



A Whole New Ball Game

Author: *Stephanie Rose*

Category: Sport

Description: From bestselling author Stephanie Rose comes a swoon-worthy sports romance filled with sizzling chemistry, a heart-stealing hero who falls first, and an age-gap love story worth rooting for.

Rachel Manning has her hands full working a demanding job at a PR firm and raising her teenage sister. The only time she makes for romance is in the hours she carves out writing steamy novels. Until she collides with her very own meet cute...

Silas Jones, a recently retired baseball legend turned manager, is gorgeous, divorced, and carrying around enough regret to last a lifetime. One magical night with Rachel gives her a chance to forget her responsibilities while awakening something in him that he hasn't felt in a long time... if ever.

When fate throws a curveball and brings them together again through work, he's ready to play for keeps. But a strict no-fraternization clause in Rachel's contract means being with Silas isn't just risky—it's forbidden. And she and her sister need every penny of that paycheck.

Falling in love was never part of the plan. But for a once in a lifetime love, is it worth risking it all?

Author's Note: A Whole New Ball Game is a steamy standalone romance with a punch-in-the-stomach meet cute, steamy times with a baseball jersey, and a cinnamon roll hero who is even better with his hands than he is with a baseball.

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CHAPTER ONE

SILAS

“This is going to be a great season, Silas. I’m so glad you joined us.”

“Me too,” I said, trying for an easy smile as I clutched the tumbler of whiskey in my hand, easing my grip when I noted how hard my fingers were pressing into the glass. If the glass shattered in my hands, it would be hard to explain and not the best way to close out the deal I’d made today.

“I can’t wait until we announce this,” Kent, the general manager of the Brooklyn Bats and now my new boss, said before he downed the rest of his vodka tonic. “The press is going to go crazy.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said, a little unnerved by the excitement dancing behind his wire-rimmed glasses. I’d only been traded twice in my professional baseball career, and each time I had, I’d been what was seen as a hot acquisition by my new team, not a bargain.

Once I’d announced my retirement, the Bats organization had hounded my agent for weeks until I’d agreed to meet.

I was still valuable, not traded down or taken on as pity or as part of a bigger deal for someone else.

Yet taking this position, one that I was lucky to get without even trying, felt like a

consolation prize. But that was a mind-set I'd have to shift, and shift fast, if any of this was going to work.

“Oh, stop being humble. And being from New York, even though you never played here, will be a huge draw too. You know how this city loves a hometown boy.”

At forty-two, I'd been heading toward the old-timer stage of my career for more years than I'd wanted to acknowledge. Rookies always started at around the same age, but each year, they'd seemed younger.

For the past two seasons, I'd needed more time in the saunas after every grueling workout or intense game and more time with the trainer to work out the kinks that seemed to multiply on the daily. But I'd held my own with all my teammates, my stats never wavering, even compared to the younger guys on the team.

Then during one crucial September game, I blew out a knee sliding into base. The pain was excruciating enough for me to realize this would end my season and my trip to what I'd already feared was my last play-off series. But after all the X-rays and plans for therapy, the team doctors had advised that maybe I should just end it all right there.

“Go out on a high note,” they'd said. I'd seen plenty of veteran ballplayers sticking around past their prime because they couldn't let go, and I had always sworn that if I ever got to that point, I'd swallow my pride and step away. I hadn't been there yet, or hadn't thought I was, but as my grandmother had always said, life can change on a dime.

And change it had. That night, my life had been split into before and after, and although it had been months, I was still getting over the whiplash that had taken much longer to recover from than my bad knee.

“Yes, I always dreamed of being a Yankee, but once I got drafted into the National League, I never left and settled on the West Coast.”

I remembered all the years in little league I’d dreamed about pulling on the pinstripes and walking up to the plate at Yankee Stadium. My grandfather would take me to at least three games a season, and we’d buy a program and keep score with those tiny pencils, later breaking down what they could have done differently or how they’d been great as we rode the number four train home.

I’d played at Yankee Stadium a few times, and I’d always had to raise my gaze to the clouds to offer a silent apology to my grandfather for trying to beat the team he’d loved. Although I was sure if he were still alive, he would have switched his allegiance for my sake.

The Brooklyn Bats were a new expansion team with a lot of early promise. They’d gained immediate fans for their Coney Island location alone and had come a lot closer to winning a pennant than anyone had expected them to in their first few years. They’d been a team to watch from the beginning.

And now, I was their manager.

“Listen, Silas. You’re still a name. A young manager who fans can remember killing it on the field as a player. The box office numbers are going to be great. I can already feel what an awesome season this is going to be.”

You’re still a name.

I didn’t feel like a name. I felt like a man too old and battered to play the sport that had been his life ever since he was six years old, but too young to manage a team.

But what else was there for me to do? Yes, I was starting over, but as long as I was

pulling on a uniform and reporting to a field for work, I could fool myself that I wasn't starting at zero.

I'd been team co-captain for most of my time in Washington, but this was on another level. I'd be management, not one of the guys, and the dynamic would be completely different. While I prided myself on strategy during a game and the younger players always leaned on me for advice, I knew that leadership skills weren't the main reason I'd been chosen.

At the beginning of last season, my name had ended up on a "hot players over 30" list in some online article that seemed to circulate everywhere.

I'd laughed along with my teammates and gotten a kick out of the signs some fans would hold up, proposing marriage and...other things they couldn't show on camera. After that, the viral videos of game footage that centered around the fit of my uniform pants had made it difficult to go anywhere toward the end of the season.

Any time a shot of me was posted on the team's Instagram or TikTok in the past few months, the comments were flooded with offers for dates and to make it all better after my divorce became final. Our social media manager would tease me about all the comments he'd had to delete for being too boisterous .

I'd mostly laughed at it, as it was a nice change of pace from the fans who would ask why I was still playing at my age. But now, being in the spotlight would make that all continue, especially since I had a good feeling my new bosses would egg it on if it did.

They were building a fan base as well as a team, and I understood that.

It just made me feel more like a mascot than a manager.

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to head out,” Kent said, sending me a wide smile as he rose from his seat. “After the press conference tomorrow, it’s going to get busy.”

“No worries.” I stood, glancing around the bar. I’d thought we’d meet by the Barclays Center or closer to the field, but the owners had wanted to come to Williamsburg and meet in this swanky new hotel. I’d gotten a room for the night since I had to head back to the Bats’ offices early tomorrow morning for the press conference instead of staying with my parents in Putnam County. It was still a trek, but it was much easier to stay in the borough.

“Thank you again, Kent. I appreciate the opportunity.”

“Thank you . You should explore a little. Williamsburg has just about anything you want.” Kent extended his hand. “Again, glad to have you with us, Silas. Washington’s loss is our gain, right?”

I smiled and took his hand, my head aching from the effort of pushing the curve across my lips. Washington’s loss had been my loss too. I’d lost who I was and now had to relearn a new version of myself, along with everything else about this unexpected turn my life had taken.

I sat back down after I watched him leave. Kent didn’t seem like a bad guy, just eager—like the rest of the organization. My agent had pushed me toward this deal because she couldn’t see me announcing or reporting like so many retired players did after they stopped playing. And, as Kent reiterated, I was still popular enough to be welcomed with open arms and attract new Bats fans.

Being a manager would mean I was still part of the action, not just commenting on it. As friends had told me, I needed to think of this as an extension of my career, not the end of it.

I appreciated the excitement, but it also added to the pressure. I'd grown up in this city. It didn't matter if I was popular or how good-looking some reporter or online influencer thought I was.

New team or not, New York sports fans wanted you to win. They loved you when you did, and maybe would forgive a bad day or two, but would start to loathe you very quickly when you didn't.

The show they'd brought me on for would only go so far. I'd have to prove my worth as a manager, both to myself and to my team.

I pulled out my phone, trying to figure out where to go to eat something. While it was hard not to be recognized everywhere I went in Washington, in Brooklyn—at least for the moment—I was just a guy in a bar. I guessed I should enjoy it while it lasted and along with maybe my last public meal in peace.

I strode toward the exit, fixated on the small screen as I passed by the tables along the outdoor terrace. A listing for a burger place caught my eye right before I was jabbed in the stomach hard enough to knock the wind out of me.

Shock more than pain made me fold at the waist, blinking for a minute before I stood and met the horrified gaze of a woman, gaping at me from one of the tables. Her hand flew to her mouth as she took in my crooked stance.

“Oh my God, I am so sorry.” Her metal chair screeched across the concrete as she popped up to stand. “Did I hurt you?” She reached out to touch my stomach and then reared back.

“No, I'm fine,” I said, sputtering out a cough when her chocolate eyes landed on mine. My stomach clenched in a different way as our gazes locked for a long minute.

“Are you sure?” she asked, almost pleading as she searched my gaze. “I could run into the hotel and get you some ice or something.” She winced when she rubbed the top of her hand as a blush stained her cheeks bright red.

A smile crept along my lips when I took her in, bobbing back and forth as she studied me. She looked nervous, contrite almost to the point of tears, and really fucking beautiful.

“You must have been really into what was on that screen,” I joked, motioning to the open laptop on her table.

Her shoulders drooped as she exhaled a long gust of air.

“I was writing and forgot that I was in public. Usually when I write, I’m alone and harmless to others. This is why writers write alone, I suppose. Some of us get crazy. Or maybe that’s just me.”

She choked out a nervous laugh.

“I better get home before I assault anyone else.”

“You didn’t assault me. And I should have been paying closer attention to where I was going. I know how it is to be so passionate about something that you forget everything else around you.”

When I’d played, I’d been so focused on the ball and moving around the bases that I’d been able to tune out everything else. Some called it a talent, but when the rest of my life had gone to shit and I managed to forget about it for three hours, I hadn’t been sure if it was a skill or a weakness.

“Thanks for being understanding. I thought a change of scenery would be good for

inspiration, but I didn't think it would be dangerous to innocent bystanders."

Another smile curved my lips, real and genuine, unlike the ones I'd had to fake all afternoon.

I swept my gaze over the sidewalk as a woman pushed a double stroller past two bearded men with tattoos creeping up their necks. "I could see how people-watching here would be good for inspiration."

"Maybe it was a little too good." Her brow creased as she sucked in a long breath. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Her chestnut hair brushed the shoulders of her jacket, snug enough to show off her soft curves. I fought to keep my eyes on hers and not let them go lower. Her pretty gaze found mine, her long lashes almost fanning against her brow.

Fuck, she was gorgeous.

It had been a long time since a woman had drawn me in so quickly, and instead of being unnerved by my reaction, I welcomed the pleasant distraction.

"Listen," she said, letting out a long breath. "Can I buy you a cup of coffee or something? I feel terrible that I basically punched you in the stomach."

"No." I laughed, shaking my head. "I'm totally fine."

"Are you sure? I almost made you tumble over," she said, grimacing as she glanced down at her wrist.

"You just surprised me. You didn't hurt me, I promise."

Her features softened as her gaze locked back on mine. The electricity between us was much more of a gut punch than when her fist sank into my side.

“I surprised me too,” she said, laughing as she shook out her hand.

“There is something you could do,” I told her, lifting a shoulder.

“Sure,” she said, her head bobbing in a nod. “What do you need? Did I scratch you? You should check. This was my grandmother’s ring, and it has sharp edges.” She traced the long onyx stone on her middle finger, a nervous gesture I shouldn’t have found so damn sensual. “I can get you a Band-Aid or something. The drugstore is only across the street?—”

I shook my head and flicked my wrist to check the time on my watch.

“How about having an early dinner with me? I was researching places to eat when I...ran into you.” I smirked and drew a laugh out of her. It was cute and musical, like a wind chime.

“Dinner? You want to have dinner with me?”

“Maybe somewhere close by,” I said, motioning behind me to the hotel. “I’m staying here for the night and was looking for something within walking distance.”

“Oh,” she said softly, her brows drawing together.

“I grew up in New York, but I feel like a clueless tourist now that I’m back, so you’d be helping me out.”

I was as surprised as she seemed to be when the offer tumbled out of my mouth. I’d planned on eating alone to clear my head and prep for tomorrow, but maybe getting

my mind off it was the better approach. Staring at a beautiful woman instead of my phone screen or a book seemed like a much better alternative.

“Sure,” she whispered, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear as her eyes darted back and forth along the sidewalk. “There’s a great taco place around the corner if you like that.”

“Sounds great to me,” I said, stuffing my phone back into my pocket. “I’m Silas, by the way,” I said, extending my hand. “Usually when women punch me, they already know my name.”

We shared a laugh, her first relaxed smile stealing more of my breath.

“Rachel. Nice to meet you, Silas.”

A jolt from where my palm grazed hers ran up my arm, and once again, we both lingered a long, extra moment. I couldn’t remember when I’d had such a visceral reaction to a woman, never mind one I didn’t know.

I finally dropped her hand and motioned to the exit.

“You lead the way,” I said, my smile deepening when I spotted hers as she slid her laptop into her bag.

I’d been feeling out of sorts all afternoon, and dinner with a pretty stranger who didn’t know me beyond the here and now seemed like an oasis in a very dry desert.

She hoisted the strap of her messenger bag on her shoulder, shooting me another smile as she jerked her head toward the corner.

Her jeans hugged her ass the same glorious way her jacket clung to her torso, her

knee-high boots making her legs seem even longer.

After a long day of tension over my past and future, I could live in the moment for the next few hours. I wouldn't have to think about what tomorrow morning and the next baseball season would bring, or how to figure out a way to both lead and belong in my new life.

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CHAPTER TWO

RACHEL

I had never been so embarrassed in all my life, although past humiliations had never paid off like this.

My writing time was usually before dawn, before God and the sun were up, when I could guarantee no distractions.

My little sister had caught me talking to myself a few times or making strange gestures in the air when she'd woken up early. I never knew if these were common writer idiosyncrasies or if I was just weird, but I'd never given it a second thought since I was in the privacy of my home office. I'd created a secluded corner against my living room wall, with only my thirteen-year-old sister to catch me making a fool of myself when I'd get lost in the moment.

When I'd hit that dreaded halfway point in my manuscript where I always wound up stuck, I'd been desperate to figure out a way to get past the block and finish this damn thing, but nothing had worked.

I had a free day and night for a change, so I trekked to Williamsburg from my brownstone apartment in Park Slope. I'd settled at a table on the outside terrace of a new hotel, armed with a large coffee and a mission for five thousand words by the time I went home.

I'd finally nailed the scene I'd been needling with all damn day and pumped out my

arms in celebration, one fist landing right into the granite gut of the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen.

When I met his hazel gaze, I'd fallen into a full-body panic. People had been arrested and sued for much less, but not only wasn't he mad, he'd seemed to get a kick out of it.

And then he asked me to have dinner with him.

Things like this didn't happen in my life, at least not off the page. I'd always found Williamsburg fascinating, thanks to the diversity of its residents: families, hipsters, and some corporate types. The area was homey yet industrial, and I could attach a story to anything and anyone I'd see when I'd stroll along the sidewalks.

But this was the first time I was the story.

Silas followed me down the street to the taco place I'd planned to visit in celebration before my subway train ride home, about half a block away from the hotel. The warmth from his presence behind me radiated down my back, the nape of my neck tingling from the feel of his eyes on me.

I'd fumbled through an apology, mortified that I'd gotten so lost in my story that I didn't know where I was or what I was doing, but I'd sworn I'd felt an odd yet potent crackle between us. I was scrambling for what else to do or say when I'd offered to buy this strange man coffee as penance for jabbing him in what felt like a rock-hard six-pack.

His gaze lingered on me as if he were taking me in, although I wasn't sure if he was just trying to decipher if I was crazy or not.

If it was the latter, I couldn't blame him, although he didn't seem that put off by it if

he wanted to have dinner with me.

This restaurant wasn't fancy, and I'd always loved the dive bar feel as much as their guacamole, but as I stood behind him waiting to be seated, I felt very underdressed. I couldn't help giving him a once-over, his muscles working under the sports coat snug enough to accentuate his tapered waist and the black pants that made his ass sing.

I'd taken him for a corporate type, but most suits wouldn't have been so easygoing after a strange woman punched them in the stomach. His full beard was cropped close enough to make out his chiseled jaw. His dark hair was short and neat, but longer in the back. It looked soft and lush, beckoning me to run my fingers through it or grab a fistful.

Jesus, what was wrong with me today? I needed to get out of romance-writer mode since this was real life and I couldn't openly drool over this very kind man who wanted to have dinner with me instead of having me arrested for public assault.

My mouth watered as I eyed a tray of margaritas on top of the bar, tempted to double fist them to both get over the embarrassment of how we'd met and relax enough to make conversation.

The inside lights were dim as usual, even though it was more late afternoon than early evening, but when Silas's hazel eyes met mine, the lights made them seem an almost translucent gold. My eyes fixated on his—again—until he pointed behind us.

I was so into whatever reaction I was having to this man, I hadn't noticed the hostess leading us to a table.

"Hope this is okay," I said after we slid into one of the booths. The cracked vinyl brushed along the back of my jeans as I set my bag next to me. "This was the first thing I could think of and where I'd planned to go anyway."

I nodded a thank-you to the waitress when she set down two glasses of water, and I took two gulps, the cool liquid down my throat centering me enough to unclench my shoulders.

“This is fine. Like I said, I didn’t know where to go and was distracted by too many options.” He shot me a crooked smile, heating my insides all over again.

Had I ever had dinner with a man this attractive? If I had, it had been long enough ago that I couldn’t recall it. Hell, when was the last date I’d had? Life blurred pretty damn fast when you had two jobs and a kid.

“I’d like to treat you. It would make me feel better about the whole punching you in the stomach thing.”

“You don’t have to treat me,” he said with a deep chuckle that permeated down to my toes. “You didn’t hurt me. And having dinner with a beautiful woman isn’t a hardship. No need to treat.”

Heat crept up my neck at the raspy way he’d said I was beautiful. Having dinner with a handsome stranger already seemed reckless, but my full-body reactions to Silas were trouble for more reasons than I wanted to consider.

And couldn’t even if I did want to.

I watched him as he studied the menu, a crease between his dark brows as his eyes roamed back and forth.

This was not the example I worked like hell to set for my sister. Our mother went off with different men all the time, but I wasn’t her. Or at least, I was trying like hell not to be.

Yet here I was, sitting at this table, fighting an odd yet immediate attraction to someone I didn't know.

Our mother had probably done this a million times, only without the remorse and trepidation. For the first time in my life, I almost wished I could be like her. She'd enjoy the man sitting across from her and not give her daughters a second thought.

My pesky conscience wouldn't let me do that.

I'd never blamed her for looking for love. My issue was that she'd forgotten she had kids to take care of while she was in pursuit.

A growl vibrated through my empty stomach, and I prayed the music and loud conversation muted it enough that Silas couldn't hear.

Maybe an empty stomach was clouding my judgment of the man across from me, but I didn't sense any danger from this guy. And while I had the chance, I wanted to know more about him. Why was he eating alone, and what was he doing staying at the new trendy hotel? He didn't fit the part for most of the guests I'd noticed coming in and out. There were no streaks of blue or purple in his hair, and I couldn't spot any piercings.

He could have had tattoos I couldn't see. I'd bet he had great arms too, judging by the broad set of his shoulders. An image of him pulling off his white button-down shirt and peeling it off possibly ink-covered muscles danced in my head, causing a tug between my legs. I cleared my throat and straightened in my seat, shaking my head for a second to erase the dirty image like an Etch A Sketch.

I wanted to blame my fascination on the writer in me and not the woman who hadn't been touched by a man in a longer time than she could quantify.

“What were you doing at the hotel? Business meeting?” I nodded to his jacket.

“Yes,” he said with a nod as he set down his menu. “I finalized an offer for a new job. I’m staying at the hotel tonight because they’re making it all official in the morning.”

He lifted a shoulder as he leaned back in his seat.

“That’s exciting! So I guess you’re moving back here?”

He nodded. “After all my meetings tomorrow, I’ll be flying back to Washington to pack the rest of my things and figure out where I’ll live when I come back. My new boss said they’d help me find something quickly so I wouldn’t be living out of a hotel.”

“Wow, that’s a big step. Relocation and everything.”

“And everything,” he said, exhaling what sounded like a defeated sigh. “Like I said, I’m from here. Not here—” he tilted his head toward the window “—from the Bronx. My parents live in Putnam County, so while the city isn’t that close to where they are, they’re excited to be able to see me without a plane ride.”

“What can I get you?” A waitress with two colorful tattoo sleeves approached our table. The flowers etched up and down her arms were striking, but not as striking as the man sitting across from me.

“The taco special and a regular margarita. Extra salt.” I smiled up at her as I handed her back the menu, trying to ignore Silas studying me in my periphery.

“I’ll keep it simple and have the same,” Silas said, shooting me a smile. Butterflies fluttered in my hollow belly.

“Wise choice,” I told him as I took another sip from my water glass, still desperate to cool off.

He searched my gaze, stretching his arm across the back of the booth.

“Whenever I travel, I always get what the locals get.” He nodded toward me. “And those margaritas caught my eye on the way in.” His smile dimmed as he leaned closer to the table. “For my...old job, I used to train a lot and always had to watch what I ate. Not that I don’t try to stay healthy now, but it’s nice to be able to have a drink and a few tacos without worrying about repercussions.”

I wanted to ask what his old job was and where he was working now, but something stopped me. While I wanted to know more about him, I didn’t want to pry or ask anything too personal.

Especially since this dinner would be as far as it would go between us.

“So, what were you writing today?” Silas asked. “I’m sure it was something good, to get you that engrossed.”

I nodded, my cheeks heating at his smirk.

“It was a scene I’d been having trouble with for a while and finally nailed. It was a good feeling until my fist landed on an innocent bystander.”

There was that chuckle again. Husky, sexy, and easy as his gaze searched mine.

“The innocent bystander didn’t mind.” The corner of his mouth tipped up. “What was the scene? Unless it’s, like, top secret.”

A laugh slipped out of me.

“No. Not top secret.” I rested my elbows on the table. “I’m a romance writer. I was writing the black moment. I mean, the big scene where everything goes south and they have to fight through it together.”

I nodded a thank-you to the waitress as she set down our drinks. The salt glistened off the rim of the glass, and I relished a tangy sip, the tequila warming my chest on the way down.

Silas’s eyes narrowed when I lifted my gaze.

“Sorry for the long explanation.”

“It wasn’t a long explanation. You just looked like you were bracing yourself for what I would say.”

“Because I’ve heard it all,” I said with a long sigh. “From both friends and family.”

He reared back, a deep crease in his brow.

“About what?”

“About writing romance.”

“What have you heard?”

I examined his face, his features genuinely curious and not ready to make some dopey joke I’d heard more times than I wanted to recall whenever I told anyone what I wrote.

“That it’s just romance. Serious readers read sci-fi or thrillers, and I just write kissing books.” I shrugged.

“They dismiss the books you write because you write romance?” He leaned his elbows on the table. Something about the way he gave me his full attention made me feel exposed, like he was seeing right through me and I couldn’t hide anything. It was exhilarating and unsettling at the same time.

“Yes, mostly.” I shrugged again. “I’m used to it.”

“You shouldn’t be.” Silas’s eyes thinned to slits. “That’s bullshit.”

I stilled as I was about to take another sip.

“It’s fine?—”

“I think of myself as a serious reader, and I read romance.”

I almost dropped my glass on the table.

“You do?” I squinted at him, and he eyed me over his glass as he took a long sip.

“That’s good,” he said as he set it down. “And yes, I do sometimes. One of the guys I used to work with liked this one college hockey series and got us all hooked. It followed four guys, and now there’s a second generation with their kids at the same college.”

“Wow,” I said, my eyes wide as I gaped at Silas. “I think I know the series you’re talking about, and I’m impressed.”

“What’s there to be impressed about? Good books are good books, right?”

“Right,” I said, biting back a smile.

“I couldn’t read the second-gen books.” He lifted a shoulder. “After following the guys while they played in college, something about their kids’ stories made me feel old. I get enough of that at work.”

A laugh escaped me at the cringe twisting Silas’s face.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, searching my gaze.

“Are you for real?” I leaned closer, squinting across the table.

“For real? What do you mean?”

“First, I randomly punch you in the stomach, and not only aren’t you mad about it, you ask me to have dinner with you. And you’re now telling me you read romance. You’re...unexpected, Silas.”

“I guess I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said with a soft chuckle. “If you love what you do, fuck what other people say. If you don’t have a passion about what you do for a living...” he started, his gaze drifting out the window. “Then what is the point of life, right?”

“Right,” I said.

Life without passion was pretty damn pointless, but I’d already traded the passion in my life for responsibility. Writing was the only luxury I had left in the little time I was able to do it.

“You sound like you speak from experience. Are you passionate about your new job?”

His shoulders shook with a chuckle.

“I was passionate about my old job. So much so that it took all my attention and focus for most of my life. But I couldn’t do it anymore, so I’m starting a new one.”

“So, this new job is a big change for you? Aside from moving across the country.”

“It is.” His gaze floated out the window again. “Trying to get excited for the new opportunity I’m grateful to have and not ponder all the ways I’ll fuck it up.”

He laughed, but it seemed hollow. He hadn’t given me any details, at least ones that could identify him and what he did for a living, but the sad pull in his features at whatever was making him so worried made my chest pinch.

“That sounds rough. I’m sorry, Silas.”

He nodded, pulling in his bottom lip as the waitress set our plates in front of us.

“It’s a good opportunity I was lucky to get. And I need to suck some things up and get my head in the game. I have no time to feel sorry for myself.”

“Don’t think of it as feeling sorry for yourself. Think of it as allowing yourself to mourn your old life. It’s okay to feel sad that something you loved ended and give yourself time before you can get excited over what’s to come.”

I scooped up one of the tacos and took a bite, the pork inside roasted to perfection as it melted on my tongue. I let go of a moan as I chewed.

When I lifted my head, a wide grin split Silas’s mouth as he stared at me.

“Listen,” I mumbled as I wiped my mouth. “It’s probably good that we met the way we did. Get all the big humiliation out of the way before you have to watch me eat.”

“It’s nice to see someone enjoying their food. I’ve gone on a couple of dates where the woman just picks at whatever she ordered, and I feel pressured to make conversation instead of eat.”

“I can eat around anyone. It’s a talent.” I said, trying like hell to forget Silas saying date . But he couldn’t have been comparing this to a date. This was... I didn’t know what this was. Dinner with a stranger. A very attractive stranger. A stranger who would give me romance-hero inspiration for a very long time.

I’d been out of the dating scene for so long, it was as if I’d never been there at all.

Maybe I hadn’t been.

“Is that why you’re staring? It’s that weird to you to see a woman actually eat?”

I laughed until he gave me a slow shake of his head.

“I’m looking at you because you’re pretty. Really fucking pretty. And I’m glad you punched me in the stomach, or else I wouldn’t be sitting here with you right now.”

A hot flush ran up my neck and heated my cheeks. I picked up my margarita and took a long sip, my mouth and throat now parched.

“Thank you,” I muttered as I set down my glass. “You’re all right too. I mean, for a gorgeous man who asks women out to dinner after they punch him.”

He laughed and picked up one of his tacos.

“Well, thank you. Now that that’s out of the way, you have me excited to take a bite.”

“I haven’t eaten for most of the day, so some of what you saw was me breaking

starvation, but this is one of our favorite places in Williamsburg. I planned to come here in celebration after hitting word count because the food here is the ultimate reward.”

His brows popped as he chewed.

“This is really good,” he said, eyeing the taco in his hand. “I’ll have to come back here.” He set down the taco and brought his eyes back to mine. “Who do you usually come here with?”

“I planned to come here alone today,” I said, covering my mouth after taking another big bite.

“You mentioned that, but you said our favorite place.”

I clenched my eyes shut for a minute as I realized my slip.

“By our , I meant my sister and me.” I sucked in a long breath through my nostrils.

“Ah,” Silas said, his shoulders relaxing as he nodded, almost as if he were relieved. I needed to eat faster, as hunger combined with tequila was making me hallucinate.

“My brother and I don’t share a favorite restaurant or really anything except for the same parents, and the only time I run into him is when we happen to visit them at the same time.”

“Well...” I drew in a breath, unsure if I should explain. Maybe we were keeping the conversation about our lives superficial, but holding back who my sister really was to me seemed wrong, even from a man I’d just met.

“My sister is...mine. Meaning I’m her parent, not simply her older sister. I always

was, but we recently made it official. I bring her to Williamsburg sometimes because she loves the tacos here, and we like to people-watch. She's at a friend's house for a sleepover since her school is closed for a conference tomorrow, so that's why I'm here alone today."

I let my head fall back and groaned, still not understanding why I had to blurt out my new guardianship of my sister to a man I didn't know—and couldn't know past this dinner.

"How old is she?" Silas asked.

"She's thirteen. Her name is Taylor. There's obviously a big age gap between us, and I was always a convenient, pretty much full-time babysitter since she was born. It's why becoming her guardian wasn't that big of a shift." I coughed out a laugh.

"Did something happen to your parents? I'm sorry. I'm prying where I shouldn't be."

"No, it's okay," I said, a little more relaxed and pleasantly surprised that Silas didn't ask for his tacos to-go after finding out I had a kid to take care of.

"My parents split when I was born, so I don't know my father. Taylor's father took off before she was born too, so we've both only known our mother, and she wasn't into parenting. Ever. But I had my grandmother to raise me while my mother indulged in whatever whim was calling to her at the time."

"Wasn't into parenting?" Silas asked, raising a brow.

"Not even a little," I said with a chuckle. "School concerts, award ceremonies, she always had an excuse as to why she never showed up. She managed to attend my elementary school graduation, but I am pretty sure that was because she was dating one of my teachers at the time. Then all of a sudden, she'd check the school calendar

for what was going on so she could be there.”

I winced and covered my eyes.

“Sorry, I’m sure you don’t want to know all of this.”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I weren’t interested,” he said with a soft rasp. “And you sound like you’ve been holding all that in for a minute.” He sent me a smile that was sweet enough not only to relax me, but liquefy my knees under the table.

I didn’t have to explain my situation to friends since they’d been around to see it all. I knew what an awful story it was, yet telling it seemed to make it worse.

“Probably,” I allowed, fidgeting with the paper napkin next to my plate. “My mother signed over her rights, so there’d be ‘no issues’ with the decisions I made for Taylor.” I held up my fingers in air quotes. “But it was less out of consideration and more about not being liable for whatever my sister did until she was eighteen. I don’t get out much, as you can imagine, so today was a treat day for me.”

When I finally met Silas’s eyes again, he rested his chin on the palm of his hand as his gaze seared into mine. I studied him back, trying to decipher what was behind his golden eyes.

Pity was something I should have been used to by now, but it still irked me whenever I spotted it. Anger on my behalf was common among my friends when it came to my mother’s antics. But I didn’t know what Silas was thinking because I didn’t know Silas.

And the bastard was making it really hard not to want to know him beyond this impromptu dinner.

“That is pretty damn admirable,” he finally said.

“Admirable?” I repeated slowly. “Which part?”

“Taking care of your sister when you were a kid yourself.”

As if I had a choice. I suppose I had, but not one I could ever live with if I’d chosen the alternative.

“Well, I was twenty when she was born, not exactly a kid. I haven’t thought of myself as a kid in a long time, even when I was, but thank you.”

I spotted a sort of pride in his eyes when his gaze found mine. That was new and kind of intoxicating. I’d enjoy the rush for the moment but not get carried away by it.

“So, it’s just the two of you?” Silas asked, his words slow. I wasn’t sure if he was trying not to appear too nosy or too interested if I went for tacos with others besides my sister. Why would he care?

And why did I like it if he did? That, I knew the answer to but had to ignore.

“We have an aunt in New Jersey whom we see occasionally, but it’s really just us. Being alone for a full day and night is a rare luxury.”

“That’s how you spend your downtime? Writing outside in the cold weather?”

“It’s not that cold. It was in the fifties today. For a minute. Brisk. Gets the blood pumping.”

He let out a chuckle, throaty enough for it to travel down to my toes again.

“Glad I amuse you,” I said, lifting a brow as I wiped my mouth.

“It’s not that you amuse me,” Silas said, searching my gaze as his smile deepened.

“You’re unexpected.”

I chuckled after Silas repeated the words I’d spoken earlier. This whole afternoon had been very unexpected, starting from the second we’d met.

“And that’s good?” I asked, tilting my head as I tried to read his expression.

“Yeah,” he rasped, the air thinning between us in this corner booth that seemed smaller every time Silas looked at me like that. Like those light eyes could see right through me.

“It’s really good. In fact, you’re the best thing that’s happened to me today.”

CHAPTER THREE

SILAS

“Can I walk you to the train?” I asked Rachel after we headed out of the restaurant.

“It’s not necessary, and you said you had an early day tomorrow.” She shook her head as she shrugged on her jacket, and I fought to keep my gaze at eye level and not let it travel down her curves and fixate on the tease of cleavage as she straightened her top, or the perfect curve of her hips as she smoothed her jacket down.

She was beautiful, funny, and from what she’d told me about her life outside of writing romance books, pretty damn selfless to give up her freedom for her sister. Shame washed over me at how I’d thrown myself a monthslong pity party over the twists and turns my life had taken recently when, looking back, I didn’t have much to complain about.

I’d had an amazing career and the full support of my family. My only sibling hadn’t ever wanted much to do with me, but I never had to worry about my parents not showing up when I needed them.

Rage rushed through me for a woman I’d just met when I thought of all she’d probably had to go through as a kid.

We’d had easy conversation through dinner but never mentioned any specifics, like what my old job was or where I’d be working now. Only die-hard baseball fans would recognize me out of uniform here, and I liked just being a guy moving to New

York for a new job to Rachel. Once she knew who I really was—and who I was about to be—things would get complicated, and the superficial bubble we'd enjoyed tonight would pop.

Not that we could do anything about it anyway. I was still a guy on the road for seven months out of the year, and Rachel couldn't drop everything to meet me wherever I happened to be or when I came back into town.

My ex-wife had never met me on the road, but I couldn't fault her for that when I was hardly present even when I was home. A career in sports wasn't conducive to commitment, at least not for me.

But Rachel wasn't expecting anything from me, not even a walk to the subway. I shouldn't have been worried about all the ways I'd disappoint her if I asked for another dinner or meeting or even for her phone number.

But I wasn't ready to let her go just yet. We could keep it simple for another hour or two before she became a sweet memory.

"You said your sister was at someone's house for the night, right? Feel like getting a cup of coffee before you head back?"

She pursed her lips as she stepped closer.

"I try not to get on the subway too late, and I didn't expect dinner to go that long," she said, smiling as she nodded to the restaurant behind us.

I hadn't expected dinner to go that long either. We'd spent hours just talking, forgetting about the empty plates and glasses in front of us.

"I'm happy to pay for a cab to get you home. I'll even let you treat me." I gave her an

exaggerated grimace, rubbing my side. “You know, to make it up to me.”

She glowered at me, letting go of the most adorable groan.

“Bad enough you wouldn’t let me pay tonight. Now you’re guilting me into a cup of coffee.”

“Is it working?” I stepped closer, quirking a brow.

She exhaled a long gust of air and chuckled.

“You’re the only man I’ve ever met who can do that,” she said, pointing a finger at my face.

“What?”

“You can lift just one brow. I write that move all the time, but you’re the first one I’ve ever known who can pull it off.”

“Is that so?” I said, a smile racing across my mouth when I spotted hers.

“Even with a little swagger too.” She laughed, shaking her head. “If you’re up for a walk, there is a good coffee place by the water near Domino Park. It’s about twenty minutes from here, but it’s worth it. The bridge is pretty at night.”

“That sounds fine to me.” I tipped my chin toward the street. “You can lead the way.”

“Sure, why not,” she whispered as she stepped in front of me.

“How far is your place from here?” I asked as we strolled along the sidewalks and some cobblestoned blocks.

“Not too far. I live in Park Slope. It’s a nice family neighborhood. The brownstone belonged to my grandmother, and she left it to me when she passed away. It was a godsend not to have to pay for anything past utilities, or else we would have been out on the street after she was gone.”

“You both lived with her?” I asked. “You and your sister, I mean.”

“No, just my mother and me. This was pre-Taylor. I wish my sister had known our grandmother.” She exhaled a long breath. “I’m basically the only responsible parent she’s ever known.”

More shame gnawed at my gut as I remembered our old house in the Bronx and the one we’d lived in when my parents moved us out of the city. All I’d had to worry about was what time to be at practice, not if I would have a place to live.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

The closer we came to the water, the more the wind picked up. Twenty minutes went by quickly as we talked about everything and nothing—managing to avoid anything too personal or details that we could look up later, which I couldn’t, despite the already crippling temptation to continue whatever we were starting now.

It was a warmer than usual March day, but as the sun set, the chill in the air was a big reminder that it was still winter, despite the men in shorts we passed as we entered the tiny coffee shop.

“Everyone has something, right?” She glanced over at me, a sweet smile curving the pretty mouth I hadn’t been able to look away from all damn night. “My sister and I are doing okay. My grandmother gave me a sense of security growing up, so I try to do the same for Taylor.”

“What’s she like?” I asked. The small shop was crowded, all the chairs and tables taken as we stepped into a long line. I didn’t mind the wait, as my time with this woman was dwindling. I wanted to know as much as I could about her until it ended.

“My sister?” She scrunched up her nose as she turned to me. “She’s a young thirteen, meaning that she hasn’t gotten rid of all her stuffed animals yet. Although they call them plushies now so it sounds cooler.” A wistful smile curved her lips. “She’s a good kid. A little sensitive, which I worry about, but she has a nice little cluster of friends. She loves her namesake, and for her birthday, I gave her a Taylor’s Version neon sign for her room. Her name was the one good thing our mother gave her, I suppose.”

Her eyes came back to mine as the line inched forward.

“Why aren’t you close with your brother?”

“I tried, but since we were kids, he’s never liked me all that much.” I shrugged, stuffing my hands inside the pockets of my dress pants, when a sudden urge to hold Rachel’s hand made my fingertips tingle. I cleared my throat, not wanting to ponder what that was about. This whole night was weird yet too comfortable.

“He’s older,” I continued, “and he was smart enough to excel but didn’t want to be bothered. So, when I did?—”

“He was jealous,” Rachel finished for me.

I nodded, lifting a shoulder. Baseball had always been a huge part of my life and how I’d received a scholarship for college, but my brother had hated going to my games. I had always wished he could just be happy for me, but my parents had tried to assure me that the way he’d acted was because he wasn’t happy with himself. After we’d both moved out, I’d stopped trying to create a brotherly bond that was never there.

“I can’t see anyone not liking you.” She shook her head. “I mean, you’re kind and considerate enough to have dinner with the random woman who punched you and then ask her for coffee afterward. I really don’t think you’re some secret prick.”

I barked out a laugh. “I’d like to think I’m not, thank you.”

“His loss,” she whispered, with a beautiful smile that made it even harder not to reach out and touch her.

She motioned to the menu board behind the counter. “Get whatever you like. I order the oat milk hazelnut latte, and it always kills.” She shot me a wry grin. “My sister likes the chai. I limit her coffee, even though she insists all her friends drink espresso.” She gave me a playful eye roll.

“I did okay copying you at dinner. Get me the same. Please.”

“You got it. I’ll get you a large to alleviate some of my guilt from assaulting you then letting you buy me dinner.”

“You didn’t assault me. And I enjoyed your company at dinner. You were a very pleasant distraction.”

A blush stained her cheeks as she dropped her gaze to the checkered floor. I stayed behind her as she gave our order and dug into her purse. I caught the barista giving her a once-over as he filled our cups, glancing over his shoulder a few times as he fiddled with the steamed milk.

“Here you go,” he said, smiling wide until he caught my gaze over her shoulder. I had no claim to Rachel, other than being a very new acquaintance, and I most likely would never see her again after tonight, but I took a half step closer and leveled him with a glare sinister enough to make him dart his eyes away.

I wasn't sure if she noticed my reaction or his, but I felt a satisfaction that made no sense when he sputtered out a have a good day and didn't give her a second glance.

"Here you go," Rachel said, the corner of her mouth tipping up as she handed me my paper cup. "Wouldn't want you to scare another barista."

I had to laugh. "You caught that?"

"He's usually a little flirty when I come here, but something over my shoulder shut him down today." She eyed me as she took a sip from her cup. "I'm assuming it was the big guy behind me, unless there was something by the door I didn't notice."

She pursed her lips and handed me a couple of napkins.

"He's very harmless." She shook her head as she stepped closer to the door. "Not that the alpha thing or whatever you were doing behind me wasn't cute, but I can handle myself."

"I'm sure you can," I said, taking the cup and holding her eyes as I took a long sip. The entire night had been like that. Lingering, charged stares with moments of silence, but not awkward. In fact, our entire time together had been so easy, it felt like I'd known her for much more than a night.

"Then, what was the death glare or whatever you were doing behind me for?" She narrowed her eyes as she took a half step closer.

"I didn't want anyone intruding on the hour or so I have left with you. You can scare him off yourself next time." I reached behind her, still holding her gaze as my chest grazed hers for a second, close and long enough to catch her soft gasp.

"After you," I said as I pushed the door open.

“We can find a bench and sit for a while. Are you cold?” She motioned to me. “You only have that thin jacket?”

“I’m fine. Lead the way.” I raised my cup toward the Williamsburg Bridge in the distance.

I’d played through all kinds of weather, especially at the beginning of the season and throughout the play-offs when the weather would turn frigid, depending on where we were playing. I’d keep moving during a game to ward off the cold, but tonight, the gorgeous woman next to me was keeping me warm.

And I needed to stop contemplating all the different ways I could heat her up. She wasn’t like the women I’d met after a game those few times after my divorce. They were okay with only one night since that’s what they’d wanted too, and I didn’t have to worry about either of us expecting more than that.

I had no idea what Rachel would want, but I had a nagging feeling I’d want more than one time since I was already making excuses not to tell her goodnight.

And that wasn’t possible.

“What is your new job going to be? I’m assuming it’s a big executive-type position,” Rachel said, holding up her hand. “You don’t have to say specifics if you don’t want, but just a feeling.”

“What makes you think that?” I asked as I settled next to her. “I give off an executive vibe?”

Her gaze traveled up and down my torso before she met my eyes with a smirk.

“You look dressed for the part, yes. Am I right?”

I had to laugh. “I don’t know if I’d call it executive, but it’s a big role. They’re all so happy to have me on board, which is good and bad.”

“Bad?” She crinkled her nose at me as she rested her cup on her thigh. “I’d think that would be a good thing if they’re excited to have you.”

“This job is new. I mean, it’s not all that different from what I was doing before, but enough to feel like I have to learn what the hell I’m doing once I’m there. All the travel is the same, but it’s not like I have anyone else to worry about at home.”

I shrugged as I let my gaze float over the ripples along the water. The sky was a dark blue behind the buildings, and the lights twinkling on the bridge reflecting off the East River made me feel very small in this big city, despite the spotlight that would be over my head starting tomorrow morning.

That feeling was why I didn’t want to tell Rachel exactly what my job was, yet I’d told her more about what I thought about it than I had to friends and family. It was something I felt I couldn’t share with anyone close to me or let show with my new team.

“I was good at my old job,” I continued. “I didn’t expect to have to leave it so soon. I was too old toward the end, and now I’m too green. So, I have a little whiplash from going from one extreme to the other, I suppose.”

I stretched my arm along the wooden bench, wide enough not to touch Rachel’s shoulders, but I still felt the tingle of having her next to me.

I’d done a quick calculation of her age when she’d told me her sister’s and how old she’d been when she was born. She looked younger than thirty-three yet seemed like an old soul, most likely from having to grow up faster than she should have.

Maybe that was why it had been so easy to talk to her, leaving out the identifiable parts of my job but confessing the deep feelings and reservations I couldn't express to anyone else.

"You'll get it." Rachel shifted toward me. "I'll bet you have it more than you think already. A good friend once told me that impostors don't get impostor syndrome. You care a lot. I can tell. So, there's no way you'll fail."

She smiled, turning her head as the wind kicked up and blew a piece of hair across her face.

"You probably know better than me, being a writer and all." Before I could help it, I tucked that stray lock of hair behind her ear and let my thumb skate over her jaw.

"You know why I write romance?" Her voice creaked before she cleared her throat. "The happily-ever-after is all part of the formula. It's a given in every single story. There are a million different things that could happen along the way, all kinds of roadblocks. And even though you know it's going to work out because of what it is, you're afraid it won't. In the end, it always does, and we become the people we're supposed to be."

Her gaze fell to the ground.

"Sometimes, when life off the page gets complicated, I like to think of it as buildup, a little angst to keep it interesting and make the payoff that much better. Getting stuck or things becoming hard is all part of the journey, and it always resolves. Eventually. It's silly, I know." Her shoulders shook with a laugh. "But it helps."

"Not silly at all," I said in a hoarse whisper. "Smart. From you, I could actually believe that."

My eyes fell to her mouth, fixated on the way she chewed her bottom lip, something I'd begun to suspect was a nervous tell.

"I'm very passionate about storytelling. Even when I don't punch random men as they stroll by."

A nervous laugh slipped from her lips, but her smile faded.

I inched toward her as she drew closer, both of us moving almost in slow motion yet so fast I couldn't stop it if I wanted to.

And I absolutely didn't want to, despite how much of a bad idea it probably was and how it would only make parting ways that much worse. Especially if this was all I'd ever be able to get.

I let the pull between us close the last of the distance, and I pressed my mouth against hers.

Her body relaxed as she melted against me, slipping her arms around my neck and running her fingers through my hair as her lips parted on a moan. A growl erupted from my throat as I slipped my tongue inside. She tasted like coffee and something so sweet, I couldn't get enough. I swallowed her whimpers as she pushed into me, pressing her beautiful body against mine and grabbing the back of my neck as the kiss went deeper.

Nothing was sweet about this kiss, at least not after the first couple of minutes. Something caught fire between us as our mouths fused together, confusing me but fueling me as we kept going.

Before I realized it, my hand was in her hair as I slanted my mouth over hers. The kiss became something too frantic and too hot to be taking place on a public bench.

She'd give a soft moan whenever I'd try to pull back, and it made me want more and go in harder and deeper. I'd been right about wanting more once I had a taste—more of whatever had drawn me to her on sight, more of what I couldn't have because I had nothing to offer her past tonight.

We broke apart at a whistle behind us, her eyes hooded and hazy as they met mine. My heart hammered against my rib cage, already fixated on her mouth again, wet and swollen from my kisses.

“Wow,” she whispered, dragging her fingers down her lips. “I...I didn't expect that.”

“Shit,” I whispered, my stomach bottoming out. We'd gravitated toward each other like magnets, but I still should have asked before I just went for it. I wasn't like that, and I hated the thought of being too forward and ruining things tonight.

“I'm sorry if I?—”

“Oh no, I liked it. A lot. Just didn't expect it.” She laughed and dropped her head into her hands, peeking up at me as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

“I liked it too,” I whispered. “A lot. Listen, how would you feel about coming back to the hotel with me?”

Her head jerked toward me, her eyes wide.

“We could stay by the bar and talk, or you could come up to my room. I wouldn't ask for more than talking if that's all you want. I just don't want the night to end yet. But if you do, I'm happy to pay for a cab to get you home?—”

“Silas, I can't date,” she blurted out. “I mean, I can, but my priority is my sister. And anything more than that right now...” She trailed off, rubbing her eyelids.

“I get it. I can’t either. This job has me on the road a lot, like I said. My plate is full, and I can’t hurt anyone else— I mean, I can’t?—”

“I understand.” She pressed her hands against my chest. “But for tonight, I wouldn’t mind going back to the hotel with you. Easier to get a cab there anyway.” Rachel pushed off the bench, adjusting the strap of her messenger bag across her chest.

“Okay,” I said as I stood. “Like I said, we can just talk. I’m not looking for anything more than that.”

“What if...” she started, chewing on her bottom lip again. “What if I was looking for more? More for tonight, that is. No expectations past the next few hours. What would you say?”

My brows shot up as I leaned in, curling my hand around the nape of her neck as I brought her in for another kiss. Soft and light, but sensual enough to make the blood sing in my veins once again.

What was this woman doing to me?

A night wouldn’t complicate things. Much. I could handle it.

Or fool myself enough to enjoy it for the glorious moment that it was.

“I would say, just lead the way.”

CHAPTER FOUR

RACHEL

What in the hell was happening?

Meeting Silas the way I had was already enough of a mind trip. It had been a long time since anyone new had come into my life. My days were all about Taylor and making sure I had the means to support her in every way that mattered.

It was why dating and men in general weren't on my radar. My entire focus was on making a good enough living to support us and to always be present for my sister.

I'd been lectured countless times by friends and the family we had left, that sacrificing my own happiness wouldn't help Taylor or me, and to stop obsessing over filling every single gap our mother had ignored before she'd officially left us behind.

Taking a reprieve for a day and into the next morning had seemed weird enough not to know what to do with myself, and that had brought me out here in the first place. I didn't know how to be home and just be . I'd thought walking away from my everyday life for a few hours would help me break the writer's block I was having and be the reset I'd needed.

As I sat in the back of a yellow cab on the way back to Silas's hotel, today and tonight seemed like a walk into an alternate universe rather than a reset. I'd wound up in another dimension, one where a gorgeous man who seemed to hang on my every word dropped out of the sky.

I was still feeling that kiss and the tingle between my legs when he'd told me to lead the way.

I'd believed him when he said we could just talk, but once that door closed behind us, there'd be no talking. The anticipation was why I was afraid to look him in the eye now. I'd either lose my nerve or climb on top of him until the driver threw us out of the cab.

I'd suggested a cab because I'd been too afraid of changing my mind and running to the train station in panic on the walk back. Thanks to traffic, it had been a slow crawl since we'd gotten in. I was surprised that being in an enclosed space with Silas calmed me down, the kind yet dirty smiles he'd give me at each jerky stop reminding me why I was here, where I was going, and how much I couldn't wait to get there.

When I recognized the turn leading to his hotel, nerves kicked in again, and I sucked in what I hoped was a quiet, deep breath. This was what everyone had been after me to do—sort of. Tonight would be something just for me, something I wanted, regardless of all the reasons why it probably shouldn't happen.

It was something for me, no matter if I could keep it or not.

“Hey,” Silas crooned, scooting closer to me after the cab pulled up to a light. “I mean it, if you only want to talk, it's fine. I won't push?—”

I cut him off by grabbing his face and hauling his mouth to mine. My God, he was a good kisser. He laughed against my lips as he speared his hand into my hair, sliding his tongue past my eager lips and swirling it around in slow, torturous strokes. The kiss was sweet, yet dirty enough for me to grab a fistful of his shirt to yank him closer.

We broke apart, both of us breathless as he ran his nose along my jaw and planted a

light kiss to the corner of my mouth. His lips were warm and soft, the scrape of his stubble against my skin drawing a moan out of me. I pretended to clear my throat and straightened when the driver glared at us in his rearview mirror.

I felt more than heard Silas's chuckle next to me as he swept the hair off the side of my neck.

"You're adorable when you blush," he whispered, his breath fanning hot against my skin as he ran a finger over my cheek.

"Yeah, I'm cute as a button," I said, not enough air in my lungs to pull off the snark I was aiming for. I lolled my head to the side as Silas's lips came back to my neck.

"You're sexy as fuck. But really goddamn cute when you blush." He brushed my lips, smiling into the kiss when I sighed against his mouth.

The raspy way Silas had said "sexy as fuck" turned the pull between my legs into a full-on throb.

"Hey," the taxi driver snapped, banging on the ceiling with one hand as he swiveled his head. "Keep it in your pants while you're in my cab."

I draped a hand over my eyes, not knowing whether to crack up or die of embarrassment. After we'd fought a smoldering attraction for most of the night, once our lips touched, it was as if Silas and I had flipped a switch and it was impossible to keep our hands or mouths off each other. I'd written instant attraction a million times, but I'd never thought it existed in real life, at least not to this degree. If I'd passed Silas on the street, I'd absolutely notice him enough for my head to turn in his direction but would never pursue anything beyond a long second look.

I was a little afraid of combusting once we were behind a closed door, without the

protective but thin shreds of common decency that made us not take things too far while we were in public.

I couldn't even remember the last time I'd hooked up with someone, never mind made out in the back of a cab. Would I even remember how to have sex? I wrote it all the time, but real-life was much different.

While I couldn't pinpoint when or with whom my last time was, I was certain it wasn't like this because whoever he was wasn't like Silas.

We hadn't done anything but kiss and touch, but he was already unforgettable.

That was going to be a problem, but a problem for tomorrow Rachel. Tonight Rachel was living her best life and would enjoy this fairy-tale interlude for however long it lasted.

I laughed to myself as I gazed out the window. This was as close to a Cinderella story as I'd get. The beautiful prince and I would part ways and not look for each other after tomorrow, although this big city wasn't big at all. I might run into him one day, but we wouldn't be whatever we were right now.

A one-night limit sounded like the best thing for him and was definitely the right move for me, but it already sucked.

The cab jerked to a stop in front of the hotel. I spotted the table I'd been sitting at all day and had to laugh.

I wouldn't be able to pass that table or take my sister for tacos without a lot of dirty memories racing through my brain. Memories I couldn't wait to make tonight.

This day had taken a weird but wonderful turn, and it still wasn't over.

But it would be. Until then, I needed to keep all thoughts of pending reality far from my mind.

I followed Silas inside, past the pink neon trails of lights illuminating the bar. The inside of the hotel skated the line between trendy and tacky, like a novelty place you'd want to go to for fun but couldn't afford.

We stayed silent, not touching as we headed for the elevator and stepped on after the doors dinged open.

"After you," he said, a wry grin curving his lips. It was hard to look at his mouth and not feel it on mine and wonder what it would be like to feel it everywhere.

I managed a nod and stepped inside. We were the only passengers as the doors slid closed. Before I knew it, Silas's body was on mine, pinning me against the wall as he covered my mouth with his, this kiss deeper and more desperate than the ones before. I slid my hand under his sports coat and scraped my nails up his back, his muscles flexing under my touch.

He was hard everywhere and making my head spin enough to push away my trepidation. Not completely, but far enough that I didn't want to run or chicken out anymore. When I'd told Silas I wanted this, I hadn't felt even one ounce of hesitation as it slipped out of my mouth, like a confession about to burn my tongue.

The right thing, or at least the better and less complicated thing, to do would have been to appreciate the kiss and tell him goodnight.

But I didn't want to. I didn't want to so badly, the idea of the regret I'd have over just walking away was intolerable.

I'd end tonight with other regrets, but I'd get a hell of a story to go along with them.

Maybe not for a book I'd publish, but one I could daydream about when daily life became hard. I'd flashback to the night it was all wonderful and easy because obligations didn't apply.

"We're here," Silas murmured against my lips as the elevator dinged on his floor. I didn't even look to see what button he'd pressed and hadn't cared once he'd backed me against the wall, but it was high enough for me to have already pulled open two of the buttons on Silas's shirt.

A lifetime sense of over-responsibility had probably led to this moment. Once I let loose, I was wild and mindless, and I had to admit it felt pretty damn good.

"That felt like a long ride to only the tenth floor," I said, still chasing my breath as Silas took my hand and led me down the hall.

"Really?" he said, cracking a wide grin as he swiped the keycard over the lock. "To me, it seemed way too fast." He pushed the door open and stood back, tipping his chin toward the room.

Now that I was here, nerves mixed with the excitement in my belly, causing the butterflies to ricochet back and forth enough to make me a little queasy.

I unzipped my jacket and draped it over the chair by the desk, setting my messenger bag on the seat. The glow from the streetlight on the sidewalk below peeked through the curtains, the rest of the room fading away as my focus zapped to the king-sized bed with the plush headboard along the wall.

With my jacket off, I became hyper-attuned to what I was wearing. I smoothed down my favorite long-sleeved black T-shirt that always drooped over one shoulder. It was comfortable and—I thought—cute, but as I gazed down my body, it dawned on me that Silas was about to see me naked.

I'd always been on the full side of curvy, even more so since my schedule and my sister's active lifestyle didn't allow for much gym time other than whatever I could do in front of my TV for an early-morning half hour.

I mostly liked the way I looked, but I was the only one who'd seen me with my clothes off for a long time. I hadn't seen what was under Silas's dress shirt and pants yet, but what I'd touched so far had appeared to be all hard muscle.

When I was turned on enough not to think, I was all too happy to peel my clothes off. I still wanted to, but I swept my gaze around the room to see how many lights I could shut off without being obvious.

I ran my hand through my hair and turned around when I felt Silas's eyes on me.

"What?" I asked when I caught him staring. I'd taken off my jacket at the restaurant, but it had been dark. This was the first time he'd get a complete picture of the wide curve of my hips and my breasts that still strained against my shirt even though it was loose.

"You're really fucking beautiful," he breathed out, shaking his head as he took my face in his hands. "That's why I haven't been able to take my eyes off you tonight."

"Yeah?" I said, my heart thudding against my rib cage as Silas glided his hand up my arm and cupped my neck, giving it a gentle squeeze until I lifted my head. "I thought you were guarding against another sucker punch."

"Sometimes sucker punches are lucky." He glided his thumb along my jaw and across my bottom lip. "At least, this one was," he murmured against my mouth before he pressed his lips to mine, slow and soft at first. But before I knew it, his hand was in my hair, and he was weaving his fingers around a fistful.

He peeled off his jacket as our lips stayed fused, dropping it with a soft thump against the carpet.

“You’re really fucking beautiful too,” I said as I feathered my hands down his chest. “I’m a sucker for a guy in a suit, or almost-suit.”

“Hey,” he whispered, catching my hands. “Are you sure you’re okay? Your hands are shaking.”

I clenched my eyes shut, embarrassment instead of arousal heating my cheeks. I didn’t realize my hands were trembling since it seemed like my entire body was shaking.

“I’m okay, but if I’m going to be honest, I’m nervous.” I lifted my head, cringing when I met his puzzled gaze. “I’m not a virgin or anything. It’s just...been a while. I’m probably not what you’re used to.”

I dragged a hand down my face. This was a golden opportunity and gift from the universe, and I was already fucking it up.

“No, you’re not what I’m used to.”

He cupped my cheek, swiping his thumb back and forth along my jaw. I relaxed and leaned into his touch, soothed and even more aroused. My brain was misfiring too much to think straight.

“You’re like no one else I’ve ever met. And I’m the one who should be nervous.”

I jerked my head up.

“You? Why would you be nervous?”

“Like I said, I read some romance. You write it, so you have high expectations of how this should go.” He drifted his hand from my cheek to my neck, spreading his fingers as he draped his palm over my throat. “That’s a common move, right? So you lift those pretty eyes to mine and see how much I want to spread you out on that big bed behind us and taste every fucking inch of your beautiful body before I sink inside you.”

I let go of a gasp, grabbing his wrist when my knees almost gave out. Yes, I had high expectations, thanks to reading and writing romance. But I had the feeling Silas would ruin me more than any fictional hero before I headed home tomorrow.

He quirked a brow— why the hell was that so sexy —and ran his other hand down my back, triggering a shiver along the path of his fingertips.

“Was that good?” He brushed his lips over my cheek and drifted them along my neck, peppering kisses onto my shoulder and gently pulling down my sleeve where it was already draping low on my arm.

I grabbed the back of his head, digging my fingers into his hair as he pulled at the hem of my shirt, dropping the neckline enough to show the lace outline of my bra. I whimpered as he dragged openmouthed kisses over my chest, running his tongue along where my breasts strained against the cups. One soft tug and I would spill right out, but I wasn’t embarrassed or timid anymore. I wanted him to see me...and maybe even remember me.

For someone who wrote scenes just like this one for a living, I was at a severe loss for words other than moans and mewls when he’d get so close to where I wanted him and then back off.

“This is all up to you, sweetheart. Tell me what you want me to do.”

I wanted him to call me sweetheart again, preferably as I was riding his face or his cock.

Maybe I could find my words and figure out what I wanted now. Every dirty thing I wanted Silas to do to me and let me do right back to him blossomed in my frazzled brain.

“I should see if I left a bruise,” I said, holding Silas’s gaze as I unbuttoned his shirt. He was smooth under my fingertips as I skated them down his torso and over the soft dusting of hair across his chest. “Which side was it again?” I asked as I slid the material off his shoulders and down his chiseled arms. I was right. He was nothing but muscle everywhere.

I bent down, swirling my tongue over the dip of his hip and across his stomach.

“Fuck,” he muttered, pulling at my hair as I nipped at the other side, his very hard cock close enough in proximity to note the huge bulge in his black dress pants.

“I think you’re good.”

Silas’s eyes were dark and feral as he grabbed the back of my head and took my mouth in a kiss desperate enough to make my toes curl in my boots. I needed them off, along with the rest of my clothes.

“You can leave all the bruises you want, gorgeous.” He fisted the hem of my shirt and dragged it up my back. “Let me see you.”

I peeled my shirt over my head and tossed it onto the chair along with my jacket.

“You are fucking killing me tonight,” he growled, reaching behind me to unhook my bra. “Is this what you wanted before?” He bent to suck a nipple into his mouth,

pulling at it with his teeth before swirling his tongue around it.

“Yes,” I managed to breathe out as his mouth went to my other nipple, the both of us fumbling with the button of my jeans until it popped open.

“Can I...” he started, his hooded gaze growing serious as it met mine. His hesitation made him even hotter. “I want to touch you.”

“Yeah?” I asked, a smile ripping across my mouth.

“Yeah.” I watched the roll of his throat as he swallowed. “Really fucking badly. But?—”

“Touch me,” I whispered, taking his hand and dipping it inside my panties. We both gasped when his fingers glided over my very wet clit.

“Shit,” he groaned, dropping his head into the crook of my neck. “This all for me, baby? Is your pussy this soaked just for me?”

I nodded, my eyes shutting as my hips swayed along with the swirl of his fingers.

“Look at me,” he rasped as he pressed the pad of his thumb against my clit and slid a finger deep enough inside me to make me yelp in delighted surprise.

“That’s a good girl. Eyes on me. After looking at your pretty face all this time, I want to see what you look like when you come.”

I fell against him, my legs nothing but limp noodles from his talented fingers and dirty words.

“I bet you’re close. Aren’t you, sweetheart?” A wicked grin curled his lips as he

slipped another finger inside.

“Silas, please.” I dug my fingers into his bicep so deep I thought my nails broke the skin as my legs began to shake. Right when I was about to explode, he slipped his hand away and pressed his hands against my hips.

“Wait a minute,” he said, smiling down at me as he lifted me up by the waist and brought me over to the bed, setting me down with a soft bounce.

I was about to ask him what he was doing as he unzipped my boots one at a time, throwing them behind him before he hooked his thumbs into the waistband of my jeans and dragged them down my legs, along with my ruined panties.

I was completely naked and spread out on the bed with most of the lights on, and I didn't care. All I wanted was relief from the throbbing at my core so strong my clit had its own pulse.

“My tongue was jealous of my fingers.” He climbed on top of me, hooking my leg over his shoulder as he dove in, kissing me like he'd been doing since the bench. Long strokes of his tongue as he tasted and explored, snaking it in and out of me before swirling around my clit.

Ruined was not the word. Any expectations I'd had of men would be obliterated after this.

I sat up on my elbows, fighting not to flail my legs as I watched the dirty sight in front of me, Silas's head bobbing up and down, moaning as he licked me like an ice cream cone, catching every drop as my arousal trickled down his chin.

When he slid two fingers inside and sucked my clit into his mouth, I went off like a bomb, thrashing on the bed as Silas kept going, wringing me out until I had nothing

left and I collapsed against the padded headboard.

“Good enough for a book?” Silas asked, his crooked grin killing me as he swept the hair off my sticky forehead.

“I could never put that into a book. Words couldn’t express how amazing that was.”

Silas laughed, pressing his mouth to mine, his lips still glistening with me. I didn’t mind my taste on his lips and even enjoyed it until my hazy gaze fell to where he still tented his pants.

“Do you have something?”

He nodded. “Yes, in my wallet,” he said, the corner of his mouth curving up as he stood, fishing his wallet out of his pocket before letting his pants drop to the floor. My mouth watered as his cock sprang free, bouncing against his stomach as he pulled down his boxers.

Other than the deep scar stretching across his knee, he was perfection. He’d said he had to train for his old job, but he had to be still doing it as I’d never seen a more beautiful man in my life from head to toe.

But more than the hard ridges of his body, his face was what held me captive. His eyes, carnal yet vulnerable, and his blinding smile would be what I’d remember the most after tonight, whenever I’d allow myself to think about it.

Maybe it was the endorphins from coming in his mouth, but Silas was special. Something about him seemed genuine and honest, even if both of us left out life details tonight on purpose.

I hoped today and tonight would be a nice memory for him too, and I’d try my best

before I walked out his hotel room door later tonight or in the morning.

“Still ready,” Silas said, shaking his head with a tiny laugh as he slid his finger up and down my slit. “You’re really killing me tonight.”

The feeling was all too mutual.

He rolled the condom on and settled on top of me, easing in slowly as he studied my face.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” he said on a tortured groan as he started to move. Slow at first, so slow I could feel every inch of him as he thrust in and out until the mattress squeaked under us as he picked up the pace.

“Can you give me one more?” he grunted out, slipping his hand between us to rub circles over my clit. “Please, baby.”

Hot, great in bed, and so damn considerate.

Man, this was so unfair.

My second orgasm snuck up on me and tripped him. My body shook as he pulsed inside me, the second high even more mind-scrambling than the first. I melted into the mattress as he collapsed on top of me, both of us breathless and spent—or at least, I was. I had no idea how to move off this bed since I couldn’t feel my legs.

“That was...” I said, trying to draw the air back into my lungs to form words, not that I had any.

I felt his laugh against my chest before he lifted his head, resting his elbow on the pillow.

“That was what? I’m excited to hear what a romance writer has to say.”

I laughed, covering my eyes for a minute before meeting his gaze.

“Not what I expected to happen today.”

He smiled, his lips as raw and swollen as mine were, although his wasn’t from beard burn. I already felt the chafing on my chin and chest, but I didn’t mind. It felt good, almost like a souvenir.

A souvenir from a night and a man I never saw coming—and probably would never see again.

CHAPTER FIVE

SILAS

It had been a long time since I'd fallen into a sleep so deep, it took a few minutes to register where I was after my eyes popped open. That had been life on the road, especially during my last couple of years of playing. I'd never had any trouble acclimating to a strange bed, and I'd pass out the minute my head hit the pillow, enjoying a long and dreamless sleep until I had to play at whatever field in whatever city I'd been in at the time.

I smiled at Rachel's soft sigh as she stirred next to me, cuddling into my chest as she rolled over. Maybe she'd forgotten where she was too, but my heart still seized when she reached for me in her sleep.

I tightened my arms around her, enjoying the last few moments before I had to let her go, the odd yet deep contentment that had washed over me when I'd woken up already dissipating to dread.

It was what we'd agreed on. I had my reasons and it had sounded like she had hers, so one night was our limit.

So why was it so hard to say goodbye to a woman I'd only known for a day?

I reached to grab my phone off the nightstand. Five a.m. glowed back at me before I set it back down. I had been sure it was earlier, judging by the pitch-black street outside the window, the soft glow from one streetlight seeping through the sheer

curtains.

Then I recalled reading two o'clock on the tiny alarm clock next to the bed before we both drifted off to sleep.

I had a long day ahead of me and would pay for that later.

But it would be worth it.

I ran my hand down my face, still debating on telling her who I was. The press conference would be broadcast across sports channels and would be in the news for at least the next few days, ramping up again when the season officially started.

As a kid, I'd race to the newspaper we'd get delivered every morning to see where my favorite teams ranked in standings and would flip the paper over to get the big sports headlines from the night before.

My parents still bought the same newspapers, but most people chose how to get their news and what they wanted to know about these days. Rachel didn't seem like a big sports fan, but I hated the idea of her picking up a newspaper or catching a story online about me. We'd both purposely held things back about ourselves, so not telling her wasn't really lying, even by omission.

So, why did it feel like I was betraying her by not sharing where I'd be in a few hours or what I was really doing here?

Something told me she'd understand, and if she knew, she wouldn't make a big deal over it or use the information to seek me out. And I wouldn't see her past this morning, so if I wanted to tell her, what was the big deal?

If I told her, everything would be different. I wouldn't be just a guy with a new job

moving to a new city. It was what had stopped me from telling her about what I used to do and what I was here for in the first place.

To Rachel, I was just Silas. What I was able to do before and what I had to do now in my career didn't apply. It was a breath of fresh air I hadn't known I'd needed, as this transition had seemed to be choking me.

She'd soothed me in a way no one else in my life had because I hadn't been open about the turmoil that had fueled my life since I'd blown out my knee. Not like I had been with Rachel, even though I'd held back all the key details about my identity.

Her comment about how impostors didn't get impostor syndrome still echoed in my head, the only piece of advice that almost made me believe I could pull this off.

Because I sure as hell felt like an impostor, from the second I'd accepted the job. It would multiply when I stepped up to the microphones today to announce managing the Brooklyn Bats this season, but I'd do all I could not to show it.

I still had that drive to succeed, even if I had to direct other players instead of playing myself. As Rachel had noticed, I did care a lot, so maybe I could do this.

I felt the first spark of excitement over this job because of the beautiful woman next to me, and I couldn't even thank her for it since she didn't know what my job was.

While my time with Rachel had quelled some of my managing nerves, I was still sorting out all that happened between us. Fixating on a woman I couldn't know past today was a distraction I didn't need.

Nope, parting ways was the best thing. I'd make sure she got into a cab and hope she'd get home safely, fighting the temptation to get her number so I could make sure. I'd take what happened between us as the glorious thing it was, a few hours of

awesome to straighten out my scrambled head.

Though, when we said goodbye, I knew my head would be scrambled for a different reason, but I could only dread one thing at a time.

“What time is it?” Rachel asked, her voice gravelly and full of sleep as she propped herself up on her elbows. The sheet draped across her torso, but I couldn’t resist a look when it drooped low, the side of her gorgeous breast exposed as she shifted toward the window.

We’d had sex until I’d run out of condoms and then had lain in bed talking until we both fell asleep. An old teammate had always advised us to pack three in our wallets, and while I’d never had the occasion of using more than one, for some reason, I’d listened.

For two people who didn’t know each other before yesterday, we’d fit together perfectly. I’d memorized every part of her body with my hands and my mouth, along with the sounds she made when I’d touch and taste her in all the right spots. She was beautiful from head to toe, and in another time, with another box of condoms, I wouldn’t have stopped touching her. Last night or ever.

Fuck, what was happening to me?

“Five,” I whispered, sitting up with the sheets still at my waist.

“I better get going,” she said on an adorable yawn. “I wouldn’t want to make you late on your first day.” Her sleepy smile made my chest pinch hard enough to want to rub away the ache.

Again, what the hell was wrong with me? I couldn’t catch deep feelings for someone I’d only known for a day. This was chemistry and good sex.

Really good fucking sex.

“I don’t have to be anywhere for a while. No need to rush.” Before I could help myself, I reached out to squeeze her shoulder, running my thumb back and forth over her soft skin. She needed to leave, and I needed to figure out a way to get her out of my head.

She turned toward the window as she let go of another loud yawn, stretching her arms over her head as the sheet dropped to the small of her back. Not being able to resist this one last temptation, I looped my arm around her waist and rolled her onto her back, the sweetest giggle escaping her when I settled between her legs.

“We should be figuring out how to detach, right?” she said with a sad sigh that echoed in my gut. “I mean—” she shut her eyes and shook her head “—you have to go to work, and I have to get my sister. This urge to stay under the covers with you until they drag us out has nowhere to go.”

“Yep,” I said, exhaling the same deep sigh but not moving away like I should have been.

“And you’re out of condoms. So starting anything up would be the cruelest kind of a tease, right?” My eyes fluttered shut when she sifted her hands through the hair at my neck, goose bumps trailing down my back as her nails scraped my scalp.

I spotted regret in her eyes, but also enough heat to make me forget about my original plan to gather her clothes off the carpet, hand them to her like the gentleman I hadn’t been last night, and wait outside the bathroom before I walked her to the hotel entrance and put her into a cab.

“Some things don’t require condoms,” I said, arousal more than sleep coating my words. If this wouldn’t last past today, what was the harm in taking just a little more?

I wanted it and her enough to ignore just how much harm a little more would be.

“Like what... Yes, right there,” she whispered, sinking her head into the pillow as I slipped a hand between us and traced lazy circles around her clit.

“Already wet. Did I give you good dreams?” I slipped a finger inside her, flattening my thumb over her clit as I pumped in and out.

“Too good,” she groaned, arching her back against me as I dialed up the pressure, adding another finger and wishing it were my cock getting lost in her one last time.

She met my gaze, eyes hooded with lust as a blush stained her cheeks and crept down her neck. She really was so fucking adorable when she blushed, but when she was turned on, she was so damn sexy I couldn’t stand it.

Her eyes on me as she drenched my hand were too much. If I was catching feelings, no matter if they made sense or not, I had to ease back from intimacy I couldn’t handle right now.

“What other things did you have in mind?” she asked, spreading her legs more as the urge to replace my fingers with my dick almost overtook me enough to forget how that really couldn’t happen.

As much as we’d held back with each other, I’d given her everything last night, more than I had given anyone in years. The sex hadn’t been just sex, and that had confused me most of all.

“I’d love one more taste for the road,” I whispered, taking her mouth in a quick but deep kiss before I dragged my lips down her body, tracing a slow circle around each of her nipples with my tongue, and trailed lazy kisses along the soft skin of her stomach, inching lower until I was between her legs. Even in the almost-darkness, the

sight of her made my mouth water, and I dove in, sucking, biting, and kissing her deeply, as I'd done for half the night.

A loud moan escaped her as she grasped the back of my head, mumbling my name and how it was all too good. I couldn't have agreed more. She was sweetness all over, and one more taste was the pure torture I'd expected it to be but still couldn't resist.

I slid two fingers back inside her, pumping in and out as I ran my tongue all over her, only going in harder when she whimpered a please and dug her heels into my back. Her arousal dribbled down my chin as her whimpers grew louder. Her taste on my tongue and the way her beautiful body quivered under my touch made me lose what was left of my mind as she squeezed my fingers, sending me right over the edge with her.

I lifted my head, dragging sloppy kisses down the inside of her damp thigh as my release ripped through me and spurt all over the bottom of the mattress.

"Is there something I can do for you?" she asked, breathless, as she gazed down at me. "I'd like a taste for the road too."

I laughed and shook my head.

"You already did, sweetheart. I came all over the sheets like a teenager." I pressed a kiss to her knee, holding her hooded eyes. "In case no one has told you lately, you're pretty fucking incredible."

She was something I couldn't explain or figure out and, I had the feeling, something that would linger in my head for a long time.

Rachel laughed, covering her face with her hands.

“This is such a bitch.”

Wasn't that the fucking truth?

“I don't have to be at the office until ten,” I said, still skating my hand up and down her leg. “How about I order us a little breakfast before I get you a cab to go home.”

“I don't need a cab. The sun is coming up, and I'll be fine taking the subway.”

“No,” I said, pushing to stand and shifting toward the bathroom to seek out a towel to clean up the mess I'd made. “Let me do right by you and get you home safely.”

“You did plenty right by me last night.” She quirked a brow at me. “But I appreciate it. The breakfast and the ride.”

I nodded and headed into the bathroom, popping over to the sink to splash some cold water on my face and get a damn grip.

I'd enjoy these next few moments with a beautiful, amazing woman before I let her go and then I had to try to forget how perfectly we seemed to fit in every way but real life.

CHAPTER SIX

RACHEL

“Can I ask you a question?” I asked Silas around a mouthful of cheese Danish. He’d ordered us coffee and fresh pastries from early morning hotel room service. They reminded me of a bakery around here Taylor and I would always sample before heading home on the subway.

I’d sampled a lot on the way home from my day trip to Williamsburg this time, and I was grateful I didn’t have to pick up Taylor until the early afternoon so I could attempt to process it all.

“I think there’s no need to be shy at this point,” Silas said, a smirk twisting his lips as he sucked icing off his thumb.

“How old are you? Like late thirties?” I took a long sip from the ceramic mug as I kept my eyes on his, studying him as much and as hard as I could. I almost wished I could take a picture of him before I left for tangible proof that this wasn’t all a dream. When Silas had gone into the bathroom, I’d pinched my arm to see if I could feel any pain through my orgasm haze.

It hurt, but not as much as the idea of never seeing or talking to Silas again, which made no kind of sense. His age didn’t matter, but I wanted to know all the random details I could to plant his memory into my brain as accurately as possible.

But I was sure he and everything we’d done would replay enough in my head to stay

fresh for a long while.

“I’m forty-two, so you’re close. And you’re thirty-three.” He lay next to me on the bed, propping his elbow onto the mattress and resting his head on his hand. After all the sex I’d had with this guy, and the ache between my legs from sudden overuse of my usually neglected lady parts, the sexy position he was in, combined with the playful gleam in his eye, still had me up for a lot more.

This really was a bitch.

“How did you know that?”

“I did quick math in my head. You said you were twenty when your thirteen-year-old sister was born.”

“Ah, yes. Good for you for paying attention.”

Forty-two. How was a man like this still single?

He’d even said he had no one at home to worry about and had sounded a little sad over it.

“Do you have to sell your house when you go home?”

“I rented an apartment, so I just need to figure out how to break my lease. My ex-wife took the house, so I downsized when I went on my own,” he said, swiping another Danish from the plate between us.

Ex-wife. Divorced. That hadn’t come up last night. No intimate personal details, even though we’d been very intimate in other ways.

My instincts were skeptical enough to always doubt everyone, especially men, but it was odd how much I didn't doubt that whatever Silas shared with me was true.

If he was leaving out anything that would upset me, I was fine with not knowing. I wanted to take the good feelings about him with me after I left his hotel room since I couldn't take anything else.

"I haven't had Danish for breakfast in a long time, probably since I was little." I gulped the last bit of coffee as the sting from another memory twinged in my belly. "If my mother saw me eating anything sweet, when she was actually around, she'd tell me how I needed to watch what I ate because no one would look at me if I stayed this chubby."

Silas's eyes narrowed in rage. "What kind of mother says that?"

"The kind she was. A crappy one." I shrugged with a sad sigh. "I've always been around this size," I motioned down my body, still naked other than the sheet draped over my torso. "Even after I became an adult, she'd always say if I just lost a few pounds, maybe men would want to date me. That was the only real sort of guidance she tried to impart. Even when I was small and would be watching cartoons, she'd say, 'Don't you want to put down that cookie so that you can be skinny and pretty like a cartoon princess?'"

I hadn't spoken about my mother taunting me over my weight in a long time. I was happy with how I looked, and my lackluster love life had nothing to do with the extra pounds and everything to do with the extra baggage she'd given me.

I lifted my gaze to Silas's, his eyes still thinned to slits. The weirdest thing about last night was the moments like this. The transcendent sex was rare, yes, but I'd told him things that surprised me when they fell out of my mouth. I didn't tell him my last name, but I'd confessed feelings that I wasn't sure people who'd known me all my

life were even aware of. I trusted Silas in ways I probably shouldn't have for someone I'd only just met, but talking to him seemed more natural to me than to anyone I'd ever known.

My mother hadn't given me a body complex. It was just another way of her showing how little I meant to her, and when my sister came along and she'd treated her the same way, it had only made me resent her more. I made sure to encourage Taylor every chance I got to try to turn it around, and watching her grow up a mostly happy kid was the best reward.

But even though I'd learned to mostly self-soothe at a young age, it was too late to turn off that nasty voice in my head that would taunt me at all my lowest moments.

"I can tell you with certainty that plenty of men wanted, want , to be with you. I think most guys are like me—we'd rather Jessica Rabbit than a cartoon princess," he said, a sexy smile coasting across his lips as he slid his hand up my thigh. Tingles from his touch ran up and down my leg even through the sheets. "And please tell me you get that reference."

"I do," I said, a laugh escaping me. "Although I'm not sure I'm Jessica Rabbit. She had a killer body?—"

"And so do you. Trust me." He jerked his head toward the damp corner of the bed.

I darted my eyes away from his , my cheeks flushing hot. I'd been uninhibited enough all night and this morning not to let all we'd done sink in, but now that the sun was turning the black sky outside the window a pale pink, the light of day was already killing my buzz.

Reality was creeping up on us, and although I'd expected it to, I still hated it.

I almost hadn't taken today off from work. Something had told me to take the extra day, even though I tried to save all my paid time off for my sister. It felt like a gratuitous luxury, but maybe fate was prepping me for a slow reentry into real life, even though I'd only escaped it for less than twenty-four hours.

I swung my legs over the bed, steeling myself for ripping off the Band-Aid and forcing myself out of this hotel room. Had I ever done a true walk of shame? Where I'd have to wear last night's clothes home because I'd spent an unplanned night somewhere else with someone?

Even when I'd had casual sex in my younger days, I couldn't recall waking up in someone else's bed, other than the times I'd stay with my best friend Auden after a night of drinking to make sure she didn't choke on her own vomit.

I'd kept men at arm's length for as long as I could remember, yet I'd broken my own rules with a stranger.

I'd called last night a walk into an alternate universe, but really, I'd morphed into a different person. A person I wished I could be if this were another life on a different timeline.

"I'm going to get changed. If you insist on getting me a cab, it's easier before rush hour starts." I pushed off the bed, careful not to let the sheet slip as I padded toward the bathroom.

Silas stood, plucking my clothes from where they were strewn across the carpet. He'd slipped on his boxers to greet room service at the door, but he was naked enough for me to ogle the perfect globes of his ass and watch his back muscles flex as he reached down.

"Here," he whispered, draping the sheet across my back as he handed me my clothes.

Goose bumps trailed down my back from the graze of his fingertips. It was a sweet gesture sexy enough to make me want to drop the damn sheet and fit in one more time before I had to go, but I was out of one-more-times.

The shadows on the wall from the sun were an infuriating stopwatch, reminding me that my time was up.

Our hands brushed as I took my clothes from him, my lips itching to touch his as he gazed down on me with a sweet but sad smile. Maybe this was hard for him too.

He'd said that he didn't want to hurt anyone else and that he was divorced. I'd bet he had baggage too, and I shouldn't feel guilty for walking away from something not possible, but the sting in my gut was real and heavy as I trudged to the bathroom, an odd sensation like I was leaving something behind gnawing at me.

When I got dressed and stepped out of the bathroom, I peeked at my phone for any messages from my sister after I'd texted her goodnight. She was probably still slumbering away with her friends, oblivious to where her usually uber-responsible sister was and who she was with.

"Wow, twenty degrees?" I said when I read the temperature on my lock screen. "That dropped fast. March in New York is a funny thing."

"Always was," Silas said as he rummaged through his suitcase. He was in a hoodie and a pair of joggers, a backward baseball cap on his head. How was that even hotter than the jacket and pants from last night?

I darted my eyes away, not wanting to ponder exactly how many levels of hot Silas was as I'd lose count and never leave.

"Take this," he said, holding up a sweatshirt. "That shirt is too light for twenty

degrees.”

I froze, staring at the gray hoodie, Washington in caps across the front.

“I couldn’t?—”

“I don’t need it. I’m hot-blooded from years of being outside.” His beautiful smile deepened the pang in my gut. “I’d feel better not thinking of you freezing in the cold.”

“Silas, I can’t?—”

He ate up the distance between us, shaking his head as he draped the sweatshirt over me. It hung on me like a minidress, almost hitting my knees, his scent flooding my senses enough to make my head spin.

“You can,” he whispered and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “After everything—” he nodded to the messy bed behind us “—let me be a gentleman this morning.”

I laughed, dropping my eyes to the carpet before I lifted them to his somber gaze.

“You were a gentleman yesterday. At times.”

We shared a laugh.

“Thanks for not getting angry at me for punching you.”

“No problem,” he said, shifting back and forth on his feet before he stuffed his hands into his pockets, as if he wasn’t sure where to put them. “Thanks for...everything. Since that punch to the gut, it’s been really great to know you.”

My nose burned as I nodded. He didn't know me. Not really. So why did it feel like, for the last few hours, no one knew me better?

I'd shown Silas a side of myself that I kept hidden. The one who wanted things for herself, not just to do the responsible thing. I didn't mind being Taylor's guardian, and I loved the chance to give her a good life and shield her from some of the issues that still plagued her big sister.

But it was nice to have a piece of something just for me, just because I'd wanted it, if only for a few hours.

I followed Silas to the elevators, a heavy but not awkward silence washing over us. What more was there to say?

We were the only passengers again when we stepped on, the doors sliding shut before anyone else could join us. Our eyes locked as he leaned against the wall, his glorious arms folded over his fantastic chest as he raked his gaze up and down my body.

We couldn't do anything now, or anymore, but reliving the heat of last night was both exhilarating and depressing. It was all so good, and now it was over.

Silas was able to flag down a cab in less than a couple of minutes once we got outside. He smiled as he held the door open, his dark brow furrowing as his eyes darted away for a second.

"I know this breaks the unspoken rule, but what name do you write under? Like, I assume you have a pen name, right?"

I flinched for a minute, surprised at his question.

"I do," I said, my reply slow. "Have a pen name, I mean."

“If you don’t want to tell me, it’s okay?—”

“R.M. Dioro. My initials and my grandmother’s maiden name. I’m mysterious like that.”

His throaty chuckle once again killed me.

“Why do you want to know?”

“I’m always looking for a good book.” His smile was almost wistful as he lifted a shoulder.

“How do you know my books are good?” I teased, smiling until he eased closer.

“Someone that passionate about writing couldn’t possibly write bad books,” he whispered, brushing my lips with a quick kiss before he backed away, holding my eyes as he reached into his pocket.

“This should be enough to get her home,” he said, leaning into the cab and handing a couple of bills large enough to be too much to the driver.

“I hope you got the inspiration you needed,” Silas said as I stepped inside.

“I got it in spades,” I told him, reaching for the door handle as he still held it open.

“Take care, Slugger.”

He finally shut the door, giving me a little wave as the driver pulled away from the curb.

He didn’t ask to see me again, and I didn’t expect him to. Silas asking to know my

pen name wasn't the same, but it was still a surprise. If he really wanted to find me, my author pages had all my social links.

I tried not to look into it because if he really wanted to speak to me again, he would have asked for a direct way. It was silly to have even a flicker of hope that I'd hear from him again. It was best to head home with all this wonderful inspiration and somehow figure out how to use it and forget about it at the same time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SILAS

“Can I come in?”

I looked up from my desk and exhaled a sigh of relief when I spotted my friend Lee standing in the doorway to my office.

“I have a few minutes before the circus starts,” I said as I set down my pencil.

Lee was the team chiropractor and had been one of the physical therapists for almost as long as I’d played for Washington. In the last couple of years, I’d seen a lot of him, thanks to the aches and pains that plagued me toward the end. So much so that he’d become one of my closest friends, and he was the only one who knew my concerns about how long I’d be able to play.

He’d been encouraging but honest, although not as encouraging as the beautiful writer I still couldn’t get out of my head after almost a month.

When I’d taken the job with the Bats, Lee had asked if they were looking for any staff, so he could be closer to his daughter in New York or at least have more chances to see her if he were based in Brooklyn. I was happy to put in a good word and have a familiar face around.

“Strategizing?” he asked, running a hand through his dark hair as he nodded to the scribbles on my notepad.

“Still tinkering with the lineup. What’s up?”

“Everyone looked good this morning, but Becker has a tweaked shoulder.” He nodded to the desk. “He insists he’s fine, but I’m watching him. I’d keep that in mind.” He jutted his chin to the piece of paper on my desk.

“Of course he says that,” I murmured, circling his name. I had him batting fourth behind our other three strongest hitters. Nate Becker loved to chase home runs, and the former manager had had him locked in as cleanup for the past season.

He had the best stats on the team, along with the most arrogance, as sometimes happened with someone young and talented. But he’d had as many strikeouts as hits last season because all he’d wanted to do was swing for the fences to tally up another home run. I’d watched videos of all the players to get a feel for how they played, and I shook my head every time Becker came up to the plate and sliced his bat through nothing but air, chasing pitches nowhere near the plate.

I was still getting to know my team, and they were a good group of guys from what I could tell. Becker was the one who’d roll his eyes at a drill or any suggestion I’d make. I could only imagine what he’d say if Lee told me I had to bench him for opening day.

But I was here to manage, not be my players’ best buddy. I’d begged to play through injuries in my younger days, and it had always set me back or, worse, would cost my team a win. I had soon learned it wasn’t worth it, but it had taken time to sink in. This team was talented, for sure, but new to a lot of what this life was, and I’d have to be on top of my own game every single day to lead them the right way.

Big egos had never intimidated me, but I’d hoped not to start the season with an argument.

“Thanks for the heads-up. He’ll lose his shit if I have to pull him, but...” I shrugged. “I don’t think he’ll tell me the truth if he’s in pain before opening day.”

“I have that feeling too,” Lee said with a chuckle. “Better to sit on the bench than get booed for a strikeout or making a bad throw, right?”

“You know that. I know that,” I said with a chuckle. “I’ll keep an eye on him as they practice today.”

“You’re dreading today, aren’t you?” Lee asked, crossing his arms as he arched a brow.

“Picked up on that?” I said, a laugh slipping out of me as I tossed the pencil into the cup on my desk.

Management had hired a new PR agency to promote us so “we would be everywhere.” I’d lost my anonymity at the press conference announcement, already getting stopped in the street as I traveled back and forth to the field, but I cringed thinking of our faces on the side of a bus. I had no clue as to what their plans were, but I had a good feeling I wouldn’t enjoy any of them.

The agency was coming to the field this afternoon for a “campaign kickoff,” as Kent called it. He thought it would be a treat for them to see the team practice and a way to “get familiar with us and our brand.”

Our brand was a professional baseball team that was here to win ball games, but, as I suspected, Kent’s priority was filling the seats. I didn’t blame him for thinking of the team’s bottom line, and I was fully aware that hating this part of it was a me thing. I’d happily argue with players over the best way we could win rather than pose for pictures like the mascot I still felt like.

“Might not be so bad, Si,” Lee said. “And I get why Kent wants to do it. The established New York teams have owned this town for decades. Being new is the main thing the Bats have going for them as far as publicity. They’re a young enough organization to be anything they want. Or at least try to be.” He shrugged. “Can’t fault them for that.”

“No, you’re right.” I nodded, rubbing my eyes.

“Plus, you have experience going viral.” Lee’s lips twitched. “This should be nothing for you.”

I glared back when he snickered.

“You grew up here too. You know how unforgiving this city can be. No one is going to give a shit how I look in my uniform pants if my team doesn’t win.”

“You haven’t been on Instagram recently, then.”

I squinted at Lee. “You’re telling me you follow this shit?”

“I follow the team I work for, yes. There’s a good highlight reel of you circulating, taken mostly from the back. I’m sure that scowl you’ll have in the dugout will be all over the damn place soon, especially if you turn around.”

“Jesus Christ,” I breathed out, rubbing my eyes as Lee cracked up.

“Hey, if you’ve got it, use it.” He threw his hands up as he stood. “Revenue is revenue, right? Take one for the team, Jones.”

“Easy for you to say. It’s not your ass all over social media. Literally.”

Lee's shoulders shook as he headed for the door.

"I'm supposed to be behind the scenes, but if I weren't," he said, shifting to look behind him, "my ass is Instagram-worthy and would give you a nice run for your money." He tapped the door and jerked his chin toward the hallway. "Now, stop hiding and get out there."

I nodded, pushing away from my desk, trudging behind him without a reply.

I hadn't been able to sleep last night, and, as I had for the past few weeks, I'd gotten lost in one of Rachel's books. I'd downloaded almost all of them after she'd left my hotel room and was already on my fifth one.

It had been weird at first to read a book by someone I knew—or someone I'd spent a glorious afternoon and night with. I'd been right. She was a damn good storyteller, and even though I couldn't know her past that night, it was nice to be able to know her a different way. An anonymous way. Although I was so tempted to look her up and learn all the things she hadn't told me about herself because they were too personal.

At only thirty-three, she'd written over twenty books, all while taking care of herself and her sister. I'd laid low since I'd moved in to the apartment the team had set me up with in Greenwich Village in Manhattan, an industrial-type of building, not unlike the ones we'd passed in Williamsburg that day.

A restaurant and a bar were on every corner, but I chose to go home after I was done here and get lost in a book written by a woman who still captivated me with her words.

It was the only tether I could allow myself to have to her or anyone, and while I knew it was a little pathetic and absolutely not healthy, I had zero inclination to stop and

look for something real.

Real still didn't fit into my life, although I'd spent the last few weeks wishing like hell that it did.

"Silas, just the man we wanted to see."

I paused, sucking in a slow breath before I turned to Kent's voice. Lee was right. I had to support the team however they would ask me to and learn how to crack a believable fake smile when it was something out of my comfort zone.

Still, I had to fight a cringe as I turned around.

Kent approached me with a wide and eager grin as he motioned for the woman next to him to follow.

"Gayle, this is our brand-new manager, Silas Jones. Four-time Gold Glove winner and still holds the record for RBIs in a single season with his old team in Washington."

"I'm familiar with his stats. Welcome to New York," Gayle said, extending a hand. She had short blond, almost-white hair and cat-eye glasses, her gray eyes magnified by the lenses as she studied me.

"Well, he's from here, so you can say 'Welcome back,'" Kent said, slapping me on the shoulder.

"Is that right? We could use that," Gayle said, tapping her chin.

"Use that?" I repeated.

“Gayle is the head of the agency that’s going to be working with us. They’re going to write articles on the team—and one on you. We’re going to be everywhere this season.”

“My staff is just here to take it all in,” Gayle said. “We only told them about this outing last night, so they aren’t prepared with questions or plans or anything.”

“Just enjoy the day, and we can strategize later.” Kent motioned to the field outside the hallway window.

Wayne Field was a state-of-the-art baseball field built by the billionaire who owned the team. Every inch of the place was cutting-edge, from the offices to the field itself to the concession stands and the high-end suites. Large windows throughout the office space had amazing views of the field, where I still itched to be instead of working the back end, even though I wore the same uniform as the rest of the team. Kent had even arranged to give me number twenty-three, my old number before I’d retired.

Getting used to the word retired and having a clean uniform at the end of each game would be an adjustment, and this place still seemed too cold to feel like home.

I missed that worn-in, old-time feeling Washington’s stadium had or the classic setup of some of the parks I’d played at during my career. There was no sense of tradition yet at Wayne Field. Everything was so new and pristine, almost like a model of a stadium instead of the real thing.

As the Brooklyn Bats’ new manager, I was part of that new model and on display for the world to see and judge. Something that had never bothered me when I stepped onto the field before. I’d owned it as a player, but I had to earn my place on it as a manager.

Despite all my reservations, I wanted to do this job. I wanted to win and the chance to teach young players. I remembered the good managers I'd had and how they'd guided us in creating a legacy in our short careers.

I'd learn to deal with the interviews, the videos, and the posters I was already seeing of me and the team plastered all over the city. If I wanted to stay and have a career in baseball at all, I had to suck it up and smile.

Letting people in had always been a challenge for me, and exposing myself like I'd have to do here almost made me break into a cold sweat. There was only one time I'd happily let someone in, but I had to let go of that and all I used to be so I could figure out how to be what I was.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RACHEL

“This is kind of cool,” my best friend Auden mused as we strode through the Wayne Field main entrance. “I mean, as far as forced company outings go.”

“True,” I said, scanning the space. I’d never been to see the Brooklyn Bats play, but I’d taken Taylor to see the minor league Cyclones play nearby along with some of her softball friends last year. They’d giggled to each other and whispered, pointing at the players as most preteen girls would do, and we’d had a fun day out. Fun was a limited and expensive luxury, but I’d been happy to treat us both.

Maybe if we were all supposed to do PR for the Bats, I’d be able to get tickets at a discount. My disposable income and last book release payout had gone to Taylor’s sports equipment and team dues, plus all the extras that popped up, so I had to choose our free time activities wisely.

I’d never joined anything as a kid because I never had anyone to take me or pick me up. Taylor’s robust schedule was part of me making up for everything our mother didn’t do for us, but it was exhausting me both physically and financially.

“Do you think this is a team-building thing, or are we supposed to do something with the Bats?”

I shrugged, trying to keep my hair away from my eyes as it blew around my face. It was a breezy, early-April day and overcast enough to threaten rain. I’d hoped for box

seats with shelter, but the rest of our coworkers were seated right behind home plate.

“I have no idea.” I shrugged as we headed toward two empty seats next to the aisle. “By the time the email came through about a mandatory outing, I was too busy figuring out who would take my sister to her swimming lessons after school to question why.”

I let out a long, frustrated breath. If I’d had the time, I would have searched online for anything about the Brooklyn Bats and if something special was going on that we all had to gather here for right away.

I didn’t follow any local sports teams. Social media would be my clue as to what New York-based sports team had made the play-offs, and I silently supported them like any New Yorker would, but I never had a real interest.

Since they’d settled in Brooklyn, I got a kick out of the team name. It was so Brooklyn to name a baseball team simply the Bats. No beating around the bush as to what they were doing here with a fancy, flowery name. To me, the name said that they weren’t here to compete with any New York baseball dynasties. They just wanted to play. You had to admire ballsy gusto like that.

“When half the office is hybrid, you should give us more notice than twelve hours to find a way to Coney Island,” Auden huffed as she shifted in her seat.

I blew out the same frustrated breath and nodded. I worked as a copywriter for a PR agency and would write articles if the client’s campaign called for it. Occasionally, a client meeting or interview would disrupt my usual hybrid schedule of two days in the office and three days at home, but I’d always had plenty of notice.

I’d handed in my manuscript to my editor last week, or else this unexpected work meeting or outing or whatever this was supposed to be would have sent me into a

breakdown spiral if I'd had to sort out my sister and a deadline.

Something had to give soon, but I couldn't handle trying to decide what.

"Aggravating or not, this is nice," Auden said to me in a loud whisper as we settled into our seats. We'd been best friends since college, and she'd brought me into the agency after she'd been a designer here for a few years.

While my book royalties would ebb and flow, they didn't cover the bills on a consistent basis. Plus, if I had only them to depend on, the creative side of my brain would close like a frightened clam. Writing was more for my mental health than my wallet and a treat for me. It was a way to forget my troubles in a fictional world I could create.

I tried not to think about the other treat I'd had last month and ponder silly questions like what he was doing now and where he was working. That treat was something I could only afford to indulge in once, even if the craving was still potent when I'd let my mind drift to all that happened that afternoon and later in his hotel room.

I massaged the tension knot in my neck as I gazed up at the gray sky, drawing on some ice-cold reality to push out the hot fantasies in my brain.

Taylor was doing too much, and I had to sit her down and make her choose rather than let her do whatever activity she had a whim for. But taking that privilege away made me feel like the parenting failure I was exhausting myself not to be.

Although, the one good thing our mother had done was set the bar low. I didn't have to try that hard to be better than she had been, but it was an uphill battle to make up for all she hadn't been to us.

I loved my sister to pieces, but being her official guardian was more pressure than I'd

ever expected it to be, even if I'd always been the one to take care of her.

My phone buzzed as I searched for my bosses in the crowd.

Emily: Girl, this is your best book yet .

My eyes grew wide as a happy rush ran through me, pure joy kicking up my heartbeat. I was confident in this book, but that nauseated wave of anxiety when I'd hand in a manuscript never wavered. My editor calling it my best book was the distracting high I'd needed today.

Me: Really? All my tenses were good this time?

I wrote for a living, yet when I told a story, past and present tense would trip me up and piss me off.

Emily: Well, no. But don't worry about that. Your readers are going to go nuts. The longing drips off the page. It's been a fight to remember I'm supposed to be editing not reading.

Me: I'm thrilled you're having that problem.

Emily: Me too. I loved your other books too, but whatever you did while you were writing this one, keep doing it.

I exhaled a slow breath, a nasty twinge of regret killing my high and settling in my stomach like a brick, as I realized exactly what I'd done differently with this book and how I couldn't do it—or him—again.

I'd channeled all that inspiration and—as Emily had noticed—longing into the story that had led me right to Silas that day. I'd finished the entire book in record time, and

as I'd read it over, I'd woven all that extra emotion and those "if only" feelings I hadn't known what to do with into the pages.

I'd known that Silas would be an endless inspiration well, but I didn't know how long I could draw from it without feeling dejected and depressed.

"What's up?" Auden asked, her brows pinched at me when I lifted my head. "You looked super excited, and now you just look sad."

"Emily is almost finished with my new book, and she says it's my best yet."

Emily was Auden's cousin from Long Island, and I'd run into her at a family party years ago, right before I was about to publish my first book. I'd been researching independent publishing for a long time but had been clueless as all hell about where to begin. She was an experienced editor and patient and kind enough to always give it to me straight.

"That's great! Please tell me you aren't already in the 'I know I won't do better than this' phase." Auden let out a soft groan as her head fell back. "Usually, it's a couple of months after you publish before we have to deal with that."

"No, it's not that. Yet," I said, lifting the corner of my mouth. "She said the longing drips off the page and whatever I did while I was writing this book, make sure to keep doing it."

Her brows jumped, realization dawning across her features.

"Ah, I think I see. This book was so good because you had an amazing night full of life-altering sex with a man you resolved to never see again." She lifted a shoulder. "At least, I'm guessing."

My eyes widened as I swept my gaze back and forth to see if anyone was paying attention to us or had heard what Auden had said. She'd been the only one I told, right after my cab ride of shame smelling like sex and the spicy cologne permeating the collar of Silas's sweatshirt.

I'd spilled every dirty detail to a silent Auden, other than a couple of audible gasps in my ear at the really filthy parts. She'd understood my reasons for not taking it any further, even though she hadn't agreed with any of them.

"No, you're right."

I was about to say more when my boss, Gayle, started waving her hands at the front of the aisle.

"Thank you all for coming here on such short notice."

"Like we had a choice," Auden whispered to me. I nodded and sat back in the oddly comfortable field seat as we waited for her to continue.

"Today is the start of our new partnership with the Brooklyn Bats—and hopefully the start of a new era for New York baseball. Our team is going to do everything they can to help make that happen."

"A new era? Dramatic much?"

I started to snicker at Auden's whisper, but I caught myself, pretending to clear my throat when someone turned their head. I loved Gayle and she was a great boss. She'd always been a big supporter of my work and accommodating of whatever I needed to do with and for my sister. But I knew that feral look in her eyes. I spotted the new big client excitement that would drive us all insane until we launched this campaign.

“I’ll explain more in just a few minutes, but in the meantime, enjoy practice.” She motioned behind her. Players were throwing balls back and forth in the outfield, while someone was pitching to a man at the plate. I didn’t know any of the players by name like my sister did for some, but they were young and cute, especially in those tight white pants.

I supposed there were worse ways to pass a workday. Maybe I could get inspired to write a sports romance and get that stupid night of a lifetime out of my head.

“I wonder what plans they have that Gayle thinks we’re going to start an ‘era,’” I said to Auden.

“Oh, I’m sure she’s got plenty.” She turned to me, the corner of her mouth twitching. “I wonder what your man will say when he reads your new book.”

“He’s not my man, and he’s not reading my books.”

“But he asked for your pen name. That’s cute. Super romantic.”

“And if he wanted to use it to look me up, he would have already. We’ve been over this. It was a nice walk on the wild side, and now I’m back to real life.”

“I bet you could, like, leave messages in your books for him in case he is reading.”

I narrowed my eyes at Auden. “Messages?”

“Yeah, like code or something. To meet you somewhere. It could be like a Sleepless in Seattle thing, keep mentioning the Empire State Building on Valentine’s Day and then he’ll just show up as you’re getting on the elevator to leave?—”

“Listen,” I said, holding up a hand. “That’s a nice...idea. A little weird, but nice. He

wasn't looking for anything either. It was a wonderful, one-time connection. And maybe it will end up helping me sell some books."

I focused on the field in front of us, ignoring Auden's glare in my periphery.

"I hate that you do this to yourself, but we can rehash that later on."

She pointed to Gayle, clustered with a few guys now on the field.

"I'd like you all to meet the Brooklyn Bats organization," Gayle said into a microphone as she stretched her arm toward the men behind her. "Barrett Wayne, team owner."

The only man in a suit waved to us behind Gayle. I'd seen articles about him, a lifelong New York businessman who decided to create a ball club in his sixties. I guessed it was more fun than the investments he was known for, as he flashed us what seemed to be a genuine and excited smile.

"This is Kent Shapiro, general manager." Gayle nodded to her side, where a man with glasses in a polo shirt nodded at us with a little too much enthusiasm.

"And brand-new team manager and head coach, Silas Jones." Gayle beamed as she held out her arm. "You may remember him from his many championship appearances when he played shortstop for Washington."

The man to the far right, wearing a baseball uniform and jacket, lifted his hand in a small wave. I knew those broad shoulders and wide chest, straining against his shirt as he shifted back and forth on his feet.

When he smiled, my vision blurred, most likely from my heart seizing in my chest right before it bottomed out into my stomach.

I blinked, praying my mind was playing tricks on me. Maybe Emily's text and Auden's usual nagging about my love life were making me see things that weren't there. When he pinched the back of his neck, an almost shy smile curved that perfect mouth that I could still feel on mine, and the full-body panic it triggered was all the confirmation I needed.

This city was full of ghosts and memories that could accost you at any moment. I'd run into a mean girl from high school at the supermarket checkout line one afternoon and had muttered an awkward hello to a college hookup on the subway one morning.

The thought of running into Silas one day hadn't filled me with that same dread, even if it would be bittersweet as we'd never be more than a passing wave of hello. But now, if in an indirect way, he was a client.

Thanks to an employee's affair with a client's married CEO that had brought the agency awful press for a few months, fraternization with clients was now cause for automatic termination.

I pressed a hand to my chest and took in slow breaths as my heart hammered against my palm. My stomach rolled, both from how that one perfect night was not only now ruined, but that it could possibly cost me my job.

It was a stretch, but our management was very sensitive about professional relationships with clients. We'd had sex before he was a client—or before I'd known he was. Would that still count?

Holy shit, I was going to throw up on my seat.

"Rachel, hey," Auden whispered, concern pinching her brow as she studied me. "What's wrong? You look like you're about to throw up."

“That’s him,” I told her in a raspy whisper, not enough air in my lungs to give much sound to my words.

“Who is him—” Auden let out a gasp as her hand flew to her mouth. “That’s your Silas?”

I nodded, even though it was almost laughable to think of him as my Silas when I’d only learned his last name thirty seconds ago.

Auden fell back on the seat, blowing out a long breath.

“That is...” She trailed off, her eyes still wide when I turned my head.

“Fucked?” I coughed out a humorless laugh. “Pretty much.”

Gayle spoke about the new partnership and what our plans were, but I’d mostly tuned her out as my focus went to Silas, all the clues about who he was crystallizing in my mind. Why his old job made him train so hard, why he was nervous about a career change, the Washington sweatshirt he’d given me before he’d put me into a cab.

I couldn’t help feeling a little violated, even though it wasn’t his fault. He’d stayed vague about his personal life, and at the time, I’d preferred it that way. I didn’t know what my part in the promotions for the Bats would be or if they’d even involve direct contact with Silas, but I’d see his face everywhere now. I could no longer romanticize the idea of him or what he could’ve been doing after I’d driven away from him that Friday morning.

Not only would I be unable to fight the temptation to look him up, I’d probably have to for work at some point.

When I’d expected regrets after leaving Silas’s hotel room, I’d thought they’d be the

more emotional ones. I'd wax sentimental with the what-ifs and think of us as a star-crossed couple brought together by fate, even if I'd known at the time that we were simply two people insecure enough in our daily lives to use each other for an escape.

It had felt real enough, though, and wonderful.

If I had known then what I knew now, other than the threat of having to finance utilities and my sister's social life with unemployment on light royalty months, I still didn't regret what had happened between Silas and me.

I just dreaded what would happen next.

After Gayle shared more details I didn't pay attention to, we all rose from our seats and headed into the interior of the stadium. I followed Auden, hoping she'd heard enough of what Gayle had said to be able to fill me in later.

The adrenaline was beginning to dissipate, and I was thankful to keep in step beside her without my legs shaking.

"Some of the concession stands look open." Auden pointed to a pretzel and hot dog stand where a bunch of our team had already congregated. "Want to eat your feelings a little?"

"No, because they'll just come back up," I scoffed. "If I didn't know Gayle would freak out, I'd fake a migraine and get out of here."

"There she is!"

I clenched my eyes shut at the excited tone of Gayle's voice behind me.

"Just the person I wanted to see," she said, grasping my arm. "Come with me."

I forced a smile and nodded, shooting Auden a look over my shoulder as Gayle weaved our way through the small crowd. Auden's cringe as she watched me go didn't help the churn of my stomach.

I'd hoped for some time to acclimate to this idea of working with Silas and his team or how to react when I saw him again. There was no time to prepare for any of this, and I could only pray I'd wing it enough to keep my job.

"We'll talk more about this in the morning, but there is one thing I wanted you to get started on right away." Gayle pulled me to the side. "And I realize I'm throwing this at you, but you're my best writer."

"Gayle, that's very nice, but?—"

"You are, and the only one I can trust to write a good article in a short amount of time. This is going to be a series, which we'll talk more about, but I wanted you to get going on this one so we may be able to get it out around opening day or right after it next week."

Gayle trusted me, and I'd always appreciated that. I wanted to give her my best, and I wouldn't be able to give her anything if I hid away. I was a professional and an adult, and I had a kid to provide for. I'd dig deep enough to find a way through this.

"Okay, where do you want me to start?"

"Right here," she said, jerking her chin toward two figures over her shoulder. "I want you to start a piece on their new manager. Kent, Silas, this is Rachel, our best writer, who is going to start right away."

"Nice to meet you," Kent said, stepping in front of Gayle to give me a firm if clammy handshake.

I nodded, muttering a nice to meet you when my gaze drifted over his shoulder, meeting the same hazel eyes that had bored into mine when he'd told me to come on his fingers, widening as recognition spread over his perfect face.

I couldn't run or even step away, only wish the rest of my body wouldn't melt along with my liquefied knees and splatter onto the floor.

"Hi, Rachel." Silas extended his hand to me after Kent stepped aside. "I'm happy to work with you" he said, that zing up my arm from where his palm grazed against mine not at all helping my weak equilibrium.

"Me too," I managed to get out, pushing the widest smile I could muster as I gripped his hand.

This was why I preferred to write my own fictional endings. When it came to real life, it always went to shit.

CHAPTER NINE

SILAS

I was no stranger to pressure or never letting anyone see me panic or break a sweat. When I had a baseball or a bat in my hand, I had to show that I had it all under control, no matter what kind of turmoil was simmering in my gut. I'd need that poker face even more as a manager, but after spending my entire life playing this game, I could handle it.

This, I had zero preparation for.

The woman who'd haunted my dreams and starred in all my dirty fantasies as of late was standing right in front of me. What happened between us wasn't supposed to leave that hotel room, even if my mind drifted there all too often.

All I'd had of her was a pen name and a collection of books after we parted ways. It wasn't even her real name, although now I was pretty sure she'd given me her actual first name after her boss referred to her as Rachel.

Writing an article about me would mean more time with her, something I'd wished like hell for a month ago. At the last minute, I'd scrambled to figure out a way to keep in touch after she left, but I hadn't wanted to lead either of us on. Or the chickenshit in me hadn't wanted to start another relationship that would inevitably end in failure.

I'd asked for her pen name instead, thinking that would give me something to go on if

I ever grew the balls to find her but would still keep her at a comfortable distance.

I'd known then that more time with her would have only made things worse, but whether it was luck or fate or the universe simply laughing its ass off at me, I now had no choice.

"We'd like to get started right away so the article can coincide with opening day."

My head swooped back to Gayle. I nodded, clearing my throat as I tried to reset myself, and hoped like hell neither Kent nor Gayle noticed our long handshake or the way I stared at her a little too long for an introduction.

As much as I tried to shake off the disbelief, I'd needed a minute to recover. I just prayed it wasn't an obvious minute.

"The Bats have a lot to offer fans this season, and we are going to make sure to get you as many fans as possible." Gayle waved her finger between Rachel and me. "You both can work out how you'll meet. Kent, I'll introduce you to some designers as they talk."

Rachel nodded. "I'll start right away, Gayle."

"That's why she's the best," Gayle gushed as she squeezed Rachel's shoulder.

I watched Kent and Gayle make their way to the concession stands before I stepped closer to Rachel.

"So, this is..." I started, lifting the baseball cap off my head to run my hand through my hair.

"Yes, it certainly is." Her shoulders drooped with her long exhale.

“I didn’t expect to see you...here.”

Or period. I’d wondered if she’d seen any of the early press about me and what she’d say, but while I didn’t do anything wrong by deciding to keep my job and my full identity close to the chest since she’d done the same, I’d never anticipated actually having to explain.

“I’m sure,” she laughed, shaking her head. “This is my day job. I’m a writer for a PR agency when I’m not R.M. Dioro.”

“I never thought you had another job.”

“You saw me on a rare day off. This job pays the bills more than feeds my passion,” she said, flashing me a real smile, reminiscent of the ones from the day we’d first met. I remembered that smile, and that inclination to do anything just so I’d see it again pulsed in my fingers. But unlike our first meeting, I wasn’t free to give in.

Not here and not anywhere.

“Makes sense,” I finally said, my gaze snagging on that fucking beautiful mouth as she chewed on her bottom lip.

“And I didn’t know this was your job,” she said with a little chuckle as she looked around. “Or what your old job was. Explains why you said you used to train so much and were so happy to be eating tacos.”

“Yes, I was. When you play, you have to stay in shape. This job suits me since managers can let themselves go a little.” I patted my stomach.

“You didn’t let yourself go, not even close,” Rachel said, her eyes darting to the floor for a minute before they came back to mine. “I mean... I don’t know what I meant.”

That adorable blush stained her cheeks as she ran a hand down her face. My gaze traveled over the V neck of her silk blouse as memories I shouldn't have been entertaining right now—or at all—ran through my brain. How she tasted, the sounds she made. The sweet way she'd said not getting to know me had been my brother's loss.

The odd but very strong pull between us was still there, but as we were both at work and being watched, there was nothing either of us could do about it.

"I was just as surprised as you probably were when I noticed you." Her smile faded as her gaze came back to mine. "But we have to keep it professional because?—"

"No need to explain." I held up a hand. "I get it. When can you meet?"

"Well," she said on a long sigh. "Gayle is going to want to see a first draft very quickly. Would you be able to talk tomorrow?" She reached into her bag and pulled out a white card. "That's my card with my cell and email. Send me some times you'd be available, and I can set us up with a video chat link."

"I'm free tomorrow. What about meeting in person?"

What was I doing? Torturing myself, most likely. I wouldn't take it any further than a conversation, but if Rachel fell back into my life, I couldn't walk away again without knowing her. The real her, not just skimming the surface like we'd both done with each other that day.

Other than the sex. That was deep and raw and so unforgettable I could barely think of anything else.

"Um, sure. We could do that. I would have to figure out a few things at home to give you a time to be able to come back here."

“What if I came to you?” I raised my hands when her eyes grew wide. “I mean, closer to your neck of the woods.”

Her lips curved when I gave her a smile.

“I live in Park Slope. It would probably be easier for you if I came?—”

“How about a nice public place where I could give you whatever you need from me over a decent meal? PR hasn’t made me New York famous yet. And I should get to know Brooklyn as much as I can.”

She studied me for a long moment before she nodded.

“We could do that. Do you like Chinese? There’s a great restaurant about a block away from me. We could talk, and then I could head home and start on your article right away.”

This was getting much too close for professional comfort. Why couldn’t I just agree to a video chat or have her come here?

Maybe it was the gentleman in me not wanting to inconvenience her, remembering how she took care of her sister while she worked what I now knew were two jobs.

Or it was the confused caveman in me who didn’t want to share her—at least this last time I’d get to talk to her. But you couldn’t share someone who wasn’t yours and whom you didn’t really know. After I’d learned just how much I didn’t know her, the best thing to do would be to keep it all business.

“I’ll text you when I get back to the office, and you can text me back with the address, if that’s okay with you.”

“Sure. And one thing, don’t be nervous.”

“Nervous?”

She gave me a little eye roll when I squinted back at her.

“This isn’t like a hard-hitting journalism piece meant to expose all your secrets.”

Her smile turned playful, and I had to remind myself this was as close as I could get, and tasting her mouth one more time wasn’t an option.

“It’s my job to make you and the team look good and to show you in the best light possible.” She leaned in closer. “And I would never use anything you told me before. That is all off the record and doesn’t count unless you want it to,” she whispered.

“I know you wouldn’t, but I appreciate that,” I whispered back.

I might not have known much about her in her real, daily life, but we’d connected enough for me to sense the kind of person she was.

The kind that I couldn’t get out of my head, the kind that drew me in from the minute our eyes locked and made me regret watching her drive away because I was too scared to figure out a way to make room for anyone in my life but me.

Meeting her would be a tease, but I couldn’t resist. Rachel would be an itch I could never truly scratch, because if I got too close to her, I’d only want more—and there was no more for me to give.

CHAPTER TEN

RACHEL

“I don’t know. Maybe I should stay home. Just in case.”

I bit back a laugh at my sister’s scrunched-up face, her ponytail falling over her shoulder as her head drooped. I shook my head but tried to keep in mind her act wasn’t all fake.

She’d just gotten her period for the first time last month. Even though I’d made sure to prepare her as much as I could, she was scared from both the novelty of it all and the pain shooting across her abdomen. I’d let her stay home the first couple of days and huddled on the couch with her as I worked and she watched movies on her laptop.

Once I’d realized that her complaints were nothing severe enough to keep her home, I’d sent her to school with a discreet purse of feminine products and a note for the nurse to let her take ibuprofen if she became uncomfortable. She was still just as nervous with her second period, but I couldn’t have her stay home every single month, even though the guilt in my gut kept nudging me to let her.

Maybe I shouldn’t have been such a pushover, but I remembered how scary it had been for me. My grandmother had still called pads “napkins,” but she’d sent me to school with a reassuring nudge that I would be fine. I’d spent the day a nervous wreck that my cramps would kill me or I’d get blood on my skirt for everyone to see.

My mother, as usual, had nothing to offer when she'd stopped by soon after that other than a "good for you" when I'd told her.

My life was dedicated to reassuring my sister in ways I'd never been, but letting her stay home every month if she didn't have severe symptoms wasn't the right thing either. There was being loving and supportive, and there was being too much of a soft touch. As our aunt Lucy had told me, Taylor would appreciate it later if I didn't try to coddle her too much.

And I was all about giving Taylor things to appreciate, although I hadn't spoken to her about reducing her activities outside school yet. I was still working out the math of expenses and time and trying to find a way to make it all work, even though I always came up with the same answer.

It wouldn't. But I would tackle that tomorrow.

My mind was preoccupied with other ways I'd drive myself crazy today.

It wasn't unheard of to meet a client for an interview at a different location. Usually, it was at their office, but I went anywhere they'd be comfortable. I'd told Gayle my plan for today, and she was all for it if having the interview closer to home allowed me to get started on it that much quicker.

She hadn't thought anything of it, just told me to let her know how it went as soon as I got home and what material I'd suggest highlighting.

I had to call Auden right after as well and let her know how my lunch date had gone for different reasons.

This was supposed to be an interview, but it wasn't just an interview or just a lunch date. Not that I would address that in any way this afternoon.

It was odd to both anticipate and dread something so much.

“Kiddo,” I said, taking my sister’s face in my hands. “You were happily playing video games all through breakfast not twenty minutes ago.”

“It comes and goes,” she murmured, rubbing the lower part of her stomach.

“I get that, and I’ve been there. But unless your symptoms are really bad, I can’t keep you home every month. The truant officers would come for me.”

Her head jerked up, her eyes wide with real fear.

“Oh no. You’re right. I’m okay. I don’t want that.”

She darted toward our hallway.

“I’ll finish getting dressed.”

“Hey,” I whispered as I pulled her back by her arm. “I was making a joke. I’m not going anywhere, and neither are you.” I tapped her chin so she’d turn to meet my gaze. “Okay?”

She nodded, tension still pulling at her features.

Taylor had been used to our mother coming and going over the years, but it was me she was afraid of losing.

We looked like sisters, but then we didn’t. Our mother’s dark eyes and long lashes were the same, but Taylor’s hair was almost black, while mine was more of a chestnut brown. She was rail-thin, even with the “puffy stomach” she’d been complaining about all week, whereas I’d been mid-sized for most of my life.

We were almost the same height, but any shirt she borrowed of mine hung off her frame without my padding to fill it in.

I laughed to myself every time I thought of how Silas had compared me to Jessica Rabbit. It was ridiculous, yet one of the nicest compliments I'd ever received.

And something else not to think about today.

I guessed the differences between Taylor and me came from the fathers we'd never known, and although my sister would always suggest getting a DNA kit after we'd see an ad for one, I shut it down immediately.

There was no point, only danger, because Taylor's father could take her away from me if he wanted to, especially if he hadn't known about her.

Mom had said she'd told both our fathers about us and they just weren't interested. If that was true, our parents all seemed to have that in common.

Still, that was a can of worms I wasn't going to open for the sake of curiosity while my sister was still under eighteen.

I watched Taylor get her backpack together and reach for her jacket on the hook after she'd finished getting dressed, a slight twinge of guilt in my gut when I caught her grimace. I'd gone to school with cramps, and if I could function, she had to as well.

My baby sister meant everything to me, which was why I exhausted myself to be everything for her, and was a big reason I felt like I was thirty-three going on one hundred. What I had left of my youth was dwindling, but I was still happy to give it all to her.

"Who is your interview with?" Taylor asked as we strolled up the street to her bus

stop. Next year, she'd be a freshman and at a school farther away.

I exhaled slowly, trying to stay in the moment rather than indulge in my usual panic about the future.

"New client," I told her as we turned the corner. I hadn't realized how early we were as we strode to a mostly empty stop.

"One of those tech ones?" she asked as she adjusted the strap on her arm.

"No, actually. The new manager for the Brooklyn Bats."

My sister turned around, a loud gasp escaping her as she brought her hands to her mouth.

"You're interviewing Silas Jones!" Her mouth was as wide as her eyes. "Patti is going to flip out when I tell her."

"You can't say anything yet," I leaned in to whisper. "This is for a new campaign. When the article is out, you can brag all over the place."

She glared at me before letting out a whimper of disappointment.

It was comical how my sister knew Silas's last name before I did.

"Okay," she relented with an audible sigh. "Wow, you're lucky. He is so hot."

"Hot," I repeated, studying my sister and soaking in the first time she'd called a guy hot. It happened to be the guy I'd had very hot and dirty sex with multiple times on a night that was supposed to stay in the past, but I was too busy fixating on her finding someone hot to connect those queasy dots in my head.

“I had no idea you followed the Bats.”

“Some of my softball friends do. You don’t know Silas Jones? He has the best butt in baseball.”

I burst out laughing before I could help it.

“And you know this because you make it a habit to compare backsides of baseball players?”

She rolled her eyes with a groan. “You haven’t seen one of his reels from when he played in Washington?”

She dug out her phone from her backpack and tapped on the screen.

“I told you that I didn’t want you on social media yet.”

“It’s a video link in our group chat. You don’t have to have an account to view it.”

She turned the phone to me, and I recognized Silas in his Washington baseball uniform. It was a montage of different games, mostly shots of him from the back, ending with his press conference with the Bats.

I had done a good amount of digging on Silas after the company outing yesterday. I’d always had to muster up the effort for the research part of a project, but I’d had no problems getting started with this one, not even trying to lie to myself that it was all for my article.

Part of it was, but I did a deeper dive than I would have for most clients. I’d confirmed his age, birthplace, found photos of him in little league as a kid in the Bronx and in all-state championships from high school after he’d moved outside of

the city. I'd searched for videos of games he'd played for Washington and the awards he'd accumulated throughout his career.

I'd also found his wedding photo with a very beautiful woman and the date of his divorce, only a little more than a year ago.

I'd studied footage of his last game, unable to watch the exact moment of his career-ending injury.

That also explained the scar across his knee that I'd spotted when he'd dropped all his clothes. He'd needed two surgeries and a ton of rehab after his final game, but he'd seemed to move around just fine.

Especially when he didn't have clothes on to get in his way.

While he'd held back certain details, the pieces he did share all led to the truth. He'd had an amazing career, and now his new team was drawing on his popularity to push theirs.

I couldn't imagine that kind of pressure. No wonder he'd been looking for a distraction and had taken the lady who accidentally punched him out to dinner. He'd been a distraction for me too, but from life in general. That was why I'd been so ready and willing to dive into bed with him, never expecting to run into him again when lust wasn't clouding every sense of good judgment I had.

I really had to get that part of knowing him out of my head, especially today, but it was hard to forget something that was branded into my brain.

"Can you get me an autograph? I swear I won't show anyone until you tell me I can."

"I'll see how it goes today," I said as I caught her bus pull up to the curb in my

periphery. All those cuts of Silas's ass had distracted me enough to lose track of time.

"Have a great day at school, and I'll pick you up from softball later." I pulled her into a hug. The days of my sister being too cool to hug me back hadn't come yet, and I relished how she'd pull me close and rest her head on my shoulder for a split second before we broke apart.

I waved when she glanced over at me right before stepping onto the bus.

Taking care of a little person, or at least one a few inches shorter than me, was a lot.

But she was the only family I had, and she'd always be worth it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SILAS

“All right, guys. Take it easy this weekend, and I’ll see you back here early Monday morning,” I told my team as they filtered into the locker room after the last practice. I was a little jealous as I watched them pack their gear from the lockers, as I’d been one of them this time last year, gearing up for a new season.

I missed a practice grueling enough to feel a good kind of sore as you collapsed in sweat at the end. Pushing my body to its limit had made me feel powerful and, although we’d all been advised to know better, invincible. After a lifetime of depending on my body to excel, I didn’t know who I was anymore.

That uncertainty made being in an entirely new place in a very different job that much worse.

I still worked out to stay healthy and manage the dull pain in my knee, but leading a ball club had already brought on a different kind of exhaustion.

When I was playing, I had to trust my teammates, but I’d only had to worry about me, my focus on the game, and what they’d expected from me.

Now, I had to put together a human puzzle. In the short time I’d watched the guys play, I had to figure out where each one fit and how to use the skills I’d seen from them so far in the best ways to move us forward.

It was a shit-ton easier to be the puzzle piece than the one flipping them all, trying to get them to fit.

I turned my head to Nate's huff behind me.

"Don't worry about me." His gaze flicked to mine, an arrogant curve on his lips. "You can save the coaching."

"Rest the shoulder," I said, ignoring Nate's dismissal. "Opening day is next week."

"I'm aware. And the shoulder is fine. I know what I have to do?"

"Lee will take a look on Monday morning. Report to his office before the field. Have a good weekend."

He glared at me before he slammed his locker door shut and headed for the showers.

Most of the team was open to suggestions and respected me from my recent time as a player, but Nate Becker made sure to point out every time I tried that he didn't want my advice on anything.

I wasn't sure if it was because the old manager let him coast and never put him in his place or that I took away the spotlight. I'd gladly forgo the attention if I could and let him have it all, but that wasn't in the cards for me at the moment. I had to play this up as much as I was told to.

I'd played with some of the biggest names in baseball in my career, but I never cowered to egos. This guy was talented but cocky enough to keep getting in his own way, and he would double down every time I mentioned the hitting slump he'd run into at the end of the last season. He had every excuse and blew off any suggestions I made to turn it around.

Fans wanted a player to produce, and his pretty face couldn't save him at the plate if he kept missing the ball. Team superstar status or not, I had no problems taking him out of the lineup or moving him down if his stats didn't improve.

"Any good plans, Coach?" Ricky Ruiz, our twenty-three-year-old first baseman, asked me as I shifted to leave. He was our youngest player, starting on the Bats last year as a new draft. He had a ton of promise and charisma but wasn't full of himself.

That combo was what gave players longevity in this game, but it wasn't something that could be taught. You either were that—or were knocked down a few pegs until you became that.

"Some promo work for the team, maybe unpack. Nothing exciting," I said and smiled, lifting a nonchalant shoulder as I headed out.

My promo work was with Rachel, and while I'd reminded myself all fucking day that this was just a professional interview and to stop looking forward to it so damn much, I couldn't be convinced.

"Heading out?" Lee caught up to me after I padded down the long hallway from the field to the inside of the stadium on the lower level.

"Yeah, I have that interview in Park Slope."

"Ah, that's right." Lee nodded. "With the pretty reporter," he said, lifting a brow.

"She's not a reporter. She's a writer for the PR agency. She said she won't write anything I don't want her to."

"I'm sure," Lee said with a slow nod. "I caught the way she looked at you when you were introduced. She must be part of the fandom."

I shoved his shoulder when he snickered.

“She’s not. I’ve met her before.”

“Wait, you what?”

I groaned when Lee stilled and stepped in front of me.

“So, all that tension I spotted simmering between the two of you was from memory.”

I grimaced before I could help it.

“You spotted tension?” I asked in a whisper.

“Shit.” His eyes flew open. “Did you date one of the PR people?”

“No. Well, not exactly.”

I guessed Rachel and I had gone out on a date that day, even if we hadn’t called it one.

I didn’t know what to call what had happened between Rachel and me then or what was going on with us now, much less explain it.

“We met and had a great night. Then resolved not to take it further because neither of us has time for it.”

“And now you have to work with her? Didn’t Kent say she’s going to write a series of pieces for us? What a way to hit the ground running.”

“Listen,” I said, sighing out a frustrated gust of air. “I don’t want to get her into

trouble or have anyone think?—”

“Si, come on.” Lee shook his head. “You know me. I’d never say anything. And while I’m giving you shit right now, I’m happy for you.”

“Happy this job got even more complicated for me?” I sputtered out a laugh.

“You’ve been alone for long enough. Blamed yourself for long enough. I like that this woman is putting some wind back in your sails.” He slapped my arm.

I’d been alone long enough for my ex-wife to already be remarried and living a whole new life. Our divorce had only been final for a year, but we’d been living separate lives months before that. When I’d heard a couple of months ago, I hadn’t been upset she’d found someone else, but it had highlighted how stagnant my life had been since we’d split, both professionally and personally.

Other than the afternoon a beautiful woman punched me in the stomach and knocked me on my ass. Seeing her again had only reminded me how I hadn’t recovered.

“I was just surprised to see her, that’s all.” I shrugged, trying for aloof even though Lee would know I was full of shit.

“Well, I was on the pretzel line right next to where they pulled you both aside. Kent was too eager to blow up the Bats on socials to notice all the pining.”

“I’m not pin—” I trailed off when he narrowed his eyes. “I only knew her for a day. A very fucking amazing day. But I can’t.”

“Why can’t you? I don’t get it.”

“I’m on the road all the time. I can’t be anything for anyone right now or maybe ever.

I'm over forty, and I'm figuring shit out."

And still terrified to make a commitment I'd fail at again. Agreeing to see a woman again wasn't a commitment, but that fear of getting attached to someone and letting them down was too raw and potent to shake off.

"Who isn't? I'm heading to see my little girl in a few, where she lives with my mother, sister, and brother-in-law because her father has to travel too much for work. Figuring shit out is a process with no time or age limit, and we've all got a long way to go, dude." He slapped a hand on my shoulder. "I'd better get going. You enjoy your interview."

I had to laugh. Of all the PR events the Bats would make me do, I was certain this was the only one I wouldn't have to force myself to enjoy.

No matter how I wasn't supposed to. Because what could come of it? Our situations were still the same, regardless of whether we stumbled upon each other in our daily, real lives now.

Maybe that was why I was looking forward to this so much. After wondering about her for so long, I was happy to finally get my own answers about Rachel, even if she would be the one interviewing me.

It wouldn't end the same way as our last meal had. I couldn't take her back to my hotel room and fuck her until we were both senseless. And if I was going to get through this evening, I'd need to work on forgetting that, along with the already crushing disappointment of walking away—again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SILAS

I'd headed to Park Slope early, finding a spot around the corner from the restaurant Rachel had suggested. This was definitely a different neighborhood from where we'd first met, the tree-lined streets and little shops giving an urban small-town kind of vibe.

I made my way to the restaurant, adjusting the baseball hat on my head to shield my eyes. After the season officially started, I'd probably have more of a risk of being recognized, but I didn't want to chance being photographed with a woman and having it go viral like those stupid reels from last season had.

I had to laugh at the weird position I was in. Kent wanted to exploit my popularity, telling me earlier today that my jersey had already been selling well online. But it had nothing to do with my stats or talent. It was about how I looked and what fame I could bring my new team.

I seemed to be the only one focused on wins this season, but I'd have to try to keep that edge of resentment out of whatever I'd tell Rachel. I didn't doubt I'd sit down and want to spill everything.

"Oh hey. I didn't expect you to be early too."

I turned around to find Rachel standing behind me as I made it to the front entrance of the Chinese restaurant.

“I came early to get parking.” I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my jeans, shrugging. “My new truck is around the corner.”

“Wow, brave soul.” I smiled back when her lips curved. “I rent a car when we have to travel outside of the city, but I get to most places on foot or by subway.” She motioned to the restaurant door. “Park Palace is one of our favorites, but we usually get takeout. Eating inside will be a treat.”

Her brown eyes sparkled as they met mine, a deep, bottomless chocolate I could still get lost in.

I averted my gaze and glanced back at the gold letters across the black restaurant awning.

“I’ve missed New York Chinese food.” I reached for the door handle and pulled it open. “After you.”

I caught her chest rise with a deep inhale as she met my eyes, probably thinking of the time I’d grazed against her on purpose as I opened the door to that coffee shop. We couldn’t be flirty or playful today, and it already sucked.

The tables were mostly empty, as I’d expected on a late Friday afternoon. Rachel asked the hostess for the booth in the far corner that seemed to be closed in on all sides. I guessed she’d picked that table for the privacy we’d need to talk, even though the few patrons here didn’t seem to notice us as we made our way to sit.

All I could think about was that it was tucked away far enough to run my hand up her thigh and get her to make that little mewl when my fingers found the heaven between her legs.

For fuck’s sake. Get it together, Jones.

“Are you okay?” Rachel asked after I cleared my throat a little too loudly, trying to knock myself back into the present and end these hot yet pointless fantasies that would only tempt and distract me more than I already was.

“We can go somewhere else?—”

“No, this is fine,” I said, squeezing her shoulder before I realized it. “It’s just been a long week, but this is okay.”

She stiffened a moment under my touch as she glanced back at me, her eyes searching mine, beckoning me even more. This attraction or pull or whatever this was between us was just as confusing and potent now as it had been when we’d first met.

Something that, if we were going to work together, I had to try harder to ignore.

My ex-wife had once accused me of being a robot without feelings or affection, and I’d always wondered if she was right. I’d thought the way Rachel had made me come alive that night was a fluke, but when I couldn’t stop thinking about her afterward and almost swallowed my tongue when I saw her again, maybe the problem wasn’t me after all.

Maybe it had been a marriage dead enough not to want to fix it, even if it had felt like I should.

“If it’s okay with you, once we get started, I’d like to record.” She set her phone on the table and handed me a small clip-on microphone. “I’ll take notes, but it will be easier for me to capture everything if I can play it back. No one will listen but me, and I promise to delete it after the article is written.”

“That’s fine with me,” I said, taking the mic and clipping it onto my T-shirt. “How’s this?”

She slipped in an earbud and nodded.

“Perfect,” she said, pressing a button on her phone screen as she smiled. “Is that your way of being incognito?” she joked, nodding to my cap.

“I guess. I mean, I’m not that known around here yet, but I didn’t want any leering eyes or interruptions.”

“Well, you’re sitting down. No one can watch you walk away.” The corner of her mouth lifted as she picked up a menu. “They won’t know they’re dining with the best butt in baseball.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’ve been on Instagram, I guess.”

“Only today. My sister was the one who told me about that and showed me a reel. That’s quite the accomplishment.”

“It’s ridiculous,” I said, nodding a thank-you as the waiter set down glasses of water. “One online article with me on a list seemed to get everywhere. The guys would always give me shit over it.”

“I bet you had that title before the article. I’ve seen enough footage of your games. But when I start the recording, I’ll leave that out.”

I took a sip of water, holding Rachel’s pretty gaze over the rim. The cold liquid slid down my throat, and I managed to relax for the first time this week.

“So, what should I get?” I asked Rachel as I picked up a menu.

“Asking the locals again?” As the side of her perfect mouth tipped up, a smile glided across my own lips.

While I'd been excited to see her again—and talk to her without anyone else watching—I'd been nervous too. I hadn't known if she was angry for what I didn't share with her or embarrassed about what had happened between us, but it was just as easy as it had been when we first met.

I wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing, as it was already a struggle not to get sucked in again. Or sucked in more.

“It's never failed me before.”

I caught her cheeks flush a little red before her eyes flicked to the menu. It felt like unspoken memories of that amazing night dangled between us, even if we were only referencing the before.

“The chicken lo mein is awesome and comes in family style if you'd like to share. I usually wouldn't offer to do that with a client, but...”

I laughed as she trailed off, pursing her lips.

“Yes, I think we...know each other enough to share.”

“That we do,” she whispered with a slow nod as she called the waiter over and told him our order. She brushed the hair off her shoulder as she straightened and leaned forward in the seat, treating me to a peek at the graceful slope of her neck. She really was beautiful, and I really needed to stop gawking at her each time I noticed.

“So,” she started, nodding to the mic still clipped to my collar. “Are we ready to begin?”

“Sure. Ask me anything you need to.”

She tapped her phone screen and dug out a notebook from her bag.

“For my research, I had to watch a lot of videos. Well...not the reels set to music, but the actual games. You were an incredible player. I can see why the Bats are so excited to have you.”

“Well, I’d become suddenly available,” I said, trying to laugh, but the ending of my baseball career was fresh enough to sting.

“I watched that video too,” she said with a soft whisper. “Not the actual play at your last game. That was...too hard to watch.”

“I haven’t watched the replay either, for my own reasons, but I can see how it would be traumatic to see someone get injured like that.”

“I couldn’t watch because it was you.” She raised a brow. “I didn’t want to see you get hurt, especially knowing the choice you had to make after.”

My chest flooded with warmth at the sincerity in her gaze. Empathy, not sympathy or pity, was reflected in her brown eyes.

“Well, it really hadn’t been a choice. But I’m glad it wasn’t. I would have probably thrown myself into rehab that wouldn’t have worked, only to come back the injured old guy who couldn’t do his job anymore.”

I lifted my hat and smoothed my hand over my hair before setting it back on my head. I hadn’t wanted to talk about my career-ending injury and aftermath, but I couldn’t stop the word vomit over it.

“I think walking away was brave. And smart. Despite how much it must’ve sucked.” Her voice softened an octave as her hand flexed, almost as if she was going to reach

out to touch mine.

I would have let her and grabbed on.

“I’d known my time was running out before then. I was still doing well, but playing wasn’t as easy as it used to be. Or at all. It’s the reason why our team chiropractor is now one of my closest friends. We spent a lot of time together after I turned forty.”

Her shoulders shook with a chuckle.

“What is it like, being on the other side? Is that something you planned on doing after you retired?”

Retired. The word still made me feel ancient and useless, even though I’d always been told to prepare for it.

“I honestly hadn’t given it much thought. The Bats approached me while I was still in rehab after I had announced that my playing time in Washington and in general was over.”

“That fast?” Rachel reared back. “They didn’t give you a chance to recover?”

“My agent told me that was a good thing. That I was still a commodity. I resisted at first because I’d become very fucking sick of the word ‘still.’ Still playing, still doing well for a player my age, still wanted as a manager even though I couldn’t do the job I’d had since I was a kid.”

I fell back in the booth and dragged a hand down my face.

“Not sure if any of this is good for the article?—”

“I told you. I won’t write anything you don’t want me to. That’s a tough headspace to be in—and a lot of pressure to start not only a new job but a career with such high expectations.”

“The Bats are a good organization and a good team. I’m lucky for the opportunity and committed to the team. My hangups won’t get in the way.”

All I wanted was for my team to grow as players and have a good season, even if I had to do this show-and-tell in between the actual work.

“The team must be a little starstruck,” Rachel said with a warm smile. “I lost count of all your awards.”

I laughed. “Not that starstruck—or, at least, I don’t think so. They’re a great group of guys who want to win, and I’m happy to use what I know to get them there.”

“What’s different about playing in New York compared to Washington?”

“I don’t know if there is anything different. Everyone wants to win, and all the fans want their team to go all the way. Growing up here gives it a different vibe since I know how tough New York sports fans are in general.”

“I know you’ve been away for a bit, but we’re not that bad. New Yorkers get a bad rap.” She raised a scolding brow, and it was as adorable as it was hot.

“I agree, and no shade to New Yorkers at all. All fans want their team to do well, but here, I think it’s on another level. New York fans have an immense love for their teams, but it comes with higher expectations. The Bats may be new, but they’ll be held to the same standards. It’s just another thing to keep in mind.”

And lose sleep over.

“I would agree with that,” Rachel said, smiling as she looked up at me from her notebook. Shit, she was cute. And sweet. And off-limits.

“It’s good to be near my family again.”

She nodded as she scribbled a note.

“I’m sure they’re happy to have you home.”

“They are,” I said, nodding. “My mother says that she’s not as worried about me on the road because being in the dugout all night means less chance of me getting hurt or getting into trouble.”

“I’m sure you were a real menace on the road.” Her lips twisted in a smirk. “Booze and women at every stop, right?”

“Not every stop,” I said, slowly shaking my head when she lifted her gaze. “At least, not for a very long time. Other than my recent stop in Brooklyn before I settled here, but it was a good fucking stop,” I said, unable to help myself.

Her smile faded as her eyes, now darkened with heat, met mine.

“Let’s...um...stick to the subject.”

“What fun is that?” I asked.

“The only fun we’re allowed to have on my company’s dime.”

She shot me a playful scowl, and I could’ve gotten used to this. Eating dinner with a beautiful woman who chased all my troubles away and made me feel lighter just by listening.

Unfortunately, eating her was off the table—or, at least, we’d said it was.

Didn’t we?

We made it through all her questions and two plates each of the best chicken lo mein I’d ever had. I’d let out some vulnerable shit on her recording, but I trusted her not to use it. Other than this crazy attraction between us, we’d also connected on a deeper level than two strangers should have.

I felt like I knew her, despite how little or absolutely no sense it made. All I had to go on was the crazy chemistry we’d had, the way I could talk to her for hours about anything, and how she wrote her books. That kind way she had about her came through on every page, and I couldn’t stop reading.

It was a safe way to get lost in her without hurting us both, although it didn’t help the instant fixation I couldn’t shake off.

“Hopefully that wasn’t too painful,” Rachel said, her gorgeous smile once again making me forget everything around me but her.

“It wasn’t painful at all. I knew I was in good hands.”

My dick twitched at the memory of how good her hands really were. There’d been more than a few moments like that during the interview, but thanks to the table covering the bulge in my jeans from reminiscing, I was able to keep it to myself.

“I could send you my first draft before I show it to Gayle, if you’d like. Not my usual process, and I think Kent is supposed to be approving all the articles and promo, but I want you to feel at ease. I know this PR stuff isn’t your favorite.”

“Is it that obvious?” I huffed out a laugh. “I trust you, but if you want to send it to me

to take a look, I'd love to read it."

"Then that's what I'll do." She flicked her wrist to glance at her watch. "I was going to suggest dessert, but I have to pick up my sister at softball."

"How far is it?"

"Only about a half hour away, but I try to leave extra time for the subway in case the train is late."

"I can drive you. I'm parked up the block."

"I can't ask you to do that." She shook her head.

"Why can't you? I'm not just a client you're interviewing. I'm a friend. Or I'd like to be."

Friend wasn't what I wanted to be to Rachel, but I'd gladly settle for it if it meant I could see her again. I didn't have a lot of free time and neither did she, but what was the harm in talking?

Probably more than I wanted to consider, but I still wanted this piece of her, at least while she'd be lingering around the field over the next couple of months.

"Sure," she said as her shoulders relaxed. "They have good ice cream here, and if you drive me, we'd have an extra half hour."

"Good." A smile ripped across my mouth. I'd take any extra time I could get. "How many different sports is your sister in?"

She dropped her chin to her chest.

“More than I can afford, but I haven’t figured out how to tell her no. Softball and swimming for right now. But sports are expensive, between the dues and the uniforms and the equipment, plus the stress of making sure I can leave work.” She pressed her fingers into her temples.

“It’s a lot?”

“Yes,” she said as she dropped her head onto the table with a thump. “I try to overcompensate for our mother and give her all the stuff I didn’t get growing up.”

“Can you ask her to choose?”

She shrugged. “She likes softball better, but she has friends in both. We have to have a hard conversation very soon, but I keep putting it off, thinking four extra hours a day or five hundred dollars are magically going to appear out of nowhere.”

“You can’t help her if you exhaust yourself.”

“I’ll figure it out. I’ve come this far. A lot further than anyone expected,” she mumbled to herself.

“But what happens to you?”

Her head jerked up. “What do you mean, what happens to me?”

“What happens when you wear yourself out and make yourself sick? Days off for yourself shouldn’t be so rare.”

“My downstairs tenant helps us out. She was a friend of my grandmother’s. She’d watch Taylor when she was little and if I had to work, and she keeps an eye on her for me when she’s home alone, which I try not to let happen very often or for too long.

Since this guardianship came through, she's been a little antsy."

"Why? Didn't you say you've been taking care of her from the beginning?"

"Pretty much, but our mother would breeze in and out. If she needed a place to stay for a night or two or had to use the bathroom while she was out." She snickered. "My sister would look for her, until one day she stopped. And she would only get sad and quiet when our mother would pop back into our lives."

"So, you never knew when you'd see her again?"

My mother had doted on both of us, despite what my brother had always claimed. I couldn't imagine never knowing when I'd see my parents and having to take care of a younger sibling too.

"When I mentioned that it was getting a little dicey signing my mother's name on Taylor's school forms, my mother suggested handing over her rights to me and said, with my sister in earshot, if it got to be too much, I could always just put her in the system."

"Jesus," I spat out.

"Yep, and I would never let that happen. Taylor knows that, but when I made a joke about the truant officers coming to take me away if I let her stay home from school this morning, she got upset and I felt like shit. And I again went back to my bank account and schedule to see if she could keep both sports."

"Can I say something?" I set my elbows on the table and leaned in. "Since we're friends and all."

A tiny smile danced over her mouth as she nodded.

“Sure.”

“It’s not your job to make up for your mother. You love your sister. I saw it that night when you first mentioned her. I’d bet if you make her choose one sport so you could breathe and have a break, she’d be fine with it.”

An intrusive thought barreled into my head, about being that person for her. The one who made up for all she’d obviously missed out on because she had a parent who didn’t care and had to learn to depend on only herself.

I’d caught a glimpse of the carefree side she probably never had a chance to show, and it had hooked me. The memory made me wish for that night all over again and yearn to be the one to let her have that kind of life, not just for a day.

But I’d be on the road soon, and I couldn’t be that guy, no matter how fucking much I wanted to be.

“I know that.” She exhaled a long, defeated breath. “But I have this need to keep trying. For both of us. It’s dumb.”

“It’s not. It makes you pretty fucking amazing. Taylor is lucky.”

Her eyes glossed over as they darted around the room.

“Thanks, Coach.”

I wanted to leap across the table and kiss her troubles away, forget all my own worries in those full red lips that I’d bet would taste just as sweet as I remembered and couldn’t for the life of me forget.

“This is a nice ride,” Rachel said, skimming her hands over the leather seats of my

truck as I followed her directions to the softball field.

“It’s not bad. If I leave early enough, the ride from my apartment to the field isn’t that long. And it gives me time to get into the zone.”

“The managing zone?” she teased.

“Well, that remains to be seen. The zone that helps me look the part, even if I’m not there yet.”

“You’re there, Silas. I’m sure things will be an adjustment, but you’re there. I’m excited for you.”

I smiled as I pulled up to the curb in front of the field.

“And for all the new reels we’ll get.”

I cracked up as I shut off the engine.

“I’ll get out here. That cap isn’t going to protect you from all the teenage girls about to spill off the field in a few minutes.”

“I understand,” I said, stretching my arm along the back of the passenger seat, Rachel’s hair tickling the inside of my forearm. Why was this so natural? I itched to touch my lips to hers, to grab the back of her neck, press my mouth against hers and bring out that throaty whimper that haunted my dreams.

But that couldn’t happen. Not with her sister a few feet away, and probably not ever.

It had been hard enough to walk away from her the first time. Having her around but not having her would be its own special kind of torture.

“Oh, that reminds me. Taylor asked for your autograph.” Rachel grimaced as she reached into her bag and tore off a piece of paper. “Would you mind? I wasn’t going to ask you, but we’re friends, right?”

Her lips twisted into a smirk, my gaze snagging on her gorgeous mouth as very not-friendly feelings washed over me.

“We are,” I said, skimming my fingers against hers as I took the pen from her hand and scribbled my name onto the paper.

“Thank you. You just made me a hero.” She stuffed the paper in her bag, her eyes still on mine.

“I think you’re already a hero. So give yourself a break. Okay?”

“Only if you do the same.” She reached for the door handle, stilling as she looked back at me. “See you soon, Coach.”

“See you around, Slugger.”

She rolled her eyes as she heaved out an audible sigh and stepped out of the car.

“I’m never living that down, am I?”

“Nope,” I said, popping the p.

She glowered at me as she shut the door and jogged toward the field, leaving me as breathless as the day she’d punched me in the stomach.

And just as clueless as to what to do about it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RACHEL

“I hate when it rains,” my sister lamented from our couch, dropping her head back with a dramatic sigh.

“You hate when I let you order donuts and you have to sit in front of the TV and watch movies while I work this weekend? Sis, you’re breaking my heart.”

I laughed at her huff as I read through my article one more time. It had been a long time since something had been both so easy and hard as hell to write. There was so much I’d wanted to say about Silas, but I’d been afraid of how my tone would sound. I eyeballed what I’d written a million different ways until I was confident it didn’t sound like some fangirl who loved his ass in white pants.

Or someone who’d had a front-row seat to that ass without the pants.

My sister was supposed to be at softball practice, but it had been canceled because of weather. We’d had that talk about choosing a sport the night after I’d had lunch with Silas, and she’d picked softball with no argument. I’d relaxed until she’d shown me the paper from her coach later that night, with all the fees for new uniforms and even a couple of team-building trips. It was great that I could drop one sport expense, but the increase for the one she kept didn’t feel like I’d saved anything.

I scrolled back through the article, honestly satisfied with how it had turned out. I’d reached out to Silas’s old manager in Washington, never thinking that I’d hear from

him on such short notice, but he'd sent an email a couple hours later with effusive words of praise for his former shortstop that I was able to weave in.

The Bats' management was so thrilled he was here, Kent reiterating how Silas was such a great player and the fans would "eat him up," when I'd chatted with him. The women would too, I was sure. But that was none of my concern—or shouldn't have been whenever I thought of women throwing themselves at him at every game. It was none of my business and shouldn't have made my hands ball into fists each time it crossed my mind.

The Brooklyn Bats had an attractive roster, as my sister had pointed out when she'd given me a rundown of the players she'd known. But Silas was more than just a hot team manager. He was young enough to pull off that sinfully cocky smile, but the touch of gray at his temples and the crinkles around his eyes made him so attractive it was almost painful to look at him.

He'd confessed feeling like he was past his prime, but nothing was further from the truth. He missed his old job, but I was sure he'd not only be embraced by fans, but he'd be an amazing manager.

I'd done plenty of research on Silas and how he'd been team captain at such a young age. There was no way he wouldn't be a great leader, and I'd had enough recovery time from all the orgasms he'd given me that first night to say that—sort of—objectively.

"How many chapters have you written? You've been sitting there forever," Taylor whined. "I saved you a Nutella donut."

"This isn't a book. It's for the day job. The article on Silas."

I smiled when her gasp traveled all the way to my corner of the living room.

“Can I see?”

“When it posts,” I told her, laughing when her lip jutted out in a pout.

Gayle wasn’t expecting the article until Monday, so I had time to read it over again...or send it to Silas like I’d offered.

I pushed away from my desk, the wheels on my chair sending me back about a foot as I eyed my phone. He’d said we were friends, and this PR campaign was making him uneasy. Why not show him the article?

He had paid for a cab for me to go home and had given me his sweatshirt—a sweatshirt I still hadn’t washed so I could bury my face into it when my sister wasn’t around, letting his fading scent bring back all those memories I could only relive in the forbidden corners of my mind.

God, I was so pathetic.

Before I lost my nerve, I rolled myself forward, pulled up my email, attached the article, and sent it to his email address.

Me: Hey! Article draft is done. I just sent it over so you could have a peek.

“It must have been so cool to talk to him.” My sister giggled as I settled next to her, clutching my phone in my hand and totally not anticipating a response. I should have just emailed it and waited for his reply without giving him a text heads-up. But maybe he didn’t check his email all the time, especially at night.

And maybe I needed better excuses.

“It was. He’s a nice guy,” I said, stretching my legs as I lounged back. My

grandmother had had a plastic-covered gold couch that held a lot of memories but was uncomfortable as hell, especially in the summer. It had taken me a long time to finally replace it after she was gone. I'd kept the couch longer than I wanted to as a way to introduce Taylor to a grandmother she'd never known but who would have adored her as much as I did. I kept a pillow from the old couch, even though it stuck out in our living room because it didn't go with anything.

I missed my grandmother every day, and although she'd been gone for a long time, sometimes a memory would sneak up and knock the wind out of me. When I'd lost her, I realized how alone I was in this world. I'd soon had a kid to take care of and didn't have much—if any—free time alone, but the loneliness never wavered. Thankfully, taking care of Taylor had kept me busy enough over the years to limit any extra time to think.

My grandmother would know what to do with Taylor and how to do it better, and I'd wished for her advice so many times. I could only hope I'd learned enough by watching her all those years.

I dropped my chin on top of Taylor's head as I pulled her closer, the rush of emotion getting the best of me. I jumped when my phone buzzed, almost forgetting the inappropriate or at least unnecessary text I'd just sent.

My stomach dropped as I read the message, not out of disappointment, but all too familiar dread.

Mom: Just wanted to say hi. Hope you girls are good!

A random text usually meant we'd be seeing her soon, but things were very different now. I'd changed the locks since she'd signed over her rights to my sister, and if she was back in the city looking for a place to stay, this wasn't it. My grandmother had been done with her daughter before she'd passed away and had told me when she'd

put my name on the house to call the cops if she ever tried to move back in.

But when my mother had come back for my grandmother's funeral, she'd been pregnant and had stayed until Taylor was two weeks old. I'd had to learn about babies and formula quickly as she was never around long enough to show me. Or maybe she wasn't around any babies long enough to know what to do herself.

It was easier to worry about Silas than my mother and what antics she would pull now. I wouldn't let her come and go anymore, and I was prepared to fight her on it. I had fully executed guardianship papers, and my aunt Lucy had told me she'd pay for her lawyer to take my case if it ever came to that.

I prayed that would never happen.

"What's wrong?" Taylor asked, squinting at me as she lifted her head. "You got all tense just now."

"Just work. No big deal. So, why don't I be a bad guardian and tee up that island dating reality show for us?"

"No, that would make you the best guardian." She kissed my cheek and scurried off the couch. "I'll get the cookies to go along with the donuts."

I smiled as she raced to the kitchen, opening the drawer to our coffee table to stuff my phone inside in case my mother texted again, when I spotted Silas's name on the screen.

Silas: Wow. That is an amazing article. Sure it's about me?

Me: I don't meet too many Gold Glove winners with six championship rings. Don't worry, I didn't get you confused with anyone else.

Silas: Well then, thanks. This is great. You make me sound like I could actually do this job .

Me: Because you can. I already wrote you a glowing article, so don't fish for any more compliments.

Silas: You're a talented writer.

Silas: I've been reading your books, by the way. So I already knew that.

My eyes grew so wide, my head tilted forward.

Me: Are you serious?

Silas: Well, maybe not all of them. I'm about eight books in. You're pretty amazing. Just don't tell me if you punched other guys as you wrote these books. I want to believe I'm the first.

He was the first for a lot of things, things that didn't make sense for someone I'd only known for a day before we'd run into each other again.

Me: Thank you for saying that. And yes, you were the first writing casualty.

Silas: Good. I can't believe R.M. Dioro wrote about me.

Me: She didn't. Rachel Manning did.

Silas: Come on. Let me dream, Slugger.

“One box of chocolate chip cookies or two?”

My head whipped around to the sound of my sister's voice.

Dreaming was nice, but it wouldn't do me any good if I wanted to focus on real life.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SILAS

“Ready, Coach?” Ricky asked me as he bounced back and forth on his feet. The roar of the opening day crowd, not quite at capacity from what I could tell when I had peeked, was loud as the announcer introduced the Bats one by one.

Opening day at the first home game was always a lot of ceremony. Special guests singing the anthem after a big introduction for all of us as we ran onto the field, followed by our manager. My old manager in Washington had always joked that while we jogged onto the field, he could trot since no one was paying attention to him by the time it was his turn to be introduced.

How I wished I could trot with no eyes on me today, which was stupid since I’d jogged on to a field at the start of every baseball season for all my adult life. Fans were part of the package—an important one—but while I’d heard nothing but excitement today, I already felt the scrutiny from all the pairs of eyes that would watch me join my team.

“You should be first,” Chris, our catcher, said next to me as the guys headed to the field and lined up by the dugout.

“Yeah, Coach. Our famous manager,” Adrian, our pitcher for today’s game, joked as he nudged my shoulder.

For a group of guys I’d only known for a matter of weeks, I’d clicked with them

pretty well. I was still navigating the manager dynamic, trying to be encouraging yet honest about what I expected from each of them and what I noticed they could capitalize on or improve upon, but they were young enough not to be swayed by ego and excited to play.

At least, most weren't swayed by ego.

I caught a glare from Nate before it was his turn, as he bobbed up and down, swinging his arms in and out before he ran onto the grass. I wasn't sure if he was antsy, annoyed at the connections I'd made with the other players, or just in silent pain with his shoulder and trying to stretch it out without being noticed.

I could only keep an eye on it today and hope Nate and his shoulder wouldn't be a hindrance to the team.

"I wonder what song they'll use for the reel," Chris said with a smirk tipping the side of his mouth.

"Guys, stay off Instagram," I growled but bit back a smile.

"Try to give us a good lead before you head out there," Adrian said. "If we get caught in the shot, we may go viral too. Not sure if I'm ready for that kind of fame yet."

"Same, dude," Chris said, pressing a hand to his chest.

"Let's go," I said, shoving Chris's shoulder. "We've got a game to play."

The reels didn't bother me, or they didn't bother me as much since I'd learned to laugh at them. My team, other than one cranky player, took me seriously and, so far, respected my opinion. If whatever popularity I still had sold more tickets, I was willing to play it up in the name of revenue for the good of the team.

I'd loved and hated the rush of opening day. The surge of adrenaline as I prepped for another season and prayed I could deliver the same or more than I had the previous year to show I still had it.

Now, I was going out there attempting to prove I'd had it in the first place.

I waved to the crowd as I ran out, smiling at all the fans on their feet holding signs for us. I caught a couple of signs with my name on them but didn't try to read what they said.

If they mentioned my ass, I'd hear about it later anyway.

I slipped off my hat and held it over my heart as the anthem began. I scanned the crowd in front of me until my gaze snagged on Rachel, sitting two rows behind the dugout. Her gorgeous smile and tiny nod triggered a flood of warmth in my chest, potent enough to melt the tension from my shoulders.

This would be the only glimpse of her I could afford to take today, but knowing she was here wasn't the distraction I would have expected it to be. It soothed me in an unexpected way, just like on that first day we met.

Rather than wonder for the millionth time what it was about her that affected me so much in so many ways, I used the calm she brought me to focus.

Whatever happened today, and in the games that followed, I'd make it work. This might have been my first time as a manager, but this game was more than just my job. It was who I was.

Impostors don't get impostor syndrome.

I stole another glance at Rachel as the song ended, the guys taking their positions on

the field in my periphery.

She always knew the right things to say.

As with most games, once it started, it all went by in a blur. Adrian was our strongest pitcher and had a shutout going into the seventh inning, and Nate had gone two for four, only striking out once. I spied a wince after he swung toward the later innings, but I had to trust him and Lee right now for assurance he could play.

I stepped out of the dugout, keeping my eye on Adrian as he gave up his second hit of the ninth inning. We still had a good lead, and I knew he'd want to go for a complete game, but I didn't want him to exhaust his arm and take a hit in his earned run average if he didn't have to. If he let one more batter on base, the game could get away from us pretty damn quickly.

I guessed this was a manager moment. For the most part today, I'd just encouraged the guys and offered support, even if Nate had grunted back or nodded at me. After getting behind on the count, the batter hit a pop fly, easily caught by Chris behind the plate.

I caught Kent behind the dugout as my eyes flicked to the field, giving me a boisterous thumbs-up. I was tempted to ask if he even noticed the tension on the mound right now. I still wasn't sure whether he cared about winning or the show.

Ignoring him, I nodded at the umpire and called a time-out before jogging to the mound.

"I know, I know," Adrian said, closing his eyes as he nodded at me.

"Hey, you pitched a great game." I stuffed my hands in my pockets as I stepped closer. "No sense in tiring out your arm when relief is ready to come in. A win is

more important than a complete game.”

It was funny how, in all my years in baseball, not that much had changed from when I’d played as a kid. Adrian was only in his mid-twenties, but even the most seasoned players needed a little guidance and a push once in a while.

Some of them needed a kick in the ass too, but I’d deal with one issue at a time.

He let out a frustrated breath as he lifted his hat and raked a hand through his sweaty hair.

“You’re right. Shawn can close this up.”

“He can.” I smiled and stepped closer. “And you can enjoy the win and a great start to the season.”

He nodded, shooting me a tired smile.

“All right, Coach.”

Yeah, I could do this fucking job.

Shawn shut down the next two batters, and the Bats had their first win of the season. I knew better than to get cocky, but I’d take it as a possible good sign.

Kent was waiting for me inside, along with Gayle, beaming as I stepped closer.

“Awesome first game,” Kent said, extending his hand. “I knew you’d be great.”

“They worked hard, and it’s the first game. I’m glad we won, but we still have a season to play.”

“And so humble,” Gayle said, sneaking me a smile from where she stood next to Kent. “Rachel’s article posted this morning, and it already has a ton of views.”

“That was a great article,” Kent agreed as something caught his attention over Gayle’s shoulder.

I followed his gaze to Rachel, smiling when her eyes met mine.

“It’s easy to write something great when you have so much material. Congrats on your first win, Coach.”

I held back a laugh when I noticed Rachel wearing an open Bats jersey over her shirt.

“Nice shirt,” I said, fighting the urge to rake my gaze up and down her body.

“I wanted to support a team that plays in my home borough, and my sister will get a thrill when I bring it home. I told the girl at one of the vendor stands to grab me one before I came back down here to meet up with Gayle.” I spotted Nate’s name and number on her back as she turned around.

My smile shrank as I held in a growl, which was ridiculous. It wasn’t the issues he’d been giving me. Rachel wearing any man’s name and number triggered a lousy, sour feeling that felt a lot like jealousy.

I could add that to the list of things Rachel brought out in me that made no sense.

“Kent and I have to talk a little strategy,” Gayle said to Rachel. “I’ll let you know where we want to go from here, and it’s good that you were here today to soak up all the good opening-day vibes for what’s coming next.”

I looked away, afraid I’d laugh at Kent’s and Gayle’s identical widened eyes.

“Yes, I got all the vibes,” Rachel said, tapping her temple. “I’ll head back home and start on my other work until you let me know.”

“Great, and congratulations again, Silas.” Gayle squeezed my arm and shifted to leave with Kent.

“So, how does it feel?” Rachel asked me when Kent and Gayle were out of earshot. “Your first win as a manager.”

“It feels good. Weird, as I’m the adult in the room, I suppose.”

“Isn’t it the worst?” She scrunched her adorable nose. I had to laugh until my eyes found Nate’s number on the back of her shirt again, that rancid feeling churning for a different reason. I’d overheard his comment to Adrian in the locker room of how it was too bad he “wasn’t allowed to finish.”

I wasn’t afraid to go back at Nate, and I had to nip things in the bud if he was talking shit about my choices on the first day. The energy was good, so I’d let it slide the one time and pretended I didn’t hear it.

“I think you did great. And I’m sure there’s a good video of you taken from the back circulating its way through social media as we speak,” she teased as we ambled past the stores and concession stands. “A win all around.”

“I suppose so. How’s your sister? Still on the sports circuit?”

“Yes, but I took your advice and asked her to choose. You were right. She picked softball and went back to scrolling her phone.”

“Ah, see?” I told her. “Good for you. And I bet you’re relieved.”

“No,” she breathed out. “I mean, time-wise, I guess so. But the softball team has all these new fees and team-building trips they never had before. I’m just as broke, but now, I at least get two extra nights at home per week.”

Would the urge to grab her face, pull her mouth to mine, and kiss her breathless ever fade? I doubted it, and if we weren’t in a crowd of people, it would have been even harder to resist.

“One second,” I said to Rachel before turning to the vendor behind us. “Do you have any Jones jerseys back there?”

The vendor’s brows ran up to her hairline when she recognized me.

“Um, yeah, only a couple. What size?”

Usually, the stands sold only player jerseys unless the manager was a veteran player from the team. Kent had pushed to get jerseys made for me, and although I thought it was weird, he’d told me Nate and I were tied in jersey sales online.

“What size is that?” I nodded at Rachel.

“It’s a large,” she replied slowly, eyeing me as if I’d lost my mind.

I reached into my pocket and dropped a couple of bills on the counter, double what she was charging.

“Keep the change.”

“You’re buying me a?—”

“Take it off,” I growled before I could help it.

Her brows popped as heat pooled in her wide chocolate eyes.

“Um, excuse me...? Take it?—”

“Off, yes.” I held out a hand.

She scanned the area behind her before she slipped the jersey off her shoulders and dropped it into my hand.

“Should I go return it?”

“No, you can give it to your sister.” I draped the jersey with my name and number on it over her shoulders, holding her eyes as I let my hands glide down her arms for a quick second.

This was dangerous. Her boss was here, my boss was here, plus fans who could recognize me and record us. Yet, I wasn’t moving, and neither was she.

“So, I can only wear your jersey here? This is that alpha thing you have again, isn’t it?”

I smiled, holding her gaze as I lifted a shoulder.

“Whatever we...” I trailed off, lost in the curve of her lips, the lips I wanted to cover with mine and forget about all the reasons why that one day in Williamsburg was as far as we could go. Reasons that I couldn’t think of right now because all I cared about was when I’d get to see her again.

“Whatever we were, if you’re here, it’s my name that goes on your back.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RACHEL

“Slow down,” I told my sister as she ran toward the field to join her friends. Her softball coach had called us to the field for a special announcement, and Taylor had texted with her friends the whole ride here, bouncing with excitement as to what it could be.

I’d splurged for a cab after a long workday, but I couldn’t muster any of Taylor’s revelry.

Sometimes, I envied my sister a little. She was a sweet, happy kid, despite the odd way she’d grown up. Our mother was in her life much less than she’d been in mine, and Taylor had been able to detach from her easier. I thought of it as a win, that just maybe all the effort I’d put into being a good parent, the polar opposite of the one we’d had, was working.

I usually did a much better job matching her energy, but it was hard when you had adult things to worry about, like how much this “surprise” would cost. Were they announcing one of the trips? Did it include airfare?

My mind raced with possibilities, but unlike Taylor, they were mostly bad.

“Hey, Rachel,” Hayley, one of the softball moms, called as she came over to me. “Any clue about the exciting news?”

“Nope,” I said, shaking my head. “I feel like the girls are building it up to be something a lot more than what it probably is.”

As terrible as it was, that was my hope.

“I think,” Hayley whispered as she came closer, “the team got a sponsor. From the rumor I heard—” she held up her hands “—they’re going to cover everything for the girls this year.”

“What?”

I didn’t realize how loud my gasp was until a cluster of teen girls turned to gape at me. I mouthed a sorry to my sister and turned back to Hayley.

“Like, everything?”

“Like, everything . Even getting them new uniforms with the sponsor logo, no matter that we’re a couple of months into the season. How cool is that? I mean, if it’s true...”

I clenched my eyes shut and said a two-second prayer to God and my grandmother to will it so. I’d planned to cover some of it with my next release payout, but if I didn’t have to, I could take Taylor on vacation or treat us to something fun if my book sold well. It was all an if at this point but more than what I’d had before we’d stepped out of the cab.

My chest tingled after what felt like a massive brick slipped off my chest. That rare but exhilarating feeling of relief coasted over me. I spotted the coach waving us over to the field and followed with considerably more pep in my step.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” Taylor’s coach, Amy, said after

everyone had quieted down. “But this was news I wanted to deliver in person. Our team has a sponsor for the season, and they’ve agreed to cover all expenses for the girls this year, including all fees, uniforms, and trips.”

“Wow,” Hayley breathed out next to me, her blond ponytail swishing behind her as she whipped her head toward me.

“Seriously,” I said, exhaling so much air, my shoulders slumped.

“And that’s not even the best part! Our new team sponsor is the Brooklyn Bats!”

Taylor snuck me a look over her shoulder, her eyes almost as wide as I was sure mine were, but she was a happy-excited, not shocked enough to forget to breathe or blink.

“Wow, that’s incredible,” Hayley mused next to me. “But why would a professional baseball team sponsor a girls’ softball team? I mean, I love that they did, but it’s rare, you know.”

“Yes, rare,” I replied, all that sweet relief from just minutes ago dissipating into what felt like a familiar panic. It wasn’t rare or a coincidence.

It was Silas.

Gayle had suggested local sports sponsorships in her overall PR campaign to spread the name around the various Brooklyn neighborhoods and get the residents to think of the Bats as one of their own. I hadn’t heard if the Bats management had taken her up on it. Sure, it could have been by chance, but it was a one-in-a-million chance that the Bats would pick my sister’s team to sponsor this year.

I hadn’t been able to get Silas out of my head even before opening day. I’d sat in the stands as I tracked him on the field, so confident and sexy despite the trepidation he’d

confessed to me.

He'd worn the shit out of that uniform, and I'd watched him instead of the game. Gayle had been up and down next to me, checking out parts of their stadium and telling all the ideas that had come to her. I'd nodded as my gaze stayed on Silas, his gorgeous face stoic and serious as he talked with his players, perched right outside the dugout for most of the game.

It had made me think of his easy smile that first day, even after I'd clocked him in the stomach. It was like we'd had our own secret, like I knew a side of him that no one else in that entire crowd did. Even though I'd spotted signs from a few women requesting to know him a lot better.

When he'd told me to take off the jersey and slipped one with his name on it over me, I didn't know if I was going to combust or melt.

He'd done that right after I'd told him about the extra softball fees, another reason I had the feeling he was behind this. I guessed he remembered the team's name from the poster outside the entrance to the field when he'd dropped me off after our interview.

I was grateful yet embarrassed. The last thing I'd wanted was for him to pity me. Not that I truly thought he had, but even as I sat in a crowd of ecstatic girls and their relieved parents, it felt like I'd been given a handout.

I'd avoided those all my life. But that would have to stay a me issue, and I'd push my pride—and my feelings for Silas—far enough away not to make any trouble and appreciate this wonderful gift for what it was, even if it would put me in Silas's path once again.

Hayley gave us a ride home, her daughter Kylie and Taylor giggling over who they

were most excited to see at the game we'd all been invited to next week. According to all the places I now followed the Brooklyn Bats on social media, for work and...reasons, I knew they were in San Diego today for a three-game series starting tomorrow. Our tickets, also paid for by our sponsor, were for the Sunday afternoon game at Wayne Field next weekend, and all the parents and players had seats right behind the Bats' dugout, where I'd be even closer to him.

"This is so great. I wish Coach wasn't asking us to wear our uniforms so I could wear my Becker jersey. Could you introduce me to Silas Jones?" Taylor clasped her hands under her chin. "Did you tell him about me?"

"Yes," I said with a chuckle. "When I asked him for his autograph, I told him it was for my sister."

I'd also told him to touch me, right before I shoved his hand down my pants. But I wasn't supposed to think about that.

Not when I saw him again, not when I had to interview him, and for sure not with my sister and her entire softball team around us.

For a part-time romance author, I was jaded when it came to fate. I loved the idea of love—I had to, or else I'd suck at writing it—but real life was always more practical than romantic to me. As heavy as the temptation was with every interaction, I couldn't be with Silas. That one day we'd had, where none of the regular rules of each other's life applied, was a wonderful memory that wouldn't work in reality, and we'd both known that and had agreed.

Then his team became my new client, and now he was my sister's team's sponsor. I'd see him at another game, and maybe his team would come to one of hers.

I found nothing romantic about this torture. I thought of this as more bad luck than

fate, a constant tease of what I couldn't have.

Or what I shouldn't.

When Taylor disappeared into her room, I pulled out my phone. If staying away from Silas was in my best interest, texting him wouldn't help, but I had to say something.

Me: So, the Brooklyn Bats are sponsoring my sister's softball team this year. Know anything about that?

I fell back on my couch and set my phone on the cushion next to me as three dots popped up.

Silas: I might. When Kent asked us for names of local sports teams and camps that we could sponsor, I suggested your sister's team.

Me: The Bats really want to sponsor a teen girls' softball team?

Silas: Are you saying that girls and women in sports don't deserve support? I have a field-hockey-playing cousin who will kick your ass.

Me: No, that's not it at all. I'm sounding ungrateful, and it's not my intention. Thank you. Truly. Just another surprise.

Silas: I get that, but I hoped it would be a good one. This is the one PR thing we're doing I can get behind. And if it helps the sister of someone special, even better.

Silas: So you're very welcome.

Someone special.

I'd do well not to read too much into that or read it five thousand times as I'd probably do tonight.

Me: She's upset we can't wear our jerseys. They want the girls in uniform and the parents in red shirts to match.

Silas: If you ever come into the stadium in a jersey to watch us play, remember the rules.

I didn't think I could wear that jersey in public, never mind the stadium. Every time I'd slip it on, I'd think of the smolder in Silas's golden eyes and what else I would have taken off if he'd asked me to, public place with my boss around or not.

This was dangerous on too many levels now. Silas was too tangled up with work and my sister's team to be tangled up with me.

My mind went to the disheveled sheets in his hotel room and the glorious mess we'd made.

The only mess we could make without screwing up our lives—or, at least, my life.

Me: Oh, I do. Good luck tomorrow.

Silas: Thanks. Road trips are a lot easier when you don't have to participate in practice, only direct.

Me: I haven't decided whether I'll watch or look on Instagram later. They'd give me the better angle.

Silas: I am sure they would, but you already know the good angles, right, Slugger?

I did, and I remembered them every damn time I watched Silas walk back into the dugout. As sexy as he was in his uniform, he was lethally gorgeous underneath. I remembered every ridge of muscle, the smooth skin on his back as I dragged my nails down, the soft tickle of his chest hair against my breasts.

My body heated from head to toe, the yearning and frustration hitting me hard in equal measure.

Me: Good night, Silas.

Silas: Sweet dreams.

I let my head fall back on the couch.

I'd have dreams tonight, but they wouldn't be sweet.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SILAS

“How long is this PR thing?” Chris asked me after we headed out of the locker room. We’d won in the tenth inning of a long game, and the guys had to be exhausted. If the girls weren’t waiting in the offices, dying to meet them, I would have excused them all to go home, but I couldn’t do that.

“Not that long. I know you guys are tired but think of when you were their age and how it would feel to meet professional ballplayers.”

I spied a few nods and grunts when I turned my head. It didn’t matter how much I sympathized with the team. Kent would have had a heart attack if I’d let them skip, and I didn’t want to disappoint Rachel and her sister, although I tried to forget they were here.

I wasn’t sure what it was about Rachel that lured me in so much that I’d felt her presence. It was weird and not at all helpful, but it was palpable. I did have altruistic motives for choosing a girls’ softball team to sponsor. Girls’ and women’s sports teams always got the least amount of funding because the possibility of going pro, at least on a level that most considered pro, wasn’t there.

Kent had agreed with me when I’d suggested it, not knowing why I’d recommended sponsoring this particular team.

Rachel and I weren’t possible. I knew that. We knew that. This tense friendship we

had would be all I could get, but I wanted to help her in some way, be someone in her life who made things even a little easier so maybe she'd get to enjoy a moment or two without worrying about doing all she could for her sister.

And if I got to see her again, what was the harm? We were adults and could handle ourselves. As long as we'd see each other in public places, we'd be fine.

So what if she starred in every dirty fantasy I had and I'd probably call out her name with my hand around my dick during my next shower—again. I'd focus on the team I had to manage and the publicity hoops my bosses made me jump through, not on the woman who'd taken over my mind and most of my common sense.

The guys followed me toward the back of the field, where the management offices were. The girls would be waiting for us in a conference room, and it was supposed to be a short meet-and-greet. I hoped so for their sake and mine, as too much time around Rachel would make the feelings I was trying to ignore bubble up and make me do something that might be too obvious, like stare at her beautiful face and linger around her for too long.

Extra time with Rachel would only mess with my head even more, so why did I keep trying for it?

Kent was waiting for us with the girls and their parents, quickly introducing us and mentioning that we were all happy to be their sponsor and would sign anything they asked us to. They stared back at us with nervous smiles, whispering to each other as they clustered together.

“Hi, I'm Amy, the coach. I'll introduce them since they all seem to be a little frozen.” She jerked her head back to her mostly quiet team. “I can't tell you how much we all appreciate this.”

“Oh, it’s our pleasure,” Kent said, extending his hand to Amy, a tall woman with red hair pulled back into a ponytail. “But I can’t take the credit. It was Silas’s idea.”

“Well, thank you too,” Amy said as she shook my hand. “I don’t know how you heard about our little team, but we are very grateful.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, not explaining how I knew about her team, because how would I? I had mind-altering sex with the older sister and guardian of one of your players and never thought I’d see her again. Now that she’d stumbled back into my life, I had to find a way to make her happy, even though being with her again could never happen, and the more time I got to spend with her, the more I’d started to forget that.

Nope, I couldn’t understand those reasons myself, let alone explain them.

I spotted Rachel over Amy’s shoulder, standing next to a girl I assumed was her little sister. She had long black hair that draped almost down to her elbows. She had the same eyes as her sister, but she was tall and lean, a little less than a head shorter than Rachel.

Rachel turned her head, smiling when she caught my gaze, and wrapped her hand around her sister’s elbow to push her forward.

Kent and Amy had moved on to speak with other players, clearing a path between us. I was thankful and hopeful none of them would be watching us or catch how, once my gaze landed on her, I couldn’t tear it away.

She wore tight jeans that highlighted all my favorite curves and a snug red T-shirt with her sister’s team logo on it, and my fingers tingled to touch her, my dick twitching in agreement. But there was no room for twitching from dirty memories in my uniform pants, so I had to get my head on straight somehow for the next few

minutes.

“Silas, this is my sister, Taylor.” Rachel’s lips curled into a smirk as she pulled Taylor forward. “Taylor, this is?—”

“Hi, Mr. Jones,” she said, breathing out the words in a rush. “It’s so great to meet you.” She blinked, a blush staining her cheeks as she leaned in closer to her sister.

“It’s very nice to meet you too,” I said, extending a hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

She took my hand, shaking it as her brows pulled together. “A lot?”

“At the interview, I mentioned you played softball and were a fan of his Instagram reels,” Rachel said, popping her brows when her eyes found mine.

Right. The interview. Not the taco dinner or the morning after when she’d draped a sheet over her naked body and confessed how hard she worked to be the parent to her sister she’d never had growing up.

“You told him that?” Taylor asked her in a loud whisper, a horrified glare in her eyes.

“He knows about the reels and his unofficial title.” Rachel held my gaze and elbowed her sister’s side. “All good PR.”

A laugh escaped me as the tension drained out of Taylor’s features.

“I brought my Becker jersey. Would he sign it?”

“They’ll sign anything you ask. Well, anything you brought with you.” I snuck a smile to Rachel. I’d been asked to sign a few odd things in my career. Jerseys were

easy, but breasts and inner thighs weren't. I'd always said no, even when I wasn't married anymore, because it felt too intimate.

If Rachel had asked me to brand her with my name, anywhere, I'd be happy to do it.

"Go ahead," Rachel told her, pointing to a few of the girls surrounding Nate. He was good at these events from what I'd seen. Professional in a way he wasn't with me or the other coaches and trainers. His issues were our problem, although I'd had to watch him with umpires and other teams the last few games after he'd make a big show of rage at a call he hadn't agreed with or an opposing player he'd felt got in his way.

For today, I was grateful to see him making a good public impression and not giving me a headache.

"The girls are loving this," Rachel said as she took a careful half step closer to me. "I feel so awful about coming across as ungrateful."

She peered up at me, those chocolate eyes and the twist of her red lips rendering me silent for a split second.

I shook my head, managing to recover the minute before it became obvious and weird.

"You didn't. I'm sure it was a little bit of a shock. I would have reached out to you earlier about it, but I wasn't sure if it was official."

"I do love that they sponsored a girls' team. I know all this publicity exhausts you?—"

"Not this. I was a kid once, wishing I could meet some of my favorite players, and if

it makes the season better and more enjoyable for them, I'm all for it. I'll sign and smile as much as they want."

A slow grin spread across her mouth. I stood by everything I'd just said, but that beautiful smile was everything. I'd make the Bats sponsor her sister's team every season for her to look at me like that.

"That's...wonderful. You're a good guy, Silas," Rachel said on a long exhale, as if what she'd said was hard to admit.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I joked.

Her shoulders shook with a chuckle.

"Because it is. Makes it...harder."

I didn't ask her to clarify because I knew exactly what she meant. Time with her was a sweet kind of torture, even the few minutes now and the interview that had taken longer than it had to because neither of us had wanted it to end.

"Now, ask me about the gala and silent auction we have to go to next week, and my answer may be a little different."

"My agency bought a table. So I'll be suffering along with you."

Rachel, in a gown or dress or whatever she'd wear to this black-tie thing, all those gorgeous curves that I recalled enough to torment me on the regular would be on display. And I'd have to pretend not to notice—or, at least, not notice long enough for someone to see.

"Silas." Kent slapped my shoulder. "Some of the girls are asking to meet you. Oh

hey, Rachel,” Kent said, furrowing his brow when he noticed her. “Are you covering this for an article?”

“Maybe, but my sister is on the team,” she said, pointing to where Taylor was speaking to Nate.

“That’s great,” he said, probably so happy to get more coverage, he didn’t think to look into the coincidence.

“I better get my Sharpie out,” I said to Rachel. “I guess I’ll see you next week.”

“See you next week,” she said, the same exhausted resolve in her eyes that I’d been fighting with for what seemed like forever at this point.

I’d hoped I’d get used to seeing her enough to lessen the craving to see her again. But all it did was make me want her that much more.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RACHEL

“Your heels should be higher,” Taylor said as she perched on the edge of my bed, eyeballing the modest black wedge heels I’d picked for tonight.

“Tay, I’d like to be able to walk without killing myself or having to endure unbearable pain.”

I narrowed my eyes at her reflection in my bedroom mirror as I twined a piece of hair around my curling iron.

Yes, I had enough to worry about and keep track of tonight. Whether I’d be able to walk wasn’t something I wanted to add on to my already piling anxiety.

I’d attended client galas before and never minded them, other than the hassle of making sure my sister was taken care of for the night. Since she was sleeping over at a friend’s house, I should have been able to go out worry-free and have a good time without rushing home.

However, anticipating a night with Silas in the general vicinity, in a suit or tux that would cling to his broad chest and massive shoulders, had me so on edge I almost burned my fingertips three times as I tried to get ready.

I unplugged the curling iron and set it carefully on my dresser as I ran my fingers through the curls to loosen them up. I met my smoky eyes in the mirror and sucked in

a long breath. My black cocktail dress had some shimmer along the hem and was snug enough to both lift my boobs and taper my waist.

I swiveled around and glanced at my reflection over my shoulder. Not bad. All that extra effort, despite almost singeing off my fingerprints, had been worth it. The dress was sexy but not over the top, good for a work function and to maybe catch the eye of a man I really needed to stop thinking about.

Gayle had been happily surprised when I'd told her about the Bats sponsoring my sister's team, all excited for more of an inside scoop on the team and how they fostered community in the borough they played in, even though sponsorships were her idea.

If we were seen talking tonight, it wouldn't put anyone on alert unless we talked to or stared at each other for too long, something that seemed to be a struggle for both of us. We'd been lucky enough to be in busy places where no one was paying attention, but at an event like this, chatting and lingering were more obvious.

I hoped we'd end up on opposite sides of the room, but something told me we'd be sitting with a bunch of the Brooklyn Bats staff, including their gorgeous manager.

I packed my lipstick into my clutch for the night as the doorbell rang.

"Tina's mom is always on time," I said, smiling at my sister as I reached down to lift her backpack. "Have a great time, and I'll pick you up in the morning." I pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her forehead. She was getting so tall, I barely had to bend anymore.

"Can you text me some pictures?" she asked as she pulled the straps onto her shoulders. "Especially of Becker."

“You moved on from Silas?” I teased as I walked her to the door. If so, at least one of us had.

“Becker was so nice after the game. And he’s going to look so hot in a suit tonight.”

I couldn’t help but laugh when her head fell back with a deep sigh.

I was sure he would and that I wouldn’t notice because I’d be mesmerized by a different suit. Only I wouldn’t be free to unbutton his dress shirt in his hotel room like the last time.

I had to remind myself it was the one time, not the last time. Even the language my brain used for Silas was tempting me toward a repeat that couldn’t happen.

“Hey, Rach,” Tina’s mom, Bonnie, greeted us when we opened the door. “You look great!”

“You’re not used to seeing me out of jeans and leggings. Truthfully, neither am I.”

I turned to kiss Taylor’s temple. “Have a great time tonight. And thank you, Bonnie.”

“Come on,” Tina said from behind her mother, grabbing Taylor’s arm. “Wait until you see all the stuff we bought for tonight.”

Tina was petite, her curly black hair framing her face like a halo as she pulled my much-taller sister down our front stairs and toward their car.

“We bought a lot of junk for tonight, but I promise she won’t come home with a stomachache.”

I waved a hand. “Just send home some Oreos if you have any left.”

“Will do, and you really do look great tonight,” Bonnie whispered.

“Work thing, but it’s nice to get dressed up once in a while,” I said with an almost believable nonchalance, as if I hadn’t obsessed over my dress and hair for the past three hours for the man I wasn’t supposed to be this excited to see.

I waved one more time before I shut the door behind me and ran upstairs to grab my phone and wrap.

“Look at you,” Mrs. Ruiz, our downstairs tenant, said from behind me after I came downstairs and pulled up the Uber app on my phone.

“I hope that’s a good look at you ,” I said with a chuckle. She was more of a family friend than a tenant, but I could never stop calling her Mrs. Ruiz.

“It’s a wonderful look at you .” She looked me over with a smirk, arching her gray brow. “Get it, girl,” she told me before shutting the door to her downstairs apartment.

Our circle was small, and lately, being at the center of it brought on a new exhaustion. When my sister would be out for a day and night, it would highlight the loneliness I fought to keep from breaking the surface.

Taylor and I had each other, but I couldn’t help feeling all alone in this world sometimes.

The app said my car would be here in ten minutes, and I headed outside to wait on my stoop, not realizing someone was behind me as I locked my front door.

“Mom? What are you doing here?”

My mother’s wide smile faded at my words. It hit me how much Taylor was

beginning to look like her, something I'd never noticed—or my subconscious had worked overtime to ignore. Her dark eyes roamed up and down my body before she met my gaze again.

“I guess I caught you on the way out. Nice dress, even if you should have gotten the size up.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Yeah, thanks. I'll ask you again—what are you doing here?”

“Jared and I had plans in the city, so I thought I'd stop by to say hi.” She motioned behind her to the tall, bald man on the sidewalk. He seemed younger than Mom, the shadow of hair on his head suggesting he'd shaved his hair off rather than lost it. A slimy grin pulled across his mouth as he stuffed his inked arms into his black pants, his gaze traveling over me in a way that made me want to jump back in the shower.

“Taylor isn't home, and I'm on my way out.” I pushed past her and headed down the stairs, willing the car to somehow get here faster.

“We can wait inside, then?—”

“No, you can't. I changed the locks, and I don't want you and your new one in my house.”

“My new one?” Mom pressed her manicured hand to her chest. As much of a flake as she'd always been, she was always put together. Looking after herself was never one of her issues, only her kids. “You don't even know Jared?—”

“And I'll bet you hardly do either. I am out of energy for you and this and, right now, out of time. So again, you aren't staying at my house?—”

“Your house,” she spat out. “I grew up here just like you?—”

“You never grew up. That’s why Grams left it to me and told me to change the locks. I didn’t when you were pregnant, but now that I am Taylor’s guardian, that was the first thing I did after we signed the papers.”

By the mercy of God, my car pulled up to the curb after I stomped to the sidewalk.

“I don’t know what the big deal is. We wouldn’t stay long, and I thought you’d like to meet?—”

“We wouldn’t. Taylor gets uneasy when you’re around. She’s old enough to know it’s not normal to have your mother stop by only every few months.”

“So, I can’t say hi to my kids? Why are you like this?”

“Nope. And I’m like this because, unlike you, I care about my kid. Yes, my kid, officially and legally, according to the state of New York. And this is my house.” I pointed to the door. “So, leave, or I’ll call the cops when I get back.”

I jogged to the car and slammed the door, watching as my mother shook her head as she came down the stairs.

My mother hadn’t brought any men home after she’d had my sister, probably because she didn’t want to introduce them to a small child and make herself seem less fun in their eyes.

My mother’s boyfriends had never touched me because my grandmother would never leave me alone with any of them, but a few had looked like they’d wanted to when I was around Taylor’s age.

Jared's slimy stare had brought back that gross, dirty feeling that had always made my skin crawl.

If she thought she was bringing her parade of losers near my sister, she'd lost what was left of her mind. I'd have to call Aunt Lucy to get in touch with her lawyer and maybe get a restraining order going.

I texted Mrs. Ruiz as the cab turned onto the highway, letting her know my mother had stopped by and to keep an eye out if she tried to get inside.

Mrs. Ruiz: DON'T THINK ABOUT THAT WOMAN. HAVE A GOOD TIME WITH YOUR BEAUTIFUL DRESS AND GET SOME.

The driver's head whipped to mine when I let out a cackle. She never knew how to take caps off to text, but I could hear her yelling. She'd always hated my mother for what she'd put my grandmother and me through, and she'd adored my sister ever since she was a baby.

My small circle was good. A bad seed from the past wouldn't ruin it. Being around a handsome man all night who drove me to reckless distraction didn't seem so bad anymore.

It seemed like a beautiful escape, as long as I remembered not to run too far.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SILAS

“Why are you so tense?” Lee asked me as he handed me a bottle of beer, studying me while he leaned back on the bar.

“I’m not tense,” I said all too quickly as I tipped the bottle back for a long pull.

“You’re full of it, but can I guess why?” Lee smirked around his own beer as he took a sip.

“If I said no, would it stop you?”

He leaned back on the counter and shrugged. “Probably not. You’re tense about seeing your reporter friend.”

“She’s not a reporter. She’s a writer for the PR agency.”

“So, you’re telling me I’m right?”

“I didn’t say that. Just clarifying who she was. You know I hate these things. I hated them in Washington where PR wasn’t this...” I trailed off, not sure what word to use for all the extra show we had to put on for the Bats in comparison to our old team.

“This...intentional,” Lee finished for me. “You had PR responsibilities back then too, but they were mostly keeping your nose clean and no bad press. Here is all about the

face time, I get it. Remember that one gala in Washington?” Lee laughed to himself. “Katie tried so hard to win that purse on silent auction.”

I turned, taking a break from scanning the crowd for my “reporter friend,” whom I wouldn’t admit I was looking for.

“I remember. She was so determined that she didn’t even eat dinner so she could stand by and watch.” I smiled as Lee exhaled a sad chuckle. His wife had passed away after their daughter had turned two, and although she’d been gone for almost four years, his eyes would still gloss over whenever he said Katie’s name.

“But so far, I see nothing different from those awards dinners. There are no photo ops or anything out of the ordinary. But if seeing her tonight isn’t making you tense?—”

“It’s not,” I insisted, picking up the bottle and tipping it all back, the extra alcohol not taking the edge off like I’d hoped.

Seeing Rachel only at a distance after having that incredible taste of her, a taste I’d resolved to never have again because I’d never planned to see her again, wore on me in ways I couldn’t understand.

All those reasons I’d avoided getting involved with anyone didn’t seem so important right now, or maybe I just didn’t give a shit anymore. But hers hadn’t changed, and this sort of working relationship we’d fallen into had made the temptation for more even worse.

I either accepted it or did something about it, and I couldn’t figure out how to do either.

“Then watching her cozy up with Becker shouldn’t bother you, right?”

My head snapped to his. “What are you talking about?”

Lee exhaled a long gust of air and shook his head.

“I noticed her over your shoulder a minute ago. She came in with that head PR lady, but Nate found her and chatted her up right away.”

I shifted toward where Lee was pointing, and sure enough, Rachel and Nate were laughing like old friends near one of the cocktail tables. She’d only met him once, or at least once that I knew of, so the familiarity between them seemed off. Wrong.

Fucking unacceptable.

I took in a slow breath so I could get it the fuck together. I couldn’t go over there like the jealous boyfriend I wasn’t and cause work trouble for all of us. Neither of them was doing anything wrong or owed me anything. The rage roaring in my veins from watching them together was as uncalled for as it was polarizing.

Rachel was single, beautiful, and sexy as fuck in a tight black dress that teased just enough cleavage and thighs to remind me of every gorgeous inch underneath.

“You’re going to lose a back tooth if you clench your jaw any harder,” Lee said, snickering as he nudged my shoulder. “Go over and say hi before you get an ulcer, Coach.”

I glared back at him before I stalked toward Rachel, trying to take slow steps to not make it seem like I was ambushing their conversation.

I guessed I could add caveman to the list of what I’d become since Rachel had taken all my attention and most of my sanity.

“Hey, Rachel. Nate,” I said, keeping my voice as even as possible. I’d managed to hold a calm tone during games and Nate’s tantrums over getting his shoulder checked, but it was a lot easier without a beautiful woman between us.

A beautiful woman I wanted for myself but couldn’t claim.

“Hey,” she said, smiling up at me as Nate looked between us. “Nate seems to be the favorite player on my sister’s team since he signed the most. I promised I’d get a picture with him when I arrived, but my cab was stuck in traffic by the bridge. My sister has been blowing up my phone.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask why she hadn’t just asked me to pick her up, but we weren’t friends like that, were we? Friends who could meet and talk without having a work reason. The Bats had chosen a high-end hotel in lower Manhattan, a quick trip from the field in Brooklyn. Picking her up would have been out of my way, but I was making all kinds of exceptions when it came to Rachel.

“I need a drink before I take any pictures.” She pointed to the bar. “All that time in the car has me a little antsy.”

“I’ll get it for you,” I said, the words falling out of my mouth before I could make them make sense. “We should talk about the other article anyway before dinner starts.”

Rachel’s brow creased in confusion since there was no other article to my knowledge, at least not one that had anything to do with me. But I was focused on getting her away from Nate and to myself, and sounding coherent wasn’t my focus.

She was.

“I guess I’ll see you inside, Rachel,” Nate said, squinting at me before he turned and

headed down the hallway toward the dining area.

“Another article? Do you know something I don’t?” Rachel asked as we headed toward the bar. Lee had moved to the opposite end, speaking with one of the trainers. His shoulders shook when he caught my gaze, but I didn’t react.

“No, just needed an excuse.”

“An excuse,” she repeated, chewing on her bottom lip as she studied me.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked Rachel, setting a napkin on the bar top.

“Glass of pinot grigio, please.” She smiled, flicking her eyes from him to me.

“Sure,” the bartender said, uncorking a bottle of wine and pouring it into a glass. I kept my gaze straight ahead and not on Rachel’s smirk in my periphery. I was an over-six-foot piece of fucking cellophane and wasn’t about to deny it.

Again, the only question now was what the hell to do about it.

“So that was another alpha moment,” she whispered, grabbing the glass and taking a sip, smirking at me around the rim.

“Maybe,” I allowed, letting go of a laugh when she chuckled.

“You look amazing,” I told her.

“Thank you,” she said, a tiny smile coasting over her gorgeous mouth. “I never know what to wear to a formal work event. I hoped this was okay.”

“It’s a lot more than okay. You’re fucking stunning,” I said before I could help

myself. “It’s why I stole you from Nate.”

I couldn’t help the smile racing across my lips when she rolled her eyes.

“We were just talking.”

“I didn’t like it.”

She reared back, blinking at me as if I’d lapsed into another language.

“I don’t get how talking to?—”

“I didn’t like it,” I whispered, leaning closer as her eyes bored into mine. “Yes, it makes no sense. And I had no right to stop you.”

“Then why did you?” Her voice was a breathy whisper and not helping my crumbling resolve.

I reached down and grabbed her hand, grazing my thumb over the soft skin of her knuckles under the bar counter. Her hand closed around mine, our gazes locked as neither of us moved an inch.

“I don’t get much time with you. I wanted those pretty eyes on me and only me.”

She clenched her eyes shut, setting down her glass with a defeated thunk. When she lifted her gaze, I spied the same frustrated heat reflected at me. Heat that wasn’t supposed to have left my hotel room but had followed us anyway.

“As if I’d be able to look anywhere else.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

RACHEL

After two glasses of wine and laughing at Silas and Lee giving each other shit back and forth, I'd almost been able to relax enough to forget about running into my mother on the way here.

Almost.

It nagged at the back of my mind, but with each tiny smile Silas would sneak me as they'd told me stories about when he'd played shortstop in Washington, I'd managed to push her visit and what it could mean far enough out of my consciousness to let go of a real laugh.

"There's a big candy store around here my daughter likes," Lee said, a wistful smile curving his lips. He was tall at about Silas's height, built, but not as broad as Silas. He had dark, cropped hair and blue eyes, with light salt-and-pepper scruff shadowing his jaw.

"My sister would probably like that. She'd sneak candy into her bedroom all the time when she was little, and I still have to watch now that she's thirteen. How old is your daughter?"

"Six. She stays with my family because I'm always on the road. Now that I'm working for the Bats, I can see her more since I'm based on the East Coast."

He was a single father? And his daughter stayed with his family, not her mother? I'd never ask and couldn't after I noticed the sadness flickering over his face at the mention of his daughter.

I was glad Silas had a good friend on the team—or, at least, on the team's payroll. Most of my friends had scattered all over the country after college, and Auden was the only one I saw on a regular basis.

On nights out or, I guessed, days out like when I'd met Silas, I'd realize how isolated I was. It wasn't all bad, as staying focused on my sister had paid off. But sometimes, I just wanted to have fun. Not be like my mother and make fun for myself my only priority, but do something for no other reason than it made me feel good.

Like spend time with the man sitting across from me.

Of course, Kent had seated the few of us here from the agency with Bats management, which included their manager and team chiropractor. Silas wasn't directly next to me but close enough to be in my line of sight the entire night.

And for once, I was allowing myself to look. I'd spot his eyes flick up and down my body, lingering on the slope of the neckline of my dress. Instead of averting my gaze, I leaned closer to the table, knowing the dip of my cleavage would deepen as my breasts strained against my dress.

I was treating myself by playing with fire. The fire I had to avoid if I wanted to keep my job and my sanity.

"Have you guys bid on anything yet?" I motioned to the silent auction items in the back of the dining room.

"I haven't really looked," Lee said. "We were about to take a walk over if you'd like

to check it out with us.”

I bit back a smile when Silas’s head whipped to Lee, his dark brows pinching.

“Go see if I’m still the high bidder on the spa day,” Gayle said and went back to her huddle with Kent. I’d bet we’d have a part two to our PR campaign by the morning, but I was glad she was distracted enough not to notice any of the potent sexual tension shooting across the table.

“So, how did you guys meet? Silas never said.”

I stilled at Lee’s question and swiveled my head to Silas.

“He...knows that we didn’t just meet. He’s not going to say anything.”

“Nope.” He pinched his thumb and index finger together and pulled them across his lips as if he were zipping them shut. “But I’m curious. The big guy usually doesn’t say much, so I’m just curious how the conversation started.”

“I punched him in the stomach as he was walking by.”

I lifted a shoulder as Lee squinted at me.

“True story,” Silas said, bobbing his head in a slow nod.

“By accident, I swear,” I said, holding up my hands.

“I’m sure.” Lee smiled as he looked between us. “I’m going to see if that day at American Girl Place is still open for bids. I mean, the actual price would be cheaper, but charity and all that.” He cracked a sneaky grin as he padded toward the back row of items.

“Was this a ruse to get us away from the table?” I asked Silas.

“Probably,” he said, following me as I scanned the next few items. “I can’t say I’m mad at him for it.”

“Me neither. My boss is so into getting Kent to spend more money in promo, she won’t notice anything else at the table anyway.”

“I wanted to sit next to you, but?—”

“Too obvious? No, I told you. I could be on fire next to her, and she’d just scoot her chair closer to Kent to finish whatever she’s pitching to him.”

“Not because of that.” His gaze raked down my body, heating up every inch of my skin in its path. He glanced behind him before he leaned in to whisper in my ear.

“That dress, those legs,” he rasped. “My hand would want to reminisce all the way up those beautiful fucking thighs, and I wouldn’t be able to stop there.”

“Silas,” I groaned, turning around and pretending with all my might to be interested in the ugly vase behind us with a high bid of two thousand dollars.

“Let’s talk after this. I know it’s complicated, but maybe it’s simpler than we think.”

He traced his thumb down my shoulder before dropping his hand.

“You really are so fucking beautiful.” I felt the scratch of his stubble as his breath fanned hot against my neck. I waited for him to walk away before I turned, taking slow steps back to the table.

I couldn’t do this again. I shouldn’t do this again. It was one thing to allow myself to

enjoy Silas's company, but to hop back in bed with him had all kinds of consequences. Not only could I lose my job, but I didn't want the girls to whisper about me in front of Taylor if they found out—like some of the girls I'd known as a kid always had about my mother in front of me.

Consciously, I knew it wouldn't be like that, at least not exactly. I wouldn't be known for a revolving door of seedy boyfriends, and my sister's teammates would probably think it was cool that I was dating the Bats' manager. The fight to never put anyone before my sister was an unhealthy hang-up. There was no reason why I couldn't take care of her and make room for someone else in my life.

But the thought of even making the attempt frightened me to my core.

If I ended up with Silas tonight, it wouldn't be another fleeting night. Hell, that one night was never just one night. It had haunted me before I'd run into him again, and it would be even harder to walk away a second time.

But would it be worth it? I knew with a bone-deep certainty that it would be everything and more because he wasn't just a guy I'd run into by chance this time. He was someone I knew, that I admired, that I liked for who he really was, not the fantasy he'd been then and after.

I headed back to the table and found Gayle alone, punching something on her phone screen.

"I'm going to head out. I'll let someone else have the spa day." She gave me a wary smile. "I just had to tell Letty to ease up on the flirting with the cute catcher over there."

She jutted her chin to one of the players' tables. Letty was a new assistant, only in her mid-twenties. I wasn't surprised that she was flustered around all these gorgeous

athletes, but I was sure she was fangirling more than flirting.

“I’m sure she was starstruck?—”

“She knows the rules. The players are clients, as is their entire organization. Hopefully I put a stop to it before it was too late.”

Shit.

The wine that had happily glided down my throat earlier now bubbled in the pit of my stomach. I’d hoped that was a technicality, that she would think of Kent as our client but not the team. I was smart enough to know that wouldn’t be the case, but the confirmation doused any hot hopes I had for tonight and beyond with a big bucket of ice-cold reality.

I needed this job, especially if I had to fight my mother to keep her away from Taylor. Aunt Lucy would help me, but lawyers weren’t cheap.

I’d find Silas and make sure I drew a deeper line in the sand this time, despite how much I’d always want to cross it.

The gala had dwindled to just a few, the only guests left the ones interested in the items on auction. The team was mostly gone, with only two players left at their table.

I dipped into the ladies’ room, washing my hands and tapping a soft paper towel against my forehead and the back of my neck to cool the flush running over me. Being strong and responsible was how I’d rolled all my life, and tonight, it exhausted me to my core.

“Leaving so soon?” a male voice slurred behind me right after I stepped out the door, close enough to smell the vodka on his breath.

“I am. Good night.” I gave him a tight smile and picked up my pace back into the dining room. I scanned the space for Silas or Lee or anyone who could help me tell this guy to back off.

“Oh, come on,” he said, grabbing me by my wrist and spinning me until my back was against the wall. “I’ve been watching you.” He was about my height, maybe in his fifties with a very receding line of dark hair. The overhead hallway lights glowed on his bald head, and I would have laughed if I weren’t so terrified.

Where had this guy come from? I hadn’t sensed anyone watching me, but while I was sitting across from Silas, I hadn’t paid attention to anything or anyone else.

“Let me go,” I said, pushing against his chest as it rumbled with a laugh.

“I love them thick,” he said with a gross snicker as he tried to grab my hip. I swatted him away and kicked him in the shins, sending him back far enough to escape his hold.

“You bitch,” he sneered, grabbing my wrist again. For a man who swayed on his feet, his grip was strong enough to hurt. “I was just trying to be?—”

“Get your fucking hands off her!” Silas bellowed as he grabbed the creep by the collar and lifted him up, knocking him against the wall.

“I was just...t-trying to be friendly,” he stammered, his eyes wide and almost sober as he gaped at Silas.

“The fuck you were.” He banged him against the wall again, his head making a clunk loud enough for me to register heads turning in our direction.

“What’s going on?” Lee asked, taking us all in and rushing over to me. “Are you

okay, Rachel?"

"Yeah," I said, not realizing how breathless I was until I tried to talk. Lee caught me as my knees wobbled. "He's drunk and wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Everything all right?" A security guard came over and approached Silas, eyeing us both as Silas kept this guy in a grip so tight, he sputtered for air.

"He came up to me when I left the ladies' room and wouldn't leave me alone. I pushed him away and was trying to leave, but he grabbed me again. Silas pushed him off me."

"Hey, big guy," Lee whispered, tapping Silas's shoulder. "Let security handle it. She's okay."

Silas looked back at me, his chiseled jaw still clenched.

"Optics, dude. We don't know who is still here and will take this out of context. Let him go, and let security handle it."

Silas let him go with one last shove and rushed over to me.

"Are you okay?" He took my face in his hands, and I was shaken up enough to let him. I yearned for comfort from the man I'd planned to say goodbye to, so much that I didn't care if someone saw us and reported back to Gayle that I'd gotten cozy with the team manager.

"I am, just shaken up, But I'll be fine. I'll sit for a few minutes until I take a cab home."

"No, I'll take you home. And you're not going to fight me on that. Got it?"

“Got it,” I said, clearing my throat when I caught my voice squeak.

The concoction of feelings I had for Silas swirled in my belly as he led me outside, making my head spin. I was almost grateful Gayle had scared me out of being so reckless tonight.

Once I’d let myself get even a small piece of Silas, I’d want all of him and wouldn’t be able to let him go.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SILAS

“Do you want me to stop anywhere?” I asked Rachel as we hit a cluster of traffic on the highway. She’d been quiet ever since she’d climbed into my truck, and while rage still burned in my veins thinking of that asshole’s hands on her, I had to hide it.

“No, just home. Listen, thank you for?—”

“You don’t have to thank me. I’m sorry I didn’t find you sooner.”

“It’s fine. I probably wouldn’t have gotten as rattled if my mother hadn’t stopped by with her new boyfriend on my way out tonight. And he was just as creepy as the ones I remembered.” She rubbed at her neck. “I don’t want that around my sister.”

“Your mother’s boyfriends were creepy, how?” I asked as traffic came to a full stop. I grasped the steering wheel so tightly I had a cramp in my wrist.

“When I was a teenager, they’d leer at me. My grandmother never allowed them in the house for too long. And my mother would always say I was overreacting, but I think my instincts were pretty spot-on.”

“Did any of them touch you?” I cleared my throat when my question came out like a growl.

“No,” she said, turning toward me with a tired chuckle. “What would you do if they

did? Go back in time and kill them for me?”

“You’d be surprised what I’d do for you.” I drifted my hand down her cheek, letting my thumb run up and down over the curve of her jaw until the blare of a horn made us both jerk forward.

“Where is your mother now?”

“I really don’t know,” she scoffed. “I told her I changed the locks and not to come back. But I get the feeling she will. My sister isn’t little anymore, so my mother thinks we can all hang out like besties without her having to pretend to be a parent. I won’t let her fuck up my sister’s head.”

“You’re sure they left?” I asked as we turned off the exit toward Rachel’s neighborhood.

“Locks are changed on my upstairs door and the front door so she couldn’t get in, and my downstairs tenant hates her and would call the cops on sight. It’s fine. For now. I’m calling my aunt to put her lawyer on retainer in case I need one.”

“It’s not fine. You shouldn’t have to deal with any of this.”

“My mother has been a constant problem. Even when she’s not around, her existence fucks things up.” She let out a humorless laugh. “I mean, she gave me life, gave me a sister, a grandmother I loved very much. I just wish she’d stay away. But I’ll figure it out.”

Her long sigh both gutted and infuriated me.

“Wow, you’re lucky to find a spot right in front.”

Rachel pointed to the brownstone in the middle of the block. “This is me. Thank you again.”

I grabbed her hand when she reached for the door handle. “I’m walking you up.”

“Silas,” she said on a long exhale. “They’re gone. Trust me.”

“I’d like to make sure. I’ll only be a minute. I’ll walk you upstairs, make sure you’re alone, and then I’ll leave. Promise.” I held up a hand.

The corner of her mouth curved as she held my gaze.

“Okay, Coach. If you want to do a sweep to make yourself feel better, have at it.”

I waited for her on the sidewalk as she shut the car door. My eyes found hers under the glow of the streetlamp, the light illuminating her like the angel she was. Leaving her tonight would be the hardest promise I’d ever make.

“This is a beautiful house,” I said, gazing up at the flower beds on the second floor.

“Thank you. My grandmother would appreciate that. She loved this house and this neighborhood.”

I followed Rachel inside as she opened the front door, a light flickering on after I shut the door behind me.

“I thought maybe she was back,” a short, tan-skinned woman with a thick Spanish accent said to Rachel. “She and that baldie hung out outside after your cab drove away. She saw me give her a look out the front window and left.” She tightened the sweater around her chest when she found my gaze over Rachel’s shoulder.

“Mrs. Ruiz, this is my friend Silas. He wanted to walk me upstairs to make sure my mother hadn’t infiltrated my apartment while I was out tonight.”

She glanced over her shoulder at me.

“Silas, this is my downstairs tenant and my grandmother’s oldest friend, Mrs. Ruiz.”

“You can call me Alba,” she told me, smiling as she stepped closer. “So nice to meet you.”

I took her extended hand between both of mine.

“Very nice to meet you too, Alba,”

“So nice of you to make sure she’s safe at home. I’ll let you go check it all out. Have a good evening,” Alba said, smirking as she shifted back to her door. She snuck a look to Rachel, fanning herself before disappearing inside.

Rachel’s head fell back on a laugh.

“Oh, Manager Jones.” She tsked , shaking her head. “The effect you have on women of all ages.”

“Maybe so,” I said, lifting a shoulder. “But I’m only concerned about one.”

She clenched her eyes shut and motioned to the stairs.

“I’ll give you the tour while you search.”

I climbed the stairs behind Rachel, my gaze drifting toward the perfect curve of her ass as she headed up the short flight. Standing back, I let my eyes roam her beautiful

body as she sifted through the keys in her hand and opened her door.

“Come on in,” she said, pressing the door open. “It’s small, but the view is pretty awesome.”

“It’s not small at all,” I said, surveying the space. A bookcase lined the back wall of the living room, and a short hallway led to three doors.

“This is my sister’s room,” she said as she clicked the light switch and pushed the wooden door open.

“Wow, so he did make a good impression, huh?” I said as I spotted the large poster of Nate on the wall above the twin-sized bed.

“One of the girls on the team found it online. Taylor crushed on you first, so take that as you will.”

“Is that so?” I asked as I tracked Rachel farther down the hallway.

“Yep, sure is, Mr. Instagram,” she said. “This is the bathroom. Actually not a bad size with a full tub. Want to do a sweep before I shut the door?”

“Sure,” I said as I peeked inside, my gaze landing on the shower curtain as visions of a wet and naked Rachel popped into my head.

Which wasn’t going to make leaving any easier.

“This is my room.” She opened the door, her shoulders a little more tense as she moved aside to show me. Her bed was bigger than her sister’s, but it would be a tight fit to climb in with her.

I'd make us fit and make her forget her mother, her creepy boyfriends, and the asshole who'd put his hands on her and had made her feel worse about it all. Rachel didn't need anyone to take care of her, but I still wanted the job. I wanted it with so much certainty that it confused the shit out of me.

"Where do you write?" I asked, my voice a husky rasp as I tried, and failed, to forget the last time Rachel and I had been this close to a bed. Tonight wasn't about that, no matter what wishes I had for it or visions of what we could be.

If I wanted her, and fuck, I wanted her so damn badly, I had to take it slow. Show her that I wasn't just here for a good time and we could be so much more than that.

When it had come to fighting for my marriage, I'd given up before I'd begun to fight. No matter what guilt I'd felt over how it ended, forcing it had seemed like a waste of time.

But I'd wait for Rachel. I hoped I wouldn't have to for too long, but the timeline wasn't mine. If she let me in, I'd make the room in my life that I'd never tried for because it had seemed impossible.

Maybe that was because I'd never wanted anyone else to fit.

"Oh, I'll show you my fancy office," she teased, kicking off her shoes, and padded barefoot to the living room.

"I have a little alcove." She pointed against the wall. "No door, but it's set off enough for a little bit of privacy and a great view."

"I can see that," I said, my gaze drifting down her face and snagging on where she chewed on her bottom lip. "I'm in the market for a paperback," I said, nodding toward her top shelf, lined with all the titles I'd come to know. "How much?"

“Like I’d charge you. If you want one, just take it. I’ll even sign it for you.”

“I was hoping you would.” I reached over to the top shelf and slipped one of the books off. “This is the one I started with, so you can sign this one.”

She took it from me, narrowing her eyes as she grabbed a pen.

“You really read my books?” She eyed me as she popped off the cap and opened the book to the first page, darting her eyes from the book to me as she scribbled.

“I did. I like how they’re a series, but if you start in the middle, you’re not really lost.”

Her head snapped up, her cute little nose scrunched as she met my gaze.

“That is great to hear. I try hard to make sure they’re stand-alone stories. Here you go,” she sang, handing me the book. “You’re really something.”

“Why, because I can read? We jocks can read.”

“No,” she said, letting out a chuckle. “You didn’t ask for my number, but you asked for my pen name. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to look me up or if you wanted to see if I was lying.”

“No, I knew you were telling the truth.”

“So, you intended to read my books, just not speak to me again? Hey, I didn’t ask for your number either because I figured we were?—”

“Your books feel like you. Smart. Beautiful. Hot.”

She blinked when she met my gaze, an adorable blush staining her cheeks.

“If you ever want to post that in a review, feel free,” she teased. I had to remember my promise to leave tonight and take it slow if I wanted to get this woman to be mine. The problem was, all I’d wanted was to stay and go full speed ahead.

“I mean it.” I set the book down on her desk as I inched closer. “That’s why I’m halfway through all of them now.”

She dragged a hand down her face.

“Thanks to you, I had to explain to my sister when we were watching *Roger Rabbit* the other day why I got so misty when Jessica came on-screen. I still think you’re a little nuts for saying that.”

“Look at you,” I rasped, draping an arm around her waist to pull her to me. “This body...” I glided my hands down the silky material of her dress, lingering over her ass. “Those eyes,” I whispered, slipping my hand around the nape of her neck, goose bumps pebbling under my thumb as I drifted it back and forth. “And that fucking mouth,” I growled out, sweeping the pad of my thumb over her faded red lips.

I hissed out a “fuck” when she opened her mouth to bite it. I relinquished that last fraying thread of control and took her mouth in a hungry kiss. I swallowed her whimpers as I slipped my tongue inside and took long, desperate strokes. She tasted like sweet memories that weren’t supposed to become reality again.

This would be a better reality. One that wouldn’t end tomorrow.

I lifted her by the waist and carried her over to the hallway. She wrapped her legs around my waist as she scratched her nails up and down my back until I backed her against the wall and set her down.

“You taste like you missed me,” I murmured against her mouth, pulling at her bottom lip with my teeth. After all this time of willing myself to go slow, I was about to fuck her in her hallway because there was too much blood in my cock and not enough in my brain to think. Rachel was all I saw and all I wanted, and instead of wondering why, I was taking it and her, instead of talking myself out of it.

“Maybe,” she said on a moan as I hooked her leg over my hip.

“Only maybe, huh? Feel how much I missed you?” I pressed my aching erection against her core, drawing a whimper out of her.

“This is exactly what I was thinking about all night,” I whispered in her ear as I slipped my hand inside her panties. “Maybe I wasn’t the only one? You’re soaked, sweetheart. You want to come for me like a good girl?” I slipped two fingers deep inside her as I thumbed her clit, my knees almost giving out as she dripped all over my hand.

Just like the day we met, I was consumed by her enough not to think or care about anything else. It had been a mindfuck of crazy lust and an instant connection I still couldn’t understand.

“Fuck, Silas,” she groaned and dropped her head against my shoulder.

“Oh no, you don’t. Look at me, Slugger.”

She lifted her head, her eyes hooded and her mouth red and swollen from my kisses. I’d avoided this that night, freaked out by the intimacy it had triggered for someone I’d hardly known and unsure what the hell to do about it.

Now, instead of running from it, I fucking craved it, desperate for every piece I could get of her, even if fitting into each other’s lives had become even more complicated.

“I want to watch you. That’s it. You’re so close, aren’t you?”

She nodded, her chest heaving against mine as she dug her nails into my jacket.

“You’re a fucking dream,” I grunted out, pumping harder as she shook around my fingers. I pressed my hand against the wall behind her as my cock strained against my zipper, the need to sink myself inside her potent enough to make my head spin.

“Oh, there you go. Such a good fucking girl. Scream my name, baby. Tell everyone on the goddamn block how good I make you feel.”

She let out a yelp before she sank her teeth into my chest, rocking her hips against my hand until she melted into me, a gorgeous puddle in my arms.

I kissed the top of her head as I eased back, my stomach sinking as she draped her hand over her eyes.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to go too?—”

“Stop. Did you hear me complaining? I just...” She trailed off, pressing her palm to her forehead. “Come with me to the couch, easier to talk there.”

She slid her palm against mine and dragged me to her couch. I didn’t know what she was about to say, but I had a feeling I’d hate it, and I’d only have myself to blame.

I didn’t know how to want something and not push for it. This was the first time what I wanted had nothing to do with baseball and everything to do with the woman sitting next to me, her eyes looking everywhere but into mine.

“There is an agency clause in all our contracts that if we fraternize with a client, it’s automatic termination.” She finally looked my way, her eyes, crazy with lust only

minutes ago, now full of sad regret.

“I’m not really your client, though. Kent and the other executives?—”

She gave me a slow shake of her head.

“Gayle reiterated that tonight, in fact. One of our assistants was getting too chummy with your catcher, and she gave her a warning.” She raked a hand through her hair as she dropped her chin to her chest.

“I need this job. The books, like I told you, are a hobby that some months out of the year can be lucrative. But to give my sister the life she deserves? Not even close.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen. And that’s a fucked-up rule.”

“I agree,” she said, bobbing her head. “Someone had an affair with a married CEO, earned the company a lot of bad press, and management was pissed and embarrassed enough to make it a hard rule. I shouldn’t have let it go this far. I wish I could peel all your clothes off and bring you into my bedroom, but I can’t.” She fell back against the couch. “And it fucking sucks.”

I’d known being with Rachel would make things a little weird for her at work, but I’d never thought it would get her fired. There had to be a way around this. Or to make her want this enough to fight for a chance.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I reached out and squeezed her knee, running my thumb back and forth over her silky skin until she lifted her head. I was supposed to stop touching her and back away, but I couldn’t help myself.

“About tonight, yes. I was just rattled from before, and that creep made it worse. But I’d kicked him in the shin before you slammed him into the wall.” Her shoulders

jerked with a chuckle. “That’s why he was so pissed off.”

“That’s my Slugger,” I said, squeezing her knee one more time before I dropped my hand. “I’d stay longer, but I’m going to go,” I said, cupping her chin. “Because I really want you to peel my clothes off and take me to bed, and I’m afraid the temptation is too big for both of us.”

“That’s because it is.” She turned her head and pressed a kiss to my palm. “Thank you for tonight. For being the alpha hero you are, for listening, and for—” she flicked her eyes to the wall “—another nice memory.”

I stood, bristling at her words that sounded a lot like a goodbye. I wouldn’t accept it. I just had to think.

And I couldn’t do that around Rachel tonight.

“Do you need to follow me to lock up?” I asked.

“No, it locks on its own from the inside, and I’ll double-lock my door up here.”

We both trudged to the door, her sadness more resolute than frustrated.

I’d find a way to fix that.

Somehow.

“Is it all right to text you tomorrow? See if you’re okay?”

“You can.” Her lips curved with a sad smile. “I’d like that. And we’re friends. Friends can text.”

“Right,” I said, pressing my lips to her forehead. “Sweet dreams, Slugger.”

“Back at you, Coach.”

She leaned in and brushed her lips against my cheek, lingering long enough to tempt me to walk back in and fight.

And I would.

Once I figured out how.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RACHEL

“If I’m not mistaken, I think you have a line,” Auden whispered next to me as she handed me a book to sign.

I’d been to a few author signings, but never one that was held just for me. A new romance bookstore in New Jersey had contacted me to come in and celebrate my latest release with a small in-store event.

As bad luck would have it, it was on the same weekend as my sister’s first softball trip. I hated missing it, but a couple of the team mothers I was friendly with promised to keep an eye on her, and I knew Taylor would never stray far from her friends.

I wouldn’t say I was all the way okay with it, but Auden had pushed me to say yes and had volunteered to be my driver and signing assistant.

I hadn’t anticipated enough readers showing up to form a line, and when I looked up from signing my new book to see if Auden was exaggerating, a lump scratched at the back of my throat.

I wished my sister were here to see this. I’d show her pictures, but I knew she’d bounce with excitement for me if she were here. She was old enough to come to a book signing, although I’d noticed some adult swag throughout the store that wouldn’t have been very fun to try to explain to her.

Auden was happy for me, but the signing took me back to when I was a kid in school at assemblies and shows. My grandmother had always tried to take the day off from work and come, but when she couldn't, I'd had no one. I'd look out into the audience and pretend my mother or grandmother were seated in one of the back rows.

I was a grown-ass adult now, but during moments like this, when I wanted someone in the crowd looking on with pride, that hollow feeling I was usually able to ignore from all those years ago would come back.

I tried to focus on the readers who were excited to meet me. Some were fans of my books, and some were meeting me for the first time. It was a small event, but it felt like a big deal. An accomplishment and milestone to be proud of, no matter who was or wasn't here.

I couldn't have grown up like I had without forcing a little toxic positivity on myself at times. I'd strain to see the good in an event or award or just a special day when I'd yearn for family around me.

"How's the hand?" Nina, the store manager, whispered from behind me. I guessed she was around my age, running the store with her sisters. She'd told us when we arrived that their mission was to celebrate local romance authors, and even though we'd had to drive over a bridge to get here, she'd assured me that I still very much counted.

"I'm good," I told her, flexing my fingers. "This is a great turnout."

"It is. You have serious buzz over this book. Even the readers who haven't read you yet couldn't wait to get their hands on the paperbacks as they came in. You're welcome back anytime."

Nina's blue eyes sparkled as she tucked a stray lock of blond hair behind her ear.

“You only have a few more, so hang in there.” She squeezed my shoulder and raced back to the line.

“This is seriously cool,” Auden whispered. “I’m so proud of you.” She bumped her shoulder into mine. “There’s a Mexican place across the street. I’ll buy you all the margaritas to celebrate.”

I forced a smile as my stomach dipped. It wasn’t the same Mexican place as the one I’d taken Silas to, but I was already in a weird headspace. I didn’t have the energy for any more what-ifs on what should be a great day.

“I’m more in the mood for Thai. I think I saw a place around the corner,” I said as Nina organized what was left of the line.

I hadn’t heard from him since the day after the gala. He’d texted, as promised, to make sure I was okay before he’d left for a weeklong road trip.

It was more than I’d expected after I’d told him that we couldn’t be together and followed it up with a thanks for everything and a goodbye. I’d started and deleted what felt like a million texts, but it wouldn’t have been fair to send them.

We’d done the right thing by stopping it. There was no reason to tease us both.

I tried to keep busy with work and what I needed to do for my book release, but even my sister had noticed my sour mood and had asked me why I was moping around the house all the time. I tried to pass it off as release nerves, but she didn’t buy it.

I knew better than anyone else that life wasn’t a romance novel. It was easier this way. I didn’t have to wonder about him like he was some fantasy. I’d had the chance to get to know the man he really was, and even though that made it that much harder to walk away, it felt like a lucky bonus. It was a nice little interlude, but I had to

accept that it had ended.

I'd take the memories and make them into art as I always did with my silly wishes that never fit into reality, and I'd be happy with that.

Eventually.

A few readers lingered right before the store closed and a couple sneaked in right as Nina was locking the door.

"You can make it out to Jana." A girl with curly red hair and a wide smile handed me a paperback. "I'm so happy to meet you, but I'm a little nervous."

"I'm so happy to meet you too. And don't be nervous." I took the book out of her hand and flipped through to the first page. "Readers like you are why I'm here."

Her smile deepened as she leaned in closer.

"I loved this book. I read it on the first day it came out. All your books are great, but there was something about this one."

"She did extensive real-life research," Auden said, smirking at me.

I glared at Auden for a second and turned back to Jana. "I enjoyed writing it, so I'm glad that came through."

"I agree."

My head popped up at a familiar, deep voice.

Silas stood behind Jana in a T-shirt and shorts, a plain baseball cap pulled down low

enough to hide his face.

Jana swiveled her head around, eyes wide when her gaze landed on Silas.

“You read the book?” Her lips pursed, probably just like mine had when Silas had told me he read romance.

“I did. I’ve read a lot of her books, and they’re all fantastic. But yes, there is something about this one. It shows you had a good time writing it, and that’s great.”

Jana nodded, still examining Silas’s face. I didn’t think she recognized him as the Brooklyn Bats’ manager, but even if I didn’t have very personal insight as to why he thought it was so great that I enjoyed writing this book, I would gape at this beautiful man too.

A guy in a romance bookstore, in line to meet a romance author, was enough of an anomaly to turn the heads of everyone left inside.

He hadn’t come in here by chance. I guessed if he followed me online, he’d known about this event. Warmth flooded my chest, and the rest of me, at the thought of him coming all this way to see me, but it still felt like fate screwing with my emotions. It was, once again, dangling something wonderful in front of my face to remind me I couldn’t have it.

“It was so great to meet you,” Jana said, her gaze darting from me to Silas as she plucked the book from my hands and turned to leave.

I can relate, girl.

“Who should I make this out to?” I said, clearing my throat when I caught the crack in my voice.

He quirked a brow, drawing out the little air left in my lungs with his crooked grin.

“Make it out to Coach ,” he said.

“Sure,” I said, my hands shaking when I tried to sign in a straight line as my vision blurred, the emotion from having him here, right in front of me, for me, getting to me in ways I couldn’t handle.

“Thank you for...coming today.”

After I’d told him we couldn’t be anything, he still came.

He shrugged as he grabbed the book. “I’m a big R.M. Doro fan. See you at the next one.”

He winked, his gaze searching mine before it drifted to my mouth. I didn’t know whether to burst into tears, fling myself into his arms, or race to the tiny bathroom in the back of the store to sob in privacy.

“Good to see you, Slugger,” Silas said, his voice dipping low and husky before he turned to head for the door. Nina locked it behind him, and only the bookstore staff, Auden, and I were left.

“Go,” Auden said, ripping the marker out of my hand.

“Go where?” I said, rearing back as her nostrils flared.

“Go after him. My God, Rachel. Stop doing this to yourself.”

“Auden,” I started, propping my elbows onto the table as I let my head drop into my hands. “I could lose my job?—”

“You’re really okay with letting him walk away?” She pointed to the door. “What do you think you’ll regret more in ten years when Taylor is in college living her own life and you’re home by yourself? That you had to look for a new job, or that you let something go that could have been great? Don’t answer me because I already know.”

She reached under the table and plopped my purse in front of me. “The event is over. They’re closing. I can drive home alone. Wave goodbye to everyone and go.”

I slung my bag over my shoulder and told Nina a quick thank you and goodbye before I jogged out the front door.

Surveying the street, I couldn’t find Silas anywhere. He had long legs and was probably already blocks away. I let my head fall back, wincing at the sky and cursing my stupid hesitation before I dug my phone out of my purse to see if I could catch him.

“Looking for someone?”

I gasped and turned to the deep chuckle behind me.

“Hey,” he crooned, squeezing my wrist. “I didn’t mean to scare you?—”

I cut him off with a kiss. A deep, too wet and loud for a public street kiss as I trailed my hands up and down his back, pressing my body against his to get as close as possible. He stiffened in shock for a minute before he gave in, slanting his mouth over mine as he speared his hand into my hair.

“So, you’re not mad that I just showed up?” He leaned his forehead against mine, his chest heaving up and down as we both chased our breath.

“No,” I croaked out, fisting the soft cotton of his T-shirt.

“Good. I know you said that we were too big of a risk, but maybe it’s not as bad as we?—”

“Take me home,” I said, breathless now from my rapid heart thundering in my ears.

“Home?” he repeated slowly, studying my face.

“Yes, my sister is away, but I want to go home, to your place, with you. If...that’s what you still want.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” He grabbed the back of my head and brought my mouth back to his.

“You are all I think about,” he murmured against my lips before he eased back. “But this is all up to you.”

“I want to be in your bed all night. I want breakfast without a sad goodbye. I want you, Coach.”

His chest rumbled against mine.

“We’ll figure it out, right?” I took his face in my shaking hands. We needed to get out of here before my adrenaline dropped and I lost my nerve.

“Absofuckinglutely,” he said, bobbing his head as he leaned in, a delicious growl erupting from his throat as he ran his tongue along the seam of my already chafed lips.

For the first time, I put fantasy in front of the hard truths of reality because, despite what it might cost me, I couldn’t let it go this time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SILAS

“How did you know about today?” Rachel asked me as I headed down the highway toward my Greenwich Village apartment.

I could hear the smirk in her voice before I noticed it in my periphery.

“I may have checked your social media when your new book released and saw the post about the signing. It said open to all, so I got in the car, bought your book from the woman at the door, and here I am.”

“Here you are. Stalker much?” she teased.

I turned my head when traffic bottlenecked in front of us. Her smile was wide and beautiful, her full lips still swollen from our crazy kiss in front of the bookstore.

Something we shouldn’t have done in public, but once she was in my arms, begging me to take her home with me, I didn’t give a shit where we were or who could see.

In fact, I wanted them to see. I was pleased as fuck to let everyone around us know that she belonged to me, because she’d owned me since that first day.

And it shouldn’t have taken me so damn long to do something about it.

“Your social links are in the back of every book. I thought that meant you’d want

readers to keep up with R.M. Dioro and her book tours.”

“Book tours,” she scoffed. “One signing is hardly a tour.”

“But I’m sure one is coming. I saw the line you had,” I said, reaching over to squeeze her knee, running my thumb back and forth over her silky skin. The blue dress she wore had driven me crazy when I’d only been able to see it from the waist up. When she’d run outside, I noticed how it hugged all my favorite places, places I couldn’t wait to get reacquainted with all night long.

“It was nice,” she said, covering my hand with hers. “More than I’d expected.”

“Why would you say that?” I asked, driving with one hand as I kept the other on her leg, not wanting to stop touching her now that I was finally able to. “You have how many books now?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t matter. When you’re a one-woman show, it’s hard to get traction. I’ve been lucky and my readers are good to me, but I don’t plan on touring anytime soon.”

“Well, if you do,” I said, picking up her hand and bringing it to my lips, “I’ll be your first groupie.”

“You’re so ridiculous, Silas,” she said on a sigh, looping her arms around my neck and pressing a long kiss to my cheek.

“I only seem to be ridiculous with you.” I turned my head, dragging kisses along the inside of her forearm as I kept my eyes on the road.

“Don’t let that get out on Instagram. You’ll lose your fan base.” Her words were breathy and husky, tempting me to slide my hand between her legs and check how

turned on she really was.

“You’re the one with groupies. So I couldn’t be your first.”

Technically, she wouldn’t be my first groupie, thanks to all those stupid reels, but she was the first for so many other things. Things I still didn’t totally understand.

“It meant a lot to me to see you there today. In fact, before you came, it reminded me of when I was a kid and I’d be at an assembly in school and the only one with no parent in the audience.”

“I thought you had your grandmother.”

“I did, and she’d come when she could get off work, but most of the time, I had to pretend one of the parents in the back was there for me.”

Her sad smile gutted me.

“It’s something I should have gotten used to, and Auden was there and happy for me. But it wasn’t the same as having you there.” She exhaled a long breath. “I know that doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it does. I felt the same way when I saw you on opening day.”

“Even though I wasn’t holding a sign?”

Her teasing smile faded when my gaze locked on hers.

“You didn’t need one. I spotted you right away.”

Her smile deepened as her eyes glossed over. I’d looked for her just like she’d looked

for me today, and we fit in ways we shouldn't have in such a short time.

My marriage had soured long before I'd ended it. My ex-wife had resented me for all my time on the road and never being present enough while I was home. Being on the road was part of my job, but she'd been right. I'd been just as distant when we were under the same roof.

I'd felt guilty over ending it, so guilty that I'd let it drag on for far too long. In our last conversation, she'd told me I was too coldhearted to be a husband, and I'd thought maybe that's what I was. I'd left our house full of regret but not sadness.

I'd been sure there was something wrong with me until I met a woman who lit me up from the inside and took over every thought in my head. Seeing her again was all I cared about, even before we were pushed back into each other's orbit.

Maybe I wasn't coldhearted as much as my heart wasn't into it. My heart seemed to be very into the beautiful woman in my passenger seat, and I sure as hell wasn't letting her go again.

Or ever.

The bone-deep certainty should have scared the shit out of me, but all it did was piss me off that we hadn't gotten here faster.

"Here we are," I said after I pulled into my spot in the garage next to my building.

"Wow, even the garage seems fancy." She scanned the lot, full of cars but no people in sight.

"I was going for convenient with good security more than fancy. You'll see when we go upstairs and find only the essentials."

She nodded, chewing on her lip as she climbed into my lap.

“What kinds of essentials?” She lifted her leg to straddle my waist and painted kisses down my neck. “Is there a bed, at least?”

I let my head fall back in the seat, my cock so ready for her, and still getting over the abrupt stop from a couple of weeks ago, I was hard and heavy against the zipper of my shorts.

“Oh, there’s a bed,” I said, groaning as she dragged her lips over my throat. “And a couch and a shower and a lot of walls.” I threaded my fingers into her hair, twisting my hand around a fistful, and yanked until she looked up at me. “No rush to go, no sad breakfast, I get you the whole night?”

She pulled back, lust still burning in her eyes as her gaze softened.

“You do.” She skated her hand down my chest. “All night. However you want me.”

“Sweetheart, be careful what you say,” I said, running a finger down her neck and tracing the swell of her breasts against the neckline of her dress. “You have no idea how many ways I want you.”

Wanting Rachel had become my whole damn personality since the moment we’d met. Even when I was trying to avoid it. It had been hard enough to stop touching her that first night and even harder to leave her apartment recently.

She was still a fucking dream.

“I think I have an idea of how many,” she whispered, rolling her hips against my throbbing cock.

“No, Slugger. I don’t think you do,” I growled out before taking her mouth in a bruising kiss. She whimpered as I fisted the hem of her dress, lifting it up enough to slip my hand inside her panties.

“Fuck, you’re wet,” I grunted out, dropping my head into the crook of her shoulder as she drenched my fingers. “Close already, baby?” I slid a finger inside her, tracing circles around her clit with my thumb. We had to make this fast because I had no idea who was watching us, and I didn’t want to blow in my shorts before I even got her upstairs.

This building had its share of much bigger celebrities, but there was still enough interest in me to risk being watched. The smart thing to do was stop and take all I wanted to do to Rachel behind a locked door.

And I would have, if anything short of death could have made me stop touching her right now, even if that recklessness might cost us.

All I could see and feel was Rachel writhing on top of me as she clenched around my fingers.

“Be a good girl and come for me. Come on,” I rasped, pushing the hem of her dress up on the other side and swatting her ass with a loud smack.

She dug her nails into my biceps as her legs shook, thrusting her hips against my hand until she collapsed against me.

She rested her cheek against my chest, peering up at me with a wince. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair was a matted halo around her face, and she was so beautiful my throat went dry.

“We’re out of control.”

“Maybe,” I said, chuckling as I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I’d call it more of a long buildup.” I smoothed her hair off her shoulder and brushed my lips across her collarbone. “But we should take it upstairs. Just give me a minute,” I breathed out, nodding to my still-painful erection. It had taken every ounce of control I had not to come all over myself, like I’d done that morning against the sheets in my hotel room.

She’d tasted too good, too sweet, and I was having the same problem now.

Rachel nodded, slowly climbing off me, her thighs still trembling from aftershocks.

She swept her gaze over the garage before a smile curled her beautiful mouth.

“I can help you with that,” she whispered, leaning forward to undo my belt and zipper. “You poor thing,” she crooned, drifting her hand up and down my shaft before flicking her eyes to mine. That thread of self-control was about to break with those gorgeous lips so close to my dick.

“Don’t tease me, beautiful. If you want me in your mouth, take me.”

She popped her brow and dragged kisses up and down my length before she swallowed me whole.

This was the one thing we hadn’t gotten to that night. She’d offered and tried, but I was too afraid of things ending too quickly. And if our time together was limited, I wanted to be inside her as much as possible.

I’d been right because she was too good. It had been a lot of years since my first blow job, but I’d never had a woman worship my dick before, as if she couldn’t get enough and moaning louder than I was when I poked the back of her throat.

I rolled my hips but fought the urge to fuck her mouth until she grabbed my hand and

brought it to the back of her head, pressing on it as if reading my mind and giving me an invitation.

This woman was about to be the death of me, and I'd go a happy man.

"So good. So fucking good." I fisted her hair, pumping in and out of her mouth as hard as I wanted, going in for more when I eased back.

I tapped her shoulder and pushed her back, but she only shook her head. I finally gave up, coming down her throat in long spurts until my vision blurred.

"Sweet Jesus, Rachel," I croaked out, chasing my breath as my heart hammered against my rib cage. I hoped the cab of my truck was deep enough not to spot her head as she bobbed it up and down, but it would be clear to anyone who passed by what she'd been doing to me and how much I loved it.

Maybe I loved her.

I dragged a hand down my face, pushing that out of my head for the moment. The mind-scrambling orgasm I'd just had in Rachel's mouth was probably fucking with me, but the random thought popping into my head didn't seem so random.

"Hey, where did you go just now? I didn't short-circuit your brain, did I?" A sweet smile tugged at her lips as she feathered her hand down my cheek.

"A little," I managed to say, pressing a kiss to her palm. "Two more minutes and I'll take you upstairs before we both get arrested."

She laughed, nodding as she cuddled into my chest. I threaded my fingers through the tangles in her hair, an odd peace washing over me.

She was here and she was mine. I shut my eyes, savoring the moment of having everything I wanted in my arms for what felt like the first time in my life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

RACHEL

I followed Silas through the garage into his building lobby on shaky legs. I hadn't cared in the moment, but as I smoothed down my hair and dress, I avoided eye contact with anyone passing by on the chance they'd recognize me.

Silas swiveled his head toward me as we walked, sneaking me a grin as he took my hand.

"Don't tell me you're all shy now," he whispered into my hair before kissing my temple.

I glowered at him as we headed toward the elevators.

"Penthouse?" I asked before he pressed the button for the fourteenth floor.

"Not quite. Sorry to disappoint you," he said, leaning on the back wall of the elevator, still holding my hand. Two other passengers had stepped in after us, so backing me up against the wall and crushing his mouth to mine wasn't on the table unless we wanted to get really brazen.

It felt like a weird full-circle moment. The first time Silas and I had been in an elevator, we'd both been so consumed with need, not really knowing each other beyond an instant connection that I'd tried to attribute to all the crazy lust between us.

That lust was still there, as even in my younger days, I'd never climbed into a guy's lap in a garage in broad daylight. While I was very up for another night in Silas's bed and repeating everything that had been playing in my head since the first time, more than anything, I just wanted to be with him.

"This is me," Silas said, pulling my hand when the elevator dinged on his floor. His smile was easier than I'd ever seen it, and I felt every bit of the relief I spied in his beautiful features.

Being together would be tricky. My agency was based in Manhattan, and other than our partnership with the Brooklyn Bats, none of my coworkers or bosses ever had a reason to come to Brooklyn. But this big city was small, so running into someone I knew if Silas and I were on a date was very possible.

I didn't want to sneak around and hide something amazing, but until we figured out how to approach this, I couldn't see another way.

Silas unlocked his door and held it open.

"Wow, you really meant it when you said that you had just the essentials." I mused as I strode past him. "You have a couch, a TV, and a table."

Silas had big windows from floor to ceiling in his living room but nothing on his walls. I'd been in hotel rooms that seemed more lived-in than his apartment.

The high ceilings in the hallways and large rooms with what looked like layers of paint on the walls gave it an older feel, but the Village always made older seem trendy.

"I really don't need anything. I'm back and forth to the field and on the road. Decorating isn't a big priority."

I laughed when he shrugged.

“But maybe unpacking should be,” I joked.

“I am unpacked. Mostly,” he said with a chuckle. “I’ve been focused on other things.”

“Are the Bats working you that hard?” I threw him a smirk as I set my purse down on his table. “You’re almost in first place, so you’re obviously doing something right. They should leave you alone so you can make this place not look so...sad.”

Silas’s mouth split into a grin, almost making me forget my downward spiral of panic.

“They aren’t working me that hard. I come home tired, and the last thing I want to do is hang up a picture. I mostly read and pass out.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled my back to his front.

“Instead of getting after me for my bare walls, how about some dinner? Celebrate stop one of the tour,” he said, peppering kisses down my neck.

“It’s not a tour. And you don’t have to do that.”

“I’d suggest you eat something. It’s going to be a long night.”

I slumped against him as he smoothed my hair to the side and dragged openmouthed kisses across the nape of my neck. He slid his hands down my hips before dropping his head against my shoulder with a groan.

“I’ll bet this is Kent. Hold on,” he said as he dug his hand into his back pocket for his

phone. “Sorry, just give me a minute.” He kissed my cheek and turned around to press the phone to his ear.

I ambled past his kitchen, the sink and stove shining as if they’d never been used, and padded down the hallway. His bedroom door was open, his jersey hanging on the top of the door. I spotted a king-sized bed, a dresser, and a small closet with sliding doors.

Even if the bedroom was as plain as the rest of his apartment, the bed looked cozy and comfortable. My gaze snagged on his jersey as an idea came to me.

I stepped out of my shoes and slipped my dress over my head. Peeking behind me to make sure I wasn’t in front of an open window, I peeled off my bra and underwear and grabbed the jersey off the hanger.

I’d never dated any jocks in school, but I’d always found it stupidly romantic when a football or baseball player’s girlfriend would wear their jersey. When Silas told me I could only wear his jersey to the field, my teenage heart did a major flip-flop in my chest, even though we’d been trying to keep each other at a distance at the time.

But this was his real jersey. I could smell his spicy cologne along the collar as I wrapped it around my naked body, my nipples tingling when the material grazed them. I’d just come in his car not twenty minutes ago, and my body was already aching for more.

“Hey, sorry.” Silas’s voice echoed down the short hallway. “Kent likes to check in after road trips?—”

Silas stilled, his scruffy jaw going slack as he raked his gaze up and down my body.

“Holy shit,” he breathed out.

“I had an idea and an opportunity,” I said, lifting a shoulder. I wasn’t tiny, but the jersey managed to dwarf me, the hem hitting my knees.

“Did you now?” Silas whispered, his voice dark and dangerous as he pulled me to him by the loose collar.

“I mean, I already have a Jones jersey,” I said, darting out my tongue to wet my parched lips.

I’d wanted a good reaction from him, and the feral gleam in his eyes was exactly what I’d been looking for.

“But this hits a little different. Watching you wearing this during all those games...” I skated my hands down his chest. “It’s like you’re all over me. I guess I wanted the fantasy.”

Silas let out a groan and backed me up against his bed until I fell back on the mattress.

“You had your fantasy,” he said as he unbuttoned the two I’d managed to fasten and spread the jersey open, smoothing it down my shoulders. “Now I get to have mine.” He smiled, cupping my breasts as he kissed me deep, but slow enough to make me squirm under him.

“Patience, Slugger,” he murmured as he dove into my neck, biting and sucking as he made his way down my chest.

I bucked my hips off the mattress when he sucked a nipple into his mouth, the wet warmth of his tongue and scratch of his stubble making me reach between my legs on instinct, already chasing release.

“Oh no, that’s mine,” Silas said, swatting my hand away and tracing his finger up and down my slit. “What a greedy girl you are. So wet already.”

“Please,” I groaned into his very fluffy and soft pillow.

“Please, what? Use your words, romance author. Tell me what you want.” He inched across my chest and took my other nipple in his mouth as he traced circles around my clit.

“Put your mouth on me. Lick my pussy and make me come in your mouth.”

“Now, that’s a good girl,” he growled out as he grabbed my hips and adjusted me on the bed, his hungry gaze eating up every inch of me.

“Shit, you really are a fantasy.”

I was about to nudge his shoulder when he dropped his head between my legs, kissing me long and deep like he’d done in front of the bookstore and in his car. I dug my heel into his back when he sucked my clit into his mouth and plunged two fingers deep inside, twisting them as he inched in and out.

I was already a little sensitive from before, and with all the different sensations—being in Silas’s bed, wearing his shirt, his head bobbing between my legs as he moaned with every swipe of his tongue—I hoped the orgasm building up wouldn’t tear me in half.

I reached down and grabbed the back of his head, trying to push up on my elbows to get a better view of the filthy sight in front of me. He hooked one leg over his shoulder, and the shift of angle and friction as he kept devouring me set me off like a grenade.

I came on a scream, legs shaking and flailing as Silas wouldn't stop, wringing everything out of me until I melted into a puddle on his mattress.

"Good idea?" I asked, my chest still heaving as I tried to draw air back into my lungs.

"The best," he said, pressing a kiss to the inside of my still-trembling knee before climbing onto the bed next to me. "Here I was, thinking I'd need recovery time from the car," he said, giving me a light kiss. His mouth was still glistening with me as his lips stretched into a lazy smile.

"I'm hard as a fucking rock already," he said, settling on top of me. "You have magical powers."

I laughed, burying my head into his neck.

"I want you," he whispered, his voice still full of carnal want but enough need to make my head pop up.

"You can have me."

A slow grin spread over his mouth as he shifted to stand from the bed.

"Listen." I grabbed his wrist. "I'm on birth control, and the last time I was with anyone has been...a while, and I've been tested. I trust you if you trust me."

His hooded eyes narrowed a minute before he shook his head, peeling off his T-shirt, followed by his shorts and boxers in one swoop.

"You are really going to be the death of me," he said, climbing back on top of me.

"Let me take this off," I sat up, pushing the sleeves of his jersey down my arms

before he grabbed my hand.

“No, I want to fuck you while you wear my number.” His eyes thinned to slits but had a playful glint as he settled on top of me and slid inside me with one long, slow thrust.

This was just as amazing as the last time but very different. Silas slid his arm under my waist, pushing deeper and harder as I wrapped my legs around him.

“You feel so good like this,” he said, grunting between thrusts. “I’m ruined. Totally fucking ruined.”

I tightened my legs around him as he went faster, the bed squeaking under us as a sheen of sweat broke out on my skin.

I’d never recover from this either.

I still hadn’t from that first time. Silas made love to me like there was no tomorrow, but I wasn’t going anywhere.

Maybe I wouldn’t be in this bed again for a while, but despite what I was risking or how I’d avoided getting too close to a man for my entire life, Silas had me.

I had no energy or intention to keep fighting the inevitable.

“Look at me,” he growled out, slipping a hand between us to draw circles on my clit. I couldn’t possibly come again. Being able to do it before had to have been a fluke.

I raised my gaze, clenching my eyes shut as he rolled his hips and smacked the side of my ass hard enough to make a loud crack.

Stars burst in front of my eyelids as I fell over the edge, Silas spilling into me until he dropped beside me on the mattress with a soft bounce.

“I think you’re the one with the magic. In fact, I think you’re going to kill me.”

I felt his chuckle as he buried his head into the pillow, reaching for me before he lifted his head.

“This means you’re mine, right?” he said, holding my gaze as he pinched the edge of his jersey, now balled up at my side.

It was kind of ridiculous. Me, in my mid-thirties, wearing the jersey of a baseball team manager—or lying on it, as the case was now—shouldn’t have felt so official or so...right.

But it did.

“Yes.” I looped my arms around his neck. “That’s exactly what it means.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SILAS

“I’m actually surprised you had a blanket,” Rachel said as she cuddled next to me on the couch. “I figured the one comforter on your bed was it.”

She peered up at me, lifting a brow.

I’d ordered dinner from the Chinese restaurant around the corner, wishing I could take Rachel out to celebrate but not sure what to do yet if someone saw us. The guys had found a few photos online of me walking around the neighborhood during the rare moments I was home and not too exhausted to go for a walk.

I’d been photographed in Washington too, but because of the Bats getting my face out there whenever they could, the feeling of being watched all the damn time was something new, and something I didn’t want to involve Rachel in yet.

I hated the shit out of it, but sneaking around was what we had to do, at least for right now. The last thing we needed was for someone to post a picture of us, find out who Rachel was, and have her bosses find out before we had a chance to make a plan.

Granted, fingering her in my car and letting her blow me after wasn’t our smartest move, and I hoped that wasn’t a mistake we’d end up paying for.

“I have blankets, different sheets. Dishes.” I held up the plate of lo mein. “Just because I don’t put them all out doesn’t mean I don’t have the basics.” I kissed the tip

of her nose.

“Well, that makes me feel a little better.” She crossed her legs under her, still wearing my jersey with nothing underneath. I was sending it home with her because there was no way I’d be able to put that one on and focus on the game. Her naked body splayed out on my bed, the sounds she made when she came...my dick would be too busy reliving the memories for me to manage a damn thing.

“Does your job know that you write?”

“They do. I’m lucky that my boss thinks it’s a secret asset. A published author writes our promotional pieces. And she’s supportive of romance. Some places will just fire you for it. That’s why a few author friends don’t show their faces.”

“They’re cool with that, but not...this?”

She shut her eyes and nodded.

“No. I’m hoping that I can sit down with Gayle and explain that I’m not having a tawdry affair with a married client that would soil our reputation again. Having a boyfriend is different from having a fuck buddy.”

She reached toward my coffee table to grab an egg roll and froze, cringing when she turned back to me.

“Why the face?”

“I just called you my boyfriend. Talk about a slip.”

She flicked her eyes to mine as she took a bite.

“Why is it a slip? Do you really think I’d share you? Not in a million fucking years.”

Her lips twitched into a smile as she chewed.

“You didn’t want to share me when we went for coffee, so no, that’s not news. I’ve just never had one of those.”

I squinted at her, leaning forward on the couch.

“One of those? You never dated, even in school?”

“I dated, sure. But no one that I was interested in for more than a couple of dates. I told you my mother was never without a boyfriend, even now. I don’t judge her for that, and as a romance writer, I’d never slut-shame anyone,” she said with a hollow laugh. “But that’s all she cared about. Her next good time. And she’d use my grandmother and then me with Taylor to make sure being a parent never inconvenienced her.”

I nodded, waiting for her to continue.

“I didn’t want to be like that. Mom was a different person for every guy she dated. Would start liking whatever they liked, loved whatever food or music they were into. She used to tell me that’s what you had to do to get a man to like you. That and lose a couple of pounds.” She quirked a brow.

“All of which she was dead wrong about. You know that, right?”

I’d never hit a woman in my life, but I feared the temptation if I ever met Rachel’s mother face-to-face.

“Of course I know that. It’s weird when you have a parent you don’t like. You

wonder if all the shitty traits they have somehow made it into your DNA, so you avoid certain situations just in case you can't help yourself."

Her shoulders jerked with a chuckle. "I guess that's how I looked at men for a while. I was afraid if I got too close to one, I'd be tempted to lose myself like she always did. And with my sister, I couldn't afford to do that."

"And how do you feel now?"

She dropped her gaze to my rug, the corner of her mouth twitching. "I feel that the right person makes you better. Changes you, but in a good way. I feel more like me when I'm with you than I ever have in my life."

I knew exactly what she meant. From the moment we met, she both thrilled me and brought me an odd but palpable peace. Talking to her just made me feel better, made me feel less lost and alone, which had been my baseline since I'd blown out my knee and lost my career.

"Same," was all I could say, sliding my hand to the back of her neck to bring her in for a kiss. It was too early to say everything else I'd been thinking. The instant connection was already enough to scare us both a little, even though we'd finally stopped fighting it.

"So," she murmured against my lips as she pulled away, "you're my first boyfriend. At least, the first man I could actually call one." She flitted her eyes down her torso. "This is really cheesy, isn't it? I called you my first boyfriend as I'm wearing your jersey—shit," she hissed as she inspected the hem between her fingers. "I think I got grease on it. I'll wash it for you."

I shook my head. "No, you'll take it home and keep it. There is no way I'd be able to concentrate during a game. I'd picture it draped over your amazing fucking body,

and, in case you haven't noticed, there's no room in my white pants to get excited."

She burst out laughing and dropped her head into her hands.

"Now, that would make for a good reel," she said, climbing on my lap. "Thank you," she whispered and kissed my cheek.

"For what?"

"I've never had a...person before. It's really nice."

She pressed her head into my chest, curling into a ball as I slid my hand up and down her thigh.

I wanted to be her person, somehow lighten the load of all she'd taken on since she'd been just a kid. I couldn't fix it all for her, but I was thrilled to get the chance to try.

"Can I ask you something?" Rachel asked as she cuddled next to me in my bed. She'd lost the jersey, finally, and while we'd gone to bed early, I spied two a.m. glowing back at me from the alarm clock on my nightstand.

"I think we're past all pretense at this point. Ask me anything you want." I dipped my chin to meet her gaze as I threaded my hands through her hair.

"What happened with your ex-wife? I mean, it's okay if you don't want to tell me."

"No, I'll tell you." I shifted to lie on my side. "I met her when I first started playing for Washington. We were together for a few years before we got married, so she knew what my life was like. All the road trips, the training. It never bothered her until we were married. She'd complain I was never home, and when I was, she said I looked like I didn't want to be there."

“She was mad at you for traveling when she knew it was part of your job?”

“It was probably more than that. I guess it was fun to have a ballplayer boyfriend, but a husband was different to her. I always felt on the spot when I’d come home, afraid to say the wrong thing or piss her off if I just wanted to relax after a long road trip.”

“That is a lot of crap,” Rachel said, her nose crinkling. “You couldn’t even relax in your own house?”

“No, especially not toward the end. I still can’t pinpoint exactly when it turned, and trust me, I’ve tried. But somehow, we ended up like strangers. I felt guilty over being away all the time, so I would try, but I just got tired. I know it sounds terrible.”

I scrubbed a hand down my face. I’d said exactly that to my ex-wife when I’d asked for a divorce. It’d been too late for anything else, and if I didn’t even want to try, what was the point?

“I asked her for a divorce, and she called me a coldhearted asshole who couldn’t be anyone’s husband.”

“That is,” Rachel started as she sat up, “absolutely not true. I knew that from the first moment I met you, when you didn’t have me arrested for slugging you.”

I laughed, drawing her closer.

“I thought that for a while. That I just wasn’t cut out to commit to anyone with the kind of job I had. I’d ask her to come meet me on the road, but she always had some excuse why she couldn’t.” I shrugged. “She was tired too, I suppose. But when I admitted it first, she just became angrier.”

“That’s why you told me you didn’t want to hurt anyone again?”

“It was,” I said, letting out a long breath that seemed to lift a weight off my chest. “I didn’t want to hurt her, but this was my career. Until I got cocky sliding into a base and ended it.”

“But now, you have a new career, and you’re killing it.”

“I don’t know about killing it. My guys are talented and doing well, but I’m here because of those damn reels you like to tease me about. When I talk to Kent, all he wants to tell me are social media follows and ticket sales. He says he’s happy we’re winning, but I’m more than just a fucking face, you know.”

Rachel’s lips pulled into a frown.

“You have a beautiful face, but you are a lot more than that. When you take them to the play-offs for the first time this year, everyone will see that. You’re a bighearted, talented, beautiful man from the inside out. Fuck anyone else who’s too stupid to see that.”

I didn’t know what to say, but I had to bite back the “I love you” that was burning the tip of my tongue.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

RACHEL

“Again, you didn’t have to drive me all the way home,” I told Silas as he turned onto my block.

He frowned at me as he pulled into a spot right on the corner of my street. Silas was the first person I’d ever met who could find parking so damn fast in this neighborhood.

“So, I’m supposed to fuck you all night and hand you a MetroCard in the morning to get on the subway?”

“You’d give me my own MetroCard? That’s sweet, Silas.” I clasped my hands under my chin and fluttered my eyelashes, ignoring the heat pooling between my legs at his reference to fucking me all night.

I hoped I had a little time before Taylor came home to sit in a warm bath, as all night wasn’t really an exaggeration. It had been about four in the morning before we’d finally dozed off. I wished I could lounge in his bed for the whole morning, but I didn’t want to look like I’d been out all night long when my sister came home.

Our mother would sashay home midafternoon after one of her dates, too tired and distracted to bother with either of us as she’d sleep on the couch for the day.

I wouldn’t do that to my sister, no matter how tired I was, but I didn’t want to have to

explain why a book signing in the late evening had me coming home the following morning in the same dress she'd helped me pick out.

Breakfast wasn't sad this time, but it was fast. Silas had bought us bagels from the deli next to his building, and we'd hopped into his car after I'd stopped arguing with him over taking me home.

"Boyfriends don't do that. I know you're new to the concept, so just follow my lead," he said, pecking my lips before climbing out of the driver's seat.

I had to laugh. I guessed I didn't know the right thing to do after a sleepover with a boyfriend since I'd never had too many with any men, period. And a repeat of last night wouldn't be anytime soon. Sure, my sister loved staying over at her friends' houses or visiting our cousins in New Jersey, but that was a once-a-month kind of thing, if that.

We'd need a very long talk before Silas stayed at our house. And while I felt good about us, we'd been going fast enough. I needed some time before I brought Silas into both our lives.

But at least I wasn't afraid to bring him in. This wasn't repeating bad family habits as I'd always feared if I ever met someone I really wanted to be with.

I was doing something for me. That was a good thing—and didn't have to be relegated to only the random day off once every few months.

This was unexpected progress. But to make it stick, I needed to make it slow progress.

"You don't have to walk me all the way inside. You have to be at the field later today."

“I’m the manager. I don’t have to run any drills or stay in the batting cage. I direct. Manage .” He winked and took my hand. “I’ll walk you upstairs and go since you seem to be in such a rush to get rid of me.”

I craned my neck to him as I unlocked my door.

“That is not it.” I pushed the door open, stepping aside for him to come in and shut it behind us.

“You’re exhausted. I want you to go home and get some rest.”

“Which I will do when I get home.” Silas backed me against the inside of the door. “I like knowing you’re okay. Safe. Even putting you in a cab that morning bothered the hell out of me because I couldn’t even text you to check if you made it home.”

“But you could look up my author page and check later, right?”

He narrowed his eyes, boring them into mine as he shook his head.

“I want to take care of you. You don’t need it and you’ve done more than great on your own with your sister, but you deserve it.” He traced his knuckles along my jaw. “You’re beautiful in the morning.”

I chuckled as I grabbed on to his wrist.

“I have a head full of tangles and last night’s makeup shadowing my face. That does it for you?”

He ran his thumb along my bottom lip, his body almost flush to mine.

No harm in taking him upstairs for just a little while, right?

“ You do it for me. Give me that mouth.”

My knees melted as I fell against him, looping my arms around his neck as he crushed his lips to mine, pressing me into the door as he slid his hand up my bare thigh.

“Rach?”

My eyes popped open as my body froze. That couldn't be my sister's voice. She wasn't due home until two. I'd just spoken to her last night around ten, and she'd said, “See you after two.”

“What are you...what are you doing home?”

“Did you check your phone this morning? One of the parents had an emergency, so we had to leave first thing in the morning. Like, before sunrise.”

Taylor gaped at both of us, her eyes darting back and forth between Silas and me as Mrs. Ruiz tried, and failed, to hide her smile.

My kid had texted me that she was coming home early, and I was too busy having sex to check my phone. Too many orgasms had cost me valuable brain cells. I wasn't there for my kid because I was too distracted by my boyfriend.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“I'm so sorry, Tay. I should have checked, and I didn't.”

“She's fine,” Mrs. Ruiz said, patting Taylor on the shoulder. “She's only been here for fifteen minutes. She didn't have her key, so she stayed with me for a bit. Stop thinking what I know you're thinking.” She pinched her gray brows at me.

“So, um,” Taylor said, making a slow approach to where I was still backed against the door. “You and Mr. Jones...” She pointed her finger back and forth between us.

“Yes,” I said. While I’d planned on bringing him around a lot later, I wouldn’t lie about who he was to me. I didn’t say the words, but Taylor was a smart kid. And what she’d caught us doing was obvious for anyone to figure out.

“Listen, why don’t we go upstairs and talk? Yes, talk,” I said, my words too fast and squeaky as I pushed past Silas and Taylor and jetted upstairs.

I didn’t turn to the stomp of footsteps behind me as I unlocked the door and threw my big purse by the coat rack. Silas’s jersey was sticking out, and I gave thanks that at least I hadn’t worn it home as he’d suggested.

“Did you have fun?” I asked my sister as I sat on my couch. I found Silas’s gaze as he stuffed his hands into his pockets and leaned against the wall, jerking my head toward the cushion next to me to signal him to come sit down.

“Yeah,” she said, giving me a noncommittal shrug. “The hiking was good but hot. Two of us fell but didn’t get hurt. Did you have fun?”

She popped a brow as she crossed her arms.

“Have a seat, Tay,” I said, motioning to the recliner next to the couch.

“Did you start seeing him after you wrote the article?”

I shot a look at Silas. The last thing I wanted to do was lie to my sister, but I wasn’t sure if she needed to know all the truth and hear another story of her big sister coming home in the same clothes as the day before.

“We met before that,” Silas answered for me. “We had tacos in Williamsburg and didn’t plan to see each other after that.”

“But we kept running into each other,” I said, sneaking him a smile before I went back to my sister.

“Did he go to your book signing?” she asked, eyeing my dress.

“Yes, he surprised me. I like him, Tay. A lot. He’s a really good guy. I didn’t want to overwhelm you with this right away. I know it’s weird to see.”

“It’s not weird.” When she scrunched up her nose in disgust like that, she looked so much like me. “I think it’s really great.”

“Great?” I repeated.

“Yeah, you never see anyone. I want you to be happy. And do something besides take care of me.” Her gaze fell to the carpet.

“Hey,” I said, popping off the couch and crouching in front of her. “I love taking care of you. Our mother didn’t give us the greatest example. I never wanted you to feel like you came second to anyone.”

“Yeah, but I always made you miss out on stuff.”

“No.” I grabbed her hands. “You are the only good thing Mom ever gave me. The best thing. I haven’t missed out. Got it?”

“Got it. Like I said, I just want you to be happy.”

“So do I,” Silas said behind me. “And I’m on it, I promise.”

“There is just one little thing.”

Taylor studied me with a deep crease in her forehead.

Telling her about Silas and me had been much easier than I’d thought it would be, but this felt...gross to say out loud.

“While my agency is working for the Bats and they’re your team’s sponsor, Silas and I need to keep things a little quiet.”

“Why? Because you didn’t look quiet by the door just now.”

“We didn’t think anyone was—listen, I know. It’s...new to see me with someone. But just for now, don’t say anything to anyone until I tell you that it’s okay.”

“So, he has to, like, hide you?”

“No,” Silas answered again for me. “I’m definitely not hiding your sister. When the time comes, I’m taking her everywhere, so the world knows we’re together. It’s just a little complicated now.”

“Is this why the Bats sponsored our team?”

I swiveled my head to Silas, relieved not to be the only uncomfortable adult in the room.

“I knew about your team through your sister. The Bats wanted to sponsor Brooklyn youth sports teams, so I suggested your team’s name.”

Taylor nodded, not looking like she bought it all the way, but she dropped it.

“You like her too?” Taylor asked him.

“Yes, very much. Your sister is amazing, and I promise to make sure she never forgets it.”

Taylor’s eyes danced when she met my gaze. I finally exhaled as my shoulders sagged with relief.

Silas stood from the couch and came over to us. “I’ll let you guys talk. I need to head home and try to get some sleep before heading to the field.”

“Thanks for the ride,” I said as I straightened off the floor.

He leaned in to kiss my cheek. “Talk later?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“Nice to see you again, Taylor,” Silas said as he shifted toward the door.

“You too, Mr. Jones.”

“You can call me Silas. You ladies get some rest.”

He shut the door behind him, and the fight not to swoon my heart out over him in front of my sister was taxing as hell.

“Wow, you have a baseball player boyfriend,” Taylor said, bouncing as she pulled at my arm.

“Manager, but yes. Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

Her mouth pulled into a frown.

“You’re not Mom. I know that. You’re always so afraid that you are or that I’ll think you are, that you...hover.”

She grimaced at me.

“I hover?”

“I know it’s because you love me. And sometimes, I hover right back because I’m scared Mom is going to come back and screw things up. But now, I get some free time because you have a hot, secret boyfriend. I wish I could tell the girls.”

I lost any words as my sister grabbed her backpack and strode to her room.

It was time for a long bath and a gigantic cup of coffee.

I grabbed my purse, plucking out the jersey and rooting around for my phone.

Sure enough, Taylor had texted me right after I’d left Silas’s apartment. At least I hadn’t missed it during sex, just while mooning over him as he insisted on driving me home because he wanted to take care of me.

From the time I’d met him, I’d wondered if Silas was a conjuring of my active imagination. When I turned too fast and registered a dull pain between my legs, it was enough proof he was real.

Below my sister’s text was a message from Mrs. Ruiz.

Mrs. Ruiz: HE IS SO HOT. I AM SO HAPPY FOR YOU AND YOUR GRAMS IS TOO.

Yes, I was sure Grams would be so proud of her granddaughter doing a double walk of shame.

But she wanted me to be happy. And I was. Uneasy, but happy.

It buzzed again as I plugged it into my charger.

Silas: Everything okay?

Me: Yes. She's happy I have a secret boyfriend now so I don't have to hover over her anymore.

Silas: Ouch.

Me: Seriously.

Me: Thank you for the ride home. And for making the trip last night. And for the rest of last night. And this morning. And everything.

Silas: It was all my pleasure, Slugger.

Silas: And just the beginning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SILAS

“Photographers are over there,” Kent said as we settled into the bleachers at the softball field.

I nodded, holding back a groan. We’d always planned to attend a softball game to show support for the team we sponsored, and it was a given that we’d pose for pictures later, but I didn’t think a photographer would be on the sidelines documenting our every damn move.

We’d only brought Nate and Adrian with us. Kent had wanted the entire team here since they had a day off, but I told him that would just make us all a spectacle and not only take attention away from the girls, but distract them. Even though a few of them kept looking in the stands at us anyway.

No matter how many times I’d repeat to myself that PR was part of the deal of any team, and being a young organization, we needed to trade on whatever popularity we had, I was fucking exhausted. I just wanted to do my job without feeling like a show pony all the damn time.

While everyone was glancing back at us, I was scanning the crowd for Rachel. I’d wanted to surprise her, and even though it had only been a week since the last time I’d seen her, the need to see her again was driving me out of my mind even worse than before.

Before, I'd wanted to see her but hadn't thought I could have her, so I'd tried to view any distance between us as a good thing. Now that I did have her, I wanted her all the time. But work for both of us and this stupid secret thing we had to go along with for now made that more difficult than it ever should have been.

I'd been watching Taylor since we'd come. Poor kid didn't know how to react to me when their coach brought us over before the game to say hello. I couldn't blame her as I was also clueless about what to do. I'd met the team before but couldn't act like I knew her better than the rest of the girls, and she probably was scared to let on that she knew me better too.

"The girls are good," Nate noted as he leaned forward.

"They are," I agreed. Nate wasn't exactly warm toward me, but he'd stopped snapping back whenever I made a comment or suggestion. We'd never had words, but I did give the team an overall talk about appreciating their cooperation in avoiding any defiance or disrespect since I wouldn't tolerate that, at all.

None of the guys were like that, but Nate had had the decency to look away, most likely knowing that I was speaking directly to him. I wouldn't call him friendly, but it wasn't a battle to talk to him after that.

"That was a good double play." Adrian nodded toward Taylor as she was smoothing her hair back into her ponytail, and she slipped her hat back on.

She had a great arm, throwing bullets from her spot on third base. She'd swung at some far-off pitches, but once she made contact, the ball had sailed with a shit-ton of distance. Maybe I could help her get a better eye when she was at the plate, as long as no one was around.

Because any time I spent with Rachel and her sister would have to be in secret.

Fuck, I hated this.

“That’s one of the PR people, right?” Adrian pointed to where Rachel was settling onto a bench behind the team. She whispered to one of the parents next to her as they pointed toward us.

She was a field away, but my eyesight was perfect enough to spot her freeze up for a moment. Fumbling around Taylor was uncomfortable but not noticeable since I still hardly knew her.

But when Rachel came over, I’d have to watch myself. I couldn’t touch her or kiss her hello or head over to where she sat to be next to her.

If my gaze lingered on her, as it was doing now since the rest of the field and anyone else faded away once I’d spotted her, people would talk, and she couldn’t afford that now.

I leaned back and rubbed at my neck, the tension in my jaw giving me a pounding headache.

I reached into my pocket to grab my phone. I’d sent an email to my lawyer to see if the rule at Rachel’s job about fraternizing with clients was legal. Even though I knew that companies could make whatever rules they wanted, I hoped for a way to fight it if we ever got caught, and I was hoping the buzz I felt against my leg was good news.

The message on my screen was a text from Rachel instead.

Rachel: I didn’t expect you here today, Coach.

Me: I wanted to surprise you. Not that I can come near you right now.

Rachel: It's a good surprise! But yeah, this blows.

Me: Taylor is good. Tell her she's got a great arm .

Rachel: From you, she'll love that.

Rachel: Also, you look fucking hot today.

I smiled at my screen. I wore a Bats T-shirt and a plain baseball cap. I'd shot down Kent when he suggested to wear our jerseys. Yes, we were here for promo reasons, but the girls were the players today, not us.

Me: You can tell that from all the way across the field?

Rachel: Of course I can. Those thick, muscular thighs, the biceps bulging out of your T-shirt.

Rachel: You're a tease. Showing everyone here what's mine.

I burst out laughing before I could help it.

"You all right, Coach?" Adrian asked, chuckling as he squinted at me.

"Yeah, fine," I told him, stuffing my phone back into my pocket. "Why?"

"Whoever you were texting with put a big smile on your face. You're gonna break everyone's heart on Instagram if you're attached now. Who is she?"

"I bet I know," Nate said next to me, his cocky smile spreading wider when he met my gaze.

“I bet you don’t,” I tried to reply with enough force to stop him from any more comments or questions.

“Who?” Adrian asked. “How does Nate know her?”

“He doesn’t. Just relax and watch the game before we have to take pictures. Then you can have the rest of the day off.”

I’d grabbed Rachel away from Nate at the gala, full of enough jealous rage that I hadn’t cared how obvious I was about it. I’d truly never thought we had a chance of being together and would have to be careful not to tip off the wrong people.

But I’d already done that, so now it was just a matter of time before one of us did it again.

“Make sure you stick around for the team photo,” Kent said when he came back from the restroom, and Nate and Adrian headed toward the concession stand.

“This was a good idea,” Kent told me when they were out of earshot. “A local team sponsorship, especially a girls’ team. Looks good. I’m not on board with everything else the agency suggested, but this is easy. Gets our faces out there.”

He meant my face and maybe Nate’s, but I only nodded.

“So, what’s this I overheard when I sat back down? You seeing someone?”

Yes. And she’s incredible, and I think I’ve already fallen in love with her.

That was the answer I wanted to give.

“No, the guys were just speculating.”

“Ah, good.”

“Good?” My head jerked to Kent. “Why is that good?”

He nodded toward the girls’ bench. A few of the mothers were looking back at us and whispering to each other.

“Can’t forget about our new fan base,” he whispered.

Oh, fuck no.

I was about to stand up and lose my shit, boss or not, when I heard a squeal on the field. The girls had made the last out of the inning and had won six to three.

I couldn’t go back at my boss in a crowd, especially when this was the PR part of the day and I had to plaster on a big smile. I’d been happy to be here to celebrate the team we sponsored, but not for Kent to pimp me out to some of the players’ mothers.

“Congratulations, ladies!” Kent said, his wide, shit-eating grin churning the rage in my gut even more. “That was a good game.” He glanced back at me.

“Yes, it sure was. You’re all very talented. I’m glad I got to watch you all in action.”

I caught Taylor sneak a look at her sister. Rachel motioned for her to turn around and line up with the other girls.

Nate and Adrian stood on one side of the team, and I hung toward the back where Taylor stood.

“Thanks for coming to the game today,” Taylor said, giving me a small smile.

“No thanks needed. You have an awesome arm.”

I grinned when her eyes grew wide.

“Really? Wow, thank you.”

When her eyes lit up with excitement like that, she reminded me of her sister. Rachel had done a great job raising her when she was barely an adult herself, and to have the kind of mother Rachel had told me they had, it made them both even more special.

I smiled for three shots before the team dispersed.

“Are you headed back to the field, Silas? The guys said they have somewhere to be, so I can give them a ride back,” Kent said as he dangled his keys around his finger.

I’d met them here in the hopes of sneaking some time with Rachel after, but I needed to wait until they got the hell out of here. I wasn’t letting what Kent had insinuated go, but I wouldn’t let it ruin the five minutes I’d get with my girlfriend today.

“No, I’ll head home. I told the guys to enjoy their day off, and I intend to do the same.”

“All right, fair enough. See you in the morning.” He jabbed my arm and jogged to catch up with the guys. Adrian waved, and Nate stared back at me for a half beat too long before he turned.

And to think, I’d thought he wasn’t going to be a headache anymore.

A few parents still lingered by the girls’ bench, and I debated on taking my time leaving the field so I’d happen to run into Rachel and her sister on the way out, but then I might look like a creep waiting outside a girls’ softball game alone.

Not only did I hate having to sneak around, I was crap at it.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I was relieved for an excuse to stand by the exit and check.

Rachel: I know you're off today. Want to meet us at home, and we'll order some pizza?

Rachel: All these moms love to gab at the end of a game, and if one of them sees us leave together, the Bats being our sponsor...another level of complication.

Me: Fucking exhausting, isn't it.

Rachel: Awful. So, see you at home, Coach.

Me: I look forward to it, Slugger.

I caught Rachel's gaze over her phone screen as I left the field, a tiny smile playing on her lips when she shoved the phone back into her bag while she spoke to the other parents. She didn't look much older than her sister in a T-shirt and shorts. And as much as I wanted to run my hands all over her beautiful body, her sister would be around tonight, so we'd both have to control ourselves.

Dinner at her house with her sister felt like a big step, but every time I had to keep all I felt about Rachel to myself, it seemed like two steps back.

But the only direction I wanted to go was forward, with Rachel. I'd tolerate what I needed to if I had her in the end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

RACHEL

“Silas told me I had a good arm,” Taylor said as we climbed our outside steps.

“He told me you had a good arm too,” I said as I fumbled for my keys. Bonnie had given a few of us a ride home. The girls had been excited and animated the whole way, talking about how cool it was to see some of the Brooklyn Bats at their game today.

Taylor smiled and nodded but didn’t say much. My poor sister was probably afraid of saying the wrong thing and looking like she knew Silas better than they did. It was enough for me to worry about not being too obvious if I spoke to Silas, and I hated that Taylor was feeling that same pressure.

“When did he tell you that? He didn’t even come over to talk to you.”

“We texted back and forth toward the end of the game,” I told her as I trudged up the stairs. “And I invited him over for dinner. I thought we’d order pizza.”

I glanced back at Taylor, my stomach clenching at possibly throwing too much at her at once. But when I found her gaze, her smile was as wide as her eyes.

“You were texting at the game? That is so cute.”

Cute wasn’t the word I’d use to describe texting my secret boyfriend at her game

because I couldn't just walk over and say hi. Or kiss him hello.

The joke I'd made about him showing off what was mine had a little angry truth to it, as all I'd heard from the women around me was how hot Silas was, one mom whispering to us how she'd let him do "anything he wanted" to her.

I'd managed a tight smile without telling her to back the fuck off. After taking this long to meet a man I cared about, I hated that I couldn't shout to the world how wonderful he was and that he was off-limits.

"It's okay that I invited him over?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Taylor said, shrugging at me as she dropped her duffel bag by the door. "It's not like he's creepy like Mom's boyfriend was."

I stilled as my heart bottomed out in my stomach.

Like my grandmother, I'd never let one of my mother's boyfriends into the house after Taylor was born, for that very reason.

"When did you meet one of Mom's boyfriends?"

"A long time ago. When she used to come around and ask to take me for ice cream after school for a couple of weeks. I think it was, like, fourth grade, maybe." Taylor's brow scrunched.

"I remember," I said, eyeing my sister. Mom had had a sudden interest in Taylor for a couple of weeks and had shown up to take her for ice cream a few times. I hadn't wanted to upset my sister by refusing and starting an argument, so I'd let her go.

I didn't think Mom would steal her away since she had no intention of taking care of

her, but I'd still had my heart in my throat until they came back, the last time hiding around the corner to make sure they didn't wander anywhere else after.

Most people would be able to say with at least a little certainty that their mother wouldn't sell their little sister if she took her outside. The fact that I had next to none was so sad it was laughable.

"The owner was her boyfriend. Or at least, a guy she liked. He'd give me a big cone, and I'd sit at the one table they had while he'd take her in the back. I was little, but I remember this weird skin-crawling type of feeling when he'd look at me." Her face twisted in a grimace. "I can't explain it."

She didn't have to.

"You never told me that," I said, my voice strained from my heart hammering in my ears. I needed to call Aunt Lucy again to set up a meeting with her lawyer. I'd thought when Taylor was a kid, Mom wouldn't want to parade a small child in front of a new guy, like how she'd kept the guys she dated away from me when I was younger. But I guessed if her kid was a means to an end, it had made it okay to her.

Having such a deep disdain for the woman who'd given birth to me was always a special kind of awful.

"Mom told me it was our secret, and back then, I still wanted to see her, so I didn't want to get her into trouble with you. And the ice cream was good," she said before raising her head, a tiny smile on her lips as if she was trying to calm me down. "But I'm glad she doesn't bother with us anymore."

I nodded despite the knot coiling tighter in my stomach.

The chime of the doorbell made me jump, the aggravation from what my sister had

just told me distracting me enough to forget that my secret boyfriend was coming over for dinner.

“Nothing bad happened, Rach.” She grabbed my arm before I headed to the door. “Please don’t let her ruin things for you anymore.”

A lump poked at the back of my throat from my sister’s pleading gaze. Mom had taken enough from both of us. Having to sneak around with Silas was infuriating, but I didn’t want to taint the time I’d get with him tonight by dwelling on what Taylor had just told me.

I was glad for him to get a chance to know my sister better tonight and to bring him all the way into my life, even if I couldn’t tell many people that he was there.

Unlike what could be brewing with my mother, my situation with Silas was a temporary annoyance, and all I could do at the moment was make the most of it.

I rushed down the stairs, trying to focus on that and not the rage at what my sister had just told me, shutting my eyes and taking a long breath before I opened the door.

I laughed when I found Silas, in the same sexy T-shirt and shorts, holding a large box of donuts.

“I didn’t know what to bring, and there was a long line at this place when I parked, so I’m hoping that means the donuts are decent.”

He snaked his arm around my waist and pulled me close after I shut the door.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said and brushed my lips with a soft kiss, narrowing his eyes as he backed away. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said, clearing my throat when my voice cracked. “Long day.” I kissed his cheek. “Thank you for this.” I grabbed the box of donuts. “We haven’t ordered yet, and I’m not sure what you want?—”

Silas pressed his finger against my lips.

“I’ll ask you again. What’s wrong?” He squeezed the back of my neck. “Is it still okay to be here tonight?”

“Of course it is.” I smiled as he kneaded my neck.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t walk over to kiss you hello. I’m hoping we can find a way around this soon.”

“It’s fine. It is what it is for now, right? I understand. That’s why I texted to invite you instead of walking up to you.”

I eased back to head upstairs, but Silas stilled and gave a gentle shake of his head.

“My sister just told me a story about our mother and one of her boyfriends from when she was younger. She was fine, but I didn’t know my mother had brought her around one of the sleazy guys she was dating at the time. The only reason Taylor brought it up was because she said you weren’t like any of those guys.” I smiled up at him. “And you’re wonderful, so yeah, you’re not.”

His shoulders jerked with a chuckle.

“I’m sorry you both had to go through all that.”

I nodded. “It just makes the thought of having to fight her to stay away that much more exhausting.”

“But you’re not fighting alone this time. So don’t think of it like that.” He kissed my forehead. “Let’s head upstairs, and you can let me buy you both dinner.”

I exhaled a long gust of air, still not all the way relaxed but lighter. Since my grandmother had died, alone was how I’d rolled in life. Yes, I had Auden and my sister and some friends, but no one close enough to feel the pressure of what my daily life had always been and share it with me.

Maybe I couldn’t kiss him in public yet or claim him as mine other than behind a closed door, but in addition to all the butterflies that would take off in my stomach whenever we were together, he brought me a soul-deep relief I hadn’t known I’d craved so badly.

“Taylor,” I called up the stairs as Silas followed me. “Silas brought the good donuts.”

She met us at the door and held it open.

“Hi, Silas. Again,” she said, smiling as she took the box from me and headed into the kitchen. “I’m feeling barbecue chicken pizza and some kind of calzone. It was a long game.” She stretched her arms and let out a groan.

“I’m fine with whatever you both want as long as you let me pay.”

I leaned into Silas when he draped his arm around me. I wasn’t sure how to handle PDA in front of my sister, but she’d already seen his hand on my ass, so touching above the waist didn’t seem so wrong.

I hadn’t asked Taylor how she’d feel if he stayed over and hadn’t even asked Silas if he’d want to. But for now, we’d eat dinner, and I’d see where the night would take us, even though I was rooting for it to last into tomorrow morning.

“I’m glad those are the good donuts.” Silas yanked me closer and kissed my temple. “I guess I do have luck parking around here.”

“How many times have you been here?” Taylor asked.

“Only a couple,” I answered for her, trying for a quick change of subject. “I’ll order everything. You guys can go sit on the couch.”

I rushed into the kitchen and pulled up the takeout app on my phone. While I loved having Silas here, it was weird. Like a surreal fantasy to have him in my house sharing pizza with my sister and me rather than living in my head as a romantic dream I couldn’t have.

The restrictions on that dream were still the same, and like Silas, I hoped we’d find a way around it, even though I couldn’t think of anything.

After I finished ordering dinner, I headed to my room to change and left Silas and Taylor in the living room. I wasn’t sure where my anxiety was drawing from the most—thinking of my mother showing up unannounced again, or someone seeing Silas here and it getting back to everyone who wasn’t supposed to know.

After I changed, I headed to the fridge and took a swig of the open pinot grigio I’d shelved on the inside of the door right from the bottle.

I shut my eyes and leaned against my counter, pissed at ruining what should be an amazing time in my life with a brick of dread across my chest.

“So, you really like my sister?” I heard Taylor ask Silas before I headed into the living room. Backing up a couple of steps, I went back to the counter and waited for Silas’s response.

“I do. A lot. She’s incredible.”

“She is.”

I smiled at the stern octave in my sister’s voice, one I hadn’t heard before.

“You can’t hurt her. She has never brought a guy here. So you must mean something to her.”

“I’d never hurt her, Taylor. This sneaking around sucks, and I’m looking for a way around it. She’s lucky to have a good sister to protect her.”

I heard the smile in Silas’s voice.

“All she’s done is take care of me. She needs someone to take care of her.”

Taylor’s voice was small this time, and I hated the guilt coating her words.

“I know,” Silas said, his voice soft. “And all I want to do is take care of her. Even though she’ll fight me, I promise I’ll find a way.”

I bit my lip as I tried to swallow the lump resurging in my throat.

“I’m guessing dinner is on the way,” Silas said, craning his head toward the kitchen and catching my gaze, reaching into his pocket. “Tell me how much.”

My cheeks heated as I grinned back at him. If we had to sneak around for however long, I needed to get better at it.

“Thirty minutes,” I said, holding up my phone before he snatched it away to read the total amount on the screen. He reached into his wallet and handed me a lot more than

the total, but I'd fight him on that later.

"Stop worrying about me, kiddo," I said, tapping my toe against Taylor's ankle as I sat between them. "That's my job."

"I can worry if I want," she said, straightening from the couch and shifting toward the hallway, her eyes darting back and forth between us. "Call me when dinner's here. I won't come out until it is."

I caught her smirk as she headed to her room and shut the door.

"Is it sad when your thirteen-year-old sister is your wingwoman?" I said, sputtering out a laugh as I dropped my head into my hands.

Silas grabbed my legs and swung them around until I was lying flat on the couch, and he climbed over me, gazing down at me with a wicked grin.

"Now, give me the kiss I've wanted all damn day," he growled before slanting his mouth over mine. I sighed into the kiss, wrapping my legs around his waist as he rocked into me.

"Fuck, you taste good," he murmured against my lips as he eased back. "I can't keep going too long, or else I'll have to eat with a pillow on my lap."

I burst out laughing and buried my head into his chest.

"Sorry for eavesdropping. It was cute hearing you both talk about me."

"Taylor is a good kid. She loves you and appreciates you." My eyes fluttered as he sifted his fingers through my hair.

“I know she does.”

“And I’m pretty crazy about you too,” he said, grazing his lips along my jaw.

“I sort of had that impression. And back at you,” I whispered. “I’d hoped she wouldn’t grow up as fast as I had to, but I guess that’s what happens when you have a parent with the maturity of a child.”

“You’re her parent. And you’re doing a great job.”

“Thank you,” I said, scraping my nails up and down his back. “You guys leave for Toronto after the game tomorrow night, right?”

“I do. We’ll be back at the end of next week. Why?”

“You wouldn’t want to stay over, would you?”

He furrowed his brow.

“Why wouldn’t I want to?”

“You probably have a lot to do tomorrow to prep?—”

“I’ve packed for road trips for my entire adult life. You saw my apartment. I can grab what I need and pack in minutes. Taylor would be okay with me staying here?”

“I think so. I’ll pull her to the side after dinner to make sure.” I took his face in my hands. “This is tough, but a night before you go would make it a little better. We just have to be quiet.”

“I can be quiet.” He snickered. “You’re the loud one.”

“I can be quiet too,” I said, shoving his shoulder.

“I’ve made you come enough times to know that, no, you can’t.” He feathered the back of his hand down my cheek. “I love making you scream.”

His lips were just about to touch mine when my sister’s voice filtered down the hallway.

“I’m coming out to get my backpack,” Taylor said in a loud voice from behind her door.

Silas dropped his chin to his chest, laughing as he backed off me and settled at the edge of the couch while I scurried to sit up.

Taylor rushed past us and grabbed the bag as she shielded her eyes and jetted back down the hallway.

“I don’t feel like a good parent anymore,” I said after I heard her door slam. I rested my elbow on my knee, cupping my forehead.

“That’s not true. You raised a good kid who wants you to be happy.” He kissed my cheek, running his nose down my neck. “And I promise to make you really happy at least three times before the sun comes up.”

Dinner went by in a blur, and when my sister retreated to her room for the night, she told both of us that she’d see us in the morning, saving me from having to pull her aside to see if it was okay.

I couldn’t decide if I should be proud or worried that my sister had assumed Silas would be spending the night.

“Want to know a secret?” I asked Silas as we lounged in my bed. I’d pulled on his jersey at some point during the night, but he was gloriously naked, his cocky grin blinding even in the dark.

“Sure. What’s that?”

“You’re the only guy I’ve ever had in my apartment,” I whispered. “Ever,” I repeated.

“That can’t be right,” Silas said, shaking his head. “You never snuck anyone in when you were young?”

“I always met the guys I dated somewhere.” I turned to face him, straightening out his jersey as it bunched up under me. I’d pulled it on as a joke, but instead of him laughing, his eyes ignited with a feral lust before he pounced on me.

“I’m touched,” he said, pressing a hand to his gorgeous chest.

“You should be,” I said, hooking my leg around his hip.

“How about when I get back, you and your sister can spend the weekend with me?”

“At your apartment?”

“No. My parents’ house. They have two extra bedrooms and a huge yard. Plus, Putnam County is far enough away from Brooklyn that we won’t run into anyone. Probably.” He shrugged. “My ass isn’t so popular that I have photographers camping out wherever I go. At least not that I’ve seen.”

I laughed and crawled on top of him.

“This is another boyfriend thing, I guess. Meeting the parents?” I lifted a brow.

“They’d like to finally put the face with the name.”

“You talk about me?” I squinted at Silas.

“Of course I do. They’re thrilled I met someone I care about. They’ve been worried about me ever since my divorce. So now, I can introduce them to my beautiful girlfriend and her sister, and they can relax.”

“They know the whole story of...us?”

“I kept it mostly clean, but yes.” He wove his fingers into my hair. “They know I’m with someone I care about. A lot.” He leaned forward to peck my lips. “I’ll take you both around town. You can see where I used to play.”

“The Silas Jones tour,” I teased, my heart still fluttering at the way he’d said care about a lot .

“Now’s your chance to be a groupie. So, you’ll come?”

I propped my elbow on his chest and rested my chin against my hand.

“We’re in. Well, I’m in, but I think Taylor will be on board. I’m excited to meet your parents. Nervous but excited.”

“Nothing to be nervous about,” he whispered, his smile wide and gorgeous. “Who wouldn’t love you?” he whispered before bringing his mouth back to mine.

Despite having my lips fused to this man for most of the night, it was always so easy to get lost in his kiss.

Who wouldn't love you?

It wasn't a declaration, but close enough to make my heart race.

I'd written I love you a million times on the page, but when it came time to really pour out all I was feeling for this amazing and unexpected man, I couldn't find the words.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SILAS

“Do your parents live in the country or something?”

Rachel and I shared a silent laugh at Taylor’s question. The drive was only a couple of hours, but as we made our way up the tree-lined highway, it already seemed worlds away from the city.

“Not quite,” I said with a chuckle. “They have a huge deck, and they opened the pool last week, so you ladies can just relax for the weekend.”

“I don’t know about relax,” Rachel whispered. “Are you supposed to feel clammy when you meet your boyfriend’s family for the first time?”

I caught the nervous pull at her features as she pressed the back of her hand over her forehead.

“Hey,” I whispered, grabbing one of her hands. “You have nothing to worry about.” I pressed a kiss to the top of her wrist. “They’re going to love you.”

Like I love you , I wanted to say, but her head seemed scrambled enough. That was a conversation we needed to have alone at home, even though, once we were back, I’d probably keep putting it off.

It had only taken a few months for the gorgeous woman who’d jabbed me in the

stomach to become the most important person in my life.

The first thing I did after every game was call her. A win didn't feel like one until I heard her squeal in my ear. And when the game didn't go so well or when managing grown men on the road, plus taking on the responsibility of their season and career trajectory, became too much, her sweet voice would soothe me until I felt better.

Even when things were good with my ex-wife, I wouldn't seek her out to tell her every single thing that went on in my life.

I was hopelessly in love with Rachel but still a little scared to rush us forward.

"The only issue you're going to have with my parents is that they're going to fuss over you the whole weekend. I promise to try to buffer it a little."

"Did you have pool parties?"

"Sometimes. I didn't have a whole lot of free time when I lived there. When I wasn't in school, I was at the field or working out before I headed to the field."

"Really? That's terrible."

I smiled at Taylor's scrunched-up face in my rearview mirror.

Looking back, it didn't feel like I'd missed out on anything. Baseball was all I'd wanted to do for as long as I could remember, and I'd made it my life. It still was and probably always would be in some capacity. That was why when the guys had a stressful inning or when they were in the middle of a crucial play, it was all I could do to stop myself from grabbing a glove and running onto the field.

All those grueling days of practice and drills never felt like work to me. Being close

enough to the game made me feel like I was part of it again, although I was still making peace with it being a much smaller, less active part.

“Holy crap, this is a mansion!” Taylor gasped as I pulled into my parents’ driveway.

When we’d first moved here, the houses in our town were huge to me, compared to the city. I remembered saying the same thing when they’d brought my brother and me to see the house after they’d bought it. It wasn’t a mansion, but it had a closed-in porch and a two-car garage that made it seem bigger than it was.

Our closest neighbor was half a block away, and our yard had been nothing but woods until my father had built the deck.

It had been a big adjustment from our house in the Bronx that was literally on top of our neighbors on either side, just like the brownstone Rachel and Taylor lived in.

Dad had switched jobs from where he’d worked in Manhattan to Westchester County, and he had found a great deal on a house that had needed a ton of renovation. He’d spent most of our childhood fixing it up in parts for us, and the first thing I’d done after I’d signed my first million-dollar contract was pay off their mortgage.

“This is a beautiful house,” Rachel mused as she climbed out of my truck. “I feel like we’re at a resort.”

“If you want to pretend I’m the cabana boy at some point this weekend, I could be into it,” I whispered, pulling her to me as I leaned against the side of my truck.

“Stop, not here,” she said in a loud whisper as she swept her gaze around the driveway.

“Not here,” I repeated. “You and I will be staying in my old room, while Taylor can

have my brother's bedroom all to herself. They redid both as just guest rooms, so neither of you will have to sleep under a Yankee comforter."

"Still," she said, letting out a shaky breath. "I don't want them to think?—"

"Think what? That we're adults who have sex? Really good sex," I said, keeping my voice low, but Taylor was too busy looking over the house to pay attention to us. "Do you really think I'd let you sleep anywhere but with me this weekend?" I whispered, squeezing the back of her neck. "No fucking way."

She fought a smile, her neck still tense even as her eyes heated.

"Silas!"

My mother rushed down the outside steps with my father behind her. She was tiny, only coming up to my chest even when I was in high school. Dad was around my height, the both of us sharing the same golden eyes, dark hair, and massive frame.

My brother was the smaller one. Not as short as my mother but a noticeable head shorter than my father and me.

He called my parents once in a while, but it was rare for him to visit. I wouldn't say we actively hated each other like when we were kids, and he had reached out when I was hurt to text, "Sorry, tough break."

I was never sure if it really was jealousy or if we were just too different to connect. Our indifference hurt my parents and they'd tried to fix it by inviting us to come over together, but after a few tries that had netted out to awkward silence, they'd accepted our non-relationship for what it was and had moved on.

Mom pulled me into a hug, her petite arms barely making it around my torso as she

held on tight.

“Mom, you just saw me a couple of months ago.” I laughed and kissed the top of her head.

“And that’s plenty of time to miss my son.” She stepped back and squeezed my chin, craning her neck all the way up to look at me. “You look so good,” she said, beaming as she reached up on tiptoes to press her hands against my cheeks.

“Hey, son,” Dad said, giving me a one-armed hug. “Glad you made it up here.” He smiled at Rachel and Taylor. “Want to introduce us to your friends?”

I smiled at Rachel and pulled her into my side.

“This is Rachel and her sister Taylor. They both think our house is amazing.”

“Wait until you see the inside. Ben installed a fireplace last year. I know it’s June, but it’s still nice to look at. I’m Maryanne, and I’m so happy you’re both here.” Mom yanked them both into a hug, almost knocking Taylor to the ground with her boisterous grip.

Mom was little but strong and the parent to fear the few times I’d gotten into trouble.

Rachel caught my gaze as they both bent down to hug her back.

“Told you,” I mouthed to her.

“I’m Ben,” Dad said, grabbing both their hands. “Very happy you came with my son to visit us this weekend.”

“Thank you for having us,” Rachel said, her smile wide and her shoulders softer than

when she'd stepped out of my truck.

"Please make yourselves at home," Dad said, smiling at Rachel and Taylor as he held the front door open.

"Yes, bedrooms are all set for you," Mom added, motioning to the staircase as we came inside. "Can I get you something to eat or drink? We could sit outside if you want."

"I'll get them settled first," I said, squeezing my mother's arm. "Then you can give them the full Jones tour."

"It's a short tour," Dad joked. "The house looks a lot bigger from the outside."

"It's big inside too," Taylor said, gazing up at the ceiling.

Had they ever been outside Brooklyn? They'd both lived in the same house since they were born, but I wasn't sure if they'd gone on any trips or vacations. Rachel had been too busy trying to take care of her sister to think of any kind of fun or rest for herself.

I wanted to give her that, along with everything else she'd missed out on.

"Oh my God," Rachel gasped as she pointed to a photo on the wall of me on my first little league team back in the Bronx. Even then, I was the tallest kid on the team and had to stand in the back.

"Wasn't he adorable?" Mom said, coming up behind Rachel.

"Yes, he certainly was." She craned her neck toward me and smiled. "Viral good looks even then."

“Viral?” Mom asked, turning to me with a crease in her brow.

“You don’t want to know, Mom,” I said, squeezing her shoulder as Rachel’s gaze swept along the wall. “Let’s get you ladies unpacked,” I told her, pointing up the stairs.

“Did you ever take any pictures not in uniform?” Rachel mused behind me as we climbed the carpeted steps. My parents had lined the staircase with team shots of me from high school until my first professional team picture.

“I’m sure there are a few. We have plenty of time for my parents to walk you down memory lane. This was my room,” I said when we made it to the second floor, pushing the door open. “You can have my brother’s old room all to yourself,” I told Taylor, pointing to the door across the hallway.

“Even the rooms are huge.” Taylor’s eyes were wide as she stepped into my old bedroom, gaping as she scanned the space.

“Bigger than our house, right, Tay?” Rachel said, drifting her gaze around the room. “I think we could fit our kitchen in here. So this is where the legend spent his childhood.” She smirked as she looked back at me.

My posters had been taken down, but some of my trophies were still displayed on top of my dresser.

“I don’t know about legend,” I said.

Rachel heaved out a long sigh, rolling her eyes as she turned to her sister.

“When I had to write his article,” she told Taylor, “I lost count of all his awards from high school through professional baseball. I’d bet there are dozens more trophies in a

closet somewhere.”

“Wow,” Taylor said. “I didn’t know that.”

“Because you only knew him from his Instagram fame.”

I bit back a smile at Taylor’s gasp as she scowled at Rachel.

“Yes, I guess a lot think my career started there.”

Taylor’s cheeks flushed as she dropped her gaze to the carpet. “Can I bring my stuff to the other bedroom and use the bathroom?”

“Sure,” I said, motioning across the hall. “Like my parents told you, make yourself at home.”

Taylor nodded and padded into the hallway.

“I guess winning a Gold Glove isn’t as important as a viral reel these days,” I said, huffing out a laugh as I leaned against the dresser.

“Maybe not for her demographic,” Rachel said, closing the door with a gentle push. “But everyone in baseball remembers. Don’t be so modest, Coach.”

Before I could reply, she came over to the bed and eased onto the mattress. “So, is this your actual childhood bed?”

“From my teenage years on, yes. They had to buy me a full-size after I outgrew the twin.”

“I see,” she said, her mouth curling into a smirk as she lay back, gliding her hands

over the comforter. “How many girls have you had in this room?”

“A few,” I admitted with a shrug. “I can’t give you a number.”

“That many?” she said, pressing a dramatic hand to her chest.

“No, just none that I could remember enough to count,” I said, taking slow steps toward the bed.

She counted. More than I could begin to tell her, even if the words hadn’t been lodged in the back of my throat.

“This is kind of hot,” she whispered, a breathy rasp to her voice as I settled between her legs.

“What is? Being on my bed in broad daylight in a house full of people?” I pressed into her, my cock already hard enough not to care who was here and what time it was.

“Being in the room you grew up in, sleeping in your old bed. I didn’t date any athletes, but this is like the ultimate high school fantasy. Hot jock, small bed.” She raised her brow. “But—” she tapped her finger on her chin “—you went to high school a decade before me, so it wouldn’t have worked in real time.”

She giggled when I pinched the inside of her thigh. In a T-shirt and cutoffs, or anything she wore, Rachel was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.

I never thought about our almost ten-year age difference. From the moment I met Rachel, I’d always found her to be wiser than I ever was, at any age.

“I bet a lot of athletes wanted to date you in school, even if you wouldn’t give them the time of day.”

“I went to an all-girls school and wore an ugly plaid skirt every day. Maybe a few wanted to date me. I did have good legs back then.”

“Do you still have the skirt somewhere?” I joked, even though my cock jerked at the thought of her in a schoolgirl uniform, a skirt short enough to show off those curvy thighs, the shadow of a lace bra behind a white button-down shirt. “I may have an old high school jersey in the closet that I can bring home with me. Not that it would fit anymore.”

“Holy shit, are you serious? Could you find it tonight?”

I cracked up when her jaw went slack as she sat up on her elbows.

“Look who’s on board with fucking under my parents’ roof now.” I traced her jaw with the tip of my finger. “My dirty girl has a jersey fetish.”

A mix of shock and heat swam in her chocolate eyes.

“Please don’t call me your dirty girl when I have to go back downstairs and talk to your adorable mother.”

I burst out laughing and dropped my head to her shoulder, peppering kisses along her collarbone and up her neck until I swirled my tongue around the sweet spot behind her ear.

She covered her mouth after she let go of a whimper, meeting my gaze with wide eyes.

“My sweet little live wire,” I teased, kissing the tip of her nose. “I’m so glad you’re here.” I cinched my arms around her, pulling her to me as tightly as I could, and it still wasn’t close enough.

“Me too, Coach.” She kissed my cheek, wrapping her legs around my waist as she looped her arms around my neck. My body melted against hers, and I wished it could always be just like this.

Maybe this was what it was like to find your other half. All the chaos in my head settled when I was with Rachel. She replaced it with a deep peace and excitement for a future I’d never thought to plan for.

I wanted more than just a weekend or every other week between road trips. Maybe I didn’t know how to say it yet, but I wanted to end all my days with Rachel in my bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

RACHEL

“Can I get you anything else?” Maryanne asked me, motioning to my empty glass as we sat by the pool. The weather had turned cloudy and a little cool on Saturday morning, so instead of a nice late-June day of swimming, my sister and Silas were having their own two-person softball game in his parents’ huge yard.

“No thank you,” I said, still watching them.

I could tell Taylor was tiring out, but my sister wouldn’t stop until she got a hit.

“It’s cute that Silas still has his old equipment here.”

“Oh, I could never get rid of anything,” she said, chuckling as she waved a hand.

“The glove is probably a little snug on his big adult hand, but he’s making do.”

I caught my sister’s frustrated sigh every time she swung and missed the ball. She was a good hitter when she made contact, but from what I could tell, her strength was on the field rather than behind the plate.

Silas walked up to her each time, fixing her stance and whispering something before he’d jog back to throw another pitch. I’d seen countless videos of him playing when I wrote the article. Lately, when I was down bad alone in my bed, missing him and stalking baseball pages and YouTube clips into the early hours of the morning just to see his face.

Watching him do something as simple as jog or throw sent me into a pathetic trance. The way his body twisted when he'd swing, so strong and sure, had me drooling everywhere. All that masculine grace and beauty would suck me in for hours until I'd fall asleep with the phone in my hand.

Silas was gorgeous and talented and, somehow, by an odd stroke of luck, all mine.

Taylor nodded after he called something out to her, and this time, the aluminum bat hit the ball with a loud crack, sailing over Silas's head.

I smiled when she pumped her arms up in victory and then folded in exhausted relief.

"He's a good coach," I mused, not realizing I was getting choked up until my voice cracked.

"Yes. I knew he would be." Maryanne sent her son a wistful smile. "He was devastated when he couldn't play anymore, but I'm so glad he found a way to stay in the game." She met my gaze, a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. "I'm glad he found you, too."

I smiled, a rush of heat flushing my cheeks.

"So am I."

"Your sister is a beautiful girl. Very sweet. You've done a great job with her. Which couldn't have been easy, being so young yourself."

"I'm guessing Silas told you how..." I trailed off, cringing, as I didn't want to ruin a lovely weekend by bringing up my flake of a mother.

"You're on your own, yes." She bobbed her head in a slow nod. "Being a parent isn't

easy, even when you have help. Doing it all alone and so well is an incredible thing.”

“You sound like Silas,” I said, finding his gaze as he scooped up the ball and handed Taylor a glove. He threw me a quick wink with enough intent to trigger a full-body shiver.

Staying quiet had been a struggle last night. Every time Silas and I were able to spend the night together, it was like a marathon. Neither of us wanted to go to sleep because we never knew when the next night would be.

We were here until Sunday afternoon, but then he’d be away again, and I’d be sleeping with my phone on a pillow that still smelled like Silas, waiting to hear his voice after his game ended.

As excruciating as it was, I didn’t mind the time apart as much as I hated the sneaking around when we were together.

“I have never seen Silas lit up like this. It’s been years since I’ve seen him so relaxed and happy.”

When Maryanne smiled, she looked exactly like her son. Silas shared his height and massive frame with his dad, but the kind eyes were all his mother’s.

I didn’t mention it, but I’d noticed a few shots of Silas and his brother on the walls in their living room and along the staircase. Silas radiated the same kindness as his parents, but the chip on his brother’s shoulder was evident in every picture.

I knew how it was to have difficult family members who were better off estranged—or, at least, I hoped my mother would stay that way.

“Silas has me pretty lit up too.”

“You love him.”

My head shot up to her raised brow. It was an observation not a question.

“Yes,” I allowed. “He’s...” I sucked in a long breath and rubbed my eyes. “He’s everything.”

“I can tell. When he divorced Emmy, I was afraid he’d never put himself out there again. I’m very glad I was so wrong.” She tapped my leg and stood, shifting back toward the house. “You mean the world to him too.”

He hadn’t put himself out there so much as I clobbered him when he strolled by, not giving him a choice but to notice me.

It was a meet-cute I never could’ve written because it was too farfetched to actually happen. I wouldn’t have thought a real chance for Silas and me would ever happen after that either, but here we were.

Here I was.

I’d leave here with a full heart and another jersey. I had all these big feelings for him that I couldn’t totally explain and grew stronger each day.

A love of a lifetime was a phrase I threw around in my books, having an idea of what it meant but zero clue what the true weight of it could feel like. It seemed way too soon, but if that wasn’t what Silas was becoming to me, I didn’t know how else to explain it. The notion of falling in love with anyone would’ve scared the hell out of me a few months ago, but I was in too deep to run from it now.

“I can’t wait to step up to the plate next season.” Taylor’s face was red as she ran her hand over her sweaty forehead.

Silas laughed. “Don’t get cocky. Just remember what I said. Patience, right?”

She nodded. “I think I’m going to skip the drive into town with you. I need a shower and to sit for a while.” She leaned forward, pressing her hands against her thighs.

“You were at it a while, kiddo.” I pulled at her damp ponytail. “We can wait if you want.”

“No, it’s okay. You guys go.” She glanced back at Silas and snuck me a smile.

After all this time of avoiding entanglements with men because I was afraid to bring them around my sister, Taylor was not only okay with my being with Silas, but she was always pushing for us to be alone.

I’d babied my sister since the day she was born, but the older she became, the more I realized how much I might’ve underestimated her.

“All right,” Silas said, tossing his glove onto the deck. “We’ll be back,” he told his mother as he grabbed my hand, holding my gaze as he pressed a kiss to my wrist.

“We’ll let Taylor recover, and I’ll show you around.”

“More Silas Jones landmarks. I can’t wait,” I joked, leaning into him when he drew me into his side.

I wished it could always be like this. Silas helping my sister, getting to climb into bed with him every night, everyone around knowing we were together and in love. Or, I was.

Writing it for so many years hadn’t prepared me for the wonder and sheer terror when you loved someone with every cell in your body.

“I’m not used to all this nature,” I quipped, gazing out the window. “This town is cute.”

“A lot of city imports live up here. There are more New York accents around town than in Brooklyn, I think.”

“Do you get recognized when you come home?”

“Yes and no. I always played on the West Coast, so unless they knew me from when I lived here, no one really knew who I was unless they were a big baseball fan.”

Silas smirked right before he made the next turn.

“My old high school is up this road. Want to see where I used to play?”

“I’d love to.” I sifted my fingers through the hair at the back of his neck. “I love seeing where you grew up. It’s been nice getting to know your family too.”

“I told you they’d love you,” he said, squeezing my knee. “You were all nerves for nothing.”

“Yes, you were right,” I admitted. “They’re really great.”

“But...?” Silas prompted.

“No but. How could there be a but? Your parents are adorable and wonderful.”

“But how are they so wonderful and their sons don’t speak?” He lifted a brow at me as he turned into the empty school parking lot and cut his engine.

“Well, that may have crossed my mind.” I lifted a shoulder. “They’re so warm and

loving, and you're like a big sexy cinnamon roll."

"Cinnamon roll?"

"It's a romance term. Means you're sinful on the outside and sweet and mushy on the inside. At least, that's my definition."

He laughed, rubbing his hands up and down the steering wheel.

"I have cousins I consider more like siblings. Just because someone is related by blood doesn't always make them family."

"Oh, don't I know it." I leaned over to kiss his cheek. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Most of my family memories are good, and it's nice to come home." He coasted his hand up my thigh and inched closer. "And really nice to come home with you."

How I wished he could come home with me and stay. Maybe he could one day. This weekend was a fun if cruel game of pretend.

We climbed out of the truck, and I followed Silas to the huge baseball field in the back of the school grounds.

"I almost have chills. I can just picture you on that field." I stepped in front of Silas. "Filling out those tight pants to perfection." I slid my hands over his hips. "It's a nice image."

He dropped his head back and laughed.

"You're just remembering all the dirty things I did to you while you wore my school

jersey last night.”

“Maybe,” I said, lifting a shoulder as heat rose up my neck.

“Come on, we can sit on the bleachers for a while.”

I followed as he pulled me by the hand. The empty field was almost eerie, the breeze whistling over the open space.

“I can’t believe we go home tomorrow,” I said, cuddling up next to him on the bench. “And then you’ll be in California.”

I felt his chuckle against my cheek. “You keep up with our schedule better than the travel secretary.”

He snickered when I nudged his shoulder. “Sorry if I miss you when you’re gone. Jerk.”

He pressed a kiss to my temple.

“I know, sweetheart. I miss you when I’m gone too. But then I come back.” He lifted his arm and wrapped it around my shoulders. “I love coming back to you.”

“Know what I think about?” I let out a long breath as I cuddled into his chest.

“What’s that?” he asked, goose bumps running down my neck as he whispered in my ear.

“That lunch we had at Park Palace. Being together in public and enjoying it, even though we weren’t supposed to.”

I felt his chuckle against my cheek.

“I wish I could just go on a date with you. Go somewhere and eat at the same table without worrying over getting caught. I love when you come over and stay—and the couple of times I’ve spent the night at your apartment. I know it sounds stupid.”

“It doesn’t. I hate the sneaking around as much as you do. I want to go on dates with you too, baby.” He cradled my cheek. “Show you off and let everyone know you’re mine. But it’s not forever. It’s for now. And as long as I have you, I’ll deal with whatever I have to.”

He had me, all right. Since I was a kid, I’d sworn I’d never plan my life around a boy. I wouldn’t assimilate to whatever guy I was dating like my mother did, and I’d be my own person. It was all part of my vow never to be like her.

I wasn’t planning around Silas. I wanted to plan with him.

“Would making out with a jock on the bleachers round out the high school fantasy?” Silas asked, draping his hand across my throat to lift my head. The wicked smile curving his lips was somehow full of love at the same time.

Or maybe that was all my crazy love for him reflected at me.

“To be honest, in my fantasy, it was a football player, but I can settle.”

He reached for my waist, tickling my side before hauling me onto his lap, our faces so close his breath fanned hot against my chin.

“Well then, I’ll have to make it really good, so you forget everyone but me.”

Silas took my mouth in a hungry kiss. It was deep and dirty, yet somehow so sweet

tears pricked my eyes. He slid his hands up and down my thighs, digging his fingers into my hips as he dragged me closer. I whimpered into his mouth as his low groan vibrated against my chest.

“Good?” He rested his forehead against mine, his lips still wet from our kiss as a smile danced across his mouth.

“Not bad,” I teased, pressing my mouth to his for another slow kiss. My toes curled in my sneakers when his tongue slid against mine. I didn’t want this kiss, this moment, or this weekend to end.

Instead of losing myself in Silas, I’d found who I really was—and who I could be if I stopped letting old fears get in the way.

CHAPTER THIRTY

SILAS

“Aren’t you supposed to be inside?” I called out to Rachel as I tried to balance my umbrella against the wind and rain. A wave of brutal heat had given way to massive thunderstorms all throughout the city. We’d managed to land on time, but the worst of it seemed to hit just as I parked my truck around the corner from Rachel’s house.

She swirled around, her gorgeous eyes lighting up when they met mine. She was soaked from her shorts to her sneakers as she jogged to me across the puddles on the sidewalk.

“So much for a welcome-home barbecue,” she said, gripping her umbrella in one hand and fisting my T-shirt with the other to pull me in for a kiss too wet and deep to be outdoors, especially when we weren’t supposed to be seen together. But the sheets of rain and large umbrellas gave us enough shelter for a good hello.

“It’s okay. Indoor grilling is fine.”

“No, it’s not,” she muttered, her beautiful mouth pulling into a frown. “Taylor and I were so pumped to finally have someone use the barbecue who knew how, but the charcoal we put in last night is already soaked. Hot dogs and hamburgers on the stove don’t hit the same.” She held up the bag. “I ran out to get the hot dog buns we forgot. My sister is upstairs, making this big pasta salad for you, so just tell her how good it is, no matter how it comes out.”

“I’m sure it’s great. We have until early fall to use the grill.” I tucked a wet lock of hair behind her ear. It had been almost two weeks since I’d seen her, and I’d been going out of my mind. I’d grill and sit in the rain as long as I’d be next to her.

“We got you an apron and everything,” she said, curling an arm around my waist. “Maybe you can wear it later.”

I laughed when she popped her brows.

“So, you have a chef fantasy too? I mean, that’s fine, just making sure I keep up.”

She shoved my chest and pulled on my soggy shirt sleeve. “Let’s get upstairs. My feet are soaked and gross, and I’m starving.”

I followed her inside, shaking the rain out of my hair and my umbrella before I set it down next to her front door.

“What?” I asked when I caught her staring.

“You look good wet.” She shrugged, her gaze drifting over me as a smile curved her lips. “Can’t help it if I notice.”

I stalked over to where she waited at the bottom of the inside stairs.

“I always love you wet, but that’s for later.” I swatted her denim-covered ass. “Get upstairs so we can eat with your sister.”

Her giggle was music to my ears and frayed nerves. The Bats were having their best season on record, but the closer we inched toward a possible play-off spot, the more pressure settled into my chest. I was constantly checking on the guys and making sure they didn’t have any injuries they weren’t telling me about.

Nate insisted his shoulder had never felt better whenever I'd catch him wince at the plate. He was making contact more than striking out, and Lee had been keeping a close watch, but I had a bad feeling Nate had been holding back about how much pain he was really in.

Which was what I had to do with all this anxiety. In my playing days, I'd just go extra hard if I suspected anyone on my team wasn't feeling right to make up for it, but as I was the manager and not an active participant in the games, I had to just watch. It was frustrating enough to make my skin itch from the dugout.

I ran into Rachel's back when she stopped short.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, fear and anger lacing the tone of her voice.

I rushed in front of her and found a man and woman perched on Rachel's couch. The woman was slim, her black hair making her pale skin seem even whiter, with brown eyes that matched Rachel's.

"We haven't met," the woman stood, ignoring Rachel's question as she beamed at me. "I'm Christy. Rachel and Taylor's mother. This is my fiancé, Jared."

"Fiancé?" Rachel coughed out a laugh as Christy extended her hand to me.

I eyed it for a long minute before I took it.

"Yes, fiancé. My daughter is a little judgmental," she whispered to me, holding on to my hand when I tried to slip it away. "I guess we're crashing a party today."

My gaze drifted to Taylor, standing by the kitchen with her arms tightly crossed around her torso as if she were shielding herself. I could spot her tremble from across the room.

I'd known her mother was a piece of work, but the way she shot the breeze with me despite the obvious discomfort of both her daughters made me see red.

"No, you're not. Take your fiancé and go. I told you not to come back."

"I came to pick up Taylor. Jared and I got an apartment in Fort Lee, and I thought she could stay with us and check out the local high school."

"Why would she want to do that?" Rachel asked her mother, her tone low as she took slow, deep breaths.

"I was thinking it was time she moved in with me. Get away from dirty Brooklyn," Christy scoffed, sweeping her gaze around the living room.

"I'm her guardian. You signed over all your rights, remember?" Rachel said through gritted teeth. I stepped close to her, grabbing her arm when I noticed it shake.

Christy waved a dismissive hand.

"I figured it was more convenient that way. In case I wasn't around for some random form or permission slip. Why are you fighting me? You finally have a life." She nodded toward me. "Taylor, pack a bag, honey."

"No!" Rachel bellowed, loud enough for Taylor to flinch, but her mother barely made eye contact. "Taylor is my kid now, legally. I can take you to court. And what the hell do you want with her after all this time?"

"I'm ready for a family," Christy said, squaring her bony shoulders. "Jared and I discussed it."

"I'm definitely ready for kids," Jared said, still sitting on the couch as he lifted a

tattooed hand to scratch his head. “So, it’s good that Chris already has one.”

His clueless laugh made my vision blur, enough rage surging in me for my hand to ball into a fist at my side. This was what Rachel had been forced to deal with her entire life, and thinking of all she’d had to endure with such a cruel and selfish parent turned my fucking stomach.

Yet, somehow, she’d grown up to be the most beautiful person I’d ever known.

This would be the last day she or her sister would ever deal with this again. Picking up both these two lowlifes by the neck and tossing them onto the sidewalk wasn’t the conduct my contract had told me I had to uphold, but I didn’t give a shit.

“My buddy says Fort Lee has a good girls’ softball team,” Jared said, nodding at the photo of Taylor with her team on the wall. “With legs like that, it would be a waste to stop playing.”

Blood roared in my veins as his eyes raked over Taylor.

“You shouldn’t be looking at a teenage girl’s legs,” I growled, eating up the steps between the door and couch in two strides to get in the fucker’s face. “Or looking at her, period.”

“I’m just saying. Chill out, man,” Jared said, holding up his hands.

“So, you want her as a prop?” Rachel said, her voice still shaking. “Like when you took her for ice cream when she was little because you were screwing the owner of the shop. No. Fucking. Way,” she said, her jaw so tight I caught it ticking. “I don’t want you or your loser fiancé anywhere near my sister.”

Christy rolled her eyes, unaffected and bored when she met Rachel’s gaze. “You

know they always side with the real parent in things like this. What lawyer would you use? Aunt Lucy's?" She snickered. "He's two steps away from an ambulance chaser, and not big steps."

Rachel stepped in front of her when Christy shifted toward Taylor.

"And what happens when he moves on and you have no use for having a daughter around? You'll just drop her back off?"

"She's fourteen." Her mother shrugged. "She can fend for herself."

"Thirteen!" Rachel yelled back. "And she's still a kid."

"Fine, you know her age better than me. Really, I thought you'd appreciate me giving you a break. But if you want to fight me in court with some dopey lawyer who won't win, I guess you could try?—"

"I have a lawyer," I interrupted, glaring back at Jared on the couch. "A savage, really fucking expensive one."

"Holy shit." Jared popped off the couch, stretching out his arm to point at me. "Do you know who he is?"

"No. Who is he?" Christy asked, her eyes narrowed as she looked between us.

"That's...that's Silas Jones," he stammered. "He's a baseball legend. A five-time Gold Glove winner, and he has like five championship rings."

"Six," I corrected, a smile twitching at my lips when I met Christy's panicked gaze.

"You were in my fantasy league so many times. I made a shit-ton of money off you,"

Jared said, laughing from behind me as I strode up to the wretched woman Rachel and Taylor ended up with as a mother.

“I made a ton of money too,” I said, my tone low and menacing as I stood over Christy, shooting her a wide grin as the color drained from her face. “My salary was in the millions all throughout my career and still is. If you try to take Taylor today, and you won’t because you’ll never get past me,” I gritted out and looked back at Jared, still too starstruck to register my threat, “it would be my great pleasure to make your life a living hell. Harassment, child endangerment, child abandonment charges. I could have every paycheck of yours until you’re an old woman go to Taylor for back child support.”

“No, you couldn’t,” Christy said, trying to sound indignant despite the fear in her vacant eyes.

“Oh, but I could.” My smile deepened. “And it would be my honor and privilege to make you suffer for as long as I can afford to.”

She squinted at me, her jaw tight and quivering.

“And so you know,” I leaned in to whisper, “I can afford to for a long, long time.”

“Why would you even do that?” Christy asked, her voice shaky from obvious nerves.

“Because I love Rachel. More than anything in this world. And there is nothing I wouldn’t do for her or Taylor. Somehow, even with a mother like you, Rachel grew up to be the most amazing person I’ve ever known. And they’ve both suffered enough, thanks to you.”

Christy backed up with each step I took toward her.

“So, if I were you—” I nodded to the door behind me “—I would get out and never come back. Because if you try to reach out to either one of them or come within fifty feet of this house, I’ll make sure you spend the night in a dirty Brooklyn jail.”

Christy sniffed, giving Rachel one last glare and shaking her head.

“Come on, Jared. Let’s go.”

He followed, shuffling to the door as he dug into his pockets.

“Hey, before we go,” he said, holding up a pen and a crumpled receipt. “Can I get your autograph?”

I grabbed the pen and the receipt from his hand and flung them across the floor.

“I think that’s a no,” Rachel said, her voice calmer despite how her nails dug into my arm.

Christy pushed Jared out the door, not looking back at either of her daughters as they rushed toward the stairs.

“I’m sorry. I thought she was you,” Taylor said in a small voice after I shut and locked the door behind them. “I went downstairs to let you in, and I didn’t know what to do when she pushed past me.”

“I know, sis.” Rachel rushed over and grabbed her face. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“She can’t...” Taylor trailed off, her eyes welling with tears. “She can’t really do that, right? Make me go with her.”

“No, and she won’t,” I said, coming up to them and squeezing Taylor’s arm. “We’ll start a restraining order as a precaution, but I don’t think she’s coming back.” I tapped her chin so she’d look up. “No one is taking you away from your sister. I can promise you that.”

She nodded, dropping her head into my chest.

“Thank you,” she murmured into my shirt, her words muffled with sobs.

“Shh, don’t cry, kiddo,” I crooned, wrapping my arms around her. “It’s going to be okay. They’re both gone and not coming back. And if they’re stupid enough to try, they won’t know what hit them.”

I rocked her back and forth as she cried softly into my collar.

“So, we’re going to regroup a little,” I started, gently pushing her back by her shoulders. “And then we’re going to have the best damn indoor barbecue in history. I was promised pasta salad.”

She let out a watery laugh and wiped at her cheeks.

“You really scared them.”

I had no doubt that Rachel would have fought her mother and won, but if I hadn’t been here, it would have been a scary night for them both. I had another thing to worry about while I was on the road, but I’d call my lawyer in the morning to see what I could do to protect them while I was away.

Because I’d meant every word I said. Rachel meant everything to me, and I?—

Shit. I’d said I loved her. I’d told Rachel’s mother that I loved Rachel before I told

her. It had just slipped out.

When Taylor trudged back into the kitchen, I looked for Rachel in the living room, and she was nowhere to be found. As I moved down her short hallway, the sobs coming from the other side of her closed bedroom door made my stomach drop.

I knocked and opened the door before I gave her a chance to answer.

“Don’t cry, baby,” I said, rushing to the bed where she was crumpled into a ball. “No one is taking Taylor.” I lay next to her, gently rolling her over until she faced me. Her eyes were red as they met mine, thick tears snaking down her cheeks.

“Of all the shit I’ve been through with that woman,” she said, wiping her face with the back of her hand like her sister had done a few minutes ago. “This was the first time I’ve ever been scared. She’d come and go when I was a kid, but I had my grandmother. And then when Taylor was born, she pretty much handed her off to me because she couldn’t be bothered. I knew she was planning something, but I didn’t think she’d try to take her.”

I had to focus on calming Rachel down and not running after her mother and fiancé to make damn sure they never came back.

“She’s not.” I rested my head on the pillow next to her. “Trust me. My lawyer is the biggest asshole on the planet. He can hit her with all kinds of lawsuits and charges.” I swiped her tears with my thumbs. “I will make sure she never hurts you again.”

“I’m not crying because I’m hurt. My mother hasn’t hurt me since I was little.” Rachel sat up, rubbing at her eyes. “I’m crying because if it weren’t for you, I could have lost my sister tonight. I would have fought to get her back, but I’m not sure I would have been able to stop them from taking her.”

“You would have. Jared is a tool. You’re a tough cookie with a powerful punch. I speak from experience.”

I coaxed a laugh out of her as she scrubbed a hand down her face, a soft smile curving her lips when her gaze found me.

“So, you love me, huh?”

“You caught that? Not how I wanted it to come out.” I wove my hand into her still rain-soaked hair. “But yeah. I love you. So fucking much.”

Her face crumpled before she grabbed the back of my head, pressing her mouth to mine in a desperate kiss. Now that the words were finally out, the relief was palpable. Her mouth was salty and sweet, her tears still staining her skin.

I’d set the world on fire before I’d let anyone or anything hurt her.

“I probably loved you from that first day, and that’s why I couldn’t let you leave,” I said against her lips, not wanting to tear my mouth away from hers. “And now I’ve got you, and I will never let anything happen to you,” I said as I gently grasped a fistful of her hair, giving it a pull so she’d look up. “So you’re not going to worry about this.”

“I love you too, so much.” She feathered her hand down my cheek. “But I can’t make you spend money on a lawyer.”

“You can. He’s on retainer and he’s been bored. The most action he’s seen from me is when I had him take down a video montage of my dick in baseball pants.”

“He took it down? It’s not anywhere to look up?” Her brow quirked up.

“No, because he’s good at his job.” I glided my hand up and down her thigh. “I told you I wanted to take care of you. So let me do it, okay?”

“I still wonder if you’re real sometimes. Like I conjured you up on the page and you’re some kind of fever dream.”

I smiled at her soggy chuckle and drew her into my chest.

She melted into me, her body relaxed for the first time since we’d come through the door.

“I’m real, Slugger. And all fucking yours.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SILAS

“So, his season is over?” Kent asked Lou, our head trainer, as we waited outside Nate’s hospital room. For once, he appeared concerned about something besides ticket sales and social media follows, although losing Nate could render a big loss of both for the Bats.

“I really can’t tell you. Until all the tests come back, we have no idea what kind of damage has been done. He’s young and healthy, so that works in his favor, but...” Lou trailed off, turning his head toward the curtain around Nate’s bed. “I can’t tell you anything right now.”

We’d been practicing for our first game in Boston this morning when I’d spotted Nate go down at the plate.

We all rushed over and found him rolling back and forth in the dirt, clutching his shoulder. I’d hoped he’d stand up and tell us all to back off, but when I spied the angry tears in his eyes, I’d known it was bad.

We’d been at the hospital all day as he underwent all sorts of examinations and tests. Our doctors consulted with the ones at the hospital, but no real conclusions were made.

The tests we’d sent him for a few weeks ago had shown nothing but a minor muscle strain, so the trainers had worked with him to keep it strong and flexible, depending

on him to tell us his level of pain. I didn't know if this was a worsening injury or a new one, just that it was excruciating enough for him to leave the field without a fight.

Ending his season now would be terrible. Most of it was already gone, but we were closer to a play-off spot than any of us had anticipated, and we needed Nate. But if this was a career-ending injury, I was too worried about him to consider what that would mean for the team. I'd have to worry about it soon, but thinking of it all ending for him in his twenties, remembering how devastating it had been for me at forty-two, made me sick to my stomach.

I may not have been able to get as close to him personally as the other guys, but we'd grown into a mutual respect. He'd worked hard, and when he was on point, his talent could almost make me overlook the arrogance he still held on to, although it was noticeably less than at the start of the season.

We were on our way to clinching a wild card spot, and with one of our best players possibly gone, I didn't know how we'd do it. I'd have management expectations to figure out and a sharp drop in team morale to contend with.

I tried to inhale but couldn't take in a full breath.

"I'll go talk to him," I said, heading into his room with a slow approach in case the painkillers had knocked him out.

"Let me guess. I'm out," Nate rasped in a gravelly voice.

"We're waiting on tests. No one knows anything yet."

He rolled his head toward me as he leaned into the pillow.

“How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Figure out how to live when your career was over.”

“You don’t know that. And that mind-set won’t help you now. You’re young and strong. I was an old man when I blew out my knee,” I said, smiling when I caught the corner of his mouth lift. “Had I been your age, I would have told the doctors to fuck off and fought to come back even if they told me I couldn’t.”

He nodded, pressing his hand to his forehead.

“I don’t know who I am without this.”

I felt every tortured word. I’d been in a hospital bed, staring at the lights and wondering what the hell to do with the rest of my life. But at least I’d gotten to do what I’d loved for half of it, and I hoped for the same for Nate.

“I’m planning on you coming back, and you should be too. I bet, soon, you’ll be as good as new, and you can tell me to fuck off whenever I ask about your shoulder.”

He huffed out a laugh.

“Thanks, Coach.”

“Anytime,” I said, giving his arm a soft jab. “Get some sleep. Pain meds make it nice and dreamless.”

“Shit, I hope so,” he said on a yawn. “Good luck tomorrow.”

Our game was at noon tomorrow, and the assistant coaches had taken over running the rest of practice. We'd be as ready as we could be, and I couldn't do anything beyond that.

"Go back to the hotel and get some sleep." Kent slapped my back on my way out. "Nothing we can do about it now."

"Right. See you tomorrow," I said, trudging out of the hospital exit and plopping down on an outside bench as I arranged for a cab back to the hotel on my phone.

I'd called Rachel after we'd rushed Nate to the hospital this morning, needing her voice to calm the chaos in my brain as always. She had no answers, but none of us did. The guys were looking to me to lead, but I had no one to follow.

It was the loneliest feeling in the world.

Too wired to try to sleep, I stopped at the hotel bar for a drink. I couldn't have more than one or else I'd really be useless tomorrow, but maybe the liquor would uncoil my nerves enough to sleep.

I slid onto a stool at the bar and pulled up my texts with Rachel. She hadn't written back since I'd spoken to her this morning, which wasn't like her. Maybe something was going on with Taylor today. We hadn't talked about her plans for the day since it was all about me and my worries over Nate and my team and what the hell I would do.

My girl deserved more attention than that, and I needed to get out of this shitty mind space so I could be who everyone needed me to be.

But right now, I needed to be the lost asshole at the bar trying to find the answers to all his problems at the bottom of his bourbon glass.

“Excuse me, sir.”

My head shot up at the bartender’s voice.

“The lady over there wants to buy you a second drink of whatever you’re having.”

I held in a groan, not in the damn mood for this tonight. Since Kent would lose his shit over any nasty behavior that could make its way on to social media, and rude was never my style, I tried to smile and shook my head.

“Tell the lady thank you, but I have a girlfriend so I’m going to decline.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “I’ll let her know.”

I hoped she’d take no for an answer and I could just go upstairs without a hassle and try for a few hours of sleep.

“I should’ve known. The hot ones are always taken.”

My head whipped around to a very familiar voice. I blinked a few times, wondering if I was hallucinating Rachel’s face on the woman settling next to me at the bar.

“You didn’t even pick up your head to see what I looked like. Whoever your girlfriend is, she’s one lucky lady.”

I wasn’t sure if it was my exhaustion or shock that left me speechless. Rachel was here. In Boston, on a stool next to me at the bar. Smiling and carefree like that day we’d met in Williamsburg.

Her lips were painted a bright cherry red that matched her skintight red dress. Her chestnut hair brushed her shoulders in loose waves as she crossed her legs, the swells

of her breasts fighting with the low neckline.

Jessica fucking Rabbit.

How the hell had she pulled this off? This explained why I hadn't heard from her since this morning, but how long had she been waiting for me at the bar? Looking like that?

All good questions I wanted the answers to, but right now, my only interest was in playing along.

"You look a little sad," she said, jutting out her crimson lip in a pout. I wanted to bite it, along with the rest of her. "Missing your girl?" she asked, tilting her head as she set her large purse on the stool next to her.

"I am." I nodded. "I always do, but especially on long trips like this. Sleeping in a king-sized bed by myself is a little lonely."

"I bet." Her eyes traveled up and down my body as she leaned back. "What do you do for a living that you're this built? Football player?"

I stifled a laugh as she waved at the bartender.

"Since he didn't want a drink, I'll buy myself one." She rubbed her hands together. "You can give me whatever he's having," she said, narrowing her eyes at me.

"Bourbon," I said, lifting my glass.

"Sounds perfect," she said, leaning over the bar.

He nodded, giving Rachel a long once-over that almost had me over the counter and

in his face, but he didn't know she was with me.

And I couldn't fight every man in this bar. That dress was pure fire and sin, and while I hated anyone looking at my girl, I couldn't blame them.

"So, back to you. What do you do?"

"I'm a ballplayer. Baseball, so sorry to disappoint you."

"Oh, that is disappointing." She frowned. "But I bet you're hot in uniform. Of course, I can't make that judgment until you stand up." Her eyes flicked to the back of my chair as she muttered a thank-you to the bartender when he set the glass in front of her, almost breaking character when she sputtered the first sip.

Bourbon wasn't Rachel's drink of choice. She preferred a margarita, a glass of wine, or something sweet and fruity. The harder stuff wasn't her thing, but she loved a good fantasy.

"I guess you're on a long stretch of games?" She traced her finger around the rim of the glass. "Too bad you can't ease the loneliness somehow. But I guess it's hard to do that without some company, right?" She took another sip, her face twisting in a grimace as she set it down. I had to sink my teeth into my bottom lip to stop myself from laughing.

She was sexy and so damn adorable.

"This is my second week on the road. It's tough. What about you? You're here alone, so you must be a little lonely too, right?"

"Sure, maybe a little. But I like being alone. See, I'm a writer, so I get the best inspiration just by people-watching. And you caught my eye the minute you came

in.” She propped her elbow on the counter, resting her chin on her palm. “I bet you have a ton of good stories.”

“A writer. What kinds of stories do you write?”

“Dirty ones,” she said with a wink. “I guess that’s why the hot ballplayer in the room gave me the most inspiration.”

“Glad I could help. So, what do you mean by inspiration exactly?” I inched closer, grazing my knuckle from the back of her calf to where the hem started at her thigh. “Does that mean you’ll leave me and go upstairs and write the sexiest scene you can dream up? Or...” I flattened my palm and skated my hand over her knee, teasing the inside of her leg. “You’ll slip your hand in between those beautiful legs and play with that soaked pussy until the thought of me makes you come.”

She let out a gasp, clenching her legs shut around my hand.

“I’m wrong? I see how you’re looking at me. I bet you’re drenched. If only I could check to make sure. I bet you taste nice and sweet too.”

Her gaze swept over the bar. It was a Thursday night. The crowd was filling up but sparse enough for the moment.

Her lips curled as she gripped my wrist, spreading her thighs just enough for me to swipe the wet skin between her legs.

A satisfied smile pulled across her mouth. She was in that dress, in this bar, with no fucking underwear.

My head spun, the lust potent enough for my cock to almost pop through my zipper. The possessive caveman in me was about to hoist her over my shoulder so no other

man would see her in that dress—and what was or wasn't underneath—but me.

“I was right.” Her nostrils flared as I drifted my finger up and down in soft, slow strokes. Her legs jerked when I found her clit, flicking it as she dripped all over my hand.

“That’s inspiring, all right,” I said, my voice husky as I slipped my hand away and sucked the tip of my finger. Fuck, she was always so sweet. I was going to eat her pussy until they dragged me out of my hotel room at game time tomorrow.

“I think I’ll call it a night,” I said, sliding off the stool and dropping a couple of bills onto the counter. “If I could help you out with more inspiration,” I said, coming up behind her and pressing my hands on the bar, boxing her in, “I’m in room 723.”

I strode out of the bar and toward the elevators, not looking back as I hit the button.

“Oh wow, Silas Jones!”

A man approached me just as I was about to get on the elevator. He wore a Boston baseball cap as he met my gaze with bulging eyes, gaping at me as he extended his hand. “I’m a big fan,” he said, shaking my hand with a little too much bounce.

“Thanks, even though I’m playing against your team tomorrow?”

He let out a chuckle. “You’re still a legend. Tough break on Becker. I mean, good for us, but not so good for you, right?”

“It’s a tough break, but we have a great team. I wouldn’t count the win just yet.” I forced a tight smile. We were more than one player, but no one realized that. I had to make sure the guys knew it tomorrow or this good season would crumble fast.

“It was nice to meet you,” he said, waving as he headed toward the exit. I nodded back, getting on the next elevator as I tried to shelve all the bullshit I’d have to deal with tomorrow to tomorrow.

I had a gorgeous stranger to take to my bed for the night.

“Goodness. What took you so long?” Rachel asked, her arms crossed over her beautiful tits, pushing them up even more as she leaned against my door. “What’s a girl have to do for some solid inspiration around here?”

I should have opened my door, pushed her inside, and ripped that dress off her like I’d wanted to do since she sat next to me. Instead, I couldn’t wait one more second for that lush mouth on mine. I grabbed her by the waist, backed her into the wall next to the door, and crushed my mouth to hers. One hand went to her hair as my other one shot up her bare thigh.

She squirmed against me as I dug my fingers into her ass, pressing my painful erection against her core, my cock throbbing as it remembered how bare she was underneath.

“Get the fuck inside,” I growled, swiping my keycard over the lock and pushing her inside once the lock beeped.

“On the bed,” I said, so turned on I barely had the air to get any words out.

She smiled, climbing onto the big mattress and propping herself up on her elbows.

“I love a man who knows what he wants.”

She yelped when I climbed next to her and flipped us over, bunching the hem of her dress as I lifted it above her hips.

“What I want is for you to climb up and ride my face until you come.”

I grabbed her thighs and pulled her up, positioning that beautiful pussy right where I wanted it.

“So pretty,” I said, spreading her open with my thumbs and giving her one long lick. “So sweet and so pretty,” I rasped before I buried my head between her legs, licking and sucking every soaked inch as she bucked her hips against my face.

“That’s it. What a good girl you are.” I dragged kisses along her damp thigh. “Ride me harder.”

“I’ll kill you,” she croaked out, her legs already shaking as I snaked my tongue deep inside her, lapping at her clit.

“Holy shit,” she moaned, grabbing the headboard with both hands as she rocked into me.

“You won’t kill me, and if you do, no better way to die, sweetheart.” I sucked her clit into my mouth and slid two fingers inside her, twisting as I inched them out.

She shook from the waist down as she screamed, coating my tongue as her legs went rigid against my face.

Her chest heaved as she draped a hand over her eyes, sucking in a deep breath before she sat up.

“I don’t think I’ve ever come that hard.”

“You said you wanted inspiration,” I said, holding her eyes as I licked my lips.

Fuck, she tasted good.

“I know I just got a ton.”

She grinned, lifting her still-quivering leg to straddle me as she popped my jeans open and dragged the zipper down until my cock sprang free.

“My turn,” she whispered as she bent her head and swallowed me whole.

Fuck, I wasn't going to last. Her dress bunched around her waist as her head bobbed between my legs, moaning around my cock. I was about to come hard too, but I didn't want to like this.

“Get up here,” I said, my voice a low growl as I lifted her up by her underarms and pulled her back on the bed. “Spread your legs for me,” I told her, hooking her leg over my hip as I slid inside her with one quick thrust.

“Silas,” she said on a long whimper when I picked up the pace, the mattress creaking under us as I went deeper and harder.

“You going to come for me again, pretty girl?” I grunted out, reaching between us to play with her clit. “Show me how much you wanted me in the bar. Make a mess all over my cock and come for me. Yes, that's it. Such a good fucking girl.”

She clenched around me, making me come hard enough for spots to burst under my eyelids. I grabbed the pillow instead of Rachel's hair, afraid I'd pull too hard as I spilled inside her.

“Sorry I broke character first,” she said, laughing against my shoulder.

“How did you get here?” I asked, still gasping as I chased my breath.

“I planned on surprising you here tomorrow. But you sounded so upset today.” She ran her fingers through my sweaty hair. “I called Auden to see if she could stay with Taylor tonight so I could come see you earlier. I switched my train ticket from tomorrow to today, and here I am.”

My eyes fluttered closed when her nails grazed my scalp.

“You sounded like you needed me. I bought the red dress a while ago.” She settled on her side. “Not quite Jessica Rabbit, but close enough.”

“It’s perfect.” I pecked her lips. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too. I didn’t plan on the whole role-play thing. I figured you’d turn around to see who wanted to buy you a drink.” She kissed my cheek.

“Why would I? I don’t need or want anyone else but you. I had no reason to look.”

“Well, yes, and I love you for that. But I figured you’d see it was me and we’d just come upstairs. I didn’t plan on all that, but it was fun as hell.”

She chuckled, cuddling into my side.

“I stuffed a tank top and shorts—and underwear—” her mouth curled into a grin “—into my big purse so I don’t have to go home in a fuck-me red dress tomorrow morning.”

“Fuck-me red is definitely accurate,” I said, pinching the material between my fingers. “Did I ever tell you how gorgeous you are?” I ran my finger over the blush staining her cheek.

“Yes, but feel free to keep repeating it.”

“That was a lot of fun. But know what’s even more fun?”

She shook her head. “What?”

“I get to wake up next to you on what I expected to be the shittiest day of my managing career so far. And that makes it already not so bad.” I drew her closer. “When did you get here?”

“Like a half hour ago. More or less.”

“Then I have to feed you.” I delved my hand through her tangled hair. “I have more inspiration for you, so you’ll need to keep up.”

“You take care of me,” she said, lacing our fingers together, “and I’ll take care of you.”

No one had taken care of me since I was a kid. Not at home, especially not on the road.

I did need her, and I was sick of hiding the woman I loved. When I got home, the first thing I was going to do was put a stop to that.

I’d tell the whole goddamn world that this woman belonged to me as much as she owned me right back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

RACHEL

The alarm blared from my phone as I blinked my heavy eyes open. Silas still dozed next to me, unfazed, his grip tight around my waist even in a deep sleep. I'd booked the nine a.m. train to Penn Station, and I wished I could lounge in bed until Silas's game this afternoon.

Losing Becker would be rough for the team, whether it was for a few weeks or the season. Silas had sounded so tired and defeated when he'd called me, I couldn't let him take this on all alone.

I guessed that was what it was like when you had a partner in life. There was no way I could just wait for his phone call after the game without seeing in person that he was okay.

And he was, or he would be. Knowing that didn't make leaving easier, and even if I had time to stay, I couldn't.

What reason would I have to travel to a Bats game on a workday? I had nothing more to do for the account at work. Everything else we were doing for them was a regular marketing campaign without the PR. Their sponsorship of my sister's team had ended with their season back in June, so I had no ties to the Bats or explanation for being here.

Other than being in love with their manager.

I kept trying to think of loopholes for that stupid clause in our contract. The marketing initiatives were ending, and Silas wasn't the one signing the checks for promotion since he was just an employee of the organization. Maybe if we could prove that we started dating after the partnership was over, we could get away with it.

But I was smart enough to know that wouldn't happen. Even after our dealings with the Bats were finished, the stain on our reputation for getting too involved with a client was still fresh enough to allow for no exceptions.

If it were just me, I could leave before I had to tell anyone about my personal life—that should have always been personal—and take freelance jobs. I'd done well in freelance, other than scraping by on out-of-pocket insurance payments.

Taylor needed health insurance and a parent who thought of her more than the man in her life. I wasn't our mother and still put my sister first, but I couldn't deny how much Silas meant to me and how terrible it was to hide him and us.

"I'm pretending I didn't hear that alarm. And that I get to keep you in bed all day long."

"Um, you have a game to coach," I said, still not making a move to get out of bed as Silas buried his face into my neck, his stubble scraping my skin as he peppered kisses across my shoulder.

"No time for sad breakfast?"

I laughed, remembering our first morning in a hotel room. I hadn't wanted to get out of his bed then either but for much different reasons.

I'd see him again, but other than close friends and family, no one would know. I hated how it cheapened what we had, and I really hated how I couldn't figure out a

way around it.

“No. I need to get the train back to Penn, and the station here is about thirty minutes away.”

“I don’t like you traveling all this way by yourself.”

I laughed, finally pushing away from Silas and swinging my legs over the side of the bed.

“I’m fine. Plus, all that time alone is good for plotting my next book. Thanks to the hot ballplayer in the bar last night, I have a ton of ideas.”

Silas’s mouth curved into a sleepy smile as he watched me pluck my clothes off the floor.

“How do you start? A book, I mean. I’ve always wondered where writers begin.”

“Everyone is different,” I said as I slid on my bra. “Personally, I start with tropes.”

“You start with what?” Silas asked me on a yawn.

“I guess I start with what I want the story to be. Like a second chance, age gap, forced proximity, friends to lovers. Maybe think of it as the colors I use to paint the picture.”

“What are our colors?” he asked, lounging against the headboard, resting the back of his head on his hand. His eyes were hazy as they fixed on me. He was so beautiful, and leaving him was already excruciating. “Besides age gap.”

I laughed at his narrowed eyes.

“Well,” I started after I pulled on my tank top and sat on the edge of the bed, “forbidden lovers, forced proximity. Since we couldn’t seem to escape each other.”

“I never wanted to escape you.”

“Same,” I said. “And celebrity, since you know, all the reels. And it always comes with a happily ever after.” I stood, bending over the bed to brush his lips. “Guaranteed.”

I scratched at the extra stubble on his chin.

“You’re damn right it does.”

“I better go because you need to shave before you get into uniform.”

The sun bled through the hotel curtains. I wished I’d booked an earlier train to lessen the chance of running into anyone on the team. We’d taken a big risk in the bar last night, but I hadn’t seen anyone from the Bats, and the team they were playing didn’t know me.

We were either going to come clean or get caught since we were becoming sloppy. The scary part was, even though I was supposed to, I was beginning not to care.

“You didn’t have to walk me all the way outside,” I told Silas as we strolled through the lobby. “I don’t even have luggage to carry.”

“I will get you into a cab, and then you can text me from the train station here and when you get to Penn.”

“Any specific stops you want to hear from me in between?”

“Just humor me,” he said, squinting at me as a cab pulled up to the entrance. Other than the driver and the hotel staff, no one was around but us.

“I love you,” he said, pressing his mouth to mine for a quick but toe-curling kiss. “Get home safe, Slugger.”

“Have a good game, Coach,” I said, smoothing my hand down his shirt as I brushed his lips. “I love you too.”

I stepped into the cab and scooted toward the middle of the seat as Silas shut the door.

Keeping my gaze straight ahead despite feeling Silas’s eyes on me as the driver pulled away, I pulled out my phone and searched for my train ticket. I hoped my phone had enough battery life until I arrived home. I’d forgotten to pack a charger in my mad rush out the door as I’d been too preoccupied with getting to and being with Silas. I didn’t think to borrow his before we drifted off to sleep.

Maybe one day, one of us wouldn’t have to sneak out in the morning like a thief in the night, but until then, I had to accept this empty, frustrating-as-fuck feeling as normal whenever we parted ways.

Despite how much I hated it.

I arrived home around one and found Auden working from my kitchen table. Taylor was watching TV, at least out of her pajamas today. I was letting her lounge until her softball camp started next week, another expense that reminded me of how reckless my impromptu trip to see my secret boyfriend had been.

Or forbidden boyfriend. Either term pissed me off.

“Hey, guys. Nice to see you awake, sis.”

Taylor grunted a hello as she burrowed her head into the couch cushion.

“Hey, girl. Have a good trip?” Auden asked with a lilt to her voice.

Taylor had been at a friend’s house when I’d left, so she hadn’t seen me all dolled up in a red dress and lipstick. She was a teenager who noticed more than I liked to think about, but if she’d seen what I’d looked like before I’d left for Boston, finding an innocent way to explain would have made me break out in a cold sweat.

“I had a great trip. I’m still a little worried about him, but he’ll be okay. I hope they win so what’s going on with Becker doesn’t get into their heads.”

I fished my phone out of my purse and plugged it in after I set it on the table next to my work laptop. My phone had died right before my train pulled into Penn so I couldn’t text Silas like he’d asked me to.

“I told Gayle I’d log on late this afternoon just to check in, but no meetings so I don’t have to fix myself.”

“Lucky you. I have a management meeting at four. Who does that on a Friday afternoon? Personally, I come in checked out on a Friday.”

I laughed until I noticed the slew of notifications on my screen and three missed calls from Gayle as my phone chirped back to life.

The alerts were from social media. I didn’t get many notifications other than during a book launch, so to see this many was already unnerving enough to kick up my heartbeat.

I swiped on one and my heart seized. It was a shot of me at the bar next to Silas. You couldn’t see where his hand was, but both of us looked at each other with enough

intent not to be innocent.

A sports gossip influencer had tagged my author account in the shot and wrote, “Silas Jones has a hot date as Becker waits to find out if his season is over.”

How had they recognized me? My phone shook in my hands as my vision blurred.

“What’s going on?” Auden asked, gripping my hand. “You look like you’re having a heart attack.”

“Because I am,” I said, my voice quavering from the rapid and sudden increase in my pulse. I went to the next notification, and a surge of panic rushed through my veins. It was a picture of me, draped outside the door of Silas’s hotel room as he approached, the logo on the back of his Bats T-shirt facing the camera.

“R.M. Dioro, an indie romance novelist linked to Silas Jones, has also been identified as Rachel Manning, copywriter for the same PR agency that has put the Brooklyn Bats on everyone’s radar this season. Now that’s what I call doing business.”

It hadn’t even been a full day since that photo had been taken, and I had already been doxed and humiliated.

I slid my phone to Auden, unable to speak, and I let the photos, tags, and notifications speak for themselves.

I didn’t want to know what else they’d seen and posted, and right now, they’d posted enough.

Not only was I seen with Silas, my pen name and personal identity had been linked and shared all over the place, and this was just one platform. Influencers like this always cross-posted over a ton of different sites.

I'd been ready to be caught as Silas and Rachel, but I hadn't planned on coming out as R.M. Dioro to everyone. I didn't hide it and would show my face when I had to on my author pages and events, but I had a pen name for a reason.

I could choose who I told about my other career, and while I'd had moderate success as an author, I wasn't big enough to be recognized on the street or during a work meeting. I'd been happy and comfortable with that and only told who I felt needed to know or who would be supportive and safe.

I wasn't ashamed of writing romance. I was proud of all the books I'd written and always believed that it was a privilege and a blessing to be able to get lost in the worlds I created. But not everyone viewed romance as the amazing genre it was. I was looked down upon by some and, in some spaces, ostracized by others.

I didn't want that to extend to Taylor.

I glanced at the back of my sister's head as she watched a rerun of *Gilmore Girls*, totally oblivious to how our lives had just imploded. Some of the moms at her middle school had loved my books, but I didn't want her to endure any teasing in her new school because of me.

Now, I'd put a double target on my head. I was having an affair with a local celebrity that I'd done business with, and everyone knew I wrote kissing books for a side hustle. The wrong kids could torture Taylor with that information if they wanted to, and the thought triggered shame so potent I tasted bile in the back of my throat.

"Holy shit," Auden whispered.

"Those photos just went up this morning, and look how many likes and comments." I sucked in a long breath as I gripped the edge of my table. "This is all my fault."

“No, it’s not. For it to go viral this fast, he had to have been followed. Unless you both holed up in your apartments and never saw each other, this was going to happen eventually. And I hate that you ever had to make allowances for this bullshit in the first place.”

“So did I, but I wanted to tell people on my terms. About everything. And since I have three missed calls from Gayle, I guess that ship has pretty much sailed.” I glanced at my sister, still oblivious to her guardian’s meltdown.

“Like mother, like daughter,” a nasty voice taunted in my head.

It wasn’t totally wrong, but my mother wouldn’t have cared about reputations, safety, or a steady job.

I wasn’t wired that way, and I had no idea what to do or how to control the train wreck that had already gone too far off the rails to even begin to fix.

“This is not as bad as it seems,” Auden said, her words coming a little too fast to be soothing. “Stuff like this fizzles quickly.”

I let out a hysterical laugh.

“Which part? Where I not only got caught violating my employment contract, they have me splayed in front of Silas’s hotel room door in my Jessica fucking Rabbit dress like some hooker, and they tagged me and the company. Or that my side job of writing romance just got blasted to everyone right before my little sister starts high school.”

“I am sure it will fade by then. And hey, maybe it will give her some street cred, having a sister who’s a famous author.”

“Aud, famous and in famous are two very different things.” I let my head fall back, already exhausted by all that could be coming at us.

I’d known this was a risk, but one stupid mistake took risk into reckless.

It was odd to feel envy for my mother. She’d managed to move on without a care or regret when she’d fucked everything up, and she lived with herself and her choices just fine.

The worst part about all of this was that I’d never be able to do any of that, all while figuring out where the hell to go from here.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

SILAS

The morale of the guys heading into the locker room after the game was the opposite of when we'd first stepped onto the field today. We'd needed this win, even if it was close.

I hadn't checked any social media before the game, turning off my phone once I arrived at the field. Practice had been quiet as we waited for word on Nate. Lee made sure to check the guys over before practice just to make them, and all of us, relax.

I'd felt their relief as much as mine after the final out. We proved we could still win, and losing someone important for hopefully just a little while wouldn't mess with our heads and stop us from doing our jobs. The win hadn't mattered much in the standings, as the team above us had won today too, but for moving forward period, it was crucial.

We had two more nights here before I could head home to Rachel and finally make a plan to come clean to her job about us. I'd talk to Kent and make him speak to her boss and somehow convince her that this wasn't a tawdry fling like the one that made them implement the stupid rule in the first place. Then we'd deal with whatever we had to after together.

I had to run it by Rachel first, but I knew she was as exhausted as I was. Her sister wouldn't miss out on anything—neither of them would—even if I had to convince her to see it that way.

“Good game, guys,” Kent said, his smile forced and fake as he glanced around the locker room. “When you have a moment, Silas, meet us in the office.”

Adrian stilled next to his locker, the rest of the guys also frozen to the sticky floor.

The grim pinch in Kent’s brow didn’t ease any of the nerves I’d been trying not to think about, but I needed to know so we could all come up with a plan for the rest of the season and maybe after.

“What’s going on?” I asked, shutting the door behind me. Kent and Cole, the managing partner, both met my gaze with the same wary eyes, and that had the hairs on the back of my neck sticking straight up.

“Is it Nate?”

“Nate tore his rotator cuff. They don’t think it was related to the issues he’d been having at the beginning of the season, but the doctor said with surgery and therapy, he should be fine for next year.”

“Okay. Sucks for the rest of the season, but glad to hear the prognosis is good.”

Kent nodded, dropping his gaze to the table as if he was having trouble maintaining eye contact with me.

“It’s a loss, but the guys had a good game today. I know we all have our eyes on a wild card spot, but the best thing to do is take it one game at a time.”

“No, we aren’t worried about that.” Cole shook his head. He was about Kent’s height, slim with a gray beard, and he stayed mostly silent in management meetings. He sometimes traveled with Kent, but I’d never been part of a meeting with only the two of them.

“Okay, so then what is this meeting about?”

“You haven’t been on social media today, have you?”

“No, I shut my phone off when I arrived at the field. Did something happen?”

“A few pictures of you were posted last night. You and Rachel from the PR agency.”

I fell back in the chair, clenching my jaw so it wouldn’t go slack.

“What kinds of pictures?” My mind went to that moment at the bar when I’d fingered her under the counter and when I’d pinned her against the wall outside my hotel room. I’d known it was risky, but I’d been too happy to see her and too turned on to care or notice if we’d had an audience.

“Nothing too graphic, but suggestive enough to show you were...together. A few influencers found out that she’s a published author too.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said, the wind getting knocked out of me for the second time in ten minutes.

“We’ve had a word with the photographer. She wasn’t supposed to show faces,” Kent said with a quick wince.

I pulled out my phone and turned it on, my leg bobbing as I waited for it to power up, when what he said hit me.

“The photographer? What are you saying? Whoever took these pictures works for the Bats?”

“Not exactly,” Cole said. “I’m sure you understand. We’re a new team and don’t

have the deep history of some other teams in the city and state. Until we start breaking records, popularity is how we keep the ticket and merch sales up. But this went too far, and we're sorry."

"Wait just a fucking minute," I said, my words slow as rage roared through me. "Someone on your payroll followed me, took pictures of what were supposed to be private moments with my girlfriend, and then showed her face by mistake and took away all her privacy."

"Yes. And we've spoken with Gayle," Kent said. "We both agreed the agency letting her go is the best thing to do to quiet things down."

"Best thing for who? She's raising her teenage sister. Did you even think about what losing her job could cost her?"

"It's a terrible solution, but she is in breach of contract by fraternizing with a client. Letting her go and allowing this all to fade is best. We did get more hits on our pages today than ever before." Kent's smile faded fast when he met my furious gaze. "You can go back to being a bachelor who had a fun night, and we can keep the hook we have left for the rest of the season."

I shot up out of my chair so fast, it clanged to the floor behind me.

"I am not a fucking show pony. I had a successful twenty-year career in baseball and have been working my ass off with this team to have a good season. I should walk right now, leave you without a star player and a manager so you can figure out another hook."

"No, don't do that," Kent said, shaking his head as his eyes grew wide with panic. "We regret the trouble this caused Rachel, especially because of her sister. The best way to let it die down is?"

“For me to pretend we’re not together? Nope. Fix this another way, or you’ll be hearing from my lawyer about breaking my contract and then whatever else I could sue you for.”

“Look, Silas, I know you’re angry. And we sincerely regret all the trouble this caused both of you. There’s a press conference for both managers in a few minutes,” Kent said. “Where you can talk about the win and about Nate’s recovery and however you want to set the record straight.”

“Fine. But I want you to remember something.” I stalked over to them both.

“You hired me to manage a team. Whatever your reasons were, that’s what I’ve done. And I’ve done a damn good job. My life with the woman I love is not subject to exploitation, and my love life period is none of your business or part of my employment.”

“We know that,” Kent said, having the decency to look me over with a cautious gaze.

I should have stopped this much earlier, from the minute Kent told me to stay eligible and single for their new fan base , but I never thought playing that up would harm the people I cared about. I’d thought the front office’s obsession with my popularity was a harmless inconvenience, and that misjudgment was all on me.

“Again,” Kent began with a sigh, “I’m sure that after the pictures come down, things will go back to?—”

“Normal?” I scoffed. “For who? Rachel is still out of a job and her identity is all over the internet. You’re going to make sure she gets her job back.”

“I don’t think we can,” Cole said. “She went against company policy?—”

“Tell them you’ll pull the account. And if that doesn’t work, you can contribute to a big severance package for them to offer her. Something substantial, that would probably be a lot less than what you’d have to pay if she sued you.”

“She’d want to sue us?” Kent gaped at me, the color draining from his face at the horror of potential bad publicity.

“She would after I suggest it.” My lips curled into a smile. “Remember my lawyer? The one who made you draft four contracts? He’d get her a good five years of salary and more, I’d bet. He’ll also be taking another look at my current contract to make sure you can never use my personal life to sell tickets ever again.”

I left the room as they regarded me with the same widened, panicked eyes.

I leaned against the doorway as I unlocked my phone, cursing as I saw all the pictures Kent had mentioned. I closed the app when I caught the comments about her, ranging from her weight to if I paid her by the hour.

Instead of protecting her, I’d thrown her to the fucking wolves.

I only had a minute to calm down, and if I had any hope in salvaging any of this, I couldn’t go out there like the madman I felt like.

I’d promised I’d take care of her, not ruin her life.

I hoped I still could. This wasn’t how I planned to announce us to the world, but we weren’t going back. I’d love her out loud and out in the open, and I wouldn’t let anything take her away from me.

I only hoped that after I’d cost her this much, she still wanted me too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

RACHEL

“We could sit outside,” Taylor said, her voice garbled around a spoonful of ice cream. “Get some air in the yard without running into anyone.”

I lolled my head toward my sister. Since my conversation with Gayle, tense and short despite all the years I’d been her star writer, I’d camped out on the couch, my head already making an indent on the top of the back cushion.

I’d let Taylor serve me ice cream once I’d been able to swallow something, but I hadn’t moved from the time I’d plopped onto the couch.

The words “have to let you go” echoed in my head and turned my stomach each time. I’d expected to hear them eventually since, as Auden had pointed out, it had only been a matter of time before one of us slipped.

If we hadn’t been outed so publicly, I might have had some recourse. If I had just come clean and explained how this was a real, loving relationship and not the home-wrecking scandal that had made them write the damn clause in the first place, getting caught wouldn’t have been such a risk, even if it would have had the same results.

If I had confessed already, I would have been able to visit Silas wherever the team was playing and sit in the stands to cheer them on, not hide out in a bar and take a separate elevator to his hotel room.

The deep despair was twinged with a little bit of relief. I wouldn't have the stress of reading the room before I said that I was a romance author. Silas and I could walk up my block holding hands and not worry about it getting back to my job.

Because it had gotten back to everyone. We just had to deal with people gawking at us and asking inappropriate questions.

I'd shoved my phone away in the end table drawer next to the couch when scrolling became too much. The summary of the comments was how I was a hack of an author, why is Silas with a "plus-sized" girl, and one cute inquiry asking if I bought my dress from "hookers r us."

I'd been a published author for long enough to be familiar with keyboard warriors, miserable people who grew the balls behind a computer screen they lacked in real life.

Maybe I wasn't a skinny girl and the dress I'd worn was snug enough to show it, but Silas looked at me as if I was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen from the first moment we'd met—after he'd recovered from my jab to his stomach.

We needed to talk, but I was just so tired from the drop of my hours-long adrenaline spike ever since I'd walked through my door. Tired, worried, and sad. I was sure this hadn't looked good for him either, and I prayed no one mentioned their sponsorship of Taylor's team this past season in anything that was circulating today.

I curled up on the couch in my grandmother's old quilt. I'd put our air conditioner on high to make the room as cold as possible just so I could burrow myself in a blanket without a layer of sweat.

I'd worry about how to pay for the air conditioning, softball camp, and everything else tomorrow.

“I’m sorry, Tay,” I finally said, my voice hoarse with exhaustion. “I didn’t want this for you.”

“Some creep took your picture and blasted it on Instagram. You didn’t do anything wrong.” Taylor came up next to me, crossing her legs under her. “You’ve been so happy. Don’t let idiots take that away.”

She laughed when I pinched her chin.

My wise baby sister. I’d tried to make life as easy as possible for her, but maybe I shouldn’t have. Maybe I had to let my sister experience some of the shit in the world so she knew how to fight against it.

And I was in a lot of shit right now.

“The Bats won,” Taylor said as she scrolled through her phone.

“Good,” I said, exhaling a little relief that Silas didn’t have to deal with two problems today.

“Silas just texted me. He said to turn on the channel the Bats usually play on.”

I sat up, reaching into the end table drawer for my phone. A flurry of texts from Silas littered my screen. He’d probably had the same awful day as me, and I’d made it worse by causing him to worry about me. I was about to reply when I heard his voice through my TV speakers.

“Good afternoon,” Silas said, still in uniform as he spoke to reporters. I scooted to the edge of the cushion to get a good look at the man I’d left this morning before both our lives had been turned upside down. He seemed okay, but as I took a closer look, I spotted the hard set of his jaw, his tell when he was angry and holding himself back.

“Nate Becker is out for the rest of the season with a shoulder injury, but he’ll be back next year after surgery and some therapy. We’ll miss him, but we look forward to seeing him come back and break his home-run record next year.”

He paused, glancing down at the podium before he continued.

“His friends won for him today. And I’m hopeful that we can still take it all the way and clinch that wild card spot this month. They’re an amazing group of guys, and I’m proud to be leading them this season.”

He sucked in a long breath, his chest jerking as if he were laughing to himself.

“That should have been where my statement ended, but I have one more thing to add. Pictures were posted of me and my girlfriend this morning, and those pictures exposed her identity and where she works—or worked .”

Shit, he knew. He’d probably figured, but Gayle had mentioned a call with Kent before she’d told me HR would be contacting me with termination papers and hung up.

“I know that a life in professional sports means there is no such thing as true privacy, but there should be. Rachel Manning is the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and she’s had to deal with a lot in the past few hours. Please leave her and her family alone.”

He smiled at the camera, and it was as if he were standing in my living room. The reporters, my furniture, and even my sister faded into the background.

“I’m lucky to have found the person I want to spend the rest of my life with, but I’m asking you to let us do that in peace. I owe you all the best season I can give you, and if you want to post my ass on social media from fifty different angles, go ahead. But

my girl is off-limits.”

“Oh my God!” Taylor squealed, pressing her hands against her cheeks. “This is like one of those old movies you make me watch sometimes. By that guy John Hayes.”

“Hughes,” I said, my voice cracking as tears streamed down my cheeks. The first good tears of the day.

“Yes! He’s telling the world he loves you,” she said with a big sigh, clasping her hands under her chin. “And that he wants to spend the rest of his life with you.”

“It’s a local channel, Tay,” I said, wiping at my eyes.

“But I bet it gets streamed.” Taylor pulled on my arm. “This is so cool.”

“So the girl in all those pictures this morning is your girlfriend?” an out-of-sight reporter asked.

“Yes, and I’m all hers.” His lips stretched into a smile, his jaw finally relaxing as he found the camera again. “If she’ll still have me.”

Silas waved and walked off, the flash from the cameras still flickering as he stepped away.

My phone vibrated in my hand, hot against my palm as if the ton of notifications I was getting right now would make it explode along with my heart.

If I’d still have him? When he’d started talking about us, I’d thought it was a fuck-you to whoever had posted our picture and my identity, but why would he think I didn’t want him anymore?

I'd been an active participant in all of it, and I'd made the decision to go to Boston to see Silas. What had happened after sucked, but how could he think I blamed him for that?

"Now Auden is calling me," she said, eyeing me as she pressed her phone to her ear. "She's right here."

Taylor waved her phone in my face before I took it.

"Hello."

"Don't you answer your damn phone? Everyone here watched the press conference and is swooning their hearts out. That was like a movie."

"I know." I pressed my palm to my forehead. "I haven't even talked to him since this morning. I've been on my couch since I was laid off."

"Well, don't be surprised if they take it back. If word gets out they fired you because you were with Silas, and he just went public to tell everyone he wants to spend the rest of his life with you, that's bad PR for a PR agency."

"I won't get my hopes up. I just need to see him."

"Your next book is going to be epic. You're living in a fucking romance novel. This is the best resolution ever."

I laughed, my chest so much lighter than a few hours ago. I couldn't call it a resolution as I was still unemployed. In all the years I'd known Gayle, she'd double down before she'd admit she'd been wrong. If they did rescind my termination, they'd probably give me a smaller job just to save face.

I didn't want to work anywhere that I couldn't be with Silas out in the open, and it was on me for tolerating it far longer than I should have.

I had faith that it would work out because, for the first time in my entire life, I wasn't alone.

That was what I'd gotten from Silas's grand gesture or declaration or whatever he'd intended it to be. He'd told me that many times, but that was the moment it had finally sunk in enough for me to believe it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

SILAS

“Managers aren’t supposed to play hooky,” Lee teased as he spotted me in the hotel lobby.

He’d come to find me after this afternoon’s press conference, and I’d pulled him aside and told him what happened, including how management had accidentally started a fiasco trying to keep me relevant enough to stay popular.

I wouldn’t tell Rachel about that part of this mess yet. Once the Bats made proper restitution, or at least an offer for it, I’d tell her why they needed to make it right. But right now, I just needed to see her in person and make sure she was okay.

“The assistant coach can handle it for two games. I asked the guys not to embarrass me while I was away.”

Lee snickered. “If there is anything else you want, I’d say now is a good time to ask.” He shook his head. “I still can’t believe they did that.”

“They pushed it along, but something like this would have happened anyway. Maybe not this bad. This does make me wonder how much of the traction on my social media accounts this year came from them behind the scenes, but I can’t worry about that now.”

“I’m happy for you,” he said, slapping my arm. “Glad you finally woke up.”

“Thank you. Maybe you should too,” I told him, hoisting the strap of my duffel bag onto my shoulder.

His smile faded as he shook his head.

“My situation is a little different, Si.”

“Maybe it’s more complicated, yes. But I think if you stop holding yourself back, things could change.”

“Look at you, all optimistic.” He squinted at me, a smirk lifting the side of his mouth. “What happened to you?”

“I fell in love with a romance novelist.” I shrugged. “It’s made me less of a brooding asshole, I guess.”

I flicked my wrist to check the time on my watch. “And if you’ll excuse me, I have a train to catch.” I slapped him on the back. “See you back in Brooklyn.”

When I’d texted Taylor before the conference, she’d told me that her sister was okay, just tired and sad after her boss let her go. I didn’t blame Rachel for shutting off her phone, and I hated thinking of her feeling exposed and unsafe after what had happened today.

I had no doubt that it would blow over, and I hoped I’d given them something else to talk about with a more positive spin.

I’d told Rachel I loved her many times, but I’d never admitted to wanting to spend the rest of my life with her. Everything was out in the open, the worst had already happened, and we were still standing. The risk was gone, so what was the point of holding back now?

I was all in. She was mine as much as I belonged to her, but I was terrified that upending her life, even though we were both equally at fault for being so brazen, would be a deal-breaker for her. She'd worked so hard not to be the parent her mother was, and I knew the public shame of how we were caught had to dredge up some of those terrible memories she'd mentioned to me.

I didn't know how to fix everything, but I would give it all I had to try.

I'd made it to the station just in time to hop on the train to Penn. I'd debated flying, but with getting to the airport and security checks, this seemed like the quickest way. My nerves made it seem like the train inched all the way to New York, but to get to the other side of what Rachel and I were going through, I needed some patience.

I stepped out of the subway station near Rachel's house and took off my baseball cap, refusing to put on any kind of bullshit disguise to visit my girlfriend. It was almost midnight and dark, but I didn't care. Things were going to be different now—or, at least, I hoped so.

I climbed her outside steps and rang the bell. I hadn't spoken to her at all since I'd put her into a cab this morning, and it was surreal how different life was from a few short hours ago.

But now, I could take my girl on a date, she could sit behind the dugout at games, and she could come visit me on any road stop she wanted. I could claim her to the whole fucking world with no repercussions when she claimed me right back.

I had five missed calls from Rachel, but I'd wanted to wait to talk to her in person and honestly didn't know who was around to listen to and twist our conversation.

I wanted this to be a beginning for us, but I was afraid everything that had happened today could make it an end.

I wouldn't accept it and would fight like hell to get her back, but I was scared to lose her at all.

The locks clicked as Taylor peeked her head out from behind the door.

"Sorry it's later than I thought, kiddo."

I'd texted Taylor to let her know that I was on my way here but had asked her not to say anything to her sister. If I'd told Rachel that I was leaving the team to come to her, she'd insist that she was fine but after the day she'd had, I wasn't going to leave her alone like this.

And I needed to be with her right now, too.

"It's okay. We're both too wired to sleep anyway. Come in," she said, waving me in and shutting the door. "I haven't been outside all day. I keep looking for people with cameras in the bushes. I guess this is the closest we'll get to famous, right?"

"Until they get distracted by the next thing, which I'm hoping happens tomorrow." I nodded up the stairs. "How is she?"

"She's okay, I think. Worried about you. I don't think she's let go of her phone since the press conference."

I smiled. "She doesn't have anything to worry about. And neither do you, okay?"

"I know that. That press conference was pretty cool. Like a movie." She peered up at me, a slow smile coasting across her mouth. "Rachel deserves that. She deserves you."

"I will promise you one thing," I said, grabbing her hand, "I will fight every single

day to be the man your sister deserves.”

“I don’t think you have to fight that hard,” she whispered and squeezed back. “You’re pretty awesome. I’m glad she found you.”

“What’s going on? Ah, Silas,” Mrs. Ruiz said, beaming at me as she padded out of her apartment. “I couldn’t sleep, so I was up baking. Everything okay?”

“It is, or it will be. Nice to see you, Alba,” I said, praying I remembered her first name correctly.

“He came here to surprise Rachel,” Taylor told her, still looking at me.

“Ah. You know, Taylor, I could use some help with cleaning up, if you wouldn’t mind coming inside with me.”

I had to look away to hide my laugh when she jerked her head toward her front door.

“Sure,” Taylor said, smirking at me. “I’ll see you later.”

I nodded as Mrs. Ruiz took her by the hand and pulled her through her open apartment door.

I laughed and climbed the stairs, taking them two at a time when I lost patience. I tiptoed through the open door and slipped inside, closing it with a gentle push.

“Taylor,” Rachel called out, her voice raspy and raw, rubbing her eyes as she trudged toward the hallway. Her hair was in a messy bun, strands falling over her face. She wore the same tank and shorts from this morning, and she was so damn beautiful I almost forgot how to speak.

“Why were you downstairs— What are you doing here?”

Her eyes, red and swollen as if she'd been crying for a good part of the day, grew wide when they met mine.

“I took off for a couple of days to come see my girl.” I dropped my bag by the door and stretched out my arms. “Do I get a kiss hello or what?”

“Do you...” She trailed off, her face crumpling as her jaw shook. “Jesus, Silas.”

She ran into my arms and sobbed into my chest.

“Hey, don't cry, baby.” I pressed her flush to my chest as I rocked her back and forth. “I'm so sorry for everything.”

“You?” She popped her head up. “ I'm sorry. If I hadn't come to see you and played that stupid game in the bar?—”

“I loved that stupid game. Every fucking second of it. And that you rearranged your life just to come see me and make sure I was okay.” I took her face in my hands, swiping her tears away with my thumbs. “That's why I left Boston early. A call or a text wasn't going to cut it today.”

“Are you in trouble at work? Between me working for the PR agency and sponsoring my sister's team?—”

“No, Slugger. I can assure you that I'm not. In fact, they were all too willing to give me a couple of days off. I am going to stay here and take you out to breakfast in the morning. People may stare, and I honestly don't give a shit.”

“I love you so much,” she said, swallowing when her voice cracked. “And I love that

I don't have to hide it."

"Me too. And the next home game, you're right behind the dugout. And I'm going to kiss you in front of the whole goddamn stadium so everyone knows you're mine."

"Still can't shake that alpha thing, huh?" She gave me a soggy smile.

"When it comes to you, never. I just hope you can forgive me."

"Why?"

"Because," I breathed out, rubbing my hand up and down her back, "I've brought a lot of mess into your life. And I made it pretty damn miserable for you today."

She lifted her gaze, grabbing the back of my head with both hands.

"You didn't do any of that. We did that. And I wouldn't trade one single second with you. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, besides my sister. As long as I have you, whatever happened today doesn't matter."

My shoulders slumped, the tension knotting my back since my meeting with Kent and Cole finally loosening enough to breathe.

"You have no idea how much you have me."

I was seconds away from dropping to one knee and begging her to marry me. But I didn't want the day that we went viral to be the same day I officially asked her to spend the rest of her life with me.

And I needed a big ring.

But until then, I had the girl, and she was all I'd ever want.

We fell into a kiss, sweet and full of relief at first before it caught fire as usual. I lifted her by the waist, drifting my hands up her thighs and playing with the hem of those tiny shorts.

I'd claim her on the couch now and in front of the world tomorrow.

"Hey, guys. I'm sorry." Taylor's timid voice wafted in through the hallway. "But Auden is on the phone, and she says she has to talk to you right now."

I groaned, sitting on the edge of the couch and grabbing a pillow to place over my lap.

Rachel laughed, smoothing down her tank before she opened the door. "I'm here," she said as she pressed Taylor's phone to her ear. "Why are you calling my sister so late?—"

She held the phone away from her ear as I heard Auden's muffled voice, loud enough to make out from the couch.

"I haven't checked my sales dashboard all day, but viral videos never do much for me," Rachel said, holding the phone in the crook of her shoulder as she flipped up her laptop screen. She punched a few strokes on the keyboard and gasped.

"I have never sold that many books in one day since...ever."

I popped off the couch, still holding the pillow as I looked at the screen from behind Rachel.

"How many do you usually sell?" I asked.

“Um, about a hundredth of that in a non-release month. Not even.” She glanced back at me, her eyes wide with a different kind of shock. “Auden found a couple of viral videos from book influencers today and told me to check my sales. And there are... a lot.”

She grabbed the phone and stabbed at the screen.

“You’re on speaker, and Taylor and Silas are here.”

“Okay, the last video I found had ten thousand views from only an hour ago, and I came across five others.”

“Are you searching me?”

“Well, yes. Of course. I figured I’d watch so you wouldn’t have to, but I didn’t find any of those twats who were talking about you this morning. It’s all about your books. I found a comment from someone who thinks she may have seen Silas at one of your book signings. Your readers are going to eat this up with a spoon. Fuck Gayle. Who needs to write PR when they’re famous?”

“It’s one day,” Rachel said. “I’m a temporary fascination, and they’ll move on.”

“Not when the press conference circulates. And this isn’t even a full day. Having them tag your author account was like striking gold.”

“Okay, calm down. I may get to pay my bills for another month, which is fantastic—let’s not push it.”

“Ugh, I can’t believe you.”

Rachel and I shared a laugh at Auden’s groan.

“I think she’s right,” I said. “I think all this attention is going to get R.M. Dioro everywhere.”

“Well, since Rachel Manning is out of a job, it would be nice for my alter ego to support us for once. Listen, I have to go. Thanks for letting me know. I’m sure if I keep circulating, you’ll tell me.”

“You could be a little excited.”

“I am.” Rachel met my gaze with that same fucking smile that knocked me on my ass the first day, and I’d never been able to get up. “I got exactly what I wanted today.”

“Fine. Go sex up your famous boyfriend, and I’ll report back in the morning. Oops. Sorry, Taylor.”

“I’ll be in my room. With my headphones on and the door closed,” Taylor said, pushing past us toward the hallway.

“How do you feel about that?” I asked, nodding to her laptop screen.

“What? That all this got me a few book sales? It’s good, and I’ll enjoy it while it lasts.”

“I think it’s going to last a lot longer than you think.”

She rolled her eyes.

“I’d say let’s go back to what we were doing, but...” She flicked her eyes to Taylor’s closed door. “Rain check for later?”

“You should know by now,” I said, pulling her back, “I’m not going anywhere. Not

tonight. Not tomorrow.” I yanked her closer and pressed my mouth against hers. She grasped the collar of my shirt as she smiled into the kiss.

“Not ever.”

EPILOGUE

RACHEL

Two months later

“You think they’re going to do it?” Taylor asked me as we took our usual seats behind the Bats’ dugout.

“I don’t know. I hope so,” I said, shivering in my Bats hoodie with Silas’s number on the back. The weather was abnormally chilly, the fall crisp in the air we’d just started to enjoy now just plain cold. I wore heavy gloves and a long T-shirt under my hoodie, but I still trembled in my seat.

If they won today, they would have the first pennant in Brooklyn Bats’ history. No one had expected them to get this far, and even if they lost today, they’d had a fantastic season with a lot of new fans filling the stands.

But I really wanted them to win. They deserved it. And so did my boyfriend.

My live-in boyfriend, as of this month.

Since he’d returned from Boston, he’d been staying over at our house almost every night, other than when he had to go back to his apartment for his bills or the small amount of clothes he still had there. Parking his truck in our neighborhood wasn’t as easy, but he’d insisted it was worth the hassle to come upstairs to me at night, no matter how far he had to walk from whatever spot he’d find.

Coaching and living in Brooklyn had heightened Silas's popularity, but instead of being treated as a legendary celebrity, he was just one of us. That gave us some privacy on a local level, and we were able to have dinner in a restaurant without anyone bothering us, most of the time.

"This is a nice stadium," Ben said from his seat next to Taylor. "If a little clean and too modern."

"Why? A ballpark has to be dirty to be authentic?" Maryanne asked. They were both in full Brooklyn Bats gear. Maryanne wore a scarf and Silas's dad wore a baseball cap.

"Yes, lived-in. Sticky floors." He swiveled his sneaker. "In time, I suppose."

Silas's parents were as excited as we were, but not as tense, as they'd been to plenty of play-off and championship games throughout Silas's career.

To me, even though I hadn't been there with him at that time, this was different. He'd been a baseball star for his entire life, and now he was on the verge of success from the other side. Killing it at a job that he'd been so afraid he wouldn't be able to do.

One of my favorite things about him was how he could be endlessly humble while being so damn exceptional.

"Rachel!"

I swiveled my head to a fan in a Jones jersey under her puffy jacket. I guessed she was about my age, her brown hair blowing in the fierce breeze, clutching my latest paperback in her hand. The one that had led me to Silas, or I liked to think of it that way.

I'd even changed the dedication in the book to him, although no one knew but us

what I meant by signing it, “All my love, Slugger.”

“I’m sorry to bother you, but could you sign this? My seats aren’t really here, but I took a chance.”

“Of course,” I said, grabbing the book from her hands. “I take it you’re a Jones fan too?”

“Well, honestly, I bought the jersey after I heard he was your boyfriend. I am now, but I found him through you.”

I popped my head up. “That is the coolest thing I’ve ever heard, and I can’t wait to tell him later that I got him a new fan,” I whispered.

She laughed, muttering a thank-you and scurrying off when she noticed security checking tickets.

It was a new experience to be approached to sign a book outside of a bookstore or signing. I was still riding the viral wave, more videos popping up every day, along with the occasional candid shot of Silas and me. We were careful to take the heavy PDA behind closed doors now, so whatever shots someone was able to get of us were cute, not scandalous.

I was almost surprised my mother hadn’t contacted me after seeing all our newfound semi-fame, but Silas had scared her pretty straight when she’d barged in and tried to take Taylor. A restraining order had been served to Jared’s New Jersey apartment, and we hadn’t heard a peep from her since.

Taylor had stopped asking if she’d reached out, and the relief I’d witnessed once it started to sink in that our mother really wasn’t going to pop back into our lives when we’d least expected it anymore was palpable and mutual.

As Silas had said, sharing blood didn't always mean sharing a bond, and relatives were better off out of your life if they were toxic.

Even if they were supposed to be a parent.

Sometimes, a local restaurant would get a jump in business if Silas and I were photographed there, so everyone, everywhere, was always happy to see us.

It was the good side of his popularity, unlike the occasional comment of what a guy like him was doing with a girl like me. But jealousy and cruelty didn't bother me because I was too busy being in love and so happy my cheeks ached.

Gayle had offered me my job back a couple of days after Silas got home from Boston. It hadn't been a very boisterous offer, and I didn't want to ruin any of the good memories I'd cultivated while working for Gayle by agreeing to come back when I hadn't really been wanted. Working at a job that was given to me under duress wouldn't be conducive to my best creative work.

I should have come clean from the beginning and accepted the consequences rather than continue to violate the rules by sneaking around.

When a large payment hit my bank account, large enough to cover my salary for three years, I'd called the agency's HR, sure there had been a mistake. I had been dismissed for cause and didn't qualify for severance, and I totally didn't buy it when the HR rep said that it was just procedure.

That was when Silas told me about the role the Bats had played in our social media mess.

I appreciated the gesture, even if I knew it had been strongly suggested by my alpha boyfriend. Everything had ended well, but the trauma of being double doxxed with a kid to take care of was fresh, even now.

Each day, both Silas and I made an effort to move past the anger and focus on the good the Bats had given us, like the path to stumble back into each other's lives and the chance to stay there for good.

I'd found a freelance writing job instead that brought a small but steady income, but I spent most of my time at the computer writing my own stories. Now that everyone knew I was R.M. Dioro, I was embarrassed about hiding it.

Romance was something to be celebrated. If someone was too limited to understand that, their opinions weren't worth any consideration.

It felt so damn good to live the life I wanted without compartmentalizing the pieces I thought I couldn't show.

Starting with the hot-as-hell baseball manager jogging over to me.

"It's cold," he said, shaking his head as he came up to where we were sitting. "That hoodie is too lightweight."

"But how are people supposed to know I'm your girlfriend?" I turned to show him his name and number on my back.

"Oh, they know. Trust me," he said, coming in for a slow, sensual kiss that triggered whistles from the stands.

"Your parents are behind us," I said as I backed away.

"They already know I'm hopelessly in love with you," he said, coming back in for another quick kiss. "I'm supposed to be focused on the game, not warming you up after."

"Ick," Taylor said, making a gagging noise as her face twisted in a grimace. "You

guys are cute, but stop testing my gag reflex.”

“Sorry, Tay,” Silas said, adjusting his hat and going in for one more peck. “Wish us luck.”

I spotted Nate on the field, still in uniform despite recovering from shoulder surgery. Silas had said Nate would be here today to support and, hopefully, celebrate with, his team. He’d waved a hello at us as we’d headed to our seats, my sister turning all kinds of red when he’d asked her if she was playing softball again next season.

“He remembered me,” she’d whispered. Nate was your typical ballplayer kind of gorgeous, but my eyes were on someone else in uniform today.

I spent most of the game shivering in my seat. The score went back and forth, each team only taking a narrow lead but not holding it. After an exhausting nine innings, the Bats were one out away from going to their first championship series. The batter popped up what seemed like a million foul balls into the stands as the count stayed at three and two.

One out was all they needed, and it was taking forever. I couldn’t see Silas’s face, but I could picture him leaning on the rail of the dugout, stoic and solid as always. Only I knew the nerves beneath and the insecurities and specters from his career as a player that haunted him in moments like these.

It made me love him more, because he loved me enough to show that side of himself only to me, because he trusted me. Even on that first day.

I wanted this for him so badly, I tasted blood from where I’d sunk my teeth into the inside of my cheek for the past five pitches.

“I can’t look,” Taylor said, burying her head into my shoulder.

“What kind of ballplayer are you,” I said, giving her a playful nudge. “You know it gets tense, especially during a big game.”

“I know. I just really want this for him,” Taylor said, her face twisting into a grimace I could feel. I took both her hands and held on tight.

“I do too,” I whispered. “But whatever happens, we’ll celebrate him big tonight.”

She nodded with a strained but wide smile.

Our heads popped up when we heard another crack, this ball sailing deep into the outfield. I gasped, afraid it was going over the wall, but it started to land just short of it. It was so quiet, I swore I heard the thump of the ball against the glove before the crowd went wild.

Everyone was on their feet while Taylor and I folded in relief.

My mind went to the mysterious man sitting next to me on a park bench, confessing his worries about the new job he didn’t think he’d be able to do.

He always forgot how amazing he was, and I was thrilled to spend the rest of my life reminding him every single day.

We sat for a minute, Taylor and I silent as everyone cleared the dugout, piling on top of one another.

“Think they’ll stop me if I rush the field?” I asked my sister.

“I’ll be mad if you don’t. Go!” She pushed my arm so hard she almost shoved me off the seat. Silas’s parents, both with identical wide smiles, nodded toward the field when they met my gaze.

I crept to where the bunting lined the rail, the climb over a little steeper than I anticipated.

“Need a hand?” one of the security guards asked, biting back a smile. Luckily, I’d sat in that seat for the last month of home games, and Silas had always made sure to make an open display of greeting me hello.

“Yes, please,” I said, holding out my hand as the sweet man helped me over. I swept my gaze over the field and tried to spot my boyfriend in the midst of happy players bouncing off one another.

“I was about to come get you,” a gruff voice said behind me before I was lifted off the ground.

“I’m so proud of you,” I said, cinching my legs around his waist as I clung to his neck.

“I didn’t do anything, but thank you.” Silas laughed in my ear as he spun me around.

“No, you did everything. I love you so much.” I grabbed his face to kiss him, but he pulled back.

“Wait,” he said as he set me down.

“Since when do you want to wait to kiss me?”

He held my gaze, a small smile playing on his lips as he took off his hat and tossed it on the grass.

“Since I wanted to do something first.”

He dropped to one knee and dug into his jacket pocket.

“I almost did this when I came back from Boston, but I wanted this day to stand on its own.” He opened a purple velvet box, but I couldn’t see the ring through the tears welling in my eyes.

But I could tell it was big. The stadium lights bouncing off the stone almost blinded me.

“I love you. From that first day and more every day since. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” He slipped the ring on my finger. “Which you already know, or you should know.” He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my finger right below the stone. “Here is probably not the best place either. I was going to do it later, but why not ride the high?”

“Holy shit, look,” I heard one of the guys say behind us. As usual, the entire world faded around Silas, but I turned around to find my sister. She stared back at me with a watery smile spreading across her lips, not looking surprised at all.

“Please, Rachel. I need you to marry me.”

“Yes,” I said, forcing out the word with the little air I had left in my lungs.

I’d always thought happily-ever-afters weren’t for me. I’d make them for my sister or the fictional characters I’d create, and I’d been okay with that.

Once I’d met the man in my arms, the one sagging against me in relief like there had been even a remote possibility I would say no, nothing had ever been the same.

It was everything I hadn’t let myself dream of and so much more.