



Body Heat

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Suspense

Description: The last thing security specialist Sera Russo wanted was another ego-driven super star athlete for a client. They had a habit of being a pain in the butt. Sometimes literally. Rowan Charles was widely believed to be the best quarterback to have ever played the game. The person who called themselves his biggest fan in a series of disturbing notes definitely agreed. And they're pissed Rowan has decided to leave the game. Sera's job was to keep Rowan safe, and pretending to be his girlfriend was the easiest way to do it. But when their feelings for each other quickly turned real, Rowan has a new goal in mind...to claim his guardian angel forever. Body Heat was previously released in the Team Player 2 anthology but now features a bonus epilogue.

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Chapter 1

Sera

“Another hotshot athlete? And I’m the one stuck on close protection detail again? Seriously?” I dropped my head low and squeezed the bridge of my nose between my index finger and thumb. A deep sigh puffed out of my mouth as I thought about how much of a pain in the ass the jock we’d protected last month had been. And I didn’t just mean that figuratively. He’d literally been a pain in my ass because he’d taken every opportunity he had to pinch it. Hard.

Since my cover required me to be his date at public events, the douchebag had plenty opportunity to put his grubby hands on me when I couldn’t react. By the time the threat to him was over, he’d even left a few bruises behind on my ass. The only reason I hadn’t broken his fingers was because I damn well knew it’d end up being front page news. He was a major league pitcher whose hands were worth millions, after all.

The media coverage wasn’t the problem in and of itself. It’s what it would’ve triggered that was the issue. If my boss found out exactly how much of a slimeball the client had been around me, the guy would have had more than a few broken fingers to worry about. Even though he and the rest of the team knew I could take care of myself, they were still protective of me when it came to guys. They had no problem treating me as an equal when we were on assignment, but it wasn’t rare for them to act like I was their little sister during our downtime. Having three pseudo big brothers who’d been trained to kill wreaked havoc on my dating life, that was for damn sure.

Not that I wasn't just as protective of them—in my own way—as they were of me. I'd taken the crap dished out by the douchebag client in stride and had only allowed myself a small measure of payback. After the threat to him had been neutralized, I visited his hotel room and rammed my knee into his balls hard enough that he was going to sing soprano for a while. I hadn't said a word about it to anyone because I hadn't wanted the guys to run the risk of getting caught when they made him pay for it. As skilled as they were, he was too high profile for the kind of vengeance they'd want to rain down on him—no matter how much I would've loved to see him writhe in pain. Besides which, if I'd really wanted him to pay, I could've done it myself. But just because I'd let it go didn't mean I wanted to go through it all again.

“He's the client. His job shouldn't matter, not when he's paying us to keep him safe,” Brecken chided as he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his broad chest.

I clenched my teeth at the idea of disappointing him. Brecken was more than just my boss; he was a friend. Our paths had crossed during my last tour overseas, and we'd quickly learned to rely on each other in some pretty fucking bad conditions. When he'd heard I was leaving the Army three months after he had, he'd looked me up and offered me a job working for the security firm he'd started with Whit Baker as his right-hand man. Boot camp and eight years of active duty together had forged an unbreakable bond between the two men.

“Rowan Charles isn't just any hotshot athlete. He's the best damn quarterback to have ever played the game,” Whit chimed in.

I tilted my head to the side to look at him. He was sitting in the chair next to me with his legs kicked out. His twinkling eyes and shit-eating grin made him look like a little boy who'd just found out he was getting every item on his wish list for Christmas. “Since you're such a big fan of his, maybe you should be the one assigned to close protection detail instead of me.”

Whit gestured down his long body with a sweep of his hand. “As gorgeous as I am, I just don’t fill out a cocktail dress half as well as you do.”

“The last thing I need to picture in my head is you in a dress,” Brecken grumbled.

Whit leaned forward and rubbed his hands together. I was familiar enough with the wicked gleam in his eyes to know that whatever came out of his mouth next would be dirty. “I can think of worse things. Like—”

“Don’t,” Brecken cut Whit off before he could get started.

“But—”

Brecken glared at Whit until he settled back in his chair with his lips pressed together. My lips tilted up in a smug grin until Brecken aimed his scowl my way. “Don’t you start with me, either.”

I put my hands up in surrender. “Hey! I didn’t do anything!”

“And that’s exactly why I’m pissed at you.” His eyes narrowed as he leaned forward and rested his elbows on the top of his desk. “Because you should’ve spoken up the first time that cocksucker took advantage of your professionalism and touched your ass. I put you on close protection detail because his team wanted to keep the situation under wraps, and it was easier for them to spin the presence of a new woman on his arm. It wasn’t so he could treat you like shit.”

Dammit. I should’ve known at least one of the guys would’ve noticed him getting handsy with me. I might’ve been the one assigned to be close to the douchebag, but it wasn’t like I’d been on the assignment by myself. Whit and Devon, the other member of our team, were too damn observant for my own good sometimes. When neither of them said anything about it, I assumed that I’d managed to keep a lid on it. And as the

saying went, I'd made an ass of myself because of it.

"You're right, I should've said something. I'm sorry." I kept my apology short and to the point, figuring that my explanation would come across as an excuse more than anything else.

"We're a team. We don't keep shit from each other," he added. "That's why we're the best at what we do. We trust each other, one hundred percent."

"Fuck." The last thing I ever wanted to do was give Brecken any reason to think I didn't trust him. Even though I'd known it was time to get out, I'd had no idea what I would do as a civilian. His offer of a job helped keep me sane and eased the transition for me big-time. "It had nothing to do with not trusting you and everything to do with having your back. I didn't want you to wind up in jail. Not over something as insignificant as a few ass grabs, and definitely not when Hadley already has her hands full running around after Quinten while she still can before her belly gets any bigger."

Bringing up his pregnant wife and toddler like that while he was pissed at me was a dirty trick, but I knew it would work to defuse the situation because my boss was head over heels in love with Hadley. And crazy protective of her, which was understandable considering how they'd met.

His eyes softened like they always did when he was thinking about Hadley. Shaking his head, he growled, "Don't think for a second that I don't know what you're doing."

"You always do," I laughed.

"Keep that in mind the next time you try to pull the wool over my eyes," he ordered before picking up the remote for the large monitor on the wall to my left. When the screen powered on, he pulled up the quarterback's dossier. As soon as I saw his picture, an inappropriate thought popped into my head. If the pitcher had been half as

gorgeous, I might not have minded the ass grabbing quite so much.

Chapter 2

Rowan

“Do you really think this is all necessary? It’s not like I’ve never had an obsessed fan before.” I glared at Carl as the SUV we were riding in pulled into the parking lot next to the building where we had an appointment in about five minutes. It wasn’t so much that I was angry with him as it was the situation.

“You know I’m not in the habit of scheduling appointments just for shits and giggles.” I thought of the meeting as an unnecessary hassle, but Carl viewed it as being vital to my safety. I was fairly certain he was overreacting, but I felt I owed it to him to take this seriously based on how freaked out he was. He’d been my agent ever since I first declared my intent to enter the draft during my senior year of high school eight years ago, and letting him take the lead on business decisions had made me wealthy beyond my imagination. If meeting with a security expert made him feel better, then it was the least I could do. Especially after I’d crushed his dreams two weeks earlier.

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But I wasn't happy that he'd sprung this appointment on me at the last minute, knowing damn well I'd think he was going overboard. He could be over the top sometimes, and it definitely felt like this was one of them.

His office was only a mile down the street, but he'd had an SUV with blacked-out windows pick us up at the back door his employees used. Even though nobody was in the parking lot, he shoved a cap and glasses at me to help disguise my identity. It must've worked because the guard at the front desk barely glanced my way before waving us through to the elevators. The receptionist also didn't react when Carl gave her his name, and we were quickly ushered into a corner office.

After spotting the security team he'd hired, I was struck by the knowledge that I wouldn't be able to take any of them in a fight. I was a big guy who was paid millions of dollars to keep his body in peak physical shape, but they had an air of lethality that I couldn't match—including the hot as fuck woman who was perched on the far corner of the desk.

The lean muscles in her calves and biceps made me think that she might just be as serious about her workouts as I was. But it was her unflinching gaze that set her apart from any other female I'd ever met before. This woman not only knew herself but she was also comfortable in her own skin. Her confidence was one hell of a turn-on.

The man sitting behind the desk stood as we walked toward him. He reached his hand out to shake Carl's.

"Thanks for meeting with us so quickly, Brecken." Carl turned to me, and added, "This is my client, Rowan Charles."

“My client too now.” The man’s focus shifted to me, and he stretched his arm out again. “I’m sorry it isn’t under better circumstances.”

“It never is,” one of the guys to my left mumbled. He was sitting with his legs stretched out. The other one reached over and slapped him upside the head, earning himself a glare.

“That’s Whit and Devon.” Brecken pointed at each man as he said their name. “They, along with Sera”—he jerked his chin in the woman’s direction—“make up the team I’ve assigned to you.”

“Nice to meet you.” My greeting was meant for all of them, but my focus remained on Sera.

“Carl tells me you have a stalker.” All our heads swung back in Brecken’s direction.

“Yeah,” I confirmed with a shrug. “It’s not the first time I’ve had one, but Carl is concerned that my retirement announcement triggered this guy and is taking his interest in me to a new level.”

“I don’t just think it; I know it,” Carl argued. He pulled out copies of the notes I’d received from his briefcase and set them on the desk in front of us. “This guy has been writing to him ever since he was drafted. For years, he’s talked about how he’s Rowan’s biggest fan. That all changed when he announced his retirement. The cops agree the tone of the letters is different now, and the risk level to Rowan has increased. They’re the ones who suggested I hire him some private security.”

Brecken read the notes and handed them over to Sera. “It’s my understanding that you want one of my operatives to go in with a cover so nobody knows they’re on close protection detail. Is that correct?”

“Absolutely,” Carl confirmed. “The last thing we need right now is a scandal. It could hurt Rowan's chances of locking down a gig after retirement, as well as put some of his endorsements at risk. We can't afford for that to happen.”

Maybe he couldn't, but I sure as fuck could. If I ever ended up having a family, they'd be set for generations to come even if I didn't work another day after this season ended. But now wasn't the time to argue with Carl over my plans for the future.

“We've had similar cases where protecting the client from scrutiny was second only to their safety.” Brecken gestured to Sera. “In your case, utilizing one of my female operatives for your close protection detail seems the wisest course of action because her presence can easily be explained away.”

“Whoa, wait.” Carl gave Brecken an incredulous look. “Are you trying to tell us that she”—he pointed at Sera—“is going to be responsible for Rowan's safety?”

Brecken leaned back in his chair and nodded. “If you want to keep the situation under wraps and avoid questions from the media, she's your best bet.”

“No. No way. Not a chance in hell.” Carl shook his head. “He's not going to have some chick on his arm pretending to be a badass when the danger is real. Rowan needs someone who can actually do something about this guy if he escalates to violence.”

Whit and Devon snorted, but they bit back their laughter when Brecken shifted his gaze their way. Sera's eyes gleamed with humor, but she didn't say a word in her defense. I was intrigued by her lack of response. Most women would've lost their shit, but she seemed completely unbothered by the trash talk Carl was flinging in her direction.

I wouldn't be nearly as set financially without his hard work, but that didn't mean I wasn't aware Carl could be a bit of a prick at times. Normally, his attitude meant good things for me because it was why he was such a great negotiator. But not today. Not with this woman.

“Back off,” I ordered him. “You said these guys are the best in the business, and they’re giving us exactly what you wanted.”

Carl’s eyes widened in shock. “You're really okay with having this bit of fluff in charge of your safety?”

“Bit of fluff?” Whit echoed in disbelief.

“Dude, they really don't know her at all,” Devon added.

Sera slid off the desk and looked at the Whit. Some form of unspoken communication passed between them, and he jumped up and moved toward her. When he got within two feet of her, his arm whipped out in a jab aimed straight for her head. She deftly blocked the blow and countered with a hit of her own.

What followed next was a shock to Carl...and maybe me a little bit, too. Within the small confines of the office and without coming close to where we sat, they went full force at each other. I’d never seen anything like it before. The two co-workers sparred as though their lives were on the line, the man holding nothing back just because Sera was a woman.

Brecken let it continue for a minute or two before he barked, “Enough.” Then his gaze swung to Carl and me. “My employees don't need to prove themselves to you. They’ve more than proven themselves to me, on the battlefield and off. If that's not good enough for you, then you can hire another firm.”

After glaring at Carl, I turned to Brecken. “It’s my decision to make, and I’m comfortable with the team you've assigned me.”

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“You're the boss,” Carl grumbled.

“Damn straight I am,” I shot back.

He'd been a little testier than usual since I announced my plan to retire. Like most people, he didn't understand why I was getting out of the game when I was on top. But it wasn't their decision to make, and I didn't let other people's opinions bother me too much. Sera might be the exception, though. The approval shining from the sexy but dangerous brunette's green eyes meant more than it should this soon after meeting her.

Chapter 3

Sera

It was rare for a hotshot athlete to truly be cool with me being assigned to their close protection detail, but the firmness with which Rowan shot down his agent's objections made it clear that he was. Some of our male clients pretended they were completely on board because they hoped to get in my pants. But since I was there to protect them, not sleep with them, that was never going to happen. I'd never been tempted to get personal with a client. Until Rowan.

Not that anyone with a vagina would blame me. He was hot as fuck with his muscular six-foot-three frame, thick dark hair, dark eyes, and square jawline covered with scruff. Backing me up the way he had only made him more attractive to me.

“Thanks, boss. I've got it from here.” I walked to the door and opened it. Looking

over my shoulder at Rowan and his agent, I added, “Since Whit, Devon, and I will be working your case, how about we head into the conference room to hammer out the details? I’m sure Brecken has a million other things to do today.”

Rowan was the first out the door, moving faster than I expected. Whit and Devon followed him, and his agent wasn’t far behind them. Whit led us into the conference room, claiming a chair at the head of the long table. Devon chose to sit opposite from him on the other end. Rowan and Carl snagged the seats closest to the door, leaving me with the side across from them.

Once we were all settled, I kicked off the conversation. “Although Brecken was correct in saying there’s no need for me to prove myself, I want to reiterate that I am more than able to handle your security issues. Not only have I served in the military but I’ve also taken lead on similar cases in the past with positive outcomes. Brecken didn’t pick me for your close protection detail purely because it will be easier to explain the presence of a woman at your side. He would never risk one of his client’s safety to help them save face. The fact that I won’t stand out like a sore thumb is just a bonus.”

Rowan’s dark gaze did a quick survey of what he could see of my face and body. My hair was pulled up in a ponytail, I’d only bothered with mascara and a hint of gloss this morning, and I was wearing a green T-shirt with dark jeans. My look was low maintenance, but judging by the masculine approval in Rowan’s eyes, he didn’t mind. “You’re very much mistaken if you think you won’t stand out, just not for the reasons you think.”

“I’ve noticed that most of our athlete clients like to hit on her,” Whit murmured.

“I think it must be the challenge she presents,” Devon added.

“Yeah.” Whit smirked, shaking his head. “Remember that Brazilian General? He sure

thought he was up for the challenge.”

Devon snorted. “Boy, did she prove him wrong when she landed him on his ass after he tried to pat hers.”

Rowan’s eyes flared with anger. “She shouldn’t have to put up with that kind of bullshit.”

Whit leaned forward and smiled. “I’m glad to hear you think so. I’d hate to be forced to hurt, maim, or kill my favorite football player, but I would if I had to.”

“And he wouldn’t be alone when he did it,” Devon added.

Rowan held his hands up in surrender. “You’ve got nothing to worry about with me. I’m not about to disrespect any woman, let alone one who could kick my ass all by herself.”

“I’m glad at least one person in this room has faith in my ability to protect myself,” I grumbled, aiming a glare at Whit and then Devon.

“You know it’s not that, Sera. It’s because we feel like shit after—”

Rowan and his agent didn’t need to hear Devon’s explanation. What happened on our last case was mine to share when and with whom I wanted. “Now that we’ve gotten all that out of the way, how about we focus on the plan to keep Rowan safe from his stalker?”

The guys took my hint and got down to business. Whit shoved a pad of paper in Rowan’s direction. “We’ll need a list of anyone who might be out to get you, in case the culprit is someone you know. Ex-girlfriends, teammates, anyone who’s had beef with you in the last five to ten years.”

Rowan's dark eyes went wide in surprise, and he shook his head. "I don't know anyone who would write the shit that's been in the last few letters."

"Yeah, you do." His agent snagged the notepad and pulled a pen from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "You just don't realize it because part of my job is to handle the negative crap so it doesn't mess with your game."

Carl jotted down a dozen names, and a muscle in Rowan's jaw jumped when his agent handed the pad of paper back to Whit. He did a quick scan of the list and asked, "These are all former and current teammates. There haven't been issues with exes who weren't ready for the relationship to end? No jersey chasers who thought they could get knocked up and nab a ring?"

These were standard questions for our athlete clients who had stalkers. It'd never bothered me before, but I found myself bracing for the endless list of chicks who'd been in and out of Rowan's bed.

"I've been too focused on my career to have a relationship."

"And no jersey chasers for him," Carl added. "He's one of the few who took my advice seriously when it came to staying away from them."

Some of the tension eased from my body upon hearing this information even though it gave us fewer leads to run down. Whit ran through the rest of the usual questions. "Okay, I think we've got enough to go with for now. We'll pass this information along to our investigative team, and they'll dig into everyone on the list to rule out whoever they can. If anything pops up in their search, they'll let us know."

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“And in the meantime? You’re going to keep Rowan safe until you can figure out who’s doing this, right?” Carl asked.

“Absolutely,” Devon confirmed. “That’s where Sera comes in.”

Carl’s gaze shifted to me. “What’s your big plan?”

“Easy.” I flashed him a grin, enjoying the fact that my answer was going to drive him up a wall. “I move in with Rowan.”

“You what?” Carl sputtered.

I let myself enjoy his reaction for about thirty seconds before I got serious. “The girlfriend cover story works so well because it allows me access to all parts of his life. I can be at his side during public appearances, at his games, and in his home at night without anyone thinking twice.”

“That’s what you think,” Carl muttered with a frown.

Worried what his response meant, I turned to Rowan. “And there isn’t anyone in your life who will take issue to me staying in your house?”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “Just my mom, and it’d be more a case of her wondering why she didn’t meet you sooner.”

“I’d highly recommend letting her in on the story,” Carl suggested.

Rowan nodded. “It’d make my life a hell of a lot easier.”

“If looping her in will help with my cover story, then you can tell your mom what’s going on. Brecken mentioned that he already ruled her and Carl out as possible suspects,” I agreed.

Carl’s head jerked back at my answer. “You looked into me?”

“And my mom?”

“Of course we did,” Devon confirmed. “It would’ve been irresponsible of us to assume that it wasn’t one of the people you’re closest to. For all we knew”—he jerked his thumb in Carl’s direction—“this was something your agent cooked up to get you to change your mind about retiring.”

“Huh.” Carl tapped his chin with his pen. “I guess I’m not nearly as devious as my reputation might lead people to believe since I didn’t come up with that plan on my own.”

Okay, maybe the agent wasn’t as bad as I’d originally thought.

Chapter 4

Rowan

My reaction to Sera’s declaration that she was moving in with me was the opposite of what it should have been. I’d never lived with a woman before. Not even close. The small amount of dating I’d done since getting drafted never reached the relationship stage. My focus had been on my career and my mom.

I should've felt the need to protest the idea of having Sera in my home, but instead, I

felt the same rush as I got when I threw for a game-winning touchdown. The adrenaline coursing through my veins made me feel like I could conquer the world. Even the end of my career and what'd led me to make the decision to get out of football after this season. And a stalker.

“Don’t believe him, not even for a second,” I warned with a chuckle. “He can be calculating enough to come up with a devious plot like that, but he’s also a loyal motherfucker, so it’d never be aimed my way.”

Carl clapped me on the shoulder. “I might not always agree with your decisions, but I’ll still have your back. No matter what.”

I nodded in agreement. “The same is true for my mom. There isn’t a chance in hell she’d ever do anything to put me at risk. If anything, my stalker should watch their back because she’ll want to go apeshit on them once they’re caught.”

“She sounds like my kind of woman.” Sera grinned. “Go ahead and give her the sitrep. It’ll probably help maintain my cover as your girlfriend, too.”

“Thanks. It’s a relief to know I won’t have to lie to her since it wouldn’t work anyway. My mom has always been able to see through me.” A stray thought popped into my head, and there was no way in hell I could wait for an answer. Not when just the possibility of what I was thinking had my hands clenching into fists. “What about you? Is there a man in your life who’s going to be pissed when he finds out you’re living with me?”

“Nope. No worries there.” Sera shook her head, and a lock of her dark hair slipped free from her ponytail and came to rest just above one of her tits. “I’ll only be missed by my plants.”

Devon cocked his head to the side. “Do cacti actually count as plants?”

“I don’t think so,” Whit answered.

“They do if they’re in my condo, and that’s what I want to call them,” Sera huffed.

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Carl looked as though he was about to jump in on their banter. I didn't want him to put his foot in his mouth with this crew again, so I asked, "Is today good for you?"

Their conversation stopped, and Carl shot me a dubious look. Sera's lips curled up in the slightest grin before she pressed them together. "Yeah, the sooner, the better is our motto where your safety is concerned."

"Good. My schedule is jam-packed for the rest of the week. They only give us one off day when we're in season, and today's it."

"Then we better shift this into high gear if we're going to get me moved in tonight." Sera stood and rounded the table. "Devon and Whit will fill you in on the particulars, and I'll meet you at your place in about an hour."

I tore my gaze from the sway of her ass as she departed to focus on what Whit was saying. "While Sera is getting settled in, Devon and I will scope out the security situation at your house. If there are any tweaks that need to be made, you can always explain it away as wanting to make sure your home is as safe as possible for your new live-in girlfriend."

"Basically, your job is to act like the perfect boyfriend while Sera takes care of any up close threats. Whit and I will handle everything else. Do you think you're up for that?" Devon asked.

"I am."

Carl snorted in disbelief and mumbled, "Sure, you are."

Whit leaned toward Carl. “Go ahead and get all your shit talking out of your system now because we need you to get fully on board with this plan. You're close to Rowan. If people sense animosity or doubt from you about Sera being in his life, then they're going to start asking questions. Once we walk out of this office, you can't make any offhand comments about Sera or her relationship with your client. Will you be able to manage that?”

I answered for Carl. “If he can't, he's the one who's going to be out of a job. Not you two, and definitely not Sera.”

Devon and Whit's eyes filled with respect as they nodded, but Carl hissed, “You've got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Nope. Not even a tiny bit. Unless you think you can back up my decision without being a whiny ass?”

“Fuck,” Carl groaned. “You know I can.”

That was what I thought he'd say.

* * *

The guys were in the middle of their security system audit when Sera pulled up in a red Ford Mustang Shelby GT500 with white racing stripes. The muscle car was sexy as fuck, and it was a perfect match for the woman driving it. I almost had to wipe the drool from my chin.

“I'm glad you found the place okay,” I greeted as she climbed out of the driver's seat. “The guy at the gate didn't give you any trouble, did he?”

“Nah,” she chuckled. “Even if he had, I would've handled it. I need to talk to Whit

and Devon about how easy it was for me to drive right into your super-exclusive gated community.”

“They were expecting you because I gave them your name,” I explained, pulling a suitcase out of her trunk while she grabbed a duffel.

“Yeah, but they didn’t ask for my ID so I could prove who I was.” She made a tsk-ing sound and shook her head as she followed me into the house. “It’s a major oversight and needs to be addressed.”

I skimmed my gaze down her body and thought about how hot she’d looked behind the wheel. “I can see your point, but I also can’t blame the guy in the gatehouse for forgetting his job when he saw you roll up in your Shelby.”

Her lips curved up in a smug grin. “She is a beaut.”

I meant the woman driving more than the car itself, but I didn’t correct her. Instead, I gave her a quick tour of the first floor of my house. “I have four guest rooms you can pick from.” Standing next to the kitchen island, I pointed to the hallway on the right. “There’s a suite down here and four more upstairs, including the master suite. They all have their own bathrooms so you don’t have to worry about sharing with me.”

“The one down here won’t do,” she answered with a quick glance toward the hallway. “Let me see the ones closest to your room.”

I led her up the stairs and turned to the right, pushing open the first door. “The master suite is on the other side of the stairs, and the rest of the rooms are down here. This one’s the closest.”

She shook her head. “This isn’t going to work either. Show me yours.”

I doubled back and walked her to my bedroom. “When I bought the house, I had a crew come in to knock down the wall between two of the bedrooms to create this suite. It's more than double the size of the rest of the rooms, which is good because I don't like feeling cooped up.”

“Being cooped up is definitely not a concern. You've got plenty of space to spread out.” She wandered through the room, taking in the oversized, custom bed before turning her attention to the sitting area off to the side. There were two large leather club chairs with a round table between them. The seats were turned toward the eighty-inch flat screen hanging on the wall.

“I know the screen is a touch overkill, but it's necessary.”

“It's not the size that matters; it's how you use it. Right?” Her plump lips curled up in a teasing grin. “But seriously, I'm not going to judge anyone based on how big their television is.”

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“I put it to good use watching game video,” I promised.

She winked at me. “Good because I was lying. If your screen was tiny, I probably would've judged you.”

“No worries there,” I chuckled.

“Yeah, the guys are going to be jealous when they get a load of my view each night.”

Her view each night? “Are you planning to kick me out of my room?”

“Nope, but the other rooms are too far away for me to be able to protect you at night. It'll be better for me to bunk in here with you.” She dropped her duffel on the floor and crouched down to unzip it. Then she pulled out a sleeping bag and started to unroll it.

Not a chance in hell. “No way are you sleeping on my floor.”

“It's no big deal. I've slept in worse places in this,” she reassured me.

That was something I could've done without hearing. But Brecken had said all of his employees had proven themselves on the battlefield, so it was safe to assume some of the places she had served had been beyond uncomfortable. “It doesn't matter. If you're in my home, you're going to sleep in a bed. On that I refuse to budge.”

She tilted her head to the side and searched my expression. “It bothers you that much?”

“Yes, I won't be able to sleep well knowing I'm comfortable in my bed while you're on the floor. Sleep is vital to me getting my job done.” I pointed at the left side of my mattress. “If you need to be closer to me, do me a favor and sleep over there.”

“As gentlemanly as your offer is, I have to say no.”

“Come on, Sera. The bed is more than big enough for the two of us. You don't have to worry about me making something out of nothing if you sleep with me.”

“It's not that,” she reassured me. “I need to be closer to the door. If you really want me in your bed, then I'm going to have to take the other side.”

Fuck yeah, I really wanted her in my bed. I knew I'd just told her I wasn't going to make anything of her sleeping there, but hearing those words come out of her mouth made my dick hard. It was too easy to picture her laid out on my mattress with her dark hair spread over my pillows. Even though having her so close and not being able to touch would wreak havoc with my sleep patterns, I wasn't about to change my mind. I'd never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth. “Sure, wherever you think is best.”

Chapter 5

Sera

My first night in Rowan's home went more smoothly than any other case where I'd served as the close protection detail. It wasn't only because his bed was incredible. I was already comfortable around him, which was unusual for me because it usually took me a while to warm up to people. I'd slept better than I expected, but my eyes popped open when I heard a sound.

We weren't in the house alone.

After shaking Rowan's shoulder to wake him up, I slid off the mattress and yanked open the top drawer in the bedside table to grab my gun.

Rowan's eyes went wide when he spotted the Glock in my hand. "What's wrong?"

"Quiet," I hissed softly. "Someone's downstairs." I ran over the house's floorplan in my head and came up with a plan. "Follow behind me and head into the guest room at the end of the hall. Bring your phone with and call Whit's cell to let him know what's going on after you make it into the closet in there. I'll send a text to Devon."

Rowan rolled off the mattress and picked up his phone from the bedside table closest to him. He glanced at the screen and flashed me a reassuring smile. "You're not going to need that." He gestured at my gun. "It's just my mom."

His words stopped me in my tracks. "Your mom?"

"Yeah, shit. This is going to make me sound like a momma's boy." He ran his hand through his hair, tousling it even more than it already was. "Ever since I bought her the place next door last month, she's started coming over to make me breakfast in the mornings."

The houses in his neighborhood went for five to ten million, minimum. "That's one hell of a gift."

"She's one hell of a mom and more than deserves it. I wouldn't be where I am today without her," he explained.

His love for his mom was obvious, and I liked how comfortable he was talking about her. "Don't worry. You're too confident to come across as a true momma's boy." After placing my gun back in the drawer, I added, "But that wasn't included on the calendar or expected visitors Whit shared with me last night. Is there anyone else you

might've forgotten to add? Surprise visitors don't always go well in my line of business."

"Sorry about that. I didn't think to add my mom because I don't think of her as a guest. But she's the only one I didn't add to the list I gave Whit," he swore.

Heading toward the walk-in closet where Rowan had me unpack my stuff last night since there was more than enough space, I asked, "There isn't anyone else in your family who stops by and has keys to the place or the code to the security system?"

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“Nah, it’s always been just my mom and me.” Rowan grabbed a sweatshirt off a hanger and pulled it over his head. He’d worn a pair of athletic shorts and a T-shirt to bed last night, and he kept those on.

I tugged a sweater on over my shirt, thanked the creator of my favorite sports bra for being comfortable enough to sleep in, and grabbed a pair of jeans from one of the drawers Rowan had told me to use. “I’m going to pop into the bathroom real quick. Wait for me before you head downstairs please.”

“Sure thing.” He grinned, and I swore I felt it in my ovaries. “If I went down by myself, my mom would just grill me about you anyway. I’m all for you handling her interrogation instead of me.”

Considering all the training I’d received in the military, I figured I was more than up to the task. “No worries. I can handle your mom.”

“That’s what you think,” he chuckled as I shut the bathroom door.

It didn’t take me long to get ready, and then we headed down to the kitchen. The woman busy stirring eggs wasn’t who I’d expected. The resemblance between the two was strong, but she looked way too young to be Rowan’s mom.

“Mom, this is Sera.” Rowan smiled at both of us, looking completely relaxed. “Sera, this is my mom, Rachel.”

“Ahh, the mysterious woman who moved in with you for your protection.” Rachel’s dark eyes—so much like her son’s—twinkled with humor. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

“You as well.” My greeting came out awkward as hell, but I wasn’t used to meeting a man’s parents the morning after I met the man. Or ever. And certainly not after I’d spent the night in their bed. Even if nothing other than sleeping had happened, and I had a perfectly good reason for being there that had nothing to do with sex—other than the vivid dreams I’d had of Rowan.

A hint of mischievousness filled her eyes as her lips curved up in a grin. “You didn't tell me she was so beautiful.”

“Mom,” Rowan groaned, shaking his head.

“What?” Rachel batted her lashes, putting minimal effort into trying to look innocent. “I'm just saying that I can see how Sera's cover story would easily work. She’s gorgeous, confident, and accomplished. If anything, people will probably wonder what she's doing with you.”

This wasn’t how I pictured the conversation going after Rowan had warned me about facing an inquisition. I tried to bite back my laughter but failed.

“It's going to be like that, huh?” Rowan sighed, shaking his head. “I should've known you two were going to team up against me from the start.”

“Yup, you should’ve,” Rachel agreed, winking at me. “Us women have to stick together.”

“What about team Charles?” Rowan asked as he dumped ingredients into a blender.

“I’m always on your team, bub.” Rachel patted him on the back. Turning to me, she urged, “Please sit. I'll have breakfast whipped up in a jiffy, and the coffee is already brewing. I made extra just in case you wanted some. My boy here sticks to a pre-workout supplement and a god-awful smoothie in the mornings during the season.”

I perked up at the mention of coffee, but a frozen fruity drink sounded good, too.
“What kind of smoothie?”

“A super-healthy, protein-enriched one.” Rachel made a gagging sound. “They’re disgusting, but he’s been drinking a variation of them ever since he started bulking up in high school. Honestly, I have no idea how he manages to choke them down.”

Rowan shrugged his broad shoulders as he ambled over to the fridge. “You get used to them after a while.”

“But why should you when I can make you a perfectly good breakfast that tastes a million times better?” his mom argued, shaking her head.

“I’m a football player, Mom. I’ve got to do what it takes to stay in peak physical condition,” he reminded her after pouring his smoothie into a glass and taking a gulp of the dark green mixture.

Rachel flashed him a soft smile. “Not for too much longer. At least you’ll be able to eat whatever you want soon.”

Rowan tensed at his mom’s reminder that he was going to be leaving the game soon. To ease the tension, I joked, “It can’t be worse than some of the MREs they served us in the military.”

“MRE?” his mom echoed, spooning scrambled egg whites on a plate already loaded down with turkey sausage and whole grain toast.

“They’re meals ready to eat, but calling them a meal is overstating things by a lot,” I explained, taking the plate from her as I slid on the stool at the counter next to Rowan. “One of the best things about getting out of the military was never having to see another one of those again, but it’s rare for me to eat a home-cooked meal like

this.”

Rachel patted my hand. “I love to have people to cook for, so plan on plenty more while you’re here. It’s the least I can do since you’re helping to keep my son safe.”

It was messed up, but between Rachel’s cooking and my attraction to Rowan, I was starting to hope this case remained unsolved.

Chapter 6

Rowan

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“I'm driving.”

Sera's announcement stopped me in my tracks. “I'm sorry, what?”

She tossed the keys she was holding into the air and caught them. “I'm driving,” she repeated.

That's what I thought she'd said. I was the kind of guy who didn't like to have other people behind the wheel when I was in the car, but I didn't want to be a dick about it with her. “Do you know where we're headed?”

“Yeah,” she laughed. “Nice try, but I know where the stadium is.”

I had to give it to her; it was a stupid question. “Of course you do.”

“You can wipe that concerned look off your face. I'm not just a good driver, I'm an excellent one,” she boasted.

“It's not that—”

“No, I get it,” she interrupted. “Most guys aren't comfortable with a woman driving them around. But in this instance, you're going to need to get used to it.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Because I've been extensively trained in both offensive and defensive driving. If anything happens on the road, I need to be the one behind the wheel.”

I considered her explanation and nodded. “That makes sense to me.” I pulled my key fob out of my pocket and tossed it to her. “But I think we should take my ride. It's a little less noticeable than yours.”

“I’m cool with driving your SUV.” Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “But why do I feel like you're expecting me to let you drive my baby if you let me drive yours.”

I grinned at her. “Probably because it’s what I’m hoping for.”

She started walking toward my SUV before saying, “Not gonna happen. Nobody drives her but me.”

“I used to be able to say that about my ride, too,” I grumbled good-naturedly.

She didn’t look the least bit guilty as she grinned at me, but she sure as fuck was gorgeous. “Too bad, so sad.”

I shook my head and chuckled as we climbed in to the vehicle. After she pulled out of my driveway, she asked, “Do you always start your day this early? Your schedule for this week looked pretty brutal.”

“In season, yeah. I pretty much live and breathe the game twenty-four seven. Team meetings, offense meetings, practices, media sessions; it all adds up.”

She asked questions about my daily routine until we were a few minutes from the stadium. “I never realized how much effort went into playing sports professionally. I have to admit it's more than I expected.”

“I can’t really complain, though,” I chuckled. “Not when I'm getting paid millions of dollars to play a game I love. I work hard, but I'm sure it's nothing compared to the effort you put in when you served our country.”

“Yeah, a soldier’s schedule is intense. But my time in the military paid for my education, gave me lifelong friends, and ultimately led to a career I love.”

“And to me,” I murmured under my breath as she pulled into the stadium’s lot.

The guy who manned the gate at the players’ entrance spotted me in the passenger seat and stepped forward to stop the car. “Hey, Rowan. Everything okay?” he asked after Sera rolled the window down.

“More than good,” I confirmed. “This is my girlfriend, Sera. I’m going to give her a quick tour before I head in to the weight room.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” The guard nodded and jotted something down on his clipboard. “Make sure you guys check in with security inside so they can get her a badge. I’ll call and let them know you’re coming.”

It was still early enough that Sera was able to snag a primo spot near the doors. As we were walking toward the entrance, I rested my palm against her lower back. Feeling her gun holstered there, I jerked my hand back and whispered, “I don’t think you’re allowed to have that while you’re in here.”

“You can count on me having a weapon at all times. It’s non-negotiable where your safety is concerned. I’m sure ownership will understand. The last thing they want is for their star player to get hurt while he’s on their property. If I get caught with it, I’ll figure out a way to talk myself out of trouble.” She didn’t look too worried about the possibility. “It shouldn’t be too hard since I have a concealed carry permit along with a private investigator’s license.”

I opened the door and waited for Sera to go ahead of me. When I spotted the guard waiting for us just inside, I groaned. I’d never had a problem with him personally, but I’d heard a few of my teammates complain that the guy thought of himself as a ladies’

man and wasn't afraid to flirt with their women. He was related to the GM and felt like his job was secure.

“I had to come down and see this for myself,” he drawled when we got close.

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“Pardon?” I asked.

“I heard hell had frozen over, and you brought a girl to the stadium.” He eyed Sera up and down, and I barely stopped myself from punching him in the face. She was pretending to be my girlfriend in order to keep me safe from my stalker, but the instinct to protect her was still there. Or maybe it was because I didn’t want another guy looking at her at all. Jealousy was a new emotion for me, but I was man enough to admit that it was at least some of what I was feeling.

“Not a girl. A woman,” Sera corrected.

“That you are.” The guard pulled a visitor’s badge out of his pocket and went to hang it around Sera’s neck.

He didn’t get far before I wrapped my fingers around his wrist. “Thanks, but I’ve got it from here.”

“I’m sure you do.” He leered at Sera’s tits before turning and walking away.

I waited until he was out of our line of sight before growling, “What a little shit.”

“You can say that again,” Sera agreed.

I jiggled the badge, and she let me lift her hair up to drop the lanyard around her neck. After it was in place, she tilted her head back and asked, “You know I could’ve handled him on my own, right?”

“No shit. I saw the way you sparred with Whit. I think you could take anyone in this building in a fight, and that includes our starting left tackle who is six foot eight and three hundred and fifty pounds. I’m not sure why I stepped in”—I was such a fucking liar, but it’s not like I could admit to being jealous—“and I hope I didn’t overstep.”

“You’re fine.” She waved off my concern. “You warning him off me will probably even help with my cover story because I’m sure that little punk isn’t the kind of guy to keep his mouth shut.”

“I don’t know him that well, but from what I’ve heard, you’re probably right.”

“Remind me to put his name at the top of the list of suspects,” Sera muttered. “Even if he’s too stupid to find his way out of a paper bag, thinking it’s wise to make a lame attempt at hitting on a pro football player’s girlfriend while he’s standing right there.”

I hoped he was smarter than he seemed because then I’d have good reason to kick the little douchebag’s ass.

Chapter 7

Sera

Rowan and I had quickly fallen into a routine over the past week. With him at the stadium for ten to twelve hours a day, handling close protection detail for him felt more like a vacation than work. His mom seemed to be on a mission to fatten me up because she’d started cooking dinner for us, too. Sleeping with him each night wasn’t a hardship, either.

Attending his game on Sunday was a whole different story, though. I wasn’t into football that much. Usually when I watched a game, it was because one of the guys had it on. The downside to most of my friends being male was an overabundance of

testosterone and nonstop sports on the television.

Watching Rowan play was different. As corny as it sounded, he truly was poetry in motion on the field. I finally understood why Whit insisted he was the best quarterback in the history of the game. Five minutes into the first quarter, I was already starting to have a new appreciation for football.

“Who are you here for?” I looked over my shoulder and spotted the woman who’d asked the question. She was seated in the row behind me, two seats to my left. I clocked how insincere her smile was in less than a second.

Having run the gamut of judgment when I was stuck on close protection for that asshole baseball player, I knew what came next. The wives and girlfriends club for professional sports players reminded me of high school. Some of the women were truly interested in helping the newest addition fit in, but many of them felt threatened and acted accordingly. This one was definitely part of the latter.

Dealing with women like her was a hell of a lot easier for me now than it had been back when I was a teenager. Being supremely confident in my ability to kick her ass with both hands tied behind my back helped. Not that I would actually get physical with her, but just knowing what I could do took the power out of her hands.

“I’m with Rowan,” I answered.

“Rowan Charles, our quarterback?” she echoed in shock.

I hadn’t wanted to draw too much attention to myself, so my answer had been softly spoken. Apparently, she didn’t have had the same concern because she screeched her response. It wasn’t much of a surprise when the head of every person sitting near us turned our way.

“But he never brings anyone other than his mom to the games,” she stuttered.

I shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you. She couldn’t make it today, so Rowan gave me her ticket.”

The girl sitting on the other side of her, who looked like she was barely out of high school and was dressed more for the night club than a football game, added, “My best friend couldn't even get him to buy her a drink when he was out with the guys a few weeks ago, let alone ask her on a date or to a game.”

The woman sitting next two seats down from me, who was dressed in an oversized jersey and a pair of skinny jeans with kick ass heels, muttered, “Probably because he's interested in a woman who can hold her own with him. Not a girl who would drop to her knees in the middle of the club for any of the guys if they pointed down at their dicks.”

I made a mental note to have one of the guys look into her best friend. It was doubtful that she was the one sending the notes to Rowan because she didn't fit the profile, but I would not rule anyone out without digging into them. If she was pissed enough over his rejection, it was possible she would’ve done something about it.

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“You don't know what you're talking about, Britney,” the girl said. “Marnie is like a thousand times cuter than this chick. It makes no sense that he'd get serious enough with her but not even give Marnie a second glance.”

“And that right there is why you'll never fit in with the wives, and we're all rooting for Dave to wise up and dump your ass.” Her attention shifted to me, and she asked, “What's your name?”

“Sera,” I answered with a grin, really liking Britney's style.

“Sarah?” The girl rolled her eyes. “See, she even has a boring name.”

“Actually, it's Sera, spelled S-E-R-A. It's short for Serafina.”

“Whoo, boy!” Britney hollered, slapping her knee. “You couldn't have been more wrong about her name if you tried. And if you had more than two brain cells to rub together, you'd look under the surface and realize Sera here is a hell of a lot more interesting than you think. I have a feeling that still waters run deep in this one.”

I lifted my cup and asked, “Can I buy you a drink?”

“Hell, yes,” she agreed, nudging the woman sitting between us to ask, “Switch seats with me?”

“I'll buy a beer for you, too,” I offered the woman.

“Sure,” she said as she got up. “I'll take a Miller Lite.”

I flagged down a beer vendor carrying a cold tub of bottles and ordered three. I was on the job and hadn't planned to drink more than one to fit in, but the bottles were aluminum, so nobody would know I was leaving them half empty. Plus, Whit and Devon were seated about ten rows behind me, so I had backup in case the stalker tried something during the game.

Settling back in to watch as Rowan took the field again, I jumped to my feet and cheered with the crowd when he threw for a touchdown with only thirty seconds left on the quarter.

"Hot damn! Your man is on fire." Britney tapped her bottle against mine. "If he keeps playing like this, you're going to have to come to the rest of the games this season."

Since I didn't know how long it was going to take to resolve Rowan's stalker situation, I couldn't commit to Britney's suggestion. "This was a one-time thing. I'm sure Rachel will want to use her ticket during the next home game."

Britney aimed her thumb in direction of the girls we'd gotten into the argument with earlier. "Football players are notoriously superstitious. If Rowan kicks ass on the field, a bunch of the guys would volunteer to give up their tickets in a heartbeat. If their current flavor of the week doesn't understand the game comes first and complains too much, they'll be replaced with someone who does." A wicked gleam entered her eyes. "Maybe I'll suggest to Roger that he gives up his ticket."

"Who's Roger?" I asked.

She grinned. "He plays on the offensive line, and the teenybopper behind us is currently riding his dick."

I grinned back. "Have I mentioned how much I like your style?"

“Not yet, but all is forgiven if you buy the next round of beers, too.”

I laughed and raised my almost full bottle to grab the beer guy’s attention again.

“Sure, I can do that.”

The cost of a couple more beers was a small price to pay to keep Britney happy. Not only was she a lot of fun to hang out with, but she was also a font of information when it came to people connected to the team.

Chapter 8

Rowan

Off days were some of my favorites during the season, second only to game days. Thirty-six hours wasn’t long enough for the aches and pains from my game to disappear, but this one was still better than most because Sera was in my bed. It was the first morning since meeting her when I didn’t have to hurry out the door to get to the stadium. Rolling onto my side, I enjoyed the sight of her sleeping beside me. I reached out and lifted a long, dark curl off her pillow and wrapped it around my finger.

“I guess you haven’t figured out that I’m a light sleeper yet.” Her voice was raspy from sleep, and my morning hard-on flexed at the sexy as hell sound.

I was grateful for the loose fit of my athletic shorts and the sheet draped over my lower body when she turned over and blinked up at me. Resisting the temptation Sera represented had been difficult even when my schedule was jam packed, but I had a feeling it would be impossible with her to myself today.

Things on the stalker front had been quiet, without any new developments since Carl hired the security team. I still felt like he’d been overreacting, but now I was grateful

for it because I might never have met Sera otherwise. Our situation was unusual, with her moving into my home the same day we met and technically working for me, but we'd grown close over the past week. Sleeping with someone night after night was bound to do that.

"I figured that out the morning you almost shot my mom," I teased.

She sat up and flared at me. "I did not almost shoot your mom!"

"I don't know." I grinned at her. "It seemed like a close call to me. I mean, you had your gun out. For all I know, the safety was off."

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“That goes to show what you know,” she snorted. “My Glock doesn’t have an external safety.”

“Really?” I glanced over her shoulder to look at the drawer where she kept her gun at night.

I must’ve looked concerned because she added, “You don’t need to worry about an accidental discharge. There are three independent internal safeties to prevent that from happening.”

I gave her a sheepish look. “I don’t know much about guns. Football has been my thing since my mom let me join a team when I was seven. It was only touch, not tackle, but I fell in love with it right away.”

She shifted on the mattress, sitting cross-legged and grabbing a pillow to set in her lap. “Your love for the game came through loud and clear when I saw you play on Sunday.”

“I don’t think the day will ever come when the game won’t still have my heart,” I admitted.

“Then why are you leaving it?”

Curling up to sit across from her, I ran my fingers through my hair and sighed. “It’s my mom. She’s been the only constant in my life, ever since I was a baby. She had me young but didn’t let that stop her from being the best damn parent I could possibly ask for.”

Sera's green eyes filled with confusion. "I'm missing the connection between your mom and retiring from football early. She's really proud of what you've accomplished."

"I know she's proud of my career, and she'd never ask me to stop playing. This was my decision, and mine alone." I looked around my master suite, taking in the huge space and pricey furnishings. "I've earned more than enough money to be set for life, so leaving football now won't hurt me financially. But like I told you before, I live and breathe football during season. It's never been an issue for me, until now."

"What changed your perspective?" Sera tilted her head back and stared up at the ceiling. "She's sick, isn't she?"

I hadn't been expecting her to figure out my mom's secret so easily. "How did you guess?"

"I figured it'd have to be something big for you to make a drastic, life-changing decision. And it was because of your mom," she explained her thought process. "Then I remembered how she got a little shaky the other day, and you freaked out. At the time, I just assumed it was because you're overprotective, but now I realize it's more than that. Plus, I thought it was weird how she loves coffee so much but only allows herself one cup a day. And I spotted a weekly pill organizer in her purse yesterday morning. "

"Damn." I shook my head. "You're more observant when it comes to my mom than I am."

"Don't feel bad, paying attention to small details most people wouldn't notice comes with the job," she reassured me. "How bad is it?"

"She's only forty-eight, but she was diagnosed with heart disease a few months ago.

She has atrial fibrillation where her heart has an irregular heartbeat that can lead to blood clots, stroke, or heart failure.” Just thinking about what could happen to my mom had me choking up, and I took a minute to pull myself together before continuing. “She didn't want to tell me until the season was over, but she almost passed out one morning and finally told me what was going because it was the only way to stop me from calling an ambulance to take her to the hospital.”

I was fiddling with the edge of the sheet, and Sera laced her fingers through mine. “I can see how the threat of a trip to the hospital would get her to confess.”

“She said she didn't want the news to mess with my head and fuck up my season. But my mom means more to me than football. I can't run the risk of not being there for her when she needs me.” I squeezed her hand. “The only reason I'm finishing out the season is because she taught me to honor my commitments.”

“You're a good man, Rowan Charles.”

I'd heard similar compliments before, but the words had more meaning coming from Sera. “That's yet another thing I owe to my mom.”

As she rose on her knees and leaned toward me to brush a kiss against my cheek, I held myself utterly still. I knew that if I got my hands on her, I'd have a hard time stopping with only a kiss. It took everything I had in me not to drag her lithe body onto my lap, but I wasn't going to let the need that'd been growing inside me day by day fuck shit up between us. I'd never doubted my self-control before, but Sera pushed me to the limits of my endurance.

Considering what we'd been talking about, I knew she'd meant the gesture to be sweet. I just had to convince my dick that she wasn't trying to be sexy before she noticed it was about to bust through my shorts to get to her.

Chapter 9

Sera

After spotting the hard-on Rowan was sporting—which was impossible to miss, considering the size of what he was packing down there—I dropped back on the mattress and sat cross-legged again. It was either move away from him or jump his bones, and I wasn't ready to cross that particular professional line. Not yet. I was a heck of a lot closer than I was willing to admit, though. "What's the plan for today?"

"I need to lift and get a run in."

His answer wasn't what I was expecting to hear. "I thought it was your off day? Don't you ever take a break?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Not during the season. That's why early retirement seemed like the only solution with my mom's health situation."

If he kept on being such a nice guy while we sat here talking in bed, I would end up tempting him into showing me exactly how bad he could be too. We needed to get this show on the road before that happened.

Thinking of the workout room he had in the basement that could easily compete with most small gyms, I asked, "Do you like to run inside or out?"

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“I use the treadmill when I’m at the stadium, but I prefer to head outside for my run when I’m home. But if someone needs to check my route first, I can hit my workout room instead,” he offered.

I shook my head. “No, that's fine. Just give me five or ten minutes to get ready, and I'll go with you.”

He flashed me an apologetic grin. “As much as I'd like to have you with me, I'm not sure you'll be happy with how far I plan to go. It's not by accident that I'm one of the top five rushing QBs in the league.”

Running wasn't my favorite thing to do, but I'd survived a hell of a lot of it when I was enlisted. “How many miles?”

“You good for five?” he asked.

I heaved a sigh of relief because I thought he was going to say at least ten miles. “Yeah, I can do five.”

“All right.” He grinned at me, rubbing his hands together. “Let's do this.”

I hadn't thought it was possible for a guy to be sexy and adorable at the same time, but Rowan's boyish excitement over running with me didn't detract from his hotness level at all. If anything, it added to it. Hopefully, getting hot and sweaty in an unenjoyable way would put a damper on my libido.

Half an hour later, we were ready to head outside after getting changed, gulping down

a couple of those god-awful smoothies Rowan swore by, and stretching. Less than a minute into our run, I realized my hope was in vain—he could run me until my muscles cried out, and it still wouldn't stop me from wanting him. I was starting to think nothing would, but definitely not running because he looked so damn good doing it.

Rowan moved unlike anyone I'd ever seen before. His stride was even, his muscles bunching with each shift of his body. He was basically a running machine, and it didn't take long for me to seriously doubt my ability to keep up. About two miles in, my heart was already racing in my chest. Between the pace he set and the view I had from running behind him, my breathing was doomed.

I'd never been much of an ass woman, but Rowan's behind was a masterpiece. Rock hard and rounded, his runs did a lot for his glutes. I would be more than happy to stare at it all day, even if it meant more than a five-mile run.

A little less than thirty minutes after we started out, we were nearing Rowan's house again. As we ran by the place he bought his mom, I asked, "Why didn't you just move Rachel in with you?"

Although I was out of breath and had to pant out my question, you would never have guessed Rowan had just run five miles when he answered, "Because she refused to move in with me. When I suggested it, she said her health wasn't anywhere near bad enough to live with her son because it would cramp her style. Hers, mind you. She wasn't worried about mine."

"Your mom cracks me up." We reached Rowan's driveway and started to do a few stretches as a cooldown. "She has a key to your house and knows the security code so she can come and go as she pleases—which is often—but she won't move in with you."

“I learned a long time ago that my mom’s mind works in mysterious ways.” He lifted the bottom of his shirt up to wipe the sweat from his face, giving me a nice, long look at his six-pack abs. “I’m better off letting her do her own thing than trying to talk her around to my way of thinking.”

“That’s a good plan when it comes to any woman.” I dragged my gaze away from his stomach as he dropped his shirt back into place. “Including me.”

“I think you mean something more along the lines of especially you,” he corrected with a sexy grin aimed my way as I followed him into the house. “My mom likes to joke about how she brought me into the world so she can take me out of it. It’s funny as hell since she doesn’t even like to kill spiders on her own, but you’re a whole other story. But we both know you could actually do it if you had to. Maybe I’m crazy, but I find your dangerous edge sexy as fuck.”

Rowan’s confidence was a major turn-on. He seemed comfortable with what I did for a living, which was unusual for most men. Even some guys who worked in the same field as I did had a hard time dealing with a woman like me.

Not Rowan.

He wasn’t deterred by my past in the military or what I did for a living. The incredible man standing in front of me was a famous athlete. He could have basically any woman in the world, but I had no doubts about the strength of his desire. Rowan wanted me.

The only thing standing in the way of Rowan and me acting on our chemistry was the fact that I was here to protect him, not sleep with him. Or at least that was what I kept telling myself. But maybe I’d been wrong to keep denying us both what we wanted. It wasn’t like I would be the first person from Kane Security who had crossed the line from professional to personal with a client. Brecken had met Hadley when we’d gone

into the jungle to rescue her from a kidnapping, after all. If the boss could find love on the job, why couldn't I?

Chapter 10

Rowan

Disheveled and flushed after our run, Sera was sexier than usual. I couldn't stop thinking about all the other ways besides running that I could make her look the same. We'd have a fuck of a lot more fun with any of the ideas that popped into my mind. Images of us together—each one filthier than the last—played like a movie in my head.

My dick was as hard as a steel pipe, tenting the front of my shorts and making it impossible to hide from Sera. She eyed my hard-on, and her green eyes filled with heat. Her lips parted on a sigh, before curving up in a small smile of feminine satisfaction.

“What's that look for, angel?” Please let it mean good things for me. Hot, sweaty, naked things.

“I was just thinking about how badly I need a shower after our run.”

Fuck. I would give my left nut to see the water beating down against her bare skin and trace the path of the droplets with my tongue. I was so busy fantasizing about showering with her that it took longer than it should've for me to register that she'd stripped her shirt off. Then she pulled her sports bra over her head and tossed both items at me before racing toward the stairs.

The scraps of material acted as a red flag did to a bull and had me charging after Sera. All I'd needed was a sign from her that she was ready to explore the explosive

chemistry between us, and she'd just given it to me. I caught up to her midway and swept her off her feet, tossing her over my shoulder.

"Took you long enough," she laughed, taking advantage of her position to lightly swat my ass.

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When I reached the top of the stairs, I swung her down so I could hold her securely against my chest. “Not so long that I didn’t catch up with you.”

“True,” she conceded with a smile. “So I guess this means you’d like to limit our water usage by showering together?”

“I have a feeling your plan to use less water”—I carried her into the en suite bathroom—“is about to take a drastic turn for the worse.”

“I bet you can come up with something to make me feel better about my failure,” she suggested after I set her down on the floor. Dipping her hand into the waistband of my shorts, she wrapped it around my dick. My hips punched forward, and I pressed my hardness into her palm.

“Challenge accepted, angel.” After tugging her hand out of my shorts, I walked over to the glass-enclosed shower and flipped on all the showerheads. I set the water temperature hot enough to fog up the windows and turned back to Sera.

I kept my eyes locked on green orbs as I kicked off my shoes and stripped out of my shirt, shorts, socks, and boxers. Staring at my hard length, she bit her bottom lip. “It looks like you’re issuing a challenge to me in return.”

I winked at her as I grabbed a couple of extra towels and hung them closer to the shower. “They’re one and the same.”

She was down to just her panties when she asked, “It’d be super cliché of me to comment on your size right about now, wouldn’t it?”

I stalked over to her and slid her panties down her legs. When they were on the floor, I glided my palms over the silky skin of her inner thighs. “I don’t know. Is this the part where I reassure you that I’ll fit?”

She waited until I was cupping her pussy, a deep growl rumbling up my chest when I felt how wet she was for me, to answer. “I’m looking forward to feeling how well you fit.”

“Perfectly,” I promised, wrapping my arms around her lower back to lift her. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and I padded over to the shower. With her hot pussy pressed against my dick, I didn’t want to put Rowan down. But it’d be beyond poor form for me to just thrust inside her without any foreplay, especially our first time.

I swatted her ass as a signal to let go, and her legs unwound from my waist. Bending my head low, I sucked one of her nipples into my mouth. Her nails dug into my biceps as her back arched to press her tit closer to my mouth. After playing with her other breast, I tilted her head back to claim her lips. Our tongues tangled together as the steam built up around us.

She reached between us and stroked her palm up and down my cock. After pumping my hips a few times, I pulled out of her hold. “Hey, I wasn’t done with you yet,” she complained.

“If you keep that up, I’m not going to last long enough for you to forget how much water we’re using.” I slid my fingers through her wetness and parted her pussy lips as I lowered to my knees. “But I need a taste of you before I sink my cock inside your pussy.”

I gave her pussy a long swipe, and her fingers sank into my damp hair. With her cries echoing off the walls of my shower, I teased her with my tongue, lips, and teeth. It

wasn't long before I drove her over the edge. I licked her through her orgasm before standing again.

"Can't wait any longer. I need to feel your tight little pussy wrapped around my cock, angel." Grasping her ass cheeks, I pulled her toward me as I thrust my hips forward until I was buried balls-deep inside her. "So fucking perfect, just like I said."

I waited until she adjusted to my cock filling her before I set a fast pace, plunging in and out. Her walls fluttered around my cock, and my control was close to snapping.

"Rowan," she moaned. "Oh, yes! Fuck! You're going to make me come again!"

"Let me see, angel. I want to watch your gorgeous face while you fly apart for me."

Her head flew back, and I kept my eyes on her while I continued to hammer in and out of her. When I slid my hand between our bodies to circle her clit with my thumb, her plump lips parted and her green eyes darkened. A rush of wetness soaked my dick, and her pussy clamped down hard. That was all it took to throw me over the edge, and my orgasm roared through me. "Fuck yes!"

I slumped against the wall, trying to catch my breath. "I fucking swear, perfect isn't good enough to describe what just happened," I panted.

"Yeah, that was better than I imagined," she sighed, cuddling against my chest. "Which is one hell of a compliment since some of my dreams about you were so hot, I was surprised they didn't wake you up."

Knowing she'd been thinking about having sex with me all this time had my dick hardening again. "Fuck lifting. I need another round of cardio with you instead."

She slid her palm up my arm and squeezed my bicep. "Maybe we can get creative

and come up with a way for you to mix those workouts.”

Damn. I was a lucky man.

Chapter 11

Sera

My hand went to the gun holstered at the small of my back when I heard a sound from the front of the house. Looking up from the notes I was taking on my laptop, I listened more closely. Rowan wasn't supposed to be back for a few more hours. Whit had a meeting with a head honcho at the stadium this afternoon about a possible new case. He wasn't going to leave until Rowan was ready to go, and Devon was at Brecken's office, giving the investigative team hell for their lack of leads on Rowan's case. It'd been almost two weeks, and the team's away game next weekend presented complications when it came to keeping him safe. There weren't too many other people who knew I was here, and I wasn't expecting any visitors.

I slid off the stool I'd been sitting on and slowly moved around the kitchen counter. Before I made it across the room, most of the tension eased from my body because I recognized the sound of the code being punched into the security system. “Rachel?” I called out.

“Sera, I'm so glad you're here. I don't know what to do.” Rachel's voice was full of relief but still sounded shaky.

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I hurried into the living room, picking up my pace when I saw how pale she was. “Is it your heart? Do you need me to call you an ambulance? Or should I just drive you to the hospital myself?”

“I don’t need to go to the hospital.” She shook her head and lifted up the piece of paper she was holding. “Although my heart is beating faster than normal, Afib isn’t the problem. It’s this letter I found on my doorstep when I went out to check my mail.”

I took the note but didn’t examine it until I got Rachel settled on the couch and grabbed her a bottle of water. Crouching down in front of her, I asked, “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, dear.” She patted me on the hand. “Or at least as good as I can be, considering the shock I had.”

Glancing down at the letter, I cursed myself for not thinking clearly when I took it from her. I should’ve put on gloves or placed it in a bag so I didn’t make it more difficult to get fingerprints if they were left behind. Not that I expected our techs to find any since the cops hadn’t, but it was still worth a shot. “Give me a second.”

After Rachel nodded, I headed in the kitchen to grab a bag. I dropped the note inside, zipped the bag shut, and grabbed my cell to send a quick message to Brecken, Whit, and Devon. Then I snapped a picture of the letter to send to them as well. Once that was all done, I finally read it.

I’m not sure what you did to make Rowan decide to retire, but I know you’re the

reason behind it. You must be. Nothing else makes sense.

You're his mom, but he deserves better. I blame myself.

Rowan's #1 Fan

Shit. This wasn't good.

* * *

Leaving Rachel alone wasn't an option, so I brought her with me to the office. Brecken's wife, Hadley, and their son, Quinten, were there for a visit. Their little boy was quite the charmer, and Rachel was easily distracted by him. Since Whit was sticking close to Rowan, it was just Devon and me in Brecken's office as I let loose.

"How did we let this happen? Why didn't we think to wire Rachel's house, too? If we had, then we'd have this guy on tape." I paced back and forth while both men sat back and watched. "The safeguards we put into place after Whit and Devon reviewed Rowan's security system have done us no good with this guy. I don't like feeling that he's a step ahead of us. Not when it's Rowan's ass on the line."

"We couldn't have known he'd switch shit up and go after Rachel like this. I would've been less surprised if he switched his focus to you. You're the only new thing in Rowan's life. If he was going to blame the early retirement on anyone, it should've been you." Devon scrubbed his hands over his face. "We still should've covered her better since she and Rowan are so close, though. Even if none of this makes any sense."

Brecken tapped his pen against his desk. "They live in a gated community, and the guy we put in the guardhouse said nobody unexpected tried to get through today. Only residents and their guests. The guard on duty today followed protocol. He

checked the identification for anyone who didn't live there and called the residents to confirm their visitors. There weren't any surprises."

"Some good came of the security overhaul. While you were driving over here, we pulled the footage on the cameras at the front of Rowan's house," Devon added as Brecken turned his monitor so I could see the screen. The video clip they played showed a teenager on a skateboard.

His pace slowed as he passed Rowan's house, his hand dipping into his pocket just as we lost him. "Shit. Do you think he's the one who left the letter on Rachel's doorstep?"

"Give it a minute, and you'll see," Brecken urged.

It wasn't long before the kid was back on the screen, heading in the same direction he'd just come from. "Do we know who he is?"

"Yeah, his dad lives in the neighborhood. Recently divorced and rotates custody with the ex every other week," Devon explained. "It didn't take long to identify him since the guard recognized the kid. Our guy at the gate just finished questioning him, and he said some guy paid him a hundred bucks to do him what he'd thought was a harmless favor."

"Did he remember what the guy looked like?" I asked.

"The guy gave him cash. Of course he did," Brecken confirmed. "Not that it did us much good. The kid said it was some old dude with dark hair and eyes, who looked fit for his age and was a tall motherfucker. He thought he was around his grandfather's age but way cooler."

"That's not much to go on." I was frustrated as hell and felt like I didn't have anyone

to blame but myself. “If I'd had my mind focused on work instead of what's been going on between Rowan and me, I might've caught on to a clue that would've tipped us off to this guy by now. Who knows what I've missed?”

“Quit beating yourself up. There hasn't been anything to miss, Sera,” Devon reassured me.

“I can't blame anyone else. It's my fault.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I'm the one on close protection detail. The buck stops with me.”

“That's not how it works,” Devon argued. “We're a team, just like we were in the military. If one of us fucks up, all of us fuck up. And you didn't fuck up.”

“But I—”

“Clear the room,” Brecken ordered, interrupting me. He waited until Devon shut the door behind him to turn to me. “I think I know what's going on in your head right now because I've been there. It's different when you're protecting someone you've grown to have feelings for.”

“It is,” I agreed with a sigh. “Which is why you should take me off the case. My emotions are getting in the way of my ability to think clearly, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something happened to Rowan or his mom because of it.”

“Are you sure that's what you want to do?” Brecken asked.

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I hated the idea of someone else being in charge of his safety, but that was my heart talking and not my brain. “Yes.”

“Okay. I’ll switch things around, but only on one condition. You need to talk to Rowan about this first. If he’s the reason you feel like you can’t do your job, then your feelings for him are deeper than you’ve been letting on. You shouldn’t make a decision like this without talking it through with him first. All that’ll do is hurt your relationship.”

Brecken was right about needing to talk to Rowan, but he was also partially wrong. I didn’t think I had to worry about hurting my relationship because the stalker had already done enough damage to it. I highly doubted I was even in one anymore. And I wasn’t looking forward to facing Rowan after the scare his mom had been through today. She was the most important person in his life, and I’d let them both down.

Chapter 12

Rowan

When Devon came back from Kane Security’s office with my mom about thirty minutes ago, I’d been worried that more had happened than Whit had explained during the drive home from the stadium since Sera wasn’t with them. I was on edge after the shit that had gone down and more than a little pissed that the women in my life had decided to keep it from me until after I was done with practice.

I didn’t like being out of the loop, especially when this was happening because of me. It was difficult not to blame myself when it was my stalker who’d fucked

with my mom. My coach would've understood the interruption, even if we had a big game coming up in two days. Which was a point I'd made more than clear to my mom, Whit, and Devon. Now I just needed Sera to come home so I could lay it out for her too.

From what Devon had said, I was expecting her back any minute. He'd reassured me that everything was fine with her, even though she wasn't answering her phone, and that she shouldn't be too far behind him. Apparently, she'd had a few things to go over with her boss before she could leave.

I was seriously contemplating grabbing my keys so I could hunt her down when I heard the front door open. After turning off the stove burner so I wouldn't burn the broccoli I was steaming, I headed into the living room. Devon and Sera were standing at the bottom of the stairs, and it sounded like they were wrapping up a conversation. "Sure, I'll grab my go-bag from my place. I can be back in less than an hour. Let me know if the plan changes before then."

"Will do."

I didn't understand the apologetic smile Devon flashed me as he headed for the door. Not until I caught the shut-down expression on Sera's face before she started up the stairs. "What's going on?"

I followed her into our room and then the master closet. She didn't say anything until she pulled her duffel off the shelf. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry for what?" My brain must've been slower than usual because I didn't understand what was happening here. Not until she started shoving some of her shit into her bag. "What the hell are you packing for? Is Brecken taking you off my case? Did he fire you?"

“I wasn’t fired, and he didn’t take me off the case.” Her fists clenched around the straps on her bag hard enough that her knuckles turned white. After sighing, she finally turned around and looked me in the eyes. “But Devon is going to swap out with me tonight.”

“For how long?” I glared at the clothes she was stuffing into her bag. “Because it looks like you’re packing all your things.”

“When Brecken assigned me to your close protection detail, I was the best person for the job. But things have changed, and that’s no longer true anymore. It’s better if someone else takes my place as your close protection detail.”

I was starting to understand what was going on with her. I wasn’t the only one feeling guilty over something I couldn’t control. “Are you beating yourself up over the letter so much that you can’t stay here with me?”

“Of course I’m beating myself up,” she cried. “I don’t understand how you can even look at me after what your mom went through today. She could’ve ended up in the hospital!”

I moved closer and pulled her into my arms. “It’s not your fault.”

“If not me, then who?”

It’d taken my mom practically knocking me upside the head for me to accept that only one person was to blame for this mess, and it wasn’t Sera or me. “The asshole who’s doing this.”

She collapsed against me, her arms circling around my back to hold me tight. “I was so afraid you’d blame me as much as I had before Devon and Brecken talked some sense into me.”

“I don’t, angel. Not even a little bit. And neither does my mom.” I brushed a kiss against the top of her head. “If anything, I’m grateful you were here because without your help, I’m not sure what she would’ve done today. The whole thing scared her enough that she agreed to let Whit stay in one of her guest rooms until this is over.”

“I’m glad she’s got Whit to watch over her, but I’m still not sure it’s wise for me to stay on close protection for you,” she sighed. “Being personally involved complicates things.”

“You didn’t get involved with me all by yourself. I’m in this, too,” I pointed out. “The bottom line is that it’s you, or it’s no one.”

She tilted her head back to stare up at me with wide, green eyes. “But you need someone to stick close and keep you safe.”

“Then I guess you’d better put your stuff away.” When it looked like she was going to try to argue with me again, I tried a different approach. “Do you want another woman to come in here and pretend to be my girlfriend? To take your place in my bed.”

She was quick to snap, “Of course not.”

“Good, because if our roles were reversed and some man felt like he could sleep next to you, it would be the last thing he ever did,” I growled. “I might not be a whiz with guns like you are or trained in martial arts, but you can be damn sure I would put my muscles to good use in taking him down. I protect what’s mine.”

With her lips curved up in a tiny grin, she didn’t look bothered by my threats of bodily harm against a figment of my imagination. “Am I yours?”

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The answer was obvious to me. “Hell yes, you are.”

Her smile grew bigger. “Does that make you mine?”

“Fuck, yeah.”

She took a small step backward and eyed me up and down. “What am I going to do with you?”

“I can think of a few things that would help us blow off some adrenaline after the day we just had.”

“I like the way you think.” Crashing my mouth down over hers, I yanked her close again. Then I dropped my hands down to her perfect ass and lifted her off her feet. When she wrapped her legs around my waist, I groaned at the feel of her pussy pressed against my cock.

I was desperate to get inside her as I strode out of the closet and over to the side of the bed. We ripped off our clothes and fell onto the mattress, our bodies already tangled together. She pumped my cock with her fist while I nibbled and sucked at her tits. Sliding my hand between our bodies, I slid my fingers through her wetness. “Your pussy is drenched, angel.”

Sera twined her arms around my neck and lifted her hips off the mattress to press closer. “Because I need you.”

“You have me,” I promised, notching my dick at her entrance.

“I want more.”

“You’ll get it all,” I rasped as I buried my cock in her pussy. I didn’t bother going slow, setting a quick pace right off the bat.

Sera met me thrust for thrust, her need as powerful as mine. “Yes! Just like that!”

I wrapped her hair in my fist and tilted her head back to lick at her pulse point. Her nails dug into my back harder, and her pussy clamped down around my cock. When I circled my hips on the next thrust, she flew apart and took me with her. “Sera! Oh, fuck!” I bellowed as my orgasm crashed over me.

“Wow,” she panted, collapsing against the pillows. “You managed to end my god-awful day on a monumental high.”

I dropped down onto the mattress and pulled her close. “It’s only fair since you did the same for me.”

Chapter 13

Sera

“Itold you getting an extra ticket would be easy.” Britney plopped down in the seat next to me. “And I was right about who would give it up too.”

I looked behind us and realized both girls from the game last Sunday were gone. I grinned at Britney. “Nice!”

After Rachel, who was sitting on my other side, and Britney greeted each other, we settled in to watch the game. It was just as much fun as it had been the last time around. Maybe even more so because Rowan's team dominated.

With five minutes left in the fourth quarter, they scored. Rowan threw another touchdown to pull ahead by two. After we were done cheering, Rachel leaned close and whispered, “I see the way you've been looking at him lately. Something has changed, hasn't it?”

“I don't know what you mean.” I stared at the field so she couldn't see my eyes. I'd been trained to withstand interrogation, but nothing had prepared me for how I would react to Rachel's questioning. I'd grown to care about her, and I didn't want to lie to her.

“Deny it all you want, but I can see things have changed between you and my son. A mother always knows these things.”

Britney leaned over me and asked, “What's changed between them? Oh my God, is Sera pregnant?”

“No,” I hissed.

“I wish,” Rachel sighed, shocking the fuck out of me. “But I guess I'll just have to be satisfied with the fact that she's falling in love with my son.”

“I think she already fell, which is only fair since she's his girlfriend,” Britney pointed out.

“Which is probably why the relationship is starting to look real,” Rachel mumbled.

She wasn't quiet enough because Britney's eyebrows shot up. She surged out of her seat and tugged on our arms. “Come on. We need to talk.”

She led us out of the stands and down to the room where families went to meet the players after the game. Since there was still time on the clock, nobody else was there.

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“Okay, you two. Spill. This one”—Britney pointed her thumb in my direction—“shows up out of nowhere and says she’s Rowan’s girlfriend last week. I didn’t question it because he’s always been super private and she’s more than awesome enough to have snagged his attention. But now you”—she pointed at Rachel—“are making me think there’s more to the story.”

I was about to deny everything when Rachel blurted out, “Rowan has a stalker, and Sera is his bodyguard. But I know she’s really more than that because I see the way they look at each other.”

“Stalker? Bodyguard?” Britney echoed in shock.

Now that the secret was out, there was no reason for me not to share more details since Britney had already been cleared as a suspect. I laid it all out for her, and when I got to the part about what happened with the letter Thursday, she gasped, “Oh, my God! The kid said the guy was old enough to be his grandfather, right?”

“Yeah. He wasn’t much help beyond that, though,” I confirmed.

“This is going to sound crazy, but I noticed a guy out at the players’ entrance with the diehard fans. He caught my attention because he looked like an older version of Rowan. I remember thinking it was probably what he’d look like in about twenty to thirty years. That would probably put him smack dab in the grandfatherly range for a teenager.”

“He looked like an older version of Rowan?” Rachel echoed, looking as though she’d seen a ghost. Britney nodded, and Rachel cried, “I think I know who Rowan’s

number one fan is.”

“Who?” I pulled my phone out of my pocket to update the rest of my team.

“Rowan's father,” she answered. “It would explain the odd part in the letter I got, too. About the stalker blaming me for being a bad mom.”

I sent a quick text to Whit, asking him to come to the family room. “Rowan never talks about his dad. Who is he?”

“That’s because my son has never met his father,” Rachel sighed as she walked over to a chair in the corner and sat down. “He's just the guy who knocked me up when I was eighteen and then ran as far as he could in the opposite direction when I told him I was pregnant. I haven't seen him since then, except for when he signed paperwork to relinquish his parental rights after Rowan was born. That was thirty years ago.”

I gave her hand a comforting squeeze. “What’s his name?”

“Jack Duncan. He was my gym teacher in high school. Nobody ever knew that he was the one who got me pregnant.” She shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. “He gave me some money, and I kept my mouth shut because I didn't want my baby boy to always be known for the scandal that would've surrounded his birth if people found out.”

Shit. Our team should’ve asked about Rowan’s father sooner. I would’ve wanted to track his ass down so I could kick it, and then we would’ve known where he was. After I shot the information over to the rest of the team, things moved quickly. It turned out that the guy had season tickets. I left Rachel in the family room with Britney as Whit, Devon, and I made our way over to his seat just as the clock ticked down the final seconds of the game.

Jack Duncan was easy to spot. I immediately understood why Britney had noticed him. His resemblance to Rowan was striking.

The people around him had left their seats right when the buzzer sounded, but he stayed where he was. His eyes were locked on Rowan, who was talking to one of his teammates on the sideline.

“Stadium security is tight. He shouldn’t have a weapon on him.” Whit’s voice was the barest whisper of sound.

“There are three of us and one of him,” Devon pointed out.

“And there’s no record of violence in his past.”

While they bantered back and forth, I moved closer to our target. Coming up behind him, I waited for Devon and Whit to flank him on either side before I tapped on his shoulder. “Mr. Duncan, I’m going to need you to come with us.”

He jumped out of his seat and twirled around, recognizing me in an instant. “You’re that girl who’s dating my s—Rowan Charles.”

He’d almost slipped up and called Rowan his son. It would not take much for the cops to break him and get him to confess to sending the letters. “I’m not his girlfriend”—Whit and Devon both snorted at that—“I’m part of the bodyguard team he hired to protect him from a stalker.”

“A stalker?” He glanced from Whit to Devon and back at me again. His eyes filled with anger, and his cheeks went red. “He thinks I’m stalking him? That ungrateful son of a bitch! He wouldn’t be anything without my blood running through him. Where does he think he got his talent for football? His mother?” he spat.

“He didn’t get anything from you,” I hissed. “And he sure as fuck doesn’t owe you a damn thing except for the paperwork for a restraining order.”

He reared back and looked ready to explode when Whit yanked his arms behind his back and pushed him down the row and up the steps. Devon patted me on the back as we followed them. “Another mystery solved, and without a drop of blood shed. I’m glad things turned out so well.”

Me, too...but now I needed to figure out what the end of the case meant for Rowan and me.

Chapter 14

Rowan

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk to him?” My mom searched my face for any sign I might regret my decision. “Because I’d understand if you did. He’s your father after all.”

“He isn’t my father.” I’d heard him ranting over the fact that my mom had stolen his legacy from him when I’d gone down to stadium security office. I’d missed the takedown, but at least Sera had sent Devon into the locker room to let me know what happened right away. “I have no need to talk to that man. He’s nothing to me.”

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“Okay, honey.” She gave me a hug and smiled up at me. “Just keep in mind that we both have something important to thank him for.”

My brow wrinkled in confusion. “What’s that?”

“I wouldn’t have you if it hadn’t been for him.” She walked to the front door of my house and opened it, turning to add, “And you wouldn’t have met Sera if he hadn’t gone bonkers over your early retirement.”

“I’ll give him that much,” I conceded. But nothing else, I thought to myself as she shut the door.

It was past midnight, and I was physically and emotionally drained between the game and what had gone down with the man who thought of himself as my dad. Coach had been understanding about the situation and told me I could skip tomorrow. Or today, considering the time.

All I wanted to do was climb into my bed, pull Sera close, and sleep for about a dozen hours. She’d gone upstairs to give me time to talk to my mom, which I appreciated at the time. But now that my mom had gone back to her house, I went in search of my woman.

I didn’t spot her in the bedroom at first. Then I heard a sound from the master closet and went to see what she was doing. She’d been busy during the time I had spent with my mom but not in a good way. All her things were off the hangers, and it looked like her duffel bag was full. “What are you doing?” I asked, gripping both sides of the doorframe tight in my hands.

Sera kept her head bent toward the top drawer where she'd kept her panties and bras. I couldn't see the expression on her face when she answered, "Packing up my stuff."

"Why?" I growled.

"Because once the job is done, that's what the person on close protection detail does. They leave. It's not as though I can just stay here with you forever." Her voice cracked on the last word, and it got me moving.

"That's where you're wrong." I stopped right in front of her and waited for her head to tilt back so I could look into her eyes. "I thought we already covered this when you tried to hand me off to someone else from your company."

She shook her head. "No, the only thing we decided was that I'd be the one to stick close to you while you were dealing with your stalker. Now that we know who it is, the case is over."

"Let me be more clear, then. I want you to stay here with me." I brushed a kiss over her lips. "Forever."

"We've only known each other for two weeks," she halfheartedly argued. "And they've been an emotional roller coaster for you. I don't think you should be making decisions like this right now."

"But we've spent those days together almost around-the-clock," I countered, determined to knock down any roadblocks she put up.

She cocked a brow at me. "It hasn't been close to around-the-clock."

That was a fair point, but I was undeterred. "Okay, as much as my schedule allows in season. And if we use some creative math and tally up the hours we've spent together

to compare it to normal dating situations, I bet we're at least on date number fifty."

She laughed softly, some of the tension leaving her body. "How do you figure that?"

"Three hours per date times fifty gives us one hundred and fifty hours." I tapped the side of my head. "We've definitely spent at least that much time together so far."

"I'm not sure about that creative math you're using, but you do have a point," she conceded.

It was enough of a green light to get me moving again. I tugged on her hand and led her into the bedroom. "The fiftieth date is definitely in the acceptable range for moving in together."

"Maybe I'd agree to that with a little convincing," she suggested.

"I'm at my most persuasive when we're in bed together."

"Then by all means." She climbed on the mattress. "Show me what you've got."

I quickly stripped out of my clothes and then tugged hers off her lithe body. Once I had her naked, I rolled onto my back and lifted her to straddle me. "I want to see your tits bounce while you ride my dick."

Wrapping her hand around my cock, she guided it to her entrance and slid down. Her pussy was tight around me, and this angle let me go deeper than usual. "You feel so fucking good, angel."

"Yes," she whimpered, rocking her hips while I was anchored inside her. Her pussy was already fluttering around me, and she was dripping wet.

“Don’t you want to be able to ride me like this whenever you want?”

“Yes,” she hissed, as I glided my hands up her stomach to cup her tits.

She started to ride me harder, and I tweaked her nipples with my thumbs. “Then move in with me. For good.”

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“Uh-huh,” she sighed, her head falling back and her eyes drifting shut.

I slid my hands around to her back and pressed her forward until her tits were smashed against my chest. I hammered up into her pussy, feeling it tighten around me. She was so close to coming, and so was I. But I needed something else first to make the moment perfect.

“As my wife.”

Her entire body shook as she cried out, “Yes!”

My cock jerked inside her, my hot come filling her up. We continued to rock together until her orgasm was over. She slumped against my chest and peeked up at me. “Did you really just ask me to marry you in the middle of sex?”

“You wanted me to convince you to move in with me.” I switched our positions and stretched my arm out to pull the top drawer on my bedside table. Pulling out a jewelry box, I flipped it open with my thumb. “I figured a great orgasm and a diamond ring just might do it.”

Her eyes widened in surprise and filled with tears. “This isn’t a spur-of-the-moment thing? You got me a ring?”

“When you tried to leave, I realized I loved you and never wanted you to go.” I pulled the ring out of the box and slid it on her finger. “I asked one of my teammates for the name of their jeweler. The guy he uses was more than happy to come to the stadium yesterday to let me pick out the perfect ring.”

“You did an excellent job.” She stared down at it in awe. “Can I let you in on a little secret?”

“Absolutely.” I stroked my thumb over her finger, just below where my ring now rested. “I want all of them.”

She grinned at me. “I was hoping you’d come upstairs tonight and talk me into staying. I didn’t want to go for the same reason. I love you, too.”

I claimed her lips in a passionate kiss before asking, “Is that a yes to my proposal?”

“Only if you tell me why you call me angel.”

It was going to sound corny as fuck, but that didn’t stop me from answering. If she wanted to know, then I was going to tell her. “Because you’re my guardian angel.”

Curious about Breckenand his wife? Save Your Soul is only 99 cents and available in Kindle Unlimited!

Epilogue

Sera

I wasn’t usually prone to nerves, but I’d never been in a situation like this one before. I was anxious enough that I was betraying the feeling each time my leg started to bounce up and down. I’d caught myself doing it five different times during the drive to the office for our meeting with my boss.

“Stop stressing about what Brecken is going to say.” Rowan reached his hand across the console to rest his palm over my stomach. “It’s not good for you right now.”

“I know,” I sighed, lacing my fingers through his. “I shouldn’t be this worked up about it. I’m sure Brecken will be cool about my decision, especially under the circumstances.”

“Of course, he will.” Rowan’s lips curved up in a smug grin. “It’s not like you can keep working in the field when you’re carrying two of my babies inside you.”

I’d almost fallen over in shock when the doctor announced I was carrying twins less than an hour ago. We’d found out I was pregnant at the six-week mark but had chosen to keep it quiet for a little while. Things had already been crazy enough with Rowan nearing the end of his last season as a football player, and I didn’t want the focus to be split between his professional and personal life. The only person we’d told was Rachel, who’d been doing great ever since her doctors had figured out the right dosage for her heart medications. She’d gotten even better once she knew she was going to be a grandmother.

Since my team had been working with a Fortune 500 company that needed a major security overhaul for the past two months, there hadn’t been any risk of hurting myself at work. The timing had been perfect for me to be able to hold off on sharing the news with the guys right away.

We’d been planning to wait until I was past the first trimester, but today’s revelation had prompted us to re-evaluate that decision since we were less than a week away anyway. The knowledge that I was carrying two babies instead of one changed my plans for work, and I wanted to loop in my boss and teammates sooner rather than later.

“You ready to do this?” Rowan asked after pulling the car into my assigned parking spot.

I flashed him a reassuring smile. “Yup.”

We walked into the office hand-in-hand. When Whit spotted us, he whistled under his breath. “Look who’s here. The happy couple.”

“I thought you were going to be a lady of leisure, taking a random day off?” Devon asked.

Rowan aimed a glare Devon’s way, knowing how much the guys liked to razz me about my new lifestyle as a football wife. They felt comfortable teasing me about it because other than my address and attending football games, nothing much had changed. Little did they know how true their jokes were about to be.

I ran my hand down Rowan’s back in a soothing gesture. “We’re just dropping in for a quick meeting with Brecken and you guys.”

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“Since when do spouses sit in on team meetings?” Whit asked, his brow wrinkled in confusion.

“How quickly things have changed now that you and Brecken are married,” Devon muttered with a frown. A growl rumbled up Rowan’s chest, and my coworker held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “To other people! Not each other, obviously.”

“One day, you’re going to fall hard for some woman,” I warned Devon with a grin, rubbing my hands together in anticipation. “And I’m going to make sure I’m around to give you hell while you go down fighting it all the way.”

“Of course, you’ll be around. Where else would you be?” Whit asked.

Devon shook his head and said, “No way is that happening anytime soon.”

“Get your asses in here,” Brecken called out from his office.

I didn’t let go of Rowan’s hand as I made my way into my boss’s domain and sat down on the small couch against the wall nearest the door. Whit and Devon followed us inside and took the chairs in front of Brecken’s desk when he pointed toward them.

As soon as we were all seated, my boss turned his attention to me. “You got something to share with the team?”

“Yup.” Rowan threaded his fingers through mine, and I took comfort in his touch as I battled down the nerves. The freaking pregnancy hormones had me almost ready to cry, and I hadn’t even gotten the words out yet. After taking a deep breath, I blurted,

“I’m pregnant.”

“And it’s twins,” Rowan added with a smug grin.

The three men who were as close to me as brothers all seemed frozen in shock for a long moment before they jumped out of their chairs to give me hugs.

“Damn, I can’t believe you’re going to be a mom with two little babies soon,” Whit murmured, his gaze on my lightly rounded belly.

“We work in close quarters with you for hours on end every day.” Devon shook his head. “I can’t believe we didn’t notice it before now.”

“If they already know it’s twins, then they must’ve done an ultrasound, right?” Brecken asked.

I wasn’t surprised that he was well aware of how pregnancies went since he hovered over Hadley each time she was carrying one of his babies. “Yeah, today.”

Brecken’s gaze remained locked with mine. “There’s more you wanted to tell us, right?”

“Being pregnant with my job was already going to be tricky enough, but now that we know I’m carrying twins”—I sighed, struggling with how to get the words out when I felt like I was abandoning my team—“I want to move into a consultant role on a limited basis.”

Rowan had pushed me to reconsider my initial decision to quit altogether. He’d even gone as far as teasing me that one of us should have a job now that he’d officially retired from football. He knew how important my team and career were to me.

“There will always be a place for you here,” Brecken reassured me. “One hour or

forty. We'll take what you can give us."

"Damn straight," Whit agreed as Devon nodded.

I felt as though a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders as I hugged each of the guys before we left. As we headed home, I beamed a smile at Rowan. "I can't wait to give your mom the good news."

He grinned back at me. "She's going to flip."

She did...and she was no less excited when we followed our twin sons up with a baby girl two years later.