



Defending Madison (Sexy as Sin Series #9)

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Category: Sport

Description: Navy SEAL Preston Dixon thought he'd never get another chance with Soccer star Madison Bennett. After their sizzling forbidden weekend together, he left thinking it was just a fleeting moment—until fate throws them back into each other's lives. Now, with Madison's heart broken and her trust shattered, Dixon is determined to prove that their scorching chemistry isn't just a one-time thing. But can he win back what he lost... or will his past mistakes destroy any chance they have?

Madison Bennett had it all: a career in soccer on the rise, a future that seemed endless—until one devastating injury brought it all crashing down. Now, an unexpected opportunity offers her a chance to reclaim everything she's ever dreamed of—but it comes with one catch: Preston Dixon, the man who broke her heart.

As they're pulled deeper into a whirlwind of desire and unresolved tension, they must confront the threat to Madison and escape Dixon's mistakes that nearly ruined them. Can Dixon prove that he's worthy of her trust—and her love? Or will their undeniable attraction lead them down a path of heartache once again?

Defending Madison is a sizzling, steamy novella filled with high-stakes romance, raw emotion, and a chemistry that burns hotter with every page. This stand-alone short read is part of L.B. Burns' Steamy Campbell Romance series, where secrets, second chances, and explosive passion collide.

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FRESHMAN YEAR COLLEGE

MADISON

“Benny?”

I roll my eyes. Brian, my brother, constantly annoys me when he’s home on leave. He’s a big, bad Navy SEAL and a genuine hero. It doesn’t change the fact that he treats me like he’s my third parent. He’s the one who nicknamed me ‘Benny.’ He told my parents I was as cute as a bunny. My mother wouldn’t let him call me bunny, so it became Benny instead. Stupid story for a stupid nickname. I wish he’d just call me by my actual name.

Ugh. “What?” I walk around the corner from the open family room in my childhood home as he’s holding his phone out like it’s a snake.

“I need you to pick up Dix at the airport.”

I scoff. “Wait a minute! I’m not a chauffeur for your friend.”

“He’s not my friend. He’s my SEAL teammate. He’s family.”

I thrust out my hip and slam my palm on it with an annoyed, sour look on my face. “So, you pick him up.”

Brian puckers his mouth and clicks his tongue. “I’ve got a date.”

Rolling my eyes more deliberately, so he sees me. My mom stands at the doorway behind my brother, giving me the ‘go do what he asks’ sign. “Fine. But I’m not entertaining him. And I’ll have to take the truck because there’s no way he’ll fit in my little sedan.”

“Sure.” My brother is running out the door like someone’s chasing him. He calls over his shoulder. “Take him to get food. It’s late, and I’m sure he’s hungry.”

“Oh. Come on. I said...” He slams the door as my mother chuckles.

“You don’t mind Dixon.” Her eyes twinkle. Her petite frame no longer carries the extra weight she had a few years ago, and her dark blonde hair is now highlighted with more silver than color.

“That’s not the point, Mom. This is my vacation from school. I planned on binge watching some show while I chatted with Penny on the phone until the wee hours of the morning. Brian’s ridiculous. I did not plan on taking care of his teammate.” I use my fingers to make air quotes as my mother shakes her head.

“His plane lands in forty minutes.” She shrugs as she walks toward the front door with a profound goodbye wave above her head.

“Shit!” I grab my purse and the truck keys as I head to the garage. Dixon makes my panties wet. He has since Brian first brought him home three years ago. Not that he noticed me at all. I resembled a pimply giraffe with my long neck and legs. At twenty-two, he was so ridiculously out of my league, but a high school sophomore can dream, can’t she? When I met him, his huge frame filled the doorway, even more than my brother, and unlike my brother and the other boys around here, he’s hot. Rarely does a man tower over me, but he’s tall, like six and a half feet tall, with short blonde hair and piercing sea-green eyes that remind me of the water at a clear lake in the summer. I bite my lip as I pull the truck out of the garage. And his body is

banging. More muscles than Arnold Schwarzenegger in Terminator . Put his body on the side of a bus and it would sell anything imaginable. I snicker. Not to mention cause accidents because who could take their eyes off him?

Our house isn't far from the airport, so I don't have to rush. Houses in our neighborhood are one of five cookie cutter designs. Different fronts and colors, but similar in style and structure.

I pull to the arrivals area at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport, and he's leaning against the wall chatting up some cute, dark-haired woman in a short dress. I hit the horn and wave as he slings his bag over his shoulder and walks toward the truck. He tosses the bag in the backseat and smiles. "Hey, Benny."

"Dixon." I motion to the woman who's shooting daggers at me with her squinty eyes. "I hope I didn't tear you away from something."

He glances at the pouting woman standing at the curb. "Oh. No." He gets into the passenger seat. "Where's Bri?"

I side-eye Dixon. "You know."

"Some woman?"

I nod as I pull the truck into traffic. "He's been home for more than a day, so yeah. Where do you want to eat?"

"Huh?"

I blow out my breath. "Eat. You've had a long flight, and my mom is on some health food kick, so there isn't much in the line of quick food at the house. She's out with church friends, so we'd have to fend for ourselves at the house, anyway."

He nods, leaning against the seat. “Where can I get a burger?”

“Mark’s. They’re good.”

His eyes scan my body as I drive. “I can’t imagine you eat burgers.”

“You don’t have much of an imagination, Dixon. I love burgers.”

“Aren’t you some star soccer player?”

His foolish comments are going to make me roll my eyes permanently into the sockets the more time I spend with him. “Athletes eat. I’m an athlete. Therefore, I eat.”

He nods. “I get it. Brian always shares the highlights of your college career.”

I turn and smirk at Dix. “Seriously? You need better things to read about. Sports, current events, porn.”

The satisfaction I feel when his jaw drops is palpable. Go me!

“What?”

“Porn. Dirty writing. Erotica. I imagine you can get online enough to surf porn, but you could get books that would travel with pics and cheap dialogue.”

“What the fuck do you know about porn?” His cocky smile has receded to be replaced by shock.

“I read erotica. It’s a great way to pass the time when we’re traveling.” I flick my head at him again. “And close your mouth. A fly’s going to fly in it.”

“Damn. How old are you now?”

“Nineteen. And you?”

“You know damn well how old I am. I’m the same age as your brother, twenty-five.”

I shrug. “You just seem so much older than that. Those gray hairs peeking around that buzz cut make you seem much older.”

The laugh he offers bounces around the cab of the truck and warms my heart. My damp panties are now soaked. It’s a happy, deep laugh like Santa would make only sexier. “I’m glad you think I’m funny.”

He smirks. “Funny is not the word that comes to my mind about you.”

I’d love to ask what word does, but I don’t have any intention of inquiring. I pull the truck into the parking lot at Mark’s Burger Joint and turn off the engine. Dixon stares at me like a lion surveying his prey. “What?”

He offers a sly smile before he reaches for the handle and bounces out of the truck, coming to a stop next to the driver’s door. “Here, let me.”

He holds the door as I step down, grabbing my bag on the backseat and handing it to me. “Thanks. Nice to know chivalry isn’t dead.”

“Did Brian give you any idea when he’d be back at your house?”

“No.” We head across the parking lot, making a beeline for the double glass doors. “I’m guessing late tonight.”

He mumbles, “man whore,” under his breath, and I couldn’t agree more.

A server lifts two menus and motions for us to follow her into the restaurant. Various eyes watch us as we walk together. Dixon's arm wraps around me with his hand resting lightly on the small of my back. It feels like possession. It isn't, but a girl can wish. He leads me to the booth as the server hands me a menu. She nearly drops his, making googly eyes at the sexy man.

"What would you like to drink?" She stares at Dixon.

I can almost see drool in the corner of her mouth. I smile at my own joke. "I'll take water with lemon."

Dixon smiles. "If you're driving, I'll take a beer."

The server lists a half dozen beers. Dixon is too busy surveying the restaurant and doesn't look like he's paying attention, but chooses one as she writes it down on her notebook and turns away.

The gorgeous man leans back against the booth and outstretches his arms. "Brian hasn't mentioned, so whatcha' studying?"

"Pre-law."

His brow lifts. "You hoping to be a lawyer?"

"Eventually."

The server sets down the water and his beer. "Are you ready?"

"Uh. We need more time. I haven't even looked at the menu." The woman could be courteous enough to look at me when I answer. But she stares at Dixon, shrugging as she walks off.

Dixon focuses on me. “Eventually?”

I take a sip of my water and set down the glass. “Yeah. If I go pro, I’ll need a job to support myself, and then when my career is over, I’ll need a future.”

“Why do you need a job on top of playing pro soccer?”

“The salary is pathetic. So, it’s necessary. Women make less than professional men athletes, and unless I’m a star, I’ll make low five figures.” Dixon continues to scan the restaurant, sipping his beer, looking like he’s waiting for someone to jump up and cause trouble.

He nods. I don’t expect a reply because what can you say about that?

A few minutes later, the server arrives back at the table and breaks the uncomfortable silence. “Ready?”

I hand her my menu. “I’ll take a burger with cheddar cheese, tomato, lettuce, and light mustard.”

“Fries or tater tots?” She can’t keep her eyes off Dixon.

“I’ll do fries. Thanks.”

He smirks, noticing that I’m annoyed at the server’s behavior. “I’ll take a double burger the same way with tots.” She collects his menu and walks away. I wait. He’s going to ask more questions. It’s what he does.

“Brian mentioned you’re doing really well on the soccer team. I didn’t know college soccer was a thing, at least for girls.”

Way to sound like a misogynist. “There are many women’s sports in college, Dixon.”

His smile increases as I realize he’s just pushing my buttons. He focuses his gorgeous eyes on me. “Got a boyfriend?”

I shake my head. “No time. I’ve got a guy friend to scratch the itch.”

The color drains from his face, and I have to stop myself from beaming. I caught the arrogant man off guard. Yay, me! I steel my face and drink water from my almost empty glass. The women that had been trying to engage him have stopped, and I have a chance to notice the new movie posters hung on all the walls.

Dixon clears his throat. I turn and his surprise turns to a glare. “You shouldn’t do that.”

Here we go. “Do what?”

“Have random sex.”

I set my glass down. “It’s not random. Bobby and I have been friends since high school. He’s a football player and busy, like I am. He doesn’t want anything more than I do. It’s just good sex.”

He scoffs while rolling his eyes. “How good can a nineteen-year-old boy actually be?”

I deadpan. “At least three orgasms for me for each session. He’s thick and long, exactly what I prefer.” This is a whole new way to flirt with a hot man. Bobby and I aren’t exclusive, and if it weren’t for my own fingers, I’d never have an orgasm with him, but Dixon doesn’t need to know that.

“If Brian knew what you were doing, he’d have a heart attack.”

“My mom knows.” I move my long blonde hair over my shoulder. “I can’t say she’s thrilled about the ‘friends with benefits’ plan, but she wants me to be happy.”

His jaw is back down, hanging like a dog waiting for a treat. “You told your mom you’re screwing some guy?”

My forehead wrinkles as I think about how far I want to take this conversation. It would be nice if he didn’t see me as some kid. “Mom understands I’m not a kid anymore. Sex is a healthy activity. She encouraged me to get birth control in high school.”

“Wow.” He leans back in his seat. “You have a totally different relationship with your mom than I imagined. I assumed she’d be protective like Brian.”

“Pfft. Brian wants to be another parent. If he knew I was having regular sex with a friend, he’d blow a gasket.” I raise my eyebrow. “He’s a hypocrite. No one is a bigger man whore than Brian.”

The server brings our meals, and we continue to chat about things. I learn about how he was orphaned at seven. He bounced around foster and group homes until he landed in one that worked. He smiles when he tells me he had to get permission from his foster mother at seventeen to enlist. Listening to him talk about how he and Brian met in Basic and went on to become SEALs warms my heart. By the end of the meal, I feel like I know him so much better than when he visited with Brian a few years before.

We step away from the booth and walk out the door into the cool night air. “Thanks for bringing us here.”

“You’re welcome.” I hit the remote on my dad’s truck to unlock as Dixon walks around to open the driver’s side door. “Thanks.”

“Yep.” He heads around the truck and gets in. “Does your mom go out a lot at night?”

“Enough, I guess. She spends Wednesday nights at church. Dinner is served there, so if you don’t go with her to church, you have to figure out your own dinner.”

He bobs his head. “That seems fair. I’m sorry I missed your dad’s funeral.”

I pull the truck out of the parking lot. “I understand. Brian barely made it home in time and left the following morning.”

The house is dark when we get back to my childhood home as I raise the garage door. “Shouldn’t your mom be home by now?”

“Yeah.” I put the truck in park and slide out my door. “She probably stayed at a friend’s house.”

Dixon opens the door that leads into the kitchen. “Does she do that often?”

“Over the last two months or so, yeah. Dad’s been gone almost three years. She’s finally moving on.”

The clock on the oven reads ten after nine as I flip on the overhead light. “Want some eggnog?”

“Sure. I haven’t had eggnog in years. Usually, I’m in some jungle at Christmas.”

DIXON

The woman throwing her head back and laughing in the kitchen isn't the girl I met a few years ago. She's grown up. Brian talks about her like she's ten. Benny is so right when she says he'd lose it if he knew she was having sex with a guy. Hell, he thinks she'll be a virgin until marriage. I can't blame her. I love sex and have no interest in any kind of relationship. Once is always enough. Her beautiful voice catches my attention. I should call her, "Madison." She's not "Benny" anymore.

"Dixon?"

"Huh?"

"You weren't listening."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. Jet lag, maybe." I can't exactly tell her I'm thinking about her having sex and wishing it was me. "What did you say?"

"I asked if you have any plans this week."

"Oh. Brian and I are going hunting tomorrow near your family's cabin."

I nod. "I got a buck there last year."

"Did you? Wow! I wasn't aware you liked to hunt."

"Dad took me when I was eight for my first hunt. I winged the deer he brought home that year."

"Bri and I are thrilled that we both got leave and could be here to go hunting in the North Zone. He mentioned you had a cabin in North Texas near that area for deer hunting."

Benny, I mean, Madison nods. “I was planning to go, but Bri pitched a fit.” She holds up her fingers and makes air quotes. “It’s a guy’s adventure. No girls allowed.”

I shake my head. “He’s nuts. The more the merrier.”

Stepping to set her glass in the sink, she speaks. “My mom put you in the second bedroom on the right, the one next to mine. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks for picking me up at the airport.”

“Welcome.” She strolls out of the kitchen, and I will my cock to stand down. Brian would fucking murder me for my dirty thoughts about his sister, let alone the itch I want her to scratch. I stay for a few minutes after rinsing our glasses. Ugh. I don’t need any temptation with the girl next door to my room. Walking up the stairs, I study the family photos that adorn the walls. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to return to the house where I lived with my parents, with photos and reminders of me and my family. Melancholy seeps into my brain when I realize that life and house don’t exist anymore. My parents died when I was young, and everything from the life I had before foster care was buried in the bottom of a dump outside of Denver.

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MADISON

“What the fuck do you mean, we aren’t going?” Dixon growls from the kitchen. It’s barely six in the morning, and the hairs prickle on the back of my neck. My dad used to scream in the kitchen before he left for work. The heavy smell of coffee hangs in the hallway outside the kitchen. I run my hand across the peeling paint of the door trim, eavesdropping.

“I’m taking CiCi to her sister’s in Phoenix.”

“Fuck you, Brian. You haven’t had any contact with the woman since you joined the TEAMS. Why the hell is it your responsibility to drive her fifteen hours to Phoenix?”

My brother grumbles something about guilt, and I roll my eyes. Brian uses his leaving her as fodder for her life choices since they broke up. Bitch. The back door slams as I move to the bottom of the stairs with my hand on the banister. I’m ready to go back up the stairs just as Dixon storms out of the kitchen, halting as he sees me. Gritting his teeth, he seethes. “I guess you can go to the cabin to hunt, after all.”

Shaking my head as I frown. “I’m sorry. This is the Brian who comes home, so I’m not surprised. You don’t need him to go hunting. All the stuff is in the cabin. I can write directions to get there, and you can take the truck.”

Dixon casts a glance up the stairs. “Are you sure your mom won’t mind my taking the truck?”

“No. She doesn’t drive it, anyway.”

He stares at me with an intensity that makes me uneasy. “Come with me.”

“Really?” Oh. This could be bad. The warmth of my core and my moist panties vie with my brain.

He leans against the wall, seeming less imposing. “Screw Brian. Let’s both go hunt.”

My heart races so far ahead of my brain that I’m dizzy. Without thinking, I blurt out. “Sure. That sounds good.” It’s one sided. He has no interest in me. “We need to fill the cooler so we have fresh food and grab the guns.”

He touches my arm and slides down his hand, pulling it away with a strange look. He steps around me. “Can we leave in an hour?”

“Sure. Let’s see who can get ready faster. The winner gets to sleep on the way there.”

He speaks over his shoulder. “Deal.”

MADISON

We’ve been at the cabin for an hour. I’m fully rested, having slept for the drive. A smile peaks my lips. I loved the look on Dixon’s face when he got to the truck, and I had tucked myself in the passenger seat with my pillow against the window.

I stroll out of the smaller bedroom in our cabin and smile at Dixon, who’s loading a rifle. “Your family’s got some nice hunting gear.”

I run my hand over the rifle stock, remembering my father and his gun safety directions. “We loved to hunt.”

He sets the cloth down after wiping down the rifle, setting it into the case. “Thanks

for suggesting this.”

“You’re welcome. There’s no reason for you to give up bagging a White-tailed deer, because Brian has his nose up her skirt.”

He flicks his wrist. “Want to try for a late afternoon kill?”

“You’re confident. Sure. I’ll put food in my pack and be ready to go in five.”

Four hours later, we drag a twelve-point buck into the prep room attached to the cabin. Dixon scoffs. “I can’t believe you got him.”

I beam. “Thanks. I love to beat people’s expectations. Are you going to help me dress this?”

He nods, hanging up the carcass. We’ll do additional cleaning to make sure our field dressing of the deer washed out all the bacteria. We used a cooling blanket and ice packs to get the deer back to the cabin.

“Does your mom cook with venison?”

“Pfft. Mom doesn’t really cook anymore. Dad taught me how to do it all, and I’m the one who stocks the freezer every season.”

He leans against the large steel butcher table. “You cook, too?”

“Can’t everyone cook in this day and age?”

He shrugs. “I guess. I cook. Not well, but I do cook.”

I scan my eyes up his body. “You don’t look like you’re starving.”

He lifts his shirt to show me his muscular abs. His sexy smile curls my toes. “Like what you see?”

Rolling my eyes. “Of course I like what I see. You’re gorgeous.”

“Ha. That’s a word for women.”

“No. Cars, animals...” I cock my head and smile. “...other inanimate objects can be gorgeous, so men fall into that category, too.”

“Hardy har har. You’re funny.”

I smirk. “I try.”

He moves to where I’m standing and brushes a tendril back behind my ear. “You seem older than nineteen.”

Whatever you need to tell yourself, bucko. I grab the hose and spray down the inside of the carcass. It takes us three hours to skin the deer and reduce it to a more manageable size. The large fridge is a hunter’s dream, allowing us to cool the deer in large slabs of meat. I close the door on the fridge when we replace the final chunk of carcass. “I need a shower. How about you?”

Dixon’s eyes dilate as I ask, and his breathing catches. “We could save water and shower together.”

Nodding, I lead us into the cabin. “Let’s drop our clothes in the laundry,”

He smirks. “More time for me to watch you naked.”

“Nuh uh. Your sweet ass is leading us to the shower.” I motion for him to lead as he

drops his pants as he pulls his shirts over his head. Reaching down to drag off his pants and briefs, his cock bounces against his taut abdomen. I can't help but drop my jaw. His cock is long and thick with a prominent barbell piercing that calls out to me to grasp. "I didn't expect that."

He bobs his cock. "You haven't seen a pierced cock before?"

"No. I have. I didn't expect you to have one. You're so straight."

The laugh he offers is perfect. The rumble and pitch are deep and sensual. "If you only knew the things I've done."

"Come on, get a move on to the shower. You can show me how experienced you are."

The cabin is warm and familiar. Wood floors creak as we walk. Photos of previous hunting and camping trips decorate the light blue walls. He grasps my hand and pulls me to the shower through the bedroom to the primary bath. "My pleasure."

The bedroom hasn't changed since I first stayed here with my dad when I was eight. The dark blue walls make the room much darker than it actually is. The large four-poster queen-sized bed has a new mattress, according to my uncle. I guess we'll get to break it in.

Dixon is gloriously naked as we stop moving in the bathroom. It's recently been updated in gleaming nickel and white marble. I fumble with my bra and underwear. I'm behind because unlike Dixon, I'm still dressed.

He chuckles. "Get naked."

"I'm trying. You move so damn fast. It's those incredibly long legs of yours."

He reaches for the bottom of my bra and yanks it off, dropping it as it falls to the floor. My breasts spill out of the cups and his brows lift. “How do you hide those breasts?”

I scoff. “I’m an athlete. Big boobs are uncomfortable. I use a well-fitting sports bra to keep them against me rather than bouncing.”

“Bouncing is what beautiful bountiful breasts like that were made for.”

I lean into the shower to start the warm water and push my panties down, eliciting a groan from the big, bold SEAL.

“Fuck me, you have a nice pussy.”

I giggle. “I’ve never heard it put that way before.”

“See. A nineteen-year-old boy doesn’t have my sophistication.”

I glance down at the erection bobbing against his stomach, missing the opportunity to contradict his personal praise of himself. “Or the massive cock that’s presented before me.”

He bobs it against his body. “I’m big. You’ll enjoy.”

I chew on my lip. “Yes. I’m definitely looking forward to that.”

DIXON

Madison is staring at my dick, and I’m intrigued. She doesn’t act like she’s nineteen. She seems more mature than some of the women I bang on leave.

Her brow raises as she cocks her head, thinking. “You’re thinking about something?”

“Yes, I am. Let’s get showered, get clean, then get dirty.” I check the temperature of the water and pull her in with me. I hold her against me as the water sprays down our bodies. “Can I wash you?”

Giggling, she nods. “So long as I can wash you when you’re done with me.”

“I’m not sure if I’m ever going to get my fill of touching your body.” I reach for the unisex body wash on the shelf and squirt some onto my hands. Lathering the soap, I proceed to spread the suds all over her body.

“Your hands are massive. They’re closer to the size of large paws.”

I can’t help but smile. Chuckling, I kiss her nose. “As you’ve noticed, I’m big all over.” I rub my hands between her legs and lean to push the suds over her legs down to her feet. “You’re more muscular than I realized.”

“Athlete. Remember.”

“I’m getting that. I want these legs wrapped around me as I thrust my cock in you.”

“That can be arranged.” She squirts body wash onto her hands and rubs me down with soap. Grabbing the water wand with a hand, she rinses as she washes. My cock and balls are covered in a sudsy cocoon. She moves down my body, cleaning my legs and feet. I love her touch as she raises back up to caress my package once again before she washes my torso.

“Do you work out, or is this from your SEAL stuff?”

“I work out. We have down time, and they encourage us to keep in shape.”

She sprays my body to remove the residual soap and does a final pass on herself.

I help her to hang the wand as I turn off the water. Grabbing a towel, I wrap her. “You’re going to need another one of these when I’m done with you.”

She bends over to wring the water out of her long hair. “You keep saying that, but I’m not convinced.”

“Oh, you will be.”

I dry off as she hangs up her towel. “Last one to the bed gets to be on the bottom.”

I chuckle. I’ll be last. Can’t say I mind her riding me and letting the glorious tits bounce free. I hang my towel and walk into the bedroom. Madison is sitting in the middle of the bed. She’s set a clean white towel on the pillow behind her. She catches my raised eyebrow. “For my hair.” She smirks. “You’re last.”

Moving to the bed, I sprawl out next to her. “I’m happy for you to ride me.”

The smile creeps up her face. “Lie on your back.”

I don’t usually like for women to take charge in bed, but she intrigues me. She’ll submit. It just might take a few minutes to get her there.

I shift my large body to lie flat next to her and motion for her to climb aboard. The smirk she offers is the first glimpse of her actual youth and inexperience. She lifts herself up to straddle my hips. Her breasts are round and perky. I can’t wait to cup them and play with her nipples as she rides me. I can see the benefits of having sex with an athletic woman. She positions herself perfectly and stops.

“I’m on the pill, and I always use a condom. I know Brian gets regular physicals, and

they check for STDs.” She steels her face, focusing on my eyes. “Should we use a condom?”

I shake my head. I wish all women were this direct. “So glad you asked. I had my physical and got my results before we left. The negative results included tests for STDs. I typically use a condom, but unless you brought some, I don’t think we’ll have that option.”

“I didn’t. I’m surprised we’re doing this.”

Her eyes drift while I scrutinize her face. “Madison?” My tone is sharper than I intended, but she brings her eyes back to mine. “Say no, if you don’t want to do this.”

“What? No. I mean yes. I do want this.”

“Thank fuck!” I shift my hips, ready to thrust up, as I wait for her look to confirm she understands what’s going to happen. Lust breaks on her face as I lead my cock to her sex and push in to find her warmth. “Feel my cock.”

She smirks as she slides farther down my length. It’s tight, and she bites her bottom lip, concentrating. “You’re big.”

“Uh, huh. That nineteen-year-old boy doesn’t seem quite that big anymore, does he?”

She stops moving. “No. You’re much... Oh... bigger.”

I wrap my hands around her hips. “Ready for me to pleasure you?” The emotions that cross her face make the possessive side of me peak as she nods. I reach up and pull her down to kiss her hard as I press my length into her warmth.

“Oh. Fuck yeah!”

Her swift intake of breath halts my progression. Time to get on top. I pull out as I flip her onto the bed, laying her down on her back while I settle, kneeling between her legs. Now I understand why she put the towel on her pillow. I grasp her knees and pull them up, pressing them up above her as I thrust my length inside her. “Breathe.”

She blows out a breath as I ease back only to press forward once again. “Damn, that’s good.” She’s biting her lower lip again.

I chuckle. Her reactions are so honest. They humble me. “What do you need, Madison?”

She pants with a focused glare as her hands wrap around my arms. “Move faster.” She meets my thrusts to increase the depth and the stunning look of rapture with her parted lips and tightened face let me know she’s close. That’s all I want. Make her come, and I’ll never be able to give her up. The little voice in my brain is throwing out thoughts, reminding me of my commitments, and it’s to no avail. I’m lost in her. In us.

She cries out my name as her sheath tightens around me, and it’s all my cock needs to find my release. My body tightens as I scream, coming like I’ve never come before. It’s moments before I realize I’ve collapsed on her. Raising my head, I kiss her nose. “Sorry. I’m heavy.”

She smiles. “Didn’t notice. That was awesome.”

I roll off Madison and trudge into the bathroom to grab a warm towel to wash her. It’s my job to take care of her. When I walk back into the room, she’s already fast asleep, spread out on the bed. I use the towel so she’ll be more comfortable. Tossing the used cloth into the hamper, I snuggle next to the woman I’m growing to care about, and pull the comforter over our bodies. Think later. Enjoy now.

MADISON

Dixon killed his own buck this morning. We've been here three days, and I couldn't be happier. And it's not just the stupendous sex, though that has made it even better. We spent the time getting to know each other. Gentle touches and passionate kisses, building a foundation for a relationship that can't happen. Dixon is so much more than I imagined. He grew up in Denver. His parents died together in a small private plane crash. He went into foster care which didn't turn out well. Lack of attention led him into trouble and trouble led him to a judge. She recognized his situation and gave him an ultimatum: military or jail. His foster mother cared for him, but he was too wild for her to control. Dixon talked about how he chose the Navy, and the judge dismissed all charges. His clean record allowed him to volunteer for SEAL training and ultimately join the SEAL teams. So many stories about him and my brother make me feel like I've known him forever. It helped with how I feel about Brian, too.

"We can drop the meat from our kills by your uncle's on the way back to your mom's."

I nod. "Uncle Brad can't wait to fill his freezers with the venison. He'll miss the entire deer season because of his work injury."

"I'm happy he'll be able to utilize the meat."

I pull on his shirt. "Speaking of..." I don't get to finish my dirty statement, and his mouth is on mine. I moan as he runs his hands under my shirt.

He breaks the kiss. "Let's wash the day off and let me pleasure you."

I chuckle. "We'll pleasure each other."

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:40 am

DIXON

I step out of Madison's room and lean against the door. We spent four days at the cabin and got back late last night. She's perfect. I can see myself sliding into her bed, waking up with her every morning, and taking care of her every day. Joy bubbles up from my toes until I glance into the pissed off eyes of my best friend and TEAMS member. Shit.

Brian's head motions toward his little sister's door. "What the fuck?"

"Now Bri."

His hand slams against my chest. "Don't 'now Bri,' me. You fucked my sister."

Anger slams into the joy clouding the warmth I felt leaving her room. "Your sister and I have a relationship."

He sputters. "It's been five days. How the hell is it a relationship? You don't live here. Neither does she. She's in college in Boulder. That's thousands of miles from where we spend our time. She doesn't have time for you or this." His hand flaps around. "End this now. You can't give her what she needs." He scrapes his hand across his head. "Hell, she's just a baby."

"Brian. She's a woman. She's brilliant, beautiful, insightful, and analytical. She's the whole fucking package."

He grabs my arm and pulls me down the hall. "She'll never be yours." He blows out a

breath. “Did you forget you’re married?”

“That’s in name only, and you know it.”

“Benny will never understand that you have a wife.” We get to the edge of the stairs.
“Get your shit and be ready to leave in ten.”

I pull my arm from his grasp. “I’ve got two more days.”

He shakes his head. “We’ve been called back. Check your phone. You can leave her a note and tell her you’ve changed your mind. It was just a fling.”

“It wasn’t a fling. We found a connection.”

“My sister is young and naïve. Hell, you probably stole her virginity.”

I stand up straight. “One, she hasn’t been a virgin in a while. Two, she’s not naïve. And three, she knows what she wants.”

The area echoes with Brian’s growl. “She wants to be a professional soccer player and win a world championship. Nowhere in her life plan is a man. Especially one who will only see her occasionally throughout the year.”

“Fine. Let me tell her I’m leaving.”

Brian grasps my arm. “No. I’m ordering you to leave it alone. We’re leaving.” I recognize his tone. I’m not going to win this. I’ll get back to her and tell her why I left and find out when we can see each other again.

MADISON

The light brightens my room as I stretch the used muscles in my body. It's amazing the muscles you use in stupendous sex. I can't contain the smile. The other side of my bed is cold. I wonder where he went. My pussy dampens at the thought of having Dixon again. I jump out of bed and bound to my bathroom to wash off three rounds of sex. The man is a beast. Twenty minutes later, with my hair in braids, I stroll into the kitchen.

My mother nods. "He left. Well, they left. They headed back to wherever they go."

Shock slams into my soul as my jaw drops. The little voice that keeps me on the straight and narrow rattles off reasons why Dixon left without telling me. I take down the cereal box from the cupboard, shaking some into a bowl from the dish drainer, and use the milk on the counter to soften my cereal. She rises from the bar stool. "I'm headed out to work. When are you heading back to school?"

There it is. She's inviting me to leave. Tomorrow is Christmas, but now that Brian is gone, she'll find church people to spend the time with, so I'm not needed. I frown, feeling abandoned by her as well as Dixon and my brother. "Today. I'll be gone before you get back. There's venison in the freezer and some in the garage fridge. You could offer it to your friends at church."

Her eyes light up. "Oh. Yeah. I will." She leans in and kisses my cheek. "Be a good girl, Madison. Don't embarrass me."

I nod. "I never do."

She meanders to the front door as I collapse onto the stool to stew in my sadness. No note, no text, no nothing. Prick! Merry fucking Christmas to me. I'll just go visit my friend, Penny, until school starts up again.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:40 am

SEVEN YEARS LATER

MADISON

“Madison?”

“Yeah, Mom.”

“Your phone has been ringing for the last hour. What’s the deal?”

I am always forgetting my damn phone. “Sorry. I forgot it.”

She rolls her eyes as she hands me the phone. “It must be important. It says fifteen missed calls.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” I take my phone from her hand and yep, fifteen calls in the last hour and a half from my agent and a number I don’t recognize. I walk away and hit the last voicemail.

A woman’s deep, sultry, southern accented voice drawls. “Hi. This is Georgie Scott, head coach for the Dallas Dauntless FC.” She exhales a heavy sigh. “I’m trying to reach Madison Bennett.” She goes on to leave her number. My mind scrambles. I don’t recognize the name, and the Dauntless wasn’t on my list for potential soccer teams. Penny would know. I dial my best friend from college.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Penny.”

“Hi, Benny. How are you? Is your mom driving you nuts, yet? I still don’t understand why you decided to rehab your knee in Dallas.”

“I’m good. Um. Pen? I got a call from Georgie Scott with the Dauntless FC.”

Penny sucks in air like a hoover, making a funny squeak. “The Dauntless are good, and they’re in Dallas. Their coach is a legend.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. What did she say?”

“She left messages.” When did I become the woman that was afraid to listen to my own voicemails?

Penny scoffs. “You didn’t have your phone again, huh?”

“You know me.” And she really does. We met at Freshman orientation the summer before college. We roomed together for all four years. She left Boulder after our Freshman year like I did. I’d never been as unhappy as I was under Coach York. She took an instant dislike to both of us. I stretch my neck with a sigh. We had hoped to find a professional team to take both of us. A pipe dream. FC New Orleans drafted Penny while I was drafted to the Phoenix Bobcats. I extend my knee, well until I blew my ACL and that bitch of a coach took over at Phoenix in the off-season. Now I’m team-less when all of my former teammates have been playing all season while I’ve been out since March. I stretch my leg, remembering the first game of the season when I injured my knee.

“Benny?”

“I’m here. What do you know about Dallas?”

Penny pauses. “The team or the city?”

“You’re funny Penny. I only lived here all of my childhood. I mean the team, silly.”

“It’s great. Two former Wildcats play for them. The coach, Georgie Scott, is a dream. She’s an ex-player, and her husband assists her as her lead assistant coach. They’ve been rebuilding for three years; this should be their break out year. She must want you to replace Holly, who unexpectedly retired last week.” She clicks her tongue. She’s thinking. “This could be a perfect fit. You’re better than Holly and younger. You were captain for two years in college, so you’ve got the leadership experience.”

“Gah. I’d be brand new to the team. There’s no way she’s planning for me to take on that role. Six of her players have much more experience than me.”

“I guess. I suppose I’m biased. You were my captain and did a stellar job.”

“You’re my best friend, Penny. I don’t have any experience with these players.”

She clicks her tongue again. “Well, looks like you’re going to get to know them.”

“Yeah. Thanks. I’ll call with deets.” I hang up the phone and stare at it. Do I call now or should I wait?

My phone rings in my hand, startling me, and I almost drop my phone. “Hello?”

“Oh finally. Hi. I’m Georgie, Georgia Scott of the Dallas Dauntless. I assume this is Madison?”

“Yeah. Hi.”

“I had planned on schmoozing you when I got you on the phone, but I’m just too excited. We’d like to have you in to meet with us on Friday. I’m aware it’s only three days away, but we spoke to your agent, and we all think you’re a perfect fit for the Dauntless.

“Uh. Sure. You’ll send me the itinerary?”

Georgie blurts. “Yes. My assistant will call in a few. Can’t wait to meet you.” The line goes dead, and I’m staring at my blank phone again. Why the hell didn’t my agent call me and tell me what was going on? And why isn’t my team fighting to keep me? I know why. The Bobcats hired my former college coach, and she hates me. This is revenge for my leaving her in Boulder. The feeling is very mutual. I thought Phoenix would want to keep me after my accomplishments last season. Once again, I missed the memo that what I expect isn’t what’s going to happen.

Three days later, I step into the Dauntless facilities. Penny said the team was rebuilding, but damn, the place looks like a show pony in a corral of burros. Everything in the building looks new and polished. Much better amenities than Phoenix. I glance at the wall. Every award and recognition for the last ten years is showcased behind glass. The championship win from eight years ago is highlighted with the silver trophy. My friend and agent’s words rattle around in my brain about what a fortuitous opportunity the Dauntless would be for me. Everything I could want in a contract is on the table.

I jump as a woman’s voice hits my brain. “I see you found the brag case.”

A beautiful black woman wearing a dark gray power suit with a bright red shirt and shoes approaches as she extends her hand. “Hi. I’m Georgie.”

I grasp her hand in mine and smile. “Hi. Nice to meet you, I’m Benny.” She chuckles and the soft lilt of her voice catches me off-guard.

“It’s an unusual nickname for a woman. From ‘Bennett,’ right?”

“Yeah. It was a family nickname that helped me out in grade school. Too many Madisons in school, so the P.E. teacher called us all by nicknames. There were two Madison B’s, so she called me ‘Benny.’

Georgie smirks. “And the other was called?”

“Barry. Her last name was Barrison.”

She cackles. “Very creative. We have two Amandas, so maybe this idea could be a trend.”

I put my finger up to my lips. “Let’s not mention the idea came from the new girl.”

She doesn’t respond as she turns with her hand outstretched. “Let’s tour.”

The gleaming white floors remind me of a hospital: sterile and stark. The long hallway has a dozen doors leading into it, and while most are closed, I can see into a few of the offices. They’re well decorated with professional looking people sitting at the desks.

“Our staff is almost entirely new since we took over.”

I nod as I absorb the experience. “When RMK bought the Dauntless, they brought you in as the head coach?”

“Yes. I went to college with Mackenzie and Robert. They named their corporation after their initials R. M. Kilkenny.”

A man barrels into the hallway and nearly steps on my foot. I recognize the scent, and

my body alerts. He turns to smile at Georgie. "Sorry." As his focus swings to me, his face morphs from a handsome man to an ogre as soon as he sees me. "Oh."

"Oh?" I scoff. "Good morning to you, too, Dixon."

Georgie's head pings back and forth between me and the gorgeous obnoxious man. "You've met before?"

He rolls his eyes. "She's my best friend's little sister."

Georgie raises her hands. "Excellent. Another family connection."

The color drains out of Dixon's face. "What?"

"A little slow on the uptake."

The realization that I'm standing with the head coach hits his face like a flyswatter. "Wait. Really?" His scowl lifts into a beaming smile that lights up those stellar sea-green eyes.

Georgie's smile drifts into a scowl. "What's going on here, Dixon?"

For a moment, I forget about our past and my heart lifts at the thought he's so happy to see me. As fast as his happiness resonated on his gorgeous face, it dims as quickly.

"Nothing." He glares at me. I guess he thinks I'm going to word vomit all over my new potential coach that we had a relationship. I wonder if he's still married. Cringing inside, I scold myself for caring.

Georgie's stare continues to follow him as he heads into a different office than the one he came out of. "That was... interesting."

I chuckle. “Men.”

She laughs. “Right? I find them intriguing but tiresome.”

That’s a good explanation of Dixon. “Does he work here?”

“Sort of. He works for Campbell Petrov Security and Protection. They handle organization security. He’s our liaison. You’ll see him once a week or so.”

I’m not going to see him ever again if I can manage it.

DIXON

What the hell is the little nymph doing in Dallas? I tap the door of the Team Assistant Manager and friend, Kyle Brooks. “You’re bringing on Benny Bennett?”

His eyes read my face. “Who?”

I flick my head to the door. “Bennett.”

Recognition pops on his face. “Oh. Madison Bennett.” He purses his lips. “You know her?”

“Yes. She’s my best friend’s little sister.”

“Small world. Her file looks really clean, I doubt you’ll have any security work to do for her.” I sit down across from his desk as his face morphs into a huge smile. “You like her?”

“What? No!”

Kyle gives me the side-eye. “I think he doth protest too much. Have you two...?”

I throw up my hands. “She’s not my type.” Well, not my type anymore since I fucked it up again with her in Newark a few years ago.

Kyle cocks his head. “I’ve met your type. And yes, she is. She’s exactly your type. Trust me, I’m just as happy if you avoid her. We don’t need any fraternization.”

“Sure.” I pull my large body out of the chair and stand before his desk. “So, her knee is good?”

“You tell me, pal. You’ve got a history with her.”

“No. Her brother and I don’t discuss her.”

He cocks his head. “There’s more to this story, huh?”

“No idea Kyle. I’ll catch you later.” Damn straight there’s more to this story. We had a good thing starting until I ruined it all. Fuck. This is a nightmare.

MADISON

I grab my phone from my purse and turn it on, frantically pushing buttons.

Penny answers and I blurt before she can say ‘hello’. “He’s here.”

“Ooh. I love guessing games. Let me guess... Snoop Dogg?”

I laugh. It’s a desperate, I’ve been lost in the desert and finally rescued kind of laugh.

“Ha, ha. Dixon.”

“Dixon... Dixon? Where?” “In Dallas.”

“Didn’t your brother tell you he was going to be in Dallas?”

“We don’t ever talk about Dixon. It took them months to get their friendship back after we got snowed in together in New Jersey. He’s a forbidden subject.”

Penny clicks her tongue. “Wait. How much does he know about all of it?”

“Who? My brother? Well, I didn’t tell him. I can’t imagine Dixon shared all about our hunting adventure or New Jersey, either.”

“And you haven’t seen him again?”

I blow out my breath. “Not since I spent those four days with him in Newark three years ago, but no. Not lately.”

Penny speaks. “He’s a liar and a cheat. Be grateful you dodged a bullet.”

“Damn straight, I dodged a bullet. Think about the drama if we had continued with it. We had two brief flings, and Newark could have been a happy memory, but when Brian told me Dixon was married, that ruined it.”

Penny breathes out a hard breath. “He had an excuse about why he was married and the fact that it didn’t mean anything.”

“To him. To me, it meant everything. Loyalty means everything. You know this after what my father did to my mother. I...”

“I’m sorry, Benny. I can’t imagine he’ll be in Dallas long. Where’d you see him?”

“At the stadium. He works there.”

“What do you mean he works there? He’s not a SEAL anymore?”

I swallow, trying to take a moment to process. “He works for the Dauntless in security or something.”

“Oh... That could be weird.” Her statement hangs in the air like the smell of dirty gym socks.

“Yeah. I guess he’ll just be around occasionally. He works for some security firm and just stops by.”

Penny pauses. “You’ll just have to avoid him... Unless you'd rather not?”

“Pfft. That ship sailed.” I blow out my breath, trying to assure myself that it’s true.

“Tell me about the team.”

Penny’s enthusiasm about this opportunity gives me something else to focus on. I ramble for the next twenty minutes talking about the facilities and the team. I have to take the position. It’s better money than the average and being cut by the Bobcats after my injury has put an asterisk by my name.

“What’s your brother going to say about you guys being in proximity again?”

“I don’t have a clue what Brian is going to think about this. It doesn’t matter. I’ve worked long and hard to put him into the brother box he belongs in. I’m not sure I’m even going to mention it. It will just be another subject we avoid.”

“See, there’s a downside to not talking about him with your brother. You would have

known and been prepared to see him.” She pauses, which means she’s going for the real questions. “How did it feel to see him again?”

“It sucked.”

“I can imagine. Is he still hot?”

“Damn it, Penny. That’s not something I need to think about.”

“Ha. So, he is.”

“Yeah. He’s still hot. Maybe hotter than ever.”

She sighs. “I’m sorry.”

My throat constricts at the thought of our two brief chances at a relationship. “Let’s talk later.”

“Sure, hun. Call me when you’re watching our show tonight.”

“Yeah. Bye.” I end the call and swallow, not wanting to think about the hurt he caused when he left the first time without telling me. Then three years ago, our hot accidental forced proximity at the hotel in Newark. My mind drifts to the past.

THREE YEARS BEFORE DAUNTLESS

MADISON

I step up to the counter. “Excuse me.” I slip my backpack off my shoulders and pull out my wallet, keeping the backpack and my carryon between my feet. The stench of sweat permeates the area along with angry voices and screaming babies. Flights canceled and people waiting makes for stress you can feel and smell.

The airline attendant lifts her head with a too wide smile that doesn’t crinkle her eyes. She reminds me of a clown without the makeup, an uncomfortable fake smile. Holding up her hand, she squawks. “I’ll be right with you.”

People walk up behind me and the aura of the area changes. The space behind me shrinks, and someone’s body presses into mine. I turn my head to glare at the man who’s close enough I can smell his overpowering cologne. He rolls his eyes.

The woman speaks to me in a sticky sweet high-pitched voice. “How can I help you?”

I try to ignore the man’s scent as I turn, plastering a friendly face on my annoyed soul. “My flight to Phoenix was canceled. I’d like to get on the next available flight.”

“Well.” She cocks her head. “All flights have been canceled because of the storm. We’re handing out hotel vouchers, but this storm is expected to ground flights through the day after tomorrow. You’d better hurry. I hear the hotels are filling up fast.” Her hand grabs a piece of paper and I pluck it from her hand as she yells,

“next.”

“Shit.” I hustle to the door with a group of people. It’s obvious we’re all searching for the holy grail of hotel rooms to wait out the storm. The bus to the Newark Campbell Hotel idles at the curb. I hand my voucher for the cheap airport hotel to a young couple with three small children as I run for the bus’s sliding door. Jumping on the Campbell Hotel bus, I text my boss, friend and agent, Lily, to ask if she can get me a room. She responds with a thumbs-up emoji as a text. I sit down with a smile. Whew. The bus comes to a stop in front of the ornate and luxurious Campbell Hotel. I heist my carryon and backpack higher onto my shoulder. My week in the Bahamas wasn’t worth this mess.

A man nods at me as I get off the bus. “Ma’am?”

Fuck. When did I become a ‘ma’am’? “Hi.” I follow the guy, who’s probably only a few years younger as we enter the lobby. The opulence of the décor makes me smile. Women, and especially professional athletes, typically don’t make a lot of money, but my team, the Phoenix Bobcats won the Women’s professional soccer championship in November. I can’t help but smile. I had a big part in that and was named League Defender of the Year as a rookie. Scorers and goalies usually get the accolades in soccer, but defenders make the difference by keeping the ball for their team, thus giving their offense time to score. I picked up two endorsement contracts and a team bonus, so I can afford to stay here. I’m lucky enough to have a work-from-whenever-I-am, remote job with my agent’s company. This little time will give me a chance to do some work for Lily while I wait out the storm. I glance up to the smiling, handsome man at the desk. “Good evening. Welcome to The Campbell Newark.”

“Hi. I’m Madison Bennett.”

His smile increases. “You’re a soccer player. My daughter has your poster on her wall.”

I feel the blush creep up my neck. “That’s sweet. What’s her name? I’ll autograph my team photo for her.”

“Oh. Wow. Lauren. She’ll be thrilled. Thanks.”

“Of course.”

The man beams as he turns his head to his screen. “I’ve got one room left, and it’s yours. You must know someone who got you one of the reserved rooms.”

I present my credit card to the clerk and feel my shoulders relax. A nice shower to wash off this crappy situation would be nice, and I should call my brother to tell him I’m stuck here.

“Thank you, Miss Bennett.” He hands me back my credit card.

“No, thank you. I’ll drop the photo for your daughter in the morning.”

His warm smile reminds me of my dad, and my heart clenches. Enough time has passed that I remember the good times more than his faults.

“I know she’s going to love it.” He hands me a card. “Here’s a free meal with room service.”

I hold it up with a shake and a smile. I turn and run into a hard, warm body with a scent I instantly recognize. Dixon. Looking up, I catch his annoyed then pleased smirk.

“Madison?”

“Oh shit. Hi.” I move to skirt around him as his large hand wraps gently around my

waist. “Let’s get you out of the melee.”

“Thanks, but I’m heading to my room.”

He nods. “I’m hoping to do the same.” I frown and his brow lifts. “What?”

“He said I got the last room.”

He cracks his neck from side to side as he walks me around the throng of people.

“Well, shit. I guess I need to find another hotel.”

My head and heart war with each other. I could just share my room. It’s the right thing to do. I understand my brother made him leave me after the hunting trip. It didn’t lessen the hurt or my annoyance, but...

“Madison?” Dixon’s scruffy face reminds me of our time together and a part of me wants to not offer, but I chew on my lip and ask.

“Why don’t you just share my room? I’m sure there’s a sofa or something.”

The shock on his face is totally worth the scolding my mind is giving my heart at the moment. “Really?”

“Sure. I guess this storm caught everyone off guard. Just come with me. We can be adults.”

He nods and reaches for the carry-on I have on my shoulder. I pivot to slip his grasp.

“I’ve got my bag. Just handle yours.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

I hold up my room card. “Fourth floor, room four-thirty-seven.”

He’s silent in the elevator and when we get out, I slip the key into the door as he holds it open. “Congrats on your award and win from last season.”

“Thanks.” Because he’s so damn big, I can walk under his arm to get into the bedroom, lugging my bags onto the bed. I look around. No sofa. Shit and that loveseat isn’t much bigger than a large chair. He can’t sleep on that.

He nods. “I can sleep on the floor. It won’t be the first time.”

Shrugging, I nod. “Let’s order some food. Then I want a shower, and after, we can talk about sleeping arrangements.” The look of possession that crosses his face stirs my core. No. Not doing that again. I grab the menu off the table and scan, quickly deciding on a burger and a salad. I hand the menu to Dixon. “What do you want to order?”

He peruses the hard back black book binder with multiple pages. I kick off my shoes as he reaches for the hotel phone and hands it to me. “I’ll do a burger, fries, and add a side salad with thousand island.”

“Any other particulars you want me to mention?”

“No. I’ll take it as it comes.”

I push the button for room service and order our food. Hanging up, I nod at Dixon. “She said thirty minutes. I’m going to take a shower.”

“I’ll open for room service if you’re not out.”

“Great.” I reach into my backpack and pull out a team photo, along with my

permanent marker. I write a cute message for the clerk's daughter and put it inside an envelope with the clerk's name. I hand it to Dixon along with the card for the free meal. "Would you make sure to hand these to whomever drops the meal?" I wave my hand as I walk into the bedroom to grab my bag to take it into the bathroom and close the door. It's been four years, and I can't understand how it's possible, but he's even hotter. Damn. Light my panties on fire, hot. I turn the water on as I strip off my clothes and step into the stream to wash off the crappy situation and get my libido in check.

Twenty minutes later, I walk out of the bathroom in a heavy pair of sweats and slipper shoes. I couldn't look less attractive.

Dixon lifts his head from his phone. "You look more relaxed."

I plop down onto the other chair. "I am. It's been a long day. I'm surprised to see you in Newark. I thought you were still in Virginia with your SEAL team."

"I'm helping with the Navy SEAL Foundation in New York. I visited Liberty Park, here in New Jersey, before my flight to Virginia."

"Oh."

A deep frown mars his handsome face. "Let me apologize for leaving the way I did that Christmas."

I pull my shoulders in and rub my hands up and down my arms. This apology arrives just a little late. "Brian explained."

Dixon shrugs. "I know I hurt your feelings."

The hair on my nape prickles. How dare he tell me how I felt. "Yes. You hurt me. I

admit I'm surprised you just left. I learned something about myself and what I want. I don't need a man. Frankly, I don't want one either. They steal my focus from my goal of playing professional soccer."

He nods. "You're definitely doing whatever you have to do for that. I watched your championship game. You destroyed their offense. You gave your team that win."

"It was a great season..." I have no idea what else to say. He diverts his gaze to look out the window. I don't have to be awkward for too long before a knock on the door disturbs the eerie silence that had shadowed the room. It's weird that we have nothing to say to each other. We talked and really spent quality time with each other when we went hunting at the cabin. Smiling, he gets up from his chair and strolls to the door.

The hotel staff member pushes the cart into the room and sidles up next to the desk, setting the tray on the flat surface. "Just set the tray outside the door and someone will pick it up. There's a door tag you can fill out for your breakfast order and the time you want it." His eyes flick to the single bedroom, and I'm pretty sure I see a look between him and Dixon. Men.

I pick up the envelope with the photo and catch the man. "Hey, can you make sure this gets to the front desk?"

"Sure." He takes the envelope as he closes the door.

Dixon pulls the table across the stretch of room to the two plush chairs. "It's not quite a coffee table for eating, but better than standing."

"Yeah. Thanks." I stand up to collect my plate and sit back down, palming my silverware.

"I'll be back in a second." Dixon grabs the keycard and bolts out the door. Rolling

my eyes, I eat the first bite of my burger. A few minutes later the door clicks, and Dixon strolls back in with my favorite soda along with his in hand. “Here.” He hands me my drink.

“Thanks. Wow. You remembered.”

“Of course I remembered. We talked about how our sodas are bitter enemies. You drink Coke and I prefer Pepsi.” He winks and collects his food as he sits down in his chair. “I overheard some airline personnel talking about the weather. We’re not flying out of New Jersey any time soon.”

I blow out my breath. “Seriously? I have things to do in Phoenix.”

“I get it. My commanding officer won’t be happy that I’m not reporting day after tomorrow.”

“Well, shit.” My burger has lost some of its appeal. I have nothing specific I need to get back to, but I enjoy my life in Phoenix and being here with Dixon reminds me of that vulnerable feeling when your heart is held captive by the one you want.

“What’s keeping you busy in the offseason?”

“I’m working for a friend. I picked up my paralegal certificate, so I can do legal work for her firm.”

“You still want to be a lawyer?”

“I think so. I don’t have the time right now.” I dab my face with the royal blue napkin and set it on my finished plate. “That was good”

Dixon nods “It was. I think I’ll check my email.”

Picking up my phone, I scroll through the news. The weather is going to suck. Flights may be flying in three days. I glance at my bag. I don't think I have three more days of clothes. The small hotel amenities binder on the table catches my attention. I reach to grab it to find the laundry room. "I'm about to do a load of laundry. Do you want me to do any of yours?"

Dixon gasps. "You can't go do that alone. It's late."

"Come on. It's a reputable hotel. I'll be fine, and I need fresh clothes."

His eyes glance into the bedroom at my bag. "I find it amazing that you only have a carry-on. Don't beautiful women usually have at least a checked bag?"

I shrug. That was a nice off-hand compliment. "I did a photo shoot for the advertising company promoting the draft. They provided my clothes for that. I just needed two days of clothes."

"It's great that they're including you. They should. You were the highest defender drafted last year."

"I'm grateful Phoenix drafted me."

"They're the lucky ones. You're the reason they won last year."

Winning the Championship as a rookie is never a good omen for your career. I can't sit here and dwell on what may be. Dixon opens and closes his mouth, and I'm grateful for the reprieve. "I'm gonna do some laundry." I turn and put my hand on my hip. "What do you need done?"

He jumps up and rushes to his bag. "I'll just come with you." He cocks his head. "I don't have anything else to do. Maybe you'll tell me about your championship

game.”

I stop and stare at the gorgeous hunk of a man, the memory of his leaving me slipping farther away. “Wait. You watched my game?”

“Yeah.” He nods with a sly smile. “It wasn’t easy to do in the middle of an op, but I did it.”

“Wow. I’m surprised.”

He places his hand on my arm as the warmth from his touch sends tingles up my spine. He tips his head to me. “I’m sure I hurt you when I left. I’m sorry. It wasn’t that I didn’t care.”

“Yeah. I know. Brian explained he warned you off of me.” I can’t help the blush that creeps up my face. “So, to speak.”

“He did. He was pissed when I walked out of your room.” He grits his teeth with a frown. “I would do it differently if I could go back in time. Brian can be convincing and to be honest, I was afraid of messing up your future.”

My scowl catches his breath. “How were you going to mess me up?”

He breathes out hard. “I couldn’t offer you more than a weekend here and there and some time during the holidays. That’s not a relationship.”

He has a point, but I should have had a choice.

He nods. “I can imagine what you’re thinking, I should have talked to you rather than taking off. And you’re right. Leaving was a huge mistake, and I am sorry.” He leans forward and kisses my forehead. “Laundry?”

“Yeah.”

“Unless you want me to grovel.”

I put up my hand. “That’s the past. Let’s move on.” I focus on his striking green eyes. “As friends.”

He nods as we walk out the door of the room with our clothes.

Two hours later, we get back into the room. It’s midnight and amazingly enough, I’m not tired. We spent the entire time talking about our lives and our thoughts. He’s the type of man I would want if I wanted to have a relationship.

He walks from the bathroom into the living room of the suite. “Are you going to bed?”

Pink rises up my neck as my nipples pebble in my bra. I want him. Heaven help me, no other man has surpassed him in the bedroom, and I need a release. I can have sex without my heart involved. I know I’m lying to myself, but my feet propel me to him. His pupils look like saucers as lust slams on his face. He wants me too. My hands travel to his chest as he wraps his arms around me and draws me closer.

“Thank fuck.” His mouth covers mine, and my body remembers the taste and smell of this hot man. My gasp gives him access to explore my mouth with his tongue and my panties dampen. His left hand drops to my ass as he slams me into his body. I’m surprised his massively hard cock isn’t busting his sweatpants. My hand dips down, and I rub the outside of his pants, caressing his length. Dixon moans into my mouth.

I break the kiss and grab his hand, pulling him to the bedroom. He grips my elbow, turning me abruptly as his hands divest me of my clothes before yanking off his own. “You’re sure?” He mutters.

I am. Bobbing my head, I'm overwhelmed with need. I want him to fuck me and make me come like he did four years ago. Lost in the moment, I drop to my knees and slide his erection into my mouth, caressing the head with my tongue. I focus my attention on the piercing, remembering how good it felt inside my pussy. He sucks in a breath and puts his hand on the dresser next to the bed. Power. I feel powerful. Making him come in my mouth is more than my next breath. Sliding his cock in and out of my mouth, I massage his balls with my other hand. His moaning spurs me on.

“Madison?”

I vaguely hear him speaking my name, but I can't stop myself.

“Madison? Please, sweetheart.”

Does he want me to get him off as much as my body needs the relief? His body dips as his hands find their destinations, circling my body, he brings me up. “I love that and you can do more later, but I have to be inside you.” He lays me on the bed, running his hands up my thighs. “You're even more beautiful than I remembered.”

My hands caress his face as I draw it to mine and stare, fascinated at his intense focus. I'm his prey. The watchful eyes of the wild cats you see on the Discovery Channel pale in comparison to how Dixon stares into my very soul. Obsession is the word I'm looking for before he takes my mouth in a passionate kiss, swallowing my moans. He breaks the kiss to mumble. “Do we need a condom?”

“We should.”

He bolts off the bed and dives his hand into a side pocket of his bag, withdrawing a silver foil packet. Coming back to the bed, he rips the foil of the condom and rolls it down his thick, engorged cock. I'm engrossed in his movements as he slides it down. He centers himself between my thighs, caressing my legs as he finds my warmth. The

slow penetration that gets deeper with each stroke feels better than I remembered, and the intensity on his face makes me feel powerful knowing he's barely holding himself from plunging deep. "You feel so good."

I smile. My orgasm is just at the edge of my reach as he moves in and out like a piston. Pleasure builds in my core, warming my body as he lengthens his movements. His cock stretches me the deeper he goes reminding me of his size. I sigh, eliciting a smile on his gorgeous face. "Oh, Dixon."

"I need you to come, Madison."

I can't answer because my climax hits me like a tsunami, overtaking my senses and drawing me into oblivion. "Oh. Yes." Sensations bombard my body, mind, and soul. I want to feel this over and over again, catapulting over the edge of supreme satisfaction, I settle back down on the bed rippling around his length.

"That was the best."

I smile, thrusting my sex onto his slick steel in a race to make him come before I come a second time.

My mind and heart battle with me in the middle. It's just sex, but my heart remembers the love I felt for this man. My moaning spurs him on as he increases speed. He wants to make me come again, and I need an orgasm. The piercing moves along the wall of my pussy and my second climax is within reach. He moans, shoving and pulling nearly out, again and again. His eyes close as his body stiffens. The look of release announces with his groan and my body comes on cue. I'm catapulting over the precipice of bliss as he cries aloud. His cock pulses in the condom and my pussy misses the drenching it had received years before.

He kisses my lips. "That was awesome."

Giggling, I press my hand to his chest as he bounds off the bed into the bathroom. He returns without the condom and with a warm wet washcloth to clean me. Damn this man. He's going to wedge himself back into my heart.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:40 am

DIXON

“Dixon?”

“Huh?” She’s sitting on the plush chair, curled up in a blanket, looking like a princess burrito. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

She rolls her eyes as I groan. “I just went through the movie options.” She glares with a little smile. “I’m not listing them again,”

“Just pick what you want. I’m just happy to be sharing this space with you.”

She chuckles. “You’re just a sweet-talking man.”

Her words resonate with my thoughts. We’ve spent the last three days together with little time separated. Working out with her this morning was the last straw in my resolve. We’re perfect together. Sex is utterly amazing, and it’s only intensified by the intimacy we’re gaining with the time we’ve spent together. Could fate be giving us another chance? I’ve been thinking about retiring from the TEAMS. Security companies send me offers for employment. I could pick the region and choose a firm. There’s a phenomenal security and protection company in Dallas and one in Phoenix. I could start out in Phoenix and move with Madison wherever she goes.

She raises the remote and clicks some buttons. “I’m glad we ran into each other.”

Halfway through the movie, Madison is fast asleep, and I move quietly to the bedroom to pull her luggage off the bed. I turn down the covers and go back into the

sitting room. I run my hands under her compact frame and lift her up, bringing the blanket with us. She snuggles into my chest, and my heart clenches. I made a mistake four years ago. Brian didn't give me any choice, but I still regret it. Her breathing warms my soul. She feels like home. Laying her down on the bed, I pull the blanket around her and place the bed bedding on top. The room is warm, but if the hotel were to lose power, it would drop temperature really fast.

After I turn off the TV and the lights, I move back into the bedroom. I'm still dressed in sweatpants and a t-shirt. I'm going to snuggle next to her. It's going to be really hard to keep my hands to myself. I want her like I've never wanted any other woman, but she needs rest. I do too, if I'm being honest.

Light streams through the window as I move to look out. White covers the world with a blanket of fresh snow reminding me of the fresh-faced woman on the other side of the bed. I'm glad she didn't hear my alarm that alerted me breakfast was imminent. Walking to the door, I catch the knock on the first thud.

"Good morning, your breakfast, sir."

I nod. "Good morning. Thank you."

She sets the tray on the table and nods. "Have a good day. I doubt there will be any fun sightseeing today."

"No worries." I walk her out and turn to see Madison standing at the bedroom door.

"I'm starving."

"Bon appétit."

Rolling her eyes, she moves to her chosen chair. "Have you been up long?"

“No.” My head flicks to her. “Why were you rolling your eyes?”

“Every woman falls all over themselves for you. No regard that I’m here and could mean something to you.” Her face falls, sadness covers her face, and I know she’s remembering my leaving without saying goodbye.

My heart grieves from the insecurity in her words. She does mean something to me, and it’s my fault she questions my intentions when another woman shows interest. Maybe the ship sailed four years ago. I devour my breakfast, unsure what to talk about, but as usual, Madison starts to natter.

She holds up her fork and blurts. “I really like Phoenix. There are a plethora of fans and they are knowledgeable, too.. I feel like the team is my family.”

“Yeah.” My understanding of women’s soccer begins and ends with Madison. I glance around the room trying to think of something to say. Luxury Campbell hotel rooms always have an abstract painting on the opposite wall of the window with a C and a complicated geometric design. It’s a cliché, but makes sense, too. I focus my attention back to Madison. “Why?”

“I love the coach. She’s a former player with two Olympic golds, and she’s the kind of coach I hoped I’d get.”

“They are lucky to have you.” I did my research while I watched her games. I know the positions and the best college players. Madison is incredible. She dominated in college. The way she controls the ball and takes it away from her opponents is remarkable.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’ve already made your mark with Phoenix. Teams assume their players

can handle defense so they focus on the offense. Phoenix knew you'd help them get to the next level."

She smiles and my heart beats faster. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were following me."

"I am. I watch you play whenever I can."

Madison's mood lifts. "Thanks."

I finish the last bite of my meal and set down my fork. I love this time with Madison. "Why did you leave Boulder your freshman year and go to Stanford?"

She shrugs. "Better education along with a stronger women's soccer program."

I inquire further as she collects our dirty dishes. "You didn't like your coach?"

Rolling her eyes again she swallows. "Coach York is a bitch. She didn't value me. Her idea of player management consisted of verbal abuse and fat shaming."

"It's great that you could transfer."

"It is. I can't imagine how miserable I would have been if I'd had to continue playing for her."

MADISON

My body jostles as Dixon carries me to the bedroom. I'm unsure how he got me off the loveseat without waking me as I slowly rouse in his arms. We spent the entire day binge watching programs we both like. With so much in common, you'd think we'd be tired of each other, but we aren't. And I want him. He's been a perfect gentleman,

and my heart is back in the game. I snuggle my head into his chest, relishing his strong arms, feeling safe. His scent reminds me of happiness. And lust.

“Hi, sleepy head.”

I yawn as he sets me on my feet next to the bed. “I’m sorry I fell asleep.”

“It’s nothing. It just gave me a reason to put my hands on you.”

My grip tightens on his arm. “I didn’t realize you needed a reason. I can’t ignore the sparks that have already happened between us.”

The predator closes the distance between us as his mouth slams onto mine. Lust. A heady feeling of power envelops my body. My permission was enough to unleash the beast. My hands travel down to the hem of the henley he’s wearing. Gripping the bottom, he breaks the kiss as I pull up his shirt and yank it over his head. My right hand drops the shirt on the ground as my left hand explores his muscular pecs. The smoothness of the skin is exemplified by the hardness of his chest. The sharp intake of air he offers lets me know he wants me too.

Dixon pushes down the waistband of his track pants, catching his briefs and drags them down his legs. His soft, warm hands caress my naked legs as he grabs the long flannel shorts I wear. Dropping to his knees, he smiles up at me. “You were commando this whole time.”

I snort. “Don’t really have enough undergarments to bother with them if I’m not going out.”

His reaction fills my soul with joy as his hand moves under my shirt, across my belly, grazing his fingers across my large breasts. “Damn, fondling these never gets old.”

Smiling, I run my hands around his face. “Perv.”

“You have no idea, sweetheart.” His eyes twinkle. “Take off that tank top.”

DIXON

On my knees to worship Madison, my senses peak. Her smell is intoxicating, and I want to throw her naked body onto the bed and ravish her, giving her the pleasure she deserves. I brush my nose across her sex to make her moan. She’s incredibly sensitive, her body shares every emotion that runs through her head.

“Oh, Dixon.” The temperature in the room skyrockets as she reaches for me.

I chuckle, blowing on her clit as I slip a finger between her swollen lips. She jumps, giving me the opportunity to wrap my hands around her ass and pull her closer to me. I rub the pad of my thumb across her sex as my finger finds her warmth. I don’t think I can do this seduction thing for too long; my cock is so hard I feel like I could explode at any moment.

“Yeah.” She pushes her sex into my hand as I add another finger. Pumping in and out while rubbing her clit, she’ll come like a rocket in a matter of moments. Her breathing quickens. She’s building, climbing that sensation cliff that’s going to throw her off into a mind-bending climax. I could stay here all night, but my cock can’t hold out much longer. I speed up my ministrations as her body tightens like a spring.

Panting, she cries out. “Dixon. I’m going to come. Oh, yeah.” Her pussy spasms on my fingers as she bites her lower lip and grips behind my head as she rides her orgasm to a cataclysmic high. Panting my name, her body stills. I stand and grab her lax body and lay her out on the bed. Let the fucking begin. Her mouth opens as I remember my condoms are in the other room.

I'm running for my bag as she calls out to me, her impatience dripping from her command. "Get on this bed, Dixon. Fuck me!"

Chuckling, I hustle back, ripping the package and roll on the condom as I get back to the bed and stare at the gorgeous goddess spread before me. A Smorgasbord of emotions crash into me while I settle myself between her legs, spreading her thighs as I press my cock against her sex.

"Dixon. I'm so horny."

"Let me make it better." Thrusting into her warm pussy hardens my cock. Patience may be a virtue but waiting to have her was killing me. She moans with each thrust, meeting every movement intensifying the pleasure. Making love to Madison is the best sexual experience. I will never get enough of her. Her pussy constricts my cock as she cries out. Orgasm number two. My balls pull up as my cock explodes. I tumble off the cliff of ecstasy, feeling her milk every ounce of come as her pussy quivers around my length.

"Wow." Her beaming smile makes everything right in my world. I need to do this again, but slower. I intend to stretch out her pleasure, giving her everything she deserves.

Jumping from the bed, I dispose of the condom and bring back a warm, wet cloth to wash her. Her breathing is slow and steady. She's already asleep as I clean off our mess. Moments later, I'm back from the bathroom and pulling her warm, lax body into my front.

MADISON

It's the morning of the fifth day, and the airports are open and flights are happening. I throw my legs over the bed and smile at the bathroom door. Dixon let me sleep in this

morning. My heart warms at his thoughtfulness but my pussy is sad. Yesterday's shower led to another round of glorious sex. It's been a perfect five days. He's constantly touching me and his soft kisses stir my heart. He makes love to me each time like it's the first time and it's obvious he wants me as much as I want him. Talking and laughing with him may be even better than sex. I giggle. Not quite. He's talked about leaving the TEAMS and moving to Phoenix so we can give this thing between us a fair shot. He said if I got traded, he'd just go with me wherever I go. Warmth surrounds my heart and spreads throughout my core.

His phone rings on the dresser next to the cracked bathroom door. He calls out from the shower. "Answer that, would you Madison? It could be my TEAMS."

I mumble as I reach for the phone and answer the call. "Hello?"

"Madison?"

Fuck. My brother. "Hi, Brian."

"Why the fuck do you have Dixon's phone? Is he fucking you again? I swear I'll kill him. I told him you're off limits."

I yell. "Brian." He keeps swearing. "Brian!"

"What?"

"It's none of your damn business. We ran into each other in Newark. We got snowed in."

He sighs. "He fucking took advantage of you again."

"Dixon did no such thing."

“If he’s kept you there, screwing you. God damn it. He’s married, Benny.”

Noise rushes through my brain and echoes in my ears. Married? We talked about a future. I can still feel what we were doing in the wee hours of the morning when he was inside me. That sinking feeling that men cheat and lie takes hold of my joy and crushes it into dust. “What?”

Brian grumbles. “He’s married. He has no right to do anything with you.”

The door opens as I hold up the phone to Dixon’s crinkled brow. “Who is it?”

“My brother. He wanted to share about your wife.”

Dixon’s jaw drops as my brother continues to bark on the phone. Dixon blurts. “I can explain.”

Wicked retorts hover in my mouth as I move toward my luggage. Throwing on whatever clothes I can find, my brain hears him pleading but anger radiates off me, keeping him at bay. I wrap my messy ‘just-fucked’ hair into a messy knot. He tosses his phone on the bed as he approaches.

“Leave me the fuck alone. I shouldn’t have let you in again.” I sob. “How could you make me a woman who sleeps with a married man? I’m disgusted. You’re just like my father.” Sliding my feet into my shoes, I hoist my carry-on over my shoulder and rush for the suite door, listening to Dixon beg me to stay. I can’t believe I’m so stupid. Checking my phone, I let out a sigh as my boarding pass pops up on my notifications. Put this in a box and just get back to Phoenix; back to the only thing I can count on. My hand pulls the door as Dixon wraps his hand around my arm. I turn and my heart clenches at the regretful face of the man I’d fallen for again.

“Now, Madison. Give me a chance to explain.” He runs his fingers down my arm.

“It’s not an actual marriage.”

Bile spikes in the back of my throat anger coats my regret with a righteous stench. I set my hand on my hip. “Are you married?”

His face falls answering my question. “We got married young. I haven’t seen her in a dozen years.”

The anger locomotive roars into my brain. “Wait. You mean you were married when we were together four years ago?”

The color drains from his handsome face. “I thought Brian told you.”

I bring my hand and slap his face providing a loud pop. “Fuck you. I’m not that kind of person. I never would have had anything to do with you if I knew you were married. How dare you?” I brush by him as he’s sputtering words about convenience as I exit the room. Moving quickly, I remember he’s still in a towel. He won’t be running after me until he throws on some clothes. Taking the stairs, I arrive at the concierge desk.

“Hi. I need the shuttle to the airport.”

“Yes, ma’am. You got here just in time; he’s getting ready to close the door.”

I move to the van and step on, holding my bags as protection from the hurt once again.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:40 am

PRESENT DAY

MADISON

Shaking off the memory of the last time I saw Dixon, I walk alongside my new coach. She's nattering about the team and team dynamics. "Your agent should be in the conference room."

I nod. Todd, my agent, works for my boss. My day-job, boss, Lily Dornan. She manages Glenwood Elite Sports and Talent Management. It's a sad fact of life that most professional women athletes have full-time jobs while they play their sport. I acquired my Paralegal certificate and fate brought me to Lily who needed someone to handle legal paperwork for her company. When I moved to Phoenix for the Bobcats, her firm represented me. By the end of the weekend, she hired me for a thirty-hour weekly position to supplement my income. Smiling, I think about how great it will be to be back in Dallas on a permanent basis.

Lily smiles when we walk into the conference room. "Hey. Todd's sick, so you get me."

I laugh. "I appreciate you taking his place."

She smiles as the Dauntless General Manager strolls into the room. Elise Wilcox, a former star player and coach, motions for everyone to take a seat. She leans across the table to shake my hand. "I'm very happy to meet you, Benny. May I call you Benny?"

“Sure.”

She turns to Lily. “Good morning, Lily. I’m sure everyone is a bit caught off guard with the urgency of this meeting, but we need to replace a player, and Ms. Bennett needs a team.”

She’s not wrong. I had expected I’d be going back to Phoenix next week. Circumstances changed there and now it appears I’m without a team and this looks like a good fit.

Lily pipes up. “This is a preliminary get-to-know-each-other meeting.”

Ms. Wilcox beams. “I spoke with Phoenix. They said they’re planning to go a different way with player personnel and schemes. I’m unsure exactly what happened, but I suspect I know.”

I gasp and stare at the stunning older woman with salt and pepper hair dressed like she just stepped off the runway for Vogue. Her head dips as she leans. “I’m familiar with your former coach pretty well. Scuttlebutt suggests she was the reason you left Boulder.”

Lily raises her hand. “Let’s not get into the past. I think we can all agree that Madison brings a lot to the table. She’s won the Defense MVP twice; once as a rookie, and made the difference in both Phoenix Championship wins. They’re foolish to let her go. I’ve fielded calls from four other American teams and three international teams.”

Georgia, who took a seat at the end of the table, smiles as she gets my attention. “It’s no secret. We want you. You’re perfect for our current and upcoming plans for the Dauntless. This is your home, and I can’t imagine it will be a hardship to be close to family and friends. Your contract with Phoenix lasts through this season. We’ve picked it up, but want to sweeten the deal. You’ll be the highest paid defensive player

in the league if we all decide this is the place you want to be next season.”

Elise tosses a document to Lily. “I don’t know what Madison has for endorsements, but there are four Dallas businesses that want to work with her. She’s well known and liked in Dallas. We all understand that won’t hurt her opportunities for more.”

Lily flips through the pages. “These will go well with her current endorsements. She has two through the Bobcats, so likely they will end.” She hands the folder to me, and I scan through it.

The endorsements will give me enough income that I won’t have to work at all outside of women’s soccer. I catch a knowing look from Lily and a soft shrug. She’s the kind of person that wants me to advocate for myself. I take a breath and get the focus of the GM. “You bought my contract, so I’m here. There are things I love about Dallas, but frankly I enjoyed being in a new place. How do you see me fitting in with this team?”

Georgia clicks her tongue. “You’re a born leader. You ran the Bobcats with a steel fist in a velvet glove. We didn’t make this decision lightly. You’re young, but even the older players respect you. The Bobcat coach’s illness didn’t become known until after it was affecting her coaching. You made the difference with the playoffs last year. I honestly believe that if you hadn’t been injured, they’d be making a run for the Championship this year.” Her mouth bows to a grin. “I’m looking forward to having that chance for us.”

I’m surprised with her response. The doctor cleared me to play, and I should be practicing right now. I’m kicking myself for not realizing Phoenix was biding their time to get rid of me.

Georgia reads my mind. “We’d like for you to start Monday.”

Lily laughs. “We’d like the room.”

Heads bob in agreement as the other two women stand and leave, pulling close the glass door. I chuckle, not knowing how else to respond. “I didn’t expect this.”

She shakes her head. “It started earlier in the week. Your history with ‘she who should not be named’, is legendary. Everyone saw the writing on the wall when she took over at Phoenix. She had to bide her time to cause you problems and then you got injured so quickly into the season. Anyone knowledgeable in women’s soccer knows you would never work out your differences. This is a great fit.”

I nod. “Yeah.” My face drops as Lily sets her hand on mine.

“What?”

“Dixon is here.”

Lily nods. “Well.”

My eyes bug out as I stare. “You knew?”

“Of course I knew. But it shouldn’t come into play with your decision. He’s in the past, right?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Great.” Lily flicks her head at the file. “We can fight this move, but do you really want to?”

I shake my head. “No. I want to be here.”

“Excellent.” Lily raises her head at the two sets of eyes trying not to study us in the window. The two women walk in. “We’re good.”

Georgia walks over and thrusts her hand out. I shake it. “Want to meet the team?”

Do I? Lily shares her ‘you’ve got it’ look and I nod. “Yes. Let’s do it.”

Ms. Wilcox waits until I stand and shakes my hand. “Welcome to Dauntless. I can’t wait to see how you bring us to the next level.”

That’s not pressure at all. I inhale and hug Lily. She whispers. “The girls and I are going out to Dangerous tonight at nine if you want to come.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you there.”

I walk with Georgia as she points out the player perks while we walk to the field. “Bethany’s retirement was a blow to the team. We haven’t shared that we’re bringing you on board, but I can tell you, everyone will be thrilled.”

I hope so. We exit the elevator and walk through the tunnel to the field. Assistant coaches are running drills, and I hear a familiar voice call my name.

“Benny?” A former teammate from Boulder, Evie Benning, runs up. “Oh my God. You’re our new defender.”

Georgia shakes her head as she chuckles. “Way to blow the surprise, Benning.”

Evie squeals as she wraps her hand around the bend of my elbow. “This is the best news.”

Georgia raises her voice. “Team! Gather round.” The players run to join us on the

edge of the field with chattering about who I am and what's going on echoing around. "I'd like to introduce everyone to Madison Bennett." I nod and raise my hand as she beams. "She's joining us as our new defender."

Hoots and positive comments emanate from the group. The oldest player on the team, Nadia Jurgens, raises her hand. "Welcome."

Surprise tickles my neck. That was easier than I thought. "I'm excited to be here. I can't wait to see what we can do together as a team." The group of women swarm me and, just like that, I'm one of them.

Later that night, I stare at myself in the mirror. The short blue suede skirt hits just above the scar on my knee. I'm not vain enough to care. I'm a professional athlete. If someone is going to judge me for my scars, they can fuck off. My hair is long and loose in ringlets down my back with a light dusting of makeup. The off-white blouse shows more cleavage than I typically do, but I don't feel the need to hide them as much as I did. I tip my head to myself in the mirror. "You control your destiny. Go get it!"

Dangerous is a dance club in the Quad owned by one of the Campbell cousins. They're an uber-rich family in Dallas and Lily's close to the wives and girlfriends. In fact, her fiancé is a Campbell cousin as well. The club is the happening place to be. It's typically full of hot women, rich men, professional athletes, and other notorious characters. Regret peaks up in my mind as I stare at myself. My soccer career is the most important thing to me, but am I missing out by not having someone to share it? My phone rings me out of the thought.

"Hello?"

"Hey. Are you coming to my condo or are you meeting us there?" Lily is a good friend, of course she's calling to check on me.

I flick my wrist. I'm late. "I'll meet you there in twenty."

"Cool."

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MADISON

Eighteen minutes later, I walk through the doors into the loud, popping music. On the bottom floor of the entertainment tower of the Quad, the rich and famous frequent Dangerous. Cameron Campbell and his brother, Calder, designed the club after their favorites in Amsterdam. I inhale a deep breath as I approach the ground floor area that leads down the stairs to the club. The burly gorilla of a man, who towers over me by half a foot, nods and moves the red velvet rope to just let me walk right in. Why do I feel like I've left Dallas and been transported to a ritzy, famous, glamorous club in New York?

I glance around and don't see Lily or her friends. Most of Lily's friends are involved with her fiancé, Stewart's brothers or cousins. I've met quite a few of them. Those men come from a phenomenal gene pool. All of them are rich, successful, hot with dark hair and swimming blue eyes, including Lily's fiancé, the All-Star professional baseball player.

I stop at the bar and catch the attention of the female bartender. The club is decorated in black, white, steel and glass. The hard edges give it a bold, retro look out of the nineteen seventies. It looks like a night club should look. Lily mentioned that above the club, there are other businesses in the Quad, owned by the Campbells and their relatives: the most popular restaurants, bars and clubs in Dallas. I smile thinking about the gentlemen's club I've heard is in the basement.

"What can I get you, hun?" The petite, dark-haired, tatted bartender smiles.

"Surprise me."

She beams and walks off as I feel a hand slip around my waist and wait for some man to whisper he wants to buy me a drink. The hand tightens and pulls me into a broad chest. I'm tall for a woman at five-foot eleven. Well, I'm just a smidge off six-foot, but that intimidates men, so I just round down.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

Predictable. I face the older man, not quite my height. Well, let's see whether he's the confident type or the bully. I smile. "Sure. But let's drop the hand."

He frowns and tightens his grip. "You don't mean that. I saw you come in. You're alone."

"I'm meeting friends."

"That's okay. Why don't we grab a table and get to know each other?"

"I came to dance with friends."

His face scrunches up as Lily and her posse join me at the bar. Her look frightens the man, and he steps away. "I can't leave you alone for a moment that you don't find trouble."

My brows come together. "Trouble?"

She leans up on her tiptoes. "He's a regular creep."

I laugh. "Figures. I seem to draw those."

The bartender sets down my drink and takes the ladies' orders. I sip the nectar with just a kick of alcohol, smiling. I'm not a heavy drinker as it doesn't work to do that

in-season, but I like an occasional cocktail.

“Have you been here long?”

I smile at Lily’s best friend, Mia Campbell. “No. Just got here.”

She motions down toward my knee. “It’s good?”

“Yeah. I guess I start practice with Dauntless tomorrow.”

Various women squeal in delight as Mia nods. “Lily mentioned you were here for good.”

I shrug. “We’ll see. I can be traded at any time.”

“You won’t be.” Mia leans in. “You’re just what the team needs to get them to the next level.”

I can’t answer because Lily pulls my arm and drags me to the dance floor. “Dance.” I tip my head to drop my hair down my back and absorb the loud, pulsing music. My knee has just a touch of stiffness. I’m incredibly lucky the ACL surgery was successful. I shimmy down and back up, comfortable on my three-inch heels, even though they make me even taller. I’ve learned to embrace my size. Men join our group of women and dance with us. No one specifically engages me, and I’m happy with the chance to just hang out and have fun.

We’ve been dancing for twenty minutes. Gorgeous couples, well dressed and happy, grind into each other. Lily’s fiancé joins her on the floor, and her excitement at seeing her man is palpable. Am I missing out on that? He’s a pro athlete, she’s an agent. They’re busy but the fireworks they’re sharing shows they make it work. A few more single men enter the dance floor, and I’m dreading the usual type of man who’ll feel

comfortable touching me. As though my thought manifested it, a hand slips along my hip. I sigh, knowing the man from earlier has crawled back. I make eye contact for a moment without a smile and edge my hip away from his hand as I maneuver myself to the other side of the dance floor, easing in between two of the friends Lily brought. The music shifts into my favorite techno beat. I catch the rhythm as I throw up my arms.

That man's fingers pull into my hip as his second hand grasps my other. Enough. I turn and glare at the man. "Hands off."

He laughs. His sneer confirms he's the bully kind, and not someone I should know. I stop dancing to step back, crossing my arms as he laughs louder, his fake smile turning into a sneer. His hand outstretches as I step back into a hard chest. The man behind me is taller than I am. His masculine, woodsy scent catches my nose as he gently eases me around him and stands before the bully. Words are exchanged, and I don't stick around. It figures Dixon would be there to intervene. I step to the bar. A second drink is called for after that.

The DJ changes the mood by changing the beat. Loud bass thumps through the club. Bright colored lights slam along the walls. Reds, blues, and bright white remind me of a Fourth of July celebration and I can almost taste the cool, ripe watermelon we have every year.

Sauntering up to the bar, the cute bartender smiles as I tick my head up mouthing, 'drink'. She nods as I sit on a stool. Dixon will find me and stick his nose in my business. I feel him move next to me and take the seat. He leans closer. "Are you okay?"

I nod as the bartender sets down my drink. "I'm fine. That's not the first time some random bully has put his hands on me."

He growls and the sound catches my full attention. “No one puts their damn hands on you unless you want them to.”

I roll my eyes. “You should have been born a woman. We deal with this shit all the time. You’d think they’d be afraid of someone my size, but no, that seems to be an invitation for some guys.”

He exhales. “I was hoping to get the chance to talk to you.”

I cock my head. “This really isn’t much different from putting your hands on me when I don’t want it on the dance floor.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got no interest in dealing with you anymore than some bully troll.”

His chuckle has a thread of hurt and I cringe. “I get it. We’re going to see each other. It would be best if it wasn’t awkward.”

I turn in my stool and face him. “Okay. What?”

He puts out his hand. “Can we move to the balcony so we can talk without screaming?”

Oh that’s a phenomenal idea. “Maybe I want to scream.” I allow him to cup my elbow with his hand to lead me to the opposite area of the club. He pushes the glass door and walks us out. The door closes, and the sound shuts down. My ears pulse, and I take a sip of my cocktail. I think she added a bit more alcohol than the last one and relish the buzz. “What?”

“I’m sorry about what Brian told you at the hotel.”

I laugh. "Of course you are. God forbid you'd have told me yourself. Married?"

He holds up his hand. "Give me a chance to explain."

I down my cocktail and cock my head to listen. "That was four years ago.. We haven't thought about each other since then, so why does it matter?"

Hurt slams into this chiseled face. "You may not have thought about me, but I think about you all the time."

Cocking my hip, I cross my arms not hiding my scowl. "Why?"

"Why what?" His frown pulls at my heart.

"Why are you telling me now that you've thought about me?"

He grabs my upper arms with his hands and pulls me closer. "I was wrong not to contact you both times."

I shake my head and cast my eyes to the lights reflecting on the tall glass building. "Sure."

He moves his hand to touch my chin and brings my eyes to his. "The first time, I let Brian convince me that we wouldn't work. I was gone all the time, and you were young. It wouldn't have been fair to you."

I grit my teeth. "Fair?"

He closes his eyes and takes a breath. "My leaving without a word wasn't fair, either. But I wasn't ready for a commitment any more than you were."

“Fine.” I take a small step back as his hands fall to his sides.

“For the record, I did think about you. I devoured any bit of information I could find about you online.”

The ice surrounding my heart cracks for the first time since the hotel. “You should have told me you were married.”

He adjusts his stance and leans back. “Yes. I should have. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” My blood pressure rises as my heart rate picks up. “You hurt me by just leaving, and when Brian told me about your marriage while we were in New Jersey, you had the chance to explain then and you didn’t.” Not that I really would have listened, I bolted out of there as fast as I could.

“Again. I was wrong. I was a tier-one operator. As a SEAL, I wouldn’t be home for months at a time. Contact is limited on ops.” He rubs his hand over his hair. “I wasn’t ready, and neither were you.”

“You act like you had a thought about the future.”

“I did. I figured you’d solidify your career, and I’d retire from the SEALs. I’d come find you.”

My heart leaps into my throat as I gasp. The colors change in the club and reflect off the glass. Green and yellow with flares of magenta, making nausea overtake my senses. “You assume too much.”

He drops his eyes. “Probably. I’ve always known you’re the one. Those four days over Christmas when we went hunting meant so much to me.”

Blood courses through my veins and the noise is deafening. The nerve. “We’ll come back to that ridiculous statement in a minute. Tell me why I shouldn’t castrate you for cheating on your wife.”

He exhales and leans against the wall. “It’s complicated and not, both at the same time. Meredyth, my girlfriend from high school, got cancer and needed health care.”

My brow lifts. Okay, I wasn’t expecting the conversation to shift back to high school. “That’s horrible.”

“It is. She found out three days before I joined the Navy. Her parents sucked. Neither had a job, so she didn’t have health care or anything but a roof over her head, and we knew that would be short-lived.” He scrapes his hand through his hair, and I realize he’s changed since we last saw each other in New Jersey. The cold, crewcut, military man has downshifted to a calmer, quieter being.

“So, I married her. She got health care and a housing allowance. I sent my check home to her once a month, so she had money to live on. I only saw her every six months or so.”

“Is she okay?”

He nods. “Yes, thank God. She’s getting married next month.”

His words rattle around my brain. His explanation excuses some of it, but I’m still angry. “Loyalty means everything to me. My father was a jerk. He cheated on my mother and abandoned us for weeks at a time. After his death, we realized he had another family with step-children he spent time with when he wasn’t with us. So, my finding out you’re a cheater matters.”

He nods. “I get it. She and I stopped dating in high school. We were just friends.

Neither of us considered it a genuine marriage; it was a convenience for her. It worked. She went into remission and is doing really well.”

“You’re old Dixon. Shouldn’t you have divorced and stopped paying her when her health improved?” I raise my hand. “Never mind. That’s not my business. Thanks for telling me. I’m glad she’s better. So, if she’s getting married then you and she aren’t married anymore?”

“No. We had it annulled.”

“Huh. They still do that?”

He nods slowly. “I wasn’t unfaithful to her when I was with you. We didn’t have an intimate relationship and never consummated our marriage. I should have told you, but it was a secret, and I just didn’t share it. The military wouldn’t have approved our marrying for her health care.”

“Okay.” His words remind me how much I hate secrets as my blood heats again. “You shouldn’t have slept with me.”

He folds his arms across his chest. “That’s true.” He reaches for me, and I step back. “Madison?”

I hold up my hand. “My listening to your excuse isn’t giving you permission to start something again. I’d be a total idiot to think round three would have any better outcome.”

Dixon’s pupils dilate and his nostrils flare. “I think you can agree that we’d be really successful with round three.”

I blush. Bringing it back to sex warms my core. I’ve never had a better lover, and my

body is screaming at me to give him another chance. Shaking my head, I gnaw on my lip. “I appreciate your explanation, but I don’t see myself trusting you again. You had multiple opportunities to tell me the truth. I don’t want a man who puts excuses before me.”

He dips his head and whispers. “I won’t.”

Scoffing, I whisper. “Yeah. I don’t see this working.” I shift around him and grab the handle of the door. “Thanks for intervening with the bully. Goodbye Dixon.”

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TWO MONTHS LATER

DIXON

My breath catches as Madison walks out of the hallway and into the auditorium. Her laugh is infectious. She's been on the team for two months and her teammates treat her like she's been here all along. Her quick glance reminds me of my screwup once again. I've been careful to keep an appropriate distance. We've seen each other at get-togethers with the team and our mutual friends.

"Dixon." Kyle smirks from the front of the auditorium. "What's the deal with you two?"

"Nothing. Non-fraternization and all that, remember?"

"Yeah." His side-eye brings me up short again. Brian's not talking to me again. As though I had some control over the team offering Madison a contract. It's taken a while for he and I to build back our friendship and watching Madison I'm angry again that he told her about my marriage the way he did.

Kyle raises his hand to quiet the room as he clears his throat. "We've had some security issues, so I've asked Mr. Dixon to come and talk about security protocols in and out of the stadium. We've set up a system where you can text Dixon's team if you have a security issue." He drones on for a few more minutes and asks for questions.

A dark-haired player with a nose ring is leaning back in her seat with her arms

outstretched over the adjacent seats. She raises her hands and blurts out. “What’s a security issue?”

Kyle looks at me, and I move forward. “As professional athletes and women, there are instances where you might find yourself in an unsafe situation. Let’s say paparazzi won’t let you leave your residence. You would call us. If someone is giving you unwanted attention in a threatening way, say a stalker or over-touchy fan, you would call our number. There will be security personnel on all team travel excursions, and we have a full staff here in Dallas.”

Heads nod around the room as Kyle clicks his tongue. “This security is not for personal use to get in and out of a location more conveniently. You will not use it to assist in everyday annoyances. This is only for security issues.”

Madison whispers to the two women next to her. The look on her face is one of contempt. Damn. Just give me a chance to work this thing out with her. Giving her space was stupid. Clearing my throat, I raise my voice. “We’re going to need your cell phone and landline numbers, if you use one, for our records, so we know it’s you if you call and can’t speak.” Curious looks with raised eyebrows cause me to clarify. “Let’s say you’re hiding from someone and need help but don’t want to give yourself away. You would call, and we would know it was you.” I rattle off my work email and ask everyone in the room to email me their contact information. This way I have a reason to approach Madison.

Kyle leans over. “You don’t have to stay for the rest of the meeting. Thanks for this.”

I tip my head. “It’s the job. Are you playing poker tonight?”

“Yeah.” Kyle whispers. “I’ll meet you at Destinations at eight.”

I walk out and run through the schedule for the rest of my day. Destinations is a bar

owned by a rich Campbell cousin here in Dallas. I work for another one of those cousins and his former SEAL Team member. I get back to the office and the two owners and their partner, Ella Campbell, motion for me to enter the conference room.

Ella glares at me. I haven't figured out how she became a co-owner after Maxim Petrov and Banner Campbell created CPSP, but she acts like she's the boss. Her stare lets me know she's pissed about something. I've worked here for six months, and her mood has gotten worse as her pregnancy moves along.

She raises her voice to talk over the employees in the room. "I created an algorithm to collect the data from the Dauntless staff and team members. We'll be able to run any calls through our system to determine the severity of the security issue." She cocks her head. "It was a great suggestion you offered to the team, but calling and telling us after you offered it to the team doesn't work for us."

I'm surprised. Banner and Maxim, fellow SEALs, nod as the little waif puts me in my place. "I guess I should have run it by you first."

Her forehead crinkles. "It's an intriguing suggestion, but not all suggestions are workable. Time, money, and resources are commodities we manage to create the most feasible solutions. Next time run it by the group before you offer it."

The hair peaks on the back of my neck at the scolding. I speak before I think it all out. "Who's running this show, anyway?"

Banner and Maxim stare at me like my hair is on fire until amusement creeps across their faces. The dark-haired waif stands and glowers. "We run this show. The resources you offer fall under my purview for the company, therefore I'm the one to let you know you missed the mark." She crosses her arms as Maxim chuckles to my right. "Anytime you want to remove yourself from CPSP because you can't handle being told how it is by a woman," she points at the glass door, "there's the door."

The full realization that I have shoved my foot all the way down my own throat and made an enemy of a CPSP owner rings the stupid bell in my head. I bow my head and look back up at Ella. “I apologize. I’m out of line. I’m not used to having to run security ideas up the chain of command. I realize this was my fault, and I’m sorry.”

“Okay.” She blows out her breath and tips her head to her cousins. “I’m heading upstairs to the condo.” She puts her hand on her swollen belly. “This one needs a nap. Graham will be at poker tonight. Please remember we’ve got an early meeting in the morning.” She steps out of the room as Banner leans back in his rolling chair.

“What the fuck was that, Dix?”

I run my hand through my hair. “I’m sorry. I was pissed about a woman and took it out on Ella. She’s going to tell her husband, huh?” Graham is a tier-one operator like the rest of us, but he has an edge to him that even scares me. His nickname, Ghost, was given to him because everyone that goes against him becomes one. He’ll waste no time in pounding me if his wife’s unhappy.

Maxim chuckles. “She probably won’t share with him. She fights her own battles.”

I watch the woman step into her office and scoff. “If she doesn’t tell her husband to kill me, what can that little woman do to me?”

Banner breaks out into a deep laugh. “She can make your life a living hell. You don’t realize but she’s the best hacker I’ve ever met. She knows everything about everyone, and she’s mean when she’s pissed.”

I shake my head. “I seem to make mistakes that piss off all the women around me.”

Maxim gets up from his chair and sets his hand on my shoulder. “You should figure out how not to do that. And be prepared for scut work until you get out of her

doghouse.”

I raise my head up to his smiling eyes. “Really?”

“Oh yeah. You’re new enough she can’t make you re-qualify for everything, but she’ll send you on the crappiest jobs she can find.”

“I deserve it for being stupid.”

Banner motions for us both to leave the room. “If this is the way you handle women in the rest of your life, you might want to consider an attitude adjustment.”

Don’t I know it. “I apologize. I was wrong. I will apologize to her the next time I see her.”

He nods. “You used to be so charming with the women.”

Before Madison. “I was. I’ve let circumstances change the way I look at things. I realized that when I saw Madison today. I’ll do better.”

Five hours later, I’m sitting at the poker game with guys from my office as my phone beeps. I pick it up to see an alert from one of the Dauntless stadium security personnel. Ryan didn’t make it from the stadium. He was bogged down in work. I wonder if he’s dealing with whatever mess is pulling me from the game. I toss my cards and nod to Banner, Maxim and the other five guys at the table. “There’s an issue at the stadium.”

Banner stands. “I’ll come with you. Maxim just dealt me my last crap hand for the night.” We walk out of the entertainment room in the residence section of the Quad where Banner and Maxim, along with tons of their cousins and employees, live. It’s above the CPSP office and was more convenient for everyone tonight rather than

going next door to the bar we usually play at. We take the elevator down to the garage and get into Banner's SUV. "Tell me about this woman."

I sigh. "Madison Bennett."

Banner smirks as a light of recognition shines on his face. "She's hot and one damn fine soccer player."

I shake my head. "Yeah."

"What did you do to piss her off?"

"I played a stupid game of 'let's not tell the woman I want, that I was married'."

He laughs his big laugh as we pull out of the parking garage. "That was dumb."

"Yeah. I know it. Her brother doesn't want us involved, and he told her about the wife. She's a good friend, but we haven't been together in more than a decade. It was a marriage of convenience because she needed health benefits. I should have told Madison, but didn't. She is still pissed from the betrayal."

"Well, at least you understand why she's pissed. Did you explain it to her?"

"Yeah. She finally let me tell her all the gory details."

Banner blows out his breath. "You're a good guy, Dix. I know this from personal experience. You need to man up and talk to her again. She's had time to process whether she can forgive you or not. You need closure. It'll help your overall attitude, as well."

"Her brother will not be happy."

Banner glances at me. “Who’s her brother?”

“Brian Bennett.”

“Whew. He’s a real prick. He’s got so many issues. He doesn’t have any right to judge you.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

We pull into the stadium parking area as Kyle and the head of stadium security hang their heads. Kyle blurts out. “A player has a stalker.”

My eyes ping to the man. “Who?”

“Benny Bennett.”

Damn it. My heart clenches as my inner demon raises his fists. No one is going to hurt Madison. “Let’s go inside, and you can tell us everything.” I flick my eyes to Banner.

“See, this is why we hired you, your great instincts. You’re running this show, I’m just here for logistical support. Thanks to you, we’ve got everyone’s info, and we’re ahead of the game.” We walk inside the building and into the large conference room where other staff members congregate. I nod at Kyle. “What do we know?”

The security chief tosses a file onto the table. “A month ago, we got the first weird letter. It wasn’t unlike typical overly-interested-fan letters. But it seemed different. Then we got three letters, two large envelopes, and now, a package.” His gloved hands set the box in front of me and Banner. “It’s a...” He opens the box. A stuffed animal with red paint dripped over it with its head removed. The security chief hands me a blue nitrile glove. “Pick it up.”

I slip on the glove and pick up the body of the blue bunny. Underneath, words written in the same red to look like blood. “Die Benny.”

Banner grits his teeth. “Any idea why there’s a bunny?”

My heart pounds in my chest, blood rushes into my brain and the sound pulses in my ears. “Her brother wanted to nickname her ‘bunny,’ but it became ‘benny’.” I blow out the breath I’ve held. “Only someone close to her would know that.” I turn to look at Banner. “Who’s on Madison?”

“Maxim left the poker game right after us and headed to her apartment building. We’re going to encourage her to move into the apartments in the Quad.”

“Good luck. She’s not easily convinced of things.”

Banner smirks. “Maxim is very convincing. The women adore him.”

“Of course they do. It’s that Russian accent he turns on and off.”

Banner chuckles. “Da.”

We drive back to the Quad, and my hands itch to get my hands on Madison. Maxim texts Banner that she’s agreed to move into one of the open apartments. I should relax, but my heart is pounding out of my chest. “We need to handle her day-to-day protection, and the team goes on travel next week.”

Banner blows out his breath. “It makes sense for you to travel with the team and oversee Madison’s security.” He turns his head. “Can you get her to agree?”

“She’ll agree or I’ll call Lily. She’s her agent.”

Banner laughs. “Are you sure that’s the card you want to play?”

“Sure. I showed you tonight, I never play the right card, why would this be any difference?” Banner’s laugh only heightens my anxiety. “I’d like to stop by Graham and Ella’s condo to apologize.”

Banner’s forehead wrinkles. “Pfft. Why?”

“I’d like to talk to her about Madison’s online security.”

“That’s a good idea. Good luck.” Yeah. I’ll need it.

I knock on Ella’s condo door, knowing full well she saw my every move into the building. She was gracious enough to agree to let me visit. The door opens, and her husband, a fellow CPSP employee, glares down at me.

“Dixon.”

“Ghost.” Graham spent years in Army Intelligence with a reputation of what he did and how quietly he executed people. His growl makes me smile. “I come in peace.”

Little feet run toward the door with Ella close on the young boy’s tail. He looks up at me and stops, tucking himself behind his massive father’s legs. “Who’s that?”

Graham leans down and pulls up his son with one arm. “A friend. You’ve been running your mom ragged again, young man.”

The boy giggles as Ella saunters up, seeing me standing at the door. “Come for round two?”

I blow out my breath and cock my head. “No. Ma’am. I came to apologize.”

Graham's brow lifts. "Apologize for what?"

I hold up my hand. "I was rude earlier." I focus on Ella. "I shouldn't have acted that way to you. That's not me. I respect women. Hell, I love women. You're awesome at your job. I apologize for having my head up my ass."

Graham spins his son down to the ground and mock-growls. "Get ready for bed."

The little boy who matches his father in hair and eyes seems to want to disobey but the look his mother gives him, stops it. "Yes, Daddy." He moves to hug his mother and places his hand on her belly. "Good night, little brother."

The couple smile as Graham puts his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Give me a heads up if I need to hide the body."

Her smile sends the big man off with a skip in his step heading for the back of the condo. Ella motions for me to step inside. "Come in." She leads us to the kitchen. "Whatcha want?"

"Benny Bennett from the Dauntless has a stalker."

She nods. "I pulled up what I have on her. You've spent time with her and her family."

"Yeah. Her brother and I go way back."

Ella opens up her laptop and turns the screen to face me. "Someone has been in her emails and her social media. She needs to change all of her passwords to sets that are obscure enough to not have any meaning for her. Her passwords are the same on quite a few things, and I've found them on the dark web."

“Shit.” The dark web is a haven for criminals. Ella rubs her belly. “When’s the baby due?”

She beams. “A few months.” She pauses, and the silence deafens my senses. “Can you get Ms. Bennett to let you protect her?”

I shrug before I realize I’m flaying my soul for her to judge. “I think so. She’s pissed at me for good reason, but she’s smart enough to know that I won’t let anything physically hurt her.”

“Okay. I’m running the algorithm through all the security data. We’ll know what her vulnerabilities are when I’m done.”

“Thanks, Ella. I appreciate you. Again, I’m sorry for my attitude. You didn’t deserve it, and it won’t happen again.”

I startle to see her husband lean against the kitchen wall. “I’ll walk you out.” I know he’s going to warn me. I deserve it. He intimidates the fuck out of me, but I hold my head up as we walk. I extend my hand to the man as his lip raises in a slow smile. “My wife seems content with your visit.”

“I’m glad. I was out of line. It won’t happen again.”

Graham nods. “I know.” He shakes my hand, and I exit the condo.

“Congratulations on the new baby.” I mumble as he nods as the condo door closes. Well, that went better than I thought it would. I race to the elevator needing to get to the other side of the Quad to the apartments that will house the woman I love.

TWO HOURS BEFORE

MADISON

The knock on my apartment door halts my stride to the back of my apartment so I change course to look through the peephole on the door. I open the door to the apprehensive look of the Dauntless security chief, Carl, and a hot buff blond man. I recognize him as a Campbell cousin that always seems to be on the periphery of the Campbell owned places I visit.

Carl sighs as I push the door open further. “Hey, Madison. This is Maxim Petrov. He runs Campbell Petrov Security and Protection. He’s here because there’s a security issue with the team.”

Dread creeps up my spine and settles around my neck like a frightened cat. “What happened?”

Maxim smiles a killer smile and moves his hand asking permission to enter my apartment. “May we?”

I turn. “Sure.”

They follow me into my apartment, and I walk us to my kitchen table, turning to sit on the end bar stool as they take two other seats.

Carl frowns. “There’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just blurt it out. Someone sent threatening letters and packages for you to the stadium.”

“What?” Carl’s words swirl in my brain as I try to make sense of what he’s saying.
“Who?”

Maxim pipes up. “We don’t know. Yet. It seems someone is obsessed with you, and what started out as just overly-interested notes has become a little darker.”

My stomach rolls. “How dark?”

“Someone sent a blue bunny stuffed animal.”

My brows nearly touch as I try to comprehend what Maxim is saying. “A blue bunny isn’t dark.”

His face expresses concern like Carl’s. “It had a veiled threat with it.”

Sighing, I sit up in my seat. “What threat?”

Carl pulls out his phone and shows me a photo of a headless blue stuffed bunny in a box. There’s red stuff on the fabric.

“Okay. That’s not nice.”

Carl cringes as he swipes to the next picture. A photo of ‘Die Benny’, sits on his screen.

“Wait? Someone wants to kill me?”

Maxim speaks with a low voice. “We’d like you to relocate to the Quad apartment complex while we investigate this threat.”

“I can’t afford to move.”

“The team will cover the expense, and when the issue is resolved, you can move back. This apartment complex doesn’t have adequate security. If he were to find out where you live, you’d be vulnerable.”

Carl gets up from his stool. “Just agree. Let CPSP handle the person and your personal security.”

Something about the way he said it smells like rotten fish. “What personal security?”

Maxim pats my hand. “We’re going to need to give you a bodyguard until we resolve the situation. They’ll be with you outside of the stadium.”

“We travel on Thursday.” How inconvenient is it going to be to have someone tag along with me?

Maxim nods. “Your bodyguard will travel with you. It’s inconvenient, but necessary. Our CPSP team is on this. It will be handled soon.”

“Fine. Let me pack a bag.”

“We’re going to send out the moving team to your apartment in the morning. We’ll bring you any personal stuff you want and put anything else in storage at the Quad. If your stalker figures out you live here, we want to throw him off the scent.”

“Fine. I have little here, anyway.”

An hour later, I’m walking into a swanky apartment in the mile square area known as the Quad. My friend and boss, Lily, lives in the condo side of the area. I open my mouth to thank Maxim as Dixon strolls through the door. “What the hell?” His smile brightens the room and makes my stomach flip. “What are you doing here?”

He flicks his head to Carl and Maxim as the two men nod before leaving. Dixon leans against the sofa. "I'm your bodyguard."

"Fuck. No!"

He purses his lips. "I'm sorry. Yes. I'm the most familiar with the team and you."

"Seriously? We aren't friends."

He nods. "I know. You're still angry. I get it, but I need you to be safe, and I'm good at that."

"There has to be another option. I don't want a bodyguard." He shakes his head. I knew this was going to be difficult to have someone around, but Dixon... Steadying myself, I smile. "We can keep this professional."

He flares his nostrils as he takes in a breath. "I'll do whatever I need to do to keep you safe."

I flick my hand at him. "It's late and Maxim said I was safe here, so we can get into whatever specifics tomorrow." I walk toward the door, leading him. "Good bye, Dixon." He steps out of the apartment as I close the door and lock it. Why the hell is this happening to me, and how do I get away from him? Answers don't come from the empty apartment as I grab my bag, walking into the primary bedroom. Sleep. It'll all seem better in the morning.

MADISON

Looking out the plate glass floor to ceiling window at Glenwood Elite Sports and Talent Management in downtown Dallas, I'm not focusing on anything. Sleep eluded me after Dixon left.

“Benny?” Lily Dornan, my boss and friend calls my name.

“Hey, Lily.”

She pulls me in for a hug. “Why did I have to hear about your stalker from Maxim?”

I sigh. “I was too tired to deal with it last night.”

Lily motions for me to follow her into her office. I grab a seat in front of her desk as she leans against it. “SportGym wants to put you in their ‘women of sports’ calendar.”

“Really? They usually have women athletes that look like supermodels.”

Lily scoffs. “That’d be you.”

“What? I’m not a supermodel.”

She raises her hand and lifts it up and down in front of me. “Tall, beautiful, great body. Hello, Madison.”

“I never thought of myself as any of that.”

She nods. “Of course not. But you are, and SportGym knows it. You got October.”

The smile pings on my lips. “I love October.” Questions swirl in my brain. “What do I have to wear?”

“No swimsuit. That’s the July athlete, a swimmer.”

“Excellent. I’m good. What do I have to do?”

She purses her lips and her face tightens. Bad news, folks. “You’ll need to be in New York on Sunday, so you’ll travel with your bodyguard to Seattle for your Friday game and then go straight to New York.”

I nod. “Okay. I can do that.”

Her face falls further, and she opens her mouth just to close it again.

“Just say it, Lily.”

“Dixon is going with you.”

The sound of the blood rushing to my brain pounds in my ears. “What? What the fuck, Lily?”

She holds up her hand. “He’s who CPSP picked. I tried to convince Banner and Maxim to no avail.”

Gritting my teeth, I stand up. “I don’t trust him.” My little voice scoffs in my head. I do trust him to protect me from danger, but my heart is a different story.

Lily stares at me with that knowing look that’s well beyond her years. “This is for your safety.” Cocking her head, I see the smallest smirk. “Protecting your heart is up to you.”

“Whatever. Should I take anything special to New York?”

“Nope. Just your wonderful self.”

I pull her into my arms and hug her. “And to answer the text you sent, I know I don’t have to work my side job with you anymore, but I want to.” I stare at her pleased

expression. “Unless you don’t want me to.” She shakes her head. “No. You’re an excellent paralegal, and I don’t want to lose you.”

“Great.” I stroll out her door and get into the elevator. The doors close as I clench my fists, grit my teeth, and growl. “Fuck.”

DIXON

Madison’s teammates swarm her at the end of the game. She scored an impressive goal that vaulted the Dauntless ahead of the Seattle Thunder. It’s not her first goal, but it certainly isn’t typical. She made a critical save on a penalty kick that led to a teammate tying the game. The four-three win puts them at the top of the standings for the playoffs. She nods at me as she walks with her team to the locker room. I sigh. Let’s see if she puts on her security necklace without my having to nag her.

Twenty minutes later, Madison strolls out of the locker room. I’m used to killing time, waiting. I clocked eleven people walking out of the locker room. Three didn’t seem like they should have been in there. I texted Ella at CPSP to get me access to the cameras outside the locker room. There’s one on the other side of the locker room, by the offices and this one. Madison steps out and nods at me as she waves to teammates.

“Ready?”

She nods. “Can we get food?”

“Of course. We’ll grab a sit-down dinner on our way to the airport.” I stare at her for a moment before turning to walk with her down the stark hallway. “Is the necklace on your neck?”

“Duh.”

I reach for her bag and gain a scowl. “I’ve got it.”

“Of course. I just thought I’d stow it in the back of the SUV.”

She casts her eyes to the vehicle and hands me her bag. “Okay. Thank you”

I’m not sure I like the forced formality any better than her typical annoyance. Blowing out my breath, I set her bag in the back and shut the lift gate. I get into the driver’s side and tip my head. “You had an awesome game.”

She beams. “It was good. We play Phoenix next and I’d love to have this kind of game repeat.”

“I get that. I’m sorry about how that all shook out.”

Annoyance flits across her face. “Life is a small fishbowl. Even if I could have seen the future and known my freshman coach would come to Phoenix and mess that up, I still wouldn’t have stayed. She was toxic for me.”

“I’ve known people I wish I could have gotten away from. It’s interesting that someone like that can move into a role with a professional team.”

“It’s not really. It’s all about politics of who you know. She knew the Phoenix owners, and that made all the difference.”

I nod, not really sure what to add. I turn into the parking garage for the Il Terrazzo Carmine, an upscale Italian restaurant, right by the stadium. Madison is busy checking her phone and hasn’t asked where we’re going. It will be a nice surprise. I turn off the engine as her eyes ping to mine. “Oh. We were close.”

“Yep.” I open my door, trying to get around to open hers before she does. I miss the

chance, but meet her at her door to close it.

She looks up at me and for a second the typical annoyed face is absent. My heart beats faster until the look arrives. “Thanks for dinner.”

“Of course. I thought you’d like Italian.”

A half hour later, Madison’s face shows contentment. She devoured her dinner. It’s no wonder considering the number of calories she burns during a game. She looks up and a blush starts to rise. I race to find a question that won’t piss her off. “What do you do for Lily Dornan?”

The blush ebbs as she reaches for her lemon water. She takes a drink and sets it down. “I do paralegal work for her company.”

“Huh?” Come on Dix, dig for more. “How’d you meet her?”

“I met her through my friend, Caitlyn. She’s married to a Campbell and was a rodeo star during college. She suggested I meet Lily for representation.”

I raise my brow. “How did you work for her from Phoenix?”

“I do online work for her and we kept couriers busy with our documents.”

“That seems like a good gig. You can work from anywhere.”

“Yeah. I’m lucky. She’s a great boss and a good friend.”

The server arrives and I pay the bill while Madison gives me the stink eye. “What?”

“I can pay my way.”

Will there come a moment when I don't do something to piss her off. "I know you can, but I had my card out."

She shrugs. "What time do we get into New York?"

"Around seven-thirty."

The server returns the slip for me to sign, and as we get up from the table, I scan the room. It's a habit. There hasn't been any additional letters or packages since the bunny, but I'm still concerned. Stalkers don't just go away. I open her door and extend my hand to help her get into her seat. I hold back the smile that wants to burst forth on my face. Every little battle brings me one step closer to Madison. I can't expect that she'll ever feel for me what I feel for her, but maybe we can find a friendship.

MADISON

The redeye from the west coast to the east coast of the U.S. is a brutal flight for someone who can't sleep on a plane. In complete honesty, I hate to fly. By the time we took off, Dixon was holding my hand with reassurances about the safety of flight. He nattered at me about his time in the Navy, his travels around the world, and funny stories about Brian. I've been angry at Dixon since he left the morning after the cabin. My tattling brother didn't help my thoughts about Dixon either, but I can't help but like him. I'm meeting with the calendar team from SportGym this afternoon. Dixon arranged for us to check into the Manhattan Luxury Campbell Hotel early, and I took advantage of the opportunity to nap and settle myself before this meeting. I run my hands down the navy-blue suit. Cocking my head, staring in the mirror, the smile creeps up my face. I look good.

The knock on the door to my bedroom door brings me back to the realization that we need to be leaving. "Madison?"

"Come in."

He opens the door and my body warms at the appreciation in his eyes,

"I'm ready."

"Great." He moves to the side to let me pass by as I grab my purse. "Think about what you'd like for dinner when you get done."

We've been driving for ten minutes, and I can tell Dixon hates the silence between

us. “Um. Thanks for talking to me on the flight. I just can’t relax on the plane.”

“Sure. Why is that?”

“When I was little, we took a plane to Disneyland, and I got sick on the flight. It was the last time we were all together as a family on a trip.”

“That’s rough. Have you thought about seeing someone for your anxiety?”

“Never in a million years would I think you’d be a proponent of mental health care.”

He laughs. “Mental health is important.”

“It is. I saw someone in early college. She’s probably the reason I had the courage to move on to Stanford.”

“What happened with your coach your freshman year?”

“She and I didn’t get along. She was a screamer. Well, she is still a screamer. She bullies and plays teammates against each other which creates a very toxic team dynamic. Coach York constantly rode me about my weight. Every day she weighed me before practice or a game, and if I was more than a pound off her idea of my ‘best’ weight, she added extra running at the end of practice.” I offer a sad chuckle. “The Weight Training coach tried to explain that I was at a great weight and even showed her my BMI analysis, but that wasn’t enough. I hated soccer by the middle of the season. My roommate’s mother was a therapist, and Penny encouraged me to meet her and talk to her. She helped me to realize that team and that coach weren’t for me or Penny.”

Dixon nods. “It’s great when that special person comes into our lives and gives us what we need to make the future better.”

How is it that he's saying all the right things? We pull into the parking garage, and I let him walk around to get my door. Heading up the elevator and into the lobby, I'm happy to let him lead. Dixon and the security guy at the desk talk in short-hand that reminds me of when I'm on the field with my teammates. Dixon hands me the clip-on badge and slips his hand behind my back to lead us into the elevator. "I'll hang out in the outer lobby while you have your meeting." He cocks his head. "I'm sure everything here is perfectly safe, but if you ever need me, just push the center jewel on the necklace."

I have to admit I was pissed when he and Lily told me I had to wear the necklace. A panic necklace was the last thing I thought I'd be wearing around like a dog collar. I was out of line. I realize that now, but at the time I didn't want Dixon having any control of my life. My mind grinds to a halt. Do I want him to have something now? My mind reflects through the past twenty-four hours where Dixon was the perfect gentleman and friend. It was the easiest flight I've ever taken.

Dixon pushes open the glass door and we move through. I step ahead as the receptionist looks up and smiles. He asks. "Madison Bennett?"

"Yeah."

He beams. "The team is ready for you in Conference Room B." He stands and motions to the next set of glass doors. "Follow me."

Dixon's beaming smile catches my attention. "I'll be waiting, looking up options for a steak dinner to celebrate."

I bob my head and stride to catch up with the man holding the door. We walk silently down a long hall with a dozen glass doors leading into small offices with people sitting in front of computers typing away. The next door he opens leads to a massive wood table with five people sitting around it. The room has wood paneling with

posters of products they market. The plate-glass windows overlook other buildings in Manhattan.

A man stands, extending his hand. “Hi, Ms. Bennett. I’m Grayson Dubois.”

“Call me Madison.”

He extends his hand out and introduces the other people sitting around the table as I sit down in the seat across. Grayson starts to speak as the door opens with Lily jogging into the room. “I’m so sorry to be late.” She nods at Grayson and takes the seat to my right.

Grayson taps a button as the projector board comes to life with a screen size photo of me from the team website. “We’re very excited that you’re interested in doing our calendar.” He drones on about this being the fifth year, and I tune out thinking about Dixon and how well we’ve gotten along. Lily’s leg touches mine and I refocus. “This is a mockup of what we plan for your calendar photo.”

A photo of a woman sitting on a hay bale in my jersey with a puppy in her arms. There’s a soccer goal behind and a ball next to the model. My brows come together. “I’ve never seen a calendar like that.”

A woman raises her voice. “We want to be original.”

Grayson tightens his jaw. “Penelope Williams runs the largest no-kill shelter program on the east coast. This is her idea to increase awareness.”

I nod. “There are so many pets in need. Shelters are over full, people dump animals without a care about their safety, and the euthanasia rate is higher than it’s been in years.”

Ms. Williams beams at my explanation. “Exactly.”

“I’m happy to lend my support to this important cause.”

Lily clears her throat. “And now for the business side of this. Who’s got the contract?”

A different person slides a folder across the table, and Lily flips through the pages. I’ve seen so many contracts in the four years I’ve been working for Lily. She’s a phenomenal agent, leading athletes and superstars to find the best options for their careers. Lily closes the folder. “We’ll get back to you.”

Heads nod around the table as we all stand up. Lily leans in. “You haven’t killed Dixon.”

“Uh. No. He’s been... kind.”

We walk out and as we stroll, I note the difference in our heights in the glass as we walk by, reminding me that I’m so damn tall.

She looks up. “I can read you like a book. You look very professional in the suit.”

I scoff. “You should know, you helped me pick it out.”

She chuckles. “I have good taste, but you could wear anything and look like a supermodel. You’re so tall and lovely.”

I nod. I’ve been told that before, but it’s hard for me to believe it. Weight and body image have been ingrained in me. I’m heavier than the average woman and much taller. I inherited large breasts from my mother and have only recently been willing to not bind them, even when I go out. It’s one of the things Coach York bullied me

about my freshman year. We step into the lobby with Dixon's smile greeting me as he sees me. He nods at Lily. "Good afternoon, Lily. Are you joining us for dinner?"

She shakes her head. "I've gotta catch the next flight back to Dallas." She flicks her head to me. "When are you back home?"

I shrug as Dixon answers. "We're scheduled for a flight tomorrow afternoon, unless Madison wants to sightsee in the Big Apple."

My heart skips a beat. I'd love to look around the Big Apple. "We can talk about that later." I hug Lily, and she steps away to get into her car.

Dixon leads me to the car with his hand on my back. "Steak for dinner?"

I giggle. "You know me." Why is it so damn easy to fall under his spell?

He opens the passenger door as I slide in. "Did you get what you wanted for your contract?"

I nod, pulling out a piece of gum from my purse. "Lily is great in contract negotiations. I'll be going to the Caribbean after the season." I know my tone is sharp, but he needs to know. "And I won't be taking a bodyguard on my trip in December."

The burst of breath he expels answers my question. "Yes you will, Madison."

"I don't get it. So, someone sent something that resembles a threat. Maybe it's just someone being overly dramatic."

He maneuvers the vehicle into a parking garage and parks. Why do I feel like a scolding is going to happen? His hand moves to my shoulder as I turn to see his

solemn face. His frown tugs at my heart. “Team security and CPSP deemed the package and letters to be a threat to you. This wasn’t my decision. To be clear, I completely agree with you having a bodyguard, but it wasn’t my call. Stalkers are unpredictable and while we’re away, CPSP has been investigating the items sent to you. We’ll have a meeting when we get back to Dallas and discuss what should be done next.”

“Okay.” I open the passenger door to his loud sigh. Stepping out of the car, Dixon meets me and wraps his hand around my waist. “How do you know about New York restaurants?”

“I asked Cameron Cambell. He travels here pretty often.”

“Oh. I have a hard time keeping track of all the Campbells. I know Cameron is Lily’s fiancé’s cousin.” We step into the elevator as I continue. “I’ve hung out with Cameron’s fiancée, Kylie. I like her.” Dixon nods as we enter the restaurant, waiting to be seated.

In the middle of dinner, I’m devouring my medium steak with mushrooms and peppers. Elegantly dressed diners fill the tables and mill around the bar. It’s an upscale restaurant owned by a television chef with ridiculously expensive prices. Looking back, I should have talked to Dixon about the choice of restaurant before. Am I paying for his security services or is the team? If it’s me, this meal will be a big charge on my credit card. Eyes are boring into me as I raise my head to Dixon.

“What month did you get for the calendar?”

That’s an out of the blue question. “October. I get to hold a puppy for the photo shoot.”

His brow lifts as he shifts his head. “A puppy? What kind of sexy calendar is this?”

“Who says the calendar is sexy?”

He scoffs. “It’s got you in it, so it’s sexy.”

His compliment warms my soul. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Is the team going to mind you being gone for a few days?”

“No. This was their idea. They want to increase my profile now that I’ve joined the team.”

He sets his napkin to the side of his plate and raises his head at the server. She walks over as I reach for my purse. Dixon leans. “I’ve got it.”

“That’s okay. I’ll pay my way.”

His sigh makes me cringe. “Can’t you forgive me?”

My hand moves slowly out of my bag as I study Dixon. “This has nothing to do with that.”

He clicks his tongue. “I should have told you about Meredyth when we were at the cabin. I didn’t feel married, like in a relationship. She and I were just friends, and by that time she was in remission and we rarely communicated.”

I grip the purse in my lap like it’s a lifeline and take a breath. “You know I have a hard time with trust. My dad was a cheater and a liar. I have a hard time having a relationship with people who misrepresent themselves. It probably started with my first college relationship, then you did your disappearing act. It’s one of the reasons my career is so important. It has been more consistent.”

He nods. "I understand. If I could go back in time, I'd wake you up and tell you that Brian was making us leave, but I didn't. I've made mistakes, but I want an opportunity to be friends again."

His words pull at my heart. "I thought we were going to be friends, and then Brian told me about you being married, and I have to admit, it hurt. Now I'm here with you and afraid to trust you because you haven't been honest."

"I get that." He takes the bill as the server sets it down, slips in his card, and hands it back to her. Waiting for her to leave the table, he cups my hand with his. "I don't have any more secrets." He frowns. "Except top secret secrets that I can't share."

"Of course. I just want to believe that the man sitting next to me is real. That you aren't going to break my heart again or lie to me."

He edges closer. "I won't. I am that man."

Can this be true? The server hands back the bill with his card and he fills it out. I'm staring around the restaurant while his words seep into my soul. Women glance at Dixon and scowl at me which makes me chuckle.

"What?" He asks.

"Women like the look of you, and dislike me for being next to you."

He stands and puts his hand out for me to take. "I don't care about other women. The only one I care about is you."

We step through the restaurant and get on the elevator. His words rattle around my head giving me a headache. A few minutes later we're sitting in the car with old eighties rock playing on the radio. "Want to go back to the hotel?"

I nod, yawning. “I’m tired. What time is our flight tomorrow?”

He makes a turn in the direction of the hotel as he answers. “We’re catching a ride back with Cameron tomorrow evening, late.”

“Oh?”

“Perks of being friends with billionaires.”

Nodding, I set my head against the headrest and think about everything I know about Preston Dixon, former Navy SEAL.

DIXON

Madison sleeps in the second bedroom of the suite. We've got a list of places to visit tomorrow, and I'm more hopeful than I've been in years. Sipping my scotch, I'm waiting for Ella to get back to me about what she's found. The line clicks back on.

"Sorry." She mutters.

"No problem."

"So, the stalker used a courier to send the package. It appears he, and I'm using the word, 'he' because most stalkers are men. He mailed the letters from around the city, but one came from Phoenix."

"Phoenix? Was she being stalked in Phoenix?"

"I don't think so. The Bobcats' security team hadn't received anything. I assume Madison hasn't mentioned any other issues."

"She hasn't. If the person who sent them was in Phoenix, and is now in Dallas, it ratchets up my concern."

She pauses. "Mine too. I got her itinerary for her photo shoot from Lily for December. I assume you're going?"

"Yes. Though I hope this stalker thing is long worked out before that trip."

“I’ll put it on the books. We’ll send you down in the smaller CPSP jet.”

Perks of knowing billionaires. “Thanks. We’ll be in tomorrow night.”

“Make sure you remind her to keep that panic necklace on.”

“Oh, I am. I don’t plan to be far enough from her that she’ll have to use it.”

She coughs. “I wondered when the possessive Dixon was going to show up. Just remember you work for CPSP, so keep it professional.”

“I will. Thanks Ella.”

I stand under the hot water spray in my shower, trying to wash off the restlessness from the night before. With Madison sleeping in the adjacent bedroom, my cock couldn’t settle and frankly neither could my heart or mind. I’m impatient to see her. My hand stretches down as I grab my cock, stroking up. I’ve never felt like I felt when I made love to Madison. It was the first and last time my heart engaged in sex.

MADISON

We stroll through Central Park. It’s wilder than I’ve seen in photos. Birds chirp in the trees, but it’s the sound of the zoo that captures my attention. I’m finishing the hotdog from the vendor cart and it’s better than I expected. Dixon finishes eating two in the time it takes me to get half of mine down. He hands me the soda cup we’re sharing, and I take a sip.

“We’ll have time to grab a nice dinner before we head out tonight. Thoughts about what you want to eat?”

I smirk. “You’re always so interested in feeding me.”

“Of course. I love to watch you eat. It’s one of my favorite pastimes.”

He’s wearing me down. “What the fuck is going on, Dixon?”

He gently pulls my arm and leads us to a bench. “I think you should call me ‘Preston’.”

My forehead furrows, my brain scrambles for a pithy response but all I come up with is his first name. A name I’ve never used before. “Why Preston?”

He pulls out his phone and taps it, handing it to me. “Listen.”

I take the phone and put it to my ear. He’s talking like he’s leaving a message. “I’m sorry, Madison. I fucked up. Brian is making me leave you without telling you. I’ve just left you in bed. I was planning to go for a run and then waking you and making love to you again. Maybe leaving is for the best.” He exhales. “This is so hard for me to admit, but you scare me.” He laughs, and it sounds like when someone is nervous. “I never imagined finding someone to claim as my own. It’s probably why I didn’t give a second thought to marrying Meredyth. She was the safe choice. I knew she’d never want anything else from me. But you, you’ll demand everything from the man you choose, and I wasn’t ready. I had a dangerous job. It wouldn’t be fair to commit to you and then get killed. So, I’m going to bide my time until the stars align, you realize I’m the man for you, and forgive me. Then we can be together. Hopefully I won’t continue to fuck it up as we go along. Oh, I should have told you about my marriage.”

Madison watches a young family as they stroll around our bench. It’s time for me to come clean. I take out my phone to open the recording app and press play. I hold the phone out to her as she turns her head to me.

“What is this?”

My voice narrates my thoughts about Madison from a few weeks before. “I made a mistake in leaving you without saying goodbye. I can only imagine how much I hurt you when you realized I had left. I cringe at the thought that you might never forgive me. Please forgive me...” She hands the phone back to me and I press pause.

“There are hundreds of messages like that. Most of them are on the cloud, which I had to buy more space because of all of them.”

“When did you leave this message?”

“It was after I left you that morning after hunting.”

I turn and slug my fist into his chest. “So, you’ve shared everything to this imaginary message app, but not me?”

He pulls me into his arms. “I’m sorry. I thought it would be best to wait until you were ready, and then I realized I can’t make that decision. I kept myself at arm’s length, keeping tabs on you from afar, but not engaging except when we ran into each other. That was wrong. Let’s start over. I’m claiming you, Madison. That’s why I want you to call me Preston. So, we can put the past behind us and start fresh.”

I push back. “Dixon, I don’t need to call you something else. I don’t know if I can just start over.”

He sets his forehead against mine. “Please try. I want to be the man you deserve. I want to build a life together.”

My brain is struggling to absorb the plethora of information. “What makes you think you’re ready now?”

He whispers. “I think about you all the time. You’re the most important thing in my

life. When I think of the future, I think of you. I'm retired. I can follow you anywhere you go."

Squeals and chatters from monkeys in the zoo break the surrounding silence. I kiss his cheek. "I need time to..."

I hug her tight. "Take the time you need. I'm not going to leave you ever again." I stand and take her hand, helping her to rise. "Let's go see those obnoxious monkeys."

DIXON

Madison sleeps against me as I chat with Cameron on the flight back to Dallas. He's another Campbell cousin and one of the owners of the Quad. "How'd you guys put together the Quad?"

"There are six of us who talked about figuring out how to live near each other. Our grandparents, of course, offered us land to build on at their ranch, but we wanted to be in the city. My brother, Calder, happened upon three of the properties in the area for sale. He went in search of more property to make a larger complex. The abandoned hotel needed a lot of work when we bought it at an auction. The warehouse where we made the condos was the perfect place for us all to live together."

I nod. "You're lucky to have family."

His brow lifts. "You don't have family?" I glance to the sleeping woman next to me as Cameron smiles. "No other family?"

Shaking my head, I stroke Madison's arm. "I'm an orphan. I had group homes and one good foster home. My foster mother was kind, but she took in kids to supplement her income, so no. No other family."

“That sucks, man. Does she know how you feel?” He gestures to Madison.

I chuckle. “She’s figuring it out. I gave Madison access to the messages I’d left myself over the years, so she has a good idea how much she means to me. Now, I just need her to forgive me for being stupid and let me in.”

The plane wheels run along the tarmac at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport. I nudge Madison. “Sweetheart, wake up.”

Her head pops up as her eyes ping open. “Sweetheart?”

I chuckle. “Yeah. Might as well move this thing along.”

The flight attendant opens the door as Madison wipes her eyes. “I’m sorry. I think I slept the whole way.”

“No worries. I love sleeping with you.”

Her eyes snap to the man getting up across from our seats. He smirks. “I didn’t hear anything. I’m not the one to go and tell tales.” He pretends to lock his lips with a key. “I’m heading to my grandparents’ ranch, but there’s an SUV waiting to take you two back to the Quad.”

“Thanks Cameron.”

Madison thanks him as he heads down the stairs. She turns and slugs my chest. “He’s going to think we’re sleeping together.”

“Well, you slept with me, so he probably already does.”

The flight attendant waves like the cartoon penguins as we go through the door and

take the stairs to the ground. A man steps away from the idling SUV. “Your luggage is in the back. Thanks for flying Campbell Air.” He chuckles like it was the best joke ever spoken as I roll my eyes. I hold the back door open as Madison climbs into the back seat.

The CPSP driver asks. “Where to Mr. Dixon?”

“Back to the Quad.” It’s late. My watch reads after one in the morning, and my hands are itching to touch Madison. I have to admit her demeanor has changed as she’s listened to my messages. Little touches and her sleeping on me have my heart hoping. Her hand drifts to my leg.

“Why does everyone call you Dixon instead of Preston?”

I lean in to her. “Last names are more commonly used in training at the beginning. And when I got to the SEALs, there was a guy with the last name, Pressman, so it just made sense that they called me by my last name.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Are you hungry?”

She shakes her head. “Well, yeah, but I don’t have food at the apartment and nothing is open.”

My body jerks, ready to burst with a great idea. “Let me make you an early breakfast before you head to your apartment.”

Her eyes bear into mine as her inner debate works out her answer. “Sure. That’s nice.”

I lean back in the seat. “That’s me sweetheart. Mr. Nice.”

She scoffs. “I’m pretty sure ninety-nine out of a hundred people who know you would disagree.”

I move my arm around her in the seat, whispering. “The only person’s opinion that matters, is yours.”

Twenty minutes later, we pull into the underground garage beneath the Quad. “When do you have practice later?”

“Oh. We don’t. There aren’t any games this week, so we have today off.”

By the time we get out of the elevator and make the turn to get to my apartment, my cock is so hard it’s going to have a permanent zipper indentation. There is no way in hell she’s going to let me lure her to my bed. I’ve never wanted anything more. Opening the door, I set her bags in the living room as we head into the kitchen. “Pepper, onions, and tomatoes in your eggs with a little shredded cheddar on top?”

She beams. “Wow. You’ve got a good memory.”

“Yeah. Like I said, I love to watch you eat, so I pay attention.” I move into the kitchen and set out the pan and grab ingredients from the fridge. “Will you have free time one evening this week?”

Her eyes bore into the back of my head as I stop myself from turning. I need to be patient. She sighs. “Yes. Why?”

“Oh. I thought I might take you on a date if you’ll let me.”

She sputters. “A date?”

“Yeah, a date.” I crack the eggs and drop in shredded cheese. Then I grab the bread and drop two slices into the toaster. Waiting. She doesn’t make me wait long before she answers.

“Yes.”

My heart pounds in my chest at her answer. Patience has never been one of my virtues, but I’m learning. A few minutes later, the omelets are done and as I plate them, I ask. “Do you still like to hunt?”

“What?”

Oh yeah, now I’ve caught her off-guard. “Hunt. Do you still hunt?”

“To be honest, I haven’t gone hunting since that trip with you.”

“That’s a shame. Let’s go.”

“On a date?” She sputters again.

“No. when the season is over.”

She blows out her breath. “Who says we’ll be talking at the end of the season?”

I hand her the plate and move to sit beside her. “I do.”

“Pfft.” Her focus falls to the plate before her as she swipes the fork into the omelet. Her smile is my undoing. Watching her eat makes me happy. I never thought of myself as the nurturing type of man, but making her happy and giving her what she needs could easily become my obsession. She brings her eyes to mine. “This is so good.”

“Anytime, sweetheart.”

“There’s that word again. I haven’t decided to forgive you yet.”

I move within inches of her ear. “Sure, you have. You’re here. You wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t forgiven. Admit it. You’ve decided to start over with me. Haven’t you?”

She shrugs. “I can’t seem to stop myself.”

I raise my hand to tuck the loose tendril behind her ear. “Eat your food, so you can get to bed.”

As she finishes her last bite of omelet, licking her lips, she glances at her bags, sitting in the living room. “I should get going.” The statement hangs in the air waiting.

“I’ve got a guest room. You could just sleep here and go home in the morning.”

Her forehead crinkles in thought. “Guestroom?”

I slip my hand around her neck and finger the hair on the back of her neck. “Unless you want to sleep in my bed.”

Her lips twitch and my cock springs to attention. “And if I say I don’t want to do anything with you in your bed.”

Smiling, I pick up her empty dish and carry it to the kitchen. “Sleeping is just fine for an activity.”

On cue, her hand covers her mouth as she yawns. “I’d like that.”

I step back to her and take her hand in mine. “Want a t-shirt to wear or do you still

sleep in the nude?”

She smirks. “I’ll take a t-shirt.”

Sadness creeps up from the depth of my soul that she’s choosing to wear a shirt because she doesn’t trust me. I think she actually does, but she doesn’t want to admit it to herself. We head to the back of my apartment, walking into my bedroom as I flip on the light by my bed. I open the third drawer of my wood dresser and hand her an old SEAL shirt. She pulls it from my hand and escapes into the bathroom. I strip off my clothes, down to my briefs and climb into the far side of the bed. She steps out as I lift the corner of the bedding as an invitation to join me.

“No funny business.”

I nod as she snuggles down into the bed. I touch the light to turn it off, dropping the room into near complete darkness. “Good night, sweetheart.” I place my arm across her waist and will my cock to relax. It’s only moments and her breathing softens. She’s asleep.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:40 am

DIXON

A few hours later, my body is too warm. I wake enough to realize Madison has inched back into my front and her ass is pressed into my erection. Her breathing is soft. She's content in my arms, in my bed. This is home; a feeling I've never felt before, as though everything has finally clicked into place. My dick and my brain war within me on what to do next. I could seduce her right now, wrap my hands around her, touch her breast, and make her mine again, but my mind reminds me to move slow. I feel her shift, she's waking. I slow my breathing, wanting her to think I'm still asleep.

She whispers. "Dixon?"

I should remind her we agreed she'd call me 'Preston', but then she'd know I was pretending to still be asleep. I'm still, focusing on keeping my heart rate and breathing slow.

"Dixon?" She moves back and forth, rocking into me.

Well, I can't stay asleep after that. With a sleepy voice, I answer. "Good morning, sweetheart."

"There you go again being sweet."

I rub my hand down her arm. "Of course I'm sweet. Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah. I ended up on your side of the bed."

“Did you? I didn’t notice. All that matters is that you slept well.”

She rolls over onto the pillow and smiles. “I did. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Want to let me take you to breakfast?”

“Um.”

“Come on, just agree.”

“Okay. Yes. Thanks. I...”

“You can use my shower, sweetheart.” Her smile heightens my happiness as she leans and brushes a kiss across my lips. The shock in her eyes once she realizes what she’s done makes me laugh. “Go on.”

She jumps out of bed and runs to the shower as I get up to bring her bag from the other room. I tap on the door. “Your bag is just outside the door. I’m going to use the bath in the other room.” I head out of the room and rush into the adjacent bedroom to start my day with Madison.

MADISON

I can’t do this. Can I? The hot water sprays down on me from the large flat shower head in the middle of the shower. My mind tries to focus on anything besides my thoughts. His bathroom looks like one you’d find in a Luxury Campbell Hotel. Decorated in Navy blue and gray with nickel plumbing and accents, the countertops are a lush gray quartz with flecks of white and blue that I’ve never seen before. I can’t believe I worked myself back to Dixon... Preston in the night. I’ve got to tell him I don’t want to call him something else to show we’re starting over, as much as I do. He’s always been the one. My mind scans through my memories of the audio

clips he made about me. I just have to get him to verbalize his feelings to me like he did in his messages.

Stepping out of the shower, I stare at the door, willing Dixon to walk through. I know he won't, he's too much of a gentleman and way too patient. I blow out the breath I've been holding and tuck the corner of the towel to wrap the towel around my body as I open my bag to find clothes to wear.

I open the door to the sound of Dixon barking at someone. "This isn't any of your business, Brian. I've bent to your will about your sister for the last time. I love her. I've loved her since we went hunting. She's a fearless, intelligent, strong woman that doesn't need you or anyone else telling her what to do." I'm standing around the corner of the hallway. Smiling my heart speeds up. He loves me. I should be annoyed that he told Brian before me, but I can't be upset. He's declared himself, and I want him.

"Fuck you, Brian. That's not a choice man, but be clear you've made yours. Ugh. Fuck!"

My phone vibrates in my pocket as I pull my bag from the hallway, smiling at Dixon. Sliding it from my front pants pocket, I grimace. Brian. No way I'm going to give him the satisfaction of offering any opinion about me and Dixon.

Dixon's face shows an array of emotion. "Is that Brian?"

I nod. "I couldn't help but hear your conversation."

His eyes widen. "I'm sorry I shouldn't have shared with Brian before I told you."

"You're right. You shouldn't have, but I forgive you, Dixon."

He sighs. “We agreed that you’d call me...”

I raise my hand to the stop position. “There’s no reason for me to call you something else. We can’t just start over.”

Dixon whispers with his hands on the sides of my face. “You’ve got to stop fighting this. Just let me love you.”

Smirking, I stare into his beautiful eyes. “You promised me breakfast.”

He brushes his lips across mine and follows his fingers down my cheeks. “Yes, sweetheart.” He takes the luggage from my hand and rolls it to the front door, setting it to the side. “Grab your shoes and we’ll go.”

Ten minutes later, we’re walking into Grace’s Bakery on the first floor of the Quad, next door to CPSP. “I’ve only been here once. It was good.”

He holds the door open for me to walk in. “We eat here pretty often at work.” He nods at the owner who meets us at a table with two menus.

“Good morning, Dixon.” She turns and smiles at me as she extends her hand. “Hi. I’m Grace.”

“Madison.” I extend my hand to shake. “This is such a cute bakery. I love the blue and white décor.”

Grace beams. “Thanks. Can I get you a coffee?”

I don’t typically drink coffee, but I do love it. “I’ll take a vanilla latte.”

She nods at Dixon. “Black coffee?”

“Yes. Thanks. We’re going to look through the menu.”

I open the menu, smiling. “This has more in it than the last time I was in.”

“She added to her menu. Not many people know, but she acquired the space next door, and she’s going to expand. She’ll offer more brunch and lunch items.”

“Just what I need, more reason to eat luscious food.”

“Pfft. You’re an athlete. I’ve seen how much care you take in your food choices.”

“I don’t really have a choice. My first coach made me feel so bad about my weight. She was always harping on me for every pound I fluctuated.”

Dixon’s mouth hangs open. “Madison. Your body is what’s right for you. That coach is an idiot.” His eyes widen. “Wait. She’s the new coach for Phoenix. No wonder you left.”

I laugh. “Left? I was traded.” Embarrassment creeps up. “I’m pretty sure I’m the first player who won the highest defender award and helped their team win an International Championship to be traded the next season.”

He reaches for my hand. “They’re going to regret losing you. Their fans already realize. The team is losing and looking unmanaged as they fail.”

His words warm my heart. “Thanks.”

“I’m not blowing smoke up your ass, sweetheart. You’re too good for them. Dallas is lucky to have you, and they know it.”

Grace steps back to the table with a photo in her hand. Her teeth nibble her lower lip.

“I’m so sorry, but would you mind signing your photo so I can put you on my wall of champions?” Her finger points across the room to a wall with similar photos.

I take the photo and the marker she hands me. “Of course. Is there anything in particular you’d like me to write?”

She giggles. “Just whatever you want to write, to Grace.”

I nod, writing words on the photo and signing it. “Thanks for this.”

Her smile widens. “Oh. Wow. No. Thank you. I realized when I walked away that you’re you. I watched you in college as well as in the pros. You’re awesome.”

“You’re sweet.” I catch Dixon’s grinning face. “We’ll need a few more minutes.”

She takes the photo and the pen and nods. “Take your time.”

“That was sweet.”

Dixon sits with a look of pride I’m not used to. “She’s right, you know? You are awesome.”

I wave my hand up as I peruse the menu. That was a nice moment.

A half hour later I set my fork on my plate, absorbed in the positiveness of my day as Dixon takes my hand in his again. “What else would you like to do today?”

“Don’t you have to work today?”

The corner of Dixon’s lip pulls up as his eyes sparkle. “I actually am working. I’m your bodyguard.”

Giggling. “You’re getting paid to watch me?”

He leans back in his chair with a Cheshire grin. “That I’m doing for free. But I am getting paid to protect you.”

Shaking my head, I pull out my ringing phone from my pocket. “Is that really necessary?” Nothing has happened... I turn my phone screen to Dixon.

“Your mom?”

“Yeah. I guess she talked to Brian, and she wants deets.”

Dixon looks around. “I could step away.”

“No. It’s fine.” I press a button on my phone. “Hi, Mom.”

“Not your mom, Benny.”

Color drains from my face as my jaw drops open. Some man has my mom’s phone. “Where’s my mom?”

Dixon moves to crouch by my side, pulling my hand down from my ear and touching the speaker button. He places his finger over his lips and points at the phone.

The man answers. “I have your mother, and if you don’t do what I say, I’ll kill her.”

My heart is pounding. His words echo in my brain as Dixon touches my hand and points to his phone. My mother has her hair in her usual morning curlers with a cup of coffee in her hand. She’s home. She’s safe. I open my mouth to scream at the beast on my phone as Dixon squeezes my hand. He shakes his head, mouthing, ‘no’. He presses the mute button. “Play along. Elias is tracing the call. Be scared.”

“I am.” He pushes the mute off and I gasp. “Don’t hurt my mother. What do you want?”

“You left.”

Huh? “Left what?”

“Me, you bitch. I gave you my heart, and you threw it away. You’re mine. You’ve always been mine.”

I take a deep breath. “Who is this?”

He growls. “Figures you wouldn’t know. You’re selfish.”

I shrug at Dixon. Someone walks through the bakery door making the bell tinkle. “What was that?”

“Someone came into where I am.”

“You stupid bitch. This is private.”

I close my eyes, focusing my brain, trying to place the voice. It has a familiar tone, but I’m unsure. Dixon mouths more instructions and I ask. “Where are you keeping my mother?”

“I’m sure you know by now that your mother is safe. I know you, and you’re too calm so someone has already assured you of your mom’s safety. But know I can get her and you whenever I want. You’re mine, Benny.”

The call ends and I gasp. Dixon is around the table, kneeling next to me. “You’re okay. You did great. I knew you could do it.”

Tears stream down my face. My mother is yelling from Dixon's phone as I pick it up.
"Why are you crying?"

"It's a long story. We're okay."

"Dixon said you have a stalker. Why is this the first I'm hearing of this? I can add you to the prayer chain at church."

Of course you can. "Please do that mom. I'm fine. Please be really careful. Dixon is going to call you in a few minutes and talk more about this." I end his call and crumple into his arms. "I thought you were overreacting."

"I get that, sweetheart. Let's head out of here and get back to my place."

The door opens and CPSP shirts enter the bakery. Banner and Maxim step to the table with concerned looks. "We're going to put surveillance on your mom. I don't think she's in any real danger. The stalker wanted to scare you. He's working alone because he didn't have current information on either of you. That's good." Banner pulls out a chair and continues. "Did you recognize his voice?"

Shaking my head, my hand wipes the tears. "No. I mean, it sounded somewhat familiar, but not enough for me to place it."

He nods. "Okay. Ella wasn't able to trace it. He used a spoofing program to get your mom's number and hid his location. We'll be better prepared next time." He holds out his hand. "May I borrow your phone?"

I hesitantly hand it to Banner. He takes it, as he grabs a chair from the adjacent table and spins it around to sit on it backward. He's a massive man sitting in a smaller chair. The image brings a smile to my lips.

“I look silly on the little chair, huh?”

My smile morphs into a huge grin and I can't help myself but to laugh. “Yeah.”

“Keep that sense of humor.” He messes with my phone and hands me a new iPhone. “This is a temporary phone. We want to make sure he hasn't got anything on this one.”

My head flips to Dixon who rubs the back of my hand with his thumb. “Let's head out.”

Grace yells from the kitchen. “Wait. I put a few things in the bag so you won't go hungry. Next time, stay and eat.”

Heads bob around our table as Dixon stands to take my hand. He tips his head to Maxim and then Banner. “Let me know what you find.”

We step outside the restaurant, and Dixon walks between me and the street, taking the almost hidden side door that leads back into the Quad. I'm so tired as we walk to the hallway that will take us to his apartment complex about five hundred feet from the street. “Is there anything you needed to do today?”

I stop walking as the last fifteen minutes bombard my senses. My jaw stiffens. “I can't believe someone is doing this to me.”

Dixon's arms wrap around my body in the stark white hallway with a flickering fluorescent bulb clicking above. “I will protect you.”

I look up into his sea-green eyes. His pupils take up nearly all the color in his eyes. Pure predator stares back at me, and I can't imagine anyone getting by Dixon to get to me. “Just take me home.”

He sighs as regret flashes on his handsome face. “We’ll grab your luggage on the way.”

I lean into him. “We could just stay at your place.”

His beaming smile catches me off-guard. “Thank God.” He turns us to walk down the hallway and opens another set of white steel doors. We head out into a lobby with the elevator to our right. “How long before you need to be somewhere?”

“I don’t have to be anywhere until later this afternoon.”

DIXON

My heart galloped out of my chest when Madison said to take her back to my place. My jean's zipper has imprinted on the length of my cock. I'm so hard thinking about having Madison in my apartment all the time. I know it's too early, but my hands itch to make her mine again. We step into my apartment and as I turn to ask her if she wants a drink, her hands are on my face, pulling it down to hers.

"I don't want anything but you." Her lips slam against mine as she massages my neck with her fingers.

All I can think of is getting our clothes off and getting her into my bed. I have no idea how it happened but we're naked and standing next to my bed, as she drops to her knees.

"Oh, God." I grab her under her arms and pull her up, setting her on the bed as I sit down next to her. "We need to wait."

Her eyes bulge as her forehead furrows. "What?"

"We need to stop for a moment." I blow out a breath and search for the words to slow us down. "You just had a scary situation. This is taking advantage of you."

She turns her body to face mine. Her full, firm breasts with perky nipples catch my attention as she groans. "I know exactly what I'm doing." She takes her hand and presses under my chin so my eyes are on hers instead of her magnificent breasts. "You said you love me."

That phrase snaps me back to reality. “I do. You’re everything to me.”

She beams as she strokes my scruffy face. “Good. Make love to me.”

DIXON

The following week, I’m leaning against the back wall near the locker room entrance, Madison’s spectacular game nears completion, and I’m so excited for her. The Dauntless was down by a goal in the second period as the Bobcats, her old team, looked like they were going to go up by two. The veteran wing of the Bobcats advanced the ball up the field, skillfully weaving through the Dauntless players with deft footwork. Madison’s expression revealed her focus as she positioned herself strategically, ready to intercept the opponent who was preparing for a decisive shot on goal. Suddenly, Madison executed a slide move where she insert her foot between the opponent and the ball, launching the ball toward her Dauntless teammate. Anticipating the play, her teammate raced down the field and scored the tying goal.

I’m hoarse from screaming. My woman is a soccer legend in the making. Now, it’s deep into the last period and both teams are scrambling to make the winning goal. Dauntless offenders charge up the field with Bobcat defenders trying to steal the ball. Madison runs interference with defenders in front of the path of her teammates. In the flick of a bird’s wing, Madison’s teammate loses the ball to a Bobcat. Madison shifts effortlessly and attacks the offender, rescuing the ball from her extended foot. In slow motion I watch Madison maneuver her body to pass the ball to an awaiting teammate. She runs alongside, waiting for the opponent’s attack. Her teammate boggles the ball, and it bounces to Madison. She’s twenty feet from the goal with a clear path. She drives her body and pretends to pass the ball, until the last moment, she kicks it into the far corner of the net. The buzzer sounds above the net as her teammates swarm her. She’s made the goal they need to win.

Madison’s arm shoots up into the air. This is the moment she’s been waiting for. Now she’s back to her previous playing ability. Professional success is within her reach.

This win gives them an edge on the other teams.

I stand in earshot of the reporters wanting her attention. I'd rather grab her and pull her sweaty body into mine and show the world she belongs to me, but I know to wait.

Madison steps out of the locker room. Voices call out to her but she ignores them to find me. Her focus on my eyes makes my heart swell. She wants me just as much as I want her. She rushes to me, dropping her bag and throwing her arms around my neck, she claims my mouth. I hold her above the ground and kiss her hard. The kiss breaks earlier than I'd like but voices surround us.

"Were you watching?"

"The entire game, sweetheart. You were phenomenal. The Bobcats know they made the biggest mistake giving you away. They deserve that loss and all the others they are going to get."

I set her down as she beams at me. "Feed me."

"Your wish, my command."

A few minutes later, we sit in my SUV waiting at the light, three turns before Madison's favorite restaurant. Her stalker has been silent since the call. No letters, calls, or packages.

The light turns green as I pull the SUV into the intersection. Madison's joy permeates the interior, and I want to soak up every second. "Your two plays are vying for supremacy on ESPN. The sportscasters can't decide which reel is the number one sports accomplishment for the evening."

"Right now, I just want to eat dinner with my man."

I turn to answer her as a loud crash explodes, and a jolt hits my SUV. I instinctively throw out my arm to Madison. The SUV jolts as it skids across the intersection. My brain scrambles with what is happening as Madison screams. The SUV jerks to a stop. Airbags pop on my side of the SUV as pain radiates along my shoulder. Madison reaches for me with a scared tone that heightens my focus. We've been hit. I tap the alert button on the dash as Ella's voice speaks out.

"What do you need?"

"Been hit. Ambulance. I'm injured. Send help. Fifth..."

"I know where you are Dixon. Is Madison with you?"

"I'm here." Madison leans to open the door as I bark.

"Keep the door closed until someone from CPSP gets here."

"You're hurt."

"Madison. This one time just fucking do as your told."

"Yes, Dixon."

Ella chuckles. "Madison, can you look around? What's going on in the street?"

Madison's head pivots as I disengage my seat belt. Pain burns around my shoulder. My left side aches. She gasps as I turn to see a man approaching the SUV.

"That's Bobby."

"Who the fuck is Bobby?" Stay conscious. I reach inside the center console for the fingerprint lock for my Glock 22.

“My high school boyfriend. The one I screwed my freshman year in college.”

“Seriously?” Why the fuck aren’t any emergency personnel or CPSP guys here yet?

“He’s your stalker?”

Her head snaps to me. “Oh my God, that makes some kind of sense. He would call me Benny, he’d know my mom’s number, but why would he do this now? We broke up after you and I... at Christmas.”

“No idea why he would try to hurt you after all this time. I need you to move closer to me.”

She reaches for the door. “I’ll just...”

“Madison! No, you won’t. Someone will be here soon. I can’t get out because my door is crushed, and it’s too late for you to get out your door.”

The man struts toward the SUV with a sadistic grin. Madison looks around and points. “Cops.”

“Thank fuck. They took their time getting here.”

The man she called Bobby slams his fist against Madison’s window. He’s screaming with spittle hitting the glass as rage drips off him.

Adrenaline spiking through my body, I pull Madison toward me as I point my large black gun at the window. “Step back.”

He recenters his stance and cocks his head. Surprise lands on his face as he focuses on the gun in my hand. Slowly he turns his head and leers at Madison.

“Get around me into the back seat, Madison.”

“You forget how big I am.”

“Now, damn it.”

Madison is moving between our seats. Pain steals my breath every time she jostles my seat to get to the back. It's worth it. I need her safe. Bobby reaches behind him into his pants and pulls out a large silver object. My mind takes a brief click to realize it's a pipe or tool, not a gun. He slams it against the window sending shards throughout the SUV and spraying back on himself. He stands there, holding it up, ready to strike again as Madison makes it all the way through.

“Bobby?”

The man's focus turns to me.

“Set the weapon down.”

“She's mine. Who the fuck do you think you are? I've seen you two together. You're the man she fucked when we were in college before she broke up with me.”

“Come on, Bobby. That was a long time ago. Why now?”

“My wife left me. She...” He swivels his head to stare at Madison as he starts yelling.
“It's your fucking fault.”

He moves to the rear passenger window as the opposite side door opens. Maxim pulls Madison to safety. I drop my gun in the center console and using all my strength, I pull myself across the console and onto the passenger seat, pushing open the passenger door as Bobby realizes Madison has gone out the other side. I propel my body to follow, reaching him before he gets around the SUV. My uninjured arm grabs him, and I slam him into the side of the SUV. Banner grabs Bobby as the cops surround the vehicle.

“Dixon?”

Madison’s voice brings me back to find my woman.

Maxim grabs me as I get to her. “Dude, you’re injured. She’s safe. I’m not going anywhere so let’s get you to the hospital.”

Madison moves with Maxim and I to the waiting EMTs. “Don’t worry, Dixon. I’m not leaving your side.”

“Music to my ears, sweetheart. Let’s make that permanent.”

The EMT helps me climb on the gurney and peppers me with questions about my injury.

MADISON

It’s been three days since the car accident, and I haven’t been away from Dixon for more than fifteen minutes a few times a day. Walking back into his room, I smile. Did he realize he proposed? Whether he knew what he was saying, doesn’t matter. The man is mine. I called Brian to tell him as much.

Dixon’s smile greets me and all is well with the world. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m sore as hell, but relieved you’re okay. I’m sorry.”

I approach the bed, sitting on the edge. “What are you sorry about?”

“I failed. He could have hurt you.”

I take his hand in mine. “You protected me even though you had a dislocated shoulder and were bruised all over.”

“If he’d had a moment more, he could have gotten his hands on you. I could have lost you.”

“Oh, Dixon. You’re never going to lose me.” I lean forward and set my head against his. “I’m safe.”

“You need to know. I’ll defend you with my life. No one is ever going to hurt you again so long as I have breath in my body.”

“You did defend me. He didn’t get the chance to hurt me. I trust you.”

He wraps his uninjured arm around me. “I love you.”

I lean up to kiss his cheek. “And I love you.”

“You do?”

“Of course I do. We couldn’t get married if I didn’t love you, too.”

He groans as he takes my mouth with his, kissing me hard and then shifting gentler. He breaks the kiss. “We could honeymoon when the Championship is over, after your photoshoot.”

His cock-eyed smile and sea-green eyes implore me to agree, and it’s the only thing I can think of. “Yes.” His smile dips as his eyes look away for a brief moment. That glimmer of sadness catches my breath. “What?”

“Brian probably won’t stand up for me.”

A cough turns our heads to the door. Brian stands with his arms crossed. “I wouldn’t say that.” He trudges into the room and stops at the end of the bed. “You saved my sister from that lunatic she was banging at school.”

“How.. How do you know about me and Bobby?”

Brian smirks. “I convinced him not to follow you to Stanford.” He adjusts his feet. “I can’t help but think his instability increased when I ended you two.”

I squeeze Dixon’s hand. “We were done long before that. How do you know about Brian stalking me? You just got to town.”

He sidles up to the side of the bed and kisses my forehead. “Banner told me. Apparently, Bobby’s wife, who looks just like you, is named Madison.” He cringes. “She left him and his dysfunctional mind blamed you.” His eyes flick to Dixon. “I’m sorry I’ve been an asshole about you and my sister, even my mom knows Benny’s happy. Your call proved to my mother that you’re the perfect man for her, and I can see that she couldn’t be in better hands. I know you’ll take care of her.”

I stiffen as Dixon pats my hand. “Madison doesn’t need a keeper, Brian. She’s capable of living her own life just fine.”

My brother’s mouth falls open. He sputters. “That’s not what I meant.”

I laugh. “That’s exactly what you mean. You don’t respect that I’m a grownup. You pop into my life so infrequently that you’ve missed the fact that I’m a grown ass woman, and I live my life the way I want to.”

He moves his arm to pull me to his side. “Well, that’s going to change.”

“Sure, it is. The SEALS are your life.”

“Not anymore, Benny.” Sadness creeps across his face. There’s a story there that I know he will never share with me. He swallows. “Banner offered me a position with CPSP, and I’m going to take it.”

Dixon readjusts himself on the bed as his jaw stiffens. “Don’t you want to find your own thing?”

Brian frowns. “Man, I have really been a dick if you don’t want to work with me again.”

The door to his room opens and the area quickly fills with CPSP employees and friends. Banner approaches the bed and extends his hand to Dixon. “That was above and beyond, man.”

Dixon’s laugh dims. “Brian tells me he’s going to be working at CPSP.”

Banner’s head flicks to Brian and then back to Dixon. “Yes. We’re establishing a formal bodyguard unit.”

Dixon nods. “You brought him in to run it?”

Banner’s head shakes. “No. He’ll be working under you. You’re the lead on that, well assuming you can get used to Ella’s way of doing things.”

“Oh. I can. Whatever Ella wants, I’m there.” Mirth flashes in his eyes. I’m going to ask him what happened with Ella when everyone leaves. That’s a story I want to know.

Everyone exits Dixon’s room, and he crooks his finger at me. “Come here.”

Smiling, I get up from the chair I’ve spent so much time in. I’ve got a permanent print from the chair on my ass. They should offer me a plaque for it. “I thought they’d never leave.”

He nods. “I know, right? I’m sorry about Bobby.”

“What happened to him? I feel sorry for him, but he’s an asshole for what he did.”
Dixon remains silent. He instinctively understands what I need, giving me space to get my head around what’s happened. I touch his hand in a silent announcement that I’m okay.

“What kind of wedding do you want, Madison?”

I move to the side of the bed and sit down, stroking his face with my hand. “I’ve never been one of those girls that dreamed of a wedding with all the trimmings. Are you okay that I’d rather have a small wedding and a nice honeymoon?”

“That sounds perfect.”