



Fumbling in the Dark (Vegas After Dark)

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Category: Sport

Description: What happens when love, secrets, and the spotlight collide?

I've just been drafted to one of the best teams in the NFL, the Las Vegas Vipers. It should be the happiest time of my life, right? Wrong. Instead, I'm sitting at home, replaying every moment of my breakup with the woman I thought was my forever. Just when I'm drowning in my own misery, my best friend and teammate decides to play Cupid, setting me up on a blind date. Not just any blind date—a Valentine's Day blind date.

Then she walked in. From the moment I saw her, I was hooked. She was everything I didn't know I needed, though a bit grumpy. But I could work with that. There was just one tiny problem: she doesn't know who I am or what I do. So, I decided to keep my life as a famous football player under wraps, hoping she'd fall for the real me before she discovered the rest. It seemed like a foolproof plan until it wasn't.

This is a spicy story about a sunshine of a football player who goes on a blind date for Valentines Day and meets the grumpy woman of his dreams.

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Chapter one

Shane

R ing...Ring...

My gaze goes to my phone lying in my hand. I feel it buzz, but I can't seem to move. When the ringing sound hits my ears, it should make me do something, but everything seems so far away. The entire room goes silent as the sound of my phone continues to echo through the room, but I can't seem to answer it. The air in my lungs seizes and I can't seem to take a full breath. This could be it.

My vision tunnels as I look around the room, knowing my whole family is here to celebrate me. It feels uncomfortable. I squirm, trying to shake the feeling from my skin. I know they all love me and tell me that this is a great honor, but it doesn't feel right. Maybe because the only person who isn't here is the one person who has supported me for the past two years, my girlfriend Shelby.

Ring...Ring...

"Honey, are you going to answer that?" My mom softly whispers to me, breaking me out of my panic. I look down at my hand. Oh yeah, my phone.

"Hello," I answer, hoping to keep the shakiness out of my voice.

"Shane Mitchell?" the man on the phone asks.

“This is he.”

“This is Berkely Ryan from the Las Vegas Vipers. We hope you will come and play for us here in Vegas. Do you think you could do that?” he asks me.

I nod my head, then remember that the man can’t see me. “Yes, sir. It would be an honor,” I tell him as my hands tremble.

“Congratulations, Shane. We will be in touch with the details and are excited to have you on the team.”

“Thank you, sir,” I reply as I hang up.

I just stand there in shock, not sure how to tell my family that I’ll be moving to Las Vegas. “Well, what did they say?” my oldest brother, Taylor, asks me.

“Ugh...” I stutter at first, then it hits me all at once. I look back up to find my brother still looking at me, waiting, when I mutter, “I’m going to be playing for the Las Vegas Vipers.”

My brother and I stared at each other, both shocked by the words that just came out of my mouth. Before either of us can say anything else, a voice is welcoming the Commissioner of the National Football League out onto the stage where they’re announcing the draft picks.

Every member of my family is standing in the middle of the living room, hypnotized by the television as we watch everything all play out. The commissioner makes his way to the podium and leans forward. “The fourth pick goes to the Las Vegas Vipers and they’ve chosen tight end Shane Mitchell.”

The room bursts into celebratory shouts, and I can feel the camera pan over me and

my family. My mother places her hand on my back, pulling my attention to her. She has tears in her eyes as she wraps her arms around my neck and whispers, “I’m so proud of you, honey.”

After a moment she pulls back and it gives me a chance to look around the room, I can see the smiles on everyone’s face and for the first time I’m able to shake the shock off. A smile spreads across my face when I allow the excitement to wash over me.

“I’m going to be on the Vegas Vipers,” I shout, punching my arm into the air.

“Yeah, you are,” my brother Cliff shouts.

The rest of my family takes turns giving me hugs and encouraging words. The last one to come up to me is Taylor’s wife, Mya. She places her hand on my elbow, saying, “We are all so proud of you.”

“Thanks Mya,” I say as my cheeks burn with embarrassment. I’m the worst at taking compliments.

My heart drops a bit when I remember that the one person I want here isn’t and won’t be coming. She said she was busy and couldn’t make it, but didn’t really explain. Just went on about a family emergency. Hopefully, everyone is okay.

Needing to hear her voice to settle my nerves, I pulled my phone out and dialed her number. It rings out for what feels like forever when finally, her voicemail picks up. “This is Shelby. Leave a message and I might get back to you.” Beep .

“Hey Shelbs, I have amazing news. Call me back. Love you,” I tell her. Hanging up my phone, I put it back in my pocket and turn back toward my family.

Two hours later, the camera crew has left and I'm in the kitchen helping my mother clean up.

"What an exciting day! I can't believe you're moving to Vegas. It's so far away," she says as she hands me another dish to dry.

"Don't worry, Mom. I'll visit often," I say, wiping the water off with a towel.

"I know you will," she says while washing the next dish.

"Besides, won't it be so much fun for everyone to come and watch me play?" I ask, furrowing my brow.

"It will be the best time. I can't believe I'll get to say my son plays in the NFL," she says wistfully.

Right then, my phone rings. Placing the dish I'm holding on the counter, I pull out my phone hoping it's someone worth talking to. It feels like since the announcement, everyone in town has been calling to congratulate me.

Relief washes over me when I see Shelby's name on the screen. I take a moment to walk outside before answering so we can have some privacy. "Hey gorgeous," I answer the phone.

"Shane," she snaps back in a surly tone, sending up a red flag. The only time she gets like this is when she's upset. Then I remember she had a family emergency and guilt hits me. What if something bad had happened?

I take a deep breath and wait for her to continue, hoping that she'll explain why she's so angry. She doesn't. After a moment, I ask her, "I know you had something going on, but did you watch the draft?"

“No. I don’t have time for that,” she says, and it grinds on my nerves when she talks about football like that. Football is important to me, but Shelby has never cared about it. She just likes the perks and status it brings.

Ignoring her, I continue because this is great fucking news. “I’ve been drafted to the Las Vegas Vipers. I was the fourth pick overall.”

“Vegas? That’s far away,” she shrieks.

“Yes. Las Vegas,” I tell her, trying to stay calm. This doesn’t feel like a supportive girlfriend. This feels like something else.

“We need to breakup,” she bluntly replies.

“Wait, why?” I ask, confused as to why we need to break up.

“I’ll never move to Vegas, and I don’t want to do long distance.”

“Shelby, you knew this was a possibility,” I say in exasperation, throwing my free hand up in the air.

“I’ve been planning on breaking up with you for a while now. This is just the perfect excuse.” She says it with no emotion in her voice, but it pierces my heart anyways.

This is not the girl I fell in love with. My family always said that she wasn’t good for me. That she would never support me, that she was just using me to give her status at college. Is she showing me her true colors right now?

My eyes narrow at the empty space in front of me as if she was standing there. I ask the question I’m not sure I’m ready for the answer to. “I thought you said you loved me.”

Shelby laughs manically. “I never loved you.”

Before I can even respond, the line goes dead. My head swims with what just happened, and I can’t help but look to the sky as if all the answers to life will be up there. Being drafted was supposed to be the best moment of my life, and now it has turned into the worst.

“Are you okay?” A gruff voice interrupts my thoughts. Looking over my shoulder I see my two brothers standing behind me. I was so caught up talking with Shelby I didn’t even hear them come outside.

“How much did you hear?” I ask them as I look away and stare out at the land that my parents worked so hard for.

“Enough to know it wasn’t a happy conversation,” Taylor says.

Nodding, I mumble, “Shelby just broke up with me.”

“What?” they both say in unison.

“She said she never loved me.” I repeat the words that broke my heart.

“Fuck,” my brother Cliff says under his breath, then he grabs my shoulders and looks me in the eye. “Listen to me, Shane. She wasn’t worth it. One day you’ll find the person who is worth it, and you won’t have any doubts.”

“I loved her,” I say.

“But did you?” Taylor asks.

“What do you mean?”

“You hadn’t even asked her to move with you.”

“I was waiting to see where I got drafted to,” I defend myself.

He shakes his head. “I don’t think so. If you loved her, you would’ve asked her right away. I think deep down you knew she wasn’t the one.”

“How did you know Mya was the one?”

“I never wanted anyone else. No matter who was in front of me, I only thought of Mya. Everything I did was for her, to get closer to her.”

“Is that how it was with Shelby?” Cliff asks.

“No,” I mutter. “But it still hurts.”

Cliff tries to comfort me by knocking my shoulder with his, then he reminds me, “I know, but this is your chance to start over and find something even better.”

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Chapter two

Janae

“Are you going out tomorrow night?” my roommate Samantha asks, placing the mail on the bar of our apartment.

“Uh, no. It’s going to be crazy at work tomorrow with last-minute orders. No, when I get home, my plans are to stay here, take a bath, sip on a glass of wine and read. My book boyfriends will keep me company,” I inform her, returning to my book and hoping she’ll get the point.

Unfortunately, she doesn’t because she walks more into the living room, whining while throwing her hands in the air. “You have to go out. It’s Valentine’s Day in Vegas! There is literally a guy on every corner.”

“Exactly. It’s Valentine’s Day. I don’t want to be out in all that. I’ll have to deal with it all day and besides, I don’t want just anyone,” I tell her, waving my hand in the air, then dropping my voice, I whisper, “That’s when the extra crazies come out.”

“Hello. We live in Vegas. The crazies are out every night,” she says and both of us stare at each other for a moment, then break out into giggles.

That’s what I love about Samantha. We met our freshman year in college as roommates in the dorms. I was sad that I had to leave my wonderful family behind, especially my Nana, but Sam had made some stupid joke and that was the beginning of the end.

Of course, that was when I was enrolled and figuring out what to do in life. After an internship at Sunshine Flowers for my horticulture class, I fell in love and flowers became my destiny. Once I'd figured that out, I dropped out of college and became a full-time employee. Now I get to play with flowers all day.

Since we were great roommates and good friends, neither of us wanted to risk it when I'd needed to leave. So, Sam moved into our small abode with me and now she commutes to The University of Las Vegas each day. Thankfully, I only have another month left of my florist certification program and Sam will be done with college next year, allowing us to move to a different place that will be better for us.

We both come from middle class families who can't help us with college like they want to, which is the reason we both work so hard. Neither of us is taking your typical college route, but what matters to our families is that we have a better life, better opportunities, than they'd had.

Samantha drops down onto the couch next to me, giving me her puppy dog eyes. "Come on, it's not healthy for you to be locked up here all the time."

"I'm not locked up here all the time. I go to work."

"Exactly, you only go to work and that's it."

"What else am I supposed to do?"

"Get out and have some fun, meet new people," she informs me, shimmying her boobies at me. When her phone buzzes in her hand, she looks down at the screen, and her face lights up. I assume it was from her boyfriend. I glance back at my book, giving her some semblance of privacy.

I haven't met him yet, but she seems happy so he can't be too bad. They've only been

dating for like a month. And if I know one thing about Samantha, it's that she is careful. I won't be meeting this guy until she is pretty sure about him. The whole time I've known her, I've only met one person she was dating.

She has told me a little about him, but not much. I know he plays some kind of sport. I'm sure she's told me, but considering I don't give a crap about sports, it went in one ear and out the other. Let me think, what else has she told me? He moved to Vegas a few years ago from Texas and has a dog named Murphy. Other than that, I'm at a loss, but all that matters is that my friend seems happier.

Her gaze leaves her phone and she zeroes in on me. Oh crap, that can't be good. And when her lip curves up into a smirk? Shit, this will definitely not be good for me.

"What if I have a date for you on Valentine's Day?"

"I don't know. I'm going to be exhausted tomorrow," I say, looking away from her.

"Come on, Kade has a friend who is new in town and also needs to have some fun."

"Who is Kade?" I ask her, pretending I'm clueless.

She looks at me, her jaw dropping at my words. "He's only my boyfriend. The guy I've been dating for a month now, and the one who is going to set you up."

"Why me?" I ask, feeling a little lost. Wasn't she just saying I have no fun?

"No real reason. My thoughts that ran through my head were actually 'who do I know that doesn't have a date for tomorrow, oh yeah, Janae.'"

"You're such a jerk," I tell her, shaking my head.

Samantha then moves closer to me on the couch and playfully wraps her arms around me, giving me a wet kiss on the cheek. “But you love me anyways.”

“I guess I love you,” I tell her as I wipe the slobber she left behind on my cheek. “I don’t know this guy.”

“Listen, I’m not asking you to sleep with him. Just have dinner and a good time. If it makes you feel better, Kade and I can go to dinner, too.”

“Like a double date?” I ask with a tiny bit of hope in my voice.

“Exactly. A double date,” Samantha answers, snapping her fingers at me.

I can tell that if I don’t give in to her, this is never going to stop. Letting out a sigh, I closed my book and leaned over to her. “What are you going to do for me if I go?”

My friend rolls her eyes at me. “Seriously, Jay? Aren’t I already helping you by getting you out of the house?”

“No. And I’m dead serious. This feels like a favor, Sam, and if I’m going to do it, I’ll need payment in return.”

Sam scrunches her face as she thinks about something she can offer me. It’s not money I’m looking for, because honestly neither of us has any of that. I work as a florist at a shop here in town while I’m finishing up my floral design program, and Sam works as a cocktail waitress at one of the popular casinos while putting herself through college.

“I’ve got it,” she says, interrupting my thoughts.

“What?”

“I’ll get you that new book you’ve been wanting,” she says with a look of victory in her eyes.

I bite my lower lip, letting her wonder if I’ll take her form of payment. The fact that look of victory hasn’t left even though I haven’t answered right away is a sign that she knows she has me. Because we both know that I’ll never turn down a new book.

“Fine. I’ll take it.”

“And?”

“And I’ll meet Kade’s friend,” I sigh.

She hugs my neck tight while chanting in my ear, “Thank you, thank you.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Now leave me alone, I want to read my book.”

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Chapter three

Shane

“Man, are you just going to sit here and pout all weekend long?” Kade’s voice pulls my attention to him.

“What do you mean?” I ask him, furrowing my brows. “I don’t pout.”

“You know what I mean. And you definitely do. Since you’ve been drafted, all you’ve done is sit at home. You never come out with us or talk about doing anything.”

He’s the only one who could ever get away with talking to me like that outside of my family, and that’s because he basically is. Kade and I used to be teammates in college. We’d roomed together in the football house and quickly became friends.

He was like one of my brothers: helping me navigate classes, football and the social scene at school. We were living our best lives—football and partying. Until he left and I met Shelby. Being two years ahead of me, he’d been drafted to the Vegas Vipers before me, and it was sheer luck that I ended up on the same team as him.

“I’ve just been focused on football, man,” I say, focusing on putting my gear back into my locker.

“Really? And not pining over Shelby?” he asks me with one eyebrow arched.

“No,” I answer quickly, maybe a little too quickly.

“Man, she is not worth this sadness. She broke it off months ago. The reason was bullshit too. You had to move away from your town to Vegas and she didn’t even give you a chance. And on draft night? Come on, man, that’s bullshit.”

I know he’s right. She isn’t worth my time. My brothers had been telling me this for years. She’s always demanded my attention and would get mad when I needed to focus on football. And here’s the biggest kicker, or “red flag” as my sister-in-law Mya would say—she would get upset when my family needed me.

“You never put me first,” is a phrase that she would say on repeat. Which wasn’t even remotely accurate, but she would never listen when I tried to talk with her about it.

My brain knows that I should be glad that I’m not with her anymore and that I can be here, in Vegas, without any baggage. That this is the time for me to live my life for me and football, but my heart still feels crushed. Not because I miss her. No, I miss being part of an us .

I’m a one girl kind of man and believe it or not, it can be hard to find someone. Especially someone who is interested in me and not just the fact that I play football.

I’m actually very awkward, especially when it comes to the opposite sex. I have no game. I mean, I do when it comes to football. And video games? One hundred percent.

But ladies? Nope, not even close. All my brain cells leave my head. Anyone will tell you that. Teammates have literally laughed watching me pick up a woman. The only reason I ended up with Shelby was because we had a mutual friend who’d introduced us. It’d made me relax. She would talk about football with me, and I thought that

meant she was interested in what I enjoyed. When, in reality, all she cared about was the status I brought her being a football player's girlfriend. The funny part was that she didn't like it when I became really good, either.

After Shelby broke up with me, I decided that was it. I didn't have time for relationships, and I would try to get out more. I did it once and it was fucking exhausting. Is it too much to ask for my soul mate to be dropped into my lap? Probably.

Blowing out the air in my lungs, I know I need to say something, but I must've been quiet long enough because Kade talks first. "Why don't you come out with me tomorrow night?"

My body tenses up at his suggestion. I don't want to go out. "I don't know, man—" I begin, but he cuts me off.

"Shane, you need to get out. Not just for your sake, but everyone else's too. You need to make friends with the team. How else do you expect us to win?"

Grabbing my bag out of my locker, I shut it and turn toward him. "Fine. What are you doing?" I ask, exasperated at the fact that Kade won't just leave me alone.

"First, a drink at Moe's with a few of our teammates, then a girl I'm talking to shows up with her friend," he says, raising both of his brows up and down.

"Okay. I'll go. Will you leave me alone now?" I ask him, lifting my duffel bag over my shoulder.

"You know I won't," he says. "But this is a start. We'll have you out of this funk before you know it."

“Whatever, man. Just text me what time and shit.” I leave without another word. It’s time for me to go home and rest. The start of the season will begin soon, and I need to make sure I’m in top shape.

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Chapter four

Janae

Today started off like any other day. I got up, dressed and went to work. That's when it seemed like it took a nosedive. Every single person in Vegas who forgot and wanted to get last minute flowers has either called me or has been rude to me, like this man now.

"Do you have any more roses?" an older gentleman asks me as he pushes up his glasses.

This feels like the hundredth person to come into this shop asking me about flowers today. Don't they realize that ordering flowers on Valentine's Day is not going to work? Our inventory of roses was reserved for weeks in advanced, though people like this man don't seem to care.

"I'm sorry, we are out of roses. Can I get you some daisies instead?" I ask him while plastering on a smile, hoping that he doesn't see how much his attitude rubs me wrong.

I watch as the man runs his hands through his hair. Trying to keep his anger back, he replies to me through clenched teeth, "No. I want roses or at least something that screams 'Valentine's Day.'"

I lean forward, resting my elbows against the counter when I lock eyes with him, and my smile drops. Pretending to look at a clock behind him, I begin, "I'm going to say

this one last time and maybe you'll get this through your head. Considering it's five o'clock on actual Valentine's Day. No. We don't have any flowers that are actually for Valentine's Day. They have all been ordered for weeks."

I push back from the counter and plaster on a smile once more. "Now, can I get you a bouquet of daisies?"

The man in front of me drops his head, muttering, "Yes. That will be fine."

"Great. Let me get those for you," I say, leaving him where he stands and heading into the back room to the refrigerator.

The commotion between Ed and Millie fills my ears the moment I walk over the threshold. "Another order? What type of flower this time?" Ed asks me as soon as he sees me walk into the back room.

Ed and Millie are the best. They're an elderly couple who have been married for thirty years, though they started the florist shop only fifteen years ago. When I came to them looking for an internship to help fulfill the credit for my horticultural class, they were the only ones who gave me a chance and I've been grateful ever since.

"Yep. I'm just trying to figure out if the flowers are for his wife, or girlfriend," I answer him as I walk into the refrigerator, grabbing the daisies before heading back out to the arrangement table. "This time I got the customer to buy the daisies," I inform both of them as I hold up a few of the flowers.

I kneel down to the shelf under the table and grab one of our basic glass vases. Pulling it back out, I begin to make the arrangement for the man out front. This is what I love. I don't really care for all the customer service this job requires. What I really want to do is just stay in the back room making arrangements. People make everything worse where flowers make everything better.

“I bet it’s his girlfriend. If he’s okay with daisies instead of pushing for a more prestigious flower, then he just cares that he has something in hand,” Ed chimes in and as soon as the words come out of his mouth, Millie smacks him on the shoulder.

“It doesn’t matter who the flowers are for, we are here to create beautiful arrangements for them.” Millie points her finger at each of us. Then she turns on me. “And I’ve told you over and over again not to encourage him, Jay.”

“Sorry, Millie. It was just a bit of fun,” I mutter, continuing on and finishing up the arrangement.

Ed and Millie continue trimming flowers, bantering back and forth, but I tune them out. Minutes later, I take the vase and head back to the front of the store. “Here you go, one vase full of daisies,” I say putting it down on the counter, then I type the amount into the cash register. “That will be forty dollars.”

The man gasps. “Forty dollars? That is a rip off, they’re just flowers.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but it’s still forty dollars,” I tell him, putting my hand out and waiting for payment.

He continues to mutter under his breath about it not being worth it, but the man still pays and that’s all that matters. As soon as he’s done, just like clockwork, another person walks into the shop, also looking for flowers.

Hours go by before the shop, even somewhat calms down. This is why I hate Valentine’s Day. I glance at my phone. “Shit. I’m late.”

Right then, Ed comes out. “Late for what, Jay?”

Gathering all of my stuff together, I mutter, “I’m supposed to meet Sam and a guy

tonight.”

“Ooh, you have a date?”

“No. Sam just thinks I need to get out more,” I tell him.

“Well, she’s right,” Millie chimes in behind her husband. “All you ever do is work. Here, let me help you,” she says as she hands me my jacket. “Now, go have some fun.”

“I won’t have fun, but I’m going,” I say as I rush out the door. Pulling my phone out, I send Sam a message.

Me: Sorry I’m late. Got caught up at the shop. Be there soon.

Sam: Okay. See you when you get here.

I shove my phone back into my purse as I reach my car. Starting up the car, I reverse out of my parking spot and head to Moe’s. The whole time I’m driving, I just pray this guy isn’t a total douche. It’s hard to know when it comes to Sam and her taste in men.

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Chapter five

Shane

“S he just texted and said she’ll be here soon,” Sam, a girl that Kade just introduced me to, says about her friend.

“Okay,” I mutter focusing back on the TV hanging on the wall across from our booth. I could care less if this woman shows up. Sitting here watching the game until I can say, “I’m out,” sounds like a plan.

“No, really. She works at a flower shop and it probably got really busy considering it’s Valentine’s Day,” Sam insists, probably hoping that these excuses will help smooth things over for when she gets here, but I’m not sure it will.

I was already not feeling this whole plan that Kade came up with, having me meet a friend of the girl he’s been fucking, but now, I’m even more over this since she can’t even be here on time. Being late is a pet peeve of mine, and I can tell that this is probably going to be a thing for her, especially the way her friend keeps giving out excuses.

Thankfully, Kade takes Sam’s attention away from me as he kisses up and down her neck, making me a different kind of nauseous. This whole place is filled with couples so no matter where I look, I see people hugging and kissing. Ugh, this is why I didn’t want to come out on Valentine’s Day.

I try to keep from looking at them by taking a sip of my beer and keeping my eyes on

the TV in front of me. But it's so hard because they're right in front of my eyes, sitting across from me in a booth. Honestly, it's kind of rude.

Right then, I hear a feminine voice break through the commotion of the bar, "Sorry. Sorry."

I look toward the voice to see the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen burst into the bar. She has black curly hair thrown up into a bun that sits on the top of her head. Her dark skin glows against the light pink crop top that looks to have some kind of design on it, leading into a pair of curvy hips. All I can think about is getting my hands on her and how she would feel underneath them.

Taking her in, I watch as she has a look of panic on her face. Hmm...I wonder who she's here to see?

She continues to rush through the bar, yelling, "Sorry, I'm late." My eyes never leave her and that's when I realize that she's coming towards our table. Oh crap. Is she really coming toward our table? Suddenly, butterflies take off in my stomach.

Shit. Is this bombshell Sam's friend? Said friend slides into the booth with me when she heaves her stuff on the table, trying to catch her breath. "Seriously, sorry I'm late. Work was crazy busy," she says, somewhat out of breath. Logically, I know it's because she ran in here, but my cock doesn't seem to get the message because it thickens as I imagine her breathing on it.

"It's okay. I was telling Shane here that you work at a flower shop," Sam says to everyone at the table, as all eyes turn on me.

With everyone's eyes on me, I can feel my neck and face heat up with embarrassment. Taking a gulp of my beer, I swallow, muttering, "Yeah. Sam told me."

“Oh good. I’m glad I rushed over here as fast as I could because I thought you might be worried,” she says sarcastically, right as our waitress comes to our table.

Fuck, she’s perfect. I watch as the mystery woman next to me orders herself a margarita. As soon as the server leaves, she turns her full attention to me, and my whole body tenses.

“What is your name?” she asks.

“Uh…” I begin to stutter because suddenly, looking deep into her beautiful brown eyes, all thoughts have left me. Told you I was awkward.

“It’s Shane,” Kade informs her, giving me a look that tells me I need to get it together.

“Uh, yeah, Shane,” I repeat like the dumbass I am.

“Well, nice to meet you, Shane. I’m Janae but my friends call me Jay,” she says as she puts out a dainty hand.

I take hers into mine and a bolt of electricity runs up it, causing goosebumps to break out all over. “Nice to meet you, Janae,” I rumble out.

From the corner of my eyes, I can see Kade and Sam go back to making out, but I don’t care because I can’t take my eyes off the goddess in front of me.

“Are we not going to be friends? Because my friends call me Jay,” she tells me once again with a sharper tone.

This time I know exactly how I’m going to react, because her prickliness is making me want her even more. I pull her hand toward me, moving her body closer to me as I

lean down and whisper in her ear, “No, I will not be calling you Jay, because we will never be friends. We’re going to be so much more, Janae.”

She lets out a gasp and her whole body shivers. My lips raise into a smirk, because I can tell that she liked my words. When she releases my hand, I let her go, knowing I’m going to find a way to make her mine.

“Well, isn’t someone full of themselves?” she says as she turns away from me. Grabbing my beer, I take another sip trying to hide my growing smirk. This woman has completely captured my heart.

The waitress brings Janae’s margarita to the table, and she smiles at the waitress. “Thank you,” she says to her.

Another reason to be attracted to her—she’s polite to other people. Fuck. I’m done for . She takes a drink of her margarita, then picks up the complimentary nuts and throws them at her friend. “Sam, stop making out with this guy and tell me how your day was.”

Sam pulls back from Kade and wipes her lipstick off his lips, both of them smiling at each other like they know something the rest of us don’t. She puts her attention back on the woman sitting next to me. “Gosh Jay, you’re such a stick in the mud,” she says back to her.

“Better to be a stick in the mud than someone who kisses it all away,” Janae bounces back at her with a smile and I can’t help but be mesmerized.

“Well, now that you’re here...we’re going to head out,” Sam says as she grabs Kade’s arm pulling him to the edge of the booth.

“Wait, what?” Janae asks her furrowing her brows. “You said this was going to be a

double date?”

“It is a double date. We had a drink and now we’re leaving,” Sam tells her.

Oh, it’s an option for them to leave? And I can have her all to myself? Yeah, let’s do that. My eyes go to Kade and I stare at him, hoping that he is getting the message that yes, in fact, I do want them to leave.

Kade seems to get my message, because after a moment, his lips go up. “Yeah, let’s go, Sam,” he says while he begins to scoot across the seat.

Janae’s eyebrows shoot up and she shakes her head. “No, you can’t leave,” she says to Sam.

Sam seems to take it as a challenge because her eyes narrow at Janae when she mumbles, “I am leaving because I’m going to go back to Kade’s place and we’re going to fuck. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Janae doesn’t even have time to answer before Sam and Kade are already halfway out of the bar. Turning toward Janae, I smile at her then mutter, “I guess it’s just you and me.”

She doesn’t seem to think it’s as funny as I do because she just frowns at me, but doesn’t say anything, giving me time to insert a joke. “What happens when you crack your funny bone?”

Janae furrows her brow probably trying to figure out where I’m going with this, when she mumbles, “I don’t know.”

“You crack yourself up,” I tell her and she lets out a burst of laughter.

I can't help but feel pride well up inside of me because I just made this beautiful woman laugh, and I plan on doing that for a while.

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Chapter six

Janae

I can't believe this man, this beautiful man, just made a stupid joke, but what I can't believe even more is that it made me laugh. And not just a soft amused giggle. No, I full on belly laughed, which kind of embarrassed me even more.

Shane returns to his beer, and I take him in, my eyes roaming over his body. Shane is the complete opposite of me in every way—he's built. Muscles on top of muscles. I'm built curvy—I have every curve you can imagine on my body. He is pale from his skin to his hair, which is so blonde it almost looks white. Shit, even his eyes are a clear blue. And it's not just our looks either that are opposite. It would appear our personalities are different, too.

I haven't dated anyone in a long time because men I've encountered don't look at me this way. I wiggle in my seat because honestly it makes me uncomfortable.

He must feel my gaze because he looks over at me, giving me another one of his dazzling smiles and looks like he might say something, but then returns back to his drink, leaving me a little confused. The silence between us is tense, but not awkward quite yet and I find myself wondering more about him. I take a sip of my margarita, thinking what I could ask him, like I've never done this before.

“What is your favorite color?” I ask him.

He looks over at me but doesn't seem to be able to keep his focus on me when he

replies, “Blue.”

Why won’t he look at me, I think to myself. Maybe he doesn’t like me.

“Is there something more interesting on the TV?” I snap at him.

“No. You’re just so beautiful it hurts to look at you,” he says, looking at me from the corner of his eye.

Hmmm...his words are saying he’s attracted to me but he’s actually acting super weird if that’s the case. But I can’t help but laugh at his words because the way he delivers it so seriously cracks me up. “Do you use that line on everyone?”

“Nope,” he says popping the p.

“Well, it was stupid. Don’t say that again,” I tell him but instantly feel the regret to well up within.

With those words, he turns toward me showing me his sparkly white teeth, then says, “I’m just a little awkward. But I was serious earlier when I told you that you would be mine, and that you are the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen.”

“You don’t even know me,” I whisper, wondering if this guy could be serious.

“I don’t need to know everything about you to know that you’re going to be mine. From the moment I saw you, everything in me started screaming for you,” he says.

My heart rate picks up at his words because I’ve always been the nerdy, awkward girl that no one wants. Every relationship I’ve ever been in has ended because the person doesn’t like something about me. Sometimes it’s my dazzling personality, other times it’s the way I look.

And every time they leave, they like to give me advice, like “Condition your hair more,” “Wear clothes that don’t show off how curvy you are,” or my favorite, “You don’t smile enough.”

Which is why I’m so prickly the moment someone says that they don’t like something about me. If I put those walls up first, then whatever they have to say can’t get to me.

The pull to him is strong, so I find myself leaning closer to him. “I’m really awkward too,” I whisper.

That’s when Shane does something to me that I never expected—he brushes his lips against mine. I close my eyes and feel him for just a moment. When he pulls back, he rumbles in my ear, “Then we can be awkward together. I mean, our first date is on Valentine’s Day.”

His voice caresses my body as if it was made from silk, goosebumps spreading across my whole body. When he pulls back, he looks at me with a devilish smirk that goes straight to my clit. He knows exactly what he’s doing to me.

After a moment, I process what he’s said and I can’t stop myself. I try but I’m not able to—a burst of laughter comes from me. I try to calm myself down but can’t seem to get myself together. Another bout of laughter and then a snort escapes me. My eyes go wide along with my hand over my mouth.

What is it about this man that keeps me from keeping my walls up? I don’t laugh uncontrollably around people, especially ones that I just met. Looking up at Shane, he just keeps staring at me with a twinkle in his eye and a goofy grin on his very gorgeous symmetrical face. My mind turns to mush and I’m not sure how to respond to him, because within these few minutes we’ve been sitting here, he’s annihilated every wall I’ve built.

My breathing calms the longer I stare at him, his clear blue eyes anchoring me in the moment. Finally, I'm able to get a few words out. "Now that we have the fact we are both awkward out of the way, tell me about yourself."

He clears his throat and I can't help but watch as his Adam's apple moves up and down. My nipples pebble at the sight and like...fuck, can you get turned on by someone's throat? I think I might be in trouble.

"Since I already told you my favorite color is blue...I grew up in a small town called Rose Valley. I'm the youngest of three boys," he tells me, watching my reaction, as if he is expecting me to question what he has said.

"Are you and your family close?" I ask.

"Some more than others," he replies as he shrugs his shoulders but doesn't explain any further.

A sadness washes over me as I watch him take another swig of his beer. The idea that he might not be close to any family member just strikes me as sad. My mind drifts to the dynamics of my own family and I couldn't imagine not being close to any of them. I speak to almost every single person in my family every day. Even speaking to extended members of my family at least once a week.

"Are you close to your family?" Shane asks breaking me from my thoughts about my family.

A smile spreads across my face as I answer, "Yes. I'm really close to my family. I'm the oldest of three. I actually speak or text with a member of my family every day."

"Tell me about them," he commands. I don't normally like it when someone tells me what to do. In fact, it usually grates on my nerves and makes me want to do the exact

opposite, but there is something about him that makes me want to obey. So I do.

I spend the next hour telling him all about my family. How both of my parents are teachers, how they helped me as much as they could when I went to college but were grateful when I decided to work at a florist shop.

Shane listened the whole time, never interrupting, only asking questions. It seemed like he was actually interested in me and what I had to say. Hope blooms in my chest that this could be someone I could have a future with. He could be the one that's been missing...

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Chapter seven

Shane

If someone had told me that I would be spending Valentine's Day with a beautiful woman who has captured my complete attention, I would've called bullshit. Especially knowing that this goddess was someone that Kade set me up with. But as I sit here listening to her talk about her family, I'm entranced.

"I talk with my parent's every day on the phone. They worry a lot," I hear her say.

"You talk with your parent's every day?" I ask, astonished.

"I do. Usually on my way home from work," she replies.

It amazes me that someone could talk to their parents every day. I mean, I'm not sure what I would say to my mom let alone my dad if I talked to them that much.

"I take it you don't talk with your parents much?" she asks me.

"I mean, it depends on your perspective I suppose. I talk with my mom once a week and text with my brothers sporadically through the week."

"What about your dad?"

"No. My mom just tells him the important parts."

She cocks her head at me. “Why is that?”

I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know. My dad’s always been a hard ass to everyone, including us kids. Except for my mom. He demanded nothing less than perfection from us boys, and that pushed us away.”

She nods her head. “What about your brothers?”

Taking another sip, I answer honestly. “I think when we were kids, we were just trying to survive our dad in some way or another. Like my oldest brother, Taylor, did everything he could to stay away, and Cliff, the middle brother, tried to appease my dad by doing anything and everything on the farm.”

“And you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, what did you do to survive your dad?”

“Oh, I focused on sports.”

Right at that moment, Janae’s stomach lets out a loud growl. Both of our gazes drop to her midsection and then we let out a big laugh.

“I supposed you’re hungry?” I chuckle.

“I guess so. I’ve been enjoying talking with you so much I didn’t even realize,” she says.

With her words, I can’t help but puff out my chest. I’m not sure anyone has ever been so enthralled with what I’m saying, or told me that they’ve ignored their basic needs,

but her stomach grumbling triggers my protective instincts.

I track down the waitress quickly, who is standing across the room flirting with the bartender, which has me shouting, “Excuse me. We would like to order some food.”

The waitress looks over at me, rolling her eyes and I watch as she pushes off the bar and makes her way over to us.

“What can I get for you?” she asks us reluctantly.

Glancing over at Janae, I see she’s quickly searching the menu and muttering about how she should get a salad but kind of wants a burger.

Giving her a moment, I order mine first. “Can I get a cheeseburger with fries?”

The server types my order on her tablet before looking up at me. “With everything on it?”

“Yep, that’s fine.”

Once I’m done order, I lean into Janae and ask, “Do you have an idea what you want?”

“I’m trying to decide between a salad and a burger,” she says keeping her eyes on the menu. Taking a deep breath, she then looks at the server with a resigned look on her face. “Can I get a grilled chicken salad?”

Nope. If she wants a burger, then that’s what she’s going to get. She needs to know that she can order whatever she wants with me, I’ll never judge her. Placing my hand on hers, I stop her from saying more as my fingers go to her chin pulling her attention to mine. “Do you actually want the salad or would you rather have the burger?”

“The salad is fine,” she says, trying to brush me off but I don’t let her.

“Janae, I didn’t ask you if the salad is fine, I asked you if that’s what you wanted,” I softly say to her.

“Okay. I kinda do want the burger,” she whispers. At that moment, I release her and look up at the waitress, telling her, “She doesn’t want the salad. She’ll have the same as me. Also can we have a refill on our drinks?”

“Are you sure?” she asks Janae.

“Yes. That’s what I want,” Janae answers her.

We both watch as the server places Janae’s order on the tablet then leaves us, returning to her post to flirt with the bartender. While we wait for the food, we continue the conversation when she asks me, “You just moved here, to Las Vegas, right?”

“Yep. Moved here a few months ago,” I tell her, taking the last swallow of my beer.

“Why did you move here?” she asks. Right at that moment, I realize that this beautiful woman doesn’t realize who I am. That I was just drafted to one of the most popular football teams in the league. And not just drafted but was the fourth pick.

Maybe I should just keep it vague when I tell her this answer, that way she can fall in love with me for me .

Sweat beads on the back of my neck as I try to think about the best way to answer her without completely lying. Then I think, just keep it vague . Shaking out my shoulders, I answer her, “For work.”

She nods her head in understanding. I decide to try to keep the conversation more on her than me. “What about you? Are you from here?”

“Yep, born and raised,” she says and by the look on her face, I can tell how proud she is.

“What is your favorite thing about here?” I ask her.

She smiles but before she can expand, our server brings our food and drops it down in front of us. We both eat in silence, neither of us realizing how hungry we were until we started eating.

I finish before Janae because, honestly, I just shove my food down my throat. It was the way it worked in my family. A house full of boys meant it was always a feeding frenzy at mealtimes.

Using the napkin, I wipe my face and look over at the woman who has captured my attention. She is currently humming and it’s so cute as she chews the last of her food. I can’t help imagining getting to watch her sit at the small dining table I have in my kitchen area eating her breakfast every morning.

I’m all up in my head when she grabs her napkin and starts dabbing at her face, pulling her eyebrows in, and asks, “Do I have something on my face?”

“No,” I say with a confused look. Why does she think that the only reason I would look at her gorgeous face is because she has something on it? No, if it wasn’t so creepy, I would never take my eyes off of her.

“Okay then. How about we go somewhere else?” she asks me, pulling up one side of her mouth into a smirk.

Suddenly, my mind wanders over to me opening the door to my apartment, stripping her out of her clothes, laying her down on my bed as her black curly hair splays out on my sheets. My hand caressing her curvy body, as my mouth kisses down her soft skin, giving extra attention to her nipples, swirling my tongue around the nub—

“Shane? Do you want to go?” she asks, shaking me of my dirty thoughts.

“Yes. Let’s go,” I answer as I pay for our dinner. Truthfully, she could lead me to my death and I would still follow her.

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Chapter eight

Janae

This blind date has already gone better than anything I could've imagined. Usually, the men that Sam has tried to set me up with are huge losers. This time it's way different. It started off weird at first, but things turned around quickly. We ate in silence, which some might think is not a good sign, but it was a comfortable one. Something I've never had with anyone before but have always yearned for. The comfort I feel with Shane is amazing, giving me more courage to open up to him.

One of the things I want to show him is my Vegas, all the parts that I love. When I asked him if he would come with me without giving him any details, my jaw dropped with his quick answer of yes without asking for any more details.

Shane follows me out of the restaurant. I wrap my arms around myself when the night air hits me while simultaneously trying to pull my phone out of my purse to call an Uber since we've both been drinking. It's a hard task because I'm low-key shivering. The one thing about living in Vegas is that people don't realize how much the temperature drops at night.

Strong arms wrap around me, catching me unaware. "What are you doing?" I murmur.

"You were cold. I'm warming you up," he casually answers as if we've done this a million times before.

The heat from his body does warm me up, making it easier for me to call an Uber. Not only does his embrace feel warm, but it also feels right, too. Like this is where I have always belonged. My body melts into him as we wait for the Uber, both of us basking in each other.

When the car pulls up, we both get in and I lean forward toward the driver. “Can you take us to the Bellagio?”

“Sure thing,” the driver says as he pulls into traffic.

Shane looks at me with a look of amusement. “You want to take me to a hotel on the Strip?”

I grin at him. “You’ll see.”

“I mean, if you wanted me to go to a hotel with you, all you had to do was ask. You didn’t have to make it seem all secretive,” he replies with a huge, shit-eating grin while wagging his eyebrows.

Rolling my eyes, another laugh bursts from me. “In your dreams, loverboy.

What is it about this man that makes me laugh so easily? That’s not me. No, I’m the prickly one, but something about him makes me so comfortable, allowing me to lower my guard.

“No. We’re going to watch a show. It’s so fun and makes you feel as if you’re in a different place,” I tell him.

The laughter subsides between us just in time to pull up on the Strip not too far from the hotel. We get out and head over to the fountain that sits in front. Thankfully, I’m able to find a spot for us to sit to the side. The crowd isn’t too full since it’s around

ten o'clock at night. Most tourists are now either heading to the club or have been entranced into the casinos, gambling their money away.

Glancing down at my watch, I see the fountains should go off in about five minutes. My leg shakes as we sit with anticipation. I can't wait to see his face when it goes off. The idea that he might not like it as much as me has me literally shaking with anxiety. Shane's large hand rests on top of my knee to help quell the anxious feeling that is brewing, but all I can feel is an electric current run through me from his touch.

Right then, the fountain lights up and shoots water into the sky. I usually love watching the show. This is where I like to come to when I need to think but not today. No, today I look at Shane the whole time, needing to see every expression on his face as he watches and I'm not disappointed.

With every change of water and color, the smile on his face gets brighter and brighter. Just as quickly as it starts, it's over.

"Well, what do you think? This is one of my favorite places. Sometimes I'll just sit here and watch each show repeatedly as I think," I ramble.

Shane's eyes are on me, never leaving me with every word that falls out of my mouth. He leans in so close I can feel his breath on my lips. Is he going to kiss me? God, I hope so. They tingle with anticipation that I could possibly feel his on mine.

He tucks one of my curls, one that has gotten away from my pony tail, behind my ear and then mutters, "It was beautiful. I can see why you like it."

I take the moment to lean in even closer to him. Our lips are a heartbeat away from each other. Not wanting to wait any longer, I take things into my own hands, wrapping my arms around his neck, and crashing my lips to his. I swear fireworks went off in the sky the moment they touch.

Shane doesn't miss a beat and meets me with every kiss. He opens his mouth, and I slide my tongue in—he tastes like beer and peppermint. I get lost in him. His hands grip my ass as he pulls me into him, showing me how much he's enjoying this moment.

Someone from behind us wolf whistles, shattering the bubble we were in. I pull away from him, feeling the heat of embarrassment crawl up my chest. "Don't worry about them," Shane says with a look of concern.

"I know it's late, but can I take you to another one of my favorite places?" I ask him.

"Baby girl, I will go anywhere with you," he says so earnestly.

Nodding, I summon another Uber on my phone, taking him to my secret place.

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Chapter nine

Janae

S hock runs through me when I think about the fact that I'm taking this man I just met to one of my most private places. A place that I've never taken anyone else. Shane and I jump into another Uber, giving the driver instructions to where I want to go.

Once the car is going, curiosity gets the best of Shane, when he asks, "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," I murmur.

"You're really not going to tell me?"

"Don't you trust me?"

He taps his finger on his lips while looking up at the roof of the car, pretending to ponder my question. I grin at his antics. "You're so stupid," I chuckle at him.

Leaning as far as the seatbelt will allow me into his space, I whisper in his ear, "I promise you're going to love it."

Goosebumps break out all over the back of Shane's neck, and I can't help but feel a sense of pride in how he's reacting to me. With that, my brain starts to go into overtime with what all of this could mean and where it might go. He wants me. I want him. Maybe this will work out.

“How did you end up working at a florist shop, Janae?” Shane’s question pulls me out of the spiral I was about to put myself into.

“Last year, I was at school and needed a job. Thankfully, Ed and Millie needed help. They’re the elderly couple that own the shop I work at. They were willing to take a chance on me. I fell in love with making floral arrangements and learning about each flower. And the rest is history.”

“That is lucky. Not everyone finds something they love,” he says.

“What about you?” I ask.

“Football,” he says but doesn’t really explain, leaving me confused.

“Football?” Scrunching up my face, I admit, “I don’t know very much about sports.”

“It’s nothing. I just help out the team. Since I only ever did sports growing up, I thought it would be good to get a job that involved it,” he explains a little more but still doesn’t really say what his role is. I don’t push because this is technically a first date. And who am I to push for more? No one.

“Like a trainer or something?”

“Yeah like that,” he answers.

“Cool. Do you like it?”

“Yeah, it’s fun. I’ve never really been good at anything but football,” he says as he looks out the window.

“You never said if you and your brothers are close now that you’re older?” I ask him

trying to get more out of him.

“Yeah, I guess so. We’re just all doing our own thing, catching up when we can.”

Shane falls silent after his confession, deep in thought. Allowing him to brood, I look out the window, watching as we leave the city so the expansive desert is all you can see. Sadness washes over me for a moment as I think about what Shane said about his family. Mine are my best friends. I couldn’t imagine not turning to them when I needed something. And when they can’t help me, I retreat to my one of my favorite places. The desert.

I’ve been to other areas of the United States and nothing compares to the beauty of the Nevada desert. Excitement bubbles within me when I realize that we’re getting close.

The car comes to a stop, and I jump a little in my seat. We both get out of the car and Shane looks around. “Where are we?”

“The best place to see the city lights,” I tell him with a huge smile. “It’s this way.”

I take a few steps toward the path that leads to my secret spot. The orchestra of the night’s sounds fill my ears but all I can focus on is Shane’s footsteps behind me. We come to the edge of the small cliff that overlooks the city, and I take in the view. You can see the outline of the buildings of Vegas, especially the ones that are littered with different colored lights. The spotlight from multiple casinos illuminates the sky. It never gets old.

When you’re down on the Strip, you can feel the energy that it emits, but up here, it feels more like another world. One that is close but you could never really touch.

Shane comes to stand next to me and grabs my hand, intertwining our fingers. “This

is beautiful. I can see why you like this spot so much.”

“I found this place when my grandfather died. It helped give me peace. Even though I know it’s not possible, it felt like he spoke to me through the lights of the city, telling me that everything will be okay. Now, this is where I come when I need to get away,” I tell him as I pull his hand down so we can sit on the edge, both of our legs dangling in the air.

“You know I’ve never brought anyone here before?” I whisper, turning toward him. Both of our eyes connect, the air filling with something that I can’t quite put my finger on. I swear the music from the crickets gets louder as he leans into me.

Shane wraps his large hand around the back of my neck and pulls me into him, our lips colliding. And those fireworks from before shoot off once again. It’s as if we can’t get enough of each other, the heat between us rising higher and higher.

With his encouragement, I straddle him, lining up my pussy with his cock through our clothes, rubbing against him as if I was an animal in heat, and fuck, he feels huge. The friction of our jeans adds to the sensation, leaving my clit throbbing, and my pussy drenched.

Our lips haven’t left each other’s since we started kissing, and I swear I could kiss him forever. He’s still holding me by the neck while his other hand rubs up along my spine as if he already owns me. The crazy part is I think he does.

From the moment I met Shane, I knew something was different about him. I was completely and unapologetically myself and he never turned away. We could be quiet and just enjoy each other’s company, no forced conversations, no awkward silences.

Shane is the first one to pull away. “Fuck, I could kiss you forever, baby girl.”

“Funny, I was just thinking the same thing,” I say smiling at him.

I can’t imagine what we must look like, both of our lips swollen and puffy. Our hair and clothes askew from our hands roaming, learning each other’s body. Shane’s cock twitches underneath me and it spurs me on to start thrusting my hips so that my clit rubs along his length. I make sure to do it slow and steady.

“Baby girl,” Shane says in a stern voice. His hands come to my waist, halting my hips from moving any further. “If you keep doing that, I’m going to come in my pants. Is that what you want?”

I shake my head, then lean forward once again. He lets out a groan. “No. I want you to come inside me,” I whisper in his ear in my best seductive voice.

“Shit,” he grunts out as he flips me over onto my back, hovering over me with a devilish smile. “Your wish is my command.”

Chapter ten

Shane

Her eyes go wide as she lifts herself up on her elbows, and loudly whispers, “You mean have sex here?”

Which of course makes me smile because if there were people around everyone would know what our intentions were. I make a show of looking around the small lookout that we are on and narrow my eyes back on her, muttering while lowering myself as I lightly brush my lips against hers, “Why not? It’s quiet and no one is around.”

Not wanting to get lost in her kiss just yet, I don’t stay for long. Instead, I make small kisses down her jaw line, down her neck until I reach that sensitive spot right above her collar bone. She lets out a huge breath as if she’s not sure what to think but arches into me, probably not even realizing, just reacting on instinct.

Janae doesn’t answer me nor does she protest so I continue my exploration of her body. The moment I try to slide down to her chest, my foot kicks a rock and I realize how close to the edge we are. Shit, we need to move further back . I can’t have my baby girl getting hurt.

I jump up from my position, searching the area for a better spot. “Wait. What just happened?” she asks stunned as she props herself up.

Still scanning the area, I look over at her, softening my face when I see that she is on

the cusp of crying. “Don’t worry, I’m just finding a better spot.” Then, like a buffoon, I stretch out my arms as if I’m getting ready for a fight. “I just need more space to explore you.”

She lets out a laugh and my body relaxes a bit. I didn’t even realize I’d tensed up so much from the idea that I’d hurt her just because I didn’t tell her what I was thinking. I give her a wink, pulling off my shirt, laying it down on the dirty ground so she can have a better place to lay. Sitting down next to it I pat the spot. “Janae, come here.”

I watch as she trembles while getting up from her spot. She slowly walks over to me, swaying her hips with every movement, and it kills me. She has got to know what she’s doing to me. My cock thickens even more under my zipper as I fight myself from scooping her up and into my arms. But it’s important that she comes to me. I want her to feel that she can stop this at any moment. That she’s always the one who is in control, even if I’m the one giving the orders.

When Janae gets to me she surprises me and by the look on her face she knows it too. Instead of sitting next to me, she decides to straddle my lap again. Looking down at her small, soft curvy body that nestles nicely against my large hard one, I can’t help but think to myself, We fit together like two perfect puzzle pieces.

Since I’m not wearing a shirt she has more access to my body and Janae takes advantage. I watch as she uses her fingertips to trace every line on my body, feeling as if I was on fire with every touch. “I love your body,” she mutters so quietly I’m pretty sure that I’m not supposed to even hear her.

Not wanting to break the spell that I’ve seemed to put her under, I don’t let her know I heard her. My fingers twitch at wanting to touch her, and this time instead of fighting it, I do it. Slipping my hands underneath her pink crop top, I take in the heat of her skin, pulling it up and over her head. A gasp leaves me when I see her sitting in front of me in her plain white cotton bra, looking like a goddess.

Not being able to take it this slow any longer, I crash my lips against hers in a fury. We both deepen the kiss as we explore each other. The moment I pop open her bra, I know that everything is going to change, and I can't wait. The cups of her bra hangs over her breasts, hiding them from me. I take the moment to slow things back down, just for that moment, and pull them down her arms, revealing the most perfect brown nipples I've ever seen.

My mouth waters at the sight. Using my hands, I anchor her, leaning her back and taking one of them into my mouth. Swirling my tongue around each of them, Janae runs her hand through my hair and tightens her fingers with every movement.

Not being able to wait any longer, I flip her over onto her back. Her hair is a mess, laid out in a dark brown halo, covered in dirt. But she's never looked more beautiful.

Releasing her, my hands glide down her body until I get to the waistband of her jeans. Teasing her a bit, I rub my fingers underneath the band for a moment, but Janae is not having that. She moves her hands to her own jeans. "Let me help you," she breathes out.

Fuck, she must be as impatient as me. I watch as Janae pops open her jeans and tugs them down her legs. It's the sexiest strip tease I've ever seen because it's her that's doing it. She only gets to about her knees when I see that she's struggling some. This time I don't wait. I grab her jeans and pull them the rest of the way off.

"You are so fucking beautiful," I tell her. My eyes gaze over her. Her skin has a pink glow from the Vegas lights below us, and I think this is my favorite moment of all time. Even better than the day I was drafted. Or my first football practice.

"Shane. I need you," she moans.

Not wanting to make her wait any longer, I pull my own jeans off, leaving me in just

my boxers. "All of it, Shane. I want to see you," she demands.

And I'll never not give her what she wants, so I pull my boxers all the way off, my cock springing forward. "Damn. I could tell you were big, but I didn't know you were that big," she gasps. "How is that going to fit?"

"Easy. You were made for me," I tell her, while I grab the condom out of my pocket. When Janae sees what I'm doing, she shakes her head. "No condom. I have an IUD and I'm clean. I want to feel every bit of that monster."

"I'm clean too. Honestly, I've only been with one other woman and that was my ex-girlfriend," I inform her.

"Too much talking," she mumbles as I settle between her legs.

Wrapping my hand around my cock, I jack it a few times while simultaneously rubbing it against the seam of her pussy, her wetness coating the tip. "Janae, you are so fucking wet."

Her fingers grip the outside of my shoulders, and I can feel her nails dig into my skin when she mumbles, "That's because you turn me on so much, Shane."

Those words give me courage and I slowly push my dick into her tight pussy. Feeling her stretch around me, I relish the feeling of how she chokes me with every movement. When I'm finally in all the way, my chest is heaving, trying to hold back from coming just at the feel of her.

"Damn. You are so tight. But do you feel that? How you stretch around me perfectly?" I ask her. She doesn't answer me at first, just trying to move underneath me. But I want her to understand what she means to me, even after just getting to know each other for a little bit. My hands tighten around her, not allowing either of us

move until she answers me.

“Shane. I need you to move,” she wantonly says.

“Not until you tell me that you can feel how perfect we are for each other,” I demand.

Her eyes pop open as she stares into mine, pupils dilated, but she doesn't say anything else, and a small part of me is doubting everything I've felt tonight, that she might walk away from everything. But she changes all of that with just a few words.

“Yes. We're perfect for each other.”

It's at that moment I couldn't wait any longer. We both begin to move, our bodies telling each other everything we've felt tonight but couldn't say with words. Making promises to each other under the stars and lights of Vegas.

Her pussy tightens around my cock as her nails rake down my back. “Yeah, baby girl, that's right. Come on my cock.”

One thing about Janae is she follows directions well because shortly after my words, she does exactly what I told her to do, bringing me along with her.

I hover over as we take in the moment and try to settle our racing hearts. She then grins at me. “That was amazing. Now, you have to take me on a second date.”

I kiss the tip of her nose. “I'm going to be taking you on all your dates.”

Chapter eleven

Janae

My phone buzzes next to me, waking me from my dream about Shane. I feel like I'm drifting on a cloud. It was the best date I've ever been on and I hope I'll never have to go on another first date again. But that shameful voice in the back of my head tells me that it's too good to be true.

When my phone buzzes again, I click the side ignoring them. "I'll get to everyone later. Right now, I don't want my bubble to burst," I mutter to no one in my room.

Getting up and ready for the day after being with Shane feels like I can do anything. That I can face anything. The smell of coffee and bacon is what actually gets me out of bed though, because I would love to spend most of my day fantasizing about Shane, but I know I have to take care of myself.

Following the scent, I head out to the kitchen where Sam is cooking at the stove. "Good morning, Sam," I say as I pour myself a cup of coffee.

"Good morning. Someone got home late," she says turning toward me wagging her eyebrows at me.

I leave her stewing for a moment while I grab creamer from the fridge, pouring it into my cup. Once I'm completely done, I turn back toward her and lean against the counter. "I had a good time last night," I reply as casually as possible as I take a sip from my cup.

When Sam processes my words, her eyes go wide, and then she smiles at me. “Oh my gosh...you actually like this guy.”

“I do.” There’s no reason to deny it. I continue to drink from my cup while Sam finishes cooking.

“Here. I knew you would be up soon so I made some food too,” she says, placing a plate on the table.

“Thank you, boo. You know I love you,” I say to her. Sam is the closet person to me other than my own siblings.

“You know I have your back. Now, tell me about the date,” she says, biting into her breakfast.

“It was easy, comfortable. He didn’t seem to be taken aback with my prickly nature. I took him to my two favorite places in Vegas, and he enjoyed them,” I summed up the date leaving out any of the naughty parts. That just seems too personal.

“What? You took him to that hiking trail that you won’t even let me go to?” she asks.

“Yeah. Honestly, I’m not sure why. I just felt compelled to show him all of me.”

“Oh shit. You like, like him.”

Right then my phone rings, saving me from having to say anything else about Shane and me. I jump up and jog back into my room to grab it before it stops ringing. I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face as Shane’s name runs across my screen. “Hey, Shane. How are you?” I ask, trying to sound as casual as possible and not internally freaking out.

“Janae.” He says my name in his deep timbered voice and my clit starts throbbing. “I’m good. I just wanted to call and see if you wanted to get dinner with me tomorrow?”

I don’t even have to think about the answer. “Of course. Text me the details.”

“Wonderful. I have to get back to work but wanted to get that on the books. Talk to you later,” he says then the line goes dead.

I can’t help but feel the flutter in my stomach. This man has me in a choke hold and it scares the shit out of me. Hoping to take Shane off my mind for at least the moment, I decide to check my messages.

When I see my notifications, I can’t help but wonder why I have so many. Not just from my brother and sister but from random people I haven’t talked to in a while. I scroll past those and click on my brother Jermaine’s message first.

Jermaine: Why didn’t you tell me you were dating the SHANE MITCHELL?

Jermaine: Have you seen the news yet?

Jermaine: Janae why aren’t you answering me?

There are two more messages that are similar. I furrow my brow with confusion because how the hell does he know the name of the guy I was on a date with last night? I was going to call him later to tell him about my date.

Some of his texts seem to be urgent so I decide to ignore the rest and call him. The moment I hit the call button, he answers right away.

“Janae. What took you so long?” he says.

“What, no ‘hello, how are you?’ I was sleeping Jermaine. Then I was eating. What is so urgent?”

“Did you see the news on the internet?”

“Uh...no. I don’t normally check the news.”

“Well, you might want to today. Here, let me send you this link, you’re going to want to see it,” he says, my phone buzzing in my hand.

Hitting the speaker button, I check his message and see the link to a news article. When I click on it, the first thing I see is a picture of me with Shane cuddling at the Bellagio. Next to it is another picture of me and him kissing. Under it, a headline reads: Shane Mitchell’s new girlfriend? Or is he just another football “player”?

I keep reading. It’s an article talking about how Shane is known as the best rookie tight end and that everyone has high expectations for him. My mind races back to last night. He said he worked with a football team, but he sure as hell didn’t tell me that he was a famous football player. In fact, I believe I asked him if he was a trainer and he said “Yeah, like that.”

Anger bubbles up in my gut and my hand starts to shake. What a fucking liar! I should’ve known that he was too good to be true.

Jermaine’s voice pulls me out of my anger spiral just enough for me to hear him say, “Are you dating the Shane Mitchell?”

“No. I went on one date with him. Last night. In fact, it was a blind date and I’m not going to see him again.”

“Why not?” he asks curiously.

“Because he’s a liar. I’ve got to go to work,” I say hanging up without any more fanfare.

“Samantha,” I yell out through the small house.

“What?” she says coming out of her room.

“Why didn’t you tell me that Shane from last night was a football player?” I ask her.

“I didn’t know for sure. I mean, Kade plays football and I assumed that he knew him from there, but I didn’t ask. Why?” she says unapologetically.

I push my phone into her face. “I’m on the internet.”

She grabs it and I see her eyes scanning the article. “It’ll be okay. Just talk with Shane.”

Shaking my head, I take my phone back from her and tuck it into the pocket of my sweatpants. “No. I’m not going out with him again.”

“Janae. You like him, you should at least give him a chance to explain.”

“He’s a liar and you know how I feel about liars. I asked him if he played football and he said he worked for the team.”

I turn to walk back to my room to get ready for work. Right before I close the door, I hear Samantha yell, “It will all workout, Jay. Trust me.”

Chapter twelve

Shane

Putting my gear away, I can't help but recall everything about last night. It was amazing and not just because we had sex. No, it was everything about her. I've never connected with anyone like I did with Janae. She was nothing like I expected. I mean, it started off a little rocky because she showed up late and honestly that irked me, but as soon as she sat down next to me in the booth, it all changed.

We are completely different. I'm an optimistic person and mostly an open book. But her? She was like a rose right before it blooms. Closed up tight and a little prickly, but the moment she begins to open up, you can see that she's going to be the most beautiful flower you've ever set eyes upon.

Look at this, I'm waxing poetry. No one has ever had me like this before and so quickly. I was with Shelby for a year before I even told her about how my dad could be, and I told Janae on our first date. The best part about it is that she listened, and seemed to care about what I had to say.

Most people only want to know about football when they're trying to get to know me. They ask questions from how I prepare for a game to actual plays that I might use. It's all ridiculous.

"Hey man, did you see this?" Kade says as he shoves his phone into my hand. Squinting, I read the headline and all the blood drains from my face. Shit, did Janae see this? The thoughts about not telling her right away that I was a football player

rushes through my mind, and from what I know about her, she's going to be pissed. Fuck.

I push Kade's arm out of my way, muttering, "Do you know if Janae saw this?"

"Yeah. Sam's the one who sent it to me," he says.

"Fuck."

"It's not a big deal. So someone took a few photos of you, just be careful next time," he says.

"That's not the problem," I say, tightening my towel around my waist.

"What's the problem?"

"I didn't tell her that I was a football player. Actually, I made it sound like I was a trainer," I tell him.

"Oh shit, that is bad," he says.

"Yep. Now let me go take a shower so I can figure out what to do to make Janae go on another date with me," I say as I leave him behind and head to the showers.

I take the fastest shower known to man, because the sooner I get out of here, the sooner I can fix the mess I've made. The need to make her understand why I didn't tell her consumes me, and I know I won't be able to rest until she's at least heard me out.

Pulling my shirt on, I'm almost home free when I hear my name being called. "Mitchell."

I look up and Coach Martin, the assistant coach for the football team, is looking at me knowingly. “Yes, Coach?”

“We need you to come in here for a moment. Coach Wilber wants a moment with you,” he says tilting his head, indicating I should follow him. A lump in my throat forms and I’m not sure what this could be about.

Putting the rest of my stuff away, I shove my wallet, phone, and keys into my pocket and quickly close up my locker. Then I make my way down the hallway toward the coaches’ offices. For some reason today, the hallway seems to have a darker feeling, and I swear I even hear doom music playing in the background.

When I reach the room, I walk in and my hands start sweating when I see both coaches, and the general manager sitting there with a stern look, whispering to each other. I just stand at the threshold, not sure what to say. But I don’t need to say anything, because Coach Wilber sees me and says, “Come on in, son. Have a seat.”

I take a first terrifying step into the room and silently take a seat on the couch. I try to rack my brain as to what could’ve happened to get called in like this. I mean, the season hasn’t even started yet.

Coach Wilber clears his throat and looks just as uncomfortable as I am. That can’t be good. “We called you in today because after the article we saw of you, we wanted to clear up some things,” he says.

“Okay,” I say warily.

“We pride ourselves on not having any of our players involved in any scandals, and though the article about you last night wasn’t a scandal, we want to make sure it stays that way,” the general manager says.

“I’m sorry. Did I give you an impression that I might cause scandals?”

“No. We just want to help you navigate this before it becomes too much,” Coach Wilber replies.

“Okay, because I can’t help what people write about me. But I can tell you that I’m not the type of person who goes out looking for anything. The girl I was with last night was a date. And I don’t think my dating life is really anyone’s business,” I explain to them hoping we can end this now.

“You’re right, it’s not. But we want to make sure that you don’t become a media circus. We are not here to scold you, we are here to help,” Coach Martin says.

“Okay, well honestly there is nothing to tell. Kade set me up on a blind date just to get me out of the house. It turned out to be a great date,” I tell them.

Coach Martin lets out a sigh then says, “Fuck, I should’ve known Kade had a hand in this. Listen, be Kade’s friend but he loves to show off for the media. We have to have these talks with him once a week.”

“Just be on your best behavior and come to us if you have any issues,” Coach Wilber says as he cringes. You can tell that he doesn’t want to have these conversations. I wonder if this is something he does because of the general manager.

“Will do,” I say standing up from the couch. “May I go?”

“Yes. If you make headlines again, expect this again,” Coach Wilber says. “It’s team policy to have a ‘powwow’ with every unsavory one.”

“Thank you, sir,” I say then leave the room, heading out to my truck in the parking lot.

I jump into my truck but before I put it in drive, I pull out my phone and send Janae a text message.

Me: I'm sorry about everything. Are we still on for dinner tomorrow? I can explain then.

I sit and wait for a few minutes, but she never reads it. Taking a deep breath, I just hope that she's at work and not ignoring me. With that, I put my truck in drive and head home, hoping tomorrow will be better.

Chapter thirteen

Janae

I walk into work pissed at finding out that Shane lied to me last night. Millie and Ed who are helping customers in the store, eye me as I walk to the back room. Throwing my bag under the table where we cut flowers, I slam myself down on the stool. I can't believe I let him fool me like that. What could be his motive not to tell me? Why would I care if he played football?

The door opens and I know it's Ed coming to check on me, but I ignore his presence. I'm not in the mood to deal with other people. Especially after fielding phone calls from everyone all morning. I looked like a complete fool too because I had no idea that Shane was a football player. And not just any football player either, the most sought-after tight end coming out of college this year.

Grabbing a pile of flowers that needed the stems trimmed, I start cutting them, trying to get my mind off of the whole ordeal. After a few trims, I hear Eddie say, "What did those flowers ever do to you?"

His words grab my attention and I look up at him, not understanding what he's trying to say. Ed must see the confusion on my face because he nods his head toward the flowers in my hand. "You're cutting them a little harshly. Did they yell at you or something?"

Oh, I get it, he's trying to make a joke. "Ha ha, Ed. Very funny. But I'm not in a laughing mood," I tell him.

“I can tell, but I’m serious, you’re cutting the ends too jagged,” he explains.

My eyes go to the ends of the flowers and I see what he’s saying, they’re all cut in different places, some aren’t even cut all the way through. I take a deep breath trying to release all my anger, because it’s not fair to these flowers for me to take it out on them.

“Sorry,” I mutter, feeling perfectly scolded even though Ed didn’t even raise his voice. Going back to the flowers that I’d almost mutilated, I begin calmly cutting each one making sure that each stem has a perfect cut. Ed sits down on the stool across from me, silently joining me.

After we’ve worked on a few of the flowers, I hear a throat being cleared behind me. When I look over my shoulder, I see that Millie has come into the room, standing in the doorway with a scowl on her face. I’m sure she’s come back here to yell at me about my behavior, but I don’t care, I just return to my work, needing to calm my mind.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her make her way to her husband and it seems they’re having one of their silent conversations. Then, I hear Ed ask, “Are you going to tell us what has you so upset?”

I stop cutting and look up but neither of them are looking at me. They’re both working on organizing the flowers and cutting the stems. Since they’re not focused on me, it gives me the courage to tell them, well, at least part of the story. “Sam set me up on a blind date last night.” Or maybe not.

“It was bad?” Millie asks while raising her eyebrows.

Shaking my head, I reply, “No. It was actually amazing.” But I don’t explain any further because honestly, I don’t know if I can stand any more humiliation today.

“Well then, what has you all in a tizzy?” Millie asks, placing her hand on her hip. That’s her sign that she means business. I take a deep breath, ready to uncover my embarrassment. “He’s a famous football player, but he didn’t tell me. Actually, he lied to me about it and I had to find out through an article that was written about us.”

“Oh,” they both say in unison.

“Yep. Oh.” Instead of continuing with any more thoughts, I go back to my work because I just don’t want to deal with my feelings right now.

“Men do stupid stuff, but what if he had a good reason?” Ed asks cautiously.

“There is no good reason to lie,” I snap.

Millie places her hand on top of mine, stopping me from using my scissors. “You’re right. There is no good reason to lie, but all I ask is that you keep your heart open for forgiveness. Love is forgiveness.”

I just nod, because all of snippy comments and words are stuck in my throat. It’s always been hard to keep my walls up around Mille and Ed. Just like with Shane. Nope, not thinking about him.

The next few hours go by and I barely think about Shane because I’m deep in making flower arrangements. Some are just bouquets for people to come and grab for any occasion, others are for weddings and funerals. The beautiful thing about flowers is that they make you feel good, or worthy, no matter the situation.

When the sun has gone down, Millie walks into the back room. “Okay, Janae, time to go home. You can’t hide forever.”

“I’m not hiding, just working,” I scoff. Putting my tools down, I grab my purse from

under the shelf, placing it on my shoulder. “But fine. I’ll be done.”

I pull out my phone to check my messages before heading to my car and the only one I see is Shane’s. I’m not ready to talk to him, and I will not be going on that date , I think as I move his message into the trash. Next, I go and block his number.

I just met him. There is no reason to explain my feelings to him. He had a chance and bombed it. I don’t need anyone anyways.

Chapter fourteen

Shane

It's been three harrowing days since I've seen or talked with Janae. I've tried texting her to see how she's doing, begging for another chance, but they never go through. I got the hint when I tried calling and the automated voice on the other end told me that my call couldn't go through.

She'd blocked me.

I need to figure out how I'm going to get her to go on a second date with me. Maybe I could bring her flowers and try to force her to talk to me? She likes flowers. No, she works with flowers. That's too pedestrian, I need to think bigger.

"Get your ass over here, Mitchell," the offensive coordinator yells, breaking me of my thoughts.

I push my ideas to the side and head over to the huddle. "It's about time," one of my teammates says to me.

"Sorry, guys," I say.

"Ok, men, time to get your head in the game. We have our first game in two weeks, and we need to be in top shape." Turning to me, he narrows his eyes at me. "That means you, Mitchell."

“Yes, sir,” I answer because the man is right; I need to focus on my game, then I’ll figure out how to get Janae back. This will be my first NFL game so I can’t choke. Because what if she’s watching?

Before I can let my brain go down the spiral of Janae, Coach is explaining our next drill. I line up on the line of scrimmage next to one of our offensive line men, Blake Scott, and get ready to run my route. I’ve been working on them for weeks now to prepare for the game. Since I’ve been in the clouds the last few days, it’s time to show them that I know my stuff.

“Ready. Hut. Hut. Hike,” the center calls and then the ball is snapped.

I slide past one of the defensive men and make it out to the sideline. Thankfully, the quarterback sees me and throws the ball. It comes right into my hands and I’m able to catch it. Doing as planned, I move and start to run toward the end zone, but Coach blows the whistle before I get too far.

The coach claps his hands looking at me and yells, “Now that’s what I’m talking about. Next is to put it in the game.”

For the next hour, we continue running different routes. I’ve been studying since I got here to show them that I know the plays. By the time we’re done, I’m exhausted. Making my way to the locker room, Kade and Blake jog up next to me, sandwiching me in between them.

“What’s been going on with you, Mitchell?” Blake asks me.

When I go to open my mouth, Kade beats me to it. “He’s pouting about a girl I set him up with.”

I try to respond but Blake jumps in first. “Oh, the girl from the article? She’s hot.”

My body tenses at the way he says “hot.” I’m about to tell him to go shove it when Kade keeps going, “Yep. He didn’t tell her he was a football player.”

Blake stops with those words, forcing us all to stop while he stares me down. “Why didn’t you tell her you’re a football player?”

This time Kade doesn’t interrupt. I guess it’s my turn to talk now. “I didn’t say I wasn’t a football player, I just didn’t confirm it either.”

“Why?” Blake asks again.

This time Kade doesn’t let me answer. “Because he’s stupid.”

Turning toward him, I narrow my eyes as I protest, “Hey.”

But Kade doesn’t back down, he crosses his arms over his chest and gives me a look that says “don’t even try to deny it.”

My shoulders slouch and I concede, “Okay, yes. It was stupid. But I’ve had people use me before, all because I’m a football player. When she didn’t seem to know who I was, I saw it as an opportunity for her to get to know me .”

Blake slaps his hand down on my shoulder. “That’s commendable but you should’ve known that she would find out.”

“I know. I just hoped it wouldn’t be so quick. Now she’s blocked me, but I’m going to figure out how to get her to go out with me again.”

Kade shoots his hands up in the air and shouts, “I know. I know.”

“You look like an idiot,” Blake tells him while grabbing his arms to pull them down.

“What do you know?” I ask him.

“You need a grand gesture,” he says like it’s an obvious answer, and that’s because it is.

“I know that. But what grand gesture?” I ask.

“Let’s go get some food after practice. I’ll text Sam. I have an idea, but we’ll need her help,” he says, and that’s exactly what we do.

I went to dinner with Kade and Blake. Sam met us there. Kade’s idea was a great one except that it meant I wouldn’t be able to talk to Janae for two weeks, the day of our first game. Doesn’t he realize how awful that is? I’m not sure I can do it. Which is why I’m now standing in front of her house, or at least I think it’s her house. This is the address she sent me before everything erupted. I was supposed to pick her up for what would be our second date two days ago.

Now I’m just going to actually do this. Maybe she’ll just let me explain and it won’t matter. But I don’t have any more time to contemplate because suddenly the front door opens and a raging Janae comes out. “What are you doing here, Shane?”

Every word that I wanted to say gets stuck in my throat as I take her in. Fuck, she’s even more gorgeous than the last time I saw her. She’s standing there in running shorts, a t-shirt, no makeup and her curls are wrapped up. I could stare at her forever.

She pulls me out of my trance when she snaps, “Are you not going to say anything?”

I take a few steps to eat up the distance between us, towering over her. “Janae. I’m sorry. I—”

But she cuts me off before I can keep going. “You’re sorry? Do you know how

foolish I looked? And you lied to me. Why did you lie?"

All of the answers are on the tip of my tongue, but they don't seem to want to come. Hoping that the words will flow, I wrap my hands around the back of her neck, pulling her closer to me, touching forehead to forehead.

"I've had a bad experience with women knowing I'm a football player," I say as if it explained everything, but I don't allow her to say anything else because I crash my lips to hers. And just like last time, everything around us fades away, leaving just us two.

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Chapter fifteen

Janae

The moment Shane's lips touched mine, everything I had come out here to tell him, every reason why we couldn't be together, vanished. He had mumbled something about another girl before kissing me, but honestly, I didn't have time to process it, and at this moment I could care less. That is something future Janae can deal with instead.

Pushing my hands into his short blonde hair, I grip it with all my might. When he grunts, I can't help but feel pleased that I'm causing him a bit of pain. Even though my brain can't seem to register the reasons I'm angry, my body still knows.

Beep...Beep.

The noise of a car alarm goes off, breaking the bubble we're in and I pull away from him.

"Why don't you come inside?" I tell him as I walk into my house, not pausing once until I'm in my room, hearing Shane close both doors. The need for him still consumes me and I decide that I'm not going to think about it for once. I'm just going to act. We can consider this closure or some shit like that.

Shane is looking at me as if he's trying to figure me out, but there is no need. This is all carnal. He continues to watch me as I grip the waistband of my running shorts and pull them down my legs. I step out of them, leaving me in just my sports bra and T-

shirt. Shane's pupils have dilated, and his cheeks have turned red. Looking down at his crotch, if I didn't know before, I know now that he's turned on.

Knowing that gives me the confidence to keep going, because tonight is going to be about me getting what I need and that's all. Next, I pull my shirt off and throw it to the ground. Shane still hasn't said a word, but his eyes track my every movement. Lastly, I pull my sports bra off, leaving me completely naked.

Using the last of my strength, I walk over to my bed and sit against the headboard, spreading my legs so that Shane can get an eyeful of my wet pussy. I watch him, but he still hasn't made a move. Honestly, I'd expected him to be naked already, but I've never done this before.

"Do you like what you see?" I purr at him, and I just hope that's how it comes across. If it wasn't for the fact that Shane is sporting a huge hard-on, I might be concerned that I wasn't affecting him, but I know I am. Besides, he's holding his body so tightly it's as if he's trying to keep himself together.

He clears his throat, then asks, "Are you sure you want this? You don't want to talk?"

I glide the tips of my fingers along the seam of my pussy gathering my wetness, then I dip my fingers into me. When I pull them out, I show them to Shane. "Does it look like I'm unsure?"

That does it. Shane snaps.

"Don't stop. I want you to get that pussy ready for me."

Dipping my fingers back into my pussy, I collect my come, using it to circle my clit. The whole time I keep eye contact with Shane as he quickly strips down to his naked self. Once again I'm amazed by how large his cock is, and I can feel a rush of

wetness remembering how it felt inside me.

Shane doesn't make me wait any longer. He dives onto the bed, gripping each of my thighs as he zeroes in on my pussy. He looks up at me with a devilish smile. "You know, I haven't tasted you yet. I can't walk away not knowing."

Before I can even gather any words, he licks me clean from my seam to my clit. The warmth of his tongue feels glorious, and I thrust my pussy into his face. Shane takes it as the invitation it is, gripping my ass he continues his ministrations with his tongue.

"Fuck yes," I moan when his mouth hits my clit.

At that moment, he pulls my clit in between his lips and sucks. The sensation sends me to new heights and I come so hard I swear I see stars. "I'm coming," I groan.

"Good girl," Shane praises me and I expect him to stop and move on. But I should've known better. He does everything differently than I'm used to.

This time though, Shane makes sure to keep eye contact with me as he slowly licks me, gathering my wetness on his tongue. After a few swipes, he looks up at me and makes a show of swallowing every ounce of my cum, then he licks his lips. "Mmm...you taste just like birthday cake. My favorite."

Fuck. My only response is to spread my legs even further. He smiles when he sees the action. Sitting up on his knees, he crawls between my legs, rubbing his cock against me.

"Put it inside me," I beg.

"Don't worry, baby girl, I got you," he says as he thrusts into me.

My pussy stretches around him and I can't help but enjoy the sting. This man is so big, I wonder if I'll ever get used to it. I shake those thoughts from my head, because that's not what this is about. No, this will be the last time we have sex. This is closure, I remind myself.

Shane kisses me as he thrusts deep into me. I can feel every one of his emotions but I choose not to worry about that. He's the one that lied to me, I'm just enjoying the moment.

"Fuck, baby girl, you feel so good," he says breathlessly.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I begin to meet him with every thrust, concentrating on what we're doing instead of all the emotions that swim around us. He slips his hand between us and grazes my clit a few times, and that's all it takes for my pussy to clench around his cock.

"Ugghh..." I moan as I come around him.

Not long after I fall over the edge, he joins me grunting his release. Rolling off of me, I take a deep breath trying to revel in the afterglow, but I'm not able to enjoy it because all of my feelings of anger come back full force.

Sitting up from my bed, I start to gather all of Shane's clothes off the floor. His cum is dripping down my legs, but I don't care. This opened me up to him more than I would have liked. I need him gone.

"You need to go," I say firmly, shoving his clothes into his hands.

"I thought we could talk, Janae." I shiver at my name on his lips, but I hold strong.

"No. You lied to me. This was just closure sex," I tell him.

Shane begins to get dressed, but looks up at me with a look of sadness. “Please, let me explain.”

“I can’t. I’ve been lied to before and I won’t allow it.” I hold firm.

Shane just nods and finishes getting dressed. As he goes to leave, he looks back over at me and mutters before closing the door, “I’m sorry, Janae.”

Chapter sixteen

Shane

Climbing into my truck, I feel like a dog who got kicked. The sex between us was just as explosive as the last time. I knew there was chemistry. But the way she looked at me after, like I was scum...I can't deal with that.

My head drops against the steering wheel and I know I should've listened to Kade. Right then, my phone buzzes in my cup holder, and I can't help but feel a glimmer of hope that it might be Janae. Every bit of hope is dashed when I see Kade's number on my screen. I click on the message.

Kade: You're a dumbass. I told you to stay away from her.

How did he even know I was here? Then I remember that Janae lives with Sam. She must've ratted me out. Man, I'm fucking everything up these days, because he's right. I'm an idiot and I should've stayed away. If not for any other reason, then that I feel worse now than I did before.

Me: I needed to see her. But I messed up, man.

I throw my phone back down into the cupholder and start up my truck. Before I can put it in drive, another message from Kade comes through.

Kade: Don't worry, even though you were stupid, I think we can still pull this off.

I don't answer him. All I can do is hope that he's right.

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Chapter seventeen

Janae

Two weeks have gone by since the last time I saw Shane, and my life is now just as mundane as it was before. All I do is go to work, go back home and continue my online course for the flower shop. Sometimes I allow myself to get lost in a book, but even my book boyfriends don't compare to Shane.

He was perfect. Except that he lied to you about his job. I still wonder why he lied, because honestly, I can't wrap my head around it. But it doesn't matter. It's time to move on.

I pour myself a cup of coffee when Sam walks into the kitchen and singsongs, "Good morning."

"Good morning," I mumble to her as she stops at the coffee pot next to me.

She stops in her tracks and looks me dead in the eye before saying, "Nope. We're not doing this anymore. You are coming with me today."

My brows come together in confusion as Sam begins pouring herself a cup of coffee. We sit in silence but curiosity gets the best of me, so I ask, "Where are we going?"

She sips her coffee. "To Kade's first game," she says nonchalantly.

"Uh, what?" I screech.

“To his first football game. You should get dressed soon so we’re not late,” she says as she looks me up and down. That’s when I realize that she’s wearing a Vegas Vipers shirt. Is that the name of their football team? Nope, don’t care.

“No. I’m going to stay home. I don’t like football,” I tell her.

“Nope, you’re coming. Jermaine and Jasmine are already on their way,” she says.

“You brought my brother and sister into this?” I ask.

“Yep, it’s time to pull out the big guns. Now, go get dressed,” she says.

Knowing that none of them will let me get out of this, I turn away and slink back to my room to get ready. What does someone even wear to a football game?

Entering my room, I don’t have to wonder long because there is a Vegas Vipers shirt sitting on my bed. My guess is that Sam put it there. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, hoping I’ll be able to get through today.

How did I end up here? I’ve asked myself this a million times in the last hour that we’ve been here. I’m sitting in the front row on the fifty-yard line with a Las Vegas Viper’s shirt on, and letting Jasmine put a stupid tattoo of a glittery silver number twenty-three on my cheek. I don’t even know why that number. I assume it’s some football thing. At the time, it seemed like a good way to shut her up, but now I’m regretting it.

The crowd cheers loudly and everyone around me stands up in their seats, yelling and clapping. My eyes go to the jumbotron and I see that Shane made another touchdown, or at least that’s what I think it’s called. When I told him I didn’t know anything about sports, I meant it. I’ve never been interested in learning about any sport.

After a few minutes, the cheers calm down and most people, including my brother, return to sitting in their seats.

The moment his butt touches the seat, I turn toward him and ask, “Is this almost over?”

“Stop being a sour puss. Yes, it’s almost over,” he says, returning his gaze back to the game.

Jasmine pulls my attention to her when she screams, “Isn’t this fun? I can’t believe Sam is dating a professional football player.”

“Whoa. Whoa. No one said anything about dating,” Sam yells from next to her.

Jasmine rolls her eyes at Sam’s words. “Whatever. Can you introduce me to one of his friends?”

“Sure. I’ll ask Kade,” she says, but the crowd begins cheering again, interrupting their conversation.

I watch in amazement as they both get wrapped up in the game. My eyes go to the field, but I try to avoid looking at Shane. Which is easier said than done, especially when he’s the one who is making all the plays.

“Whoa. Shane Mitchell is on fire . Welcome to the NFL,” the announcers say. A wave of sadness and pride washes over me. My heart breaks at the idea of not being next to him as he accomplishes everything he’s set out to do.

Jermaine comes over to me and says, “I told you the game was almost over.”

His words grab my attention and I look over at the field. The players are dispersed

around the field, some congratulating each other, others talking with the media. Shrugging my shoulders, I guessed he was right. It looks like the game is over.

“Should we go then?” I ask him as I look around the stadium and see people leaving.

“Sam says we need to wait for Kade,” he says, looking out at the field.

“Okay,” I say, searching among the sea of people.

“Are you looking for him?” my sister asks me, pulling my attention to her.

“No,” I deny immediately.

“Are you sure?” she says, lifting one of her brows up at me.

“You might want to look over there,” my brother chimes in, pointing me in the direction of three players holding up signs.

The first one reads my name. Wait. I turn back toward my brother and ask, “What’s going on?”

“Keep reading, Janae,” he tells me.

Returning to the signs, I read them:

Janae. I’m. Sorry.

Looking closer, I realize that Kade, Shane and some other guy I don’t know are holding those signs. All three of them are still in their uniforms and at that moment, I realize why Sam put the number twenty-three on my cheek. What a sly friend I have. I take a deep breath at seeing him again. I’ve been even more miserable since I told

him to leave me alone. Every day I hoped that he would text me but disappointment took over me every night when he didn't. What did I expect, I told him to leave.

"Are you going to talk to him?" Sam asks me with a knowing smile.

I stand up from my seat. "Yeah. I'm going to talk with him."

Making my way down the stadium stairs, I get to the field when the security guard looks over his shoulder at Shane who nods to let me on. I watch Shane drop the sign he is holding as I slowly walk over to where he's standing. Dread wells up in my stomach the whole time I'm walking toward him, not knowing what to expect. Even though I missed him, I'm also still mad that he lied to me. It's all so confusing.

He meets me halfway across the field, stopping right in front of me. I'm waiting for what he has to say, feeling everyone's eyes on me. Shane grips my waist, pulling me into him as he rests his forehead on mine. I love it when he holds me like this.

"I want to keep this part private. Janae, I'm so sorry I didn't tell you about being a football player. I've had people use me, especially girls, just for being a football player. And when you didn't know who I was, I thought maybe this was my moment to get you to like me for me, and not my job. Seriously, Janae, I'm sorry," he whispers.

I think about his words, and they melt my heart. The idea that someone would use him and not just love him for him guts me. He's perfect. Goofy. Loyal. Understanding. Gorgeous.

I understand where he's coming from, leaving me to whisper back, "I forgive you, Shane. But please don't lie to me again. I have issues with that."

"Never again," he vows.

Taking a step back, he gives me his signature devilish smile and I can feel my body start to tingle, and I know he's about to do something else.

“Janae. I’ve been enamored by you since the moment you rushed into the bar for our blind date. Will you be my girlfriend and go on another second date?” he yells, loudly pulling everyone’s attention.

I let out a huge laugh as I bring my hands to my face. I don’t answer right away, trying to make him sweat a bit, but it backfires because the people around us start chanting, “Say Yes.”

Another laugh bursts from me and I don’t have words to speak. Smiling at the man of my dreams, I nod my head. The crowd erupts into cheers. Shane opens his arms, and I know exactly what he wants. I run and jump into his arms, crashing my lips to his.

He pulls away briefly smiling. “Baby girl, we might’ve won the game, but this is the best prize.”

“Just take me home,” I say before kissing him once again as everyone around us fades away.

I could do this forever.

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One year Later

“I’m so nervous,” she says as her leg shakes next to me.

Placing my hand on her leg to help calm her, I say, “Why are you so nervous? You’ve met my parents before.”

“Yes, but I’ve never been to your childhood home or met your brothers, and you said they didn’t like your last girlfriend,” she explains.

“That’s true. But it will be fine, my brothers will like you. The fact that you care is different,” I tell her as I pull into the driveway. “Welcome to the Mitchell Family Farm.” I give her a wink. “Come on, let’s go inside so you can meet everyone, then I’ll take you on our Valentine’s date.”

Opening the car doors, we both get out. As Janae comes around the front of the car, she says, “You’re not going to tell me where we are going?”

“Nope. It’s a surprise.”

“You know I don’t like surprises,” she groans.

“I do. So I’ll give you a hint...it’s one of my favorite places in town,” I tell her.

“That’s not fair. I’ve never been to Rose Valley,” she whines but intertwines her fingers in mine as we make our way to the front door.

I open it, not even knocking. My brother, Taylor, knocks and has done so since my dad and him got into it when he moved out, but not me. My brothers claim that it's because I'm Dad's favorite, but it doesn't feel like that.

We step into the house and my mother comes around the corner right away, greeting us. "Shane. Janae. Welcome! Happy Valentine's Day."

"Happy Valentine's Day, Mary," Janae says back as she steps into my mother's arms. They've met a few times since I moved to Las Vegas, and they hit it off right away. Which I knew they would. They're very similar.

"Did you hear?" my mother's question brings me back to the conversation.

"I don't think so. What?" I ask.

"Taylor and your dad are going to build a house at the back of the property for him and Mya. That way they're closer to the farm for him. You know he took over full time now," she says proudly.

"Actually, I did know that. I talked with Taylor about it the other day," I tell her. That's another thing Janae has done for me. With her encouragement, I started calling my brothers more often and now we're closer than ever. Another reason I know they're going to love her.

"Come on, everyone is in here," my mother says as we move into the kitchen area. Looking around, it looks like we're the last to arrive. My brother Taylor and his wife are sitting at the table. He's holding his one year old son, Sebastian.

Janae focuses on them and instantly makes her way over. She loves to be in control and since she's so nervous, that's what she's doing. Placing her hand out, she introduces herself, "Hi. I'm Janae."

Mya is the first one to grab her hand and shakes it, smiling at her. "I'm Mya. This is my husband, Taylor."

"Nice to meet you," he rumbles out.

Janae then squats and tickles my nephew on his chest. "And who is this cutie?"

"This is Sebastian," Taylor says proudly.

"Well, aren't you so handsome. You must take after your mommy," she says, pulling a laugh from everyone in the room.

Taylor looks at me smiling. "I like her. Good job, Shane."

And even though I didn't need them, those words make me puff out my chest with pride. I walk up next to Janae and wrap my arms around her shoulders, replying, "She's the best."

"Sorry to interrupt the party," my brother, Cliff, says as he places glasses of champagne down on the table. "But before we get carried away, I want to make a few introductions."

My gaze goes to behind where he is standing and there are two people standing in his shadow. The woman looks vaguely familiar, but I can't quite put my finger on it. Cliff then calls our attention to him again, pointing to the man who looks to be about Taylor's age. "This is Hunter. We met when he came to Rose Valley looking at an athlete. He's the one who helped me get a job at Elevate Sports Agency."

Everyone cheers and smiles, congratulating him. Cliff puts his hand up and we all fall silent. Turning toward the young lady who has now moved to sit next to Mya. "And this is Jade, she's Mya's sister." It dawns on me as to why she looked so familiar. I

can see the resemblance now. “Okay, grab your glasses.” We all do as instructed. “Jade was just drafted to the Los Angeles Stars, and she chose me to represent her as her manager.”

With his words, all hell breaks loose. Placing my glass down on the table, I engulf him in a hug. “Congrats, man. If I’d have known, you could’ve represented me.”

He slaps me on the back. “I know, man, but I wanted my first client to be someone other than my brother.”

“I get it. But the moment my contract expires, I’ll be contacting you,” I tell him.

Janae slides up next to me with her glass hiding her mouth. Leaning in, she whispers, “Who are the Los Angeles Stars?”

A laugh bursts from me, but Janae just shrugs her shoulders. “What?”

“You’re cute,” I say as I bop her nose.

“I told you I don’t know any sports,” she says.

“It doesn’t matter. But the Los Angeles Stars is a women’s basketball team.”

“Wow, that is amazing,” she says, her eyes going wide before walking off to talk with Jade.

We stay at my family’s house for about an hour, talking about Cliff and his new job. When I notice the sun start to set, I grab Janae and whisper, “Hey, let me show you my favorite place.”

We get in the car and start driving toward town. She looks out of the window, taking

it all in. “I love your town. It’s got perfect small-town vibes.”

“That’s because it is a small town,” I tell her as we pull into the high school parking lot.

Janae looks around, then she pulls her eyebrows together, asking, “Your favorite place is your high school?”

“No. Come on, I’ll show you,” I say as we get out of the car. Taking her hand, I walk her over to the bleachers of the football stadium. “ This is my favorite place,” I tell her as we sit down in the front row.

“This is where I got away from all the bickering between my older brother and Dad. Or the perfectionism everyone expected from me.” Pointing to the field, I continue, “Out there is the only place I could be free.”

She turns and wraps her arms around my neck. “I’m glad that you had football for all of that.”

I nod. Then I decide it's time to tell her. She has broken down enough walls for me and is ready. Sliding my hand into her hair, holding her possessively at the base of her neck, I say, “Janae Levine. I love you. The moment I saw you, I knew.”

Her eyes go hooded, and they move to my lips as she whispers back, “I love you, too, Shane Mitchell. I’ve just been too scared to say it.”

With her confession, I crash my lips to hers and as always, we enter our own world where no one else exists, just us two. Pulling back, I look deep in her eyes. “This used to be my favorite place, but now it’s anywhere you’re at.”

“You are my home,” she whispers.

And she's right. No matter where we go, as long as we are together, we will be exactly where we need to be.

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Cliff

“Understood sir,” I reply, but apparently that doesn’t get the ole’ kook to stop talking. He’s been saying the same thing repeatedly. I get it. Do we really need to hash everything out this many times?

“Even her teammates say she can be frigid. That she doesn’t socialize with them or even try.” He keeps going. “Even fans are talking about how cold she is when they approach her outside of the arena. They’re making videos on social media. Social Media Cliff!”

“I hear you Mr. Wilkes. I promise I’ll talk with her,” I repeat once again but it takes everything in me to not lash out, I can feel him triggering my protective instincts for Jade.

“You do that, son. I want to see improvement over this upcoming season, or I’ll be forced to trade her no matter how good she is on the court.” Leaving me with those last words, he hangs up.

With my phone in one hand, I softly bang my head against the desk, hoping it will help a plan magically come to me. Dealing with managers and owners having hissy fits because they feel the players aren’t acting exactly how they want them to be is not why I left the family farm, my small town, behind to become a sports agent.

I wanted to help athletes accomplish their goals, especially those who have a harder time in the industry, like woman, but unfortunately, it’s part of the job. An important part of being a manager for women, because in this world we don’t see them as

capable. I roll my eyes at the thought because every woman I know is stronger than most men.

Woman sports are less likely to make money, just because the audience doesn't gravitate toward them, and that's because we don't market them the same as men's sports. Anyway, I digress, but I could go on forever on this subject.

My stomach rolls at the thought of having to talk with Jade about all of this. She's a talented basketball player and despite what the owner feels about her, she is nothing like he described. She's strong, independent and knows what she wants, she can be hard to get to know sometimes which makes others uncomfortable around her. They're a winning team so it's obviously not an issue.

I hear the door to my office open, but I don't look up to see who it is, needing time to figure it all out. "Cliff, why are you hitting your head on the desk?" Hunter, my boss and friend, asks me with a cautious tone.

I take a deep breath as I think about how I would still be stuck in Rose Valley if it wasn't for Hunter.

I owe so much to him. When he came into our small town three years ago, to check out one of the local kids, I sat down next to him, both of us feeling sorry for ourselves, and he somehow got me to spill my guts. "Growing up I always thought I would do something in sports."

"Really what changed?" he asks me with an eyebrow raised.

Shrugging my shoulders, I mutter, "Life."

"Yeah, it has a way of doing that," he said.

The next day he'd tracked me down at the local hardware store. "I convinced my

company to give you a chance as a junior manager under me, but the catch is you have to bring a client with you.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said returning back to my job.

Later that night when my sister-in-law, Mya, and Taylor came over for dinner, the subject of how rumors around town came up. “Cliff, I heard that you got offered a job today,” Mya said holding her stomach.

“How did you hear about that?” I ask narrowing my eyes at her because I haven’t told anyone about it.

She waves me off. “Sheila overheard you and some guy talking. You know what living in a small town is like.” Pulling a chuckle from my older brother Taylor.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. I have to bring a client with me and I’m not asking Shane.”

“What about Jade?” Mya asks.

“What about her?”

“She’s going to be one of the top recruits this year for the WNBA,” she casually commented.

I don’t respond because I’m still over here trying to pick up my jaw after it dropped because, of course, I knew her sister was good at basketball from what she has said, but I didn’t realize that she was that good.

Later that night Mya called her, and Jade was out on the next plane to talk with me. The moment I saw her I thought she was the most gorgeous woman I’d ever seen. The more time we spent together I began to fall in love, knowing nothing could come of it. She needed her career. I needed mine. Doing the right thing, I bit the bullet and

became friends with her instead.

I bang my head once again, then sitting up, I groan, “Mr. Wilkes just called me and told me that if I don’t get Mya to appear more approach able and less, in his words, ‘frigid,’ then they’re going to trade her.”

“That’s it?” he asks as he sits down in the chair across from my desk.

“That’s it?” I repeat, narrowing my eyes at him. “Do you know how Mya is going to take this? Not only that, but I also can’t think of any solution to help her.”

We are both silent for a moment as we contemplate a plan, or at least that’s what I’m trying to do. I sure hope that’s what Hunter is doing, too. Thankfully, I’m right, because his eyes light up a moment later. Yes, he’s got an idea. I sit up straight in my chair, ready to hear what he has to say.

“I know. You just need her to date someone,” he says casually, like it’s that easy.

“Date someone? How is that going to help?” I ask him.

“Statistics say that woman who are in power and are dating someone else appear softer and more approachable. I mean, its bullshit, but this is all about optics, right?” he asks as he shrugs his shoulders.

“Right,” I say wearily. How would that work or better question how do I get Jade to agree to this?

“Cliff, all you have to do is make it appear that she’s dating someone. Just a few dinners here and there, maybe a few events together. Have them show up to a few of her games. Maybe later they can break up. No big deal. This is done all the time.”

I roll my eyes at him. No big deal, yeah right.

“Okay, how will that work?” I ask entertaining him and his idea.

“That’s for you to figure out. Do you know anyone who would do this?” he asks standing up and buttoning his jacket.

I try not to examine too closely as to why the suggestion of someone else being with Jade makes my blood boil, even if it’s fake. It’s probably a moot point because there is no way she’s going to agree to this ridiculous idea. Besides, it will have to be someone else. Maybe I can find another celebrity who needs to “fake date” someone. All I know is it can’t be me. It could ruin everything for her.

“I don’t know,” I breathe out. “I’m not sure I could even get her to do it.”

“Well, it sounds like you have your work cut out for you.”

“Yeah. Get out of here, I have work to do.”

“Will do. Also, I need you to check out the email I sent you. It’s about our next client,” he says rubbing his hands together.

I just nod as he walks out of my office. Taking a deep breath, I take my chances and call Jade, hoping she won’t have my balls for this.