on the innocent girls, I can't bring myself not to care about him.

I left the Wranglers in possibly the most humiliating way possible, but the entire world doesn't need to know about it.

Of course, there is always the *other* option, but I also knocked that one out of the realm of possibilities as soon as I thought about it. There's no way I'm not going to have this baby. Stone may not be a perfect man, but I do still think he's a good man. And I can't accept the idea of not having his baby. Our child will be *beautiful*.

That being said, Stone never has to be a part of this child's life. He doesn't even know about the pregnancy, and he doesn't need to know about it. Telling him will only cause him to feel obligated and act out of a feeling of trapped responsibility. I know he doesn't want a family or to settle down. He's rich, hot, single, and a football star—he definitely doesn't want to be saddled with a kid. Besides, he hasn't even talked to me in weeks. *That's partially my fault, but still.*

It's better if I just keep all of this to myself and deal with it alone. In a day or so, I'll tell my parents. I'm worried that they'll be disappointed in me, but I know that at the very least they won't abandon me and will still be there for support. Brook Downs is exactly where I need to be right now while I figure out how to handle all of this.

But as I sit on my apartment floor, looking out the window at the tree branches blowing in the wind and feeling the chill in the air, I feel as if I left my heart back in Austin.

This doesn't feel like *home* anymore because I know that Stone isn't here. Right now, he's probably out celebrating the game. I saw on social media that the Wranglers won. I even saw a few pics of Stone scoring touchdowns. I saw a few pics of Heather leading the cheerleading routine, too. I'm sure that it won't take long before she's back in his pants again, especially with me removed from the picture.

I wrestle with my conscience over not telling Stone that the baby I am now carrying inside of me is his. But it's better that he doesn't know. I've already caused him enough trouble, and he's caused me enough trouble too. There may have been red-hot feelings between us, but it was bound to be a concoction for trouble. Stone and I may be from the same hometown, but he belongs in an entirely different world than I do.

I wrap my blanket tighter around my shoulders and stand up to go to the bed. When I lay down, I think about how it felt to lay in the four-poster bed in Stone's room. It was the epitome of luxury, and I didn't realize just how wonderful it all felt until I knew I wasn't going to experience that again. The worst part is knowing that I won't be experiencing *Stone* again either.

Even though I was avoiding him at all costs, just *knowing* he was there made it seem like we weren't completely over. Although I suppose that's a ridiculous thing to say since we were never really officially together to begin with. But now *everything* feels over—my cheer career, my chance to be with Stone, and maybe even my life in accordance to how I had it all planned out.

Sure, I wanted kids *someday*, but not yet.

It's all just too much to take in.

I spend all of the next day fighting waves of nausea, getting unpacked and settled back into my apartment at home, and thinking about how I'm going to break this news to my family. I decide to call up my brother because he always has a good head on his shoulders. I thought that I did too, but lately my judgment seems to be taking some liberties.

"Hey, Vi!" he says cheerily over the phone. "I heard you're home for a bit, everything okay? I saw that you didn't cheer at the last game."

"Everything is... fine," I try not to hesitate with the last word but it's hard not to. I want to tell my brother the truth, which is that things are a terrible mess right now, but I don't want to get into it over the phone.

"Do you and Beth and the kids want to come to Mom and Dad's for dinner tomorrow night?"

"Are you inviting us on their behalf?" he asks, sounding confused.

"Well, not really. I'm planning on going over there tomorrow night for dinner and to talk to them about some stuff, and I was just hoping you would be there too."

"Uh oh, this sounds like you need backup," he says teasingly. "Please tell me you didn't buy some fancy car out of your budget or adopt an Indonesian kid off a website."

"Okay, that last one came to you a little too easily," I chuckle.

"You'd be surprised—people do it," he says. "But yeah sure, Beth and I can come. Are you sure you don't want to tell me about whatever it is beforehand?"

"Nah, it's not that big a deal. It can wait until tomorrow," I lie. It is a big deal. It's the *hugest* deal ever.

"How is Stone doing?" he asks out of nowhere.

"What? Why would you ask me that?"

"Just because you guys were both in Austin together, and I haven't talked to him since Thanksgiving. I thought maybe since you're both at games together you might have at least said hello."

I jumped to conclusions for no reason. It was a completely innocent question on my brother's part.

"Uh, I'm not sure," I answer honestly. "I haven't talked to him in a while. We've both been really busy."

"I'm sure. Looks like the Wranglers had a great game on Sunday night

though. I watched some of the highlight reels that were posted to social media. Too bad you weren't cheering at that game instead of the one they lost."

"Yeah, I just wasn't feeling well. Stomach was a bit off." At least it's not a lie. It's just not the whole, entire truth.

"Well, there's always the next game," Del says cheerily before we set a time for tomorrow and then hang up.

After I talk to my brother, I go ahead and answer the texts I'd been avoiding from Sara. I feel bad because she was super worried, and she *is* my friend. She must have sent me at least a dozen messages asking if I'm okay and why I quit the team. At least it's good to know that Coach Margo hasn't told any of them the real reason I left.

I tell Sara I'm fine, and that I just needed to go home to take care of some personal family business. All of these things I keep telling people aren't *technically* lies, but it sure doesn't feel like I'm telling the truth either. I hate not being completely honest.

As much as I'm dreading telling my parents about this over tomorrow night's dinner, I'm hoping it's cathartic and that I can then get past the *holy fuck what am I going to do* stage and try to figure out an actual plan. Babies need care and *money*, and even though I know that Stone's a billionaire, he doesn't even know I'm pregnant, so I sure as hell am not going to try and squeeze him for money. I'll be fine.

For the rest of the day, I read, stay off social media, and get some groceries while wearing a baseball cap and keeping a low profile. This little town isn't so bad. Granted, it's no Austin. And it still doesn't feel like home because I've already discovered that sometimes home can be a *person* and not necessarily a place.

I still can't believe how much my life is going to change here shortly. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to raise a child here on my own.

God, what am I even thinking.

At night is when it always hits me the hardest—that feeling of an aching, empty loneliness that can't be filled by anyone other than Stone. Hopefully, as time passes and I don't see him for a while, it will get easier to not think about him at all.

But at the current moment, he pervades my every thought, even my dreams.

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CHAPTER 21 - STONE



When I walk into Coach Rex's office in the morning, I am expecting a good meeting with him. Things with Violet might be uncertain right now, but at least my standing with the Wranglers is top tier after last night's game. I'm sure Coach has accolades to give and maybe even some sort of surprise bonus to brighten my morning. I welcome anything that will give me a reprieve from feeling shitty over Violet leaving.

"Come on in, Stone," he says when I knock on his office door.

That's not the best sign. Usually when Coach Rex is proud about something he calls us by our last names. He only uses our first names when he's got a beef with us about something. After last night's game, I don't know what he could possibly still be upset with about though.

"Have a seat," he says when I step inside.

I notice that the assistant coach is there too, and I start to get a feeling that this isn't the congratulatory meeting I thought it was going to be. Instead, it feels a bit like an ambush.

"Your performance last night was stellar," Coach Rex says to start. The assistant coach next to him just nods his head in agreement. "But that kind of performance isn't *above and beyond*. That's what we expect from you and that is what the team *requires*. That type of playing is what made you legendary, and it's what needs to continue to be your baseline. This is the level that you can and should be playing at all the time."

I look at him without a word because I already know all the stuff he's saying. The point is that he doesn't *need* to be saying it to me, especially not after last night's game. They're lucky to have me. Most teams have quarterbacks who have *never* played a game as good as the one I just played.

I should be getting a pat on the back, not a reminder that I need to stay in check.

“Going forward,” he finishes. “We will accept nothing less.”

“Nothing less? Nothing less than what?” I ask gruffly.

“Nothing less than the kind of game you played last night,” the assistant coach chimes in.

Honestly, I don’t know why that guy even gets paid the large salary that he does. He mostly just acts as a yes-man for Coach Rex.

“Don’t get defensive, Stone,” Coach says as he picks up on my changing demeanor. “We all want the same thing here—to win games.”

I shake my head and try to keep myself from blurting out the dozen or so things I want to say to him.

I don’t just want to *win games*. I mean sure, that’s a big part of it, but I also want to play well, feel good, and be treated with respect. This whole *disposable* approach doesn’t work for me. It’s entirely unmotivating and defeating.

“Look, I don’t play football for the money,” I say as I stand up and put my palm down on the top of his desk. “I don’t *need* this job. I play it because I love the sport—the salary is just the icing on the cake for me. But if I’m going to get treated like some—”

“You’re not being treated any better or worse than any other member of this team. And that is what you need to remember, Stone, that you are a *member* of this team—not the only one on it.”

As Coach Rex and his assistant pull out the new playbook to discuss some of the changes they’re going to be making for the next game, I only pretend to listen. Instead, I tune out and think about one of the *smart* choices I’ve made over the past years. I have wisely invested my money into new businesses that have thrived and turned record profits over the long haul. Thanks to my finance degree, I had the sense to invest what started out as a modest amount of money, accumulated with my increasing salary and more chances to invest, and all of it snowballed. The more I made, the more I invested, until billionaire status became the natural conclusion. I’ve got shares and am on the board of several highly profitable businesses that continue to make me richer even while I’m out here playing football. Thanks to that, I don’t even *need* the NFL paycheck. And that’s a *great* position to be in—especially right now.

I have dominated the field for more than twelve years, and I can’t *believe*

this is the treatment I'm receiving. It just goes to show that all of this time and energy I've invested doesn't mean anything to anyone else. They only care about the wins, not about me. It's not like I need to be coddled, *I don't*. But I also won't be taken for granted. If they think I'm so easily replaced, then maybe they should see what happens when I walk away.

"Stone, did you catch all of that?" the assistant coach asks.

I realize that even though I'm still standing up and looking at the playbook spread open on the top of the desk, I haven't been paying any attention at all.

"Yeah, got it," I say. "Anything else you want to discuss with me?"

Coach Rex shakes his head and juts out his chin. It's a habit he does when he's irritated but knows he's too out of line to confront me about why.

When I leave the office, all that I can think about is that this career—this *job*, has basically just cost me Violet. Essentially, I gave up being with Violet for this job, and in the end, that's all it is—just a job.

I stayed away from her, pushed thoughts of her out of my mind, and refused to even *look* at her, just so that we didn't break any of the NFL's rules again. *But what was the point of any of that?*

I had a chance at something good, but I chose the NFL over her, and this is what I got for it—*nothing*. What a fool I've been.

Practice that afternoon is *terrible*, and not because I'm distracted by thoughts of Violet. This time, I just don't have any motivation to be here. I find myself not even caring about the training, or the game, or the win. Sure, I don't want to let my team down, but in the end their allegiance lies with the Wranglers. And I'm just not sure that's where mine belongs anymore.

"What's going on with you?" Eddie asks as he pulls me aside.

Thankfully the coaches aren't here yet. This is a player-led practice while Coach Rex and the assistant coach work out a few kinks in the plays before joining us during the second half. Not that I care about impressing the coaches anymore, but I'm not *trying* to get slack for the team. They shouldn't have to suffer because of my lack of motivation. Maybe that's reason enough for me *not* to be here at all.

"Just because last night's game was epic doesn't mean you should slack off today," Eddie says with a frown.

"Trust me, I know. I've already heard that from Coach," I grumble.

"At this morning's meeting? I thought that was supposed to be giving you kudos for a great game."

“Yeah, so did I. Turns out they just want to ensure I don’t fuck things up again.”

“I mean, I can get where they’re coming from. They’re looking out for the team because that’s their job,” he says without taking sides.

“I know that,” I mumble under my breath as I walk away and punt the ball against the ground. “And maybe it’s time I start looking out for *me*.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Eddie calls after me.

But I don’t even turn around to answer him. I just keep walking until I walk right off the field, and I don’t stop until I reach the locker rooms to grab my stuff.

The coaches still aren’t here yet, but they’ll be here any minute, and I don’t want to deal with Coach Rex or his sidekick any more today. I need time to think.

I grab my bag and head to my car, not even bothering to remove my gear. Before I even reach my apartment, my phone rings with a call from Coach. I don’t answer it because I don’t give a fuck about being reprimanded for walking out of a practice. Not anymore.

When I walk in the door of my penthouse, I glance at a text from Eddie.

Hey, I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I told Coach you weren’t feeling well. Not sure if it’ll spare you from his wrath but I tried.

I turn my phone off and toss it face-down on top of the table. I appreciate my friend, but I just don’t care about any of this right now.

I pull off my gear on the way to the shower and toss it all onto the floor. The hot water feels cathartic as it washes over me, and I stand there for a few minutes with my eyes closed beneath the water. For the first time in possibly my entire life, I am at a crossroads about what to do.

I have always had everything planned out and always been able to *control* every facet of my life, and that’s how I liked it. But now I feel as if I’ve spent *years* trying to control things instead of letting my life play out. I’ve been afraid of what might happen if I allow myself to *feel* things and have avoided emotional connections my entire life. Instead, I’ve focused on amassing wealth, and my football career, and having sex without catching feelings. I thought that was what I wanted. I thought I was avoiding heartache and disappointment and a life of mediocrity by doing things that way. But it turns out I might have been walking into it head-first instead.

When I get out of the shower, I feel as if my life is spiraling out of control. On top of everything else, it’s only a few days away from Christmas,

and I need to make another trip home to Brook Downs to visit my parents. I really don't want to get into any family drama right now. I just don't have the energy to deal with my father's condescending tone. But it might not be the worst thing to get out of Austin and away from the Wranglers for a few days. A change of scenery and a change of perspective might help matters. Besides, I'll get to see Del and maybe bend his ear a bit about how Violet is doing and why she left.

I *want* to see her, but I know that I shouldn't. Violet and I aren't in a good place right now, and she obviously left the cheer squad for a reason. Showing up at her apartment door in Brook Downs after we haven't spoken in weeks, would be a terrible idea. I know that.

After I get dressed, and pour a *double* scotch on the rocks, I sit down to call my parents.

"Stone!" my mother says with an exhausted enthusiasm.

Her job as a manager at one of the local hotels in Brook Downs sometimes makes for a long day. I've seen both her and my dad practically crawl into bed with sheer exhaustion at the end of several long days in a row. Again, it's been something I've tried to avoid my entire life—the daily grind. Thankfully, my fortune renders me immune from that fate now.

"I'm just calling to make sure you're still expecting me for Christmas," I say.

"Of course," she gushes. "Your father and I are both very excited to see you and can't wait for you to come home."

We talk for a few more minutes, catching up on the day to day. She tells me how my father is, and I pretend that I'm not still angry with him for the argument he started over Thanksgiving. She's always just trying to keep the peace, and at the moment, peace sounds pretty damn appealing to me.

When she asks how things are going with me, I vacuum all of the emotion out of my answer and tell her things are fine without much elaboration.

After our call, I text Del and give him a heads-up that I'll be in town again. He responds back within a minute or two but it's much less zealous than he usually is when I tell him that I'm making a trip back.

I wonder if his dry response has anything to do with Violet. I want to ask him—my fingers are itching to type the words. *I need to know what's going on.*

But I know it's better that I don't get involved. So, I down the rest of my scotch instead.

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CHAPTER 22 - VIOLET



It's four days until Christmas and instead of feeling merry, I feel as if all of my nerves have been set on fire.

I take a deep breath as I walk into my parents' house. Del and Beth and the kids are already here. At least I know that my brother will be here as a shoulder to cry on if need be. Tonight, I'm going to tell my family I'm pregnant.

I've gone over it again and again in my head, deliberated about whether I should wait or not, and each and every time I come to the same conclusion. Since I've already decided to keep the baby, there isn't any reason to put off telling them. I'm going to need their help and support, *especially* since I don't plan on telling Stone. I'm going to be all alone, with only my parents and brother to lean on.

As supportive and caring as my parents have always been, I'm worried about telling them this.

I'm worried that they'll think less of me for finding myself in this position. Granted, I *was* on the pill, but I still made the choice to have sex and so the possibility was always still there. I'm worried that they'll look at me with pity and tell me that now I have to let go of any dreams or goals I had so that I can raise my child. I'm not ready to let go of the things I want to do in life—I want to be able to have this baby *and* still become a vet.

But most of all, I'm worried they are going to ask me who the father is. *Obviously*, they're going to ask me that question, and I don't want to answer it. I don't want to ruin Del's friendship with Stone. That would only hurt both of them. And my brother is protective enough to likely want to ring the neck of whoever knocked me up.

I give both of my parents a hug, followed by Del and Beth, and then sit down for a bit to play with the kids. Maybe I need to just give them all the benefit of the doubt. Maybe it won't be so bad.

I wait until we're all gathered around the dinner table because the kids have their own small table to eat at and are busy watching a show on Beth's tablet. Breaking this news over dinner is also a good idea because there's food and drink and distraction at the table, lessening the intense focus that will undoubtedly be on me once I let the cat out of the bag.

Now, I just need to figure out how to *start*.

"Red or white?" my father asks as he walks around the table pouring wine into everyone's glass.

"None for me tonight, thank you," I smile. What should have been a small gesture turns into an immediately suspicious moment. It makes me realize that I have probably *never* refused wine at my parents' house before.

"No wine?" my mother asks. "Are you not allowed to drink over the holiday break?"

I exhale deeply, without having even taken the first bite of my mother's home cooking and come out with it.

"I'm not actually *on* break," I say. "I quit the cheer squad."

My mother holds her wine glass to her lips as if she is frozen before even taking a sip, and my father's jaw drops open. Beth looks over at Del as if my brother is supposed to do something about this, and the mood around the table suddenly feels awkward and uncomfortable.

"Why?" my brother asks, as if in response to his wife's glance. "I thought you loved being part of that squad. Weren't you planning on cheering for another couple of years before finishing your degree?"

"Yes, I *was*, but the situation has changed."

"What situation?" my father looks at me confused.

It feels like all of the air is being choked out of the room. But it's too late to put this whole conversation in reverse. Besides, I asked everyone to have dinner together tonight so that I could break the news to them. There's no chickening out now.

"I'm *pregnant*."

Beth lets out a small, involuntary gasp and my father chokes on the piece of salad that he just put into his mouth. I can tell by the looks on both of my parents' faces that they are both trying to stay calm and emanate a supportive vibe. But I can also tell that they are concerned. Beth nudges Del in the arm,

but this time, he's speechless.

"Who's the father?"

I knew that would be among the first questions my father would ask.

"It's not important," I say, realizing that answer isn't going to be glossed over.

"Like hell it's not," he says.

My father rarely curses so this is a notable exception. He is obviously feeling pretty emotional and likely overprotective as well.

"Whoever the father is, he needs to be responsible for his part in this."

"I'm not going to name who the father is," I say, refusing to rat Stone out. "So, I hope you can simply trust me that it's better this way. It's better for everyone if I handle this myself and don't involve him."

"Are you okay?" my mom asks with worry lacing her voice.

"Yes, Mom, everything's fine. He's not a horrible person or anything and everything was consensual. It's just better if I do this on my own."

"So, you've already decided that you're going to keep the baby then?"

"Yes, without a doubt. And I'm not willing to give up on the rest of my life either. Well, aside from cheering with the Wranglers," I explain. "I obviously can't do *that* while I'm pregnant. But I still intend to finish college and become a veterinarian. I'm going to have and raise this baby on my own, and I hope that you can all be supportive of that."

"You're never truly on your own," my mother says as she gets up to walk around to the other side of the table and give me a hug. "You know that no matter what, your dad and I are always here for you, Violet."

My father nods and after a few more tearful reassurances that they will be here through anything with me, I feel a wave of emotions wash over me.

"Motherhood is definitely a challenge," Beth chimes in. "But it's a rewarding one. You'll be exhausted almost all of the time, but I have no doubt you'll find a way to balance being a mom while still achieving all of your goals."

I smile at her and then look over at my brother, who hasn't said anything this entire time. I almost feel as if he's looking right through me, and it's unnerving. There's no way that he could know the baby's father is his best friend. But for some reason, perhaps my own guilt, it *feels* like he already knows.

I take a few bites of food while I listen to my parents talk over some of the smaller logistics of the matter as if they are already jumping onboard to

help. My mother talks about a local obstetrician with a great reputation, and my father says something about changing around the budget in order to accommodate for the incoming additional expenses that will arise.

It all starts to fade into a blur of conversation as I get lost inside my head. It all feels very *real* now.

I start to feel uncomfortably warm and then nauseous again, but this time I think it's not the pregnancy—it's the overwhelming feeling that suddenly my entire life is changing, and I hadn't planned on it.

"I'm going to get some air," I say as I stand up from the table. I can feel the tears stinging at my eyes, threatening to expose just how close I am to falling off an emotional cliff right now.

"But you barely ate anything," my mom says gently. "You're eating for two now."

I ignore her well-meaning attempt to care for me because I feel as if my heart is breaking in two, and I walk out of the dining room, out of the house, and onto the back patio.

It's cold outside, and frost is dusting the ground for the first time this season. I stand there on the back porch, wrapping my arms around myself and shivering not from the cold but for the influx of emotions that crash over me. The cold doesn't bother me now, it feels like an escape. For a few moments, I just look up at the sky and try to breathe. I can't think about everything all at once.

Suddenly, the tears come. And *boy* do they come in full force.

"Hey," my brother says as he walks up behind me and wraps a blanket around my shoulders.

"Thanks," I snifle as I sink into the blanket that is still warm from the heat of the house. "You didn't need to come out and check on me, I'm fine."

"*Obviously*," he says sarcastically.

For a few minutes, we stand next to each other in silence.

"Look, I don't have to be a rocket scientist to know who this baby's father is," Del finally says. "I saw the way you were looking at Stone on Thanksgiving. And more so, I saw the way *Stone looked at you*."

I turn to look at him in surprise, especially at that last part.

"You need to tell him, Vi," he says. "You need to tell Stone the truth."

I shake my head instantly. "I can't."

"Why not? I get that this was unexpected, and maybe not something that either of you planned to have happen right now," he says empathetically. Del

sometimes gets that *teacher tone* as if he's acting more as a counselor than a brother. "But you are both equally as responsible for what *did* happen, and this baby belongs to *both* of you. Trust me, from a father's perspective, even if I hadn't wanted a kid, I would still want to know about it. You can't keep this from him, Violet."

"I've thought about it over and over and over," I say as I start to break into tears again. "I've picked up the phone, held it in my hand, and tried to press the call button a million times, and *I just can't*. Stone doesn't want me, and he definitely doesn't want a baby. He wants his freedom. A pregnancy will ruin his life. He's worked so hard to get where he is in his career and jumping into an unexpected fatherhood would destroy everything he's built. How unfair is that for me to take it from him?"

"You're not *taking* something from him Violet—the two of you made this baby *together*. Stone is a better man than you're giving him credit for. I know it's difficult, but you *need* to tell him."

"I'm not going to tell him, and *you* can't tell him either," I urge. "Please Del, you have to promise me that you won't say a thing to anyone about this. You have to *swear* that you will keep this a secret between the two of us."

He looks reluctant, and I realize that I'm putting him a tough position, asking him to essentially lie to his best friend, or at least keep something hidden from him. But I can't chance Stone finding out. Things are already bad enough and that would make everything even *worse*.

"Come on, Violet. Stone is a *billionaire* for goodness' sake. You need his help. You don't even have a job right now, and it would literally be *nothing* for him to financially support you and the baby for the rest of your lives."

"I'll be fine," I say stubbornly. "I can do this alone. I don't need Stone's help."

No sooner do I say that than my emotions take over, and I find myself bursting into an involuntary fit of tears. Without a word or a moment of hesitation, my brother wraps his arms around me, and I cry on his shoulder.

I *will* do this alone. I can, and I have to. But I thought that coming home and having my parents and my brother show me support would make me feel *stronger* but instead, it's making me feel even worse. It makes me feel as if I'm truly leaving Stone behind, and Del's insistence that I tell him makes me have a moment of weakness. *Am I really doing the right thing, or am I being entirely selfish?*

When I head to bed that night, I once again talk myself into the fact that I

can do this on my own, and that I am *not* going to destroy Stone's career over an unexpected pregnancy. It would be even worse for me and for our child if Stone felt obligated to be a part of our lives and wound up resenting us for it.

So, I resolve to hold firm in my decision to keep this a secret.

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CHAPTER 23 - STONE



The drive home to Brook Downs this time is a pensive one.

Normally, I spend the whole time thinking about my next game and counting down the minutes until I can get back in the car and head back to Austin. But this time, I'm actually looking forward to some time away from things, time at a slower pace to think about where I want to steer the ship driving the course of my life.

"Something wrong, son?" my father asks as I sit at the kitchen table with him over coffee the morning after I arrive home.

Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and there is a strange sense of nostalgia and uncertainty hanging in the air.

I hesitate, and give an almost imperceptible nod.

In truth, I've been mulling over my future with the NFL ever since I got back home. It's been a good run, but maybe it's finally time to retire. I had always planned on seeing it out fully and letting my career run its natural course—playing until my performance started to slow. But now I just don't know if I want to keep going.

I still love the game, and I likely always will, but I don't love the way things are going down. I've built up my financial portfolio for a reason, and that reason is so that I can quit when it's time to quit. Sure, I thought that was a ways off, but things change. Maybe Violet Dawson was the catalyst for a change that was imminent anyway.

It isn't her fault that Coach Rex and the others showed me their true colors. It's been an underlying truth all along—I was only ever important to them as long as I kept winning games and pouring my heart out for the team. It's been a good ride, and I've enjoyed every minute of it, but the fun's over.

It's not fun when I'm being treated like a machine to score wins instead of a person who deserves respect for their talent and commitment.

And if there is one thing that I've learned from all this, it's that I am no better or more important than any other player on the team or any cheerleader on the squad. I was a fool to think I ever was and am embarrassed at my hubris.

Maybe my dad had a point somewhere in his jaded argument after all.

Regardless, I don't have to keep playing football for the money. I don't *need* a cent from them anymore. The NFL can have it. The only thing that makes me waver is the fact that I have tacked my identity to being a football star for so long that I don't really know who I am anymore without it.

I'm almost ready to just tell my father that I'm fine, but something about the way I feel this time is different.

"You boys ready to do a little last-minute Christmas shopping?" my mother interjects before I say anything else in response to my father.

"Honestly, Jeanie, haven't we spent enough money already?" my father groans. "Christmas is only two days away. If we don't have it purchased by now, I don't think we need it."

"Nonsense," she says, giving him a disapproving frown. "It's a family tradition to go Christmas shopping together, and Stone just got back home."

My father grumbles something under his breath about it being a *family tradition to go broke each year*, but he eventually concedes to make my mother happy. Before I know what's happening, I'm getting dragged along to some of the quaint, independently-owned shops in Brook Downs.

The town is strung with twinkling lights that glimmer even in the daytime, and most of the storefronts have wreaths on them. There is a sort of charm here that Austin lacks—a sort of off-grid eclecticism that feels warm and inviting around the holiday time.

I wander in and out of shops with my mother, feeling more like I'm back in high school days than a thirty-four-year-old man. Yet, I carry her shopping bags and stare out the shop windows as I try to ignore my father tabulating the expenditures under his breath.

My parents are *always* on a budget, and every year I tell them not to buy me a gift. But my mother is one of those people who feels the need to present everyone she knows with something wrapped up for the holiday, even if it puts her in the red. I humor her, not because I think it's wise, but because I know it makes her happy.

After an exhausting day of shopping, we finally return home for dinner.

My father heads straight for the liquor cabinet, and honestly, I don't blame him because I'm ready for a drink myself. It's not the shopping that has mentally worn me out, but my dilemma with what to do after the holiday break that has me all tangled up in knots.

I take a gin and tonic from my father, and my mother tosses a rosemary sprig in each of our short glasses.

"It's festive," she smiles.

"It looks like a tree spit in my drink," my father retorts.

I can't help but laugh because sometimes their argumentative banter is the stuff of standup comedy.

Over dinner, my mom talks about things that are going on at the hotel while my dad tells me about the new staircase he's going to be building at the house—one with a carved banister that he designed himself. I'm trying to listen, but I keep getting lost inside my own head. When my dad jostles me out of my thoughts, I can only imagine that my eyes were starting to glaze over.

"Something's wrong with you," he says. Surprisingly, he sounds more concerned than accusatory this time. "You've been sullen and aloof all day, and normally you're just *aloof*."

I chuckle at his dig—if only my father knew how much I *do* take things to heart, then maybe he wouldn't act this way toward me all the time.

Still, as much as I feel like I can't relate to him most of the time, I am feeling much more alone and confused than I have since I was a kid—alone enough to actually open up to my parents about what's going on with my career now.

When I tell them about my meetings with the coaches and the team owner, my father asks me a few questions to make sure *I'm* not the problem. He always likes to start with the basic presumption that I have somehow fucked things up or made a bad choice. If he knew I broke the rules with Violet, it only would have fueled that fire. But I don't tell him about any of that, just how the coaches treated me after my stellar game.

"Look, I know that quitting the NFL will be nothing more than another disappointment," I say as I look straight at my father. "I'm nothing but a long string of disappointments at this point, I'm sure. But I do have enough money not to *have to* play football anymore, and everyone deserves to feel valued at their job no matter what their salary is."

I wait for my father to get angry and lecture me about how terribly shallow and hypocritical it is to complain when I'm getting paid a lucrative salary in a high-profile career. But surprisingly, he doesn't say a word. He stays entirely silent while my mother tries to assure me that they will be *proud of me no matter what I do*. I know that's complete and utter bullshit, but it's a nice sentiment all the same.

"Well?" I ask my father.

"Well, what?"

"Aren't you going to say anything?" I ask.

Surely, he's waiting to give me the big *I told you so* speech or ramble on about the evils of highly paid sports figures. But all he does is shake his head and continue on with eating his dinner.

"You know that we both love you," my mother says. "And we don't need to worry about how you'll get by thanks to the fortune you've amassed."

Still, no word comes out of my father's mouth. He doesn't say a single thing.

In the middle of the awkward dinner moment, my cell phone goes off.

Crap. I thought I'd silenced it, but maybe a part of me wanted to keep the alerts on, just on the off chance that Violet might reach out.

But instead of Violet, it's her brother. Del is probably calling to see if we can get together while I'm here in town. I don't get to spend that much time with my best friend anymore, but I'm not so sure that's a good idea, especially considering how I've treated Violet. The guilt alone is eating at me.

I let the call go to voicemail and get ready to shoot him a quick message to tell him I'm too busy with family stuff this trip and will have to catch up with him next time. But I pause to reconsider before hitting send.

I *do* really need to get out of this house and take a break from my parents for a bit. Even though my father isn't picking a fight with me like he usually does, it's almost even *more* uncomfortable when he acts like this. My mom is trying to be supportive but is mostly just coming across sounding like she doesn't know what to say.

I wanted to use this time in Brook Downs to try and get my head on straight before going back to Austin, and so far, it's not working. Maybe a heart-to-heart with my best friend would help.

But then I remind myself that's stupidest idea ever. I can't have a heart-to-heart with Del about what's twisting my emotions up in knots—not when

the thing that's responsible for it is his own sister. And I sure as hell can't tell him about what happened between me and Violet.

I go ahead and hit send to let him know I can't talk right now, blaming it on *family obligations*. Then, I get up and reach for my jacket.

"I'm going out to meet with Del for a bit," I lie to my parents. I just need to get out of the house and be alone, maybe grab a drink at the local bar and wash some of my worries away. I'm on holiday break, not even in Austin or around anyone on the team, and honestly the *no-drinking rule* is the least of my fucking worries right now.

"That will be nice to spend some time with your friend," my mother smiles at me. "Tell Del we say hello and that he's welcome here any time. He can even bring his sister along, too; I haven't seen Violet in *years*."

I grab my keys and leave, driving down the one-lane road toward the nearest bar. I drive past the Dawson house and can see Violet's car in the driveway. Del's car is there too. It takes everything I have not to stop. That would be a terrible thing to do. My desire to see Violet is *almost* too strong to resist, but I force myself to keep driving. It's only two days until Christmas and creating family drama with not only my own family but my best friend's family as well, would be a horrible move on my part.

So, since I can't really talk to my parents, and I *definitely* can't talk to my best friend, the only option I'm left with is to drown my sorrows and maybe bend the ear of a captive audience with the bar staff at the local pub.

After I drive past the Dawsons', I can't seem to shake the image of Violet sitting inside by a fully lit Christmas tree, a glass of wine in her hand, and a beautiful smile on her lips. Oh, how I would love to be in that room, enjoying the hospitality of the Dawson family, hanging with my best friend, and eating Mrs. Dawson's homemade pies. All while staring into the eyes of the woman I haven't been able to stop thinking about for more days than I can count.

And what I *really* want to do—after I figure out what the fuck I'm going to do about my own situation with the Wranglers—is ask Violet why she dropped the squad and moved back home to this tiny little town.

CHAPTER 24 - VIOLET



“Are you sure you want to go out tonight, Violet?” my mother asks me. She isn’t trying to be pushy, but I can tell by her tone that she doesn’t think it’s a good idea.

Here I am, knocked-up and crawling back home after quitting the cheer squad, and I can’t even have a glass of wine to wash my sorrows away.

“Yes, Mom. I’ll be fine,” I say as I roll my eyes and get my keys.

I was getting ready to leave my parents’ house anyway. It’s been a long and emotional day. It was actually a welcome distraction when a few of my old high school friends texted me to ask if wanted to go out for a few drinks at the local bar. Obviously, I’m going to pass on the drinks, being pregnant and all. But getting out of my lonely apartment, and out of my parents’ house, all seems like a good idea—drinks or not.

“I’m just going to go and catch up with some friends, and then straight back to my apartment to bed. After all, tomorrow’s Christmas Eve, and Santa’s coming,” I say with more than a touch of sarcasm. “I won’t be out late.”

When I get to the bar, I have mixed feelings about having come. I *wish* I could order a drink. It would be nice just to dull my senses for a bit and escape into inebriation.

“Violet!” one of my old classmates shrieks with excitement as she sees me. “Oh my *God*, I can’t believe we finally get to catch up! How have you been? How is Austin? Tell us what it’s like to be a Wranglers cheerleader—we’re all *dying* to hear all about it!”

For a moment, I feel a bit like a B-list celebrity. A B-list celebrity who has just quit the team and walked away from any opportunity to cheer again

for a very long while—but I don't mention that.

I tell the small group of girls, most of whom got married and started popping out kids straight out of high school, about the cheer squad and the games and all of the exciting highlights I can think of. In a way, it makes me happy to relive the best moments of it all, but it also makes me sad to think about how I gave it all up and walked away.

“What about that *hot* quarterback, Stone Clark?” one of the girls asks. “I remember he was like the local *town hunk* for a while before he made it to the big time. I heard he's not only a billionaire now but that he also is quite a player—and *not* just on the field.”

All of the girls burst into a fit of giggles, and though none of them notice, I blush.

“I heard he and the head cheerleader are an item.”

“I heard he's banging practically the entire cheerleading team,” someone else says.

A third girl chimes up to make a comment about how Stone is the *hottest thirty-something man she's ever laid eyes on*, and I start to feel like I'm going to be sick.

They turn back to me after their rumor dump. “Come on, tell us the scoop.”

I try to think carefully before letting words spill out of my mouth. Fortunately, most of them are already on their third drink and the intoxication is beginning to take over and make things fuzzy for them. I highly doubt they'll remember much of this in the morning anyway. And honestly, I'm jealous.

“There really isn't anything to tell,” I say as I sip my ginger ale. “I wasn't around the players very much. Fraternalization between players and cheerleaders is strictly forbidden, so most of the time I was just around the squad.”

“That's too bad,” one of the girls says as she nearly slips off her stool. Everyone is already teetering too close to the edge of being completely wasted to even notice I'm not drinking.

“Let me hear about what you guys have been up to,” I say as I try to change the subject and take the attention off of me and the Wranglers, and definitely off of Stone. “I want to hear all the updates about what everyone's been doing here at home.”

They all start talking about their lives, most of which sound entirely

uneventful. One has a husband and two kids already, another just got married and they're trying to conceive. One of the girls is still trying to finish up her degree while working full time at a local bank. Overall, it all sounds super underwhelming. I was looking forward to hearing updates from my high school friends to help take my mind off my own personal drama, but everything feels different now. They don't feel like my friends anymore. Maybe I've outgrown them, or maybe they've outgrown me.

This used to be the bar I came to all the time to throw back shots and dance with my girlfriends. Those were great times, but they're over now, and tonight is a stark reminder of that.

A few of the girls are still single and sound like they have a bit of fun—drinking, dancing, and taking a cute local home every once in a while. But I can't do any of that now. I'm going to be a single mother soon, and I have no idea what to do with that new identity. None of this is what I anticipated for myself.

At least I'm here, out of my empty apartment and hanging out with some old friends. It's better than wallowing in my sorrows or listening to my parents tell me *everything will be fine* on a cyclical loop.

I try to just relax and enjoy the company as I listen to them ramble on in a drunken stupor. At least it's entertaining and serves as a distraction from obsessing about Stone.

Since it's almost Christmas, I imagine he's probably here in town, visiting his parents for the holidays. I'm sure my brother probably knows whether Stone is here or not but has refrained from telling me anything for fear that it would upset me. *Smart move on his part, because it would.*

When the bartender comes by our table again and all the girls ask for another round, I meekly nod my head when he offers me more ginger ale. To be honest, *this sucks.*

But then, as if to torment me more, the door of the bar opens, and I stare in frozen shock as *Stone* walks into the bar alone.

Not only am I surprised to see him here at all, but I certainly wouldn't have expected to see him come drinking alone. Stone always has an entourage with him. In Austin, it would be Eddie and some of the other players, and sometimes even a few of the cheerleaders who follow him around like groupies. Here at home during his short visits to grace this small town with his presence, he's usually either with my brother or some of his old high school friends.

But this time, Stone Clark is flying solo.

He stands in the doorway for a moment or two, filling the space with his broad shoulders and looking like an Adonis coming to lower himself to play with the peasants. After a second or two of scoping out the place—during which I try to duck behind some of my girlfriends so he doesn't see me—Stone moves across the room to sit at the bar.

I watch as he orders a drink, a double scotch on the rocks. That definitely means things aren't going his way. That's a stiff drink, not a relaxing beer.

I try to think about what he could possibly be stewing over and why he wouldn't either be at his parents' house or hanging out with friends. He's just come off of a great game in which he scored most of the winning touchdowns, I would think he'd be out celebrating instead of drinking alone.

Regardless, it's not my problem. I have my own problems to deal with and Stone's a big boy. He can take care of himself.

But even as I try to push him out of my head and focus on the mindless chatter of the girls around me, I can't stop glancing over at Stone at the bar. He goes through his first scotch and then quickly orders another, and then another. Something is for sure bothering him.

"Oh my god, is that Stone Clark?" one of the girls says, slurring her words together so badly that his first and last name all sound like one syllable. "What is *he* doing here?"

I don't say anything but suddenly all eyes are on me as if I magically have the answer to their question. Just because I cheered for the Wranglers, and just because they think I still *do* cheer for the Wranglers, doesn't mean I know the personal agendas of the football players.

I sigh and answer them anyway.

"His parents still live here," I say. "I'm sure he's just home to visit them for the holidays."

Several of them make eyes at him from afar but considering his back is turned, their longing doesn't go very far. I wonder what they would all think if they knew I slept with him, and if they knew I was now carrying his child in my womb. I'm sure it would blow even their incredibly inebriated minds.

I try to change the subject again, not wanting to continue talking about Stone and also not really wanting to continue watching him get wasted at the bar alone.

It doesn't take long before I can't help myself and turn to glance in his direction again. This time when I do, Stone looks pretty close to blasted.

The bartender hands him another scotch, and I already see four empty glasses in front of him. Stone hasn't been in the bar long enough to warrant that amount of stiff alcohol. And since he has lean muscle mass and also a nearly alcohol-free regimen usually, I can safely assume that he is pretty damn drunk.

I remind myself that it's not my business, but before I can turn away, Stone stands up from the bar with his fresh glass in hand and locks eyes with *me*.

No, no, no... he's coming this way.

Stone makes a beeline for the table where I'm sitting with my friends. They're no help because they're all drunk too. And I can't just jump up and run out the door without making an obvious scene.

So, I sit there, unable to turn my gaze away, as Stone Clark walks unsteadily toward me.

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CHAPTER 25 - STONE



The Broke-Down Bar and Grill is the local watering hole that I used to go to all the time when I lived here in Brook Downs. Del and I used to affectionally call it *Broke-Down in Brook Downs* as if we were so clever because we knew how to articulate a play on words.

But tonight, it just happens to be where I pull in my Lamborghini because I need a stiff drink *stat*.

Since visiting the Dawsons would be the worst idea ever, and even asking Del to come meet me for a drink would inevitably evoke conversations about his sister, I opt for my favorite old bar in the hope that I might run into some of my old friends.

Brook Downs is such a small town that I always run into someone I know here.

But when I first step into the place, I see the one person I certainly *hadn't* expected to see here.

Violet Dawson is sitting at a table surrounded by some of her old high school girlfriends. They all look wasted—giggling and chattering and balancing precariously on their stools. And Violet looks practically miserable. She is quiet, looking off into the empty corners of the bar with a far-off look in her eyes as if her thoughts are entirely preoccupied with something else. As much as I would like for her to be thinking about me, I know by her complete avoidance of me for weeks, that it isn't the case.

I sit down at the bar and order a double scotch on the rocks from the bartender. I really had only intended on drinking one or two, but *damn* they go down easy. The fact that Violet is here makes the drinks seem even more necessary. I just can't figure her out.

What the hell is she doing here at a bar with her old friends two days before Christmas? If memory serves me, she didn't even like any of these girls that much. The Violet I knew would much rather be home with her parents and brother than out here at a bar during the holiday break. Although now that she's dropped the squad, she isn't on an *no-alcohol diet*, so maybe that's it.

The question of why she left the Wranglers' cheer team to begin with is still burning on my tongue.

I sit at the bar and try to listen but can't hear what they're saying. I catch myself glancing over at her more than I should. I can't help it.

One of her friends sees me and smiles at me in return, but I quickly turn away and order another drink. The last thing I need is *more* small-town girls in my life. One has been enough to practically ruin me.

I know Violet saw me walk in, but she's making a point to look as if she doesn't know I'm here.

Fine.

I sit at the bar, pounding drink after drink until I finally start to feel less on edge about everything. My anger toward Coach turns into a murky annoyance, my frustration with my parents is exchanged for a sense of pity that they can't seem to meet me halfway, and my guilt over keeping a secret from my best friend is reduced to a dull ache of remorse. The only thing I truly can't seem to shake is the angst I have for Violet and the guilt I'm holding onto over how I have treated her. Funny how getting drunk doesn't seem to erase the things you *most* want to forget about.

While I try to drown myself in numbness, I can't help turning to look at her again. And that's when it hits me. Here she is, at the same bar me, on the day before Christmas Eve. I have no idea why she left Austin or quit the squad, and after this trip, I probably won't have another chance to find out. More importantly, I won't have another chance to tell her how *sorry* I am for the shitty way I've behaved toward her, especially if it's part of the reason she decided to quit and come back home.

Now is my chance, maybe my last chance, and I need to take it. No one else is here to get in my way—the NFL rules, the coaches, her brother—it's just me, Violet, and a bar full of locals. Even if this all goes south, and she tells me to get the hell away from her, at least I'll know that I tried to apologize and set things right.

So, with my newly topped off glass in hand, I get up from my barstool

and walk straight toward her table.

Instantly, all her friends fall silent and turn to look at me. Several of them are already pouting their plump, drunken lips, undressing me with their eyes as I saunter toward them. I couldn't care less about a single one of those girls.

Violet, on the other hand, looks horrified, but also much more sober than the rest of them—the rest of *us*.

I am keenly aware of the stares that I'm drawing, not only from her girlfriends at the table but also from the rest of the bar. I'm a bit of a hometown hero, a big fish in a small pond, and the sight of me trying to keep my balance as I walk drunkenly toward a table of women is definitely garnering attention from more than a few patrons.

When I reach the table, I stop right in front of Violet. Ignoring the rest of the girls, who are now whispering giddily, I focus my eyes on her.

"Violet," I say as if I have rehearsed her name over and over again in my head. "Can we please just talk?"

It comes out sounding much more like a desperate plea than I meant it to. But considering that I've been up night after night thinking about her, desperation isn't too far off. She's definitely got a hold on me that I can't seem to shake.

For a moment, she doesn't answer. She simply stares up at me in silence with those big, brown eyes of hers. It looks like she's going to refuse me, so I plead my case a little bit more.

"Please Violet, just a few minutes. I think we owe each other that much."

The girls at the table exchange glances as if they are privy to a scandal, so I shoot them a look of warning and suddenly they're all getting up and scurrying off without asking a single question.

"Bye, Violet," one of them says, grabbing onto the arms of a friend as they head toward another table.

"We'll catch up with you later," another girl says, fighting back a giggle.

At least they know when it's time to scam.

"Fine," Violet sighs. She motions toward one of the empty chairs her friends have just abandoned. "Have a seat and we can talk for a minute."

I sit down, sobering up to the moment even as I down my drink again. If only liquid courage would help this situation. I wave my hand in the air for the bartender to bring me another. This is probably not the best idea but hell, I can't have this conversation sober—not without feeling like an ass.

"What do you want, Stone?" she asks. I can't read the expression on her

face. She seems almost *sad*, which is different than what I expected. I figured she would be angry with me, mostly for getting her in trouble with her coach. And in the back of my mind, I also figure that I'm somehow to blame for her quitting the squad, although it would really be self-centered of me to think that I'm so important that she would give up her cheer career just to avoid having to look at me. There *must* be another reason.

"I'm sorry," I say. The words spill out of my mouth before I say anything else, partly in thanks to the scotch loosening up my ego.

"For what?" She looks confused more than anything.

Thankfully, the bartender arrives right on time with another drink. I look over and see all Violet has is a half-empty glass of ginger ale. I presume that her financial situation isn't very good considering she just quit her paid spot on the squad.

"I'll pick up her tab, too," I say to the bartender. "Whatever she wants—a bottle of your best pinot maybe?"

I look over at Violet, but she is shaking her head.

"No, nothing for me, thank you."

I frown. She probably doesn't want to chance getting drunk around me again. Both times we've gotten wasted together, we've wound up naked, our bodies entwined.

Since she isn't drinking, and since I most definitely *am*, I continue on with my apology without delay.

"I'm sorry for what I put you through. I romanced the hell out of you and then ignored you as if you didn't matter to me," I continue, feeling as miserable as I sound. "But it *did* matter to me, Violet. It truly did."

"You're speaking in the past tense," she points out.

"Only because I'm trying to apologize for my past behavior."

"I'm not sure I understand what you're trying to do here, Stone. Are you saying that something has changed? That you're a different man now? Because I didn't ask you to change for me."

"I know you didn't, and honestly I don't know what I'm saying." I pause for a moment to try and collect myself and gather my thoughts.

It's even harder to do after as much scotch as I've had to drink than it would be normally.

"I just know that you deserve the world, Violet. And even though I'm rich enough to *buy* you the world, I seem to be truly terrible at being able to give it to you."

Her eyes look at me in confusion.

“Why would you want to give me the world? It’s not like we—”

“And you know what else?” I interrupt. The alcohol is starting to blur my thoughts and speech together. “I think I might even leave the Wranglers.”

“You *what*? Why? You’re literally the star quarterback. I saw your last win—eight touchdowns. Why in the world would you walk away from your career at its peak?”

“You watched my game?” I grin like a drunken schoolboy.

She scoffs as if she regrets having admitted to it. And I shrug off my last remark and start rambling on drunkenly about whatever else pops into my head, courtesy of way too much scotch.

“My father’s a good man,” I say, entirely out of context. “But his life is so unambitious. I mean I guess he’s happy. But you know the one thing he *isn’t* happy with? *Me*. I can’t do a single thing to please that man, and I don’t know why I even want to. Why should I keep trying to mend a shitty relationship with my father? Why doesn’t he ever try to meet me halfway? Even if I quit the team, he probably still won’t be happy. He’ll find some other way to say that I’m a disappointment or that I *just don’t get it*.”

I look over at Violet and see her sitting there listening to me sweetly as I ramble on in a drunken stupor. She is so sweet, *too* sweet. She’s too good for me, and I think I’ve known that all along. Still, it doesn’t stop me from wanting her—*bad*.

I talk some more, and Violet listens. I apologize to her again, and she simply nods without saying anything. I’m amazed she hasn’t gotten up to leave yet.

By the end of the evening, I’m clearly too wasted to get behind the wheel and drive home. I can barely walk a crooked line, let alone a straight one.

“Come on,” she says as she threads her arm in mine to keep me steady. “I’ll take you home.”

“You’re going to drive me all the way back to Austin?” I tease. I think I’m funnier when I’m drunk, although I’m probably not.

“No, I’m going to drop you off at your parents’ house.”

“No, no, I don’t want to go there,” I protest as she tries to stuff me into her tiny little silver Civic. I get distracted for a moment, thinking about how she really deserves a better, newer car than this.

I sit down in the passenger seat, and Violet comes around to the other side to get behind the wheel. Suddenly, it dawns on me that if she drops me off at

my parents' house, this will be the end of it. I still have questions I want to ask her, like why she quit the squad. And I still don't want to entertain the thought of never seeing her again.

"Violet, take me back to your apartment," I say. "Just one more night together—one more night of sweetness with a girl I know I don't deserve."

I see her struggling to answer me as indecision rests on her face.

"Please, I'm sorry. I never should have acted like such an asshole to you," I continue as she pulls the car away from the bar. "I know it's no excuse, but I couldn't help myself. You *do* something to me, Violet. And I didn't know how to handle the way you make me feel. Fuck, I *still* don't."

She opens her mouth as if she is going to say something but then closes it promptly.

"Violet, please. Hear me out."

"*Fine*," she says as if she's angry at herself for giving in to me. "One night. But in the morning, you're gone."

"I'll get a ride back to the bar to pick up my car first thing tomorrow," I promise.

When we get back to her apartment, even as drunk as I am, I know what I want, and I know what I want to give her. And I am absolutely sober enough to give Violet another night of ecstasy.

As soon as we walk inside, I reach around her waist and pull her into my body—thrusting my quickly hardening cock against her and putting my mouth over hers to push my tongue inside.

I remember this apartment, and I remember where the bedroom is. I lift her up and carry her straight there, only knocking my shoulder against the hallway wall once to steady myself.

I lay her down on the bed, quickly pulling our clothes away from our bodies in an urgent frenzy. And as soon as we are skin-to-skin, I waste no time pushing my swollen cock into her body with a force of desire that makes me groan in pleasure.

These nights spent making love to Violet are the most wonderful nights of my life. And even after we finish and lay beside each other in well-earned exhaustion before falling asleep, I can't stop thinking about how much I want to have this *every* night. As I hold her in my arms and fall asleep, I realize I never want to let Violet Dawson go.

But in the morning, Violet wakes up, makes me a cup of strong, black coffee to combat my pounding hangover headache, and asks me to please,

please, never speak to her again.

This last night together was her goodbye.

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CHAPTER 26 - VIOLET



“Merry Christmas!” my brother says as he pops into the kitchen while I’m still nursing my Christmas morning cup of coffee.

Del is funny that way; he’s just as boisterous on Christmas morning now as he was when he was a kid. Perhaps it’s fatherhood that’s making him relive the holiday season with fresh eyes.

Me on the other hand—I feel anything *but* merry.

“Merry Christmas,” I smile at him as I lift the cup to my lips and breathe in the caffeinated steam.

I wish I could feel merry. I’m trying to feel merry, but the truth of the matter is all I can think about is the other night with Stone. I shouldn’t have done it again. I knew that letting myself sleep with Stone again would only make it even harder for me to let him go. *But I couldn’t resist.*

There he was, apologizing and practically begging to come back to my apartment, and grabbing me passionately as soon as we step through the door. A part of me knew it was wrong. He was intoxicated, and I obviously have raging hormones thanks to early pregnancy. I should have left well enough alone and simply dropped him off at his parents’ house.

But I *needed* to be with him one more time. I needed to try to find closure and say goodbye. His apology didn’t give me much closure in itself, it only made me want to be with him even more—so did having sex with him.

In the morning, it took every single fiber of willpower in my being to tell him to leave and not call me again.

But at no point during that night did I waver in my decision not to tell him I’m pregnant. Stone seemed confused, questioning his career with the Wranglers, getting wasted alone at a bar that he used to dominate with his

friends. Adding the news of being an unexpected father is definitely not what he needs right now.

So, I'm taking one for the team and doing him a favor by relieving him of a responsibility that he doesn't even know he has.

Now, the only problem is that I need to learn how to move on with my life and be happy without him. And at the current moment, sitting here at my parents' house on Christmas morning surrounded by everyone's joyous mood and presents stacked beneath a colorful, glittering tree, all I can think is that I will *never* be happy without Stone.

Somehow, I've got to find a way to move on so I can do what's best for my child. I need to figure out how to be happy again for my own sake and for the baby.

Yet, even as I incubate this precious new life inside of me, I feel like I'm *dying*.

I sit there quietly and watch as my brother's kids scramble around the Christmas tree, the youngest one practically crawling over himself in order to grab a present in his chubby little fist.

Beth looks sleepy-eyed as well and almost walks toward my mother's coffee pot before wishing everyone Happy Holidays. My father and brother start talking excitedly about some project they are going to do out back in the shed after we all celebrate this morning.

But my mother walks over and sit down beside me, putting her hand on my shoulder, then reaching over to give me an impromptu hug.

"Everything is going to be okay, Violet," she smiles. "Even when you think the world is falling apart, children somehow wind up giving you the strength to piece it all back together again. You'll find your way through this, I promise." She leans over and gives me a kiss on the forehead before standing up and herding all of my brother's children toward the Christmas tree.

Next comes a flurry of wrapping paper and box tops as everyone digs into their gifts. The kids are thrilled, and it's nice to see the excitement in my brother's eyes as he enjoys a nice Christmas morning with his children and wife. But it also makes me a little sad.

I start to wonder if I will ever have that—those Christmas mornings with a *whole* family. With a loving husband and father for my child. None of this is playing out as I'd envisioned it would for my future. And as much as I'd like to believe that what my mom said is true, and that it will all simply *work*

out, I'm having a hard time believing it.

When the kids are done opening presents and are sitting in the middle of the living room floor in a heap of toys and playing their little hearts out, my mom goes to cook Christmas breakfast.

"I'll help!" Beth says, eager to go refill her cup of coffee.

My dad goes out to get some more firewood for the pellet stove, and Del comes to sit next to me on the couch so he can watch over the kids.

"It looks like you pulled off a successful Christmas morning," I say as I try to muster a smile. "The kids all look so happy."

"Yeah," he nods in return as he smiles out upon his little crew. "But *you* don't."

"I'm fine," I shrug. I don't want to detract from my brother's happiness this holiday. It's not right of me to impose my situation on their merry Christmas. The least I can try to do is be pleasant and not bring everyone around me down. There will be plenty of time *after* Christmas for me to wallow in my misery. Still, it's hard to shake off feelings on a day that is so inherently sentimental.

"You're making a mistake on this one by not telling Stone," Del tells me again. "He would want to know. *Any* man would want to know. And Stone deserves to know if he has a child."

"I already feel guilty enough," I grumble. "Please don't add to it. I know you think telling him is best, but I've thought about this for a long time, and I've already made my decision. I am not going to tell him. It will ruin his career and quite possibly his life. It's my decision, Del, and I want you to promise me that you will *not* tell him."

"You're putting me in a hard place, you know," he frowns. "Stone's my best friend. I've never lied to him before, and honestly, I don't condone lying to *any* man about his child."

I start to interrupt him, but Del puts up his hand to stop me.

"I wasn't finished," he says. "You're my sister, Violet. And I will always protect you and have your back. Even when I don't agree with you."

It's not exactly a *promise* of secrecy, but I feel like it's the best I'm going to get out of my brother. At least he respects my decision, even if he doesn't agree with it.

"Please don't ever talk to me about Stone again, okay?" I ask, sounding rather pitiful. "I'm done with him. I've already said my goodbyes, and I need to start moving forward for me and the baby."

“Okay,” my brother says gently as he puts his arm around my shoulder and brings me into a hug. “I’m sorry this is all so hard for you, especially on Christmas Day. I wish there was something I could do to make it better.”

“Not talking about it anymore would be a good start,” I say with a half smile.

“Do you remember the year you got all those plastic ponies for Christmas?” Del asks, changing the subject in response to my request to move on.

“Yes,” I laugh lightly. “I got so many that I had enough for a small pony army.”

“You really did,” he laughs. “Remember the one with the pink hair and the wings?”

“Oh, that one was my *favorite!* I flew it around the house almost all of Christmas Day.”

He nods as if he can remember it as clearly as I can.

“And later that night, you lost it,” Del reminds me. “You were outside playing with all the ponies and somehow you flew that one somewhere that you didn’t remember and couldn’t find it again when you went looking for it.”

“I can remember it so vividly. I cried all night.”

“And you begged me not to tell Mom and Dad because you were so worried they would get angry at you for having lost a new toy on the very first day.”

“And you didn’t tell them. I wound up finding that pony the next morning when I woke up,” I recall aloud. “It was sitting right on the patch of grass next to the front step as soon as I went out to play, which was odd because I could have sworn I would have seen it there before.”

“Well, there’s something I never told you about that.”

“Let me guess,” I chuckle. “You found my pony and set it there for me to find in the morning?”

“No, *Mom* found it.”

“But you said—”

“I told Mom you lost the pony—not to try and go behind your back but because I *knew* she wouldn’t be mad about it and she would try to help find it, which *she did*. She scoured the whole yard, found your pony, and set it out on the step for you to find the next morning when you woke up.”

“But she never said anything about it to me,” I say in surprise.

“That’s because she didn’t want you to get mad at me for betraying your trust.”

“Why did you tell her after I asked you not to?” I frown.

“Because I knew you were afraid of something that wouldn’t happen, and that she could help.”

He’s not wrong. I never got in trouble, and I did get my favorite pony back. I played with that plastic, pink pony for *years*. But I can see why he chose to tell me this story now and this is much different. I’m an adult now and there are bigger issues at play than just toys.

“Well, this time I didn’t lose a plastic pony,” I say, letting him know that I understand the point of his story. “And this isn’t just about Mom staying up late looking through the yard. This is about someone’s whole *life*. There are lasting repercussions if this secret gets spilled.”

“Yeah, I know. I was just trying to remind you that sometimes, if you give people a chance, they might surprise you,” he says as he gives me one more squeeze before standing up to go play with his kids beneath the tree.

“You’re a good guy, Del. Always have been,” I smile at my brother.

“Thanks,” he grins. “Stone is, too.”

“I never said he wasn’t,” I sigh, still feeling more conflicted about everything than I’m letting on. “Now can we *please* stop talking about Stone Clark?”

Del nods and then jumps down off the couch to join his kids on the floor.

As I sit on the couch, snuggled up in a blanket and still nursing my cup of coffee, I touch my hand to my stomach and think about the little life growing inside.

It *is* going to all work out okay, somehow or another. I’ll make sure of that, because this little baby deserves it.

CHAPTER 27 - STONE



It's Christmas morning, and I can barely even bring myself to speak to anyone.

I sit alone in front of my parents' Christmas tree, sipping coffee and staring at the strings of twinkling lights until my eyes go blurry. There are some presents under the tree, and my mother has already paced back and forth twice asking me if I'm ready to open them yet.

But all I can do is sit here wondering what in the hell I've been doing for the last thirty-four years of my life. I've spent all of this time sinking my energy into my football career. And any time I wasn't devoting to the sport, I was sinking into investing to grow my wealth, or sinking in between the thighs of women to grow my cock. I haven't *once* stopped to think about actually *building* a relationship with someone I like. I haven't ever thought about having a family, or leaving a legacy, or any of the things that most men my age probably think about.

Maybe I've been too busy focusing on trying to be some big name in sports and trying to stockpile money so I could continue to live the lavish lifestyle I've become accustomed to. It all seemed like a good idea and was exactly what I wanted at the time. But now I look back on it all and wonder what I really have. What have I actually accomplished that *means* something?

My all-star NFL football career? Well, that only means something as long as I'm winning, and desired by coaches and teams and fans. As soon as that fizzles out, there's literally nothing left. It's not as if I've built an empire or been a philanthropist. It's literally just a *game*. It's entertainment, not rocket science.

And all my wealth? Yeah, I'm absolutely glad I'm a billionaire and won't

have to worry about money a day in my life. My bank accounts and investments will continue to self-propagate, and it's the very thing that will allow me to walk away from any career that doesn't serve or appreciate me. But it's not as if I have anyone to share and enjoy it with, no one to take care of with it. There is literally only going to wind up being me, an ending career, and a pile of money. It's pretty sad when you think about it.

This whole time I thought not getting attached to anyone and not believing in love and relationships was the way to go. I thought it would help me avoid an unfulfilling life like my own father has. I thought that focusing on my career and reputation and my stock portfolio would give me the freedom to be happy, and a new girl in my bed every month would give me the excitement I craved.

But now, here I sit, staring at my parents' tree on Christmas morning, feeling alone and miserable and confused.

I jump when a hand comes down to pat my shoulder and my father sits down beside me.

"Nice tree this year, isn't it?" he asks as he stares ahead of us just like I am.

"Yeah, very nice."

"I cut it down myself from the woods out back," he continues. "I have to say, I was pretty proud of myself for this one. Even cut the bottom of it straight without needing a trimming once I brought it home and got it in the stand."

I look over at him because it's the most that my father has said to me in a while, unless you count all the arguing. Normally, he either sits and says nothing around me or tries to start an argument about our constantly differing views of the world.

I study his wrinkled face and gray, peppered hair as he continues to look straight ahead into the tree branches.

"You know, there hasn't been one single day of your life, Stone, that I haven't been proud of my son," he says, catching me completely by surprise. "Not one single day. I was just never any good at showing it."

He looks over at me, and I honestly don't know what to say. I feel as if my mouth has suddenly gotten too dry to form words because I'm rendered speechless.

In all my thirty-four years, even going all the way back to my early childhood, I can't remember my father ever once telling me he was proud of

me. I only remember being a constant disappointment. My father was always telling me how I should do things better or think smarter. His words always *implied* that I was greedy or lazy or selfish, even though he never came right out and said those exact words. So, hearing what he's saying now, comes as a complete and utter shock.

"I guess I just always thought you had so much potential that if I constantly pushed you to try and be better that you would be limitless, you know?" he says. "But then when you went off to be a star and make loads of money, I just felt like I was losing you. I felt insufficient as your father. After all, how could you learn from and look up to a man who wasn't even as successful as you were becoming?"

"Dad, I—"

"But I realize now that was the wrong approach to take," he interrupts so that he can continue. "It drove a wedge between us, and even though you and I have very different views on a lot of things, and probably always will, I don't want to keep making the same mistakes that I've made with you in the past. You came home for Christmas this year, even though we always argue. You didn't have to—you could have stayed in Austin or used your billions to take a holiday trip anywhere in the world. But instead, you still chose to come home and spend Christmas with your mother and me. And you told us a little about what you're going through right now. That means you still love and trust us enough to hopefully give me a shot at being a better father and expressing my feelings to you a little more than I have in the past."

I nod, feeling uncomfortably emotional and not really sure what to do about it, as my dad reaches over and gives me a hug. It's a hug I have waited *years* for.

When he lets go, we both let out a big sigh and go back to staring at the tree together.

"If you want to quit the Wranglers after your contract with them ends this year, then you should quit," he says. "You know your mother and I will love you and support your decision no matter what. We always have, even though we haven't been so great at expressing it."

"I know that now. Thanks, Dad," I say. I shift in my seat because even though this was probably the best heart-to-heart I have ever had with my father, there is just too much going on in my head and heart right now all at once. It's overwhelming, especially for someone like me who has tried to skate through most of their life *avoiding* deep emotions.

“I don’t really know what I’m going to do with the Wranglers yet,” I say. “And honestly, it doesn’t really matter anymore. I’ve already ruined the first and only actual good thing I’ve ever had in my life.”

I wait for my father to ask me what I am talking about, or to tell me I’m being dramatic over things. But instead, he surprises me for the second time this morning.

“If you’re talking about the Dawson girl,” he says, “then I think you may be reading the situation wrong.”

“What do you mean? And what do you know about Violet Dawson?” I ask.

“Only what I’ve seen with my own eyes,” he smiles. “When she dropped you off here the other day, she stared after you while you walked in.”

“What? How do you know that?”

“I was watching,” he answers. “Not in a creepy way, mind you. I was just on the side of the house stacking wood and saw her pull up. I saw you walk inside, and I saw the way that she lingered and watched you.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“It does when you look at something the way that she was looking at you,” he smiles. “That girl *loves* you, Stone. I’d bet my life on it. And love is *never* truly over.”

I shake my head, not wanting to allow myself to hope that what he’s saying might be true. Violet Dawson definitely doesn’t *love* me. If she did, then why would she have pushed me away? My father is probably just grasping at straws to make me feel better about the situation.

“How do you even know that’s what I was referring to?” I ask as I try to debunk his theory. “I could have just as easily been talking about something to do with the team, or even another woman back in Austin.”

“You weren’t,” he says with confidence. “I might not know the ins and outs of your life as much as I would like to, but I *do* know you, son. And I know you are head over heels in love with that girl. When your mother mentioned her before you left the other day, even the sound of the Dawson girl’s name lit your face up in affection. You love her, and I’m trying to tell you that I’m quite sure she loves you, too.”

“It just wouldn’t work out now anyway,” I say, sounding sullen and feeling rather hopeless about the whole thing. “I’ve fucked it up with Violet to be quite honest. I don’t want to get into the details, but I’m sure you can fill in the blanks—rich, cocky billionaire quarterback trying to avert NFL

rules and regulations. And throw in the fact that she's my best friend's little sister—it's all a recipe for disaster.”

“Have you said anything to Del about it?”

“No, of course not. I don't want to overstep Violet's relationship with her brother.”

“But what about your relationship with your best friend?” he asks.

I know he's just trying to be helpful, which honestly is a welcome change from our usual relationship, but it's all just too much. Between the pressure of the Wranglers and Coach Rex's demeaning opinion of my worth on the team, and Violet pushing me away while I'm still trying to sort through my feelings about whatever's going on between us, and the fact that I've been avoiding Del just so I don't wind up getting cornered and having to lie to my best friend—it's all too overwhelming for me to deal with at once.

“Look,” my father says as he puts a hand on my shoulder again before getting up. “I have faith that you'll figure all of this out. You're a good guy, and a *smart* one, too. Just don't make the same mistakes I have.”

“You mean having to struggle and be under so much stress in life?” I ask.

“No,” he laughs shaking his head. “Struggling financially and being under stress are the *least* of my worries. Those things are sometimes just a part of life, but they don't matter as much as making sure you hold onto the people you love. I almost pushed you away, Stone. And I finally realized that before it was too late, thank God. I will never regret having to work hard in order to support my family. And I will never regret the hours of productive argument that your mom and I went through in order to come out even stronger on the other side. But I *almost* had to regret ruining a good relationship with my son. Don't waste the time I've wasted and wish I could get back. If you love someone, tell them. If you want to be a part of someone's life, then do it. And if Violet Dawson is the woman you want to be with, then you just have to believe that you can work out all the rest of it later. If Del is your best friend, then the two of you will be able to figure it out, too.”

He gets up and leaves me alone by the tree to think. I can hear him telling my mom something about our little chat, and I can hear my mother saying what a *nice girl* Violet Dawson is. You'd think at my age I'd have my life figured out, and maybe I even thought I did. But then Violet came into my life and threw a wrench in things, and I'm still not sure whether I should hate her or thank her for it.

But my father is right about at least one thing he said. And it's the same reason I could never actually hate Violet—because *I love her*.

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CHAPTER 28 - VIOLET



I know I need to pull my shit together. Christmas has come and gone, and I wake up the next morning trying to figure out how to best reorganize my life. I just wish I knew what to do.

I thought I would be able to come home, come back to my apartment here in Brook Downs, and maybe even come back to my vet tech job, and figure out the rest of it along the way. But nothing *feels right*.

I shouldn't have slept with Stone again. That was the biggest mistake I've made so far since coming back home.

I knew he would probably be in town for Christmas, and I should have just stayed sequestered in my apartment or in my parents' house and avoided any chance of crossing paths with him until after I knew he would be back in Austin. The Wranglers players only get a break until Christmas Day and are expected to return right after the holiday. If I'd just waited until today before going out to meet up with friends, I probably could have avoided the whole thing. But instead, I tempted fate.

And then Stone tempted *me*.

And now everything hurts even worse.

With Del and Beth and the kids gone back to their own home, and my mom and dad spending the day after Christmas going about their regular Monday activities, I'm left sitting in my apartment alone again, trying to figure out how to pick up the pieces. I'm also left thinking about what my brother said to me.

What if Del is right? What if Stone would want to know? What if I'm doing a terrible thing by keeping the existence of this baby from him?

If he ever found out, years from now, and he *had* wanted to know about

it, then I will have essentially stolen years of time from him with a child he never even knew existed. Stone would hate me for it, and so would our child.

But still, I believe that telling him about the pregnancy now would ruin his life.

Stone is at the top of his game and the very height of his career. He would stop everything in order to take on his obligation to me, or he would wind up looking like a degenerate, which I know he wouldn't want as a stain on his reputation. There would be no easy way out for him. Not unless I offer him an easy way out now by never telling him. I am still *convinced* that I'm doing the right thing.

I can't ask him to give up the life he's built for himself. He would resent me and stay with me only out of a feeling of duty and responsibility, and he would be miserable just like he said his own father is. After listening to him pour his heart out to me about that and hearing how hard he has tried to build his life to *avoid* ever having to fall into that same lifestyle, I just can't do that to him.

Though, my brother is right about something else, too—Stone has more money than he knows what to do with, enough that it could make *all* the difference for me and this child. Even a few thousand dollars, which would mean literally *nothing* to Stone, could make or break some of the things I now need to be concerned with. But even though I know it would help me and benefit our child, I can't bring myself to place this burden on Stone. And the single reason why I can't do it is because *I love him*.

I've known for a while now that I've fallen head over heels for Stone Clark, but I've never actually admitted it to myself. Now, I have no choice but to see it for what it is. I'm willing to shoulder this entire thing myself and leave Stone out of it simply to protect the sanctity of the life he has created for himself *because* I am so in love with him.

Maybe I'm being naïve, but it is what it is. I can't change how I feel.

I spend the whole day trying to sort out what I'm going to do and trying to be more productive than I have been ever since returning home to Brook Downs. By early evening, I am no further along in my planning than before, and I have lost all motivation to think about it anymore because all I can think about is Stone being back in Austin now. He's probably surrounded by the rest of the team, the other cheerleaders, and *Heather*. The thought of it turns my stomach.

Out of sheer desperation, and the desire to *not* be left alone with my

thoughts anymore today, I call up my girlfriends to hang out again.

Stone has left town by now since the Wranglers would expect him back for practice immediately after Christmas, and I don't want to burden my brother or parents with my sour, depressed mood anymore. Not that going out with my old high school girlfriends and being the only one *not* drinking while they all have fun is going to make me feel much better. But at least it will get me out of my apartment and serve as a distraction. I even offer to buy their first round of shots just to ensure that they agree to come out with me.

After this, I'm going to need to put myself on a tighter budget with the baby coming though.

When I get to the Broke-Down Bar, this time it's even more depressing than ever.

The bartender is already taking down the Christmas decorations and removing the multi-colored strings of lights from above the bar. I thought they would at least wait until New Year's Eve. It makes me sad for some reason, maybe just because I'm feeling overly emotional, but it feels like things are *ending*. I know that what I really feel like is ending, is my chance to ever be with Stone. I might not even ever see him again. I don't think he even came to see Del during this visit, and maybe the two of them are growing apart. At least I will always have a little piece of him with me in our child, as utterly tragic and depressing as that sounds.

"Come on, Violet, have a shot with us tonight," Christy pleads. She's one of my longest high school friends and is also the one who eggs on the rest of the group. "You didn't drink a lick the last time we were out."

"Yeah, join us!" Ashley echoes. She always follows along with whatever Christy says to do. It's funny because not much seems to have changed about any of them since high school.

I put my hand up to refuse the shot that one of the other girls is trying to hand across the table to me.

"No thanks," I say. "I'm really trying to eat clean these days, the squad is really big on it."

"Well technically this isn't *eating*," Ashley laughs. "It's drinking. So, I think you're in the clear! Speaking of rules, don't you have to get back to Austin soon for cheer practice? When does the squad start training again?"

I falter when I try to answer her. I really don't want to get into the explanation of how I quit the Wranglers cheer squad right now. I wanted to come out with them tonight for a distraction, not a reminder of everything

I've given up and left behind only to have come crawling back home to Brook Downs and be sitting in the Broke-Down with the friends I went to prom with.

"Come on, Violet, you're being a *pansy*," Christy laughs. Her clever play on words as she tries to pull out her floral-specific vocabulary to tease my name, makes the rest of the girls laugh, but I simply roll my eyes.

"What ever happened with Stone Clark the other night?" someone asks. "Did you wind up going home with him?"

"Of course not!" I lie, acting offended at the mere suggestion.

"Yeah," Ashley smacks the other girl on the arm. "They can't do that. Players and cheerleaders can't fuck each other. It's NFL rules. Even *I* know that."

"Oh, *please*," Christy chimes in. "You can't tell me that all of those football players aren't getting a ton of action with all those pretty cheerleaders. Those girls are super attractive, and super *flexible*. A guy like Stone probably has had the entire squad in his bed at the same time."

Everyone stops to look at me as if I'm going to add some sort of inside scoop to their speculation, which I most definitely am *not* about to do.

"Don't look at me, I have no clue," I say, acting as innocent as I can.

"Did *you* ever sleep with one of the football players?" Christy asks as she leans in with a whisper. "It's okay, you can tell us. Your secret is safe between the girls."

I nearly laugh out loud at that notion. These girls are a bunch of gossip hens. There is *no way* I would tell them anything I didn't want to entire world to know about. I especially wouldn't tell them a secret that could damage my reputation and Stone's career.

"No," I lie again. "I didn't sleep with any of the players. I've been much too busy with practices and stuff."

"That's boring," Ashley frowns. "You need to have two shots just to make up for the missed opportunities in Austin. I bet you can't wait to go back. If *I* were going back to Austin, I would have a whole list of things I want to do, starting with a bar crawl and ending with riding the lap of a football player."

The rest of the girls howl in laughter and try to push another shot glass in front of me. I'm starting to get frustrated because I *can't* drink anything and damn how I really, *really* want to.

"Please stop harassing me about taking shots," I say, trying not to act so

annoyed that they want to leave. At least this gets me out of the house, even though it's not the most ideal outing considering my current condition. "I really don't want to drink tonight."

"You heard the pretty lady," a voice comes from behind me.

Before I can even whip my head around to hear who the strange voice belongs to, I feel an arm land on my shoulder and a hand drop down to lay against my chest. I look down to see stubby fingers just grazing the top of my chest, before turning to see some guy I don't recognize standing uncomfortably close behind me.

Before I can ask this guy what the hell he thinks is acceptable about coming up behind a woman and putting his arm around her without her knowledge or consent, the scumbag continues talking as if he's invited himself to our table for drinks.

"I, on the other hand, would be very interested in taking one or two of these shots off your hands, ladies," he says.

Christy smiles at him because he's relatively good-looking, and Ashley goes ahead and hands him a shot glass. No one seems to care that this creep has his arm around me still.

I reach over and lift his hand up from my shoulder, dropping it into the air beside me, making it clear that I don't want to be touched, especially not by some handsy local townie who's acting a little too weird for my comfort.

"Want to dance?" he winks at me as if removing his hand wasn't enough for him to figure out that I would like him to leave entirely.

"No, I don't."

"Awe, come on, Violet," Ashley frowns at me. "Stop being such a priss. Just because you're a famous cheerleader now doesn't mean the locals are beneath you."

"I never said that!" I exclaim in annoyance. "I just don't like being touched by random dudes in bars, and I don't feel like drinking or dancing."

"If you didn't feel like drinking or dancing, why come to a place that's all about drinking and dancing?" the guy taunts. "Come on, I promise I'll try to keep my hands to myself."

I think this guy is pretty harmless, and the rest of the girls are all apparently taking his side and accusing me of acting too uptight. It is a bar after all. I can feel myself beginning to break down.

Coming here was a mistake. I don't even want to be out at a bar. I don't want to be here with these girls, and I certainly don't want to be manhandled

by this local. I can't drink, and I don't feel like dancing, and suddenly everything starts to feel too loud and claustrophobic.

I *could* just get up and leave. I haven't been drinking, and my car is right outside waiting for me. But where am I going to go and what am I going to do? Go home to an empty apartment and cry over Stone being in Austin while I'm stuck here—knocked-up and depressed? Going home sounds unbearable. And going to my parents' house sounds even worse because they're going to smother me in so much well-meaning pity and sentiments of support that I'll feel like choking.

Out of my options, staying here and watching this loser hit on my high school friends is at least distracting me from the life that I'll soon pine over losing.

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CHAPTER 29 - STONE



I'm just not ready to leave yet. I don't know what the hell my problem is, or why I'm holding onto this stupid place for any longer than my visit was planned, but something about leaving Brook Downs today doesn't *feel right*.

"It's only one day after Christmas," my mother says as she tries to make me feel better after hearing the one-sided phone conversation I just had with my coach.

Coach Rex is massively pissed-off that I'm taking an extra day in my hometown before returning to Austin. I should have texted him, but I thought a call would be easier. *Guess I was wrong*. He spent almost the entire five-minute phone call yelling at me through the phone so loud that it sounded like I had it on speaker.

When he asked me what my reason for extending my holiday visit home without prior approval was, I suppose I could have made up a lie about there being some sort of family emergency. But the truth of the matter is that I just don't even care.

I don't care that Coach Rex is pissed. I don't care if I miss today's first practice after the holiday break. Hell, I don't honestly care if they cut me from the team for it.

My father's words of wisdom are ringing in my ears, and I'm trying to reconcile with my own conscience. I don't feel right about leaving yet, and about the prospect of possibly never seeing Violet again, so I'm just not going to. Nothing is going to implode or self-destruct simply because I stay an extra day in Brook Downs. It's certainly *not* the end of the world.

I don't even know why I'm staying, only that it feels wrong to leave just

yet.

As far as I know, Violet will be living here in town now, and it's not as if I won't ever come back to visit my parents and my best friend again. But something feels too *final* about leaving this time, as if the moment I step foot out of this town, things are actually *over* between us.

A rational man would know that things have already been long over between Violet Dawson and me. Hell, they barely even started. But I guess I've been becoming a bit more irrational lately all around.

I'm still going to leave tomorrow. It's what Violet wants. She asked me not to call her again, not to see her again, and I know that she doesn't want me accidentally running into her around town again. I fully intend to get in my car and drive back to Austin tomorrow morning and face whatever consequences are waiting for me from the coaches. But today, I'm going to stay here and think about things for a hot minute.

"Here, son," my father says as he hands me my phone. "It was sitting on the couch next to me when it started blowing up like crazy. I think someone wants to talk to you."

When I look down at the phone, and I see that Del Dawson is calling me once again, I know I need to pick up the call.

I've avoided him the entire Christmas break, and I feel truly terrible about it. He's my oldest and very best friend, and I haven't even said so much as *Merry Christmas* to him. It's a completely shitty thing for me to have done, but I just thought it was easier if I put some space between Del and I until things with Violet died down to nothing more than a smoldering memory. The problem is that it's taking a lot longer to try and snuff out my feelings for Violet than I'd ever anticipated.

But seeing as I've avoided him to the point of it being rude and awkward, and also to the point of being possibly the shittiest best friend in the entire universe, now I need to take the call.

Besides, I'm leaving tomorrow, so there's really not too much harm that can be done over one phone call on my last night in town.

"Hey, man," I say when I pick up. "Look, I am *really* sorry I haven't gotten to spend any time with you during this trip. I know it's Christmas and everything, and I know I've been acting like a super shitty friend—"

"Don't worry about it," Del interrupts before I continue on my pathetic and lengthy apologetic rant. "I didn't call to give you shit about ignoring my messages. I called because I have something important to tell you."

Instantly, the hairs on my arm stand up as if I'm about to hear bad news.

In the back of my mind, my thoughts instantly go to Violet, and I hope everything is okay with her. I have a flash of worry that maybe she quit the team because something might be wrong with her health. But it's much more likely to be something with their aging parents. Maybe that's why Violet moved back home, to help Del take care of them.

"I just want you to listen to me and hear me out before you say anything, okay?" he asks.

"Okay."

In the tiny microcosm of a second that I wait before Del starts to talk, I can't possibly anticipate that he's about to tell me something that I would never have expected hearing in a million years.

In true best friend fashion, he simply blurts it right out, like ripping off a bandage.

"*Violet is pregnant, and the baby is yours.*"

I make some sort of sound akin to an audible gasp, and then I get ready to say something, but Del quickly reminds me that I promised not to interrupt, and to wait until he's finished before I say anything.

"She's already decided to keep the baby," he continues. "And she's also already decided *not* to tell you about it. She has convinced herself that she doesn't want to bother you, and she thinks that telling you of her pregnancy will ruin your life. I've tried to tell her otherwise, and I told her that she needs to tell you, but she won't listen. In fact, she swore me to secrecy that I wouldn't say a word to you about it."

There is a silent pause that hangs on the phone, and I'm not sure whether that's my cue to be able to talk yet or whether he's just taking a moment before he continues.

"You know how much I love my sister, and I would protect her with my own life. I'm not divulging her secret to you simply because you're my best friend, although it has been bothering me to keep something like this a secret, even for the short time I've known about it. You are the father, and I think you have a right to know. But that's not even why I'm calling to tell you."

"Then why are you telling me this now?" I ask, abandoning my promise to stay quiet until he is finished.

"I'm telling you because Violet is *miserable*. She's absolutely miserable because she's *in love with you*."

I freeze on the other end of the phone.

“Look, whatever happens between the two of you is none of my business. She’s my sister, and you’re my best friend, and you are both grown adults. But I know what kind of man you are, and I know you’re not the cocky playboy bastard the rumors make you out to be. I also know my sister, and I know that even though she will never admit it, and even though she thinks she’s doing the right thing, she’s making the wrong choice here. I’ve never seen her so miserable and unhappy before in her entire life. She loves you, Stone, and I’m pretty sure by the way you were looking at her over Thanksgiving that you love her too.”

“I’m not sure what to say.”

“Do you love her?” he asks me flat out.

“Yeah, I really think I do.”

“Then I’m just going to leave this right here for you to do with as you will,” he says. “I just thought you should know. What you do next is up to you.”

“Where is she?” I ask, feeling a sudden pang of urgency.

“I honestly have no idea. I would assume that after she left the holiday festivities at my parents’ house she went back to her apartment. But I haven’t talked to her at all today.”

“No, she’s not at her apartment!” a voice calls from somewhere on the other end of the phone. I can hear it through the line.

“Hang on a second,” Del says. “Beth thinks she knows where she is.”

“Hello?” Beth’s voice says into the phone.

I’ve only met his wife a few times, but she seems like a nice woman.

“Hi, Beth,” I say, trying to be polite even though I am filled with a nervous energy to get to Violet as fast as I can.

“Hey, I think I know where Violet is. I was out earlier running errands, maybe like fifteen minutes or so ago. I just got back home now because I needed to run out and get the kids some juice boxes and—”

“Beth, get to the point,” I hear Del gently scolding her in the background.

“Right, sorry. Anyways, I saw Violet’s car parked outside the Broke-Down.

“She’s at the bar? What is my sister doing at the bar while she’s pregnant?” I can hear Del ask her.

“Stop being so judgmental,” Beth snips back at him. “There’s no rule that says you have to drink alcohol just to go sit in the Broke-Down. She probably just wants some time around people who *aren’t* trying to give their two cents

about her current predicament.”

That remark shuts Del up pretty fast.

“I have to go,” I say as I hear Beth hand the phone back to her husband.

“I love her, Del. I really and truly love her, and the thought of not being with Violet... I can't bear it.”

“Then that is all that matters,” he says. “Go find my sister and tell her that, too.”

I hang up the phone and shove it in my pocket as I fumble around looking for my keys. I drop them twice as I try to tell my parents that I'm going out for a bit but will be back before it gets too late.

As soon as I get to my car, I peel out onto the road and race toward the Broke-Down, which thankfully isn't too far away. Even so, I can't seem to get there fast enough. I run a four way stop and then two traffic lights. The roads are pretty empty being that it's a Monday and also the day after Christmas. Everyone is probably at home recuperating from the holiday rush. Meanwhile, I am beside myself trying to get to Violet at the speed of light.

I'm not sure what I think is going to happen. It's not like she's going to disappear into thin air or head back to Austin. She lives here now, and I'm not in danger of not being able to find her in this tiny town. But something feels so urgent right now, so intense, that I feel like I'm going to burst if I don't get to her right now.

“*Pregnant*,” I say to myself alone in my car. “Fuck, I can't believe it.”

I think I'm still in shock. It all makes sense now. This is why she quit the Wranglers' squad and moved back here to Brook Downs.

I try to piece together the timeline in my head, starting from the first time we slept together until now. I think about the two weeks she was suspended from cheer, and then the way she started to ignore me and push me away.

Damn it, I wish I'd known. Here I was acting like an asshole when she might have been pregnant and just not telling me. If I'd known, I would have held her and told her that everything would be okay. Now, I can only hope it's not too late.

Suddenly, my father's words weigh even heavier in my mind.

All these years of thinking I had it all figured out. But he was *right*. And I refuse to believe that it's too late for me and Violet. I'm going to get to her, tell her I know about the pregnancy, and tell her that I love her.

I'm going to make all of this right, and to hell with everything else. The only thing that matters to me right now is Violet and the child she is carrying

inside of her—*our* child.

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CHAPTER 30 - VIOLET



“Go away and leave us alone,” I say, swatting the asshat’s hand away as he tries to wind Christy’s blonde hair around his finger.

Whoever this local yahoo is, he’s annoyingly persistent. And trying to get him to *stop* hanging all over our table just seems to be encouraging him even further. Honestly, it’s guys like this who give small towns a bad rap. These ignorant fools who can’t take a hint, or even a blatant request to get the hell away, are the reason that city dwellers think the residents of Brook Downs are a bunch of hicks.

“Oh, you’re one of them jealous girls, aren’t ya?” he sneers at me. He’s also had way too many shots thanks to the girls thinking it’s hilarious to keep handing him drinks. “You want me all to yourself? Don’t worry, there’s plenty of Jake to go around.”

“Ew. Trust me, I don’t want *any* Jake at all,” I say as I make a sour face.

He reacts by trying to reach across the table and touch me again. His stubby thumb nearly grabs the tip of my chin, and I recoil. Somehow, he takes that as an invitation. Honestly, I will never understand how men like this get through life. Didn’t their mamas ever teach them that *no means no* for fuck’s sake?

“It’s okay, sweetheart, I think you’re really pretty, too.”

“Get away from me, you sleezeball,” I recoil. “You’re nothing but a washed-up townie, and I don’t want you hanging all over me or my friends.”

“He was amusing at first,” Ashley giggles from behind the guy as he walks around the table to stand beside me. “But now he’s getting kind of gross.”

I can’t possibly roll my eyes far enough back in my head. If she and

Christy hadn't egged this guy on and given him so many shots already, then maybe he wouldn't still be here. Leave it to the pregnant, sober one to have to act like the bouncer.

But this guy truly isn't taking a hint, and he reaches out to hook his arm around my waist to pull me closer. I am just about to call out to the bartender for help with this escalating situation, when the door to the Broke-Down bursts open, and I look to see *Stone Clark* standing there in the entry.

I am *shocked*, and I don't know whether to be ecstatic or horrified.

He scans the bar and almost instantly locks eyes with me. Within seconds, he charges toward us and has crossed the entire length of the Broke-Down. He steps protectively in front of me, places both hands on Jake's chest and tosses him backward.

"Get away from her and keep your hands to yourself," Stone growls at him.

The entire bar is now looking at our table as Stone postures himself in front of me with his muscles bulging and his chest heaving. He looks like the quarterback mid-game—all bulking muscle and with a glare in his eyes like he will knock down anyone who stands between him and the win. Except that this time, the win is *me*.

I hadn't expected to see him again, let alone here in the bar. And I sure as hell didn't expect him to come barreling in like some kind of irate knight in shining armor, looking to knock down anyone who laid a hand on me.

I stand there behind him for a second in complete shock with my mouth hanging open. I have no idea what the hell is going on here. Even when Stone and I were *kind of* together, he still never acted like this.

"Dude, what the fuck?" Jake says as he tries to stay steady on his feet. "If you want her, you need to put forth the time and effort that I have, charming this table of ladies. You don't just get to smash in here and try to steal the girls."

Jake is either drunk or stupid to be challenging Stone because he pales in comparison to Stone's size.

"I'm not trying to *charm any ladies*, you idiot," Stone snarls at him. "And if you lay one more finger on the mother of my child, then the only thing I'm going to be smashing in here is your skull against the bar."

I freeze, and all of my girlfriends let out a varying degree of a gasp.

Jake looks at me over his shoulder and then shakes his head and slinks away, apparently deeming that neither me nor my friends are worth a cracked

skull. *Smart move.*

I feel everyone staring at us now. Christy and Ashley are staring at me with a look of surprise on their faces but honestly, no one could be more shocked than I am.

How does he know?

Stone turns around and looks at me as if he can read my mind.

“Del told me,” he says.

I don’t have words. I mean, I have a whole bunch of words but none of them come out of my mouth. I want to be upset with my brother for betraying my trust, but also there’s a part of me that’s glad he did. The guilt over not telling Stone was eating me up, even though I was keeping it from him because I thought it would be better that way.

“And don’t be mad at your brother,” he says. “It was the right thing to do. I am the father, aren’t I?”

I nod. I can feel all the blood rush out of my face, and I start to feel faint. This is all just too much. My emotions are bombarding me like a blizzard of feelings swirling around in my head.

“Violet, I understand why you didn’t tell me. I get it. I’m not upset with you. In fact, you should be upset with me,” he says. “Hell, I’m sure you *are* upset with me because I’ve been an ass. You have every reason to be mad at me, and I’m the one who needs to explain myself. I should have told you sooner.”

Now I’m all sorts of confused. *I’m* the one who’s been keeping something from him. What could he possibly tell me that would be more of a shock than a pregnancy?

“I’m *in love with you*, Violet,” he says. “I’ve been in love with you this whole, entire time, and I’ve just been too much of a coward to admit it to myself and to you. I want to do the right thing by you, not because I feel obligated, but because I *love* you.”

I think my heart stops when I hear those words.

I swallow, and my throat feels dry, but there is a warmth rising in my chest.

I can only manage two words. “You do?”

“Yes,” he smiles as he takes my hands to hold in his. “And I’m happy that you’re pregnant. I am *so happy*. I didn’t plan on being a dad, and I didn’t plan on you either, but I’m so damn happy about all of it.”

“But what about your football career, and your billionaire bachelor

lifestyle?” I ask. “I thought the last thing you would ever want is to be burdened down by fatherhood.”

“So did I, but I was wrong. And I’m so sorry that I made you feel like you couldn’t come to me about this,” he says. “I’m *done* with the Wranglers, Violet. I don’t want to go back to the team. My time with them is over. And it’s not because the news of your pregnancy is *ruining* my life, it’s because it is finally giving me the purpose I’ve been searching for. *This* is what I want—you and our baby. Not some stupid trophy on a shelf or a meaningless sports record. I want *you*.”

I stand there speechless as tears run down my face. I can’t even hold them back anymore. I can’t believe this is happening. It doesn’t feel real.

I look around the bar, just to assure myself I’m not dreaming. Every eye is on Stone and me.

“Please forgive me, Violet,” he says as his jaw trembles. “I am *not* the same man you’ve heard rumors about. I may not be perfect, and I may have completely fucked things up with you right from the start. But I *can* tell you this. I remember your birthday—January twelfth— and I remember that you used to have posters of pink ponies in your room that I would see as I passed down the hall to hang out with Del. I remember the first time I saw you cheer with the squad, and I most vividly I remember the way your eyes looked at me in the bar that night when we were stranded in Minneapolis. There is *nothing* about you that I have ever forgotten and maybe that’s a sign that you and I have always been meant to be together. Can you *please* forgive me for the moments I acted like an asshole? Because if you can, then I really, *really* want to be with you—more than anything.”

“Yes!” I exclaim as I try to choke back more tears. “I forgive you. But only if you can forgive me, too. I swear I wasn’t trying to lie to you, Stone. I wasn’t trying to keep this baby away from you or hold onto some dark secret. I just didn’t want you to feel like you *had* to take care of us. I didn’t want you to resent me or the baby, and I didn’t want to be the one responsible for destroying your career and your life.”

“You *are* my life now, Violet,” he says as he reaches out and swoops me up in his arms.

With all of my friends teary-eyed and gawking at us, and practically the entire bar hushed in silent awe, Stone carries me to the door and kicks it open with his foot.

Once we’re outside, he sets me gently down on the snow-dusted ground

amidst the cold winter air. I shiver, and he's quick to take his coat off and wrap it around my shoulders.

"What are we doing out here?" I ask as my wet tears start to freeze against my cheeks. I stare at him in confusion as my mounting emotions run rampant.

"Well, I can't propose to my future wife in a bar," Stone says as he drops down to one knee. "You're much too good for that. And you're also too good for me. But I hope that you'll have me anyway."

My breath sticks in my throat as I watch Stone pull a ring out of his pocket. The stone shimmers under the glow of the outside lights at the Broke-Down as if the diamond is made of a thousand stars.

"Violet Dawson, would you please be my wife?" Stone asks.

"Yes!" I squeal.

Stone stands up and grabs my face with both hands and kisses me with more passion than I've ever felt before. I feel as if I'm living inside a fairy tale.

When he lets me go, he puts the ring on my finger, and suddenly I hear a wave of cheers erupt from behind me. I turn to see the door of the Broke-Down open and everyone from inside all smooshed together in the entryway watching. Christy and Ashley are gushing with tears and smiles, and the bartender is in the back popping the corks out of champagne bottles on the house. *Obviously*, I'll be sticking to ginger ale, but who needs alcohol when you're drunk on love?

"Come on, let's get you back inside and out of this cold," Stone says as he wraps an arm around me.

"Are you always going to be this protective over me?" I tease.

"Oh absolutely," he grins. "You know what they say about us professional football players. We can't let our eyes off the ball."

I toss my head back and laugh. I have never felt better in my entire life.

"What are we going to do?" I ask once we sit down at the bar. The bartender pours Stone a glass of champagne and adds a maraschino cherry in the top of a fresh ginger ale for me.

"About what?" Stone asks.

"*Everything*. Where are we going to live? What are we going to do for work?"

"We'll figure it all out as we go," he says. "My father said something to me this trip that really sunk in."

“You and your father are getting along now?” I ask glad to hear that his family relationships are mending.

“Yeah, and he basically told me that if I focus on what’s important and don’t let it go, the rest will all work itself out.”

“Wise words,” I smile as I clink my glass against his, feeling on top of the world.

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EPILOGUE - STONE



“*I* can’t believe it’s been a year already,” I mutter aloud.

“What are you doing?” Violet asks as she walks up behind me and wraps her arms around my waist.

I stand there, holding our baby girl as she stares at the twinkling lights on the Christmas tree with wide, eager eyes filled with awe.

“You two have been standing here for a very long time,” Violet smiles. “Everything alright?”

“Couldn’t be more perfect,” I say as I turn my face to kiss her cheek. “She likes the lights.”

“Of course she does,” Violet says, leaning down to kiss our baby girl on the top of her soft head. There’s just the tiniest tuft of blonde hair on Abigail’s scalp, and her blue eyes look back at her mom as she coos and gurgles with sounds of affection that only a baby could make sound so lyrical.

“Her father did an absolutely epic job of putting up the Christmas tree,” Violet compliments me.

“See, now I know you’re teasing me,” I laugh. “Because I’m pretty sure I missed a whole row of lights. There’s an entire bald spot in the back of the tree this year.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s our first Christmas together, and it’s Abigail’s first Christmas *ever*. That makes it special no matter what. No one’s going to remember a missing string of lights.”

I turn to go sit down next to my beautiful wife on our couch as we both look out the window at the falling snow.

“Do you ever wish we would have gone back to Austin?” she asks me.

“Do you ever miss the city? When I first saw you again, back in that bar in Minneapolis, you seemed pretty hell-bent on never living in a small town again.”

“I remember. But that was before *you*,” I say affectionately. “And before our family and our happily ever after. So, in answer to your question, no. I don’t miss Austin at all. And I also don’t miss playing football for the Wranglers.”

“Really?”

“Really. One day, when she’s older, I’m going to buy Abigail a little pink helmet and teach her how to play ball.”

“Oh dear,” Violet laughs. “Please promise me no one will get hurt in this process.”

“Of course not,” I reassure her. “Just a bit of fun in the backyard. Not all girls need to be cheerleaders, you know.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?” Violet asks with a laugh as she feigns offense at my remark.

“It means that I don’t think you were ever truly cut out to be a Wranglers cheerleader. You’re *much* too smart. And Abigail is going to be much too smart, too. Speaking of which, how’s the set up for the new practice going?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” she reminds me. “I’m still a few months away from finishing my degree and getting my certification.”

“I know. But then, after that, you’re good to go with your own veterinary practice, right?”

“Yes, but I want to try to do it myself. I don’t want you throwing a bunch of money at some big fancy building. I want to build it from the ground up, like normal people.”

“Normal people?” I laugh

Violet laughs too and leans over to give me a hug.

“You know what I mean. I don’t want to use my billionaire husband’s advantage in this little town. I want to have a humble little practice, one that I can be proud of for building myself.”

“Of course, but you at least have to let me throw some money at the party I’m going to throw you once you get your degree.”

Her smile is so wide that it fills my heart.

“Okay, if you insist,” she says. “I’d be a fool to turn down an extravagant party. Although I feel a little selfish having *two* giant extravaganzas in the same number of years.”

She's talking about our wedding, and *damn* if it wasn't spectacular.

"That was my gift to you, for overlooking everything that everyone said I was, and for seeing the real me, for who I truly am. And also, for giving me the chance to be the father that I never knew I wanted to be."

"It was beautiful, and I still think about it every day. I'm going to remember the details of our lavish wedding for the rest of my life. But I know it cost a small fortune."

"It did, and who cares?" I say, nonchalantly. "I told you I never needed that football job with the NFL. My investments have continued to pay off and they will continue to pay off well into our daughter's adulthood. Everyone in our family for generations to come is going to be *very well* taken care of."

"And what about your new project?" she asks as I hand Abigail over to lay in her mother's arms.

The glow of the fireplace casts dancing shadows against them, and my two girls couldn't look more beautiful on this most magical of Christmas Eves.

I smile when I think about my new venture. I never would have thought in a million years that I would want to start up a small artisan carpentry business. I spent most of my life trying to avoid following in my father's footsteps, and now here I am finding pleasure in doing the very same thing he was called to do. Granted, it's not *exactly* the family business. My father still insists on going out and sourcing his own wood and building things with his own hands.

I opt for a more modernized version, the kind that a whole lot of money can buy. But still, my new carpentry business has a personalized, local touch. And it's brought a whole bunch of money and jobs to Brook Downs. Not the least of its accomplishments has been making my father cry over how proud he actually is of me. I have to admit that my eyes weren't completely dry at the company ribbon-cutting ceremony either.

"It's going well, and my father and I were thinking that we would like to build the counters and tables in your new practice. Once you decide on the building and get your degree, of course."

I look over at her for a second, hoping that I'm not overstepping because I know she really wants to do everything about this on her own.

But she beams and nods her head. "I would love that so much, thank you."

We both look down at Abigail, who is now sleeping peacefully in her

mother's arms. She's too young to know about Santa Claus and stockings, but we get to see the excitement in her eyes when she looks at all the decorations and goes outside to feel her first cold snow drop falling on her nose.

When the phone rings suddenly and sends a jarring noise into the peace and quiet, I grab it quickly, so as not to wake the baby.

"Del! Good to hear from you. Are we still on for tomorrow morning?" I ask.

"Absolutely, Christmas morning sledding," he explains over the phone. "This is going to be an epic new family tradition. I can't wait."

First, we plan on going sledding, just me, Del, and both of our dads. And then we plan to go back to the house and cook brunch for our girls as Beth, and Violet, and our moms, along with all of the kids open gifts. It's going to be the perfect Christmas day.

There isn't a single second of my life that I regret not returning to Austin. And there isn't a single second of my life that I regret not going back to professional football. But I know for a fact, that if I hadn't proposed to Violet that night outside the Broke-Down, and if I'd walked away never knowing that she was carrying my child, I would have regretted missing out on the best things about my life for the rest of my days.

I hand the phone over to Violet and she talks to her brother for a few minutes while I go and put Abigail in her crib to sleep. When I come back out, she's already off the phone and standing in front of the Christmas tree, holding two half-filled glasses of champagne in her hands.

"What's this for?" I ask. "Are we celebrating something other than Christmas?"

"Yes," she grins at me. "We're celebrating everything that you and I have managed to accomplish in the course of only a year. We're celebrating the birth of our beautiful baby daughter and the start of your new carpentry venture. We are celebrating nearing the end of my journey to get my degree and open my own veterinary practice, and we are also celebrating all of the mended relationships that we now have and can now give to our daughter as a loving and supportive extended family to share Christmas Day with."

"Well, if that isn't the most wonderful toast I've ever heard," I say as I take my champagne flute from her hand, and wrap my arm around Violet's waist.

"I think I also want to celebrate one more thing," I add.

“Oh?”

“I want to celebrate *you*,” I say.

“Me?” Violet laughs. “That sounds like a bit more grandeur and accolades than I’m probably deserving of. I mean, when you think about it, it’s been mostly *your* money that bought our new house here, and your money that paid for the rest of my degree, and pretty much your support that has helped us to achieve all of us.”

“Money is nothing. *You* saved me.”

“Saved you? From what?”

“From the empty life that I thought I wanted. I thought I was on top of my game, that I was a star, and all I wanted was freedom and fame and piles of cash. But what a terrible existence it would have been. Now I’m happy, and in love, and have a family, and every single day I get to make new memories with you and Abigail. I couldn’t possibly think of a better life, and I owe all of that to *you*.”

“I think we both owe some of that to my brother,” she laughs. “Especially since we were both willing to walk away, and it was really Del who forced our hand by spilling my secret.”

“Perhaps,” I contemplate. “But honestly, Violet, I don’t think I could have ever truly walked away from you. Ever since the moment we first laid eyes on each other in that bar, it was as if you were in my very blood.”

She leans forward and kisses me, and I pull her closer. The fire crackles in the background and the twinkling lights of the tree can be seen even with my eyes closed.

The moment is magical, and since Abigail is asleep, I find myself once again unable to contain my desire for Violet.

I take both of our glasses and set them down on the top of the hearth, then I slowly pull Violet’s shirt over her head until I can toss it aside. I feel her hand trail down my torso, and under the top of my pants, and before long, we both find ourselves naked in front of the tree.

Thankfully, the tree skirt is plush and velveteen, because that’s where I lay her down beneath the soft lights to make love to her.

“This is a Christmas fantasy,” she says as she lets out a small moan when I push inside of her.

“Every day since the day you agreed to be my wife has felt like a fantasy,” I say, pressing my lips to hers and letting my words spill into her mouth.

With every movement inside of her, I feel as if I couldn't possibly love her more. And thankfully, we reach the point of ecstasy before Abigail starts to make small sounds from the other room.

"Here you thought she was going to sleep for the night," Violet, laughs. "When really, she was only taking a cat nap."

"She must know Santa's coming," I tease as I help Violet to her feet and hand her her clothes.

"Speaking of Santa," she says. "If there was one gift that you would like, one more thing you think would perfectly fulfill your happy ending, what would it be?"

"That's a tough one, especially since I feel like everything is absolutely perfect the way it is. There's literally nothing that I could ask for now that I don't already have."

"And that makes me exceedingly happy to hear," Violet says. "But if there was just *one* other thing, anything in the world, even if it sounds impossible, just something that you think would fill your heart to the point of overflowing, what would it be?"

I take a minute to think about it as my pull my pants up over my hips and pick up my champagne glass to have a sip. I know we only have a few more minutes before Abigail gets restless and wants to come out and join us again.

"Well, I guess this sounds kind of crazy, but you did tell me it could be *anything*. So, I suppose if I could pick any impossibly ridiculous thing that might make things even more perfectly perfect than they already are, it would probably be something that would surprise you."

"Tell me," Violet says as she steps so close to me that our noses are practically touching.

"I know it sounds nuts, but I guess I would wish for just one more child," I say.

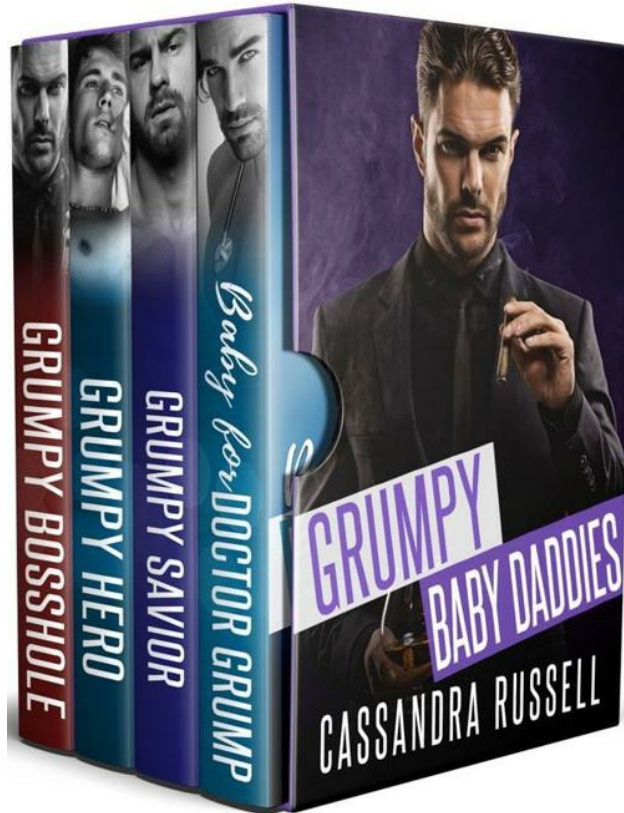
"Then I suppose it's a good thing you still believe in Santa Claus," she grins.

I look over to the table and suddenly notice that Violet hasn't taken even one sip of her champagne tonight.

And for the split second before we both go to get Abigail together, I stare into Violet's eyes with absolute adoration, completely convinced that there is no fairy-tale ending more perfect than ours.

THE END.

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- (b) Hot celebrity doctor
- (c) Sports star heartthrob
- (d) Ruggedly handsome storm chaser

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BOOK 1: BABY FOR DOCTOR GRUMP



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CHAPTER 1 - FIONA

“*H*ow do you *still* not know what kind of practice you want to go into, Fiona?” Ginny asks as she lifts a finger to signal the bartender to bring us another round of house ale.

It’s the beginning of autumn and their special on tap is some sort of spiced lager that has a lingering aftertaste of cinnamon and pumpkin. It’s delicious, but I’m in a foul mood, and I try hard not to snap at my friend.

“It’s only my first week of med school,” I say as I polish off the last sips from my mug. “Most twenty-two-year-olds have just graduated college with generalized bullshit degrees. At least I’m in med school working toward my dreams.”

“Well, you might want to narrow down exactly what that dream is a bit,” she giggles. I can tell the ale is starting to go to her head. “I mean, are you going to be dissecting brains or staring at vaginas?”

“No one dissects brains as a career,” I scoff, irritated by her simplistic view of the medical sciences. “And gynecologists don’t go into the field to *stare* at vaginas.”

“Are you sure about that?” she grins. She looks like she is about to burst into laughter, and I just can’t deal with her crude remarks right now.

“God, you’re incorrigible,” I frown as I roll my eyes.

“What’s the matter with you tonight?” she asks.

The bartender sets a fresh round down on the table in front of us. The ale is dark amber with a thick layer of velvety foam that fizzes with tiny bubbles, which immediately start to smooth out and disappear. I lift it to my lips and take a long swig before I answer her so I can try to even out my mood. Coming here to this local hole-in-the-wall pub was supposed to help, but I

guess I haven't had enough alcohol yet for that to work.

"My mom dropped the news on me after classes today that she's going to marry *Fuckface*," I say with a sour expression.

Ginny nearly spits out her beer.

"*Fuckface*? Is that your nickname for your mom's boyfriend?" she laughs.

"Trust me when I say it's a compliment. The guy is sick. Every time he sees me, I can feel him undressing me with his eyes. And he makes these disgusting, inappropriate comments *all the time*."

"Doesn't your mom pick up on any of that?"

"Nah, she's all idiotically doe-eyed in love with the asshole. She wants me to come to their wedding in Mexico, and I'm pretty sure I would rather dissect my *own* brain than attend that event."

"Yeah," Ginny sighs as compassion sets in. "That's tough."

Ginny is an interesting drunk. Some people get angry, some get sad, and some even get super horny, but Ginny just gets loopy with either the giggles or all the feels. Honestly, I envy her. I don't want to think about anything of substance anymore tonight.

I down the rest of my drink and order another.

"So, tomorrow morning is my first class with the new celebrity doctor," I say, changing the subject to something more upbeat and less heavy.

"Ooh, I heard about that! He's a fancy city slicker, at least that's what everyone is saying."

"Ginny, nothing makes you sound more like a country bumpkin than using the term *city slicker*," I tease. "Just because we live in Eugene, Oregon doesn't mean we need to sound like we just fell off the back of a pickup truck."

"Are you calling me stupid?" She raises an eyebrow at me, but I can see her smirk bleed right through her attempt to act offended. "Anyway, what's his name again? I've seen him on TV, but I forget."

"Dr. Maxwell Benson," I answer, holding the mug up to my mouth and pretending it's a microphone. "The celebrity doctor that has, for some unknown reason, decided to teach a class here at our puny little med school as a new adjunct faculty member."

"*Geez*, seriously though, what on earth compelled a rich, successful guy like that to come here of all places?"

I shrug because I honestly don't know. Teaching a course in a small,

quiet, rural college is an odd choice for someone of Dr. Benson's status. I'm just grateful he's coming. I'm excited to take a class with him.

"I've never seen him," I admit. "I'm not much of a TV watcher. But I've heard he's hot for an older guy."

Ginny is more of a lightweight than me. She's only just now starting on her third beer and already she's starting to slur her words.

"He's not *old*," she laughs. "I think he's in his mid-thirties or something. I haven't seen him either, but we could..."

She reaches into her purse and fumbles around to get her phone, but I stop her before she can pull it out.

"Nope, no social media. I don't want to know what he looks like in advance," I say as I shake my head. "I don't want to form any superficial judgments about the guy."

"Why not? Superficial judgments are fun!"

I stand firm in my rejection of the idea of stalking his social media profiles.

"Dr. Benson is world-renowned and very respected, and all I want to do is learn from him. It's a rare opportunity to get someone of his caliber to teach here, and I don't want to spoil it. Becoming a doctor has been my dream ever since I was a little girl. I can't afford to let myself get distracted or go chasing after guys like my mom does. I need to stay focused on my future career goals."

"You're such a nerd," Ginny teases.

She's not wrong.

This is legitimately the first time I've been out to a bar all month. I've been too busy preemptively studying in order to be prepared for my upcoming classes.

But, nerdy as I may be, I am also *finally* starting to feel better after having a less-than-ideal conversation with my mother over the phone and then imagining all the scenarios and family holidays where I'll now have to put up with Fuckface once she marries him. The ale is definitely helping. And as nervous as I am about taking the class with Dr. Benson in the morning, I can't help but want to join Ginny in becoming a little bit tipsy. So, I order another drink.

Before I know it, I've lost count of how many mugs I've emptied. Ginny and I are both reeling with laughter, and I don't even care about anything anymore. It's a nice feeling.

“Fuck Fuckface,” she says, chortling over the way her lips vibrate when she says so many Fs at once. *She’s drunk*. And I am right there with her.

She’s also being loud enough that we’re starting to garner some attention from a *very* attractive guy sitting at the bar.

“Oh, look!” Ginny says as she waggles her drunken finger in the air and then spins in around in circles. I look toward the general direction she’s trying to point in, but my head is a lot fuzzier now than it was an hour ago. “It’s Pete!”

Pete is Ginny’s *very* overprotective older brother. I don’t know what he’s overprotective about though, considering the only things here in Eugene are hippies, college students, and a whole lot of trees.

“Don’t you have work tomorrow?” he scolds his sister once he arrives squarely in front of our table.

“Yeah? So?”

“Come on,” Pete says. He reaches down to help Ginny to her wobbly feet, despite her insistence that she wants to stay. Then he turns his eyes to me. “You should probably come with me too.”

I laugh at him because he’s now trying to ‘big brother’ me too.

“No thanks,” I say with minimal slurring. “I’m an adult, and I can get a ride home when I’m ready.”

“With who?”

“With whoever I want,” I retort.

Ginny laughs, and Pete just rolls his eyes at me as if I’m being stupid.

“Suit yourself,” he says. If Ginny were less drunk, she might have put up more of a fight. But she’s toeing the line of passing out now, so it’s actually probably good that Pete came to collect her.

I, however, am still fairly functional thanks to my high tolerance. I’m not entirely sure if that’s a blessing or a curse.

“Mind if I join you?”

I look up to see the attractive guy from the bar standing next to my table. He’s tall enough that I sit up straight to take in his whole composition, and the lines of his chiseled muscles are noticeable even beneath the layer of his thin shirt. He’s imposing, drop-dead handsome, and for a moment I sit there gawking at him with delayed reflexes until he talks again.

“I noticed your friend left, and I also noticed your glass is empty,” he smiles. “I thought I could help fix both of those things for you.”

His lips curl around his smile in a way that makes me bite down on my

own.

If I was thinking more clearly, I might have realized this would turn out to be something I will most likely regret. But between the alcohol and the stunningly hot looks of this man, all rational thought has already left the building.

“Sure,” I smile as I motion a surprisingly steady hand toward the empty seat in front of me.

He sits down, orders another final round of drinks, and the chemistry in the small space of air between us becomes palpable.

“You know, for a second there, I thought the man who came and collected your friend might have been trying to whisk you away as well. I’m glad he didn’t.”

“Oh?” I ask coyly. “And why is that?”

“Because then I wouldn’t have been able to sit here and stare at your loveliness while imagining all the ways I could make your toes curl beneath the bed sheets.”

Wow.

I don’t think I have ever been approached by a man who’s been quite so blatantly sexual with me before. I always imagined I was too uptight to do something as reckless as go home with a stranger I met at a bar, but now I am *seriously* considering it. Maybe it’s all the rounds of beers, or maybe it’s the rebellious streak that’s been rising in me all night, ever since I got off the phone with my mother. Or maybe it’s the fact that this guy, who looks older than me but in all the right ways, is hot as fuck and commanding in his presence—*something* is making me literally want to throw all caution to the wind.

One round of beers with him turns into two as we’re swept up in flirtatious conversation.

“What’s your name?” he finally asks me. One might think we would have started with that, but honestly, we’ve been too busy swallowing down the building angst and trying to outwit each other with clever remarks.

“Fiona. And you are?”

“Max.”

“Well, Max, I haven’t seen you here before and there aren’t too many pubs in Eugene to frequent. Are you new in town?” I ask, hoping he’s going to be forthcoming about recently moving to the area and planning to stay. I wouldn’t mind making this impromptu meeting a frequent occurrence,

especially if he's as decent of a guy as he is hot.

"For now," he answers vaguely.

"You're *mysterious*," I tease.

"And you're *incredibly sexy*."

I can feel the heat flushing my cheeks, and also sinking down into *other* places. The feeling makes me press my thighs together out of fear I might explode.

"Fiona," Max says as he looks at me through eyes that seem to dare me to jump into bed with him. "Why don't you come back to my place with me? We can continue our *talking* there, and I can pour you a better drink than this autumn ale."

I pretend to gasp as if insulting my favorite pub is blasphemy.

"Better than autumn ale?" I chide playfully.

He stands up and offers me his hand, and my eyes fall instantly on the bulge between his thighs. Without thinking, I get up and go with him.

The rest of the night is a blur of carnal adrenaline that wraps around me like a twisting snake. I don't even notice anything particular about Max's home or make it to that next drink he promised me. Instead, as soon as we step foot inside his place, I lunge forward and kiss him.

It's out of character for me, but I don't care. I *want* this man, and I want to feel the freedom and rush of doing something rash and utterly enjoyable. Tomorrow, I'll go back to being responsible.

The kiss is impassioned, made more so when I feel his tongue wrap around my own. A flurry of desire sweeps over me as Max lifts me up and carries me into his bedroom. He makes quick work of undressing me, and I try to keep up by undoing the buttons on his shirt and fumbling with the zipper on his pants. My inexperience may have been showing, but I was too riled up to care. As soon as I get the zipper undone, there is a frenzy of tossed-aside clothing that results in a whole lot of bare skin and the appearance of his swollen cock, which makes me quiver with an excited anticipation.

He pauses for a brief moment as if he's trying to act at least a little responsibly, but I push my body against his, unable to keep still. As soon as I wrap my legs around his waist to pull him closer, he bends down to kiss me again and all bets are off.

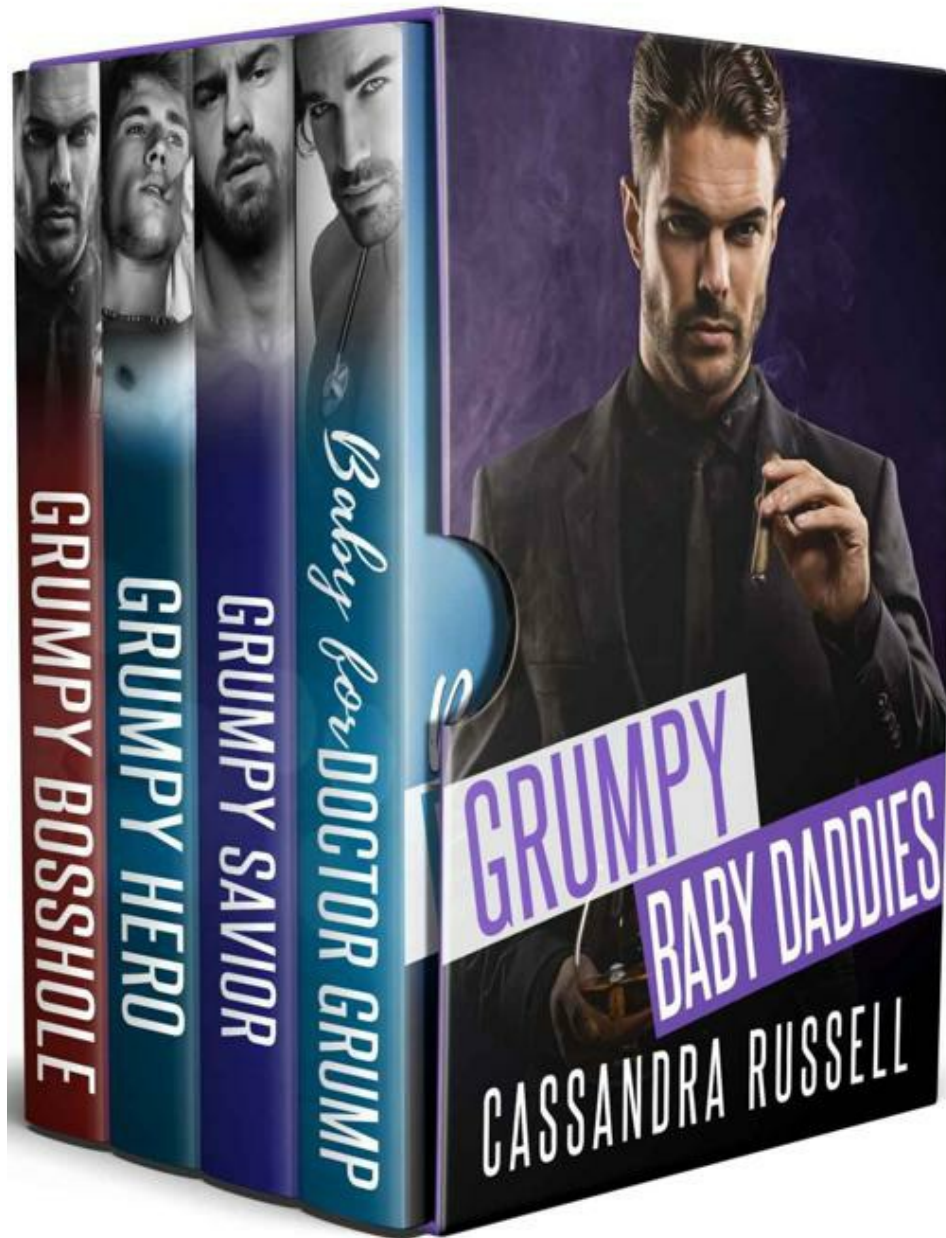
With one swift, strong motion, he pushes inside of me and pleasure shoots into my body like a bolt of electricity. Suddenly, I feel intensely sober

because of how badly I want to relish this experience.

With each slow pull and thrust, Max pushes deeper into me with a heightening pace that I try to slow down so I can savor it. Eventually though, the sensation overwhelms me, and I erupt into a trembling fit of satiated pleasure. He follows almost instantly.

And to think I started this night off with an argument with my mother and a drunken friend—and am ending it in the bed of this strikingly hot stranger. I can only imagine what the morning will bring.

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