



# Tumbling the Cornerback (Austin Troopers)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Lucas:

2-4-6-8, Who Thinks Cooper Howards great?

Everyone but me!

Ive been busting my backside for three years as one of the handful of male cheerleaders in the league and it takes Cooper Coppertop Howard five minutes to knock me back down to the status of laughing stock. All of my hard work for the cheer squads fundraiser up in literal smoke thanks to his size twenty feet and lack of spatial awareness.

Youd think the brand-new cornerback the team shelled out an insane amount of money for would be able to navigate tight turns better but the pile of charred pom poms and Austin Troopers mascot plushies begs to differ.

When Cooper tries to make it up to me, I do the only thing I can: Tell him where to stuff it.

But hes determined. And sincere. And okay, hes really hot and hes really winning me over.

Maybe accepting his apology wouldnt be so bad? Not if it means repairing my image and comes with a side of

hot, sweaty football player in my bedroom

This is part of the Austin Troopers shared world and can be read as a standalone. It features opposites attract, the grumpy one and the sunshiney one, a smidge of hurt/comfort, and a happily ever after.

**Total Pages (Source):** 19

## CHAPTER 1

### LUCAS

“Breathe, baby. It’s all going to be amazing!”

I nodded jerkily, staring at the parking lot we’d turned into a fundraiser. “But it’s eight a.m. and hot as balls,” I whispered. “What if no one shows up?”

Tori, one of the flyers on the cheer squad and a perpetual ray of sunshine, slapped the top of one of the industrial fans, almost as big as us. “That’s what these suckers are for. Sure, we may accidentally blow a few kids to New Mexico, but it’ll be an adventure!”

Marisol snorted, which started me off, and soon all three of us were helplessly giggling, leaning against the huge round fan propped in the pavilion’s opening. Several of the enormous plastic-and-canvas tents were set up through the old Bluebonnet Save Mart parking lot. It had once been a huge discount department store but shuttered during the whole Enron collapse in the Nineties, leaving an empty building that sometimes got thrown into consideration for a convention center or office spaces but mostly just sat there being what folks called an attractive nuisance .

We’d had to come out a few days before the Queering Sports fundraiser to help scrub some very specific and elaborate graffiti off the side of the building.

Grinning, Marisol nudged me with her pointy-ass elbow. “This is gonna be awesome, Lucas. Seriously. Cass is practically vibrating with joy over this whole thing. You did

good, kid.”

I gasped in mock-outrage. “ Kid? Excuse me, miss first year college student! I’m twentymumble years old!”

Tori rolled her eyes. “Oh yeah, such an old man. You’re barely able to drink legally, Gramps.”

“Hold on, Tori, I got something for you here.” I shoved my hand in my shorts pocket and brought it back up with my middle finger extended.

The women burst into laughter, making me grin as we fell to teasing and bothering each other. Putting this event together had been the work of months, fighting hard to find an event space that would let us hold it once they found out what charity we were supporting, then finagling for accessibility and comfort since it was not only going to be in an old asphalt parking lot, sketchy at best when it came to safety, but also in the middle of June in Texas.

Don’t believe what those travel sites show you with the sparkling rivers and lush green grass and shady old oak trees. I mean, yeah, the Hill Country has that, but for the most part it’s just fucking hot . And bright .

It was barely nine a.m., and we were already glistening as my abuelita liked to say. Us pretty people don’t sweat, carino. We glisten !

They were my ride or dies, the four of us having been fast friends from pretty much the moment we each joined the squad and, despite the fact we weren’t even out of our early twenties, we were the longest-serving members, and that gave us an extra layer to our little bubble of closeness. But our time was running short—I’d been there nearly four years now, Tori and Liz for two, Marisol for three. Four was the average lifespan of a pro cheer career. Marisol had her paralegal job, Liz was finishing her

education degree, and Tori was in school to be a physician's assistant. I was the only one without somewhere to jump.

When Cass, the squad's PR lead, ambled over, she found us clustered around one of the industrial fans, soaking up the breeze while we still could. "Y'all ready?" she sing-songed, ever cheerful even while being the most hard-ass PR person you could imagine. "The gates open in less than an hour!"

I peeled away from the fan reluctantly, nodding. "All of the tents are prepared, volunteers have been prepped, the water dispensers are full, and the ice machine we rented is working and full of ice. The swag bags," I pointed to the long table at the back of the tent, "are all packed and ready. The?—"

She laid her hand on my shoulder, giving it a small squeeze before discreetly wiping her hand on her denim shorts. I was sweaty—did I mention that already? "A simple yes works just fine," she chuckled. "The players are already here and will be mingling with the crowd off and on throughout the day. Be nice," she added, glancing at me sharply.

I held up my hands, defensive. "I'm a constant freaking delight!"

Liz, ambling up from organizing the bags so the kids could find their own names easier, barked a laugh. "Don't lie, Lucas. You're setting a bad example for the newbies."

Tori nodded. "Yeah, you gotta make sure to set a good example, dumbass."

Cass rolled her eyes. "Classy. All of you. Just absolutely classy." She grinned at our giggling, then motioned for me to follow her towards the front of the tent. Tori and Liz gave me that raised eyebrow you good? look. I nodded, even though I felt like I was being hauled in front of the principal.

“Don’t look so scared,” Cass laughed. “I just wanted to tell you how proud I am of the job you did here. I know, I know—the whole squad worked together with the PR team, and the Queering Sports group is fantastic, but you pushed for the squad to take on Queering Sports as y’all’s charity focus. And you busted your ass to make this come together when everything got...” Her smile fell. “Well. There were some huge chuckholes in your path, that’s for sure. But you worked hard, Lucas, and did an amazing job. All of the squad did. But,” she leaned in and, in a conspiratorial whisper, added, “you pulled this whole thing over the finish line.”

My face warmed and I knew I was blushing. And, not gonna lie, I did a little happy wriggle at her praise. I had worked hard; I had been super aggressive and busted my ass. I’d been the loudest voice yapping for this to happen. “Thank you,” I sighed. “It’s obviously something near and dear to my heart and, well, I know the kids in QS need all the support they can get.”

I’d been a kid like that once, without an awesome group like Queering Sports behind me. Participating in sports in a safe, fair environment that was supportive as well and allowed me to express myself had been an uphill battle.

“Well, that brings me to the next point—the players.”

My smile fell.

“Look, I don’t know the whole story about why you’re such a prickly pear with the players, but you gotta at least pretend to like them today, alright?”

At her stern, no-nonsense tone, I nodded. “I know. I’ll keep the fangs retracted. Who’s it going to be today anyway? Yowie? Matty?” Those guys were alright. We weren’t besties or really even acquaintances, but they didn’t act like dicks when we ran into one another at events and had never said anything shitty about the squad.

She shook her head. “He’s got a prior commitment. But Wyatt and Ryeland are coming as is the newest member—Cooper Howard.”

The name took a second to click. And when it did, my heart did a funny little skip-flip-flop maneuver that made me wonder if I needed more salt in my diet. Because surely it had to be some electrolyte issue and not how I thought Cooper Howard was fucking adorable in that giant overgrown puppy sort of way.

Well. Maybe not a puppy. More like... giant sexy man with the prettiest eyes and a smile making this dimple in his cheek pop and hands that... Well. Yeah.

Definitely a salt issue. I sure was fucking thirsty.

I forced a smile. “Awesome. Awesome, awesome, awesome...”

“Mmmhmm.” She raised one finely penciled grandma brow at me. “I’m sure.” The walkie talkie on her hip buzzed, and she sighed. “We’ve got the new intern with us today. Lydia? Linda? The comms major from UT. She’s even less into football than you are, so this has been... a treat. A real treat.”

I smiled again, a tiny and almost real one. “This is gonna be great. I’ll behave, the kids are gonna have a blast, and we’ll be out of here by dark-thirty so the property management doesn’t flip out about us running over time.”

Spoiler alert: I was wrong. Like... super fucking uber wrong.

And it wasn’t my fault! I behaved!

The first problem struck around eleven a.m. The initial wave of kids and their adults spilled into the tents set up with sports-related games and activities, including a huge pavilion where the players ran kid-ified versions of drills with prizes at the end. The

kids were beyond pumped, shouting encouragement at each other, showing off for the players and each other. Even the ones who lost were excited to have played.

The problem was... the parents.

Two of the dads circled each other for a hot minute, glaring when the other's kid succeeded in one of the drills, gloating when theirs won. A couple volunteers subtly interjected themselves between the dads while their kiddos were playing one of the relay courses. When nothing happened after several minutes, I breathed a sigh of relief and turned back to Tori, Liz, and Marisol to finish preparing our first demo of the day. The entire squad couldn't be there—we all had day jobs, after all, and not everyone could take a Saturday off.

We'd just finished our safety check when all hell broke loose.

"I said fuck off!"

"Sir." One of the volunteers bumbled like a bee around the two silverbacks—er, dads—squaring up in front of the Agility Skills tent. "Sir, there's children here! Why don't y'all go into the cooldown tent and?"

"And nothin'," the other dad shouted. "You need to get the fuck outta my face!"

Tori made a sad, scared, squeaky noise beside me. Liz patting my arm, we all stared, frozen. "I'll call security," she whispered.

"Yeah, good idea."

More parents came over to see what the shouting was about, and quite a few of the older kids and not a few volunteers. Cass and one of the QS reps made a beeline from the PR tent, but I saw what was about to happen. Wyatt and Ryeland were moving in

from the autograph tent, but I was closer. Sure, the guys were easily almost a foot taller than me (okay, maybe not that much but still!) and way bigger, but I had the power of scrappiness and a loud voice on my side.

I bolted for the shouting pair. “Hey!” Marisol wailed my name as I ran but I didn’t look back. “Hey, you two! Cut it out!”

“Oh, fuck off,” one of the dads growled—the one I mentally called Walrus due to his High School Coach Special on his upper lip. He didn’t look away from Questionable Footwear—seriously, wearing flipflops on hot asphalt in midsummer in Texas? That is not a good plan.

Skidding to a halt next to them, I shoved myself in between their posturing. “Either shut up or get out! This is a fun event for kids, not for two adults, two parents, to try and have a—” I paused, glanced at the wide eyes staring back at us— “a you know what measuring contest!”

“No, what?”

That had to be one of the teens.

“This asshole needs to get out of my face! My kid’s just fine and doesn’t need his help!” Walrus shouted.

“I just suggested they try out for baseball,” Questionable Football retorted. “It’s not the end of the world!”

“Fuck you! My kid’s a future wide receiver!”

“But I don’t even like football!”



I whipped my head around to face a distraught kid with wide, wet eyes and a face gone an unhealthy shade of red. “Hey, my name’s Lucas.”

“Benny,” they muttered, ducking their head.

“Benny, you want to go grab a cold drink with Tori?” I pointed to my squadmate, jogging up. “We’ve got the stash of the good stuff over in the cheer tent,” I added with a cheesy wink. “Fruit punch with no nutritional value whatsoever.” It had the hoped-for effect—Benny, Liz, and a few of the other kids trailed towards the cheer tent while I turned back towards the problem people. “ Seriously ?” I hissed. “Seriously?”

“He had no right,” began Walrus.

“Hey. Maybe you two need to take a walk.”

The low rumble of a voice sent a shiver straight down my spine. I didn’t have to turn to know who’d come up behind me.

The two dads turned as one and stared. In just a few breaths, their rancor fell away, replaced with childlike adoration. “Cooper Howard,” Questionable Footwear breathed. “I’m a huge fan.”

“Me too,” Walrus interjected, glaring at Footwear before turning a wide, hopeful smile towards the gentle giant behind me. “Huge.”

Cooper took a step closer. I could feel his body heat even though we weren’t touching. It should’ve seemed gross on such a hot day, but I wanted to sigh and slump against him, a small swoon to make him catch me.

Oh my god, Lucas, stop watching those period dramas with Abu! “I’ve got this,” I

growled under my breath.

“Hey, man,” Ryeland said, all jocularly and big smiles as he crowded in next to Cooper. “What’s up?”

Wyatt joined his teammates, and I was surrounded by a wall of giant men. Which, on any other day, would’ve been a dream come true, but today of all days?

Not so much.

Cooper pressed forward, slipping past me. He shot me a friendly grin, meant to tell me he was helping out and to let him handle things.

I mean, maybe I was reading too much into it, but I knew that look. I’d seen it so many times over the years—someone sees the short guy, the femme guy, into cheer and wearing eyeliner, prime bully bait, and they think, well, obviously, he can’t handle this on his own. Let me step up for that poor weak guy.

Fuck that.

“Cooper, I appreciate your assistance, but?—”

“It’s no trouble, buddy,” he said. Then he ruffled my hair.

Oh. My. God.

A few of the parents laughed.

I seethed.

Cooper dropped his hand and shoved it in his shorts pocket. He also had the good

sense to avert his eyes on the off chance I suddenly manifested laser powers and burned them out of his skull.

The players and the dads had fallen into a discussion about the team, youth sports, and the dads' college bowl games.

Liesel was shooting me annoyed, do something looks.

The guys were drawing a crowd, parents and kids abandoning the tents to drift over and rubberneck. The small handful of media closing in like sharks in chummed water.

The day was spinning out of control. Posts about how the event sucked danced before my eyes. The social media posts about how the event turned into a brawl, about how the queer sports group couldn't even have one day without drama. My heart jackrabbited against my ribs.

Drawing myself up to my full height, I planted my hands on my hips. In my best cheer captain shout, I called out, "Okay! Let's break this up! Hey, kids, we're about to do a demo in the cheer tent! Who wants to come see and learn some cool tricks?"

I gathered a coterie of children and, like a cheerleading Pied Piper, led them over to the tent. Benny stood with Marisol and Liz, who were showing them how to do a perfect standing pike. Tori fluttered nearby, rushing to help me herd kids into the area we'd cleared for seating. The plan had been a demo, then a brief talk about being a professional cheerleader (highly edited for the kids because they didn't need to know about how it was poorly paid and poorly supported—this was supposed to be a fun day, damn it!) The QS volunteers assigned to our tent got into place, and we started the music. The routine was simple but showcased some moves that were way more advanced than any elementary or middle school cheer squad would do.

We demonstrated some of our most popular cheers and short versions of routines for

about fifteen minutes, ending with a basket toss, always a crowd pleaser. I mentally thanked the gods—namely, the 1970s Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders, hallowed be thy names—that our tent allowed Marisol to be tossed so high. Otherwise, that'd be one more disaster to add to the day's roster.

The kids went wild, whooping and hollering as we took our bows and did our post-cheer wave and bounce. Someone turned the music off, and volunteers passed around juice boxes while we settled on the floor to answer some questions. Other volunteers moved some thick mats into place behind us for the kid-participation portion of the proceedings. Some questions were expected, mostly about uniforms and did we get to be on TV, and a few more pointed ones asked about the league's attitude towards queer cheerleaders and boy cheerleaders.

“Well,” I said, “there's not a lot of us guys in professional cheer for the NFL but there's way more than there used to be. And so far, just from my own experience, it's been overwhelmingly positive. I've never had to hide who I was, and with very few exceptions, other cheerleaders and the players have been very accepting.”

“Were some people mean?” a little kid in the front row asked. “Did you have to tell your dad to beat up their dad?”

I snorted at that mental image. My dad was the sweetest, softest man on the planet, preferring to work on his doctoral thesis on the creation stories of the Olmecs than do anything aggressive. p. “No, I didn't have to get my dad involved, but some people have some really old ideas about what it means to be a man, or what men should and shouldn't do. I show them they're wrong by being awesome at being me.”

Yeah, it was a pretty simple and fluffy answer, but I wasn't about to trauma dump on a bunch of little kids. Marisol bounced to her feet and clapped her hands. “Who's ready to try some moves?” she shouted. “Total newbies can do them, I promise!”

A handful of kids swarmed up to the mats, the rest milling around and watching as the first group was led through some basic moves. Benny lingered near Tori, eyes wide and fixed on the squad as we went through the routine with the kids. Soon, we were playing music, and they were showing off their new skills. Then the next group came up. In no time at all, we'd cycled through four groups of kids, and several parents approached the QS volunteer at the signup table about cheer camps for their kids.

Benny sidled up to me and gave me a small, shy smile. "My dad's really into the idea of me being a football player," they muttered. "I want to be a dancer."

"I'm a dancer." I grinned. "My day job, when I'm not a cheerleader."

Benny nodded thoughtfully. "You can do both, huh?"

"It actually helps to have a dance background. Do you take lessons?"

"Since I was three," they said proudly, puffing out their chest. "I don't want to brag too much, but I'm pretty much better at all of it than the other kids where I go now. Mom said I can take tougher lessons this fall if she can find a place that's cool with..." They trailed off, their pride melting away as their chin dipped and arms came up to cross over their stomach.

"Hey, listen, there's plenty of awesome places that are welcoming, okay? And if you want..." I motioned for them to come with me towards the volunteer table. "Here. This is where I teach. It's in Dripping Springs, which might be a little far, but tell your folks, and maybe y'all can check it out. We're really inclusive, and we only care if you want to be there and want to learn and try." I handed them the paper I'd written down the studio name and website on. "You gonna be okay with your dad there?"

Benny glanced at Walrus in the tent opening, hanging on every word Cooper Howard

was saying. Benny snorted. “Yeah, I think he’s gonna be riding this high for days.”

Disaster two didn’t come until four p.m.

It was exactly at four because Cass popped by the tent to tell us it was time to wrap up. About a hundred kids came through, half of whom had signed up for cheer camps and workshops. The other booths reported great numbers too. The event had been a success, and I was buzzing pleasantly while Liz and Tori cleaned up the mats and Marisol began trash patrol. I hadn’t forgotten about the dads earlier, but I no longer wanted to just burst into flames whenever it crossed my mind.

“Hey.” Cooper loomed over me, appearing out of freaking nowhere to block the orange-yellow glare of the sun off the windows of the Save Mart building. “I was hoping to get a chance to chat with you today.”

His smile was toothpaste-commercial perfection. Hell, everything about him was commercial-ready. His scruff was the perfect length between beard and five o’clock shadow; his hair—despite being in hell’s sauna all day—fell in salon-worthy waves around his face. He wasn’t even pink from the sun and heat, I noticed with a spike of irritation.

“Don’t redheads burn easily?” I blurted. Jesus Christ. Smooth, Lucas. Really fucking smooth.

He blinked, jerking back. “Uh, yeah? I guess? I mean, I use sunblock religiously, and I’m probably about eighty percent zinc oxide right now so...”

My lips twitched with the urge to smile, but I forced myself to nod briskly. A reasonable and appropriate response, right? “Okay. Good talk.”

There. That made it all better.

Cooper laughed, a startled and loud sound making my face warm and my skin tingle. “You’re funny. I kind of thought you might be. I saw how everyone was laughing with you earlier and, well, you just seem like you’ve got a good sense of humor.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was babbling. But big-time football players pat my head and call me cute, and they treat me like a pet if I get close. They don’t babble at me. “Okay...”

Cooper ducked his chin, glancing over at the rest of the squad, pretending not to eavesdrop. It would’ve worked much better if they weren’t all staring at us. “I was wondering if maybe you’d like to grab a drink later?”

Shit . “Uh?—”

“Cooper! Hey, Coop!”

Cass hustled over, shooting me an apologetic look, in the wake of Texas Gridiron Report With Steve Greene ’s very own Wally Byrne. “Hey, Cooper,” Wally chuffed, shoving his hand out and nearly punching Cooper in the ribs. Cooper smiled politely, giving him a quick handshake.

“Hey,” he murmured. “Um, I’m not scheduled for any interviews. What’s going on?”

“Oh, this isn’t an official interview! Steve’s talking to the catcher from the Cottonmouths right now, and I wanted to grab you before you got away,” he chuckled. “I’d like a few soundbites about today in our wrap up on the ten o’clock news tonight. You’re the man of the hour, after all. It’s already all over social media.”

My stomach cramped. My nightmare’s come true! “I’m sure the disagreement between the parents earlier wasn’t that interesting.” I smiled. “Hardly enough to make the evening news.”

Byrne shot me a confused glance. “Huh? Oh, no, I mean he’s the face of Queering Sports!” He gave another of those good ol’ boy chuckles, adding, “ESPN’s already got a sound bite from Jameson Creel about the whole thing.”

Cooper blinked, mouth opening and closing like a stunned fish.

“I’m sorry, what?” I squeaked. Fucking hell, Jimmy... Goddamnit! My stomach felt cold and on fire at the same time. The urge to burst into shrill giggles was nearly overwhelming because surely that had to be a joke, right? “Jameson Creel was johnny on the spot with some comments about Queering Sports?”

Byrne nodded, checking his recorder. “Cool, huh? He’s in Houston doing some speaking gig and caught the news earlier.” Red-faced and beaming, he looked up. “Can you believe he watches our segment? Whooooooo, I about pissed myself when I found out!”

Cass forced her way forward, smiling tensely. “Lucas Ortiz here organized the event today. He’s been working closely with Queering Sports for two years now, bringing attention to their mission in the Texas youth sports community.”

Cooper nodded. “I’m not the face of anything. Er. Except that one sports drink ad. And that underwear campaign. Which is kind of a weird thing to be the face of, right?” he chuckled weakly. “Underwear. Faces. They don’t go together. I mean, not usually... Oh! And that hotel chain, but that’s the whole team. Actually, I think it’s the whole league, but we do the ads for the Texas locations. Oh! And I do have?—”

I winced. “Stop talking, Cooper.”

He nodded, lips quirked in a moue of awkwardness. “Yeah, good idea.”

Still grinning, Byrne shook his head. “It’s not official, but you’re the one everyone is



talking about. One of the sport's only out players, throwing his weight behind this event and making it the amazing time it was."

It was my turn to blink and gawp.

Smile brittle, Cass shoved herself between Cooper and Byrne. "If you want to talk to the person who organized things, Lucas is definitely your man."

Byrne glanced at me, his smile fading. "He's a cheerleader."

Cooper nodded. "A damn good one."

"See?" Byrne's expression snapped back to pleased. "There you are, a top-tier athlete, supporting the queer sports community." He shook his head in that Southern dude bro way, the one that's supposed to look like they totally get it and can't believe the bullshit, but you just know really means they're trying to manipulate you into thinking they're not a massive ass canker.

"Cheerleaders are athletes," Cooper said sharply. "Lucas is a damn fine one. One of the best."

"Excuse me." I turned away, striding towards the rest of my squad. "I need some air."

"Wait," Cooper called, trying to hurry after me. "Lucas!"

I ducked out of the tent, Cooper hot on my heels, Byrne hot on his. I strode towards the command center tent, acutely aware I was being filmed. Cooper grabbed my arm, seemingly uncaring if Byrne and his camera minion were recording the whole exchange. Dani and Cass bore down on them like avenging Valkyrie, but they were far enough away. This was about to get messy fast.

“Let go of me,” I ordered between clenched teeth. “Do not touch me!”

I jerked free, and Cooper held up his hands. “Okay, calm down,” he soothed. Tried to, anyway. I may or may not have hissed like a scalded cat. “Or not...”

Whirling on my heel, I headed for the merch table and started boxing things up. Cooper was determined, though, and closed the distance between us again, reaching for one of the remaining sets of pompoms to throw into a waiting box. He was staring at me, though, and not watching what he was doing.

Which is how he ended up throwing the damn things against one of the industrial-sized fans blowing into the tent.

And I am not one hundred percent sure how it happened, other than displeasing some god somewhere, but in the midst of the sudden explosion of cheap plastic confetti and the grinding of the plastic handles lodged in the fan, sparks flew.

Literal goddamn sparks.

Did you know flame-retardant things still burn, just slower than stuff that’s not flame retardant?

I didn’t. But now I do.

The smell of singed plushies and melting plastic was instantly cloying. I spun away from the carnage, covering my face with my hands only to find myself falling—no, I realized belatedly, being lifted! By Cooper!

“Christ,” he ground out. “Are you okay?”

“No!” I wiggled free of his grasp. Dani, Cass, Rye, and a few others had come

running with a fire extinguisher, and someone had grabbed a stack of towels from the dunking booth. The fire was small—barely more than a few embers really—but the results were just abysmal.

“Cooper,” Byrne broke into the stunned silence.

Cooper held up his hand, glaring at the man. “No.” Turning to me, his expression softened. He dropped his hand only to offer it to me, as if I’d want to hold it. “Lucas...”

“No,” I said, mimicking his snarled refusal. “No. I need to go. I need to just... go.”

No one tried to stop me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:47 am*

### CHAPTER 2

#### COOPER

“Whoooo-eeeeee! It’s Mister Spokesmodel!”

“Oh my god, shut up,” I muttered, ducking my face as the guys laughed. It wasn’t quite the preseason yet, but more days than not had been spent working out. Getting ready for getting ready basically.

It sucked.

I loved it.

Except for days like today when the guys decided to take the piss. I knew they meant no harm, but I felt bad this time. Mostly because of the look on Lucas’s face when Byrne cornered me and lionized me for Lucas’s hard work.

“Come on, you’re telling me you’re not proud of this pic?” Rye asked, holding up his phone. There I was, grinning like a doofus, at the top of the page on Austin News Now’s sports page.

Shoot.

“Whatcha smilin’ at?” Wyatt teased. “Lookin’ at those cheerleaders?”

“Shut up,” I grumbled, reaching for the clean shorts I’d shoved in my bag that

morning. Even after the showers, I felt gross and sticky. I couldn't wait to get home and take a long soak in that massive tub I'd splurged on. Maybe some bubbles.

"Thought you were queer," one of the other guys called out. I didn't recognize him immediately, so it had to be one of the reserve players who came out for training with us.

"You thought right," I said.

"Oh, you checking out that little twink then?"

One of the other reserve players groaned. "Oh my god, Harris! You can't say twink. You're straight."

"What?" he yelped. "Who says?"

Wyatt chose that moment to saunter closer, still holding his phone where I could see the picture. "Seriously, man, you keep staring at him like that, he's gonna catch on."

I shrugged. "Who said I was looking at Lucas?"

"Dude."

"Dude," I mimicked, pulling a clean shirt. "Look, this," I flicked his phone, "is bullshit. I'm just the flavor of the month for these media guys. Soon as the season starts, they'll all become armchair quarterbacks again, and I'll be old news until I fuck up mid-game or something."

Wyatt shoved his phone in his shorts pocket. "I was there on Saturday," he reminded me with a small smile. "I saw how you were eyeballin' him. And I know you were pretty pissed off about this Byrne situation."

Nodding, I swallowed hard. “It’s bull. I had nothing to do with the event other than just showing up. Everyone with Queering Sports was singing his praises, and now I look like the asshole who tried to take credit.”

Whistling low and long through his teeth, Wyatt shook his head. “What does Caitlin have to say about all this?”

I winced inwardly. Caitlin Cole was the team’s PR go-to and protective as all hell, but she also didn’t take nonsense from anyone, including us. Especially us. So far, I’d been on her good side, but I’d heard some stories about her running guys who screwed up through the wringer. “No freaking idea, man. I haven’t heard anything from them, but I let my agent know what’s up, and he’s not happy.” Neither was the cheer team’s PR person. From the looks of things after the event, she’d been mad enough to shoot sparks. She hadn’t said anything to me directly, and I’d hoped it was because she knew I had nothing to do with Byrne and Green’s shenanigans.

She seemed like someone I didn’t want to get on the wrong side of.

“Look, I don’t really know Lucas at all. I’ve seen him at a few PR events and obviously at the games, but for the most part, us and the cheerleaders?” He made a slicing motion with one hand, cutting something down the middle. “Two separate entities. They do their thing, we do ours, and we stay out of one another’s way. But from what I do know? Lucas isn’t a doormat. If you’ve pissed him off, you’re gonna find out sooner rather than later.”

“Hey, Wy, you coming?” Rye called.

“Later, Coop,” Wyatt said, giving my arm a shove. “Talk to Caitlin.”

Turned out I didn’t need to go track her down. As if summoned by Wyatt’s suggestion, my phone flashed with an incoming call. “Welp.”

Wyatt shot me a sympathetic glance and tight smile. "Make it right, man. We're giving you shit about it, but you know how much it sucks to have someone diminish your accomplishments, right?"

I nodded, numb, and grabbed my phone before it could roll over to voicemail. "Hello?"

"Howard," she sighed. "What the hell, kid?"

The meeting at Caitlin's office was squeezed in just after three, which meant I had enough time to run back to my place, shower, grab a pretty tasteless but balanced prepared meals the team nutritionist had arranged for us, then turn right around and zip back into town. The team's PR office was in an imposing older building in central Austin, one of those really Eighties office towers that screamed oil money built this . Inside, the place wasn't as dated, all decked out in a modern, minimalist style making me afraid to touch anything in case I left a smudge.

Security buzzed me in with barely a glance, and the receptionist offered me a smile, waving me past with a flick of his wrist. "Everyone's upstairs already. They're running early, so don't worry! You're right on time!"

"Everyone? Who's everyone?" I paused at his desk, glancing up at the ceiling as if I could see through the intervening floors into Caitlin's office.

He shrugged. "I don't know all of their names. She's ready for you," he added, glancing at his screen. "She says they're waiting."

Shit .

Thankfully, the elevator was the fast sort. Usually, they made me queasy, but today, it meant less time to dwell on what I was about to walk into. It couldn't be that bad,

right? Sure, it was a pain in the ass, and I felt awful Lucas had been given short shrift, but maybe we could issue a statement, I thought. Something official from me, not the team, about how I was proud to be invited to take part in the event and how Lucas had done an awesome job...

A tiny—slightly more selfish than I'd like to admit—part of me imagined Lucas smiling up at me as I gave this fantasy statement to one of the team's pet reporters. In my little daydream, Lucas's eyes were crinkled with amusement and maybe a bit of admiration. He leaned into me, those full lips of his curved in the most damn adorable smile and?—

The doors slid open to reveal his scowling face. Not a single dimple to be had.

The carriage dinged, and the doors started to slide shut before I shoved my foot out, making them bounce back and open once more. "Please exit the elevator," an automated voice ordered. "Please exit the elevator."

I stood there, uneasiness bubbling behind my ribs. Past Lucas, Phil, Cass, and Liesel sat in the plush waiting area. Caitlin's door was shut, but she had to be in her office unless she'd decided to take off for the afternoon and leave us all to duke it out.

Which, judging by the look on Lucas' face, I'd likely lose.

"Oh my god," Lucas muttered. He made an exaggerated come here motion with both hands. "Step away from the elevator."

Phil gave me an up nod, ignoring Lucas entirely. "Hey, Coop. Sorry to ruin your afternoon plans. How'd workout go?"

"Uh, fine," I muttered, slipping away from the carriage and striding towards the waiting area. It was hard not to look at Lucas—I wanted to offer my apologies again,



but a slight widening of Phil's eyes and a tiny, almost invisible, shake of his head put me off that idea for the time being. "Really...sweaty."

Lucas snorted softly. "In this heat? Gee, imagine that."

Cass made a quelling sound and muttered, "Lucas. Remember what you promised."

Pressing his full lips into a thin line, he gave one sharp nod in response.

"Sorry," Liesel muttered, looking very sheepish as she offered her hand.

I smiled. We shook hands and did the standard awkward small talk. I was rescued from having to think of another way to mention how hot the weather was when Caitlin flung open her office door. She gave us all a broad, expectant grin. "Well, this is gonna be a thing, huh?"

"Cait," Phil sighed, standing to give her one of those bro-y, professional hugs. "Thanks for getting us together on short notice."

"Well, you know me. Nothing I love more than cleaning up messes."

I winced, my face going hot. "I really didn't intend?—"

"Bup bup bup!" Caitlin shushed me, holding up one hand. "Let's get comfortable. Then we'll talk."

We filed into her spacious office like baby ducks, taking up our perches around her desk in the comfy chairs. The size, accommodating of players' huge frames, made Lucas look like he was lost. He frowned, sinking back into the large leather club chair and tucking his feet up under his thighs. Like me, he'd dressed casually but nicely for this meeting. Where I wore light colors—a pale blue Polo shirt and light khakis—he

was in dark red and black, with sharp-toed boots and a thin leather strap around his wrist.

He looked fierce.

Sexy.

And a little annoyed.

"Dude, stop staring," he muttered under his breath while the others started verbally posturing to assert dominance or whatever. "You're weirding me out."

"I like your boots," I blurted, maybe a shade too loud because Phil shot me a slightly confused look before returning his attention to what Liesel was saying.

Lucas eyed me warily. "Thank you?"

I shrugged. "They're cool. I could never wear something like that."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Fuck. How did I mess this up already? "I dress boring, you know? Sneakers, loafers, the one pair of dress shoes I drag out if I have to be in a suit or something. And I have huge feet, you know." I held out one leg to demonstrate the fact. "If I wore pointy boots, cool as they are, I'd look like a cryptid." I offered him what I hoped was a charming smile. Judging by the look he gave me, it was less I want to get to know you better and more it puts the lotion on its skin .

"Wow." He stared at me, wide-eyed. "Wow."

"Gentlemen," Caitlin said sharply. "Are you quite ready?"

Lucas straightened in his chair, swinging his legs down and folding his hands on his lap, giving Caitlin his full attention.

Or pretending to. I know a kiss-ass when I see one. The little smirk and side eye he shot me didn't hurt either. I couldn't help the snort bursting from my chest, a barely strangled laugh that drew the glare of Phil and Cait both. "Sorry, I just thought of a picture of an angry cat, and it made me laugh."

Lucas's eyes narrowed.

"Okay," Caitlin drawled. "I'll keep this short, then, so you can get back to your feline fancying."

She did a lightning-round version of the events from the weekend, mostly to confirm what she'd been told already. Neither Lucas nor I had anything to add, but he sure appeared like he might want to. He shifted in his seat, twisted his fingers together, did his damndest not to look at me the entire time.

"I don't blame you for being mad," I said suddenly. "I mean, you busted your butt for the event, and there's some news guy giving me credit for your work. And that's BS—pardon my language," I added, nodding at the others. "I was thinking maybe I could make an official statement about things, say I was misquoted or something?"

Phil made a seesaw gesture with one hand. "That could work, or it could come off as you trying to seem too humble. Or trying to draw more attention."

Liesel cleared her throat, leaning forward, more than a little embarrassed. "The thing is... attention isn't a bad thing."

Beside me, Lucas went stiff as a board. "You okay?" I muttered.

He didn't even blink.

Cass patted the back of his hand gently. For the first time since I'd met her, Caitlin looked like she felt a bit bad about what was coming. Liesel pressed on. "Since Byrne's video hit YouTube, we've gotten almost half a million in donations. Half a million!" She turned a pleading expression on Lucas, who nodded once, still stiff and now a bit green around the gills. "And several other major sports teams in the state have reached out about 'doing something' with Queering Sports. It's huge for us."

This time, Lucas closed his eyes for a moment. A bit too long to be a blink but just long enough to hold back tears, I thought. When he spoke, his words were full of fake politeness so clear even Phil winced. "I get it. It's fine. I just put almost a year of work into this, and I'm pushed aside. Okay. It's fine. Because it's for the kids."

He stood, raking his fingers through his dark waves, turning his sharp glare on me. "I really do get it. It's not just me being nice so I don't get shit-canned by the squad for going off on you, Cooper. I've volunteered for the organization since college, so I know how big a deal this is. That donation." He jabbed a finger in Liesel's direction. She flinched as if he could reach her from across the room, sinking back in her seat a bit with a guilty expression on her pixie features. "It's enormous. Queering Sports doesn't see money like that in a year. But here we are." He smiled, sharp and feral to me but smoothed into something more businesslike, smaller and flat, towards the others. "So, what is it? Thanks, Lucas, it's been real, but we're replacing you with Mr. Football here?"

Liesel shook her head, but Cass beat her to the punch. "Sit down, Lucas, and listen for a minute. You're acting like a brat, and it's embarrassing you, not anyone else."

"Lucas, you know I'm not going to take your credit. Besides, if we let this go and ignore it, it'll be forgotten by the end of summer. I've got team PR stuff to do. I have some sponsorships to follow up on..." I shrugged weakly. "I'm not gunning for your

project."

"Wait a sec," Phil sighed. "Coop, let Caitlin and Liesel talk..."

Lucas was fast as hell. I caught up with him in the parking garage, jabbing at a key fob and cussing under his breath as his car beeped somewhere deep in the level.

"Hey, wait!"

"Don't talk to me right now. I can't... I just can't!"

Frustration thrummed through me, clenching my jaw and burning in my chest. "Lucas, look, I know this is awkward as hell and really annoying, but I don't understand why you're this angry about what's going on. I mean, it's not ideal, and it's gonna make my schedule suck too, but?—"

Lucas whipped around, giving up on his car search for the moment to glare at me.

And I was pretty sure I knew how the guy in Jurassic Park felt coming face to face with that raptor about two seconds before he got got.

Lucas stalked towards me, all five foot something of him, eyes narrowed and teeth bared. I've faced huge dudes on the field intent on causing pain, but I'd never backed away from a single one of them. Lucas Ortiz, though... The part of my brain that made good decisions kicked in and said move now.

One step, then another, then another, and I was pushed up against the parking garage wall, Lucas just inches from me, fairly vibrating with poorly suppressed feeling. "This is not about our fucking schedules. Jesus, how many hits to the head have you taken?"

"Hey! That's not even close to being funny," I growled. "What the fuck?" Anger hot

enough to match the fire in Lucas' glare flared in my chest.

Something in his expression changed, flickered behind the anger, but it did nothing to soften it. Instead, he gave me a single jerky nod. "You're right. TBI's not something to joke about." His cheeks were flagged with red, his eyes glittering, but he didn't avert his gaze, letting me see his sincerity and embarrassment, not trying to hide it behind bluster or telling me I was overreacting.

It was my turn to nod. Slowly, though, warily. "So, I don't understand. Why don't you explain it to me then? Because upstairs, they're pretty sure they've got our lives figured out for us." And it was true, at least for me. The schedules made by other people dictated my life. I had an enormous calendar on my office wall at home with everything color coded and shit.

No one ever tells you playing pro sports involves so much paperwork. It kind of sucks.

Lucas closed his eyes, sweat dotting his brow and throat, a single droplet doing its level best to distract me by running down to the hollow between his collar bones, bare where his shirt lay open. I was staring so hard at that drop I almost missed his low, resigned words. "Fuck. Let's go get a drink or something. It's too damn hot to do this in an underground concrete box."

I jerked my chin up. "You want to get a drink with me?" Okay, maybe today wasn't sucking.

"I'm dying of heat. There's a place down the road that's not super touristy and doesn't think it's some artisan craft cocktail shit."

I nodded, brain going a little fuzzy. Lucas Ortiz wanted to go get a drink with me? Hell yes. I'd need to cancel plans with my sister and nephew, but I think they'd

forgive me.

Lucas sighed again, ruffling his hair to fall in thick waves around his face. He glanced at me, then back into the depths of the parking level. "I have no idea where the hell I parked."

"I can drive," I offered quickly. Lucas raised a brow. "What? I know exactly where my car is."

His sudden, bright laugh settled behind my ribs, warming me down to my bones. "Come on then," he ordered, still smiling just a little. "Lead the way."

## Page 3

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### CHAPTER 3

#### LUCAS

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m still pissed. I’m just not mad at you.” I paused, turning the words over for a moment in a haze of heat and the babiest of buzzes from my second beer on an empty stomach. “Not as mad.”

Cooper Howard, golden boy and fan favorite—at least among certain groups of fans—smirked over the edge of his glass of sweet tea. “Could’ve fooled me. Since Saturday, I’ve been pretty sure you were gonna show up at my place while I was asleep to smother me with my own pillow.”

“Please,” I scoffed, doing my very best not to imagine Cooper in bed and failing spectacularly. “If I was going to take you out, I wouldn’t be sneaky.”

He hummed thoughtfully, taking another sip of his tea. We’d been at Cherry Bo Berry’s for an hour or so, me nursing a Hand Wing sour ale and him drinking tea like it was going out of style. The roiling anger and frustration simmered under my skin, but I’d been unable to keep the fire burning over Cooper’s involvement. Down in my bones, I knew he hadn’t sought out Byrne, or credit for my accomplishments, but... I glanced up at him. His dark, warm eyes fixed on my fingers, fiddling with the bottle’s label. When he noticed I’d caught him staring, he ducked his chin, clearing his throat before trying to hide his blush behind his tea glass.

“Look, the thing is, I have had horrible luck with football players,” I blurted. “It’s not you, specifically. Just every player—scratch that, every team—I’ve ever been even



peripherally involved with in any way has screwed me over, and I've been expected to smile and take it because I'm a cheerleader and rah-rah team and all that crap."

The deep swig of the ale was probably not my smoothest move. I choked on it, forcing myself to swallow around the cough tickling my throat, waving off Cooper's offer of a swift pat on the back. He scooted closer, moving around the small two-top to awkwardly, almost carefully, rub my back between my shoulder blades.

I dabbed my mouth and chin. "That was fucking classy," I muttered when I was able to speak again. "I was going for dramatic and tired."

"Well, dying at my feet in the middle of the day in a crowded bar would be pretty dramatic."

I looked around. Other than us, there was only the bartender, a bar back not long out of high school, and two old queens at the far end of the bar arguing over a dart game. "It's not crowded."

"It will be when I tell the story." Cooper smiled and ugh. Something inside me melted. Or maybe I just had heartburn or something because I felt hot and shivery all over. The way the corners of his eyes crinkled, how he caught his lower lip with his teeth like he was trying to keep from smiling too big...

"I survived so I guess you'll just have to disappoint your fans. I'm sure Byrne will be sad he missed out on a way to make my death about you."

Cooper's smile fell. For a flicker of a second, I felt like an ass. Then my better sense kicked in, and I reminded myself that we were here to talk. I sighed, pushing my beer to one side and leaning in closer, ostensibly to keep my voice low. I couldn't fool myself—he smelled really good. I'd noticed a faint hint of it when we were in Caitlin's office, but when he scooted over, it was a definite waft, and I wanted a

better whiff.

Ugh. I sounded like one of those telenovela dickheads Abuelita liked so much. “Look, I’m not thrilled about how this is going down, okay? I would not mind one single bit if you were volunteering to help because you wanted to, or if you had some awesome ideas about how to help Queering Sports. That’s not the issue. I’m pissed because, suddenly, all of the hard work the ladies and I put into the event is being brushed aside for one of the golden boys off the team. I’m angry because I’m being treated like a commodity by people I thought I could trust and I thought respected me.”

“We are commodities, though,” Cooper said, brow wrinkling as he gave me a considering and worried look. “We make money for organizations. We’re products. What we do, what we represent, it’s all money to them. Even doing PR events. I get told where to go, what time to be there, and where to stand so the camera gets my best angle. I’m done, and then it’s Yowie or Matty or hell, one of a million other players. “He shrugged. “The way I figure things right now, for some reason, my involvement in the event on Saturday got more eyes on it, right?”

Reluctantly, I nodded. “Donations have never been so high.”

“Then maybe we should consider things.”

I gave in and took another sip of my beer. The sour blueberry and yeast flavor flooded my mouth, then burned down my throat, leaving an acid-malt aftertaste verging on unpleasant. Just like my mood, “I guess you missed the part of the meeting where this is already a forgone conclusion—us working together. Liesel has been dying to take Queering Sports national and get it the recognition it deserves. I’m not even remotely mad about that. What’s grating my cheese, though, is being relegated to the role of hired help. I busted my ass, put literal blood into this project, and I gotta admit, it’s my pride and fucking joy. Don’t tell my cat I said that.”

Cooper's eyes widened, and his lips quirked, entirely too sinful for him to do in public. "You've got a kitty?"

I nodded, barely able to suppress my smile. "Desmond. He's a flame point Siamese I adopted from someone who knew someone who was friends with my great grandma."

Cooper's eyes lit with a childlike excitement, his entire posture perking up like the golden retriever he was often compared to. "I love cats. I want to adopt one, but I travel too much, and, when I'm not on the road, I'm training, I'm doing promo, I'm trying to be a good brother and kid..." He sighed. "Well. That's my trauma dumping. I'm sorry I did that and made you listen."

Cooper very seriously stirred his straw around in his tea, watching the slurry of sugar at the bottom of the glass. "Caitlin and Liesel were very certain their plan would work," I finally said. "It pissed me off because they were reducing everything I'd done over the past many months to some early 90's sitcom bullshit."

His expression, usually warm and open, shuttered. Rolling his tea glass back and forth slowly between his palms, Cooper shrugged. "It's not a terrible idea. I can see the appeal. Even if it meant you'd have to be nice to me for longer than passing one another in the stadium corridor."

The bubbles in my ale were nearly gone. I should be wrapping things up now— We had a drink; it's time to go. No hard feelings, have a great one. Instead, though, I gingerly reached out one foot and poked his shin. My annoyance and frustration still simmered below the surface, and a perverse part of me wanted to nurse that feeling. Cooper was a football player. His ego had enough boosting on the daily from not just the team but fans as well. He might not be the most famous guy on the team, but he was definitely well known.

He'd seemed pretty oblivious to it, too. The glances that weren't very covert, a few

hollers about good game or critiques of his playing last season shouted from passer-by and, in one case, an Uber. But he'd just shrugged it off with good humor, like these were folks he knew in passing and not people who watched him every week, some probably paying ridiculous sums of money for the opportunity in person. Even the fans bold enough to approach him for one-on-one conversation hadn't triggered some preening, cocky star attitude like I'd come to expect from players. Coop been genial with some teenaged fans who'd stopped us as we walked into Cherry Bo Berry. He'd smiled, signed, asked some questions about what they were up to, then deftly extricated us and waved the kids off while they did their best not to squeal aloud. And the entire time, he'd looped me into the interaction.

It'd been weird. Nice. But weird. The cheerleaders had fans, sure, but most of them were either aspiring cheerleaders themselves or people with absolutely zero boundaries who thought porn was an accurate depiction. Being introduced to randoms like I was somebody important had been... Well. Nice. Really freaking nice. Cooper Howard doing it had also been nice. More than. And I hated myself for being excited.

He was making it too easy to let this slide, to fold into the PR plans for all the work I'd done. There, there's the anger. Nice to have you back again.

"Look, I get that this would be great for Queering Sports, but I'm going to be up front with you here... I've been working myself to the bone with this group for two years now. I know you understand why they're so important, yeah?" He nodded, and I kept going, not giving him a chance to interject. "And I won't begrudge them the boost in donations, the huge spike in media attention, the requests from all these famous athletes about supporting them... It's wonderful."

He watched as I took a more careful sip of my ale, waiting until I was done to say, "You sure as hell don't sound like you think it's wonderful."

"The part that's not wonderful is the thing y'all seem to be missing in gushing over

the proposal. All of these events coming up this year, every single one of them, I made happen. Between me and Liesel, we organized six whole fundraisers between now and December. The women on the squad have really pitched in to help when their day jobs and school allow, but?—”

“But,” Cooper interrupted softly, “you feel like your work’s being swept under the rug.”

My nod was short, jerky.

I rolled my bottle back and forth between my hands again, watching the label flake with moisture. A few more people wandered in, eyeballing Cooper hard. At least one of the kids he’d spoken with must have made a social media post or maybe told a friend who told a brother or dad because they were doing that thing, trying to act casual but obviously staring. I snorted softly, taking one more sip of my drink to finish it off. “The important thing is the organization is getting notice, yeah? They’re getting funding.”

“And you’re getting lost,” he murmured, leaning just a little closer. “Listen, this is important to me, too—it was before I heard all of the awesome things they do, but after Liesel gave us the full rundown of the organization?” He shook his head, leaning back and taking that soft, spicy scent with him. Damn it. “I honestly had no idea how deep their roots are, Lucas. I don’t think anyone does unless they’re working with them, you know?”

I sank down in my seat. Another guy joined the two looky-loos at the bar, all three pretending not to stare at Cooper. Great. An audience was forming.

I could do audiences. I knew how to perform and look happy and at ease even if my day was shitty. “I’m not always going to be a cheerleader. There’s a time limit on how long this will last for me. You know how it goes. Our bodies are only going to

perform at peak for so long. Eventually, injuries and age catch up to us. Hell, every year when it's time for our annual audition, I stress about making the cut. There's gonna be a year when I don't. I planned to transition from cheering and teaching to teaching and hopefully working with a nonprofit." I shrugged, staring at the bottle again. "Maybe go back and get my master's in social work or something so I can help more."

"I don't see how this is stopping you," he said, frowning. "Was this some sort of a test for you? And now you're not going to get the job working with Queering Sports?" A tiny divot formed between his brows as he gave me a considering, confused look. Damn it, why did he have to be so freaking cute? I wanted to hate him, and it'd be way easier if he was one of those no-neck, high-and-tight having, dude bros who talked to me like I wasn't able to parse big words and had cotton for brains.

"No," I groaned, pressing my face into my hands to muffle a growl of frustration. "It's more than that. Or maybe not more than, but... ugh. This fundraiser, and all of the ones I've helped line up for the rest of the year? Those were supposed to be proof I could do this, you know? Proof I'm more than the perky little twink who can toss Tori into the air and never miss a beat. I'm trying to build a portfolio so when I have to stop cheering, I have something to pivot towards."

Cooper sipped the last of his tea, his gaze thoughtful. A few more guys came in, one wearing a Howard jersey with his number on it, trying to act casual. They were circling, though, getting braver as they realized Cooper wasn't going to wave them off. "Don't you need some training or something to work for nonprofits? Like a college degree?"

I scowled. "What makes you think I didn't go to college? I have a bachelor's in business administration with a certificate in nonprofit management, and a bachelor's in performance with a specialization in dance education."

Eyes gone wide, Cooper let out a low whistle. I felt a tingle of pride under his appreciative, impressed gaze but did my best not to let him see how his reaction gave me the warm fuzzies. “Two degrees? Jesus. When’d you start college? When you were twelve?”

“How old do you think I am?” I laughed. “And I did a bunch of dual credits in high school, then double majored. Worked my ass off with summer classes and accelerated programs so I could graduate by twenty-three.”

“So, you’re twenty-three,” he said, nodding. “I’m twenty-four.”

“I’m twenty-five,” I corrected, wishing I hadn’t finished my beer. I needed something to do other than pick at the soggy label. I needed to go was what I needed to do. Just leave and call this done. Show up for the photo op next week like Caitlin proposed, smile and nod and just go with the flow like Cass gently suggested. Use Cooper as our big draw. Bring him along to the events. Put him front and center.

Push him as the main attraction, not actually supporting an awesome, desperately needed organization working to make it easier for queer kids to be involved in sports.

Jesus.

“Ooooooh, an older man,” he chuckled. “I’m in trouble.”

He leaned back in his chair and ran his thumb over his lower lip, wiping away a stray drop of tea.

Teasing me.

Heat flared in my belly. I’m sure it wasn’t intentional, but it did things to my blood flow and sent my thoughts careening back on that earlier track. Imagining him in bed

for just a minute.

Lucky for me—maybe—one of the circling sharks finally got close enough to fake surprise at seeing Cooper. “Holy shit, Cooper Howard! Hey, I’m a huge fan!”

Cooper’s expression flickered from relaxed and amused to irritated. Before the guy could even notice, Cooper plastered a big, game-winning grin on his face and stood up to shake hands with him. The rest of the guys swarmed over, shaking hands and talking about his performance last season, asking about pre-season whatever’s, inserting themselves between Cooper and the table.

With all the chickenhearted gumption I could muster, I saw my chance and took it. Slipping to my feet, I dropped some bills on the table for a tip and headed out of the bar. I could feel Cooper’s eyes on the back of my neck as I left, but I didn’t look back.

Caitlin was still in her office when I arrived. Cass had lingered, too. “Lucas,” Caitlin said with a slight edge to her voice. “I do have a phone, you know. And email. You didn’t have to march yourself back in here.”

“I know,” I muttered. I hadn’t remembered until I was halfway back, when my buzz started wearing off, but I pressed on. “I thought this would be better in person.”

“You left pretty quick, before we hammered out details. Cass here’s been going over your squad’s schedule with me, but we need your input on your personal schedule as well.”

Cass smiled, a touch cool but mostly kind. She’d known what my endgame was, and she’d known how the sudden pivot hurt me. Or at least I thought she had. “Lucas, hon, I know this isn’t what you’d dreamed of, but you need to focus on the charity. It’s for them, not you.”



Neck prickling with shame, my face heated, but I jerked my chin up and stared back at them both, daring them to call me anything but committed. “I’m not upset because I wanted all the credit or because I was jealous that Cooper’s suddenly getting a ton of media attention when I wanted it or some crap. I am nothing but thrilled for the sudden spike in attention for the organization. What I’m not is excited for turning this into a non-sustainable dog-and-pony show to capitalize on a flash in the pan interest by Troopers fans.”

“I think you’re letting your past experiences color your perception of the fans,” Cass remarked drily.

I flinched—she knew about my past experiences with pro players. She knew better than anyone. She’d been there to help me pick up the pieces.

“And you’re doing a real disservice to Cooper and the other guys on the team who’ve recently expressed interest in taking part with Queering Sports.” Caitlin added, her tone far sterner and more displeased.

“Am I, though? Remember when Danny Trent in Tacoma got papped wearing a sticker from that animal shelter fundraiser the Sailor’s cheer squad did, and all of a sudden, fans just inundated the shelter? It was the best thing ever for them, but a few months later, they were back at zero because the fans moved on to the next thing Danny was into. The shelter’s donations were a roller coaster,” I pointed out.

“Er. No?” Cass murmured. “I remember the team having some dogs on the field once at halftime.”

I nodded. “Because of Trent. It was a joke to them—the guys brought their dogs out to tease Danny, give him shit for being known as the puppy guy or something. But the shelter went from barely scraping by to literally a million dollars in just a few months. Then Trent started doing ad campaigns for that travel company, the fans

moved on, and the shelter returned to almost nothing. The squad does literal backflips to help them raise money, but the general attitude seems to be that since Danny's not part of it, what's the point?"

"Danny Trent never officially attached his name to that fundraiser," Caitlin pointed out. "I should know—I work closely with other PR firms who deal with league teams, and the Sailors have never paired with animal-related charities."

"That's not my point," I sighed, head throbbing. Maybe that beer on an empty stomach had been a bad idea, but here I was, and backing down wasn't an option. "Trent's involvement implied support from the team, which wasn't an issue in any legal sense since there were no claims made by the shelter when the funds stopped, no attempt at any sort of recourse because no explicit or implicit promises were made. The problem is that leaping on Trent's interest and apparent involvement created an unsustainable situation, where the influx of support was contingent upon apparent approval by a celebrity. When that approval waned or disappeared entirely, so did the support." I sniffed, shooting Caitlin a glare. "I should know. I wrote my entire senior thesis on the mess."

Caitlin and Cass exchanged a look over my head, one I didn't like. "What?" I demanded.

"Hear me out," Cass said slowly, some unspoken conversation passing between her and Caitlin. "What if—and this is going to be entirely dependent on the organization's receptivity to the idea—instead of putting Cooper out there as the face of this event series you helped plan... What if we pivot a bit?"

"Huh?"

Caitlin nodded slowly. "I'll need to talk with Queering Sports' legal team, and with Cooper's agent..."

“What the hell is going on here?” I demanded. “Cass?”

“Our initial idea was too small,” Cass said, a small smile blooming.

Caitlin shook her head. “Lucas, I’m afraid I was misjudging you. I thought you were passionate about helping the organization because of your ties to the queer sports community. I didn’t understand. It’s bigger, isn’t it?”

“Er, yes?” I glanced at Cass, typing something furiously on her phone. “Y’all?”

“Let me make some calls,” Cass said. “Caitlin, we’ll be in touch.”

Caitlin nodded, not even looking up as Cass shepherded me out of the office and to the bank of elevators.

“You want this to be sustainable, right? That’s your buzzword for this?”

My turn to nod. “Yeah, but smiling and nodding and letting Cooper be a talking head isn’t going to help in the long run. Look, what I said about Tate and Tacoma is true. I can give you the sources on it. Shit, I should probably talk to Liesel about it first. She’s the one in charge and, frankly, the one who needs to worry about the outcome. If it goes to hell, the squad and the team won’t really be affected.”

We stepped onto the elevator, and Cass jabbed the button for the ground floor. “How would you manage this for Queering Sports so this blip in interest becomes sustainable?”

“Uh...”

“Don’t play confused, kid,” she ordered, glancing at the scrolling numbers as we went from fourteen to one. “You must have an idea.”

The doors opened onto a busy lobby. Numbly, I followed Cass, my mental gears grinding as I tried to keep up with her words. “I... I’d need to sit down and look at the numbers. Talk to Liesel. Get more information on where they want to go long-term. Like real long-term, not just one or two years.” I grabbed my phone from my hip pocket and opened the note-taking app.

Cass pulled me to a stop near the doors. “And don’t forget to talk to Cooper Howard. He’s still part of this, remember. His name’s attached now, his face. So figure out how to make that work or how to fix it before it becomes a bigger problem.”

“Sure,” I smiled thinly. “Totally doable.”

Fuck.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:47 am*

### CHAPTER 4

#### COOPER

“You got yourself a fan,” one of the guys called out from across the gym. “He’s peepin’ on you!”

I didn’t look. “This is a private workout facility,” I grunted instead. “He can talk to security.”

“I don’t think they’re gonna bug him,” Rye noted. “It’s your cheerleader.”

The plates hit the base of the squat machine with a clang, momentarily silencing the rest of the guys. Then a wave of catcalls and laughter burst free as I got to my feet. Sure enough, Lucas was peeking through the window in the weight room’s door, eyes narrowed until he spotted me. He raised his hand to give me a wave, then mouthed something I couldn’t make out. “Huh?”

“He said I’ll wait,” Anders supplied helpfully. “What? I’m good at reading lips!”

That led to a cavalcade of crude commentary about Anders’s private life as I reset the machine. Giving Lucas one more glance, I resumed my workout. I did my best not to get distracted, but it was nearly impossible, knowing he was on the other side of the door, waiting for me. Every once in a while, I’d allow myself a peek between sets. He’d moved to lean against the wall, looking down at something and grinning. Was it his phone? Why was I jealous that someone else was making him smile like that? I stretched a bit further, just on the verge of making my hammy cramp, and felt a mix

of relief and affection when I saw what it was. He was holding a romance novel with two guys on the cover, classic shirtless hot dude pose.

I wondered if I should tell him about my secret stash I carried to away games and the box my sister set aside for me once in a while whenever she got new consignments at her shop?

I moved over to the bench for flutter kicks, giving me a better view of Lucas. He glanced up then and met my gaze, his eyes going wide. When I waved, he ducked his chin, but I couldn't miss the quick flash of a dimple and a smile.

Cutter, our assistant trainer, stopped by the bench to critique my form. "You're not paying attention," he scolded. "At this rate you're going to give yourself a ruptured hamstring before the season starts."

I tore my attention from Lucas and gave Cutter a nod. "Sorry. Just got sidetracked."

Anders, nearby and concentrating on his own squats, snorted. Cutter gave him a quelling glance before turning back to me. "It's important to have a life outside the team," he murmured, squatting to correct my positioning, "but you can't bring it in here."

"Sorry. Lucas is working on a project I got involved in and?—"

"I heard," he said dryly. "He's one of the cheer team, right? Then he knows not to interfere with training."

Before I could stop him, Cutter was up and out the door, talking to Lucas, who nodded in response. Rather than leaving, he settled back against the wall. Cutter sailed back in and headed over to talk to Rye.

Lucas didn't look up from his phone—at least he didn't seem to—for the rest of the hour I was in the weight room. When the guys and I headed for the showers, he hung back, out of the way, giving me a small nod when I muttered hey in passing.

"I'll wait here," he said, shoving his phone in his pocket.

"I won't be long."

I rushed through the shower and changing, ignoring the ribbing from the guys before slipping out and hurrying back. Lucas was still fiddling on his phone. "You could've come down to the lock room hall," I said. "There's benches."

"It's also for team only," he pointed out, tucking his phone away again. "And I didn't have a way to get hold of you, and Cait wasn't really keen on handing out your contact info so here I am."

"You just happened to know the team's weight room schedule?" I shrugged my duffel bag higher up my shoulder. His cheeks turned a sweet shade of pink, making a handful of freckles stand out as he tipped his chin defiantly. "I'm teasing. I know it's posted at the practice field."

"Marisol knows it," he muttered. "Her pet project is getting the squad access to a better gym, and she's been pushing for using this place when y'all aren't."

"Where do you go?" I asked, motioning for him to follow me. "Want to grab some lunch? There's a place not far from here we can walk to if you want."

He hesitated, then nodded. "Okay. And we go to Bodied, this gym near the university. We get a discount membership." He shrugged. "It's alright. Small, but we can do what we need to usually."

Frowning down at him, I stopped in my tracks. “Seriously? Y’all have to pay to use the gym? Even though you’re training for the cheer squad? They should be paying for a membership, at the very least.”

He gave me a weird look, brow scrunched and lips curled into a half smile even as he shook his head. “You are unbelievable. Where’s this place? I’m starving, and I want to go over this shit with you before my shift at the studio starts.”

The walk to Spur’s Deli wasn’t far, and the hole-in-the-wall diner wasn’t very crowded as we took up a booth in the farthest corner. Almost as soon as we were seated, we both ordered sandwiches and drinks. The server sped back to drop off our order before heading for another table.

“Okay, so here’s the thing,” Lucas started the moment we were alone. “Cait and Cass had a good plan. A solid one. But,” he held up one finger to hush me when I started to say see, you just had to think about it for a bit and likely shove my entire foot in my mouth. “ But it wasn’t big enough. It would’ve been a quick bandage, you know? They weren’t seeing the opportunity to make this work . And I admit that I wasn’t either, at first.” His smile was a little nervous, a lot excited. “I talked to Liesel last night, and she’s been on FaceTime and junk all morning with the board for Queering Sports. This isn’t final, but they plan to leverage this into something long-term for the organization.” He caught his lower lip with his teeth, nibbling gently as he eyed me with speculation. “And you’re gonna be part of it. A big part, if this works out. And if you consent.”

He was damn near sparkling . It made my heart do a funny little flip. I wanted to lean in close and touch him, feel the vibration of joy coming off his skin. Be part of it somehow, show I was interested not just in his plan but him .

Damn stupid crush was going to get me in trouble. “Explain it to me. And keep in mind I’m kind of hamstrung by my contract when it comes to what I can and can’t



endorse.” It sucked, but it was part and parcel of getting endorsements. Phil weeded out the bullshit from genuine offers, and we worked with my lawyer to parse those down further into things I genuinely wanted my name, face, and sometimes body attached to.

Not gonna lie, I was kinda hoping one day I’d get offered a Joe Namath pantyhose level contract. For now, I stuck to pre-workout, shoes, and workout gear with the occasional local commercial thrown in.

We paused as the server set down our food and poured more water for us both. I thought Lucas was going to burst a vessel, waiting for her to go to the next table. “So here’s what I’m aiming at. Right now, Queering Sports's name is out there in a bigger way than before, and a huge amount of donations got dumped on them this weekend, but less than one percent of the new donors are sustaining donors. That means?—”

“I’ve seen enough PBS telethons to know what a sustaining donor is.”

He snorted softly at that before snagging a fry. Chewing, he scrolled through his phone and turned it so I could see the screen. “Our goal is to increase sustaining donors, expand social media presence, secure more volunteers, attain corporate sponsorship, and finally implement the programs Queering Sports has wanted to start for almost three years now.”

“Five.” I held up one hand with my fingers spread wide.

“Huh?”

“That’s five goals. Four more than you said you had.” Grinning, I took a sip of my water as he blustered in annoyance.

“Shut up. You know what I mean.”

Was that a quick little smile I spied as he ducked his chin? Maybe. I'd take it.

"I do."

He glared at me while I took a big bite of my vegan Ruben sandwich. His frown deepening, he stared at my mouth. "Do I have something on my chin?"

He startled, his glare slipping, replaced by something that made me think he might be nervous. Before I could ask, he waved me off. "The point remains," he ground out, "the plan in place currently does nothing other than steer into the skid and leaves us with absolute dick when it's over."

I started to say something, but his sharp glare cut the words off before they could finish forming. I might be a lot of things, but stupid wasn't one of them. As we ate, I let him go on about his tentative plan, about the numbers and the projections. The plates were cleared, and I ordered pie for both of us, but he barely noticed. At least until the slice of blackberry with a side of vanilla ice cream was set in front of him.

He stared at it, then up at me, then back at the pie. "Seriously?"

"It's not like we won't burn it off," I pointed out. "We're both active, and I don't know what your squad's nutritionist tells you, but?—"

He laughed. "I can't eat it because I'm lactose intolerant. And we don't have a nutritionist. Everything we do, we either pay for ourselves or has minimal subsidy. Like the gym membership? We're required to have it and to keep in shape and practice our routines. But we have to pay for it ourselves. If we want a nutritionist? Same deal. Beauty treatments to look good on the field and on camera? We pay for it. Our uniforms? We pay for those too."

"Whoa, what?" I leaned back, disbelief coloring my words. "No way. That's gotta be

hundreds of dollars a year.” I paused, doing rough calculations. “Jesus...More than hundreds...”

“Thousands.” He stabbed at the pie without taking a bite. “Unlike y’all who get paid millions in some cases to play a literal game that fourteen-year-olds are out there doing, we get paid less than minimum wage and have a laundry list of rules we have to follow. Rules for our hair, our bodies, our social media, our social interactions. Some squads even have to follow rules about which grocery stores they shop at, which clothing brands they wear, what color their hair is. There was scandal a few years ago when one of the women on the Tulsa squad dyed her hair honey caramel instead of honey butter. Ugh. I want caramel now.

“But the big rule is,” he pointed at me with his fork, “not fraternizing with players. Which makes this whole thing a bit of a pain in the ass on a few levels.”

I shook my head, reeling a little from all of those rules. “We’ve got our own set to follow, mostly about workouts and keeping our mouths shut near hot mics, but we do get told to stay away from the cheerleaders,” I admitted. “For most of the guys, that might be a problem.”

Lucas looked up from the tracks he was making in his ice cream with the tines of the fork. “Not you, though? Good to know.”

I hesitated. “I’ve been known to be wrong,” I murmured. “Take a bite of your ice cream before it melts.”

He broke away from my gaze and glanced down at the plate. “I’m lactose intolerant—why are you laughing at me?”

“It’s vegan. This whole place is vegan. No dairy, no lactose.”

His jaw dropped, and a soft huff of laughter jumped in his chest. “Huh.” I watched him take a bite, then do a happy wiggle. “This doesn’t suck.”

“Glad you approve,” I chuckled, taking a bite of my own, mixing the pie and ice cream together.

Lucas flashed me a real grin then. “I haven’t had ice cream since I was a kid. I’ve tried some of the lactose-free stuff, but it just wasn’t the same. This is really good, though.”

And the conversation drifted. Ice cream, favorite deserts, favorite foods. Finally, his phone chirped, and he groaned. “I need to get going. Shit. Look, can we meet later? Like... lowkey? Cass is talking with the team and shit to make sure this,” he motioned between us, “doesn’t get my ass fired, but until I get the all clear for fraternizing , I want to keep this quiet.”

I nodded, standing as he did. Lucas dropped several bills on the table, joining the ones I laid out by my water glass. “Let’s trade numbers?”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah, that’ll be easier than trying to track you down all over Hell’s half acre.”

“I haven’t heard that phrase since my grandma died,” I chuckled, putting my number in his phone and naming it Best D .

For defensive player , of course. Cough cough.

Lucas smirked. “Think highly of yourself, do you?”

When he handed it back, I glanced at my phone. “Just Lucas ?”

“Just Lucas is all you ever need, babe,” he snarked, flipping imaginary long hair and scooping up his bag to sashay out of the diner with an exaggerated sway of his hips. I couldn’t help the laughter bubbling up, nor the warm rush when he glanced back at the window, giving me a wink before he disappeared down the sidewalk.

Lucas didn’t call or text me that evening. Or the next day. Or that evening either. By day three, I was getting antsy, and it showed.

“Dude, what the fuck man?” Anders demanded, scowling when I dove for my buzzing phone, narrowly missing his drink. “I just got this house—don’t fuck up my carpet!”

“Sorry, man,” I muttered, fumbling to check that last text.

Heloise.

I loved my sister more than life itself, but I couldn’t help the disappointment I felt at seeing her name. As bummed as I was, Anders was interested. “Ooooooh, the sister,” he sing-songed. “Is she still single?”

“Not for you,” I growled, grabbing my phone back when he tried to open the lock screen. “She doesn’t play around, man.”

“You’re her brother. Of course you wouldn’t think that,” he chuckled. “Hey, Yowie! Get yer feet off my table!” Anders pushed himself away from the sofa and stalked over to give Yowie hell about scuffing the mahogany. Anders was house proud about his new place in Hyde Park, a combination of adorable and annoying. Before leaving, I had the urge to smudge up a few windows and see how long it took him to notice. It’d only be fair, I reasoned—he’d clogged the toilet when I moved into my new place and didn’t say anything, leaving me to find it after he left.

Yeah. I'd definitely smudge a few windows.

I checked Heloise's message—a reminder about Gregg's recital next week—and started to put my phone away when it pinged again.

Lucas .

Anders, Yowie, Matty, and Rye were setting up Scrabble (the life of a pro football player is one thrill after another; don't let anyone say otherwise) so I slipped into the kitchen. A few of the other guys stood around the huge island in the center, munching on snacks Anders had laid out. Not a single one of them paid me any mind, so I opened the message.

Lucas: Free tomorrow around 7 pm?

Me: I can be. Why?

Lucas: Three guesses and the first two don't count. Meet me so we can get the ball rolling on this.

The next text was an address on Fifth Street, an apartment.

He was inviting me to his place. Holy shit... I bit my lip, doing my best not to grin like a goofball at my phone while surrounded by people who would have zero problem giving me crap for the rest of my life about it.

Me: Should I bring anything?

Lucas: Like... pen and paper or something? I guess.

Yeah, I knew it wasn't going to be a date but couldn't blame me for trying, right?

Me: Like wine?

Lucas: \*laughing emoji \*You're adorable. Seven pm. Any earlier and you'll have to wait outside.

I shoved my phone into my pocket as Yowie and Anders tumbled into the kitchen, shoving at each other good-naturedly. "Football terminology only," Anders insisted.

"You can't play Scrabble with just football words," Yowie protested. "Coop, tell him."

"Hey, it's his house, his rules." I shrugged, saluting Anders with my beer. "Worried you don't know enough big word, Yowie?"

"Fuck off," he grumbled, reaching out to pinch my arm. We devolved into a juvenile slap fight that spilled out into Anders' back yard. The other guys trailed after us. An hour or so later, when we ended up with a small fire in the metal contraption Anders was so proud of and the tussling died down to shit-talking and rambling, I got my phone out again.

Me: Seven is great.

Lucas's reply was damn near instant, making my stomach flutter at the possibility he'd been waiting to hear back from me. Because apparently, I was still sixteen inside and wanted to squeal at the sight of my crush's name.

Lucas: Awesome! Can't wait.

I glanced up to see Anders watching me with an intent, curious stare. "What?"

"Wondering who you're talking to. Can't be your sister—no one looks like that when

they talk to their sister.”

“Ooooooh,” Yowie teased. “You got yourself a fella? What’s his name? When can we meet him? you know the team has to approve.”

“Since when?” I laughed. “No way in hell am I letting y’all around anyone I’m dating. And I’m not dating anyone, for the record. It’s a... a PR thing.”

Rye sat forward, dropping his feet from where they’d been resting on the cooler. “A PR thing? There’s nothing on the schedule for the rest of the month.”

“It’s his new spokesmodel gig,” Jensen, one of the newer players and a second stringer, announced a little sloppily, waving his beer in my direction. “Gonna go do a photo shoot for the queer kids thing, Coop?” He shimmied his shoulders and made a purse-lipped face.

“Cut it out,” I snapped. “It’s not like that. Yeah, it’s for Queering Sports. Lucas Ortiz is helping organize some long-term fundraiser thing, and since I got pulled into the whole media thing about last weekend, Cait suggested I help out.”

“Cait did, huh?” Yowie murmured, raising a brow. “And you’re not fussing?”

“Why should I? We’re in pre-season right now. I’ve got time between practices and shit.” Another shrug. “Besides, Queering Sports is an awesome group, and they need more support.”

“No denying that,” Rye agreed. “Just kind of surprised you’re okay with adding PR stuff to your plate. You know as well as any of us do—it’s not exactly light work during pre-season.”

He wasn’t wrong, but still I persisted. “It’s not a big deal. I’m not running the thing,



just showing up for some photo ops or something from the sound of it.” Though it really sounded like more, if our brief lunch meeting was anything to go by. Still... “And if Cait’s cool with it, then it won’t be that heavy. She knows our schedules and understands the higher-ups will lose their shit if we get overbooked and it interferes with training.”

Rye didn’t appear convinced, but he tipped his chin in acknowledgement and sat back. “Just be careful.”

Returning his nod, I leaned back myself. “I’ll be fine.”

### CHAPTER 5

#### LUCAS

In the hour between my sister and nephew leaving and Coop arriving, I did a last minute "Flight of the Bumblebee" tidy-up (entirely unnecessary but kept me from fidgeting), arranged, then rearranged the throw pillows on the sofa four times, changed my shirt from a snarky pop culture reference tee to a button-up then back again, brushed my teeth, tried to watch TV... Generally lowkey panicked until the buzzer chimed, letting me know someone needed to be let in downstairs.

I fumbled with the access code and, a moment later, received a text informing me Your Guest Is On the Way! Thanks For Living At Bluebonnet Tower!

Cooper was here. At my apartment. Alone. And even though I knew it was for this project, I couldn't stop the rush of excitement spinning through my core and spreading through my extremities. "Just because the project is huge and it's a major step," I muttered, rubbing my damp palms on my jeans. "Get it together, Lucas."

Then he knocked, and all my cool, such as it was, flew out the window.

He's a player. Just like Jimmy. And you know how that went.

When I opened the door, Cooper was smiling like the sun. "Hey. I'm not too early, am I? It didn't take me as long to get here as I thought."

I shook my head, words stuck in my throat. He'd showered, his long hair still damp,

the bright auburn muted to a deep red-brown for the time being. As I stepped back and motioned him in, the tang of citrus mellowed by sandalwood enveloped me, a stronger version of the scent I'd picked up from him before.

Unf .

Damn it. Guys who smell good were my Kryptonite.

"Nice place," Cooper said, making me realize I'd been too quiet for too long.

"Oh, uh. Yeah, thanks. I share it, but it's just us tonight." I'm not sure why I was hesitant to tell him I lived with my sister and nephew—I mean, it wasn't hard to see a kid lived in the place. Maybe a bit of embarrassment from being my age and sharing with not just a roommate but family?

Or maybe I merely didn't want to think about my sister and nephew while a very sexy man I had no business thinking very sexy things about was standing in front of me.

Cooper's brows crept up, a small smile on his lips. "Just us."

I reached behind me to lock the door. "Yeah..." Shit, did that come out breathier than I wanted? Judging by the smirk on Cooper's face, it damn sure did. "So! I, um, set up my laptop in the living room. I'll show you what I'm thinking, what Liesel and the board are aiming for, and then we can talk about your part."

He nodded, but when I started to walk past him, I noticed he was staring at something over my shoulder.

Del's picture.

"Who's that?" He peered closer, his smile fading. "That's not you, is it?"

"Ha. No. Del was much taller than me. And blond. And Swedish," I added on a chuckle. "He's my brother-in-law. That's my nephew he's holding."

Cooper nodded slowly. "You're not a dad then?"

I nearly choked on my laugh. "Not even close. I love being an uncle, but I'm nowhere near ready for kids. Come on."

Cooper followed me the short few feet into the living room. "So you don't want kids?"

"I never said that," I retorted. "Just that I'm not ready now. Hell, even if I had a partner, I'm working two jobs just to get by. Never mind living in a state that's not exactly friendly to queer guys adopting or fostering."

Sighing, Cooper made a sort of fair point gesture with one hand. "I keep telling myself that's a problem for Later Cooper, but I can't deny I think about it from time to time. The whole white picket fence and a partner and kids and maybe a dog."

"Ah, sorry, can't be me then," I sighed dramatically, dropping onto the other end of the couch with a practiced sort of fold, tucking my legs under me. "I'm a cat guy. Desmond is my ride or die, BFF, OTL, all that jazz."

Cooper tipped his chin. "I can absolutely be a cat dad."

"I'm sorry, did you just say cat dad ? Nope, I can't do this. I'll figure out someone else we can use. Get out of my apartment."

Cooper laughed as I tried to shoo him away. Downright giggling, really. I swatted at him, his mirth pulling me in. We don't have to dive in right away. "What's wrong with cat dad?" he demanded, swatting back. Our fingers brushed. For just a fraction

of a second, his giggling stopped, and his breath sharpened.

Or maybe I was imagining it, I decided. Because if he'd really had that reaction to touching fingers, his flirting was more serious than I wanted.

Remember Jimmy. His flirting was serious too, until it wasn't.

I drew back, my own smile fading. "Let me go over this with you. Cass and Liesel are keeping Cait in the loop, but this is apparently my baby." My jazz hands were weak, but he had the good grace to give me an encouraging nod, smiling at my feeble attempt at levity.

As Cooper scooted closer, I opened my laptop, explaining what Liesel and the board had concocted, future plans, and how things stood with my input now. "So this is all contingent on your acceptance, of course, and this will have to involve legit paperwork and contracts and blah blah blah, but ideally, we want to seize the moment here, really leap on the chance to build out and increase the sustainability of Queering Sports, instead of plastering your pretty face on some posts as a social media handjob."

Cooper went still, eyes wide as he stared back at me. "I'm sorry, a what now?"

"Handjob," I muttered with far more confidence than I felt. "Quick, fun, momentarily satisfying but, in the long term, not really what you need."

Cooper shifted a little closer. Not quite close enough to touch, but close enough I could feel the heat of his body through our layers of clothing.

Maybe the A/C was on the fritz, I thought. Maybe I was having a stroke because I was not thinking about Cooper Howard's bare leg, how the rough hair might feel under my hand, how those hard muscles would fit in my palm, in the curve of my

grip.

"I think you might be getting the wrong kind of handjob," he said, voice the tiniest bit gravelly. "They can be very satisfying."

How did we get closer? His leg pressed against mine, his hand close enough all I had to do was stretch my pinky one iota in order to touch him. To feel the sinew and ridges of the back of his hand, the vein between the bones, how warm his skin would be...

"Bait!" I blurted, sitting up straighter. Cooper jerked back, huffing a breath, both relived and frustrated. "We'd use you as bait."

"So first I'm an unsatisfying handjob and now I'm bait?" he asked skeptically. "You really know how to flatter a guy, Lucas."

A small smile tempered his words, but it didn't reach his eyes. I licked my lips, heat prickling my neck as his eyes tracked the tip of my tongue. Get it together, Ortiz! "I just mean we can use your participation in this set of campaigns, between now and December, as an example for other athletes, to attract them to the programs and hopefully get their support."

Cooper eyed me thoughtfully, his gaze no longer hyperfocused on my lips. "So I act like a good boy for you and you'll be happy?"

My voice came out a rasp. "That's... that sounds a lot different than what I intended."

"Does it, though?"

I don't know which of us moved first. One moment we were leaning and the next, his lips were so close to mine I could feel the ghost of his breath across them. "What are

you doing?" I whispered—barely whispered, really. The words were more sigh than sound.

He shook his head minutely, denim-blue eyes fixed on my mouth. "If you don't know, I'm not sure how to explain it," he said, throaty and low. "I can show you, though."

The kiss was butterfly-fast, a bare brush of lips before he withdrew only enough for us to say we weren't touching. The tiniest shift would bring us together again.

"Are you still mad at me?"

I shook my head the smallest bit. "Maybe."

His smile filled my vision, transforming his face, making my heart lift and take flight. "Which is it?" he murmured, leaning slowly, slowly, slowly nearer. "No or maybe?"

"Do we have to talk about it?" I whined. Giving in, I reached for him, one hand going to that hard thigh I knew would feel like granite under my fingers. The other crept up to his shoulder, almost touching the copper-gold strands escaping from his low ponytail.

This was ridiculous, I scolded myself. Giving in to attraction—not even lust just attraction! —and putting my plans, my professional standing in jeopardy...

Remember Jimmy?

He leaned in. "Soon. We'll talk soon," he promised.

Then he was kissing me, or I was kissing him, and it was nothing like I expected, nothing like I'd even remotely thought it could be. For long moments, we were only connected at those few points: the kiss, my hand on his thigh, on his shoulder, the

tentative brush of his fingers on my wrist.

Then I sighed. Or maybe it was him.

With that soft breath, everything shifted. He moved, leaning back and pulling me with him, startling a laugh and gasp out of me. He seized the moment, dipping the tip of his tongue just past my lips. Deepening the kiss, we settled back, me on his chest and him against the arm of the sofa. I pulled away enough to take a breath, letting him nose against my jaw, working tiny kisses against my chin, my throat, down to the curve where my neck met my shoulder.

Any remaining rational thought dissolved like sugar in the heat of his attention. "Fuck, Lucas," he muttered against my skin. "Fuck."

The single syllable, so rough and low just below my ear, sent that remaining bit of reason soaring out the window.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:47 am*

### CHAPTER 6

#### COOPER

Lucas tasted like sweet tea and a hint of mint toothpaste and warm and sweet and ugh... My heart was racing a mile a minute, hands shaking. I hadn't felt this riled with a guy since I was fourteen and made out with Tommy Benson behind his parents' garage during the Fourth of July block party.

Lucas made a tiny, desperate noise into the kiss, the sound a fiery dart straight to my groin. Without thinking, I arched against him, relishing the way he tensed, then melted against me. Lucas pulled back again, a soft gasp as we broke for air. Eyes squeezed shut, he tucked his chin to his chest. "What are we doing?" he asked again. "I know what we're doing, but... What are we doing?"

"Well, I might be a little bit rusty," I admitted with a smile, "but I think the kids call this making out."

He opened one eye to glare down at me from his perch astride my body. "You're not funny."

"I'm fucking hilarious." I ran my hands up his thighs to his hips, giving him a squeeze. Lucas didn't moan or sigh, but he definitely whined, rocking against me for one second before he stopped himself. "Come back here. We're not done."

He hesitated. "Cooper..."

“I’ve had the worst crush on you,” I interrupted. “For at least two years now.”

He huffed, cheeks darkening. “I don’t fuck around with players. I don’t date y’all, hang out with y’all?—”

I thrust against him, rocking my hard cock against his through our layers of clothing. “Well, you’re definitely doing something with a player.”

And that was the exact wrong thing to say. Lucas was quick, rolling off me and to his feet with lithe ease. “This was a colossal mistake, Cooper. You need to go, okay? I thought... I thought...”

“What did you think?” I asked, sitting up but not standing. We were both hard enough to cut glass—Lucas didn’t bother trying to hide his erection, and I don’t think I could’ve hidden my own if my life depended on it. “I’ll tell you what I thought,” I went on when he just shook his head in silence. “The two of us are attracted to one another. We have some vibes between us. And we’re both adults who want to find out if this,” I waved my hand between us, “is something to explore further or a flash in the pan.”

He huffed again, this time less amused and more irritated. “I could lose my position on the squad if anyone found out we even kissed,” he spat. “Cass pulled every string she had to make sure I could work with you, and I don’t want it to all be for nothing.”

“Do you get shit about working with Ash?” I asked, naming former Troopers players who did some work with Queering Sports. “Or Rye? Or Yowie?”

He shook his head, not meeting my eyes. Everything in me pulsed with the need to reach out and touch him, to feel that slight roughness of his jaw, the smooth warmth of his throat and collarbones, to taste him again and again. We’re alone here, Lucas. Why are you acting like we’re under a magnifying glass?

“But I’m not having late evening meeting with those guys,” he murmured. “Ash has been volunteering with Queering Sports since forever. He helps run our football camps. But he’s not a player. Rye, Yowie, Matty, all the guys who came out to the last fundraiser?” Spreading his hands wide, he made a show of glancing around the room. “Do you see any of them here?”

“I just see you.” I stood. He took half a step back, but no more. I moved around the coffee table. “Tell me to stop.”

He nodded. “I will.”

“Okay.” I paused a few feet from him. “Lucas, I’m not asking you to marry me or something. All I’m asking is you don’t run hot and cold on me. If you don’t want to do this, say so now. Don’t... don’t go along with what we’re feeling and then tomorrow act like I kicked your dog.”

He closed his eyes, but I had the feeling he was rolling them even behind the lids. “If my name gets dragged through the mud, I’m not only fucked out of my position with the team but any professional consideration in the field. I’ll be oh, that twink who fucks the players and not oh, that’s Lucas Ortiz, the guy who gets queer kids involved in sports and made the community welcoming for them.”

Defaulting to humor was a failing of mine. I knew it, but I did it anyway. “That sounds like an awful lot to put on a business card.”

Lucas opened his eyes to glare at me, but the smallest of smiles tugged at the corner of his lips. “I know it sounds like I’m being overdramatic with this project, Cooper, but there’s so much riding on it. Queering Sports could be so much more . And if we’re able to steer this in the right way, time everything right, then we can start building up and out instead of entrenching.”

His enthusiasm was effervescent, lighting him up as he spoke, hands like hummingbirds when he gestured to emphasize a point or sketch out some vision in the air between us. “It’s not just making it financially successful because, really, most organizations like this aren’t ever going to turn a profit. And that’s fine . All of the money should go to the kids. Queering Sports has an all-volunteer board, and Liesel is one of three paid employees. It’s shit pay even by Texas standards.”

We were moving slowly back to the sofa. I sank down onto the cushion Lucas had been occupying. Instead of taking up his post at the other end, he sat beside me. Our thighs touching and his eyes bright on some faraway goal, he shot me a small, soft smile.

“But the thing is,” Lucas continued, “we’re not only changing people’s lives—we’re redefining what it means to be a team player. It’s about acceptance and understanding everyone’s unique struggles and journeys, and it’s our responsibility to embrace them and learn from one another. If we can make just a small dent in the world, think of the ripple effect.”

I couldn’t help but feel inspired by Lucas’s passion. That kind of conviction made you want to be a part of something bigger than yourself. But I had to be honest with him. “Lucas, I admire your faith, but you’re making it sound like a walk in the park. We both know the struggle of fighting for acceptance and change. It won’t always be easy...”

“I’m not an idiot.” His soft smile slipped into a frown. “You think I don’t know that? I’ve spent most of my life fighting for things. It’s never been a walk in the park, Cooper. I?—”

“Hey, hey, just a sec,” I cut in, holding my hands up in surrender. His chest heaved with annoyance, the bright eyes of moments before snapping with anger. The urge to panic was definitely rearing its ugly head for me. You just got to kiss him, you

asshole. Now you're insulting him? Smooth, Howard. Real fucking smooth. "I'm sorry, Lucas," I said, my voice soft and sincere, hoping to diffuse the tension that had filled the room. "I didn't mean to make it sound like I think you're naive or that I doubt your commitment. I just want to make sure we're both prepared for the effort it will take to see change. I admire your passion for our cause, and I want to help any way I can."

His expression softened, and he let out a deep breath, relaxing his body against the sofa. "You're right, Cooper. This won't be easy. But the alternative is far worse. If we don't try to make a difference, who will? I can't imagine giving up on our community."

I nodded—he was saying things I'd said before to more than one would-be sponsor who wanted to trade on my queerness to sell their product but refused to actually do anything to help. "Okay. Let's focus on the positive, then. All the progress you've already made. That the organization's made."

The tension thrumming through him like a live wire dissipated. His thigh against mine no longer felt like an iron bar.

"You're right," he said, smiling again, "we've come a long way already, and I'm proud of everything we've accomplished so far. But we can't become complacent. There's still so much work to be done."

I grabbed his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "I know, and I'm with you every step of the way."

His eyes met mine, the distance between us seemingly melting away.

He didn't let go of my hand for the rest of the night, which kept me smiling long after I got home.

Hell, I was still grinning like a goofball when I met my sister for our weekly run. “Stop laughing at me,” she grumbled. “It’s too early for this shit.”

“It’s eight in the morning. And I’m not laughing at you. I’m just smiling.”

Heloise pushed her bright pink bangs back out of her face and glared. “Just for the record, I told Gregggy if I’m not home by noon, he should avenge me.”

“Gregggy is five.” And that time, I did laugh, stretching my quads on my front steps as she took a rather savage slurp from her water bottle. “Don’t get all sloshy. You’ll puke.”

“Hmph. How far are we going today?”

“Same as last time.” Every weekend, we eked out a few hours to run together in Zilker Park, early in the day as we could manage to avoid the worst of the heat. Heloise grumbled, but she never turned me down when I called. It was one of the few times we could visit without worrying about Gregggy or the bookstore or my training schedule or anything other than how much distance we were covering and whatever silly challenged we’d set for one another.

Last week, I had to run backwards for a quarter mile, which, hello, corner back. That’s easy as closing my eyes. Running backwards is kind of half of my job. She didn’t appreciate my return challenge of run without complaining for a quarter mile.

“What’s it gonna be today?” I asked as we set out on a slow jog. We’d take it easy until we got to the park, then fall in with the other runners out doing the same thing—escaping the daily grind for a bit, getting some fresh air, and, for folks like Heloise, suffering for their health. “I have to skip for a mile? Crabwalk? Wear a sports bra?”

She huffed, shaking her head. “Today’s challenge is telling me what has you looking so dorky.”

“I can’t help it. That’s just my face.”

“I didn’t say ugly . And whoever it is, when do I get to meet him?” When I started to deny it, she shushed me, jabbing one finger at me to poke my shoulder. “Don’t even try to deny it. Whoever texted you a few minutes ago at oh-god-o’clock on Saturday morning had you grinning ear to ear. Unless you’re suddenly that excited to hear from Phil, it has to be a new lov-ah.”

I cringed, and she laughed. “Never say that word. Ever. Especially not like that.”

“Why? Don’t you want to talk about your lov-ah?”

We weren’t at the park yet, but I put on a burst of speed, leaving her shouting rude things about my parentage until I slowed enough for her to catch up. “We have the same parents,” I reminded her as she glared, huffing. “So that makes you a?—”

“We found you in the cat’s litter box,” she grumbled. “Shut up.”

I laughed as we hit the park’s running trail, an easy path that ran for about a mile. On my own, I’d go around five or six times, a nice warm up for my day ahead, but with Heloise it was only about once, maybe twice, at a leisurely pace. It was an easy day for me but one I sorely needed. After our parents moved to Dallas for Dad’s job when I was in college, Heloise and I were on our own for the first time ever. We were both technically adults, but that first step out of the nest is always a doozy. And when she opened her bookstore and scouts started noticing me, we leaned on one another more than ever, finding a bond as adults we didn’t really have as kids.

“Because you were a little shit,” Heloise panted when I mentioned how different our

relationship was now.

“I’m a delight,” I sniffed. “And I wasn’t a shit. You just thought you were too cool to have a little brother.”

“I was. And I am. But needs musts. So, are you gonna tell me about this new...person?” she teased. “Are they another player? Are they on the same team? Oh my god, is it Anders? Tell me it’s Anders. He’s so hot!”

“Er, no, ew. And Anders is single if you want me to put in a word.”

She made a face. “No thanks. I’m not looking for anything more than a few hours at a time. If even that.”

“Also, ew.”

Heloise bumped me as we moved around a couple pushing a stroller, moving at just above a speed walking pace. “It’s not ew . It’s normal for a lot of folks with a sex drive, thank you very much.”

“Who watches Greggry while you’re out with these guys? Becky? Samantha?”

“Nosy,” she retorted. “Jenny from next door. Greggry and her kid Micah are besties. And you can’t distract me, Coop. Who’s the guy?”

“There’s no guy.” A tingle of guilt wiggled through all those lovely endorphins the run was stirring up. “Okay, not... yet. Maybe. I don’t know. I want there to be.”

“Oh my god.” Jaw dropping, she stopped.

I turned to jog backwards a few feet, motioning for her to move. “Don’t stop like that.



Ouisie. That's how you get cramps."

She put on a surprising burst of speed to catch up with me. "I get cramps from my brother making bad choices. Like hooking up with Lucas Ortiz !"

"Shhhhh! Jesus, Ouisie! Just take out a freaking billboard on MoPac, why don't you? And we didn't hook up."

She huffed, either annoyance or the run was catching up with her. I wasn't sure which. "Spill, Coop. You've had the hots for this guy for years. How did it happen? When? What does it mean? Oh my god, you can't tell anyone! It's forbidden!"

The way she whispered forbidden was just too much. I slowed to a fast walk, shaking my head. "We're not trading nuclear secrets," I muttered. "I'm just helping him."

"I bet."

"Oh my god..."

"Challenge," she said sharply. "You tell me all about this not-a-hook-up with your big crush, and I'll run the rest of this trail without telling everyone we meet you're trying to murder me."

"No one would believe you."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take."

We eased into a jog once more. The crowd on the path grew more difficult to navigate as people moved in clusters and some others decided today was the day to show off, running too fast or cutting through groups with nary a warning. Finally, we broke free of the worst of it, and I shot her a glance. She raised a brow at me, a silent

go on then .

So, I told her about Lucas's freak out. The plans. All of them. And then last night's meetup. "He's just so passionate," I sighed as we rounded the last corner of the trail. "And I see what they're doing, you know? It's not some cool little thing for the kids to keep busy with. Kids like me and him, the ones that have a hard time in sports with shitty homophobic coaches or transphobic teammates..." I trailed off. "I'm still interested in him in a huge way, but maybe helping out with this whole thing isn't just a time filler, you know? Maybe I can really throw myself at it."

Heloise was quiet as we ran the last quarter mile. When we slowed to a cooldown, heading back towards my place near Zilker, she finally offered any commentary. "I think you need to be careful."

"What do you mean? Phil and Cait are both fine with this. Coach has no problem so long as it doesn't fuck with practice or the games once preseason starts later this summer..."

Darting a concerned, careful glance my way, she shook her head. "You invest a lot of yourself in projects, Coop, and lose sight of things. And not just things like the sports group. What I'm worried about, what I'm cautioning you over, is your tendency to go from zero to sixty in a heartbeat when it comes to loving someone, Coop."

"I'm not in love with him. Lust, maybe. And I'm definitely attracted to him. And I want to get to know him better. I want... I want to see if this becomes anything. But Lucas is high-strung, and he's so focused on this project. And last night I kind of had an eye-opening moment—maybe this is something I want to be part of too. Not just for these handful of events to give them a boost but in a real, meaningful way."

"Cooper," she sighed, that tone familiar from a lifetime of exasperated big sister lectures, but I didn't cave. No you might have a point or okay, okay, I'll think about it

this time.

She stared at me, her pink and black hair damp on her forehead, face red from the run or aggravation or maybe both. Finally, she nodded. “Okay. Okay. You’re a big boy, and so is he. Just promise me something, Coop. If this turns to shit, you cut him off immediately. Don’t try to fix things. Don’t try to fix him. And for the love of god, don’t try to fix yourself .”

For the first time I could remember, Heloise beat me back to my door.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 4:47 am*

### CHAPTER 7

#### LUCAS

“Nice of you to join us,” Lynda snarked. She tossed my old, worn pair of black ballet slippers in my direction as I reached the front desk. “Dee is out sick, so you need to take her intermediate barre class.”

“Nope.” I tossed the shoes back at my aunt. “I’ve got a private tumbling session in ten. And you know as well as I do how much traffic sucks between here and the gym.”

Lynda slapped the shoes down on the desk. “One, the barre class is after your tumbling class so ha. And two, when are you gonna quit that damn squad, mijo? They pay you shit. Hell, you end up paying for the privilege some months. I see you stressing about the money!”

Grabbing the shoes as I passed, I rolled my eyes. “I’m fine, Titi. Everyone has bad months, right?”

She pursed her lips into a thin line, watching me head down the corridor towards the open gym area at the back of the repurposed warehouse. Mom and Aunt Lynda started Stars and Rainbows when I was little. It’d been part of my life forever, it felt like, and when I got old enough and skilled enough to teach kids some tumbling and dance skills, it was only natural I joined them there.

Adding on the Troopers Cheer Squad had gone over like a fart in church. Between

my childhood dreams of being on stage and my mom's dreams of me committing to ballet, cheer was like a slap in the face to the family, apparently.

At least according to my cousin Allie, who loved telling me all about her career in Chicago and how Mom and Lynda would just sigh and look sad whenever I was mentioned.

I tossed the slippers, an old pair I kept at the studio 'just in case,' next to the shelf unit with the student cubbies and the dock for my phone. The gym was quiet now. The lightly colored walls closed in on me as I made my way to the center of the space to warm up. Lynda's words echoed in my mind, stirring up years-old frustration and nausea. I'm not just a cheerleader, I responded whenever Lynda or Mom started in about my life choices. But finally, finally, after what seemed like forever, I realized it didn't matter if I was 'just' a cheerleader. If that was my one and only goal in life. I loved it, I was damned good at it, and I busted my ass to get where I was. That should make them proud and not act like I was having some rebellious phase and would snap out of it, run off to Chicago, and join the Joffrey like Allie.

As I stretched and warmed up, I couldn't shake off the conflicting emotions swirling within me. The truth was, the cheer squad was my lifeline, my escape from the harsh realities of my life. Executing a perfect flip or nailing a difficult routine brought me a sense of euphoria I couldn't find anywhere else.

But Lynda was right too. The squad barely covered my expenses, and every month was a struggle to make ends meet. The constant pressure of financial worries gnawed at me, threatening to overshadow the enjoyment I got from cheer.

Which, when I really thought about it, was kind of ironic in a mega-suck way. "Cheer makes me uncheer," I muttered, heading for the mats to stretch.

As I settled into a split, the familiar creak of the gym door opening made me glance

over. Standing there, equal parts nervous and determined, was Kyle. A longtime dance student who'd recently expressed interest in cheer, Kyle was a shy kid who had been coming in for private tumbling lessons for the past few weeks.

"Hey, Kyle. Ready to work on those back handsprings again?" I called out, smiling warmly at him. He nodded, his eyes darting around the room before landing on me.

"Just me today, right?" he asked, his voice bouncing off the high, empty walls. He sounded little wary, a little shaky, only easing further into the room once I nodded.

"Just the two of us. What's up?" When he started to shake his head, I gave him a look. "Dude. I know the look of being picked on. I have a gold medal in being bullied. What's going on, Kyle?"

I gestured for him to join me on the mats, and together we went through the drills and exercises I had planned for the day. As Kyle struggled with his form, I offered more encouragement and guidance than usual. Something about his determination resonated with me, a reminder of why I had fallen in love with cheer in the first place. It didn't erase my uneasy feeling entirely, but it soothed the anxiety to be reminded why I was doing this. Why I was cobbling together so many jobs to make the ends come even close to meeting.

After an hour of intense practice, Kyle finally nailed a solid back handspring. The look of pure joy on his face mirrored the buzzy flutter in my chest. "That was awesome, Kyle!" I enthused, raising my hands for a double high five.

Kyle grinned, the bright pink bands on his braces bright in his wide smile. "Am I gonna be ready for the tryouts, do you think? They're in July so the squad can practice a lot before the season starts. I mean, it's okay if I'm not. But I really want to be."

“One step at a time,” I soothed, motioning for him to go grab his water bottle. “Honestly, about ninety percent of acing tryouts freshman year is enthusiasm.”

“But I want to be awesome ,” he complained, dropping to sit on one of the folded mats. He shot me a plaintive look before adding, “I’m the only guy, you know? I’m already getting crap from my brothers about it and some of the guys on the soccer team.”

“And you want to make them eat their words?”

He huffed. “Eat something, alright.” After a noisy slurp from his water bottle, he gave me a sideways glance. “My brother Matt, his girlfriend Cara went to that fundraiser you did the other day. Her sister’s into soccer too and got a lot of crap about being trans and bi.”

“Ah, shit,” I sighed, sinking down to sit beside him. “She’s got a queer sister, and she’s dating your brother?”

Kyle shrugged. “Matt’s not a ‘phobe. He’s just a jerk. He thinks me going into cheer is giving up soccer, and all the guys in my family play soccer.” Another slurp, then, “And maybe he’s a little phobic. He was all weird about that thing with Cooper Howard.”

The rush of defensiveness for Cooper surprised me. Well, annoyed me, then surprised me. He’s a bit boy, Lucas. He doesn’t need you defending him. Especially against some high schooler whose frontal cortex hasn’t finished forming. Still, I couldn’t stop myself from asking, “Weird how?”

Kyle shrugged. “Like, wondering why Coop was there, why did he have to shove in our faces, man ,” he said in an obvious mockery of his brother’s tone and voice. After one more sip, he smirked. “That pissed Cara off. I think she’s gonna break up with

him. She can do way better than Matt.”

“It definitely sounds like it,” I huffed.

“Is it true, though? That he’s helping out with Queering Sports now?” He scrubbed at a chalk mark on his shorts, affecting disinterest. “I knew Ash was, but he hasn’t been a player in a while. And those guys from the minors in San Antonio. My brother Rob is super into baseball and loves the Cottonmouths, so he was kinda excited they were in town but not enough to go to the event.” Frowning, he stared at his bare, chalky feet on the blue mat. “It’s really cool Cooper Howard’s helping out. My dad usually bitches about the whole Queering Sports thing whenever I bring home a flyer, but he was kind of excited that Coppertop was front and center, you know?”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I’m hearing a lot of that lately.”

Kyle shrugged again. “Anyway. I know the other guys from the team were there, and you and the cheerleaders were there, but I was thinking maybe my dad would be cool with me going if he thought a lot of big sports guys were there too.”

“There were a lot of ‘sports guys,’” I laughed. “Tons!”

Kyle’s cheeks pinked, and he gave me another one of those teenager shrugs. “I know, but, like... my dad and his friends would be really excited, right? It’d be a good excuse to take the kids and whatever...”

I nodded. “Or whatever.” My phone beeped to signal the end of the break. “Well, he’s definitely helping out, and we’re definitely having more events soon so tell your dad Cooper Howard will be there. Maybe we’ll see you?”

Kyle smiled. “Maybe.”



We did another twenty minutes of practice before our time was up, but I spent most of it silently cursing everyone for being right about Cooper Howard and myself for not thinking of this sooner.

I dragged myself into the empty apartment after classes were done and I endured another lecture from Lynda about getting a real job, dedicating myself to the school, getting my MBA... I just nodded and wished for death for a good ten minutes until another student came in and I could make a break for it. The heat of the day was unrelenting, a thunderstorm threatening with crunchy black clouds overhead and oppressive humidity sticking to my skin even after I shut the door behind me.

I recited the prayer of all Texans—"Thank god for air conditioning!"—and headed for the bathroom in the hallway, shedding my clothes as I went. With Renata out of town, I could be an absolute slob for a few minutes, I reasoned. And if those few minutes turned into half an hour because I happened to glance at the sofa as I walked past and couldn't shake memories of the makeout session with Cooper... Well. No one was there to jump on my case about using so much water.

I was still riding a slightly guilty vibe when I padded out of the bathroom to grab my dirty clothes and toss them in the wash. Catching a glimpse of myself in the shiny surface of the fridge door, I pause to give my body an assessing glance. And okay, maybe a tiny bit admiring because damn I had been working hard to stay in shape for the squad, and it was showing. Maybe I got a little caught up in my kitchen posing because when my phone buzzed, I yelped and leaped about six inches in the air. Fumbling my phone from the pocket of the pants clutched in one hand, I saw Cooper's name on the screen. Heat rushed to my throat and face, the urge to cover my junk as I answered reflexive. "Hey," I breathed. "Um. What's up?"

Cooper's pause was weighty. When he finally replied, he sounded... lower. Like maybe a little gravelly? Like... really really sexy. "Well, a minute ago, I would've said nothing, but now I'm not so sure. Am I interrupting something?"

"Huh? Oh, er, no?" I winced, snagging a fallen sock from the floor and hustling through to the laundry room to toss everything in the open washer. "Just settling in for the evening. You?"

He sighed, sounding tired. I thought I heard fabric rustling on the other end of the line. "Same. I was going to ask if you wanted to grab a drink, but it sounds like you're in for the night."

"So do you."

Yeah, that was definitely fabric. Was he in bed? Oh my god, was he in bed? Not like I had room to talk—I was balls naked in the middle of my sister's kitchen. At least he had a sheet.

Maybe.

"I mean, I could be persuaded to go out." Even though my heart was somersaulting in my chest, I tried to sound casual. "Where did you have in mind?"

Cooper chuckled, a warm sound making me shiver with delight. "There's this quiet bar down the street from me. Nothing fancy, just a place to unwind. How does that sound?"

"Sounds perfect." A grin spread across my face. "Let me just throw on some clothes and I'll meet you there in fifteen minutes."

After hanging up, I practically danced around the apartment. I settled on a simple but stylish outfit, wanting to look good but not like I was trying too hard. As I headed out the door, I couldn't ignore the butterflies in my stomach or the way my pulse quickened at the thought of seeing Cooper again. When I pulled into the tiny parking area behind the bar, I had a burst of second thoughts. What the hell am I doing? A

week ago, I wanted him to fuck off into the sun, and now I'm giddy about getting a drink with him.

Okay, Lucas, keep this professional. Let him know from the get-go this isn't something romantic, not a hookup, strictly two people getting together to have a drink and talk about a shared project.

Tell him about Kyle. That's a good jumping-off point. Get the conversation going about bringing in those uncertain parents.

I spit out the minty gum I'd popped before leaving the apartment and smoothed my hands over my shirt one more time before I caught myself. "Christ, Lucas," I scolded my reflection in the visor mirror, "stop this. Now. Gay Commandment Number One: Thou Shalt Not Let Your Dick Make Decisions For You."

Apparently, my dick had missed that Sunday school meeting because I gave myself one more primp in the mirror and stepped out into the humid evening.

The bar was dimly lit when I arrived. Cooper sat at a table near the back, a faint smile playing on his lips as he saw me walking in. My heart did a little flip at the sight of him, so relaxed and confident in his jeans and t-shirt. As I made my way over, I tried to keep my own grin in check but felt it tug at the corners of my mouth uncontrollably.

"Hey," I greeted him, sliding into the seat across from him after stopping by the bar to order a gin and tonic.

"Hey yourself." Cooper's eyes crinkled with warmth. "Glad you could make it."

"Honestly, I almost said no," I admitted. "I was giving serious consideration to binge-watching the episodes of Interview with the Vampire I haven't seen yet and eating my

weight in pretzels, then zonking out for the night."

"Glad I'm more appealing than pretzels," he laughed. "Though I have to say it's quite the ego stroke that you picked having a drink with me overspending the night with hot vampires."

"Well," I smiled slyly, "you know what they say. Vampires suck."

He snorted, almost spitting out the sip of beer he'd just taken.

I took another sip of my drink. The initial uncertainty melted away under Cooper's easy charm. We talked about everything and nothing, sharing stories and laughter like we'd known each other for years. The more we talked, the more I found myself drawn to him—his passion for helping with Queering Sports, his love for baseball, and the genuine kindness shining through in everything he said.

As the evening wore on, the bar grew more crowded as people moved through the city looking for things to do for the night. "It's usually way more chill than this." Cooper leaned across the table so I could hear him over the dull thrum of conversation around us.

"I guess this means we won't be talking business," I sighed, fishing one of the juniper-flavored ice cubes from the bottom of my glass and giving it a crunch. Cooper's expression, so relaxed and open for most of the evening, fell like a soufflé on the countertop.

"I... didn't know you wanted to talk about the project," he said carefully, leaning back in his seat. "Um. We can, if you want. Maybe go somewhere quieter?"

My stomach gave a lazy, lopsided flip. I'd upset Cooper, maybe hurt his feelings, and I felt like shit. Just one simple sentence, not even something intentionally hurtful,

chased that smile from his face and closed him off as sure as slamming a door between us.

Before I could second-guess myself, words tumbled out. I leaned close, his gaze wary, as I blurted, "Look, let's go somewhere, okay? Not to talk about the project or anything. Just... I don't know. A walk around the block?" I suggested, offering a tentative smile. "Ice cream?"

A clot of people burst through door of the bar, two wearing sashes proclaiming Bride-to-Be. The vibe shifted dramatically, people calling out congratulations. The music on the jukebox, sort of a lowkey instrumental jazz situation, flipped to something fast and poppy.

"Walk sounds good," Cooper allowed, though he didn't sound enthusiastic.

Still, though, he followed me as I wove a path through the growing crowd and out into the humid night.

### CHAPTER 8

#### COOPER

For the first part of our walk, the gut-punch feeling, realizing Lucas thought I'd invited him out to talk about work-related stuff, left me off-kilter. I let Lucas lead the way, moving around groups talking on the sidewalk. Crossing at the light, we headed towards a quieter side street with some old bars and a tattoo parlor scattered between the mostly darkened storefronts. We walked for a few minutes in relative silence until Lucas ducked under the awning of a secondhand book shop, still open for another two hours. I smiled quickly at the sight—I knew the place well.

“What’s funny?” Lucas asked, his smile small and uncertain.

“I just find it amusing that you brought me to my sister’s competitor,” I replied, unable to suppress a chuckle. “She has a shop in Bee Cave. Bibliosmia.”

Brows drawing together, he shook his head. “I don’t think I’ve heard of it. I’m sorry?”

“Secondhand books, a lot of rare and hard to find stuff.” I opened the door, motioning him ahead of me. “The name means the smell of books.”

He snorted softly. “Well, it’s a good smell so who can blame her?”

“The owner has a thing for Ouisie,” I whispered. “They were in college together, but she was dating her ex at the time. Then she got pregnant and had Gregg, her ex

disappeared, and she wasn't in any place to date."

"Ooooooh," Lucas crooned, eyes lighting up. "Enemies to lovers! My favorite!"

".. what?"

"Enemies to lovers! The best fictional trope! Like Darcy and Elizabeth—okay, they weren't so much enemies and antagonists, but it counts!" He rattled off a few more names, flashing me that dimpled grin and winking before adding "So your sister and this guy... total Darcy and Elizabeth vibes?"

"No, no, nothing like that," I chuckled. "I mean, he's kind of a sourpuss sometimes, but that's just him, I think. He's been carrying a torch for Heloise for almost ten years. Not in a creepy way, just... if she ever looked his way, he'd definitely faint."

"That's kind of cute," Lucas cooed. "Totally a romance novel setup."

"Maybe," I allowed. "If they stopped trying to outdo one another in sales."

"Okay, nerdy-romantic then," he said with a shrug. "It can work!"

"Tell you what," I laughed, "you can tell my terrifying sister she needs to date her business rival. Sell tickets. I want to see if you can handspring your way out of that verbal beatdown she'd dole out. Ouisie is convinced she's not dating until she's at least forty and Gregg is in high school."

Lucas looked taken aback before joining in my laughter. We stepped inside the cozy bookstore, the scent of old paper and leather enveloping us. The dim lighting and the soft jazz playing in the background created a warm atmosphere. As we perused the shelves filled with literary treasures, I caught Lucas stealing glances at me, his eyes holding an unspoken question.

I pretended to be engrossed in a dusty copy of a classic novel, but his gaze made my heart race. Finally, mustering up all my courage, I turned to him. “You know, this isn’t exactly how I imagined our evening would go.”

Eyes sparkling, he took a step closer, closing the distance between us. “How did you imagine it then?” he asked softly, his hand brushing against mine. The touch sent a shiver down my spine, and a rush of warmth flooded through me. Something clouded in Lucas’s expression as he stared back at me, his lips pursed in a thin line as his gaze searched my face. Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone, replaced by something clear, cautious. Maybe a little interested. “Because I can safely say this is not at all like I’d pictured the night going.”

“I imagined a quiet dinner, maybe some good wine, and talking about everything but work,” I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about the other night. And I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want a repeat.” Or more...

A soft smile tugging at the corner of Lucas’s lips, he reached out to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “Well, who says we can’t still do that?” he murmured, swaying closer. Eyes hooded, his gaze caught on my lips.

My heart fluttered at his touch, the air charged with an undeniable tension. Without another word, Lucas closed the gap between us and pressed his lips to mine in a tender kiss. In that moment, surrounded by the scent of old books and the soft sounds of the shop around us, my crush burst into flame, became something else entirely.

And I only hoped Lucas might feel it too.

“Hey! Hey, you’re Heloise Howard’s brother.”

The kiss broke, Lucas taking a half step back and shoving his hands into his pocket,



expression wary. A tall, thin man with sharp features and hair even redder than mine peered at us from the end of the aisle, a deep frown on his face. “Did she send you to check the place out?”

“Hey, Sonny,” I sighed. “No, we were just... out?—”

“On a date,” Lucas broke in at the same time, his cheeks flaming pink. “We were on a date, and I suggested stopping in here.”

Sonny turned his shrewd gaze to Lucas. “Are you a bookseller?”

“Not even remotely. Unless you count me taking those boxes of Mom and Titi’s romances to Half Price Books for them every year.”

He sniffed. “No. No I do not.”

“Long time no see.” I gave him one of my Media-Friendly smiles. “Should I tell Ouisie you said hi?”

Red crept up Sonny’s throat, above his buttoned collar and tie. “That’s not necessary. I’ll be watching the pair of you, though. No pictures! And if I see her little shop is suddenly copying mine, I’ll know who passed the intel on to her!”

Lucas’s eyes were so wide the whites clearly showed around the deep brown irises. “Roger that,” he murmured. Nodding sharply, Sonny turned to stride back to the counter, no doubt to watch us on CCTV.

I squeezed Lucas’s hand, offering a reassuring smile. Once the coast was clear, I turned back to Lucas, unable to contain the laughter bubbling up inside me. “Well, that was unexpected,” I said, chuckling nervously. “Weird, though.”

Lucas let out a breath he seemed to have been holding since Sunny's interruption and joined in my laughter. "You sure know how to show a guy a good time," he remarked, fluttering his lashes at me with a coy smirk.

"If that's all it takes to impress you, then I think this evening is going better than I assumed."

Lucas studied my face carefully, his smirk falling into something serious, considering. "Are you trying to impress me?"

Awkwardness flooded my veins, heating me to a nice, cheery pink under Lucas's shrewd gaze. "Maybe?"

He snorted. Shaking his head, he turned away to head down the aisle. "Come on. Let's buy each other a book."

I strode after him, catching up easily. "Seriously? This is a book date now?"

He hummed in agreement. "I pick out something for you, you pick out something for me. Then we swap. My sister Renata did this with a few of the people she's dated and said it's a fun way to find out what they think about you."

That was worrisome. "I don't know if I want to know what you think of me," I muttered. He flinched, ducking his face away.

"Maybe I'm worried, too."

I gestured to the books around us. "One way to find out, I guess?"

He nodded slowly. "What're you going to do if the book I pick for you sucks?"

“Smile and say I love it.”

He rolled his eyes. “No. That’s shitty. Then I’ll think you love it, and that’s how you end up getting 400 tiny thimbles from various state and national parks.”

“Er...”

“Long story short, I told Titi the little thimble she brought back from Yellowstone was cute, and now I have hundreds of the damn things in a storage unit outside of town with the rest of my shit.”

Slipping around him to block his path, I made a cross over my heart. “I promise I will never inundate you with souvenirs from national and state parks, even if you told me my spoon collection was cute and I had very refined taste in dust catchers.”

His lips tilted mischievously, but he nodded. “I’ll hold you to that. Now come on. Let’s browse first. Then we’ll split up.”

As we wandered through the aisles of the bookstore, our fingers brushing occasionally as we reached for the same book or shared a whispered comment about a rare find, I couldn’t shake the warmth blooming in my chest. Being with Lucas felt effortless, comfortable, and undeniably exciting all at once. I wanted to browse the store forever, wanted to take him back to my place, and—well, yeah, do the fun stuff, but also just watch something silly on streaming, talk about the books we got, learn more about him. Tell him more about me... About how maybe he had the right idea looking farther into the future, past what we were doing now.

About how maybe he had given me some ideas about what I could work towards one day, when it was time to pack it in.

We split after twenty more minutes, Lucas heading for a corner of the store we hadn’t

been to yet. I, after a moment of hesitation, veered towards the social sciences shelves. It took a few minutes for me to find something I knew my sister had in her shop because I'd helped her stock the shelves a few weeks back, so I guessed Sonny might have it too. Sonny rang me up with a suspicious glare, watching me as I waited for Lucas.

"Bup bup bup," Lucas scolded as he sailed out of the aisles, wagging a finger at me. "No peeking."

Obediently, I turned my back as he handed Sonny his selection, then listened in amused surprise as he charmed the hell out of the prickly shop owner. "You're welcome back any time," Sonny informed him. "He's not."

My laugh was stifled until we stepped out onto the pavement. "Geezly crow," Lucas snickered, "he's personally offended by your existence."

"It's impossible not to like me," I complained with mock offense. "Something must be wrong with him."

"I dunno. I didn't like you much when we met..." He trailed off, not meeting my eyes as he instead focused back the way we'd come. "Walk me to my car? I parked behind the bar."

We walked for a few moments, the street quiet as we were off the main drag, before I mustered the courage to say, "You said that in the past tense."

"Hmm? Yeah, because I parked in the past. If I was still parking my car, we wouldn't be here."

I stopped, and, after a few more steps, so did he. "Your ears are red."

“Shut up,” he muttered, darting a glance up at me. “It’s warm out. I get red when I’m warm.”

“And here I was thinking it was because you were a little embarrassed. Maybe a tiny bit shy.”

“I’ve never been a shy a day in my life.”

“Is that so?”

He nodded slowly, big brown eyes fixed on my face as he darted his tongue out, licking his lips. “I’m a pretty bold person, nine times out of ten.”

“And what happens on the tenth time?” I asked, my voice rougher and lower than I expected.

“I’m cautious.” He took a step towards me. “Not shy. Not afraid. More... watchful. Mindful.”

“Aware?”

He nodded. Another step. Somewhere down the block, someone let out a loud whoop, and a car beeped as it was unlocked. Neither of us flinched. Neither of us so much as glanced their way.

“Sometimes,” I murmured, “when I’m on the field...” Another tiny step. He was just within arm’s reach now. My fingers twitched at my sides, eager to feel the bare skin of his arms, the warm silk of his hair. “I know there’s thousands of people watching, shouting, chanting. The other players, you all cheering, Coach...”

“But?” One last step and now he was close enough to feel the tickle of his breath on

my neck as he looked up at me. The shadows falling over us between the streetlamps made it feel far more private than we truly were.

“But sometimes, everything else disappears except me and whoever I’m blocking.”

“Are you trying to say you’re blocking me, Cooper?” he asked, a small smile teasing the corner of his lips, pressing in the tiniest of dimples there.

I wanted to taste them.

“I’m saying that whenever we’re together, it’s like that for me. Everything else is outside, far away.”

He swayed towards me on a breath, our chests barely brushing. “That doesn’t seem safe. Aren’t you afraid you’ll get hurt?”

I nodded slowly. “Very.”

We were kissing on the next breath, his inhale and my exhale. Hesitantly, he brought his hands up to my shoulders. I bent to meet him, my own hands gripping his hips like an anchor. It wasn’t a deep, dirty kiss, but it left me breathless as we pulled apart. My heart jackrabbited against my ribs like I’d just gotten an interception off Tom Wiesner.

“We shouldn’t do that in the street,” he muttered, bouncing down on his heels.

“We should go back to my place,” I offered immediately. “Trade our books?”

He nodded slowly. “We could do that... Or mine?”

“Mine’s closer.” Closer meant faster, faster meant being alone sooner, and that meant

more kissing, more touching...

"Okay," he whispered. "Okay."

Okay...

Lucas drove us back to my place, giving me a sideways look when mentioned I'd walked. "It's really not that far," I laughed. "And I thought maybe I'd be drinking a bit, so I didn't want to chance leaving my baby out there overnight."

"Oh my god," he groaned, turning where I indicated. "You're one of those guys who names his car Lucille and polishes the rims every Sunday and special orders seat covers that match your eyes or something. I should've known!"

"First," I sniffed primly, "my car's name is Molly. Second, I polish the rims on Wednesdays. And my seat covers are Trooper gold with our team logo in blue."

He cackled, almost missing the turn to my building. "Oh my god," he repeated, shaking his head. "I swear, you'd better be kidding, or I'm just dropping you off right here."

"Not about the name," I laughed. "Or... the seat covers."

He snorted. "Of course you're not. I've yet to meet a football player without the team's name all over every damn thing they owned. If I check your socks, will they be from the merch site? Oh my god, are your undies Troopers branded?"

"No," I drawled. "My socks are black, thank you very much."

He pulled into the drive leading to the private parking garage, punching in the code as I recited it for him, then moved into one of the visitor spots near my car. "And the

undies?"

"That's a surprise for later."

Lucas's startled squawk made me laugh as I let myself out of his older-model hatchback. "Come on. Don't forget your book."

The trip up to my floor was mostly quiet. Once we were confined in the brightly lit elevator, a sudden nervousness overtook both of us. The building played a 24-7 loop of local news and what Rye referred to as yacht rock in the elevators, which meant we were both awkwardly listening to a report about a horrible accident on MoPac followed by the opening strains to "Summer Breeze."

"I have to admit," he said as the doors finally opened on my floor. "I didn't picture you living somewhere like this. Most of the players I've known either go embarrassingly big or they get a freaking farm."

I snorted, leading him down the corridor to my apartment. It was nice—like, way nicer than most apartments I've been in—but it wasn't ridiculous. Or at least, I didn't think it was. As I unlocked the door I had a moment of anxiety—what would Lucas think of my place? Would it put me in the ranks of 'most of the players he'd known?'

"Oh, wow, this is nice," he crooned. "Beautiful view of the park! I bet you can see that Trail of Lights thing they do at Christmas from here."

I nodded, locking the door behind us and following him to the picture window overlooking part of Zilker. Lucas dropped his bag from Sonny's shop on the sofa, staring out at the darkened park. A few lights picked out trees and part of the nearest foot path, but twilight swallowed most of it, never fully dark thanks to Austin's glow but a nice little island in the night, somewhere not busy and loud. "That feeling I was talking about earlier? Being the only ones in the world?"



Lucas nodded, craning his neck to look up at me. I stood close behind him, looking out over his head at the dark blotch of the park and the bright lights of the city. "You feel it here too."

"Sometimes. Right now."

"Sometimes right now?" I loved his smile, the puckish tilt, the way it smoothed out the worry lines he wore like a hair shirt. "Sounds complicated."

"It doesn't have to be," I whispered. Lucas closed his eyes on a sigh, a shiver racing over his body. "Lucas..."

"We shouldn't do this," he said quietly. "We shouldn't. I could lose my job, my reputation, the nonprofit would stop working with me..."

"Or," I interrupted, pressing my fingers to his lips, feeling the firm muscle and soft skin, the way it sent a pulse of need you now and please please please straight to my cock. "Or maybe nothing bad happens. Because this is ours. And for us."

He huffed a tiny, helpless laugh against my touch. "People always find out."

I dropped my hand, let him take a step back before I spoke again. "We'll stop then. It's... it's just two adults acting on impulse, acting on attraction. We?—"

My words ended in a started grunt as Lucas flung himself at me. One thing about cheerleaders—they can fucking jump. Lucas was airborne from a dead standstill in just a heartbeat, and then in my arms before I could do more than process motion means grab!

"Stop talking for a minute," he ordered, lips brushing mine as he spoke. "Nice catch, by the way. I see why the team shelled out the big bucks for you."

My startled laugh rang off the high ceilings and bounced between us. "Warn a guy next time?"

"I like to keep you on your toes."

Lucas felt good in my arms, right even. We kissed in the middle of my living room until I couldn't hold him up anymore; then we moved to the couch. Somewhere, my phone buzzed, but I ignored it. Whatever it was could wait until I damn well felt like talking to anyone other than Lucas.

As we made out on the couch, Lucas's breath mingled with mine. The creak of springs and rustle of fabric were all but lost under the tiny noises he made, the whimpers and gasps as I found spots on his throat and behind his ear that made him arch into me, cling to my shoulders and back, stretch and drum his heels in pleasure. Our hands roamed freely, exploring familiar territory and new discoveries alike. I trailed my fingers through the short hair at the nape of his neck, coiled between my fingers and begging to be touched.

Breaking away, he looked into my eyes, his face flushed and his cheeks damp with sweat. "We both know why this isn't a good idea," he whispered, "but I think we also know why it's a very good one."

I nodded, braced above him and wanting nothing more than to trade places, be the one held down. Held down by Lucas Ortiz, at his mercy even if only for a few minutes. "God, yes."

He tilted his head and pressed his lips to my ear. The warmth of his breath sent shivers through me. "We need a code word," he said, his voice barely audible, "something that means..." he hesitated, his eyes locked onto mine, "This needs to stop." At my stricken expression, he reached up and pressed his palms to my cheeks, "No, no, no... I'm not saying..." He closed his eyes, resting his forehead against

mine, then huffed a frustrated laugh. “If I say handspring, we need to stop, okay?”

I nodded. “If I say...”

Eyes still closed, he smiled. “Fumble.”

“Don’t jinx me,” I teased, pressing a kiss to that damn dimple. “Fumble.”

Lucas opened his eyes, and I fell into that deep gaze. “Coop?”

I nodded. “Yeah... yeah...”

He closed the distance, craning his neck to kiss me. Everything melted into a haze of pleasure and need. Lucas’s body was smaller than mine, but he was strong, a fact which shouldn’t have surprised me but did. He looped his arm around my shoulders and did some maneuver, ending with me on the floor and him on top of me. At my startled yelp, he grinned. “I spend most of my time training to catch people flying through the air. Flipping you on your back is nothing.”

“That is way sexier than I expected it to be,” I breathed, diving in for another kiss. He laughed against me, his breath catching between us. I seized the opportunity to deepen things, tasting his tongue and lips, the remnants of our drinks, the cinnamon gum he’d chewed in the car. Lucas made a desperate, needy sound in his throat, tangling his fingers in my hair to hold me still before rolling his hips, pressing his ass against my hard cock. Even through our layers of clothes, it was divine.

I arched up the next time he did it, drawing a shuddering sigh from him. And again, and again, until we were moving together, the kiss more a smear of heat and wet and need than anything now. It didn’t matter that the corner of the coffee table was jabbing my shoulder, or the wood floor was uncomfortable as all fuck. Lucas’s weight atop me, his panting, gasping breath, his hands moving over my hair, my

neck, my chest, grabbing at my shoulders—it all made any discomfort worth it.

“Oh god, yeah,” he breathed, throwing his head back when I squeezed his hips, grinding him down on my hard, almost painful, length. “Fuck, I wish we’d taken a minute to take off our pants,” he laugh-sighed.

“Next time,” I promised. Because I wasn’t going to last much longer, not with the way he was moving, the sight he made. “Fuck, you’re beautiful,” I murmured. “So beautiful.”

Surprise flared in his eyes, his lustful, heated expression flickering before the shock was gone, replaced by desire.

It had been years, close to a decade, since I’d been so damn frantic to orgasm, but with Lucas atop me, working me over, every other thought dissolved in a haze of heat and need, replaced with a pinpoint focus on making him fall apart so I could follow. He gasped and laughed when I lunged up, holding onto him so he wouldn’t fall. I moved us back onto the sofa, pinning him beneath me. At the questioning look on my face, he nodded, whispered, “Please, yes,” and moved against me again.

Hands and mouths came into play, each kiss and touch more desperate than the last. We fumbled the buttons on our jeans, the rasp of zippers lost under panting breath. “Just a sec,” I muttered, pushing up so I could see between us. His cock was thick, blunt-tipped and rosy at the head, a bead of precum leaking down the underside. He was shorter than me, but girthier. My jaw twinged with anticipation; he’d be a stretch to take. Whining, Lucas thrust up into my hand. “Don’t tease,” he ordered throatily. “I’m so close.”

“Can I?” I asked, nodding to my own hard length jutting between us.

Lucas pushed up onto his elbows and smirked. “Ginger all the way, huh? I didn’t

know you could get freckles there.”

“Hush,” I chuckled. “Can I?”

“I’d be disappointed if you didn’t.”

It took a little maneuvering—that whole thing about height doesn’t matter when you’re laying down is kind of bullshit—but soon enough, we’d figured out a position that let me grasp our cocks together in one hand. Just barely, but still. Both of us leaking like faucets, we were slick and sticky and hot in my grasp. Lucas wiggled beneath me, locking his legs around my thighs, digging his fingers into my biceps, and that was it for me.

For a moment, everything suspended. It was like the instant before I hit a tackle, that breathless, timeless in-between state. Then everything burst into sparks and heat. Hot release coated my fingers, my body bowing against Lucas. His sharp, high gasp was the only sign his own peak was right there. His body went taut, eyes fluttering closed. On a breath, his orgasm broke. Streaks of cum painted his belly and my knuckles, the mess we’d made cooling rapidly on our skin.

Reluctantly, I let us go, both of us oversensitive now but neither wanting to stop touching. He scooted up to rest against the arm of the sofa, uttering a small oof when I carefully lowered myself to lie between his spread thighs, head on his chest and his hand in my hair. “So this evening went way differently than I expected,” he said after what felt like a long time but was really just a few minutes.

“How’d you expect it to go?”

He hummed thoughtfully. “A drink or two, maybe talk about the upcoming fundraiser, bitch a little about how things are going with the nonprofit, you’d be charming, I’d be bitchy, then we’d go our separate ways.” He tilted his chin to peer

down at me. “Maybe a kiss.”

I scooted up, moving my head to his shoulder. I brushed a kiss against his prickly jaw and smiled when he shivered. “Maybe?”

“Mmm. To be honest, I couldn’t stop thinking about the other night. But I didn’t want to assume...”

“Lucas—”

“Ooooh, you sound serious.”

“I am. Listen to me: I am interested in seeing where this goes between us, okay? I’m... more than interested, if that’s possible. I want to get to know you better. I want you to know me . And I understand it’s not going to be easy with our jobs and... Well. I was hoping you saw more to me—to us—than physical attraction and having to work together for the nonprofit.”

Lucas stared at me so quietly, for so long, something inside me shriveled. My neck felt hot with embarrassment. Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore and started to move off him.

“Wait.”

His legs gripped around my hips so tightly I couldn’t move.

“I want to find out too.”

“Yeah?”

Tentatively, he smiled, relaxing his grip on my hips, and nodded. “Yeah.”

### CHAPTER 9

#### LUCAS

Coop: So, when are you going to let me give you that book? I still have the bags.

I glanced at the rest of the squad at Bodied. For the past few years, the small, private gym had been awesome to us, between the discounted membership and arranging to use the space on the days they were generally closed. But it felt too crowded and too overwhelming surrounded by the rest of the team while I was trying to sneakily check my texts from Cooper. Since the weekend, we'd been texting one another several times a day. It was Wednesday, and we'd both been busting our asses with training, him with some sponsorship and admin stuff, me with Queering Sports and teaching.

And by several, I mean maybe two, three dozen times. Or more if I found some funny memes about football or athletes.

Cooper didn't seem bothered by it, though, always replying when he had the time, never telling me I was being annoying or too chatty. He must like me, I thought. I'd have been sick of me by the fourth meme.

Me: You didn't peek? I'd have peeked.

Cooper: Some of us are better at being patient. Taking our time. Making it last...  
\*winking emoji \*

Me: Shut up. I'm at the gym with the squad. Can't do leg presses with a hard-on.

Cooper's reply was a bit longer coming, the dots bouncing then stopping, bouncing then stopping. Finally, he sent it.

Cooper: I feel like there's a sex joke in there somewhere, but I can't make it happen.

Me: \*tongue sticking out emoji \*

"You're gonna get your ass fired," Marisol announced, dropping to sit beside me. Sweaty and breathing hard, she gestured at me with her water bottle. "Don't lie and say you're not talking to Cooper Howard. I had a feeling in my gut at the fundraiser. My grandma had the Eye and she said it runs in the family." She tapped the center of her forehead. "My cousin Ellie, she can throw a curse like no one's business. Me, I'm good at sussing out when people are lying." She gave me a pointed, eyebrow-raised glare.

"I'm not lying about anything. I'm just texting with Cooper about the fundraiser in August."

"You're flirting with him. You've wanted in that man's jock since at least the fun fair, if not before. And don't you give me that tongue click and eye roll, Lucas. I know you. You're one of my BFFs, and you cannot lie to me."

"Which is it? You got your grandma's magic powers or I'm a bad liar?"

"Don't you try to distract me. You know this is a bad idea," she hissed, grabbing my wrist when I started to stand. "Even if you weren't literally contractually forbidden from dating a player, what about all that shit with Jimmy?"

"Cooper isn't Jimmy," I muttered, glowering at her fingers on my arm. "I... I thought maybe he'd be like Jimmy too, but he's not."



"How do you know?"

"Because he's not!" The sudden quiet that pooled around us told me I'd been way louder than I'd meant to. Marisol let go of my wrist and made a whatever gesture, but I knew we weren't done with the topic. Shoving my phone in my bag, I went back to the circuit. A few times, I caught her and Liz with their heads bent together, glancing my way only to stop when they caught me looking.

Fanfuckingtastic. I smelled an intervention.

By the time I'd done my rounds and run through a cooldown, I had just an hour before I needed to be at the studio, so I couldn't linger and chat like usual. When Marisol, Liz, and Tori trailed after me towards the locker rooms, I stopped and shot them all three a stern look. "I know we're close, but I am fully capable of changing without help."

"Lucas, listen," Tori began in a gentle, firm tone, ever the Mom-friend. "Marisol told us you're messing with a player, and that's not just gonna come back and bite you on the ass, but any of us who knew about it too."

"Marisol doesn't know that I'm doing anything," I shot back. "Marisol is pulling things out of thin air."

"Am I?" she demanded. "Lucas, I'm not dumb." She leaned in closer, dropping her voice to a near whisper. "Someone saw the two of you this weekend, okay?"

Shit. I pasted a smile on and shrugged, forcing down the wave of nausea threatening to send me bolting for the bathroom. "He asked to meet up. Cass and Dani cleared me working with him, and it's okay. Management gave the go-ahead."

"Lucas," Liz sighed. "Look, none of us are famous enough to get recognized on the

street?—"

"Unless it's by those creepers who think we're all nymphos," Marisol added.

Liz rolled her eyes. "Them aside, some gossip pages say Cooper Howard was seen on a date with a guy who looks a lot like you. They described his date as short, dark hair, Latine?—"

"So that could be like forty percent of the male population of Texas," I pointed out.

"Don't be dumb," Marisol snapped. "It's not that hard to figure out. And it doesn't even have to be true," she added. "It just has to seem true for management to cut you loose."

"And to come down on the squad, too, since we'd obviously know. You're not exactly being lowkey, Lucas," Liz said gently. "Look, I'm not telling you who to date or fuck. Just... be careful, okay?"

"Remember Jimmy," Marisol said with a sneer. "You didn't think he'd turn out to be an asshole, either."

"Jimmy wanted me to lie," I hissed. "He wanted me to be okay with him dating a woman—him marrying a woman—and keeping me on the side!"

"Until it was convenient for his career to be out and proud," Tori reminded me. "And then what happened?"

I pursed my lips into a thin line, the words burning my throat.

"He decided you weren't the right kind of queer guy he wanted to be seen with. And you found out when he stepped out with that asshole Tyson Janes," Marisol

continued. Tori and Liz shifted uncomfortably—they'd been there when the shit with Jimmy went down. On Thursday, he and I had talked about our big debut, now that he was retiring from the NFL after a devastating knee injury. On Friday he'd been papped out and on the town in New York City with Tyson Janes, the supermodel son of a billionaire hotel magnate. The only response I received when I tried to talk to Jimmy had been a cease and desist from his lawyers and a threat of a lawsuit if I ever spoke about our relationship, with a stern reminder about my own contractual obligations to not date players.

"I'm not trying to be a bitch," Marisol sighed.

"You're failing," Liz huffed. "Listen, we just don't want to see you get fucked over again, okay? And we don't want you to lose your career. Just... if—if—you are seeing Cooper Howard... be careful, okay? Like however careful you think you need to be, double that."

I nodded faintly, stomach still roiling. "I have to go. Got class soon. See you at practice tonight," I muttered, turning away and striding into the locker room.

When I emerged later, the gym was almost empty, and I could make a beeline for my car, pretending I wasn't about to burst into tears.

Thankfully, Tia Lynda wasn't behind the counter when I got to the studio. One of the older students who sometimes picked up a few hours to help pay for classes gave me a sunny smile and wave, pretending she wasn't hiding her phone in her lap.

I sailed past on my way to the Beginners' Hip Hop class. As usual, the kids were full of energy like trying to herd hyperactive cats, but it was a relief from my circling worries and kept me from sending something to Cooper I probably shouldn't. In fact, I didn't get a chance to even look at my phone until after I got home. I had a few hours before I needed to be at the field for our practice, so I took a quick shower and made

some food before checking messages. Cooper had texted me a few times—some risqué emoji combinations, a hint about the book he'd picked for me ( It's not about sports, he promised), and asking if I wanted to grab some dinner before he met with his agent.

Me: Too late. Already eating. Had training this a.m. then teaching, about to go to the field for practice.

Cooper: The field? I didn't know y'all practiced there. I sort of thought y'all just showed up on game day.

I snorted to myself before replying.

Me: We use the field sometimes, to block out bigger routines and get a feel for any changes to the space between the end of the season and the start of preseason. Usually, we practice at a big studio downtown.

He asked me a few more questions—how long practices were, was it as tiring as it sounded—and I felt a tiny warm glow, pleased he was asking about my day, my life. Jimmy never gave a fuck, I reminded myself. It was always about his schedule, his day, his life.

I rinsed my dishes and set them in the dishwasher, pausing to send one more text to Cooper, letting him know I'd be out of touch for a while. Then my phone rang. Giddily, I grabbed it to answer without checking the caller ID. "Hey," I laughed. "Texting not enough for you? I can't do dinner tonight but maybe?—"

"Easy there, stud," Cassie interrupted, amused. "It's just me. Though I'm flattered your foray into dating a woman would be with me, I have to tell you my wife would not be thrilled with the idea."

"Oh. Oh, hey..." I deflated. "Um, I'm heading out to practice in a few so..."

"I know. I wanted to talk to you before you left. Try and get ahead of things, so to speak. Have you checked your email this evening?"

"No?" I headed over to where I'd left my laptop on the coffee table the night before and opened it up, clicking on the email icon. "What's going on? You're freaking me out here, Cassie."

"Liesel sent out an email before checking in with me, which is her right since the squad doesn't have any control over Queering Sports' PR or business, but I thought maybe you'd like to know before finding out when you checked social media tomorrow."

Liesel's email was in the first ten in my inbox, a little red flag marking it as VIP. Great News! was the subject line.

Apparently, leftover spaghetti and a side salad can turn into a rock in your stomach given the right conditions. "I'm about to open it," I warned Cassie. "What am I walking into here?"

"News of Cooper Howard's involvement has really lit a fire in the league, apparently, and several players have reached out to take part in upcoming events."

Oh shit.

"He's like Bloody Fucking Mary," I wheezed, a panicked laugh burbling up in my chest. "I said his name too many times, and I summoned him."

"Lucas..."

"No, no. Let me read."

Hey gang! This is awesome news! Ash has been working so hard on the football camps for the kids, but we all know how hard it's been to get and keep funding for projects like this. Well, we've had a small miracle occur, and a wonderful donor has not only contributed enough for us to run the camp for FIVE YEARS—they've also volunteered their time and name.

I want y'all to welcome Jameson Creel to our volunteer team! In addition to Ash and Cooper, Jimmy's going to be part of our social media blasts going forward and developing the organization's football camps, workshops, and expo games!

"Hey, Cassie," I wheezed after a moment. "Just a quick question here, but...what the fuck?"

Cassie's dry, tired chuckle was familiar and almost a balm—she knew how bad it had been with Jameson, especially towards the end. How much I'd spiraled. How I'd shut down and almost gave up everything I'd worked so hard for just because some man who couldn't own up to being with me decided to tell me I wasn't good enough.

And I'd believed him.

Cooper would never...

"Queering Sports doesn't owe us anything when it comes to letting us know who they're working with or, well... anything, really. Unless you're organizing the event, which is the case for the upcoming fundraisers you have set with them..." She trailed off. "Hon, I don't think you're going to be able to avoid seeing Jameson."

"I can if I quit," I muttered, then shook my head, knocking that thought loose even as Cassie sputtered. "No, I'm not going to. He doesn't get to drive me out of this. He can

eat a bag of rancid dicks for all I care."

She was silent for a moment. "That's disgusting, Lucas. But I like that. Keep that thought in mind. Is it going to be a problem meeting with Liesel on Monday for your next-step meeting?"

"Why would it be?" I hastily tabbed over to my calendar app and checked the date. "I'll be professional. She had no idea about Jimmy."

Cassie hummed agreement. "Of course. Just thought it best to check."

I paused. She sounded weird. Hesitant, maybe a little worried. "Cassie. What's going on?"

"Well. There's been a few rumors going around. Gossip, really. You know the team doesn't get a lot of space in the gossip pages, but a few really glom onto the guys."

Damn it. Marisol was right. "Is this about me having drinks with Cooper the other night?"

Cassie's breath came out in a whoosh. "You've heard then?"

"That I had drinks with him? Well, I was there, so yes..."

"Don't be a smartass," she scolded. "Right now, management is not concerned. You have clearance to work with Cooper for this project, and you weren't acting in an untoward or overly familiar manner. At least not as was reported. But be careful, Lucas. Do you hear me?"

"Marisol already gave me the talking-to earlier," I sighed. "I know."

Cassie was quiet for another moment. "I know you're not going to screw yourself over for a bit of fun, Lucas. But I also know you lead with your heart nine times out of ten. I'm not gonna tell you what to do—I know what the contracts say, and I also think that's ridiculous, thank you very much. But I am going to remind you how much is riding on your reputation, and what it would mean for the squad as well as your future."

I promised her I'd be careful, she made some chiding noises about me running late, and we rang off.

"Well, shit," I sighed, scrubbing my hands over my face. "Shit, shit, shitty shit shit."

Not only was I going to be late, but I was also going to be distracted. This was going to be amazeballs.

"Dude. What the hell was that shit?" Marisol demanded. Practice had been rough. The new routines weren't sticking, some maintenance stuff was going on loudly, the sound system wasn't working right... And I'd fumbled two catches, nearly dropping Liz and Tori.

"It's been a day," I muttered, huddling over my knees. We were about to do our last run-through of our newest routine, needlessly complicated but definitely a crowd pleaser. "I need a minute."

Marisol sat beside me, tapping her toes on the ground in a rapid, frustrated rhythm, fidgeting with the metallic poms half the squad had for the routine. "I'm sorry I came off as bitchy today," she said quietly as the others milled around, waiting for the end of break. "You're one of my best friends, Lucas, and I don't want bad shit to happen to you, okay?"

I nodded. "Yeah," I whispered. "I know. Did you hear about Jimmy?"



Marisol hesitated, then nodded herself. "Tori told me just before practice started. You gonna be okay, or do I need to take up a bail money collection?"

Her brisk tone made me giggle, which infected her a second later. "I'm gonna keep on doing what I've been doing." I bumped her shoulder with mine. "I'll do my best not to let him take up any real estate in my head, you know? If he's gonna throw money at Queering Sports, then we're gonna use it. If he's gonna help the kids, then okay. But he's not part of my life, and I'm gonna make damn sure it stays that way."

Marisol pursed her lips like she wanted to say something but, after a moment, shrugged. "Okay, bestie. But just so you know, my brother Marvin works for a funeral home. If we need to hide a body, I know a guy."

Coach Dani blew her whistle, and we were on our feet, conversation over in a heartbeat. We dragged ourselves into one more round. By the time we wrapped up at ten, all of us were dragging ass. "Fuck, I wish they'd let us use the showers," Neda, one of the new members, grumbled. "I hate driving home sweaty."

"It's still in the high nineties," I pointed out. "Even if we could shower here, we'd be dripping by the time we got to our cars."

"Y'all can't shower here?"

Cooper's voice startled us. Emerging from the dark entrance to the tunnel under the seats, he looked effortlessly, casually cool in a loose, light button up open to his chest and pale blue shorts verging on Magnum P.I. length. Which, by the bye, is the only correct length for men's shorts, so jot that down. "Seriously, y'all have to leave all gross and grassy?"

Ah. So maybe that was disgust and not lust in his eyes. "We have showers at home," I returned primly, parroting what Dani told every newbie with delusions of grandeur.

"The team's facilities are off limits unless it's something like this." I gestured at the field. "Even then, we're on a tight constraint and have a babysitter." Two security guards watched over our practice, ostensibly for our safety but really to make sure we weren't getting too big for our britches and getting into the team's beeswax. "What are you doing here?" I added in as low a whisper as I could manage.

"Had to stop by to drop off some paperwork for Coach and I wanted to see you."

"There's too many people," I whispered hurriedly. "I'm gonna get in trouble." And it was true—Dani was staring hard at us, as were a few of the other squad members. Even with the fundraiser excuse, it was a hair-thin line we were walking. "There's people everywhere!"

Cooper's smile fell away entirely. He looked up at the empty stands and did a slow, considering turn, brow furrowed, and lips crimped into a frown, seemingly forgetting he was surrounded by the cheer squad and our very annoyed coaching staff. "If you don't mind, Mr. Howard, we need to get going. We've already stayed past our allotted time," Dani called out.

Cooper jolted, shooting her a sheepish, apologetic smile. "Sorry, ma'am. I'm working with Lucas on the Queering Sports fundraising campaign, and we had a meeting scheduled for after practice."

Dani's brows nearly met her hairline. "Did you now?" She turned her sharp gaze towards me. "I was unaware of that. But I suppose what Lucas does on his own time is his own business."

Every eye in the squad was on us. Cooper was loose-limbed, still frowning around the field as if looking for some hidden meaning in the grass, oblivious to the keen interest in our meeting. Forcing a small smile, I nodded at Dani. "It's not a big deal. Cooper, did you bring the, uh, thing?"

His attention moved back to me. "The thing? Did I bring it?"

I wanted to kiss that slow smirk right off his face.

"I left it in my truck."

"Well. Then. We'll.... We'll just go get it?"

He nodded, his own grin slow and sharp. "We should."

"Oh my god," Tori muttered. "You are so getting fired."

### CHAPTER 10

#### COOPER

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, showing up at Lucas's practice. Part of me wanted it not to matter, that we weren't supposed to be hooking up or even 'fraternizing' outside of the stuff for Queering Sports. I'd had a tiny little daydream about him running over, stretching up on his toes to kiss me... Though, to be fair, in that daydream, no one else had been on the field, and we'd made excellent use of the bench under the bright stadium lights.

I lingered as the cheerleaders filtered out. Their coach waited, arms folded and eyes narrowed on me until it was just the two of us. "I know you're working with Lucas on his projects," she began without preamble, "and I know the inherent drama in this whole forbidden relationship bullshit, so I'm not gonna tell you to mind your step with him."

"I have the same stipulation in my contract," I pointed out mildly. "No cheerleaders, support staff, other players..."

"Yeah, but who do you think would get fired if this came to light? You, with your high-dollar contract, fan base, and valuable skills that might help the team get to the bowl games, or Lucas, the cheerleader whose career has a short shelf life and can be replaced before preseason even begins if push comes to shove? It gets out that the two of you are... canoodling," she said, rolling her eyes at my huff of laughter, "it won't be you getting shit in the media. You might get a few jokes, some late-night talk show host still hanging in there might use you as a punchline for a week or two,

but Lucas will be slut-shamed, name-called, and blocked from the industry. He could lose his job at the studio if enough parents get huffy about the relationship."

"I get it, I get it!" Raking my fingers through my hair, I couldn't help the glower I sent her way. "We're just... seeing what's what," I admitted. "That's it. And it's really no one's business but ours."

She nodded, still eyeing me warily. "Lucas means a lot to us. Not just me but the team. And to Queering Sports. He has a huge amount of potential if he just..." She sighed, shook her head, and seemed to deflate. "If he just lets himself dream a bit bigger."

"What are you saying?"

She shook her head again, glancing back down the tunnel where the squad had gone. "He's an amazing cheerleader, but sometimes people forget that's not all he is. It's an uphill battle for him, you know? People want to pigeonhole us into the whole airhead pretty bimbo sex kitten fantasy, but he's out there fighting for us to be taken seriously. For himself to be taken seriously..." Her gaze drifted back to me, and that stern expression slipped back into place. "So don't fuck things up for him, okay? If you're going to see where this goes, make sure you're sure before letting anything out of the bag."

She gave me a sharp nod and turned away, grabbed her bag from the end of the bench, and disappeared down the dark tunnel. I was left on the field with the distant figures of two security guards pretending not to watch. My phone buzzing startled me out of my moment of what the fuck. I grabbed it to see Lucas's name on the screen.

Lucas: Hey, meet me at my place? It's too hot, and I'm too gross to stand out here for long.

Lucas: And most of the squad's finding reasons to linger and it's creeping me out.

I smiled at the screen like a giant dork and sent him a reply, agreeing to meet him at his place in half an hour.

Lucas opened the door with a waft of sandalwood and mint, his hair damply curling behind his ears and feet endearingly bare. "Hey," he said, distracted. "Come on in. Want a drink? I have tea—hot and cold, water, beer but it's my sister's, so it's some weird hoppy mess she's into, juice if you're feeling fancy..."

I followed him into the kitchen. "Water's good."

"Better living through healthy choices," he sing-songed, mimicking an after-school PSA that had been popular about ten or twelve years ago. He grabbed a glass from the cabinet and filled it with ice before glancing back at me. "You're looking at me weird."

"I can't help my face."

"Ha. You know you're hot. That's like ninety percent of the reason the whole social media thing went bananas when you got linked to Queering Sports. We had to jump on that."

"We all have our strengths," I agreed, nodding solemnly. Lucas snorted, handing me my water and heading for the living room. I followed, taking up a perch on the overstuffed ottoman. He set up on one end of the sofa, tucking his legs beneath him and grabbing his laptop from the coffee table. "Right to work, huh?" I teased.

"The next fundraiser is in early August. That's barely six weeks away. Between now and then, you've got preseason starting, I have training four days a week, classes to teach, volunteering with the nonprofit..." He trailed off, suddenly very interested in

whatever was on his computer screen.

I seized the opportunity, scooting close on the narrow sofa. "What's going on?"

He hesitated for a long moment before sighing gustily. "Just had a lot on my mind lately. My Titi—auntie—she's always on me to go back to school since, in her words, I wasted my potential by going into pro cheer instead of becoming a dancer like my cousin. She and Mom, they were prima ballerinas in Cuba, back when they were younger."

"Holy shit, that's awesome." I smiled down him before his words sank in. "Wait, your aunt is making you feel like shit because you didn't go into ballet? Dude, you have two freaking degrees! You're working for a nonprofit, teaching, and doing professional cheer! What's disappointing about any of that?"

"Ask my mom and Tia," he muttered, lips crimped in an annoyed frown. "They don't care that I busted my ass through school for my degrees, that I got scholarships and grants and worked until I was hallucinating from lack of sleep to pay for it. They don't care that I have literal articles published under my name in professional publications. They're just mad that I threw away the family legacy and didn't make my name in dance like they were denied doing."

"Even though you didn't want to be a ballet dancer?" I asked quietly, fingers itching to card through his hair, offer him some physical comfort as he sank into his funk.

"I don't think they'd have cared much what kind of dance, so long as it was dance," he admitted, sinking in on himself. "Don't get me wrong—I seriously thought about it. I auditioned for some big companies when I was younger. Ballet, jazz, hip hop..." He shrugged, catching his lower lip between two fingers and pinching it worriedly as he stared at the cold, empty fireplace across from us. "I loved it, but it didn't love me, you know? Cheer and tumbling, though?" He let go of his lip and let out a low

whistle. "That was love at first handspring."

His expression somehow both proud and uncertain, Lucas darted a glance up at me. "I figured out I was good at tumbling and cheer. Then I learned how to be great at it. But Lynda and Mom, they held on to hope I'd get accepted to one of the big companies or even go to school for a dance major and teach ballet or something, but..." He spread his hands. "Here I am."

"Not such a bad place to be, is it?" I asked gently.

He shrugged again, those fingers moving back to worry at his lip in a nervous tell. "Maybe. I don't know. I didn't expect to still live with my sister at this point in my life." He pointed to one of the pictures on the mantel. Pride of place in the center, it showed a dark-haired woman with the same wide eyes and pointed chin as Lucas standing beside a tall, grinning man with an open face and a riot of sandy curls. They held a tiny baby between them, wrapped in one of those white hospital baby blankets and looking pissed as hell, little Winston Churchill face squished up and a silent shout caught for all time on film.

"I moved in when she was pregnant with Bas. Allegedly, to help out since it was a rough time for Renata and Del's job was super demanding." He scooted a bit closer to me, our knees barely touching now.

Still, I felt the point of contact like a brand. My hands itched to be on his skin, but my mind knew now was not the time. Still, it simmered there beneath the surface, my fascination with Lucas. Everything about him drew me to him, so much more intensely than when I first saw him a few years before. It wasn't merely a crush with a dash of lust, I realized, watching him reflect on that photo. It was turning into something more. Something tiny and fragile but hopeful. Possible.

Lucas shook himself, the tremor small and fine, before turning to face me, resting on



one hip. The move shifted him away a little, but he caught one of the escaped locks of my hair between thumb and forefinger, giving it a gentle tug and slow twirl. "Del died when Bas was a few weeks old. Undiagnosed heart problem," he added, voice soft and a shade rough. "Renata found him on the bathroom floor one morning. I... I'm never gonna forget that scream."

"Jesus..." I reached for him, cupping his chin in my palm. The very faint rasp of a day's growth tickled as he turned into my touch, exhaling roughly.

"I moved in to get out of the house. I was in my junior year at UT, just starting out with pro tryouts. Things were just insane at home. Mom and Lynda were furious I was throwing it all away, and Dad was just trying to stay out of it, so Renata suggested I come stay with them. Del was cool with it—totally big brother vibes, you know? Anyway. When he died, I stayed with Renata. Mom and Lynda backed off, but I guess my statute of limitations is coming up. Bas is starting pre-K in the fall, so there's no reason for me to stick around and help out, according to them."

I moved closer, guiding his head to my shoulder. Sighing, Lucas melted against me, his arms slipping around my neck in a loose hold. "This is nice," he whispered against me. "I'm so tired, Cooper."

"Rest a bit then," I offered. "We've got some time."

"Not nap-tired," he protested, shifting disconsolately. "Just tired of a million things happening at once. Working my ass off, barely scraping by on my own, the changes to the project, Jameson—" He stopped talking so fast I heard his teeth click together. "Just tired," he finished quietly.

"Jameson?" I shifted, bumping him a little with my shoulder so he'd sit up. "Jameson Creel? The former Copperhead?"

Lucas chuckled, but it sounded weak. "Something like that. Hey, no offense, but it's late, and I know we both have full days tomorrow. Can we sort out some of this stuff before we have the meeting and maybe get some rest?"

I raised a brow. "Why, Mr. Ortiz, are you inviting me to sleep over? I didn't even pack my jammies!"

His snort was closer to humored than not. "Nope, I actually need sleep tonight, mister, so no slumber parties."

"Not yet anyway."

Giving me a considering, heated look, Lucas cocked his head. "Not yet."

Everything was pretty straightforward. Lucas came up with a series of social media posts for me to make, and Liesel approved. He'd also gone over some talking points they'd worked on for me to slip into interviews where I could. He saved the doozy for last, though. "And here's something that's going to give us both hives," he sighed. "Liesel wants you to do another interview with Byrne. This one just about Queering Sports. She said she cleared it with Caitlin and Phil, but I'd double check if I were you."

"Don't trust Liesel?" I asked mildly, looking up from where I'd been making notes in my phone. "Why not?"

"I trust her. It's just she doesn't always get the ins and outs of our end of things. She was a college athlete, Division One basketball. But she never went pro, and she doesn't have a solid grasp of PR on a pro player's side of things. I mean, Ash—you remember him, right?" When I nodded, Lucas pressed on. "He's been helping out for a few years now and really busting his ass, but he's a retired player, so it's a lot fewer moving parts when it comes to contractual obligations and what he can and can't sign

off on his own time."

"Do you think Liesel is going to mess this up?" I asked quietly. "Is that why you're so stressed about everything, Lucas?"

"It wasn't until just recently. I mean, she's been running this joint for several years now, but it's mushrooming, you know? And things are starting to happen that aren't in her scope. The board is doing its best, but I can't shake the feeling there's not enough support—wait, no, not enough of the right kind of support." He huffed, pushing to his feet to pace agitatedly. "And it's not like I can really do anything about it, you know? I'm a cheerleader and dance teacher with a bachelor's in nonprofit management, but that's not enough. I have zero real experience."

"That's what this is, isn't it? Getting experience."

He threw up his hands. "Yes! But if it all goes to shit, then I'm screwed. I have nothing to show for my work, the organization is boned, and with my name attached to any cockups, I'll be a laughingstock at any admissions office if I decide to get my MBA!"

"Lucas, breathe," I urged, getting to my feet. "One step at a time, yeah? My grandma always said don't go borrowing trouble, and that's exactly what you're doing." He let me pull him into my arms, his body still ramrod stiff. "Can I touch you?"

"You already are," he mumbled against my chest. "But... maybe more is okay?"

Tucking my chin atop his head, I stroked his back slowly, tracing my fingertips down his spine. Even through his t-shirt, I could feel the definition of his muscles, the strength hidden in his smaller frame. "One step at a time," I said again, softer.

His body relaxed in increments, first his shoulders and neck, then down his torso,

until finally, he leaned almost fully against me, letting me hold his weight. Lucas slipped his arms around my neck again, and I moved my hands lower. On a whim, I lifted him under his ass until he was face to face with me. Wordlessly, though with a small, bemused smile, he wrapped his legs around my waist. "Okay?"

He nodded, resting his head on my shoulder. "Okay."

We swayed in silence, and then Lucas tipped his face back to look at me again. "One step at a time. First thing to do is those social media posts. I sent you some of the media pack from Queering Sports to your email the other day."

"I got it."

"Lemme down." He wiggled free, dropping lightly to his feet, and headed back to the sofa. "Enough whining," he sighed. "I need to get up at oh god o'clock and I know you do too so let's get this ball rolling, strike while the iron's hot, all that shit."

Was I disappointed we weren't going to get at least partially naked? Yeah, who wouldn't be? But the energy building as Lucas started walking me through what I needed to do was special—he was letting me see his world, beyond being a cheerleader. Letting me see his hopes and plans. And I felt honored, trusted.

"You're awful quiet," he noted after about half an hour. "Too much?"

I shook my head. "Just admiring how you've got this shit nailed down. If you decided to go into doing this full-time one day, I think you'd really ace it."

He sighed, rolling his eyes. "Maybe. This is one thing, but I don't have the experience..." He trailed off, his smile turning inward. "Well. Enough of that spiral, right?"

When Lucas got down to business, it was impressive and a little bit terrifying. He'd give Caitlin a run for her money when it came to organization, his social media blitz planned with surgical precision. By the time we wrapped up just after midnight, I had three folders on the cloud with specific dates, even times, to post, talking points to memorize, and a list of names to expect calls from to set up interviews and appearances. "I'll talk to Liesel and get her to talk to Phil," he said, but I shook my head, cutting him off.

"I'll talk to Phil myself. I have a phone call with him tomorrow about a promo offer, so I'll work this in."

Lucas nodded cautiously. "Tell him to call me or Liesel if anything needs clearing up." He followed me to the door and, without hesitation, stretched up on his toes to kiss me. "Talk later?"

I kissed him back, maybe a little longer than I should have given the hour and how tired we both were, but I didn't regret it. "Definitely."

### CHAPTER 11

#### LUCAS

The next few days were some of the best I'd had in years. The grind was still a thing, absolutely no changing that, but the texts and calls from Cooper were bursts of color in the world, like finding one of those stringy mystery weeds growing in the sidewalk crack was really a rose. It didn't go unnoticed by anyone, really. The squad commented on how cheerful I was. Lynda was suspicious and asked if I had a new man and if Renata knew I was slutting it up in her home. My students even noticed. Kyle figured out almost immediately that I 'had a thing' going on.

Renata swore I sounded lighter and made me swear to tell her all the details when she came back and wasn't surrounded by kids and burly Norwegian-Canadian hockey players. She sounded happier than I'd heard her in months, but I didn't want to point it out in case she remembered why she wasn't exactly kicking up her heels back here in Texas. "Mom wanted me to tell you to call her," I added before we hung up.

Renata made an annoyed, displeased sound. "She's trying to set me up with some guy from her church. It's been long enough, mija. Bas needs a solid father figure," she mimicked in a fair approximation of our mom's accent.

"Then I guess you don't want to hear that Dad's hired on a new nurse practitioner named Charles and was asking when your next day off was."

"Oh, god, it's spreading," she sighed. Bas made a happy, high-pitched sound in the background while someone—probably Renata's brother-in-law Soren—shouted in

pain. Renata chuckled softly. "I gotta go, Lucas. The kid's discovered beards are fun to yank, and Soren's going to be bald-faced soon if I don't rescue him."

"Call me," I ordered. "Soon, okay? It's getting lonely being the only kid for the family to pick on. I need you here to use as a human shield."

"Ha fucking ha." She hesitated for just a few seconds—if Bas wasn't shrieking in the background, I'd have thought she'd hung up on me. Finally, she said in a low, hurried voice barely above a whisper, "You know, you don't have to see them, right? Or take their shit?"

I groaned, leaning against the counter and closing my eyes. She had a very good point, one she'd made many times before, especially over the past year. "It's fine. I mean, Lynda does mean well, you know? And she and Mom lost so much when they came here. They just want?—"

"Bup bup!" Renata silenced me. "They just want to live their dreams through us . Swear to god, blowing out my knee was the best thing that happened to me because it got them off my back about dancing. I sucked, and I hated doing it. But you..." She sighed. "Lucas, you deserve every good thing, okay? And you are amazing at what you do. Don't let Mom and Lynda's dreams keep you tied to something you've outgrown. Now," she said before I could protest, "I need to go save Soren from Baz and get some sleep. We're gonna go see Del tomorrow."

Even though she couldn't see me, I nodded. "I love you."

"As you should." I could hear the smile in her voice before she hung up. She was far, and I missed her like crazy, but knowing she wasn't dealing with the heavy expectations of our family was a breath of fresh air... And a tiny hint of envy. But I'd have to squish down and examine that annoying emotion later, after this new event promo started. For the time being, I had to balance my work, my volunteering, and

just being alive, never mind whatever was happening with Cooper. Taking it slow was the best idea, I told myself as I headed for the bedroom. It was only Monday, and already I was worn thin and ready to collapse. Not talking to Cooper for a few days would be fine.

Totally freaking fine.

I was such a liar.

On Thursday, four days since we'd last talked in person, our time off aligned just right, and we could call instead of text. I stretched out on my bed, grinning to myself when I saw Cooper's name pop up on the screen.

"You sound like you're lying down," he said, almost accusatory, as soon as I answered.

"Maybe I'm standing on my head. You won't know unless you come over."

Cooper groaned. "Can't. Want to but can't. We have a mandatory team meeting this evening. Reviewing tapes." He laughed when I called it Real Housewives of the Gridiron. "Some days it sure feels like it," he groaned. "Two of the newbies got into it in the weight room earlier, just a dumbass dick-measuring contest, both of 'em barely old enough to drink but sure they're god's gift to football."

"Ugh. I remember guys like that from high school and college," I sighed. "They always thought they were entitled to the cheerleaders and drill girls too."

Cooper was quiet for a long moment. When he asked, his voice had a dangerous, sharp edge. "Is that why you said you don't get with players? Because someone thought they were entitled to you, Lucas?"



"I told you. It's because of the contract," I said, only a half lie. Cooper's silence told me he didn't believe me, or at least thought there was more to be said. I thought of Jimmy—Jameson, since he detested nicknames professionally—and something inside me crumpled. As much as I hated him, as much as he'd hurt me and threatened me, a tiny part of me still felt like I should keep that secret. That maybe I deserved to be silenced.

Why, though? Because Jameson wanted to portray the image that he was the right kind of queer guy, placate fans and management.

I wasn't enough . I wasn't right.

Fuck him. I was about to have to work with that asshole while he threw his money around and dragged Queering Sports into his orbit? Nope. "I dated a pro player," I heard myself say, sounding like I was speaking in another room. Cooper made a startled sound. "Uh, it was several year ago. I was in my last year at undergrad and just starting out pro myself."

"Do I know him?"

I heard the unasked question. "He doesn't play for the Troopers. He, um... he doesn't play for anyone anymore. He retired after an injury."

"I gotta admit I'm trying to do the math here, but so many of us have forced retirement..."

I worried my lower lip with my upper teeth for a minute. "Okay," I sighed. "I'll tell you, but you have to let me get it all out, okay?"

To his credit, Cooper was very quiet during the entire story, even the parts that made me want to curl up in remembered, remaining shame. "So, I got intimidated into

keeping my mouth shut. And really, nothing he did was illegal or anything. Just... being a giant floppy dick about our relationship. About me."

"Jameson Creel," Cooper said slowly, intentionally, "was a shit player, and I'm glad that sack by Philly's cornerback took out his knee."

I huffed a small, startled laugh. "Wow."

"And blackmail is illegal, you know. Threatening to expose you, to make you lose your job, to sue you? All blackmail."

"You're cute," I sighed. "But no. It's not. Marisol checked. She works for a law firm—has since undergrad—and it's just shitty. Not a crime."

Cooper huffed. "It should be." He shifted on his end of the line, fabric rustling as he moved.

"Why do we always end up in bed when we talk?" I complained halfheartedly. "Why don't we ever talk while we're sitting in chairs or standing up?"

He chuckled distractedly. "Maybe it's because it's the ass end of the day and we're both tired by the time we get the chance?"

"Oh, and here I was thinking it's because we're just always eager to try and get each other horizontal."

Cooper clicked his tongue, but he had a smile in his voice. "Now Mr. Ortiz, I thought we were having a serious conversation about Jameson Creel being a human-sized hemorrhoid. Are you trying to distract me?"

"Is it working?" I groaned, flopping back on my bed. "I don't want to talk about him

anymore. I want to pretend he doesn't exist until I absolutely have no choice. Then, when the meeting is over, I want to go back to pretending he's just a bad smell in the room."

Cooper snorted softly. "I like the idea, but I don't think that's how it's going to work. Not if he's throwing money at the group like this."

"Well," I said slowly, an idea taking shape, "then we just have to make sure he's not the most interesting guy in the room, won't we?" Cooper made a startled sound as I hurried on. "Be your charming self, and Jameson will look like a no-neck-having blowhard toad in comparison. And just really go balls to the wall on this promo stuff before the next fundraiser. And... do you trust me?"

"Yes," he drew out. "Why? What are you planning on doing?"

I wiggled my feet happily, a growing wave of giddiness swamping over me. "Making this event at least ten times more awesome."

Cooper laughed nervously. "Ah, how so? I thought you already had things all in place for this. Ash sent me a message earlier to confirm I'd help with the training..."

"Oh, I'm not changing that," I promised, ideas spawning and growing by the second. "Trust me. This will be awesome! It will get Queering Sports a heap of support and long-term growth potential. Shit, I need to bust out the spreadsheets for this one. Ooooooh, maybe I can add a pivot table!" I do love a good pivot table... I opened my spread sheet app and started moving things around.

"I love it when you talk organizational to me," he purred with a laugh. "Say slide deck. Oh, no, wait! Tell me to optimize my workflow and facilitate the synergy of the customer experience!"

"Oh my god, that's it, I'm breaking up with you," I sniffed, smiling to myself as I opened one of the other sheet tabs.

Cooper suddenly fell silent, the drop in conversation snapping me out of my split focus with a sudden lurch in my belly. I realized belatedly what I'd said. A worm of panic took bites out of my good mood. "Wait?—"

"Breaking up with me," he repeated. "So that means we're together? I mean, since you can't break up with someone you're not dating, so..."

"Uh..." I leaned back from the laptop. "Uh. I mean. I..."

"Lucas..."

Were we? I mean... I wasn't seeing anyone else. I didn't want to. I just wanted to see him. Cooper was who I thought about first whenever I wanted to share something. He was who I wanted to see first thing in the morning and last thing at night. When we weren't together or talking, I wondered how he was doing, if he needed anything, wondered if he missed me too...

"Lucas, it's okay if you're not sure if you want this to be more serious," he said quietly, though his voice told me it was definitely not okay.

I frowned down the line. "You're making a face. That one where you're trying to look all stoic and badass, but your eyes get all tight and your lips go all crimp. It's the same one you make when y'all lose a game."

"Am not," he grumbled, but there was a hint of a smile in the words. "How do you know?"

"That's your upset face. I may not enjoy football, but I've seen enough of it to know

what your upset face looks like."

Cooper made an offended sound. A second later, my phone beeped with an incoming request for a video call. "This," he said as soon as I picked up, "is my upset face for football." He pulled the exact expression I'd just been teasing him about. "And this is my upset face when I find out there's no vegan ice cream left." He made a sad puppy face, lower lip jutting out, brows drawn, head tilted to one side. "And this is my upset face when I see someone's parked too close to my truck and I can't get in since they decided they are super-special parkers and need to crowd other people, so they feel special."

I burst into giggles, unable to stop myself as he demonstrated a few more levels of upset face for me. "Okay okay, fine, you weren't making that face! But you were still upset!"

His expression smoothed, and he shifted, moving nearer to the screen now. It would be easy to pretend he was here with me, I thought that we were lying on my bed in the dark, his head on the pillow beside mine. If I just focused on his face, the rest of the room could fall away. He was just an image on my phone's screen, but that wouldn't matter—my vision would be filled with him and not the reality that we were a city apart, feeling like an entire continent rather than just a handful of miles. "I wasn't upset. I was... cautiously optimistic. That's this face."

His small smile, his slightly raised brows, made something prickle in my chest. "Cautiously, huh?" I murmured. "Well. Maybe hopefully is a better word?"

I shifted onto my side, bringing the phone a little closer. "Hopeful sounds good."

He licked his lips, his gaze traveling to mine, sending a zing of heat through me even across the distance. "I know we'll have to keep this quiet. I really wish we didn't. But?—"

"But yeah." There went my warm fuzzies. The zip and zing of arousal fizzled out under the cold dash of reality. "It's going to suck. Not the us part," I hurried to correct as his face froze. "No! The hiding it part. I... I have bad experiences with that."

He nodded slowly. "I know. I just... I wish it didn't matter."

I blew out a rough breath and shook my head. As my warm glow faded, tiredness crept in. "But it does. For both of us."

"You'd get it worse than I would, if word got out," he muttered, raking his fingers through the tangle of red curls that had fallen in front of his face. He pushed them back so I could see the striking blue of his eyes again. "So, for now, we're private. As much as we want to be seen on one another's arms..."

"In public, purely professional and if anyone asks, it's about the fundraisers. So brush up on your talking points," I teased halfheartedly.

He nodded. "And even if we have to deny involvement, we know the truth."

I nodded, desperate to see him suddenly, More so than just a few minutes before. I needed confirmation. Anchoring. Proof, for myself more than anything, this was really happening. "Do you... do you want to come over this weekend? I have Sunday afternoon free."

He nodded. "Unless something comes up. Four? I can make you dinner?"

I smiled. "It's a date."

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### CHAPTER 12

#### COOPER

If we didn't have to lock our phones up during practice, I'd have reverted to high school Cooper, staring at it and grinning like a goofball all morning. Instead, I daydreamed between scrimmages, wondering what Lucas was up to. Wondering how many times I could mention him in an interview before it got suspicious. Just that morning, ESPN asked me about my ties with Queering Sports, and I might have sung Lucas's praises a bit more than would be considered professional admiration. Phil had given me a stern, short lecture about focus and don't fuck things up for anyone involved, Coop once the chat ended.

I really was trying my best.

I had to—not only my reputation but Lucas's entire career was riding on me not being a lovesick twit.

Love...okay, easy there, Coop. I don't know if we're even close to being there yet.

But maybe?

My parents had known just weeks after meeting each other, according to my mom. Hours, according to Dad.

But then there was Heloise. Within a month of meeting David, she'd thought it was true love, but he turned out to be the human equivalent of that wad of hair in the

shower drain, leaving her when she was seven months pregnant with Gregg. He hid out until she hired a PI to track him down and get child support arranged.

To this day, almost five years later, he was fighting her on it, and Heloise was soured on the whole true love thing.

Which was why I found myself calling her during a break in training, fishing my phone out while the other guys grabbed drinks and grouped up to hash out plays or just bullshit for a few minutes before they blew the whistle on us.

"Who's dead?" Heloise said by way of greeting. "I know you're at practice, so something major had to have happened for you to call. It's not Mom, I just got off the phone with her. Is it Uncle Sammy? Oh my god, it's David, right? If it's David, call me back in like an hour. I have to order a cake and some party platters."

"No, you vengeful Valkyrie, no one is dead. Though to be fair, I'd arrange the party for you if it was David."

"Because you're a good brother."

"The best. But seriously, I need to ask your advice, and I think I could ask our folks, but they'd definitely be biased."

She put me on hold for a second or two so she could go back to her office while one of the clerks staffed the counter. "Okay, talk to me. If you don't want to ask Mom and Dad about it, that means it's either about a guy, about your career, or you're in trouble."

"Maybe all three," I muttered.

"Cooper Stephen Howard, what did you do?" Heloise growled. "Oh my god, are you



going to be on the news again? Swear to god, if that Byrne guy sets one foot in my shop?—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa—Byrne was at your place? What the hell, Ouisie?" I shot to my feet, pacing. A few of the guys nearby fell quiet, watching. I lowered my voice. "When was this? What did he want? Jesus, Ouisie, you shouldn't talk to that asshole!"

"Easy there, killer." I could practically hear her eye roll. "I told him I had nothing to say, I have zero idea what you're doing, and I thought his job was to interview athletes and not booksellers."

"I need to talk to Phil and Cait," I muttered. "Get on his ass about being shady. What did he want?"

"No idea. He just asked me if you were legit working with Queering Sports, and I cut him off," she said, exasperated. "What's going on? Is this anything to do with that gossip mess?"

"No... maybe? I don't know." The whistle shrilled, and I groaned. "Gotta go."

"Wait! You didn't ask your question!"

"Shit." The team was jogging back into place, and Coach gave me one of his death glares, the get your ass in line, Howard look I'd become very familiar with over the past few years. "How did you figure out you were wrong about David?"

"Huh? How did... Cooper..."

"Howard! Now!"

"Gotta go. Call you later."

I shoved my phone back into my bag and ran onto the field, jamming my helmet into place as I moved. Giving Coach an apologetic nod, I took my place and waited for the signal to begin.

Lucas : I have the books now. Muahahaha. Bow before me!

He attached a picture of the bags from Renny's shop on his coffee table.

Lucas: Are we ever going to exchange, or is this going to be our cutesy relationship thing?

Me : Cutesy relationship thing?

The sounds of the locker room bounced around me as the guys showered and dressed, shit-talking each other with some serious conversations wound between. No one bothered me as I sat half-dressed on the bench near my locker, texting with Lucas.

Lucas: Like some people have a song or a restaurant or a place. We have two unopened bags of books we just keep passing back and forth.

I thought of the book I'd picked for him, and anxious excitement prickled along my spine. I'd hoped he'd like it but now, so many days out from actually choosing it, I was having doubts. Maybe he'd hate it, I thought. Maybe he'd think I was making fun of him or that I didn't take him seriously or?—

Lucas: Or not?

Me: Sunday night. We'll trade then. No matter what.

He sent me a string of emojis, making me grin like a giddy kid.

"Hey there, Loverboy," Matty sing-songed, dropping to sit beside me. "Gonna put on pants, or is this a free show for all comers?"

Slamming my knees closed, I shot him a glare. "Just resting for a minute. The new plays kicked my ass a little."

He chuffed softly, rolling his neck from side to side and working out a kink. "Preseason is starting soon. The Copperheads are looking strong this year."

"So are we," one of the other guys called from across the room. "They ain't got nothing on us!"

Matty rolled his eyes as the newer players started up a raft of shit talk about our biggest rivals. Most of us knew no amount of bigging ourselves up would compensate for lax skills and cockiness. "Listen, I know you know about the rumors, you being out on a date with Lucas Ortiz. But just a head's up—we've got your back if anything comes out, okay?"

I bit down hard on the admission—yeah, he and I were officially official now, and he was amazing, and anyone who had something to say about it could talk to me directly. "It's just gossip. I'm helping out that queer kids sports nonprofit Lucas volunteers with, and people have nothing better to do than run their mouths."

He grunted, looking out over the rest of the guys. "Just watch yourself, alright? I don't want you to have to muck yourself out of some shit because someone gets the wrong idea." Cutting me a sideways glance, he offered a small smile. "And let me know if they need more volunteers, alright? It sounds like an awesome group. Rye and Yowie talked about that sports festival for three days straight."

"I'll give text you their contact info."

Matty gave me a nod and got to his feet. "I'm getting outta here. Sick of you," he added in a louder voice, earning his own whistles and smack talk as he headed for his locker.

Before I went for a run, I shot off one more text to Lucas to tell him I'd be neck deep in meetings most of the afternoon.

He sent back a selfie of him making a horrified face with Running is a tool of evil superimposed over it.

I made a mental note to send him a pic later, all sweaty and shirtless after my run. Then I shoved my phone into my bag and stood. Dicking around in the locker room wouldn't make the day go any faster, and the sooner I was done with everything, the sooner I could call Lucas.

I should have known Ouisie wouldn't just let things go so easily. By the time I got out of my meeting with Cait's assistant and a video call with Phil and a new promo for the hotel group the team partnered with, she'd called six times and left five messages.

"I didn't leave a sixth because Renny showed up," she sniffed angrily. "That little weasel is up to something, I swear to god..."

"Yeah, it's called being bad at flirting," I teased. "Watching the pair of you hate fuck each other with your eyes is gross. Put the guy out of his misery and either tell him to leave you alone or ask him out."

Heloise sputtered. "I'm a single mom with my own business! I don't have time?—"

"Yeah, yeah, Reba, I remember the theme song."

"Oh, fuck you," she grumbled. "Renny's just being Renny and accused me of sending

you and your, I quote, boy toy—who even says that in real life?—to spy on his shop." I didn't have to see her to know she was throwing her hands up at the very idea. "I told him we run bookstores, for fuck's sake. We don't traffic in government secrets or something. There's only so many ways to set up a used bookstore. There's only so many kinds of promos we can do! And speaking of promos..."

"Whoa, slow down there, I think I got whiplash from that sudden change of topic." I'd sprawled on my sofa while we talked, but now I just wanted to slither onto the floor. I regretted my panicked question earlier, but Heloise was a terrier with a pup cup when it came to things I didn't want to talk about.

"Take a salt tablet. Walk it off," she gruffed in imitation of our infamous high school football coach. "What the hell did you mean by how did I know with David? Because he walked out on me. And he's a lying liar who lies."

In for a penny... "But nothing before that? I mean, you were bananas for him for years. Y'all were like the perfect couple until you weren't. There wasn't any lead up or anything?"

Ouisie was quiet for a long moment. Greggy sang along with some show in the background, the only thing letting me know she hadn't hung up on me. "I don't think there was," she finally said, low and sharp. "For months after, I picked apart every conversation, every glance, every sigh... I wanted evidence, some sign I'd missed so I could point out how dumb I'd been and how it should've been obvious because look, here's proof that David's a shitlord of the highest order."

"But there was nothing," I finished for her.

"Probably not. I'm sure I missed something, but if there is, it was so small as to be negligible. He never verbally abused me, never hit me. Hell, until the morning he left, he was seriously in the running for world's best boyfriend." She sighed, the sound

changing for a moment as Gregggy's voice grew clearer. Quietly, she told him she loved him and asked him to go grab his drawing pad and some colors. "The point is you're not psychic. You are, however, scared, and that tells me whatever you're feeling for this guy is legit. It's the cheerleader, right? The one you said you're not dating."

"It's new," I admitted. "Like... super new. And yeah, it's Lucas. We're being careful, keeping things quiet. But Ouisie... I haven't felt like this for someone before. Not this fast anyway. Or this much. And I'm worried it's the forbidden fruit aspect. Or that whole new relationship energy vibe..."

She sighed. "I can't tell you what it is or isn't, Coop. But I can say you should trust yourself a little more. And if you really care about this guy, trust him ."

Gregggy's sudden, loud cry of "Uncle Coo!" made me startle. Ouisie cackled, trying to grab the phone back from his grabby hands. The conversation shifted to what he'd been doing in his summer day camp at the Y and whatever was happening on his favorite cartoon. By the time he gave the phone back to my sister, the moment had passed. "I know you're going to dwell on things," she said as we got ready to call it a night. "But do yourself a favor, huh? Try not to fuck things up."

"I thought you weren't hot on the idea of me seeing Lucas," I pointed out tiredly. The day's exertion was catching up to me, and I wanted nothing more than a shower and some food, then bed. Hell, I might even skip food and just crash as soon as I was clean.

"I was against the idea of you getting in trouble for violating your contract," she shot back. "But hearing you talk about him, even a little bit?" She whistled through her teeth. "You've got it bad, Bubba."

"And that makes everything okay?"

"Hon," she sighed. "Not everything has to be a fight, okay? Some things.... some things can just be good ."

And maybe she was right, I decided a bit later. My stomach protested mightily when I tried to go on about the evening without eating so I chowed down on one of the prepped meals I kept on hand and headed for the shower. Half undressed, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and thought of Lucas.

Me: Running isn't so bad.

I attached a picture of myself from the navel up, one hand on my chest and a smirk on my lips. Was it cheesy as fuck? Hell yes. Did I care? Hell no. Especially after Lucas sent a reply a few seconds later, a picture of his facescowl and the simple message I don't mind you keeping me up at night, but it's rude to do it when we're a city apart.

Whistling, I hopped in the shower. Some things can just be good , I repeated, closing my eyes as the water sluiced over my face and chest. Some things can just be good.

### CHAPTER 13

#### LUCAS

My relationship with Cooper had been easy. Like, shockingly easy. So easy it made me wonder if I'd hit my head during tumbling practice, and this was all some sort of a dream.

On Sunday night, he'd come over and made dinner—some salad situation that ended up being way better than I thought. We had a beer each and disagreed about old movies. Monday, I went to his place, and it was my turn to cook. He'd been a bit surprised by my presentation of a Danish potato and chicken dish that Del had taught me when I first moved in with him and Renata. That night, we ended up too tired to watch a movie and too sore from our respective practices for sex but curled up together on my bed. Listening to him breathe, resting on his chest, was a better ending to the night than I imagined.

And by Wednesday, we were in a routine. One night at my place, one night at his. We'd make each other dinner, have long and often rambling talks about anything and everything. When we did have to work on social media stuff or fundraiser things, it was all business (except for the part where I sat on his lap, or we were naked. Or both). On Thursday, when the lowkey campaign for Queering Sports hit, we celebrated—Cooper's posts about working with the organization coupled with pictures of him sweaty on the field definitely opened at a tiny floodgate. In fact, on Friday morning when he posted about how the organization was always looking for new volunteers, the online application submissions and the calls Liesel had to field spiked.



Everything felt... good. Right. Nice .

Even when we had to keep our time together so secret—every morning spent waking up with one another meant a morning sneaking out, taking side exits, walking to a car parked around the block or calling a ride share from a café half a mile away.

It wasn't all bliss and roses. We still had practices to deal with. Training. I had my day job and the work with Queering Sports. Cooper had meetings with agents, coaches, trainers, podcasters, and god only knows who else. Those evenings together and those tiny slivers of mornings were little golden drops of happiness amidst wide swaths of stress and exhaustion.

"Nope, you're just really gooey and gross," Marisol said, shaking one of the ridiculous pompoms at me. We'd just been issued our new ones for the season—a metallic version of the team's colors with loopy handles that bit into our palms when we shook them for the fans. In addition to the standard-sized ones we used, a pile of other sizes stood beside the bench, like some sad sci fi monster's egg cache gone disco. "These things are awful. Why did they get the loops?" she complained, shaking one again. "I'm so glad we barely use them, but ugh!"

Liz and Tori bounded over, huge goofy grins firmly in place as they shook theirs at us. "Ready?" Liz sing-songed. "O-kay!"

"Oh my god," I muttered, shaking my head but unable to hide my smile. "Y'all are awful."

"We're cheerleaders!" Liz squeaked, mocking the stereotype. "We're always so happy! We're always so friendly!" She shook one pom in my face before stopping her bouncing and rolling her eyes. "Swear to god, if one more guy on the apps tells me how bummed out he is that I'm nothing like a 'real cheerleader' because I'm not a bubble-brained fuck doll, I may commit a felony."

Snorting softly, Tori elbowed her. "Bubble-Brained Fuck Doll is going to be the name of my garage band. Come see us at Cherry Bo Berry."

I grinned at all three of them, shaking my head. "Y'all are awful, and I love you for it." I stared out at the empty space we used for our tumbling practices, a former warehouse converted to purpose, floor a sea of worn blue pads and chalk dust. Like everything else related to the squad, we had to pay for the privilege of using it. "Do you ever think maybe we should unionize or something?" I asked, stopping their conversation cold.

"What?"

Marisol's amused but pointed tone dragged my gaze away from the waiting pads and back to my friends. "Just thinking about how, with only a very few exceptions, we're all expected—league-wide—to take the scraps and be grateful."

"I don't know. I think we're pretty lucky," Liz murmured. "I mean, you remember that scandal a few years ago. Those cheerleaders forced to do shit like a twerk contest on a sponsor's yacht?"

"Or the ones who were basically pimped out to sponsors?" Tori added, shaking her head. "The Troopers have kept us safe, but when it comes to everything else? It's right in line with the rest of the league."

Marisol's brows crept up. "There's some workshops at Third Coast about how to organize," she said carefully. "I mean, if someone was interested..."

Gesturing with one of my poms, I huffed softly. "Let me just add that to my schedule," I muttered. "Queering Sports, teaching, cheering, and now unionizing."

"Ortiz! Get over here!"

Becca, Dani's assistant coach and a former Houston Oilers cheerleader who never learned to talk without cheer captain shouting, waved me over.

"Shit, it's like they're psychic," Tori whispered. "How'd she know we were organizing?"

"We're not organizing," Liz shot back. "Not yet anyway."

"Ortiz!"

"It's probably nothing," I protested, handing my poms off to Marisol. "Be back in a few."

I was not, in fact, back in a few. Not even close to a few. Becca sent me to the changing room, informing me Dani and Cass wanted a meeting now. I glanced back at my friends, staring after me with eyes so wide I could see the whites from yards away. "We're not done," I protested.

Becca shook her head, jabbing her finger towards the changing rooms. "Go. They're at Dani's office. You've got thirty minutes before this becomes a problem."

I hustled, barely bothering to clean up past a wet paper towel on my sweatiest areas and a dose of antiperspirant. The trip to Dani's office wasn't long, but it was hot and slow thanks to late afternoon traffic. I arrived with two minutes to spare and found Dani, Cass, and a frustrated Liesel waiting for me. "Er, if this is about the unionizing thing, I'd like to ask how the hell y'all move this fast but also point out that we're legally allowed to."

Dani's brows drew together, and her lip curled. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Um. What's going on? I'm guessing I'm not suddenly being promoted to

like president of the cheer squad or something?" I edged to sit in one of the chairs across from Dani's desk. I'm in pretty good shape, but can I have a heart attack from stress anyway? Under the regard of all three women, my pulse felt too fast and too hard at the same time.

Something bad was happening. I wanted to call Renata. No, I wanted to call Cooper. Wildly, I wondered if I could excuse myself for a minute and send him a text, beg him to come to Dani's office right the fuck now . Because whatever was happening, it was going to suck, and I was going to need someone.

No, just him .

"Your contract with the squad contains a morality clause," Dani said with a heavy tinge of tiredness in her voice. "That includes not dating players."

Shit . I had to make a split-second decision: come clean about Cooper or play dumb. Either way, I was fucked. But if I played dumb, maybe Cooper could have some wiggle room, a chance to deny things too. "Are you talking about that gossip bullshit? Me and Cooper Howard were just meeting to talk about the August fundraiser. He had some great ideas to loop in guys from special teams. The team itself can't sponsor anything at this point without a lot of paperwork and negotiations, but Coop wants to include access to the skybox for the kids who are interested, free of charge for the families. He'd arrange it and pay for amenities." He'd mentioned it the other night and had been very enthusiastically rewarded for being so good at ideas.

Twice.

Dani and Cass exchanged a bemused glance. "It's not Cooper," Cass said gently. "Here."

She grabbed the tablet from the corner of Dani's desk and handed it to me. On the

screen was an article from Texas Sports News , an interview with Jameson Creel. I skimmed it, frowning when he boasted about throwing money at Queering Sports and spewed his usual nonsense about how queer athletes needed their own league. Something about it struck me the wrong way, not because we don't want safe spaces but because his big talking point was how straight players shouldn't have to put up with the bullshit that comes with having queer players on the team .

"So he's got a lot of internalized shit to work through," I said, glancing up at them.

"Keep reading," Liesel muttered. "It gets worse."

I read aloud, "Creel notes that he stayed closeted as long as he did due to pressure from his then-boyfriend. 'I dated a cheerleader for a rival team when he first went pro. Things were great till they weren't. He was very openly gay and would complain about how I hid him from everyone. Things came to a head when I was ready to finally come out to my team. I didn't need a stage-five clinger making me look bad, you know?'"

I set down the tablet and closed my eyes, taking a long, deep breath and letting it out slowly. "What does this have to do with me?" I asked, the words weak in my own ears.

Liesel grabbed the tablet from me. "He talks about how this cheerleader was a whiner, a," she paused, giving me an apologetic, frustrated glance, " too femme twink , and how this ex has become a crusader for queer rights, really politicizing things way too much ."

The hummingbird in my chest threatened to explode. "I... I'm not... How do you know..."

"He names you. Later," Cass said quietly. "He claims he had to take legal action to

keep you from outing him."

"That's bullshit." I leaped to my feet. "He threatened to sue me when he ghosted me for that fucking model and I called him to ask what the hell was going on!" My eyes burned hot and wet. Unable to stay still, I paced the length of Dani's office, scrubbing my hands on my arms, chaffing them like I was cold. I was burning, though. Rage and embarrassment and fear swirled around hot enough to catch light if I gave it enough air. "I have proof. My lawyer can send it. I... I..."

"Needless to say, we're cutting ties with him," Liesel said quietly. "It's going to be a huge blow to the organization, but?—"

"Oh god," I groaned, stopping in my tracks. "No, no, no. It's okay. I'll make sure I'm not involved. I'll..." I swallowed hard. The words lodged in my throat like an ice cube, sharp and cold at the same time. "I'll step down."

Liesel pressed her lips into a tight, tired smile. "Even if I wanted you to, the fact remains—Jameson Creel is not someone Queering Sports wants to be associated with. Before, when he'd pop off about having a separate league, separate events, it was so easy to think it was a misquote. We did a deep dive on his media past, and he apologized, started actually doing better." She sniffed. I wanted to go to her and offer a hug, but I was still frozen in shock, unable to feel my fingers or toes. The whole room had that wavy, uneven quality of being on a boat. Things looked stable, but your body knew you were moving, that at any moment you could get knocked on your ass.

"You were named by him as his boyfriend," Dani said wearily. "I've already fielded calls from management about this. Given the nature of his statements, they feel it is best if you are on leave."

The numbness spread to my lips. "Fired. We don't get leave in cheer. I'm fired."

Dani's pained gaze met my own. "I'm fighting this. His statements are inflammatory. And you said you have the documentation?"

Cass piped up, "I know he does. I was aware of the goings on after the fact."

Annoyed at being out of the loop, Dani scowled, but sent Cass a sharp nod. "Help him get it together. You know what we'll need. I'll keep talking to management."

Liesel stood with Cass. "Lucas, I don't want you to leave the organization. You've been amazing, helping us with everything, organizing fundraisers and events for the kids. But I understand if you want to stop. We didn't do enough due diligence with Creel, and now..." She made a choked-off, helpless sound, throwing up her hands. "I'd hate it, but I'd get it."

I shook my head, finally, finding the will to move, to push through the frozen feeling creeping over me. "No, Liesel! If y'all will still have me, I want to help. Queering Sports is important to me, and so are all of y'all working there, and the kids and..." I sighed, closing my eyes. "Just give me a few days, okay? Everything for August is in motion. Cooper's pulling in some good numbers with his fan base, and it's spreading."

A little less glum, she nodded. "Half of the Copperheads have reached out, asking if we can host some events in Tulsa next year!"

My smile felt too small, too sad, but I pushed it. "That's amazing! See, it'll be awesome!"

Dani shifted uncomfortably, finally getting to her feet. "I'll talk with the rest of the squad about what's going on. It's best if you don't," she added apologetically. "Until things are set to rights, keeping the line clear between the squad and the individual is necessary."

"Of course," I muttered. "Sure."

Cass patted my arm. "Come on, hon. I'll walk you out."

I'd parked on the street, so it wasn't a long walk down from Dani's office. The stadium loomed not far away, and I felt a sharp pang, leaving me breathless. Cass followed my gaze and sighed, slipping her arm around my shoulders. "Hon..."

"This is it," I gasped, the urge to cry nearly overwhelming. It burned in my sinuses, behind my eyes. My throat ached. "I'm done. I'm done for good. No team will want me now. I'm... fuck!" Pressing the heels of my hands against my eyes, I jerked away from her. "I hate Jameson Creel! I hope he gets infected anal hairs!"

Cass's squawk of laughter was abrupt, cut off with a fake cough. "Just make sure you don't repeat that to any reporters. Especially Byrne."

"Fuck Byrne," I growled. "This is all him, isn't it? I didn't check the byline. He's the one..."

She nodded glumly. "Trying to make his name. I've seen it a dozen times in my career, and it's always a PR nightmare."

Another nod. "I need to go. I have to work this evening. I... I just need to go." The idea of going into the studio made me sick. I wanted to curl up in my bed and cry and then break something. A lot of somethings. Preferably with Jameson's picture on all of them.

"Maybe call in," she suggested as I got into the car. "Take a day or two for yourself. Because that's just about how long you have before you need to start making public statements, hon."



With a sharp, angry nod, I locked the car door and turned the key in the ignition. Cass watched me drive away, but I pointedly didn't look back. If I did, I'd start crying.

### CHAPTER 14

#### COOPER

I wasn't going to be one of those boyfriends who got all weird about my man texting me. Or not texting, as it were. We were both busy with demanding careers, and sometimes there just wasn't a spare moment to spend sending goofy texts.

Or, apparently, answering them.

Practice had been rough but ultimately good, all of us exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. Preseason would be starting soon. Like every team in the league, we had our eyes on the ultimate prize. The Superbowl. Yeah, yeah, a solid season would be great too, but The Superbowl... I sent a few texts to Lucas during the day, asking him what we'd do to celebrate when it happened.

Nothing. Not even a teasing comment about my huge head or keep dreaming .

Nothing when I asked how his day was going.

Not even a blip when I asked if he wanted me to pick up dinner. We'd spent last night at his place, so tonight we were at mine. When his sister returned from visiting family up north, we'd have to sort something else out but for now, this worked.

Why not just ask him to move in with you?

Welp, hello impulsive thought that bore looking into later...

But no, really? Why not? You've spent every night together for over a week now. And you know in your gut—he's the one. Or he could be, anyway...

I closed my eyes, scolding myself. One week was not enough time. But it had been more than that, really. Almost two years of pining, and now almost a month of whatever we were, even before the sleepovers.

I tapped my phone against my palm, leaning against my locker as I tried to decide whether or not I should freak out. One more try, I decided. Then I'd really worry.

Me: Hey, just wanted to check before heading out. How do you feel about Thai? I have zero desire to cook. HBU?

Not even a bouncing gray dot telling me he was starting and stopping a response.

"You good?" Matty asked, pausing mid-stride as he headed for the door. "You look constipated."

"Gross, man."

"I'm just saying some fiber would clear that look right up." Grinning, he gave my arm a backhanded slap. "Seriously, though. You good?"

"Yeah, just... long day, you know?"

Matty eyed me with suspicion but slowly nodded. "Sure, man. I get it. If you need to talk or something, you know how to find me, right?"

"Of course. Yeah, yeah." I smiled, knowing it didn't reach my eyes. But Matty gave me another nod and, after a brief pause, thumped my arm with his fist again. "Later." He trailed out of the locker room with a few of the other guys.

Lucas didn't answer when I called. He didn't answer when I texted again. And then when I decided I would come off as desperate but didn't care, he didn't answer an email.

I thought about contacting Liesel, asking if he was working with the nonprofit today, if I'd missed a meeting. Maybe I could call the studio, I mused, getting into my truck, but dismissed that idea quickly.

If I threw our personal life out in the open like that, Lucas would never forgive me. I owed it to him to keep things quiet for as long as we could, to protect both our careers and reputations.

Hell, I owed it to myself, too, but those needs felt like a distant second to ensuring Lucas was okay, that he was thriving. With a sigh, I backed out of my spot and headed back towards my place across town, half-hoping Lucas would already be there but knowing he wouldn't.

I was so wrapped up in worry about him I almost ignored Phil's call. Instead, one ring before the call went to voicemail, I hit the button on my steering wheel to send it to the speakers. "Hey, man, what's up?"

Phil's sigh filled the cab. "Shit has hit the fan in a major way. You got a minute?"

"I'm heading back to my place. What's going on? It can't be the team—I just left those guys, and no one was up to shady shit as far as I know. And I'm not a free agent, and it's not trade season."

"Just stop yammering for a sec, man. You talk to Lucas today?"

I pulled over onto the shoulder of MoPac, ignoring the blaring horns from the people behind me. Setting the brake and flipping on my hazards, I answered. "No. What

happened? Is he okay? Why are you calling me about him? You don't rep him. Phil?—"

"Stop. Talking. Let me finish," he huffed. "Cass, the squad's PR lead, called me because she doesn't have your direct contact info. She and Liesel decided I'm the best person to talk to you about what's going on."

"Oh my god..." There'd been an accident. He'd fallen. Or one of those horror stories of undiagnosed heart problems just like his brother-in-law, a vibrant light snuffed out by some quiet little defects you think happens to someone else, somewhere else.

"Get it together," he ordered sharply, pulling out his old quarterback voice. "Lucas is... fine, as far as I know. No injuries or anything. The problem is Jameson Creel. He went public about having dated Lucas and claimed some... let's just say unflattering things about him. Normally, it wouldn't be a huge deal, and the squad would handle it quietly. But Creel made it look like Lucas was up to some manipulative tactic." He paused, heaved a heavy, tired sigh. "Long and short of it, management views this as a violation of a few clauses in his contract. Cass assured me Dani—the cheer coach—and her team are working with management to clear things up, but..."

"But Lucas is toast," I groaned, eyes prickling. "Goddammit."

"If I were Lucas," Phil said softly, "I'd be holed up and licking my wounds right now."

Even though he couldn't see me, I nodded. I knew him. He was in pain; he was angry and torn and sad. And he wouldn't want me to see him like that.

All because Jameson Creel needed to be the center of attention. Because he needed to run others down to make himself appear important.

"And where would you be if you were Creel?" I asked lightly. "Just out of curiosity."

A sharp, cold silence met my words. After several heartbeats, Phil replied, "No, Coop. No. You do not want to fuck your career over for this guy."

"Lucas isn't some guy," I started, but Phil's sharp bark of no cut me short.

"Not Lucas. Creel. You don't want to end your career because you think popping him one is the thing to do. I'm not saying he doesn't deserve it, but Cooper, this isn't a movie. You can't defend your man's honor like that. You need to sit tight and let this go through the legal and professional channels, then make a statement later."

"Statement?" I sat up straighter. "I thought... Ah."

Phil hummed his acknowledgement as I realized what this meant. "He's off the squad. He's no longer a cheerleader, so he's not stuck with that clause."

"But if we come out as a couple, we'd be admitting he broke it twice now."

He snorted. "What're they gonna do? Fire him twice? Look, let me worry about this end of things, okay? I'm not his agent, but I am yours, and if this affects you, I'm gonna be on it. Right?"

"Right, right..." Traffic whizzed by in a rumbling blur. My stomach felt hollow. The need to go to Lucas, to comfort him, to absolutely rock Creel's shit, all jumbled together in an uncomfortable and heavy lump. "Do I need to worry about management?"

He huffed. "I don't see why. No one names you in any of this. I'll deal with things that need dealing with. And for the love of god, keep your mouth shut, got me? No talking about this to friends, family, the little old lady in the produce section, no one."

Byrne is a slimeball looking to make it big, and he's decided this exposé bullshit is the way to go. Creel's just the same, scrambling for relevancy since he's not a big shot anymore. So keep your nose clean, keep your head down, and go see Lucas if you can. Otherwise, go home and act like nothing's going on. Got it?"

"Got it," I sighed. And after a few more warnings, he let me go. I don't remember pulling back out into traffic, but I made it home in one piece. The guard behind the desk at the side entrance gave me a cautious nod, likely due to the thundercloud that was my expression, but it was hard not to think he had formed some idea about Lucas, about how he went after players or something. I strode to the elevator, tamping that idea down—Phil warned me about avoiding the article and online comments, PR 101 for anyone on the team and simply good life advice, really. Avoid comment sections, avoid online chats about the subject, anywhere I'd find armchair coaches, shrinks, and agents.

But I knew, in my heart of hearts, Lucas would be glued to his feeds, watching what people said about him. About us.

The elevator doors opened, but I didn't get on.

Lucas was out there, marinating in his grief and anger, and I was about to start a damn fine mope session on my own, bemoaning how awful he must feel.

Shit. Way to make it all about me . I turned on my heel and strode back towards the door.

"Everything alright, Mr. Howard?" the security guy called out , frowning slightly as I marched straight past him again.

"Nope. Just decided to go see my boyfriend."

Lucas didn't answer the door when I buzzed the bell. Or when I knocked. Or when I called.

"I know you're in there," I called softly. "I can hear music."

The music shut off.

"Lucas, it's me. Can you open the door before the neighbors think I'm here to rob it or something?"

There was a soft shuffling on the other side and then his voice, muffled. "No. Take a hint."

Sighing, I turned my back to the door, sliding down until I sat on the floor. "I know what happened. Baby, I just want to make sure you're okay."

A thump and slide on the other side of the door told me he was mirroring my position. "I'm not okay. But I need to not be okay for a bit and then I'll... I'll be a little bit less not okay. I have to do this, okay?"

No, not really.

We were both quiet for a long while. He might have fallen asleep on the other side of the door. But then he spoke again. "This floor is cold, and I hate it."

"Go sit on the sofa," I said quietly. "Or your bed."

"But you're here."

I almost asked him to let me in again, but I swallowed that down and asked, "Do you want me to go for a while?"



"Would you hate me if I said yes?"

"Never. I want to give you what you need."

"I need a time machine," he grumbled. Then there was the sound of movement. A second later, the door at my back moved. I shot to my feet before I could fall into the apartment, meeting Lucas' puffy-eyed, tear-streaked face with a concerned gaze. "This isn't an invitation. I just... I wanted a hug," he admitted, breath hitching.

I swooped in, gathering him to my chest as he pressed his face against me. His body trembled in my arms, breath hitching. He let me kiss the top of his head, his cheek, the shell of his ear, before pushing away. "Can I help?" I asked, knowing it was futile. "It hurts to see you like this. I want to do something."

Shaking his head again, he smiled thinly, then paused. "You know what? The fundraiser. Make sure you make a post or something tonight, keep the interest going. But I really just... I need to rot for a bit, okay?"

Reluctantly, I dropped my hands from his hips and nodded. "Promise me you'll call when you're less...rotty?"

He snorted softly. "You'll be the first."

After he closed the door and I heard the music come back on, I stood there for a long minute.

"He in there?"

Three women stood at the end of the hall, just past the elevator lobby. "Marisol, right?" I asked. "Liz and Tori?"

"We figured it was bad when he didn't come back to practice," Liz sighed, striding towards me. "They wouldn't tell us details, but it was all over the place by the time I got my phone out."

Marisol and Tori hurried to join us. "I called my brother—he's a lawyer, and I work at his firm so sometimes I can weasel a favor out of him. He said if Lucas wants, he can get the ball rolling on a defamation suit and a cease and desist. Which means I'll start the paperwork, since I'm his para," she added with a roll of her eyes.

Shrugging one shoulder, Tori sniffed. "He's one of us, you know? We're tight, the four of us. Ride or die for each other."

"He said he needs to rot," I offered. "He wants to be alone for now."

Marisol straightened her shoulders and tightened her ponytail. "We'll see about that. No offense, but sometimes you don't need a boyfriend. You need your besties."

Tori nudged me with her elbow, drawing my attention down to her mischievous expression. "Look, I'm not saying you need to leave, but I am saying if you did leave, you might want to go to the Hotel Lavolin and get a drink at the bar. Because I'm not saying that's where Creel's been hanging out this week, but my sister's a bartender there, and she may have mentioned seeing him."

Marisol and Liz gasped. Marisol gave her a light shove that bounced her off my arm. "That's encouraging violence!" she hissed. "Or whatever the law is!"

"I'm not going to hurt him," I promised, though I wasn't entirely sure if I was lying. "I want to talk to him, though. He hurt Lucas more than once, and now he's cost Lucas something he loves dearly—there's no way in hell I'm letting him smarm his way through life with Lucas as an acceptable casualty."

Liz pushed me towards the elevator. "Go. And swear to god, if you get arrested, Lucas is going to kill you."

I nodded firmly, glancing back at the door. "Don't tell him..."

"We're not stupid. We never saw you," Marisol said shortly. "Get out of here before he hears us. And don't do anything actionable!"

### CHAPTER 15

#### LUCAS

Something was up.

Like... not just the shitshow that was my life. Or maybe I was merely being paranoid. When I cracked the door open to peek out, sure Cooper knocked to beg me to let him in after all, Marisol, Liz, and Tori had shoved their way inside. Overwhelm swamped my disappointment. The three of them a veritable tornado, they pushed me back into the apartment. Tori pulled me into the living room, Liz opened cabinets to make drinks, and Marisol shook the plastic bag she'd brought with them. "I told Mom you were suffering from heartbreak, so she sent some of the tamales she made for Nito's birthday. She always makes too many. Score! I've got mariscos, bean and cheese, that weird fungus you like?—"

"Huitlacoche," Tori called before I could. "Those are the shit. Save me two!"

"Y'all are welcome to 'em. I'm keeping the poblanos," Marisol said decisively.

"Water, tea, or beer?" Liz held up an empty glass and a bottle of beer. "Personally, I'd go with the nonalcoholic options because hon, you look like shit, and booze will only dehydrate you."

I snorted wetly. "Tea." As nice as getting myself drowsy-drunk and just sleeping until everything seemed less awful sounded nice, I knew that would only make things worse. Hangovers never made the morning brighter, and drinking didn't solve

anything, just made it less present until I sobered up. Nodding approvingly, Liz popped back into the kitchen.

I sank on the sofa and let them whirl around in controlled chaos, closing my eyes and trying not to cry.

"Hey," Tori said quietly. "Listen, it's bullshit, okay? We all know it's bullshit. And we're gonna try to help fix this. But it's okay for it to be awful right now."

"That's kind of what I told Cooper earlier," I sighed, opening one eye to look at her beside me. "But Tori, I'm never gonna be let back on the squad. Even if Jameson came out tomorrow morning and announced he screwed me over, that I never tried to manipulate him, I'd still be found in breach of my contract. They'll have someone new in the lineup before next Friday. And I'll be at the studio, with Lynda and Mom telling me they told me so and how right they were and how I've wasted my life."

She toed my ankle. "Hey. Look at me, Lucas. Shhh. Look at me. Now listen." Leaning in closer, she lowered her voice so Marisol and Liz couldn't hear and chime in. "So what?"

"Uh. That's not what I was expecting?"

"So what?" she insisted. "You knew when you tried out that this isn't a long-term job. Not the cheering end of things anyway. You can love something infinitely, but it doesn't make it right for you."

"Your pep talks suck," I muttered.

She laughed, pushing her braids back over her shoulder and leaning in to give me a sideways hug. "But I'm right. And now we're going to have tamales from Marisol's mom. We're going to drink sweet tea, and we're going to watch some trashy reality

TV. Then we're going to let you talk."

Liz appeared, setting glasses down in front of us, followed by Marisol with plates. "And when you're done talking," Liz said, "we're going to help."

"But—"

"But nothing," Marisol scolded gently. "You're gonna steer this ship, okay? We'll figure this out together because that's what ride-or-die besties do."

My poor heart had been dragged from one extreme to the other today, and I didn't know how to feel just then. Happy I had support, distraught because I had to lean on them... angry at Creel, frustrated at myself for being young and making foolish choices. For being older and making the same choice.

Liz waved her fork at me. "What did Cass have to say?"

I shrugged. "She texted earlier, said to keep my mouth shut basically, and she'd let me know how management wants this presented. She's pushing for an official statement tomorrow since Jameson's making this everyone's business." Though delicious, the tamale felt heavy when I swallowed, choking on the words already in my throat. "If this was just me dating Cooper, I'd be let go, and it'd barely be a ripple," I sighed. "But because Jameson decided to make this his lore, now I'm dragged out in the middle of everything, and my reputation is shot to hell. Fuck!" I dropped my plate on the coffee table with a clatter, making them all jump in their seats. "Sorry! Just... I'm going to have to tell Liesel I appreciate her insisting I stay on, but this will screw them over."

Marisol set her own plate down far more delicately, dabbing at her lips with one of Renata's everyday cloth napkins. "Not necessarily."

She told me about her brother's offer to start legal proceedings to make Jameson shut the fuck up, including his pro bono offer. "Unless it becomes a huge thing. Then he'll take his fee out of your compensation because Nito don't play. He'll have Jameson wrung dry before that asshole has a chance to even blink in court."

Before I could stop myself, a small huff of laughter escaped. "Nito's very confident," I said dryly.

"Because he knows he's good." She picked her plate back up and took a defiant bite of the tamale.

"Right. First thing we're doing. Eating and catching up with the Kardashians," Liz said loudly. "Where's the remote? Enough about Nito's briefs."

"Oh, ew, Liz." Marisol flicked a bit of masa at her.

"Ah! Renata will kill me! Save the food fights for the kitchen. Everything in there can be wiped down!"

Tori grabbed the remote from the side table. Within seconds, we were watching overly wealthy people complain about how hard life was. Which, to be fair, maybe it was. Money didn't fix everything. It sure didn't hurt, though, I thought glumly, glancing around the apartment. There went moving out in the next year or two, unless something miraculous happened soon and I not only got my job back but a huge raise.

While the episodes played and the tamales dwindled down to nothing, I drifted. Marisol went to the kitchen and came back with cookies since her mother heard heartbreak, and that word activated Southern moms like sleeper agents, triggering an outpouring of food.

"Have you given any more thought to grad school?" Liz asked after another episode

wrapped up. "I know you mentioned it before..."

"Maybe," I grumbled. "Now I don't know if I can, though. Money aside, I was going to parlay working with Queering Sports into a platform for my master's degree one day. I might be able to get into a good nonprofit management program but at this point..."

"Hon." Tori turned off the TV and leaned forward, grabbing both of my hands in hers. "You're not that special."

Offense quickly morphing into surprised laughter, I sputtered, "What?"

"People in grad school—hell, in every facet of life—have either fucked up royally or been dragged through the mud, or both. And you know what? They're doing okay. Some of them better than okay. And if a graduate program refuses you because some no-neck dipshit with a five-head and all the personality of a wet wad of toilet paper talked trash about you, then that program doesn't deserve your name on their roster."

"It's more complicated than that," I started, but Tori gently pinched my lips together. "Mmph?"

"Shhhh," Tori soothed. "It's really not. You've just set your standards to a level that doesn't exist."

Marisol gently patted my knee. "I know about having stupid high standards, babe, and yours are bananas."

Pushing Tori's hand away, I glared at Liz. "Don't you have anything to add?"

She shrugged. "They'll tag me in when they need a breather," she said, laughing at my offended gasp.



"Listen, Lucas," Liz redirected, "we're not saying high standards are bad. Just make them realistic ."

"You're not a saint, babe." Marisol took a savage bite of her cookie. "You're stronger than you think. And if your mom or auntie think this is some divine sign they're right, I'll kick their asses for you."

"Titi could totally take you in a fight," I muttered, snagging another cookie. Brown butter chocolate chip fixed everything, really.

"So here's what I'm thinking." Liz brushed crumbs from her hands, her clear tone interrupting the incipient cat fight between me and Marisol. What can I say—arguing's our love language."You have two options here: hang on to hope and pray management comes down hard on your side and stands up for you. Or two, you start looking for the good in this. Like," she waved one finger, "you are officially free to date Cooper without trying to keep it quiet."

"And you have the time to get an actual paying job that doesn't require you to wax from eyebrows to toes every three weeks," Tori added.

Marisol rolled her eyes. "Y'all are forgetting the most important part. Lucas can make Creel look like shit and also boost Queering Sports!" She paused, giving me a wide and toothy grin. "And the super-secret third thing: be out and open with his actual boyfriend who gives a good goddamn about him."

Oh . I sat up, putting my drink and the remains of a cookie down on the coffee table without a care for a coaster. I'd suffer the wrath of Renata later, but at that moment, a beam of sunlight broke through iron-dark clouds, and I couldn't look away. "Cooper."

My friends leaned forward. "Go on," Marisol urged, a tiny smirk playing on her lips. "Tell us all about him."

"If one good thing comes of this whole mess," Tori added, "you can date whoever you want. Even another player."

"And you stop seeing all players as unmitigated assholes," Liz threw in.

"They're not all assholes," I grumbled, cheeks warm. "Just some of them." Grabbing my cookie again, I took a decisive bite. "And Cooper is the polar opposite of Jameson. No! He's not even on the same spectrum as Jameson! He's amazing."

"Awwwww," Marisol teased. "Someone's twitterpated."

Liz shook her head. "No, someone's happy ."

"He was here earlier. I made him leave, though. I wanted to wallow and be mad." The cookie was gone, and I was sad about it, but the bubbling excitement in my chest was more than enough to make me forgo another. "Cooper just wants me to be happy." And saying the words made everything lock into place.

Cooper was a constant for me. We were building the one thing that felt real and solid. He had no expectations other than my happiness— our happiness—and he didn't want me to fit some idea in his head of what his boyfriend should seem like, act like, be like in order to make him look good.

"That's the goofy face of a man in love," Tori teased softly.

"He's just so good ," I sighed with a hint of a whine.

"Tell us about him," Marisol urged again, this time kindly, no hint of teasing. "If our bestie is gonna date this guy, we need details."

"But not the naked ones," Liz blurted. "Keep those to yourself! I don't need to know

about anyone's penis!"

"Except Robert's," Tori muttered.

I sat up. "Excuse me? Robert? As in Robert the groundskeeper? Robert with the pretty eyes? Robert with the arms?"

"Shut up," Liz whined. "This is about you!"

"And Cooper," Marisol intervened. "So spill."

"Right. We'll get back to Robert in a bit," I muttered. "Because hello, miss secret squirrel with this news!"

Tori cleared her throat. "Talk. Now."

So I did. And it was disgustingly sappy. Cooper's goodness, the way he didn't try to remake me, the way he respected keeping it quiet but not because he was ashamed... How kind he was. Smart and funny and how he made me feel. "Honestly," I said, pausing for a moment, weighing the words, "he's the first guy who saw me and not some idea of who they wanted me to be."

I sniffed, grabbing for my drink again. "I mean, seriously, I can't think of another guy who would've actually listened when I said to leave Creel alone. If things were reversed in Bizarro land and I'd been dating Creel and Cooper'd been the dickbag, Jimmy would be out trying to find him right now and being all big-balled about shit."

Liz got to her feet. "Well, I need another glass of tea. Anyone else?"

Marisol popped up. "I'll help."

"Me too!"

They headed to the kitchen, almost at a run.

"Wait!"

As one, they turned towards me. I got up, walking slowly towards them. "What is going on? Y'all are terrible liars, and I know you're trying it right now. What happened? Did Cooper beat up Jimmy before coming here? Did he lie to me?"

Marisol jerked her chin up defiantly, while Tori fiddled with the end of one of her braids, giving me a bland, curious expression. Liz looked anywhere but at me. Bingo . The weakest link.

"Lizard, talk to me."

"I...think that tea sounds really good right now," she squeaked, hurrying to the fridge.

I followed.

"Not only am I your colleague—well, not only was I, blah blah blah, since now I'm fired, but I'm your teacher! "

"Oh! That reminds me! I need to reschedule next week's private. I have a dentist appointment."

I narrowed my eyes. Marisol and Tori slipped back into the living room, leaving me and Liz alone. "What happened, Liz?"

She pinched her lower lip between her thumb and forefinger, eyes moving all around, avoiding my glare. Finally, she broke. "Ugh, okay! I told Cooper he might find Creel

at Hotel Laviol."

"Where Dezzy bartends?" Liz nodded. "Shit! That was hours ago!" I bolted for my phone, left on the arm of the sofa. Several messages from Cass, two from Dani, one from Renata, one from Lynda, one from Dad, but nothing from Cooper.

Shit.

"I need to go," I blurted. "Cooper's going to ruin his career because of me and?—"

"And," Marisol said sternly, stepping in front of me to block my panicked flight to the door. "I thought you trusted him."

"I do! But?—"

"But," Tori added, "if you trust him, trust him ."

Liz made a sad noise low in her throat. "He was really mad," she whispered. "I thought maybe... let him. Because Creel is an asshole and ruined your career and?—"

"And," Marisol cut her off. "Do you really think Cooper is hotheaded enough to throw his entire life's work away to beat on some jerkwad ex-player who thinks his own shit doesn't stink?"

"No," I admitted, jittering anxiously. "But I can't let him?—"

"You can." Looping her arm through mine, she led me back to the sofa. "So right now we're going to sit down. And you're going to tell us about the amazing things you're going to do next because I know you have plans."

"I don't think I'm ready." My voice shaking just made me more annoyed with the

entire situation. My voice never shakes. Not even when I'm in front hundreds, even thousands, of people! I shook my head, knuckling my tear-stung eyes. "I need more time."

"Lying liar who lies," Tori pronounced. "You've got a million of 'em. You just don't know which ones to take yet."

Liz was quiet, settling on the very edge of the sofa cushion beside me. "Sorry," she whispered. "I thought maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing if Creel got a little scared, you know?"

I nodded. "I know."

But now I was going to be terrified until I heard from Cooper.

### CHAPTER 16

#### COOPER

Hotel Laviol was one of those new hotel builds made to look like an old fashioned skyscraper. All brick and wrought iron on the outside, entirely out of place in a long row of bland, corporate, cookie-cutter, high-end hotels. One of those see-and-be-seen places, attracting celebrities who came to Austin for the South by Southwest film festival or when they wanted to pretend to be down to earth and country.

So of course they chose to stay in a hotel where one night cost more than a month's rent for most people in the area.

It was also home to a popular bar, a pseudo-speakeasy type with expensive themed cocktails and little lighting. You'd think that if they could charge forty dollars for a martini, they could afford light bulbs, but I guess they needed to invest in artisanal flavored olives instead.

I was definitely not meeting their dress code when I hopped out and handed my keys to the valet, a college kid who recognized me right off the bat. "Holy shit! Cooper Howard!" he breathed. "Me and my dad have seen every game you've ever played, ever since you got with the Troopers!"

"Awesome." I smiled—just because I was a man on a mission was no reason to be a dick to the kid. "I'm thrilled to meet a fan!"

He preened a tiny bit. He couldn't have been older than nineteen, if even that. With

the vibes of a very wiggly puppy, he clutched the keys to my truck to his chest. "Could I, um... could I get an autograph?" he whispered, glancing back at the valet stand where an old man waited, looking entirely unamused.

"Sure, do you have something to write on?"

The kid nodded and fished a slip of paper out of his pants pocket—a receipt for a sandwich shop across town—and grabbed a pen from the stand. After getting his name, Donny, I wrote him a quick note. He folded it carefully, tucking it into his vest pocket, then took a picture with him to send to his dad. "Thank you so much! Oh my god, my dad is gonna die when I call him later!"

"I hope not," I teased. "We don't want to lose any fans!" We'd drawn a bit of attention, a few more people drifting over with their phones out. I took some more pictures while Donny parked my truck, slowly drifting towards the entrance. Buoyed on a wave of selfies and friendly fans, no one said a word to me about my casual attire in the midst of all the retro dresses and sharp suits. Politely waving off the offer of drinks from several people, I scanned the small bar for my quarry.

Jameson Creel was holding court at the end. I'd imagined him perched in some booth with a few likeminded twits around him, but he was on a stool with a fancy cocktail half-drunk in front of him, a tall Raphaelite man beside him. A few folks chatted with him, and he was laughing, slapping backs, putting on the good ol' boy show, all while his companion lounged against the bar, bored.

"Creel," I said firmly as I reached the bar. "Haven't seen you since the last time we played."

He eyed me, recognition sparking through the haze of drink and whatever else he'd been imbibing that evening. "Coppertop Howard," he laughed, reaching out to tug one lock of my hair. "Still wearin' it too long, huh?"



"I hear you've been talking about someone I care for very much." I ignored his attempt at a jab.

The bartender raised her brow at me. Is there going to be a problem? she asked with a gesture. I shook my head subtly. "Could I get whatever's your favorite?"

She smirked. "I think you can handle it. Sure."

Eyeing me thoughtfully, Creel leaned on his elbow. "So, he got you too, huh? That little twink's still at it."

The bartender placed a drink in front of me, something clear with a skewer of fruit and a wedge of blood orange on the rim. I took a sip and managed to hide my surprise—it was just water. The bartender winked, heading down the line to take the next order. "You know, badmouthing someone like that? It's not a good look, Creel. You're not winning any friends."

"Baby, go grab us a table, huh?" he muttered to the beautiful man beside him. I don't know if Creel caught the eye roll, but I did. The man pushed away from the bar and sauntered over to one of the two-tops in the middle of the room, the perfect place to people-watch and make sure he was watched too.

"Ricardo's a bit of a socialite in Chicago," Creel preened. "Met at this gala the Field Museum held for donors. Best ten grand I've ever spent." He eyed Ricardo the way some people would eye-fuck a sports car or mansion.

"Good for you." Bad for Ricardo. But I had the feeling Ricardo knew the score. He was already talking to another man, his posture far more relaxed and expression agile and open. Maybe bad for Creel instead.

"So, I'm guessing you're, what, defending your little guy's honor? Seriously, Howard,

you can do better than a clinger like Lucas. He's not exactly gonna do you any favors, is he?"

I sipped the water before plucking out the skewer and pulling off a cherry. "What sort of favors do you think I'm owed, Creel? What did you think he owed you , for that matter?" Movement to my right caught my attention. A few people had their phones out, either for pictures of their favorite player or picking up something ugly brewing. We were being quiet—or I was, at least—but our body language was anything but friendly. "What did Lucas do to make you ruin his career?"

"Please," Creel snorted. "He's getting long in the tooth for cheerleading. Probably why he glommed on to you. Gotta have some financial security, huh? I saw what they upped your pay to last round." He saluted me with his almost-empty glass before finishing it off in two gulps. "Lucas is pretty enough but hardly worth keeping around long-term. If you're gonna splash out on someone, they need to be worth it. An investment, you know?"

Off the field, I wasn't an aggressive person. Some of the guys called me a human golden retriever, and that was pretty accurate. Creel was severely pushing my limits, though. I didn't want to get my own headlines declaring I'd snapped, I'd gotten violent, I'd attacked him in public. But the urge was strong.

Lucas would be inconsolable if I got myself canned because of this asshole. Hell, he'd be torn up if I even got fined because of Creel. I took a fresh sip, popped another piece of fruit in my mouth, and turned to lean against the bar and face Creel fully. "Is that what it was for you then? Lucas wasn't a good investment?"

"You get it," he mumbled, signaling for a refill. "He was fun, you know? Bright guy. But that Mary Sunshine shit, the whole nonprofit thing? That's a recipe for a miserable life. He moved in with his sister, yeah? Because he can't afford his own place. I don't need that kind of baggage. Besides, it's hard enough being open in the

league, you know? Lugging around a cheerleader who paints his nails and wears glitter? I'd be a laughingstock, even if he wasn't bottom of the barrel. He's fine for a fling, but when I came out, I needed the right image."

"You don't make any sense," I sighed. "Judging Lucas for how he presents himself, assigning value to men based on what they can provide for your public image... What are you trying to hide, Creel? Just how miserable are you?"

Something hot and angry flashed in his eyes, but he held himself still. He wanted to lunge at me—you didn't play our position for as long as we both had without learning the signs of an incoming tackle. I braced, even knowing he wasn't going to follow through. Because that could change at any second, couldn't it? Especially given how touchy he was, the closer I got to the meat of his problem.

"Fuck off, Howard. Go to your little boy toy and have fun with him, but don't get too attached. You're the golden boy right now, but people won't put up with that nonsense for long." The bartender set another drink down in front of him, eyeing him warily. "I'm good, doll. I've got a room upstairs. I ain't drivin'." Reluctantly, she moved away. That was going to be his last drink of the night, whether he liked it or not. "Look, you're young. You've only been in the big time for a few years now." He winked sloppily. "I follow your career, you know? You're good. Better than good, if someone was gonna press me on it," he added with a chuckle.

"Thanks..."

"But it's not all about how you play. You need to have your image, right? Cultivate that shit. And when it got out that I'm gay, people had some real strong things to say. I had to show 'em. It's not all that shit they see on TV and the internet." He waved one hand lazily, a mix of a derogatory gesture and a floppy whatever sort of motion. "So, I made sure Lucas couldn't run his mouth, you know? Had the papers drawn up and all. And he signed 'em and stayed shut up."

So aware of those cameras on me, knowing it was going to be all over socials soon, I pushed my drink aside and leaned in close. I had not only myself to think about here, not only Lucas, but Queering Sports and everyone involved there too. The team. My family...

"What I don't get," I said quietly, "is why you're suddenly so all fired up to help a queer youth sports organization when you've done your damndest to distance yourself from the community for years now. You insist there needs to be a whole separate league to appease the bigots. Playing respectability politics. Why are you throwing time and money at Queering Sports now? Why hurt Lucas like this?"

Creel stared at me for a long moment, the scent of juniper berries and citrus strong on his breath, eyes red and watery. "Maybe I'm growing as a person," he offered lazily, his smile slow and sharp.

"Bullshit."

He chuckled. "Maybe my agent told me to cultivate a friendlier image if I expect to keep getting sponsorships and all that jazz. It's been thin on the ground lately, and the queer-friendly sports leagues thing is really hitting in a big way. More out players in all of 'em," he sighed, frustrated.

"So you don't believe in the organization, but you want to boost yourself. Why am I not surprised?" I muttered, pushing away from the bar. "You know, I was going to kick your ass for hurting Lucas—you cost him his job, his reputation. Hell, he might even lose his volunteer spot with Queering Sports because of you. But I'm not going to. Because I give a damn about him, Creel. And about myself. I know who I am. He knows who he is. You..."

I shook my head, suddenly exhausted by him, by everything he'd set into motion. "You're just a sad sack of shit who's afraid of himself. No one should judge you for

being in the closet, but we're gonna judge the hell out of you for hurting people to make yourself feel better."

Creel waited until I was halfway to the door before calling out, "You could never kick my ass, Coppertop."

"You're right. You're doing a good enough job for the both of us."

I stopped in the restroom to splash cold water on my face and breathe. It had been close, the urge to plant my fist in his face. He'd have deserved it, a small part of me reasoned, even while more of me pointed out that would've only made him the victim, giving him more fuel for his fire. "Let him burn out," I muttered to myself, scrubbing my hands over my face. I needed to get to Lucas, to make sure he was doing okay. If he even wanted to talk. I had no idea how things had gone with his friends, if he let them stay. I hoped he had, for his sake—he needed someone at his side, and if it couldn't be me, it should be chosen family.

When I reached the valet stand, Donny was gone, and the new guy didn't seem to recognize me at all, which suited me just fine. With the exception of a couple stopping to take a not very discreet selfie with me in the background, people flowed past me going and coming. I stood in silence, half waiting for Creel to stumble out after me.

As they pulled up with my truck, I thought to check my phone and saw a text from Phil. He'd attached a picture from someone's twitter and added Do Not Fuck This Up!

In the picture, I was leaning in towards Creel. We looked like we were just having a chat. It had been taken too far away to make out his expression clearly, but he'd been glaring at me, pissed to high heaven.

I sent back a quick assurance that I was already on my way home and shoved my

phone in my pocket to accept the keys from the driver.

Pulling out onto the road, I had a decision to make: left towards my place, right towards Lucas.

That was a no-brainer.

### CHAPTER 17

#### LUCAS

Around midnight, my buzzing phone dragged me out of a drowse. Marisol and Liz were curled up on the sofa, one on each end, and Tori sprawled in Renata's favorite recliner. The TV quietly played some teen vampire show we'd decided to binge around the time we got my life sorted out for the third time since dinner. It took a minute for me to realize the sound was my phone and not some new power the square-jawed, very blond, very bland male lead was manifesting along with his sudden ability to fly, read minds, tame any animal, and make the perfect souffle.

Okay that last one wasn't one of his powers, but he'd made a souffle in three episodes out of ten. I was suspecting it was either some vampiric evil, or the writers were really into souffles.

Cooper's name flashed on my screen. The last traces of sleep fleeing, I fumbled the phone to answer. "Hello?" I hissed. "Cooper? What's going on? Where are you?"

"Downstairs," he said, sounding both tired and amused. "Ah, can I... can I come up?"

I looked around my living room and sighed. "Maybe. No? I don't know. I've got company."

He hummed in acceptance. "Okay. It was kind of an impulsive idea to come over anyway. I just thought..."

"I'll come down."

I hung up before he could try and stop me. Quietly, I slipped my shoes on and grabbed my keys. As I padded to the door, Marisol raised her head. "Hey," I whispered. "Um..."

"Don't get arrested," she grumbled. "I'm too comfy to come bail you out." She dropped her head again and was out like a light.

With a small smile, I let myself out into the hall, locking the door behind me.

Cooper appeared tired but good. Like... too good to be true. His hair fallen from its usual soft knot, it hung around his face like one of those old Renaissance paintings. Caught under the security light by the front door, he fairly glowed. I stood there a moment, just inside the lobby doors, and stared. He had on shorts and the t-shirt from the Queering Sports fundraiser eons ago now, peering at something on his phone. He looked beautiful. He looked like mine .

That thought sent a thrill through me, cutting through the funk and grimness like a hot knife. I must have moved or made some sound that caught his attention because he glanced up and met my gaze with a small, cautious smile. Shoving his phone into his pocket, he gave me a half-wave near his chest, cocking his head curiously.

Oh, right. I guess I should open the door.

When I hurried towards him, he held his arms open for me. I ran the last few steps, letting him take my weight as I buried my face in his chest. Cooper stroked my hair with one hand while the other pressed me to him, his heart beating hard and steady against my cheek. "Today sucked," I said finally. "I'm glad you came back. I missed you."



He laughed softly, soundlessly. "I'm glad you had your friends."

"I'm sorry it wasn't you," I said, then hesitantly added, "But I think maybe I needed to see them first. To get through the dreck. I didn't want to dump all of that on you."

"Baby," Cooper sighed, pushing me away just enough so he could see my face, "if we're gonna do this, you need to understand this right now and never forget it. I will never be upset about you needing to vent, cry, share, whatever you need when you have a bad time. I want to help you shoulder that burden, okay? And if you need space to do it, I want to give you that too, so you know I'm not off sulking or calling you a brat."

The tears were sudden and unexpected, my eyes stung. "Why is it so prickly when you're nice?" I complained, burying my face in his shirt again.

"Because it's breaking your shell."

Damn it.

We stood there quietly for a few minutes, rocking slowly with one another's breaths. Finally, when I felt like I could talk without crying, I said, "Liz said she told you where you could find him."

"Ah. Yeah. Here..." He shifted, fishing his phone out to unlock the screen and show it to me. "Phil's been sending me links."

"Cooper Howard is a badass," I read from the first post. "Saw him at Laviol talking to JCreel. Creel was a drunk a-hole. Coppertop was total class, didn't rise to the bait." I grinned at him. "Class, huh?"

"I wanted to lay him out," Cooper admitted, cheeks pinkening as he ducked his chin

sheepishly. "But what would be the point? I'd feel good for a few minutes. Creel... he's not a great person, but tonight, I got the definite vibe he's not happy with himself. Like, deeply unhappy."

"So that gives him the right to fuck me over? To talk shit about other queer players?" I demanded, temper rising. "I know you like seeing the best in people but?—"

"But that doesn't excuse what he's done," Cooper interrupted firmly. "You're right. And he does need to be held accountable. And he will be. But punching him? That would only make things worse in the long run for all of us. And the last thing I want to do is be like him, Lucas." He captured my chin with his fingers, guiding me close for a kiss. We were on the street in view of passing cars, the drunk party girls passing on the sidewalk, the security cameras, but he didn't care.

And neither did I.

In a minute or two, things got too heated to call it innocent.

"We can't go to my place—they're gonna wake up when we come in," I mumbled into the kiss.

Cooper grunted, pulling away to nod towards his truck. "There's room."

"Seriously?" I laughed, leaning back. "On the street?"

"Well, I was thinking of going around the corner where it's darker, but if you're into the whole showing off thing, we can find a consensual situation at one of those clubs or something, and?—"

"No, no, no! I mean, if you are, we'll discuss, but no one gets to see your sweet ass but me."

"And the guys in the locker room," he teased.

"Shut up. No exhibitionism for me, thank you."

I eyed the truck, then glanced back at the lobby doors. "Can you be quiet?"

He grinned. "Might have to put something in my mouth."

Heat suffused my body, blood rushing down in a dizzying sweep. "I think that can be arranged."

We traipsed up to the apartment as quietly as we could manage. Side-eye from the security guard downstairs made us giggle like teenagers, which just got worse the more we tried to shush one another. Thankfully, my friends were sacked out when I got the door unlocked or doing a damn good job of pretending. "Come on," I whispered, barely making a sound, and led Cooper to my room.

He flashed me a grin, backing up to the bed and flopping dramatically on the huge stack of pillows there. "I believe you mentioned something about shutting you up?"

"You sweet talker," I scoffed without any heat to the words. Crawling up on the bed beside him, I shifted suddenly, straddling his hips before he could move on me. "How quiet can you be?"

Cooper surged up to kiss me, startling a muffled squawk from my lips. He laughed softly, pulling me down to lie on his chest, his heart beating so hard I could feel it through my ribs. The kiss was messy and sweet, all tongue and teeth and lips for several minutes until Cooper took over, changing the trajectory back to where we'd wanted to go in the first place.

Clothes went flying, his sure fingers making short work of my joggers, skimming

over my hips and ass as he pushed the fabric down. “Sit up,” he muttered against my neck. I nodded, raising, only for him to stop me before I could move off of him. “Damn, you are so pretty,” he sighed, drinking me in hungrily with his avid gaze. The flush rushing over my face and chest couldn’t have been attractive, but he seemed to find it the best aphrodisiac. His hands spanned my ribs as he moved them up from my hips, smoothing them around to my back and back down again. “Come here,” he whispered, nudging me up his chest.

It took half a second, but I caught on quick. “You sure?” I asked quietly. “What about you?”

“I want to, if you do?”

I nodded, moving up until my knees were on either side of his head and his hands cupped my ass. The first touch of his tongue on my sac made me gasp, high and ecstatic. He chuckled, which definitely didn’t help things, the vibration and tickle of his breath sending explosive thrills through my veins. Cooper didn’t waste time, setting to work laving and sucking my balls, driving out any rational thought I had left in seconds. All I could do was grab onto my headboard and hope I didn’t get overheard as he drew one ball, then the other into his mouth, alternating gentle sucks and firm licks. “Oh my god,” I breathed. “Cooper!”

He pulled away just enough to shush me before holding up one of his hands. “Suck,” he ordered quietly. “Make it wet.”

“Oh god...”

Cooper groaned against my thigh as I licked and sucked his finger like I wanted to do to his dick. Another high gasp escaped when he moved his face to bury it against me again, tongue and lips and teeth making me shake, breath short and sharp as I tried not to shout. Cooper pulled his finger out of my mouth, and I bit down on my lip,

knowing what was coming, thrilled and nervous and desperate for it.

Cooper tipped his face to the side, breathing hard as his finger slowly, slowly pushed into me. Head bowed and eyes squeezed shut, I couldn't see the look on his face, but I could feel his smile against my thigh, the way his hands shook as he held me in place. "Let me suck you?" he finally whispered, and I panted yes yes yes .

I felt trapped in the best way, his finger inside me and my cock in his mouth. I could barely move from the intensity of it, the way he stroked that little nub inside while he sucked and licked me. I was certain I'd shout, I'd burst into flames, I'd melt, I'd cry.

My release was building so fast it made me dizzy, the heat and tightness pooling in my belly. A knot of pleasure at the base of my cock gave me just a tiny split second of warning before it released. A spurt of precum and my reedy "Cooper!" and I was there. Cooper grunted in surprise but didn't pull away, drinking my release down in sucking swallows that left me weak. I slumped over, my grip on the headboard the only thing holding me up, until finally he pulled away. "Oh my god..."

"Yeah," he panted roughly. "Yeah..."

The bed was shaking, and it wasn't just me. I rolled to one side and eyed him as he worked himself, eyes squeezed tight, and jaw clenched. "Let me?" I breathed.

He nodded, moving his hand so I could take over. "Show me what you want," I demanded prettily, and he smiled through his pleased grimace, closing his fingers around mine and setting the pace. He was hanging by a thread, so close it just took a few strokes before he arched into our joined hands. His thick, reddened cock spurted over our fingers and onto his fuzzy belly. I licked some of his spend off his skin, making him gasp loudly in the quiet apartment.

"Shhh," I teased, smiling up at him. "They're sleeping in the other room, remember?"

Cooper opened one eye, his smile tired and pleased. "You're a menace, and I think I'm okay with that. Come up here a second. Let me hold you before we get cleaned up, if that's okay?"

I nodded. "More than."

When I woke up Saturday morning, I hoped for a magical movie moment where everything felt right and all my fears and worries were gone. "I guess your dick isn't enchanted," I sighed, startling a snort out of Cooper.

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't be," I yawned. "I like regular dick just fine. Do I smell coffee?"

He grunted affirmation. "Marisol started a pot before they left. She had to go to her brother's birthday thing, Liz needed to work on her thesis, and Tori didn't give an excuse, just said we should be careful because she's not ready to be an auntie yet."

I laughed, rolling onto my back. "So you ran into 'em, huh?"

"Kind of hard not to when Marisol stuck her head in to thank us for not waking them up with our, and I quote, 'relationship affirming bang-fest.'"

"Oh my god."

"C'mon," he cajoled. "Let's at least grab breakfast together. I've got training this morning, then practice after lunch, so I'm gonna be wrapped up all day."

The thought of not going to the field again, not being on the field, stung. That would be raw for a while. But I forced a small smile and nodded. "Okay. I guess I need to get up and face the day too. There's calls to make, and I need to talk to

Liesel."

Cooper rolled to his feet and grabbed my hand, pulling me towards the bathroom, "C'mon. Using a t-shirt to clean up doesn't make us actually clean, and I'm not going to practice with dried jizz in my chest hair."

"Okay, first, ew. And second... ever had shower sex?" At his dubious glance, I wiggled my brows. "I'm very bendy."

Cooper ended up late to practice, and I almost missed a call from Dani. Still glowing, I accepted her request for a video call. Her raised brows informed me she knew what I'd been up to. "Not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Not a thing. Except my existential crisis."

"Well," she sighed, "I'm not sure if this is going to help or hurt. Management, who is not thrilled with working on a Saturday morning but they can suck it, has received the documents from Cass and decided Creel's statements were, in part, false. But you did violate your morality clause by dating a player while contracted to the cheer squad. He was in violation as well, but since he's no longer a player, the Copperheads can do nothing to address that. It'd be opening cans of worms they would just rather not deal with, especially since it would leave them open to accusations of homophobia, queerphobia, and so on."

"So what does this mean for me?" I asked, barely above a whisper. My good mood was officially gone, and reality was creeping in faster than I'd ever wanted. "When do I come clean out my locker?"

She winced. "I'll have one of the ladies do it this afternoon, after practice. In the meantime, I'll need to collect your keys to the gym, the practice facility, your uniforms?—"

"I paid for those," I pointed out dryly. "Do I get my money back?"

"Lucas..."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Shit." I tipped my face up, hoping the tears would stay behind my lids when I finally looked back at the screen. "What else?"

"Management has agreed, after Becca and I went hard to bat for you, that you can audition in twelve months for another spot on the squad. But for this year, you're out."

"And the chances of me getting a spot at age twenty-six are virtually nil," I whispered. "Okay then."

"It's not impossible. And you're amazing, Lucas. This isn't the end of the world."

"Not the entire world, no. Just mine."

I stopped by Dani's office to drop off the things considered cheer squad property, down to my uniform socks, leaving everything in a box at the front desk. I couldn't stomach seeing her face to face now. I could barely face Liesel, waiting for me in the lobby of the tiny office block Queering Sports rented.

"Hey," she drawled, bouncing on her heel. "There's no good way for me to say this without sounding like a total jerk but?—"

"I'm fired. Leave. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars," I sighed. "I know. I've been expecting that."

"No," she giggled. "Come here. I want to show you this."



Grabbing my wrist, she pulled me to her office. She had her computer on and facing the door. "I've been preparing." She waved for me to sit down, joining me in the other chair. "I got an email early this morning from Jameson Creel's representative. He's backing out of his role with the organization but," she held up one finger when I gasped, "he's still donating, and throwing his weight behind signing people up. "

On the screen was the email and several open tabs. "Here," she added, clicking on another. "This is QS's fundraising link we keep going all year. Look at the past twelve hours!"

"Jesus... that's half a million dollars!"

She squealed. "All unique donors! There's no definitive evidence, but the spike started after pictures of Cooper in his shirt hit the socials last night. And," she drawled, drumming her hands on the desk in a fanfare, "we've had twenty new volunteer applications this morning. Over half cited his involvement in the organization as a draw. Only a few cited Creel."

Taking it in stunned silence I nodded slowly. "So things are... good," I said weakly. "Really good."

"Well, they could be a lot better." She shifted to lean in closer and clasp my hands in hers. "Lucas, I'm about to ask you something and you can totally say no if you want to. I just ask that you think about it, okay?"

When I stared at her, she sighed, smiling a little more widely. "Don't look so scared. It's not bad. It's kind of huge, actually. One of the big deals this morning was this." She clicked the last tab. An email from a law firm informed Liesel and the board they would be establishing a scholarship fund at Cottonwood College, a private university known for its STEM and business programs, for nonprofit management. The anonymous donor stipulated that the recipient be part of the LGBTQIA+ community

and demonstrate a desire to work with kids.

"Uh," I sputtered. "That sounds oddly specific. Who's the donor?"

"We have our suspicions, but the law firm won't answer calls. They're legit, though! I checked 'em out. They specialize in trusts, rich people stuff, but their client is determined to be incognito. Lucas, we want you to be the first recipient. All you have to do is apply to the program and get in." She bit her lip, barely stifling another squeal of excitement. "And honey, you're gonna be a shoe-in."

"I don't... I... what ?" My world was rapidly tilting again, the second time in twenty-four hours. "I need a minute. What the hell is happening?"

She shook her head. "No idea, but isn't it wonderful?"

### CHAPTER 18

#### COOPER

"Coppertop, you got a guest," Rye hollered. A few catcalls went up, a few hisses. I raised my middle finger. Grabbing my towel, I headed for the locker room door in my flip flops. Practice had been brutal but good—preseason started in just a few weeks, and we were going to kick so much ass. I could feel it in my bones.

"Who is it?" I called out as I passed Rye, hoping he'd say Lucas.

He rolled his eyes. "Your new BFF."

Huh?

I stopped by my locker, grabbing my shirt and some loose shorts. If it wasn't Lucas, I didn't want to shock whoever it was by standing there mostly naked. It might be Phil, but according to his last text, he was in Beaumont dealing with some player drama for another client. Stepping out into the hallway, the slightly hungover person of Jameson Creel greeted me. "Oh lord," I sighed. "What is it?"

He chuckled dryly. "You got me thinking last night. To be honest, it wasn't something I hadn't thought before. And something my agent mentioned."

When he fell silent for a long moment, I leaned back against the wall. "Go on."

"Look, I'm not saying what I did was wrong. Lucas wasn't gonna fit my image, and

there's no two ways about that."

"Okay then," I muttered. "Good talk."

"Hey," he barked when I turned to walk away. "I'm not here to make excuses."

"Seriously?" I whipped back around, crowding him against the opposite wall. "That's all you've done! Why are you here, Creel? You gotta understand I will not be on your side in this. You cost Lucas his job. You treated him like trash. Why would I sympathize with you?"

"I'm not asking you to," he snarled, but I was sure he was lying. "I wanted you to know... I'm trying to make things up to him."

"Huh?" I rocked back. "Why are you telling me and not him?"

"Because he won't accept it coming from me. So it's going to be private. But you'll know." He gave me a nod. "And so will I."

"Forgiveness in secret? It doesn't work like that," I laughed. "Creel?—"

"What're those head shrinkers fond of saying? You can't love anyone till you love yourself?"

"That's RuPaul."

Brushing that information aside, he waved one hand. "Whatever. The point is I'm patching up holes I've made. And right now, Lucas don't need to know I've tried. But I'll know. And now you will too." He eyed me one more time, a smile curling over his expression. "You're gonna go far, Coppertop. You're one of the best out there. Don't fuck it up like I did."

"You had a blown knee and broken femur," I said. "Wasn't your fault."

"I don't mean the game. I mean everything else."

As he walked down the corridor, back towards Coach's office, I stared after him. "What the hell was that?"

Lucas was curled up asleep on my sofa when I got home. He'd let himself in with the spare key I'd given him before heading out that morning. He'd made himself right at home, from the looks of things. Quietly, I toed off my shoes and set my keys and wallet down on the table by the door. Padding past him carefully, I took my things to the laundry room to sort and headed into the kitchen. It was late, past ten, the day stretched out by interviews with various sports agencies, meetings with coaches and medical team checkups. A rumor zipped around that Byrne was fired from Texas Sports News, and none of us were sad.

Lucas was still snoozing when I found the leftovers he'd put in the oven for me, a little heart drawn on top in parmesan.

I grabbed my phone and called Ouisie. "I think I love him," I said as soon as she answered.

"Hello to you too, Coop," she yawned. "Is this a good thing?"

"Yeah... yeah it is." Lucas snuffled in his sleep but didn't wake as I carried my plate to the table and sat down, Bluetooth in my ear and phone in my pocket. "I wasn't sure, but... he put a heart on my food, Ouisie."

"Well, that does it. Now you have to marry him," she said dryly. "That's true love right there."

"There's more," I laughed softly. "God, this week has been a mess."

"Tell me about it," she said, sounding sleepy. "I'll make some coffee."

"Don't keep yourself up. I'll call tomorrow. I just... I had to say it. I had to let someone know."

"Maybe you should let him know, huh?" she teased. "And when you call, don't make it too late. I've got a date."

"What? With whom?"

"Renny. Gotta go. Byeeeeeee!"

"What? Ouisie!"

Lucas snorted. A moment later, his feet hit the floor. "Coop?"

"Kitchen!"

He shuffled in, not stopping until he perched on my thigh. "I made you a heart," he said sleepily. "How was your day?"

"I know." I smiled, drawing him in to kiss the side of his face. "And it was long. Tiring. Good. How about you?" I decided not to mention Creel and his odd visit unless I had to.

"It was... weird," he yawned. "You will never believe what happened."

"Oh? Try me."

He was right, but not for the reason he thought. As he told me about the ups and downs of his morning, he grew really animated about the scholarship. "I don't know who set it up, but it's like they knew me," he sighed happily. "I guess Marisol was right—it's time for me to take the next step. I'm so freaking excited, Cooper! I just... I wish I knew who set it up. I want to send them a thank you note or, I don't know, a basket or something!"

"Maybe," I said carefully, "someone wants to make things better for you." He tipped his face back to raise one of those expressive brows at me, a silent oh really, and I held up both hands in protest. "Not me. I mean, I would if I could! But I honestly didn't even think about the possibility of a scholarship."

Smiling, Lucas stretched up to give me a smacking kiss on the lips. "I believe you." He leaned back against me, drowsing as I took a few bites of food. "What were you so loud about earlier?"

"Hm? Oh, my sister is going on a date with her bookstore nemesis."

"Awwww! Enemies to lovers! My favorite!" He bounced, craning his neck back to kiss me. "Well, second fave after opposites attract." He grinned, wiggling those brows at me.

"Oh! That reminds me!" I shifted him from my lap, hurrying to the bag I'd brought in with me, the poor bedraggled thing having seen better days. "It's past time we trade."

Lucas' eyes went wide. "I... now? Okay?" He reached under the coffee table and pulled out his own beat-up bookstore bag. "On three?"

I laughed. "Sure." We held out the bags towards one another and, in his best cheer voice, Lucas counted to three. I grabbed his, he grabbed mine, the plastic bags flying. But the book in my hands gave me pause. "Wait. I think we swapped bags

somehow..."

Lucas snorted, eyes shining as he held up a copy of the same romance novel I was holding. "Nope. Opposites attract, queer cheerleader and football player..."

"It's a sign," I laughed, my own eyes stinging a little, joy bubbling in my chest.

I managed to toss the book aside just as Lucas leaped for me, his arms and legs looping around me as I grabbed his ass to hold him up. Grinning, I dipped him back to kiss his throat as he squealed. "I love you," I said suddenly, and he went quiet and still. "Lucas?"

"I heard you," he whispered, lifting his chin to meet my gaze. "And I love you too. Now let me up before I faint." I shifted, taking us both down to the sofa so he could get more comfortable, and I wouldn't have to let go.

He settled against my chest, both of us quiet, glowing in the late-night glare of the kitchen lights. "Not now," I said after a while, "but one day soon, can we talk about moving in together?"

He nodded. "So long as you're okay with my cat."

"Baby, I'm okay with everything about you."

"Sap."

"Damn straight."



### EPILOGUE

#### LUCAS

##### Two Years Later

##### Superbowl Sunday

I crept down the hallway, doing my best to keep from waking Cooper, but it was useless. He was sitting up in bed, grinning. “Go back to sleep,” I hissed. “I’m trying to surprise you, damn it!”

He laughed quietly—my sister and nephew were just down the hall in the guest room, his parents in the other. Heloise, Gregg, and Sonny would be by in a few hours. Later, we’d have a house full of loud football players, their partners, kids, some friends from work, ... Pretty much an entire small town by headcount. But for now, it was just us and our sleepy loved ones in the predawn hours. “I can’t sleep when you’re sneaking around like the world’s noisiest cat burglar.”

Desmond huffed an annoyed sound from the end of the bed. He’d taken to sleeping with Cooper every night Cooper was home. “Sorry,” Cooper corrected, sounding not at all contrite. “No offense to cats.”

I shut the door quietly behind me, pushing it with my foot. I balanced a tray with coffee, tea, way too many pancakes, that gross turkey bacon Cooper liked, and a huge bowl of fruit. “Shove over then. I don’t need to be all sweet and wake you with gentle kisses and shit if you’re already up.”

“I don’t know—I could do with some gentle kisses.”

I raised my brow, setting the tray on his lap. Carefully, I crawled over his shins to perch on my side of the bed with its stack of pillows and overflowing nightstand. He eyed me expectantly, tapping the corner of his lips when I just stared back. “Oh, I suppose,” I grumbled, barely able to keep from smiling. When I leaned in to give him a peck, he grabbed me around the middle. He managed not to dump the tray over as he dragged me in for a deeper, longer kiss than I’d planned on.

Not that I minded.

“Breakfast,” he muttered against my lips when I tried to squirm even closer.

“Not hungry.”

He grinned, giving my lower lip a sharp nip. “Liar. You’re a bottomless pit.” With another smacking kiss, he set me back on my side of the bed. Three years in and his casual displays of strength still made my stomach flutter and heart skip. “Ooooooh, kiwi! Thanks!”

I slid down lower in the bed, stretching my legs to bump Desmond. “Feeling better?”

He nodded. “Everything hurts, and I want to die a little, but not nearly as bad as last weekend. I have an appointment with the doc on Monday.” He popped a piece of bacon in his mouth.

I snagged one of the berries from the fruit bowl, turning on my side to watch him eat. “Are you happy?”

He coughed on his kiwi, waving me off when I tried to smack him on the back. After a few moments, he set the tray aside on his nightstand and turned to face me more fully with a concerned, confused expression. “Are you?”

“Very,” I promised, scooting closer. “I know we’ve been really just swamped this year between my work and yours, and your injuries this season and—” I trailed off, leaning into his hand as he stroked my hair back from my face. “I just wanted to make sure, I suppose.”

“What did I tell you?” he murmured, leaning in close. When he brushed his lips against mine again, he tasted of kiwi and coffee and sugar, barely a kiss but definitely a promise. “What do I always tell you?”

“Get my feet off the coffee table?” I teased.

“Exactly. Lucas, get your feet off the coffee table.”

“I love you too.”

The morning spiraled quickly into chaos. Once we'd finished breakfast, it was like a signal went up to everyone in the vicinity. My nephew tested his lung power, which led to Cooper's parents cooing and fussing over him with significant glances and mentions of how wonderful babies are and I sure wish we had a baby to hold all the time now that Greggy was getting too big for them to carry around easily.

They didn't appreciate my suggestion to start a babysitting business.

It wasn't long before the house filled, family members arriving first, then a flood of players, friends, and loved ones. After a while, we just left the front door open to stop the constant ringing of the bell. The music I'd picked out was absolutely smothered under the rumble of voices and shrieks of children who'd discovered the box of water toys set up on the back patio. Mom and Aunt Lynda played lifeguards while some of the older kids swam in the heated pool. A few of the newer players perched, wide-eyed and a little stiff, on Cooper's prized leather sofa while everyone else made themselves at home. Cooper disappeared into the sea of huge men clustered in the media room. The crowd reminded me of those nature documentaries where the big

cats are all devouring some poor beastie—except in this case, the beastie was a massive charcuterie platter Marisol, Tori, and I made and the jugs of sangria Liz and Jenny provided.

"Talk to Dani yet?" Marisol asked, catching up with me in the kitchen. "She was looking for you earlier."

"That can't be good," I groaned, sinking down against the counter. We'd found a surprisingly quiet spot, tucked into the corner near the fridge and pantry. Everyone was distracted with pre-game shows and roughhousing, up to their eyeballs in snacks and drinks. "What did I do now?"

Marisol smiled mysteriously, doing her best to conceal it behind her glass of sweet tea.

"Marisol. What are you hiding?"

"Not a thing," she sing-songed as Tori sauntered over.

"Did you tell him Dani was looking for him?"

"Oh my god," I groaned. "Does everyone know but me?"

Tori snickered. "If it helps, I don't think the kid does." She patted her gently rounded belly. "Though Dani is pretty loud, so maybe?"

"Baby Lucas," I said sternly, bending to talk level with her bump, "you don't let your mother and aunties gang up on me. You got my back, right?"

"He's a fetus, sooooo," Marisol drawled, saluting me with her tea. "You're on your own, dude."

"And," Tori smiled, bouncing on her heels, "it's not a he. Well. They're not a he. Kind of." She squealed, clapping her hands. "We're having twins! Scans showed a boy and a girl!"

"Oh my god!" Marisol and I both rushed Tori only to pull up short. "Oh my god," I repeated. "I want to squish you so bad, but I don't want to hurt the babies!"

"It's okay," Tori laughed, tears sparkling. "I've got 'em."

Cooper found us huddled in the kitchen in a sort of bouncy group hug a few minutes later. "Y'all good?" Smiling faintly, he reached for another of the prepared platters to set out. "These are awesome by the way."

"Tori's having twins!"

"Having them do what?" He winked at me, clearly teasing.

"She's pregnant, you dork," I laughed.

"Oh, wow! Congrats! Hey, Billy," he shouted, heading back into the media room, "congrats on the twofer!"

Tori snorted into my shoulder. "Oh my god."

Closer to game time, little divisions appeared. Most of the cheer squad, present and former, ended up on the back patio overlooking the pool and garden. The players crowded into the media room or kitchen, partners and kids drifting between the three spots as they herded kids or just wanted to get away from the noise for a bit.

Beside me, Renata stretched her legs, closing her eyes against the surprisingly bright glare of the sun. "It was so nice earlier," she sighed. "Why's it gotta be so bright out?"

"Because Texas," I deadpanned. "Where's Bas?"

"Playing with some of the other kids." She opened one eye to check. "Yeah, over there. Taking after his uncle Lucas."

Bas tried to lead the kids in a cheer, but they succeeded only in tumbling over each other and cackling. Which, to be fair, happened a lot in regular cheer practice too. "He's been great at the studio," I murmured. "Really into the lessons."

"Because Bas wants to be just like his Tio."

Renata's smile became sly and curly as she leaned a bit closer. "You talk to Dani yet?"

"Ugh! Why does everyone know what's going on but me?"

"Because we're smarter than you?"

"Fuck you."

She snorted. "There's my little brother. More importantly," she scooted her whole chair close now and lowered her voice to barely a whisper, even though the nearest person was a good twenty feet away. "Did you talk to Coop?"

"Not yet. I thought today would be the day, but I don't know. There's so many people here, and even after the game's over, he'll be all keyed up."

"Dude. You can't just keep pretending."

"Pretending what?"

"Dani!" I nearly fell out of my chair, whipping around to face the squad's coach.

"The one and only," she said, giving me a wink. "Hey, Renata. How's the kid?"

"Loud and adorable." Renata pulled a strand of hair up so we could see it. "I named this gray one after him."

"Sounds about right," Dani laughed. "All of my grays are either from my wife's love of motorcycles, or the older two kids. Thankfully, the youngest one seems to have missed out on the give Mom ulcers gene."

"So apparently, you've been looking for me?" I put in, steering them away from parenting chat. "I don't think you can technically fire me again."

Renata snorted into her tea, and Dani rolled her eyes. "I just loved it so much the first time I thought I'd give it another go."

I hummed, suspicious, and took another sip of my drink. "Why is everyone acting so cagey?" A horrible idea crossed my mind. I sat up, stomach sinking, and sat my drink on the small table between us. "This isn't about a reality show, is it? Like some Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders thing except about the Troopers Cheer Squad and oh my god, you're not asking me to consult, are you? I mean, I'll do it, but I'll need to talk to the board at work first and Coop and?—"

"Out of curiosity," Dani interrupted, tone mild, "how much have you had to drink today?"

"And that is my cue to go check on the kids," Renata announced, getting to her feet. "Lucas, keep your ears open, huh? Remember?"

I waved off my sister, shooting Dani an anxious, worried glance. My stomach sloshed with nerves, every sip of tea and lemonade I'd had since nine a.m. making me regret them. "Do we need to use Coop's office? It's nearby and is pretty quiet."

She shook her head, smiling gently now. "Lucas, you were the cornerstone of the squad for years longer than most cheerleaders hang around. And since you... left... you've been one of the squad's biggest supporters and most vocal advocates for their rights and the rules governing what they're expected to do. Between your passion for the squad, your work with Queering Sports, and your teaching, I can honestly say you're one of the most dynamic and dedicated people I've ever met."

"You sound like you're saying goodbye." I chuckled nervously. "Are you being fired?"

"Tell me something." She nudged me to walk with her as some of the partners stepped out onto the patio, and a spill of loud voices and a blasting pre-game show followed. We stepped off the patio and onto the narrow rock path leading past the pool and to a small flower bed around a massive oak tree. A year or so ago, I'd convinced Cooper to put a bench out there and a bird feeder. He'd called it my old man seat since I loved to go out and sip tea and watch the birds come and go every morning, but I'd caught him out there more than a few times, so he had no room to talk. Dani and I headed over there now, dodging a tumbling kid who declared themselves to be Captain America, chased by my nephew demanding the shield back. "How're your knees?"

"Huh?" I stopped. "Is this... what?"

"I'm gonna be retiring in a year or so," she said quietly, glancing around to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. "Not right now, but soon. And I'm starting to pull back, shift more of my duties to the assistants. Things are changing in our world, Lucas. Not for the Troopers squad but across all of pro cheer. We need people who can keep up, who want what's best for the squads, not following the old playbooks. We need people who will kick off the dust from the boots, so to speak, open up the sport for more diverse members. Make it less ornamental, you know?"

I nodded slowly. "I... I don't know. God. My head is spinning! Maybe I did have too



many sangrias...”

"Listen. I'm not retiring tomorrow. I'm looking at next year. Maybe the one after if I have to hang around and make sure you're doing alright." She bumped my shoulder with hers, smiling softly. "I'm asking, very poorly, if you'd consider training to become a coach and applying for my position once I announce my retirement officially."

I tried to find words, but the best I could do was gawp like a fish for a minute before squeaking out, " Are you sure?"

Dani laughed loudly this time. "Come by my office on Tuesday, huh? We'll talk. See if we can find a way to fit this in with your work at Queering Sports."

I nodded slowly. "Everyone else knew before me," I blurted. "Why?"

"Element of surprise?" she suggested. When I made a face at that, she snorted softly and looped her arm through mine. "I wanted to get a feel for things. I'd heard you talking to Tori about how you felt your career was winding down, and it got me thinking. I talked to the other squad members and got in touch with some of the former ones?—"

"Marisol and Liz."

"And Tori, Julia, Hannah, Norah, Jess, Jess, and Jess..." She paused. "Well, you get the idea. They all said the same thing. That you'd be an amazing coach, and that management would be hurting themselves not to hire you."

"Huh." I stared across the lawn. So many people were milling around, laughing, shouting, holding on to one another, being there... And I wouldn't be part of it if not for the team.

If not for Cooper.

I nodded slowly. "I think... Yeah. Let's talk. I'll, um. I'll bring my five-year plan for the nonprofit, and we can see how things mesh in terms of training and?"

"Slow down," she urged kindly. "One step at a time. Right now, I'm feeling like I need too much queso and beer, and you need to find your fella before the game starts. Otherwise, you're not seeing him for hours."

"Nah, he'll come find me at halftime," I smiled, standing to join her as she headed back across the yard.

Me. A Coach. Huh...

Tori and Marisol were on the porch when we got there, Marisol sipping sangria and Tori clutching a water bottle as if her life depended on it. Marisol shot me a thumbs up and raised her brows. I just nodded. They squealed again, and I could only laugh.

"Hey! Game's starting in five," someone—I think it was Rye—shouted from inside. "Let's go Dallas!"

"Blasphemy!" That was definitely Cooper.

Dani shook her head. "Queso, beer, and the back patio."

"At least until halftime," I agreed, unable to hide my smile.

The aftermath of the game was... a lot. Dallas squeaked ahead and won in the last quarter by a hair's breadth, beating Jacksonville in a dramatic win. The crowd in our media room shouted so loud I was pretty sure the neighbors would file a noise complaint.

Or they would've if they hadn't been lodged up in there, too, shouting right along with the guys from the Troopers. Eventually, people drifted off. A few friends stayed to help clean up after I shooed my sister and nephew off to bed and Cooper's folks turned in for the night, unable to keep their eyes open much longer once the game was over and the adrenaline faded.

"Jesus," I muttered, staring at the recycling bins and piles of clear bags set aside for the recycling company to pick them up the next morning. "I don't even want to look at the actual trash."

"It's grim," Cooper sighed, leaning against the garage wall. "Shit. I thought playing in the All Stars was exhausting. I was practically skipping home after the game. This party knocked me on my ass."

"Well," I drawled, turning to press against him, looping my arms around his neck, "that's probably because you've been on a high since last week. All those interviews, filming the promotional stuff for Nike and all that jazz. And today you had the party and those phone-in spots to talk about the bowl and..." I sighed. "You've been running on all cylinders this past week. You're gonna crash."

"Don't wanna," he pouted comically, lifting me off my feet when I laughed. "I want to take my boyfriend to bed and do very athletic and sweaty things for the next few hours."

"Hmmm. I love that," I admitted. "But our family is sleeping on either side of us, remember?"

"Boo."

I was glad we were in the garage—my laugh was so loud surely it would've woken Bas otherwise. "Let's go to bed."

"Did Dani ever track you down?" he asked with a yawn. "I heard she was looking for you."

"Ah, yeah. Yeah, she did."

"And?" He tugged me to a stop at the foot of the stairs, raising his brows expectantly.

"You already know, don't you?" I accused. "Who told you?"

"Tori," he shrugged. "Well, her husband. She told Billy, and Billy can't keep a secret to save his life." He scooped me up, holding me under my butt when I wrapped my legs around his waist. "Tell me about it?"

So I told him, while he carried me to our room. With a soft grunt, he tossed me onto the mattress. We tussled for a few minutes, debating a shower or just going to sleep. I thought of the ring I'd been carrying in my pocket all day. My plans to propose during the party in front of our friends and family were scrapped before the party even began, but the ring was still there. Still beckoning. I wanted something for us and not part of the game, part of the team or the nonprofit or anything but him and me after so much of our lives were tied into such a public line of work. His face in ads, on television screens, in magazines. Mine... less so, I smiled to myself. But I was there, along for the ride. I had students, I performed.

But things with Cooper? That was for us and us alone.

Beside me, Cooper snored softly. I fished the ring out of my pocket and, oh so slowly, slid it onto his left ring finger. Cooper snorted, shifted, looping his arm around my waist to pull me against his chest. His newly ringed hand rested over my chest, but he didn't wake. I stared at the glint of silver on his finger, watching it in the dim moonlight as sleep slowly crept over me. My eyes were too heavy to stare for long. I melted against his chest, his breath tickling my neck, the weight of his arm comforting.

"Night, baby," I whispered, sinking.

"Night," he muttered. "And the answer is yes."