



Hard Hearts

Author: *Ella Goode*

Category: Romance

Description: Frankie

I've got no time for men and not much use for them either. I'm busy with my friends, my career, and my family. Some may call it hard-hearted, but I prefer smart. I'm on the verge of closing a deal of a lifetime and no famous quarterback trying to make his rehab time go by faster is going to convince me to give up being single.

Kaden

Even though I throw a football for a living, I know a good thing when I see it. Frankie Lodato is the whole package: smart, funny, and a total smoke show. While I hate that I'm spending my off season recovering from rotator cuff surgery, the bright side is that I have all the time in the world to woo Frankie. She's a hard nut to crack, but a small town boy doesn't get to be a star football player without overcoming every tough challenge I've ever faced.

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Chapter One

FRANKIE

“You got a date too?” There is no missing the excitement in my mom’s question. I snap closed the compact I was using to make sure all my freckles were covered and put it back down onto my vanity.

“When do I ever have a date?” Quickly I swipe on my peachy lip gloss before going in search of heels.

“You went on one a bit ago with some football player.”

“I went and left.” My date with Kaden Gunner, Pro Bowl quarterback nursing a torn rotator cuff, had barely lasted five seconds before I was rushing out the door. It was a date I never should have gone on, but in a moment of weakness, I had agreed.

I had far too much fun with Kaden. Arguing with him had been stimulating. I thoroughly enjoyed it. It was different than when I fought with others, which I often do in my line of work. It’s a required skill set as a lawyer. But when I bickered with Kaden, it felt intimate. It was almost as if we were engaged in some kind of foreplay. I had no idea that arguing with someone could be erotically charged.

“I googled him. He’s a good-looking man.” That’s an understatement. Kaden is beyond good-looking. The man was once on the cover of GQ. He could moonlight as a model. I don’t even want to start thinking about his body. The way he’s lean with muscle but thick in all the right places. Don’t even get me started on his thighs.

“It’s not happening.” I grab my black Tom Ford heels. They’re comfortable, and I have no clue how long tonight is going to go. I already spent the whole day in the office wearing heels.

“Then why are you getting all dolled up to go out?”

“It’s a work thing.” If I was only going to meet the girls, I’d throw on jeans and pull my hair up. I was happy that my last meeting of the day got out early so I had time to prepare for tonight and freshen up.

We’re meeting a potential new customer the company I’m working for is trying to acquire. Elite Motors is in the market for a steel production company, and we’re trying to land that contract. Things have been going back and forth between them and us. My boss is foaming at the mouth for this deal, and I’m happy that I was selected to be on the team to make it happen. It can be hard to get picked for some projects when you’re not in the boys’ club.

“The man I’m seeing has a son.” I glance over at my mom. Now she is all dolled up. It’s still hard to believe I came out of her. She’s tall and slender with hair so shiny you’d think she spent thousands on upkeep. She also has flawless skin. There isn’t a freckle in sight.

I’m the polar opposite; my father’s genes are running fully through me. I have wild red hair that takes far too much time to control. Freckles cover my fair skin, which I struggle to conceal.

I truly wish I could have gotten my mom's height. Instead I've had to train myself to wear killer heels so that I don't get lost in the mix. It's either that or you fall to the back. I work with all men, and they would all tower over me if not for the four inches I can get out of a pair of heels.

“Mom, no.” I wag my finger at her. She’s always trying to set me up with someone.

I adore my mom, but she is a romantic at heart. I have seen her fall in love so many times only to get her heart broken. I have to give it to her, though. She always dusts herself off and puts herself out there again.

“Fine.” She lets out a little huff. I’d never tell my mom this because it would hurt her feelings, but she is a part of the reason I stay away from dating. I have no time for that kind of drama in my life. I imagine it’s exhausting to spend your nights worrying about what a man is up to or if he will return your texts or calls. That’s not a position I ever want to be in.

“You look gorgeous, though.” Mom has a wrap dress on, showing off her slim figure.

“Thanks.” She walks into the room, giving me a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow. I have an early shift I picked up for one of the girls at the hospital.”

“Have fun,” I tell her before she is out the door.

Quickly I switch my purse over to a smaller one before grabbing my phone off the charger. I notice I have a few missed texts. I order a ride before I check them.

The first one is from Luna, one of my best friends. I already know what I’m likely to see when I click it. No surprise, she sent me five pictures of different bridesmaid dresses, asking which I like.

I heart a couple of the images, knowing if I don’t respond, she’ll be calling. This wedding is on the fast track. Both my best friends are now in serious relationships. It’s always been the three of us since college. Things are going to change. I can feel it. If I’m being honest, it makes me a little uneasy. Although I’m more than happy for them, I hate that an era is ending. They’re moving on in a sense, and I’m kind of left

behind.

My alert goes off that my car is almost here. I give one last look in the mirror before I head out of my apartment and downstairs. I get there right as the car pulls up. I hop in before checking my other texts.

Another is from my boss telling me to be on time. I roll my eyes, wanting to message back and ask when I have been late before, but I'm sure it's just a stereotype he holds in his head about women always taking forever to get ready and go out.

It's at a lounge. It's a luxurious and high-end one. I would never get in the door without my boss. That's for sure.

The last text I have is from Kaden. My fingers itch to click it. My heart gives an excited flutter that I'm going to pretend is heartburn from that hot dog I ate in the park during my short lunch break.

That's why I clear it out without even reading it. I have to keep Kaden Gunner as far away from me as possible.

Too bad for me the man is quick on his feet.

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Chapter Two

KADEN

“Frankie? Is that you?”

A tall, stacked woman whips around, her wild red hair floating like a halo around her pale face. “Kaden?”

“The one and only.” I look her over from head to toe, taking in the lipstick, the heels—which are responsible for her height—the black knit dress she probably thought was modest because none of her chest is on display but it obscenely clings to every curve of her body. A frown creases my forehead. This is like a date outfit, and Frankie says she doesn’t date. At least, that’s the excuse she gave me before she ran out of the restaurant I’d booked. I can’t do this. I don’t date, and this looks like a date.

Yes, it was.

“What are you doing here?” She rubs her lips together, and the action makes my dick twitch.

“I was just about to ask you that.” I shove my hands in my pockets so that my growing hard-on isn’t so obvious. One drawback of a big dick is that it’s hard to hide. My teammates pointed this out to me after I’d gone on a late-night show. Apparently the outline of my cock could be seen when I sat down, causing a minor social media storm. They taped a printout of a post that said “Kaden Gunner’s dick is so big, it needs its own uniform.”

“I’ve got a business meeting.”

“It’s seven, and you’re looking like a smokeshow.” You’re looking like someone who should be in my bed, not eating with other men. And I know it’s men because that’s all Frankie works with.

“Well, it is a meeting, and my dress is perfectly normal.” She tugs at it, making the fabric cling even more.

My tongue momentarily gets stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I have to tilt my head back and stare at the streetlamp to get myself under control. “Fine, let’s go in and have this meeting.”

She throws out an arm to block me from entering. “You can’t come with me. This is a business meeting. Did you not hear that?”

“I heard it. I’m an adult. I can do businessy things.”

“Kaden, you cannot come to this dinner with me. We’re trying to land a contract with an automotive company, and it would be huge. It’s a big deal that my boss included me on this team because, you know?—”

“It’s generally all dicks,” I finish for her. “I know.”

I gnaw on the inside of my mouth for a second because I don’t want to ruin her business deal, but she can’t be seen in public in that dress either. “Let’s compromise. I’ll buy you a new dress and then you can go to dinner.”

She looks at me like I’m insane. “No. This dress covers me from neck to knee. There’s not a hint of cleavage.” She pats the top of her chest, and her tits jiggle. I have to look at the streetlamp again. At this rate, I’m going to go blind. “Also, the

dinner is in ten minutes, so I don't have time to change even if I wanted to."

"I'm going to have to sit beside you, then. Tell them I'm your seeing eye dog or emotional support quarterback."

"Kaden, be serious."

"I could not be more serious."

"We're not even dating."

"We went on a date. We just didn't finish it, so technically, it's still going on, which means we are dating."

She throws up her hands and pushes me out of the way so she can enter the restaurant. I follow her inside.

She pretends I'm not right at her heels when she greets the host. "I'm with the Elite Motors party."

"You're early." The host smiles at her.

I swear if his eyes drop below her chin, I'm decking him. I clear my throat, and the guy's eyes fly upward to see me looming behind Frankie. She sighs and presses a knuckle into her temple.

"Aren't you—" the host starts. I reach out and hand him a hundred dollar bill.

"I am, but I don't want any attention."

"Of course." The man makes a zipping motion across his mouth and pockets the

money. “Right this way.” He gestures with his head toward a corner booth.

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“Oh, hell no,” I say.

The host stops. “Is something wrong?”

“How many are in the party?”

“Without you, um, five.”

“In that booth?”

“It seats eight,” the host explains.

“We’re going to need a table. Two of them. Five at one and me at another.”

“Kaden,” Frankie starts.

“I’m not at your meeting. I just happen to be having dinner at a table nearby.”

The host looks at both of us awkwardly. “Should I set another table?”

“Yes,” I answer for both of us.

“Fine. I’m only saying this because I know if I don’t agree, we’ll still be arguing over it when my boss shows up.”

I hand the host another hundred. He snaps his fingers, and two servers come over. Together they get the tables set up just as I asked. “You sit here.” I point to a chair at

the end and wait until Frankie settles in. I hold up a white napkin that is large enough to serve as a shawl. “Would I be pressing my luck to say you should wear this?”

“Yes, actually, and I would say no and then scream that you’re assaulting me, and the headlines tomorrow would be Former State Raiders quarterback seen harassing a poor woman at a fancy restaurant.” She snatches the napkin out of my hand and spreads it across her lap.

I concede this fight. “Why former State Raider and not current Mavericks quarterback?”

“Because everyone knows that the State Raiders are a bunch of delinquents, so hearing that one of them was involved in dubious deeds would be very believable.” She gives me a fake smile.

“You’re only saying that because we beat you so many times in football. What was my record against State?” I tap my chin, pretending like I don’t remember. “Oh right, a perfect four and oh.”

“This is why we aren’t dating, Kaden. You’re way too arrogant.”

“But we are dating. We’re in the same restaurant, having dinner, dressed all nice.” I pat my chest. “I’ll even buy you dessert if you’re a good girl.”

She glowers, but the rest of her party shows up so she can’t respond. I smile as I take a sip of my water.

Chapter Three

FRANKIE

As I greet everyone, all I can think about is how Kaden is staring a hole into me. I don't have to glance his way to know it's happening. I can feel his stare like a touch. I do my best to shake off our interaction and focus, but that is never easy when it comes to that man. He has a way of getting under my skin, and I can't get him out.

I think he was already driving me nutty when I was still a teen, and I'd watch his college football games. The man was a legend in college, and I'm sure he'll be one in the NFL too. He might have had a shitty fumble once, but don't we all?

Even back then, when he was kicking my favorite team's ass, he was pissing me off. Especially because I had this weird crush on him. He was the boy that made my mind start to wonder about the opposite sex. Before him, I'd been living blissfully male free. He ruined it for me. Before I knew it, I was noticing things like thighs, biceps, and washboard abs.

"Ms. Lodato, it's a pleasure to finally put a face to a name." Mr. Parker holds out his hand for me to take.

"The pleasure is all mine." I give him a firm shake. I swear I hear a growl coming from the direction of Kaden's table. I don't even bother to give him a dirty look. My attention needs to stay focused on my business, not on the drop dead gorgeous man behind me. "Call me Frankie."

"And call me Jasper."

Jasper Parker is in his sixties. I know for a fact he used to be a heartbreaker. I would have only guessed him to be in his fifties if I hadn't used Google to dig up everything I could about him. He's well over six feet but on the lean side. His black hair is turning gray at the sides. It works well for him.

Back in the day, he ruled the NASCAR world. It was never a sport I got into. I was

born and raised as a city girl. I have never even owned a car, and if I do end up having to drive, I pray for everyone. My internet sleuthing informed me that Mr. Parker won over one hundred Cup Series before he retired and started dabbling in building cars himself. I have no clue what that actually means, but it sounds impressive.

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“Are you thinking of having Scotch tonight?” My boss Evan asks as he pulls out one of the chairs to sit down. Turner and Kyle have already taken their seats. Turner is in the finance department at Forged, while Kyle is in legal with me.

They both have been with Forged for almost ten years now. Turner on his own isn't bad, but he and Kyle together make me often want to bang my head on the wall. Hopefully they both will stay in line tonight with our boss being here, along with Jasper. We all know how big this deal is.

“I was thinking it's more of a whiskey kind of night,” I say before Jasper can respond.

“I was too.” Jasper gives me a warm smile that has lines creasing around his eyes. I knew he was thinking whiskey, but again, I did my research. What can I say? Provide a woman with internet access, and she can discover a wealth of information about you faster than the FBI. Jasper pulls my chair out for me.

I can't help but turn my head slightly to peek over at Kaden, who is staring not at me but at Jasper. When Kaden starts to stand, a rush of panic fills me. Oh God, what is he about to do?

“Jasper Parker.”

“Kaden.” Jasper turns toward Kaden, still smiling. They shake hands. “It's been a few years.”

“The White House, I think, was the last time we ran into each other.”

“Right, that was a nightmare of a night.” They both chuckle. All of us are watching the two of them now. I see Kyle lean over toward Turner, his eyes wide. I’m sure they recognize who Kaden is. All of us at the office played in a fantasy football league together. Football is often a hot topic. Plus, I took them for all of their cash when Kaden fumbled the ball that time. I made out like a bandit.

“I didn’t know you were meeting with Jasper Parker, babe.” Kaden’s hand comes down on my shoulder. With his other hand, he grabs the napkin I’d tossed onto the table and quickly drapes it back over my lap. He does it so quickly I’m not sure anyone notices. Jasper’s brows lift. “She is always very hush-hush about work. A lawyer thing, I’m sure.” I’m at a loss for words for the first time in my life.

“You’re dating this lovely woman?”

“I think it’s more than dating at this point.” He winks at me. I’m going to murder him.

“Damn, Kaden Gunner.” Evan stands, offering Kaden his hand. I don’t miss my boss’s flinch when Kaden takes it, but he masks it. “I’m Evan.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kaden responds.

“Why are you sitting there?” Jasper asks, nodding toward the table Kaden was at.

“I was going to grab some dinner while I waited for my woman so I could drive her back home tonight. Don’t care for her calling for a car, especially at night.” Each word he speaks brings him closer to his death. I’m not sure how exactly I’m going to do it, but I’m sure I’ll figure it out.

He’s laying it on thick. But it’s kind of ridiculous that he has everyone at the table eating out of his hand and believing this. I mean, come on, Kaden Gunner wouldn’t

really sit for hours waiting for a woman. Would he?

“Good man,” Jasper praises him. “Join us.”

“I shouldn’t,” Kaden responds, already grabbing the chair next to mine.

“I insist,” Jasper pushes.

“Yes, please do,” my boss adds.

“All right, don’t twist my arm.” Kaden drops down into the seat beside me, placing his hand on the back of my chair.

“We wouldn’t do that. You need that arm.” Jasper takes the seat across from us. He is rather smitten with Kaden.

“Not more than I need my Frankie.” He leans over and kisses my cheek. I grab his thigh under the table and dig my nails in. “Easy, Kitten,” he whispers in my ear. “Save the claws for later.”

If anything needs saving, it’s him.

Chapter Four

KADEN

I don’t know what it is exactly about Frankie that cranks my engine, to use Jasper Parker’s terminology, but her angry face is more erotic than two OnlyFans girls filming a porno in front of me, which actually happened my rookie year in Miami.

I walked into my hotel room, found two of them doing some kind of shoot, and

immediately booked it down to the team manager's room to get me a new room and some better security. The number of jock strap bunnies that try to entrap you during the season is unreal.

“How's the shoulder?” This is from Frankie's boss. Last year I got body-slammed into the turf by a three-hundred-pound lineman and suffered a full rotator cuff tear. Obviously, that ended my season and the playoff hopes for my team. As soon as I could, though, I got it fixed.

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“All good. Went to Dr. Neals down in Florida. He can fix anything.” What sucked was that I was in a contract renewal year and the team was reluctant to pay me what I’m worth. I’ve won a Super Bowl, for fuck’s sake.

“I have a kid on my roster that I sent to him. He had a busted clavicle from getting rear-ended. Hell of a thing,” Jasper says, taking his whiskey from the server who just appeared with a tray of glasses.

“Neals would be the one to go to. How’s your driver doing?”

“Good. He’s a promising driver, but we’ll have to see how he does post-surgery.”

I try not to wince, but these are the same words I’m reading in the press every day. How is Kaden Gunner’s gun actually going to work post-surgery? Pretty damn well, but it’s the off-season, and until I prove it on the field, no one but my pops is really going to believe it.

“You follow the sport?” Jasper asks.

I cast a quick look around the table to see if anyone is annoyed that I’m monopolizing Jasper, but Frankie’s coworkers appear thrilled to be part of the conversation, even if it’s from the sidelines. Frankie’s mouth is straight, which means she’s moved from the pissed to the slightly irritated column.

“Watched way too much of it last year while I was laid up from the surgery.”

Jasper gives me a wry smile. “Sorry to hear about your injury but not sorry that you

got to watch some of my sport. You should come and drive on our test track.”

“I might take you up on that, but as much as I’d love to keep talking about me, I think you’re here to do some business with Frankie’s firm.” I shift so that Jasper has a better line of sight with Frankie. It’s not like I want him to look at her, but I know in business that eye contact is a big thing, and Jasper, especially, is the type of guy who wants to look someone in the eye and judge for himself whether they’re the type of person he wants to work with.

“It’s not really Frankie’s firm,” one of the uptight Hugo Boss wearing coworkers starts in, but when Jasper frowns, he shuts up quickly.

“It’s not my firm,” Frankie acknowledges with a dip of her head and a warm smile—a warmer smile than has ever been directed at me. “But we all kind of feel like we have some ownership in it. It’s a small company with big dreams and a dedicated team, which seems to fit your philosophy.”

I flip my gaze back to Jasper and realize for the first time that he is what the ladies would call a silver fox. I run my tongue along the inside of my lip and try to quell that green-eyed demon stirring inside me. Jasper’s at least twice my age, and more than twice Frankie’s age. Plus, he’s married, according to the ring on his finger. I’ve got nothing to worry about with him. Do I?

“I admit to being an old-school kind of guy. I want to work with people I know and like, even if all they’re supplying is the screws that hold the air vents in place.”

“Since we’d be supplying more than small hardware, it would be even more important for us to all meet.”

The two share another smile. I tuck my hands under the table until the feeling of wanting to punch something subsides.

The others jump in, and they start talking about steel and granular details about the weight to strength ratios. Frankie knows more about the cars than anyone at the table and is able to carry on a detailed conversation with Jasper about how they're made beyond even the steel chassis that her company would provide. She knows about the fiberglass components that he has made by a company in Alabama, and the tire company from Michigan, and even what glass cleaner they use on the windshield. I can see him falling for her over the various courses, and by dessert, I'm half-expecting him to get on one knee and pull a ring box out of his pocket.

"If I wasn't a married man, Frankie, I fear I'd be close to making an inappropriate proposal."

I clear my throat. Frankie kicks me under the table. Good thing I'm used to being tossed around like a pillow case by linemen or I might have flinched.

Jasper laughs. "No, don't be mad at your man. I've got a strong green streak in me, too." He pats my shoulder lightly. "I can see why you're hovering around her. I wouldn't let her get more than a few feet from me either. It says a lot about you, Kaden, that you're attracted to such a strong, capable woman. Reminds me of my Stella at home. Seeing the two of you together makes me remember what it was like when Stella and I were young."

He leans forward with his hands clasped together. "You're the type I want to do business with. Solid, commitment-minded people. When's the wedding?"

"The wedding?" Frankie squeaks.

I grin and drape my arm across Frankie's chair. "We're headed to the chapel this summer."

Chapter Five

FRANKIE

After wrapping up dinner, my boss and colleagues decide to head into the lounge area. They tried to talk Jasper into coming with them, but he said he was heading home to his wife. Now we're lingering out at the valet, waiting for them to bring his and Kaden's cars around. Kaden keeps his arm draped over my shoulder. He's really milking this while I have to remain calm in front of Jasper.

"How are the wedding plans going?" Jasper asks. His eyes are on me, so I have no choice but to answer.

"They're going." Right up Kaden's ass when I get him alone. He better plan on being out another season due to injury.

"I would hope so. A summer wedding is soon." I'm about to tell him next summer, but Kaden beats me. Not only quick on his toes but with that mouth of his too.

"One way or another, it's happening this summer. I've waited long enough." He kisses me on top of the head. I'm gonna make him pay for that one.

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“You know, my wife was a wedding planner back in the day. Why don’t you two come over for dinner? I’m sure she’d be happy to help and provide suggestions.”

“That would be incredible.” This time it’s me who’s first to speak. I know an opportunity when it comes knocking. Plus, I’ve already started down this path. Not by my own choice, but there’s really no turning back now.

This would really get my foot in the door with Jasper. I would rather not lie, but I think it partly comes with the job. That's what I tell myself. I'm a lawyer; I can be cutthroat. At least in some areas of my life I can be.

"Tomorrow then? I know my wife is free."

"Perfect," Kaden answers. "Frankie gets her ring back tomorrow. The jeweler was resizing it. She's been dying to show it off." Did he actually say that?

"Tomorrow at seven, then," Jasper confirms as the valets pull up with both of the fancy sports cars that I bet cost more than many people's homes.

"Tomorrow," we both agree. I keep a smile pasted on my face until Jasper is pulling away.

"I'm driving," I tell Kaden, daring him to try to stop me, but he doesn't. I didn't actually mean it. I was trying to annoy him, but he merely holds the driver's side door open for me. I slip inside. Kaden jogs around, jumping into the passenger seat. “You’re really going to let me drive?”

“Put your seat belt on first.” As he says the words, he’s already leaning over and grabbing it for me. His arm grazes my breast as he pulls it across me, clicking it into place. He, however, doesn’t move, his face a mere inches from mine. “Your makeup is wearing off.”

“What?” I snap. What the hell does that mean? He gives me a warm smile. I call it a warm smile because that’s what it always does to my insides when he does it. How does he make a smile so damn alluring?

“You cover up your freckles.”

“I try to cover them up.”

“They’re beautiful.” I open and then close my mouth, at a loss for words. For one, I don’t think anyone has ever called me beautiful. Secondly, who’s into freckles?

“You’re strange. You know that?”

“Because I find your freckles sexy?”

"Freckles aren't sexy." I didn't think they were. My childhood would agree with me. I put up with enough crap and jokes about having them growing up. Kids can be real assholes.

"Your freckles are. I didn't mean everyone's. Only yours, Frankie." Kaden drops back into his seat, pulling on his seat belt. "You know how to drive a stick, right?" My eyes drop to his crotch, and I immediately want to murder myself. "Not that stick, dirty girl."

Heat rushes to my face. I divert my eyes to look out the front windshield. I can see the smirk on Kaden’s face out of the corner of my eye. I can barely drive, let alone

drive a stick. The car's or his, for that matter.

What the hell am I doing? Why did I even get in the car with Kaden? I could've called an Uber and been on my way home already. Yet here I am.

"I can't drive a stick," I admit. I'm not willing to fake it in front of all these people out on the sidewalk. I'd end up killing the engine.

"I can teach you, but not here. Somewhere safer."

"I'll just call a ride." I click off my seat belt and slip back out.

"I'm driving you home. It's already late."

"You can't boss me around," I huff, knowing I sound like an annoyed teenager, but I can't help it. Kaden always gets me out of sorts. He ruffles my feathers like no other. I both love and hate it.

"Please let me drive you home." He holds the passenger door open.

"Fine. But only because it's late and you've inconvenienced me at this point." I walk around keeping my chin up. It only makes his smile grow, so I elbow him in the stomach before dropping into my seat.

"Easy, Kitten," he teases before closing the door for me once again. I take a deep breath and pull myself together as I put the seat belt on before he gets in. My nipples are still hard from the graze of his arm on them.

"Don't call me Kitten," I tell him when he pulls away from the curb.

"But we're engaged. We should have pet names." I'm not going to survive this. How

the heck did I even get into this situation with him?

"Why don't you worry about that ring?"

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"Oh, Kitten. I've got it covered." He has the audacity to wink at me. I ignore the comment because deep down I kind of enjoy the pet name. I'll die before I admit that.

"Give me your phone." I hold my hand out. Without hesitation, he hands it over, the passcode effortlessly flowing from his lips. Interesting. I thought he'd be more protective of it.

"Not worried I'll go searching for nudes?" I type in my address for him.

"You'll have to do an internet search to find some." Little does he know it wouldn't be the first time I googled him. I'll never admit to that either.

"Right." I roll my eyes. I'm sure he's got a stack of them.

"Search away, Kitten."

"Is that a challenge?"

"It's whatever you want it to be." I click into the photos, and to my surprise, the first one is a picture of me. It's from my company's website. "I needed one for your contact."

I scroll through, but there aren't any naked pictures. Oh wait, there is the calculator app thing people hide shit in. I search for it.

"What are you looking for?" he asks. "I'll help you find it if you want."

"The secret app where people hide dirty pictures." There has to be something hidden. There is no way his phone is this clean.

"And how do you know about this app?" Kaden snips. I think for the first time I hear a note of anger from him. Is he jealous?

"I've heard about it on Reddit. How girls bust men cheating and doing things they shouldn't be." Kaden's hold on the steering wheels loosens.

"No calculator app, but if you want to send me some dirty pictures, I'll make sure I hide them. I'll use any app you tell me to. For my eyes only."

"Not sending you any pictures." I shake my head.

"We'll see about that, Kitten. You are, after all, my fiancée."

"Hopefully soon, I'll be a widow," I snark back.

"That means you'll have to marry me first."

He's right. I hate when he does that... At least that's what I tell myself.

Chapter Six

KADEN

"Frankie hates you," Graham Dassault informs me as we walk into the jewelry store.

"She doesn't hate me. She's playing hard to get." I look around at the dingy counter and the old pocket watches under a glass case that is so clouded I can barely make out the faces. Graham ignores all of that and knocks on a small wooden door. When I

called him for emergency ring help, he said that there was only one man in the city who could help me.

The door opens, and a small man wearing a leather apron appears. He squints, and after recognition dawns, he gestures us through the entry.

“This is my friend Kaden?—”

“Gunner. I know who he is. I don’t live in this shop,” the old man grumbles. “How’s the shoulder?”

I bite my sigh back and force out a jovial “Good as ever.”

“Bet my son-in-law you’d have a better year coming up,” he says and takes a seat behind a scarred wooden table. There are two metal chairs with leather seats and armrests. They look vaguely familiar.

“They’re Eames,” the jeweler says as Graham and I take our seats.

I nod as if I know what that means, but I don’t because I’m just a country boy from Kansas who has, as my last name suggests, a gun for an arm.

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“Famous furniture designer from the '70s,” Graham informs me. “He’s into leather recliners, Mason. That’s why I brought him to you. He’s marrying an uptown girl with a law degree and lots of ambition.”

“You want something tasteful then.” The jeweler pulls out a velvet tray filled with rings with no rocks in them.

I make a sound, I guess of disappointment, because Mason holds up a finger. “Wait.”

He reaches into another drawer and fishes out a pair of white gloves. He then unfurls a black velvet roll to reveal a small collection of stones. With a long tweezer-shaped implement, he picks up one pear-shaped diamond and places it into a plain setting.

“Two point two carats, VS1, color G, ideal cut. Looks good on any type of finger.” He places a different diamond in the next empty setting. “Three point two eight carats, VVS1, color H, brilliant cut. Oval. Creates a longer, more slender silhouette.”

“Too small.”

He looks up at me over the top of his glasses. “I thought she was a lawyer.”

“She is, but everyone will know she’s married to me, a football player, and I don’t want her walking into a WAG meeting?—”

“That’s wives and girlfriends,” Graham interjects.

“—meeting feeling like she’s got the smallest rock in the room. Besides, she’s a

lawyer for a steel company. She needs to have a big diamond so that everyone in that place knows she's taken." From what I've heard, it's sausage central at her workplace with only a handful of female employees besides her.

Mason removes the small stones and tucks them away. Another velvet case appears on the table. The moment the fabric falls away, I know we have a winner. The rocks are big and colorful. There are diamonds, at least I think they're diamonds, in colors of pink and yellow and blue. I rub my hands together. "Now we're talking."

"Thanks for vouching for me with Mason. He's the real deal."

"He doesn't just make rings. He'll do anything you want. A real genius but only works by word of mouth." Graham's driver pulls up.

After seeing Graham off, I head to a wine store and pick up a bottle of La Cave du Marche Burgundy. Jasper might be a whiskey guy, but I bet his wife likes wine. This particular brand is a favorite of my center's wife. I went with him to buy it last year for their first year anniversary and almost fell over when we went to check out and it rang up to over \$11,000 per bottle. He was buying a case. I figure if it's good enough for my center's missus, it's probably good enough for Mrs. Parker.

"I've never heard of this wine before," Frankie says, turning the bottle to read the back of the label.

I explain the backstory, leaving out the price.

"Did you enjoy it?" she asks.

"He didn't break one open for me," I tell her, pulling up to the gates of Jasper's estate. "But I'm assuming it's good." For the price, it should taste like gold.

“What if it’s terrible?”

“I accidentally on purpose knock it to the ground and then we drink water for the rest of the night.”

“That sounds...” She pauses. “Actually, I can live with that. Deal.”

I pull to a stop in front of the grand stairs leading up to Jasper’s mansion and lean toward her. “You look a little too pristine.”

She flips down the car visor to stare at her reflection in the little mirror. “What’s that mean?”

I flip it up. “It means that we’re supposed to be young lovers making wedding plans, so Jasper would expect me to sneak in a few kisses before going inside, and that means your lipstick should be smudged and your hair mussed.” It’s what I’d expect.

“Are you seriously trying to use this situation to get into my pants?”

“Yes.”

Her silence is deadly. I try to look as innocent as possible. “I’m trying to help you close the deal, Kitten, even if it means getting physical.”

”You’re so generous.” She grabs the interior car latch.

“Hold up.” This time I’m serious. “If I don’t open your car door, Jasper isn’t going to let me in the house. You know he’s old fashioned like that.”

Frankie sighs and slumps back against the seat. “Fine, but no funny business. I’m already irritated that I have to pretend we’re getting married.” She holds up her hand,

the six-carat pink diamond so pure and perfectly cut that it sparkles even in the twilight. Mason outdid himself.

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“It’s not pretend, Kitten. It’s for real, and we’re here to plan it.” And then I pull her in for a kiss.

Chapter Seven

FRANKIE

A small gasp of surprise leaves me when Kaden’s mouth comes down onto mine. He slips his tongue right past my parted lips. My hands go to his chest to push him away, but instead I find my fingers gripping his shirt as he thoroughly kisses me.

I let my eyes fall closed, my whole body lighting up in a way I’m not sure I much appreciate. The not appreciating part is a lie to myself, because I start to stroke my tongue against his as he deepens the kiss. He doesn’t stop until I’m breathless and in a daze. My panties are drenched.

I’m kind of at a loss for words. I never anticipated that a kiss could be so all-consuming. Of course, Kaden would give me the best kiss of my life. A fact I’ll never share with him. Why does he have to be so damn attractive?

“What was that?” I breathe out, reaching up to touch my lips.

“Knew you’d taste sweet.” Kaden smirks, but it’s not cocky; it’s knowing.

“I’m not sweet.”

“I won’t tell. Your secrets are safe with me.” Kaden drops another kiss on my lips

before he's out of the car. I use those two seconds before he can open my door to get my shit together.

"I'm not sweet," I repeat when he takes my hand to lead me toward the front door.

"If you say so, Kitten." He lifts my hand, kissing right next to the giant ring he'd gotten me.

There is no forgetting the ring either. It's heavy on my finger and very eye-catching. It's beautiful and girly, nothing like me. At least not the me I put out to the rest of the world. A more feminine, girly part of me that I keep tucked away for her safety loves it.

The door is opening before we reach it. Jasper and his wife are there to greet us themselves. "You must be Frankie." Her whole face lights up. "I'm Kate." I already knew that because I spent today digging into her.

I go to hold my hand out, but she pulls me in for a hug, pressing a kiss to my cheek. Kate is a big philanthropist. Once upon a time, she'd been a school teacher until she knocked Jasper off his feet.

It was adorable reading about their love story. Jasper would give small details about it to the press here and there when they asked questions. He was instantly smitten the second he met her.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I tell her.

"Let me see what you've got here." Kate takes my hand to see my ring. "There is no missing that, is there?" She laughs.

"Only the best for my kitten," Kaden says as he comes up behind me, kissing the top

of my head. I want to elbow him, but it would be too obvious.

“Only the best way to make sure everyone knows she’s taken.” Kate gives a playful smirk. “I’d know. I have a possessive one myself.” Kate does, however, elbow Jasper in the side, making him chuckle.

“What can I say?” Jasper shrugs, making no apologies about it. I peek over at Kaden, who is staring down at me. I notice he is always watching me. Is he really possessive of me? I can’t tell if he’s joking when he says things or possibly quite serious. I hate that I want it to be the latter.

“Come in.” Kate motions for us to enter her home. “Jasper tells me you’re a lawyer for the steel company.”

“Yes, I’ve been with them for a few years.” I’m starting to wonder if I picked my current company as a way to prove myself. To show that I can go toe to toe with the boys.

"You like it?" Kate leads us up into what I'm guessing is the parlor. Isn't that what they call it in rich people's homes? I could be mixing it up with the Clue game.

"The company I work for is the best steel producer in the country."

"That wasn't answering my question, but I'm going to let that one go." Thank God, because I'm not sure how to answer it. I don't want to lie to the Parkers about anything else. I'm already at my lie quota with this whole engagement/marriage situation.

"I brought wine." Kaden holds the bottle out for Jasper.

"Oh, we can't drink that." Kate takes it from her husband. Shit, is it that bad? Kaden

could splurge on a crazy ring but got a junk bottle of wine? Wait, what if the ring is fake? Luna had a fake ring and didn't even know it. "Unless you really want to."

"No, the bottle is yours to do what you want with."

"Then you wouldn't mind me using it for an upcoming charity event I'm on the board of? We could get a fantastic price for it."

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"That's fine," Kaden reassures her.

"Are you sure? I'm just not a giant wine lover, and it would be a waste on us."

"Don't think twice about it." Kaden graces her with one of his smiles.

"Thank you. We are trying to raise money to fund a new recreation center for the inner city youth. We're almost at our goal, and this will help get us there. But enough about me. Come and sit, I want to hear all about you two lovebirds," Kate says, ushering us toward a very expensive looking seating area.

The men go about making us drinks before coming over to join us. I ask Kate more about the rec center she is working on. I can tell with how animated she speaks about it that it means a lot to her. There is a passion there.

I see it too with Kaden when football comes up, and I know Jasper loves racing cars. Now he's taking that passion to another level. It makes me ponder if my passion is in the right place and for the right reasons.

"You all should come to the event. It's a seated dinner event. I bet if we put you at our table, we could sell those other six seats for a nice chunk."

"Anything to help." Kaden puts his hand on my thigh. Before I can think better of it, I place my hand on top of his. I'm really getting into my part here. I'm acting. That's all.... At least that's what I tell myself once again.

KADEN

“He’s bluffing.” Graham sends a narrow-eyed glare toward Brooks, who doesn’t look up from his cards.

The chef is staring at his hand intensely, but that’s nothing new. It’s the way he looks at everything. Brooks’ usual tell for a good hand is glancing down at his chips after picking up his cards, but he didn’t do that this time, so Graham could be right.

The thing is that Graham might be bluffing too. He’s always talking, trying to cover up his own bad or good hand. Dylan, our fourth, is distracted. He might have a good hand, but he doesn’t even notice because his mind is elsewhere. I knock my fist against the felt-covered table.

“Earth to Dylan. You still with us?”

He jerks to attention and slides a handful of chips to the center. “I call. Did I hear you were bluffing, Brooks?”

Brooks slams his cards down and glares at us. “I was not bluffing.”

“Show us your cards then,” Graham says.

“I don’t have to show you anything but my five knuckle sandwich.” Brooks raises his fist toward Graham.

“Threatening me with your paw at the poker table is crazy,” Graham says, laying down his hand. It’s a flush, jack high.

“Fuck.” I throw my cards in. Graham wins more than he loses, which is completely unnecessary given that he’s a gazillionaire.

“You suck at cards, country boy,” Graham says as he rakes in the chips. “I’ll throw the next hand since your wallet is probably thin these days. You tell the boys about your big purchase?”

“Not yet.” I stretch my arms and then hold them out. “Congratulate me, gentlemen, I’m getting married.”

“I already heard,” Dylan says. “I was thinking about making you guys a wedding blanket, and no, you don’t get to say what kind you want. I’m making it so you’ll live with the final result.”

I hold up my hands. “Friend, I’m all for whatever you want to make. I hear your stuff is selling for thousands at Neiman these days. If my football career doesn’t work out, I can always sell the gift to feed my family.”

Dylan is not having it. “You can’t sell my gifts. I’d have to kill you then.”

“We can’t have that because poker sucks with three players,” Graham tells me.

“Why did Dylan already know?” Brooks suddenly says. “And Graham knew. But not me.”

“Graham took me to this super secret Batman?—”

“More like Alfred—” Graham interjects unhelpfully.

“—like jewelry,” I continue ignoring the other man. “I bought a diamond for Frankie.”

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“I didn’t know you were marrying her.” Brooks is frowning even harder. “I would have cooked you a marriage meal.”

“I just decided we were getting married. I saw an opening”—I gesture with my hand as if I was pushing a curtain aside—“and made the most of it. Frankie wanted to close a deal, and the guy whose signature she needs on the contract is a fan of happy couples.”

“So it’s fake?” Brooks wonders.

“Nah, it’s real.”

“Frankie thinks it’s fake,” Dylan informs us. All of his intel comes from his fiancée, Nat, who is Frankie’s best friend, so his intel is solid, but it’s still irritating.

I contemplate throwing my glass of whiskey in his face but realize that would both ruin the felt on the table and also affect my chances of getting the wedding blanket. “It’s real.”

“But—“

“But nothing. She has a real diamond on her finger, and by taking it, she’s agreed to be married. Isn’t that how contracts work, Dylan?” He’s the lawyer. Why is he busting my chops over this?

”It is, and I respect your efforts.” He raises his glass. “Let me know if you need me to run interference.”

“What are you going to do? Lock Nat up in a tower?”

He gets a devilish grin on his face. “If I must. Enough about you. What’s going on, Brooks? You’re not all here tonight.”

Our chef grimaces. “Supply issues. Eggs, milk, and meat are getting scarce. I need a more innovative menu.”

Brooks spends more time thinking about food than any human. He’s a master in the kitchen, doing magical things like making cake, whipped cream, and marzipan look like toast and eggs. Eating at his restaurant is like a theme park for the mouth.

“If you got more innovative, you’d probably be making food out of shoes or footballs.”

“Leather is a natural product,” he muses.

Dylan throws a card at Brooks’ head, but since he’s a knitter and not a quarterback, it flies over Brooks’ shoulder.

“Congratulations on your marriage. Bring your bride over and I’ll make you a special meal,” Brooks invites.

“I never got a special meal,” Graham says.

“I did.” Dylan makes a toothy grin.

“Brooks?” Graham prods.

“I wanted a blanket, and Kaden is my favorite quarterback.” Brooks is unrepentant.

“The hell? I thought you’d say it was a mistake. That you overlooked me by accident, but it’s intentional?”

“You can come in and order any time.”

“This is billionaire prejudice.” Graham folds his arms across his chest.

Brooks smiles quietly. “Yes.”

Dylan and I fold over in laughter while Graham quietly fumes. Brooks silently pours everyone a refill of their whiskey and deals the next hand. He loses and Graham wins, but since Graham still wants that special meal, Brooks leaves the poker table victorious.

Graham stops me after Brooks leaves to go hunt in the forest for new ingredients, and Dylan heads home to Nat. I wish I was going home to Frankie, but she’s at her place cooking up some kind of plan to reel Jasper in. His name isn’t on the dotted line, but it’s only a matter of time.

“Is it because I win too much at poker?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t stop winning.”

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“We know.”

Graham sighs and switches the subject. “How’s the shoulder?”

“Pretty good. I’ve got an appointment at the therapist, but I should be able to start throwing next week. Brooks made me some special gelatin-heavy broth he said was good for my bone growth. I drink it in the mornings.”

“God, I hate you,” Graham says but with no real heat. “Things all good with Frankie? Luna hasn’t said much other than to ask me if the ring was real.”

“You said it was, right?”

“Yeah, and then she said, ‘if it wasn’t, Frankie would smash it in your face.’”

I smile widely. “That’s why I love her.”

Chapter Nine

FRANKIE

“Whoa.” Luna grabs my hand before I get a chance to sit down. “Okay, the picture didn’t do this thing justice, and the picture was damn good.”

“It’s nice.” I pull my hand back to sit down, not wanting to put too much focus on it.

It’s not our normal happy hour night, but things have been in chaos for the past few

months between Nat falling madly in love with another lawyer. Well, kind of a lawyer because he's not practicing anymore. He's retired for the most part and now knits.

That made me laugh at first. Dylan Wolfson is a very well-known lawyer here in the city. The man graduated from Harvard with honors, clerked for a Supreme Court justice, and opened his own law firm. I couldn't believe my ears when I heard he was going to give it all up to hand-make items.

Then I got to see some of his work and hear the story of how he started knitting because his mom loved to do it. He picked it up while she was sick in the hospital. Thankfully, she's okay now, but Dylan is presently knitting full-time. I have mad respect for the man. It's easy to lose sight of your initial motivation for pursuing a career in law.

Dylan also got my best friend Nat to rethink what she was doing in her life and to pursue her real dream of writing. Then we have Luna here, who dumped one of the supposed richest men in the city who gave her all kinds of knockoffs, from jewelry to bags.

Our normal, calm, and poised Luna burned it all in front of his house. That caused a media stir. The media's attention was not only drawn to the burn party but also to her subsequent escape with Graham Dassault. A man who is the richest man in the city.

While it has all died down to a degree, there are still people trying to poke her for questions. At our last happy hour at our normal place, Hot Spot, a reporter for Vanity Fair showed up. Now we switched our nights, and it is working out because their men have poker night at the same time.

Shit, I guess my "man" is at this poker night too. He's not my man, I mentally correct myself. No matter how good he is at pretending this is all real. It's all for show. I

must say his acting skills are truly exceptional. If he ended up not playing football, he'd do outstanding as an actor. He has the looks for it already.

“Nice? Really?” Nat takes a sip of her drink. “I think you’re enjoying that ring more than you want us to know because there is no need to have it on right now.” Crap, I should have taken it off. I thought about it for a split second, but Nat is right; I am enjoying wearing it.

“You never know who you might run into,” I say. They both stare at me, knowing I’m full of it. These girls know me better than I know myself sometimes. “Fine, I love it, okay?” I hold my hand out in front of myself to admire it. I haven’t taken it off since Kaden placed it there. “It’s feminine and pretty.” It embodies two qualities I have never had.

I’ve always been the smart girl who ignored my frizzy red hair in high school. It was the least of my worries. Back then I couldn’t care less. I was all about making good grades and finding a career.

I love my mom, but I didn’t want any part of myself to follow in her footsteps, whether it be financially or because of the heart longing to have the love of a man. It sounds terrible, but I needed to succeed to have security for myself. So I kept my head down and focused on my own success. I didn’t have time for men. In my experience, they caused more harm than help.

Sure, my mom has her career. She’s been a nurse her whole life, but her pursuit of love has been a painful one, even when she’s trying to hide her heartbreaks from me.

I’m not sure when exactly, but I’d fallen into the tomboy role. Now, when I actually want to get dolled up, I usually get strange looks, and it makes me oddly self-conscious. I loathe that I care what others think, but I can’t stop it.

"It suits you," Luna says. Nat nods in agreement.

"It really does."

"Are you two fucking with me?" Why aren't they asking me a million questions and telling me this is crazy? I mean, that's what I did when they started falling for their men.

"Frankie." Nat rolls her eyes. "We know you better than you think." The server comes over and places a martini in front of me. I pick it up and take a healthy swig.

"It's all for show."

"But is it?" Nat asks. "I mean, the man has been trying to date you from that first day. Even while you were busting his balls." I smirk, thinking about that night.

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“You can admit you’re into him,” Luna adds.

“I don’t date.” Not really. In a moment of weakness, I agreed to the one date with Kaden, but it doesn’t really count. It ended quickly. As soon as I found an excuse, I used it to distance myself from him.

“Well, that works because you’re not dating. You’re getting married,” Nat points out. I pick up my drink and finish it before ordering another.

“Guys, seriously. At most, he’s using this to kind of date me.”

“Do you hear yourself? That he’s after dating you and nothing more? He’s Kaden Gunner,” Nat says.

“You had no clue who Kaden Gunner was before I told you,” I point out.

“This may be true, but I’m sure most other people around here know. He’s not only a fancy football star, but he’s also got money and is not bad on the eyes. He doesn’t need to force anyone to date him. Kaden wants a date with you.” Nat has a point there.

“It’s because I said no and ignored him. Now it’s a challenge.”

“Whatever.” Nat lets out a sigh. “Anything I say, you’ll come up with a counter.”

“Habit. It comes with the job.” I pick up my drink and make a mock toast with it before I take another sip.

“All right.” Nat holds up her hands in defeat. “But why don’t you enjoy the Kaden ride while you’re on it? You might find that you like it.” She wiggles her brows.

I bet it is a very enjoyable ride. One many girls have had themselves and would love to have another. My chest grows tight at the thought. I pick up my drink and polish it off.

Then, I do the thing they never tell you to do while drinking. I text my supposed fiancé, letting him know that while we're engaged, he better not be giving out rides. We do, after all, have an image to maintain.

Because I'm, of course, not jealous. Why would I be? I can't stand Kaden... right?

Chapter Ten

KADEN

Frankie’s mom isn’t anything like I expected. Timid isn’t the right word. Maybe weak? When she put out her hand for a shake, her fingers felt like they might break off if I touched them the wrong way. She had leaned in for a kiss, but I don’t know her like that, so I backed off quickly. It might have been too quick because the lady is now sitting halfway across the room with a slight frown on her face as she takes in my apartment.

I live in a high-rise with a lot of security. It’s not the penthouse but a place on the fifth floor. It’s big but not the biggest in the complex. When you don’t come from money, even the smallest luxuries seem big.

Plus, one thing those financial people tell you during rookie camp is that the average lifespan of a football player is around five years, and that’s also about the same amount of time that it takes for a football player to lose all his money.

I'm abiding by the Gronk rule, which is no spending any contract money. Every penny I earn playing ball goes into investments. Some of my teammates are putting money into junk bonds or AI tech, but I figure, why should I be guessing what the market is going to do when my expertise is in throwing a football?

That's what Graham is for. He knows how to make one dollar into ten, so I just buy what Graham tells me to buy. It's been a good strategy because my bank account is fat, and some of my teammates are having to sell themselves to shit teams because they need the big contracts to pay off debt.

While my contract money reaps returns, I spend my endorsements on the apartment, the ranch back home, a car, and some games. Other than that, I live a simple life. It might be too simple for Mama Lodato, though.

"I'm sorry that my cupboards are kind of bare. I don't eat much at home." When Mama Lodato arrived, I went to look for something to serve her, but all I have in my fridge is water, Pedialyte, and eggs.

"That's all right. I came by unannounced. The children's drink you offered is intriguing. Do you have children?" A thin eyebrow arches up.

"No, ma'am. It's to replenish my electrolytes. It helps me stay hydrated and keep from cramping. There are other drinks out there that do that, but the kid's stuff has a lower sugar concentration, and I'm careful about what I eat and drink, although not so much now because we're in the off-season. How about I order something?" Damn, I'm rambling. Frankie's mom makes me nervous as hell. I rub my hands together and wonder when she's going to get here.

"Do you want kids?"

"Of course."

“Frankie’s not interested in parenthood.”

It’s my turn to be surprised. “Ah, really?”

Mama Lodato crosses her arms. “She didn’t discuss this with you? She likes kids, but she doesn’t want to have them herself. In fact, she’s against marriage altogether.”

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I nod, absorbing this information. A good offense starts with an understanding of the defense. Avoid the stronghold, find the weak spots, exploit the holes. If she's against marriage, then we don't marry. Not officially, and then one day, we're in Vegas and we pop into a chapel, and it's over before she knows it.

"Maybe that's why you like her? Because you know there's no chance of commitment?" Mama Lodato doesn't seem to like me much, which is an oddity because women generally love me. Being a quarterback is its own aphrodisiac. "I've known a lot of men in my time. I can read you like a book. One foot is halfway out the door before the clothes even hit the floor."

"I feel like you're judging me on my lack of food, but me being a bad cook is the reason for that, not because I'm poor husband material." And, not that I'd say this to Frankie's mama, but a Super Bowl ring wouldn't drag me away from her naked body.

"Frankie's very?—"

The doorbell rings before Mama Lodato gets her sentence out. "Hold that thought." It's definitely Frankie. She bangs on the door noisily. "Mom? Don't say anything! Kaden, let me in."

"I'm coming, Kitten."

"Kitten?" echoes Mama Lodato.

Over my shoulder, I send a wink toward the sofa. "We've got pet names and everything. This is the real deal." I toss open the door and hold out my arms for a

hug. “Missed you.”

Frankie ducks under my outstretched arms and speeds over to her mom. “What are you doing here?” she demands.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mama Lodato tuck a piece of hair behind her ear before answering, like she’s trying to figure out the best response. She and Frankie don’t see eye to eye on things, I’m guessing.

“Why are you here?” Her mom asks her.

“Because Kaden texted me and said you surprised him.”

Mama sends me a narrow-eyed glare. “Called for the calvary, did you?”

“Sure did.” I close the door.

“I told him you didn’t want to marry or have kids,” Mama Lodato informs Frankie.

The huge diamond on her finger sparkles as she throws up her hands. “Good, because I don’t.”

“Then why are you wearing an engagement ring?”

“It’s a long story, Mom.”

“This is about work, isn’t it? You can’t marry a man because you’re married to your job. I told you, honey: Men have needs, and unless you start putting them first, you’re going to be all alone.”

Frankie bites her lip, and I can tell she wants to say something that she’s going to

regret. I jump in because my job as Frankie's man is to smooth her path, even if the bump in the road is her relationship with her mom. "This is Frankie's first time here, too, so she doesn't know the sad state of my fridge. Kitten, I don't have any food, which is why I think your mom isn't as perky as she could be. Should I order in or do you want to go out? Brooks can probably squeeze us in."

Frankie has a hand on her mom's elbow. "We're not hungry."

Her mom shakes her off. "Speak for yourself. Let's order in. Something light, though. I'm watching my figure." She rubs her hands down her sides.

"Mom, stop," Frankie hisses.

I pretend to be absorbed in ordering some food.

Frankie's mom is here. She needs food or I'm doomed. Please save me.

Allergies?

Gaining weight?

On it

"We're good to go. Food will be here shortly. In the meantime, care for some electrolytes?"

Chapter Eleven

FRANKIE

Has my mom lost her damn mind? What is with everyone lately? I can't keep up anymore. Everyone is being unpredictable, and it's throwing me off.

My mom wanders around Kaden's home, assessing everything. She doesn't seem to like him or this place very much. I know she's just acting in my best interest, but it's still unnerving. I hadn't planned for them to even meet. This is all supposed to be fake, but with each day—no, scratch that—every second, it feels all the more real.

Why has her tone changed so much from the other day when she was asking me if I was dating Kaden? Usually, she is all about dating and falling in love. Now she's giving Kaden the third degree as though he is enemy number one.

It's almost laughable to see how nervous Kaden is. I can tell I'm not the only one my mom is throwing off. I could sense his panic in the texts he sent earlier alerting me that my mom was at his place.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper to my mom when Kaden goes to answer the door.

"What did you expect? You tell me you're not dating the football player?—"

"Kaden."

"Kaden." Mom rolls her eyes. The hell? "Then you show up with a ring on your finger."

Yeah, I'm still wearing it. I can't help myself. It's so delicate and pretty. So not me in any sense of the word. I want to be stronger and in charge. Right? Of course I don't, but with Kaden. I shake the thoughts from my head.

"It's only a ring, Mom." It's a stupid thing to say to her, and I know it the second it's out of my mouth. My mom is in love with love. She has never been married, and I know she wants it, but Mom is shit when it comes to picking men.

"Is that why you stare and play with it all the time?" Mom challenges. "Because it's just a ring that doesn't mean anything to you." She raises one eyebrow at me, knowing I'm full of shit.

"I do not." I use my other hand to cover the ring protectively on reflex. She continues to stare at me. "That still doesn't tell me why you're here." Mom's face softens, and she turns fully toward me, her hand cupping my cheek.

"To make sure you're not following in my footsteps when it comes to picking men." She gives me a smile.

"Food's here," Kaden says before I get a chance to respond to my mom.

He takes it over to the dining room table next to the kitchen. Kaden's home has an open floor plan. It's nice, really nice, but it feels almost staged. The furniture is simple, and there are no personal touches. It is also spotless with everything in its place. My bedroom looks like a bomb went off in it.

"Everything in here feels staged." Mom pulls out a chair. She plucked the thought right from my head. "Have you never used the table?"

"Not really." He shrugs. Where is she going with this?

"No family then." She takes a seat.

"Mom." I shoot her a glare that does nothing. Kaden pulls out a seat for me, and I take it. "We use our dining room table as my office."

"I have family back home, but my parents aren't big on city life. I go to visit them as often as my schedule allows."

"Frankie loves the city. Don't you?"

"It's all I really know." I haven't ever given it much thought. I was born and raised in the city and don't really know anything else.

"I'll grab plates." Kaden heads to the kitchen. I follow him. The open floor plan doesn't provide us with much privacy.

"I'm sorry," I tell him in a hushed tone. He grabs my hand and leads me into the pantry. It's mostly bare except for the containers of protein powder.

"Nothing to be sorry for. The meeting with the parents was inevitable."

"This is fake. You shouldn't have to be subjected to future in-laws," I remind him.

"If you say so."

"Hey." I poke him in the chest. "It's. Fake." Kaden grabs my hand to lift it. He kisses the tip of my finger I still have pointed.

"If you say so, Kitten."

“Seriously, Kaden?”

“Then why didn’t you tell her it’s fake?” Kaden stares down at me. I dropped everything and practically ran over here when he told me my mom was here. I’m in jeans and sneakers. I have no heels on, making Kaden tower over me more than usual. It should irk me, but it oddly lights a fire deep inside me, warming places I don’t want it to.

“I don’t know, okay!” I finally blurt out, frustrated. Why does it feel like there is a pressure pushing in every direction? I can’t come up with answers for my actions or nonactions at this point.

"Hey." Kaden's hand comes up to cup my cheeks. "I got you, Kitten." A rush of emotions fills me. He’s got me. I stare into his eyes, and I can see how serious he is.

“Why?” I whisper the question.

“I don’t think you’re ready for all that yet.”

“I’m ready for anything,” I counter, making him smirk. Why does that smile have to be not only charming but also playful? Kaden has a way of making light of things. It’s lessened the pressure that seems to always be pushing in around me.

“I know you are, but maybe I enjoy making things easier for you.” My eyes drop to his mouth. “You want a kiss?”

“Why do you think that?” I pull my eyes away from his lips, knowing I was busted.

“You want me to just take it? I’ll do that for you, Kitten.” Yes, my mind screams. His thumb strokes my bottom lip.

“I’m done with all these questions,” I huff, making that smirk of his turn into a full-blown smile. “You always do what you want anyway.”

“Baiting me?” He lifts a brow playfully.

“No, I’m—” His mouth comes down onto mine in a hard, claiming kiss, letting me know he’s not playing at all.

Chapter Twelve

KADEN

Frankie looks adorably pink when she slips out of the pantry. Her mama’s sharp eyes don’t miss a thing, but she pretends like her daughter and her daughter’s fake fiancé weren’t making out before the main course was served.

Dinner goes by quick, and soon Mama Lodato is saying goodbye. This time when she goes in for a cheek kiss, I don’t flinch.

She pinches her daughter’s cheek and says, “Don’t do anything I would do,” and then disappears, leaving behind a cloud of perfume.

“Sorry again for Mom popping up unannounced.”

“It’s all good.” I pick up the plates and stick them in the dishwasher.

“She liked you.” Frankie follows behind with the glasses.

“I was nervous as hell.” I wipe down the table.

“That was partly why she liked you. Kaden Gunner, famous quarterback, was intimidated by little old Maria Lodato.”

“Intimidated seems like an overreach.” I toss the paper towel into the trash and then grab a bottle of wine. “Want some?”

“I should go.” She looks toward the door.

“Now who’s intimidated?” I step toward her. The kiss in the pantry wasn’t enough for me. It was barely an appetizer. I need something more to feed the hunger growing inside me.

“It’s recognizing and playing to your strengths, and in this case, it’s not being around two hundred pounds of pure American beef.” She reaches for her purse, but I’m quicker than her, and I grab it first, tossing it into the living room, where it lands on the sofa. She pivots toward it, and that’s when I grab her and haul her into my arms.

“I’m glad you think I’m hunky.”

She wriggles in my grip, but I’m way stronger, and I easily carry her down the hall to my bedroom.

“I never said you were hunky. I said you were?—”

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“An irresistible piece of meat. That sounds like hunky to me.” I flash her a grin, which doesn’t result in her turning into a puddle of pliable female flesh.

Instead, she rolls her eyes and tries a different attack. “You’re disobeying my mom. She said not to do anything she would do, and being carried off into some random man’s bedroom is definitely something she would do.”

That gives me pause, but I don’t want to push this with Frankie. It’s a tender spot for her.

“Men who listen to their mamas are down on the bottom of the attractive meter. Women like rebels and thieves.”

“Since when?”

“The beginning of time.” I kick open my bedroom door and walk over to the big recliner situated in front of a massive TV.

“Why does your bedroom look like a game room?”

”Because it’s where I like to have fun.” I drop down in the chair.

She tries to escape, but I hold her in place, swinging her legs over one arm and wrapping my arms around her torso.

“I can just about imagine,” she says, and this time, her tone is slightly frosty.

“If you’re envisioning me playing FIFA soccer against some NBA players, then you’re spot on.”

“How much fun have you had with other women in here?”

Very frosty.

“Zero.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“My body’s a temple, Kitten. I’m not offering it to random people.”

”But you’re offering it to me.” She points to herself as if she’s not worth the whole world.

“Exactly. You’re not random. You’re fiery, bold, forthright Frankie. A great friend. A great lawyer. A great daughter. You’re everything.”

She blinks a few times, rendered speechless, and then pushes out of my embrace. “I need to leave.” She thrusts her hands through her hair. “I can’t deal with this. You need to take this back.” She tugs at the ring on her finger.

I cover her hands with my own. They tremble under my touch. Confused, I bring her fingers to my mouth. “Kitten, why are you scared?”

“This doesn’t make any sense, Kaden. I’m not famous football player girlfriend material. I don’t have blond hair. I don’t have a banging body. I’m not small and delicate like my mom. I’m big. Look at my hands.” She spreads her fingers wide.

“They’re pretty.” I don’t know what I’m looking at.

“I’ve got man hands.”

“They don’t look like man hands.” I place my hand next to hers. It’s small compared to mine. “They look like Frankie Lodato’s hands. Capable. Strong. Nice nails.” I run my finger across the top of one. “And I don’t want someone small and delicate. I like your size. You fit me.” I bring her close, letting her measure her frame against my bigger one. “If you were smaller, I’d be afraid to hurt you, but you’re right sized.” I brush the hair away from her face and catch her chin between my fingers. “Me sized.”

This time when I kiss her, I take my time. The pantry was a quick one, a stolen peck that I couldn’t resist. But now, in my bedroom with her trying to flee, I make a case for staying with my mouth and tongue. I lick the roof of her mouth, battle her tongue. I bite her lower lip and then soothe the wound with a lick. I kiss her deep and long until the fight drains out of her, until her arms find their way around my neck and she molds her strong, gorgeous body against mine.

I pick her up easily and press her jean-clad pussy against my denim-covered cock. Using the leather chair for support, I lean back and rub her up and down against my shaft, letting her feel my heat and want.

She shudders and starts to ride me all on her own. Her fingers bite into my shoulders as she levers herself along my aching erection. One of my hands palms her ass while the other skates up her back, marking each bone of her spine, the angel wings of her scapula, the elegant curve of her neck.

Her body tenses as she seeks a release that is just out of reach. I shift upright and walk toward the bed. As I lay her down on the mattress, I break off our kiss. “What size are you, Kitten?”

“You size.”

I smile. “That’s right.”

Chapter Thirteen

FRANKIE

Kaden grinds his cock against me. Why can't I be a dress girl? I hate these jeans now. They are between me and the pleasure Kaden is determined to give me. I don't understand why, but for now, I'm going to let it go. The man could go out and find a million girls, but he's here with me.

"Kaden." I run my hands up under his shirt. "Oh my God. How many abs do you have?!"

"You can count them if you like." Kaden uses one hand to reach behind him and pull his shirt over his head, tossing it away in one quick, smooth move.

"Holy shit," I whisper, running my hands down the man's broad chest. Not only can you see every muscle, but he has a thin layer of chest hair that makes him even more masculine. It's not one that's waxed and all shiny like a basted turkey. No, that's not Kaden. He might be a fancy, rich football player, but he's not really flashy. Honestly, he's nothing like I thought he would be.

"That makes the three-plus hour workout this morning worth it." Holy crap. My idea of a workout is walking a few city avenues. Don't judge me; they're a lot longer than you think in big cities.

"Three hours! I'd die."

"Can't have that." Kaden comes back down over me. His giant body easily covers mine. This man has a way of making me feel delicate and feminine. "You can lie right here and I'll give you three hours of pleasure. Get that heart rate up."

A small laugh leaves me. That might be a workout I can get behind. This time, it's me who pulls him down for a kiss. Kaden's lips claim mine, taking over. I didn't know a person could dominate a kiss, but Kaden does.

His mouth breaks from mine to trail kisses along my jaw. "You have too many clothes on." I nod in agreement as I tilt my head so that he can kiss down my neck. I suck in a breath when he rakes his teeth across my skin, making my nipples harden and my breasts heavy. The ache between my thighs grows with each second that passes.

Kaden is waking up my body in a way it has never been before. What is he doing to me?

"I'm loving on you." I hadn't meant to say that out loud.

"Loving?" I ask dubiously.

"You'll see soon enough, Kitten. I'm a patient man, and you need me to prove myself."

"And are you up for the challenge?"

"I'm up for whatever I need to be when it comes to you." Kaden pulls my shirt off before going for my bra next. His fingers make quick work of removing it in record time. The man really is good with his hands.

"You're too good at that." He removed it quickly, way quicker than I could ever do it

myself, and I put on a bra almost every day. I'm not sure what I think about that.

"I've wanted to see you laid out on my bed naked for an eternity. Fuck, yes, I'm fast." To prove his point, he goes for the button of my jeans next, pulling them down my legs, taking them and my shoes with them until I'm in nothing but a pair of pink panties.

"I didn't know I was going to be naked in front of anyone today," I blurt out.

"Pink panties." Kaden smirks, giving a small shake of his head.

"What's wrong with pink panties?"

"Nothing, I just know you're hiding them." His finger trails across the top of them where there are little ruffles. I lay my arm over my stomach. Kaden pushes it away. "No hiding from me. Not when you're in my bed."

"I'm naked," I huff. He's all hard abs, and my stomach is the opposite.

"I know, and I'm taking it in." Kaden drops back onto his knees between my spread thighs, his eyes taking in every inch of me. "You have no reason to hide any of it from me."

He trails his fingers up my thigh and over my panty-covered sex. "This is for me." His thumb presses firmly against my clit. My back bows off the bed. "This little wet spot." I want to tell him it's for him and only him. That no one has ever garnered this sort of reaction from my body. That I've never even allowed anyone the opportunity to.

"Kaden," I moan softly as he gently traces circles on my clit. "Faster." I wiggle, needing more. He leans down over me, his mouth going to my breast.

"I give the orders when I've got my hands on your pussy." He sucks my nipple into his mouth, leaving me unable to formulate a clever response. All that comes from my lips is a moan. Kaden moves to the other side, giving it the same attention. His fingers are still moving too slowly.

"Kaden," I whine, needing more.

"I've got you, Kitten. I'll get you there, but I'm selfish." My eyes flutter open to meet his. "The first time you come, it will be against my face."

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"Yes," I agree. I feel an uncontrollable urge to spread my legs wider.

"You want that, Kitten? To come against my face?" I nod. His fingers stop moving.

"Say it," Kaden orders.

"Make me come against your face!"

"It would be my pleasure." He presses a hard kiss to my mouth before sliding down my body.

He trails kisses down my belly until his broad shoulders come to rest between my thighs. I'm so worked up, I lift my hips, not caring that I'm still wearing my panties. I want his mouth on me more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

Kaden's fingers dip into my panties, pulling them to the side. He lets out a groan before burying his face between my thighs. My fingers dig into the bedding as his tongue delves between the folds of my sex. It's too much. I don't want this to be over yet, but I'm too primed.

When he sucks my clit into his mouth, his tongue flicking back and forth, I explode. Pleasure courses through my body, making my legs shake. Kaden keeps going. His tongue still worships my clit, milking shockwaves from my body until it gives out and I melt into the mattress.

My hips jerk when Kaden presses a kiss to my overly sensitive clit. He lifts his head, his eyes meeting mine. Any discontent I had with myself for coming too fast washes away. I can tell from Kaden's heated, hungry expression he's far from done.

Chapter Fourteen

KADEN

“I have to go see my physical therapist this morning. Wanna come?” I pull on a compression T-shirt and enjoy the disappointed expression in Frankie’s eyes as the fabric covers up my bare chest.

She flops back onto the mattress and covers her eyes with an arm. “As scintillating as that sounds, I’m going to pass. I want to look over the contract documents again that Jasper sent over.”

I pause in the process of putting on my socks. “You got the deal?” She hadn’t told me.

“Not yet, but it’s looking promising. He sent out the paperwork to a couple of firms. We’re to redline it and return with our counter. He’s really thorough. Usually you just agree on the broad strokes like we’re going to supply x amount of steel frames by x date and you will pay us y dollars and let the lawyers hammer everything out afterward, but he wants agreement even on the small details. It’s smart to do it this way, to be honest, because then you aren’t super disappointed down the road when you’re dickering over who is going to pay the transport fee.”

“Makes sense.” I don’t know much about business. My friend Dylan still reviews all my contracts because that stuff gives me a headache. “Want me to give you a ride?”

“I need to stop at home first, which is twenty minutes away. I can’t go into the office wearing jeans and one of your T-shirts.” She tugs on the front of her shirt.

“That’s the only thing you should wear.”

“It has your name on the back.” She twists and taps at the vinyl decals that spell out GUNNER.

“Exactly. Then everyone knows you’re mine.” I swoop down and kiss her until she’s panting and dewy-eyed. Thoughts of leaving to go to physical therapy where they will make me pull on a rubber band a hundred times fade as my hard-on swells to aching proportions. I reach down to touch her sweet pussy, but her hand blocks my way.

“I can’t,” she says with honest regret in her eyes. “I really want to close this deal.”

I swallow a sigh and lever myself to an upright position. “Right. You should go and do that.” I adjust myself and head toward the bathroom as best I can with the morning wood bobbing in front of me like a damned abandoned pole.

“Should I tell the Uber to pick me up at the entrance or is there a different pickup place?”

“I’ll lose my mancard if I let you take an Uber,” I call over my shoulder.

“Those aren’t real.”

“Ubers are very real.”

“Kaden.”

“Okay, Ubers aren’t allowed at this building. It’s against the building code. Too downmarket.” I turn on the cold water faucet in the bathroom.

“Are you serious?”

“Yep,” I lie. I dunk my head under the stream of freezing water and let the chill travel to my balls. My back teeth start to ache from the pain of the cold, but the hard-on eases. I run a quick towel over my head and meet Frankie in the living room. She’s still wearing my T-shirt. I wasn’t kidding when I said that was the only thing she should ever wear. It feels more effective than a ring on the finger. Like my name is there on her back. Who’s going to touch her while she’s wearing a GUNNER T-shirt? No one with a lick of sense.

The ride to her place is too short, and I contemplate driving around in a circle, maybe to the next state, just to spend more time with her, but Frankie taps on the glass and says, “This is me,” so I’m forced to pull over.

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“I’ll pick you up from your office. Six sound good?”

“Ubers are allowed at my office, so I can find my own way home.” Her hand is on the latch.

I reach out and grasp her arm. “You’re running away from me.”

“I’m going to work.” She tugs herself out of my grip. “I’ll see you later, Kaden. Last night was great. Really.”

I’ve never heard a kiss-off delivered so kindly, but she’s got shit to do, and delaying her won’t put her in a better frame of mind. I’m going to punt and return with a better offensive plan. “All right, Kitten, but don’t call the Uber because I’ll have to fight him, and that would look bad in front of your coworkers.”

I zip off before she can deliver a retort. At physical therapy, I ask for some advice.

“If a woman says that she’s too busy to see you, is she really too busy, or is that an excuse?”

My therapist crunches his brows together. “If a woman said that to you, she’s really too busy. If she said it to me, it would be an excuse.” He hands me a different colored band and tells me to repeat my reps.

“Nah, how is any woman too busy if Gunner wants to see her? My sister’s married, and she’d run her husband over if you called,” says my teammate Hal. He’s a lineman.

The other Mavericks player in the therapy room, Danny, pushes himself up on one elbow. “Did someone really give you the ‘I’m busy’ excuse?”

“It seemed legit at the time.”

Danny shakes his head. “You’re doomed, man. Is she an actress or pop star? Because how are you getting the Heisman shaft?”

He holds out an arm, mimicking the famous Heisman trophy stance.

“What are my options?” I ask, ignoring the doomed part.

“Flowers,” Danny says.

“No way.” Hal shakes his head. “Women hate flowers these days. It’s meaningless. I bought my girl roses on Valentine’s Day, and she was disgusted. You have to do a gift, and it can’t be chocolates either. Like I had to get hand-dipped tangerines from Belgium and a necklace from a brand that only sells jewelry four times a year to make up for the roses snafu.”

“Hal’s right,” my therapist says. “You have to give her something special and unique, or she’ll be too busy for you for the rest of your life.”

That’s grim.

Chapter Fifteen

FRANKIE

There are only so many times I can go over this contract at this point. I know I’m using it to keep myself busy. I went ahead and sent it over to Kyle and Turner. This is

supposed to be a team thing, but they bounced out of here two hours ago.

I overheard them talking about going to play golf or some boring shit. I, of course, wasn't invited. It's not that I even remotely wanted to go; it's the fact that they didn't even give me the option.

The boys won't invite you to their club if you're better at their job than them. It's not that they're incompetent, but if they can drag ass, they will. They don't have anything to prove, and I'm starting to wonder if I do. Both of them know I'll get this done and wrapped up in a bow.

There's nothing more that I want than to send it straight to my boss Evan, but that will get twisted and used against me if I do. They would claim that I hadn't given them a chance to participate. They love to play the victim when it's convenient for them.

They both have been radio silent to me about this contract since the dinner. In fact, the only email I received was from Turner asking me if my fiancé could get tickets at a discounted price to football games.

I grimace as my email receives a reply from Kyle. All it says is that it looks good, but I know he didn't read shit. It's been thirty seconds since I sent it, and the contract is over fifty pages. I close my laptop, packing up for the day.

When I step off the elevator, Kaden is standing there, leaning up against the wall, one foot crossed over the other. The second his eyes land on me, a smile spreads across his handsome face.

A face that had been between my thighs last night. The man is way too handsome for his own good and my self-control.

"You're here," I blurt out. It's rude, but I suppose I keep thinking he might be tired of my shit. I'm me, and I even get tired of my own shit. It shouldn't surprise me that he showed up. He said he was going to, and he hasn't gone back on his word since we started whatever this is between us. I'm guessing that's not the only reason he showed up either. Probably thought I was going to try to dip out on him.

"Where else would I be?" He pushes off the wall, heading straight toward me. I stand there as he drops a kiss on my lips as if it's the most natural thing in the whole world. "I missed you." Kaden takes my hand. I don't miss the security guards at the front desk who are watching all of this.

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The news of my engagement to Kaden quickly spread throughout the building. I swear a couple of the men I worked with gave me a few glances. I'm sure they were wondering why Kaden Gunner was engaged to me. I ignored it all.

"I might have missed you." There was no might about it. I have missed him, and it irks me.

"Good, because I have plans for us."

"Are you calling it plans? Because if you say date, I might run."

Kaden smirks, letting me know I'm right. "You can try and run," he says playfully, but I see a glint in his eyes, as if daring me so that he can chase. It sends desire firing through my veins.

"Not in these heels." Kaden holds the passenger door open for me. I slip inside. "What do you have planned for us?" I ask when he takes off from the curb.

"It's a surprise."

"Surprises aren't really my thing." Well, they never have been before Kaden, but I can't help the little spark of excitement that flutters in my belly.

"I wanted to take my woman out."

"So you planned a date. Just for me?"

“I did.”

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“Are you a curious kitten?”

I snort a laugh. That’s really sexy, Frankie. I am curious. I haven’t been on a ton of dates. Hell, only a couple, if I can recall, and they might not have been full dates but more friends hanging out. Who knows? They have always been sporty dates to the batting cages or go-karts. Which isn’t the worst thing. Sure, it can be fun, but men put me in this box of the tomboy. I know I don’t help with that, but it does burn.

"Fine, I'll be surprised."

"That's the hope." He reaches over and places his hand on my thigh.

I'm more curious when he pulls up to the Bloomem Court at The Plaza. This place is super fancy. There is luxury shopping on the first three floors. The fourth and fifth floors house a spa, while the top floor features The Gilded Teapot.

"Not sure if I'm dressed for this place." Here, I wanted to be taken somewhere different, and now I'm complaining about it.

"That's part of it." He squeezes my thigh. "Stay put, Kitten." Kaden hops out of the vehicle, jogging around to open the door for me. I take his hand. He pulls me into him, dropping another kiss on me.

"Mr. Gunner." Kaden steps back, tucking me into his side. An older woman in a breathtaking Chanel tweed quilted suit greets us. Yes, I can spot designers. Luna is, after all, my best friend, and maybe I enjoy the pretty suits that are a touch more feminine than what I wear every day.

"Mrs. Metzger?" he asks, tossing the keys to the valet as he passes.

"That's me. Is this her?" The woman swings her attention to me.

"Hi." I try to give a little wave, but the woman rushes me, kissing both of my cheeks.

"A redhead." The woman beams at me. "Redheads are my favorite." She winks at me.

"Don't tell anyone that, but there are so many colors that just simply work best for you."

"Okay," I say, not sure how else to respond. "I'm sorry, can I have a moment with my fiancé?"

"Of course!" The woman steps back. I grab the front of Kaden's button-up shirt and yank him back a few steps.

"Did you bring me here for a makeover?" I glare up at him.

"If I'm giving you a makeover, Kitten, it would only be me stripping you naked and wiping off that powder you put on your face that covers up your freckles." I find myself melting into Kaden.

"Then, why are we here?"

"I thought we could get you something to wear. The Gilded Teapot has a weird-ass dress code. I don't quite understand, but Ms. Metzger here told me she's got it covered."

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I swallow. "We're going to The Gilded Teapot?" I search his face.

"We are." A slow, sexy smile spreads across his face.

There is no way this is really happening. This is the nicest gesture anyone has ever done for me. Who would have thought that Kaden Gunner would be the one extending it to me?

I was little when my grandma passed away, but she'd left me a set of teacups and pots. We always pretended to have tea. It's one of my favorite childhood memories.

It turned into a hobby, I suppose. I collect teacups and pots, but that's my secret.

Kaden tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. His hand drops to rest on the column of my neck. "You don't have to hide from me." Kaden's thumb brushes back and forth over my pulse. "When you're with me, I take care of you."

"I—"

"I know you can take care of yourself. That's not the point. I need to take care of you."

"Need?"

"As crazy as it sounds, yeah, I need to."

"Well, ah." I lick my lips. "If you need to, who am I to stop you?"

"That's my girl."

I really do want to be his girl.... and I hate that as strong as I present myself to the world, I can't bring myself to tell him that.

Chapter Sixteen

KADEN

"Would you like a few more sandwiches, Mr. Gunner? The refills are free, although I'm sure you can afford all the sandwiches you want." The waiter trips over his words in his eagerness to serve me, but I appreciate the service. He must've noticed how I inhaled the little slivers of bread and cheese spread that filled the second level of the three-tiered serving dish.

The top has desserts, and the bottom is filled with scones. I went straight for the middle section, which had four different kinds of sandwiches: a roast beef one, a tuna one, one with only cucumbers and some white spread, and a salmon one. They were all good, although the cucumber one kind of just tasted like I was eating the bagel and cream cheese without the bagel.

"Can you just make me one big roast beef sandwich instead of like twenty small ones?"

Ryan, the waiter, grimaces. "I'm sorry. All the items are pre-made, but no one is going to blink an eye if you eat twenty little sandwiches. Honestly, I don't think we've ever had an athlete here before. When we saw your name on the reservation sheet, we thought it was your mom or sister."

The poor man wrings his hands. I think if I press the issue, he might start crying. "It's all good. Fill her up." I point to the empty tier. He nods and hustles off.

Frankie watches this whole exchange with amusement. “Did you look at the menu online or is this all a surprise?”

“I couldn’t really understand it. When it said finger sandwiches I thought it meant we’d eat sandwiches with our fingers, not that the slices would be a finger’s width.” I hook my finger around the delicate handle of the teacup and take a sip. It’s more flavorful than I thought it would be.

“We can leave if you want.”

“No way. This is cool. The sandwiches are tasty, and these scones and jam are the bomb. It’s just smaller servings than I’m used to. It’s pretty here.” I stretch out my legs under the marble-topped table. The soft booths are all covered in a faded mint-green velvet, and a lighter green floral pattern is papered onto the walls.

The carpet is a plush, deep brown, giving almost a woodland feel to the place. Three massive crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, and golden sconces placed between the arched windows provide the light. Frankie looks like a pink jewel in the midst of the greenery, like a flower blooming in the forest.

Her suit coat and skirt cost almost as much as a car, but her face glowed when Mrs. Metzger brought it out. I’d have paid more than what the ring cost to see that expression on her face.

“Not as pretty as you, though.” I nudge her leg under the table.

“Not gonna lie, I love this suit.” She runs a hand over the fabric. It’s tweed, Mrs. Metzger explained. Large pink yarns woven with white and gray, and even real gold threads throughout. “It’s actually so comfortable. Luna is always saying how it’s like wearing a sweater, but I didn’t believe her.”

That is because the lining is made of silk and stitched to the tweed, also per Mrs. Metzer.

“What made you think of this?”

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“You’re a girly girl, and this seems like a thing girly girls would like.”

Both her eyebrows climb up. “You think I’m a girly girl?”

I squeeze my chin between my thumb and index finger. “Is this a trick question?”

“No, but Luna’s the one in our friend group that’s known for being, well, extra girly. She loves clothes and makeup and doing her nails. Every time you see her, she looks gorgeous.”

“Sounds like you. Every time I see you, you’re looking like you walked out of a fashion magazine. Even when you’re tired from working, heads are turning when you enter a room.”

She opens her mouth to say something and then snaps it shut. With a shake of her head, she says, “I was going to argue but then thought, why? If that’s your impression of me, I’m happy.”

“Good. Glad we’re on the same page.”

The waiter appears with a plate piled with sandwiches. A couple of ladies next to us burst out in laughter. I wink at them and take the plate. “Thanks, man.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Gunner.” He leans in close and moves his hand to the side to reveal a marker. “Would you sign my apron?”

“Sure, but not until after we eat. I’m having dinner with my girl right now”—I nod

toward Frankie—“and she deserves my attention. Know what I mean?”

Ryan nods fervently. “I do. Sorry. I’ll wait.” He backs away, almost genuflecting. There’s a certain kind of reverence fans have for me that makes me bashful. All I do is throw a pigskin on Sundays.

I feel a nudge against my foot and look up to see Frankie grinning at me. “You’re cute when you’re shy.”

“Cute?” I scoff in mock indignation. “I’m a burly quarterback.” I flex my arm.

Our neighbors clap.

Rueful, I lower my arm down and turn to Frankie for help.

“He doesn’t get out of the locker room much,” she says, leaning toward the older ladies.

“Sweetheart, who cares?” cackles one of the white hairs wearing a similar tweed suit, only hers is topped off by a choker of fat pearls. Need to get a set of those for Frankie. “If I were your age, I’d be locking him in a room and working him until we were both sweating.”

She waves a hand in front of her face while Frankie turns bright red.

“You heard her, Frankie. Time to lock me up.” I hold out my hands.

“And I’ll throw away the key,” she grouches.

“That’s the spirit,” encourages the older woman.

Frankie tosses her napkin on the table in frustration, and I roar with laughter. “I’m holding you to that promise later tonight,” I tell her.

“This is not Gilded Teapot appropriate conversation,” she replies primly, but there’s a light in her eyes that wasn’t there when I picked her up at her office. Making this girl smile makes my chest swell like I’ve thrown a four-touchdown game. I’ve got to lock her down or I’m not worth a penny of my new contract.

Chapter Seventeen

FRANKIE

I’m not sure what to make of this man. Kaden Gunner is turning out to be nothing that I keep trying to label him. I should know better than most to not judge from a glance or a few people's comments. Even my own.

I keep wanting to put him into this box when he doesn’t fit, but damn do I keep trying because putting him in that box is safe. It’s a tactic I learned long ago to protect myself and keep men at a distance. Up until Kaden, it worked like a charm. The thing is, I believe it’s far too late and I’m too deep into this. It’s as though he’s opened Pandora’s box, and now there is no closing it for me.

The older ladies at The Gilded Teapot had only been teasing earlier, but there was still a spark of jealousy I felt. It wasn’t necessarily directed at them; their comments had only nudged my mind in the direction of thinking about the possibility of anyone being with Kaden. Those thoughts hadn’t sat well with me.

That’s when reality started to truly sink in, that I could push Kaden away all I wanted, but that sharp pain of jealousy I’d have if I saw him with someone else wasn’t going away. Our lives are already intertwined because of our friend group. Which means that I will see Kaden for the rest of my life, whether I want to or not, at my

girlfriends' weddings or in tabloids.

"You're quiet," Kaden says when we're back in his car. "Are you okay?"

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"Only thinking." I give him a smile, wanting to reassure him. Everything he did today was special, and I don't want him to doubt that. It's me. I'm in doubt.

"Should I worry?"

"No." I let out a small laugh.

"I don't want to call you a liar, but you're not selling me on this story."

"And how would you know?" I ask playfully.

"Since the moment I've met you, Frankie, you've had my eye. I know when one of your smiles is fake and when one is real."

"Maybe I was debating if I should have you take me home or back to your place." That had been in the back of my mind. If I stopped fighting it, I could simply fall right into Kaden.

"Then, allow me." When he hits the next light, he takes a left, which is toward his home and not mine.

"If my mom shows up—" I give a shrug, letting him know it would be his problem and not mine, but I know that's not the truth. I love my mom and wouldn't let her get into it with him.

"Not worried about your mom." He returns my shrug.

"She means well. But it's her that is bad with men. I've never been a big dater or, well, anything, really."

"But she is?"

"If anyone should know men, it's my mom. She's in love with the idea of love. Not sure she has ever really found it, but she wants to."

"And seeing that has deterred you."

I nod, really thinking about how big of an impact it has had on me.

"And I know that and never saw a problem with it." I let out a small laugh. "Until I tried to talk some guys at a bar into giving me their table one night."

That was the night I met Gunner, and Nat fell hard for Dylan. It wasn't only Kaden that had started me down a different path that night. So many other things changed too. For so long, I had my own girls club, and we were all single together.

Now they have all gone and fallen head over heels in love. I see them and whatispossible. All of those things had set me on a different path. Made me believe deep down inside that I could have what they have too.

"I've never been so happy to hang out in a bar before. Fate, Kitten," Kaden says with a full-on cocky smile, as if he's been playing this long game before we'd met.

The old me would have denied myself the chance to have something with Kaden just to make a point. But I'm no longer that person. He has slowly chipped away at the wall I had up, and now I can't go back. I don't want to go back.

"You really believe in fate?" I ask when Kaden pulls down into the underground

parking garage of his building.

“I do. It’s a big world out there, and if I had picked another bar that night—” He shakes his head, an almost pissed-off expression crossing his face at the mere idea.

“I don’t know, Kaden,” I say when he puts the car into park. I unclip my seat belt and climb over. He sees what I’m doing, pushing his seat back quickly to make sure I have the room I need to straddle him. “You’re rather skilled at getting what you want. I think you would have found me.”

“So either way, you’d be mine.” His hands slide to my ass, gripping me there. Kaden tugs me in closer so I can feel his hardcock. A tiny moan leaves me. “God knows I’ve been waiting.” He places a kiss on my neck.

“Holy, how long have you been waiting? I’ve only made you chase a month at most.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, Kitten. I’ve been waiting my whole life.” He sucks on my neck; my eyes fall closed, thinking about how that feels between my thighs. I grind against his cock. “You need me?”

“Yes.” I sink my fingers into his hair, dropping my head back so he can keep on kissing me, loving on me.

I think I’ve needed him my whole life too.

Chapter Eighteen

KADEN

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Ikissed the breath out of her, or maybe it was the other way around. Our lips were locked. The need to feel her against me was urgent. I use the hand not tangled in her hair to grab her ass, pulling her closer to me. “Inside?” I say, staring at her wet lips.

Her little pink tongue darts out as if to taste me on her mouth, and I nearly come in my pants.

“Yes. Good idea.”

I fumble with the door handle, and we spill out of the car like just birthed foals, all wobbly legs and poor coordination. I lean on the car door and help to steady her.

The distance between my assigned parking spot and the elevator lobby is twenty feet, but it feels like a hundred yards as Frankie and I make our way inside.

“We’re in that much of a hurry?” she teases.

“Yes.” But I slow down when the rapid click of her heels against the pavement registers. I hadn’t realized I was making her run.

She squeezes my hand and leans into me. I scoop her up and jog the rest of the way, eager to get inside my apartment and then inside her. Only waiting at the elevator is an older man with a bag of groceries. His eyebrows beetle together as he takes in the scene.

“Your missus hurt?” he asks.

I slowly let Frankie down. “Her heels are too high. She’s not good with them, but she likes how they look.”

Frankie punches me. “You mean you like how they look.”

“Can’t deny that.”

The old man chuckles, his brown bag rustling with the rise of his chest. “You remind me of myself and the missus. She likes her pretty things even if they aren’t so comfortable.”

“That’s what we’re here for.”

“Right you are.”

The elevator door dings, and he gestures for us to get in. I move strategically behind Frankie so my erection isn’t shoving itself in the old man’s face. Inside the small car, I stare at the numbers, willing them to rise faster. The tweed suit she’s wearing isn’t the sexiest outfit I’ve seen her wear. It’s demure and the fact that even her arms are covered, and yet I have to shove my hands in my pockets so that I’m not tempted to cup Frankie’s ass or tangle her hair. But it doesn’t really do much good. Even the smell of her perfume makes me hard.

The car stops on the fifth floor, and I whisk Frankie out the door before the old man can say goodbye. The moment we’re in my apartment, my hands get to work removing her heels and pants. The material falls to the floor, freeing her to straddle my waist. I palm her ass with one hand and move her down against my shaft.

She wriggles against me, wanting more and better contact. I look around for the nearest flat surface and spot the table near the door that I toss my keys on. I drop her ass on that tiny ledge and fumble with my pants.

I tear her panties, and Frankie quickly removes her jacket, blouse and bra, leaving her naked. She palms my cock. My eyes roll into the back of my head. "I'm going to last all of two seconds. Hold on, baby."

I drop down to my knees and spread her legs over my shoulders. "God, look at your pretty peach pussy. Like the fruit in the Garden of Eden. No way a man could avoid taking a bite." I lean forward and fill my lungs with her scent. Her sex is wet and her pussy lips puffy. I kiss her cunt, licking the peach from nub to the pucker of her asshole and then dive in, tonguing that wet, hot channel until her fingers are clawing at my skull.

"Oh, Kaden, God, please." She says other things that I can't make out, but I know they all mean the same thing. She wants to come. I spread her juicy lips apart with my thumbs and eat her until she screams.

She's still trembling and shaking when I surge to my feet and lift her onto my cock. "It's going to hurt for just a second, Kitten. Just breathe through it."

Frankie releases a shaky breath and then gives me the go-ahead. I lower her slowly, letting her get used to the feel of my cockhead inside the tight channel.

"Kaden, I don't know," she squeaks. Her hand comes to rest on my still-covered chest. I know she feels my heart pounding a hundred miles per hour.

"Unbutton my shirt." I shift slightly, bracing my legs. We should've been doing this lying down on my soft bed, but I couldn't fucking wait. I still can't. My cock is throbbing, and the need to shoot my load inside of her is relentless. Want is crawling down my spine. Hunger is at my throat, squeezing the air out of it. The only thought I have in my head is to be inside her, to fill her up, to claim her. I have to have her.

With shaking hands, her fingers dance down the front of my shirt. The occasional

contact with my skin makes me tremble. I've faced down three hundred pound all-star linemen without any problem, but I'm putty in this girl's hands.

"Done," she whispers.

"Arms around me," I order. When she does, I pick her up, my cock slipping free. It bounces under her ass, the tip wet with her juice. Slowly I cross the room and make my way down to the bedroom.

"I'll take it as slow as you need, Kitten, but I'm having you tonight. I'm putting my cock inside that sweet cunt of yours, and I'm going to fill you with my cum. If you don't want that, you gotta tell me right fucking now."

Chapter Nineteen

FRANKIE

Kaden is good with his mouth all around. His words only inflame the needy desire coursing through my body. I've never wanted anything more than I want him at this moment.

"I want this," I tell him as he lays me down on his bed. "Be gentle with me." The man is big all over.

"I know, Kitten. When we're alone and I've got my hands on you, you're my sweet girl." He brushes his mouth against mine. "Only sweet for me."

"Only for you," I whisper. I hadn't meant for him to be gentle with all of me. At least I hadn't thought I did, but Kaden knew. He always knows when it comes to me.

Kaden presses another kiss to my mouth before he pushes off the rest of his clothes. I sit up on my elbows to watch him. The man is a piece of art. I don't want to miss a second of him undressing.

"Frankie." Kaden wraps his hand around his cock; the head is an angry red. A bead of cum drips from the tip. I lick my lips, wondering what he tastes like. "Don't."

Kaden pounces, coming back down over me. His cock grazes against my sex, sliding through my wet folds easily to find my opening.

"Not right now, Kitten. You can suck it all you want later." He kisses down my jaw to my ear. "If you're a good girl, that is." His naughty words only heighten my desire

for him. The throb between my thighs grows unbearable, but I'm too shy to admit the effect his words are having on me.

"You—" I'm cut off by Kaden's mouth before I can give him a tart response. I kiss him back, my tongue matching each of his strokes.

"See, it's not hard to be a good girl." Kaden's knees push my legs farther apart, his cock sinking in another inch. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I want to be his good girl, but I hold back. "The idea of sucking my cock got you this wet."

"Kaden." I grip his shoulders. That fucking mouth of his is going to make me orgasm from his dirty talk.

I've heard bullshit locker room talk in the office. It always irked me, but Kaden's filthy words are different. I know they are only for me. That he sees me in a way I can't bring myself to see. Kaden's intent is to turn me on. I also think it's a way he shows me how deeply he understands me.

"I need to be inside you, Kitten." I lift my hips, trying to get what I need. Wanting him to make me his. "Not so fast. Not until you acknowledge that you're mine. That no other will ever know what you feel like besides me."

"I don't want anyone else. I never have."

"Me either." A sexy smile spreads across his handsome face. "I'm all yours, Kitten."

"Then stop teasing me." I trail my fingers down his back, feeling his muscles flex under my touch. I lick my lips.

"I'll go slow. I never want to hurt you." He gets the last part out through gritted teeth as he sinks more into me.

“I need you, Kaden.” I give Kaden the dirty talk I know he needs from me.

“Kitten, fuck, I can’t. Forgive me.” He sinks the rest of the way inside me. A sharp pain sears through me; my thighs spread more to make room for every inch of him. His massive body covers mine easily.

Kaden buries his face in my neck; a low groan rumbles through his whole body and into mine. His hips jerk, and I feel his warm release spill inside of me. I’m not on anything, but I don’t think Kaden cares.

My sex flutters around his cock, making it all the more clear what my body thinks of Kaden coming inside of me.

“How are you getting tighter?” Kaden's hips jerk again.

“Did you, ah?—”

“Come? Yeah.” He lifts his head and shakes it. “Twice.” Kaden's brows furrow together, disappointed in himself. I’m not. I’m pretty sure him coming twice from sinking inside of me is going to stroke my ego for the rest of time.

I burst into laughter.

Kaden pulls out and thrusts back into me. My laughter turns into a moan.

“How are you still hard?” I'm not complaining, though. That sharp pain I’d felt is long gone. Kaden had diverted my attention.

“You’re naked in my bed, Kitten. I get hard over you even when you’re busting my balls.”

“Good, because I’ll never stop.” I lift my hips, encouraging him to take me.

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“Never want you to stop.”

“Then don’t. Take me, Kaden. Show me how badly you want me.”

“Careful, Kitten.”

“I don’t want to be careful. I want you.”

Kaden's nostrils flare. He leans down, claiming my mouth in a rough kiss. I can still taste myself on his tongue as they swirl together. Kaden's deep thrusts into me match the rhythm. He shifts his hips, hitting a different spot inside of me. It makes my breath hitch, breaking our kiss.

It dawns on me as I stare up into Kaden’s intense gaze that I am completely at this man’s mercy. He could take what he wants. The weight and power of his body would be unstoppable. That should terrify me, but it doesn’t. It is freeing. I know the only reason that is possible is because I trust him.

“There you go, love. Let go, I've got you.”

“Promise?” My nails dig into his back. Kaden’s thrusts grow longer and harder, each one with intent. I hold his eyes as he drives into me, giving me a pleasure I’ve never experienced before. I can see why people get addicted to this feeling.

“Promise.” Kaden suddenly rises to his knees, his hands gripping my hips. He pulls my body to meet each of his thrusts. His eyes roam over me with lust, taking in every exposed inch of me. It is too much. I am so close, but I need something more. Kaden

senses it too. “Come for me.” He barks out the harsh order.

My body obeys his command. I cry out his name as the orgasm takes over, exploding through every cell in my body.

Kaden comes down over me, his body caging mine in as he thrusts hard one last time, his knees digging into the mattress to make sure he gets as deep inside of me as he can reach... making sure no part of me is left unmarked by him.

Chapter Twenty

KADEN

“I ordered food,” I shout toward the bedroom. It’s ten in the morning, and I’ve done nothing this week but have sex with Frankie and go to physical therapy. Usually I hate the off-season because it’s just the drudgery of maintaining my physical form without the fun of game week. This off-season, in particular, has been endlessly long due to my season-ending injury and subsequent surgery, but Frankie is making this time feel like an actual vacation.

Not sure what I’d do without her. Good thing I won’t have to find out. We’re getting married soon, and that’s that.

Frankie pops her head out. There’s a towel over her hair, and her skin is flushed from the hot water. She looks edible. Despite having just had sex, my cock stirs. Down, boy. “I could have made something,” she tells me.

“Have to give Brooks something to do.”

“He runs a three-star Michelin restaurant. He probably has plenty to keep him occupied.”

“Trust me, if I wasn’t asking him to feed me, he’d be offended, and the next poker match, I’d be subject to an inquisition of whose cooking I was eating and how he is sure it’s trash and how that’s probably okay with me because I have trash tastebuds.” I mock shudder.

Frankie comes out from the bedroom and leans against the doorjamb, a faint smile on her face. “Seems pretty specific.”

“Last year I ordered takeout from a rival restaurant because they had a lamb pasta dish that sounded good. Brooks noticed I didn’t make an order and called around and found out that I’d been cheating on him. It did not go over well.”

“So you’re the cheating type?” Her eyebrows go up.

“Oh, no.” I hold up my hands. “I’m a good boy. I do everything that I’m told.” I walk down the hall. “Don’t you remember? You said, ‘Harder, Kaden,’ and I rocked my dick into you so hard the top of your noggin would have hit the headboard if I hadn’t put my hand up.” I place my palm over her head.

Her hand comes up to push at my chest. “Hold that thought for twelve hours.”

My brows crash together. “Twelve hours?”

“If we make love now, I won’t be able to walk, and I need to be functional because I’m meeting the girls later. We’re going over Luna’s wedding plans.” Frankie backs away quickly and shuts the door in my face.

I lean my forehead against the wood and listen as she moves about the room. “Take notes for our own wedding.”

“Sure.”

That “sure” doesn’t sound as convincing as I’d like. I half-think Frankie believes this is still a charade we’re putting on so she can close the Jasper metal deal, but once we’ve said our vows, it’ll be real enough for her then.

Frankie emerges about the same time as Brooks arrives with lunch.

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“It smells great, but you didn’t have to deliver it yourself.” I try taking the brown paper sack from Brooks, but he shakes me off.

“Where’s Frankie?”

“I’m right here.” She waves from behind the refrigerator door. “I was just getting water. Gosh, what did you bring? It smells amazing.”

“It’s a cheesesteak.” He starts unloading the bag and places hoagie buns overflowing with thinly sliced steak, cheese, and toppings on the table.

I cock my head to the side. “Is the cheese, steak, and peppers made out of cheese?” Brooks is famous for his deconstructed food where a stalk of broccoli is made out of a piece of bread and mounted on a wedge of lettuce made out of the foam of the broccoli.

“No.” He shakes his head, almost frustrated with what I’d asked. “It’s a cheesesteak. Eat it.”

When Frankie and I don’t move fast enough, he barks, “Now.”

We’re at the table and have the hoagies in our hands in the next second.

“Do you think my food is weird?”

“No. It’s great.” I’m halfway done with the cheesesteak. It’s so fucking good that my eyes are about to roll into the back of my head. Frankie looks like she’s about to

orgasm. I frown slightly. Am I jealous of a sandwich?

“Slater is ghosting me again.” Brooks interrupts my thoughts.

“Is it because of another man? I can go with you to beat him up,” I suggest.

Frankie clears her throat but I shrug in reply. I’m a “let’s hide the body” kind of friend. I set my sandwich down and get to my feet.

Brooks places a hand on my shoulder. “Better I do this myself.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have slept with the most famous food critic in town,” I call after his retreating back.

“She asked me to, and I didn’t know who she was at the time. Critics are supposed to be anonymous.” He slams the door behind him.

“Fair.” I return to my seat.

“What was that all about?” Frankie wants to know.

“A few weeks ago, Brooks was out of town getting pitched to be on a cooking show. He was at a hotel that this food critic, Slater from My Favorite Feeds?—”

“Oh, I love her TikToks.”

“Anyway, Brooks is not on social media, so when he ran into her and she was sad for some reason, he bought her a drink, and then she asked him to take her upstairs and that’s that.”

“And now she’s mad at him?”

“I’m not sure. She took off before Brooks could get her name or number, and he spent a lot of money tracking her down. I don’t know if she knows that he knows who she is yet.”

“But she would know he was Brooks Neal of The Plate.”

“Yup.”

“Complicated.”

“It is. Unlike us.” I wink. I reach for her plate and feel something snap in my shoulder. My eyes go wide before the pain washes over me like a wave taking me under. “Fuck,” I hiss. “I gotta call Doc.”

Chapter Twenty-One

FRANKIE

Kaden is on edge. He has been feeling this way for the past few days. I can’t say that I blame him. He’s stuck in the unknown. His whole career could be on the line. The doctor advised him to wait it out. His diagnosis was a small partial tear in his rotator cuff. They are hoping it won’t need surgery.

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For now, it's all about conservative treatment with rest and physical therapy. While I'm worried about his physical injury, it's his mental state that's really putting me on edge. I let myself into his place. I have been staying here for the most part. I go into work, swing by my apartment, and then come here. I want to be as supportive as possible. I haven't really asked if he wants me around so much, and I don't plan on giving him the option to tell me not to be.

I'm hoping he's getting better, but it's difficult to tell. His mood is undoubtedly worsening. He's like a bear with a thorn in his paw, and there is nothing I can do to try and get it out.

When I enter his place, his eyes lazily open from his spot on the couch. He's got SportsCenter on, his legs kicked out, resting. There is a bottle of scotch sitting on the coffee table in front of him along with a couple of pizza boxes.

"Kitty cat." A slow smirk forms on his handsome face. There is a slight slur to his words.

"Hey to you too." I make my way over to him, spotting the pill bottles he was prescribed for pain lying on their sides. "How are you feeling?"

"Doesn't matter." He drops his feet, sitting up more.

"It matters." I pick up the pill bottle, opening it. I hate that I quickly count them to see if he's taken more than he should because of the bottle of scotch, but there is only one gone, maybe two since I left early this morning for work.

"Are you counting them?" He snatches them from me and winces at the quick movement. The mood swings lately have been giving me whiplash. I've been trying not to take any of it personally. It hasn't been an easy task. Especially when I'm used to bantering back and forth with him.

"Yeah, I was counting them," I say truthfully. I know he's hurting, but I'm not going to apologize for being concerned for his well-being. "I know you're angry and worried, but you directing it at me isn't going to change the situation."

"I'm not directing it at you. You're the one counting my pills."

"You've been drinking."

"And I haven't taken any pills in hours, Mom." Ouch. I might just make a call to his actual mom. Wouldn't that be a lovely way for the two of us to meet? "It's not illegal for me to have a couple of drinks."

"All right." I'm not going to fight with him. Not when he's like this, and honestly, it cuts deep. I don't usually let people in, especially men. Kaden has been so different from the start, but then again, we haven't known each other long. This could be the real him, and the mask is slipping. The thought alone makes my heart ache. "I wanted to check on you and make sure you have food." I open one of the pizza boxes and discover that half remains.

I want to say something about the pizza. It's not that I care if he eats all the pizza in the world, but Kaden eats clean. He keeps a pretty strict diet, and it's not about cutting calories. It's about eating a lot of foods filled with the nutrients you need. So I'm told. I'll eat whatever, but I'm also not a million-dollar athlete.

"I'm good. If you don't want pizza, we can order you something else." Kaden holds his hand out to me. I take it. He gives a tug, pulling me down to straddle him. "I

missed you." He places a kiss on my neck. "Are you hungry?" he asks, placing another kiss on me.

"Not really." His hands slip under the dress I changed into after working my ass off. I can tell where this is going. Kaden's hard cock presses into my sex.

"How about I eat you?"

"You're healing," I remind him.

"So?" His fingers dip into the front of my panties. I pull my hips back so they slide back out. "You're wet." Kaden brings his fingers to his mouth, sucking them clean.

Yes, I am wet. My body has gotten used to the things Kaden can do to it.

"How about I take care of you?" I shift back more so that I can reach for the string on his sweatpants. His hands grab mine to stop me.

"You don't want to have sex with me?"

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to say it. You're dancing around it."

"You're healing."

"You mean broken."

"Kaden! You're not broken."

"You were fine fucking me when you were sure I'd still be a star football player."

It's a sucker punch that lands exactly how he intended. I start to get up, but he stops me, gripping my hips. "Let go," I order.

"It's like that now. Right." He lets out a humorless laugh but releases his hold on me. I quickly get to my feet. "Why are you all dolled up tonight?" I'd picked the dress because I thought Kaden might enjoy seeing me in it. It's him, after all, that has let me be more open to embracing all the girly things I've run from my whole life.

"I have dinner plans."

"Since when?"

"I told you last night. It's for work."

"With Jasper?" I nod. It's with him and my boss. We are near closing this deal. "I'll come with you."

"That's not a good idea."

"Are you saying I can't go with you?"

"You should rest." I glance at the scotch. "Sleep it off."

"Right, I'll do that." He leans forward, grabbing the bottle and taking a giant swig. "Got nothing to say?" he asks, dropping it back down onto the coffee table with a loud thud that makes me cringe. Thankfully, the bottle is expensive, so the glass doesn't shatter.

"No, I've got nothing to say."

"That's a first." I fight the sting of tears that burn my eyes. I will not cry over a man.

"No, Kaden. That's the last," I say before turning to leave. I hear Kaden call after me, but I ignore it. I ignore him.

But I'm no longer going to ignore myself. I told myself to stay away from Kaden Gunner. I should have listened.

Chapter Twenty-Two

KADEN

“If I wanted to do stakeouts, I would have gone to detective school,” Graham complains. He checks his million dollar Rolex again to see how many seconds have passed since the last time he looked at the watch face.

“I didn’t know there was a detective school.”

“How else would they know how to detect?”

“What are the classes? How to take a statement? Tools of observation?”

“I’d need the one about how to manage your partner and not kill him in the first twenty-four hours.”

“Why are you here again?” I ask Graham.

“You sounded miserable when I called. I can’t have my favorite quarterback depressed.”

“And you were bored,” I point out.

Graham shrugs. “Luna took her mom out for dinner and said that if I came along, all her mom would do was make passes at me, which would embarrass all of us.”

“Is she wrong?”

“No, that’s why I’m sitting in this car with you watching people come out of a restaurant which was only given two stars by My Favorite Feeds.”

“Speaking of My Favorite?—”

“Yes, I know Brooks slept with her and that now he doesn’t know what to do because he can make incredible things out of food but people confuse him.”

“Can’t blame him. Women are confusing.”

“I thought you were in the doghouse because you were mean to Frankie. How is that confusing?”

“I wasn’t mean to her.” I stare moodily out the window, willing Frankie to appear. My wishing hasn’t netted me anything for the past two hours. The door remains shut. “I was drugged up and frustrated.”

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Plus, she rejected me. Who is going to take that well? I sobered up enough to realize I'd been an asshole. That and a call with my mom, who tore into me for acting like I was the only one with hardships. I flushed my meds down the toilet, stoppered the bottle of Scotch, and cleaned up the mess in my apartment. But the mess I made of my personal life also needs to be fixed. "Okay, I was mean to her, but that's why I'm here. To apologize. To win her back." I cast a glance into the back seat, where I have a huge bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates.

"I think you should have bought her a car. I'm my nephew's favorite uncle." Graham stretches his arms out.

"You're his only uncle, and he's one and a half. He smiles at dogs with more energy than he greets you."

"I see why Frankie left you."

"Fuck y—oh shit, she's coming out." I duck down and then let out a moan of pain as the motion jostles my shoulder.

"Why are we hiding? I thought you were here to apologize."

"Right." I sit up and reach behind me with my good arm for the flowers. Graham blocks my move.

"Are you trying to injure your other shoulder?" He grabs everything and shoves it in my arms. "Go. Do the thing. Win the girl. Don't embarrass me, or Luna will probably be mad at me."

“Why?”

“Because women solidarity or something like that. Just go or I’ll have to sleep on the couch tonight.” Graham practically shoves me out of the car.

I stumble and then right myself. Jasper and Frankie are shaking hands. I hesitate, wondering if I should go up now or wait, but explaining the situation to Jasper would likely embarrass Frankie, so I hang back, walking up the unlit sidewalk until I’m close enough but still out of sight. Frankie waits until the crosswalk light turns green and then hurries across the pavement. The yellow streetlights fall on her shoulders, and a glint catches my eye. She’s still wearing my ring.

Emboldened by this, I start toward her. My footsteps on the pavement reach her ears, and her eyes meet mine. She pauses midstep.

“Best I could do this late at night.” I offer her the flowers and chocolate. “Did you close your deal?”

She nods, taking the gifts from me. This seems like a good sign.

“Get on your knees,” shouts a couple passing by on the sidewalk.

“Already did,” I yell back.

“Holy shit, is that Kaden Gunner?” A crowd starts to form.

Frankie starts to shake her head. Panic flares in my chest. I should have waited for her in the car, maybe at home. A lot of the time I forget I’m famous. That what I do off the field matters to people.

“I think I fucked up,” I say in a low tone.

“When?” There’s a challenge in her tone.

A warning bell goes off in my head, and the play in front of me starts to materialize. When you’re under pressure, you can either throw it out of bounds or try to run for a gain. The latter option is riskier with greater potential for error, and, as my shoulder will attest, for injury. But the reason I’ve been so successful as a quarterback is because I do take risks. I don’t settle for the safe play hoping that the next time will be better because next time might not come. You have to play to win every down, every minute.

I drop to my knees and take Frankie’s free hand between mine. I ignore the shouts and catcalls of the crowd behind me that is getting larger every moment. Now’s the time to take a risk.

“Before, when I was on my pain meds, I acted like an idiot.” I speak up, loud enough for the crowd to hear me. “Which is no excuse, and you have every right to throw those flowers in my face because I’m a dick. I’m sorry. I’ll do better, but you have to know that without you, I’m a worthless piece of shit. If I never play another day of football, then that’s how it should be, but my biggest win was hearing you say you love me, and my biggest loss will be you walking away. So please, forgive me.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

FRANKIE

I stare down at Kaden on his knees in front of me begging for forgiveness. So many emotions bubble up inside of me, but deep down, I knew he’d show up once he got his head on straight.

Kaden might have been a dick today; we all have our moments, but the man has won me over. So much so that I had trust in him to fix this. Jasper also laughed when I

told him the whole story after my boss had to cut out early from our meeting.

The second he was gone from the table, Jasper said he knew something was up and made me spill, and spill I did. He wasn't even mad about the lie because he said it wasn't really a lie because he knew Kaden meant it when he said we were engaged. I believe that too.

At first I thought I was only a challenge for Kaden. That he liked me because I didn't fall at his feet. That it was just a passing infatuation. As time went on, I realized I was a lot more than that.

Kaden has believed in us from day one. No matter how many hardballs I lobbed his way, he caught each one. He didn't toss them back either. No, he returned each one to me with a kiss. Whoa, when did I turn into such a sap?

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It's probably all the girly stuff Kaden has been encouraging me to do. If I'm being honest, I think I've always been this way; I was just waiting for the right person to bring out this side of me.

"You made me cry."

Kaden shoots to his feet, his eyes widening. "I made you cry?" His hands cup my face as he searches for the tears from the past, as if he could travel back in time and make it right. I bet he'd try.

"Almost. It was close," I huff. "And I never said I love you. Where did you get that idea?" I do love him, but I've never spoken the actual words out loud. I mean I've thought them a lot, but he doesn't need to know that.

"You love me." He says it matter-of-fact.

"Whatever." I roll my eyes. Kaden fights a smile. "Don't smile." I poke his chest. "It's not as though you've said it to me."

"Kitten, you know I love you. I love you more than anything in this whole fucking world."

"Do you love me enough to become a State Raider fan?" His brows lift.

"I, ah?—"

"I'm fucking with you."

“Oh thank God.”

“But—” I point my finger at him. “You do have to wear a State Raider shirt when you take me to the next game.”

“The next game.”

“Front row.”

“Any other demands?”

“Kiss her!” someone yells, intruding on our private moment. I want to give them a piece of my mind, but I keep my mouth zipped shut. I mean, if Kaden is willing to lay himself bare in front of all these people, who am I to stop him?

“Did she say yes?!” People continue shouting random things.

“I love you,” Kaden declares loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Then kiss me.” I smirk. “Everyone is watching, so make it good.” I don’t have to ask Kaden twice. His mouth comes down onto mine in a claiming kiss. I moan into his mouth, sinking my fingers into his hair. I can hear the cheers of the people, but I don’t give a shit. That is until Kaden dips me, his mouth still on mine.

“Kaden!” I hiss when I break the kiss. “Your arm.”

“Your love healed me.”

“You’re full of shit.” I laugh.

“Come on before I fuck you in the middle of the street and we’re all over TMZ.”

“TMZ?”

Kaden takes me by the hand, leading me back to his car. “Yeah, they can be a pain in the ass.” He opens the door for me. I grip his face and pull it down for another kiss.

“You’re a pain in the ass too, but I love you.”

Kaden’s whole face goes soft. “Love you too, Kitten.”

“No more fighting.” Kaden lifts a brow. “Okay, no morerealfighting. Bickering is our foreplay.”

“I do enjoy riling you up.” I do too, especially when he then brings me back down.

“I missed you.” I know it was only a few hours, but I had.

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“I always miss you, Kitten.” This is true. He’s kiss-attacked me when I have gotten back from the bathroom before. The man is a cuddle bug. It’s annoying, and I love every second of it. Wow, Kaden might have really nailed it with that kitten nickname.

I am rather catlike, and he is the only one who can make me purr.

Epilogue

TOM GUNNER, 19

“Do you feel any extra pressure playing for your dad, Tom? Do you feel like you’ve earned the starting position?”

The question comes from Sports Fan Network. He’s been writing articles about how I’m a nepo baby and that I’m only the starting quarterback for the Raiders because my dad, two-time Super Bowl champ Kaden Gunner, is the coach.

“There’s no extra pressure. I want to win, and that’s my goal regardless of who my coach is.”

“You’re only a red shirt freshman. Do you think you’re starting material?” This question is from GSports Podcast. I hate them, too.

“Yes.” This elicits a laugh.

“Anything to add?”

“No.”

The room laughs again. I give them a quick grin that my mom says is a ladykiller. Since every woman I’ve tried it on is still alive, I feel like that description is an exaggeration, but everyone in the press room seems to lighten up. The clicks of cameras seem to increase. From the back of the room, my dad catches my eye. Good time to end the questioning. When I stand, a bunch of groans spread among the reporters.

“One more question, Tom!” a couple shout out.

Our press secretary steps forward. “Thank you all for coming. That will be all for today. Don’t forget to come to our spring game in three weeks,” she chirps.

I escape off the podium and out the side door of the hotel conference room where the presser was held. Mom is there with a big smile on her face.

“You did great.” She draws me into her arms for a hug. Over her shoulder, I lock eyes with Starr. My parents had a late-in-life baby girl, and since Mom runs Gunner, Inc., she brought in Starr to help her with Tilly. The problem is that Starr is outrageously hot, so hot that people are always coming up to Mom telling her what a mistake it was to hire her. Mom always laughs and says even pretty girls need jobs. She knows Dad would never stray. I don’t even think Dad registers other women as women. They’re just humans that exist in a circle that my mom occupies. Unless he’s focused on the field and his players, his eyes are on her.

I’ve grown up around that kind of love, and I knew it was the only thing that would satisfy me, which is why I never dated, never slept with any girls in high school. Football and my family were enough. Until Starr came along.

I want her, but I can never have her. She works for my family, and you don’t take

advantage of someone like that. And that makes my life miserable because everywhere I turn, Starr is there.

I reach down and open my arms for little Tilly to totter into them. I scoop her up and hold her like a shield between me and Starr. “You having a good time, T-bear?”

She shakes her head, her pigtailed bouncing beside her ears. “It’s too noisy.”

“It’s a lot. Should we go and throw the football?”

This time her head nods vigorously. “Did you bring your special ball?” Tilly’s three. She can barely hold a Nerf, but she wants to be like her big bro, so Mom and Starr commissioned a tiny leather ball that fits in her tiny little hands.

“No.”

“I have it, Tilly.” Starr comes up, brushing my arm.

I jerk away. Starr scowls at me.

“You have owie?” Tilly asks, patting my arm with her pudgy toddler hand.

“No, T-bear. Just got startled.”

“Star-pled?”

“Starr pilled for real,” Starr mutters under her breath.

“Surprised. Like when Hello Kitty is surprised and meows?”

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Tilly giggles. “Meow. Meow. Meow. You funny when you meow.”

I chuckle and jostle my sister, pretending to drop her. Starr sucks in a breath. “Be careful,” she admonishes.

“I’m always careful.” I scowl at the girl.

“You two squabbling again?” Mom comes up and reaches for Tilly. T-bear wrinkles her nose and shoves her face into my neck. Mom sighs. “The girls love you, Tom. Always have since you were born.”

“I love you best.” Dad comes up and nuzzles Mom’s cheek. His hand drops down to her ass.

Starr’s and my gazes lock, and we both roll our eyes. Then Starr realizes we’re sharing a moment and turns away, pretending to cough.

“Dad, the press?” I say.

He just pats Mom’s ass. “Nothing that they haven’t published before. Let’s get some grub. I’m hungry. T-bear, come to your daddy. You can’t be giving all your love to your brother. Spread some to your parents.”

Tilly reluctantly peels herself away from me. “Can I have a fruity drink?”

“Of course.”

“Meow,” she replies with delight.

Starr and I look at each other again and burst out laughing. My parents walk away, shaking their heads like Starr and I are silly kids.

The shared moment ends when Starr says, “You’re so uptight about your parents’ PDA.”

“Because it’s unnecessary.” And embarrassing because what teenager needs to see their parents necking when they open up their favorite sports forum? Not a single kid wants that.

“You’re just jealous because you know you’ll never have it like your parents.”

I don’t know why I love this girl. She’s always jerking my chain.

“I’ve got more numbers and Insta handles than a K-pop idol.”

“Because you’re going to be famous, but how many of them would want you if you were plain Tom Gunner, not the son of a Super Bowl champ and coach of a historic franchise?”

“Every one of them because I’m hot and funny.”

“This is why I don’t like you, Tom Gunner.” Starr hurries to catch up with my parents, leaving me to walk behind.

“But you will someday, Starr. Just like I’ll win the Super Bowl like my pops, I’m going to have you, too. I swear it.”

My dearests:

One more story in this series to go. If you haven't been keeping track, Natalie and Dylan's story is in *Tangled Hearts* and Luna and Graham's story is in *True Hearts*. You can read all of these stories this summer on the beach and soon, you'll be able to LISTEN to these stories too. Stay tuned for that.

Also, I'm working on a longer story—one that is twice as long as these lovely romances. This is taking me a little longer and it's a little darker than the others, but I think you'll love it. Keep a watch on my socials for more.