



and THE BRICKWALL
THE BOMBSHELL

A *New Orleans Revelers* NOVEL

JIFFY KATE

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CHAPTER ONE

GREER



“MY OFFICE,” GEORGE BARKS AS HE WALKS BY MY DESK, FORGOING ALL pleasantries.

With my focus still on the computer screen in front of me, I curl my lips between my teeth to keep myself from saying something I shouldn't. But I can't fight off the eye roll once his back is to me, because any time my boss calls me into his office, it's never for anything good.

Greer, there's a cat stuck in a tree in the Garden District. Head over there and see what you can find out.

A main water line busted on Canal; I need you there ASAP.

The senior citizens' home is having a bake sale.

There's construction on I-10 and it's causing traffic delays.

No shit, George. There has been construction on I-10 since the day it was constructed. It's not news, at least not the kind of news I want to cover. All he seems to believe I'm good for are bullshit public interest stories that never amount to anything. They fill dead air that no one watches.

Don't get me wrong, I love cats and old people, but I want a story I can really sink my teeth into. I want something that will earn me a position at the City Desk, reporting on the hard news in New Orleans. And one of these days, I want to take George's job.

“What's up?” I ask, a few minutes later as I stand in George's doorway.

“Have a seat.” Avoiding eye contact, he points to the chair across from his desk.

Using those few moments where he's not looking at me, I take inventory, trying to gauge his mood. His salt and pepper hair is in disarray, the creases in his forehead are pronounced as he frowns at the document in front of him,

and his shirt is untucked and loose, even on his larger frame. Unfortunately, he's not giving much away, considering he always has a resting dick face.

Resolved to whatever fate awaits, I sit in the chair—legs crossed, back straight, hands clasped—as I wait for him to speak.

On the outside, I'm always the picture-perfect employee, ready and willing to do whatever I need to for the sake of the station. But on the inside, I'm clambering to break free from this mundane rut I feel like I've been in for the past couple of years.

If I didn't love what I do so much, I would've quit a long time ago. But I got this position on my own merit and I'm good at it, damn it, so I'm not quitting. Regardless of how much George drives me crazy, it's not *that* bad here.

George might be an egotistical asshole, but working for him is better than the alternative, which would be working for my father. Every time I think I've had all I can take, I remind myself of that and immediately my life as a beat reporter doesn't seem so bad.

"I have a new assignment for you."

He finally makes eye contact and smirks, like whatever he's about to say is going to make me happy.

Logically, I know he's about to give me another mind-numbing assignment. But my heart has other ideas. It's stupid enough to think this might be the day he takes a chance on me. The organ beats faster from the anticipation, but on the outside, I remain cool and calm—not willing to show my cards.

After living my formative years rubbing elbows with New Orleans high society, putting on a subdued façade is second nature.

What if he's finally giving me an investigative story?

Or he might need me to fill in at the desk...

Someone could be sick or have an unexpected emergency.

Am I really wishing sickness on my fellow co-workers?

"Jeffrey quit," he begins and I let my mask slip for a nanosecond. My head snaps back in shock. "He got an offer in Chicago and left this morning. Which means I need someone to cover the Revelers' pregame and postgame reporting."

Clearing my throat, I minutely shift in my seat. I want to suggest he move Clive over to that position, but I realize that would be disastrous. Clive is such a diva. He would probably quit the first time a player looked at him

sideways.

And don't even get me started on what he'd do in a room full of penises.

"What about Stan?" I ask, thinking if he's reporting on the Revelers, I can fill his spot as an evening anchor. It would only be periodic, but it would give me a shot and that's all I need—

"Stan has to stay at the desk. He's the face of WDSU," he says abruptly.

Cheryl is also not an option. Her pink pumps and tailored suits would not mesh well with sweaty baseball players and fanatical spectators.

"I'm sure you're deducing my options and realizing the only logical move I have is you. I know you did some sports reporting in college, so you're familiar with the atmosphere and the sport. You reported on baseball, right?"

"Yeah," I say, giving him a slight nod as I try to see myself inside the fieldhouse of the Revelers. Now that I know a few of them, this might get a little awkward, but I'm typically good with uncomfortable situations.

I'm Greer Bradley—capable and in charge of my own destiny—I can handle a few baseball players in tight pants... or no pants.

Flashbacks of that time I walked in on my college baseball team having a naked celebration after a championship win runs through my mind.

"Sure," I tell him, clearing my throat. It's not a criminal investigation, but it is better than covering the construction on Bourbon Street. "I can do it."

George's hands slap the desk as he stands. "Great. Rodney will get your press pass and parking permit. He'll also give you a contact for the stadium. Your pass will give you access to the team before and after the game. I'd like you to be at every home game, do a short pre-game piece and then focus on post-game interviews. For now, we'll keep you local, but if the team makes the playoffs, which they very well could, we might send you on the road for a few games. The city eats this shit up." He chuckles as he passes me, shaking his head in amusement. "Ten years ago, I never would've imagined we'd have a professional baseball team, but here we are and, just think, they have the potential to go all the way. Now, that's news."

I follow him down the hall as he continues to talk.

"Show me what you got, Bradley, and don't let me down."

I nod my head even though his back is to me.

"I'll send over an email with everything you'll need to know. We can even send you interview questions if you need them."

"That won't be necessary," I say, staking my claim. "If I'm going to be the correspondent, then I want the liberty to ask the questions I want to ask

and interview the players I want to interview.”

George stops and turns, leveling me with his steely blue eyes. “Don’t fuck this up. If you want to get off the public interest stories, you need to impress me.”

Being the correspondent for the Revelers wasn’t on my career wish list, but it’s not the worst gig and, damn, I want what he’s dangling in front of me.

“Next home game is tomorrow night,” George orders. “I’ve already cleared your schedule.”

He doesn’t have to tell me the Revelers’ schedule. I already know it by heart. Since my best friend, Sophie, is engaged to Owen Thatcher, one of their pitchers, I follow the team closely. As a matter of fact, I already had tickets for tomorrow night’s game, but I had planned on sitting with Sophie and Owen’s kids.

Looks like my plans have changed.

CHAPTER TWO

MACK



“YO, BRICK, DID YOU EVEN BREAK A SWEAT AT BATTING PRACTICE TODAY?” Luis, our back-up shortstop and all-around shit-stirrer asks as he strolls into the locker room.

“I don’t have to sweat to prove my skills, but I can wipe my balls with your towel so you can check to see if I’m wrong.”

“No thanks, you sick fuck,” he laughs, walking toward the showers.

Trash-talking in the locker room is a skill I pride myself on almost as much as my ability to catch anything that comes across the plate. For as long as I’ve been in the game—which, if I’m being honest, is a long damn time—I’ve been a master at slinging childish insults at my teammates and sometimes, opposing players. It’s all in good fun though.

Like I always say, if you can’t take it, don’t dish it.

“Don’t listen to Luis. I thought you looked good out there. No signs of a hangover or anything. What exactly did you do during the break, learn to crochet?” Ross Davies isn’t just the best pitcher on our team, he’s also the guy who holds this shitshow together and the man who knows me better than anyone, which means he knows the answer to his question already.

“Well, it wasn’t exactly crocheting, but I did learn some new moves while living it up in Vegas. You should’ve been there.”

Ross laughs. “Maybe next time.”

We both know he’s full of shit. Ross is too nice to say what he’s really thinking; that his Vegas days are over now that he’s married with a kid. I don’t hold it against him. His wife, Casey, is perfect for him and it does me good to see him so happy.

I used to think that life wasn’t for me, but the older I get, the more I feel

my goals shifting.

Needing to take a quick shower before dressing out, I pull my shirt over my head and toss it in a nearby hamper. When I stop by my locker to grab my toiletry bag and a towel, Jason Freeman, our resident douchebag, strolls in looking rode hard and put up wet.

“Freeman, you gonna make it? You could barely lift your bat out there on the field.”

It’s our first game back since the All-Star break and while most of us managed to get some much-needed R&R, a few played a little too hard, and it shows.

“Don’t worry about me, Brick. I just need a Red Bull and maybe a sling for my dick. Poor guy is exhausted from our weekend with Holly,” he says wagging his eyebrows.

I smirk, shaking my head. Holly Cooper is a cleat chaser who has run the bases when it comes to our team. She’s hot, extremely outgoing, and she doesn’t blab to the media about her conquests.

All of that makes Holly a perfect companion for guys who are only looking for a good time and zero commitment; guys like Jason Freeman, and not too long ago, me.

My last encounter with Holly was about a year ago. We were at a bar on Bourbon Street and she cornered me in the bathroom, where she dropped to her knees and *congratulated* me on our win earlier that night.

“Holly? You mean Holly “The Hoover” Cooper?” I ask, knowing I’m about to piss Freeman off and loving every second of it. “I didn’t know she was still making the rounds. Man, that girl is fun.” I pause for dramatic effect, a dreamy look on my face as I pretend to reminisce. “She damn-near sucked the barbell off my Prince Albert the last time I saw her.”

“You motherf—”

The room goes quiet as our skipper, Buddy, clears his throat. Loudly. And obviously in response to our exchange, based on the stern expression on his face.

When I make eye contact and start to apologize, I realize he’s not alone.

Standing beside him is a familiar face I definitely did not expect to see here.

Greer Bradley.

She’s a friend of a friend. Owen Thatcher, one of our relief pitchers and a good friend of mine, is engaged to her best friend, Sophie. So, I’ve seen her

around. But besides that, she's a reporter for one of the local television stations.

One thing is for sure, she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen—a real bombshell.

Long, toned legs, curves in all the right places, a mouth that's begging to be kissed, dark hair, and sultry green eyes that are shooting daggers straight at me.

Damn.

Not sure what I did to deserve that, but if looks could kill, I'd be dead. Maybe she overheard our bullshit, but surely that wouldn't be enough to earn me a death sentence. It had nothing to do with her.

Instead of giving her a look of apology, something to smooth the waters, I do the opposite and smirk. I can't help it. Give me a challenge and I'm going to attack.

These guys call me Brick, as in brick wall, because nothing gets through me. But when I was in college they called me Bulldog, because if I wanted something, I latched on and I didn't let go. I'm tough and tenacious. Nothing gets me going more than a challenge. Since I was a little kid, I've always thrived in the face of adversity.

So a little pushback from Greer is like catnip for me.

And let's get one thing clear, my smirk is not your run-of-the-mill facial expression. It's a weapon of mass destruction, capable of vanquishing mere mortals with devastating accuracy.

That's not me being cocky, just confident. I've seen what it can do.

We're a team, my smirk and I.

It makes the promises and then I follow through.

The only question is, how will the illustrious Greer Bradley react?

I watch her intently and she does not disappoint. Her eyes narrow even more and if I had blinked, I would've missed the brief flare of her nostrils. There might have even been some smoke coming out of her ears, but I miss it due to her breaking eye contact and making a quick sweep down my naked torso.

Did I just flex my chest muscles?

Maybe.

“Gentlemen,” Buddy calls out. “I have some information I'd like to share with you all, so if you could settle down and remember the manners your mamas taught you, I'd appreciate it.”

Greer's eyes meet mine once more, briefly, and I see a slight blush on those gorgeous high cheekbones.

That's right, Greer, take it all in, because there's plenty here to see.

As I let my smirk morph into a full-on Mack Granger panty-dropping smile, I swear she lets out an annoyed huff and it makes me chuckle.

With a clap of his hands, Buddy gets everyone's undivided attention. "You all know Jeffery, our local news correspondent? As of today, he's working in Chicago and that means Miss Bradley"—he gestures toward her—"will be taking his place."

Buddy gives Greer an approving look, almost as though he's proud of her, because that's the kind of guy he is. His reputation as a baseball club manager is well-known. We're all fortunate to work for a man who believes in and supports his team from the get-go, rather than making everyone jump through hoops to impress him first.

Greer's expression is a little less sure, but she hides it well, putting on a good face for the guys. I'm just a little more familiar with her usual confidence than the rest of these dipshits. With her being best friends with Sophie, and me being close with Owen, our paths have crossed quite a bit over the past year.

I know she reports on all sorts of news around the city, but I'm guessing this might not be her cup of tea.

"She'll be stepping in immediately and covering tonight's game," Buddy continues. "If she approaches you for an interview, give her your time. This is not the first female reporter we've had in our locker room, so you should know how to behave. But if any of you need a reminder, I'll be happy to chat with you while you run sprints."

Message received, Skip.

There's some murmuring amongst the guys as we all disperse to finish dressing out for the game. Some of them are a little too excited to have the gorgeous Greer Bradley in our clubhouse, while others seem a little annoyed. It's not that she's a woman, which some people might think would be an issue. There are some great female sports reporters and broadcasters. And they've finally started earning the respect they deserve.

The restlessness comes from change.

As baseball players, we're creatures of habit. So it wouldn't matter who Buddy brought in just now, the fact it isn't Jeffrey is the real problem. We don't like change.

After an amazing first half of the season, where our winning percentage is over six-hundred, we don't want anything messing with our mojo.

From now until October, it's eye on the prize.

Greer gives me one more side-ways glance before she turns her attention back to Buddy and they walk out of the locker room, talking like they're old friends.

"I'd hit that," Freeman says, dropping his drawers and walking butt-naked toward the showers. "Actually, I *will* hit that."

Something about the way he says that last part—or maybe because it's about Greer and she's more or less a friend by association—has my blood boiling.

I'm not going to go all holier than thou. I have my faults, plenty of them. And sure, I've been known to talk about women I've hooked up with, like Holly. But Freeman takes it to a whole new level, which is why any time I can, I like to give him shit.

That dude needs to be dropped down a peg or two.

A few hours later, after our third baseman, Bo Bennett, gets a walk-off homerun against the St. Louis Sledgehammers, we're back in the clubhouse and ready to celebrate.

"Beignets and beers for everyone tonight, fuckers!"

But, first, a shower.

Then ice for my knees.

And then, beignets and beers.

When I'm clean and dressed in a t-shirt and shorts, I grab some ice packs from one of our trainers and find a comfy chair to plop my tired ass in. Jorge and Val are seated nearby but their attention is pulled across the room where Greer is interviewing our new shortstop.

"Damn, she's still here?" I ask. Most reporters quickly hit up the star players from the game, get their sound bite, and leave.

"Yeah, the guys keep lining up to be interviewed by her, whether they deserve it or not, just for the chance to talk to her. I guess she's too nice to turn them down," Val explains, looking like he wishes he'd thought of the idea first.

"Maybe she hasn't figured out their game yet," Jorge offers. "Or she doesn't want to. She looks like the type to enjoy this kind of attention."

I'm getting ready to shut Jorge up when Greer turns our way, her expression morphing from professional and pleasant to annoyed and maybe a

little hurt, which means she probably overheard the conversation.

I hate the ball of guilt that immediately churns in my gut. Even though I wasn't technically part of the banter, I also didn't stand up for her and that's just as bad. But, really, what does she expect? She should be relieved we were going easy on her.

Being a newbie comes at a price, regardless of who you are.

Greer straightens her back and calls out to the room. "I'm done here. Thanks for the interviews and congratulations on your win. I'll see y'all tomorrow."

"You should stay for beers and beignets. It's tradition." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, but I can also hear the cutting edge, almost daring her to join us. I can't help the way this woman gets under my skin. My reaction to her feels instinctual, like how I know where a ball is going to land in my glove. I don't overthink, I just react.

She pauses, tossing that gorgeous hair over her shoulder. For a second, when our eyes meet, her armor slips and I watch as her eyes soften and her shoulders relax. For a moment, I think she's going to take me up on the offer, but then some other douchebag motherfucker lets out a hoot and holler and the walls are immediately back up.

Her green eyes turn cool and she quirks an eyebrow. "Maybe another time."

It's effortless, the way she packs a punch with just one look. And when she turns to walk out the door, her ass swaying in that skirt—it's like an award-winning motion picture crammed into three seconds.

The woman knows how to make an exit.

CHAPTER THREE

GREER



ONE OF THE MANY GREAT THINGS ABOUT LIVING IN NEW ORLEANS...NO ONE bats an eye if they see you talking to yourself. There are all sorts of people filling these streets—performers, eccentrics, drunks. You name it, we’ve got it. Being a melting pot of people is what makes New Orleans what it is.

So, all the muttering I’ve done to myself from the field to my apartment has gone unnoticed.

Irritation is still boiling through me after a quick trip to the press booth to file my story on the game, I barely remember calling an Uber. Thankfully, my driver didn’t try to engage me in a conversation, allowing my rage to boil and fester as I cursed Mack Granger the entire drive home.

I’m still fuming and mumbling under my breath when I open the front door to the condo I share with my friend, Whitney. If she’s here, she’s not making herself known, so I stomp to my bedroom and slam the door.

Beignets and beers, indeed!

Who does that guy think he is?

“Brickwall. Ugh!” I spit out, removing my clothes and throwing them on top of my dry-cleaning pile. What does that nickname mean anyway? I’m sure it’s sports related but I can’t help wondering if there’s more to it... like maybe referencing the way he’s built like a brick wall... or perhaps all the women he’s taken up against a brick wall.

For fuck’s sake, Greer, why is that where your mind goes?

Because as infuriating as Mack Granger’s behavior is, I can’t deny the man is hot as fuck.

Thick shoulders and thighs.

Dark hair.

Dark eyes.

And a jaw that could cut glass.

He's not as tall as some of the other players, like Ross Davies and Owen Thatcher, but he carries himself like he owns the goddamn room. He demands attention.

When he's behind the mound, he's nothing but power and grit. There's a reason his teammates and opponents refer to him as Brick or *Brickwall*, and that's because nothing gets through him. And on the off chance it does, he's the first one to want to kick his own ass.

Mack Granger takes the game of baseball seriously, but he's also a fun-loving guy. He keeps the team's morale up and facilitates a lot of comradery between the players. So, despite what I walked into with him talking shit about some girl to Jason Freeman, I know he's not always *that* guy.

However, as attracted to Mack as I am, and have been since we first met last year, I've done my best to avoid him at all costs. It wasn't hard for a while because I was still dating Miles the narcissist off and on. And ever since I blocked him, I've been busy with work and haven't made it to many get-togethers where I'd see Mack. But now that my job is forcing me to interact with him, I don't know how much longer I can continue to avoid him or the way he makes my body tingle by just looking at me.

When I step out of the shower, my cell phone rings so I quickly wrap a towel around my body and run to grab it off my nightstand.

"Hey, bitch, hey! Congrats on your first Reveler's segment!" Sophie's enthusiastic voice rings out when I put the call on speaker phone.

Laughing, I reply, "Thanks. I didn't think you'd make it home in time to watch it."

"Of course, I did! Watched it and recorded it for posterity's sake. You rocked it and you looked amazing, too. Owen said you made a great first impression with the team."

That last comment leaves me feeling both surprised and relieved. Being that he's one of the pitchers for the Revelers, his opinion is important to me. Even though this wasn't an assignment I was gunning for, I still want to do a good job in hopes it leads to something more—something I'm passionate about, like stories that change people's lives.

I also want to shut down those cocky assholes and prove that I'm just as good, if not better, than any man who's ever been in my position. And I want them to know I'm there for the story, not to flirt with every player.

So, I'm going to make the best of it and kick ass while I'm with the team. I need to impress George and anyone else who's watching.

One way to ensure that happens is to avoid Mack as much as possible, because it's obvious he knows how to push my buttons and rile me up.

From the second I walked into the clubhouse and overheard his manwhore comment, I felt my hackles go up. I've always known that Mack is a player, but hearing him talk about having his dick sucked by Holly "The Hoover" Cooper made me want to bleach my ears... but that last bit, about the Prince Albert, made my lady bits tingle.

How is that legal?

Men as hot as Mack Granger shouldn't be allowed to have things like Prince Alberts.

I've never been with a man who had his dick pierced... *I wonder—*

"Greer?" Sophie asks, reclaiming my attention.

"Yeah."

"Thought I lost you for a sec," she says.

My cheeks heat. I know she can't see me and has no clue I was just thinking about Mack Granger's pierced cock, but I'm embarrassed anyway. Clearing my throat, I fake a yawn. "No, sorry. I'm just tired," I say, walking over to my chest of drawers to pull out some pajamas.

I really am exhausted, that part isn't a lie. All I want after the day I've had is my couch, a bag of potato chips, and a bottle of wine.

"Let's have lunch soon," Sophie suggests.

"Don't you start back to school next week?" I ask, realizing the month of July is practically history and August... Well, New Orleans summers are brutal for kids returning to school. I'm counting down the days until fall and a reprieve from the sweltering heat and humidity.

Sophie sighs. "Yes, and I'm equal parts excited and already counting the days until the first break."

We both laugh. I can't imagine how taxing it is to shape and mold children, but Sophie was born to teach and she was also born to be a mother. Even though she started out as a nanny for Owen's kids, Molly and Ryan, she quickly became more of a mother figure.

"Well, that calls for a night at Lagniappe. The team travels back on Sunday and has an early game on Monday, maybe we could meet up that night for dinner, unless Owen won't let you out of his meaty paws."

"I heard that," a gruff voice growls.

I smirk. "Permission to take your fiancée to dinner, sir."

"Permission granted."

I hear Sophie and Owen laughing, probably doing things unsuitable for the eyes of children.

"Okay, I'm going to let you two go do whatever you do when the Revelers win."

I know all about baseball players and their superstitions and traditions. I have no doubt Sophie and Owen get wild in the bedroom. Even though they both come across as well-mannered and wholesome, I've heard enough to know their private time is anything but.

"Dinner next Monday," Sophie calls out. "Love you!"

"Love you too. See you soon."

When I walk into the kitchen to grab the wine and potato chips, I feel a little lighter. Somewhere between my hot shower and much-needed chat with Sophie, I don't feel as frustrated or annoyed. Still a bit turned on, if I'm being honest, but that's nothing my vibrator can't fix.

I wonder if they make one with a Prince Albert piercing?

Is that a thing?

"Hello," Whitney's voice calls out just as I'm snuggling into the couch and grabbing for the remote. "Greer?"

"Living room," I call back.

Whitney and I started rooming together about six months ago. She was in the process of giving her boyfriend of three years an ultimatum and my last roommate had taken a job in Atlanta. We've been friends since high school, but never super close, which makes the roommate arrangement work pretty great.

"Hey," she sing-songs as she walks into the living room carrying two armfuls of shopping bags. She drops them by the chair and plops down with a delicate grunt.

Whitney's parents are loaded and unlike me and Sophie, she doesn't mind taking every penny they give her. According to another mutual friend of ours, she's only had access to her trust fund for three years and has blown through half of it. So, late last year, her parents put her on a budget.

The entire idea is laughable, because she still buys and does whatever she wants.

"Looks like you had a good day," I surmise by the huge smile on her face. I know shopping is her drug of choice, but it takes a lot for Whitney to look

this blissed out.

She sits up straight and presses her lips together as she exhales, then she shoves a hand toward me. “Conrad proposed!”

Leaning forward, my mouth falls open as my eyes grow wide as I try to take in the ring on Whitney’s hand. Now, that’s a diamond. There’s no way this rock is less than six carats. I also try to hide my shock, not that she’s getting married. We’ve always known Whit’s ultimate goal in life was to land a rich husband, but I didn’t see it coming so quickly.

“You’re going to need a brace to hold your hand up.”

“I know!” she squeals. “Isn’t it gorg?”

It really is stunning, huge but stunning. “Congratulations,” I finally say, extracting myself from the couch to give her a hug.

She lightly pats my back, never being one for much affection.

“Let the wedding planning begin,” she says, folding her hands in her lap as she stares at the ring. “I was thinking about a bachelorette party in Paris. That’s where my designer is and if we time it right, I’ll be able to do my dress fitting while we’re there. Of course the wedding has to be here, my mother practically has it planned already. She put deposits down last year.”

“You weren’t even engaged last year.”

“Well, you can’t wait until the last minute, silly,” she says, waving me off. “Anyway, you’ll be one of my bridesmaids, and Soph, of course. I need to make some calls.”

She shifts to stand, gathering her bags, and stops. “Oh, I almost forgot. Conrad bought us an apartment in the Quarter, and he wants me to move in right away. The bottom floor has already been remodeled, but he’s letting me redecorate the top floor. I can’t wait!”

“So, you’re moving out?” I ask, following her from the room with my chip bag in one hand and wine in the other as dread collects in the pit of my stomach like a lead weight.

“Next week,” she verifies. “But don’t worry, I’ll pay up my portion of rent for a few months to give you time to find a new roomie.”

That’s really nice of Whitney. She’s not usually so thoughtful.

“Conrad suggested it when he surprised me with the ring and apartment. I told him it probably wasn’t necessary, but you know how he is.”

Yes, I do know. Conrad is actually a nice guy, and how Whitney landed him, I’ll never know.

She might be my roommate, and our friendship dates back to high school,

but Whitney is one of those surface level friends. You always know where you stand with her, and that's below her status and money. Nothing comes between or above those two. She was bred to be a prize pony and she's happy to fill that role.

"I appreciate it."

She pauses again in the hallway. "Are you okay? Why are you in pajamas already? It's Friday night."

"Long day at work," I tell her, powering on the television. I don't even bother telling her about the turn of events in my life because, let's face it, she's not really that interested.

Once she's gone, I down the glass of wine I poured myself and switch it out for the bottle. This day just keeps giving. Now, not only do I have to find superhuman strength to stay away from Mack Granger, but I also have to suffer through the grueling process of finding another roommate.

Whitney's getting married and moving into the apartment of her dreams.

Sophie is living her best life, engaged to Mister Sexy Balls.

And I'm sitting alone on my couch, chugging straight from a bottle of wine and eating my feelings.

Like Whitney, I have a trust fund, but unlike Whitney, I don't like using it.

It's tempting, but also feels a lot like spending blood money. My parents love to use money as leverage, not just in business, but in their personal lives as well. At a very young age, I realized how it worked in the Hawthorne household. Every relationship they have has been bought with a price, except mine.

I'm the one thing in their lives that can't be bought or controlled.

Ever since I graduated from high school, I've made it on my own. I worked my ass off and got a scholarship to Tulane. I spent my summers working and saving money, much to my mother's dismay. And when I was in college, I got an internship with the television station I work at now.

That was the straw that broke the camel's back.

My family owns Hawthorne Communications, the largest communications company in Louisiana. They have two television stations, a newspaper, and several other media-based companies under the HC umbrella.

Me taking a job for the competition was like drawing a line in the sand with blood.

When you come from a well-known family like mine, certain things are

expected of you, but all those things come with a price I've never been willing to pay. I don't want my parents telling me who I'll marry and where I'll live. I refuse to let them dictate my life, which is exactly what would have happened if I had accepted the position my father offered me at Hawthorne Communications.

When I took the job and they cut me off, I accepted my losses and moved on with my life.

Call me crazy, but I'd rather be struggling to make ends meet than be under their thumb.

Sophie's the only person who really understands me. She gets it. Coming from a wealthy, overbearing family herself, she's seen the ugly side of money. We'd both decided at a young age that we didn't want to grow up to be carbon copies of our parents.

To some, we might sound ungrateful, but it's not that at all.

I just want to know that everything I have in life is truly mine. And at the end of it all, I want to leave my own legacy, not one that was bought or decided for me.

CHAPTER FOUR

MACK



“AIDEN.” I ANSWER THE CALL FROM MY AGENT THROUGH MY EARBUDS AS I do a few reps on the leg press. “What’s up?”

“Mack,” he says, sounding a little annoyed.

Our last few conversations have started this way, but I feel like I’ve been minding my P’s and Q’s and staying out of the spotlight, so I’m not sure what this call is about.

“I haven’t banged anyone’s fiancée recently, if that’s what you’re calling about.”

He huffs out a laugh. “That’s good to hear. Unfortunately, the gossip hounds are still on your trail. They’ve pulled up some old photos of you coming out of a hotel room and they’re recycling them like old trash.”

Fuck.

It’s not that I care what people think about me. I don’t. I’ve always lived my life under the belief that we’ve only got one to live and I’m going to fucking live mine to the fullest.

Unlike so many of the guys I play with, guys who are more family-oriented and settled down, I’m a free spirit. According to the gossip columns and tabloids, I’m *Big League’s Biggest Playboy*.

My life isn’t quite as salacious as they make it sound, but I do like to have sex and I don’t usually have repeats. If that makes me a playboy, so be it.

However, that way of life has started coming with a price, one that I can’t afford to pay any longer. My philandering ways, although fun in the moment, have cost me a few lucrative endorsements. A few years ago, I didn’t really care much about that. But the older I get, the more I realize I won’t be able to play this game forever.

The oldest players in the league are barely forty these days. If all my parts were in top condition, I might get another five years, but thanks to a knee injury a few years ago, I'm already pushing it at thirty-three. After every game, I meet up with a trainer who treats my knee—massages it, ices it, and wraps it.

I'm playing the best season I've had in years, and I'd like to think I'm hitting a new stride, but nothing is guaranteed.

Last season, another top catcher in the league had a career ending injury just from catching a wild pitch. That shit can happen in the blink of an eye.

Even though I've done well for myself, early on I wasn't as wise with my money. Coming from nothing, I went a little wild in the beginning and lost some money on failed investments. I've also donated a lot of money to charities back home, funding new buildings and providing resources for kids growing up like I did. Those endeavors mean a lot to me and I want to be able to continue to support them, even after I retire.

Over the last few years, I've buckled down and done what I need to for my future—diversified my portfolio and relied on people like Aiden to direct me in my decision making.

"Tell me what to do," I tell Aiden, hating that I have to bend to anyone's approval, but also knowing I have no other choice.

He heaves out a heavy sigh that I feel all the way from California.

"We need to clean up your image."

Finishing my last rep, I wince at the tinge of pain in my knee, knowing I'll need to stop by the trainer's office. I decided to squeeze in a conditioning session prior to tonight's game against Toronto. Blane will probably give me the third degree about conditioning on game day, but I needed to release some built-up tension after my verbal sparring with Greer Bradley.

And since I'm trying my damndest to keep my dick in my pants, I had no other option than to sweat it out in the gym.

"And how do you suggest I do that?" I ask, grabbing my towel and running it over my face and hair. "I've been doing everything you told me to do. I haven't been hooking up when we're out of town. The last chick I took home was over three weeks ago and I was discreet. We haven't been hanging out at bars after games. I'm basically living like a monk over here."

There's a long pause and for a second I think he hung up on me. "Aiden?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm still here." He heaves a heavy sigh. "Just thinking."

“You said it’s just going to take some time, right?” I ask, running back over our last few conversations. “Pretty soon, someone else will catch their attention and they’ll move on.”

He chuckles darkly. “Not with you playing like you are.”

“Fuck, man, I’m not blowing my game just to score an endorsement.”

“I’m not suggesting that, just stating the facts. As long as you’re raking like you have been and playing a mean game of defense, the dogs will stay on your trail.”

Laying back on the bench, I throw a sweaty arm over my face. “So, what you’re saying is I’m fucked. Damned if I do and damned if I don’t.”

“I think that’s the answer,” Aiden says slowly.

“What?” I ask, not following the dots he’s connecting.

“We’ve been going about this all wrong.”

I sit up and climb off the bench. “So, you want me to go back to banging randoms?”

“No, I want you to pick one and make her your girlfriend. Let’s really give them something new to talk about and in the meantime, we’ll give you a new, cleaner image, show the brands we want to work with that you’re a safe bet.”

As I stare at my reflection in the floor to ceiling mirrors, I wonder if maybe I fell and hit my head. Maybe I never even made it to the gym and crashed my car on the way here. I could be laying in a hospital bed somewhere with a head injury because there’s no way Aiden is saying what I think he’s saying.

“You want me to call up one of my fuck buddies and ask them to go steady?”

He laughs. “If this was nineteen-fifty-four, sure. But it’s not. So, how about you think back on all the women you’ve hooked up with and narrow them down to someone you could tolerate going on a few dates with, being seen in front of the cameras with. There’s that benefit gala coming up, she can be your date to that. And then, of course, post-season will be right around the corner and since the Revelers will most likely be—”

“No!” I practically yell into the phone and look around to no one is listening in. “You can’t say that shit, man. It’s bad luck. We don’t need any bad juju messing shit up.”

“Right, I forgot, but you get the idea.”

The phone goes silent for a moment as I pace around the gym, running a

hand through my hair trying to wrap my mind around what he's asking me to do. "So, I need to find someone to fake a relationship."

Aiden huffs out a laugh. "Well, I'd like to say find a *real* girlfriend, but I realize that's asking a lot. So, yes, a fake girlfriend who's willing to be in on the ruse and not blow your cover... someone you can trust. Because if it gets out that it's a load of shit, it will backfire and cause a bigger mess than we're trying to clean up."

"Fuck," I mutter, plopping back down on the bench hard enough the weights rattle. "This sounds like a bad idea, man."

"It's not," Aiden says confidently. "It'll work. I just wanted to throw that out there so you know how serious it is that you pick the right girl."

Right, like that'll be easy.

"I have faith in you," Aiden adds. "I'll call you back in a few days to see how things are going. In the meantime, continue keeping a low profile until you find this wonder woman. If we play our cards right, we can fast track this relationship and convince the media you've been involved for a while."

My gut twists. I don't like this one bit. A fake relationship means I'll be lying to the public, and probably to my teammates, at least some of them. I know I can trust Ross, Owen, and Bo. But that's about it. Even Val and Phil, who used to be my roommates, can't really be trusted. One trip to the bar after a game and they'd likely spill everything they know. The last thing I want is for someone like Freeman catching wind of this. He's the kind of douchebag who would take it straight to the gossip rags.

"Mack, you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"You good?"

Exhaling, I drop my head between my shoulders. "Yeah."

"I'll talk to you in a few days."

After that, he ends the call and I'm left wondering how the hell this is going to work out.

Part of me wants to tell everyone to suck my dick. If that means losing out on the big endorsements, then that's what it means, because I'd rather live my life without lies and deceptions.

But the other part of me, the one that wins out in the end, knows pulling this off and getting the endorsements is what will set me up for whatever happens next. If I blow out my knee next season and my career ends, I'll be fine.

And so will my mom.
And everyone else who depends on me.
For them, I can do this.

CHAPTER FIVE

GREER



SITTING AT MY DESK, I HAVE TO BLINK A FEW TIMES TO KEEP MY EYES FROM glazing over as I look at last night's stats. Not just for the Revelers, but for every damn team in major league baseball. I'd forgotten how much this sport loves its numbers and I swear, there's a statistic for every second of the game.

This is my life now. Just click-click-clicking away on my laptop until it's time to get prettied up for the next game, waiting to be surrounded by sweaty guys preoccupied with spitting and scratching their balls.

Not gonna lie, I really don't mind the sweaty guys. But being the professional I am, I can't let it be known I'm enjoying the locker room show.

Lucky for me, the New Orleans Revelers are quite pleasant to look at, even that smart-mouth, Mack Granger. I just need to handle myself better when I'm around him. He's one of those people who instinctively knows when he's getting to you and doubles down on his efforts. I know from Sophie he's a genuinely nice guy, but I can't help my automatic response to him.

I can't even put my finger on why he irritates me.

Maybe it's his arrogance?

Maybe it's that smirk that makes me want to drop my panties and then slap him for making me react that way?

I don't know. But whatever it is, every time I'm around him, I feel hot and flushed. My heart rate spikes and I have to talk myself down from the rafters.

Once I'm done with stats, I start working my way through emails. The amount I receive now has nearly tripled since starting my new position a

couple of weeks ago. Besides the quantity, the tone of my emails has also changed. Long gone are the sweet grandmas emailing to tell me how thankful they are that the cat made it out of the tree, or the kids who would email me after I did a report on one of the local schools. Now, I get misogynistic emails from men who think they own the sport of baseball.

Ask better questions.

Learn something about baseball before the next game.

Your skirt is too short.

Your skirt needs to be shorter.

All of it does nothing to soothe my workplace ire.

“I watched your last few tapes,” George mentions as he approaches my desk. “This new position seems to suit you well.” He stands by my side looking pleased. “The camera loves you.”

“Thanks,” I tell him, giving him a fake smile in hopes he’ll go away and just let me do my job.

“Having said that,” he says, clearing his throat, “I do have one critique.”

How did I think I’d get lucky enough for him to compliment me and move on? This is George we’re talking about and he always has something critical to say, even to his best reporters.

Leaning back in my chair with my arms crossed, I wait for him to continue and brace myself for whatever is about to come out of his mouth, knowing it will more than likely piss me off.

He slips his arms into his suit jacket he had draped over his arm, obviously on his way out the door. “You should smile more,” he says, turning to walk away. “The people love that. Makes the ratings go up.”

Fuck right off, George.

He chuckles as he walks away, knowing exactly the kind of affect his words had on me. But George is old school and he doesn’t give a shit about how backwards his antiquated thoughts are.

Flipping him the bird behind his back, I push away from my desk.

I need a change of scenery before I get fired for creating a hostile work environment. So, I load up my laptop and head to Neutral Grounds, my favorite coffee shop in the French Quarter.

The walk from my office to the shop is exactly what I need to clear my head. I’ll never tire of the sound of jazz music floating on the breeze along with the aroma of delicious food. Beautiful architecture, people laughing... New Orleans is simply good for my soul.

When I walk inside Neutral Grounds, the smell of espresso overwhelms me in the best of ways. I take in a deep breath and exhale loudly, making the owner, CeCe, laugh.

“What’s up, bebe? Need your usual fix?”

“In the largest cup you have, please, unless you have an intravenous application behind the counter you can hook me up to.”

“I’m fresh out of I.V.s but a big-ass cup I can do, don’t you worry.” CeCe turns around to fill my order, so I toss some bills onto the counter and go find a seat on the comfy couch by the window.

A few minutes later, CeCe slides onto the couch beside me and hands over the huge cup of what I know is the best iced coffee this side of the Mississippi. “You look like you’ve had one helluva day and it’s barely two o’clock. What’s up?”

“Same shit, different day,” I say with a sigh before taking a very unladylike drink. The only thing better than this would be my favorite martini from Come Again, but technically, I’m still on the clock, so this will have to do for now. “Well, that’s not entirely true. There’s new shit to go with the old shit... but it’s shit all the same.”

We both laugh and then simultaneously lean back into the couch.

“Is spending your nights on camera with a bunch of hot, dirty guys really that bad?”

I think about her question for a moment. Is it my dream job? No. But it’s also not the worst assignment I’ve had by far. And I realize there are a lot of people who’d kill for this job, so I should be thankful for this stepping stone.

“You’re right, it’s not horrible, it’s just not what I want to be doing right now. I know I sound like an ungrateful brat, so feel free to ignore me.”

CeCe squeezes my arm. “You’re not ungrateful,” she insists. “And you’re allowed to be a brat every once in a while, just don’t make it a habit. I’d hate to have to cut off one of my best customers.”

“I’d never be able to live without your coffee,” I say, sitting up and grabbing my laptop out of my bag. “No more bratty behavior, I promise.”

“How’s everything else?” CeCe asks, standing from the couch. “Sophie, Owen, and the kids?”

I sigh, nodding my head as I think about the happy family. “Good, they’re all doing really good.”

“And the Revelers are killing it,” CeCe adds.

“We don’t talk about how good they’re doing,” I say dryly as I open my

computer and power it on. “Superstitions and all that bullshit.”

She laughs. “Well, they should send out a memo to the whole city because that’s all everyone is talking about these days. Maybe you should do a side piece on baseball superstitions and traditions?”

“That would have to be its own series.”

The bell above the door tinkles and CeCe calls out a welcome to the newcomers. “That’s the end of my break. Let me know if you need a refill before you leave.”

“You’re the best,” I call out after her as I open my email and pick up where I left off at the office.

The first few emails are from random people who have news topics they think I need to cover.

The traffic on Canal is horrendous!!

Someone needs to do something about the smell on Bourbon Street...

I have a new restaurant opening and would love to have you in for dinner on the house.

There is also one from George thrown into the mix, with information about next week’s schedule, one from a coworker inviting me to happy hour next Friday, and one from the Revelers’ front office letting me know I can pick up my parking permit any time today or tomorrow.

I’ve been taking an Uber to the stadium, but that’s only because parking around the stadium is awful and it saves me time. However, having my own permit will be convenient and keep me from having to head back to the station to pick up my car after night games.

When I make it through all of the junk that the filters didn’t catch, there is still one unread email. The subject line reads: *Greer, long time no see.*

At first, I think it’s something from a viewer, possibly someone who moved out of state or something... maybe they’re back in New Orleans and missed our station. But then, I open the email and read the contents: *A sense of entitlement is a cancerous thought process that is void of gratitude and can be **deadly** to our relationships.* — Steve Maraboli

It’s the bolded **deadly** that makes my stomach knot. Glancing around, I’m not sure what I’m looking for, maybe just to remind myself I’m in a public place and have nothing to worry about. Or maybe, I want to make sure no one is reading over my shoulder, because after reading it a few times, my knee-jerk reaction is to delete the email and pretend like I never saw it.

I mean, it’s just an email, right?

Maybe it's *blackdiamond259*'s favorite quote?

This isn't the first email I've received from this sender, but it's been over a month since I've seen this username in my inbox. And the earlier emails weren't this creepy. They were more observational, usually mentioning my latest public interest story. Sure, they weren't my typical viewer email, but they didn't have this tone.

Something is different about this one. I guess they might've meant to add an explanation for the quote and accidentally hit send instead... I've done that before—started an email and forgot to finish it. That's plausible.

But if that's the case, why isn't there a follow-up email? Because it was sent over nine hours ago, at three-thirty in the morning to be exact, so the sender had plenty of time to write and send an additional email.

Beyond that, the words make my skin prickle.

The more I read it, the more I agree with the sentiment. Entitlement is cancerous. I almost hit the reply button and tell the sender just that, but my gut won't let me.

Chewing on my thumb nail, I decide it's better to not engage, but I don't delete it like I have the others. For some reason, I pull it over into a new file and then close my laptop. As I finish off my coffee, I notice a slight tremble in my hand, and I breathe in and out slowly to get my heart rate back to normal. The adrenaline spike was unexpected. It usually takes a lot to rattle me, so why is this email getting to me?

When I glance down at my watch, I see it's already after three and I have a game to cover tonight, so I stand and smooth down my skirt.

"Are you headed out?" CeCe asks from behind the counter.

"Yeah, I need to get back to the station," I tell her, as I shoulder my bag and grab my empty glass from the table, walking it over and placing it in the bin provided for dirty dishes. "I'll probably see you tomorrow."

"See you then," she calls out. "And good luck to you and those superstitious baseball boys."

Her wink makes me laugh and helps ease some of the anxiousness coursing through my body, but I can't shake the feeling I have when I walk out of the shop, like I'm being watched.

My eyes take in each person who passes me, and I find myself glancing around at storefronts as I go by, looking for anything or anyone out of the ordinary—a reason for my paranoia—but nothing sticks out.

The ring of my phone actually makes me jump and I laugh at the

ridiculousness of it all.

Get a grip, Greer.

When I look at the screen, I see it's Sophie and immediately answer.

"Hey," I say, still trying to sound normal.

"Hey, sorry it took me so long to call you back," she says. "It's been a crazy day, but sounds like things have been even crazier for you."

I texted her yesterday, letting her know Whitney is moving out and asking if she knows anyone who might need a place to stay. I don't have to have a roommate, but I like having one. It makes my life a little more comfortable and keeps me from dipping into my savings, which hopefully will be what I use to buy a house one of these days.

When I meet the person I'm supposed to live my life with.

Whenever that is, if ever.

"I can't believe Whit finally found her future Mr. Rothberg!" Sophie exclaims, making us both laugh. "I mean, I can, but I thought her and Conrad would have one of those really long, drawn out engagements, but it sounds like they're taking the fast track instead. At this rate, they might be married before me and Owen."

Appreciating the distraction, I let out a deep sigh. "I know. I thought I had a little more time to find a replacement."

"You'll be fine, right?" Sophie asks, the concern evident in her tone.

Waving my hand in the air, I nod, even though she can't see me. "Yeah, and she's going to pay her part until I find someone else, but the hard part is that all of my friends are either married, getting married, or have a dick."

Sophie laughs and I join her, grateful for the mundane conversation relaxing the tension in my chest.

"How about someone from work?" Sophie asks. My face scrunches at her suggestion and before I can say anything, she laughs. "Never mind, forget I said that."

And that's why Sophie Callahan is my best friend. She knows me better than anyone, sometimes even better than I know myself. She nurtures me like a mother, cares about me like a sister, and listens better than any therapist ever could.

"It'll work itself out," I tell her, not wanting her to worry. "Will you be at the game tonight?"

Now it's Sophie's turn to sigh. "That's the other reason I was calling. The kiddos are under the weather. I think it's just a summer cold, but I want them

to get all the rest they need before we start back to school, so we're staying in tonight."

"Oh, dang. Sorry they're sick. Give them an extra cuddle from me."

"I also wanted to see if you'd mind coming over and hanging out on Monday night after the game instead of us going to Lagniappe. The guys are wanting an impromptu cook-out that night and I didn't have the heart to tell Owen no. But if you're not okay with it, I could get everything ready and still meet you. It's okay, whatever you want to do."

Smiling as I cross the street toward my building, I shake my head at my best friend who is always trying to make everyone happy. "It's fine, Soph. A cook-out sounds good."

"I know you're around these guys all the time now, so if you don't want to—"

"I'm always happy to come over and hang out with you," I assure her.

"We don't even have to mingle with those sweaty meatballs," Sophie says with a chuckle. "We can take a bottle of wine and sit by the pool."

The last time we all were over at Sophie and Owen's, those sweaty meatballs took over the damn pool, launching themselves cannonball style, but I let her have her dream. "Sounds like a plan."

An hour later, I've refreshed my makeup, pulled my hair back in a low ponytail, and I'm headed to the stadium to pick up my parking pass and get ready for tonight's game. When I go to open my car door, I notice a small piece of paper stuck to the driver's side window.

It's square and innocuous, but my stomach still drops.

Shaking my head at my ridiculousness, I open the door and toss my bag inside, but once I'm in the car, I open the folded piece of paper. All that's written is the word *gratitude* with a circle drawn around it and a harsh slash across the word.

Totally innocuous, right?

Except, it doesn't feel that way.

This, paired with the email that's now branded on my brain, feels too coincidental.

Glancing around, I only see a few familiar cars parked in the lot and no one else in sight.

It's nothing.

Tucking the piece of paper into my bag, I start my car.

With one last look around the parking lot, I drive out onto the street, but I

only make it a block or two before the silence in the car is too much. All I can hear are my loud thoughts.

Unable to stand it any longer, I turn on the radio and use the rest of my drive to the stadium as my own personal concert—belting out the words to a Taylor Swift song.

You can do this, Greer.

It's nothing.

You're fine.

When I arrive at the field, I'm still feeling a little rattled, but less so after I sang to the top of my lungs for a few blocks. I swear Anti-Hero was written about my ex, which makes it very therapeutic to sing along to, especially at high volume.

After flashing my press badge to the necessary personnel, I find myself on the field where the Revelers are scattered about, doing various drills.

“You look a little lost, Reporter.”

There's no mistaking that low baritone. Slapping on a smile, I turn to him.

“You're actually just the person I was looking for. Roger said you'd be my go-to for some pre-game sound bites. And my cameraman will be here in just a few minutes to catch some clips we're going to edit together for a new intro.”

Mack's gaze is blazing, a lot like the New Orleans summer sun, and I can't tell if he's annoyed or amused at my presence. Regardless, I don't let it deter me.

After a few seconds, he nods, motioning over toward the dugout.

“Let's sit in here. It's out of the sun.”

When he takes a seat on the bench, I follow, but I can't help noticing how freaking good he smells, even now—when he's hot and a little sweaty. It's like the heat amplifies his manly scent.

Not going there.

Nope.

Get your head in the game, Greer.

Clearing my throat, I dig around in my bag and pull out my recorder.

“Obviously, everything you say will be recorded,” I preface. “But if there's anything you want removed, just tell me and I'll delete it. I only want to use material you're comfortable with.”

Mack gives me a nod and I swear I see his big shoulders relax a little.

“Ready?”

“Fire away,” he says, giving me that damn smirk that does not nice things to my body.

Ignoring my annoying womanly reaction to this specimen of a man, I put on my professional facade and start the interview. “Let’s start with something easy, and something I know a lot of our viewers would like to know: how do you stay in shape?” I could stop there, but I feel a slice of heat surge through my body when Mack quirks his eyebrow, so I continue, trying to spin the question into something that doesn’t say: I think you’re hot. Tell me how you do it. “You’ve been in the league for over ten years, and you were called up nine years ago. That’s quite a long career for a baseball player, especially a catcher. So, after all this time, how do you keep up and stay competitive?”

Mack’s expression is unreadable, but eventually he answers. “I’m not ancient,” he deadpans, and heat creeps up my ears.

When he laughs, the building tension eases a little.

“Fortunately, I love the sport and I actually enjoy working out. The guys on the team are great motivators and we typically meet up to lift weights and do cardio. That helps me stay committed and they keep me accountable. Of course, I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention the amazing staff in our organization. They’re committed to keeping all of us as healthy as possible.”

I fight back a smile. A lot of players would use a question like what I just asked to boast, but Mack just used it to shine a light on not only his fellow players, but the Revelers organization as a whole, and I really like that.

Nodding, I continue. “As much as you don’t like to talk about it, you have to know the rest of the country is tossing around the Revelers when they mention playing into October. I know you don’t like to talk about the future, but could you tell me some about the games you’ve already played? Does the beginning of this season feel different from other seasons?”

Mack scrubs the light scruff on his jaw and turns his attention out to the field. “I like how you just skirted around the trigger words and still asked the question. That’s good work, Reporter.”

Swallowing, I press my lips together. Did Mack Granger just give me a compliment?

“To answer your question; yes. This season does feel different. It started back in Spring Training. You could feel it then, the way the team started coming together at an earlier stage. We were crushing balls and playing good defense. And then when we started the season, and that kind of behavior

continued, I think we all realized we had a good opportunity here. We just have to keep our heads down and play good ball. The reason no one likes to talk about the future isn't just because of baseball superstition, although that's a real thing and should not be messed with." He pauses, laughing as he shakes his head. "But it's also because we can't afford to get ahead of ourselves. That's a good way to lose games and blow a season."

After that heavy, honest answer, I switch to lighter topics—his favorite thing in the clubhouse, what he likes to do before a game, his favorite pre-game meal—and when I see him starting to get fidgety from being under the microscope too long, I call it good.

"That's great," I say, turning off my recorder. "I think I got everything I need, except..."

"What?" Mack asks, already standing.

"My boss thought it would be a good idea for me to... uh, participate?" It comes out as a question instead of a statement, because I think it's a bad idea. But George was insistent.

Looking out onto the field, I notice my cameraman has arrived. "He wants me to catch a ball... or hit one... something like that."

Mack throws back his head and laughs. I should probably be offended, but I'm not. Because I know it's funny. His gaze flicks from my face down my body, stopping at my shoes. "You can't hit or catch in those."

"Oh, I have these," I say, pulling my tennis shoes out of my bag.

He cocks his head. "What the fuck else do you have in there? It's like you're fucking Mary Poppins."

I can't help but laugh. "Thanks for not dropping the f-bombs during the interview," I muse. "That would've made editing a bitch." Tossing the shoes to the ground, I slip off my slingbacks, and make the switch. "And for your information, I wear a lot of hats throughout the day, never knowing where my job will take me, so I have to be prepared."

"You're like a grown-up Girl Scout."

That makes me laugh again. "Shut the fuck up."

"Now who's dropping the f-bombs."

A few minutes later, Mack has me out in a batting cage with a helmet on my head and a bat in my hand.

"Now, just stand like this," he says, demonstrating the proper batting stance.

When I place the bat on my shoulder and step up to the plate, he shakes

his head.

“No... like this.” Walking around, he stands behind me, his body entirely too close to mine for this to be a professional setting.

I'm working.

This is my job.

Do not react.

I feel Mack's thick thigh press between mine and he uses his foot to nudge mine into position. “Feet shoulder's width apart.” His low voice in my ear makes my body flush with heat. “And then, hold the bat like this.” His hands come up around mine and the calluses are a stark contrast to my soft skin.

When he steps back, I immediately miss the heat from his body and mentally berate myself for feeling that way.

Get it the fuck together, Greer.

“Okay, that's good.” Stepping back, he appraises me and I feel his gaze like an actual touch. “Keep your eye on the ball at all times. Don't look away.”

I nod, suddenly feeling nervous.

Most of the other players aren't watching, but Mack is, and Brian, my cameraman, has the lens trained right at me. Eventually, all of New Orleans will probably see this attempt. I'm not shooting for perfection, but I'd really like not to suck. Or get pummeled in the face with a ball.

When Mack walks back a few steps, I see the ball in his hand.

“Wait, are you pitching to me?”

“There's no way in hell I'm letting you swing on a pitching machine.”

Oh, okay.

“Close your mind and open your eyes,” he coaches, and I swear it's like foreplay, but I quickly shut that down. I think it's just been too long since I had an orgasm so everything he's saying today sounds like sex talk. That's it. It's me. Not him.

“Close your mind, Greer,” he calls out from further away, drawing my attention back to him. “I can see those thoughts running. Don't overthink it, just swing.”

I'm glad he can't read my thoughts and he thinks it's all about baseball.

Because it is.

Baseball is safe.

Baseball is my job.

The second my bat makes contact, I hear him mutter, “Fuck yeah, that’s what I’m talking about.”

Even Brian lets out a congratulatory yell.

“I did it!”

“Yeah, you did.”

All thanks to Mack Granger.

Who I will not be thinking about when I’m home alone tonight.

Nope.

CHAPTER SIX

MACK



“HOW IS THE FAKE GIRLFRIEND HUNT GOING?” ROSS ASKS AS WE PUT IN A few miles on the treadmills.

Scanning the room, I make sure no one else is around. The last thing I need is for this to get out to the other guys. They’ll never leave it alone and I’ll end up having to use some muscle to shut it down.

“Fuck,” I mutter, wiping my towel down my sweaty face and then tossing it over my shoulder. “It’s not going anywhere. I haven’t even made the first step. I fucking sat in my hotel room last night trying to make a list and ended up drawing a big fat dick instead. Because, if my future relies on my ability to enter into a fake relationship with a past hookup, I’m fucked.”

Ross chuckles darkly. “Or you could find someone you actually want to date?”

Well, that is the logical option, but not realistic for me.

“If it was only that easy,” I mutter, picking up my pace in hopes I can squelch this conversation. “Unfortunately, we’re not all as lucky as you. I don’t have a friend to swoop in and save my loser ass.”

He laughs, because he knows I don’t mean anything bad by it. I’m happy for him and Casey. But I also know it wasn’t that easy for them. They definitely had their fair share of obstacles and unexpected surprises.

“Touché,” Ross says, picking up his pace to match mine. “You going to Sophie and Owen’s Monday night?”

“Yeah, planning on it,” I tell him, my breaths getting more labored as we start to push harder.

Thankfully, I get a reprieve from the inquisition as we amp it up to finish strong, but I can’t help where my mind goes—Greer.

She's been everywhere lately—in the clubhouse, on the field. Even though we're out of town for a couple games, I still find myself thinking about her and her perky ass and sassy attitude.

But she is so far out of my league and off limits it's not even funny, which is the only thing that keeps me from crossing the line.

Well, that, and my hookup hiatus.

Even though I already know Greer would never be hookup material. No, she's girlfriend material. She's *take her home and introduce her to your mama* material. Greer Bradley is someone you settle down with.

She's all the things I don't allow myself to want or need.

For my remaining time on the treadmill, I stupidly wonder what Greer does when she's not reporting on the Revelers. I mean, I know she's probably at the television station and I'm sure there's a lot more that goes into her job than what the viewers see, but I think about other things too.

Is she in a relationship?

I think I remember Sophie mentioning in passing that she was dating someone, but that was a while ago.

"I'm headed to the showers. You coming?" Ross asks, pulling me from my ruminations about Greer and keeping me from going down a deeper hole where she's concerned.

"Yeah," I reply as I kick the speed of my treadmill down to cool off. "Right behind you."

Ross grabs his towel and water bottle then turns back to me. "You okay?"

"Sure." *My head is a fucking mess*, but I don't admit that. "Knee is feeling pretty good."

His eyes narrow. "Not talking about the knee. I need your head clear for the game tonight."

"Don't worry about me," I say, jumping off the treadmill. "You know the second I'm on that field, my focus is on the game."

Ross nods, but doesn't say anything else, just heads for the showers. I know he knows me and knows there's a lot of shit that could rattle me. But when I'm behind the plate, everything else fades away. It's one of the beautiful things about this game.

It's been my escape my entire life. When everything else is a struggle, I know I can depend on baseball to make sense. It's always come easy to me, second nature. Baseball doesn't discriminate. It doesn't care if you're rich or poor, black, brown, or white. It doesn't matter if you came from an affluent

private school or a small town in Texas.

If you've got what it takes, it accepts you.

But it does take its toll and unfortunately, I won't be able to play this game for much longer. Even though I just said my knee is feeling pretty good, a slight twinge streaks through it as I make my way to the showers. If I said I'm not worried about the future of my career, that would be a lie.

I think about it all the time.

Even when I'm not, it's still there in the back of my mind.

We all want to play forever, but that's not possible, especially not for me, and accepting that my retirement is probably coming sooner than I'd like is not something I'm ready to accept just yet. So, I'm thankful for ice baths and team doctors who know how to make me better and keep me in the game.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GREER



“THAT WAS ANOTHER GREAT GAME,” SOPHIE SAYS, NONCHALANTLY AS WE settle into a couple of Adirondack chairs by the fire pit. It’s lit, but not because we need the heat, that’s for ambiance only. But it’s either this or the pool, where half a dozen Revelers are engaged in a belly-flop competition.

The unspoken part she won’t say is the Revelers have been on a nine-game winning streak, but we can’t speak of that or the postseason. If any of the guys were to overhear us, they’d flip out.

I’m even super cautious with my interview questions right now, trying to focus on each individual player’s performance and the positive aspects of each game, without mentioning win streaks or all of the championship rumors swarming the team.

“And you were kickass, per usual,” she adds, reaching across to clink her wine glass with mine.

A few of the guys are playing cornhole in the yard behind us, but no one is in our immediate space and it feels good to have a moment of peace and quiet with my bestie.

“I’m sure Lagniappe would’ve been better, but I’m glad you came over.”

“Me too,” I tell her, leaning my head to the side as I block the late evening sun. “This is nice.”

Sophie gives me a soft smile, but her eyes are appraising. “Are you happy?”

I bark out a laugh, nearly choking on my wine. “Way to lead with the hard questions. Maybe you should be the reporter.”

She laughs with me, but doesn’t give up. “I know you’ve had a lot thrown at you recently, which is definitely enough to rock anyone, even you, but I

don't know... it seems like there's something else going on... something you're not telling me."

"Why would you say that?" I ask as my neck gets hot. Any time the tables are turned and I'm the one being scrutinized, the temperature seems to rise.

"Best friend intuition," Sophie says with a shrug. "Is that narcissistic dipshit bothering you again?"

Holding my wine glass up, I stare through it to the fire and get a little mesmerized by the beauty of it. Normally, I tell Sophie everything, but I haven't told her about the emails or the note on my car. It honestly felt trivial until now, but... "It's not him," I start, realizing I need to tell someone and Sophie is a good place to start. "I've been getting some weird emails at work."

Just saying it sounds stupid. She knows I get stupid emails all the time, so what's different about this time?

"What kind of emails?" Sophie asks, sitting up in her seat.

I shrug. "They started off just being random and kind of... nonsensical. But last week, I got one that kind of freaked me out," I admit. I lower my voice because I don't want anyone to overhear this part. "The same day I got that email, I also found a note on my car."

"Like a threat?" Sophie asks, her voice doing the exact opposite and growing in volume. "Is someone threatening you?"

"Shhh," I say, reaching over to cover her mouth. "Keep it down. I don't know what it is, but I don't think it's anything to worry about."

That feels like a lie, even to myself, because my gut instinct is telling me it's more than just a random email.

"But last night, I was in my apartment and thought I heard something at my door," I whisper. "When I went to check the peephole, there wasn't anyone outside. For a second, I thought it might have been Whit coming back to get a few things... I don't know," I say, letting out a deep breath. "That's why I called you late last night."

"I *knew* there was something going on," Sophie exclaims. "You've been skittish and jumpy for days. Why didn't you just tell me? I could've had Owen come over and check everything out. I don't like this, Greer. I don't like you being by yourself and all this creepy stuff happening. Maybe you should come stay with us for a while."

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I shake my head. "No, I'm not doing

that. This is why I didn't want to tell you. I knew you'd overreact."

"I heard my name," Owen says, walking up with Mack in tow. "And who's overreacting?"

My eyes immediately zone in on Mack, and the fact he's wearing swim trunks that show off his incredibly toned thighs. After our interactions at the field, it's starting to feel normal running into him, but I wasn't ready for a half-naked Mack in swim trunks.

Now that he and Owen are hovering, I palm my forehead, wishing I had waited to say something to Sophie or maybe not said anything at all. "Nothing and no one," I mutter, wishing them away.

"Someone is messing with Greer and she's trying to play it off like it's nothing, but I'm not going to sit around while my best friend ends up on *48 Hours*. You need to take this to the police."

"What are they going to do with a cryptic email and a post-it note, Soph?" I ask, catching Mack's intense gaze from where he's standing beside Owen. I was hoping he wasn't paying attention, but he definitely is, and I can't tell if he's annoyed or pissed. Regardless, the scowl on his face is making me uncomfortable. "I already feel like I'm making a bigger deal out of this than is necessary."

Owen chuckles, obviously trying to diffuse some of the tension that's settled over our previously Zen area. "Who's messing with you, Greer? Is it that dick you were dating?"

"No," Sophie and I say in unison.

"Well, at least, I don't think it is," I add. At this point, I don't know who is doing this or why, so I guess, technically, it could be anyone. That creepy sensation I felt leaving Neutral Grounds the other day slides back up my spine. The idea that anyone could be doing this and they could be watching me right now, it freaks me out.

"Tell her she should stay with us," Sophie tells Owen.

"No," I insist, standing with my wine glass. "I'm going for a refill. Anyone else want anything?"

I'm just met with worried stares, not just from Sophie, but Owen and Mack too.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MACK



AFTER GREER ESCAPES INTO THE HOUSE, SOPHIE AND OWEN BEGIN TO TALK about the conversation we walked up on. From the sounds of things, Greer has a stalker, and I feel an intense urgency to help her.

I would be pissed if any woman was being harassed and stalked, but the fact that Greer's been targeted rouses an irrational anger in my gut.

"Do you think one of the guys would play with her like that?" I ask Owen in a low tone, looking around and all the people in the backyard. "They do like to fuck with newbies."

His brows fold into harsh lines as he follows my gaze. "They better not."

"I don't think it's one of them," Sophie says, pulling her long blonde braid over her shoulder. "I'm trying not to worry, but something tells me it's more than that. And if it was one of the guys, I think they'd be leaving something lewd or about how hot she looks on camera."

"You're probably right." Owen's attention returns to his fiancée. "What did the emails say?"

Sophie shrugs. "She didn't say anything other than they freaked her out. There was a note left on her car too. And last night she thought she heard someone at the door of her apartment. She's living alone right now. Her roommate recently moved out."

Fuck.

I don't like the sound of that.

While Sophie and Owen continue to discuss, I slip away and follow the path Greer took into the house, finding her at the kitchen counter with her back to me, as she watches everyone through the large window.

"You okay?" I ask quietly in hopes of not spooking her, but no such luck.

Greer jumps and clutches her chest.

“Sorry,” I say, raising my hands in surrender. “Just wanted to check on you.”

She shakes her head. “It’s fine... I’m fine really.”

“They’re right, you know?” I tell her, walking over to join her at the counter.

“Sophie’s just overprotective. It’s not that big of a deal.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I watch her from my peripheral. She’s beautiful. Her features are so soft and subtle. The gentle slopes of her nose and lips beg to be touched. And, fuck, she smells good. It’s also not lost on me that, while I’m taller than her, it’s not by much. At five-eleven, I’m one of the shorter players on the team, and when Greer is in those fuck-me heels she likes to wear, she’s just barely shorter than me.

It’s no surprise that someone is stalking her. It doesn’t make it right, but the fact she’s a fucking bombshell and in the public eye, makes it a recipe for disaster because there are some horrible, fucked up people in the world.

“I have three extra bedrooms,” I blurt out before I even have a chance to filter my thoughts. “I used to have roommates, but they moved out. And I’m sure you think of my house as the team bachelor pad, but it’s not like that anymore, I swear. It’s quiet. And best of all, it’s secure.”

Greer doesn’t even acknowledge my words for at least a full minute. Her gaze is still trained on the world spinning outside the large window. For a second, I think she’s gone into some sort of trance, but then she laughs softly.

“The last thing you need is me cramping your style.”

“You won’t,” I say, again without thinking. “I mean, I have no style.” Palming my face, I let out a low chuckle. Leave it to me to fuck up a simple offer.

“You said it, not me.”

I’ll have her know I have a shit ton of style... so much style it’s oozing from my pores. But I don’t say that. This isn’t the time for sparring with Greer, even though I do really love getting under her skin.

“Thank you for the offer, but I’m fine,” she says with a little more confidence than I’ve heard her use since Owen and I walked up on her and Sophie’s conversation. “I’m going to turn the emails and note over to my boss tomorrow at work. I’m sure there’s something they can do—track the IP address of the email or maybe they can pull some footage from the cameras in our parking lot.”

“What about what you heard last night at your apartment?” I ask. For a reason I don’t understand, I’m fully invested in her safety. I’ve always respected women and their autonomy, but I also grew up protecting those I was closest to, especially my mother. So, I guess my desire to protect Greer is innate.

I need her to be safe.

“If they’re crossing that line, there’s no telling what else they’re willing to do.” I don’t want to scare her even more than she is, but I also want her to take this seriously and not be naïve.

“That was probably my imagination. I’ve kind of let it run wild lately.”

Exhaling through my nose, I clench my jaw and turn to face her. “Don’t be stupid, okay? And I’m not saying that to piss you off, but I can tell you’re someone who thinks they can take care of themselves and I’m sure you can, but if this is some sicko motherfucker who has an obsession or something, there’s no telling what they’re capable of.”

She lets out a laugh, crossing her arms over her chest. “Thanks a lot, Granger. You really know how to make a girl feel better. I can see why you’re Baseball’s Most Eligible Bachelor... oh, wait, that wasn’t the title they gave you. What was it?” She taps her full bottom lip, making my mind wander to things I’d like to do to her sassy mouth. “Big League’s Biggest Player, that’s more like it. No, thank you. I’ll take my chances with the stalker.”

When she mentions the title the gossip blogs have given me, my mind starts turning. I can’t help the way my lips curve up into a smirk. She’s so damn sexy, especially when she’s pissed. She’s also deflecting, throwing my bullshit in my face in hopes I won’t pay attention to hers.

You can’t bullshit a bullshitter, Greer.

“This could be mutually beneficial,” I start, a plan forming in my mind.

Her eyes narrow and her nostrils flare. “Oh, no,” she starts, shaking her head, but I take a step forward, my toes almost coming in contact with the point of her shoes.

Before she can open her mouth, I cut her off at the detour, placing my finger up to her lips, and trying desperately to ignore how soft they feel against my fingertip.

Plump.

Pouty.

Perfect for wrapping around my—

Fuck, Mack. Hold it together.

“I’m not talking about sex.” *Just standing here fantasizing about it.* “I realize you think I’m a total douchebag, but despite what your opinions are of me, I’m actually not a sleazeball. I don’t proposition women. We have consenting sex with no misconceptions. But that is not what I’m proposing to you.”

She rolls her eyes and turns to look out the window again, but when she doesn’t say anything, I continue.

“I need someone to date me,” I say, ripping the Band-Aid off. “My agent thinks I need to clean up my reputation, make it more wholesome, so I can get the endorsements I want.”

Her head swivels back to me, eyes widening. “You want me to... date you?” she asks, confusion laced in her words.

“Pretend,” I insert. “Pretend to date me. It would just require you to attend games, which you already do because you’re... well, you. We’d also need to make appearances at a few charity events that are coming up and be seen around town when I’m home. Six months, tops. And then...”

“What then?” she asks, cocking her head in a way that says she’s getting ready to eat my lunch, and not in a good way.

“If everything works out, I’d get my endorsements and your stalker would be long gone.”

“Just like that, huh?” She snaps her fingers and shakes her head like I’m an imbecile who can’t see past his nose.

“Sure.”

“It would never work.” Her tone drops and sounds defeated. I’m not sure why, but I hate it.

“Says who?” I challenge, stepping in front of her and forcing her to look at me.

“What would I tell my boss?”

“You’re dating a player.” I shrug. “The same thing I’d tell Buddy. I think as long as we were upfront about it, no one would care. It’s not like we work for the same company or for competitors. There isn’t any fraternization going on here. We’re two consenting adults who met through mutual friends. As far as they know, we were already dating privately before you became the reporter for the Revelers. But now we’re ready to be more public... we’re moving in together,” I add, raising my brows, hoping she’s catching on to the plan unfolding.

Greer bites down on her bottom lip and averts her gaze, but I can't tell what she's thinking.

"Also, if it's anyone on the team fucking around with you because you're new, when they think you're with me, they'll back off."

"I—" she starts, but bites her bottom lip.

I feel an immediate disappointment.

"I can't do it. I'm sorry," she continues, sounding exactly that, like -she wants to say yes, but she won't allow herself to. "You made some valid points, but I can't."

Reaching out, she places a hand on my arm, making my entire body light up from her simple touch.

"You're a good guy, Mack. I know we kind of rub each other the wrong way sometimes, but I can see under all that posturing you're a real stand-up guy. Thank you for the offer, but I'm trying to uncomplicate my life, not make it more difficult."

With a final squeeze that feels more like a branding, she brushes past me and walks out of the house.

I should accept her response and leave well enough alone, but I know myself. I won't. Somehow, I need Greer to see this is the best option for both of us.

CHAPTER NINE

GREER



OVER THE PAST WEEK, I'VE DODGED MACK GRANGER AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, which wasn't that hard since they were out of town for three days. But it doesn't mean I haven't had to interact with him. And I don't know why it feels so... *ugh*.

I don't know what it feels like.

His proposal of moving in with him did make sense. I see where a stable relationship could improve his reputation in the media. I've seen it happen countless times.

But what about the day-to-day of actually living in the same house?

Would we share meals?

Could I handle seeing him half-naked?

I'm assuming if we were faking a relationship neither of us would be allowed to bring people back to the house, but there's no way we'd also be expected to go months without sex, right?

Not that I'm in the market for a hook-up right now. All I can think about is doing my job and steering clear of a stalker.

Living with Mack could also help with that, but that night, I convinced myself I didn't need any help. Fixing the stalker issue was as simple as taking it to my boss and the authorities. Problem solved.

Unfortunately, it wasn't that easy.

George did take my concerns seriously, much more seriously than I thought he would. But once we spoke with a local police detective, I felt like we were at a standstill. They have the emails, but haven't had any luck tracking down who sent them. I also turned in the note from my car, but they dusted it and found nothing. They also pulled tape footage from the day I

found it and the only thing they were able to learn from it was the person who left it, climbed a fence and wore dark clothes.

They obviously knew where the cameras were and avoided them as much as possible.

I watched the footage and got nothing from it, other than the creeps.

Ever since then, my paranoia has tripled. I'm not sleeping well, if at all. Every night I'm at my apartment, I hear things, most imagined. Without sleep, my concentration at work is shot.

I thought if I had my alarm company come over and check the window sensors and door sensors, I'd feel better. I also contacted my landlord to inform them of what's been happening and they assured me the cameras in the stairways work and are monitored.

But I still don't feel safe.

Except here, in the clubhouse, surrounded by all the players and staff of the Revelers. Over the past couple of weeks, I've started to feel at home here, which is why I don't think it's any of these guys. I get what Mack was saying, and I know players love to pull pranks, but nothing about the emails feel like a harmless prank.

Speaking of the emails, I got a new one today from a new email address, but I know it's the same person. They informed me my skirt was too short during last night's broadcast and I shouldn't have to dress like a whore just to impress people.

Unlike the other emails, somehow, this one felt personal and like they're getting closer. I don't know how to explain it, but initially, it was like they were making broad assumptions or comments and now it feels like they've zoned in and I'm being targeted—me, personally.

“Is that all the footage we need tonight?” Brian, my cameraman asks. “I'm supposed to meet my girlfriend's parents tonight at dinner and I don't want to be late.”

Without even glancing up from my notepad, I wave him off. “Go, make a good first impression.”

He's packed up and out the door before I even finish what I'm writing.

“Ahh, young love,” I sigh to myself.

“Should we warn him it's a trap?” Mack asks, conspiratorially, over my shoulder, causing me to jump.

Placing my hand on my heart, I close my eyes. “Shit, you've really gotta stop doing that.”

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” he mutters. His brows pull together as he takes me in, his gaze penetrating and assessing. “How is everything?”

Glancing around the room, I notice most of the players are either gone or in the showers. Besides me and Mack, there are a couple of trainers still icing players body parts and that’s about it. Ross didn’t pitch tonight, so he was one of the first ones out, and Owen just left a few minutes ago to meet Sophie so they could ride home together.

The game got over relatively early, but it’s a school night and Ryan and Molly needed to get in bed.

“Fine, I guess,” I tell him, assuming he’s talking about the emails. “I’ve handed everything over to the authorities.”

It’s the same bullshit line I fed Sophie, except Mack doesn’t seem to buy it or take comfort like she did.

“And?”

Keeping myself busy with stowing my notes in my bag, I reply, “And they said they would let me know if they find anything.”

“That’s bullshit,” Mack growls.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think he’s the one being stalked.

“It just is what it is,” I say, shrugging my bag up on my shoulder. “I’ve gotta run. Good game tonight.” Not sticking around for him to ask any more questions, I speed-walk out the door and down the corridor. It’s not until I’m about halfway down that I pause, that feeling like someone is watching me coming out of nowhere.

When I look back over my shoulder, I don’t see anyone.

The corridor is empty.

Most people are long gone and the entire stadium is relatively quiet, especially in this part where it’s mostly team members and personnel, with the occasional friend or family mixed in.

Regardless, it requires a pass to get by security, which means I’m fine.

It’s fine.

You’re fine.

I chant that in my head as I try to calm my racing heart and breaths.

But when I turn the corner and lose sight of the door I just left—where I felt safe, where Mack is—the feeling intensifies and my fight or flight kicks in. Turning, I begin to run back to the clubhouse, not sure what I’m going to say when I get there, but anything is better than this fucked up feeling.

Even facing Mack Granger.

There's the sound of feet behind me and it forces mine to move faster, but the next thing I know, my left foot gets caught on something and the ground is approaching in what feels like slow motion. I reach out to brace myself, my hands taking the brunt of the fall.

"Shit," I cry out. "Damn it."

As I try to scramble back to standing so I can keep moving, away from whoever is behind me, someone's hands are on me and they're pulling me up.

"I've got you."

My adrenaline is still pumping and, initially, my body tells me to fight, but when I hear the husky voice in my ear it immediately calms me.

Mack murmurs, "You're alright."

Checking behind me, I see the coast is clear. No one is back there and I feel absolutely insane.

"I'm fine," I repeat, still running the mantra through my head. "I thought I—"

"Fuck, you're bleeding," Mack says, holding my hands in his and inspecting the scuffed-up skin. "Let's go back in and wash you up and then we'll talk."

His gaze darts down the corridor before he ushers me back inside the clubhouse and straight to one of the trainers' offices.

Gently, he takes my injured hand and lays it in my lap, palm up. After inspecting the scrape, he grabs a few items from a cabinet before cleaning it. When he goes in with the disinfectant, I suck in a breath from the sting.

Mack pauses. "You okay?" he asks, his voice laced with concern.

Glancing up, I see a pained look on his face, like he can't bear seeing me injured.

I nod, taking a deep breath. "It's okay, just burned a little."

He goes back to meticulously tending to my hand. When it's bandaged, his thumb sweeps across the exposed skin on my wrist and my pulse races.

Just when I think he's going to step back, giving me back my space and breath, he lifts my hand to his mouth, placing a quick kiss on the bandage, murmuring, "All better."

I swallow, completely dumbstruck by not only the turn of events in the corridor, but the past few minutes with Mack. His actions stun me into silence, which is really hard to do, and it's only broken by Mack's low timber.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" he asks, eyes raking over my body. It's

not in a sexual way, but I still feel it—his eyes are like an extension of his large, strong hands and I feel them from my head to my toes.

“No,” I finally say, realizing he was waiting for a verbal reply. “Thank you.” My voice sounds shaky, and I still feel like I’ve been running a race. My heart is pounding, but I’m not sure if all of that is from my scare or Mack, both have me on edge and my body is trembling as Mack leans in.

Placing both of those large, strong hands on either side of me where I’m perched on a table, he locks his gaze on mine. “Now, you mind telling me what happened out there?”

I swallow, feeling absolutely wrecked, but knowing I need to pull it together.

“My, uh, my heel got stuck,” I say, hoping that does the trick and I can thank him one last time for his medical care and be on my way.

Mack nods, his dark brown eyes still locked on mine. “Uh-huh. Did you forget something?”

“What?” I ask, confused by his question.

“You were headed back to the clubhouse. Thought maybe you forgot something.”

I swallow again, still trying to will my body to relax. “Oh, yeah... I thought I forgot my, uh, pen.” To keep up the lie and to break the hold he has on me, I begin to dig through my bag. “But it’s right here,” I say, holding it in the air as proof and trying to pull off a self-deprecating laugh. “I guess I just didn’t see it. It’s my favorite one... you know how that is. I know you baseball players have your superstitions. We reporters do too, and you just can’t lose a lucky pen...”

My words trail off as I realize Mack is still staring at me and not moving a damn muscle.

“Thanks again for cleaning me up,” I whisper, suddenly afraid to make too much noise. The entire room feels charged and one slip up could trigger a chain reaction. “I’m such a klutz sometimes.”

“Never noticed that before,” he deadpans, his tone unamused.

When I try to slide off the table, Mack doesn’t move and my body brushes against his, feeling every inch of his hard muscles. “I should go, I still need to do some work when I get home.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Mack insists, finally giving me some space to move and following me out of the room.

My entire body deflates knowing I don’t have to go back out there alone.

When I feel tears prick my eyes, I quickly blink them away. How stupid to feel so much relief over something so simple.

It's a quiet walk to my car and my ankle is twinging the entire way, but I don't let out a peep. I'll save all the freaking out for when I get home and can get a bag of frozen peas on it and process what the hell just happened.

"I know you weren't coming back for your fucking pen," Mack finally says as we reach my car. "And I would feel a lot better if you at least let me make sure you get home safely... or reconsider my offer."

Hitting the unlock button on my key fob, I open the door and toss my bag inside. "I'm fine, really," I reiterate. "I think I just got a little spooked and next time I'll just make sure I walk out with someone. I should've left when Brian left. That was my fault. Please don't worry about me. I'm going to call Soph on my way home and my apartment is secure, promise. I just had my alarm company come out this week and check my sensors. So, no need to worry."

He hesitates and I can tell he wants to argue with me, but instead, it looks like he's swallowing razor blades when he says, "Okay. Be safe."

After I start my car and put it into drive, Mack finally retreats and heads to the players lot and I let the emotions I've been tamping down come to the surface. By the time I make it to the first stoplight, my hands are shaking again as I use my Bluetooth to call Sophie.

"Hey."

Her sweet, upbeat tone does a little to calm my nerves, but I can't keep the quiver out of my voice when I answer her.

"Hey, Soph."

"What's wrong?"

I give her a brief synopsis of my night and she immediately responds with, "I'll meet you for drinks."

"No, you don't have to," I tell her. "I know you and the kids have school tomorrow and I don't want to take away your time with Owen while the team is in town. I just wanted you to know I'm fine, in case Mack says something to Owen."

"Greer," Sophie warns. "You're my best bitch and you had a shitty night. Let's meet for a drink and you can tell me all the details you left out last week, because I know you're not being completely honest with me. We'll both decompress. You'll feel better and so will I."

Her words make my lips pull up into a half smile. "Okay, a drink with

you sounds exactly like what I need.”

“Thought so,” she says. “Meet me in thirty at... The Vintage?”

“Sounds good. I’m going to run home, change clothes and call an Uber.”

When I get to my apartment, I immediately pull up the Uber app and schedule a pick-up and then hurry to my bedroom to change into something more comfortable. When I look in the mirror to check my hair and make-up, I realize I’m missing an earring.

“Shit,” I mutter, pulling at my bare earlobe. “These are my favorite earrings.”

After a quick search around my bedroom with no luck, I realize I must have lost it when I fell or maybe it’s in my car. I’m running behind, so instead of spending any more time looking for it, I make a mad dash through my apartment, checking for something more important than a missing earring... I open closet doors and peek under beds, even fling back the shower curtain to make sure no one is lurking inside.

You know, just in case.

When I’m satisfied the place is secure, I turn on the television and lamp in my living room, so I won’t come back to a dark and quiet apartment.

Call me crazy, but it makes me feel less alone.

A tad bit more than thirty minutes later, I’m jogging up the sidewalk to The Vintage and find Sophie sitting at a table for two by the front door.

“Sorry, I tried getting something more private, but they’re busy tonight,” she says, standing and pulling me into a hug.

“This is good,” I tell her, returning the hug. “Thanks for meeting me.”

She pulls back, gripping my shoulders and giving me a once-over. “You know I would do anything for you, right?”

An appreciative smile pulls at my lips. “I know. I love you.”

We sit and she reaches across the table to take my hand in hers, inspecting the cut and the stellar job Mack did in cleaning it up. “I love you too, but if you don’t start taking your safety more seriously, we’re going to have a problem.”

From there, I tell her everything.

“So basically, until this fucker tries something else, they’re not going to do shit,” Sophie seethes. “That is not acceptable! I think I should call my dad or Harrison and see if they can help.”

I groan, dropping my chin into my hands as I brace my elbows on the table. “God, Soph, as much as I hate this, I can’t let you do that. I don’t want

you to do that. I just want all of this to go away.”

She sits quietly for a minute, obviously thinking of solutions, and when she begins chewing on her bottom lip, I feel like I know what she’s going to say before the words come out of her mouth.

“Maybe you should call your parents.”

“They don’t care,” I retort. “They’ve basically written me off. For fuck’s sake, they might be the ones who hired this guy. Maybe their new tactic to get me to cave and come back to the fold is to scare me into it.”

A sad expression washes over her face and I reach over and squeeze her hand.

“Stop,” I tell her. “You know I’ve come to terms with all of that and I’m fine. If things don’t calm down, I might take you up on that spare bedroom you offered.”

“Promise?” Sophie asks.

“Promise.”

After another glass of wine, we decide it’s too late for responsible working women to be out and about in the city and we schedule our respective Ubers.

“Call me if anything happens,” Sophie orders. “I mean, anything. An email, a note... whatever. And don’t walk anywhere alone.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, saluting her and trying to diffuse the seriousness of the situation.

“I love you, you bullheaded, independent woman,” she says, wrapping her arms around me tightly.

“Love you,” I tell her, hugging her back and soaking up her goodness, hoping to take this calm feeling back to my apartment with me and get some sleep.

“Text me when you make it home.” Every time she tells me that, she reminds me what I missed out on by having the mother I did. Never, not once in my life, did my mom tell me to text her when I got anywhere. But thankfully, God gave me Sophie, and she’s the best person I could ever ask for.

As I take the flight of stairs up to my apartment, the weight of the day starts to lay heavy on my shoulders and I feel like I might have to skip the shower and head straight to bed. Pulling my key out, I notice something hanging on my door handle before I even get there.

It’s a small floral gift bag.

Who could've left this?

For a split second, I wonder if it was Mack, but then I remember he doesn't know where I live.

Sophie was with me all evening, unless she ordered something to be delivered as a pick-me-up while we were out. I wouldn't put it past her, because that's just the kind of friend she is.

Opening the door, I'm grateful I took the time to come home and leave a light on. My apartment is glowing in the dim light from the lamp and television, and it looks so cozy. Setting the bag down on the coffee table, I head straight to my bedroom to strip and put on my favorite silk pajamas. It was a gift to myself last year at Christmas and they were worth every penny. Pulling my hair back in a ponytail, I wash my face and brush my teeth, before heading to the kitchen for a cup of tea.

A couple glasses of wine, followed by a nice cup of chamomile tea, is my secret to a good night's sleep.

With my steaming cup of tea in hand, I settle onto the couch and pull my favorite blanket onto my lap before grabbing the cute little gift bag and searching for a card or tag.

There's no identification or label to let me know where it came from, just a piece of tissue paper concealing the contents. I can't help the faint smile on my face as I reach in and find a small box.

My phone chimes and makes me jump, dropping the box on the floor.

"Damn it, I forgot to text Soph," I mutter to no one but myself.

Typing out a quick text, I tell her I'm home and already in my PJs, thanking her again for meeting me tonight. Once I've hit send, I lean over and grab the box, but the lid has come off and laying on the floor beside my couch is an earring.

The same earring I was wearing, and lost.

Mindlessly, my hand goes back to my earlobe and I rub it, fighting furiously with my thoughts, trying to make sense of this whole thing.

But as my chest tightens and my breaths become shallow, I realize there is only one good explanation. Someone found my earring and left it on my door.

And that person isn't Sophie.

Or Mack.

Which only means...

I move so fast that my feet get tangled in the blanket and I fall off the

couch. My ankle wrenches again as I bang my side on the coffee table and lose my breath for a second.

“Fuck... shit, shit, shit.”

I have to get out of here.

If they left it on my door, they know where I live.

And if they know where I live, they could come back.

Calm down, Greer.

Think clearly.

But I can't.

I can't think clearly.

All I can think about is getting the hell out of this apartment.

CHAPTER TEN

MACK



LOGICALLY, I SHOULD BE PASSED OUT IN MY CALIFORNIA KING BED ABOUT right now, but my body still feels charged after the game.

Oh, fuck, who am I kidding? My body is charged because of Greer. All I've been able to think about, when I'm not behind the plate, is her, especially after Monday when I found out someone is stalking her. And then tonight, I knew she was running from something or someone. I could see the fear and trepidation all over her gorgeous face.

I damn near followed her stubborn ass home, but thought better of it.

Greer Bradley is a woman that could sear your balls off by just glaring at them, which is one of the reasons seeing her so rattled is disconcerting.

And don't even get me started on my need to keep her safe. It damn near overwhelmed me the other night at Owen and Sophie's. I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and go caveman on her sassy, stubborn ass.

I'm standing in the kitchen, when I swear I hear someone drive up to my house. Checking the security panel, I'm right—a car has pulled up my drive and parked in front of the house.

Walking to the door, I swing it open just about the time a disheveled Greer walks up on my front porch. Before I even have a chance to ask her what she's doing here, her face crumbles and she starts to sob.

Not cry.

Sob.

"Come inside." I can hear the harshness in my tone and feel her shoulders tense, but I'm not mad at her. The anger isn't because she's here. It's because I know I'm going to lose my shit when she tells me why.

Thankfully, she willingly lets me guide her inside the house and take her

bag.

When the door is shut and locked behind us, I walk her into the living room and grab a blanket from the couch, wrapping it around her shoulders. It's warm outside, but she's only wearing some thin pajamas and her entire body is shaking, probably from fear. And it's breaking my fucking heart.

"What happened?" I grit out, trying to rein in my anger.

"I'm sorry," she says, roughly wiping tears from her face. "I shouldn't have come here. I just—I didn't know where else to go. I didn't want to bother Soph and Owen and risk waking up Molly and Ryan... I—I just didn't know where else to go."

Standing in front of me isn't the strong, capable woman I'm used to seeing. Gone are the determined eyes and tenacious demeanor. And in their place is fear and defeat. Her shoulders are hunched and she can't look me in the eye.

Not even thinking, I wrap my arms around her and pull her to me.

"I'm glad you did," I assure her, rubbing my hand over her back, hoping to stop her from shaking. I forgot she even knew where I live. But about six months ago, I hosted a party here during the off-season after Phil moved out. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Someone came to my apartment," she whispers into my chest.

My hand stops on her back and I grind my teeth so hard it makes my jaw hurt. "Did you see them?" I ask, hoping she got a good enough look at them so the cops will be able to track them down and put an end to this bullshit.

"No." She snuffles and for a minute, I wonder if she's just spooked herself again. I wouldn't blame her; it's scary shit and she shouldn't have to deal with it by herself. So regardless if there was really someone there or not, I'm glad she came over, because she's obviously terrified, and it's killing me.

"They left a bag hanging on my doorknob. It was there when I got back from having a drink with Sophie."

I pull back so I can see her face and her puffy eyes splinter my heart. "What was in the bag?"

Her lip trembles and bites down on it, taking a deep breath before answering, "the earring I lost when I fell earlier at the stadium."

This whole situation is getting crazier by the minute. Guiding her over to the couch, I make her sit and I settle next to her, turning so I'm facing her.

"What do you mean?" I ask, trying to put all the pieces of this fucked up puzzle together.

“I know I had both earrings in the clubhouse, because I remember seeing them when I watched a piece of my last interview back. Then, when I got home to change clothes before I went to meet Soph, it was gone. I searched my bedroom, but it wasn’t there. I know I lost it when I fell. Don’t ask me how, I just do. Regardless, when I got to my apartment, I didn’t have it. But then, when I got back from having drinks, that fucking bag was hanging on my door.”

She grits the last part out, biting down on her bottom lip again and turning her face away from me. “I thought someone had left me something nice, like maybe Sophie had ordered something without telling me or... I don’t know. I just wasn’t expecting that.”

With a deep exhale, she tilts her head back and then her eyes come back to meet mine. “When I saw the earring, I knew it was him... whoever has been following me. I just knew it and I couldn’t stay at my apartment. I needed to get out of there.”

“Fuck, Greer. I wish you would’ve called me. What if they had been waiting for you?”

Her face pales and tears well in those beautiful eyes again. Closing the distance between us, I pull her back into my chest. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I just wish this wasn’t happening.”

“Me too,” she says, her voice quivering. “And I didn’t have your number, so I couldn’t call, but when I got in my car, this was the first place I thought of. I mean, you did offer me a place to stay the other night, so I hoped—”

“Of course, you can stay here. I’m glad you thought to come here.”

I want to ask about her parents or siblings. I know she grew up in New Orleans and she and Sophie have been friends since they were kids, so I would assume she has family she’s close to, but I don’t want to push. I know how private I am about my mom and where I grew up.

“I have three spare bedrooms,” I tell her. “There’s plenty of space for you to stay here, whether it’s for tonight or however long you need to... even if you don’t want to take me up on the other part of my offer. You can stay here.”

I end up making Greer a hot tea and reheating the cup I was drinking when she showed up. And then, I take her upstairs, but when I show her to the spare bedroom closest to mine, she stops in the doorway and starts worrying her bottom lip.

“What is it?” I ask, looking around at the room and realizing it’s probably

not up to Greer Bradley standards, but it will have to do for tonight.

“I don’t really want to be alone,” she says so quietly I almost miss it. “I know I’m asking a lot of you, but I just—”

Walking out of the room, I flip the light off and take her hand. “Come on. My bed is plenty big enough for both of us.”

I’ve never had a woman sleep in my bed before, but I want Greer close so I can keep an eye on her, make sure she’s safe and gets some much-needed sleep. If laying next to me in bed offers her the security she needs, I can put aside my attraction for her for one night.

She lets out a nervous laugh when I turn on the lamp beside the bed. “It’s big enough for half a dozen people... which I wouldn’t put past you.”

“Alright,” I say, fighting back a smile. Even when she’s having the worst day of her life, the sass is still strong. “Let’s shelve the manwhore jokes for the night. We can even put up a pillow barrier if you want,” I say, turning around and meeting her eyes. Even with splotchy cheeks and red, puffy eyes, she’s still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. “I promise, you’re the first woman to sleep in this bed.”

That’s not a lie. I never bring women back to my house. It always felt too personal and when I was done, I didn’t want to worry about how I was going to get rid of them.

Her pouty mouth parts as her eyes grow wide, showing her genuine surprise.

I’m not as predictable as you think I am.

“Let’s get some sleep and we’ll talk more in the morning, figure out a game plan and I’ll take you to your apartment to get more of your things.”

“I have work and—”

“Not tonight,” I order, placing a finger against her lips. “Sleep, then you can argue with me about the rest of it tomorrow.”

Uncharacteristically, Greer does exactly what I tell her to and she climbs into my bed without another word.

When the lights are out and I think she must’ve already passed out, she speaks. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I’m thankful Greer can’t see the smile on my face. I shouldn’t be smiling. She’s had a terrifying encounter, but I can’t help the warm feeling I get hearing her voice floating around me in the darkness. I’ve never had an interaction quite like this with a woman—no sex, no expectations, just simply

lying next to each other.

Again, minutes pass before she says. “I’m sure this isn’t weird for you because you’re Big League’s Biggest Playboy, but I don’t sleep in random men’s beds.”

Her words come out with a bit of slur, letting me know she’s somewhere between awake and asleep. I fight back a laugh, but I don’t fight back my smile. One, because it’s dark and she can’t see me, and two, because I’ll take her sass over her sadness any day. The fact she continues to bring up my reputation with women lets me know she thinks about it quite often, which means I’m on her mind, and that leaves me wondering if she’s as attracted to me as I am to her. I’ve caught her checking me out, but that’s carnal, and my feelings toward Greer are a little more than that.

Sure, I want to get her naked, but I also want to get to know her.

However, my response to her is off the cuff and unfiltered, because that seems to be our style.

“I fuck random women, but I don’t sleep with them. Get your facts straight, Reporter.”

That shuts her up and the next time Greer makes a noise, it’s to the tune of a faint little snore.

And it’s the cutest fucking thing I’ve heard in a long time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

GREER



AS SLEEP STARTS TO FADE AND I BEGIN TO AWAKE, MY MIND IS FLOODED WITH memories of last night.

The second I remember where I am and why I'm here, my pulse starts to race. Not just from the realization the person who's been following me was *at* my apartment, but also from the fact I'm *in* Mack Granger's bed.

His last words to me before I drifted off to sleep last night ring in my head.

"I fuck random women, but I don't sleep with them. Get your facts straight, Reporter."

Reporter.

He probably meant that as a dig, so why does it make my body tingle?

Reaching out my spidey senses, I try to assess the room around me without making it known I'm awake. Is he still in bed? If I roll over, am I going to see his ruggedly handsome face... all that dark hair and scruffy jaw line?

Damn him and those gray sweatpants he was wearing when I showed up last night. Even though my mind was a mess and my body felt completely out of my control, I noticed.

Geez Louise, how could I *not* notice.

It's not that I haven't seen him in stages of undress over the past few weeks, and even before that. I've been privy to everything from private practices to workout sessions, and even hangout time between some of the players.

There are a lot of attractive men on the team and, I guess, as a woman, I notice all of them. It's in my nature to notice. Like Mack said, I'm a reporter.

I typically pay attention to details, but when it comes to Mack, it's different.

I can't say when that happened really, but if I have to guess it was around the time Sophie and Owen got engaged.

I remember Sophie showing me a video of Mack dancing. It was oddly one of the hottest things I've ever seen. A manly man like Mack Granger taking the time and care to dance with a little girl who thinks he hung the moon.

Ugh, be still my ovaries.

Until recently, I thought they had shriveled up and died. But now with everything happening around me with proposals and marriages and babies, I feel like maybe one of these days I might want kids. The jury is still out, but for the first time in my life, it doesn't scare me as badly as it used to.

I remember Sophie teasing me about my ogling Mack and rewatching the video, but I quickly shut that down by telling her I was just enamored with Molly and how cute she was.

The chance of her believing that lie was slim to none, but at least she didn't push.

Realizing the sun is peeking through a window somewhere behind me, I decide I'm going to have to face the music—or Mack. Whatever. So, I slowly roll over, only to find his side of the bed empty and the bed semi-made. The sheet and blanket have been pulled up and straightened, and Mack is nowhere to be seen.

Now, my heart races for an entirely different reason.

Did he leave me alone in his house?

Sure, I've been here before, but it was only once and I have no clue what the hell I'm doing. Besides that, I'm still freaked out about last night and I don't want to be alone. Admitting that is hard, even to myself, but it's true.

It's why I couldn't sleep in Mack's spare bedroom and was willing to ask him to allow me to sleep in here. On any other normal day, I would have never asked that. It was a sign of vulnerability and I don't particularly like being vulnerable.

But the alternative of sleeping in a relatively strange house after everything that happened yesterday was enough to drive me into this infuriatingly cocky man's bed.

The one I've called out on multiple times for being a manwhore.

However, surprisingly enough, I don't feel threatened here. I don't feel threatened by him. And all of the jabs I throw his way are tactics to keep him

from penetrating my very weak walls. Any time Mack Granger is nearby, I feel my body gravitate toward him and, to be honest, it freaks me the hell out, but not as much as my stalker.

Stalker.

Is that really what I have?

Has it officially crossed that line?

The nausea is back in full force as my body goes hot and cold all at the same time.

What do I do now?

“Hey.”

Letting out a small scream, I whip my head around to see Mack standing in the doorway. He’s lost the sweats and traded them for a pair of workout shorts, which don’t do anything to hide what he’s packing. Everything seems to be on display—from his hair to his rippled chest to his thick, muscular thighs.

“Sorry,” he mutters, running a hand through his damp hair. “Didn’t mean to scare you. I just came to check on you and see if you were awake. It’s almost seven and I wasn’t sure what time you need to be at work.”

“Oh, shit.” Tossing the blanket off my body, I scramble out of the ridiculously comfortable bed. “I have to be there by nine and I didn’t really think about that when I ran out of my apartment last night. I don’t even remember what I packed in my bag. For all I know, it’ll look like a sorority girl’s Halloween costume.”

He barks out a laugh, drawing my eyes back to him. This time, I try to only focus on his face. As attractive as it is, it’s much easier on my composure than the rest of him.

Who knew thick thighs were a turn on?

“I doubt your viewers would complain about that,” he deadpans. “I bet if you did your public interest stories in this little number,” he says, motioning up and down my body, “viewing rates would skyrocket.”

The warmth on my cheeks and chest is immediate and I turn quickly to keep him from seeing what his words do to me. “Sorry to inform you, but everyone isn’t a horny perv like you.”

“Yes they are. I’m just more honest about my feelings.”

“Is that why you hide them behind whoring yourself out?”

Damn, that jab was a little sharper than I intended. I should be thanking this man for taking me in last night and instead I’m jumping right into our

typical verbal sparring match.

“Just because I sleep around doesn’t mean I’m not honest,” Mack retorts, not the least bit offended by my question. It’s one of the things I like about him. He can take it as good as he can give it, and he doesn’t get offended when someone is brutally honest with him. “The first thing I’ve always told any woman I’ve ever slept with is that I’m not looking for a relationship. The second is that I don’t have sex without a condom,” he says, ticking off his fingers as he counts. “I like to put that one out there right up front. The third is that I don’t do sleepovers. And the fourth is that if they ever talk about our time together to the media, I will ruin their chances of any future fucks with me or anyone else.”

Cocking a hip, I turn back to him. “And how would you do that?” I don’t know why I ask. It’s not like I plan on sleeping with Mack and if I did, I would never talk. Not to a media source or anyone else for that matter, except Sophie. She’s my best bitch and I tell her everything.

“Easy, I’d let everyone know she has syphilis.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Is syphilis still a thing?”

“Absolutely,” he says, in all seriousness. “It’s actually on the rise and is one of the worst STDs to live with, beside HIV. But it is curable now, so it’s not as bad as HIV.”

Trying to figure out my response to that gives Mack time to continue.

“It’s also an STD that can be transmitted orally. So, even though everyone knows I suit up, it’s still plausible, because I do love a good blow job.”

This conversation should make me feel something besides humor. I should feel indignant about the day I walked in on him talking about Holly, but I don’t.

“Do you really have a Prince Albert?”

What the fuck, Greer? Where did that come from? I was going to say something smartass-ish, yet when I opened my mouth that’s what came out?

You speak for a profession. Do better.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” Mack’s smirk could melt the panties off a woman at the North Pole.

Good thing I’m not wearing any.

Oh, shit. That’s right. I came over in my pajamas because by the time I found the earring—which I will never be able to wear again and that really sucks because they were my favorites—I was already dressed for bed. And I

don't like wearing anything between me and my silk pajamas.

Now, not only are my cheeks and chest flushed, but my entire body is on fire.

"This was a lovely conversation, but I really need to get dressed and figure my life out," I say, barging past him even though I don't know where the hell I'm going.

Anywhere but within touching distance of Mack, that's where.

"I put your bag in the spare bedroom," he says, humor lacing his tone. "Shower is stocked. Towels are in the warmer. I'll be downstairs making coffee and eggs, if you need anything."

I beeline to the room he originally was going to have me sleep in last night and for the first time, I take it in. It's nothing like what I was expecting. Instead of being a blank space with mismatched furniture, like most men's spare bedrooms, it's bright and fresh. The linens are white and blue and incredibly inviting. Not as cozy looking as Mack's bed, but that might just be because of its occupant. There's a reading chair in the corner by a bookcase and a brass lamp that hangs over it to give the perfect light. A large painting above the bed reflects the buildings in Jackson Square in a perfect evening glow. It's the prettiest thing I've seen in a long time and it sets the tone of the room perfectly.

He's just a ball of surprises at every turn.

The bathroom is similar to the bedroom—clean, fresh, and relaxing—with white and blues and a walk-in shower with a rain shower head.

My apartment isn't a dump by any means, but this is... this is nice and completely unexpected, which makes it even better.

Forty minutes later, I'm clean and dressed in jeans and a linen button-down with the sleeves rolled to give me some reprieve from what is sure to be a hot one. Slipping my feet into some flats, I take a look at myself in the floor mirror that's so gorgeous I think about seeing if it'll fit in my car.

Surely, Mack wouldn't miss it.

Thankfully, traumatized Greer did have some wherewithal to pack appropriately. She even remembered a toothbrush and basic makeup necessities. So, when I walk out of the room, I'm feeling pretty dang close to human and the smell of coffee from the kitchen completes the process.

"I wasn't sure how you like it," Mack says, sliding a mug toward me as I approach the island where he has two plates of eggs with sliced avocado and toast waiting.

“Honey, you cooked,” I tease, immediately taking the coffee and lifting the mug to my lips.

“Didn’t peg you for a black coffee kind of girl,” he says, eyes light and playful.

I could get used to this version of Mack Granger.

He’s so much more at ease, not that he isn’t with the guys and fans. But when it comes to him and I, we’ve always tended to rub each other the wrong way. We pick and prod, jab and tease. And although we’ve still been doing that, there’s a different vibe this morning that only comes with lowering the veil, so to speak.

I let him in a little, and so did he, quite literally.

He could’ve called Sophie and told her to come get her girl, but he didn’t. He practically carried me in from his front porch, comforted me with a blanket and hot tea. He hugged me, for fuck’s sake! And then, when I asked to sleep in his bed, he didn’t even hesitate, he just took me into his bedroom and tucked me in.

Why the hell do my eyes feel prickly?

Not now, Greer. Not today.

Today is for being strong and figuring your shit out.

After a few tentative sips, I place the mug back on the counter and reach for the cream he left out for me. “Sometimes, I just need a hit of the undiluted variety at first, and then I can perfect the cup... get it just right.”

When he doesn’t say anything, I glance up as I stir, satisfied with the shade of brown in my cup.

“You might be the most fascinating woman I’ve ever met.”

Leaning a hip against the counter, I smirk. “If you think stirring coffee is so captivating, you should see me mix a martini.” Bringing my fingers to my lips, I kiss the air. “Chef’s kiss.”

“You’re also the biggest smartass I’ve ever met and that’s saying a lot.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, picking up the fork that he set out on a napkin—*such a great host*, I think, but don’t say. Mack doesn’t need any help with his ego. “I studied really hard in school to get this smart.”

He laughs. “I bet you did.”

“How about you? Did you finish college or did you get drafted before that?”

Still smiling, Mack replies, “Can you believe I’m one of the rare ones who actually got a degree? Played all four years. Graduated with a business

degree.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Impressive. I feel like most of the players I’ve interviewed either got drafted out of high school or while they were still in college.”

“Most do. I think it’s something like twenty-percent of players who actually finish college. But I knew being a catcher, it was likely I’d get injured and have to retire early and I couldn’t put all of my eggs in one basket. I needed to know there was something else for me outside of baseball.”

“That’s really admirable,” I tell him. “And not to mix business and... whatever this is,” I say, waving a hand around the kitchen. “But I’d love to do a special interest interview with you. I think fans would love to know more about Mack Granger and you mentioned needing to clean up your reputation with the media. I think that could help.”

Mack’s demeanor shifts and I watch as his eyes turn from light and playful to dark and guarded.

“I don’t like doing interviews like that,” he mumbles, taking his plate and scraping it off into the sink.

Usually, someone like him craves the spotlight and thrives during interviews. It’s always the cocky, self-assured ones that enjoy being the center of attention. So, him saying he doesn’t like personal interviews is a surprise.

“It’s a great way to spin your own narrative,” I push, not liking the way he’s shutting down on me. “If you don’t like what the media is saying about you, give them something else to talk about.”

Placing his hands on the counter, he levels me with his dark eyes. “Which is what I was proposing to you the other night at Owen and Sophie’s. If I’m going to *spin a narrative*”—he throws my words back at me—“then I’m going to do it in my own way, something I’m comfortable with.”

Okay, Mack Granger doesn’t like personal interviews. Noted.

“I think it’s time to cut the bullshit, Greer,” he continues. “You need a place to stay, that’s more obvious now than a week ago. I need someone to go to a few events and on pseudo-dates. We enjoy each other’s company.” That last part comes out a little less confident and he winces a little. “I mean, most of the time we can get along, that’s more than I can say for any other woman. After last night’s impromptu trial run, I realize I don’t mind you in my space and that’s... well, that’s huge. Because before you, the only woman I’ve ever

let spend the night here was my mom.”

Wow, so many revelations in so little time and my head could have its own gravitational pull, but I see his point and after last night, I realized I don't mind being in Mack's space either. I actually like it. I feel safe here and when I'm with him.

“I'll do it,” I tell him before taking another bite of my eggs, which are delicious by the way.

This is a first. I've never had a man make breakfast for me.

I've had them order breakfast and I've had them take me to brunch, but never have they cooked something with their own hands.

Mack's eyes grow wide and his mouth opens slightly, like he's searching for words.

Another first, ladies and gentlemen, I've rendered Mack Granger speechless.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MACK



“WAIT,” I DEMAND WHEN I PARK NEAR GREER’S APARTMENT BUILDING AND she starts to get out of the car without me. “I’m coming with you.”

She huffs. “It’s broad daylight and we’re both in a hurry. Just let me run up and grab a few things and I’ll be right down.”

“No.” Ignoring any further arguments from her, I step out onto the street and jog around to help her out of the car.

The subtle smile she gives me lets me know she really did want me to come with her, but she wasn’t going to ask me to. Outside of last night, which was extenuating circumstances, Greer Bradley doesn’t like to ask for help.

She’s quick to give it, but not accept it, always keeping up a brave facade. But I don’t need that from her. She doesn’t have to prove to me how brave she is, I already know that. I also know she’s scared and vulnerable, and whether she likes it or not, I’m going to look out for her.

“There are a few more ground rules we need to cover,” she says as we walk up the stairs.

When we get to the top, she pauses and I wonder if she forgot her key or something, but then I look at her face and see the way she eyes the door and then looks around. Instead of bolting, like I can tell she wants to do, she glances once at me and then squares her shoulders.

Business as usual.

I see you, Greer.

I see you.

“Like I was saying,” she says as she inserts the key into the lock, her hand only trembling slightly. “We need to cover some ground rules.”

“Ground rules,” I repeat, placing my hand on the small of her back and feeling her tense, only to completely relax a split second later as she lets out an audible exhale. “Fire away.”

Turning to look at me over her shoulder, she gives me another smile, and in that small gesture she pours in all her gratitude, the things she won’t say, but doesn’t have to.

“Number one,” she begins as we walk into her foyer. “No sleeping around. If we’re doing this, it’s going to look as legit as possible and I’d never be with someone who plays the field.”

With her back to me, she can’t see my smirk, but that’s probably for the best. There’s literally no one I’d want to sleep with right now except her.

“I haven’t slept with anyone in over a month,” I’m not sure why I tell her that, but something inside me needs her to know I’m not fucking around, and haven’t been for a while.

Greer turns to look at me, her brows knitting together like she’s trying to figure out a puzzle.

“I can promise you my dick will stay in my pants,” I confidently reply, as I break away from her gaze and take in her living room. It looks a little disheveled, but I’m assuming that’s due to her quick departure last night. The gift bag she mentioned is laying on the floor by the couch and her coffee table is turned on its side. There are a couple blankets also on the floor and a mug of tea that must have spilled.

The scene helps fill in the blanks of what Greer was too upset to tell me.

She panicked and ran for her life.

And I’m really fucking glad she ran to me.

“I’ll clean this up,” I mutter, rubbing a hand over the back of my neck. “You get your things together.”

“I don’t think we should touch that,” Greer whispers, pointing to the bag.

“Damage is already done, since you held it last night. I’ll get something to put it in and we’ll take it to the police, just in case. But if I had to guess, this fucker didn’t touch the bag or the earring. He sounds pretty conniving to me, so I’m guessing he used gloves or some shit.”

Letting out a long sigh, she nods. “You’re probably right.” As she fills her lungs, I watch as she tries to collect herself. “Don’t worry about the mess, I’ll get it. Just give me a few minutes to get my things.”

“I’ll do it,” I tell her, giving her hip a squeeze. “I don’t mind and it’ll save us time.”

Finally, she gives me a half smile and heads down the hall.

“If I’m keeping my dick in my pants, you can’t fuck anyone either,” I call out, hoping to distract her from the memories of last night long enough for her to get her shit together.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” she yells back.

“Is there a boyfriend or fuck buddy I should know about?” I ask, digging around in her kitchen for a plastic bag or something to secure the gift bag in. “Anyone who’s going to be banging down my door because I’m with their woman?”

Just the thought of Greer with another man makes my jaw clench with a rush of unexpected jealousy.

But my question earns me a distant chuckle from Greer and the sound releases some of the tension in the air.

“No, to both. There was this asshole I was sleeping with who wouldn’t leave me alone, but I blocked him.”

My back stiffens. “Have you told the cops about him?”

Someone like that could definitely pull this kind of shit.

“Yes, he’s on the list of possible suspects, but I doubt it’s him. He’s more of a narcissist than a stalker. He can’t handle being turned down or told no. Everything is all about him, you know? So I can’t imagine him doing all of this for little ol’ me.”

Greer obviously doesn’t see herself clearly. There’s nothing *little ol’ me* about her. She’s gorgeous and larger than life—vibrant, charismatic, outgoing. It’s easy to see how and why someone could become obsessed with her.

“He’s worth checking into,” I grumble, using the baggie to pick up the gift bag and then zipping it up. With the contents secure, I go about righting Greer’s living room, taking in the space. It’s pretty, but not too girly. She has similar taste to what I like—timeless pieces, classic vibes, and simple colors.

The guys gave me a lot of shit for having an interior designer redo all my bedrooms and living room after Phil moved out. I was just tired of having the quintessential bachelor pad and thanks to all of them, my house had some wear and tear, so I wanted to reclaim the space.

Maybe it’s because I’m getting older or maybe it’s because I see the damage my lifestyle has done to my potential success. But I’m done with all of that. I’m tired of partying and sleeping around. It was fun while it lasted, but that’s just not me anymore. I want to focus on my last years of baseball,

because let's face it, they're limited, and I want to secure my future.

"Any clingers I should know about?" Greer calls out. "I've noticed most of the photos circulating about you are old shots from last year. What's that all about?"

Suddenly, I feel nervous and, I don't know why the fuck my neck feels hot. Sometimes, when she starts prying into my personal shit, I feel like I'm no longer talking to Greer Bradley, my pseudo-friend, but Greer Bradley the reporter. It's uncomfortable, always has been and probably always will be. I don't like people knowing my business.

"They always do that," I grumble, knowing I have to give her something. "And no, I haven't slept around in a while."

It's just been me and my hand for what feels like a decade.

I'm exaggerating, obviously, but this is the longest dry spell I've had since I lost my virginity at fifteen. Even during my college days, when I was burning the candle at all ends—studying, going to class, going to practice, working out, playing games, on the road, *and* working a small part time job to send extra money to my mom—I still found time for fucking.

I like sex.

Love it, actually.

But I've never liked relationships.

Which is how I earned the title of Big League's Biggest Playboy. For a while, I embraced it, but I'm beginning to realize it's all people were talking about and then my agent started getting push back from sponsors. That's when he started trying to revamp my image.

And here I am, standing in Greer Bradley's apartment, helping her clean up and pack up, thanks to a stalker and my crazy plan to kill two birds with one stone.

Scrubbing my hands over my face, I inhale, appreciating her sweet scent. I've caught hints of it before, but standing in the middle of her living room, it's all I can smell.

Fuck, maybe this wasn't a good idea after all.

"This will only work if we're honest with each other." Greer comes back into the living room with a large suitcase on wheels and a bag tossed over her shoulder. "If you fuck up, you need to tell me before it leaks to the media. I know how rabid they are for any dirt on professional athletes. It's like catnip."

She's back to no-nonsense Greer now, fully taking control of the situation

and I love it.

“What about when you fuck up?” I ask, knowing she’s going to give me her death stare.

In three, two...

Bingo!

My dick immediately stirs. What can I say? I love it when she’s angry and so does he.

“Unlike you, I can control my sexual urges.” Her tone is patronizing, but I wouldn’t expect anything less. When we’re like this, I start to believe it can work. It’s when we get vulnerable and raw that I start to question my decisions.

She smirks. “But when the urge hits, I just use my trusty vibrator.”

My dick lengthens and swells, which I know my athletic shorts will not hide, so I shift my weight to hide my reaction to her admission. But what I can’t do is stop myself from imagining exactly what Greer would do with the aforementioned vibrator.

Her lean legs spread.

Head thrown back.

A little pink—no black... definitely black vibrator poised at the entrance of her perfect—

“Furthermore, let’s not start bringing in hypothetical fuck ups. I’m just starting to not hate you, but when you start throwing your playboy ways, those feelings bubble to the surface. It’ll behoove you to not mention it for the next... oh, that brings me to the other topic we need to cover, time. How long will we keep up this ruse?”

I don’t know where the cold sensation comes from, but it replaces the heat that had just been coursing through my body, bringing me back to reality.

“I guess until the off season, whenever that is.”

Our team is so close to the playoffs we can smell it, but we can’t speak about it now, because that would jinx us.

“After that, we can reevaluate. My agent might want me to keep it up through the offseason, but if you’re done and need to move on, I think we could come up with something... maybe a public break up or you could be seen out with someone. I just can’t be the one to do it. Everyone would hate me if I broke it off with you.”

Her smile falters and she cocks her head back. “I need to be the one?”

She huffs out a laugh and shakes her head, opening and closing her mouth a couple times before she continues. “We’ll work something out, but believe me, I don’t want to be known around the city as the woman who broke Mack Granger’s heart. Trust me, even though people think you’re a playboy, they still adore you and that would be bad for *my* image.”

Huh, I hadn’t really thought of it that way, but I guess she’s right. Greer also has an image to uphold and it’s important to her career.

“I’m telling George about our relationship today, when I take him this new evidence and information,” she informs me, her tone going back to business. “I think you should do the same and tell Buddy. I don’t want any awkwardness in the clubhouse or on the field. Let’s keep in mind we both have a job on the line.”

I nod, crossing my arms over my chest. “I agree. And I have an event when the team is back for our long home-stand, so that can be our first public outing. Bo and Lola will be there, but I haven’t heard anything from the rest of the team.”

“Who are we telling the truth to?” she asks, mimicking my pose. “I can’t keep this from Sophie.”

“Agreed, I can’t keep it from Owen or Ross, and I think Bo should know too, so that implies Casey and Lola will also be in the know.”

She inhales deeply and then puffs it out, her eyes locking with mine. “That feels like a solid circle of trust and there should be enough people on the inside to help us make this look legit.”

“It sounds like we have a game plan,” I tell her, taking the bag from her shoulder and commandeering her suitcase. With the plastic baggie tucked safely under my arm, I walk out her front door. “Be sure to lock up.”

“Rule number one, no bossing me around.”

I want to ask her about when we’re naked, but I don’t because that should be the farthest thing from my mind right now. Not only is Greer in a crisis, but we also just entered into an agreement for a fake relationship. Real feelings would only complicate things and I know now, if I ever get Greer naked, it won’t be just fucking.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GREER



“I DON’T LIKE THIS,” GEORGE SAYS, SITTING IN THE OFFICE WITH ME AND THE detective who’s taken on the case. “It’s one thing for them to try things at work, but following you to your house is some next level bullshit.”

His face is red, and it only gets like that when he’s angry, but I’ve never seen George pissed about anything besides rankings and numbers.

“You’re going to do something about this.” George isn’t asking a question; he’s making a statement—a very strong statement.

The detective shows no emotions as he leans forward in his chair. “We’re doing everything we can, which isn’t much at this point.”

“What the hell do you mean it isn’t much?” George bellows, standing from his chair so fast it rolls into the wall behind him. “We don’t need this kind of publicity. If this leaks to the public, other stations will pick up on it and it’ll be a whole fucking fiasco.”

Ah, so that’s it. George apparently isn’t in the *all publicity is good publicity* camp.

“We’ve pulled the video from your apartment building,” Detective Briggs informs, turning his attention back to me. “But it’s similar to what we got from the parking lot the day the note was left. The suspect entered the building wearing a dark hoodie with no identifying marks. They never looked at a camera, seemingly aware of their placement or just keeping a low profile, and they were in and out in a minute.”

Just the thought brings back the fear from last night and my stomach knots. “How did they get into the building? You need a key card and, as far as I know, everyone is very diligent about not letting strangers in the building.”

“That’s the thing, they had a card.”

All of the blood drains from my body and my heart feels like it stops.
“What?”

The detective holds up his hands. “It’s not someone from your building. We were able to pull up the log from the door entries and the key was issued to Francis Dunkin.”

“Miss Dunkin?” I ask, confused. “She’s the one who—”

“She lost her card yesterday morning,” he says. “Her purse was stolen when she was at the grocery store. She reported it as stolen, and later yesterday, NOPD got a call from a shop owner who said they found it near their dumpster. Everything seemed to be in place when they returned it to Miss Dunkin, but apparently her keycard was the only thing the perp was after. And before you ask, we’ve already pulled the surveillance from the grocery store, but it’s the same story—a tall figure, could be a man or a woman, it’s hard to tell, dressed in dark colors and wearing a hoodie. They always keep their head down and go straight for whatever their mission is—placing the note, lifting the purse, hanging the bag on your door. They know exactly when and where they are at all times, so if I had to guess, it’s someone who does this sort of thing all the time. I think we have a career criminal on our hands.”

George grunts his disapproval. “What about the surveillance from the stadium? Were you able to get that?”

Detective Briggs nods. “We did and there was nothing. The corridor she was in doesn’t have a direct line of sight to any cameras. There is heavy security just outside of that corridor though and everyone who gets past that point has to have a badge and be checked by security. We’re still at a loss how anyone would get by all of that.”

“What does he want with Greer?” George asks, pacing his office and making me even more nervous than I already am. “Any leads on who it could be?”

The detective lets out a deep sigh. “It’s hard to say. We have looked into the ex-boyfriend and nothing seemed suspicious or out of order. Have you been in contact with your family recently?”

“No,” I answer quickly, my eyes trained on the floor, “I haven’t.”

The last time I spoke with Miles it was to inform him I never wanted to speak to him again and demand he lose my number. Then, I blocked him. And I haven’t spoken to my father since he uninvited me to Christmas a few

years ago.

“It wouldn’t be a bad idea to make contact with them and inform them of what is happening. They have a lot of pull in the city and could be a useful resource.”

My gut flips with the thought of calling my parents. “I’d rather not.”

The detective gives me a curt nod. “Okay, but this guy is smart. He’s moving around security systems like he’s part of the *Ocean’s Eleven* crew. The way he has diversified his tactics is enough to keep us all guessing. At this point, we’re basically waiting for him to do something stupid.”

As my heart starts to jackhammer in my chest, the blood seems to rush through my body and I feel like I can hear it in my head. “Do something stupid?” I ask slowly, hoping what I’m assuming is wrong.

“We need him to slip up,” the detective says matter-of-factly. “Until then, we’ll be patrolling the station and the vicinity around your apartment. Do you have a roommate?”

“No,” I tell him, deciding now is as good a time as any to inform George about my fake relationship with Mack Granger. “But I’m going to be staying with my boyfriend for a while.”

The detective nods his head in approval. “I’d also like you to stay with your cameraman when you’re at the games. If you need an escort at any time, we’ll provide one for you. But I need you to stay diligent... all of you.” He turns his attention back to George. “I’m assuming you have adequate security measures in place.”

“We do,” George confirms before turning to face me. “You’ve never mentioned a boyfriend before.”

Swallowing, I put on my game face. “It’s a relatively new development,” I begin, deciding to go with Mack’s suggestion from earlier. “We met through mutual friends and have been keeping things private, but we feel like it’s time to go public. I was planning on speaking to you about it before all of this started happening, but never got the chance.”

“Why would you need to speak to me?” George asks.

“It’s Mack Granger,” I tell him with all the confidence in the world. “I thought you might want to know before everyone else. He’s talking to Buddy Malone and the rest of the staff on his end. We just want to keep everything above reproach. Even though we don’t work for the same organizations, we do realize we work together occasionally, and we don’t want it to be a problem.”

George's brows furrow as he cocks his head to the side. "Never saw you as one to go for a baseball player," he grumbles. "Especially one that plays the field like Mack Granger, but what do I know? Keep things professional when you're on the job and I won't have a problem with it."

Without another word, he swings the door open and stomps out. I realize for someone like George, who doesn't like change, all of this is a lot for him to process.

"We'll be in touch," Detective Briggs says, following George out the door.

Letting out an exhausted sigh, I pinch the bridge of my nose and pray away the headache I feel creeping up on me. Between the stalker and the fake relationship and temporarily moving, my whole life feels out of sorts and my emotions are all over the place.

I need a chance to decompress, but I have work to do here and a game to be at tonight.

After that, the team will leave for another series on the road and... *shit*, what am I going to do then? I'll have Mack around to make me feel safe for one more night and then what? Am I going to stay at his house alone? Even though there is no way I'm going back to my apartment right now, the thought of staying in Mack's big house by myself also feels scary.

Maybe I could stay at a hotel? But then there's the coming and going by myself and after last night, I feel like my every move is being watched. If I knew what the jackass wants, it wouldn't be so bad. It's the unknown that is freaking me out.

When my phone vibrates, I jump. Everything is panic-inducing at the moment, but when I see Mack's name on my screen, my body calms almost instantly.

"Hey," I say, walking out of George's office and into one of the recording booths that's not being used. It's quiet and soundproof, perfect for a phone call with my fake boyfriend.

"How'd it go?" Mack asks, sounding concerned, which makes me concerned.

"Fine, how did it go on your end?"

"Good, I was just worried your boss might be a dick."

I huff out a laugh. "He's always a dick, but he was actually pretty cool about the whole relationship thing."

"And with the detective?" he asks. "Did you have a talk with him too?"

I tell him everything we discussed, including the new information about Miss Dunkin's purse and how the guy got into my building. Every so often, Mack lets out a curse under his breath and it does something to my body. It's not the fight or flight response I've been experiencing, instead he makes me feel other things, things that take my mind off the fear—comfort, attraction, lust...

But more than anything, he makes me feel not alone.

"We need a plan for when I'm gone," Mack says when I'm finished catching him up to speed. "My house is secure, but I'd like to implement a few more measures before I'll feel good about you being there alone."

Shaking my head before he even finishes, I squeeze my eyes shut, placing a hand on my forehead. "No, I don't want you going to extremes for me."

"It's not extreme," Mack replies firmly. "It's necessary and I'll benefit from it too. I've been meaning to beef up security for a while. Bo's already hooked me up with a guy they've used at their place and he'll be coming out in a couple of days to evaluate the property. He said it should be complete by the time we make it back from Seattle."

Tears threaten to spill from my eyes and I can't speak right now. If I do, Mack will be able to tell I'm on the verge of crying and I'm trying really hard to keep it together. I can handle scary situations. I can handle a stalker. What I can't handle is people taking care of me.

My therapist said it's because my mom and dad have always been so calloused, so when I experience genuine care, it triggers my emotions. The only person who truly cares about me and shows it often is Sophie, but over the years, I've learned to accept her care and not get emotional.

Mack is another story.

He's unexpected.

"I also wanted to mention that I talked with Owen and Ross and filled them in about our *arrangement*, so I think you need to talk with Sophie. Maybe you can stay with her while we're on the road."

Normally, I would take offense to someone telling me what to do, especially Mack, but he's right. Not only do I need to talk to Sophie, staying with her and the kids for the week is the only logical solution.

"Okay," I manage to say while still keeping my emotions in check.

There's a long pause, but I know Mack is still there because I can hear the faint sounds from the field in the background. Glancing down at my watch, I check the time and realize he's probably at batting practice. And there go my

damn emotions again, getting all twisted up. Because he should be focusing on tonight's game and not on me or my safety.

That's something a real boyfriend would do and we're just pretending.

"You should get back to practice," I tell him.

After another elongated pause, Mack exhales and finally replies, "Please be safe."

"I will."

"See you tonight."

When the call ends, I take a moment to collect myself and then I send a text to Sophie. She's probably still at school and I don't want to interrupt her day with a phone call.

ME

Hey, I know this is last minute and you can totally tell me no, but would it be okay if I stay with you guys this week while Owen is gone? Also, I need to tell you something really important, but I don't want to do it over text.

Surprisingly, she texts me right back.

SOPHIE

Of course you can stay with us. I was going to offer again, but I didn't want you to get pissed at me for trying to boss you around.

SOPHIE

Can whatever you have to tell me wait until tomorrow or do we need an emergency coffee date? I can drop the kids off at Casey and Ross's after school if you need me.

ME

It can wait.

ME

And thank you. You're the best.

Slipping my phone into my pocket, I lean against the wall and just breathe. With my face turned to the ceiling, I work on centering myself.

Deep breath in.

Hold it for five.

Exhale.

And repeat.

When I feel like I have my shit together, I step out of the sound booth and

head back to my desk to finish up editing a few videos for the evening broadcast and then jot down some interview questions for tonight's game.

Mainly, I want to focus on a few guys who never see any spotlight before the game. And of course, after the game, I'll highlight the key players. Ross Davies is on the roster to pitch tonight and Mack will be behind the plate. They are my favorite duo in the league and that has nothing to do with being friends with them. Even if I wasn't a Revelers fan, they would still be my favorites. Ross is an ace pitcher and Mack is a literal brick wall—nothing gets past him—and together they are pure magic.

"Hey," Brian says, leaning over my monitor. "I thought we could head down to the field in about thirty. George said to stick to you like glue, whatever that's about. So, I just wanted to let you know."

Giving him a smile, I nod my head. "Yeah, I'll be ready to go. Thanks for the heads up."

Thankfully, he doesn't push for any additional information regarding George's demand. Brian is such an easy-going guy, so it's no surprise he's okay with going along with whatever he's instructed to do. It's one of the reasons I love working with him.

Thirty minutes later, I've touched up my hair and make-up and packed up my bag. When I get to the back exit, Brian is right there waiting.

"We riding together or..."

"Let's take separate vehicles," I tell him, not wanting to have to come back here for my car before going to Mack's.

"I'll follow you."

When we get to the field, all thoughts of last night seem like a distant memory. It's there, in the back of my mind, but it's not overwhelming me like earlier. Thankfully, when we turn down the corridor that leads to the clubhouse, there are so many people buzzing around that it doesn't even feel like the same place. Instead of being a hall of terrors, it's full of excitement and anticipation for tonight's game.

As we walk into the clubhouse, I spot Mack getting treatment on his knee from one of the trainers. When he sees me, he gives me a nod and his dark eyes bore into mine. Has it really been less than twenty-four hours since I ran into his arms in search of safety and comfort?

"You want me over here?" Brian asks, oblivious to the dress-down I'm currently getting from the Revelers starting catcher.

Clearing my throat and breaking away from Mack's gaze, I redirect my

focus. “Yes, let's get set up and I'll pass off this list of players to Roger.” Roger McIntosh is the PR guy for the Revelers. He's been a great resource and helps coordinate interviews. “After that, we'll go ahead and shoot an opener and lead-in.”

Business as usual, Greer.

Keep things professional.

Over the next hour, I manage to get all of my interviews done even though I can feel Mack's eyes on me every step of the way. When the players head out to the field for warm-ups, I breathe a sigh of relief because I wasn't sure how much more of his attention I could take.

I appreciate his concern and that he's watching out for me, but I'm glad he's going on the road tomorrow. I think I need a little space to get my head on straight. If I'm not careful, this fake relationship is going to turn into real attraction—*like it hasn't already*—and I don't need that complication on top of everything else.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MACK



CROUCHED BEHIND THE PLATE, I PUT DOWN THE NEXT SIGNAL FOR A SLIDER. When Owen rejects it, I give it again. I know the batter, he's going to take the bait, but if Owen throws another fastball in the strike zone, it'll be out of here and we'll go down by a run in the eighth.

If he'll throw the fucking slider, we can end this now.

Putting down the signal again, I try to use a little more force to emphasize my insistence.

We're throwing this fucking slider, Thatch, and we're getting the hell out of this inning and going to the clubhouse with another win.

Throw the fucking ball.

While we wait, I keep my eye on the runner at second. If he steps any further toward third, I'm giving Thatch the signal to throw his ass out. We could also end it there. It's always good to keep your options open, but then Owen nods and starts his windup.

Here we go.

Getting a little lower, glove out, I prepare for the pitch, ignoring the twinge in my right knee.

As adrenaline courses through my body, that low hum I need during a game, I watch as Owen releases the pitch and the batter reaches for the ball. It all happens almost simultaneously, thanks to Thatch's killer arm and speed.

When the ball slaps into my glove and the ump calls the strike, I flip up my mask and call out to Owen. "Fuck yeah, man. Fuck yeah."

No one likes to talk about it, at least not out loud, but you better fucking believe we're keeping count and realize how much closer each win gets us to clinching the division.

Gripping Owen's hand, I pull him into my chest, heartily pounding his back. "That's what I'm talking about!"

"Thanks to you," Owen chuckles, always downplaying his greatness, which adds to how fucking awesome he is.

The rest of the team files out of the dugout and we go through the line, high fiving each one. Ross is waiting to congratulate me and Thatch on closing the deal.

It's a team effort, but Ross put in the work tonight, going seven full innings.

None of us can deny how this season feels. We're always gunning for the postseason, but something about this year feels different. The energy is high, the team has gelled, and we're all doing everything we can to ensure the win.

Before I can escape down the tunnel, McIntosh stops me and redirects me to where Greer and her cameraman are set up doing post-game interviews. She's currently talking to Freeman, who made a game changing catch in the fifth inning, but my blood starts to boil when I see the way he casually touches her arm, where a sliver of skin is exposed from her jacket sleeve being pushed up.

Standing to the side, I cross my arms over my chest and give him a death glare, hoping he feels it and gets the memo before I have to hand deliver it.

Hands off, mother fucker.

When his interview is over, he jogs off and shoulder checks me on his way by.

Yeah, we're going to have a talk. Soon.

"Great game tonight, " Greer says, her professional smile on full display. I prefer the one she gives me when it's just the two of us. The way she smiled appreciatively this morning when I had coffee and breakfast waiting for her or the way her lips turn up when she knows she's hit her target with a verbal jab.

But this one is gorgeous too.

"Thanks," I reply, giving her a wink and a smirk, as I brush my sweaty hair off my forehead. "It was a team effort."

Her eyes narrow, as if to say, *don't put that voodoo on me, Granger.*

"That stop you got on the wild pitch in the fourth was pivotal," she continues, always impressing me with her knowledge and attentiveness to the game. With her looks, she could totally phone it in and no one would bat a lash, but she doesn't take the easy road and I appreciate it.

“Stops like that become instinctual over the years. You don’t really have much time to think it through. All you can do is react and hope for the best.”

“Your instincts are spot on,” she continues. “There’s no question why they’ve deemed you The Brickwall. Brick, right?” Greer questions with a smirk of her own. “That’s what some of the guys call you?”

I nod, fighting back a smile. “Yeah, got that one my first year in the majors.”

“Baseball players and their nicknames, right?” she asks, giving me an easy out. Some reporters might start pushing further at this point, digging into my past or bringing up other nicknames I’ve acquired over the years, like the one she keeps throwing in my face, but she doesn’t. Just congratulates me on a great game and lets me go.

The ice bath is calling my name tonight. I need a good rub down on my thighs and some treatment on my knee. Thankfully, tomorrow’s game is a late one in Seattle, so I’ll have almost twenty-four hours turnaround to recoup as much as possible.

I’m just coming out of the treatment room when I see Greer and her cameraman packing up.

“Greer,” I call out, getting her attention and watching her cheeks tinge a light shade of pink when a few pairs of eyes turn her way.

Put the woman in front of a camera and thousands of viewers and she’s a pillar of strength and confidence. Make her the center of attention in a room full of baseball players and she turns into a blushing beauty.

And it is beautiful.

I’d like to see how far that blush goes.

“Don’t leave without me,” I instruct. There’s no way in hell we’re having a repeat of last night. She’ll be leaving when I leave and I’ll walk her to her car and then follow her to my house.

She nods, brushing a strand of her dark hair behind her ear and then turning back to her cameraman, probably making an excuse for why I asked her to wait on me.

I figure it’s better for everyone to know now that she’s mine and I’m glad to see Jason Freeman still lingering around and noticing. This will make my future conversation with him a little easier. When he catches me looking at him, he gives me a smirk, like I’ve just initiated the beginning of a game, but I have news for him. He won’t win this one.

“Was that necessary?” Greer asks between clenched teeth when I

approach her.

“Yeah,” I confirm, ready for this fight, craving it. “I didn’t want you to walk out by yourself.”

She continues organizing her bag, getting her laptop in there just so. “Brian was going to walk me out, but now I feel like the entire clubhouse is watching us.”

“They were going to find out we’re together one way or another. Seems like getting that part out of the way tonight was a good idea. Besides that, Freeman was waiting in the wings to stake his claim on you and there was no fucking way that was happening.”

She whips around, her long hair almost slapping me in my face and giving me a healthy dose of that sweet scent I’m starting to crave.

“Listen,” she says, her eyes darting around to make sure no one can overhear our conversation. “Just because I agreed to this fake relationship doesn’t mean you have the right to dictate my life, got it?”

I nod as my eyes lock with hers, struggling to fight back a smile. “I got it, Reporter. But I also need you to understand that I protect what’s mine and whether you like it or not, where everyone else in this world is concerned, you’re mine, at least for now. Got it?”

Her nostrils flare and she breathes deeply, her chest rising and falling.

To anyone watching, we probably look like we’re about to start going at it right here in front of everyone. Buried under the fight and stubbornness is a shitload of sexual tension. Greer will probably never admit it, but she wants me. It’s written all over her face and in the heat of her eyes.

She wants to tell me off right now, tell me to go straight to hell and fuck off, but she knows I have her between a rock and a hard place.

My cock strains against the zipper of my jeans and I’m thankful I dressed before coming out here. If I was still wearing sweats, I wouldn’t be able to hide the bulge.

“You ready?” I ask, taking her bag from the table and motioning toward the door.

She stands her ground for a moment longer and then she inhales deeply, then exhales, smoothing her hands down her slacks. The slacks that hug her tight ass and make her legs look even longer than they are. I’ve seen her in skirts and dresses, and those always get my attention, but there’s something about her in this pant suit that turns me the fuck on.

I’m going to have to get that under control before we get home.

“Let's go,” Greer says, typing something out on her phone and walking ahead of me.

We don't say much as we walk down the corridor and out to the gate that leads to where she parked her car, but I notice Greer watching. Her eyes dart to every dark corner and once, she glances over her shoulder, only to find me right behind her.

As much as she wants to fight me right now, I feel the way her body relaxes when I place my hand at the small of her back.

You're good.

I've got you.

When we reach her car, she stops and her body tenses.

There's a piece of paper tucked under her windshield wiper and my immediate thought is it's some sort of advertisement, but then I notice the handwriting and the way the paper is crinkled. It's like someone found a scrap piece of paper and scrawled out a note.

Reaching around Greer, I pull the piece of paper away from the windshield. After I'm holding it, I briefly think about fingerprints and ruining evidence, but it's already been established that this guy doesn't leave anything behind.

Checking our surroundings, I look at every shadowed area, like I expect this fucker to be lurking, but of course, he's not.

The lot only has a few cars left and there isn't anyone else in sight.

Holding the paper up, my voice is gritty with anger as I read it to her.

“I'm glad you got my gift. I know those are your favorite earrings and I wanted you to have the complete set. Maybe next time, I'll deliver the gift in person.”

This fucker is crossing every line.

“Who the fuck does he think he is?” I mutter, dumbfounded by this whole situation and wishing I could find him and rip his fucking balls off.

Greer turns to me, her eyes searching. “I don't know what to do,” she whispers. “Most of the time, I know exactly what to do. I'm capable of taking care of myself and every situation I face, but this feels...”

“Out of your control?” I offer, trying to put myself in her position. She's a single woman who lives alone and leads a pretty public existence. Her livelihood is in front of the camera and her face is in front of thousands of people a day. I can't imagine how she's feeling, but I know it has to be scary and infuriating.

“Totally out of control and that’s messing with my head,” she admits. “I want to tell this guy to fuck off and give him the double birds while I walk off and dare him to come at me. But logically, I know that’s a stupid thing to do. There are no leads and no one seems to know what he’ll do next. When the detective said they’re basically waiting for him to do something stupid, I swear I felt the life leave my body. To me, something stupid means he’ll do more than he already has... something public or that can be traced back to him. And if I’m being honest, it scares the shit out of me.”

She braces her hands on the hood of her car and dips her head.

“I hate being weak,” she grits out, lifting her head to stare out across the parking lot. “I want to pretend like this is all a big joke and go about my life, but I also don’t want to play into this guy’s hands. I’ve seen what happens to people who don’t take things like this seriously. A month ago, I would’ve been frothing at the bit for a chance to cover a story like this, but being in the middle of it, I just want it to go away.”

When her words break at the end, I close the distance between us and wrap my arm around her shoulders.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

Greer’s head drops in defeat, and I move on instinct, pressing her into my chest, surrounding her with my body in an effort to keep her safe.

“You’re not alone in this,” I whisper into her hair, pressing my lips there to seal the promise. “I can tell you feel that way, but you’re not. You’ve got your friends. And you’ve got me. There are so many people around you who care about you and are willing to do whatever they can to help you, but you’ve gotta let us, Greer. Don’t try to do it on your own.”

She nods against my chest, her arms wrapping around my waist, as she reluctantly returns my hug, and shit, it feels good. Having her in my arms feels... right.

Even though this situation feels so fucked up, this part feels perfect.

Once Greer is safely in her car and the doors are locked, I jog over to the player’s lot and meet her at the corner. She claimed she was fine to go ahead and drive to my house, but there’s no way I’m letting her out of my sight any more than I have to. Especially since the stalker was here this evening.

He could be sitting back in the shadows watching, so I also instructed her to drive around before going to my house in an effort to make sure we’re not being followed.

I realize the bastard could’ve followed her last night and might already be

casing the place, but I'm confident in the cameras I have around the property for tonight. Before we left the house earlier, I turned on some perimeter cameras I haven't used in a while, along with the extra sensors in the backyard.

For living in a place like New Orleans and being a public figure, I've always felt safe. Throughout my career, I'm lucky enough to say I've never had a stalker or even a disgruntled fan. Chalk it up to my good nature or the laid-back fans in this city, but I've never worried about my safety or even the safety of my teammates, so this is new to me.

The closest I've been to anything like this is when Bo Bennett and Lola Carradine started dating. She's a rock star, literally, and the paparazzi love to stalk her and know all the ins and outs of her life—public and private.

When they first started dating, it was a little messy at first, but over the last few years, they've managed to find a balance and don't really seem to battle it as much as they did at first.

However, they're still diligent at keeping their place safe and I'm grateful for the contact with the security company who's coming out later this week. It'll make me feel better knowing everything is secure and fully monitored.

Half an hour after we left the stadium, we're finally turning into my drive. I think I'm going to have a gate added here for an extra layer of protection.

I hit the button to raise the garage doors and Greer parks in the empty bay while I take my usual spot. As the door closes behind us, I find myself checking my rearview mirror one last time. Thankfully, I don't see anyone or anything out of the norm and I'm trusting the easy feeling in my gut that we weren't followed.

It's never steered me wrong and I'm hoping it doesn't fail me now.

"You good?" I ask, when she steps out of the car and goes to the trunk for her luggage we packed away in there earlier today.

With a heavy sigh and a look of exhaustion, she nods. "Yeah, I think so."

"Let's get inside and I'll make a late dinner."

"Not hungry," she mutters, shouldering her bag while I disarm the alarm and take her luggage inside the house.

Once she's in, I turn and immediately reset the alarm, initiating the boundary alerts and I watch Greer's shoulders relax.

"Did you eat before the game?" I ask, rolling her luggage down the hall and into the spare bedroom. I'm assuming last night's sleeping arrangements were due to extenuating circumstances and she's going to want her own bed

tonight.

When she doesn't respond, I turn to find her watching me from the doorway of the room.

"Don't tell me you finally gave into the beignets and beers at the clubhouse?" I tease.

Her nose scrunches up in disgust and it's adorable. "That's the most disgusting combination I've ever heard of. Why on earth is that how y'all choose to celebrate?"

Chuckling, I shrug my shoulders and take a seat on the edge of the bed. "It's been around for a while. Back when Ross and I were first traded here, we wanted to embrace the culture of the city and we'd always go out for late night beignets at Cafe du Monde. When the season picked up and we started winning, we kept going and later added beers into the mix. Throughout the season, we started including the whole team and it got to the point it was easier to just have the beignets and beers brought to us."

"And I know how baseball players are about their superstitions," she says, walking into the room and taking a seat on the recliner.

"Once we find something that works, we stick with it. How does the saying go? If it ain't broke, don't fix it? That's baseball in a nutshell."

She laughs and it's music to my ears. I can physically feel the tension and trepidation leave not only her, but the air around us. The easygoing comfort we found this morning is easing back in.

"How about I introduce you to another tradition?" I ask, standing from the bed and offering her my hand. "Come on."

For a second, I think she's not going to accept my offer and call it a night, but then she places her hand in mine and I feel a faint electric current when our skin touches. Call me crazy, but that one simple touch seems to travel all through my body.

"I don't like beer," Greer says, following me down the hall. "But I do love beignets, especially with café au lait. Now, that would be a Reveler's tradition I could get behind."

"The beer makes it manly." That earns me a hearty laugh from Greer and it makes me smile so wide my cheeks hurt. Turning to her, I ask, "How do you feel about grilled cheese sandwiches?"

Her eyes flare. "What kind of cheese?"

"Any kind you want," I tell her, knowing my refrigerator is adequately stocked with a variety of cheeses especially for this occasion. "Back in

college, I started eating grilled cheeses when I'd come home late from the bars after a win. I think it's the bread and butter that always helped soak up the alcohol, but, regardless, it always guaranteed I'd wake up the next morning feeling no pain and ready to go again."

"If it ain't broke," Greer says, leaning against the kitchen counter as I pull the ingredients from the fridge.

"Damn right," I tell her, reaching around her to grab the bread from where I left it this morning after making us toast.

Greer turns a fraction of an inch, causing my arm to brush across her breast.

My rapidly hardening bulge presses against her thigh and I'm so close, I can hear her sharp intake of breath when she feels what she's doing to me.

Closing my eyes, I inhale her intoxicating scent and immediately feel lightheaded.

As I step back and meet her eyes, there's no mistaking the need. Greer's pupils are dilated, swallowing the green of her irises. Heat radiates from her body, begging to be touched. The question is: how dumb would it be for me to hook up with my fake girlfriend?

I realize it could complicate things and possibly cause all of this to blow up in our face.

But it could also be exactly what we both need—a mutual agreement to fuck and release all of this pent-up tension. I know it's the best way for me to release the lingering adrenaline from a game and I can only imagine the stress she's feeling from all the bullshit happening in her life.

My dick is trying to convince me it's a win-win.

But my head is still throwing up red flags and being a fucking cockblock.

Don't complicate things.

She needs a friend right now.

Owen would hate you if you made things messy with his fiancée's best friend.

Fuck if this could be any more complicated.

"Pick your poison," I tell Greer, laying out our cheese options on the counter and flex my fists, trying to redirect the blood flow to my cock.

I don't miss the slight look of disappointment that crosses her beautiful face. She quickly masks it with a smirk, but I see it.

"I prefer a triple threat of gouda, provolone, and cheddar. But sometimes, I sprinkle a little parmesan into the pan and let that get crusty on the outside

of my bread. Of course, you could always go with the classic—American cheese. There’s nothing wrong with keeping it simple.”

Did you hear that? I ask no one except my dick.

Like my old high school coach used to tell us, “When in doubt, remember to K.I.S.S.: keep it simple, stupid.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GREER



AFTER THE DELICIOUS GRILLED CHEESE, WHICH MEANT MACK COOKED ALL OF my meals today because I hadn't eaten since the eggs and toast this morning, we went our separate ways. He went to his bedroom to shower again, stating that he always showers twice on game nights—once at the clubhouse and again when he gets home or to his hotel room. And I went to mine.

Mine.

It's weird that I even feel comfortable enough to refer to a space in Mack Granger's house as mine, let alone the ease and quickness in which that happened. But I do feel comfortable here, still not enough to stay in this house by myself while I have a crazy stalker on the loose, but enough that I feel the stress leave my body as I stand under the waterfall shower and try not to picture Mack naked across the hall.

Not helpful.

As I step out of the shower, I think about digging out my vibrator from my bag and putting it to use. An orgasm would definitely do wonders for my stress level—releasing all of those good endorphins into my system. But I also need a release after the interaction with Mack in the kitchen. Unfortunately, my exhaustion wins out and I just want to put on my pajamas and crawl into bed.

Once my damp hair is braided, teeth are brushed, and my face is thoroughly washed, I lather my body with lotion and pull out a fresh set of pajamas.

It's the same routine I do most nights, but this definitely feels different.

The pull toward Mack's room hasn't subsided. I still feel the need to be close to him, maybe it's the reminder note the stalker left, but I don't want to

be alone.

Tiptoeing out of the spare bedroom, I listen for any signs of life on the other side of Mack's closed door. With my ear pressed to the hard wood like a creeper, I hold my breath and wait.

Nothing.

No heavy breathing, thankfully, because overhearing Mack rub one out would be enough to make me self-combust and that would be embarrassing. However, I'm a smart woman and I know a man like Mack Granger can't go from having sex whenever he wants to and however he wants to, to nothing at all.

I'm sure he's still taking care of his needs.

And that visual is enough to send me back to my own room.

Thanks to the ache between my legs there is no way I can lay beside him and not think about his cock and whether or not it has a piercing. He could've been joking about that—locker room talk and all that jazz. But when I asked him about it, the smirk on his face told me he wasn't.

He definitely has a pierced dick and that's hot.

I've never been with anyone who has a piercing.

Quite frankly—and this is going off only what I've witnessed while he's clothed—I don't think I've ever been with a man who is as well-endowed as Mack Granger. If the steel rod that brushed up against my thigh was any indicator, he's packing some serious heat.

Just as I'm getting ready to close my door behind me, Mack's door opens.

"Did you need something?" he asks, his voice sounding subdued and husky.

Clearing my throat, I shake my head. "No, I, uh... I was just going to get a glass of water." When I turn around and start down the hall, I try not to make eye contact with him, but like always, his gaze pulls me in.

The way his eyebrow lifts in question lets me know he doesn't believe me, but he doesn't say anything. "Want to sleep in here again tonight?" he asks, nodding over his shoulder.

I thought you'd never ask.

"No, I mean, I don't want to—"

"Go get your glass of water and then get your ass in my bed."

Holy fuck.

Why is his demanding tone such a damn turn on. I do not like to be told what to do, except when Mack gives me orders. He's like an exception to

every rule I've ever set for myself, which doesn't bode well for this arrangement of ours.

When I get to the kitchen, I guzzle a glass of water and try to drench my libido, along with my nerves.

Pouring another half glass, I take it with me back to Mack's bedroom and find him propped up on his side of the bed with a book, and our pillow wall already in place. He's shirtless and wearing a pair of black-rimmed glasses I've never seen before, and he's never looked sexier.

Sweet Jesus.

"Do the adoring fans know their resident playboy wears glasses?" I ask, trying to sound playful and teasing, but I'm not sure how well I'm pulling that off.

Quickly, I climb into bed and pull the blanket up, hoping Mack doesn't notice how hard my nipples are right now. If I had to guess they're about to cut their way out of my pajama shirt.

"No and if it gets out, I'll know exactly who leaked the information," he deadpans, flipping a page.

This is not a routine I ever saw for Mack after a game, and I realize, up until a few months ago, it probably wasn't how he spent his nights. But even now, with this celibate Mack Granger, I still didn't expect him to come home and make homemade grilled cheese and follow that up with a good book in bed.

It's unexpected.

And the biggest turn on.

Which, honestly, pisses me off. I need him to say something cocky. I need him to argue with me or pick a fight, anything to get under my skin, so I can forget how much I want to get under him.



THE NEXT MORNING, MACK AND I ARE BOTH UP BEFORE DAWN. HE HAS TO BE at the airport by seven and I need to be at the station early. I have a meeting with George and the rest of the production team to discuss possible travel plans as the Revelers' season progresses.

If they make it to the playoffs, there's a chance I'll end up traveling to all of their away games.

I would actually love that. It would get me out of the city and hopefully away from whoever is terrorizing my life. I know it wouldn't be a permanent fix, but a change of scenery would be nice.

Playoffs will start in a few weeks, so there's a chance all this stalker bullshit will be behind me by then, but who knows. I didn't anticipate the most recent turn of events, and I definitely can't predict the future. So, unfortunately, I'm left to balance what I'm being dealt.

"So, you'll stay with Sophie and the kids for the next five days," Mack says, tossing his travel bags into the trunk of his car and looking absolutely delicious in a three-piece suit.

God bless travel days.

"I'm going to be texting you to check in," he continues, adjusting his sleeves. "Please answer. If you don't, I'll worry about you, and then I'll play like shit. You don't want the hopes and dreams of an entire city resting on your reckless decision to ignore my texts."

Hitting the automatic start on my car, I cross my arms over my chest and lean back against the door. "Are you always this dramatic before road trips?" I ask, trying to ignore the knot forming in my stomach.

"I have tendencies," Mack admits, walking around his car to stand in front of me. "What's the frown for? You gonna miss me, Reporter?"

I think about bullshitting my way out of this admission, but I need to get this off my chest. "I'm worried this is a mistake."

His brows furrow. "You mean our arrangement?"

"No," I tell him, swallowing down my fears. "Staying at Sophie and Owen's. I don't want to put anyone else at risk. I'm already worried that I'm bringing trouble to your doorstep, but at least with you, there aren't kids involved and it's mutually beneficial...at least, that's the lie I'm spinning in my head. With Sophie and the kids—"

Mack places a hand over my mouth, stopping my anxiety-laden tirade. "The detective said they'd have someone patrolling the area and will be watching the house the entire time I'm gone, and when I get back, this place will be safer than Fort Knox. Everything is going to be fine," he assures me, pulling me against his chest.

I don't know when hugging Mack Granger became a normal thing, but it feels like something I've been doing my whole life and also, something I might not be able to go without now that I've experienced it.

"If something happens to them, I'll never forgive myself."

He holds on a bit longer than normal and I absorb his warmth.

“You better get going,” I finally say, giving him a push. “I don’t want the team to think your new girlfriend made you late. It’ll make me look bad.”

Mack steps back, waggling his eyebrows. “They’ll just think I got lucky.”

“Go,” I tell him, opening my car door. “And if you make up any shit about me it better be good... like, I’m the best lay of your life.”

He chuckles as he rounds the hood of his car, muttering, “I have no doubt about that.”

As I’m backing out of the garage, my phone rings and I see that it’s Detective Briggs.

“Hello,” I answer, as I begin my drive to the station, watching in my rearview mirror as Mack follows behind me in his car.

“Miss Bradley,” the detective says. “I saw your message this morning and wanted to see if there’s a good time for us to meet up today so I can get the new evidence.”

“Sure, I have a meeting this morning, but this afternoon would be okay.”

I have a lot of things on my agenda today, but I realize I have to make time for the detective. At this point, he’s my best bet in figuring out who is stalking me and why. He’s also who I have to thank for all of the added protection around me and I’m grateful.

“This afternoon will be great. I’ve already had the stadium pull the tapes, but same shit different day,” he says, his growing frustration starting to show. I can’t imagine how he must feel, probably wanting to solve this case as much as I do. I mean, it’s his job.

But it’s my life, I think. And I want it back.

“If there’s ever anything I can do to help this case, just know I’m willing to do it,” I tell him. “Whatever it is, I’ll do it. I’m not scared of this guy, just... the unknown. I hate not knowing what he plans next. But if putting myself on the line in some way could bring this to an end, I wouldn’t hesitate.”

“I appreciate that,” Detective Briggs says. “But at this point, we’re all at this guy’s mercy. My job is to keep you as safe as possible until we’re able to figure this out. I know if I was your brother or boyfriend, I wouldn’t want your life to be put in any more danger than it already is.”

Swallowing, I glance in my rearview mirror and see Mack’s car is still behind me as we make our way through the streets of New Orleans.

“So, you think my life is in danger?” I ask. We’ve talked a lot about the

emails and notes. We've tossed around motives and possible identities, but he's never said what he thinks the ultimate motive is. Does this guy want me to be scared? Does he know who my family is and possibly wants to extort me for money? Or does he want something more?

"We're not taking any chances," is all the detective will say. "And until we find this guy, we'll be taking every precaution to ensure your safety."

"And the safety of the people I'm around," I insist. "More than my safety, I'm worried about theirs. Nothing can happen to Sophie and her kids. She's doing me a huge favor by letting me stay with her this week. If anything happens—"

"Nothing will happen to them," he assures me. "Besides that, this guy seems pretty hyper-focused on you. I don't think we have much to worry about when it comes to other people."

Is that because I don't really have anyone in my life to worry about?

Outside of Sophie and Whitney, most of my other friends are only around occasionally, and usually for special events. As we all get older and more settled in our lives and careers, we're drifting apart.

Maybe the stalker knows just how alone I am.

"Just promise me you'll keep them safe."

"I promise, Miss Bradley," he assures me. "We're doing everything we can."

Later that evening, when I pull into the driveway at Owen and Sophie's, I spot a patrol car doing a slow drive-by and breathe a small sigh of relief.

The second I'm inside the house and surrounded with the love that overflows from this home and everyone in it, my entire body relaxes. It's not the exact feeling I get when I'm with Mack, but it's a close second.

"Just wanted to let you know I called in a favor from my family," Sophie says, giving me a knowing smile as she plates the kids' dinner. "Theo is having a friend who is in private protection look in on the case and they'll be keeping watch."

"You didn't have to do that," I tell her, but knowing having an extra layer of protection isn't a bad idea.

Sophie brushes her long, blonde braid over her shoulder. "You're my family," she says, turning to face me. "And I'll do anything in my power to ensure your safety."

"I'm worried about being here," I admit.

"Don't be," she says, reaching out to take my hand. "I'm not and neither

should you. All of this is going to go away soon and you'll be able to go back to living your life without looking over your shoulder all the time, but I do need to know what the heck is up with you and Mack. I'll expect a full disclosure after dinner."

Later, after the kids are in bed and the kitchen is clean, Sophie and I are settled on the couch with two glasses of wine and a plate of chocolate chip cookies, while I tell her everything that's happened in the last week.

"So, he just asked you to move in with him?" Sophie asks, biting off a chunk of cookie, her eyes growing wide.

"Yeah, he needs to clean up his image and his agent suggested a relationship—real or fake—to help change how the public sees him. I agree it is a good publicity stunt. I've seen it work with other professional athletes and celebrities."

"And you're okay with this?"

Sighing, I take a sip of wine before answering. "Yeah, I'm good with it. I mean, I need a place to stay right now because I don't feel comfortable staying alone and I hate that my building was so easily accessed. There's no way I could stay here all the time, for all the reasons you already know, and not to mention you and Owen are still technically newlyweds and I don't want to interfere with that. I'm hoping to become an aunt again sometime in the next year."

Sophie swats at me. "Stop trying to get me knocked up."

"You know your babies are going to be so cute and Molly and Ryan will be the best big siblings ever. I don't know why you're holding out on me."

We both laugh, but she knows I'm right and I see the twinkle in her eye any time I bring up babies. Who wouldn't want to procreate with Mister Sexy Balls?

For some crazy reason, that thought brings Mack to mind and I try imagining him with kids. Funny enough, it's not that hard. He's great with Molly and Ryan, and I've witnessed him holding Ross and Casey's little boy. It's adorable. Kids love him and I can tell he'll be a good dad one day.

"All in good time," Sophie says. "But for now, I'm going to enjoy this wine with my best friend."

"I do really appreciate you letting me stay this week."

"You're always welcome here," Sophie says, taking my hand in hers and intertwining our fingers. "My home is your home, always."

"Thank you."

For a moment, we just sip our wine and soak in the peace and quiet of the house. My mind still wanders to the cop car parked outside and whoever Theo might have watching the place, but I try not to dwell on it.

“So, there’s nothing going on between you and Mack?” Sophie asks, breaking the silence. “Because it might not be a bad arrangement if you were getting a little more than a place to stay out of the deal.”

Fighting back my smile, I swat at Sophie. “Oh God, don’t even. I can’t —”

“You can’t tell me you haven’t thought about it, Greer Bradley-Hawthorne. I know you and I can see it all over your face. That man is a hunk and you want a bite.”

I could lie, but this is Sophie, so of course I won’t because she’d see right through it.

“I want to ride him so hard.”

She gives me a knowing smirk. “But nothing’s happened... yet?”

“No,” I reply. “Unless you count a few hugs and sleeping in his bed.”

Leaning forward, she dips her head. “Wait, you slept in his bed? You should’ve started with that. How on earth did you sleep in that man’s bed and not end up doing the horizontal mambo?”

“It wasn’t like that,” I say with a laugh. “I just didn’t want to be alone, and he didn’t mind.”

“I’m sure he didn’t,” Sophie purrs. “He’s always looked at you like you’re a whole damn meal, so it’s no surprise he invited you to stay in his house and his bed.”

I shake my head. “Mack is attracted to anything with tits and legs,” I tell her, going after another cookie.

“No, he’s actually much pickier than you’d think,” she says with all seriousness. “I’ve seen the way he’s looked at you. He’s been interested, but if I had to guess, he’s also felt like you were off-limits because you’re my best friend and he’s close with Owen. And I’ve heard his spiel about not doing relationships, but yet he values family a lot, so I think that’s a façade. I’m not a therapist, but if I was, I’d say he’s protecting himself or trying to avoid repeating something from his past.”

“I don’t know, Soph,” I say, staring down into my almost empty glass of wine. “My body says go for it, but my mind is telling me to keep it platonic, and my heart is all over the place. I just don’t see Mack committing to one woman. I mean, look at us, we’re pretending to be in a relationship for God’s

sake. What does it say about him that out of all the women he's slept with over the years, he couldn't think of one of them to propose this to. Instead, he chose me, someone he's barely friends with and comes with enough baggage to sink the Titanic."

Sophie laughs again, but this time it's kind of sad. "I think you're both good people and have a lot to offer someone. Call me a hopeless romantic, but I can see this turning into more than a fake relationship. I've always thought the two of you would make a good match."

"Stop," I tell her, rolling my eyes. "The only thing you've ever said to me about Mack Granger is to *watch out for that one*," I say, using my best Sophie impersonation.

"And I meant it," she says, all joking aside. "But not in the way you assumed. I meant, watch out for that one, because the one who gets his attention, like really gets his attention, is going to be the last woman he's ever with. I've seen the way he's reacted to his best friends tying the knot and getting engaged. That man is itching to be tied down, he just doesn't know how to go about it. I think you could be the game changer."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MACK



ME

Hey, good morning. How's everything going?

I'M NOT USED TO TEXTING A WOMAN. MOST OF MY TEXT CONVERSATIONS ARE between me and the guys and they're a lot more off-color. So, texting with Greer these last couple of days have been different, not bad, just different.

Also, when it takes her a while to text back, my mind immediately goes to worst case scenarios and I hate it.

GREER

Good morning. Everything is fine, just the same as the last time you asked.

I know she's tired of me constantly checking in, but I can't help it. I've already told her I'm invested now and there's no going back for me.

ME

Sorry, but I have to ask. If I didn't I wouldn't be able to focus on the game and we both know how detrimental that could be to my performance.

GREER

And here we go with the guilt trip. *insert facepalm emoji*

Her sass comes through loud and clear in her text messages and I love it. It lets me know she really is doing okay. When she gets quiet and subdued, that's when I worry.

ME

Are you and Soph watching the game tonight?

GREER

Wouldn't miss it. Molly and Ryan conned Sophie into letting them watch the first few innings.

West Coast games are the worst. With the two-hour time difference, it makes for a late night—not just for us, but for our family and fans, as well.

GREER

Good luck tonight. Hope you and Ross kick some ass out there. Give me something good to report on. Have I mentioned how awkward it is doing live reporting at the gates of an empty stadium?

I laugh, remembering she told me that a couple days ago. When we're on the road, she still goes to the stadium and films some shots. I kind of like knowing she's still watching and fully-invested even when we're on the road.

ME

Think you might get to travel for the playoffs?

GREER

Yeah, the production team agreed to send me to away games.

ME

You do realize we'll have to play up the relationship if we're in the same city, right? Maybe go on a date if we have an off day? The media would eat that shit up.

GREER

You better take me somewhere good.

Oh, Greer, the places we could go...

"Let's go lover boy," Kip, our new shortstop says, giving me a nudge. I hadn't noticed the bus stopped in front of the stadium because I was so engrossed in my texting with Greer.

"That'll be enough from you Newbie," I tell him, sliding out of my seat and making my way down the aisle. "When you've been here longer than a season, then you can start giving me shit. Until then, keep your trap shut."

He laughs good-naturedly, knowing damn well I could really let him have it if I didn't like the kid so much, but he's the best shortstop we've had and for the most part, minds his business.

Once we've all filed out of the bus, we head into the locker room and

dress out, getting ready for pre-game warmups.

“How’s everything back home?” Ross asks as we go through a few stretches. “Casey said Sophie and Greer came over the other night with the kids, but Greer seemed a little preoccupied. I know she probably wouldn’t say anything in front of the kids, but is everything okay?”

Doing some hip sways to loosen up my joints, I nod my head. “Yeah, I mean, she’s worried about being around people right now. She feels like she might bring trouble with her, if you know what I mean.”

“This is so fucked up, man,” Ross mutters, eyes on the field around us.

“Tell me about it.”

“She has good protection, yeah?” Ross asks. “I mean, I know you said there is a patrol keeping an eye on Owen and Soph’s and people are keeping an eye on her at work?”

I exhale as I stretch, letting go as much of the bullshit as I can. “Yeah, and I told her she just has to trust the process and stay vigilant.”

When we hit the fifteen-minute mark before the start of the game, Ross starts throwing some pitches and we fall into our pregame routine, letting the troubles from home fall to the wayside.

GREER

Great game tonight. I thought Ross was going to throw a no-no.
Had me and Sophie on pins and needles.

ME

Thanks. It was a close one. All we care about is the W.
Hopefully we’ll get another chance at a perfect game before the season is over.



GREER

Uh, we just got a package delivered to the house and it’s full of personal defense items. Care to explain?

ME

Me and the guys got to talking after the game last night and decided all of you need to be armed, just in case.

GREER

A taser? That seems a bit extreme.

ME

Keep it on you at all times. I'd much rather be safe than sorry.

ME, ROSS, OWEN, AND BO WERE HANGING IN ROSS'S ROOM LAST NIGHT, talking about all the shit going down with Greer and we decided it would be a good idea for all the women to have a way to protect themselves. Hopefully, this fucker is found soon, but in the meantime, we want them to all be able to protect themselves.



ME

What's your favorite kind of ice cream?

GREER

Mint Chocolate Chip. Why?

ME

Mine is strawberry.

ME

A bunch of the guys on the bus were talking about what their wives and girlfriends like and I realized I didn't know much about your favorites, so I thought I'd ask.

GREER

The difference is this is a fake relationship.

ME

But we need it to look legit.

GREER

Well, in that case, my favorite pizza is Fresh Mozzarella from Louisiana Pizza Kitchen. I also love their Goat Cheese Chicken Pasta. TO DIE FOR. My favorite color is purple, my favorite wine is sauvignon blanc, my favorite thing to do is go to the zoo, my favorite holiday is Christmas even though I haven't put up a tree since I left home, my favorite book is anything by Sarah J. Maas, and my favorite flower is a peony. I'm sure there are plenty more, but this is just off the top of my head.

I SMILE AT THE LIST SHE SENT, READING OVER IT MULTIPLE TIMES AND committing it to memory, and when her next message starts bombarding me with questions in return, I oblige.

Normally, I'd balk at personal questions, especially from someone like

Greer Bradley, sports correspondent and reporter, but I don't feel that way with her. Not anymore.



TODAY IS OUR FINAL GAME BEFORE WE RETURN HOME FOR A NINE-GAME stand and to say we're all ecstatic is an understatement. Even though we lost last night, four to three, it was a hard-fought battle and we left everything on the field. Victor Hernandez, one of our new pitchers this season, was on the mound and he was on fire for five innings, but a grand slam in the bottom of the sixth sealed our fate. Our bullpen held their own, but our offense couldn't catch a break.

Win some, lose some.

But at this point in the season, we're trying to win them all. To say we all have our eyes on the prize is an understatement. It's so close we can taste it, but we still don't talk about it.

"Have you heard from Greer today?" Owen asks, sliding onto the bench beside me as I get the laces on my away game shoes just right. It's all in the details.

"We were texting earlier, why?" Glancing up at Owen, I try to read his facial expression.

He lets out a sigh, avoiding my eyes.

"Owen," I demand, knowing he wants to say something but he's not. "Just say whatever you came over here to say."

We've had plenty of talks over the past few days about what's happening at home, and he knows I'm on edge about Greer, so the fact he's beating around the bush right now is immediately pissing me off.

"Soph said she got another email this morning and Greer immediately packed up her bags. She wouldn't tell Sophie what the email said. When Sophie confronted her over it and insisted that she stay, Greer got upset and said she couldn't. That's all. She didn't tell Sophie where she was going and Soph is worried. I know this is a lot of shit to unload on you before a game, but I thought maybe you could get in touch with her and at least make sure she's okay."

"Fuck." Standing from the bench, I immediately reach into my bag to grab my cell.

We have about thirty minutes before we have to be out for our final warmup routine. I don't have time for this, but I also can't go out there not knowing what's going on with Greer.

ME

Where are you?

It takes an excruciating thirty seconds, but when the dots appear on the screen, I relax a little.

GREER

I'm at the station. A little behind on some work so I'll probably be here pretty late.

ME

Why didn't you tell me about the email?

The dots start again, only to stop. I give her time to respond but when it takes too long, I send another.

ME

Did you think Sophie wouldn't say anything? Don't hide things from me, Greer. Even if you think you're doing me a favor by keeping me out of the loop, you're not.

GREER

I'm sorry. I didn't want to mess up your game. Just know I'm safe and it's better if I don't stay with Sophie and the kids tonight. Trust me that I'm doing the right thing and we'll talk about the rest when you get back from Seattle.

ME

Where are you going to stay tonight?

GREER

The station. I'm going to catch up on some editing and fill in for one of our other reporters who's out with strep throat. Don't worry about me. I'll be safe and so will Sophie and the kids.

GREER

Good luck tonight.

ME

I'm coming to get you when I get to town.

GREER

Your flight lands at 2:00 AM. Go home and get some sleep. I'll see you after work tomorrow.

ME

I'm coming to get you.

Without waiting for her reply—which I'm sure would be an argument, because this is Greer Bradley we're talking about—I toss my phone back in my bag and run a hand through my hair.

“What did she say?” Owen asks, a worried expression on his face.

“She's going to work at the station tonight.” Letting out a deep sigh, I fall back down on the bench. “Obviously, whatever was in that email spooked her and made her feel like staying with Sophie and the kids wasn't a good idea. She's been afraid of that all week, so I'm sure it might not be anything, probably just enough to play on her fears. But regardless, she's safe and we have a game to play.”

He nods, pulling his own phone out and texting Sophie.

If I say I haven't wondered what the fuck I'm doing at least a dozen times over the past week, I'd be lying. Inviting this kind of drama into my life during the last half of a winning season is crazy.

And for someone who doesn't do relationships, I find myself treating this like a real one. From the way I'm constantly thinking about Greer to texting her every chance I get—just chalk me up there with the rest of the family men on the team.

It's not that I didn't know what I was getting myself into. It was my fucking idea, after all. I willingly entered into a fake relationship with Greer knowing she came with a load of baggage, that's actually what prompted me to present her with the idea.

That also sounds crazy.

What no one else knows is I've felt drawn to Greer for a while now, way before a week ago. Any time we're in the same room, I find myself watching her, paying attention. But I've always convinced myself she's off-limits. She's always had a wall up and never seemed like the type who's into casual fucks, and that's all I've been into for the past decade.

Now that she's in my orbit, close enough to touch, I find myself wanting more.

It's not because she needs me. She's not a damsel in distress. And it's not because I want to keep her safe, even though, at this point, I'd die trying. It's

more than that.

It's her strength, her tenacity, the way she doesn't put up with my bullshit, along with a million little things I can't quite put into words.

I haven't even kissed her and I already feel her getting under my skin.

So, basically, I'm fucked.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GREER



“THE EMAIL WAS FROM A DIFFERENT ADDRESS, BUT THERE’S NO DENYING THE sender is the same,” Detective Briggs says, his frustration obvious even on the other end of the phone line. “We’ve been filtering your messages, but this one slipped through somehow.”

The knot in my stomach starts trying to move up to my throat. “Have there been any other messages I don’t know about?”

“No, I won’t keep you in the dark,” he promises. “That won’t help either of us. But I was trying to catch them first so you didn’t have to be caught off guard again. I’m sorry, Greer.”

Swallowing down my nerves and unease, I let out an exasperated sigh. “It’s not your fault. I just freaked out. It’s like he knows my fears and is playing on them.”

“I hate to bring this up, be he might. I’m going to get you a new cell phone that’s encrypted. Just in case yours has been compromised.”

“Compromised? As in, this guy has now hacked my cell phone?” I ask, trying to keep my voice from rising. There aren’t many people in the office right now, but I don’t want everyone knowing my business. “How does that happen?”

“It’s really not that hard,” Briggs says. “Any time you’re on public Wi-Fi, they’d just need to be within 30 miles of you and have the right software. This guy seems pretty tech savvy, so it’s a strong possibility. That’s why I called you at the station. Until I get you this new phone, try not to use yours. I wouldn’t be surprised if this guy isn’t keeping track of your location via your cell phone. Have you noticed any weird issues, like your phone getting really hot or acting sluggish?”

Thinking back over the week, my mind goes to all the times I popped into Neutral Grounds to work. I felt safe because I knew someone from the police station was tailing me. It never crossed my mind that dangers could come from somewhere like my phone.

“Yeah,” I finally answer, picking up my phone and looking at it like it’s not a dangerous weapon. “The other day after I worked at the coffee shop I go to pretty often, my phone shut down and then started back up. I just thought it was some sort of glitch, but it has been acting weird ever since then.”

“Shit,” he mutters. “I’ll be by later this evening to switch out phones. We’ll take yours and go through it and give it back when it’s cleaned off and secure.”

I appreciate the company, but it won’t keep me from getting to you.

The panic I felt when I read that email this morning was enough to send me packing from Sophie’s, taking this threat as far from her and the kids as possible. Now it makes sense how it was so easy for this guy to find me. If he hacked my phone earlier this week, he’s probably been able to use my phone to find my location.

“Ugh, I hate this. I want it to end so bad I’m ready to go out in the parking lot and just lay down, let him come and get me. The longer this goes on, the more pissed I’m getting. What does he want?”

“Attention, notoriety,” Detective Briggs offers. “It’s hard to say. The pattern is all over the place, so it’s not giving us a lot to go off. But it does seem to be subtly escalating, so we need to stay diligent. Surveillance, patrol... don’t go anywhere alone if you can help it. I know it’s inconvenient, but it’s necessary. I feel like we’re getting close to a break.”

I don’t doubt that, but will it be my stalker that breaks or me?

“What are you still doing here?” George asks as he walks through the bullpen with his jacket. “Shouldn’t you be at home getting ready for your boyfriend’s return from a week away.”

“Editing,” I tell him, keeping my focus on my screen.

“For what? Next week’s broadcast?”

Always a smartass.

“Just getting a head start... reviewing some notes and doing a little fact checking.”

He stops in front of my desk and stares down at me. “Is there something I should know?”

“No.”

“Greer.”

Letting out a sigh, I push back from my computer. “I got another email today and I’m going to stay here until Mack gets back in town.”

“This fucking shit has got to stop,” George snaps.

“Uh, I haven’t pulled an all-nighter in a wh—”

“Not you,” George growls. “This fucking stalker bullshit. It’s enough. What does this guy want with you? I swear, if this has anything to do with Hawthorne, I’m going to run that entire company through the mud.”

“The thought has crossed my mind, but as cruel as my parents are, this isn’t their style.”

His face is beet-red, a sign of just how angry he is at this situation. Whether on my behalf or due to the fact it’s inconveniencing him and our work environment, George isn’t happy.

“Trust me, if I knew what he wanted... whoever *he* is, I would make it all go away. But unfortunately, I’m just as confused and frustrated as anyone.”

And still fucking scared. Even when I try to convince myself I’m not, it’s a lie.

“I know you think I’m an asshole, but I’m not that big of an asshole, Greer.” He tosses his jacket over the wall of my cubicle and falls into the chair across from my desk. “I’m worried about you. I’ve reported on shit like this over the years, but it’s never touched someone I know personally. The possibilities of this case are unsettling, at best. This guy seems relentless and I don’t like where things are headed. If it doesn’t let up, I think I should pull you from reporting. Maybe being on camera is just fueling this guy’s fire. He might be some perv that’s developed an obsession or some shit like that. I don’t want your position in the public’s eye to compound the situation.”

I stand, my heart pounding. “You can’t do that. Please, don’t do that,” I beg. “If you pull me from reporting, take me off the correspondent assignment with the Revelers, it’ll make it look like he won. If scaring me into seclusion is what he’s after, I refuse to let that happen. I’m not going to cower to this creep.”

Can a person be terrified of the unknown, but brave enough to face it at the same time?

“If something happens to you on the clock, that’s on me,” George says, bringing his head up and meeting my gaze with worried eyes. “I’d never forgive myself.”

“Nothing is going to happen to me,” I tell him, knowing I can’t promise him that, but also unable to face the alternative. Surviving this and making it through to the other side is the only option.

With that, George stands and grabs his jacket. “Stay here as long and as much as you need. Security is aware of everything going on and they’re instructed to escort you to your car. Detective Briggs has also assured me they’ll be doing frequent patrols around the building and in the vicinity looking for any suspicious behavior.”

“Thank you, George.”

“You better stay safe, kid. If you don’t, I’ll kill you myself.”

That earns him a half grin and I watch as he ambles out of the bullpen area. He might be an asshole boss on most days, but deep down, George is a good guy.

As the next few hours go by, the newsroom ebbs and flows as the people around me shift from the evening crew to the overnight crew.

When Briggs shows up with my new temporary phone, he gives me a brief update that doesn’t amount to much, but he does guarantee this phone is secure and no one will be able to hack it or use it to follow me.

After he’s gone, I text Mack and Sophie, letting them know about the phone switch and telling them to not send any other text messages to my other phone until it’s been cleared.

Mack immediately texts back.

MACK

Please tell me you’re still at the station.

ME

I am.

MACK

Thank you. I’ll be there as soon as I can.

Checking the time, I realize their flight has already taken off and they should be back in New Orleans in a few hours.

ME

Good game tonight.

MACK

Thanks.

ME

It was a nice save on the series and you had some good plays. That out you threw to second was a game changer.

MACK

It was a team effort. Owen was throwing heat tonight and their bullpen gave our bats a chance to shine in those last two innings.

I love that about him. Even though he can be so cocky sometimes, he's also humble and never misses a chance to praise the people around him.

People think of Ross as the team captain, which he is, but Mack is like second in command and he's so good at communicating with his team and rallying the troops. Not only is he aggressive as a defender, his batting skills are impressive. And the mental support he brings is invaluable. I've seen him walk out to the mound and completely turn an inning around—going from bases loaded to that final out to win a game. He's incredible.

ME

Well, it was a great game and it kept me busy taking stats and notes. I appreciate the distraction. I swear these walls are starting to close in on me and the food from the vending machines is no longer appetizing.

ME

And all I have in my desk is a cup of ramen and two bags of pretzels.

ME

And I'm so tired all I can think about is crawling into bed and sleeping for at least eight hours.

It's not that I haven't pulled all-nighters while working here. I've done plenty, but they're usually adrenaline-fueled nights due to bad weather or major news events. Tonight is slow on all fronts. And the longer I'm here, the more I think this is stupid and I should just go back to my apartment, which isn't far.

Now that the stalker can't track me with my phone and I have someone on patrol who would follow me home, it's probably okay—

MACK

If I get to town and your fine ass isn't safe and secure in that station waiting for me, there's going to be consequences for your actions, Reporter.

Have I also mentioned he's bossy and demanding, and quite possibly a mind reader?

Speaking of minds, I can't help the filthy direction mine goes, wondering about all the delicious consequences he's threatening me with.

An hour later, when I'm still sitting at my desk, willing my eyes to stay open and finding myself drifting off every now and then, someone calls out my name from the doorway of the newsroom.

"Greer, you've got a delivery."

Blinking my eyes, I squint at the clock on my computer. It's a little after one o'clock in the morning.

Who on earth would be sending me something? And what?

My mind immediately goes to my stalker, wondering if this is a new tactic. Since he can no longer track my phone or hack into my personal information, he's decided to make contact by sending me something.

The thought makes me lightheaded even though I'm sitting down, and my hands tremble as I let my mind run wild.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Charles, one of our producers, says as he approaches my desk. "Just looks like grilled cheese and soup from the place down the street."

About that time, my new phone dings with an incoming message and I grab it so fast I almost drop it. I don't know what I expect, maybe a message from the person who's been terrorizing me for the last few weeks. But it's not, and instead, it's someone who was equally as unexpected, but in a completely different way.

MACK

Sent you some food and I just got notification it was delivered.
Didn't want you to starve before I got there.

At that, my heart slows to a steady pace, almost melting in my chest.

"Did you not order anything?" he asks, now eyeing the bag suspiciously.

I reach out and take it, suddenly feeling flustered for an entirely different reason. Mack is constantly surprising me, being a man I could honestly see myself with, not just on a fake relationship basis, but a real one, and I don't know what to do with that realization.

"Uh, no, I didn't, but Ma—my boyfriend did," I say, giving him a nervous chuckle and eye roll, trying to brush it off like it's no big deal, but failing miserably.

“Sounds like a keeper,” Charles says before turning to head back to the production room, leaving me alone with my grilled cheese and soup and a ridiculous smile on my face.

Damn it, Mack. What are you doing to me?

ME

Thank you. That was very sweet of you.

MACK

Just looking out for my girl. I can't have anyone thinking I'm shitty at this relationship thing. That wouldn't do any favors for my image.

That sounds like a line of bullshit, but I let it go, because I don't want to fight him on this one. The reality is no one is watching, so he didn't have to do this. He didn't have to do any of the sweet things he's done for me in the past week, yet he's done them anyway.

Cared for my scrapes after I fell.

Took me in, no questions asked.

Let me sleep in his bed.

Made me breakfast and dinner... and coffee.

The coffee alone is more than most of my past boyfriends have accomplished.

Two hours later, my delicious, thoughtful dinner is long gone and I've bunched up a spare sweater to use for a pillow. I'm not in a deep sleep, but I'm dozing off for sure, enough that there's a little drool on my cheek.

When my phone rings, I jump and grab it, blinking rapidly to clear the fog. I've almost forgotten where I am and it takes me a second to look at the screen and see Mack's name.

“Hello,” I say, looking around the room as I answer and seeing there are a couple new faces, which means a few of the early morning crew made it in while I was asleep.

“Greer?” Mack's tone is worried and it immediately puts me on edge.

“Yeah, what's wrong?”

“You didn't answer my text,” he says, causing me to pull my phone back and see my missed notifications.

“Sorry, I fell asleep at my desk.”

His audible sigh is full of relief. “Thank God. I was getting ready to storm the gates. I'm out front. Why don't you leave your car and I'll drive you to

work.”

“Honestly, I should just stay. I need to be back here by ten and that’s only,” pausing, I check the time. “Shit, that’s only seven hours from now. You need to get some rest too.”

“I wake up at the same time every morning, regardless of what time I go to sleep. Get your ass out here or I’m coming in to get you.”

God, it’s good to hear his voice. We’ve kept in touch this past week, but all our communication has been through text messages. Hearing that deep grumble, which is even deeper right now because he’s probably more tired than I am, it does things to my body.

“I’ll be right out.”

After locking my computer, I tidy up my desk and grab my bag.

“I’m out,” I say, popping my head into Charles’ cubicle. “Let George know I’ll be back in time for the production meeting.”

“You need someone to walk you out?” he asks, checking his watch.

“My boyfriend is waiting outside,” I tell him, the fabrication rolling off my tongue a little easier each time I say it.

He nods, turning back to his computer. “Get some rest. You look like you need it.”

Gee, thanks, Charles.

But I’m sure he’s right. My morning started off shitty with the email. After that, I freaked out and packed my bags, feeling an urgent need to remove myself from Sophie and Owen’s house and put distance between me and the people I love the most, just in case my stalker decided today was the day they’d do something stupid.

Since then, I’ve been inside this building. Almost twenty-four hours have passed at this point and there is no telling what I look like right now.

When I step out of the building and see Mack’s vehicle, my entire body seems to deflate as all the tension and anxiety I’ve been carrying leave my body at just the realization that Mack is here.

It’s unexplainable, I can’t even begin to make sense of it, but it’s real and welcome.

He steps out of his car and meets me about halfway up the sidewalk.

Taking my bag from my shoulder, his eyes meet mine and we just stand there for a minute as we unapologetically soak each other in.

“Is it weird if I tell you I missed you?” he asks, voice low and rumbly.

Shaking my head, I inhale deeply, my throat feeling tight with emotions.

“No,” I finally whisper. “Not weird at all.”

Fake relationship or not, I missed him too.

So bad.

I was even sitting at my desk earlier, counting how many days the Revelers will be home for these next two series. And then, I counted how many games until the playoffs when I’ll be joining them on the road.

Six days at home.

Then back on the road for three.

Playoffs will officially start the second week of October, bringing the total games left to thirty.

“You smell so good,” he says, pulling me into his chest and pressing his lips to my hair.

“I don’t know how that’s possible,” I groan. “I feel like I’ve been up for three days instead of twenty-four hours and Charles just told me I look like I need sleep.”

Mack chuckles, the rumble in his chest reverberating through mine. “You do look tired, but it doesn’t mean you’re any less beautiful or that you don’t still smell amazing.”

He thinks I’m beautiful.

Why is that what my sleep-deprived brain focuses on?

Mack Granger thinks I’m beautiful.

“Come on,” he says, taking my hand and walking me toward his car. “Let’s get you home.”

Home.

I also love the sound of that.

When he opens the door for me, my heart stutters. I’ve always loved when guys do that in movies or when I’ve seen Owen do it for Sophie. But growing up, I never saw my dad open a door for my mom. Someone else always did it—valet, a driver—but never him.

Before you get it twisted, I’m not a silly romantic who builds her world on fantastical dreams, but I would be lying if I said I don’t like the way I feel when Mack does things for me.

A few seconds later, when he reaches across and fastens my seatbelt, my eyes close as I will my body to not react.

I shouldn’t want this.

I shouldn’t want him.

Not only is this supposed to be a fake relationship with an expiration date,

but I'm a strong, independent woman who can take care of herself. I don't need someone opening doors for me, and I damn sure don't need a man to buckle my seatbelt, but newsflash: I love it.

With him this close, he's consuming every one of my senses. He said I smell good, but he's the one who smells like every woman's wet dream. A little woody scent mixed with spice. And he's so close the warmth radiating from his body blazes on my skin.

"Thank you," I mutter, barely managing to keep my need for this man at bay.

On the drive home, Mack is relatively quiet, but every few miles, I notice him checking the rearview mirror and I'm reminded of the lingering threat.

"I'm so tired," I whisper, eyes on the road ahead as I feel tears form and the lump in my throat return.

Mack reaches over and takes my hand. "I'm sure you are. Maybe you can sleep in a little. I don't have to be—"

"That's not what I meant," I say, cutting him off. "I mean, I am physically tired, probably more so than I've been in a really long time. But I'm tired of feeling like I'm constantly watching over my shoulder. I hate the way this person has disrupted my life... and yours... everyone around me. It's infuriating and I'd do anything to make it stop."

He doesn't say anything, but his hold tightens and his thumb makes soothing strokes on my hand. It's so comforting that I find my eyelids drooping before we make it to Mack's house.

But when the car stops, I jolt awake, only to realize we've pulled into his driveway and there's a new gate at the end of it, requiring a code for us to enter.

"When did you get a gate?" I ask, my voice hoarse with exhaustion.

"Yesterday," Mack says, pulling the rest of the way up the drive and into the garage.

Once the overhead door is shut behind us, he opens the door and just looks at me for a minute before he speaks again. "I'm only going to say this once: you're not a burden. I don't want you to feel like you roped me into something or that you're inconveniencing my life. I want to be here for you and anything I do for you is because I want to. Before you try to argue with me, just know this is one you won't win. I'm happy to argue with you about a million other things, but not this, okay? This one is off the table."

Swallowing, I nod, afraid of speaking.

“While we were away, I had a few upgrades made to my security system. The gate is one of them. Some of this stuff I’ve been meaning to do for a while, but just got comfortable and complacent. So, again, I’m not going to hear any of your bullshit about me doing too much. I wanted to do it and so I did it. End of story.”

Well, okay then.

Once we’re in the house, Mack quickly goes over the new and improved system, showing me a screen that displays views from all the cameras around his property. Between that and the gate, it would be literally impossible for anyone to come in without us knowing. And when we’re not here, it’s being monitored by a security firm.

It’s super high tech and above my pay grade, but it makes me feel safe.

Just like the man at my side.

“Thank you,” I tell him, warring with my emotions and knowing if I don’t go to bed soon, I’m either going to keel over or have a breakdown.

Wrapping an arm around my shoulder, he brings me into his chest and kisses the top of my head. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

For a moment, I just breathe him in and appreciate his nearness. The way I don’t feel alone when he’s around. I think I’ve felt lonely for so long, I started to become callous to it. The pang of longing dulled to the point I forgot what it was like to need someone.

“How about a bath?”

The low timber of his voice sends shivers down my spine and the thought of Mack naked in one of his big bathtubs floods my mind.

“Only if you’ll take one with me.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MACK



WHEN I FREEZE, GREER'S BODY BECOMES A PLANK IN MY ARMS. SHE PUSHES away from me. "Never mind," she says with a nervous laugh, her voice sounding so tired. "It's fine. I don't know—"

Cupping her jaw, I stop her backtracking and bring her eyes up to meet mine. "Whatever you need, Greer. Whatever you need."

Admittedly, that wasn't what I expected her to say, and it definitely caught me off guard. I'm also not sure it's the best idea since I've been thinking about getting her naked non-stop. But when I see her eyes soften, I know it was the right response. The dark circles encompassing her eyes and the visible exhaustion that's taken over her body is concerning, and I'll do anything to make her feel better. Anything to soothe her visible frayed edges.

"I want a bath... with you. Just a bath."

Without another word, I turn, take her hand in mine and walk toward my bedroom.

Greer stands at the door of the bathroom, watching as I draw a bath for two.

When I bought this house, the oversized tub in the ensuite bathroom was one of the major selling points. As someone who uses their body to its fullest potential, I knew I'd want a place to soak away the day—a bad game, muscle strains. But never in my wildest dreams did I ever go here. A woman like Greer Bradley here, in my home, and wanting to have a bath. With *me*. That was never part of the dream.

I've fucked a lot in my days, even though I loved someone once, but this is definitely a first.

Once the water is warm, I toss in some mineral salts and dim the lights.

There are already towels in my warmer, so I do the only thing left to do and start shedding my clothes.

As I'm unbuttoning my shirt, I see movement out of the corner of my eye and notice Greer doing the same. Normally, when I'm around Greer, my body immediately responds—lighting up like a fucking Christmas tree—even when she's fully clothed, but it's like my autonomic response trigger knows now isn't the time.

This isn't about me.

It's about her and what she needs from me right now.

And I'm more than willing to give it to her.

Slipping into the bath, I settle against the back of the tub, leaving Greer's options open. She can either slide in on the opposite side or settle between my legs. Either is fine, but I'm hoping she chooses the latter, because as much as she obviously wants to be close to me, I *need* to be close to her.

Leaning back, I roll my head to the side and watch as she twists her hair up into a loose knot on top of her head—unabashedly naked and absolutely stunning. Her long lines are accentuated by the dim light and I take in every dip and curve, appreciating every inch of her.

As she steps into the tub, there isn't a shred of hesitation as she turns her back to me and slowly lowers her body into the warm water, easing her back against my chest.

It's perfect.

Her skin against mine.

Her emotions raw and on display.

Vulnerable.

Unguarded.

Real.

It's absolutely fucking perfect, and oddly, exactly what I needed as well.

When I wrap my arms around her, she brings her hands up and grips my forearms, holding me right back. I say softly, "If you want to talk about it, I'm here to listen. But if you don't, that's okay too. I'm good just sitting in silence."

"Thank you," she whispers, turning her head and placing a soft kiss on my hand.

That simple gesture elicits a response I've never felt before—warmth erupts in my chest, and I want to pull her even closer than she already is. I want to guard her from the world and protect her from every evil.

For a split second, my body wars with the idea of how important this woman is becoming. Commitment is one thing I've always avoided because I didn't feel like I had the capacity to care for another person, not like they would need.

My happiness has been wrapped up in the game. I've found true friendship and family in my teammates, and fulfillment in taking care of my mom and giving back to my community.

I'm just not sure if that's enough anymore.

Greer seems to sink even deeper into my chest, her head lolling to the side.

"Tell me something."

"What do you want to know?" I ask, brushing my lips against her hair, completely immersed in the moment and feeling like the rest of the world doesn't even exist, only this—me and her.

"Anything. Something about you."

"I've never taken a bath with someone before tonight."

She lets out a sleepy chuckle. "Me either. Well, except for one time when Sophie and I were in Italy. There was this huge bathtub in a villa we stayed in. So we put on our swimsuits, opened a bottle of wine, and sat in there until the water turned cold."

"Y'all have been friends for a long time, huh?"

She nods. "Since fifth grade. I knew she was a kindred spirit from the moment I met her. I just didn't know exactly how important she'd be all these years later. She's my family."

Greer's voice turns sad and I want to absorb it and take her pain on as my own.

"Do you have any siblings?" I ask. I've never heard her talk about her family. All I know is that her parents are next level rich.

"Nope."

"Me either."

"My parents have basically disowned me," she adds, so matter-of-fact. "But don't feel sorry for me. It was my choice. They wanted me to take my place in the family business and I refused. I always knew that would come at a price. But if I had done what they wanted, my life would've been based on nepotism, only having a career because of my last name. I would've married who they wanted me to marry, been who they wanted me to be. Following in their footsteps." Her messy bun brushes against my chin as she shakes her

head. “I get that most children want that. But not me. Becoming my parents was my biggest nightmare. I watched them weigh every decision against the mighty dollar. If it wasn’t good for the bottom line, it wasn’t good for them. They hate each other, yet remain in their sham of a marriage. It’s a joke. And I couldn’t live that life. I couldn’t be a fake. I wanted to be real and know that everything I have in life is because I earned it.”

Whoa.

I didn’t see that coming—not just the honesty, but the truth about her family. This deep insight into who Greer really is as a person. It’s easy to see where her stubbornness comes from, that innate need to be independent and stand on her own two feet. I can relate to that, even though my childhood was the polar opposite of hers, I wanted that same independence and autonomy.

I hate that her parents couldn’t appreciate her for who she is, this amazing woman who isn’t afraid and goes after what she wants. The thought of Greer having no choice but to stand alone, brings an ache to my chest I haven’t felt before.

All of it only makes me admire her that much more.

“Good for you,” I tell her, my voice full of grit and fierceness—protectiveness for this woman in my arms. “You’re so brave, Greer. You could’ve taken the easy road, but you didn’t. You forged your own path and you’re kicking ass. If your parents can’t respect that, it’s their loss. They don’t deserve you.”

She hums, but I can tell the praise leaves her a little uncomfortable, so it’s not surprising when she turns the tables back on me. “Are you close to your family?”

“It’s just my mom.” I don’t talk about my family. It’s not a warm, fuzzy story, so I usually avoid this conversation. But Greer was so honest with me, I feel like I have no choice but to be the same with her. “My dad was an alcoholic. He left when I was young. We didn’t have anything when he was around and after he left, we had even less. My mom did what she could, but it was hard. I got my first job when I was ten. I worked at the concession stand at the baseball field. It’s how I started playing. The coach said I was a natural and made sure I always had the right gear and that my fees were paid.”

That was the driving force of my first charity. When I got my first contract, I took a large chunk of it and set up a foundation for kids who don’t have the money to pay for sign up fees or cleats.

“Are you close to your mom?” Greer asks, her voice sounding a little

distant.

“Yeah, we’re close. I don’t call her as often as I should, which she’d probably like to ring my neck over, but we talk when we can and she comes for a visit when she can, usually around the holidays.”

“You’re originally from Texas, right?”

“Yeah, born and raised. What about you? Have you always lived in New Orleans?”

She shakes her head against my chest. “No, my parents moved here to take over Hawthorne Communications after my grandfather died. I was born in New York, but I call New Orleans home.”

The water is starting to feel a little tepid, so I reach over and drain a little of it out and turn the faucet back on to reheat the tub. As I shift, I feel Greer’s ass graze over my dick and the sensation makes me harden.

It’s unsolicited, but not surprising.

Even though there is nothing sexual about this bath, having her this close to me is bound to make my body react.

When I feel her back stiffen, I let out a deep chuckle. “Sorry about that. He has a mind of his own.”

She huffs out a laugh. “I’m sure he does.”

Settling back into the water, I pull her against me. “If we ignore him, he’ll go away.”

“Mmm hmm, okay.”

“Do you have a dress for the charity event?” I ask, trying to think of something non-sexual to discuss while I will away my hard cock.

She shakes her head in a non-committal way. “I have a couple of options I can grab from my apartment, but I’m planning on going with Sophie tomorrow after work to shop for something new.”

The image of Greer trying on dresses does nothing for my cock, but I do enjoy picturing her in silky fabric and nothing underneath. “I’d love to see you in something green.”

“Is that a request?” she asks, her voice husky with insinuation.

“If I’m allowed to make a request, then yes,” I graze the shell of her ear with my nose. “I think green would look gorgeous on you.”

Greer hums and it fuels my building inferno.

“Tell me about your last relationship,” I mutter, my lips grazing her ear.

I can’t guarantee that talking about Greer with another man will deflate my cock, but it will definitely distract me from the feel of her soft skin

against my hardness.

“Not much to tell,” Greer says, relaxing against me and running her hands through the warm water. “His name is Miles Christiansen and he’s a doctor. He’s from Birmingham, but also has a practice in New Orleans, and he has a house out of town near Lake Pontchartrain. I met him at a convention I was doing a piece on and thought he was such a catch. On paper, he checked all the boxes, but once we started having sex, a switch flipped. Everything became about him and he only used me for booty calls.” She barks out a harsh laugh, shaking her head. “It took me a while to kick him to the curb, but I eventually told him to fuck off and blocked his number.”

I love that she’s a take-no-bullshit kind of person, but I hate that someone would even consider taking advantage of her.

“What a fucking dipshit.”

She laughs and it sounds more like herself—confident and sassy. “Sophie and I have a long list of names for him and that’s definitely on there somewhere, along with Douchnozzle, Narcissistic Asshole, Arrogant Bastard, and my personal favorite, Cockwaffle.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I chuckle. “Remind me to never cross you and Sophie.”

“We’re a force to be reckoned with, that’s for sure.”

“I’m glad you have her.”

Sighing, she snuggles against my chest. “I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

We both go quiet again, the only sound is an occasional drip from the faucet and Greer’s hand skimming the water. It’s soothing and almost has me lulled into a semi-sedated state when she asks, “I know you’ve said you only have one-night stands, but has there ever been anyone you’ve considered a girlfriend?”

My memories go back to college, and the naïve kid I was back then. “There was once,” I admit. “A long time ago.”

“What happened?” she asks.

“We started dating my senior year of college and she moved with me to my first minor league assignment, but that’s a crazy life and you don’t know from month-to-month, or even week-to-week, where you’ll be. I was trying to make the bigs and had a pretty singular focus. Looking back, it was just as much my fault as it was hers.”

Greer hums. “She couldn’t stand sharing you with your passion.”

It's not a question, but a statement. And it's true.

"I could've been more attentive, but I was young and ambitious and hungry."

I was so fucking hungry—for success, recognition, making a name for myself. All I could think about was never going back to where I came from and providing for, not only myself, but my mom. I made her a promise that I would take care of her and I couldn't go back on my word.

I could never become my dad.

Not only was he an alcoholic, but he was also an abusive asshole who never kept his word. Always promising to be better, but never following through.

If nothing else, I was going to have some fucking follow-through.

"I think it's admirable," Greer says solemnly. "Anyone that can come from nothing and make something of themselves deserves all the respect. It's one thing to be like me, and have all the opportunities given to you. People expect me to succeed. I'm a Bradley-Hawthorne. I come from two very affluent families. But I think people who are raised with less have less expected of them. So, when I see someone like you, I'm inspired to be better."

Well, fuck.

My throat tightens and I have to blink a few times to keep the moisture in my eyes at bay.

What the hell is this woman doing to me?

"I'm going to fall asleep in this tub if I sit here any longer," she says, bringing me out of my head.

Clearing my throat, I hope my voice doesn't betray me. "Yeah, sure. Scoot up a little and I'll grab some towels."

She does as I request and I push myself up and step out onto the rug. Thankfully, the towel warmer is close by and I grab two over-sized ones, wrapping one around my waist before I walk back to Greer.

"Stand up," I instruct, holding the towel out for her.

Without looking at me, she stands and I wrap her up, slipping an arm around her shoulders and another at her knees. When I lift her out of the tub, she doesn't balk at the gesture, just wraps her arms around my neck and allows me to carry her across the hall.

"Get dressed and I'll grab you a glass of water. Do you need anything else?"

Me. I want her to need me.

Her eyes meet mine and I see a swirl of emotions there, not being able to lock in on just one—exhaustion, need, worry, want. As much as I'd love nothing more than to spread her out on my bed and worship her body, I know this isn't the time.

But soon.

“No,” she finally says, barely above a whisper.

With my back to her, I'm halfway out of the room when she adds, “Thank you, Mack. For everything.”

“Even though I don't need or want a thank you, you're welcome.”

“One last request,” she says, making me pause.

“Anything.”

“Can I sleep in your bed?”

Adjusting my towel to keep it from slipping down my hips, I turn to look at her. “I wouldn't have it any other way.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

GREER



MACK DROPPED ME OFF AT WORK EXACTLY SEVEN HOURS AFTER HE PICKED ME up, which made it feel like I'd never left. If it wasn't for the lingering emotions from last night, I would think I dreamed it all up.

Mack picking me up.

The extra security at his house.

The thoughtfulness.

The bath.

The honest conversation.

Not one moment from last night felt fake, but this morning, everything seemed to shift back to business as usual. Mack was up before me and had made a simple breakfast. He had my first cup of coffee waiting on me. Black, just how I like it.

But unlike last night when he couldn't seem to stop touching me, he'd found his boundaries again and seemed to be keeping his distance. I didn't say anything, because honestly, I think I need it—some space to get my head on straight, time to remind myself that this is supposed to be a fake relationship with a mission and an expiration date.

Which brings me to my current task, finding a dress for the charity event tomorrow night—mine and Mack's first public outing.

I have a couple of dresses in my closet at the apartment that would work. If I need one of them, I could swing by and grab it. But I really want something new, so I'm meeting up with Sophie at Neutral Grounds for coffee and then we're walking around the corner to one of our favorite dress shops.

As I pull into the parking lot across from Jackson Square, I have my eyes open. Even though I'm in a public place, I can't let my guard down.

After the production meeting this morning, Detective Briggs brought my phone back to me and guaranteed that it's safe to use. They scoured it and removed a tracking app. The thought that someone was tracking me through my phone and possibly reading my personal messages really gives me the creeps, but I refuse to let this psycho rule my life.

The Revelers have the day off, so I leave the office a little after five and head out to meet Sophie.

"Hey, bitch," she calls out, a smile stretched across her face and arms open wide as I approach Neutral Grounds. When she hugs me, it feels like it's been a week since I've seen her even though I just left her house yesterday morning.

She smells like sunshine and goodness.

Hugging her back, I can't help but feel at peace. "Thanks for meeting me."

"Of course, it's such a nice day. The kids were ecstatic to go hang out with Casey and the baby. Besides, I have something I need to talk to you about and I've invited someone to come meet us. I hope you don't mind a little multi-tasking."

Pulling back, I squint my eyes, trying to read her. "What's up?"

"You'll see," she says, her beautiful face beaming.

When we walk into Neutral Grounds, a stunning woman with sleek black hair that is perfectly tucked behind her ears is standing by one of the tables with an expectant smile on her face.

"Sophie?" she asks, taking a step toward us.

"Hello," Sophie replies, closing the distance.

The woman shakes Sophie's hand and then turns her attention to me.

"Oh, sorry," Sophie says. "This is my best friend, Greer. She'll be my maid of honor."

Maid of honor?

My eyes go wide when I pull my attention away from the woman's captivating green eyes and back to my best friend. "What?"

Sophie is literally about to burst at the seams when she brings her hands together under her chin and turns to face me. When her eyes start to mist over, I feel mine do the same.

We've always been sympathetic criers when it comes to each other.

If she cries, I cry.

If she's happy, I'm happy.

That's just how it works with us.

"I'm getting married!" she exclaims. "I mean, I know you already know that. But I mean, I'm getting married *soon*. And there's no chance I can step into this next chapter of my life without you by my side. I wanted to make some grand gesture and send you an elaborate proposal, but this is kind of moving faster than I thought. Owen and I decided we don't want to wait until next year. Why wait when you've found the love of your life, right?" she asks, her tone taking on a nervous edge. "So, we've decided to get married when the season is over. November eighteenth. It's the weekend before Thanksgiving and we know that will add to the chaos of the season, but it just feels right and—"

"It's perfect," I say, cutting her off and pulling her into my arms for another hug. "It's so perfect and I am so happy for you. It would be an absolute honor to stand beside you while you marry the man of your dreams."

I hear a snuffle and turn to see the gorgeous woman blinking rapidly, as if to not disturb her perfect makeup. She waves a hand in the air in front of her face and looks up to the ceiling. "Oh, my gosh. I never do this. I'm so sorry."

Sophie laughs, reaching out to take her hand. "It's okay. I'm sorry we're making a big scene right here in the middle of a coffee shop. This is all just... I don't know. I'm so happy I feel like I might combust."

Once we've all collected ourselves. Her introduction continues, "I'm Everly Davenport, Sophie's wedding planner. It's so nice to meet you."

The three of us—plus intermittent visits from CeCe, because apparently she and Everly are friends—plan out my best friend's wedding. In the span of an hour, we've nailed down Sophie's top three options for venues and reception locations. She's decided on flowers, music, a photographer, and a guest list. Thanks to her being so low-key and non-bridezilla, most of the decisions were simple.

But that's Sophie. She's not over the top or extravagant, and neither is Owen. They're two of the most down-to-earth people I know. And all Sophie cares about is that at the end of the day, she's married to Owen Thatcher.

"I know I should be freaking out because it's only a little more than two months away, but I'm not," Sophie says, glancing through a few centerpiece options Everly brought with her. "Thank you for making this so easy and taking this on with such little notice. I know you typically spend months planning a wedding."

"It's what I do," Everly assures her. "I live for the adrenaline rush I get

from last minute events. One time, I put together an entire wedding for over three hundred guests in just two weeks. It's my biggest flex," she says with a laugh. "Fear not, Sophie Callahan, this will be the day of your dreams. I promise."

I look from Everly back to Sophie and see her eyes glisten. "Don't," I say, placing my hand on top of hers. "No more tears, even though they are happy. I'm tapped out on extreme emotions."

She laughs and takes a deep, cleansing breath. "You're right. I'll keep it together," she promises. "And I know you're going to knock this out of the park. All puns intended."

We all laugh and it feels good. I needed this—something new to focus on, a distraction from my crazy life. It's perfect.

"The only thing I want to make sure of," Sophie adds, "is that Molly and Ryan feel like a part of the day. I want them to know this is not just about me and Owen becoming husband and wife, but about the four of us becoming a family."

Everly's expression is soft as she nods. "Don't worry about anything," she says, gathering her binders and checklists and placing them in her leather bag. "I'll make sure they have the perfect day too. I'm thrilled to get the chance to work with you. CeCe hasn't stopped gushing about you since she called."

"Well, you're a goddess," Sophie gushes with a laugh. "I mean, quite literally. And I can't thank you enough for everything."

"No need to thank me, yet," Everly says with a wink. "I'd love nothing more than to sit here all night and talk about weddings and drink coffee, but I have a meeting in twenty minutes I can't be late for, so unfortunately, I have to run."

Once we've said our goodbyes, Sophie and I head out to the dress shop.

"I'm guessing we're not just looking for a dress for me," I say, looping my arm through hers. "This is a multi-tasking mission as well."

Sophie bites down on her lip. "I just wanted to surprise you a little and Everly called last minute to say she could squeeze in a planning session, so I jumped on it. Then I thought, the first place I wanted to look for a dress was Agatha's. I mean, it's where we bought all of our formals during school and college. If I could find my wedding dress here, it would feel very full circle."

We walk for a few minutes, making our way around the corner. The city is busy this time of evening, but not overly so, and I can't help but glance

back down the street, always looking over my shoulder.

There's nothing or no one out of the ordinary, so I turn back around and think of something else to focus on.

"Have you told your parents?" I ask. Thankfully for Sophie, her relationship with her family is a lot less strained than mine. It doesn't mean her parents fully approve of Owen or the way Sophie is living her life, but she doesn't let them push her around, and unlike my parents, they haven't cut her out of their lives.

Her brothers and sister would never allow it.

That's the perks of having siblings. When your parents are assholes, you still have someone on your side. In the Callahan family it's six-to-two. So even when Kitty and Warner pull their shit, they can't take on all of them, which gives Sophie a reprieve from time-to-time.

"I called them," Sophie says, eyes straight ahead.

"And..." I prod, not letting her stop at that.

"And they were exactly like you can imagine—cold and delusional."

Leaning my head on her shoulder, I squeeze her arm. "Sorry."

"No apologies needed," she says with a deep sigh. "Honestly, if they had responded any differently, I would've been shocked. It's better to stick with the status quo where they're concerned."

Opening the door to Agatha's, I pause. "Please tell me they didn't bring up Gavin."

"Would they be Warner and Kitty Callahan if they didn't?"

Once inside the store, we're treated like family. Agatha herself is an eighty-year-old woman who still works circles around her help who are in their mid-thirties. She's brilliant with a needle and thread and has come through for Sophie and me too many times to count over the years.

"What can I do for you, dears?" she asks, taking one of my hands and one of Sophie's into her soft, papery ones. "What's the occasion?"

Knowing Sophie's mission is much more important than mine, I start with, "Sophie is getting married."

The sweet little old lady's face lights up brighter than the Fourth of July. "Oh, congratulations. Oh, my, I remember when you were just a wee girl. Your mother used to bring you in for every special occasion. You and sweet Eleanor."

Sophie and I both choke back a cough.

No one ever calls Eleanor sweet, except for Agatha.

To everyone else, Sophie's older sister, Eleanor, is a viper. A man-eater. A ballbuster.

But definitely not sweet.

"Eleanor is... well, Eleanor," Sophie says diplomatically. "I'm sure you'll see her soon when the word gets around that I'm getting married."

Agatha turns from us and immediately begins to peruse a rack that's in the back of her small store. There might not be a lot of space in here, but the quality of the items she does have are second to none and she's always full of surprises.

"I started working on this a little over a month ago," Agatha says as she moves garment bags and dresses to the side. "No reason really, except that I had a whim to make something dreamy." Her tone lilts and it sounds like birds singing. "It's not finished yet, but I think it was just waiting for you."

When she pulls out the dress, I hear the breath whoosh out of Sophie.

"Agatha," she gasps. "It's... I can't even..."

The top of the dress is sheer with a nude underlay and it's covered in tiny, hand-stitched cream flowers with a vee neckline that dips to the waist. A delicate ribbon band ties into a bow in the back and then the skirt of the dress is the softest, billowy tulle.

"I can make it any length you'd like. Add a train, sleeves..."

I turn to look at Sophie when she doesn't speak and I know her answer without her uttering a word.

This is the one.

CHAPTER TWENTY

MACK



CHECKING MY WATCH FOR THE TENTH TIME, I TELL MYSELF TO CALM THE fuck down.

We're not running late.

Actually, we still have twenty minutes before we need to leave.

But I'm dying to see Greer.

We haven't spent much time together over the last couple of days. After the night in the bath, I felt like things were feeling too real and I needed to focus on the game. So, I took the past couple of days to do that. But I've stayed in touch, checking on her through occasional text messages.

I also keep an eye on the security cameras at my house, making sure the systems are working how they were designed.

After I took Greer to work on my off day, I went to the field and got in a good workout with Ross and Bo. Owen met up with us later that day for lunch and I took the time to get my head on straight.

Yesterday, we kicked ass and won our fifth game in a row, but today, we lost.

That's baseball. With one-hundred-and-sixty-two games in a regular season, you're not going to win them all. However, when you're as close as we are to clinching the division, every single game counts.

Collectively, as a team, we want this so bad we can taste it.

Checking my watch again, I inwardly groan.

Cut it the fuck out, man.

She'll be down when she's ready.

I've seen Greer in the clubhouse and on the field. I've walked her to her car and followed her home. We've shared meals together and I've made her

coffee and breakfast. Even when she's not here, her scent lingers. But tonight, we're putting on a show for everyone to see. Not that we haven't put up a united front until now. We have. After every game, when she waits for me or I wait for her, it's a loud message to everyone in the room that she's mine.

Stay the fuck away.

But tonight feels different. Maybe it's because of the deep conversations we've had recently or the intense feelings I've started to develop that no longer feel fake. All I know is my palms are sweating like this is a real first date.

To say I'm a little nervous is an understatement.

When my phone rings, I practically jump out of my skin.

Checking the screen, I see it's Aiden calling. I almost hit the button to send him to voicemail, but I know he'll just keep calling and texting if I try to ignore him.

"Hello," I answer, sounding every bit as annoyed and anxious as I feel.

"Whoa," Aiden says with a chuckle. "Everything alright? You headed to the charity event?"

I walk over to the sink and grab a glass for a drink of water.

"Not yet, but we're leaving soon."

"Are you ready for this?"

With the glass under the tap, I fill it half full.

"This isn't fucking rocket science," I quip, turning the water off and chugging the contents of the glass.

There, that's better.

Maybe I'm just a little dehydrated.

"Well, for someone like you, it is."

Rolling my eyes, I think about hanging up on him.

"It's not that I can't be in a relationship. It's that I've never wanted to be," I correct. "Get your facts straight before you start giving me shit. And for your information, tonight will be a breeze. Greer and I are getting along great, so there's nothing to worry about. We'll sell this like a kid selling lemonade on a hot day."

Aiden chuckles. "I've always admired your confidence, Mack. Go get 'em, Tiger. And call me tomorrow."

He ends the call and I sigh, placing my hands on the counter while I take a deep breath and feeling much more centered.

Behind me, the clack of high heels on hardwood floors quickens my pulse.

“I’m ready, sorry if you’ve been waiting long.”

Greer’s head is down as she adjusts a bracelet on her wrist. Her dark hair is pulled back at the nape of her long, delicate neck. The silky green dress she’s wearing accentuates her amazing curves without showing too much. It’s sexy, but elegant.

Exactly like Greer.

Even when she’s wearing jeans or sweatpants, she still looks sexy and elegant.

But this.

This is more than my building desire for her can handle and I’m forced to beat it down with a bat. Swallowing, I adjust my tie and clear my throat, trying to play it cool and like she didn’t just render me speechless.

“I was just talking to Aiden,” I say, needing a distraction from the goddess standing in front of me. “He was making sure I don’t fuck this up.”

Her sly smile draws my gaze to those luscious red lips and I have to bite down on the inside of my cheek to not physically react and do something stupid, like pull her into my arms and kiss the ever-loving shit out of her.

“It’s always good to have someone to keep you on the straight and narrow,” she says, patting my chest on her way by and bowling me over with that seductive, sweet scent.

It’s a little more amplified than usual and I want to drown in it.

“What would you know about that?” I ask, thinking Greer does what she wants, when she wants. Other than Sophie, I don’t think anyone can tell this woman what to do.

“Oh, for you,” she says, her smile widening. “Not me. I’m perfect and don’t need that kind of guidance in my life.”

Now, it’s my chance to laugh, and I do, a big, hearty laugh that shakes out the cobwebs and eases the anxiety and tension I was feeling. “Oh, that’s rich, Miss Bradley.”

Greer isn’t perfect, but I wouldn’t want her to be.

It’s the flaws and imperfections that have surfaced over the last few weeks that endears her to me, making me look past the gorgeous exterior that seems to have walked right out of a fashion magazine and see her for exactly who she is.

A woman who is blazing her own path and taking life by the horns. Even

when life throws her curveballs, she still gets up every day and does the damn thing. Sure, she's been afraid and lets that dictate her actions, but she's also stronger for it.

"We better get going," I say, headed to the front door. When I turn to find Greer by the door leading to the garage, I pause. "Where are you headed?"

"To the car."

"It's this way."

She turns and cocks her head.

"Car is waiting."

When the car pulls up in front of the hotel where the charity event is being held, I smooth down the front of my tux before turning to Greer.

"Ready for this?" I ask, seeing a slight hesitation in Greer's expression.

She nods, but I see the hesitation in her eyes and wait her out.

Since Greer is typically so collected and put together, it's easy for me to notice when she's nervous or on edge about something, like now. Her eyes are darting out the window at the collection of people and she's worrying her bottom lip.

Taking a deep breath, her gaze turns back to mine. "What are we— I mean, I know we're pretending, but how do we make this look real to everyone else? How do we sell this?"

Pretending, right.

Because this isn't real.

"Should we set up some ground rules, like kissing, but no tongue?" she continues, her expression easing a little.

Hearing the words *kissing* and *tongue* coming out of Greer's luscious mouth has me wanting to bite my knuckles to distract my dick from responding.

"Su—" My voice comes out higher pitched than any response should warrant.

I cough into my hand, clearing my throat, willing my mind and mouth to work in tandem so we can play it cool. "Sure. That sounds fair. Hugging?"

"Of course."

"Hand on your back?" I ask, adjusting my suit coat.

"Absolutely, like a gentleman," she says with a hint of a smile. "Sneaky hand-jobs under the table?"

I choke on nothing, my own body rebelling against me at Greer's salacious words.

I finish smacking myself on the chest to dislodge whatever shock and desire are pulling there, trying to suffocate me.

Meanwhile Greer is offering nothing more than a smirk and a wink.

At least her nervousness has dissipated. At the expense of my premature death.

Her smile soon disappears, the mirth in her eyes dimming, as those intrusive thoughts take over her once again.

“Hey,” I say, taking her hand in mine. “I’m also going to keep you safe, okay? You don’t have anything to worry about. I won’t let you out of my sight and there will be heavy security at this event.”

She finally exhales, her usual confidence coming back. When she gives me a genuine smile, I know it’s going to be okay.

Even if I would’ve had a hundred women to choose from for this fake relationship, I still would’ve picked her.

It’s a good thing fate, and a stupid fucking stalker, dropped her right at my doorstep.

“No worries,” she assures. “We’re going to kill this.”

A minute later, the driver opens the doors and we’re immediately blinded by flashes. I hear people call my name, but I’m accustomed to tuning out the noise and focusing on a task. Tonight, that task is to appear to be infatuated with the woman at my side and happy to be here.

That’s not hard.

“Are you dating?” one reporter calls.

“Mack, who’s the girl?”

“How do you feel about the Revelers season?”

“Are y’all going to the World Series?”

The questions keep coming, but I just smile and nod, deciding no response is the best response I can give right now, on all fronts. I refuse to talk about the Revelers’ season and Aiden advised to just be seen with Greer and not answer questions about our relationship.

It’s better to show the people what they want than tell them.

Actions speak louder than words.

Greer’s grip on my hand tightens and I pull her closer to me, placing a soft kiss on her cheek.

That makes the hoard of people even louder and the cameras snap faster, but I just place my hand on the small of her back and guide her into the hotel. Once we’re clear of prying eyes, I glance over at her and see that the same

calm smile is still in place.

“You okay?” she asks, her eyes roaming my face.

“I was about to ask you the same thing.”

She turns to stand in front of me. “One thing you should know about me, Mack Granger, is that I work really well under pressure. You can thank my asshole parents who groomed me to always be on. I grew up being watched by people and forced to make a good impression. It serves me well in my job, but it also makes me pretty great at situations like this.”

“You’re so fucking sexy.”

Greer leans her head back and laughs, making my dick stir as I daydream about devouring her soft skin, starting at her neck and working my way up and back down.

Fuck.

“Thanks,” she says, shaking her head. “But let’s stay focused.”

“I’m going to try, but this dress...”

I swear, I see her dark eyes go even darker as they drop to my mouth. Does she want me as bad as I want her? That’s a question I need to know the answer to. I could chalk this desperate need for her up to my lack of sex, but I don’t think it’s that. I think it’s just... her.

“Well, I could say the same for this get up,” she says, lightly gripping the lapels. “I’ve always had a weakness for a man in a tux.”

People start to filter in behind us and I can feel eyes on us. We need to head into the ballroom and get this show on the road before I call the driver back and fuck Greer in the backseat on the way home.

Because that’s what I want to do right now.

I want to consume her.

“How about we go in here and knock this fake relationship out of the park and then after, we can talk about renegotiating the contract.” She grins.

“Are you trying to seduce me?”

“It was the baseball reference, wasn’t it?”

I let out a low chuckle, shaking my head at this woman. “Fucking bombshell,” I mutter, running a hand down her bare arm and lacing my fingers through hers. “Let’s go so I can give every fucker in this room a death glare for looking at my girl.”

Thankfully, the first people we see when we walk into the ballroom are Bo and Charlotte, or Lola Carradine as the rest of the world knows her. They’re standing, talking to a man and woman I don’t know, but when I feel

Greer tense at my side, I stop.

“What’s wrong?” I ask in a whisper, lowering my head to her ear so she can hear me over the low roar of the crowd.

“Shit,” Greer says, her eyes dancing around the room. “That’s my ex.”

What the fuck?

“Why is he here and why is he talking to Bo and Lola?”

Greer inhales and seems to ground herself, putting on a smile when the entire group turns our way. “He’s also a philanthropist and is always trying to get celebrities to join his causes,” she mutters under her breath. “But don’t let him fool you. It’s just so he looks good to the public and they don’t pay attention to how much he pads his pockets.”

“Greer,” the man says, walking toward my date. He’s every bit of six-foot-four and could be mistaken for an athlete. His slicked back, blond hair and blue eyes aren’t exactly how I had pictured him. “I’m so happy to see you.”

When he leans in and kisses her cheek, the cheek I had my lips on just moments ago, makes me want to toss Greer over my shoulder and carry her out of here caveman style.

Hands off, mother fucker.

Greer, ever the polite and well put together person she is, smiles. But when she says, “Miles, I didn’t expect to see you here,” it’s obvious she isn’t as excited as he is. “And who is this?” Greer asks, directing her attention to the woman behind him.

“This is Sarah Matthews,” Miles says, like he just remembered he had someone attached to his side.

“Nice to meet you, Sarah,” Greer says, commandeering the situation and offering her hand for the woman to shake. “I’m Greer Bradley. And this is my boyfriend, Mack Granger.” Her possessive hand on my arm makes my chest puff out all on its own.

Miles looks down at me, eyebrows pulled together.

“Nice to meet you,” I say, then turn my attention to Bo and Lola. “Please tell me they sat us at the same table.”

“Yes, they did,” Charlotte says. “I was prepared to swap name plates.”

I catch Miles still looking at Greer as she and Charlotte talk, and I don’t like it, not just because he’s looking at her, but because something about him doesn’t sit right with me. Maybe it’s all the shit Greer has told me about him, but all I know is I don’t like him. Actually, I’d like to punch him in the face

just for being a dick to Greer, but this isn't the place.

"I think we'll make the rounds," I announce, Bo and I having a silent conversation where we both agree this guy is bad news. "We'll meet y'all back at the table in a few."

"It was great seeing you, Greer," Miles says. "Hopefully, we can get a chance to talk tonight."

Over my dead body.

"We don't have anything to talk about," Greer says matter-of-factly. Turning to his date, she says, "It was lovely meeting you."

I can tell she wants to say more, but she doesn't because we're in a very public place with a lot of important eyes on us.

"See you in a few minutes," she says, when she turns back to Bo and Lola.

Taking my offered hand, she joins me at my side and once we're a good distance away, she lets out an exhale. "I can't stand him." Her hand goes to her stomach and she takes a few deep breaths. "I wanted to tell that poor girl to run for the fucking hills."

As we continue to walk, I lean over and place a kiss on her cheek. "I needed my lips to be the last thing that was on this skin."

I watch as her eyes shutter and she shakes her head, like she's trying to come to her senses.

Oh, Greer, I know exactly how you feel.

Quickly, those thoughts fall dormant as the owner of the Revelers appears in front of us and he has me in his sights.

"Mack Granger," the older man says, reaching a hand toward me in greeting.

"Mr. LeBlanc." I take his offered hand and he grips it in his right and grasps my forearm with his left, giving it a hardy squeeze. "So great to see you, sir."

He's in his eighties, but has always seemed so spry and he's always been active with the team, not only in decision making, but in support.

"I know we don't talk about winning this close to the playoffs, but I have to say I couldn't be happier with how the season is shaking out," he says, pride radiating from him. Turning to the man beside him, he asks, "Have you met my grandson, Cohen?"

"No, I don't think so." Giving him the same respect as his grandfather, I reach out and shake his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

“Likewise,” he says.

Turning to Greer, I give her a small smile before saying, “I’d like to introduce you to my girlfriend, Greer Bradley.”

“Miss Bradley,” Mr. LeBlanc says, turning his attention to Greer. “I believe we’ve met before.”

Greer smiles and nods. “Yes, sir. I interviewed you a few years ago when I first started my job as a reporter at WDSU.”

“That’s right,” he says. “And now you’re a correspondent for our Revelers, what an interesting turn of events. I love your work.”

She beams. “Thank you so much.”

“I just want to say how much I appreciate all the charity work you do,” Mr. LeBlanc says, causing my shoulders to tense under his praise. “It’s players like you that make our team so great. And I know you don’t like to be recognized, but I want you to know it doesn’t go unnoticed.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Greer’s grip on my hand tightens a little and I adjust the collar of my shirt.

Mr. LeBlanc reaches out and grips my shoulder. “We’ll let you get back to your evening. Mr. Granger... Miss Bradley, always a pleasure.”

“Great meeting you both,” Cohen says, giving us a polite smile.

For the next half hour, Greer and I work the room like we’ve done this a hundred times. She’s charming and knows a lot more people than I expected her to, but due to her family connections and her current job, it puts her in front of a lot of different people. With every encounter, I find myself holding her closer and not wanting to let her go.

“I could really use a drink,” Greer mutters as we’re coming back around to where we started.

“You read my mind,” I concur. “How about you go find our table and I’ll track down the bar.”

“Sounds like teamwork at its finest.”

I damn near pat her fine ass as I walk off, but stop myself just in time. She probably would’ve had my balls for that one, but I can’t help it. I just want to touch her, any and all parts of her.

For a moment, I watch her walk away, appreciating the sway of her hips.

“How did you land that?”

Turning, I see Jason Freeman and my good mood immediately turns sour.

What the fuck is he doing here?

“Freeman,” I nod curtly. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“You’re not the only do-gooder on the team, Brick. Besides, this is a great place to pick up women. Cougars, MILFs, *and* their rich ass daughters. I’m in the prime of my life and can easily take any of them home. But once you’re finished with Miss Bradley, I’d happily take your sloppy seconds.”

The growl that erupts from my chest is involuntary. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll back the fuck up and show her some respect.”

I want to instruct him to not look at her or talk to her or even breathe in her vicinity, but I can’t, because her job involves communicating with the team. Unfortunately, that includes Jason fucking Freeman.

He chuckles, loving that he’s worked his way under my skin. “We both know you’ll get tired of her. I’ll be sure to keep an eye on her when you’re done,” he says, winking and slapping my shoulder like we’re part of the good ol’ boys club.

My jaw aches from the way I’ve been clenching my teeth and when Bo walks up, he frowns. “What’s up?” he asks, looking around. “Where’s Greer?”

Nostrils flared, I exhale. “She’s at the table. I was just headed to the bar until I ran into Freeman.”

“I can’t stand that guy,” Bo mutters. “Don’t let him get to you. That fucker just likes to hear himself talk.”

I give myself a minute to cool off. I know Bo is right, but I don’t trust Freeman. I might’ve been Big League’s Biggest Playboy, but this fucker takes it to a new level. He’ll likely steal that crown *and* reinvent it. But I also know I can’t do anything about his bullshit. There’s no way in hell I’d put him in his place and risk being suspended. We have too much riding on the next month of games and I wouldn’t screw myself or my team over like that.

Bo claps my shoulder and together, we walk to the bar, getting a beer for us and two martinis for the girls.

On our way back to the table, I feel Bo cutting his eyes over at me.

“What?”

He shrugs. “Just wondering if this might be a little more than a fake relationship.”

“Hey,” I say, furrowing my brows as I glance around to see who’s listening.

“Relax,” Bo says. “I know how to be subtle. I’d never blow your cover. I just know you, and I’ve never seen you like this.”

I chuckle, trying to blow him off. “Of course you haven’t, because I’ve never had a girlfriend since I’ve known you.”

“Yeah,” he agrees nonchalantly. “But I also didn’t think you’d take this so seriously.”

“You know when I do something, I always give it one hundred percent.”

Bo nods. “Yeah, you do. But this is more than that.”

Thankfully, we’re back to the table and he immediately ends the conversation, handing Lola her drink and bending down to kiss her.

I slip into the seat beside Greer and pass her the drink I brought back for her. For a second, I think about kissing her the way Bo just kissed Lola, but I know that’s taking things a little too far.

Once the program begins, the rest of the evening goes by in a blur.

We have a great meal.

We’re entertained by a local band.

And, most importantly, we learn more about the charity we’re supporting, benefiting underprivileged children in the city.

It’s a charity that’s near and dear to me, and after mine and Greer’s conversation in the bathtub the other night, I know she knows this. Occasionally, I feel her watching me, and once, during an emotional video presentation showing where the money donated goes, she reaches over and places her hand over mine.

To anyone else, it just looks like an affectionate gesture, but it’s more than that.

We’ve bared parts of our souls to each other and it’s her way of showing her solidarity.

I appreciate it.

But her touch also evokes an intrinsic reaction from me.

I want her.

I want more than her hand on mine.

I want all of her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GREER



“STRAIGHT HOME, MR. GRANGER?”

The driver who brought us to the hotel is waiting just inside the doors to escort us out.

Thankfully, there are barely any paparazzi loitering about, so we’re able to make it to the vehicle with only a few camera flashes. Like when we arrived, Mack gives them a polite smile and places a hand at the small of my back.

That simple touch ignites my blood and has every cell in my body on alert.

“Yes, please,” Mack says, pausing while I slide into the SUV and then steps in behind me.

We sit in silence for a few minutes as the driver maneuvers through the city, the ongoing attraction crackling between us. Tonight was more than just our first outing, it was also a trial in keeping my composure while Mack turned me on time after time.

From the light kisses on my cheek to his alpha male display of staking his claim, everything he did tonight had a direct line to my clit.

My core has literally ached with need all night long.

“About that contract negotiation,” he says with a low grumble—just for our ears—as his hand slides up my thigh, sending chills down my spine and causing goosebumps to erupt along my arms.

Oh, God.

“I think we should consider making an addendum.”

“What did you have in mind?” I whisper, trying to control my voice so I don’t give away how much I want him right now. My libido hasn’t been this

charged since I had my first orgasm and realized what all the fuss was about. I've been chasing that high for the last eight years, mostly falling short, but I've never been one to give up that easy.

And something tells me Mack Granger can deliver.

"I'd like to hear your thoughts." He keeps his eyes ahead, but the way his fingers inch closer to the apex of my thigh tells me he wants exactly what I want.

Swallowing down my need, I focus on just breathing. "Sex. I want to have sex," I admit, keeping my voice low. "We can't have it with other people and I need it. I have too much pent-up emotion and tension, and I... I need the release."

It's not a lie, but it's also not the complete truth, because that would mean admitting to Mack Granger that I want him and only him. It's not *just* sex. I've gone without that for a lot longer than a few months. Some of my droughts have lasted for the better part of a year. There's no question I can handle my own business. But this is about more than a release.

I want him, and with every little piece of himself he shows me, I only want him more.

Mack's fingers pause as he lightly grips my thigh. "Are you sure?" he asks. "Because if this is you busting my balls or some sort of—"

"I'd never tease about sex," I deadpan, turning to look him in the eyes.

In the darkness of the backseat, his features seem predatory, and it makes my blood course like lava through my veins. "Just like our agreement for this fake relationship," I say, putting it out there for a reminder, not only for him, but me too, "I think this could be mutually beneficial."

His tongue darts out, eyes trained on my mouth.

When he dips his head, I think he's finally going to kiss me, but he stops, brushing his thumb over my lips. Feeling like I'm about to combust, I flick my tongue out to taste his salty skin.

"Hold that thought," he growls, and shifts to adjust his cock.

Closing my eyes, I press a hand to my mouth, distracting myself by looking out the window and willing the driver to go faster. Something about the anticipation of this moment makes me feel like I'm a teenager again—on the precipice of something life changing.

An incredulous laugh threatens to erupt from my chest, but I tamp it down.

When the driver finally pulls up to the gate, Mack jumps out and punches

in the code, refusing to let anyone have a sliver of access to the sanctuary he's created.

A minute later, we're being dropped off at the front door and we quickly make our way into the house. Mack disarms the alarm and then immediately resets it before turning to me.

"Tell me again," he says, leaning his back against the door.

"Tell you what?"

I am teasing him now, but he likes it. I know he does. I can tell by the way his full lips quirk into a grin.

"Tell me about all the sex you want to have with me."

Tugging on the lapels of his jacket, I pull him flush against me and align our bodies. "I want to have all the sex. With you. We both know neither of us would ever be in a real relationship without sex, so why torture ourselves in this fake one? You're available. I'm available. You have needs. I have needs. And we set our own—"

In a split second, he grabs my waist and lifts me to my toes, cutting off my words with a searing kiss.

His lips part mine as his tongue teases and tastes. My bones melt, allowing him complete access as I kiss him back just as fiercely.

With every nip and lick, zaps of electricity course through my body—reaching from my head down to my toes and making me crave him even more.

His taste.

His touch.

His mouth.

His body.

"I want you," I manage to utter as Mack trails kisses down my neck, stopping just above the neckline of my dress. "God, I want you."

Without warning, he sweeps me off my feet and carries me to his bedroom.

"This dress is my new favorite thing to see you in," he says, placing my feet back on the floor beside his bed. "So, I'm going to need you to take it off because if I do it, it won't escape unscathed, but I really need to see you naked."

"You've already seen me naked," I taunt, loving that even in the heat of the moment we haven't lost the familiar levity between us.

He nods. "That didn't count. It wasn't about that."

My heart warms even more for this man and all the facets of his being. He's so much more than the big league catcher with a reputation. He's kindhearted and compassionate. He cares more about others than he does himself.

And why am I going all mushy at a time like this?

Just get naked, Greer!

Reaching behind me, I keep my eyes on Mack as I unfasten the small closure at the top of the dress then slide the zipper down. When I let go of the dress and it pools at my feet, I watch as he realizes what I'm wearing underneath.

"Holy fuck," he grunts, running a hand over his mouth and then crossing his arms over his chest.

"I couldn't risk having panty lines," I tell him, brushing my hair over my shoulder as I stand naked as the day I was born.

Mack almost looks angry as he runs his teeth over his bottom lip. "If I had known you didn't have anything under that dress," he swears, swallowing hard. "Fuck, Greer."

Smiling like that cat that ate the canary, I step over the green satin. "This tux is really sexy, but it also has to go."

Unlike Mack, I don't just stand there and watch, I help him undress.

First, with the bow tie.

Then, the buttons of his shirt.

When he's standing before me in nothing but his slacks, I run my hands down his ripped chest, appreciating each defined ab. He's a work of art—chiseled and sculpted in all the right places. Even though I've seen and felt his body, I didn't allow myself to indulge.

But not tonight.

Tonight I'm not playing it safe.

I want it all.

Dropping to my knees, I reach for the zipper of his pants and I hear Mack suck in a sharp breath and watch as his muscles spasm in expectation.

"Greer." My name is like a warning and a prayer all mixed into one and it does nothing but increase my desire.

As I work the button of his pants and then drop the zipper, my core aches.

I don't think I've ever wanted anyone as much as I want this man. It's like the last few weeks of pretending has been a lengthy, drawn-out game of foreplay, and now I'm seconds away from combusting at just the thought of

Once I slip Mack's pants and boxers down his trimmed hips and past his thick thighs, I'm face-to-face with the most beautiful penis I've ever seen.

It's long and thick and proud, jutting up against his stomach, that elusive piercing on display, and my mouth begins to water as my pussy clenches with need.

Squeezing my thighs together to curb the ache, I lean forward and flick my tongue against the shiny barbell.

"Oh, *fuck*," he breathes out, barely hanging on to his composure. "Please... God, Greer... fuck."

Glancing up at him through my lashes, my lips pull into a wide, salacious smile. "You don't have to beg, but I like it when you do."

Those dark eyes grow even darker, like I've seen them do a few times, but this is different. He wants this—wants me—and that spurs me on.

Sucking the tip of his cock between my lips, I swirl my tongue around the piercing and relish Mack's hiss.

I can't wait to feel it between my legs, but for now, I want to make him feel good.

This is as much for me as it is for him.

When Mack grasps my face and runs his fingers through my hair, I take him deeper. He hits the back of my throat and I swallow. As my eyes start to drift closed, he grips my hair, angling my head back. "Look at me while you suck my cock. Give me those gorgeous eyes."

I comply, my eyes locking with his as I continue alternating between long strokes with my tongue and sucking him as deep as I can take him.

Mack's thumb caresses my cheek and brushes down to my lips, circling his cock as it moves in and out of my mouth. It's a controlled movement, but when his length grows impossibly thicker, I know he's about to come undone.

A second later, his fingers tighten in my hair and he starts to fuck my mouth, his hips pistoning in and out.

Tears well in my eyes as I instinctively swallow, taking everything he's giving me.

"I'm going to come," Mack growls, he says, pulling his hips back like he's going to remove himself from my mouth, but I grip his hips and hold him in place as I suck harder.

"Fuck, Greer. You want me to come in that pretty little mouth? Do you,

baby?”

Nodding, I hum my answer.

He jerks his hips—once, twice—and then I feel the hot liquid at the back of my throat. I squeeze my thighs even tighter, almost coming from the residual pleasure.

When Mack’s hands fall to his sides, I give him one last lick, making sure not to leave a drop behind. The feral smirk I get in return sends shivers down my spine.

“My turn,” he says, kicking his pants to the side and kneeling in front of me.

There’s a perfectly good bed merely feet away, but that seems too far away for what Mack has planned.

As his mouth takes mine, he grips my knee with one hand and leans me back with the other. The weight of his body on mine is perfect. His hard edges against my soft curves feel so good.

When his still semi-hard length slips through my wetness, the metal barbell hitting my clit, I moan into his mouth and buck up into him, searching for more.

“Not yet,” he growls, breaking away from my mouth and kissing his way down my neck. “I’ve been craving this gorgeous body—dying to know what this sweet pussy tastes like—for longer than I’d like to admit. Don’t rush me.”

I can’t help but chuckle as he descends and I thread my fingers through his hair. It’s so soft, such an utter contradiction to the rest of him. I know he says he’s been craving my body, but I’ve been craving everything about Mack Granger since the first time I met him.

I’ve just been too scared to admit it.

“As long as you—” I start, but my words are cut short when he wedges his broad shoulders between my legs.

“What were you going to say?”

That’s the moment he unleashes that Mack Granger panty-dropping smirk that makes every cell and atom inside my body detonate on contact.

Fuck.

I can hardly remember my name, let alone the inconsequential drivel that was on the tip of my tongue only moments ago.

“I don’t remember.” My words sound breathless as I glance back down at him, just in time to see his devilish tongue flick out and make contact with

my clit, stirring a flurry of sensations.

“Maybe you wanted to beg this time?”

Flick.

“Maybe you wanted me to lick this dripping pussy?”

Another.

Oh, dear God.

Mack Granger is a dirty talker.

And that might be my undoing.

“Shit.”

“What was that, Reporter?”

His tone oozes cockiness and normally I’d have a witty comeback, but I can’t even work up a response. When my fingers find purchase in his hair again, he lets out a deep chuckle.

“I’m going to take that as a yes.”

The second his tongue strokes up my slit, my thighs begin to shake.

Maybe it’s the build-up, weeks of denying myself, or the fact I just sucked him off, but I know my orgasm is imminent.

Mack plunges two fingers inside me, moving them in tandem with his tongue and I lose all control.

“Oh, fuck,” I cry out, pulling on his luscious locks. “Please don’t... don’t stop. Just like that. I’m gonna come.”

For once, Mack doesn’t have any words, just actions, and he does exactly what I tell him to do. He maintains the glorious pace he’s set and brings my body into submission, as my legs quake and my walls clench.

My gasps turn into cries and before I know it, I’m writhing beneath him, simultaneously begging him for more and to stop.

It’s more than I can take.

And not enough.

“Mack,” I plead. For what, I’m not sure, but I just need him. I want him.

Another orgasm.

To feel his cock inside me.

He continues to work my body and I come again on his fingers, the second orgasm coming out of nowhere. Mack holds me to him, allowing me the chance to ride it out and milk every ounce of pleasure I can.

I’m not sure how many minutes pass, but eventually he makes his way back up my body, bracing his thick arms on each side of me. But I wrap my arms around him and force him back on top of me, needing his weight and

the feel of his skin on mine.

“I want you in my bed. I want to feel you come all over my cock.”

I just nod, still unable to form coherent sentences.

Yes.

Yes, Mack, I want that too.

He stands and offers me his hand, his cock in my line of sight. The dim light winks off the barbell, causing me to squeeze my thighs together. I know what that feels like in my mouth, and I can't wait to find out how it feels deep inside me.

Just as I'm getting ready to stand, he scoops me up and carries me over to the bed.

“I can walk, you know.”

“I like manhandling you.”

I laugh, wrapping my arms around his neck as he tosses me onto the bed, bringing him with me.

“Show me what you've got,” I tease. “I want to see what else those hands can do.”

The smile on Mack's face is new, one I haven't been privy to until now, and I love it. It's happy and content, unrestricted. And the idea that I helped put it there makes me feel things I shouldn't, especially in our situation.

“Just my hands?” Mack asks, bringing the perfect distraction as he rubs his hard length between my legs.

“No,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper. “I want to see what you can do with that glorious cock.”

Mack's smile shifts into something feral as he looms above me, reaching over to his nightstand and coming back with a condom.

Sitting up on his knees, he rips the package open and sheaths himself.

I'm lost in the moment, fixated on him, his hard length, the fact we're here doing this—crossing all the lines and blurring the hell out of them.

“Greer,” Mack says, getting my attention. “Look at me.”

I pull my eyes away from his cock and back to his eyes. What I see there is everything I'm feeling reflected back at me. Want, need. It's all there in spades and I can't remember the last time I felt so desired.

“I love the way you look at my cock, baby. But I need to know you want this. Tell me you want this. Tell me you want my cock.”

There's no way he has any doubts, but if it's my consent he needs, I'm happy to give it.

“I want your cock. I want you to fuck me.”

His nostrils flare and he darts his tongue out to lick his full bottom lip before pulling my hips up and easing inside me, in one smooth movement. The way he stretches and fills me is borderline painful, but in the best way.

When I whimper, he stills.

“You okay?”

Swallowing, I breathe through my nose and exhale as I nod. “Yeah, I’m good... just... full. I need a second.”

“You’re so tight,” he grits out. “You feel so fucking good, even better than I imagined. And fuck if I haven’t imagined what this would feel like.”

He tilts his face up to the ceiling and I reach up and run my hand down his rippled chest and abs. I’ve been with guys who are fit, but not one of them could hold a candle to Mack Granger.

Not only is he gorgeous, but he’s also sweet and kind, and currently giving me one of the best sexual encounters of my life. Pulling him down to me, I wrap my hand around the back of his neck, bringing us so close, in every way.

It’s not quite the fucking I had anticipated; it’s better, and it only leaves me wanting more.

“Kiss me.”

His lips crash to mine and he begins to move in long, languid thrusts.

Each time he bottoms out, that little piercing at the end of his cock hits the perfect spot inside me, making me moan.

With each pass, his speed increases until he’s slamming into me and swallowing my cries.

“M-Mack.”

He grabs my hips and rolls, bringing me on top of him.

“Ride me.” He draws in a rough breath, reaching up to palm my breasts. “I want to watch you move.”

As I begin rolling my hips, my eyes close and I tip my head back, relishing the feel of his cock as I rock back and forth.

Mack lets me set the pace for a few minutes, as he worships my breasts and runs his hands all over my body, settling at my clit. When he circles it a few times, the sweet sensation of a coming orgasm blooms and I lose my pace.

Without me even having to tell him what I need, Mack grips my hips and starts topping from the bottom, and making me see stars.

I can't breathe.

Can't think.

Can't speak.

I can only succumb to the carnal need coursing through my body.

"Fuck," Mack drawls. "That's it, Greer. Come for me, baby. Come all over my cock."

His hips jerk a few more times and then he's coming too, holding me against him as he rides out his release.

When I fall onto his chest, he wraps his arms around me and we just breathe, allowing our bodies a chance to float back to earth.

"I'm not sure I can move," I mumble against his chest.

"Are you saying my dick paralyzed you?"

He chuckles and I love the way it reverberates through my body. I also love the way he tenderly rubs my back.

"Maybe."

Everything about this moment is so... crazy, unbelievable, euphoric... such a huge difference from my last relationship. I can't help comparing Mack to Miles. Especially after running into him tonight. The differences are startling and I don't know how I ever let myself get wrapped up in someone like him.

This is what I want.

This is what I deserve.

I deserve to be taken care of.

I deserve to be cuddled after sex.

I deserve a man who wants me in his bed for other things besides fucking.

Eventually, Mack moves me to his side and removes the condom, tying it off and tossing it into the trash can beside the bed.

"Do you need anything?" he asks, his voice sounding sleepy as he wraps an arm around me and pulls me into his side. "Water? A snack? Me to carry you to the bathroom?"

I shake my head, feeling my eyes grow heavy. "No, I'm good."

For the past month, I've felt so out of sorts. Between the stalker and my new job assignment and moving in with Mack, my life has been chaotic, to say the least. I haven't felt anything resembling peace in a long time, probably long before the stalker, if I'm being honest.

But tonight, in Mack's arms, I feel more than good.

I feel perfect—sated and safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MACK



“GOOD MORNING.”

Greer’s voice is gritty with sleep and I fucking love it. She has a great voice already. It’s not too high, not too low, and perfectly sultry. But when she first wakes up in the morning, it’s straight-up phone sex operator. The thought of my next road trip comes to mind and I wonder if she’d be up for a little FaceTime fun.

“Good morning,” I reply, burying my face in her neck and inhaling deeply.

I’ve wanted to do that every morning since she started sleeping in my bed.

“How did you sleep?” Her tone is hesitant and I’m hoping she’s not having regrets, because I sure as hell am not.

When I lightly trail kisses down her shoulder blade, she shivers and pushes her pert ass into my already hard cock.

“Best sleep I’ve had since the off-season. How about you?”

“Best sleep I’ve had since college.”

She laughs and it’s my new favorite sound.

When she turns in my arms, her eyes are hooded and I can honestly say I’ve never seen anyone sexier than Greer Bradley, especially this version of her.

“What time do you have to be at work?” I ask, pressing close to brush my lips against hers.

Leaning into me, she deepens the kiss.

The next thing I know, she’s under me and I’m balls deep inside her.

A few minutes later, her heels are digging into my ass as she clings to my

shoulders and shudders around me, crying out my name.

Her orgasm is enough to send me over the edge and I can't remember a morning better than this one. I do one-night stands, but that doesn't usually include sleepovers and I've never had a woman in this bed.

But it's more than that. Greer is quickly working her way under my skin and behind any walls I've put up and I'm not sure what to do about it.

For now, I drag her fine ass to the shower and after I wash her entire body, I drop to my knees and enjoy my first breakfast of the day.

An hour later, I'm standing in the kitchen plating up our second breakfast of waffles and fresh fruit when Greer walks in looking like she just stepped off the pages of a magazine.

"Are you on location this morning?"

After being roomies for the past few weeks, I've started to get her routine down pat. On days she's not on location, she typically wears business casual and minimal makeup, but on days she's going to be in front of the camera, she goes in wearing a dress and heels with full makeup.

Today is one of those days and I want nothing more than to strip her out of that dress and prop her ass on the counter while I devour her.

The heels can stay.

"Yeah," she says, taking her usual seat at the bar and immediately going for her coffee. "George needs me to cover a grand opening for a new office building in the business district."

"Busy day." I slide her plate in front of her.

When she sees the waffles her eyes flare with excitement. "I was convinced the only thing you make for breakfast is eggs and toast. Granted, you've made me a variety... scrambled eggs, boiled eggs, fried eggs on avocado toast, omelets... but waffles?"

She looks like a kid on Christmas morning with her hands clasped under her chin.

"If I'd known waffles made you this happy, I would've pulled out the griddle long before today."

Bracing her hands on the counter, she pushes up and leans over, planting a kiss on my lips.

Now I'm the one who's smiling like a loon.

"Thank you," she says, sitting back on her barstool and placing the napkin I set out for her in her lap. With a happy little grin still on her face, she takes her first bite and moans. "Oh, God. I can't decide what I love

more... these waffles or the multiple orgasms.”

I laugh, unable to take my eyes off her.

This woman.

So pristine at times.

So poised and collected.

Yet, she has the ability to give me a verbal beat down and never fails to surprise me with her words.

“About those orgasms,” I hedge, wondering if we need to have further conversation regarding where we stand on the whole fake relationship front.

“What about them?” she asks, daintily wiping the corner of her mouth with her napkin.

“I know you said you wanted sex last night...”

“And this morning,” she adds, giving me an innocent smile like we’re discussing the weather.

Turning in my seat, I move her between my legs, needing her full attention. “I was assuming that was an extension of last night. My question is for all the nights following.”

Greer leans forward, wrapping her arms around my neck. “Since we amended the contract, I assumed it was a given. But just in case I wasn’t clear, I would like to continue having sex with you. As long as it continues to be mutually beneficial.”

She’s such a fucking smartass and I’ll be damned if it doesn’t turn me on.

“And when we’re in public,” I ask, raising an eyebrow in challenge. “What are the rules then?”

“You mean when we’re at the field?”

I nod, placing a kiss just above her collar bone, so I don’t mess up her makeup.

“I, uh...” She stammers and I love that I have that effect on her. “Well, I think we should keep it professional. Even though we’ve been up front with our respective bosses, I don’t think we should push the envelope. But when we’re around our friends, I’m comfortable with whatever you’re comfortable with.”

Bringing my head back up, I lock eyes with her and nod again, completely captivated.

After a minute or so, I release her and let her go back to eating her waffles.

“I do have something else I wanted to talk to you about,” she says, eyes

on her plate. “I’m sure Owen has told you about the wedding.”

Swallowing down a bite, I nod. “Yeah, we’re all going to get fitted for tuxes during the next homestand.”

“I know we didn’t really set a date... I mean, we just said we’d see where things are come October. But with the wedding being in November, I just thought...”

“We’re going together,” I say, putting her out of her misery. “Regardless of where we are with all of this, we’ll still go together. Even if we decide to end this, I think it would be better to do that after Owen and Sophie are married.”

She turns to look at me and I swear I see something resembling sadness wash over her features, but then it’s gone and replaced with a smile. “Yeah, that’s what I was thinking too.”

I know November is still a couple of months away, and a lot can, and will, happen between now and then, but I don’t like thinking about Greer and me going our separate ways.

I’m not sure what that means, but I definitely see the waters getting muddied.



AS I’M DRIVING TO THE FIELD TO DO SOME WEIGHT TRAINING, MY PHONE rings.

Hitting the button on my steering wheel, I answer. “Hello.”

“Mack.”

“Aiden.”

“You did good last night.”

I smirk.

Fuck yeah, I did.

“I’m guessing there’s already been photos posted.”

There’s some commotion on Aiden’s end and for a second, I think I’ve lost him. But then he’s back. “I got a call this morning, wanting to confirm your relationship.”

Have I mentioned how much I hate this part? I know it’s a give and take. When you’re in the public eye, no matter what it is, you basically give yourself over to scrutiny. I know guys who manage to lay low and stay out of

the limelight. Unfortunately, I've made some shitty choices during my time in the MLB and now I'm paying for it.

Until I can get back on the right side of the media and secure the endorsements I need, I'm at their mercy.

"You still there?" Aiden asks.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"How's everything going? You've been playing great, so I'm assuming everything behind the scenes is going well."

I haven't told Aiden about Greer's stalker. At first, I thought it would be something that would pass once we were together. I'd hoped everything that was happening were pranks that had been taken too far. My eyes originally had been on Jason Freeman, because he's the kind of asshole who'd take pleasure in scaring someone like Greer.

When he can't have what he wants, he gets pissy.

Plus, he's a male chauvinist prick who'd love nothing more than to run a female reporter out of our clubhouse. Last year, when the organization hired our first female coach, Freeman was the first to cause shit.

But some of the things that have been done to Greer seem like too much work for someone like Jason.

"There's actually something I need you to know," I start.

Aiden exhales loudly. "Lay it out there for me. You know I can't fix it if I don't know about it."

"It's not like that," I tell him, gripping the steering wheel a little tighter, because I hate that he immediately thinks I've fucked up. That's not who I am and I don't like having a sliver of that kind of reputation. "This is about Greer. Someone has been stalking her. It's kind of how we came to an agreement on this... relationship. She needed a place to go and I needed someone to be seen with. It was a win-win for both of us. I thought the problem would resolve itself, but it only seems to be getting worse. I just thought you should know, in case something comes up."

"Shit, man." He exhales again, but it's more out of concern than dread. "If there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to let me know."

"One thing you can do is keep our location private, even when we're on the road. When we're out in public, that's one thing, but I want to keep her safe."

The line is quiet for a moment and it sounds like Aiden is walking. "You know I'll always do my best to keep you safe and that goes for Greer too. If

we need to find some personal security, just let me know. I know someone and I can have them there in less than twenty-four hours.”

“I think it’s being managed for now, but I don’t want you to be blindsided if anything were to ever come out in the press.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

I know what he’s saying and it’s nothing I haven’t thought of myself.

“It’s too late to back out now.”

“Nothing is worth your safety,” Aiden says, sounding more like my friend than my agent.

As I turn into the players parking lot, I see Bo and Owen walking up to the clubhouse.

“I’m not worried about myself,” I assure him. “It’s Greer who I’m worried about and there’s no way I’m leaving her to deal with this on her own.”

What I can’t say is that I’m in too deep to walk away now.

“Okay, but stay alert and if you think shit’s going sideways, you better give me a call.”

“I will.”

When I end the call, I look up as Ross pulls in beside me.

“Hey, man.”

He walks over and clasps my hand, pulling me in for a chest bump. “You good?”

“Yeah, just talking to Aiden.”

Ross’s brows go up. “What did he have to say?”

“Just giving me an update and letting me know photos from last night had started circulating.”

“Oh, right, you went to the charity event last night. How did that go?”

Just like when Aiden brought it up, I can’t help but smile.

“It went well. Really well, actually.”

We walk straight to the training room where we find Owen and Bo stretching. The four of us typically meet for a workout when we have late games. Even when we’re out of town we’ll utilize the hotel gym or at least go for a run.

“What’s that shit-eating grin for?” Ross asks, tossing his bag onto the floor.

I shrug. “Nothing. It just went well. Saw a lot of people, rubbed elbows, donated money... and the media was able to see me out with Greer. What

more could I ask for?”

Normally, I'm an open book with these guys, but I'm not ready to tell them this fake relationship took a real turn last night. The sex was phenomenal, better than I ever could've imagined. *She's* phenomenal. However, as far as I know, the sex is just an extension of the agreement, so I'm going to enjoy it while it lasts.

Every last second of it.

“Other than running into Greer's douchecanoe ex,” Bo mutters. “After y'all left, we saw him and his date again while we were waiting for our car and Lo gave him a piece of her mind. Told him to not contact her and she was not interested in doing any sort of charity work with someone who treated her friend like shit.”

Chuckling, I shake my head. “You've got yourself a firecracker.”

“Don't I know it.” Bo's not one to share details of his private life, but I can see it all over his face.

“A firecracker on the streets *and* in the sheets.” I can't help it.

“Shut the fuck up.”

When a towel hits the back of my head, I just laugh.

It's good to let loose with my boys and put in some gym time. This is different from warm-ups or batting practice. No one is hovering over us or around us and we get to shoot the shit and catch up.

Most of the time, part of the conversation ends up being about their women, and I'm happy for them. Truly I am. But it doesn't stop the fact I'm envious of their lives or that they're in rock solid relationships.

For the past couple of years, it's started to nag at me.

Will I always be single?

Will anyone ever love me the way Charlotte loves Bo? Or the way Sophie loves Owen? Casey and Ross; don't even get me started on them. They're relationship had a unique start, but we can all agree it was meant to be. They and Baby Sam are the epitome of happiness. It took something like Casey unexpectedly getting pregnant to pull Ross out of his post-divorce funk and feeling like his life was over. She brought him back.

But what about me?

For the longest time, I haven't been able to see past the week, the month, the season.

But today, I can picture what my potential future might look like. I can see what happiness after baseball might look like. And the only person I can

contribute those realizations to is Greer, whether I'm ready to admit that or not. She's turning things around, not only in my public life, but something is shifting inside me too.

For the first time in a long time, I can picture what my life could potentially look like five years from now. Ten years from now. And I don't hate it.

It scares the shit out of me.

But I don't hate it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GREER



“THIS NEW BUILDING IS NOW THE SECOND TALLEST BUILDING IN NEW Orleans. Coming in at six-hundred-and-eighty-one feet, it’s sixteen feet shorter than the Hancock and thirty-six feet taller than the Place St. Charles. Developers plan to fill the first floor with retail shops and restaurants, while the other floors will house a combination of office and living spaces. It’s exciting to see new growth in the Central Business District and the potential business a state-of-the-art building like this could bring in.”

When Brian gives me the thumbs up, I let my shoulders relax.

“Did we get it?” I ask, walking over to him.

“Yeah, I think so.”

We huddle around the camera and watch a quick playback.

“This, with the interviews we got earlier, will be great.”

Brian nods. “Yeah, and I’ve also got all of the footage from the ribbon cutting ceremony.”

“Great, let’s get loaded up so I can get back to the station and edit all of this before we have to head to the stadium later. I think I’ll run across the street and grab a coffee. Do you want anything?”

“An iced Americano, please and thank you,” he says, already walking toward the van. “I’ll make the block and pick you up in front of the shop.”

As I head down the sidewalk to the little deli on the corner that sells everything from po’ boys to lattes, I have my head down, checking messages on my phone when my shoulder bumps into someone.

“Sorry,” I say, before looking up and meeting a familiar set of eyes.

“Greer,” my father says, sounding almost as caught off-guard as I feel. Not that the thought of seeing him hadn’t crossed my mind. Hawthorne

Communications is in the building across the street from where we've been filming this morning. But since I don't know his schedule anymore, I had no clue if he was even in the state, let alone the office.

"Sterling," I reply back, using his first name like he always instructed me to do when we're in public.

He adjusts his tie and clears his throat before turning his attention back to me, obviously not prepared to deal with me today.

"I'm assuming you're down here reporting on the grand opening."

"Yeah, just finished up."

God, could this be more awkward?

Just as I'm about to make my excuses and leave, he looks at me, like really looks at me for what might be the first time in five years. "A detective called me recently." His brows furrow in what seems like genuine concern, maybe not for me per se, but at least for the situation. "He mentioned that someone has been harassing and stalking you, and also implied I might have something to do with it, but I can assure you I do not."

I might not like my father, but I can read him. That's something you learn to do when you grow up in a house with Sterling Hawthorne. You know his body language and expressions. When he's looking at you without distraction, a levelness to his voice, there's truth in his words—albeit good or bad.

"Okay."

That's the only response I can come up with. Thank you doesn't seem right. I'm not thankful, because all this time I thought there was a chance my family was behind the notes and emails. There was a part of me that hoped it was them, a scare tactic to bring me back to the fold.

As crazy as it sounds, that would've made sense in my world.

I could've dealt with that.

But the fact my father is standing here, point blank telling me it's not, sends a cold chill down my spine. Because if it's not the Hawthornes, then that means it's a stranger.

And the enemy you don't know is much more frightening than the enemy you know.

"Well, I have to go," I say, brushing a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "Tell my mother I said hello."

He doesn't say anything as I walk away.

Why would he?

The day he told me I was on my own and no longer part of the equation was the day I realized I no longer had a family. Not that they were great or anything, but they were all I had.

When I hop into the van with coffees and sandwiches, Brian eyes me suspiciously.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.”

My words are clipped and my emotions feel raw.

I don't want to talk or think. I just want to get back to the station and throw myself into work and forget about my father and all the bullshit that seems to follow me around like a black cloud these days.

“If you say so,” Brian muses, taking his coffee.

Thankfully, he's not pushy and seems okay with driving in silence all the way back to the station.

Once we're back, I make a call to Detective Briggs to give him an update. He assures me they're staying on top of things—doing routine patrols and filtering out messages and emails.

“We're all going to stay vigilant,” he assures me. “They'll slip up. They always do. And when that happens, we'll be there.”

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. “Okay.”

That seems to be my go-to reply today, but I don't have anything else to say. It feels like my life is happening *to me* right now, like I don't have a choice, and that's just not me.

I'm where I am in my professional and personal life because of choices I've made.

And I'm okay with that.

I'm okay with my family disowning me.

I chose that.

But I didn't choose this.

I didn't choose to be stalked.

I didn't choose to be harassed.

And it's really starting to piss me the hell off.

“Thank you,” I finally say, ending the call and getting back to things I can control—editing videos, writing copy, and getting ready for tonight's game.

Tonight's game where I'll see Mack. And with that thought, I'm flustered and hot for an entirely different reason.



A FEW HOURS LATER, I'M IN THE PRESS BOX NEAR THE DUGOUT WATCHING THE Revelers struggle for the first time in a long time. They've been dominating in their offense and defense, and even during games where the pitching might suffer, their offense makes up the difference. And vice versa.

But tonight, nothing is clicking.

There was just something cloying in the air, uneasy. Tension among the players seemed higher than usual and it left a heaviness on the field, like the air right before a thunderstorm.

Buddy pulled Ross after four innings.

No one has been able to get a hit off Miami.

Our bullpen is like a revolving door, with every relief pitcher coming out and loading the bases.

And just when I think things couldn't get any worse, one of the batters for Miami hits a foul ball and when Mack dives to catch it there's an audible cry of anguish that makes my stomach lurch.

The entire stadium goes quiet as Buddy and one of the trainers walk out to check on Mack, who is laying on the ground.

He made the catch, but no one seems to care about that.

Everyone's concern is for the veteran catcher who is the glue of this team.

When I look back at the dugout, I see Ross pinch the bridge of his nose and a silent *fuck* falls from his lips.

I know Mack gets treatment on his knees after every game, so I'm assuming whatever happened is related to that, but it doesn't help me stay still. Every cell in my body is screaming at me to go to him.

Fake or not, we do share a relationship.

We share a house and a bed.

And most recently, we started sharing much more than that.

My feelings for this man are starting to look a lot more real than they should and right now all I want to do is run over there and demand to know if he's okay.

Gripping the railing, I hold my breath along with the rest of the fans and players and watch as Buddy and the trainer tend to him.

Minutes feel like hours, but eventually, he stands and limps into the dugout. When he passes by the press box, I can see the pain etched all over his face, but at least he walked off by himself. That gives me hope that he'll

be okay and that whatever just happened is fixable.

It has to be.

He has to be okay.

After all this time and effort—blood, sweat, and tears—if anyone deserves to play in the postseason and see this team to its first World Series, it's Mack Granger.

I'm hardly able to pay attention to the rest of the game. My mind and heart are in that locker room and I catch myself praying for the first time in a long time. Praying that Mack is able to recover and play another game, not months from now, but soon.

He deserves this.

He deserves all the good things in life.



THE REVELERS END UP LOSING BY TWO RUNS, BUT BO SCORES IN THE EIGHTH inning, so at least it's not a shutout.

During my postgame interviews, I try to stay positive, focusing on the rest of this series and how the team plans on handling the next two games. After this series is an important road series with Los Angeles, which is the Revelers' rival team. They've gone back and forth all year, trading wins and series, but if the Revelers can get a sweep, they'll only need four more wins to clinch the division. Depending on how the next few series go, they could end up doing that at home, which would be amazing for the city of New Orleans.

As I'm walking through the narrow hallway that leads back into the clubhouse, I hear someone whistle and jerk my head up to see Jason Freeman standing in nothing but a towel. His grin does nothing for me and I try not to even react as Brian and I walk past.

"What?" he asks, his arms stretched wide. "You're not going to interview me and ask me about my fucking awesome defensive plays? It's not my fault I'm surrounded by a bunch of limp dicks who can't finish."

On nights like tonight, emotions are running high.

Some guys are quiet.

Some are pissed.

And then you have Jason Freeman, who is a complete asshole, but that's a

given on every day of the year. He's just extra douchey on nights the team loses, always blaming someone else. It's never his fault.

"When you want to be a decent human being, I'll interview you. Until then, you can go spout your narcissistic bullshit somewhere else." My hands are shaking when I start putting my notepad in my bag, but I refuse to let him see I'm rattled.

It's not him anyway, it's the fact that what I just said is very unprofessional and all it would take is a manager or coach hearing that and reporting it to George, who could very well fire my ass.

Brian chuckles beside me.

"Stop," I mutter. "Don't make it worse. I shouldn't have reacted."

"You handled it a lot better than most people. You can't let guys like that walk all over you."

Jason's barking laugh makes my back straighten.

"Well, aren't you a stuck-up little bitch. Do you give that kind of lip service to Granger? Open that pretty little mouth for him..."

I'm one second from turning around and telling him to shut the fuck up—job be damned—when I hear a commotion, like a chair or table turning over.

"What the fuck did you just say?" Mack's lethal voice comes from the doorway of one of the therapy rooms. When I turn around to see him, one of his knees has an ice pack taped to it. He's not limping, but he's definitely favoring the leg.

"What are you going to do about it, Brick?" Freeman taunts.

Everything else happens simultaneously—Mack lunges for Jason, Bo and Ross materialize out of thin air and hold him back, and Buddy steps in from the hallway.

"Is there a problem?" Buddy asks, eyes scanning the room as he immediately assesses the situation.

"No problem here," Jason says with a smirk. "Unless Granger wants to make it one."

"Mack," Buddy says, somewhere between a warning and a *what the fuck is going on*.

Mack points at Freeman over Ross's shoulder. "If I ever hear you talk to her like that again, *you* will definitely have a problem."

There's so much deadly insinuation dripping off his words that I feel the danger and it's not even directed at me. The glare he has aimed at Jason is full of cool anger, promising he'll follow through on his threat.

After a few seconds, Jason laughs it off and walks away, but I can see the brief hesitation. Jason might be an asshole, but he's been on this team long enough to know Mack Granger is a man of his word.

Freeman likes to talk a lot of shit, but from what I've seen, he's all bark and no bite.

"You good?" Ross asks, squeezing Mack's shoulder once Jason is gone.

He's not just asking about the current situation, but about everything.

Mack nods, inhaling deeply as he runs a hand through his damp hair and makes eye contact with me. I give him a tight smile, silently assuring him I'm fine.

Exhaling he nods. "Yeah."

"You sure?" Bo asks, concern etched on his forehead. "That looked nasty."

As the guys begin to talk, all thoughts of Jason Freeman seem to dissipate and Buddy walks off shaking his head. Today hasn't been a great day for him either and I'm sure he carries the weight of tonight's loss on his shoulders. The last thing he wants or needs is a brawl in his clubhouse. You can tell he cares about these guys, both on and off the field, and even though they're grown ass men, sometimes he has to put them in their place.

If I was him, I'd send Jason Freeman packing the first chance I got, but no one has asked for my advice when it comes to the Revelers roster.

Going back to packing up my stuff, I look at Brian and give him a wide-eyed expression.

He just shakes his head. "Never a dull moment."

"Not in baseball. On or off the field."

We both chuckle, trying to let the moment pass.

Once the camera equipment is packed away, Brian exhales. "Guess I'm going to head out, unless you need me to wait on you, but I'm assuming you're with Granger."

"Yeah, he drove me to work this morning, so I'll ride home with him."

With a salute, he shoulders his camera bag and exits the clubhouse.

A moment later, I sense someone looking at me and I turn to find Mack's steely gaze locked on me. "You okay?"

Huffing out a laugh, I push some loose hair behind my ear. "I think I should be asking you that question. How's the knee?"

A subtle wince crosses his features but he quickly schools it and shakes his head. "Old knees, old injury."

“I think we both know it’s more than that,” I tell him, shouldering my bag as I turn to lean against the wall. “You forget I’ve been following this team for more than the past couple months. I know you’ve had problems with your knee, but I’ve never seen you like you were tonight.”

He takes a few tentative steps closer. “It’s nothing that some good physical therapy and a shot won’t fix. Don’t worry about me.” Reaching out, he fingers the strap on my bag and uses it as leverage to pull me toward him.

Glancing around, I notice we’re alone. Everyone is gone and the large space is quiet.

“Worried about me, Reporter?”

I fight back a smile. “I’m just worried about the orgasms.”

He barks out a laugh, tilting his head back.

I love it when he laughs like that. It’s so full of life and happiness. There’s a reason why everyone on the team loves Mack Granger. He’s hard not to love. You find yourself craving his presence and missing his laughter and congenial personality when he’s not around.

“I can assure you I’ve been through this before, just had a moment out there on the field. But I’ll be good as new and back in the game by the next series.”

“So, you won’t start tomorrow?”

Mack shakes his head. “No, the trainer wants me to ride the bench for the next two games and then see how I feel when we head to Los Angeles.”

“Is there anything I can do?” I ask, subtly looping a finger into the waistband of his shorts.

He quirks an eyebrow. “I can think of one thing that would make me feel better.”

“I’m not giving you a blow job in the middle of the clubhouse,” I tell him, glancing around again to make sure we’re still alone. “But if you know of a more private—”

Before I can finish that sentence, Mack takes my hand and pulls me down a hall, opening a door and then pushing me inside. Once we’re in, I see it’s an examination type room. When he locks the door behind him, I go to drop to my knees, but he grabs my hip.

“Take your skirt off and bend over the table.”

“What about your knee?” I ask as I make quick work of my zipper and drop the material at my feet.

“You let me worry about that,” he says, eyes locked on mine as he pushes

his shorts down just enough to free his already hard cock.

My heart is practically beating out of my chest. I can hear it in my ears as I turn around and do as he instructed me. The thin paper that's covering the table crinkles as I lean forward.

"Hold on," Mack grits out, his voice sounding as though it's been dipped in honey and rolled through gravel.

When he sweeps the head of his cock through my wet folds, my eyes roll and I bite back a groan. That fucking barbell hits my clit and I almost lose my mind. "I have an IUD," I tell him, a desperation to feel all of him overwhelming me and making me lose all of my inhibitions and take down my walls.

The second the words are out of my mouth, I remember what he said when we were discussing our arrangement, about not having sex without a condom, and I almost take it back.

"Are you sure?" he asks, still rubbing his cock through the lips of my pussy. "I've been tested and you're the only person I've been with since."

"Yes," I tell him, pushing my hips back in a plea for more. "But I don't want to pressure you into it. Believe me, sex with you in a condom is... well, it's the best I've ever experienced, but I just want to feel all of you."

Mack grips my hips tightly, stopping my advances. "I've never had sex without a condom."

I know I'm asking something of him he might not be willing to give. Turning to look at him over my shoulder, I tell him, "Either way, I just want you inside me."

He tilts his head toward the ceiling, silently letting out a curse and the next thing I know, he's thrusting deep until he bottoms out.

"*Fuck... fuck, fuck, fuck,*" he chants. "I'm not going to last long because you feel like heaven."

Slipping his hand between me and the table, he presses two fingers to my clit and begins making slow circles as he pumps his dick inside me.

"Oh, God," I whisper, my mouth hanging open as my next breath gets stuck in my throat. "You... Oh, God, Mack. You... this feels so fucking good."

I literally feel like I'm going to shed real tears as he continues to thrust inside me while fingering my clit. The dual stimulation is my kryptonite and before long, my insides begin to quake.

When a firm slap hits my ass cheek, my eyes grow wide.

“Holy fuck. Yes, yes... I—” My orgasm steals my words and my breath and my very existence as it roars through me. If I wasn’t bent over this table, my legs would’ve buckled and I’d be a heap on the floor.

Seconds later, his movements still and he lets out a low roar as he comes inside me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MACK



“IS YOUR KNEE BOTHERING YOU?” ROSS ASKS, AS WE GET COMFORTABLE IN our seats waiting for takeoff.

Leaning back further, I stretch my legs out, thankful our team takes private flights and we have extra room to accommodate all these large bodies. “It’s not my knee.”

After taking two games off and getting all the physical therapy I could cram into the past two days, my knee feels better. Unfortunately, the only solution to my problem is retirement.

Early-onset osteoarthritis.

That’s the diagnosis and even though there are treatments to make it manageable, you can’t completely reverse it or cure it. I’m no longer in denial, I know retirement is imminent and the only thing that will relieve the pain completely is a knee replacement. I’ve started to make peace with it, but I’m not finished yet. And thankfully, I have the best trainers and doctors available to help keep me in the game.

“What is it? Everything okay with Greer?”

Everything is great with Greer.

She’s been making me baths with Epsom salts and joining me in the tub, which always lead to her sucking my cock or riding me. But I can’t think about that right now while I’m on a plane to California and won’t see her for the next seven days.

“If you’re talking about the fake relationship,” I say, quietly so none of these other nosey mother fuckers can eavesdrop. “It’s going great. Fantastic even.”

“Then why are you in such a bad mood?”

“I’m not.” Swallowing, I exhale loudly and cross my arms over my chest. “I’m just worried about leaving her.”

Ross hums. “Yeah, if she was my girlfriend, fake or not, I’d be worried too. Are they any closer to nailing this guy? He’s bound to fuck up at some point.”

Dread pools low in my gut. “That’s the thing, I don’t want him to fuck up. The thought of him getting any closer to Greer than he already has makes me physically ill, and to think I’m going to be hundreds of miles away for the next week only makes matters worse.”

We sit in silence for a while. Once the plane is in the air, a flight attendant comes around and offers us drinks. Ross and I both decline, since we brought water bottles with us. Owen and Bo are across the aisle and both of them are already asleep.

“How’s Greer handling it?”

“Fine. Better than when she first came to me. I think the increased security at my house has helped. Plus, the detective she’s working with has really stayed on top of things and keeps her as updated as possible. But beyond all that, she’s just a tough cookie. I’ve seen her hit rock bottom and literally watch as she pulls herself up by the bootstraps. She isn’t letting this son of a bitch rule her life.”

Pausing for a moment, I huff out a laugh, thinking about how amazing Greer really is. “She’s a badass. But I’m worried she’s dropping her guard down a little too far.”

A few minutes later, the flight attendants are back with our meal. No matter what time of day we fly, we’re always provided at least one meal and a snack. Which is smart, because no one wants a plane full of hungry baseball players.

Once they’re gone, Ross takes the cover off his breakfast and immediately starts digging into his omelet. “So, from what I’m hearing, you’ve fallen for her.”

I nearly choke on a bite of bacon.

What the fuck?

“I said I’m worried about her, that’s not the same thing.”

With his fork pointed at me, he continues. “Yes, you’re worried about her, but it’s more than that. You’re overthinking things, obviously concerned more about her well-being than anything else, and I’ve never seen you get this worked up over anything besides baseball.”

When I don't respond, he makes this annoying noise in the back of his throat like he's won the argument.

"Tell me, have you slept with her?"

For the first time in my life, I have zero desire to divulge my sex life.

"That wouldn't mean shit and you know it."

Ross chuckles. "It wouldn't normally mean shit, but this is different."

"How?"

He cuts off another bite of omelet and chews, but I abstain from eating until he's finished with this analysis of my personal life, because I don't want to die from choking on bacon.

That would be an embarrassing headline for the newspapers.

"She's living with you, for one, and I know for a fact you've never let a woman even come to your house, let alone occupy space. Two, you insist on people treating her with respect. I thought I was going to have to tie you down to keep you from pummeling Freeman the other night. Typically, if it was a girl you didn't care about, you might have a witty comeback, but it wouldn't go to blows. For as long as I've known you, you've always been the cool cucumber of the group, so that's out of character. Three, I've seen the way you look at each other. It's more than just lust or appreciation for each other's physical attributes. There's mutual respect."

Pulling out my water bottle, I unscrew the cap and take a long drink, trying to let Ross's words sink in and come up with a response.

"We've become good friends," I finally say, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

"That would explain the protectiveness and respect, but it doesn't excuse the pure jealousy I see on your face every time another player gets a little too close to her. You look at her like she's yours and you're willing to inflict personal damage on any mother fucker who thinks differently."

My eyes narrow and I immediately shake my head. "That's not true. I don't do that."

"Okay," Ross says with a laugh. "Keep telling yourself that... every time you fuck her."

Reflexively, my elbow nails his bicep. "Don't talk about her like that."

"I rest my case."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GREER



“GREER,” SOMEONE CALLS OUT FROM ACROSS THE BULLPEN. “YOU’VE GOT A delivery.”

After a moment, I peel my eyes away from the screen of my computer, where I’ve been editing clips for the past hour. Wiping them with my thumb and forefinger, I try to clear the sleepiness.

It’s not that late, but I’ve been here since five o’clock this morning, only taking a couple breaks to get a cup of coffee and text with Mack.

The team has been in California for two days and they’re one game away from sweeping Los Angeles, which brings them only four games away from clinching the division.

“Who’s it from?” I ask, raising my arms above my head and stretching my back. “Because I didn’t order anything.”

“Louisiana Pizza Kitchen.”

My mouth immediately begins to water. Louisiana Pizza Kitchen is one of my favorite restaurants.

“But I didn’t place an order. Are you sure it’s for me?”

He looks at the piece of paper stuck to the bag. “Yep, has your name right here. And it’s for a Goat Cheese Chicken Pasta.”

My heart immediately begins to do this funny thing, where it feels warm and beats faster in my chest. And I swear there’s a herd of butterflies in my stomach.

Mack.

That insufferably sweet man. Even when he’s hundreds of miles away, he still does things that make me swoon. The crazy part, I don’t even think he’s trying most of the time. He’s just instinctually kind and caring. Most people

don't get to see this side of him and that really sucks for them, but I also don't mind it, because I like that part of him might just be for me.

When the smile on my face grows, he walks closer and sets the bag on the edge of my desk. "I'm assuming we know who this is from by the look on your face, so I'm just going to leave this here and let you have your moment."

"Ha ha," I say, already diving into the bag before he's out of sight. "But if you've ever had this Goat Cheese Chicken Pasta, you'd be having a moment too."

And if you knew my fake boyfriend like I do... that could also make you have a moment.

Since I haven't eaten all day, besides a granola bar and coffee, I immediately delve into the still-piping hot dish and I groan. Audibly. I'm not sure if it's always *this* good, or if the level of satisfaction has something to do with the man who sent it to me, but *oh my God*.

Thirty minutes later, there's only a few bites left and I'm leaning back in my desk chair like a grandpa on Thanksgiving. The only characteristic I haven't allowed myself to mimic is the belly rubbing or the hand dipped into the waistband. Not at work. I have to keep it somewhat professional.

Grabbing my phone, I shoot off a quick text of gratitude to Mack. There's still a few hours before their game, since it's on the west coast.

ME

I didn't realize we included personal lifesaver into our agreement, but THANK YOU.

A few seconds go by, but then the little dots appear on my screen.

MACK

LOL. Not sure what I did, but you're welcome?

MACK

Are you jilling off to pics of me?

MACK

I thought you were at work?

MACK

Fuck, now I'm hard just thinking about you making yourself come. *SMH*

The smile that splits my face is borderline painful. Dang, I love this...

nope. Hmm mmm. I really *like* him, as a friend. With benefits. And my fake boyfriend. I really like him as a fake boyfriend, because he's awesome and he makes me laugh... and he makes me come faster and harder than I ever have in my freaking life.

ME

Ha. You're funny. And yes, of course I'm at work, so no "taking care of business". You can tell your third leg to stand down.

MACK

a dozen laughing face emoticons

ME

But I would be up for properly thanking you later tonight on a FaceTime call...

MACK

What am I getting thanked for exactly? Not that I don't want to be thanked, but I would like to know what I did to earn it so I can do it again.

MACK

And again.

MACK

And again.

MACK

And again.

ME

STOP! Now I'm thinking VERY dirty thoughts and I can't leave until these videos are edited. Plus, I still have to stay alert for SOMEONE'S late game.

ME

For the pasta. Thank you for the pasta. It was a godsend. I hadn't eaten all day and was basically withering away over here, but I think I'll be able to make it now. You're really sweet and I think I forget to tell you how much I appreciate you. So, literally thank you for everything.

There's a longer pause and I've almost given up on a reply, assuming he had to go do something or I interrupted an early warm-up or something, when my phone rings.

"Hello?"

"Greer?"

Pulling the phone back, I confirm it is Mack on the other end. “Texting wasn’t enough for you, you needed me to thank you in person?” I ask, laughing lightly as I picture Mack’s eyes rolling.

“I didn’t send you that pasta... the food. Fuck! I didn’t send that to you.”

My stomach, the one that was feeling so full and happy just moments ago, now feels like it wants to rid itself of any and all contents. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said.” His tone is harsh and gritty. “I didn’t send it to you. I need you to call Sophie and make sure she didn’t send it to you. Then, because I’m pretty sure she didn’t, I need you to go to the hospital.”

“The hospital?” I ask, my voice growing louder before I bring it back down to barely above a whisper. I don’t need the entire newsroom in my drama. “Why?”

“Because,” he pleads. “If it wasn’t me and it wasn’t Sophie, then it could only be one other person and you and I both know that could mean something bad. I don’t want to say it because that makes it real, but if this fucker...”

His words trail off and I can hear other people talking in the background. I’m assuming it’s Ross or Owen, but I can’t make out what they’re saying.

“Just please call Sophie and then call me back.”

I do what he asks and immediately call my friend. While I’m waiting for her to pick up, I pull up a search tab on my computer and type in “what should you do if you think you’ve been poisoned.”

I mean, Google never steers you wrong, right?

“Greer,” Sophie answers, sounding as panicked as I feel. “I was just getting ready to call you. Owen called and said I need to check on you. What’s going on?”

I give her a brief synopsis and I can already hear her starting her car before we end the call.

When I look around the bullpen, most people are busy or gone. I think about finding someone to tell what’s going on, but I don’t want to include anyone else in this mess. The fewer people, the better. It’s stressful enough as it is and if the entire staff knew a crazy person is after me, it would only make things worse.

Besides, I still feel fine.

I think.

Bending over, I dig through the trash and pull out the crumpled bag.

Surely there’s something here—a note, name, phone number. Maybe this

is the moment this guy fucks up and gets messy. Detective Briggs has warned me about this and I've subconsciously been dreading the day, but now that it's arrived, I'm just ready to catch this fucker.

The bag is empty, nothing written on it. No receipts.

Lifting the box that still has a few bites of food, I check the lid, and then the bottom. That's when I see it. Small letters written faintly on the container, likely smudged from the heat or condensation, but I can still make it out.

You think you can hide. You think you can keep me away. You're wrong.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Closing the lid to the box, I stuff it back into the crumpled bag and try to think rationally as I do a full body check.

Heart rate?

Fast.

Palms?

Kind of sweaty.

Everything else?

Okay, I guess.

What would I feel like if I was poisoned?

Shooting a quick email to George, I tell him there's an emergency and then I forward the videos I've edited to the necessary people, informing them I had to leave early.

For all they know, I've been placed on assignment, but regardless of whether I'm experiencing a medical emergency or not, I know there's no way in hell I can just sit here.

While I wait for Sophie, I make a call to someone who will know what I should do.

"Detective Briggs."

"Hi, it's Greer Bradley."

"Greer, how are you? Everything okay?"

I inhale deeply, trying to calm my nerves. "I got a food delivery today and I thought it was from Mack, but when I texted him to thank him, he told me it wasn't from him. But I had already eaten most of the food. It was my favorite, Goat Cheese Chicken Pasta from Louisiana Pizza Kitchen, and I was starving. But after Mack told me it wasn't from him, I realized I'd fucked up... I ate it and it was from *him*. What should I do?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," he says, voice calm. "Slow down. Do we know for

sure the food was from... him?"

He hesitates on what to call this person who is making my life a living hell.

"It's not from Sophie and she and Mack are the only two people who would know that's my favorite dish and that I'm at work today. Plus, I found a note."

I guess I should've led with that, but the whole situation makes me feel sick, and that makes me freak the fuck out, because I don't know if the nausea is from my anxiety or something bad.

"What should I do?" I ask, desperation coating my plea. "Mack wants me to go to the hospital."

"How do you feel?"

"I don't know." That admission comes out in almost a cry, because I'm at my wits end. "That's why I called you."

He exhales loudly. "Take anything that's left of the food and I'll meet you at Ochsner. I have a friend who works in the ER there, I'll call ahead and tell her what we're dealing with. They might run some tests or just keep you for observation, but I'd rather be safe than sorry."

"Okay," I say, barely above a whisper.

About that time, my phone pings with a text message from Sophie, letting me know she's out front.

"My friend is here to pick me up."

"Be safe and I'll see you soon."

We hang up and I grab the bag and my purse and head for the exit.

"Where are the kids?" I ask Sophie when I slide into the front seat and notice she's alone.

"I asked our babysitter who lives a few doors down to come over and watch them. Are you okay?" Her blue eyes look so worried when she turns them my way.

Closing my eyes, I lean back in the seat as she starts to drive. "I don't know."

The first round of tears start to fall and it pisses me all the way off. "I just want my life back."

Sophie reaches over and takes my hand in hers. "I'm sorry, Greer. This is awful and I wish I could take it away, all of it." When she gets to the light, she pauses. "Tell me where to go."

"Ochsner. Detective Briggs is meeting us there."

“You’re going to be okay.” For some reason, when Sophie says things like that, I believe her. She has a soothing quality about her that’s always made me feel better.

Once we get to the hospital, Sophie drops me off at the front door and leaves to park the car. When I walk inside, Detective Briggs is waiting for me, just like he said he would, along with a woman in a white coat.

“This is Dr. Emery,” he says, motioning to the woman beside him. “She’s going to make sure you’re okay.”

We wait for Sophie and then the doctor and Detective Briggs walk us down the hall and through the doors of the emergency room to one of the triage areas.

Dr. Emery immediately starts taking my vitals, while Detective Briggs asks me more questions than I have answers to.

What time was the food delivered?

Who delivered it?

Did I notice any odd tastes?

When was the last time I ate at the restaurant?

“Vitals are good.” Dr. Emery loops her stethoscope around her neck. “Your blood pressure is a little high, but that’s to be expected. The thing about poisoning is that most toxic substances work quickly. If the food had been laced with something, more than likely you would have felt an adverse reaction within the first few minutes, if not sooner. But I would still like to keep you another hour or so for observation and do some blood work, just to be thorough.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

Detective Briggs follows the doctor and I let out a sigh of relief. I know there’s still a chance something could happen, but I feel better.

“Shit.” Sophie breathes out a sigh. “This is scary.”

“It’s fine, Soph. I’m fine,” I assure her, reaching for her hand. “Thank you for always being there for me and dropping everything. I love you.”

“I love you too.” She stands and brushes hair away from my face. “And you don’t have to thank me. We’re family and that’s what real family does.”

She’s right, we are. And she’s the best damn family I could’ve ever asked for.

“Tell me how the wedding planning is going.”

“Everything is going really well. I met with Everly again this week and she’s already secured both venues—the cathedral for the wedding and

Lagniappe for the reception. Did I tell you she used to go to school with my brother?"

I sit up a little straighter in bed. "No, which one?"

"Liam. Well, he was older than her, but really good friends with Everly's brother. She doesn't act too fond of Liam, but that's no surprise."

We both laugh. Most of the Callahans, besides Sophie and her brother Bennett, aren't known for their sunny disposition.

"Sounds about right," I tell her, feeling so much better.

With every passing moment, I feel the anxiety of the last hour dissipate. When my phone buzzes, I grab it and see it's Mack.

MACK

Just checking in.

ME

I'm good. Vitals are good, but the dr still wants to run some blood work.

MACK

Okay, that's good. I'm getting ready to go out for warm-ups, but if anything changes, call me. I'll keep checking my phone when I can.

ME

Please don't worry about me. Get out there and have a great game.

MACK

You saying not to worry is like telling a tiger to not have stripes. But I'll do my best.

MACK

Keep staying alive, Reporter. I need you to be safe.

Shaking my head at his ridiculousness, I type back a thumbs up and toss my phone back on the bed.

"Mack again?"

"Yep."

Sophie squeezes my leg. "I told you he's a good one."
She did tell me that and she's right. I know she is.



TWO HOURS LATER, I'VE BEEN DISCHARGED AND I'M BACK AT THE STATION. The game is getting ready to start and a lot of times I stay at my desk to run stats and do a recap for the late news, but I'm exhausted. So, George passed on that task to someone else tonight.

Sophie drops me off at my car and waits for me to get inside. We exit the lot together, but instead of following her home like she wanted me to, I head to Mack's.

It's where I want to be.

I just want to wash away this day and pull on one of his big oversized t-shirts, curl up in his bed and watch my Revelers play ball.

So, that's what I do.

Unfortunately, they don't win.

The game ends in a walk-off homerun by LA, but our guys fought hard. You can see it on every face as the camera spans over the away team dugout. I get a quick glimpse of Mack and it does my heart good. He's giving one of the other players a man hug and I can almost hear his pep talk.

We'll get 'em next time.

Keep your head up.

Because that's just the kind of guy he is.

Once the broadcast ends, I switch over to channel six and catch the nightly news. I manage to stay awake for the first half hour, but after that the familiar voices begin to lull me to sleep.

When my phone rings some time later, I jolt awake and blindly reach for it.

"Hello?"

Rubbing my eyes, I try to clear the sleep and notice the alarm clock on Mack's side of the bed read twelve-thirty. I've only been asleep for an hour or so, but it feels like the middle of the night.

"I'm sorry I woke you up." Mack's voice is low and quiet. "I tried texting you and you didn't answer and I got worried. But I saw on my app that you unset and reset the alarm a few hours ago, so I knew you were home, but I still had to hear your voice to know you're safe."

So many of his words warm my heart.

Home.

Safe.

The fact he was worried about me.

"Yeah, Sophie wanted me to go home with her, but I just wanted to be

here.”

Mack’s sigh is loud and I can picture him running a hand through his dark hair. “I hate you being alone, but I’m not going to lie, I love knowing you’re in my bed.”

I can’t fight the smile that spreads across my face. Hugging his pillow tightly, I bury my nose and inhale his lingering scent. “I wish you were here.”

“You have no idea.”

“Sorry about the loss tonight, but you played great.”

He hums, sending shivers down my spine as I replay the way it feels when he does that with his mouth against my skin. “We can’t win them all. Plus, it sets us up nicely to clinch at home.”

“Oh, we’re allowed to say things like that now?” I tease.

“I’m not quite as superstitious as some of the guys.”

I laugh. “Says the guy who celebrates every win with a grilled cheese sandwich.”

“I love grilled cheese sandwiches.”

“Yes, but you only eat them for dinner on nights you win.”

He’s quiet for a moment, but then finally says. “I didn’t think you were paying attention.”

“I love it,” I admit. “The superstition and your grilled cheese sandwiches.”

There’s even a longer pause this time and just as I’m getting ready to fill the void, Mack says, “I’m glad you love them because I love making them for you.”

Something about this conversation feels different. I don’t know if it’s all of the love being tossed around like candy at a Mardi Gras parade or the fact Mack called me and we don’t often talk on the phone, or quite possibly because it was a crazy, stressful day and he’s the only person I really wanted to talk to.

When I realized earlier that I wanted Mack more than Sophie, I knew my feelings had truly shifted, but I can’t bring that up. Not now. Not while he’s hundreds of miles away and while the season is on the line. I’m not going to be the reason the Revelers miss the playoffs, so I’ll keep all of my not so fake feelings to myself for now.

“At least you don’t wear the same socks or drink your own pee.”

Mack’s laughter fills my ear and it’s exactly what I needed. “Oh, that’s mild compared to some of the crazy shit I’ve witnessed over the years.”

“I bet. Athletes are weird.”

“Are you calling me weird, Reporter?”

Reporter.

Why do I like it when he calls me that?

“I’m not lumping you in with the majority, but you have had your weird moments.”

“Like what?” His question is a challenge and I can hear him shift in bed.

“Like when you make the sign of the cross with your bat when you step up to the plate.”

He laughs again, but this time it’s more in awe than amused. “You really do pay attention.”

“It’s kind of my job,” I say, deflecting. But the truth of the matter is I know so much about this man. I know his batting average from college and the details of his first contract. I know his strengths and weaknesses, although the weaknesses are few. He struggles throwing players out at first base. If I had to guess, it’s due to his knee injuries and range of motion. He’s also feral when a batter talks shit to his pitcher. He will go to blows before he will let them rush the mound. But I think that makes him a great friend, more than anything.

He’s loyal to a fault.

Most people see a playboy, but I see someone who didn’t want to promise anyone anything he couldn’t guarantee. He’s a man of his word and when he sets his mind to something, he does it.

He’s everything I never knew I wanted, but now that I’ve seen it and felt the possibility, I can’t let go of the dream that what we have could be real.

After we banter back and forth for a few more minutes, I start to yawn loudly. I can’t help it. This day took it out of me.

“You need some sleep,” Mack finally says.

“I don’t want to hang up,” I say, my words already dragging as my eyes start to close.

“Put me on speaker.”

Giving my phone a soft smile, I hit the speaker button and place the phone on Mack’s empty side of the bed. My arms wrap tightly around his pillow. “Good night.”

“Good night, beautiful.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MACK



THE LOCKER ROOM IS A MADHOUSE.

After winning four games on the road, we returned to New Orleans yesterday and played our hearts out tonight to clinch the division.

Champagne and beer have been sprayed from the ceiling to the floor. Every article of clothing is drenched and half the guys are walking around mostly naked.

It's a beautiful sight, until I see Greer clawing her way through the crowd, with her cameraman hot on her heels. She's wearing a headset and gripping a microphone, looking sinful in a white blouse and purple skirt. She's dressed in team colors all the way down to her yellow heels.

And she's killing me in the best way possible.

I'd love nothing more than to press her up against a wall and bury myself inside her.

When her focus locks onto me, I realize I'm her target.

The publicist has told me I'd be on the list of postgame interviews, but once the game was over and the celebration started, all rational thoughts flew out the window.

She gives me a look, silently asking if I'm ready and I nod, still feeling completely wrapped up in the emotion of the night and the sight of her.

"Thank you for joining us," she says, professional Greer in full effect. "Mack, it seemed fitting that you were behind the plate tonight and Davies was on the mound. As part of the dynamic duo who brought this team to the level they're currently playing at, how does it feel to get the clinch and to get it at home?"

I swallow down the immediate rush of emotion.

Shit, I didn't see that coming.

Trying to collect myself, I run a hand over my sopping wet hair and breathe deeply, catching Greer's scent rising above the insanity and it sets me at ease.

"It's a special night. A special team. Not one player can assume responsibility for where we're at because it's taken every single one of us. From Davies' stellar pitching, to our infield's amazing defensive plays, and Bo Bennett's bat; it was a team effort. The game itself was very symbolic of our season. We've had highs and lows, with players stepping up when we needed them."

"That final out you made tonight was impressive, especially after coming out of the game a couple weeks ago. Was there a point where you, as an individual, thought you might not make it to the postseason play?"

I shake my head. "Not once. I knew I'd fight tooth and nail to be standing right here."

"You're one of the most devoted players I know. It's admirable how much you care about this team and these players."

"They're my family," I tell her, feeling like we're having a private conversation for a moment and forgetting that the entire city of New Orleans, and possibly beyond, will see this footage.

Someone walks by about that time and douses me with another bottle of beer.

Greer laughs as some of it splashes on her. I love how carefree she is and how she seems to be celebrating right along with us.

"I know this win is fresh, but how will this team prepare for the postseason?"

Shrugging, I tell her honestly, "We'll just keep doing what we've been doing—hustling and playing hard. But for tonight, we celebrate."

Her eyes light up at my answer and she gives me a slight nod, letting me know she got what she needed.

"Congratulations on tonight."

"Thank you."

When she goes to turn, possibly moving onto her next interview, I grip her around the waist and pull her back around, kissing her fiercely.

She laughs into my mouth, but kisses me back.

Right there in the middle of a booze-soaked locker room, for all to see.

We get a few whistles and catcalls, but for the most part everyone is still

too busy with their own celebration to pay attention to ours.

“Did you get that on camera?” I ask the guy standing behind her.

He smirks, shaking his head.

Greer slaps at my wet chest. “What did I say about PDA?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Selective memory, I should’ve known.”

“You’re with me,” I insist. I haven’t had the chance to spend much time with her since we came back off the road. We flew in late Tuesday night and had to report to the club house early the next day. Then yesterday, we played a double header to make up for a rain out from earlier in the season.

When we got home each night, we showered, fooled around for about thirty minutes, and crashed.

I’m craving more of her. More conversations. That’s the only thing I love about being on road trips is the conversations I get to have with Greer every night. Either over text or phone call, we spend hours talking to each other and it’s the best part of my day.

“I have a couple more interviews to get,” she says.

“I’m going to shower really quick and then I’ll be ready. We’re going out tonight.”

The one-hundred-watt smile she gives me does more than stir my dick. It also warms my insides and makes me feel like a million bucks.



TWO HOURS LATER, AFTER ANOTHER SHOWER AT HOME WITH GREER, WHO dropped to her knees and congratulated me on the win personally, we’re on our way to Lagniappe, a restaurant in the French Quarter.

The owner is a friend of a few players on the team and he agreed to close the restaurant down for us, so we can have dinner and drinks without being bombarded by fans.

Don’t get me wrong, I love our fans, but it’s nice not to have cameras pointed at us all night.

“There will probably be reporters and paparazzi outside of the restaurant,” I warn Greer. “Even though this is a private event, they always seem to know where we are.”

She hums from her side of the car. “It’s fine. I figure since we haven’t

had many chances for dates, this is a good way to be seen... you know, to keep up the ruse.”

Right, the ruse.

I know what she's saying is true, but I don't like it.

I don't like being reminded that our relationship isn't real. Well, at least parts of it.

The orgasms are real.

The way Greer rides my dick is definitely real.

The late night phone calls, the early morning breakfasts, and the moments we squeeze in between all of that are also very real.

But, as far as our status is concerned, we're still playing our roles for the press and gossip columns.

Right?

I reach over and grip her thigh. “We'll give them a good show tonight.”

She laughs, lacing her fingers through mine. “Don't get crazy. The last thing we need is for them to start talking about how much of an exhibitionist you are. That's not very family oriented either.”

“Aiden never said anything about that, so...”

“God, I bet you're a handful to manage.” Greer laughs, shaking her head.

When we get to the stoplight at the corner near Lagniappe, I glance over at her, admiring her profile—the elegant slope of her nose, her plump lips, and delicate jawline.

Fuck, she's pretty.

“You manage me just fine,” I say, lowering my voice and leaning over the console to nip her neck.

When I pull up next to the curb, a valet is there to take my keys.

“Wait there,” I tell Greer before climbing out of the car and jogging around to open her door.

The second the reporters spot me, cameras start flashing, and by the time I'm helping Greer out of the car, they're shouting an onslaught of questions.

“How long have you and Miss Bradley been dating?”

“Is it serious?”

“Will you be popping the question soon?”

“What do you think about a post-playoff wedding?”

I pull Greer into my side, smile and wave, but keep my mouth shut until we're safely inside and the door is closed behind us. A large man with tree trunks for arms is standing on guard.

“Mr. Granger,” he greets me in a subdued tone. “Good game tonight.”

“Thank you.”

As we step into the main part of the restaurant, I see we’re probably among the last to arrive.

What can I say? We had things to do.

“Well, that escalated quickly,” Greer muses.

“What?”

She laughs. “Three weeks ago, they didn’t even know we were dating, and now they’re trying to marry us off.”

“What can I say? I work fast,” I say with a shrug.

“You have to at least take me out on a real date first.”

If that’s all it took to get Greer Bradley to agree to a real date with me, I’d do it tomorrow.

“Greer!” Sophie exclaims, coming our way with open arms. “I’ve already ordered our favorites—a bottle of sauvignon blanc and an order of shrimp remoulade.”

She pulls Greer away and I start liking Sophie Callahan less and less. Every time she’s around, she hoards my girl.

My girl?

God, I’m so fucking gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

GREER



“DID YOU EVER IMAGINE YOU’D BE ON A PLANE HEADED TO PHOENIX TO cover an away game for the Revelers?” Brian asks as we find our seats. The team left last night after their second win in this series, but Brian and I didn’t get a flight out until this morning.

That’s the difference between flying private and commercial.

With private flights, you tell them when you’re going to travel. With commercial flights, they tell you. They also tell you your flight has been canceled and you have to scurry around to find a new one.

“No,” I tell him honestly, stuffing my carry-on into the overhead compartment while a man takes up the bulk of the aisle behind me, crushing me into the seats.

“Excuse you,” I say, pushing back with my ass. He doesn’t seem to notice and continues bulldozing his way down the aisle.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter under my breath before finally squeezing past the lady who is already sitting in the aisle seat on the row we’ve been assigned.

Today couldn’t have had more problems. “I’m just glad we made it onto this freaking plane,” I tell Brian, when he plops down beside me.

“You want the window?” he asks, pointing beside him.

“No, I just want to sleep until we get to Phoenix.”

He laughs. “Sorry you’ve had such a bad day already, but I just wanted to say thanks for insisting I’m the one who gets to accompany you on this trip.”

“I wouldn’t do this without you,” I assure him. “We’re a team now. You’re stuck with me.”

I close my eyes and Brian takes that as my sign that our conversation is

over. He's good like that. The past week has been like a rollercoaster and I'm in desperate need of a nap.

This morning, I scheduled a car service, but when they were ten minutes late, I checked my app to see they had canceled my ride. When I tried to quickly schedule a new one with a different app, I realized there was no way I'd make it to the airport in time, so I quickly loaded up my luggage and drove myself.

The bright spot at the end of all this is I'm on a plane, headed to Phoenix to cover what could be the final game of this season and my fake boyfriend will be there.

I didn't have that on my bingo card for the year, but here we are and I'm not mad about it.

Flight time from New Orleans to Phoenix is less than four hours, wheels up to wheels down, so we're landing before I know it. The jolt of the plane coming in contact with the tarmac wakes me up and I glance over out of squinted eyes to see Brian is still sound asleep.

Giving him a nudge with my elbow, I lean across and open the window shade. "Wake up, sleepy head. We're here."

Even though I'm only two years older than Brian, he often feels like a younger brother. His dad worked for WDSU Brian's whole life, so when he went to school for photography and communications, he was a shoe-in for his current position. Even before he graduated, he was already interning at the station. We haven't always worked together, but we've always gotten along well and I enjoy working with him, which is why I insisted he'd be my cameraman on this assignment.

There's nothing worse than being stuck with someone you don't gel with.

"My dream was just getting good," he grumbles. "And that sun is too bright."

"Suck it up, buttercup. We're in Phoenix and the sun is always hot and bright. Just wait until we step off the plane."

New Orleans is hot, don't get me wrong, but we have a humid heat.

Phoenix is like an oven—stifling and dry.

Today's high is one-hundred-and-one. It's the third week of September and that should be a crime.

All of our equipment wouldn't fit in our carry-on luggage, so once we deboard the plane we have to go down to baggage claim and wait. On our way there, I turn my phone on and a dozen alerts light up my screen.

“Wow,” Brian teases, giving me a light push with his shoulder. “That sounded like at least twenty messages. He’s, uh... a little persistent.”

Getting my sunglasses out of my bag, I place them on my head so they’ll be ready once we’re outside. “You’re one to talk. I thought you were going to make us miss our flight because you wouldn’t hang up on Rebecca.”

“She’s having a rough day at work.”

“In Mack’s defense,” I say, opening up my texts as we continue to walk down the corridor, “we’re over an hour behind schedule. With everything going on, he gets worried easily.”

“Y’all are the real deal, huh?”

I swallow and immediately feel my face flush. “If by real, you mean dating and figuring things out, then yeah, we’re the real deal.”

“I just kind of assumed you were having fun. He seems like a player and you’ve always come across as the monogamist type. So, when you said you were with him, I thought you were just wanting to have a good time... you know, play the field while you have the chance.”

It’s always odd to hear someone express how they perceive you or your life. From an outsider’s perspective, it always looks a little different. In this instance, Brian is both spot on and miles away.

“We’re... well, we—” I want to explain without divulging too much of the truth, but it’s hard to find the words. Even though I trust Brian, I don’t want to betray Mack’s trust. We mutually agreed who would be privy to our arrangement, so there’s no way in hell I’m going to tell him this is a fake relationship.

“No need to explain,” Brian says. “I’m the last person to judge. I always assumed I’d be a bachelor for life. As good of a dad as my father was, he was a shitty husband, and I never wanted to have a relationship like my mom and dad’s. So when I started dating Rebecca, I was just in it for the sex.” He chuckles, rubbing the back of his neck with a hint of embarrassment. “She knows that, so no need to go all girl code on me and seek her out.”

I know exactly what Brian is talking about. There was a time when I too thought I’d never get married. Throughout high school, I rarely dated. I lost my virginity to a one-night-stand. But then, when I got to college, I realized if I never found someone to be with, I’d end up alone.

Of course, I’ll always have Sophie, but she’s creating her own family now, and all my other friends are either drifting away or also getting married.

I want my own person.

“What made you change your mind?” I ask, feeling kind of odd subtly seeking advice from Brian, of all people.

“Rebecca,” he says, like his answer is as easy as breathing. “I’m convinced no one else on earth could make me feel like I do when I’m with her. She’s just... different. And she makes me see life in a new way. I want things with her I’ve never wanted before.”

We arrive at baggage claim and I turn to him. “You’re a freaking romantic.”

He blushes, shaking his head. “Love makes you do weird things, man.”

Once our equipment arrives, we head to the curb to find the Uber I booked when we got off the plane.

Half an hour later, we’re pulling up in front of our hotel and Brian lets out a whistle.

“Shit, this is nice. How’d you convince George to put us up here?”

“This is where the team is staying, and the stadium is only a few minutes’ drive from here. He wants us to be close to the action.”

That’s a lie. George threw a fit when I demanded to be in the same hotel as the team, but he finally caved because Detective Briggs convinced him it was the safest option. Even though George is a tightwad, he also doesn’t want anything bad happening on his watch.

“What is the plan?” Brian asks as the bellhop assists with our luggage and equipment.

I grab my phone from my backpack and open the app to add a tip. “I thought we could head over to the field and catch the guys at practice. Then, grab a bite to eat and go over a few notes for tonight’s game.”

“Sounds good. Would you mind if I head up to my room for a few minutes and call Rebecca?”

“No, that’s great. I need to freshen up and throw on something that’s more appealing to the camera,” I say, motioning to my travel attire. It’s not hideous, but it’s definitely not my normal blouse and skirt combo I wear for work. However, since this is a remote assignment and the Revelers are in the playoffs, I can get by with something more casual.

Once we’re checked in, Brian and I take the elevator up to the tenth floor.

I know Mack is on fifteen. That’s where the team is staying. He sent me his room number last night after he checked in, not that I’ll get a chance to visit him there. Hopefully, this will be a fast trip and we’ll be headed home with a win tomorrow.

“Meet you downstairs in thirty minutes?” he asks, placing his room card up to the door across the hall from mine.

“Yeah, I’ll meet you down there.”

When I get into my room, I check everything—bathroom, curtains, under the bed, and behind the chair. I know I’m hours away from home, but it doesn’t mean I can just let my guard down.

How can I?

At every turn, this guy is reminding me that I can’t hide from him.

Even though I try to be brave and strong and live my life, it’s so fucking hard. The day I got the food delivery, it was almost too much. I felt like I couldn’t win for losing and I was ready to throw in the towel, but I know I can’t do that. I can’t let this guy win.

Who the fuck does he think he is, anyway?

Inhaling a cleansing breath, I try to put all of that out of my mind as I open my suitcase and pull out my Revelers jersey. It’s blank on the backside, because I felt like that was a more appropriate thing for a reporter to wear.

If I could, I would have Mack’s last name and number. But I’m trying not to feed the gossip mill.

They have plenty to talk about without my help.

I’m in the bathroom, reviving my hair from the three-hour nap I just took on the plane, when my phone pings with an incoming message.

MACK

Did you make it to the hotel?

There’s just something about seeing his name come up on my phone and knowing he’s near. It makes me forget about all of the bad shit. The stalker, my crazy day, all of it just fades away like a bad dream.

ME

Yes, checked in and already in my room.

MACK

Room #?

ME

How do I know you’re not going to stalk me?

A few moments go by and he doesn’t reply. After I put some loose curls in my hair, I text him again.

ME

Was that a bad joke?

ME

Too soon?

ME

I think you should know that I like dark humor and it's how I deal with things.

Just when I think someone stole his phone or he was abducted by aliens, he texts back.

MACK

Sorry. Phone died and I had to find a place to charge it. This locker room sucks. Not nearly as nice as ours.

I snort out a laugh, flipping off the bathroom light and grabbing my backpack before heading to the door.

ME

Awwwww. Poor spoiled babies. How will you ever make it without your mood lighting and big screens?

MACK

Shut up. It's not too much to ask to have basic necessities, like accessible electrical outlets and a rain showerhead.

I don't even have a response to that, so I send a slew of laughing face emoticons.

Somehow, over the last couple of months, Mack Granger has become my favorite person to text and talk to. Okay, maybe he's in a tie with Sophie, but he's up there and that says something.

Something I never thought I'd say.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

MACK



IT'S THE BOTTOM OF THE SEVENTH INNING AND STEVENS JUST THREW A WILD pitch, allowing the runner on third to score. With runners on first and second, our two-run lead is being threatened and I catch Buddy signal for a pitching change from the dugout.

The late evening sun beats down as he jogs to the mound.

I join him, and the rest of the infielders, as we all congratulate Stevens on a good game. He might've come unraveled during his last few pitches, but before that, he was throwing aces.

"Good job, Stevens."

"You pitched a good one."

"Great job, man."

Before we break to head back to our designated positions, Buddy looks around our circle, meeting all our eyes. "Keep your heads up and in the game. We've got this."

If we win tonight, we'll go back to New Orleans as the American League Division Champions, bringing us one step closer to winning a pennant and making an appearance in the World Series for the first time in franchise history.

For our team.

For our city.

It's so close, we can taste it.

As Owen makes his way out of the dugout, I send up a short prayer that Buddy is right, and I send up another one for Owen. It's hard coming into an inning with inherited runners, and with one run scored, two more knocking on the door, and no outs, he's got his work cut out for him.

Once he gets to the mound, we lock eyes. He and I aren't as in tune as me and Ross, but over the past two seasons, we've learned each other's rhythm and we trust each other implicitly. After a few settling inhales and exhales, he throws a few practice pitches. His arm looks good and I give him a nod.

When the batter is back in the box, I immediately throw down a sign for a fastball.

It's one of Owen's best pitches. The dude has some heat. And it's always a great way to let the batters know you mean business.

"Strike," the ump calls behind me.

I see the faint smile on Owen's face and I know he's in the zone.

Owen throws two more strikes and sits the batter down.

The next batter hits into a double play, bringing the inning to a close.



"HOW DOES IT FEEL TO KNOW YOU WERE SUCH A KEY COMPONENT TO securing this amazing win?" Greer's smile is so wide, her excitement palpable, as she turns the microphone toward Owen.

He's not used to being in the spotlight, but I love it for him.

I also love watching Greer work.

"I was just doing my part. Like all of our wins, this was a team effort. But this one is special. We've worked so hard to get to this point and we're so proud to take this win back to New Orleans and get ready for the next series of games."

Owen Thatcher is typically a man of few words, unless you're a close friend or member of his family. So, it's obvious he feels comfortable talking to Greer. She's getting more words out of him than I've ever heard him speak in any interview.

"Would you like to give a shout-out to anyone back home?" Greer asks with a wink.

With the biggest smile I've ever seen on Owen's face he looks straight at the camera and says, "I love you, Sophie. Molly, and Ryan, I love you. Miss you guys so much and can't wait to see you tomorrow."

"Congratulations again on the win," Greer says before turning back to Brian and closing out her interview.

The way all our lives have become so intertwined over the past few

months makes the connection we have even stronger. Getting a chance to share these victories with people like Owen and Ross and Bo, makes it so much sweeter.

I wouldn't want to do this with another team.

I was born to be a Reveler.

When a firm hand lands on my shoulder, I look over to see Ross standing beside me.

"You played well tonight. Knee seems good."

Nodding, my eyes are still glued on Greer as she laughs at the phone Owen is holding up. I have no doubt, he's FaceTiming Sophie by the way he's looking on as my girl talks to her best friend.

"Yeah, it's holding up."

"You keep smiling at her like that and someone might get the impression you really like her."

"Shut the fuck up," I mutter, fighting back a smile because I know he's right and I hate that he's always fucking right, especially when he's calling me on my shit.

He chuckles. "If you would just nut up and admit it, this would be a lot easier. Trust me, I know how fucking grueling it can be when you're denying what you know you want."

"Well, right now, we have games to win. I have to keep my focus."

The response is automatic, a conditioned reply to anything that could possibly come between me and baseball, but I know it's also not completely true. As much as I try to keep from thinking about Greer, I can't help it. She's always on my mind.

"Speaking from experience, when your personal life is in order, everything else seems to fall into place. So, don't let the idea that you need to focus on the game before you can focus on anything else stop you."

When Greer looks over at me, her eyes are literally sparkling with joy. She seems so genuinely happy, and I love seeing her like this. I want to keep that smile on her face every day.

"It's not just me," I mutter to Ross under my breath. "It has to be something she wants too."

"She wants it. Trust me."

While Greer finishes up her interviews, I go do my ice bath and get some post-game therapy from my trainer. After a quick shower, I come out to find her and her cameraman, Brian talking quietly as they watch a small screen.

“Hey,” I say, walking up to them. “Our bus leaves in a few minutes to head back to the hotel. Are you going to be long?”

If this was a regular series game, our asses would be on the first flight out, but since we won’t have another game for a few days, we’ll get some well-deserved sleep and fly out in the morning. I’m hoping Greer is able to fly out around the same time so we can travel back home together. The idea of leaving her behind, here at the stadium or tomorrow at the airport, doesn’t sit well with me.

I want to be with her, to be close to her and make sure she’s safe, but I know I need to follow protocol for both of us.

She looks up at me, that smile still lingering. “We’re finishing up and have a car on its way to pick us up.”

“Call me when you get to the hotel?”

She nods and says she will, but her eyes say so much more.

I want you.

I need you.

This is no longer fake for me either.

Maybe I’m projecting or maybe it’s Ross’s words lingering in my ear, but I swear I see it.

“Take care of my girl,” I instruct Brian, hoisting my bag onto my shoulder. “Be safe.”

“Great game tonight, Mack,” she calls out after me.

Turning as I continue to walk toward the door, I give her a wink. “All for you, baby.”

We’re still putting on a show, right?

At least for now.

When I hear her laugh echo around the mostly-empty locker room, a wide smile splits my face. *Goddamn, this woman.*

Once I get to my room, the lingering adrenaline from the game is still pulsing through my body. It’s not the intense rush I feel during and right after a game, but it’s still humming. Normally, before Greer—before I decided to change my life and how I live it—I would’ve reached out to a random woman. I would’ve found that release and went on my merry way, never to think of her again. But now, standing in the middle of this empty hotel room, all I want—all I can think—about is Greer.

Her smile.

Her body.

Her banter.

Her mind.

Our conversations.

The way she makes me feel.

The contentment and happiness.

My brain wants to tell me it's too good to be true. There's no way I found this magical thing—something I've had to sit by and watch my closest friends obtain—in a fake relationship. It was supposed to be an arrangement to get her out of a bad situation and improve my reputation. That's it.

So, why am I standing here contemplating flipping the script?

When my phone rings, a charge of anticipation sweeps across my nerves.

“Hey,” I say, loving that she's here. She's in the same city and hotel. I don't have to make do with just hearing her voice or seeing her gorgeous face over a FaceTime call. I can have her.

“I'm back. I'm sure you want to head out and celebrate with your team. I just wanted you to—”

“I'll be there in two minutes. Three tops, and that's only if the elevator is slow. Fuck that, I'll just take the stairs.”

Greer laughs. “Are you sure? Don't you want—”

“I want you.”

There's a long pause before Greer answers quietly, “I want you too.”

That's all I need, just that confirmation she's on the same page, and I'm out the door and headed down the hall.

The second I go to knock on Greer's door, she opens it and pulls me in by my shirt.

Her lips are on mine and I grip her luscious ass, lifting her up my body until her legs wrap around my torso. Turning, I push her into the wall and grind against her.

“You weren't joking,” Greer breathes out as I make my way down her neck, nipping and sucking and inhaling her sweet and spicy scent—something that's uniquely Greer. I can't get enough.

Can't taste enough, feel enough.

I need more.

“More,” I groan. “I need more of you. All of you.”

It's a reflection of the thoughts that have been circling my mind for the past week or more, but I can't put them into coherent sentences, not like this. Not when I have her in my grasp and she's grinding on my dick.

All I can think about right now is being inside her.

“Off,” I say, dropping her legs back to the floor and fumbling around at the waist of her pants. “I need these off now.”

She laughs breathlessly, kicking off her shoes and making quick work of the button and zipper, shimmying them down her legs along with her underwear.

“You looked so fucking hot out there tonight,” she says, pulling my shirt to bring me back to her lips.

“I was hot. It was a hundred degrees.”

That earns me a harder laugh. “I mean these thick thighs in those tight pants. It should be against the law to look that good in a baseball uniform. But I also thank God every time I see you.”

“You do, huh?” I ask, pulling back to see her face.

Biting down on her plump bottom lip, she nods. “Every fucking time.”

“Good to know. Maybe you’d like to inform the people of New Orleans, Reporter.”

The little growl she makes causes my dick to jump, and when she yanks at the waistband of my sweatpants, I swallow hard.

“I know you probably started calling me that to get under my skin... and it definitely does, but it also makes me feel all tingly.”

“In good places?” I ask, brushing my nose along hers as she pushes my pants to the floor and finds me going commando.

The second her palm strokes my dick, I let out a loud groan. I can’t help it. She drives me wild.

When I feel her start to drop to her knees, I stop her. “Greer, as much as I love your lips wrapped around my cock. The only thing I want right now is to feel that tight pussy milking me dry.”

She takes off her t-shirt, letting it fall to the floor beside the rest of our clothes and shoes.

“Off,” she instructs, pulling at the hem of my shirt. “I want your skin on mine. I need it.”

Two seconds later, we’re completely naked and Greer is back up against the wall. My cock nudges at her opening as I devour her mouth, swallowing down every needy cry and whimper.

“You ready for me, baby? I need that pussy dripping wet.” Slipping one finger up her slit, I find her perfectly drenched. Pumping inside her a few times, I pull my fingers back out and bring them to my lips. “Always so

delicious. My favorite flavor in the world.”

“Mack,” Greer whines my name out like a plea.

“I got you, baby. Hold on.”

Lifting her leg over the crook of my arm, I find her sweet opening and thrust inside.

Home.

That’s what it fucking feels like when I’m inside Greer...with Greer. She feels like where I’m supposed to be and I can’t imagine my life without her. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her all of this, spill everything, but my breath is caught in my throat as ecstasy takes over.

“God, Mack,” Greer cries. “It’s never felt like this. Ever. And I’m not just saying that because you have an enormous cock and that glorious piercing... it’s just this... us... you. I—I... fuck, I’m going to come.”

Giving her clit all the friction it needs with each grind of my hips, she falls apart in my arms, her walls clenching around my cock—throbbing, pulsing. I hold her close, letting her ride that amazing orgasm, getting every drop of pleasure she deserves, before I start to pump my hips again.

When my knee hurts enough to distract me from my mission, I move us to the bed and instruct Greer to ride me. Not only is this position better for my injury, but it also gives me a chance to worship her beautiful tits as they bounce.

“These are my favorite,” I tell her, gripping two handfuls and rubbing my thumbs across her peaked nipples. “Your entire body is like a canvas painted just for me. You’re perfect... every dip and curve, made just for me.”

She tilts her head back, lost in the moment, and I can’t stop watching her.

“Fuck, Greer, just like that... keep going, baby. Make me come.”

I’m not usually able to climax in this position, but if she continues to ride me like she is, taking me fast and deep, I’m going to.

The second I feel the base of my spine begin to tingle, I grip her hips and meet each thrust with my own and together, we fall.

Half an hour later, after round two in the shower, I’m hanging on the edge of wakefulness when Greer turns in my arms, placing her chin on my chest.

“Did you always picture yourself here?” she asks, stroking her fingers lightly through the spattering of hair on my chest.

“In bed with the most beautiful woman in the world?”

Nudging me with her body, she chuckles sleepily. “No, here... playing major league baseball, winning a division title, having a successful career.”

“I think that last thing is questionable.”

“Oh, come on, Mack, you know you’ve had a great career... have a great career. Sorry, I didn’t mean to make it sound like it’s over.”

I lazily draw circles on her back, feeling so relaxed. “I know what you meant, and I do know I’ve had success, but I also know I’ve made some bad decisions and lived a little carelessly. So, I wouldn’t doubt that other people might have a different perception.”

“New Orleans loves you. The Revelers organization loves you. If you ask me, I say let the haters do what haters are going to do. I heard a wise man once say to go where you’re celebrated, not where you’re tolerated. That’s always stuck with me and I apply it to basically every aspect of my life. The people who see your value and worth, they’ll be there. Those who don’t, fuck them. You don’t need them anyway.”

I chuckle, leaning closer to kiss the top of her head. Three words I’ve never said to anyone except my mom and a few close friends are on the tip of my tongue, but I hold them back.

“You’re right. I think I just get caught up in the chatter and gossip. Aiden likes to get his feathers ruffled and usually, I don’t let it bother me, but with my consistent knee problems, I know that my time on the field is coming to a close and I don’t know... I get anxious. A lot of people count on me and I don’t ever want to let them down.”

Greer is quiet for a moment before she asks, “Who do you count on?”

For a second, I really contemplate that question. My knee-jerk response would be my team, my friends... my coaches. But I know that’s not what she’s truly asking. “I don’t know.”

Her arms wrap around my chest and she tightens them into a hug.

The gesture causes a lump to form in my throat and before I know it, I’m hugging her back.

“It’s okay to let someone take care of you every once in a while.”

Humming into her hair, I roll back to my original position and pull her until she’s on top of me. She rests her chin on my chest, and even in the darkness of the hotel room, I see her, like really see her and my chest tightens.

“Tell me more about your mom,” she prompts. “I mean, you don’t have to if you don’t want to. But I’d like to know about her.”

Most of the time, the second someone brings up my personal life, especially my past, I clam up and deflect, but I don’t want to do that with

Greer. I trust her and I want her to know everything there is to know about me.

“Off the record?” I tease.

“It’s always off the record when it comes to you and me. I don’t share.”

Fuck.

“Well, she’s strong, hard-working. She works at one of the charities I helped start,” I begin, brushing a strand of wayward hair behind Greer’s ear. “I think you’d like her.” I know she’d love Greer. “She’s kind-hearted and willing to give the shirt off her back. But growing up was hard. Now that I’m older, I realize it was probably harder on her than it was on me. I know I already told you my dad was an alcoholic, but it was worse than that. I don’t ever talk about it to anyone, but when he would drink, he liked to hit my mom and sometimes he’d turn that anger on me when I’d step in to defend her. So, once he was gone, it was a relief, but it was also the lowest point in our lives. Being a one-income household in a small town with little to no resources meant we often did without. My mom worked several jobs just to make ends meet.”

“Were you by yourself a lot?” she asks.

“Typical latch-key kid, but I had baseball, and all the coaches and players were like a second family... Kind of like now.”

She sighs and it sounds sad, so I tip her chin up, forcing her to look at me.

“Don’t do that,” I tell her.

“Do what?”

Swallowing hard. I keep my eyes focused on her. “Don’t feel sorry for me. I don’t need your pity and I don’t want you to feel sad. It’s in the past. And even though we didn’t have shit while I was growing up, my mom is well-taken care of now, and so am I.”

I give her ass a firm squeeze and she chuckles.

“I’m not pitying you or feeling sorry for you. It does make me sad to think of you being alone or not having the things you need.”

I let out a deep breath, running a hand down Greer’s shoulder and then her arm, until our fingers are laced together. “We might not have had it easy, but I knew she loved me and that got me through a lot of shit. I’ll always appreciate the sacrifices she made for me. I’ll always take care of her.”

“I love that about you,” she says, leaning forward and placing a soft kiss on my lips. For a moment, she just hovers there, inches from my face as we share a few breaths—share glimpses into each other’s soul. “I bet she’s really

proud of you,” she eventually whispers as she leans back.

I nod, emotion thick in my throat. “Yeah, I think she is.”

“That’s all I ever wanted,” she admits. “For my parents to be proud of me, to recognize my accomplishments for what they were—*my* accomplishments. But they couldn’t do that. They couldn’t see past their own agenda to see that I wanted a life I could call my own. Most parents would be proud of their kid for forging their own path, but my parents took it as a slap in the face that I didn’t want their life.”

“I used to think you were a spoiled brat,” I admit, feeling her tense, but I just hold her tighter as I continue, needing to get this out. “When all of us guys were having beers one night, Owen started talking about how you and Sophie met at prep school and your family owned a big communications company. All I could picture was this girl who grew up with a silver spoon in her mouth and had everything given to her.” I inhale, lifting her body along with my chest. “Even though I knew you were the hottest thing I’d ever laid eyes on, there was no way I was going to pursue someone like that. I know it makes me sound judgmental and I fully accept that, but I just want you to know where my head was back then.”

She audibly swallows and nods. “And now? What do you think of me now?”

I sit up, bringing her with me, because I need to look at her when I tell her this.

As I cup her face, I run my thumb over her lips. “I think you are brave, the bravest person I know, and you’re so fucking strong. I’m constantly overwhelmed by your tenacity and perseverance. The way you pull yourself up by the bootstraps, over and over again, is inspiring. To be honest, I’m ashamed of myself that I didn’t take the chance to get to know you before all of this. I hate that it took these desperate circumstances to give us a chance to tear these walls down between us.”

We stay quiet for what feels like minutes, soaking in the moment. There’s something about baring your truths that opens your soul. It feels raw and vulnerable, but also like you’re gaining strength from sharing it with someone else.

Greer’s hands come up and run through my hair and I feel a sense of calm rush over me. When she leans in and kisses me softly, I return it, still cupping her face and holding her close.

“I probably would’ve told you to fuck off,” she says quietly, letting out a

wobbly laugh. “I thought you were just a player, so I would’ve assumed you just wanted to fuck me and although I would’ve wanted that too, I’ve never been much for one-night-stands.”

“You would’ve never been a one-night-stand.”

I mean that with everything in me. Whether Greer and I would’ve fucked a year ago, because I couldn’t keep my hands to myself or my dick in my pants, or whether it would’ve been a year from now, I’m confident she would and will always have this effect on me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

GREER



THE TRAVELING GODS ARE SMILING ON ME TODAY, PROBABLY TRYING TO MAKE up for the shit show they put on yesterday, and I manage to get a flight that lines up pretty closely with the team's travel itinerary.

After we get off the plane, Brian and I say our goodbyes. He goes to baggage claim to wait for the equipment and I head out to the parking garage. The good one was covered, because it was full, so I had to park in the open lot that's damn near a country mile away from arrivals.

Since the team landed about ten minutes ago, Mack is supposed to be waiting for me where I left my car.

MACK

Are you here?

ME

Yes, just walking out now. Where are you?

MACK

Headed your way. I'll meet you at the curb.

I step out of the doors and see a sleek black car pull up and Mack steps out, wearing a nondescript ball cap and sunglasses. I guess to most people, he wouldn't be noticeable, but I could never mistake that scruffy jawline.

"Hey," I say, leaning down to see Bo behind the wheel.

"Hey, Greer." He waves and tips his head, also wearing a ball cap and shades.

"Um, you guys know the entire team uses the same disguise, right? You're not fooling anyone."

They both laugh and Mack opens the back seat, retrieving his duffle bag. “You’ve got a point. Thankfully, we have our own terminal and they're pretty good at keeping our privacy.”

“Well, I fly with the peasants and we don’t have that level of security, so we better get going before someone notices. I’m not prepared to fend off your fans.”

Mack takes my suitcase and throws his free arm around my shoulders before addressing Bo. “Later, man. Thanks again for the ride. I’ll see you at the field in the morning.”

Once Bo drives off, we start to walk toward the parking lot. I lean into Mack’s side, appreciating his nearness and the fact we’re back in New Orleans. I like traveling, but I also really love coming home.

“Shit, Greer,” Mack says as we continue to walk. “Could you have parked any further away?”

I chuckle, fixing my own sunglasses to shield my eyes from the afternoon sun. “I’m sorry. To say I was struggling yesterday is an understatement. Stupid car service canceled on me and then when I got here there were no close parking spaces. The covered garage was full, so I was relegated to this.”

My laughter dies when I see my car coming into view and immediately notice something isn’t right.

Mack catches the stutter in my step and his eyes go where mine have landed.

“Fuck,” he mutters, sounding every bit as frustrated and shocked as I feel. “What the *fuck*?”

Dropping his duffle bag, he looks around the parking lot, checking our surroundings and then takes out his phone.

“Hey, Bo. I’m sorry to do this, but can you come back to the airport and give us a ride home?”

I’m not sure what Bo says, because my mind kind of checks out for a moment.

There’s only one logical explanation to *four* flat tires. One, minor inconvenience and it could happen to anyone. Two, you’re having a shitty day and probably ran over a pile of nails. But four...four can only mean one thing.

“He did this, didn’t he?”

Mack pulls me into his chest and presses his lips to my forehead. “I don’t know, baby, but we’ll get this all sorted out. I promise.”

I believe him.

When Mack tells me things, I believe him.

But I also know this guy—this person, whoever is doing this to me—they're not right. Typical people don't harass and stalk and slash your tires. They just don't.

I'm trying not to be afraid, but it's getting harder and harder, because if they'll do this, what else are they capable of?



“HELLO?” I SAY, ANSWERING MY PHONE AS I FINISH GATHERING THE THINGS I need to take with me to the field tonight for the first playoff game in the ALCS.

“Greer, it's Detective Briggs.”

“Hey, is everything okay?”

He sighs into the phone. “We got the footage from the airport and there's a time gap.”

Pausing, I glance around the newsroom for Brian. “What does that mean?”

“It means, whoever cut your tires also found a way to cut the surveillance video.”

About that time, Brian motions for me from the back door and I jog his way. “How does that happen? How can someone cut the video at the airport? Isn't that supposed to be heavily monitored? I mean, it's the airport.”

“I know, trust me, I do. And we're working to get to the bottom of this.”

“I was hoping this might be the break we were waiting for,” I tell him, climbing into the passenger's seat of the news van.

“Me too, Greer. Me too. But I'm not giving up and I want to make sure you don't either... keep your guard up, eyes open, don't be alone... you know the drill.”

While Brian drives toward the stadium, I ask, “Is there something you're not telling me?”

“We've had an increase in emails and they're getting more... desperate. Whoever this is isn't happy about not being able to get close to you.” He pauses and I swear I hear him let out a curse under his breath. It's the first time I've heard Detective Briggs really lose his cool and it puts me on edge.

“Listen, Greer. Is there any chance you could lay low for a couple of days?”

The laugh that escapes my chest is anything but amused. “You do remember what my job is, right? I can’t really lay low and do what I do. And if you’re asking me to not do my job, that’s out of the question. This person doesn’t get to dictate where I go and what I do.”

“I get that, but not everyone’s job puts their face in front of the entire city of New Orleans.” His tone is a bit louder than I’m used to and it makes my hackles raise.

“I didn’t ask for any of this,” I say, matching his fierceness.

He lets out an audible breath and I feel like we’re at an impasse.

When Brian gets to the light, he holds up his hands, asking what he should do. I motion forward, silently telling him to keep driving.

“Stay alert. Don’t be alone. Listen to your gut,” Detective Briggs demands. “Understand?”

“Yes,” I tell him, swallowing down my nerves.

“Call me... for anything.”

After he hangs up, I end the call and toss my phone back into my bag.

“What was that all about?” Brian asks.

He knows some of what’s happening, but he doesn’t know all the details and I really don’t feel like getting into it with anyone else right now.

“Just the same old bullshit, different day.”

“You’d tell me if you were in danger or anything like that, right?”

I nod. “Yeah, I’d tell you.”

The look he gives me says he doesn’t believe me, but he drops it, and we continue toward the stadium. I refuse to let this asshole ruin tonight, or any other night for that matter. I’m not going to hide out and not fully embrace this opportunity.

And there’s also Mack.

He’s worked his entire career for this and there is no way in hell I’m messing that up.

The Revelers are no more than seven games away from winning the American League pennant and earning a spot in the World Series. It’s a feat this franchise has yet to accomplish and the excitement is prevalent throughout, not just the organization, but the entire city.

This is bigger than me, and it’s sure as hell bigger than some coward who hides behind a computer screen and lurks in the shadows.

Once we get into the stadium, the energy is so high and the whole place is

vibrating with the excitement of the game and being in the playoffs. Brian and I head straight for the locker room, where we knock off a few pre-game interviews before the guys head out to the field for warm-ups.

Mack catches my eye a few times and I make sure to smile and put on a good face.

Hopefully, not just for him, but for the fans at home too.

Brian seems fine and doesn't question me further about the call or anything, so I assume I'm doing a good job. But when I feel a pair of strong arms wrap around my midsection and whisk me into a dark corner of the hallway that leads out to the field, I gasp.

Mack's warm brown eyes are full of mirth and mischief. "I need a kiss before I go out there."

"I think that's against policy," I tease, brushing my lips against his.

"Whose policy?"

I shrug, smoothing down the front of his jersey and appreciating how hard and sturdy he is.

"Someone's, I'm sure."

"You good?" he asks quietly, his eyes locked on mine. "When I saw you walk in, you seemed rattled or something. Did anything happen?"

"No," I tell him. It's not a lie. Nothing happened, and I'm not going to put the burden of Detective Briggs' phone call on his shoulders. "I was just running a little late and you know how much I hate that."

He holds my gaze for a beat longer, then nods. "Okay. I guess I should get out there. Wait for me after the game?"

"Yep."

With one last kiss, he turns and jogs away and I turn to see Brian watching with a knowing grin.

"Wipe that smile off your face."

"I should tell you the same thing," he says, following me out to the field.

While the Revelers warm up, I take a moment to collect myself—both my nerves and my libido. Every time Mack touches me, whether it's an innocent, chaste kiss or he's buried deep inside me, it always leaves me flustered and wanting more.

When I turn back to the field, I practically swallow my tongue.

Mack is in the outfield, down on all fours and, I'm assuming, stretching his quads. But to put it simply, he appears to be thrusting the air, and every speck of composure I managed to collect only moments ago flies out the

window... or into the outfield.

“You’re going to need to roll that tongue up before we go back on camera.”

Jutting out an elbow, I make contact with Brian’s stomach. “Shut up.”

“No, I mean, I get it. I’m as straight as they come, but sometimes when we’re out here watching warm-ups, these guys make me question my sexuality.”

We both laugh and it’s exactly what I need to release the tension.

Unfortunately, the game doesn’t go in our favor.

Bo hits a solo homerun in the second inning, but that’s the last run the Revelers score. In the eighth inning, New York hits a grand slam, sealing their win.

We still have six games left in this series, but it’s definitely not the start everyone wanted and spirits are low when Brian and I finish up our on-field interviews after the game and enter the locker room. I have a list of interviews to get, but I hate that I have to.

I know these guys now and I know how much this win affects each and every one of them.

Motioning for Brian to follow me, I approach Bo. “Can I get a minute of your time?” I ask hesitantly.

He glances up with a smile. “Sure.”

“Sorry, I know how hard losses are, but—”

“You’ve got a job to do, Greer. No worries.”

Giving him a grateful smile, I nod at Brian to start recording.

“That was one heck of a hit you got tonight. What is the game plan going forward?” I ask, turning the microphone to him.

“Win games,” Bo says with a chuckle. “It’s simple. We just need to do better, as a team. We have to dig deep and get the runs. We also have to play better defense.”

“The Revelers have been on a hot winning streak. Does a loss like this kill that momentum?”

He winces, shaking his head thoughtfully. “It could, but we’re going to keep our heads up. There are a hundred and sixty-two games in a season and we can’t win them all. That doesn’t end in the postseason. There are still six games left and we’ve got a lot of fight left in us, so I’m confident we’ll bounce back and be ready for game two.”

“The entire city is rooting for you,” I tell him.

“We appreciate the support and we can feel it.”

“Good luck tomorrow night.”

“Thank you,” Bo says with a polite dip to his head.

What a class-act. For being one of the younger players on the team, he’s so composed and gracious. Knowing he’s married to *the* Lola Carradine makes his down-to-earth nature even more endearing. It would be easy for him to play the celebrity card and walk around like he’s above everyone else, but he doesn’t. He’s a team player and always puts in his time on and off the field.

“Thanks, Bo,” I tell him again once the camera isn’t recording.

“No problem, Greer. You make postgame interviews tolerable,” he says with a chuckle.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

When Brian and I are finished, I give him the okay to leave as I wait on Mack. He’s one of the last players out of the training rooms and he’s walking a little slow. My step falters when I notice his limp and then I walk quickly to him.

“Are you okay?” I ask, scanning his body. “Is it your knee?”

Mack grimaces a little and I feel my heart drop into my stomach. “I’m fine, just sore.”

“I can tell you’re not fine,” I say, sounding a little more worked up than I planned to. “Even when you hurt your knee a couple of weeks ago, you didn’t limp like this.”

“It’s going to be okay. I’m off tomorrow night and I’ll rest. It’ll be good as new by game three. That’s when Ross is pitching. I’ll be good by then.”

He’s trying to convince himself as much as he’s trying to convince me, but I think we’re both uncertain.

I nod. “Okay, let’s get you home.”

Taking his duffle bag, I let him lean on me as we walk down the corridor, past the extra security for big games like tonight, and out to the parking lot, where I take his keys and unlock the doors.

“Get in the passenger’s side. I’m driving.”

I can tell he wants to argue, but he doesn’t have it in him, so he slides into the car and leans back against the seat.

Once I’m in the driver’s seat, the silence of the car is almost deafening. “You’d tell me if it was something worse than what you’ve already been dealing with, right?”

Mack's eyes stay glued on the roof of the car.

He doesn't move.

"Mack," I prompt. "Don't keep shit bottled up. If you need to talk to someone, talk to me."

"It's the same shit," he finally grits out. "Same shit that's not going away. But I will be okay. I've been this sore before. At the end of last season, I got to the point where I could hardly make it home, but after a day or two of rest, I can usually bounce back. Postseason is always the goal, but the truth of the matter is over the past few seasons, I can barely make it through September."

"Can you have surgery?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I could, but it wouldn't make it good as new. I have early on-set osteoarthritis. The cartilage in my knee is gone. I could have a knee replacement, but I wouldn't be able to come back and play after that. It's something to consider after I retire. For now, I'll just get cortisone shots and do a lot of physical therapy... ice, soaking in Epsom baths... change up my stance a little to relieve pressure on this knee. I just need to get through these games."

"And then what?"

"That's the million dollar question, literally." He sighs heavily. "But I think this will be my last season."

My heart hurts for him. I can tell it's something he's battled a lot with and I know how much he loves this game.

"I'm sorry about the loss tonight."

"It's okay. We'll get 'em next time."

I think that phrase is ingrained in every baseball player in the world.

"Let's get you home and soak in the tub. What do you eat on nights you lose?" I ask, trying to think back to the last home game when the Revelers lost.

"My feelings," Mack groans, making me laugh.

"Ice cream and wine it is."

CHAPTER THIRTY

MACK



AFTER LOSING THE FIRST GAME IN THE SERIES AND THEN TAKING ANOTHER loss on the road, we're back home for the seventh and final game. If we win tonight, we win the pennant. If we don't, our road to the World Series ends.

Typically, I'd say there's always next year, but I don't think there will be a next year for me.

I think this is it. After experiencing some of the worst knee pain yet over the past month, I know my body is telling me it's time.

The pressure to win is always there, but this season, it feels like it weighs a ton. I try not to think too far ahead, keeping my focus on the current game, because if I project too far into the future, I get wrapped up in the unknown.

What happens next?

What will my life look like after baseball?

A year ago, I think I would've felt lost at that thought, but now, I feel like as long as I have Greer I could get through it. We could figure out the future together.

I don't know if she wants that, but I sure as fuck do.

"We've had a good run," Ross says, standing beside me as we watch the rest of our team warm up.

Glancing over to the press box, I see Greer getting ready for tonight's broadcast. She's flawless with her hair tied back in a tight ponytail and wearing a purple top that hugs her curves in all the right places. Instead of the skirt she normally wears, she has on a pair of black pants that make her ass look phenomenal.

"I wish you were pitching tonight," I tell Ross, bringing myself back to the conversation.

“Stevens is going to bring the heat tonight,” Ross says, eyes glued to the field. “I can feel it.”

Just like we don’t like to talk about the playoffs mid-season, we also don’t like to talk about next season during the postseason. It’s always about the now. But I can’t help it. If we don’t win, and this is my last game as a Reveler, I wish I was catching for Ross.

“You’re a great unofficial captain,” I tell him, kneading my glove. “In case I haven’t told you, catching for you has always been my absolute fucking honor. I love being your teammate as much as I love this team.”

“Shut the fuck up.” Ross’s words carry no bite, and I can see his half-smile out of my periphery. “If you start saying shit like that, I’m going to hog tie you to the weight bench and let everyone rub their shitstained underwear on you.”

“Fuck, dude. I take it back. You’re the shittiest non-captain ever.”

Ross chuckles. “How’s the knee?”

“Charged up and ready to go.”

“How’s Greer?”

I look over to where she’s still standing, writing furiously in her trusty notebook.

“Also charged up and ready to go.”

We both laugh, drawing Greer’s attention.

I shoot her a wink and Ross catches it.

“Have you told her how you feel?” he asks, turning back to the infield.

Taking a large inhale, I let it out and groan. “Not yet. I just... we have good talks, deep conversations and I get close, but I just can’t force myself to do it. I don’t want to mess things up and I’m afraid if we’re not on the same page, it’ll ruin what we’ve got going. And I can’t let that happen because what we’ve got going is really fucking good.”

“Don’t wait too long,” he warns, obviously speaking from experience.



IT’S THE BOTTOM OF THE EIGHTH INNING. WE’RE DOWN BY TWO RUNS AND the bases are loaded.

Bo kicked things off with a double. Then Phil hit a line drive down the third baseline. Bo held up at third and Phil made it to second. Stevens, being

a pitcher who can rake, got a single.

And now I'm up. There's nothing quite like walking up to the plate with the bases loaded. Most might feel pressure or nerves, but I feel nothing but calm. I'm seeing the ball better this game than I have all season, so when the pitcher throws a nasty curveball, I wait for it.

The next pitch is a splitter and I have to lean back to keep it from grazing my shoulder.

I could've leaned into it and took my base, running Bo into home. But we need more than one run, so I'm holding out for the perfect pitch.

With my eyes on the pitcher, I watch him shake his head a few times before he finally goes into his windup. The next seconds seem to happen in slow motion.

He takes a step back.

Turns his pivot foot.

Lifts his leg.

And delivers the pitch—a fastball straight down the middle.

When my bat makes contact, I already know it's a good hit.

When the crowd erupts, I know it's gone.

I can't really tell you the details of what happens next. I know I run the bases, but other than that, I don't hear anyone or anything. Each step feels like I'm walking on air.

Over my years in baseball, I've hit my fair share of homeruns. I've even hit a few grand slams, but this one will be the one I'll tell my grandkids about.

The second my foot hits home, I allow everything to come rushing back in—the roar of the crowd, the cheers from my teammates, the smell of fall in the air and the warmth of this New Orleans night. As I jog back to the dugout, I can't help but look over to the press box and find Greer.

Her smile is wide as she brings her hand to her mouth, kissing it and sending it in my direction. I'll kiss her good and proper after the game, but for now, that'll do.

After our closer comes in and strikes out three batters in a row, the team rushes the field. Fireworks go off and it feels like Christmas morning and all our birthdays wrapped into one moment.

For the first time in history, the New Orleans Revelers win the pennant and we're going to the World Series.

“So, where are we celebrating tonight?” Greer asks, leaning into my side.

We're both drenched in champagne. This celebration was even wilder than the night we clinched the division.

"If you're finished here, I think we should dry off and go home. I just want to take a shower with you, bury myself between those gorgeous legs, and eat grilled cheeses naked in the kitchen."

She laughs, looking up at me with so much emotion and feeling it makes my chest ache.

"Sounds perfect."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

GREER



AFTER TAKING THE PLAYOFFS DOWN TO THE FINAL GAME, THE REVELERS found their stride in the World Series, winning their first three games and then going on to win it all in game five.

It still feels a bit surreal, but seeing the swarm of people taking to the streets today, it's obvious the city of New Orleans has fully embraced the victory.

"The road to the World Series wasn't an easy one." I'm forced to raise my voice above the crowd that's gathered around me. When I compare this time to Mardi Gras, I mean it. The only thing different is all these people are waiting on one float, instead of dozens.

"The Revelers had their fair share of injuries and setbacks, but like this city, they persevered." Everyone gathered around watching the broadcast cheers. "On Wednesday night in Philadelphia, the New Orleans Revelers became World Series Champions for the first time in history and we're here today to celebrate this team and their amazing season."

After I send the broadcast back to the station, Brian gives me the signal that we're off-air.

"I think we should head down to the corner so we can catch the guys as they head toward Decatur Street and then we'll have to haul ass back to the field."

Most parade routes take St. Charles Avenue into the Central Business District, but the Revelers wanted to keep this celebration in the heart of the city, so theirs will make its way through the narrow streets of the French Quarter and end at the ballpark.

The front office offered us a spot on the float, which would've been fun,

but I wanted to capture the people—the fans, the spectators. I want to show what this team and franchise mean to the city and capture the love and support.

“This is pretty spectacular,” Brian says, repositioning his equipment as we get set up to document this historic event. “I have to say, when they told me I’d be working with you as a correspondent for the Revelers, I took it as a stepping stone assignment. I wanted something bigger, something more, but I know the business and I know you have to play the game to get the prize, so I agreed. But this ended up being worth it. Even if they hadn’t won, I still would be grateful for the experience.”

I couldn’t have said it better myself. It’s like Brian took that speech from my brain.

Feeling my emotions start to rise as I get the first glimpse of the float, I nod. “Yeah, I feel the same way. I never thought having this position forced on me would lead to where I am now.”

Not only am I standing on a street corner in New Orleans, getting ready to report on the World Series Champions, which is a very substantial news story, but I’m also in love with Mack Granger.

Over the past few months, he’s shown me exactly the kind of man I want to spend my life with.

In the midst of giving everything he has to the game, he always saved some of himself for me. When I needed him to put me first, he did, without question. I’ve never felt more cherished and wanted, more needed and desired. He brings out the best in me, while accepting the worst. And with everything that’s happened, he never once made me feel weak, but instead, showed me my strength and helped me obtain it.

So, it’s no surprise when I catch my first glimpse of him at the helm of the float—that’s decked out in the most ostentatious display of purple, gold, and green—my eyes start to fill with tears.

But this time, they’re good ones.

They’re an overflow of emotion for the man I’m insanely in love with.

He looks so happy. The smile on his face is full of pride and accomplishment. He did it. He persevered, through all the blood, sweat, and tears. He dug deep and left every piece of himself on that field—not just for himself, but for his team.

I’ll never forget the moment they won, that final out when Jorge caught a line drive and launched it to Mack, who tagged a runner out at the plate. It

was dramatic and the perfect ending to their season. I watched as the ump called the out and the Revelers cleared the dugout, rushing Mack.

But his eyes were on me. He searched over the heads of his teammates until he found me, giving me that Mack Granger smile and a wink.

I've never been prouder of another person than I was at that moment.

"You ready?" Brian asks, clearing his throat and pulling me out of my memories.

Inhaling deeply, I wipe under my eyes. On an exhale, I nod. "Yeah, I'm ready."

When I turn back to the camera, microphone in hand, I'm composed and smiling.

"Welcome back. We're standing at the corner of Burgundy and Piety streets in the Bywater. The parade will proceed up Royal Street, across Esplanade Avenue to Decatur Street, up Canal Street to Bourbon Street, and then to the ballpark. Are you ready for a taste of Mardi Gras in November?"



A FEW NIGHTS LATER, I'M SITTING IN MACK'S LAP AROUND THE FIREPIT AT Owen and Sophie's house, the birthplace of our fake relationship. The fake relationship that feels so far from fake it's not even funny, but I can't seem to bring myself to disturb this happy bubble we've found ourselves in.

First, we had the World Series, and what a ride that was. Between covering the home games to traveling with the team, it was such a whirlwind of excitement. It's a high I'll probably chase for the rest of my career, because I don't think anything can compare.

Then, it was the celebration—the parade and the fanfare—followed up by the team renting a large river boat and all of us partying until the break of dawn, something I haven't done in years.

The icing on the cake was having the privilege of being on the inside, thanks to my job, and then being a part of the more personal side, thanks to Mack.

And getting to experience all of that with Sophie, it's been priceless.

I feel like I'm experiencing what it's like to have an embarrassment of riches for the first time in my life, and that's saying something coming from a person with my background.

“Is there anything I need to do for you tomorrow?” I ask, turning toward Sophie, who looks just as relaxed as I feel, snuggled into Owen’s chest with a half-empty wine glass.

The fire dances in the moonlight and it paints their backyard in a warm glow.

Unlike a few months ago, when I spilled my secrets to Sophie, and Owen and Mack overheard, there’s not an entire team of Revelers running around. The kids are in bed, so it’s just the four of us. Ross and Casey took Sam home a couple of hours ago because it was way past his bedtime, and Lola and Bo left shortly after they did because Lola had an early recording session planned for tomorrow morning.

“I think everything is set,” Sophie says, with so much peace and contentment it warms my heart. “Everly called yesterday to go over the last-minute details, but she’s literally handled everything. I have no idea how I’ll ever repay her.”

Owen chuckles as he kisses Sophie’s forehead. “It’s her job, babe. Trust me, she’s been paid.”

Sophie laughs, lightly tapping his chest. “You know what I mean. I feel like she’s gone above and beyond, taking on our wedding with such short notice. Most people book her a year or more in advance. I feel like she’s been a godsend and miracle worker all in one.”

“She’s been so great,” I tell her. “Especially, since a lot of what she’s done should’ve been my job.”

Being Sophie’s maid-of-honor and keeping up with the Revelers during playoffs didn’t really work out so well.

“You’ve been a little busy,” Sophie says. “Besides, we kept things simple.”

They really did. She didn’t want a bachelorette party and Owen didn’t want a bachelor party, so tonight was our joint “let’s just hang out one last time before the wedding”. Sophie opted for simple flowers and the cathedral doesn’t really need decor. It’s beautiful all on its own. Their reception is at Lagniappe, and once again, it’s just a great vibe. The only extra thing she wanted was a second line parade from the cathedral to the restaurant, but that’s not too hard in a place like New Orleans.

“I can’t wait to watch you walk down the aisle,” I say, reaching out my hand toward her.

She takes it and gives it a squeeze. “I can’t wait to do it and I’m so happy

you'll be by my side."

"I'm ready for you to take my last name," Owen chimes in, kissing Sophie's neck and making her squeal. "Mrs. Thatcher."

"I love it," Sophie says with a wistful sigh. "Say it again."

"Mrs. Thatcher." This time it comes out more like a growl.

Mack and I take that as our cue to leave. "Well, it's been great," he says, gently lifting me off his lap. "But we don't want to stick around and watch you consummate your almost wedding."

Owen chuckles, helping Sophie up.

We hug and exchange one last round of "I love you".

"See you in the morning," I tell her.

She smiles and I see a lifetime of memories flash before my eyes—middle school dances, sobbing over broken hearts, our mothers planning our weddings and non-existent children, the struggles of high school, and then finally feeling free as college students. Through all of that, I always knew we'd remain friends, but I never could have predicted this.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

MACK



“FEELS LIKE WE’VE BEEN HERE BEFORE,” ROSS SAYS, PLACING FOUR LOWBALL glasses on the small table in front of us and popping open a familiar bottle of whiskey.

“And I believe I called it,” I chime in. “I remember standing in this very same scenario telling you that you would be next.”

Owen chuckles. “That wasn’t a hard call to make, seeing as you were still playing the field, Ross was already married, and I had one foot in the door.”

“Fuck you,” I tell him with a smirk.

He eyes me suspiciously. “But I feel like I can confidently declare that you will also be next and it’s not by process of elimination.”

I swallow the amber liquid Ross poured, allowing it to both burn and soothe my senses.

“Fuck,” Ross says, wincing slightly from the whiskey. “Mack has to find the balls to declare his love before you can go declaring his impending nuptials.”

Everyone laughs at my expense, but I don’t fault them, because what Ross said is true. I know I need to talk to Greer and lay my heart out there on the line, but fuck, I’ve had a few things going on and when we have had alone time, I’ve spent it worshipping her body and exerting myself so I can crash and do it all over the next day.

“To Owen,” Ross says, bringing us all back to why we’re here today. “To finding your second chance at life, on and off the field. I wish you the best, brother.”

“I couldn’t be happier for you, man,” I tell Owen, squeezing his shoulder. Glancing around the circle of my closest friends, I feel so many emotions at

once. Happy for the day and the reason we're celebrating. Proud of what we accomplished this season as a team. Sad for the end of a huge chapter of my life. But also hopeful for what's to come. "Thanks for always being there for me," I tell them, clinking my glass with each of theirs. "I've watched all of you find love and embrace it." I eye Bo and as he sips his whiskey, I see a smile hiding behind it. "You've shown me what it's like to love a woman fiercely and still follow your dreams. I needed that. I've never had a good role model for what marriage should look like, but you've all shown me, and I'm grateful. I know what I want because of you."

"Fuck, dude," Ross says, digging his thumb and forefinger into the corners of his eyes. "You can't say shit like that when I'm drinking because I'll start crying like a damn baby."

"Fatherhood made you soft," I jab, flipping him off to roughen up the soft edges of my little speech.

Bo throws his arm around my shoulder and pulls me into a side hug. "You and Ross have been the best leaders a rookie could ask for, so I think I should be the one thanking you."

"Y'all took me in and brought me back to life, literally," Owen adds, tossing back the rest of his whiskey and setting the glass on the table so he can throw one arm around Ross and the other around Bo.

Before I know it, we've created a huddle in the men's dressing room, and after drinking a good portion of a bottle of whiskey, we're hugging it out.

When a knock comes on the door, we all break away and start adjusting our suits. Thankfully, Owen didn't force us into a tux. I fucking hate those things. But a nice black suit, I can live with.

"We're ready for you," a feminine voice says from the other side of the door.

Owen's mom meets us in the hall with Ryan in tow. Little dude is dressed in a suit just like ours. He smiles so big at his dad and when Owen bends down to give his tie a little tug, he wraps his arms around his dad and squeezes hard.

"I'm so happy we're marrying Sophie today."

"Me too, buddy. Me too."

Glancing over at Ross, I catch him roughly rubbing his eyes again.

Fucking softie.

"We better not keep her waiting," Owen says, standing up and taking Ryan's hand.

“She looks so pretty,” Ryan says as we walk up to the front. “I already saw her, but you have to wait, because it’s against the law.”

We all get a good chuckle out of that.

“It’s not the law, buddy, just tradition.”

“Well, her hair looks really pretty and her dress is—”

Owen squeezes Ryan to him playfully. “How about you let me see her for myself.”

“Okay, Dad, but you’re really going to love her after you see her in her dress.”

“I already really love her,” Owen says, standing straight and adjusting his own tie.

Minutes later, we’re all standing at the front of the cathedral staring down the long aisle as music starts to play and the doors open.

I watch as Lola and Casey make their way down the aisle, each of them glancing over our way with so much love on their faces.

Once upon a time, I hated weddings. When past team players would invite me to theirs, I’d usually decline. Why would I want to go watch two people profess their love to each other when everyone knows most weddings end in divorce.

But that was before I knew what true love looked like.

That was before my close friends started finding their soulmates.

Now, I see it in a different light.

I see...

Greer.

Standing behind Molly—one of my favorite kiddos in the world—is the woman of my dreams, and for the first time in my whole damn life, I wish I was in Owen’s place right now.

I wish it was me getting ready to pledge my love to my soulmate.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

GREER



“I’D LIKE TO RAISE A TOAST TO ONE OF THE BEST MEN I KNOW AND THE woman who has made him even better. To Owen and Sophie, may your best days be ahead of you, all of your heartaches be behind you, and today be a day you’ll always cherish.”

Ross raises his glass and everyone joins him, toasting my best friend and her new husband.

“You’re married,” I whisper into Sophie’s ear a few minutes later, once the room resumes its regular programming of happy conversations and music.

Even Warner and Kitty Callahan seem to be enjoying themselves tonight.

She giggles, biting down on her bottom lip and shaking her head. “I know. It’s so crazy, but also, I feel like I’ve always been his, you know?”

I do. I can actually say I know what that feels like because even though Mack and I haven’t professed our love to each other, I feel it. Every time he looks at me, I can see it. And even when he’s not near me, there’s this subtle pull in my heart that reminds me he’s still there.

“We’re now going to have the bride and groom’s first dance as husband and wife,” the DJ announces as we all watch Owen and Sophie take the make-shift dance floor.

Most of the players from the Revelers team are in attendance, most with a plus one.

There are people I’ve known for years, mixed in with new friends I’ve made since becoming Mack’s girlfriend and also taking on the role as the correspondent for the team.

Owen’s parents are here, along with his sister.

The room is filled with so much love and that is never more prevalent

than the moment, Owen dips her and kisses his bride.

“Now, we’d like to invite everyone else to the dance floor,” the DJ says as the song changes into something more upbeat. “Let’s celebrate these two lovebirds.”

Mack stands and pulls me to his side. “It’s our time to shine.”

Practically dragging me to the dance floor, he spins me and dips me, before bringing me back and hitting me with that smirk that only Mack Granger can give.

It’s panty-melting.

Life-changing.

And it’s all mine.

He’s all mine.

Leaning forward, I brush my lips against his, loving the feel of his scruff on my cheeks. “I had no idea all these moves were hiding under those muscles.”

“Oh, baby. I have moves you’ve never seen before.” His voice is low and gravelly, pure sin. “Just give me a couple more shots of whiskey and I will blow your mind.”

I laugh, tilting my head back as Mack dips to place a kiss right below my ear.

“Save it for the bedroom,” I tease, running my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck.

“What about that bathroom down the hall?” His words are a low whisper, his breath brushing my ear, and it makes my stomach dip and my heart flutter. “I’ll be fast. But not too fast,” he purrs. “I’ll lick that sweet pussy until you come so hard you see stars and then I’ll fill you with my cock and get you off one more time before I finish deep inside you.”

Before I can give into his salacious offer, Sophie is standing beside me. “Would you mind helping me change into my reception dress? I would have Owen do it, but... well, we probably wouldn’t make it back, if you know what I mean.”

Mack groans and I can’t help but laugh.

“Duty calls,” I tell him with an apologetic smile. But before I follow Sophie off the dance floor, I lean in and give him a quick, but searing kiss. A kiss that promises I’ll be taking him up on his proposal, along with any others he might want to offer, as soon as possible.

Once Sophie and I are away from the crowd, she sighs. “What a day,

huh?”

“The best day,” I tell her. “It’s all been so beautiful and went so smoothly.”

“I was worried something would go wrong, because it always does, but even my family and Owen’s family have seemed to find some common ground. I saw Owen’s sister, Emily, and Eleanor chatting like they’re old friends and you know Eleanor doesn’t like most people.”

We both laugh as we enter an office Everly had arranged for us to be able to use for this very purpose. Sophie’s dress she bought for the reception is hanging from a bookcase. It’s a creamy white with flowers embroidered along the bottom and puff sleeves. Perfectly Sophie.

I help her out of her wedding dress, stowing it away to take home for her later, along with all of her other belongings, since she and Owen will leave from here on their honeymoon.

When I turn around, she’s already mostly redressed, with her back to me so I can button up the delicate pearls that go down the bodice of the dress.

“This is going to be you one day,” Sophie says, glancing at me over her shoulder.

I let out a soft laugh. “I used to think it might not, but now, I can actually picture it.”

“That’s how life is,” she muses. “You’re just going about your business, trying to find your path, and then, out of nowhere, love just finds you and turns everything around.”

We hug, holding on a little tighter than normal.

“Get back out there before your husband starts beating down the door,” I tease, swatting her on her fine ass. “I’m going to run to the bathroom really quickly. Save me a dance.”

She blows me a kiss and I take off in the opposite direction toward the bathroom Mack was referring to earlier. All I can think about are his filthy words and I can’t wipe the grin off my face.

As I’m washing my hands, I look at myself in the mirror.

My cheeks are flushed from the wine and dancing.

My hair is hanging in loose curls, not quite as put together as it was a couple of hours ago. A second line parade in the French Quarter will take its toll on a girl’s hair.

But it’s my eyes I can’t get past.

I’ve always heard people talk about seeing people who are truly happy

and how it changes their countenance. I see that reflected back at me in the mirror.

When I go to get a towel out of the dispenser to dry my hands, the door opens and I glance up to see another woman step inside. She's taller than me, but her hair is about the same color as mine, pretty red lips, and a beautiful pale lavender dress.

"Hi," I say, giving her a smile. "I love your dress."

"Thank you," she says, walking up beside me as she digs around in her purse. As she leans over the counter and begins powdering her nose, she glances at me through the mirror. "I love yours too. The wedding was beautiful, wasn't it?"

I nod, still riding on the high from the day. "Yeah, it was. It was perfect."

For a moment, the bathroom is quiet and just as I'm getting ready to make my exit, she asks, "You don't remember me, do you?"

Turning toward her, I take her in—really looking at her. There is something familiar in her eyes, I can't place where I might know her from. "Are you dating one of the players?"

She lets out a laugh, but it's not playful or kind.

It's cruel and condescending.

"I'm not trying to be rude," I assure her. "But I've met so many people over the past few months, it's hard to remember every face and name."

When she turns to walk toward the door, I think I've offended her and she's leaving, but then she stops, her hand on the wood as she presses it fully closed, engaging the lock.

"I wasn't going to do this here."

Do what? I think to myself, trying to stay one step ahead of this woman, but failing miserably.

"But you've really given me no choice," she continues, turning her back against the door. "Greer, Greer, Greer... Gah, what am I going to do with you? You're so obtuse it hurts and don't even get me started on how much of a pain in my ass you've been the past few weeks."

A chill seeps into my bones as I realize she knows my name.

I didn't give it to her.

Then, her words start to click and I know exactly who she is.

"You've been stalking me... harassing me," I say, pointing a finger as anger begins to thrum through my body. "Who let you in here? How did you ___"

Before I can react, her hand strikes my cheek and takes my breath away in the process.

“I’m the one who gets to do the talking,” she seethes. “I talk. You listen. Understand?”

My ear is ringing and I gingerly move my jaw, trying to get my bearings. “You bitch,” I mutter. “You fucking bitch.”

Wringing the hand that just slapped me, she begins to pace the small bathroom, never moving from in front of the door. Her harsh laugh cuts through the small space.

“I’ve spent so much time and energy trying to get your attention... so much fucking time and energy, and for what? For you to not even know my fucking name! Lydia Dalton, does that ring a bell?”

It does sound familiar, but I can’t place it.

“Let me help you out,” she says, taking a step in my direction and forcing me to back up against the counter. “We attended the same prep school. I was a scholarship student, so of course you never gave me the time of day. We didn’t really run in the same circle.”

I swallow, my eyes scanning her face. “I remember,” I tell her, forcing my voice to remain calm. “You were in journalism class with me. I think we worked on a project together.”

She smirks, sucking through her teeth as she shakes her head. “A project you took full credit for.”

“I don’t remember that,” I confess.

“You had it all—the family, money, clothes, friends. Guys fell at your feet. All I wanted was to be noticed, but you wouldn’t give me the time of day.”

“I’m sorry you felt that way.”

I know it’s a backhanded apology, but I refuse to take responsibility for something I don’t remember doing. Sure, I vaguely remember her, but I don’t recall specific interactions. In high school, I mainly just hung out with Sophie. It wasn’t like I was a snob or better than anyone, I just kept a close circle.

But I know my response was the wrong thing to say when I see her expression grow even colder.

“You have no idea the lengths I’ve gone to,” she huffs out, eyes turned to the ceiling. “I’ve left you messages, notes. I went to the same college as you. Took a job at your family’s company! And yet, still no one notices me. All I

hear is Greer this and Greer that. Greer doesn't want to work here. Greer thinks she's too good. Greer is a fucking spoiled brat!"

Her voice grows louder and louder with each unhinged declaration and my hope is someone will hear her, but I know I can't wait any longer.

That's when I see the knife.

At some point, she must have taken it out of her purse.

Not willing to die in this bathroom, I make a run for it. When I lunge for the door, she reaches for me and the knife she's holding slashes through my dress and pierces my stomach. Blood immediately begins to seep through the satin fabric.

Looking up, I see so much hate in Lydia's eyes and when she notices the blood, it only multiplies.

"You're not getting away that easy." She shoves me back against the wall and I trip over the hem of my dress, my shoulder connecting with the metal door of a bathroom stall. "I didn't come here to kill you, but I will do what needs to be done. Whatever it takes to make you listen."

"I'm listening," I tell her, my breaths coming out in shallow pants, all pretense of calm gone. "Whatever you want to say. I'm listening."

For some reason, my acquiescence infuriates her even more. Her hand comes up and grasps my throat and I instinctively grip her wrist, my eyes trained on the metal blade in her opposite hand.

"Everything I've done for the last eight years was to get your attention. I just wanted you to notice me... I even dyed my fucking hair!" She pulls at the strands, her eyes going wide and unfocused. "I fucking hate brown hair!"

Her hold on me tightens and I feel my airway constrict as my vision fades.

Fuck.

"Just tell me what you want...w—what do you want from me?"

"I want your life!"

"You have it," I tell her, tears springing to my eyes. "You've done what you set out to accomplish. If it's my last name and money you want, have it. None of it matters to me anyway."

"That's the fucking problem with people like you," she snarls, her face mere inches from mine. "You always want more!"

She laughs again and I take the opportunity to bring my knee up, kicking at her stomach with my foot, trying desperately to break her hold. When she stumbles, I reach for the door again, only to be pulled back by my hair.

There's a burning pain in my shoulder blade and I cry out, turning to see her holding a bloody knife.

"You fucking stabbed me," I gasp, reaching my hand around to feel the wound. When I bring it back around, it's covered in blood and I feel my head start to spin, but I refuse to let her win... not now, not after everything she's put me through.

Not when I finally have the life I've always wanted.

Instead of letting the pain and fear take hold, I summon all the rage inside me, harnessing my anger and using it like a battering ram.

Instead of running, I fight.

Gripping her hand that's still holding the blade, I begin to beat it against the wall until I hear it drop to the floor. When she tries to bend over to pick it up, I pull up my knee, making contact with her face.

Her eyes grow wide when she touches her nose and sees blood on her hand.

What happens after that is a blur, but one second I'm standing and the next, I'm on the floor, fighting for possession of the knife.

I feel it slice through my hand and again on my arm, but I keep fighting until I hear a loud bang come from behind me and Mack's booming voice calling my name.

"Greer! Open this goddamn door!"

Lydia takes advantage of the distraction and yanks my head up, only to smash it back down against the hard tiled floor.

A second later, I swear I hear a loud crash, right before the room goes black.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

MACK



“I’M GOING TO FUCKING KILL HIM.”

With my back pressed against the wall beside the door to Greer’s hospital room, I close my eyes and try to rein in the unadulterated fury I feel.

“Mack,” Ross warns. He’s usually a calming force for me, but right now, all I can see is red and I want to put my hands on fucking Jason Freeman.

“I’m sure Mr. Freeman wasn’t aware of Ms. Dalton’s motives,” Detective Briggs says. “He seemed a little rattled when I brought him in for questioning.”

Apparently, Lydia Dalton, the woman who has been stalking Greer and attacked her in the bathroom—*the reason she is laying in a fucking hospital bed*—met Jason Freeman at a bar on Bourbon Street a few weeks ago. If I had to guess, she fucked her way into an invite to Owen and Sophie’s wedding.

It doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together.

“Here’s my card,” the detective says. “I’ll be back to check on Ms. Bradley later, but if anything comes up while I’m gone, feel free to give me a call.”

Once he’s gone, I feel Ross take up residence on the wall beside me. “She’s going to be okay. The doctor said she’ll need some time to heal, but she’s going to be okay.”

As tears sting my eyes, I focus on the lines in the tile beneath my feet and breathe through the anger and frustration. I’ve already berated myself for not being there, for not checking on her sooner. I’ve also considered what could’ve happened had I not finally gone to find her and that took me down a dark path, one I never wanted to go on.

“I need her,” I admit, my voice cracking. “I need her to be okay and for that woman to pay for what she did. And I need her to be safe and happy and whole. I just... I fucking need her.”

I’m full-on snot-crying now and I wipe across my face with the sleeve of my shirt.

Ross’s hand lands on my shoulder and we just stand here in the hospital corridor, the faint background sounds filling the sterile air.

Beeping machines.

Quiet conversations.

My heart trying to mend itself after literally falling to pieces at Greer’s bloody feet.

When I shoved my shoulder into the locked door of that bathroom and found her on the floor. She was lying in a pool of blood, her beautiful skin marred with it, eyes closed, as a woman stood over her with a knife.

At that moment, I had my first out of body experience.

I saw myself moving, yelling, restraining the woman and kicking the knife into the hallway.

A second later, Ross was standing at the door, his eyes wide with concern and confusion, until all of the pieces of the scene started falling into place.

Everything else is a blur.

Sophie’s tears.

The police arresting Lydia.

The EMTs stabilizing Greer.

Her closed eyes that wouldn’t look at me, even when I begged and pleaded, promising her the entire fucking world for just one glimpse at those beautiful brown eyes. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to scrub that image from my mind.

But Ross is right; she is going to be okay. The doctor who’s treating her said all the scans came back clear. We’re just waiting for her to wake up.

“I better get back in there.”

Ross pushes off the wall, both of our suit jackets folded over his arm. “I’m going to head back to the waiting room and give everyone an update. I know they’re all worried.”

“Greer Hawthorne,” a man’s voice booms across the nurses’ desk.

We both jerk our heads around.

A nurse stands from her seat behind a computer. “Sir, she’s resting and there are already several visitors in her room.”

“I’m her father and I demand to see her.”

The nurse turns in our direction, and he follows her line of sight, making eye contact with me.

“Keep your cool,” Ross mutters.

That’s easier said than done on a day like today.

“I was just leaving,” Ross says a little louder for the nurse to hear, giving me one last look. “But I’ll be in the waiting room if you need me.”

I nod and we share a silent conversation that we’ve perfected over the years.

I’m here if you need me.

Thank you. For everything.

“Who are you?” Mr. Hawthorne asks me as he approaches, smoothing down the lapels of his suit jacket.

“I’m Greer’s boyfriend, Mack Granger.”

His expression is unreadable, but I see how his posture tenses. I’m good at reading people and Mr. Hawthorne doesn’t like the idea that I might know more about his daughter than he does.

“How is she?”

“She’s still unconscious, but the doctors say she’s going to be okay.”

I don’t want to give him any more information than I have to, because I don’t know how much Greer would want him to know. The last thing I ever want to do is betray her trust.

“I want to see her.”

Nodding, I motion behind me and lead him into Greer’s room.

Sophie’s head pops up when she hears us, and her red-rimmed eyes are clues that she’s been crying, too. “Mr. Hawthorne,” she says, composing herself as she stands, still in her dress from the reception.

“Sophia.”

“Sterling!” A woman’s distressed voice comes from down the hallway, Sophie tenses.

From across Greer’s bed, we make eye contact and I see the worry in her expression.

The woman enters the room, her hands flying up to cover her mouth when she sees her daughter. I would hope her motherly instincts are kicking in about now, but I can’t be sure. From what Greer has told me, the Hawthornes aren’t people I want to know.

“Molly,” Greer’s father says in a chastising tone.

I watch as her mother's countenance shifts and she morphs from distraught to collected.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Sterling Hawthorne's attention turns to Sophie and then to me. "Who did this?"

Sophie snuffles, crossing her arms over her chest as she looks down at Greer. "It was Lydia."

"Lydia?" he asks, confusion marking his forehead. "Lydia Dalton?"

Sophie nods. "She's been stalking Greer and she came to the wedding with one of the guys from the team. Apparently, she's had some crazy obsession with Greer since we were in high school." Her shoulders shrug and she looks so exhausted.

I hate this for her.

I hate it for Greer more.

But this should be the happiest day of Sophie's life and it's been tainted because of a psychopath. And more than anything, I know Greer is going to feel guilty about it all and that kills me.

"I had no idea," Mr. Hawthorne says, shaking his head in disbelief. "She always seemed interested in Greer, but I assumed it was because they were friends."

Mrs. Hawthorne clicks her tongue in disgust. "Greer was never friends with that girl. She was a scholarship student."

"Greer wasn't like that," Sophie says, defiance thick in her tone. "But you didn't really know her. All you were ever concerned about was her living up to your expectations and her last name."

An awkward silence settles over the room until I decide their visit is over.

"When Greer wakes up, she can call you," I say, looking down at my girl, who seems so peaceful. Even with the bandages, she's still the most beautiful woman in the world. "But only if she wants to. From what I understand, you've lost the privilege to have a front row seat to her life, and that really sucks for you, because she's the most amazing person I've ever met."

The fact they don't even argue with me, lets me know I made the right call in asking them to leave. Sophie's shoulders relax the second they excuse themselves from the room and the whole atmosphere changes.

"Thank you," Sophie whispers, lowering herself back into the chair by Greer's bed. "I'm not even sure why they showed up or how they knew to, but I'm assuming Sterling Hawthorne is like my father, and he knows everything going on in this city, even when it doesn't concern him."

Her words sound distant and detached.

I know Sophie's relationship with her parents isn't as bad as Greer's, but I know it's not a picture-perfect relationship, either. However, unlike Greer, she maintains a close bond with her family. If I had to guess, that's mostly due to her siblings. I could tell from watching them at the reception tonight that her brothers dote on Sophie and her sister, although not as friendly as one might like, cares about Sophie.

Greer and I are alike in so many ways that have nothing to do with money or status.

She grew up with every opportunity and chose a path that is her own.

I grew up with limited opportunities, but also chose a path that is all my own.

We both followed our dreams, and those dreams led us here—to a time and place where two people whose life view is jaded, find love in an unconventional way.

"I love her." I'm not sure who I'm telling that to. Sophie. Myself. Greer, if she can hear me. But I just need to say it. I need everyone to know how much I love this woman.

"I know," Sophie says, reaching up to lightly touch Greer's arm, just above the bandage, which is one of many.

She has one around her head due to a laceration on the back. It's small, but head wounds bleed a lot, so they cleaned it and wrapped it. Her left eye is a little swollen and a faint bruise has bloomed on her cheek.

There's also her shoulder, which is the worst of her injuries, outside of the head trauma. Thankfully, the blade missed anything important, and once they confirmed there was no damage to her lung, they sterilized the wound and bandaged it up. She might need to keep her arm in a sling for a while to allow it to heal, but no lasting effects.

Other than that, she has a cut on her arm and hand that both required a few stitches, and a slash on her stomach that wasn't as deep and will heal on its own.

Now, we just need for her to wake the hell up.

"She loves you too," Sophie says quietly. "I don't want to overstep, but I think you should know she loves you too. But you also need to know that even though Greer might seem tough on the outside, her heart is tender. She deserves someone who's going to take care of it."

There's a hint of warning in her tone and I think it's Sophie's polite way

of telling me if I break Greer's heart, I'll have her to deal with, which quite honestly, scares the shit out of me. But she doesn't have anything to worry about, because breaking Greer's heart is the last thing I'd ever want to do.

Her pain is mine.

Her heartache and struggles are mine.

But also her love.

Sophie didn't have to tell me Greer loves me, because I've seen it in the simple things—the secretive glances she gives me when she thinks I'm not looking, the smile she saves just for me, the way she runs me a bath on nights my knee is hurting because she knows it's what I like, and being the first person to ever ask me who I lean on... then silently offering to be the one.

My throat aches as I hold back another round of emotion.

Standing, I lean over Greer's bed and press my lips to her cheek, whispering in her ear. "Wake up for me, baby. I need you to wake up..."

Is it strange to miss someone when they're right in front of you?

Because I fucking miss her. I need her smartass remarks and cutting stares. I need her laughter and the energy she brings to a room. I miss her voice and the way it soothes even the deepest parts of my soul.

Just as I'm settling back into my seat, I hear a faint sound.

"Mack?"

Sophie and I both stand as Greer's eyes flutter open.

"Greer." Sophie's choked sob fills the room and Greer turns to look at her, raising her hand to Sophie's cheek. "You scared me, bitch."

A faint smile spread on Greer's lips as her eyes blink slowly. "I'm okay."

"Yeah," Sophie says, nodding as tears stream down her face. "You are... You're going to be just fine." Taking a deep breath, she wipes at her eyes before bending down and placing a gentle kiss on Greer's cheek. "I'm going to head down to the waiting room and tell everyone you're awake. I'll give you two a minute."

I watch as she leaves and when I look back down at Greer, she's crying.

"Don't do that, baby," I beg, catching her tears with my thumb. "No more tears, okay?"

"I ruined her reception. It was the perfect day and I—"

"You had no control over anything that happened tonight," I say as I kneel beside her bed. "The only person we're going to blame for any of this is Lydia. And maybe fucking Freeman, but the jury is still out on that one."

Her eyes go wide. "Freeman?" Her mouth opens and then closes. "What

does he have to do with it? Wait, did he invite her?”

Nodding, I run a hand through my hair. “Yeah, they met at a bar a few weeks ago and she was his plus one to the wedding.”

Greer shakes her head. “This is all so crazy. I can’t believe that she is the person who has been stalking me. It’s surreal to have a name and know, but it’s also freeing. I mean, I’m obviously a little worse for wear, but the weight of the unknown I’ve been carrying around for the past few months has been lifted. I’m not happy about putting a stain on Sophie’s wedding day, but...” She pauses, taking a deep, cleansing breath. “I’m so fucking relieved.”

Another tear escapes down her cheek, but I know it’s not out of pain or fear. It might still hurt my heart, but it’s okay, because I know how she feels and I share her relief.

“How long was I out?” she asks, her brows pinching together like she’s still trying to put all the pieces together.

I pull my phone out of my back pocket and see it’s going on midnight. “A few hours.”

“Sophie and Owen missed their flight.”

“Flights can be rescheduled.” Leaning forward I kiss her hand, just above one of her bandages. “There’s no way in hell anyone, especially Sophie, was leaving without knowing you were okay.”

For a moment, we just stare at each other—me soaking her in and her still trying to regain her bearings.

“I really should go tell the nurse you’re awake,” I say, brushing a kiss across her forehead and another on her cheek, wanting to touch her everywhere and see for myself she’s okay, but knowing I have to wait. “But before I do, there’s something else I need to tell you first.”

Her brows draw together and she pulls her bruised bottom lip between her teeth, wincing. “If it’s more bad news, can it wait? I feel like I’ve had my quota today and I just want to—”

Leaning in, I press my lips to hers, needing to feel her and taste her. What starts out as a chaste kiss on my part, quickly turns heated when Greer deepens it, opening her mouth and reaching up to cup my face. As she tries to pull me closer, I chuckle, breaking away.

“I love you.” I tell her, sitting back on my heels to look in her eyes. “There is nothing fake about what I feel for you, Greer. My love for you is the most real thing I’ve ever felt. Ross has been riding my ass to talk to you since before the playoffs, but I was scared. That’s my only excuse. I was

scared that you might not feel the same way or scared that things were moving too fast. But I was an idiot. I shouldn't have waited, because let me tell you, my life literally flashed before my eyes when I saw you on that bathroom floor..." I squeeze my eyes shut at the memory. "I saw everything our future could hold and then for the briefest moment, I saw what my future would look like without you, and I refuse to ever feel that level of devastation again. I need you in my life. I don't know what the future holds, but I know I want you by my side—as my person... my everything. You don't have to say anything right now, because I know you've been through a lot and this is probably an asshole move piling all of this on you too, but I couldn't go another second... If you need more time, I'll give it to you... I'll give you anything you want."

"Are you finished?" Greer asks, fresh tears glistening in her eyes.

I nod, swallowing down the lump that's lodged there. My mouth also feels a little dry as I wait for Greer to speak.

She lets out a weak laugh, shaking her head. "I'm not sure my feelings for you were ever fake. The relationship, sure, but even that started feeling real before I realized it."

Closing her eyes, she inhales and I'm worried this is all too much for her.

I probably should've waited until she was discharged, but I couldn't, because I feel like I've already wasted enough time and forever isn't feeling long enough.

"I love you," she continues. "And I'm not saying it because you said it first. I'm saying it because I've never felt more strongly about anything in my entire life."

She loves me.

I knew she did.

But hearing her say it, say those words to me... "Fuck, baby," I say, gingerly cupping her face and bringing my mouth back to hers. "I'm not sure why we have to go about everything in the most backward way, but I love it. I love us. And I'm so fucking thankful you're okay and that I got the chance to tell you I love you. You're probably going to get tired of it, because I don't plan on stopping for the next seventy years, at least."

"In seventy years you're going to be over a hundred," Greer says, a bit of her sass coming back. "You're an old man. Not sure if you've done the math, but I'll still be in my prime and you'll be an old geezer."

"You'll still be my hot, young bombshell, making all the guys at the

nursing home jealous.”

Greer laughs and it’s the best thing I’ve heard in hours. “If our kids put us up in a nursing home, we’re going to haunt their asses when we’re dead.”

That makes us both laugh and when our eyes meet, there’s nothing but love and so many promises of the future. For the first time in my life, I see forever.

EPILOGUE

GREER



OVER THE PAST MONTH, OUR DAYS HAVE BEEN MUCH MORE LOW-KEY. MY injuries have healed. I have a few battle wounds, as Mack likes to call them—giving each one special attention each time he gets me naked—but other than that, I feel good.

A week or so after the attack, Mack and I agreed we could both benefit from some counseling. I think during Mack's sessions, he not only talks about what he saw that day in the bathroom and the aftermath, but also works through his feelings regarding his career coming to an end.

Without daily games, we both have a much lighter schedule. Without a psycho stalking me, my life feels... normal.

Peaceful.

Settled.

Mack still makes his killer grilled cheeses, but now we celebrate multiple orgasms, instead of baseball wins.

"Who was that?" he asks from his end of the couch, where he's currently rubbing my feet while we watch an episode of *Yellowstone*. It's the show we mutually agreed to binge-watch after the baseball season came to an end.

My eyes are still on the phone in my hand, trying to wrap my head around the phone call I just had. "That was George. He called to tell me he was on the phone with one of our affiliate stations in Chicago today and they asked about me."

Mack's head turns from the television, and he frowns. "About what?"

"About whether or not he thought I would consider relocating," I say, looking up to meet his gaze. I watch as Mack's features morph from confusion to realization.

“Would you be interested in doing that?”

Glancing back down at the phone, I think about it for a second. “A lot of reporters start out in smaller markets and work their way up,” I start, taking a deep breath. “But that’s never been my goal. This might sound crazy, but I’m content to stay in New Orleans and cover the stories that matter to this city. I realize that limits my career, but I just have always seen myself staying here. But now, there’s you...”

“What about me?” he asks, shifting my feet off his lap and turning to face me.

I shrug. “I still want that, but I want you more. And I know you’re at a crossroads in your career, so if you wanted to make a move, I’d do that... for you.”

Closing the distance between us, he pulls me onto his lap to straddle him. “If you want to stay here, then that’s what I want. I’ve had my career, and as hard as it was to officially retire, I’m content with my decision. If staying in New Orleans is what will make you happy, then that’s what I want. But if moving to Chicago and exploring new options is what’s next for you, then that’s what will be next for me too. I go where you go.”

“How did I get so lucky?” I mutter, brushing my lips against his and loving the feel of his scruff as I cup his jaw.

“I ask myself the same thing every day, baby.”

For a moment, we kiss, and it’s soft and slow. Somehow, Mack always knows exactly what I need. He gives it to me rough and hard... passionate and love-filled... quick and dirty. He’s a rainy day on the couch, but he’s also a good night on the town. He’s everything I ever wanted and all the things I never knew.

“If you keep rocking on my dick like that, this is going to get messy really quick,” he warns, making me laugh.

But I don’t stop and my laugh quickly morphs to moans as Mack grips my hips and rocks me harder, the piercing of his cock hitting my clit with every forward motion.

“Fuck.” Swallowing down the building need, I bite down on my lip. “Who knew dry humping on the couch was so hot. This is only supposed to get you off when you don’t know how good the real thing is.”

Mack growls, his hips thrusting harder as his dick slides through the wetness I can feel seeping through my thin sleep shorts. The fact I have no panties on and he’s only wearing a pair of boxers, means there’s very little

between us. He could be inside me in a matter of seconds, but now that we're here, I want to come like this.

"I'm so close," I tell him, gripping his neck as I ride him.

His head dips to my chest and bites my nipple through my tank top, making me buck harder.

"That slick pussy is going to make me come in my pants," Mack says on a groan, wrapping his arms around my back and holding me closer. "You're so fucking sexy, Greer... so, goddamn... ahhhh... come for me, baby. Let me hear you."

My hips go faster as I chase my orgasm.

Mack kisses my neck, making a trail up to the sensitive spot behind my ear and when his teeth come out to play, I cry out and explode.

I feel Mack's hips jerk and then he's holding me impossibly tighter, melding our bodies together as we ride out the waves of pleasure, our breaths ragged and our bodies spent.

"Holy fuck," he mutters. "I don't think I've ever done that."

"I might not be your first for everything, but I will be your last," I tease.

He leans back, getting a good look at me and giving me that full-on Mack Granger panty-dropping smile. "You're damn right you are. You're stuck with me, whether you like it or not."

"I'm currently stuck to you," I joke, earning a snort from Mack.

"Let's go get even dirtier in the shower and then we can get clean."

Have I mentioned how much I love lazy days with Mack?

They're my favorite day of any week.

He's my favorite person.

And I know life with him might not always be easy, but it will be fun and we'll make it through anything, as long as we have each other.



AN HOUR LATER, WE'RE DRYING OFF IN THE BATHROOM WHEN MY PHONE rings again in the living room where I left it after our dry humping... wet humping? What do you call it when you come from all the humping?

Those thoughts disappear when I see my boss's name flash on my screen.

"Hey, George."

Mack walks into the living room, wearing nothing but a towel. His

eyebrows raise, silently asking what this call is about. Surely George isn't already calling back about our conversation from earlier. He's persistent, but not that persistent. And I already told him I'd think about it and talk to him on Monday.

"I need you to meet Brian at the station and get down to the courthouse."

My heart starts to race in anticipation.

I don't normally get calls like this from George, but if he's calling me to report on something at the courthouse on my day off, it's got to be important. And that's exactly the kind of stories I've always dreamed of getting.

"Okay," I tell him, running back to the bedroom. "Can you give me a heads up about what we're walking into? Anything I should know before I get there?"

I'm already tossing a blouse and skirt onto the bed when Mack walks back into the bedroom, still looking puzzled.

"Warner Callahan has been arrested. I know you have a personal connection to the family, so if you think you can't do it and be unbiased, tell me now."

My eyes grow wide, but I remain calm when I say, "I can do it. I'll be there."

When the call ends, I drop my phone to the bed. "Holy shit."

"What?" Mack asks. "Is everything okay?"

"Sophie's dad was just arrested and George is giving me the story."



AUTHOR'S NOTE: IF YOUR CURIOSITY IS PIQUED WITH THIS ENDING, WE HOPE you'll stay tuned for a new Jiffy Kate series featuring the Callahans. It will be the same New Orleans/French Quarter world you've come to love by reading our French Quarter Series and the New Orleans Revelers books, featuring cameos from familiar faces. Some of the key players have already been introduced in past books and we can't wait to give them the spotlight!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With every acknowledgement page we write, we get more and more grateful because it means we finished another book and you're still here reading our words.

This book felt like it was forever in progress. We started writing is over a year ago and then it sat on the virtual shelf for MONTHS. There was a moment we thought our words and creativity had dried up and life got the best of us. But then, we pushed through and this is the product of that.

Firstly, we want to thank Pamela, our alpha reader and bestie for always being along for any and all journeys! We appreciate your loyalty and encouragement. Thank you for the gentle nudges and always being willing to read our words and give us your honest feedback.

The second person to lay their eyes on this document was a long-time friend and reviewer, but new-to-us editor. Nicole McCurdy (Emerald Edits), your insight and suggestions were SO SPOT ON! You helped us turn this into something shiny and presentable. Thank you so much for everything. We can't sing your praises loud enough.

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And we love cake.

But we digress.

Lastly, we'd like to thank Wander Aguiar for this gorgeous photo that perfectly captures Greer and Mack, and Juliana Cabrera for taking it and making the perfect cover and designing a beautiful interior! We appreciate you both!

If you're still here, THANK YOU!! We hope you enjoyed reading Mack and Greer's story as much as we enjoyed writing it. And we hope you'll stick around for all of the other fun stories we have planned for the future.

Until next time,

Jiff and Jenny Kate

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jiffy Kate is the joint pen name for Jiff Simpson and Jenny Kate Altman. They're co-writing besties who share a brain. They also share a love of cute boys, stiff drinks, and fun times.

Together, they spend their evenings and weekends spinning tales. Their first published book, *Finding Focus*, was released in November 2015. Since then, they've continued to write what they know—southern settings full of swoony heroes and strong heroines.

You can connect with them and follow along with their writing journey on social media.

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