

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a man and a woman in profile, facing each other. The man is on the left, shirtless, with his hand near his chin. The woman is on the right, wearing a white strap top. The background is dark and smoky, with a bright light source creating a dramatic glow between them.

COLLETTE WEST

# NIGHT GAMES

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Editor: Mickey Reed

To those who've ever had a crush on a  
baseball player.

# *Chapter One*

## **Grey**

I like seeing things from on top of the world.

Nudging the screen door open with my shoulder, I greet the morning outside my trailer. I can't help but sigh in contentment as I gaze down at the valley below. The sun is breaking over the horizon as I sip my coffee from a chipped New York Kings mug. The pinkish orange tinge of dawn slowly gives way to blue, promising another scorcher ahead.

I sit cross-legged on the ground and pick off the blades of grass clinging to

my toes, listening to the birds call back and forth to one another through the trees. The cicadas are already humming as the forest awakens from its nightly slumber. But the air is still cool and I savor the caress of a light breeze as it weaves its way through my hair.

Nothing soothes my soul like this mountain does.

Everyone thinks I'm crazy living up here by myself. They don't understand how I crave isolation. The world is so turbulent, its hectic pace often leaving me drained. I need to get away from the constant stream of chatter and slow things down to a more natural rhythm. On top of this mountain, I'm able to think clearly and maintain some perspective.



I've made so many mistakes in my life. I don't think I can afford to make any more.

And it's not like I'm completely removed from civilization. There are homes at the base of the cliff. I can see some of them from where I'm sitting. But the summit's all mine. Jack Hardy, the hunter who owns this land, inherited it from his father. It's been in his family for generations. And even though he only uses it for recreational purposes, he lets me rent his ramshackle trailer at a reasonable rate. Too bad, the suspension in my truck is shot due to the hasty road the phone company put in when they installed a cell tower within spitting

distance of my front door. Jack promised City Council that he would open up his land for development and that installing the necessary utilities would be a worthwhile investment. He just didn't tell them that his vision didn't include anyone living up here for the next fifty years except for me. But thanks to him, I have all the modern amenities a girl could ask for—from a shower that leaks to a generator on the fritz. Ah, the joys of roughing it.

I was the first to answer Jack's Craigslist ad back in the spring. He was wearing a New York Kings hat when I met him so I knew it was meant to be. At first, he was hesitant to have a single woman as a tenant. But after talking

baseball with him for nearly an hour, he relented. He made it clear that he thought I required some protection, living up here on my own, before he'd feel comfortable with the arrangement. Being a gun enthusiast, he convinced me to buy a Glock 17 pistol. I wasn't keen on keeping a loaded firearm next to my bed but eventually conceded that he was probably right. Anyone could wander out of these woods in the middle of the night, and I need to be prepared. Sure, it feels like utopia now on a sunny morning in July, but I'm no fool. The peaceful solitude can turn dangerous in a heartbeat. I'd rather have it than not, even if I never pull the trigger.

What scares me more is the loneliness that sometimes creeps up on me. When I'm busy, I don't notice it as much, but on mornings like this, I wish I had someone to share this breathtaking sunrise with instead of always waking up alone. But I'm not going to let myself go there. It's too nice a day to throw a pity party, especially when I have to be at work in an hour.

My eyes trace the flight of a hawk as it glides through the air, catching the sunlight on its ebony-tipped wings. I should embrace my freedom, not whine about it. I'm not tied down to anyone or anything. I could pick up and leave right now if I wanted to. I could go out and

explore the world and all it has to offer. If I had the money, I wouldn't stop until I crisscrossed the globe. But I have bills to pay and my lame-ass job at the mall barely covers those.

I thought about going to a New York Kings game this summer. Too bad I had to splurge on a new set of tires for my truck instead. It's been a while since I've been to the stadium. I miss seeing the perfectly manicured field and hearing the roar of fifty thousand fans jump to their feet. So many good memories are wrapped up in that place. I used to go every year with my family, but once Mom got sick, it didn't feel right going without her.

But my enthusiasm for the Kings never

wavered. I still watch as many games as I can on TV. When I have to work nights, I'm usually home by ten to catch the last few innings. From April to October, the Kings are a part of my nighttime ritual. My Chase Whitfield t-shirt is so threadbare that it's ready to disintegrate in the wash. I finger the hem as I tip back my head and drain the contents of my mug. I really should get a new shirt, but I can't bear to part with this one. It's all worn in and cozy. Even if the number three is fading on the back, my mind doesn't have any trouble envisioning the player it represents.

It's weird, but I feel like I know Chase Whitfield. Maybe it's because

I've been watching him play shortstop for the Kings since his rookie season back when I was sixteen. When I think about it, he's been the one constant in my life. Boyfriends have come and gone, but he's the one guy who has remained. I know it's silly, but no one else could measure up to him. He's driven, yet humble. Determined, yet gracious. His personality is more dazzling than all four of his World Series rings combined.

I like what he stands for. He grew up wanting to be the starting shortstop of the Kings and he'll probably have his number retired at that position. He knew what he wanted and he went out and got it. Sure, he worked hard to get where he is today, but it all seemed predestined,

like he was somehow meant for greatness. He taught me how to strive for nothing less than my personal best, even if it's only neatly folding the underwear tray in men's accessories.

I bite my lip to keep from giggling when my phone rings inside the trailer. Scrambling to my feet, I race to answer it. No one usually calls me this early. Shit. It's my sister's name lighting up the screen. I hope everything's all right with Mom.

"Erin, what is it?" I ask, out of breath, afraid of what she's about to tell me.

"Oh my God, Grey Goose! Are you sitting down?" she screams into the receiver, forcing me to hold it away



from my ear. I hate it when she refers to me as a brand of vodka, but I let it pass. She's so frazzled I can't tell if she's excited or upset.

“Please tell me Mom's okay.”

“Mom? Yeah, she's fine.”

“Then why are you calling me at the butt crack of dawn?” I collapse on the edge of the bed, trying to still my heart.

“Just shut up and let me finish, would ya?” She laughs, knowing what a worrywart I am. “I was getting the boys ready for summer camp, and I had the news on in the background. I really wasn't paying attention until I heard a certain someone's name mentioned.”

“Oh no. Not Mark.” Erin's estranged husband took out a telephone pole with

his car after one of his drinking binges, but that was months ago. I hope he's not at it again.

"Grey, don't kill the buzz I've got going on," she snaps, annoyed that I mentioned her ex.

"Well, who then?"

"Chase Whitfield!"

For a moment, my mind goes blank. It throws me to hear Erin shriek his name after I was just thinking about him. My brain seems to freeze as my daydream collides with real life.

"What? Is he coming off the disabled list?"

That's the only thing that comes to mind since he's been out of commission

practically the entire season. He twisted his knee sliding into second base in April, and I've been in serious Chase-withdrawal mode, waiting for him to return to the team. I know I've been grumbling about his prolonged absence to Erin so much that she's probably sick of hearing me talk about him. But I didn't think she cared enough to give me a status report on his condition. It's beyond thoughtful, which is kind of unlike her. She's usually too preoccupied with whatever her kids are doing to notice stuff like this.

“Even better than that. He's coming here!”

I can't help it. I drop my phone.

“Grey? Did you hear me? Grey?” Her

voice radiates from the speaker, but I'm at a loss for words. Struggling to collect myself, I push my hair out of my face and take a deep breath before picking up the phone.

“When is he coming?” I manage to spit out.

“Tomorrow night!”

“Erin, we have to get tickets... We have to—”

“Calm down, G. Already taken care of. I went online and got them before they sold out. We're in. We've been waiting for this so I got right down to business. No fooling around.”

I don't know who is more obsessed with Chase—me or my sister. It's a toss-

up. Ever since the Kings moved their minor league franchise to our hometown of Stockton, Pennsylvania, three years ago, we always hoped that Chase would play here.

“He must be pissed that he has to come to Beaver Field,” I mutter, more to myself than to her.

“Who cares? We can’t go to New York anymore, so let Chase come to us,” Erin remarks, oblivious to the fact that an athlete of his caliber shouldn’t have to rehab a knee injury on turf.

“It’ll be awesome to see him play again, live and in person. I just hope he takes it easy and—”

“What are you, his mother? Grey, snap out of it. We’re going to ogle his

cute butt from the cheap seats, not fret over his damn knee. Just for that, you're buying me a beer. I'm bound to get thirsty as hell from all the catcalling I plan on doing."

Erin's been drinking way too much lately, but I bite my tongue. Her marriage exploded in her face when she caught Mark cheating on her. They had a knockdown, drag-out fight that escalated to the point of Mark drawing a knife on her in their kitchen. Erin managed to get away with their two boys, Randy and Jacob, before calling the cops. Since she had nowhere else to go, I happily vacated the apartment above our parents' garage and moved into Jack's

trailer. But the pressure of being back at square one has been wearing on her last nerve, and she's been hitting the bottle more than ever.

“Well, if you're taking the Chippendales' approach, I guess that means I'm driving and you're not bringing the boys.”

“Grey, we're going to stalk his ass all over town if we have to. I'm not going home until I have a picture with my arms wrapped around that smokin' hot body of his.”

I know she's trying to overcompensate after what Mark did to her, and of course, she needs to get her groove back somehow. Just not when she's desperate and inebriated.

“Uh huh. You just want to show off on Facebook.”

“Damn right I do. I intend to show all those sorry bitches out there that I’ve still got it. C’mon, baseball’s most eligible bachelor? The kids and I would be set for life. What was his last contract for—\$35 million? Now that would be sweet. Living in a penthouse. Having a maid pick up after us. Being pampered by one of the sexiest guys in the known universe.”

“Keep dreaming, Erin.”

“You’re just jealous because you want him for yourself. Admit it.”

Of course I do. But I’m not telling her that. Her ego’s still bruised. If it helps



restore her confidence, I'll play along. It's not like we're actually going to meet him or anything.

"Fine, I'll give you first dibs. As long as one of us Kelleher girls snags him, I don't care who it is." I act like we'll be in some kind of *Bachelorette*-style showdown to win him over.

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" Erin exclaims before whistling loudly. "I bet that boy's a handful in the sack. Just look at all of the models and actresses he's dated. It seems like he hasn't found one yet who's able to keep him satisfied. That's for damn sure."

My throat constricts as she rattles off my biggest pet peeve about Chase. He's a player both on and off the field.

Everyone's just waiting for him to settle down, but he never does. Erin's right. No one seems to be good enough for him, and I doubt he's going to find what he's looking for in Stockton.

"Listen, Erin. I gotta run or I'll be late for work. But text me and let me know what time you want me to pick you up." I grab a brush off my dresser, running it through the tangles the morning breeze left in my hair.

"I'm so wearing that new bra I bought from Victoria's Secret. It still has the tags on and everything. Hey, you never know. I might get lucky."

"Erin..."

"All right, see ya tomorrow."

“Bye, slut.”

“Later, ho.”

I hang up, feeling both elated and dejected. I admire Chase just as much for his talent, but all women seem to focus on are his looks or his bank account. Not many know his batting average or his on-base percentage. I only hope that the woman he does end up with at least has some interest in baseball. I mean, it's what he does for a living, and it wouldn't kill him to be a bit more particular when it comes to whom he's sleeping with.

Not that I stand a chance.

# *Chapter Two*

## **Chase**

I'm used to looking down on the world.

As the team's private jet descends into Stockton, I wish I could stay up in the clouds instead of plastering a fake smile on my face. The next few days are going to suck, no doubt about it. But as long as they get me back to the big leagues, I don't care. I can put up with the small-town shtick if I'm able to rejoin the Kings next week. Terry, the GM, is being a dick for sending me down to the minors when I could just as easily work out the kinks in New York.

Sure, I haven't faced live pitching in

three months, but I've never hit below three hundred either and it's not like I'm going to start now. I was already taking batting practice at the Florida complex. Yeah, I spent more time with the physical therapist than on the field, but she was too sassy to ignore. Having me constantly strip down to my underwear didn't help either. It wasn't long before she was joining me in the hot tub for those water therapy sessions after giving me a massage. My knee might not be a hundred percent, but my dick sure got a workout.

“Mr. Whitfield, can I get you anything else?” I recognize the sultry look the stewardess is giving me. I get it all the time from women. If only we had a little

more time, but the game starts in a couple of hours and I have to get to... what's it called again? Beaver Field? It's sounds so pathetic that I almost want to laugh. Almost. I remember joking about how I'd never be caught dead playing there. And here I am. It's like, for the first time in my career, life is mocking me instead of the other way around.

I'm not used to being considered subpar at anything I do. I'm a winner, a champion. Making me complete a rehab assignment with the Stockton Beavers is such a slap in the face. Contract negotiations are coming up once the season ends, and it looks like the team is

trying to get the upper hand in lowering my market value. I'm thirty and coming off a prolonged stint on the disabled list. Management is going to try to make it sound like my best days are behind me. Well, they have another thing coming. I intend to prove the haters wrong. I just have to get back to the majors to do it. I don't want to waste any more time in Stockton than I have to.

The oncoming runway is short and the plane rapidly loses altitude in order to meet it. The sharp change in the cabin's air pressure sends a shooting pain through my skull. I grimace as the landing gear roughly touches down on the mountaintop runway. I'm going to have a headache all day now. I can feel

it. Great. Just great.

I catch a glimpse of the tiny airport through the window. Hopefully, I'll be able to connect with my driver without too much commotion. I don't travel with bodyguards or any type of security. I like to keep things low-key, but in a small town like this, my presence is sure to attract attention. I can't blend in with the crowd like I usually do in New York. I'm going to stand out.

And there's nothing I crave more than my privacy. For years, I've stayed out of the gossip columns and shied away from the spotlight. Sure, my celebrity hook-ups are well documented, but they're all for the camera. If I were really into a



girl, the press sure as hell wouldn't know about it. I'd keep her out of sight. No one would even know we were together, much less know her name. But fat chance of that happening any time soon. I haven't come across a woman who makes me want to expend the effort. I'm not exactly the monogamous type, and there's no way I'm paying some gold-digger alimony after she catches me cheating on her. It's bound to happen, so why tempt fate? I'm happy living it up as a bachelor, the envy of every guy in America.

What I don't often admit is that sometimes it gets old. I see my teammates with their wives and kids and it hurts. They have what I'll never have,

even if they don't see their families for more than half the year. During the season, we travel so much that sometimes it feels like I'm on a plane more than I'm in a car. If I ever do get married, I think I'd wait until after I am done playing so that I could be home more. There's nothing worse than a long-distance relationship, and at this point, I know I'm not ready to make the necessary sacrifice. My roving eye would certainly get the better of me. There are just too many beautiful women out there to be tied down to just one.

I reach for my leather case and shove in the documents Steve, my agent, sent me to read. There's talk of another book

deal, but I'm not into it. I hated having a ghostwriter follow me around the last time. And being that I've been in such a rotten mood lately, it's not the smartest idea to have someone analyzing my every move. I'm so tightly wound I'd rather not have a journalist witness me flying off the handle.

I like being in control, and there's nothing I'm more obsessive about than my image. I have a Google alert sent to my phone every time my name is mentioned. It helps me stay on top of my publicist in squashing any false rumors or nasty gossip some lowlife scum tries to pawn off as the truth. People post some crazy shit about me on the internet. Supposedly, I've had every sexually

transmitted disease known to man. I've paid off women to keep their mouths shut about our one-night stands. I've been having a closeted relationship with Kings' third basemen, Drake Schultz, for years. Yeah, I've heard it all, but I also know how to spin bad press to my advantage by getting ahead of the story and framing the narrative.

Other guys eat that shit up when they hear about all of my supposed conquests in the bedroom. It's like they're giving me a high-five through the virtual universe. I'm living their dream. Banging every *Maxim* pinup girl and lingerie model in existence. I'm the embodiment of the ultimate male fantasy.

I'm a sports god. I get to play a game for a living and make millions of dollars doing it. I can have any girl I want, and one day my face will be immortalized in bronze in Cooperstown. It doesn't get any better than that, right? Yeah, if they only knew what it was really like.

The chances of getting close to someone are slim to none. Everyone I meet always wants something from me. An autograph. A picture. A moment of my time. It irritates me to go to a restaurant only to have someone at the next table recording a video of me slurping my soup on their phone. I could stay home and subsist on takeout. I could order room service when I'm on the road. But I refuse to live my life like a

prisoner of my fame. I like going out in public and enjoying myself. I only wish these social media addicts would give me a break. It's gotten to the point where I've started reprimanding them out loud, and the majority slink away with their tails between their legs. Sometimes it pays to speak up in order to wrest some power away from these obnoxious pests.

Now don't get me wrong, most of the time I don't mind engaging with fans, especially the kids. But when I'm eating, that's an invasion of my personal space and I refuse to be bothered. I decline their requests politely, but sometimes the interruptions are constant, one right after another, after I've already said that I'm

not signing. And that's when I start to lose my cool. I could be trying to have a conversation with the people at my table and someone's tapping me on the shoulder, shoving a crumpled napkin and a Sharpie in my face.

But the worst are the ones who follow me around with backpacks crammed with memorabilia—balls, cards, posters, and everything in between. They're not looking for a personalized memento. Oh no. They're hoping to make a quick buck off my signature. It's bad enough that I have to sit for hours at sports shows or sign thousands of numbered items for deals my agent agreed to. But to have some paparazzi-like con artist try to swindle me for a

profit? That gets my blood boiling.

“I can’t wait until you’re back playing in New York, Mr. Whitfield.” The pilot salutes me as I reach the cockpit, drawing me out of my negative headspace.

“You and me both, Merle. I hope you won’t be seeing me in person for a while.”

“I take it you’re being driven back to the city when you’re done in Stockton?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Good luck to you, sir. Hit one out of the park for me tonight.”

“Now, Merle. You know I’m more of a line drive guy.”

“That’s right. Mr. Whitfield definitely



knows his way around the bases,” the stewardess interrupts, trying to get me to notice her again.

I shoot her a withering look. I’m not big on people jumping into a conversation I’m having with someone else. She’s coming on a little too strong, hungry for my undivided attention.

“He sure does,” Merle complies, but he’s too old school to pick up on the sexual innuendo behind her statement.

“Thanks for flying with us, Mr. Whitfield.” She extends her hand, and with the pilot watching, I have to take it, even though I’d rather not. Her fingers wrap around mine as she presses a piece of paper against my palm. It’s the oldest trick in the book. I didn’t even bother to

catch her name, but I'm sure she has it written down next to her number, probably surrounded by Xs and Os.

I sling my bag over my shoulder and exit the plane. There's a garbage can right outside the gate, and I toss the scrap of paper into it. Like I have the time or the inclination to sleep with a pushy stewardess. There's nothing more cliché than that, even if she does have a killer body. It might be the last hot piece of ass I see for a while.

“Mr. Whitfield! Mr. Whitfield, over here!”

All eyes in the mostly empty airport zero in on me. *Gee thanks, asshole.* Now they might as well announce it over

the loudspeaker. Forget about making a quiet entrance. Immediately, a crowd starts to swell around me as I push through to the guilt-ridden chauffeur.

“I’m so sorry, sir. I just got excited and I didn’t want you to walk by me.” The guy seems sincere, and I decide to cut him some slack, especially if he’s going to be the one driving me around all week. I need him on my side.

“Mission accomplished then,” I say with a hasty smile, quickly scribbling my name across a baseball someone’s holding out to me. “Lead the way...?”

“Noah. Noah Martin,” he replies, ushering me toward the revolving door. “Your bags are already in the trunk. We can make a clean getaway.” He runs

toward the Toyota Prius, getting behind the wheel without bothering to open the passenger door for me. What? The Kings couldn't hire an experienced driver or at least a town car? I can't remember the last time I was in something that wasn't a Lexus or a Mercedes.

Before I can even buckle my seatbelt, Noah floors it, pulling away from the curb with gusto.

"I've always wanted to do that," he chuckles, gazing in the rearview mirror. "We left those suckers in the dust!"

"Well, you can slow down. We didn't rob a bank."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Whitfield, sir."

"Dude, call me Chase."

“Righteous!” His curly hair is fro’ed out and his forehead is all sweaty, even with the air conditioner on. “You wanna know something? In high school, when I was the catcher on our team, I made sure to choose three as my jersey number—in honor of you, of course. Dude, you’re like my idol.”

“That’s funny. You look more like a football player to me.” And he does, probably weighing in at over three hundred pounds.

“Yeah, I was in better shape back then. Now I just sit on my ass all day, carting people around and eating too much fast food. I never intended to bulk up like this. I work for my dad, so he’s

always busting my ass, keeping me busy. I never have time to hit the gym and work out anymore.”

I feel a momentary prick of guilt. That’s all I’ve been doing since April—focusing on my body, getting it in the most optimum condition possible. Sure, it’s a bit excessive, but I have a physical job that requires me to stay fit. When I’m on the field, I need to know that every muscle is ready to go, even if I’m only out there for three hours a day. The rest of the time I’m sitting on my butt just like Noah, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“Noah, how old are you anyway?”

“Twenty-two. Don’t worry. I’m of age if you’re planning on hitting the clubs. I make an excellent wingman.”

I exhale sharply through my nose. Like that's going to happen. Someone please shoot me now.

“Stockton is on fire, man. The whole city's buzzing about you. It's like a friggin' coronation or something.”

“What do you mean?” I prod, alarm bells going off in my head.

“Just check out the front page of the paper, man,” Noah says, whacking me in the arm with a rolled-up copy that he had sticking out of the cup holder.

As I smooth it out, my jaw starts to clench as I'm assaulted by a thick, black headline.

THE CHASE IS ON! STOCKTON  
GEARS UP TO STALK WHITFIELD!

“Pretty cool, huh?” Noah grins at me.

I grunt in response. It’s official. This week is going to be my own personal version of hell.



## *Chapter Three*

### **Grey**

“Chase, baby! Here we come!” Erin shouts from the window of my pickup, getting the cars around us to honk their horns in agreement.

“Girl, you are whacked.” I shake my head with a groan.

We’ve been in bumper-to-bumper traffic since we got off the interstate, and the game starts in a little over an hour. I fidget, tapping the steering wheel with my nails. The line of vehicles is crawling up the mountain toward Beaver Field. I should have known that everyone in creation would turn out to

see Chase.

It's not often that something as exciting as this happens in Stockton. We don't have too many celebrities stopping by for a visit. Facebook is blowing up with all of the alleged Chase sightings around town. Erin is furiously scanning through them on her phone, hoping to gain some kind of an advantage. She's determined to meet him tonight and she's not going to give up until she does. I'm already of thinking of ways to soften the blow when it doesn't happen. She's going to be a sobbing mess after downing a couple of beers. I don't want her kids to have to see her like that, even though they should be asleep by the time I bring her home.

“Missy says that she saw him downtown near the Sheraton, so that’s where he must be staying. She tried to get an autograph but he has some pudgy bodyguard keeping people away. That blows.” Erin sighs, not even picking up her head, her thumb actively swiping the screen.

I take my foot off the brake and ease forward as the traffic starts to accelerate. There are cops up ahead, shifting everyone into two lanes. Through the trees, the parking lot already looks like it’s packed. People aren’t even tailgating like they usually do before a game. They all want to get inside and catch a glimpse of Chase.

I wonder if he's anxious. He hasn't played in over three months. Even though he's only facing the Jacksonville Jackalopes, the focus is still going to be on him. My eyes widen as we pass an ESPN reporter getting ready to do a live segment outside the station's satellite truck. Wow, this really is a big deal.

The teenage guys directing traffic are into it. They're all wearing New York Kings caps as they direct me to the back of the lot near the swamp. Chase-mania is in full swing and I intend to enjoy every minute of it.

Erin is out of the truck as soon as I come to a stop. "C'mon, Grey! Let's go!" She's standing in front of the late

afternoon sun, and the glare off her sequined top is blinding. Talk about trying too hard. Who wears club gear to a baseball game? Only my sister...

“You’re not going to be able to run in those heels anyway.” I motion at the rocky ground with my chin. Beaver Field is nothing fancy. The parking lot isn’t even paved.

“Ha ha, very funny.” She digs through her purse for the bar-coded ticket stubs she printed out back at the garage apartment. “We only have general admission access to the lawn, so we’re going to have to fight to get the spot next to the condiment counter behind home plate.”

“Erin, are you serious? You want to

stand for the entire game? There's no way security's going to let us loiter there. That's where all the execs from the big corporations have season tickets. And trust me, the last thing they're going to want to listen to is you screaming all night."

But Erin's not paying attention to me. She's touching up her makeup, her eyes fixed on the mirror in her compact. She stumbles, not watching where she's going, and grabs my arm to steady herself.

"Does my t-zone look oily? It's so damn hot. I feel like my BB cream is melting off my face." Her heels click on the sidewalk as we get closer to the

main entrance.

“You’re fine...” *For a streetwalker*, I want to say but don’t.

“Thank God you don’t have on that ratty old t-shirt of yours. I was afraid you were going to wear it.”

And now she has the nerve to insult my wardrobe choices? Really? So what if I have on a pair of combat boots? If we’re going to be standing all night, at least my feet won’t be killing me. I hate to admit it, but earlier today I was stalking Chase online just like everybody else. I saw a brief clip of an interview he did after he’d arrived at Beaver Field. He was wearing a cobalt blue polo that really brought out his eyes. I own a shirt in the exact same

color, so I decided to wear it. It's stupid, but I thought maybe he'd notice me in the stands if he's attracted to that color. Working in a department store, I know men don't really care about fashion, but they do tend to gravitate toward the color they like.

“Oooh! Crystal posted that he supposedly grabbed a burger at the Jay Street Deli for lunch. Here's a pic someone put up.” Erin shoves her phone in my hand and I tap the image to make it bigger.

Chase is wearing the same shirt, but he doesn't seem as comfortable as he did in front of the news media. He looks confused, sporting a deer-in-the-



headlights expression. There's a mob of people around him, and his arm is extended like he's trying to push through them and run for his life. He's going to be inundated wherever he goes in Stockton. People have literally set up tents outside his hotel. He's not going to have a moment's peace the entire time he's here. I sort of feel bad for him. Maybe I should try to talk Erin out of her seek-and-destroy mission. He's not an animal to be hunted. He's a human being. And what chance does either of us have of getting him to notice us anyway? We're just deluding ourselves, getting caught up in all the hype.

“Do you think after the game we can call it a night?” I ask tentatively, feeling

her out as we get near the end of the line that leads to the gate.

“Grey, what the hell is wrong with you, huh?” Erin holds her hand in front of her eyes, squinting against the sun. She’s talking so loud that the people around us are starting to stare. “Are you gonna stay up on that mountain and yodel with the birds for the rest of your life? Nuh uh. Not if I have anything to say about it. We’re going out and we’re gonna have fun—even if it kills you. Your social life is more pathetic than mine and you don’t have two kids under ten or an asshole of an ex-husband as an excuse. So drop the good-girl act and live a little.”

The young boy standing in front of us studies Erin in amazement, his mother urging him to turn around.

“You’re causing a scene,” I whisper loudly, hoping Erin will take the hint.

“So what if I am? Someone has to set you straight before it’s too late.”

“Too late for what?”

“Getting laid sometime this century!”

The mother is now covering the boy’s ears with her hands and motioning for her husband to move up.

“We’re not talking about my sex life in public. All right?” My voice is calm but deadly.

Erin backs down. “I’m just worried about you, Grey. It’s not normal to act

like you're bound by a vow of chastity or something. You're twenty-three years old. You should be out living it up, not hiding away from the world." She nudges my shoulder, her hazel eyes peering into mine. It's like she's really looking at me for the first time in a long time and she's scared by what she sees.

"I'm just not the dating type. You know that. I don't like trying guys on like they're pairs of shoes, searching for the one that fits. I get too emotionally involved. And you know all they want is sex, so when I don't put out by the third date, they don't tend to stick around."

I shrug, but it hurts to have to explain this to her. I mean, isn't it obvious? I've always been overly sensitive. I really

have to get to know a guy before I'll even consider sleeping with him, and the truth of the matter is, not many are willing to wait around until I'm ready. They're on to the next piece of ass that doesn't have so many issues. All they want is a quick fuck, and they get all bent out of shape when I don't put out. I can't help it if my stupid heart always gets in the way.

“But, Grey, you told me you won't even give a guy some head. So what do you expect? That's what dating's all about. Give and take. He takes you to dinner. You give him a blow job.”

“It just makes me feel cheap.” I rub my arms, crossing them in front of me,

shivering even though it's ninety degrees. I really wish we weren't having this conversation right now. The pervy old man standing behind us is hanging on our every word. "How can a guy I'm seeing not know what my favorite movie is or how I take my coffee but be cool with me doing stuff like that to him? Sorry if I don't like feeling like an object instead of a person. I'd rather get to know someone before going there. That's all."

"Girl, you gotta learn to keep it casual. Don't make it so complicated. Just let go. You're so uptight. It scares me. Use some stupid prick to make you feel good, if only for the night. He doesn't have to be Chase Whitfield. Any

hot guy will do. Just close your eyes and —”

“Excuse me, but can you please watch what you’re saying in front of my son?”

The woman in front of us is in full mama-bear mode, but she doesn’t know who she’s dealing with. Erin’s known to start a fight whenever anyone confronts her, and I don’t want to see this poor mother ripped to shreds. She’s absolutely right. We shouldn’t be talking like this. It’s inappropriate.

“Listen, honey—” Erin whips around, but I jostle her quickly out of the way and step in front of her.

Even though she’s in heels, I’m still taller than Erin, so I’m able to block her

from view. “I’m sorry, ma’am. It won’t happen again.”

“It better not,” she says curtly as I hear Erin mumbling a laundry list of obscenities behind me.

I’m not sure if I can keep the situation from escalating, but luckily I don’t have to. The gates are thrown open and the line surges forward.

“It’s about fucking time,” Erin says louder than necessary, but the woman is too distracted to notice. “Are you ready?” She eyes me warily, assuming a sprinter’s position.

I nod as the attendant scans the paper that Erin forcefully shoves under his laser gun. He gives her an annoyed look, but before I can apologize, she grabs my



hand and pulls me through the crowd.

I smack into arms. I step on feet. I squeeze between bodies. But she doesn't stop. She keeps going, plowing through anyone who stands in her way. I hear various combinations of "Hey!" and "Watch it!" as she drags me along behind her. I don't like to stand out. I always try to blend in, but Erin's a pro at causing a commotion. I really hate upsetting people for no reason, but there's nothing I can do. She's on a mad dash to the finish line and she's not going to stop until she reaches her destination.

I nearly trip on a hot dog wrapper as Erin comes to an abrupt halt at the

counter in front of the main concession area. It offers a spectacular view, overlooking home plate, but it's already occupied. There's barely enough room at the end for one person, let alone two. Winking at me, she nonchalantly uses her elbow to hit the soda bottle on her right. It spills all over the large woman next to her, who jumps back with a shriek.

“Oh, I'm so sorry! I'm such a klutz!” Erin reaches for the napkin dispenser, pretending to mop up the mess. The entire surface of the counter is wet and sticky. Disgusted, the woman gathers up her belongings and shuffles away in a huff.

“You're terrible.” I've never been so embarrassed in all my life. I'm shocked

by the lengths Erin is willing to go to for this. Tonight, she seems overly determined to get what she wants.

“Scoot in next to me,” she urges, not even acknowledging my discomfort. “There. We’re all set. We’ll be able to see Chase up close when he bats. Wait here a minute and guard this section with your life. I’m gonna get us some refreshments. They can’t tell us we have to move if we’re paying customers.”

“Erin, the game is probably going to be about three hours long. You’re going to eat the entire time?”

“Eat? Yeah, right. Drink is more like it.” She sashays away in her skintight jeans, her booty swaying behind her as

she walks. She hasn't lost all of the baby weight from when she was pregnant with Jacob, even though it's been five years. She didn't care much about her appearance when she was still with Mark. She let herself go. I guess I should be happy that she's making an effort again. Maybe, in that respect, I should follow her lead.

I let my eyes roam across the field. The visiting team is out stretching and taking batting practice in the cage. The crack of the bat is music to my ears. There's nothing like seeing a game in person. TV broadcasts just don't compare. Savoring the aroma of freshly roasted peanuts in the air. Feeling the thud of a fastball hitting the catcher's

mitt. Dodging a foul ball that flies into the seats. I love the excitement of live baseball, the familiarity mixed with the unexpected.

For a split second, my attention shifts to the Beavers' dugout when the door to the locker room opens and a deluge of flashbulbs start to go off. My breath catches as I grip the edge of the sticky counter.

Oh God, it's Chase.

# *Chapter Four*

## **Chase**

This is turning into a circus and I'm the main attraction.

I pinch my brow beneath the brim of my brand new Stockton Beavers cap, willing my headache to go away, but I don't anticipate that happening any time soon. Reporters are yelling directions at me as I climb the dugout steps, but I ignore them. I'm not here to pose. I'm here to work. So that's what I'm going to do.

There's a collective gasp from the crowd as I take the field. A spontaneous round of applause erupts amid calls of,

“Love you, Chase!” and “Go Whitfield!” Well, that’s nice. I wasn’t expecting such a warm response. I didn’t think people in Pennsylvania even rooted for the Kings. I thought they’d be fans of Philadelphia or Pittsburgh. I guess becoming the home of our Triple-A franchise must’ve converted them.

The Kings organization supposedly refurbished Beaver Field last year, but they didn’t replace the friggin’ turf. I feel my cleats digging into it already. A lot of guys get injured on its unforgiving surface. It’s not easy on the joints either. I’m sure I’m going to feel it later. And playing defense is always tricky because the ball tends to make a lot of weird hops. It’s certainly not the ideal situation

for my first game back, but I'm a professional. I can handle it. I've played on turf before in domes in Minnesota, Tampa Bay, and Toronto, just never in an outdoor environment like this. Coupled with the sun setting right behind the pitcher's mound, the playing conditions aren't what I'm used to. It doesn't help that I'm already sweating like a motherfucker.

I remove my cap and wipe my head against my sleeve. Since my sexy therapist didn't travel with me from Florida, I checked in with the Beavers' trainer as soon as I got here. He's familiar with my case, and he briefed me as to what warm-up exercises I'm



supposed to do. Expectations are high, and there's no room for error. Ratings of Kings' games have fallen since I've been on the DL, and ticket sales at the stadium are down too. I'm needed back in New York as soon as possible in order to boost ratings and attract more fans to the ballpark. Millions of dollars are riding on my recovery.

I look around at the kitschy environment as I stretch my legs. There's a giant inflatable baseball beyond the center field wall along with a lawn area where families are sitting on blankets in the broiling sun. A bucktoothed beaver mascot is encouraging fans to clap as some dude in a suit and tie throws out the ceremonial first pitch. The public

address system is issuing a last call to buy ‘Bucky Balls,’ whatever the hell those are. Yeah, I’ve officially entered the Twilight Zone.

Some chick in the stands is screaming, “Chase, bend over!” so I purposely look in the opposite direction. But she doesn’t let up. “Chase, shake it for me, baby!” The heckling is coming from somewhere behind home plate. Great, like I really feel like listening to some bigmouth for the next nine innings.

Members of the press are stationed in front of the dugout, busily snapping away at me. I’m surprised by how many there are. All the major media outlets are here to cover my return. If I fail, the whole

world's going to know. This isn't a night to go 0 for 4.

After completing my sprints, I motion for one of the ball boys to come over and join me. The kid points at his chest and mouths the word, "Me?" like he can't believe I'm talking to him. I nod and he runs over like he just won the lottery.

"I need you to play catch with me. Think you can handle that?"

He nods emphatically, too tongue-tied to say anything.

"All right, get your glove and let's go."

I toss him the ball, and he drops it. I try not to groan. The kid is undoubtedly star-struck, but the game's starting in ten

minutes and I need to loosen up. He better pull himself together. It's a simple game of catch, not a headfirst dive into the stands.

He seems to settle down, and we go back and forth as I steadily increase the distance between us. The cameras are clicking away, capturing the indelible image of a baseball legend playing with a young boy. People eat this shit up. I don't have to utter a word. This picture will do all the talking for me. I can already see it splashed on news sites across the web.

It doesn't hurt that I have a children's charity that connects low-income kids with free baseball equipment. The board

members of my foundation are going to love this. It might even lure in some of those big-name investors we've been after. The goal is to reclaim some blighted land in urban areas across New York in order to build more fields where kids can play and learn the game. If not for Little League, I wouldn't be where I am today. I'm all for giving back—just as long as I don't have to have any kids of my own.

I can see the curiosity in the faces all around me as they watch me play with the boy. My fellow Stockton teammates are spying on us through the webbing of their gloves. Reporters are scribbling away, peering up from their notepads. Fans are sitting forward in their seats,

following the arc of the ball between us.

Everyone always asks me when I'm going to start a family of my own. They're practically foaming at the mouth, imagining the continuation of a dynasty through a Chase Whitfield, Jr.—sure to be a bona fide baseball prodigy destined to carry on my legacy. But who says I even want kids? They're noisy and needy and a pain in the ass. Sure, the little ones can be cute when they're not drooling all over the place, but the older ones are downright awful. From what I've seen, it's a generation of demanding brats, crying because I didn't pose for a picture when I was running to catch a flight or whining that I didn't autograph

their balls when I just finished signing for over a hundred people. It's never enough for these kids, no matter where I encounter them. Why would I ever want to have one of my own?

“Hey, Whit! Are you about done?”

The third base coach brings me back to reality, and I glance quickly at the scoreboard clock. Shit, it's 7:01. I should be off the field instead of acting like I own the place.

I signal to the ball boy that it's time to stop. “Thanks, kid,” I call out, patting him on the head as I rush by, causing his cap to fall down over his eyes. I don't even stop to find out his name.

A teenage girl is standing at home plate, ready to sing the National Anthem.

She's gazing at me adoringly. She's kind of hot, so I give her a wink. Her face turns crimson just as it fills the Jumbotron.

“Chase, you can wink at me any time!”

It's that heckler again. I'm closer to the seats now, but it's coming from higher up. I pretend to wipe my brow again as I raise my eyes. And there she is. Decker out in a sparkly top and waving like an idiot.

“Chase, can you see me?” People are starting to laugh at the way she is carrying on. Her speech is already slurred and the night is young. If she continues, I'm gonna have security



escort her out. I can't have any distractions taking me out of the game. Sure, I'm used to people yelling profanities at me—and worse—but in Major League-size stadiums. Here, every voice is amplified. The fans aren't rows back; they're practically sitting in my lap.

I take the dugout steps two at a time and slug down a quick gulp of Gatorade from the cooler in the corner. I haven't really had a chance to converse with any of the other guys. But if they're going to back me up on the field, I need them on my side. Hurriedly, I close my fist and bump knuckles with everyone on the bench. Some of them seem just as star-struck as the ball boy, and some of them

look just as young. How old are they anyway? Eighteen? Nineteen? I suddenly feel like an old man.

“And now for your Stockton Beavers!” the announcer says with an overabundance of enthusiasm and the crowd goes wild as a cartoon image of the mascot, Bucky Beaver, fills the screen, his one giant tooth chomping through a baseball bat emblazoned with the logo of the opposing team.

I make the sign of the cross as I do before every game. I’m not overly superstitious, not like some guys, but I like to keep my same routine from city to city. It grounds me when I’m in unfamiliar territory, and Stockton

certainly qualifies.

It looks like the guys are waiting for me to lead them onto the field. They're giving me that honor. I might actually feel good about it if I didn't have a furry woodland creature stitched across my chest. Can this get any more ridiculous?

They follow me out of the dugout and the crowd roars in approval. A thrill of excitement courses through me. I'm back in the game. I may be playing for the Stockton Beavers, but I'm back doing the only thing I know how to do, the only thing I'm good at. Playing baseball. On the field is where I thrive.

“Leading off. Shortstop. Number three. Chaaaaaaaaaase Whitfield!”

If the fans were loud before, now they

go absolutely berserk. Pounding their feet. Whistling through their teeth. Screaming at the top of their lungs. I guess Noah wasn't exaggerating when he likened my playing here to a coronation. I stand stoically between second and third, a lump forming in my throat. I haven't even had one at-bat yet.

The announcer finishes reading the starting lineup then asks everyone to rise for the National Anthem.

The little hottie I winked at begins to sing breathily at first until her voice quivers as it cracks on the high notes. So much for small-town talent... I cringe as I hold my hand over my heart. So what if I got her flustered? When it's showtime,

it's all about being able to deliver under pressure. Nothing's able to rattle me when I'm on the field. Nothing.

“I love you, Chase!”

That nut isn't going to quit, is she? The starting pitcher is getting ready so I steal a quick glance behind the plate. There she is, raising a large plastic cup of beer in the air. There's a sharp crack of the bat and suddenly the ball is headed right toward me, but I'm out of position. I was too busy looking for the heckler that I took my mind off the game. I leap as high as I can and manage to knock the ball down but it bounces away from me. Damn turf. Scrambling, I pick it up and make an off-balance throw, but it flies into the opposing dugout instead

of into the outstretched glove of the first baseman.

A murmur rolls through the crowd as the scoreboard flashes E6. Fuck! I made an error on my first play back.

That girl is dead.

# *Chapter Five*

## **Grey**

My heart breaks for Chase.

Some asshole starts to boo as he leaves the on-deck circle for his last at-bat of the game. Man, he's having a horrible night, striking out three times and looking severely overmatched at the plate. The pitcher's not even throwing that hard—ninety-two tops—but he can't catch up with the fastball. His timing is way off. Batting practice at the Florida complex isn't the same as facing live pitching, and it's starting to show. He's not ready, even though the Kings seem to think he is.

There's a slight limp to his gait that's been getting more pronounced as the game has gone on. I knew the turf wouldn't be good for him. His knee is probably swelling beneath his uniform. They should take him out and ice it up before it gets too bad. How else is he going to play tomorrow?

I'm so preoccupied with watching Chase that I don't even realize Erin's not standing next to me anymore. I whip around in search of her, holding my breath until I spot her in an adjacent aisle, talking to the usher. He's scratching the back of his head while she pesters him about something. It's the bottom of the ninth inning; why is she



bugging him to sit down now? We'll be leaving in a couple of minutes.

The usher reluctantly nods his head and she jumps up and down before giving the startled man a clumsy hug. She looks up at me and gives me a huge grin before running down the cement steps to field level. She keeps going until she's between home plate and the roof of the Beaver dugout. With phone in hand, she leans over the railing, right at the moment Chase takes the bat off his shoulder.

The flash of her camera must have disturbed him, because he stops mid-stride, checking his swing. The umpire emphatically yells, "Strike!" and a cacophony of boos start to rain down

upon him. What the heck is wrong with these people? It's his first game back. Give him a break. He's on his way to three thousand career hits for crying out loud. Talk about fickle.

I know the motions he goes through in the batter's box by heart after watching him for so many years. Pulling up his sleeve. Touching the plate with his bat. Rubbing his eyes. So my radar goes up when he just stands there and doesn't move. It's like he's staring someone down. I follow his line of vision and my stomach drops.

He's looking right at Erin.

Oh no. I have to stop her. She's holding up her phone again, getting ready

to take another picture. Chase has two strikes left. He needs this at-bat, and Erin can't screw it up for him. The Beavers are down by one run. If they lose this game, the sports reporters are going to blame it on the runner who scored in the first inning—the one who reached base because of Chase's fielding error. His whole comeback is going to unravel once they start picking apart his performance. Sure, he made some mistakes, but everyone's allowed to have an off night, especially playing on turf at Beaver Field.

Without even thinking, I jog down the steps, giving the usher a tight smile as he lets me through. The guy in the suit and tie who threw out the first pitch yells to

me as I fly by his seat, “Why don’t you tell your friend to shut up, sweetheart? I’m sick of listening to her already.” I pretend like I don’t hear him and keep going. Luckily, the Jackalopes’ manager is out on the field, talking to the pitcher. I’m almost there. *Hold on, Chase. I’m coming.*

My heart is thudding in my chest as I reach the bottom step and hop over a half-empty carton of popcorn and a carpet of peanut shells. The last thing I want to do is fall on my butt in front of all these people.

“Hey, Grey! You came down. I didn’t think you had it in you.” I try not to think of how close I am to Chase Whitfield

right now. He's like twenty feet away through the protective netting draped behind home plate. He might actually see me. I don't turn my head. I'm too afraid. Instead, I keep my eyes trained on Erin.

One of the straps on her tank is falling off her shoulder and her mascara is smudged under her eyes. Her flat-ironed hair is frizzing out and her face is all red. She looks rabid. There's no better way to describe her. She's had five large beers in three hours so she definitely has more than just a buzz going on.

"Grey, you should see the awesome shots I got! I even got a closeup of his butt when he was bending down." Since a lot of people in this section have

already left, her voice carries even farther than it should. I have to get her out of here—now.

“C’mon, Erin. Let’s go back up.” I reach for her arm, but she jerks away.

“No way! I waited all night to get down here and I’m going to enjoy the view!” She lets out a, “Woot woot!” as she blows Chase a kiss.

I feel the intensity of someone’s eyes drilling into my back. I know it’s Chase, but I don’t want to confirm it. He probably thinks we’re two white-trash sluts who can’t hold their liquor in public. I’m dying inside. I never thought I’d ever be this close to Chase Whitfield, and to know that he probably

hates my guts is making me sick.

“C’mon, already! Would you sit down?” a guy in the third row shouts over to us. “Let ’em finish the damn game!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that play has been halted on the field, but I don’t know why. Did something happen? Did they take Chase out for a pinch hitter? Some of the players in the Beaver dugout are on the top step, pointing at us.

I jump when someone taps me on the shoulder.

“Miss, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.” A burly security guard is bearing down on me from behind. I can see how big he is by the size of the shadow he’s

casting on the ground in front of me. I'm out of options. I have to turn around and face him. I just hope he's blocking Chase from view.

"What?" Erin croaks, a little wobbly on her feet as she steps forward.

I concentrate on the guard's eyes and nowhere else. They seem friendly, like he doesn't want to do this but he has to. Much like the position I'm in at the moment. Things will go a lot more smoothly if we work together.

"I've been instructed to escort you ladies out. Please follow me." He raises his hand, indicating that he wants us to take the stairs in front of him. Apparently, he doesn't trust us enough to



let us walk behind him. He'd rather bring up the rear. And based on Erin's behavior, I can't say that I blame him.

"Just go!" another fan screams out. "You're holding up the game!"

So Chase is standing there, waiting for us to move before stepping back into the batter's box? Oh God. Erin's been yelling all night long. He probably got fed up and sicced security on her. It's a douchebag move, flaunting how much power he has. C'mon, he has to be used to drunken fans heckling him by now. Why is Erin bothering him so much? Showing his displeasure for all to see. Making a spectacle out of her. What a prima donna. My sister's crazy, but she doesn't deserve to be publicly

humiliated. She can handle that just fine on her own, thank you very much.

Thinking fast, I know I need something to entice Erin up the stairs. She's standing on her toes, shifting from side to side, trying to see Chase from around the security guard's massive frame. "Erin, don't you want to get a good spot outside the players' entrance? Chase is probably going to be signing after the game. We should get outta here now and beat the crowd."

I don't have to say another word before she brushes past me and stumbles hurriedly up the steps, sloshing whatever beer is left in her cup on her sequined top. She doesn't seem to care because

she doesn't slow down any.

"Thank you," the guard says sincerely. "But I've been asked to direct you to the parking lot. You're being ejected from Beaver Field. You won't be able to linger anywhere else on the property."

In the background, I hear the game resume as the umpire calls strike two. I'm facing a losing battle, so I don't put up much of a fight. I don't think I could ever face Chase after this fiasco anyway. It's not like he wouldn't recognize us, even if we were mixed in among the throng of fans that is sure to be waiting for him after the game.

"Yes, sir. I understand."

The security guard moves out of the way just as the umpire yells, "Strike

three.” Chase angrily tosses his bat, yanking off his gloves. I should look away, but I can’t. No good can come of this. I’ll only be kicking myself later. But I have to see him, even if Erin’s theatrics ended up costing the Beavers the game. I’ll never be this close to him again. It’s now or never.

His blue eyes return to the scene of the crime, instantly locking with mine. They’re dark with a pent-up rage simmering beneath the surface. No one’s ever looked at me like that before. Like I’m the one who caused all this. Like I’m the reason he’s going to take a beating in the press. Like I’m to blame for his lousy performance tonight. Grey Kelleher, the

source of his every torment.

I want to break the silent battle that's brewing between us, but I refuse to be the first to look away. I'm not backing down. I had nothing to do with his failure to deliver on the field. He doesn't even know me. I raise my chin and challenge him head on. *Bring it, Whitfield.*

My heart starts to pound as he gets closer and closer to the stands, never taking his eyes off me. What is he doing? Is he coming over to chew me out or something? Oh God, what if he does? I don't like fighting with people. I can't remember the last time I got into a screaming match with anyone. I'll probably shrink into a ball and let him

say whatever he wants to say. Have him vent and get it over with.

He walks all the way to the backstop. The only thing separating us now is the thin layer of mesh that makes up the net. His eyes are even more breathtaking up close, swirling in a storm of blues and greens. They pierce like a laser through my heart. I can't tell if he wants to rip my head off or devour me with his mouth. There's something there that I wasn't expecting. Like he's letting me see the real him, something he doesn't allow a lot of people to see.

He's furious, and he's outwardly showing it. It is unusual behavior for him since he's so revered for his composure.

Chase Whitfield never cracks under pressure or says the wrong thing. He swallows his emotions and smiles for the camera. But not this time... This time he's pissed.

He's just about to say something, ready to unleash a tirade on my ass, when he stops and bends down. His mouth is hidden from view, but I can still hear him as he levels a warning at me.

“Don't even think about coming back here this week. You got that?”

He stands up, holding his discarded Louisville Slugger in his hands. It's usually the ball boy's job to retrieve the players' bats, but he came to get it personally in order to deliver a message

to me. I don't know whether I'm flattered, mortified, or both.

When I don't acknowledge his request, his eyes find mine again, daring me to contradict him. It's obvious he's used to getting what he wants. No one ever says no to him. His arrogance is making my stubborn side rear its ugly head. He's expecting me to nod and dutifully comply. But I'm not going to do it. He can kiss my ass.

I stare him down as he backs away. It's like we're battling each other for dominance over something I don't quite understand. He's used to being the victor and willing people into submission, but he's mistaken if he thinks I'm just like



everyone else. Because I'm not... I don't care who he is. He's not going to intimidate me.

It kills him to have to break eye contact when a reporter shoves a microphone in his face. But this isn't over—not by a long shot. If he wants a fight, then that's what he's gonna get. I'll hunt him down all night long if I have to. There's no way in hell he's getting away with this.

Let the stalking commence. I'm not going to rest until I have him down on his injured knee, begging for mercy.

# *Chapter Six*

## **Chase**

I'm so sick of hearing about my damn knee.

Water cascades down my back as I rest my hand against the shower tile, the relentless barrage of media questions echoing through my head.

*Chase, you seemed hesitant at the plate. Were you holding back a little, not wanting to put weight on your knee?*

*Did your injury have anything to do with the botched throw tonight, Chase? Did your knee prevent you from going to your left?*

*Chase, did the turf affect your knee at all? It looked like you were limping out there toward the end.*

If my self-doubt wasn't at an all-time high before, it is now. And it's getting harder and harder to conceal. I was combative with the press, which isn't like me, but they kept asking me the same questions over and over. The brunt of my condescension was aimed at the Stockton reporters who were bringing up topics they should've known are off limits. Like if I plan to stay with the Kings after my contract expires at the end of the year or if I intend to test the free agency market. I said at the beginning of the season that I wouldn't

address it until after we won the World Series. But it appears they didn't do their homework before they approached me. I can't stand people who take the easy way out. Don't they know me by now? I don't talk money during the season. Period. End of discussion. But they kept badgering me, so I went off on them a little.

Several of the regular New York beat reporters were a little taken aback by my surly behavior, but they gave me a pass because of who I am. The local stations don't have the balls to air a clip of me sounding off. They know the Kings' front office would shoot down a negative report like that in an instant. No affiliate of any of the major networks is going to

risk going up against the only multibillion-dollar franchise in professional sports. Heads would roll if they made me look bad, especially after my name alone sold out the ballpark for the next five nights. They can't deny that I'm the draw that provided a much-needed boost to the Stockton economy. Every hotel in the area is booked for the length of my rehab assignment. Fans are even driving out from New York to watch me play. I'm a force to be reckoned with. Anyone who crosses me is gonna pay.

I flashback to those warm, chocolate brown eyes, the ones whose depths I got lost in for a second. If I hadn't had my

game face on, I would've flirted with her a little. The minute I saw her, I couldn't take my eyes off her. I was drawn to that net. I had to speak to her. So what did I do? I threatened her, telling her not to come back, even if what I really wanted was the exact opposite. I'd love to see her behind home plate, every night—Stockton, New York, wherever.

So why did I act like such a jerk? I was scared. No one's ever looked at me quite that way before, and I've been stared at by a lot of people. It's like she wasn't seeing superstar Chase Whitfield. She was just seeing me, the man behind the player. Like she didn't care who I was or what I did for a living. She'd

still be into me if I were just a regular guy walking down the street. As if that were good enough—being content with me for me, not everything that goes along with it.

I curse as I shift my weight before bending my knee. It's throbbing like a son of a bitch. My whole body feels sore, tense even. I could really go for a massage, but the team doesn't have a physical therapist on staff and I don't think the trainer would be into giving me a rubdown. Besides, everyone's already left. I'm the last one here, licking my wounds in private.

My muscles are tight because I'm consumed with regret. I should have

made that play. I should have made contact with a pitch. I should have gotten her number. I slam my fist against the wall. She could've been just the thing I needed tonight. I could've told her to meet me back at the hotel. It would've been easy. Now I'm stuck having to troll the local bar scene in the hope of finding some female companionship for the night. I'm so not in the mood. Man, it sucks not knowing any women here. I'm used to having my regular hook-ups in every city. It's a lot less hassle.

“You almost done in there, boss?”

I jump, and a jet of water hits me directly in the eye. “Noah, what the fuck are you doing in here? You should be waiting in the car!” I yell through the



steam, hastily rinsing the remaining suds off my body.

“I’ve been out there for over an hour. I thought something happened to you.”

“Yeah, well. I don’t feel like signing anything tonight, so I hope the people standing outside get sick of waiting around and leave.” I turn off the water and start patting myself dry. My face falls when I see how swollen my knee is. I should go right back to the hotel and put some ice on it, but my dick is throbbing more, especially after imagining what that girl’s hands would feel like on my body, working out all the tension. I need to get laid tonight—end of story.

“There weren’t too many out there when I came in. I think you’re good. Security is feeding them the line that you already left.”

“Yeah, like that ever works. The diehards are batshit crazy. They’ll wait out there all night. Just try and stop them.” I toss a towel around my waist and step out.

“Dude, I never knew you had so many tats!” Noah’s jaw drops as he stares at my bare chest. “That’s awesome! Do you wanna see mine?”

He has his shirt pulled out of his pants before I can raise my hand in the air to ward him off. “No, that’s okay, Noah. Really.”

“My sister is a tattoo artist, so she gives me all the ink I want for free. I even have one of Yogi Bear that goes all the way down my back.”

“Yogi Bear?”

“Yeah, her little girl calls me Uncle Yogi so I thought it’d be appropriate.”

“Whatever rocks your world,” I say absently, bracing myself against the sink while wiping the condensation off the mirror. I really should shave, but I don’t have the energy. The Kings have a pretty strict policy when it comes to facial hair, but since I’m a Beaver now, I don’t think it applies.

“C’mon, man. You gotta tell me who that blazing heart is for on your shoulder.

Who's J.J.? The girl who broke your heart and turned you into a man-whoring stud?"

"I don't swing both ways, jackass. I whore for no man." I throttle him with a jock strap someone left on the floor and move into the locker room. The sooner I cover up, the better. I don't want him questioning me about every mark on my body.

My tattoos are personal. Not many people have seen them. I've never posed shirtless or got caught by the paparazzi strolling along a beach. I tend to vacation in exclusive areas, like off the coast of Italy or the French Riviera. Beyoncé and Jay-Z even lent me their yacht once. The Kings don't like players

talking to the media unless we're in full uniform, so no one's allowed beyond the clubhouse door except key personnel. It's amazing that pics of my tats haven't leaked before now, but it makes me even more protective of them all the same.

“That’s not what I meant,” Noah says, exasperated. “Trust me. If you were gay, I think I would cry. Forget the sheer amount of tits and ass that gets thrown your way... I never believed for a second those rumors about you and Drake Schultz were true. He may be a pretty boy, but you’re sure as hell not.”

“Gee, thanks,” I respond sarcastically, untucking the towel and letting it drop to the floor.

Noah clears his throat and turns away. Now he's seen everything from the size of my dick to the inscriptions on my back. He might as well be an honorary member of the team for fuck's sake.

“Get a good enough look? Want me to turn around so you can take a picture of my junk for your sister?” I can't resist busting him.

“Shut it, asswipe. It's not that impressive. Mine's way bigger.”

For the first time since I got hurt, I burst out laughing. It seems like forever since I even wanted to. I didn't realize how depressed I was until now. How much of life I'm missing out on. Yeah, my knee's jacked up. So what?

Everything doesn't have to be ruined because of it. I can still laugh and have fun.

Maybe I should open up to people more instead of shutting them out. I'm not good at lowering my barriers and letting people in. I've been burned too many times and developed too many issues when it comes to trusting people. That's why I snapped at that girl behind the net. That's why I'm ignoring Noah's question now. Well, screw it. He wants to know? Then I'm going to tell him.

"J.J. is my sister. She was diagnosed with cancer five years ago." I pause. I can't believe I'm doing this, so I just keep talking. "I got the tattoo then, scared to death that I was going to lose

her. But after hooking her up with one of the best oncologists in the country, she was able to beat it.”

I’ve never spoken to anyone outside of my own family about J.J.’s condition. The media never caught wind of the story, and I didn’t even tell the Kings. She’s not a public figure, and I didn’t want her to have to go through all that shit just because she’s related to me. She’s borne the brunt of my fame for so long. Being Chase Whitfield’s little sister isn’t always what it’s cracked up to be. She was taunted all through college by those jealous of her for having a famous sibling. She wasn’t named the MVP of her high school



softball team because the coaches didn't want to show any favoritism, even though she deserved it. She's had so many supposed friends try to butter her up in order to get close to me. Yeah, the users and the haters abound. But I don't think Noah is one of them.

“Wow, Chase.” He backs into one of the lockers, clearly stunned by my revelation. “I had no idea. But she's okay now?”

“Yeah. More than okay.” I smile to myself, remembering the last time I saw her pregnant belly. Before she started radiation treatments, she had a bunch of her eggs frozen. It was an expensive procedure, but it was worth it. At the time, she was fighting for her life, and

her request showed me that she still had hope. She wasn't giving up on her future. She underwent an artificial insemination procedure just after Christmas, and it took. Even if she can't conceive the normal way, she and her boyfriend are overjoyed that they had another option. And my money gave it to them. I don't like to brag, but I'm pretty proud that I was able to do that for them.

“You're a man of mystery, you know that?”

Noah doesn't mean anything by it, but I bristle at his remark. So what if I am? Do I have to be an open book for everyone? Some things are better kept under wraps. My private life and the

ones of those I love are off limits. There's no reason to go exposing every little secret for public consumption. I may be on TV every night, but it's a sports broadcast, not a reality show. What I do off-camera is nobody's business.

“So where are we headed? Back to the Sheraton?” Noah asks, a little despondently.

I kind of want to laugh again, but I know he's not trying to be funny. Cinching my belt, I shove my damp head through the collar of my shirt. That girl was wearing a shirt this color. It's the second thing I noticed after her eyes. Oh God, those eyes...

“I thought you said you wanted to be

my wingman while I'm here?" I need to get my mind off of her. Her face is stuck in a continuous loop that's replaying in my brain. I have to bang some other chick tonight. It's the only way I'll banish this regret about screwing things up with her. After my dick is satisfied, she'll become nothing more than a distant memory. Just one of the many girls I could've fucked but didn't. For now, it's on to the next...

"You're freakin' kidding me, dude!" Noah rushes toward me, grabbing my shoulders. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, I'm serious, dickhead. But let's start by getting something to eat because I'm starving. The women can

wait.”

“You are not going to regret this,” Noah says, slapping me on the back.

“Too bad I already do,” I mutter under my breath, but he doesn’t seem to hear me as I follow him out the back door.

# *Chapter Seven*

## **Grey**

“Can we please go home?” I wail, rocking back and forth on my toes. “It’s been two hours. He’s not coming out.”

Erin shakes her head defiantly from side to side. The security guard didn’t have the energy to escort us to the outer reaches of the parking lot. Instead, he watched as we exited the stadium, going back inside the minute we walked through the turnstile. Let’s just say that Erin didn’t waste any time doubling back as soon as he was gone.

The last thing in the world I felt like doing was waiting with a bunch of crazy

obsessive fans for Chase Whitfield to grace us with his presence. How pathetic to stand in line begging for his autograph after he just told me to get lost? Yeah, groveling at his feet would place me in a whole new category of desperate—the kind reserved for only the most deranged of psycho fans.

Plus, it's not like I even want his lousy signature anymore. I managed to lose whatever respect I had for him. He's nothing more than a pampered jerk who treats his fans like crap. Sure, Erin was out of line, but he didn't have to have us thrown out like that. And besides, she wasn't saying anything that bad. She was just proclaiming her love for him, not telling him how much he

sucks like the people who were booing. He needs to grow up—big time.

Chase would be nowhere without his fans. We're the ones who buy the tickets and merchandise that pay for his salary. We're the ones who vote him into the All-Star Game. We're the ones who come out to cheer him on and show support when times get tough. And what does he do? He throws a hissy fit.

I feel like such an idiot for being duped by him. But more than that, I feel like I was played by some vast conspiracy—like the Kings colluded with the news media to sell the superhuman persona that is Chase Whitfield. But that's all it is—a mirage,



a façade, a brand. He's playing a role they created for him—the star athlete who's so special that every guy wants to be him and every girl wants to date him. Regardless if in real life he's nothing like the person they portray him to be. He's not the humble, hard-working, genuinely nice guy we're encouraged to adore. No, he's the complete opposite—self-absorbed, irritable, conceited.

And I fell for it—hook, line, and sinker. For years, I've carried this false perception of him in my mind. I was told that he treats his fans well, so I believed it since I never came in contact with him. I was force-fed the line that he has a good head on his shoulders because he's never photographed carousing in strip

clubs or getting into trouble by overindulging in drugs and alcohol. But who's to say it's only because he never gets caught? Who knows what he's doing behind the scenes? Yeah, I don't snort coke or get rip-roaring drunk, but that doesn't make me a good person. It's like he's been living a lie, showing what he's not and keeping who he really is under wraps.

“Wait, let me check with my new friend, Debbie. Her husband went to the Sheraton to see if Chase is there. She's on the phone with him now. Let me see if she found out anything.” Erin moves beyond the temporary barrier set up to cordon off the fans. She's seems to have

sobered up somewhat. All right, I'll throw her a bone. She's had a tough year. She could use a dose of excitement. Just as long as the trail stays cold...

I look around at the people who are still waiting outside the players' entrance. When we first got here, the crowd was about three rows deep, pressed against the metal barricade. It was mostly men with hundreds of dollars worth of memorabilia to get signed, and kids screaming for Chase. For a good hour and a half, we had to listen to their chant of 'Gimme a C' as they spelled out Chase's entire name repeatedly. But I don't think he would have liked how they added an extra T to

his last name. If he had come out, he probably would've reprimanded them for spelling it wrong.

Now we're down to Debbie and her two kids, some Asian dude with a life-sized cutout of Chase, and a couple of hoochie mamas prowling around, blinged out just like Erin. They're mumbling to themselves while scrolling through their phones, no doubt trying to find out if anyone posted where he is on Facebook or Twitter.

Debbie's eyes light up as she hangs up and mutters something in Erin's ear. Whatever intel her husband shared with her causes Erin to let out a squeal before running over to me.

She leans into me so that no one else can hear. “Buster’s Crab Shack!” she whispers excitedly against my hair.

“You’re kidding!” I pick up the pace as she starts to drag me by the arm. “Wow, he’s really come down in the world.”

“What? Buster’s is great!” Erin wouldn’t care if Chase wanted to eat out of a dumpster at this point. She’d follow him anywhere. Lucky for her, she didn’t catch our little exchange behind home plate, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her. I don’t want to dampen her enthusiasm—but I really hope he’s not there.

My truck is the only vehicle left in this

section of the lot. Everyone hates to have to park next to the swamp because of all the mosquitoes. I slap my leg as one lands on my thigh. A chorus of bullfrogs is croaking away, and I kind of wish I were back at my trailer and that I'd never come to this damn game. Then my delusions wouldn't have been shattered and I could go on pining for Chase Whitfield in a state of ignorant bliss.

Erin hops in as I turn on the headlights. Buster's is about fifteen minutes away in the heart of downtown Stockton. It's the place where any visiting dignitary tends to make an obligatory visit. Politicians, actors, and musicians have all eaten there. Not that the food is that great, but everyone's

always enthralled by the kitschy decor. Buster's specializes in nostalgia from its Ms. Pac Man video game tables to its restroom with a Shirley Temple theme. Having Chase Whitfield stop by is a major coup for the owners. They'll be heralding his patronage in their advertisements for years to come. They thought having David Hasselhoff stop by was a big deal. They're never going to get over this.

Traffic is light as I head down the mountain and merge onto the highway. I'm actually driving faster than the speed limit just to get this over with. We'll either walk in and he won't be there—which I hope is the case—or he'll be in

a private room where we won't be allowed. There's no way he is sitting out in the open where anyone can stroll in and bother him.

“Someone can't wait to get her Chase on!” Erin teases as she fixes her hair in the visor mirror. “Floor it, girl!”

We're already at the exit for downtown Stockton and I'm starting to get nervous—like, really nervous. I didn't do anything wrong, but I still feel like I did. My guilty conscience is bothering the heck out of me. Why didn't I stop Erin from drinking so much? Why didn't I get her to stop yelling? Why did I let her get so out of control? Maybe it really is my fault. Perhaps Chase had every right to get mad.



I chew on my lower lip as make a left at the first light. I can already see the sign for Buster's up ahead, with its giant illuminated crab claws opening and closing. I still have time to chicken out. I could fake a stomachache or something. But I know I can't do that to Erin. If she's determined to have her fantasy dashed, there's nothing I can do to stop her. She's a big girl. She knows life isn't fair. I only wish I were driving her to meet a guy who'd treat her with kindness and respect instead of the first-class prick she's about to encounter.

I turn off the ignition after sliding into the first available space and glance over at her warily. "Why don't you put on the

hoodie I brought with me? They'll probably have the air conditioning cranked up full blast like they always do." *Please say yes*, I silently urge. I have to disguise her somehow. If he's in there, he's going to recognize her from the get-go just from her top.

"Grey, are you kidding? I gotta show off my body to my advantage. Did you see those seventeen-year-old hos back at Beaver Field? We're competing with girls half our age for his attention, and you know how he likes them young."

How could I forget? His latest girlfriend—one in a long list of famous arm-candy assortments—is Irina Portanova, a nineteen-year-old model from the Czech Republic who was

discovered by Karl Lagerfeld in an airport in Prague before she moved to Paris when she was twelve. What she and Chase have to talk about, I have no clue. I read somewhere that, before she started dating Chase, she didn't know a thing about baseball. So obviously it's all about the sex. Who cares about meaningful conversation?

“Erin, just don't get your hopes up, okay?”

“Ugh, I already told you. Debbie's husband confirmed that Chase is here.” She gives her lips one more coat of gloss. “That's her husband standing by the door. Let's go talk to him.”

Before I can give Erin more of a

warning, she's out of my truck, her heels clacking toward the door.

Something about this feels wrong. I mean, how did Debbie's husband even find out that Chase was at Buster's? I'm sure the hotel staff wouldn't have tipped him off. What kind of mega-stalker is he? He told us earlier that he'd already gotten Chase's autograph when he visited the Florida complex during spring training. So why does he want another one? Jeez, isn't one enough?

Erin's waving me over, and I can't shake the vibe that going in there is a bad idea. I don't even want to think about what's going to happen if Chase sees Erin, let alone me. He's going to think we're nuts—if he doesn't already.

He told me to back off, and what am I doing? Blatantly ignoring his request and bringing my excitable sister with me...

“He’s in the bar.” Erin claps her hands.

Then why is Debbie’s husband outside? It doesn’t make sense.

“You ready?” Erin asks, already holding open the heavy wooden door.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Debbie’s husband waves halfheartedly as we turn and enter the restaurant. Does he already know our mission is going to fail? But more importantly, how does he know?

That nervous twinge is back in my stomach, that first-day-of-school feeling.

There's no hostess to greet us when we arrive at the podium. For all intents and purposes, the place looks like it's closed for the night. So why didn't they lock the front door? There are glasses clinking in the room directly ahead of us, so I cautiously step forward. Two waitresses are in there cleaning up, refilling the salt shakers and ketchup bottles. They don't say anything to us. They just let their eyes drop and keep working. So much for customer service...

There's still the tiki bar to our right, but I can't believe he'd be in there. It's a new addition to the place that the owners haphazardly slapped on this spring. It's nothing more than a plywood deck with a thatch-covered roof. Certainly nothing

to brag about and just about the last place in the world I'd ever expect to find Chase Whitfield. He's used to dropping thousands of dollars at the trendiest nightclubs in Manhattan. I'm sure he wouldn't be caught dead in a dive like this.

Only a black swinging door stands in the way of further infamy. Erin starts to hyperventilate, breathing loudly through her mouth. It's all sinking in now. It's finally hitting home for her. He's not going to be the hot baseball player on TV anymore. He's going to be right in front of her in the flesh.

I take her hand in mine and give it a reassuring squeeze. "You can do this."

“I know, but you go first.”

A grin tugs at my lips, even though I’m just as scared as she is, if not more so. Gathering whatever courage I have left, I press my palm against the door and...

There he is, sitting directly on the other side of it.

I’m frozen in place as his eyes rake over me. For some reason, he seems just as shocked to see me as I am to see him, even though technically I knew he might be in here. He saw me now, so there’s no turning back and slinking out the door. That flame of indignation flares up in me again as he starts to shake his head in...bewilderment? Disgust? I know he said to stay away, but he only mentioned



Beaver Field. He didn't say anything about Buster's Crab Shack.

"Oh my God, it's him!" Erin cries, quickly leading me over to the only empty table left in the room.

I deliberately choose the seat where my back is facing him. My face feels like it's on fire and my heart is drumming in my chest. I actually feel lightheaded as I try to get my bearings.

He's at a table with two other guys and they're laughing loudly at whatever he just said. It's strange being in the same room and hearing his voice in person. It's not coming through a television or the radio in my truck. It's deep and rich, his familiar intonation and inflections filling my ears. It's

unreal that I'm actually listening to him talk. And for the first time tonight, I feel myself relax. I'm going to enjoy this moment, for whatever it's worth.

But just being here isn't enough for Erin. "People are going to flip when they see this." The glimmer of her pink-jeweled phone case catches my eye. She has it raised in the air, her finger hovering over the screen. Before I have a chance to say anything, she hits the camera button sending a flash of light in his direction.

"Didn't take you long, did it?"

Oh God, he did not just say that. Erin looks like she wants to crawl under the table as Chase's irate voice silences the

room. Every person in the bar stops talking and looks in our direction. My spine stiffens, but I'm not ready to face him. How dare he embarrass my sister by yelling at her in front of everybody. Where does he get off? What the hell is his problem?

Chase starts complaining about us to the guys he's with and they snigger at whatever he's saying. I can't make out all of the words. I only catch bits and pieces like "called security" and "wouldn't shut up." The people around us resume talking, but the damage is done. We've been officially exiled to outcast territory by the king of New York.

"Oh my God," Erin moans, shoving

her phone in her purse. “I thought I turned the flash off. The picture didn’t even come out.”

I try to focus on the generic steel drum music that’s playing overhead. She has no idea how bad this really is. Chase is sitting between us and the door. There’s no way we can make a hasty getaway without him seeing us. We’re essentially trapped. We’re going to have to sit here a while and let him cool off. Maybe he’ll let us slip out unnoticed once he calms down.

The waitress comes over, a tad flustered. Her blond hair is in two long braids and her big blue eyes look absolutely terrified. She’s probably

never waited on someone like him in her life. “What can I get for you?” she asks, and her eyes are kind, like she feels bad about what just happened to us.

“A Mic Ultra,” Erin says without hesitation.

I really thought she was done drinking for the night, but I guess Chase’s outburst rattled her. I’ll let it go this time. I’m not about to get on her case after she was just publicly humiliated by one of the most recognizable sports figures of our generation.

“A Diet Coke for me, thanks,” I respond, returning the waitress’s smile. She scurries away, sticking to the opposite side of the room, away from Chase.

“Can you believe they’re replaying tonight’s Kings’ game at the bar and he’s not even watching it?” Erin huffs, tapping away on her phone.

“I thought you put that thing away.” I can’t believe she has it out where he can see her.

“I’m just posting on Facebook that we’re here and what a jerk he is. Everyone’s going to find out what he’s really like.”

“Erin, I don’t think that’s such a—”

“Oooh, Kristie already commented. She says she can’t believe it. She never thought he was like that.”

The chances of Chase friending Erin are slim to none, but it makes me feel

weird knowing that she's already bashing him online when he's sitting practically ten feet away. I mean, shit like that spreads like wildfire. Sure, he's acting like a dick, but does she have to let the entire world know?

“Don't worry. I tagged you on it too.”

Wonderful. Now everyone will think we're the two bitches who wouldn't leave Chase Whitfield alone. Everybody's going to be saying we're just bitter because he didn't give us an autograph or pose for a picture. People are automatically going to side with him, no matter what we say. No one wants to believe anything bad about a person they idolize. If I hadn't experienced his behavior firsthand, I wouldn't believe it

either.

I glance down at the menu and notice the hours of operation printed on the front, and quickly look at my watch.

“They must have stayed open past closing for him.”

“Figures.”

It’s funny, but when I saw him sitting there, he didn’t seem like anyone important. He looked like just a guy in a polo shirt, jeans, and sneakers, eating a salad and chatting with two friends—nothing out of the ordinary. He didn’t look like a multi-millionaire, even if he acts like one. I don’t think I’ve ever been in the presence of someone that rich before.



Yet it's like he trying to have his cake and eat it too. Wanting to blend in with the public while still retaining all of the perks that go along with his celebrity status. One day, he's going to come to the realization that he can't have it both ways. He can't be a regular guy, no matter how hard he tries. He's different from the rest of us working-class schmucks. He has a mansion in Florida and the most expensive penthouse in Manhattan. I live in a trailer and Erin's crammed into a tiny garage apartment with two kids. Yet, for one brief moment, we're breathing the same air in the same place at the same time. Erin and I know everything there is to know

about him, and he knows absolutely nothing about us. Except that we've been hot on his tail the entire evening.

"Here you go." The waitress is back, depositing our drinks in front of us, leaving before I can stop her. I was actually kind of hungry and wanted to order some food, but I guess the kitchen is closed for everyone except for those at Chase's table.

"He looks so paranoid," Erin remarks. "He's eating, but his head is moving back and forth constantly. He's looking around like someone's gonna jump out and get him."

There's a tremendous crash behind me, and I can't resist turning around to look. Our waitress has dropped an entire

tray of silverware on the floor in front of Chase's table. She stands there, momentarily stunned, before dropping to her knees to pick everything up.

I start to rise from my seat, feeling sorry for her, but a guy who was standing at the bar goes out of his way to offer some assistance. At least there's one gentleman in the room.

"Grey, do you know who that is?" Erin whispers.

"No, who?"

"Brody Hernandez's brother. Oh my God, and there's Brody over at the bar. I didn't even notice him until now."

We both went to high school with Brody. Erin was a grade ahead of us, but

it didn't matter. Our school district was small and everybody knew everybody. Brody was the standout pitcher on the varsity team, nabbing a full scholarship from at least three different universities. If I remember correctly, the car he used to drive had a Kings bumper sticker on the back. So I'm not surprised that he's here stalking Chase Whitfield too.

“Psst...Erin...”

It's Debbie's husband. He's up against the outside wall, peeking in through the slat.

“Hey, man!” Erin gets out of her chair and bends down to talk to him.

Now, for sure, our cover is blown. If Chase thought we were two stupid girls acting on our own, his worst suspicions

are now confirmed. No, we're really in cahoots with some kind of autograph smuggling ring. Perfect.

"There are a lot more people out there now," Erin informs me, coming back to the table. "Word must've spread that he's in here."

"I don't get why none of them have the balls to come in."

"Well, here we go. Someone's approaching Chase now. I'll give you the play-by-play."

This will be the ultimate test. Is he rude just to us...or all his fans?

"It's a guy around our age and his son who looks to be about five or six. They have a poster that they're showing him."

“Nope, sorry guys. I’m not signing anything,” Chase’s voice booms out, dashing their hopes.

“But they’re not leaving,” Erin continues. “They’re still talking to him. The father is shaking Chase’s hand. The kid has his head down like he’s disappointed. Okay, now they’re walking away.”

Chase’s table erupts into laughter the minute the door closes behind them.

“I get this wherever I go.” I can make out snatches of what Chase is saying above the hilarity. “It sucks, man. Why can’t people just leave me alone?” He starts talking in a high-pitched voice. “Can you please sign this for me?”

“Oh man, he’s making fun of them,” Erin groans. “He’s making fun of that poor little kid. What a bastard. Oh no. Here comes someone else. Some teenage skater punk.”

“Not tonight.” The firmness in Chase’s voice cuts through again and this time the guys with him don’t even wait for the boy to leave before they start to laugh.

“He is so awful,” Erin moans, her eyes darting back and forth as she takes it all in. “But is it wrong that I still want my picture taken with him?”

“Yes!” I exclaim, looking at her like she’s out of her mind. “He thinks we’re all in cahoots with Debbie’s husband to

make a killing on his signature. There's no way he's going to do anything for us."

"Did you see all the pictures that guy has on his phone?"

I shake my head.

"He has a shot with, like, every player on the Kings, rappers, actresses—you name it. He must've met every famous person in existence," she says in admiration, even though it's obvious the guy's a creep. "Oh wait, Chase is getting up. Shit, I think he's walking out."

My heart skips a beat. Relieved that Chase is leaving, yet sad this might be it. What little time we've had in his presence is running out.

"But the assholes at his table are still there. So he might be back. Now Brody



is leaving the bar too. It looks like he's following him."

"Wow, Brody has more guts than I gave him credit for."

"Yeah, you ain't kidding."

There's a bit of commotion outside, and we catch a glimpse of Debbie's husband sprinting through the front door.

"Seems like he finally grew a pair, too," I remark, rolling my eyes.

"Shit, if there was ever a moment I wish I were a guy," Erin sighs, chugging down nearly half her beer in one gulp.

"What the hell for?"

"Because they all must be cornering him in the men's room...where he has nowhere to run."

# *Chapter Eight*

## **Chase**

I'm doing my thing when a Latino guy who was sitting at the bar—not five seconds ago—appears at the urinal on my right.

He's being all casual about it like he doesn't know who I am, pretending I'm just some random stranger he could care less about. He keeps his eyes lowered and goes about his business. I'm grateful that he's not trying to initiate any conversation. I step away and head for the sinks, expecting him to follow me, but he doesn't. Just my presence alone must be intimidating the hell out of him,

but tomorrow he'll probably be bragging to all his friends about how he met Chase Whitfield in the men's room at Buster's Crab Shack. Too bad in reality he pussied out and couldn't even make eye contact. Sucker.

Wow, maybe I'll actually make it back to my table without someone asking me for something. That would be a first. But my hopes are dashed when 'Crazy Jim' storms through the door.

"Hey, Whit! Long time no see, my man. How ya doin'?" He reaches out to shake my hand, but I don't extend mine. I've had my fill of this guy and then some. I can't believe he's in Stockton. Talk about relentless. "Do ya think you can sign this lithograph for me? It'd

mean the world to my kids. It really would.” His Kings cap is on backwards like he’s all gangsta and shit. He’s added to the number of gold chains around his neck since the last time I saw him down at spring training but he still reeks of cheap cologne. He’s been haggling me for years, like a whack-a-mole that keeps popping up no matter how many times I beat him down.

But sadly, his persistence pays off. I’ve probably signed more shit for him than I care to think about just to get him out of my face. He gets off on the thrill of the hunt, hounding all of the Kings players and making a hefty income off what he gets us to sign. Turns out, he has

a broker in Queens who pays top dollar for everything he brings in because the guy knows his stuff is legit. He's got quite a racket going, and it is because of people like him that I say no to everyone else because I don't want fans making money off my generosity. Having people invade my personal time in the hope of making a quick buck on the side? I don't think so. That's where I draw the line.

"Listen, Jimmy. I'm not signing tonight. So back off." I brush past him, but he has the audacity to tug on my shirt to prevent my escape.

"C'mon, man. You're gonna be here all week. Sign it tonight and you won't have to look at my ugly mug until you're back in New York."

The Latino guy behind me flushes the urinal and suddenly I feel like I'm being surrounded. It's tight quarters in here, and if he gets in on the action too, I won't have anywhere to move, wedged in between them like I am. I'm not used to the claustrophobia of small-town life and I'm already starting to feel suffocated. That drunken heckler chick from the stadium is out there along with the girl I'd rather forget. It's like a freakin' family reunion or something and I haven't even been here twenty-four hours.

“Jimmy, I don't know who you're recruiting in Stockton to keep tabs on me, but you'd better back off. Hiring

those local chicks to scope out the place is pretty low, even for you.”

“What are ya talkin’ about, Whit? They aren’t with me.”

I see the Latino guy wrinkle his brow in the mirror and shoot Jimmy a worried glance. What? Is he in on it too? Is Jimmy trying to double-team me in here or what?

“Yeah right, Jimmy. Whatever game you’re running, I’m not playing. Tell your little cronies to stay far away from me. You got that?” I push past Jimmy, more annoyed than ever. Since the minute my plane touched down, all I’ve wanted to do is get the fuck out of here, and it just keeps on getting worse. I should get Noah to take me back to the

hotel. But I can't...because she's still here.

I don't know if she's working for Jimmy or just the bigmouth in the shiny top she's with. I can't be sure, and I hate to say it, but I don't even care. I want her to come over and talk to me. I'm impressed that she even came in here after I went off on her at Beaver Field. When she came through the door, I thought I was seeing things. Of all the bars, in all the world...

But this isn't some movie. I'm not sentimental when it comes to women. I hook up and check out. No strings, no baggage. I satisfy my raging hard-on and then move on to the next in line. They're



all the same. None of them stand out. They just want a chance to say they spent the night with Chase Whitfield, so I make it worth their while. Let's just say that I've never had any complaints when it comes to my prowess in the bedroom. I know my way around a woman's body. I make sure they get something out of it, too. I'm not that selfish.

But commitment—that's where I draw the line. I have my celebrity girlfriends for show. The ones I take to awards shows and charity events when I have to make a public appearance with someone on my arm. My agent is an expert at drawing up these kinds of contracts. The non-disclosure agreement is especially binding. If they spill any details to the

press after we 'break up,' they're in for a world of hurt. Sure, I've banged them all. Why wouldn't I? None of them particularly care for the fact that I sleep around when I'm on the road, but I'm careful when it comes to STDs and unwanted pregnancies. I always wear protection. I always pull out. Wham, bam, thank you, ma'am.

One of my rules is that I never look them in the eye when I'm inside them. I focus on a scratch on the headboard or their dyed hair spread across the pillowcase. They're just a means to an end for me. They're willing to offer up their bodies, so I'm willing to take them. It's not like I'm forcing them to have sex

with me. Even if I did, they'd still be lining up outside my door. Every woman wants a chance to be with Chase Whitfield.

Except for this one, it seems. But I did screw up—twice now. I yelled at her friend. No wonder she's not exactly running over to my table. Whatever courage she had walking in here was probably dashed the moment I started ragging on them. I don't know what came over me. I was completely taken aback seeing her again. I got flustered, just like I did behind home plate. And I never get flustered. Ever.

For some reason, she's messing up my game. She's drawing me in, even if I seem to be pushing her away. I want her

to fight with me. I like a good challenge. I'm curious to see what she's made of.

Maybe it's time to up the ante and make her jealous. There's a table of scantily clad twentysomethings sitting next to us. Noah is a friend of the owner's son, and he told him we were coming and that I was interested in meeting some of Stockton's finest. Out of the five girls at the table, one of them looks halfway decent. I should invite her over and have some fun. It's a move that's worked in the past. Serve up a little competition and the girl I really want to talk to will come waltzing over to stake her claim. Happens all the time.

But damn, she's still sitting with her

back turned when I reenter the room. However, now she's alone. Her friend is up at the bar. This would be the perfect opportunity to go over and talk to her. But I'm Chase Whitfield. I don't approach women. They come to me. And for about the millionth time tonight, I wish I were just a regular guy who was able to hit on the girl I'm into instead of having to engage in these stupid games in order to get what I want.

Everyone's eyes are always on me. All it would take is one tweet or an emailed photo of me bending down to talk to her and we'd be embroiled in a shitstorm even I couldn't contain. Her world would be turned upside down as everyone Googles to find out who she is

and what she's all about. Her privacy would evaporate the second a hint of a rumor hit the web. It can't look as if I'm pursuing her. The only way this works is if she throws herself at me. That's the image people are used to seeing.

Sometimes it seems like the world is waiting with bated breath to see which girl I'm finally going to settle down with. Will it be Irina Portanova? Fat chance. No one expects me to date the girl-next-door type, especially one from Stockton. That would send a shockwave that would ripple across entertainment shows and gossip sites for months, if not years. And for some reason, I don't want to do that to this girl. Why subject her to

that level of scrutiny? I hate being in the spotlight, and I would never force her under its glare unless she went into it with her eyes open, aware of the consequences. Just because I wouldn't mind her coming back to my hotel room with me doesn't mean it's the right thing to do.

I stand in the doorway, unable to make up my mind about how to proceed, when the Latino guy from the bathroom, accidentally bumps into me from behind.

"Oh sorry, man. My bad." He looks up at me sheepishly.

"It's all right, brother. No harm, no foul," I respond, grateful that he made the decision for me. I can't stand here all night, contemplating what I'm going to

do. There's no way I can make a move on her, and that's that.

But the guy surprises me when he doesn't go back to the bar. Instead, he heads directly toward her. No fucking way. I feel like tearing after him, but I hold myself back. She's greeting him warmly, getting up out of her chair to give him a hug. As she wraps her arms around him, she gets a good look at me over his shoulder. Her eyes snap to mine and I can't look away. What I wouldn't give to be the one she's clinging to right now.

She stands on her toes, prolonging the embrace. I don't know if it's to keep looking at me or if she's trying to rub it



in. Fuck that. I'm not going to watch their public display of affection. Besides, two can play at that game.

"Where were you, dude? You like disappeared on us." Noah looks ridiculous with a tiny bib wrapped around his neck as he devours the plate of steamed clams in front of him.

"And my girl's friends are dying to get to know you better." Keith, the owner's son, makes a sweeping gesture with his hand, indicating the expectant faces gazing over at me. Someone must have pushed the two tables together after I left, so the girl I was sort of attracted to is sitting in a chair right next to mine. Well, if this isn't a stroke of luck, I don't know what is. They're making it almost

too easy for me.

“You said you wanted to get laid tonight, didn’t you?” Noah says in a mock whisper and everyone laughs, including me.

Ah, screw it. I’m not going to get caught up over this. It’s simple. These girls know what I’m after. And I think it’s fair to say that any one of them would be willing to give it to me. I just have to choose which one I want. Same as always—have them chase me as I sit back and decide. No effort required.

Until I hear the girl I really want giggle across the room. Her friend is back, showing the Latino guy something on her phone. They all start to crack up

as she replays what appears to be a video over and over. It better not be of me.

“Hey, you okay?” The curvaceous brunette I was admiring tilts her head in my direction. I unclench my jaw and give her a tight smile. Her eyes are brown, too, but nothing like the ones I keep getting lost in.

“Yeah,” I respond, sitting down and moving my chair closer to hers. “I am now.” I don’t waste any time. I lower my head, burying my face against her curls. She smells like a combination of cK One and cigarettes, a blend I’m actually quite familiar with. I move my lips closer to her ear, not caring who sees me. I nibble at her neck as she lets out a gasp. “Do

you wanna get out of here?" I ask, boldly running my hand up her thigh.

"Uh huh," she manages to whisper, closing her eyes.

"Let's go." I don't hesitate, slipping her hand in mine.

"Um, excuse me. Do you have a minute?"

Shit. It's her.

I did it. I got her to come over and talk to me. This feels even better than winning the World Series, and I didn't think such a thing was possible. I knew my ploy would work.

I drop the brunette's hand and turn around in my seat, trying to suppress my grin. But when I look up, I'm taken

aback. She's standing there with two kids. What? Where did they come from? She has her hands on their shoulders like she feels the need to protect them from me. They're two boys, probably around seven or eight, and they're staring at me in wide-eyed amazement. They shouldn't be in a bar. They should be home in bed. Not holding out their Little League caps to me with Sharpies clipped to the brims.

“What is it?” I come off as annoyed, even though I'm not—far from it, actually.

“Would you be able to sign these for them?” She scrunches up her forehead and looks so cute doing it. She thinks I'm going to shoot her down. Again, I can't

take my eyes off her. I'd do anything for her, but not this. If I sign for these kids, word will get out. And people will start to speculate why I singled her out and refused everyone else who had approached me. That first little boy was nearly in tears when he left with his father. But it's a rule of mine that I need to stick to. I don't sign in restaurants. I never did, and I never will.

Then another terrible thought shoots through my head. Are these her kids? Is she married? I let my gaze drop to her fingers, but I don't see any rings. What if that guy from the men's room is her boyfriend? All of these different scenarios flow through my mind. Up

until now, I never even considered that she might already be taken.

Everyone at the table has fallen silent. They're waiting to see what I'm going to do. Noah coughs, no doubt encouraging me to make it quick and put them out of their misery. I never really look at the kids I turn down. It's too hard. But I can't help studying their faces, searching for any resemblance to her. I see none. They're skin tone is much deeper than hers. She's as white as porcelain, her flawless complexion contrasting beautifully with the rich ebony shade of her hair. These kids look nothing like her, and I sigh in relief.

I break the news as gently as possible, knowing I'm letting her down too.

“Sorry, fellas. I’m not signing tonight.”

She starts backing away almost immediately, and I wish I could take it back and get her to pull up a chair and sit down next to me. I think rapidly for some excuse to get her to stay, but I’m distracted when the brunette behind me starts rubbing her hand up and down my arm, reminding me of what I suggested before we were interrupted.

“Oh, okay. Thanks anyway.” I can’t believe she’s being so meek about the whole thing. The fire I saw in her eyes back at Beaver Field is gone. Now they only reflect sorrow. Like she knew I was going to reject her and expected nothing less. And that makes me angry because



she truly is special, whether she realizes it or not.

Maybe if I goad her a little, she'll come roaring back at me.

“And a bar is no place for kids.” The taunt falls easily from my lips. She's already halfway to the door, guiding the boys in front of her, when she halts, her shoulders stiffening.

When she doesn't say anything, Keith snorts obnoxiously, causing the girls at the table to snicker. They're only following my lead. I've already humiliated her, so they think it's okay to jabber her some more. Noah is the only one shaking his head like he's disappointed in me.

She resumes her march toward the

door, and I hastily take a sip of water. That was harsh. I know it. She knows it. Everyone knows it. I deserve to be castrated for what I just did to her. Only an insecure asshole would do something like that. I clink the ice in my glass, wishing I hadn't come out tonight, that I'd never come to Stockton.

A hush falls over the table when I feel someone tap me on the shoulder. The touch goes right through me even though it's as light as a feather. It feels completely different from the way that brunette was just sliding her hand up my arm. This feels real.

“Just so you know, you don't treat people like that.” It's her. She's calling

me out. She doesn't seem like the combative type, so she must really feel strongly about confronting me. She was out the door, walking away, but she came back. I don't want her to go. I have to find some way to hold on to her. Even if I only end up hurting her in the end, I need to see where this could go.

“Oh yeah?” I ask sarcastically, raising an eyebrow like she's boring me.

“Yeah!” She stomps her foot, and Keith sniggers again. I wish we were alone or it were just Noah. Why did he have to invite his dick of a friend to join us? We would've been better off on our own. But once people hear the name Chase Whitfield, they all want to crash the party.

“So, what? Are you, like, my mother or something?” There’s a method to my madness.

“Just because you’re rich and successful and good-looking doesn’t mean you get to treat little kids that way. Your fans made you who you are, and they deserve a little respect. Sure, you may have the power and the influence to get me kicked out of Beaver Field, but you had a chance to make it up to me just now and you blew it.” She’s getting up on her high horse, but I kind of like it. And did she just say I was good-looking?

“Dude, you got her kicked out of Beaver Field? Awesome!” Keith

enthuses, raising his fist in the air.

“And I’m gonna have you call the cops in a minute, Keith, if she doesn’t get the hint and leave me alone.” She takes a step forward like she wants to strangle me, and honestly I don’t blame her. But I’d much rather feel her hands wrapped around another part of my body.

“Want me to call them now?” Keith whips out his phone. “The station’s right down the block.”

“Nah, let this serve as her final warning.”

Her breathing is labored, and hearing her like that is doing all sorts of things to my body. I can’t take much more or I’m gonna have to get up from this seat, pin

her against the wall, and kiss her like a girl as hot as she is deserves to be kissed. She's pushing the limits of my restraint. And it's making me want her even more. For once, I feel like I've met my match. I'm awake, alive, desperate for her.

"You are such a scumbag," she spits out before turning on her heel and stomping away.

I release the breath I was holding and look around as everyone in the place stares at me. "Problem solved!" I joke, raising my hands. Peer pressure is such a powerful motivator when it comes to influencing a crowd. Even if people are appalled by the way I treated her,

they're not showing it. Instead, there are a few titters here and there as people congratulate me for showing her who's boss.

Noah, I can tell, is the only one who feels sorry for her. I motion for him to lean across the corner of the table so I can say something to him in private.

"I can't believe you eviscerated her like that, dude. Not cool, man. Not cool at all."

"Well, you're gonna help me fix it."

Noah chokes while taking a sip of his root beer. "And just how am I supposed to do that?" He mops his face with his napkin, looking at me like I've lost my mind.

"Go out there and stop her from

leaving. Then get her to wait until everyone else is gone.”

Noah glances around nervously before inching his chair closer to mine. “And what if she refuses to hang around? What then?”

“Give her this.” I reach for the pen in my pocket and start writing on the placemat in front of me. The brunette tries to look over my shoulder at what I’m writing, but I gently shove her away. She’s already way too clingy. I can’t wait to ditch this chick. When I’m done scribbling, I hand it over to Noah.

He reads it quickly. “You really think that’ll work?”

“I know it will,” I say with all the



confidence in the world, even though I'm not so sure. "Now stop stuffing your face and go after her. Just make sure you get rid of the other one."

"Yes, boss." He gives me a smile like he's proud of me. "I never should've doubted you. You're Chase Whitfield. You have your reasons. It'll probably boggle my mind to know why you do what you do, but I should've known you're always a step ahead. That's why you are who you are."

Noah's commentary throws me a little, but I try not to show it. "What are you talking about? I'm just your ordinary run-of-the-mill guy."

"Far from it, man," Noah mutters, yanking off his bib.

“Bro, where you going?” Keith calls out to Noah, eyeing me suspiciously. I promised him that I’d autograph a menu for his father’s display case, and he probably thinks I’m going to flake on the deal by having Noah run some kind of interference.

But Noah doesn’t answer him and just keeps going.

“He’s running an errand for me, something I need done,” I explain in attempt to get Keith off my case.

“At one o’clock in the morning?” Keith asks incredulously.

I look at him pointedly and he gets my drift.

“Ah, someone’s getting lucky tonight!”

he says in a sing-song voice, and the  
brunette eyes me appreciatively.

Too bad it's not going to be her.

## *Chapter Nine*

### **Grey**

“Hey, girl, don’t even give it a second thought, okay?”

I’m sitting on the hood of my truck as Brody runs his hand soothingly up and down my arm. He means well, but it’s only irritating me more. His brother is loading his sons into a minivan. I feel bad that I let them down. When Brody told us they had gone to the game and thought Chase might show up here afterward, they left the kids outside, wanting to check out the situation before getting their hopes up. When he mentioned they were out in the van, I

encouraged him to bring them in, saying that I'd take them over to meet their hero.

Honestly, it was just an excuse to get to talk to Chase. There was no other reason I could think of to go over there. The kids gave me the courage I needed to face him since they'd reminded me so much of Erin's boys, Randy and Jacob. I'm just glad they weren't with us tonight because I'd never want them to be rejected like that in public. Talk about being scarred for life. I feel responsible for subjecting Brody's nephews to that. If their self-esteem is forever damaged, then I'm the one to blame.

"Are you sure the boys are gonna be okay? Tell them it had nothing to do with

them. Chase was just dissing the crazy lady they were with.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Grey. I don’t want you beating yourself up over this. He’s the jerk, not you.”

Erin is eyeing me despondently. “You so didn’t deserve to be treated like that.”

“Well, neither did you.”

“But I was the one who got him going to begin with. I don’t think I could have gone head-to-head with him like that. Grey, that was some brave shit, standing up for me and all.”

“Our girl’s fearless!” Brody laughs, lifting his hand to slap me five. When I give him a halfhearted smile, he smacks Erin’s hand instead.

“Ow, that hurt!”

“I thought you liked it rough, from what I remember.”

Brody’s comment sparks color in Erin’s cheeks. Oh my God, that’s right. They went out briefly while we were in high school. It was only for a couple of weeks after the Homecoming dance. But I never knew they hooked up. And now’s he’s flirting with her...

“Not anymore,” Erin replies, no doubt thinking of her ex.

“I’m sorry about what happened between you and Mark. If I had known, I would have—”

“Ugh, stop apologizing. I just wish I got my picture taken with Chase to shove

it in Mark's face, but it's all good, right?" Erin lights a cigarette, taking a long drag.

"Brody, it looks like your brother's ready to call it a night. You'd better go," I urge, staring at the boys who are already starting to fall asleep in the back seat.

"Trying to get rid of me?"

"Something like that." I give him a wink to let him know I'm only kidding.

"Call me sometime," Brody says, his gaze fixed on Erin.

"Now why would I do that?" Erin snaps.

"Because you want to," Brody responds, lightly caressing her cheek before jogging toward the minivan.



“Now that was pretty awesome. Brody’s quite the catch,” I tease as Erin watches them drive away. “So are you gonna call him?”

“Hell no!”

“Why not? He’s totally into you.”

“Yeah right. I’m secondhand goods with two kids attached. I don’t think so.”

“C’mon, give the guy a chance. Brody’s nothing like Mark. He seems great with his nephews.”

“Just drop it, Grey. All right?” Erin stomps out her cigarette with her heel.

“Oh shit, what does this moron want?”

I quickly flip my legs over the side of the truck to see who it is. “Oh no. I think he is Chase’s bodyguard. Watch him

demand that we vacate the premises or something.”

“Bodyguard, huh? He’s huffing and puffing like he just ran a marathon. I could so take him.”

“I bet you could.”

“Hi, um... Hi,” the guy repeats as he strides up to us. He’s obviously uncomfortable as he looks from me to Erin then back to me. “I know this is extremely awkward, but Chase Whitfield asked me to give you this.” He holds out a folded up piece of paper, expecting me to take it.

“No, thank you,” I respond as politely as possible. “I think Chase has said enough for one evening, don’t you?”

“Yeah, we don’t want to hear anything

more that that dickwad has to say,” Erin spits, backing me up.

“Oh, but please. You have to read it. It’s important,” he pleads, letting it slip that he knows the contents of the message.

“She doesn’t have to do anything.” Erin gets in his face, and even though he looks like a linebacker, he takes a step back. “Why does Chase have you doing his dirty work, huh? What are you, his bitch while he’s in Stockton?”

“No, my name is Noah and I’m nobody’s bitch. I’m Chase’s driver for the week, and I’ve been around him all day. Trust me, he’s not as bad as he seems.”

“What? He’s even worse?” Erin chides.

“I can’t imagine what he has to say that he hasn’t already said.” I hop off the hood of my truck. “Unless it’s an apology, which I find extremely unlikely. He doesn’t seem like the type of guy who says he’s sorry.”

Noah panics as I start to open the driver’s side door. “Wait! You can’t leave!”

“And why not? It’s a free country,” Erin retorts. “You can’t detain us here. You’re not a cop.”

I know she’s sobering up if she’s using words like ‘detain.’ If I had consumed that much alcohol, I’d be in a

heap on the ground. Man, she can hold her weight in booze.

“Chase wants you to stay here until he comes out,” Noah replies, gesturing at me. “And he wants me to drive you home,” he continues, nodding at Erin.

“Sorry, my sister doesn’t roll like that. She’s no freakin’ skank like the barflies he’s used to. How dare he send you out here to try and proposition her like that! That’s some stupid-ass shit right there,” Erin shouts, waving her hands around wildly as she rips Noah a new one. “And I’m not going anywhere with you. My sister and I are leaving together.”

Noah is sweating like a racehorse. He doesn’t look like a liar, and I don’t think

he means us any harm. He's just following orders, doing what his client asked, no matter how unusual the request.

I contemplate my options. What could it hurt? I mean, Chase has already embarrassed me in public multiple times. Nothing could sting more than that. Maybe he really does want a chance to say he's sorry. Having such an inflated ego, he probably finds it hard to admit when he makes a mistake. I'll give him one more chance. Then it's three strikes and he's out.

I start unfolding the placemat and Erin goes ballistic. "Don't you dare open that, Grey!" She snatches it out of my

fingers before I have a chance to read it, flicking her cigarette lighter and holding it above the flame.

“Oh, please! Don’t do that! Please!” Noah is practically on his knees, begging Erin to give it back.

“And why should I? Just so Chase can have another laugh at her expense? I don’t think so. He’s probably in there with his ho-bags, watching us right now. And you think I’m just going to stand by and let him make my sister the butt of another one of his jokes?”

“What’s your name by the way?” Noah effectively breaks Erin’s stride, halting her mid-tirade.

“Erin Kelleher, and this is my little sister, Grey. Sorry if I’m being

overprotective, but after the night we've had, you wouldn't feel so accommodating either."

"I don't doubt it. I'm usually the one getting picked on, so trust me, I know how it feels." Noah's honest admission makes Erin lower her lighter.

"You? You're the size of a refrigerator. Who the hell would fuck with you?"

"You'd be surprised. I might look like a ton of bricks, but I'm a sensitive guy at heart."

"And you really think Chase Whitfield is a halfway-decent human being? He hasn't been riding your ass since the moment he got in your car?"



“Nah, he’s been great. Driving him around has been super intense and a lot more chaotic than I’m used to, but that’s just how people get when they’re around him. Chase is a pretty quiet guy, actually.”

“Yeah, I always thought he was.” I respond absently.

“So you’re a fan?” Noah asks, looking at me hopefully.

“Since his rookie year.”

“Grey—” Erin warns.

“It’s okay, Erin. I’ve got nothing to hide. Yeah, I probably know more about Chase Whitfield than most of the people in my life. I’m not one of those airheads like we saw outside Beaver Field,

jumping on the bandwagon just because he's in town. I've followed his whole career, and first and foremost, I'm a fan of the game. Have been my whole life."

"Then you have to read it," Noah implores, as if my admission settles everything.

I glance over at Erin, and she throws up her hands. "Fine, but if I hear him laughing inside that damn tiki bar, I'm going to beat his ass with my purse until he's black and blue."

"Understood," Noah agrees while watching me expectantly.

I take the creased wad of paper from Erin and carefully begin to open it. My heart starts to pound when I see what Chase has written.

**To the Hernandez brothers (#10 and #28), best of luck this year in Little League. I hope the Clayton Market team goes all the way. Chase Whitfield.**

He gave Brody's nephews his autograph.

Not only that, he'd noticed the jerseys they were wearing—the front with the logo of the team sponsor and the back with their name and number. He saw all that while he was arguing with me? I'm stunned and—I have to admit—impressed.

“What is it, Grey? You look like you've seen a ghost.” Erin rubs my shoulder, encouraging me to speak.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Noah beams at me.

“Yeah, I’d say.” I give Noah a shy smile in return.

“Enough for you to stick around?”

I silently hand the placemat to Erin. “I think so.”

“Good. Just stay in your truck. He’ll be out as soon as he can.” Noah clicks the automatic locks on his car across the lot. “Are you ready, Erin?”

“Grey, just because Chase did this, you’re really going to sleep with him?” Erin raises her eyebrows at me as Noah coughs nervously behind her.

Erin is not making this easy for me. I just want to see what Chase is going to

say when there's no one else around. Maybe he'll let his guard down and just be himself. But I'd be a fool to think that he's not expecting something in return. He's not asking to meet me in order to talk. I'm sure he has other things in mind.

“What if I don't take Chase back to the hotel?” I ask brazenly.

“Where are you planning on taking him?” Noah gulps. “I'm responsible for his safety and all. I can't have some crazy fan abducting him. I mean, you seem like a nice girl, but...”

“I assure you. I'm not crazy. I can have him check in with you if you'd like.” I need to bolster Noah's faith in me or this isn't going to work. “I think he trusts me enough to get him from point A

to point B or he never would have come up with this scenario.”

“That’s true,” Noah mutters.

“Grey, I can’t believe you’re really going through with this,” Erin groans. “What if he starts yelling at you again?”

“I don’t think he will,” Noah comments. “I think he’s scared shitless of her.”

“You do?” Erin asks, her mouth dropping open. “Why?”

“Because it’s like he looks at everybody else with his eyes half closed, but with Grey, they’re wide open. He doesn’t show much of what he’s feeling on the surface, but every time he’s come in contact with her, it’s

like there's no holding back. He can't maintain that poker face that he's known for. I saw how he reacted to her in the stands at Beaver Field and now here at the bar. She rattles him somehow, and I think he's anxious to find out why she's able to get through that impenetrable force field he's built around himself. She's a mystery to him, and he's not going to rest until he solves it."

"But I don't think I'm going to be all that interesting once he gets to know me." I chuckle, suddenly getting nervous again. I'm in way over my head here. If Noah's right, I'm in big trouble. Chase is going to be badgering me for answers that I can't give. I don't know what he wants from me. Whatever caught his

interest must be a misunderstanding. There's nothing special about me. I'm plain, old, boring Grey. He's going to be bummed when he finds out the truth.

"Girl, have you looked in a mirror lately?" Noah teases, playfully nudging my shoulder.

"But I thought you said he wasn't attracted to me because of my looks?"

"Hey, I never said that. I think the outside package sealed the deal."

Erin butts in, wagging her finger in my face. "Grey, I'm so freakin' jealous I can hardly see straight, and if you weren't my flesh and blood, I'd claw those pretty eyes right out of your head. But putting aside all of the things I'd personally like



to do to Chase's body, you need to listen to your big sister because I'm only going to say this once. If you give it up, please use protection. That boy has been around."

"I'm not sleeping with him, all right!" I blush furiously as Erin and Noah exchange a knowing glance.

"Try telling him that. I don't think he knows the meaning of the word 'no.'" Erin slides her arm through Noah's. "But you're a big girl, and I'm not your mother. Plus, how many girls in Stockton are going to be able to say they had sex with Chase Whitfield while he was here? Seven? Eight?"

"You are so gross," I admonish, giving her a quick hug before Noah leads

her away.

“Be careful, Grey Goose. And if he gets fresh, kick him out of your truck and make him walk back to the hotel,” Erin advises, patting me on the back.

“But if you do, make sure you call and tell me where he is so I can pick him up,” Noah replies, slipping me his card.

I roll my eyes at the two of them.  
“Will do.”

I watch as Noah opens the car door for Erin and she ducks inside. He waddles around the front before getting in. He takes his time adjusting the rearview mirror and buckling his seatbelt as Erin gazes worriedly at me through the windshield. The two of them

are obviously conflicted about leaving me to my fate. But as they start to pull away, Erin blows me a kiss as Noah toots the horn. I follow their taillights with my eyes until they turn the corner and I can't see them anymore.

Shit. I'm on my own now, waiting out here like a damn fool. Whatever happens tonight, I don't think my life will ever be the same. I just hope this time I finally catch a glimpse of the guy I thought Chase was and not just his big ego façade. Will he be brave enough to quit sparring with me and lower his defenses?

I guess I'm about to find out.

# *Chapter Ten*

## **Chase**

I have to get out of here.

Keith is droning on and on as I run a pen over the front cover of one of his binder-sized menus. Now maybe he'll be satisfied and I can finally leave. Noah sent a quick text to tell me that she stayed and I don't want to keep her waiting. She might change her mind and then I'll be kicking myself from here to next week for not getting my ass out the door sooner.

"You sure you're not interested in Gabbi? I could call her. Tell her to come back. Or have her meet you at the hotel."

Keith has his hand on my shoulder like we're best buds. He's been pimping this girl out to me all night, but I'm not interested. I have someone much better right outside the door, if I could only get out of this damn tiki bar.

"Nah, that's all right, man. I'm beat. I think I'm just going to call it a night. But thanks for the hospitality. How much do I owe you?" I draw my wallet out of my back pocket, but Keith holds up his hands.

"Yeah, right. Like I'm going to charge a future Hall of Famer. Put your money away. It's no good here."

"C'mon, I insist."

"Forget about it. It's on the house." Keith slaps me on the back so hard that

the jolt sends vibrations through my aching knee. There's nothing I hate worse than being held hostage by someone who doesn't want to let me go. Enough is enough. My time away from the field should be my own, but it sure doesn't feel like it sometimes.

"Later, man." I shake Keith's hand before stepping outside as he tags along behind me.

"I don't see Noah around. What's he driving anyway?" Keith peers over my shoulder, scanning the few vehicles that remain.

I don't know how I'm going to talk my way out of this. Luckily, the waitress who nearly dumped a tray of silverware

on me happens to walk out of the kitchen at that exact moment. Surprised to find us standing there, she looks like she wants to bolt. Scared shitless, she hurries by us with her head down and escapes into the bar area, her braids swaying behind her. I feel bad because I think I keep freaking her out. I should have offered to pick up the scattered forks and knives, but I froze. Instead, I was fixated on that head of luscious ebony hair I was dying to run my fingers through. When the silverware hit the floor, I was too caught up in my daydream before the guy at the bar beat me to the punch.

“I’m going to give that girl a piece of my mind,” Keith fumes, hustling after

her. “No way is she going to get away with that stunt she pulled earlier. She needs to apologize to you. Let me go get her. Luanne, come back here. Luanne!”

But I don't stick around. This is my chance, and I'm taking it. I charge down the wooden steps, my feet clomping against the boards. I don't stop until I'm standing in the middle of the nearly empty lot. Where is she? Did she leave? Am I too late? I turn around in a circle and try to look inside the darkened cars. It's too quiet. I'm not used to such stillness after growing accustomed to the never-ending racket of Manhattan.

I just wish I knew her name. I could call out to her. I even learned the damn



waitress's name after hearing Keith yell at her. I run my hand across my brow, knowing that if anyone's watching, I must look like an idiot. Is this what she wants? To make me work for it after what I did to her?

I bend my head and listen to the crickets chirping next to the moat at the far edge of the property. With a working drawbridge and lighthouse tower, it looks like part of a miniature golf course. Keith's family certainly extended their brand of tackiness to the outdoor landscaping. They sure know how to make an impression for all the wrong reasons. I can't believe I signed that menu for him. He'll probably put it on the wall next to the ones autographed

by Pee Wee Herman and Weird Al Yankovic.

I amble backward, closing my eyes when I hear a faint murmur from the far side of the building. It sounds like a bunch of animated voices, and I pick up fragments of my name through the intermittent bursts of conversation. Shit, there must be a pack of fans waiting to pounce. They didn't give up. They're still around—probably Jimmy and his gang. It's time for me to bounce. If only I had a ride...

Suddenly, a pair of headlights turns on directly in front of me.

I freeze. It's her. It has to be.

Slowly, I raise my eyes and see a

shadowy silhouette behind the wheel of a pickup truck that looks like it's seen better days. The engine chugs to life, and I step back as it pulls up beside me. The window on the passenger's side starts to lower. I bend down to get a better look at who's inside, and once again I'm drowning in those chocolate brown eyes.

Her face is level with mine, and I seem to be having a similar effect on her as we stare at each other for a moment. Even if she's only feeling a fraction of what I'm feeling, it's enough. I did everything I could to drive her away, but she's still here, still looking at me like that. I didn't blow it. I can still make this right.

"Hey." I smile over at her.

“Hey,” she responds softly, pulling up the knob of the old-fashioned lock.

I waste no time getting in beside her before she can scoot back behind the wheel. I don't stop. I keep going. My hands are at her waist, lifting her up so I have enough room to sit down. My movements are clumsy and her shirt bunches up around my fingers. A groan escapes my lips as I come in contact with her skin. It's soft and smooth, and for once I wish I took better care of my hands because she gasps as they chafe roughly against her ribs. She's right on top of me as I feel her warm breath on my face. I gently lower her off of my throbbing knee, reaching back to shut the

door.

I allow my hands to move up her body and into her hair, and I get caught up in her. I want this girl. I want her bad. But this isn't the time, and it's certainly not the place. I'm not going to start things off with her like this. She's different, special even. I didn't ask her to wait for me in order to use her for sex. I want more than that. But she feels too damn good to stop.

I press my chest flush against hers. Every one of her labored breaths rises and falls with mine. I'm fully on top of her now. She's looking up at me with her lips parted. I brush a wayward strand of hair off her forehead. Do I really want to do this here? That's all I need is for us

to get caught. I don't think Keith's the type who'd sell me out, but who knows? I only just met the guy.

Her legs are spread apart and I'm nestled in between them. It would be so easy. She's practically panting for me, her fingers kneading the shirt on my back. And she smells so good, not like any kind of perfume I recognize but more like the crispness in the air on a cold winter day—so clean, so pure, so innocent.

I can't do this. I lean back, my thumbs still stroking the area around her bellybutton where her shirt is riding up. Her stomach is flat and white as snow. My skin looks so dark next to hers. I

have to admit that I like how she looks on me. What I wouldn't give to see all of her stretched out against all of me. I clench my jaw as I offer her a hand to sit up. She blinks at me, stunned. But we have to go. We have to get out of here.

I'm moving too fast. I need to slow things down. I don't want the first time I kiss her to be a moment I'll later regret. I can't screw this up. I want it to be epic. Something she won't forget. I've had too many intoxicated chicks shove their tongues down my throat. That's not what I want from her. That's not what I'm after. She has something none of them were ever able to give me—a genuine connection, a spark. I have to be patient and take my time. I can't ruin whatever

this is between us. I've been around a lot of women, and she's not like anyone I've ever met before. She's something precious, something rare. I can't be casual about this. I have to get it right. I have to.

“You are such an asshole!”

*Smack.*

I rear back as her hand connects with my cheek. *Did she just hit me?*

“What did you do that for?”

“What? Am I not good enough for you?” she seethes, propping herself up on her elbows. Her hair is all mussed and her face is bright red. Despite her anger, I love that I'm the reason she's all worked up. She's hot and bothered



because of me, not that guy who was hugging her in the bar. Her legs tangle with mine as she tries to get out from under me, and that alone is driving me insane. How the fuck am I supposed to maintain control when she's doing shit like that to me?

“Just drive.” I'm used to ordering people around, and I automatically revert back to command mode. I want to show her how much I want her, but it's too dangerous. We'll get caught, and I don't want to expose her. She's my little secret and she's going to stay that way.

Just then, the front door of the restaurant flies open with a thud as Keith starts shouting my name. The distraught waitress is standing behind him, looking

chastised as she plays with the straps of her apron. “Chase, where you at? Luanne has something she’d like to say to you.”

“Get down!” She yanks my shirt. I kind of like how she’s telling me what to do as I bend over, hiding myself from view.

“Chase!” Keith keeps yelling, his voice getting louder. “Chase, is that you in there?”

“Shit. Is he walking toward the truck?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she whispers. “But I don’t think he saw you.”

“Then floor it.” My eyes twinkle up at her as she tucks her hair nervously behind her ears. She looks so cute when

she's worried.

"You got it," she says, shifting into drive and hitting the gas. The truck's tires squeal as she swerves to avoid Keith, who's now screaming obscenities at her. She flies past him in a blur as Luanne jumps back with a yelp. This girl is badass. I like the way she rolls.

"You stupid bitch!" I hear Keith roar. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

She gives him the middle finger and keeps going.

"You better run because I'm calling the cops on your ass!" That's the last thing I hear Keith say as the mob of fans waiting underneath Buster the crab's illuminated claws descends upon us, no doubt drawn toward all of the

commotion.

“Here. Throw this over your head.” She fumbles behind her, pulling a hoodie out of the back and tossing it at me.

She doesn't even put her foot on the brake. I grit my teeth as she plows right through the crowd. Fists thump against the side of the truck, but I don't think she actually hits anyone. I hear startled voices above me, but thankfully no one notices me crouched on the floor, even as some of them get pretty close to the window.

“He's not even in there!” a woman whines. “I saw that girl in the bar. She must be a decoy. He's probably slipping out the back. C'mon, maybe we can still

catch him!”

She breathes a sigh of relief as they change direction, creating an opening for her to drive through. She guns the engine, retaking the road and flying around a corner.

“Hey, you never told me your name.” My knee is killing me from being bent in this cramped position, but it’ll be worth the extra therapy session I’ll have to do tomorrow.

“It’s Grey. Grey Kelleher. But don’t bother me now. I have to concentrate on my driving.”

I’m at the same level as her bare legs, and her shorts are high up on her thighs. I try not to look, but I can’t seem to tear my eyes away. She’s driving with both

feet, one hovering over the brake, the other on the gas. I've never seen anyone drive like that before.

Shadows are whizzing by, reminding me just how fast she's going. "You can probably slow down now," I mutter from underneath her hoodie. It's soft and feels lived in. But best of all, it smells like her. As I pull it off my head, I try not to notice the Kings logo on the front. Most girls aren't into sports. I don't want to get my hopes up that she might actually know a thing or two about the game.

"You think?" she asks, turning her head when I grunt and try to hoist myself back onto the seat.

My knee is on fire, so I grab the door handle to pull myself up by my arms. I grimace, flexing it once I'm sitting next to her again. This is not good. If it's as swollen as I think it is, I might not even be able to play short tomorrow. I'll probably be stuck DH'ing, and the Kings' front office isn't going to like it one bit. It'll be another setback to my recovery and one they weren't anticipating.

“They shouldn't have you rehabbing on turf. It's not right.” Grey's eyes meet mine for a split second before she looks away.

“And what would you know about it?” I don't mean to sound so irritated, but

she's running hot one minute then cold the next. But if I'm being completely honest, I guess so am I. "Don't worry. Being slapped by you took my mind off it."

"You deserved it," she huffs, but I can't tell if she's mad because I tried to kiss her or because I didn't. "And I might not be a professional baseball player, but I do know that playing on an artificial surface isn't good for a joint injury. I saw what happened to Manny Rogers when he got his cleat stuck in the rug in Minnesota. He was never the same after that."

"You remember that? That was like... four years ago."

"Yeah, I remember it. I never miss a



game, unless I have to work.”

“What do you do?”

She pauses for a minute, like she’s unsure about whether or not she wants to tell me. I wait her out. It’s not like I’m going anywhere.

“I’m in retail.”

“That’s pretty vague.”

I don’t know why but I like badgering her. I hope I’m not annoying her, but I’m enjoying this game of give and take we have going on. For once, I’m interested and engaged in a conversation with a woman, not distant and aloof. She’s squabbling back and forth with me like we’re on an equal playing field. To her, I’m not Chase Whitfield. I’m just some

guy, pestering the heck out of her. Even if what I'm really trying to do is get her to flirt with me.

"I fondle men's underwear all day long. Is that specific enough for you?"

"Very. Think you can hook me up with some? I should really stock up while I'm here since I never have time to shop."

"Ha, ha. Very funny."

"I'm not kidding. I could use your professional advice. What do you think? Am I a boxers or a briefs kind of guy?"

"Well, since I read your interview in *GQ*, I already know the answer to that."

"And?" She fucking read my *GQ* article? Maybe she really is a fan and she's just trying to play it cool. A guy can dream.

“You prefer more of a combination style. You like the kind that extend almost to the knee when you’re playing because...”

“Because...?” I enjoy watching the blush that’s creeping up her neck and slowly entering her cheeks.

“You don’t like to have to keep adjusting yourself when you’re on the field.” Her eyes dart beneath my waist before flicking back to the road. She knows I just saw her checking me out. She’s not that smooth, but that’s what I like about her. I can tell she hasn’t slept around, not like I have. The women I’m with are usually a lot more experienced, but they’re as boring as hell. I have

nothing in common with them so we usually have little to talk about. But with Grey, it's different. It's like I'm chatting with one of the guys wrapped in a hot, little package. I don't know what I'm more captivated by, her body or her conversation.

“So what, are you like...my number one fan or something?”

“Shut up.” She glares at me beneath her eyelashes.

“I think you are. Why else would you have turned up at Buster's Crab Shack after the game?”

“Because I was hungry.”

“I didn't see you order any food.”

“The waitress wouldn't let me because you were in the house and she

wanted us to clear out.”

“Well, excuse me.”

“And my sister was the one who found out you were there, not me.”

“Oh shit, that crazy girl is your sister?”

“Don’t call her crazy. She was just a little intoxicated. That’s all.”

“Intoxicated? She was drunk off her ass.”

“Well, she has her reasons.” Grey bites her bottom lip. Her profile is going in and out of focus as we pass beneath the streetlights leading to the highway. “She was just excited to see you. It’s how she deals with her emotions.”

“So why didn’t you cut off her beer

supply?”

“Because I’d be wearing it right now.”

“Sounds like she’s as feisty as you are. What is it with you Kelleher girls?”

“I ask myself that question every day of my life.”

I laugh and she joins in. I like the sound of her voice. It’s soothing, deeper than when she was nervously addressing me in the restaurant. Combined with her dark hair and pale skin, it makes for an intriguing mix. She’s delicate on the outside, but a little toughie on the inside—like the Jennifer Lawrence version of Snow White.

“So you’re not a fan of mine then?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you just came to the game tonight...because your sister dragged you along...even though it seems like you’ve seen every Kings game in the last decade? Shit. Don’t tell me you’re into Drake?” I cringe inside, waiting for her to contradict me.

“Hell no! I do have a certain level of taste when it comes to men. I’m not a member of DrakesSkanks.com. Thank you very much.”

“Oh God, what the hell is that?”

“Don’t you know? It’s a website devoted to all his reported hook-ups. They post pictures and everything.”

“Fuck. Is there a site like that about me?”

“There should be.”

I want to lash out at her, but I bite my tongue. My exploits are common fodder for the gossip mill. I'm not exactly innocent when it comes to one-night stands. I'm just better at confiscating a girl's phone before taking her into my bedroom no matter what city I happen to be in. It helps to have a savvy publicity team too. If anything does get out, it's usually contained before it can go viral. My playboy image is mostly hyped by rumors, not facts. There's little concrete evidence out there linking me to some random fan. Drake got sloppy after his divorce. He didn't give a shit who posted what about him, even if the Kings



did. He might have gotten a bigger contract than me when he signed, but I'm killing him when it comes to endorsements. No one wants Drake Schultz as the face of their product.

Grey's eyes are more on me than on the road, so it's obvious she thinks I'm a... What did Noah call it—a man-whore? It's time to go on the offensive. “So you know everything about my private life too?”

“As much as there is to know. You're a pretty secretive guy.”

Ain't that the truth. If she only knew the half of it, but she knows squat. I keep things hidden for a reason. I don't like people talking about what I do off the field. My sex life is none of their

business. It's not like I'm taking advantage of anybody. Hell, I don't even bother finding out their first names. When it comes to down to it, they're all just 'Baby' to me.

“Where the hell are we going anyway?” I gaze around, desperate to change the subject. I thought she was taking me back to the hotel, but we're already several miles outside the city. I should be nervous—I don't even fucking know this girl—but I'm not. I'm exhilarated, like I'm finally breaking free of the chains that have been holding me down for so long.

“Didn't Noah tell you?” She raises an eyebrow in my direction, but I'm too

distracted by the way her breasts are heaving beneath her shirt. She's trying to contain herself, but being in my presence is having an effect on her. There's no denying it. She probably can't believe I'm sitting next to her. A smirk plays across my lips from knowing that I'm getting her aroused.

“So you're taking me to some secluded spot to have your way with me, huh?”

Her foot involuntarily hits the brake and we're thrown forward. I didn't fasten my seatbelt so I hit the glove compartment dead-on, jamming my knee in the process.

“Oh my God, are you okay?” There's genuine concern in Grey's voice as I

lower my head and breathe deeply. It hurts like hell. Seeing my distress, she slows down and pulls over onto the side of the road. “I can’t believe I just did that. I’m so sorry, Chase.”

It’s the first time she’s said my name, and just hearing it roll off her tongue makes the pain almost worth it. But I’m not gonna lie, I think that about did me in. I’m definitely screwed for tomorrow’s game. Forget about playing. There’s no way I’m going to be able to walk. I’m fucked.

“It’s not your bad knee, is it?” She watches as I slowly close my eyes and lean back against the headrest. I don’t want to go saddling her with any more

guilt trips. It's not her fault that I'm in this predicament. I've been incapacitated for quite a while now. It sucks coming to terms with the fact that my body will never be what it once was. I've depended on it for so long. It's been my moneymaker, and now it's starting to fail me—big time. I still can't wrap my mind around it since last season I had the best year of my career. I'm as obstinate as a mule and I don't intend to give up. Those sports writers can kiss my ass. I'm not admitting defeat. Not yet.

But I can't lie to her either. Just the way she's looking at me now is doing all kinds of things to me. It's like she'd take all the pain away if she could. I want to believe that somehow she truly cares

about me, even if she doesn't know the real me, only the propaganda machine the Kings throw out there for fans to consume. I'm a total stranger to her, yet it doesn't feel that way. It feels like I've known her forever.

And that's what scares me the most.

I shouldn't have had Noah go after her. This was all a big mistake. Sure, I was curious. I wanted to pursue this thing with her further, see where it would go, but I'm only going to end up leaving her in the end. I can't be with this girl. There's no way. I have to start shutting this down, for her sake if not mine. I don't want to lead her on. I thought I could have some fun with her

while I was here, but this is getting too deep, too fast. I'm not ready for anything remotely like this. I don't do real relationships. Only fake ones.

"Yeah, it's my bad knee," I snap, causing her to withdraw her hand from where it was resting on my arm. "What do you think?"

She looks absolutely horrified, and I feel like a prick for exaggerating the severity of the situation. My knee was messed up before I even got in her truck. She didn't cause this, but I have to make her think she did. I need to get back to the hotel and call it a night. She has to go home and get the hell away from me. I'm no good for her. The sooner she realizes that, the better.

“Don’t blame me for all of this.” Her voice is tender but firm. She’s not backing down. “I saw you limping at Beaver Field. Here, let me take a look.”

Her hand is on my thigh, causing my dick to spring to life. Fuck! What is she doing? She bends down and starts rolling up the leg of my jeans. I stay absolutely still, not even breathing as she works her way up higher. She has to see the massive boner I’m sporting for her benefit, but thankfully she doesn’t comment on it. Her focus remains solely on my knee.

“Oh, Chase, it’s all swollen.” She runs her fingers over my kneecap, causing me to flinch. “I’m not hurting



you, am I?" She's hardly doing anything, yet all I can do is silently shake my head as I grip the edge of the seat, ramming my nails into the side. Having her touch me moves something deep inside of me that I thought was dead. I'm used to people tending to me because they have to or because I'm paying them to. It's been a long time since a girl took care of me out of the goodness of her heart. I can't give in to this. I can't. Even if every instinct in body is telling me to surrender to her.

"That's it, Chase. You're coming home with me."

"What?"

"You heard me. I have just the thing to ease the swelling."

“Grey, I can’t. You don’t understand,” I protest, but she holds up her hand, blocking any attempt for me to talk some sense into her. Instead, she digs out her phone, dialing a number off a card she retrieved from her pocket. “Who are you calling? Please tell me it’s not your sister.”

She rolls her eyes at me before turning her attention to whoever’s on the line.

“Hey, Noah, it’s Grey. Just thought I’d check in with you.”

Noah! He’s my one way out of this debacle. I have to talk to him. I never got his number because I thought he’d automatically be at my beck and call. I have to let him know where we’re at so

he can come get me. I look around wildly for any mile markers or exit signs, but I don't see any.

“Yeah, Chase is okay, but I wanted to let you know I'm taking him back to my place for the night.”

I squirm, reaching across the seat for her phone, but she angles her body away from me before I can pry it out of her fingers.

“No problem. We'll work something out before noon. Okay, see you then. Thanks, Noah.” She hangs up before I can speak to him, but not before I'm able to pin her body against the driver's side door.

I'm on top of her again but this time it feels different. I'm angry at her for

taking over. What right does she have to tell me where I'm spending the night? No one tells me what to do.

My knee is screaming at me to sit back and let her go, but I ignore it. Instead, I grasp her face between my hands. We're both breathing heavily again. I think she's afraid, but she's trying to hide it, gazing up at me defiantly. What the hell am I doing? I don't do shit like this. I don't feel passionate about anything anymore, but I feel like I want to rip her clothes off and have my way with her. Right here. Right now. I'm so mad at her I could spit, but I kind of like how she thinks she can control me. No one ever stands up to me.

But she's done it twice in one night. No wonder I want to bury myself inside of her until she's screaming my name.

She anxiously licks her lips, not sure of what I'm going to do to her. My thumbs glide across her cheekbones, my fingers nestled deep in her thick mane of hair. Her skin is so soft and her hair is so smooth. Everything about this girl is fucking perfect, like she was made for me to do whatever I want with. But I can't.

With a groan, I release my hold on her, frustrated that I didn't even run my finger across her pouty lips. She braces herself against the door. She's panting like she is on the verge of a mind-blowing orgasm. I can tell that she's mad

at me for leaving her hanging, but she makes no move to slap me even though I deserve it. I hate myself for denying her that pleasure.

“Take me back to the hotel.” I don’t even look at her as I start to roll down the leg of my jeans, wincing as the denim constricts around my knee.

“I can’t.” Her voice is so low I can barely hear it.

“Why not?”

“Noah said there are fans camped outside within view of all the entrances including the ramp to the parking garage. There’s no way either of us can bring you back undetected. Unless you’re okay with having people know you were out

all night.”

Shit. That is definitely not an option. The team placed me on a strict curfew for the remainder of my rehab assignment. Getting caught striding through the hotel lobby in the wee hours of the morning—well, it can’t happen. For now, she’s stuck with me.

“Fuck. How am I supposed to get back for the game?”

“Noah said he’d come up with something.”

“Yeah right.”

“He said it’d be better if he could meet us somewhere less conspicuous and take you directly to Beaver Field. But for now, he’ll cover for you with the team as long as he can.”

“Where does everyone think I am right now?”

“The Blue Room, a strip club on Wheeler Avenue.”

“What?”

“It’s dark inside. No one will be able to say you weren’t there.”

“I don’t go to strip clubs.”

“Sure you don’t.”

“I don’t.”

“You’re such a liar.”

“Why would I pay to look at naked women when I can get it for free?”

“C’mon, isn’t that where you superstar athletes go to unwind?”

“I’m not fucking Drake.”

“I didn’t say you were.”



“But you’re implying that—”

“Ugh, stop arguing with me already. I don’t care where you go. Right now, all I know is that you’re coming back with me to my trailer. End of story.”

“Your...trailer?”

“Shut it, Whitfield.”

And with a flourish, she peels back out onto the highway, throwing me back in my seat. Just when I thought this night couldn’t get any more unpredictable.

It does.

# *Chapter Eleven*

## **Grey**

I've freakin' kidnapped Chase Whitfield.

I glance over at him. He's biting his thumbnail, his arm propped up against the partially rolled-down window. The humidity is still high even though it's the middle of the night, but so far he hasn't complained about my truck's lack of air conditioning. In fact, he hasn't said much at all since I laid down the law.

But I couldn't resist. I mean, he was acting like a dick. He obviously doesn't want to be seen in public with me if he went to such great lengths to keep this

rendezvous of ours a secret. He could've invited me to pull up a chair at Buster's Crab Shack for all the world to see, but he didn't. He was okay with chatting up that brunette who was hanging all over him, but not with me. And I gotta admit, that stings a bit.

But he's here now, and that has to count for something.

I haven't had a guy spend the night in my trailer since I moved in. I'm not that big on dating. And after my mom was diagnosed with lung cancer, I really haven't been in the mood for hitting the bar scene. It's sad, but where else am I going to meet someone? It's not like the guys I ring up at the checkout counter slip me their numbers or anything. Who

wants to date a sales clerk who bags their socks and ties? They probably think they can do so much better.

But to have Chase Whitfield be the first dude to enter my humble abode? I have to pinch myself to make sure this is really happening. Are the gods smiling down on me for once? It's like he stepped out of my TV screen and into my life, and dreams like that just don't come true. Trust me. They don't.

We bounce along the ruts and grooves of the road leading to my trailer. I'm afraid this old clunker isn't used to having a big, strong man in the passenger's seat with me. It can handle my hundred-and-twenty-pound frame just

fine, but apparently not much else. God, this is so embarrassing. We're getting jostled so much I can feel my teeth rattling in my skull.

“So are you driving me deep into the wilderness to shoot me or just chop my head off?”

I can't tell if he's being sarcastic or if he's trying to smooth things over between us. I am going to be his lifeline for the next ten hours or so. It wouldn't hurt for us to at least try to get along.

“Neither. Why kill you when I could hold you for ransom? I heard you're worth a fortune.”

It must be a sore spot with him because his head immediately snaps in my direction and I feel his eyes on me.

“So you think I’m going to pay you off for helping me out. Is that it?”

“Not at all. I don’t expect a thing from you. Not even civility.”

“I am being civil.”

“Is that what you call having a surly temper?”

“I’m don’t have—”

“Save your breath. I know it must be exhausting not getting your way for once, and I wouldn’t want you tiring yourself out on my account.”

“I’m not tired. I could go all night.”

I shiver goes down my spine at his choice of words. “Is that a threat or a promise?” I’m alone in the dark with Chase Whitfield, and he’s talking dirty

to me. My life is going to seriously suck after this. How will I ever go back to being normal? He's ruined me and he doesn't even know it.

"It's whatever you want it to be, baby."

And just like that, I recoil from him. I can tell he's used that line a million times to his advantage. It's a command that has women the world over dropping their panties at his feet. Well, I'm not going to be one of them. Of course, I'd love to be able to say that I bedded Chase Whitfield, but not at the expense of my self-esteem. No guy is worth that. I don't care who he is.

"Keep it up and you can sleep in the truck."

“What?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not one of your usual floozies.”

Before I turn off the ignition, I could have sworn he muttered, “Damn straight,” but I’m not sure. God, I can’t figure him out. He’s nothing like I thought he would be. He’s a lot more neurotic, a cauldron of churning emotions. One minute he’s playful, the next minute he’s pissed. There’s a level of familiarity there, like we’ve known each for years, but I don’t know how that’s even possible. Yet at times he seems completely at ease with me, enough to lower his guard until some offhand remark of mine sets him off. It’s



beyond bizarre that we're even talking to each other at all, much less dishing about our private lives. I feel like in a few short hours I'm going to wake up with a wicked hangover realizing that none of this really happened and I was only hallucinating.

I don't turn off the headlights because I need them to find my front door. It's pitch black up here at night and I forgot to leave a light on. Chase is quiet as he watches me. His gaze carries so much weight. I feel his eyes on me as I get out and walk toward my trailer, trying to ignore him. He doesn't get out. He probably thinks I live in a hovel, and I don't want his sympathy. He can shove it. It may not be the fanciest place on

earth, but it's mine. I don't need much to be happy. And if he does, then he's the one to be pitied. Things don't make a person happy, people do.

“This is fucking perfect.”

My first reaction is to rip his head off, but the way he whispered the words makes my arms break out in goose bumps. I still my hand, the key hovering over the doorknob. I'm too afraid to turn around. It might break the spell he's put me under.

“You like it?”

“I fucking love it!”

Man, he swears a lot, but for some reason, I don't mind it. His voice sounds so deep and sexy, resonating through my

bones. I could listen to him read the phone book and it would bring me to my knees. Again, I can't believe his voice is coming to me right from his highly kissable lips. His words are solely directed at me and no one else.

My hand starts to shake as I try to steady myself and somehow get the key in the lock. "I'm glad." I finally work up the courage to face him, giving him a tight smile. The fact that he likes my home means a lot to me. He's been everywhere, done everything, yet he's still impressed with what little I have to offer. That has to mean something, right? For the first time tonight, I think maybe he could be happy with me. Maybe I can be enough for him. I want to explore this

connection between us, actually give it a chance.

“Yeah, the paparazzi would never find me up here. We’re completely off the grid.” He claps his hands together as he exits the truck, and my heart drops. He’s only thinking about himself. Funny, I thought he’d been thinking about me. I have to get a hold of myself. Keep things in perspective. He’s not into me. He’s just using me, like he uses everyone else. Women mean nothing to him. They’re playthings to stave off his boredom. And no place is as boring as Stockton.

Chase is right behind me as I turn the knob, and I can feel the heat of his body against my back, his breath on my hair.

He's not touching me, but it sure feels like he is. We're sharing the same space, practically the same air. I want him to wrap his arms around me and pull me against him, but he doesn't. He keeps his hands to himself.

"I really have to take a piss. You do have indoor plumbing, right?"

And just like that, my romantic vision deflates like a popped balloon.

"I am a card-carrying member of the twenty-first century. The bathroom is the first door on the left."

He brushes by me without even a thank-you and shuts the door in a hurry. I don't care if his bladder is about to explode. He can at least be polite about it.

I scratch my head, wondering what I'm going to do with him for the next few hours. Sleeping is out of the question. I only have one bed, and if he wants it, he can have it. There's no way I'll be able to fall asleep knowing that he's in here with me. I'm not used to having someone all up in my space, and I don't have the guts to even think about sharing my bed with him. Things could get out of hand in a hurry. All it would take would be his hand at my back or his leg bumping mine and I'd be a goner. I'd give him whatever he wanted and then some. But I'd hate myself in the morning when he bolts without so much as a backward glance. I'd just be one of his many

conquests. I can't give in to the temptation. I'm not going to let him use me like that.

I hear the toilet flushing, and I glance around nervously. The trailer isn't exactly spotless. I planned on cleaning over the weekend, so damp towels are strewn on the back of the couch and dirty dishes are piled in the sink. I'm not a neat freak by any means, but I'm not a total slob either. In terms of impressing my multimillionaire houseguest, I give my last-minute efforts to tidy up about a two out of ten.

I hear him banging around in there, and I wonder what he's doing. I look at the back of the door and realize what I'm staring at—my Chase Whitfield poster

taped up in all its glory. Shit! He can't see that. I'll die. I have to get rid of it. Hide the incriminating evidence of my lifelong crush on him before he comes out. It's now or never.

I hop over a pile of dirty laundry and practically hurl myself against the bathroom door. But I'm too late. It flies open, and Chase smacks me right in the forehead. I see stars as I tumble backward, tripping and falling onto the unmade bed.

“Fuck! Grey, are you okay?”

His rich baritone is directly above me, but I refuse to look up, hiding my face in the wrinkled sheets. I can already feel my forehead starting to swell,



forming a goose egg the size of Mount Rushmore. Why can't I pull my shit together and just act normal around him? Because he's Chase Whitfield—that's why.

"Hang on." I hear Chase's footsteps retreat toward the freezer before he roots around for some ice. The cubes crash loudly into the tray as he empties it on the kitchen table.

I bite my lip to hide my smile. He's making himself quite at home here, isn't he? I brought him back so that I could take care of him and now he's taking care of me. I didn't think he had it in him.

"C'mon, Grey. Get up." The mattress sinks beneath him as he sits next to me.

“You’re going to have a nasty shiner if you don’t let me put this on it.” His hand is still cold and wet from handling the ice, and I jerk away when I feel his fingers on my shoulder. He immediately withdraws his hand, making me want to kill my body for reacting that way. It’s like my subconscious is on high alert, warning me to keep my distance from him. He’s dangerous and I should stay away. But it doesn’t help that now we’re both on my bed, the last place in the world I wanted us to be.

Making an effort to be brave, I shift my legs and sit directly in front of him. He’s so close, closer than I thought he was, and my foot accidentally grazes his

side. He draws in a quick breath but doesn't say anything as I rearrange my awkward limbs. When I finally stop moving, he leans forward, pushing my bangs aside and applying the towel packed with ice to my forehead.

“Thank God I didn't clip your eye. I thought I did.” He stares at me intently, and I notice just how beautiful his eyes really are set off against his dark complexion. They're outstanding, actually. Vivid swirls of turquoise that change color like a kaleidoscope. No description of the Caribbean Sea could ever do them justice. I could easily find myself drowning in them, not caring if I sank to the bottom.

Being this close to him, I can see the

stubble forming along his jawline. I've never seen him looking so scruffy before. The Kings are pretty adamant about their players being clean-shaven in public. It's like there's a whole other side to him that not many people know exist and I have the distinct privilege of witnessing it. Chase Whitfield, uncensored and uncut.

I gulp loudly, causing the corners of his mouth to turn up. And this time, it's not a smirk. His smile is filled with warmth as his eyes dance across my face, examining me for any more injuries.

"Thanks for making my forehead look even bigger than it already does," I joke,

reaching up with my hand to keep my bangs out of the way. “It’s not easy, having a head shaped like an alien.”

He doesn’t tease me back like I thought he would. Instead, he keeps looking at me like I’m a riddle he can’t quite figure out. I’m puzzling him for some reason, but I don’t know why. I’m not that complicated—what you see is what you get.

“You didn’t have to hide the poster.” Hesitantly, he begins to stroke the bottom of my chin. His fingers are barely making contact with my skin, like he’s afraid I’m going to shatter into a million pieces. I’m a lot stronger than he thinks, but what he says gives me reason to pause. “I kind of like that you have it

hanging up in here.”

I want to die. I really do. If someone had ever devised a systematic way to torture me, this would be it. I can't deny it. He caught me red-handed trying to rip it down before he could see it. Knowing that he knows makes me want to run out the door and never look back. I don't fawn over guys. It's not my style. I'm not the cheerleader type. But for some reason, Chase has always been the exception to the rule. Why? Because I never thought I'd meet him. I never thought I'd be having a conversation with him. I never thought he'd be sitting in my trailer, looking at his face plastered on my bathroom door. *Oh*

*God, shoot me now.*

“It’s not what you think,” I mutter, fumbling for a way out of this fiasco.

“Oh, I think it is.” This time, his thumb finds my lips, sweeping softly over them. A soft moan escapes me, making him smile even more. I’m like putty in his hands and he knows it. I’m in desperate straits. I need to regain some semblance of control over myself before all is lost. One more sensation like that running through my body and I’ll be throwing myself at him. He’s too good at this. I have to stay strong. I owe it to myself not to become another one of his statistics.

So I blurt out the first thing I can think of—the ultimate buzzkill. “So is it true

that you have, like, three STDs?”

The shock value alone floors him and he drops the towel, spilling the partially melted ice all over the bed. “Shit!” he cries, trying to mop it up. But thanks to me, the moment we were having is effectively ruined.

“Well, do you?” I probe, not giving him a chance to regroup. I press forward, going in for the kill. “Because I don’t sleep with guys who do.”

“Who says I want to sleep with you?” He’s back on the defensive, which is where I need him to be. I can’t let him get that close again. I can’t.

“Your penis.” I blatantly stare at the bulge in his jeans, and he hastily gets off



the bed, stomping away to throw the remnants of ice in the sink.

“I’m clean! All right?” he shouts from across the room.

“Glad to hear it,” I mumble. But I’m not sure if I believe him or not. If he’s slept with as many women as I think he has, there has to be some repercussions for such promiscuous behavior. No one is that careful a hundred percent of the time. Condoms break. Drunken hook-ups get sloppy. Groupies sleep around.

“You know what? I think I am going to sleep in the truck.” He grabs a pillow off the bed and stuffs it under one arm.

Man, I really messed this up. I just wanted Chase out of my face, not out of the trailer. I didn’t even help him take

care of his knee yet because he was so concerned about me. I can't let him sleep all scrunched up in my truck. At six four, he's super tall. He'll never be able to stretch out and relax. And I'm going to feel guilty as hell if he can't take the field because I acted like a total bitch.

"I'm sorry, Chase." I beg him with my eyes to forgive me. "That was out of line. I shouldn't have asked you that."

"You're damn right," he huffs, standing in the middle of the trailer, not making a move toward the door. I don't think he really wants to sleep in my truck and get eaten alive by the mosquitoes. I have to call his bluff without him getting even angrier with me.

“Here, the bed is all yours.” I hop off and gesture like he just won the ultimate prize on some lame-ass game show. “You’re my guest. I insist. I don’t have work tomorrow, so I can kick back after you leave. Besides, my eyes are so heavy I’ll probably end up dozing off in the chair.”

“You don’t have a concussion, do you? I hit you pretty hard,” he asks, striding forward to examine me.

He leveled me like a freight train, but he doesn’t need to know that. I’m too susceptible to his touch. It makes me feel things I shouldn’t, so I take a step back, dodging his outstretched hand. “No, I’m fine, really. Make yourself comfortable.

I'll get something for your knee and grab some extra pillows from the closet. You'll probably need to keep it elevated, right?"

He nods, a stricken expression on his face. I have no idea what he's thinking right now, so I back away from him and start collecting the items I need. My back is to him when I hear his shoes drop to the floor, followed by the whoosh of his zipper being lowered. Shit. Is he taking off his jeans? My face feels like it's on fire. He rustles the sheets as he gets into bed, the frame creaking beneath his weight. Hopefully he'll be covered up by the time I turn around even though it's like a sauna in here. If not, I'm going to have a heart attack in the next sixty

seconds.

I nearly drop the items I'm gathering when I see his bare shoulders peeking out above the blanket. Yikes, he took his shirt off too? I look down at the floor and see his clothing neatly folded on top of his sneakers. Okay, he's a neat freak. But that's not what stops me in my tracks. It's the tattoos covering the muscular physique of his caramel-colored skin.

"Are you checking out my ink?" he asks with his eyes closed.

My bed looks so small with him in it. His feet are nearly hanging over the bottom. He's such a big guy. Any thought of sharing my bed with him goes right

out the window. I'd have to practically lie on top of him. There's no room for me, unless he supported my body with his. And that's not going to happen.

"I didn't know you had any tattoos." I try to pull myself together by wheeling my desk chair next to the bed. He smells incredible, like a crisp, clean aftershave I can't quite put my finger on. Whatever it is, I'm sure it's expensive. He can afford the best. I wonder if Irina Portanova bought it for him. A stab of jealousy shoots through me. She's probably knows every one of his tattoos by heart.

"Not many people do." His voice is sluggish, like he's on the verge of falling asleep. He's probably exhausted. It's

been a long day for him, what with flying in, playing nine innings...and running away with me.

He stretches his arms above his head, letting out a huge yawn. His arms aren't arms, they're guns. He has the body of a professional athlete, and man, is it a work of art. He's chiseled to perfection in all the right places. It's obvious he's taken his rehab very seriously. There's not an ounce of flab on him. It must have been tough staying in shape with a blown-out knee, but his body is still lean and taut.

He opens his eyes lazily as he catches me checking him out. Instead of razzing me about it, he lifts the blanket up even

higher to hide his body from view. But not before I see the blazing heart on his shoulder.

“Who’s J.J.?”

He sighs, nestling himself even deeper into the contours of my bed. The mattress is never going to bounce back from his weight. I’ll be sleeping in the impression of his body long after he’s gone.

“Grey, why don’t we stop the twenty questions for tonight? What do you say?” He doesn’t sound angry, more like he wants me to turn my brain off for a while.

I thought I knew everything there was to know about him. But I was wrong. I’ll just have to find some way to stifle my curiosity. I can’t figure out his entire



personality in one night. I'm just afraid I won't have another opportunity to talk to him like this, and that makes me sad.

“Why the long face?” His eyes are trained on me, and I quickly lower my head. He's so observant. No doubt used to focusing on the pitcher's mound, anticipating every ball to be hit to him.

I've never been around someone so hyperaware of my every expression, my every move. No one usually pays that much attention to me. So I decide to be honest with him, even if I can't look at him while I'm doing it.

“I'm just bummed that this is all going to be over soon.” I busy myself with drawing back the bottom of the blanket

and lifting his leg. His calf is solid muscle beneath my fingers as I tuck a couple of pillows underneath it. His leg is covered with a fine, soft hair barely visible to the naked eye, and his second toe on his right foot is longer than all the rest. I'm getting intimately acquainted with his body and the knowledge I'm gaining only makes me want to explore even more of it.

“What? You like hanging out with me?” He sounds surprised.

“Yeah, I kind of do.”

“Really? I know I haven't been in the best of moods lately. I don't think anyone wants to be around me.” He rests his hands behind his head, showing off his biceps to their best advantage, but I

don't think he's doing it deliberately. He's staring up at the ceiling, lost in thought.

“Well, you’ve been dealing with a lot and you’re probably crabby because you haven’t been playing. You’re not one to warm the bench. I mean, you’ve hardly ever been on the disabled list. All this time off must be driving you nuts.” I open the jar of ointment that my mom concocted before she got sick. It’s my grandmother’s secret recipe, known to relieve inflammation.

“Yeah, I’ve been going out of my mind.” He flinches briefly when the coolness of the ointment touches his skin, but he doesn’t fight it. He lets me

continue.

“Well, this should help.” I rub it in, careful not to apply too much pressure.

“What is it?”

“An old home remedy my grandmother swore by for her arthritis.”

“So you’re saying I’m nothing but a crippled old man?” He raises an eyebrow, teasing me.

“Far from it.” I blush hotly, keeping my eyes away from his as I loosely wrap a gauze bandage around his knee. “There, you’re all set. Do you need anything else?”

“Do have any aspirin?” His eyes dart around like he’s looking for any excuse to keep talking to me.

“Don’t you need something a lot

stronger than that?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t taken any painkillers since my surgery and I don’t intend to start now.”

“Okay, let me see what I’ve got.” I pat his leg lightly as I lower the blanket back into place.

Pharmaceutical abuse runs rampant through baseball. Players are required to undergo random drug tests on a regular basis. I can see why Chase doesn’t want to get addicted to any of the hard stuff while he’s recuperating. But man, I don’t know how he can bear the pain cold turkey like that. After his first game back, he’s probably in agony.

I start turning off the lights in the

trailer as my feet pad onto the tiled floor of the kitchen area. I light the cinnamon candle that I use as a nightlight and rummage through the medicine cabinet. Popping the lid off what feels like an empty aspirin bottle, I sigh in relief when I see two pills left on the bottom.

After filling a glass of water under the tap, I tiptoe back to Chase's side, his face awash in moonlight. It feels kind of romantic in here, what with the candlelight and all. But he's already snoring softly. I nudge his shoulder gently, and when he doesn't respond, I leave the aspirin next to the water on the bedside table. I don't have the heart to wake him just because I want to continue our conversation.

I watch his chest rise and fall as he sleeps with his mouth slightly open. This whole evening has been surreal, and now Chase Whitfield is sound asleep in my bed, drooling on my pillowcase. I curl up on the chair next to him and take a sip of his water. I don't care if I have to sit here all night. I could watch him from now until eternity. He looks so peaceful, so content. Like all his worries are gone.

I hate that he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders as the face of baseball's most winning franchise. The power of his name alone bankrolls an entire organization. That's a lot of pressure. What a tremendous amount of

stress to have to deal with. I don't know how he does it.

The Kings are racing Chase back to the big leagues, but he doesn't seem ready to me. He's a competitor and wants to help his team win ballgames, but it feels like they're rushing his recovery. He shouldn't play tomorrow, but knowing that Beaver Field's already sold out, they're going to put him in the lineup no matter what to stave off a horde of unhappy fans.

I can't help but wonder where his girlfriend is during all of this. Shouldn't she be here, supporting his comeback? I'm sure she's busy modeling around the world, but can't she drag her bony ass to Stockton for at least one game? He needs



her now more than ever. He shouldn't have to go through this alone. I mean, he doesn't even have his regular teammates around him. I bet until today he didn't know a soul in the Beavers' organization. He's doing this all by himself, and it has to be lonely.

I look at the gorgeous man sprawled out in front of me. The only way he knows how to connect with women is through sex. But I think what he really needs is a friend—someone who's not after his money or his fame. Whatever happens between us, I'm determined to be there for him while he's in Stockton.

If only he'll let me...

# *Chapter Twelve*

## **Chase**

A light breeze tickles my face, causing my eyelids to flutter slightly.

Did whatever chick I was with last night leave a window open? I live on the top floor of a freakin' skyscraper. I never let anyone open the windows. It's too loud, too windy. I bury my head deeper into the pillow when I'm assaulted by birdsong. All right, what the hell is going on?

Rubbing my eyes with my knuckles, I roll onto my back, resting an arm against my eyes to block out the sun. I breathe in, stretching out as far as I can go while

kicking the wad of balled-up pillows at my feet. That crisp, clean scent fills my head, and I know exactly where I am.

I'm not in my penthouse in New York.

I'm not in my mansion in Florida.

I'm not on the road in some generic hotel.

I'm in Grey Kelleher's bed. And honestly? There's nowhere else I'd rather be.

I prop myself up against the headboard and look around. The inside of the trailer appears a little more tattered in the light of day. I can see rust spots in the corners and duct tape on the screen door. According to the baseball-shaped clock on the wall, it's going on eight thirty.

I thought my knee would be throbbing like it does every morning, but it actually feels good. I shove the blanket out of the way and start unwinding the bandage. Wow, the swelling actually went down and it's not as red as it was. It's still a little tender, but for the first time in a while, I'm able to bend it without feeling a searing shot of pain. Grey's little homemade treatment worked wonders. But where the heck is she?

The front door is held open by a pile of books, allowing the cool morning air to stream in. I should really get dressed before she gets back, but I have to scope out what she's read. Mysteries, biographies, romance novels—her tastes

sure are varied. I recognize quite a few titles mainly because I've read a lot of them myself. There's plenty of downtime in baseball, so I'm never without a book, especially when the team is traveling. Sometimes I just like to tune the other guys out and focus on something else besides the game. For once, it'd be nice to talk to someone who's actually read the same books I have.

It's crazy how much I have in common with this girl. She can talk baseball and she's seriously hot, but there's like an undercurrent of something deeper I can't quite figure out. Just talking to her last night hinted at the promise of something more. Something I've never experienced before. It's like she gets me, and I get

her, even though we seem like complete and total opposites.

I stand up to clear my head and amble over to the kitchen counter. There's a pot of coffee waiting for me along with a mug with my jersey number on it. I guess Grey isn't hiding the fact that she's my number one fan anymore. She didn't even bother to leave out any milk or sugar, because I must've mentioned to the press at one time or another that I take it black. My Starbucks runs are notoriously documented by the paparazzi. They know it's where they can usually catch me with one of my celebrity girlfriends the morning after they spend the night at my place, mostly

when the team's at home and there's no game on tap the following day. My agent actually recommended that I keep these outings on some kind of schedule, so it'd be easier to tip off photographers and have the images leaked to the public. I have to maintain my street cred for being New York's most eligible bachelor after all. The guy who can get any girl he wants without marrying any of them.

Normally, I'd be freaked out by someone like Grey—a fangirl who seems to know every random thing there is to know about me. But somehow it just feels natural. Like we grew up together as kids or something and we're reconnecting after spending years apart. I can't shake the vibe of how

comfortable I feel being around her, and I don't think I want to.

It's nice.

I raise my arm and lean against the rickety doorway, looking out at the beautiful morning. It seems lately like I exist in a world that's lived behind closed doors. I'm never out in nature like this. I'm usually chauffeured around in a dark-windowed SUV, hopping from the curb to the backroom of some restaurant, or hustling through an airport on the way to yet another stadium's underground locker room. Sure, I'm outside at the ballpark, but it's usually on a field plunked down in the middle of a city, serving as one of the few forms of



outdoor recreation for the urbanites who live there. But this—this is something else entirely.

I couldn't tell last night in the dark, but Grey's trailer is set up on top of a mountain with an amazing perspective of the valley below. I thought I had a spectacular view of the Manhattan skyline, but this certainly rivals it in terms of grandeur. I'm actually a little envious of the view she has, at probably a fraction of the price. Sometimes I can't even carve out a minute in the day where I can have a moment to myself like this, and she gets to wake up every morning undisturbed, just her and Mother Nature.

No wonder she's able to see right through me. Her judgment isn't clouded

by the delusions of the world. She's not caught up in accumulating possessions or striving to reach the pinnacle of what other people deem success. She knows what's important. Fresh air. Sunshine. Freedom.

I gingerly step outside in my bare feet, not caring that I'm walking around in nothing but my underwear. There's no one else up here. No one can see me. I could walk around naked if I wanted to, but I don't want to freak Grey out.

I have this unbelievable urge to see her. She has to be around here somewhere. Her truck is still parked out front. It's ridiculous but I kind of miss her. I didn't mean to fall asleep last

night, hijacking her bed. I should've thought things through when I asked Noah to go after her. I'm usually so meticulous when it comes to sorting out the details, but at the time, I was just so afraid of losing her that I didn't plot out the whole scenario in advance. I couldn't take her back to my hotel room, but I didn't think I'd be sleeping in her bed without her.

And we're not in the clear yet. This whole thing could still blow up in my face. It all depends on the reaction I receive when I stroll into the clubhouse later today. I know the Beavers' manager isn't going to appreciate that I never made it back to the hotel. I'm not supposed to be out philandering until all

hours of the night while I'm here. No one cares what I do in New York, but in Stockton, I'm a little more conspicuous. My absence from the hotel will be noted and remarked upon. Hopefully, using my playboy image as an excuse will suffice. Maybe the locals will be flattered that I wanted to experience a taste of their nightlife.

I'm nearly at the edge of the cliff, fixated on the bits of patchy fog still drifting over the valley below. Twigs are snapping in the forest all around me as squirrels scamper through the trees. I thought after last night my knee would be sore, but I'm moving easily without even a limp. Maybe I will be able to play

tonight after all.

“Yeah, he’s really a nice guy.”

Grey’s voice trickles back to me from the other side of the cliff.

“Get your mind out of the gutter. It didn’t happen.”

Who is she talking to? Christ, is she talking about me?

“So what if I have Chase Whitfield in my bed? It’s not like that.”

Well, that answers my question.

“You want me to take a picture of him and send it to you?”

I freeze, every muscle tightening in my body. Would she really betray me like that? And here, I thought she wasn’t like that. What if she’s just like everyone else and I’m the fool getting caught up in

some stupid fantasy? I mean, I'm practically moseying through a forest like I'm in a freakin' fairytale. Jesus, how could I be so blind? She could ruin me with one click.

“Sorry. Not gonna happen.”

My pulse slows somewhat as I strain to hear what she says next.

“Yeah, he's going to be mad when he wakes up, but I have to tell him. Thanks for calling and letting me know.”

I try not to panic. Something went down last night, and now it's time to deal with the consequences. I knew being so high profile in a town like this that I'd probably end up getting caught with Grey. There's no such thing as

blending in and getting lost in the crowd.  
Not in Stockton.

“Yes, Erin. He’s big. Very...  
impressive...”

That’s it. I have to see her face. My toes dig into the dirt as I bend down and peer over the side. And there she is, sunning herself on a wide, flat rock. Her hair is wet and trailing down her back. All she has on is a t-shirt with my name and number on the back. Her legs are tucked underneath her as she combs her fingers through her hair, holding it out to the sun.

And I’ve never seen anything so beautiful in my goddamn life.

I don’t hesitate. Pebbles slip beneath my feet as I scramble down the

embankment to join her. She jumps, frightened no doubt by the mini avalanche I just stirred up. She tries to pull her shirt down to cover more of her legs, but I'm having none of it. The surface of the rock feels seductively warm as I kneel before her, taking the phone out of her hand and ending the call.

She's breathing heavily as she looks up at me with those big brown eyes. I drop the phone and my hands immediately circle her waist, drawing her into me. In my eagerness, I end up grabbing the hem of her shirt, yanking it over her stomach as I rock back on my heels. My thumbs graze her hips,



indulging in the softness of her skin. She shivers as I move my hands farther up the sides of her body. I've seen so many women wearing this particular Whitfield shirt at Kings Stadium, but I've never wanted to tear it off a woman's body like I do right now.

But I stop my hands from going too far. I exhale deeply, feeling her body move with mine as my lungs expand against her chest. I remove my hands from inside her shirt, pulling it back down like a gentleman, allowing myself to nuzzle the spot where her shoulder meets her neck. She smells like snowflakes mixed with sunshine, and I'm completely intoxicated. I can't wait any longer. I have to know what she

tastes like.

Her lips are already parted as I cradle the back of her wet head with my hand. She's so delicate, so petite. My hands feel enormous on her body. It makes me want to protect her, shelter her from harm. The alpha male in me comes alive as I respond to her femininity. Something about her fragility coupled with her inner strength is striking me on a level no woman has ever reached before. I want to claim her as my own. Tell the world she's mine—all mine.

I tilt my head, crashing my lips onto hers. There's nothing gentle about this kiss. My fingers tangle in the dampness of her hair as she opens her mouth to me,

letting me in. Her breath mixes with mine as our tongues meet. Her hands grip my shoulders and my knee starts to ache from bearing the weight of both of our bodies. But I hardly notice, too caught up in exploring every inch of her mouth. Her hands feel incredible as they roam across the width of my back, her fingers tracing every contour. Her touch is way better than any massage. It feels fucking fantastic.

For a first kiss, this is exactly what I had in mind. But that's all it can be—a kiss. Softly caressing the side of her face, I cup the smoothness of her cheek with the palm of my hand. Even though I don't want to, I back away, gasping for air. Her lips are completely swollen

after I just ravaged them. Her bangs fall to the side of her face as her hands land on my chest while she struggles to catch her breath.

“That’s as good as I hoped it would be,” she whispers in between breaths.

“Even better,” I respond, resting my chin on top of her head.

For a moment, we don’t say anything. We just kneel on that sun-baked rock, holding on to each other for dear life. I took the plunge and she dove in after me. There’s no way I can walk away from her after a kiss like that. This girl owns me, whether she realizes it or not. I’m a slave to her will. No one has ever made me feel like that—ever—especially

from just a kiss. I can just imagine what having sex with her will be like. There's no chance in hell I'm giving that up. I might be a selfish bastard for throwing her life into a tailspin, but I'll make it up to her if she just lets me worship her body. It's the least I can do for the media shitstorm I'm about to throw her into.

But I'm not hiding Grey away out of sight. I'm not keeping her out of the public eye. I'm sick of being a fraud. If we're going to do this, we're going to do it all the way or not at all. I want everyone to know that she's the one. She's not a casual fling or some publicity stunt. She's what I've been waiting for, and I've been waiting for so long. It's like I finally found my Holy

fuckin' Grail.

“You’re coming back to New York with me when I leave Stockton,” I whisper against her forehead, the water droplets falling from her hair tickling my nose.

“Chase, I—”

And I start to tremble when I hear a note of incredulity in her voice. She has to know that I’m not kidding around. I’m completely serious.

“Grey, you’re coming with me and that’s that.” I sit back, drawing her down with me, my eyes never leaving her face.

“Whoa, Chase. Slow down.” She glances at me nervously as she tugs on her shirt.

“What? Don’t tell me you didn’t feel that.” I challenge her, holding my breath. If she shoots me down, I don’t think I can handle it.

“Are you kidding, Chase? That kiss was...fucking amazing.”

I laugh at her use of profanity, and she tenderly slides her hand over the day-old stubble along my jaw.

“But you’re still scared?” I wait as she nods. I have to get her to talk to me. I need to say something, anything to break this awkward silence. So I utter the first thought that enters my head. “Why are your feet all muddy?”

She grimaces, lowering her head. “I went for a swim in the lake.”

“You’re just full of surprises, aren’t you?” I chuckle as she crinkles her toes.

“Can’t you see? I’m not the kind of girl who belongs with you. I’m not on your level. You need someone who’s wealthy and sophisticated. The world isn’t going to accept you being with someone like me. Let’s face it, I come from nothing.”

It’s killing her to admit what she perceives as her flaws. She has her pride. She’s not naïve. She knows the way the world works. But I couldn’t give a damn about what people think. I’m done with living my life for other people.

“So what? I grew up in a small town



too. My parents weren't rich. We didn't live in the lap of luxury. As far as I'm concerned, you and I are equals." Truth be told, this whole money thing never sat well with me anyway. When I'm around people who are abundantly wealthy, I feel self-conscious, like I don't belong. When I'm around people who aren't, I feel guilty for having too much. Most of the time, I feel like I don't really fit in anywhere. Sometimes I wonder if having all of this money and fame isn't more of a curse, especially if it distances me from people like Grey.

"Yeah, but that was years ago. That's not who you are now, Chase. I make minimum wage, okay? And you made \$15 million last year alone."

“Then tell me how you were able to make me feel better when all of the best doctors in the country couldn’t give me any relief?”

“It worked?”

“Hell yeah it worked. Take a look.”

I stretch out on the rock as she sits next to me to examine my knee, the ends of her hair brushing against my leg. Her fingers deftly probe the area, and I can’t help but think that after all the shit I did with that therapist down in Florida, none of it got me as aroused as I am right now. The slightest touch from Grey’s fingers is igniting every nerve ending in my body. I lean back on my hands and stare up at the sky, willing myself to

behave.

“That’s unbelievable, Chase. It’s not even as red as it was.”

“What the hell is in that stuff?”

“To be honest, I don’t even know for sure.”

“Well, it’s settled. You and your magic ointment are coming with me.”

“Or I could just hook you up with a couple of jars.”

“What is this really about?” I gently tug at her sleeve, begging her to look at me. “Grey, I can’t change who I am. It’s too late for that. I’m always gonna be Chase Whitfield.”

“I know, and I wouldn’t want you any other way. You were destined to do what you do. I don’t know if you realize

how many lives you touch.” Her eyes are shining at me like she’s proud of who I am. But she doesn’t understand that all of my accomplishments mean nothing if I can’t share them with someone like her.

“So what’s stopping you from going with me?”

“Maybe because you already have a girlfriend.”

I sigh in frustration, tossing my legs over the side of the rock, staring blankly down at the valley below. Grey thinks she’s just an ordinary person who can’t compete with a supermodel for my attention. I get it. She doesn’t have to play the kind of games I’m forced to play. No one cares whom she’s dating or

if she's dating anyone at all. She's free to live her life the way she chooses. She controls her destiny. She doesn't know what it's like to have every move scrutinized.

I wouldn't make these kinds of choices if I didn't have to live in a fishbowl. I think deep down Grey knows that my relationship with Irina isn't real. It never was. I just have to get Grey to trust her instincts when it comes to how she feels about me, get her to stop questioning everything. Even though I don't blame her for having doubts. I'm obviously a lousy actor if she can see right through me.

“Grey, look at me.”

“No.”

“Grey—”

She raises those chocolate brown eyes stubbornly to mine. She thinks I'm playing her for a fool, but she couldn't be more wrong. She's the one who holds all the cards, not me. If she sends me packing, I'll be trapped in my own circle of hell without her. She has the upper hand because I can't force her to want to be with me. No matter how much money I have, I can't buy her trust. I have to earn it.

“Irina Portanova signed a contract to be my girlfriend that I can terminate at any time. Just like all of the other celebrity women I've been linked to in the past.”

“Yeah, but did you sleep with her?”

I clench my jaw. Grey would have to be perceptive enough to bring that up. It doesn't matter though. Not now. Not after kissing her. But I'm not going to lie to her either. That would be wrong.

“Yeah, but it's a non-issue.”

I feel her withdraw from me, like she's closing ranks to protect her heart.

“So if I follow you to New York and you get tired of me and toss me aside, you realize I'll be left with nothing. No job, no home—just the stigma of being the jilted ex-lover of a Major League baseball player. I'll probably have ‘Grey Kelleher fucked Chase Whitfield’ written on my tombstone, marking it as

the one major accomplishment of my life.”

“Stop it, Grey.” What she’s saying is digging deep, and I don’t want to hear it.

“You haven’t been able to commit to one woman the entire time you’ve played with the Kings, Chase. Why should I believe you’ll be faithful to me?”

“Yeah, I enjoyed being single and living it up when I first came to New York, but after a while, it got old. Ever since I got injured, I’ve had a lot of time to think—too much time to think. I’ve been keeping myself apart from everyone else, closing myself off, and that’s not how I want to live the rest of my life. I want something more. I want



someone like you.”

Grey doesn't say anything at first as her hair falls in front of her face. I reach out and tuck it behind her ear, my hand lingering against her cheek. I want her to talk to me, but I don't want to pressure her either. Our fate is hanging in the balance. She decides where we go from here. It's her call. I'm not in control of her, even though she has the power to transform my entire life. I don't want to come home to an empty apartment anymore, and when I'm on the road, I want to fall asleep to her voice on the phone. I know she's not using me for who I am. She actually likes me for me. I just wish she'd believe in herself more

because I'm all hers. She's the one who's too good for me.

“It just scares me that all this will blow up in my face,” she finally responds.

We could be so good together if she'd just stop fighting the inevitable. Maybe I should up the stakes, go for broke. Do something completely spontaneous instead of calculating the pros and cons of every move I make. I'm sick of analyzing how my choices affect my overall image. I want to live a little. Put myself at risk of making a mistake that could just so happen to turn out to be the best decision of my life.

“What if I bolstered your confidence? Gave you some kind of guarantee?” I

question her boldly.

“Like what—one of your sex contracts? No, thank you.”

“No, not like that.” I grab a fistful of her shirt, hoisting her onto my lap, delighting in the sensation of her bare legs rubbing against mine. What the hell? I should bite the bullet and just do it. Let her know how serious I am about her. It’s the only way she’s going to understand that this is it for me. I don’t want anyone else but her.

“Like what then?”

“Marry me.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Marry me.”

“Chase, are you out of your mind?”

“I’ve never been more certain of anything.”

“Says the man who said he’d never get married until he retires, and maybe not even then.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Stop playing with me.”

“I’m not. I mean it, Grey. Marry me.”

“This is crazy. You’re moving way too fast. Twenty-four hours ago, you didn’t even know who I was. You had me kicked out of Beaver Field for crying out loud.”

“When I first saw you, I was afraid of you, just like you’re afraid of me now.”

“I’m not afraid of you, but you’re being reckless,” she sighs, letting her

body collapse against mine.

I take advantage of the opportunity and kiss her behind her ear. She leans back into me, letting me explore her neck with my lips.

Am I overcompensating by trying to convince her like this? Maybe. But this is what the average American guy does, right? Meet someone. Get married. Have kids. This is how it's done. Sure, I'm jumping the gun, but we don't have to get married right away or anything. We can have a long engagement. I just want to take her off the market. Nab her before someone else does. When I see something I want, I have to have it. That's the way I operate. Why wait when I can lock her up now?

And yeah, I have been going a little stir-crazy. It's been boring as hell sitting around, not being able to play. I could definitely use an extra dose of excitement in my life. But Grey is more than just some distraction to keep me occupied while I'm laid up. She's one of a kind. This untouched girl in the wilderness with the sparkling eyes who has captured my attention like no one else.

Sitting up abruptly, Grey levels me with her stare. "Sure, we have this undeniable chemistry going on, but what if it's too strong? What if ends up destroying us if we're not careful?"

"Then we'll go into it with our eyes

open. There's no way you're moving on with your life without me in it. I won't let that happen. Don't make me try."

"Do you think I want you to up and leave and go back to pretending to be in love with some model? If you do, it would crush me. But, Chase, have you ever even been in a committed relationship before?"

"Not since high school," I admit, and I feel her shy away from me.

"And you want to get married?" she groans, trying to climb out of my lap, but I hold on to her waist, not letting her go.

"I don't expect any of this to be a walk in the park. It's not what I'm used to, but it's a change for the better. Don't you think? It'll be the adventure of a

lifetime.”

“Or a disaster in the making.”

“C’mon, say yes.”

“Chase Whitfield is proposing to me?  
The world must be coming to an end.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, you know. You’re a pretty spectacular catch.”

“Says the man with four Gold Gloves.”

“Very funny.”

“I can’t believe you’re sitting outside in your underwear asking me to marry you.”

“Go on. Keep stalling. It’s not like I have all day.”

“Well, I’m not going through with this



unless your lawyer draws up some kind of prenup. I want to make it clear that I'm not in it for the money. It sort of terrifies me how rich you are. If it doesn't work out between us, I don't expect you to give me a dime. I'm used to scraping by."

"Grey, you have no idea how stable your world is about to become. But in order to reassure you, I'm going to keep paying the rent on your trailer. It'll always be here for you whenever you need it. It's the least I can do. Especially when the press finds out about us, you might want to hide out for a while."

"You really do live a crazy life, don't you?" She rests her head on my shoulder, glancing up at me.

“You’ve only just gotten a taste of it. Wait until we get to New York.” I don’t mean to scare her, but she needs to know what she’s getting herself into.

“I’m going to miss the peace and quiet, aren’t I?”

“But I intend to make it up to you.” I take her lips with mine and she doesn’t resist. This time, we’re careful with each other, savoring every moment. This kiss holds a promise of things to come. How she’ll be there for me and I’ll be there for her.

“This is like really freakin’ scary, Chase. Things like this just don’t happen.”

“I won’t let you down, Grey. I

swear.”

“This is insane, but...” She trails off as I stand, lifting her in my arms.

“It feels so right?”

“Something like that,” she says, circling her arms around my neck. “Oh wait, my phone!”

I bend down so she can grab it. “Who were you talking to anyway?”

“My sister.”

I sigh heartily.

“Stop it. She’s going to be a part of your family now.”

“Don’t remind me,” I groan, a smile forming on my face.

“But, Chase, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“What?”

“Erin said that the Kings issued a statement saying they’re disappointed in your behavior in Stockton. They think you were at The Blue Room. Apparently, camera crews are camped outside Beaver Field, waiting for you to arrive.”

“Great alibi, Noah.”

“The whole world thinks you were at a strip club with him last night. And if we turn up together, everyone’s going to think—”

“That you’re a stripper.”

“And it sucks because...I kind of was.”

“Wait a minute... What?”

“I...I used to be a stripper.”

# *Chapter Thirteen*

## **Grey**

Chase puts me down, and my feet hit solid ground, bringing me back to reality. He doesn't even say anything. He just storms away.

Under any other circumstances, I would seriously be enjoying the sizzling-hot view of his butt as he climbs the face of the cliff, but his sudden turnabout has me rattled. I mean, he didn't even give me a chance to explain. And he thinks we'll survive one day as a married couple? *Way to work out our differences, Chase.*

What's going to happen after we say,

‘I do?’ It’ll probably be the shortest marriage in history if his immediate reaction is to walk away from his problems. He’s slept with half of New York and I’m just supposed to be okay with that? Sorry if my past isn’t exactly pristine either. I never said it was. What? Is he only into me because he thinks I’m this sheltered little princess or something? Boy, is he in for a rude awakening.

“Chase, wait!” I hurry after him, but he doesn’t stop. He doesn’t even look back.

That does it. He’s going to listen to me, damn it, whether he wants to or not. I charge across the clearing and make a flying leap onto his back. Somehow I

succeed in knocking him down as we fall into the grass together in a heap.

“Grey, what the fuck?” He’s giving me the same vicious look he gave me behind the net at Beaver Field and it makes me want to crawl into a hole and die. It’s like his proposal never happened. He’s trying to distance himself from me again, wishing he could take it all back.

“You wouldn’t listen! I had to do something.” I’m straddling him as he tries to unseat me, but I just squeeze my knees even harder against his ribs.

“And what? You suddenly forgot about my jacked-up knee?” His words have their intended effect. I don’t fight

him as he easily slides my body off of his. But he doesn't get to his feet right away. Instead he flexes his leg, testing it out. I hope I didn't jam it up on him again.

"I didn't think I'd knock you over. I just wanted to slow you down." I try not to notice the red nail marks running down his back from where I must've scratched him.

"Yeah, well, thanks for proving just how fucked up my knee really is. I mean, how am I gonna handle a runner sliding into second? He's gonna take me out and I'll be messed up for good." Chase overthinks things way too much. He stresses himself out about every little thing—even about things that haven't



even happened yet. He seriously needs to chill out.

“Oh, come on... With your speed? You’re usually tagging the runner before his foot even touches the bag.” It’s true. His defensive skills are the best in the league. He’s always positioned exactly where he needs to be on the field. He rarely gets caught up in a runner’s spikes.

“Humph.” He’s being a big baby and he knows it.

“But seriously, are you all right?”

“I’ll live.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Do you need me to spell it out for you?”

“Yeah, I think I do.”

“There’s no way in hell I’m marrying you now. What the fuck was I thinking?”

I rear back to slap him across the face, but this time he catches my wrist in his hand, anticipating my reaction.

“You think I don’t remember how you lash out when you get angry? I’m not a punching bag, you know.” His eyes deepen to almost an emerald green as I struggle against his grip.

“Let go of me, you moron!” Finally I wrest myself free and scoot away from him, but he just grabs my ankle instead.

“Oh yeah, I’m the moron. Who’s the one who took off her clothes for a bunch of horny pricks?” He’s seething, but I

detect a tremor of jealousy in his voice.

“I never had the kind of opportunities you did, all right? Things weren’t handed to me on a silver platter. I’ve never had to depend on a guy for anything and no way in hell am I starting now.” I defiantly try to kick him away from me, but he refuses to let go of my leg. He’s not done with me yet.

“But why do that, Grey? You didn’t have to sink to that level. There are a lot more honest ways to make a living.”

“Is that what you tell the strippers whose G-strings you stuff with dollar bills? Kind of a double standard, don’t you think?”

“I don’t go to strip clubs that often.”

“But you go.”

“Every once in a while for a bachelor party or some stupid shit like that.”

“Have you ever been with a stripper?”

“No.”

“Liar.”

“I haven’t. Not my type.” His flippant response has its intended effect, gutting me to the core.

“I guess I’m not your type then.” I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek.

“I didn’t say that.” He shoots me a wounded look.

“You didn’t have to.” I turn away, dejected.

“I just want to know why a girl like you ended up doing something like that.

It doesn't make any sense." He places his hands on my shoulders, urging me to face him.

"It was a means to an end." I shrug, resisting him.

"Are you still doing it now?" he asks in a reprimanding tone.

"No!" I whirl around, glaring at him.

"Thank God," he mutters under his breath.

"Shut up. You don't know anything about me." Tears are starting to form, but I angrily blink them back.

"Apparently not, even though it seems like I'm an open book to you." His thumbs caress my neck, and despite myself, I feel those butterflies in my stomach again.

“I can’t help it if you’re famous,” I snap back, determined not to give in to the sensations coursing through my body.

“Yeah, neither can I.” He finally releases me, and I try not to look at the muscles in his chest as they heave up and down. My hair must have gotten him wet because his naked torso is glistening in the sun. “I need you to tell me why you did what you did.”

“Wow, you’re giving me the benefit of the doubt?”

“For now. Start talking.”

I’m so freakin’ mad at the way he’s treating me. Like he’s the one running the show, telling me when I can and cannot speak. Who the hell does he think he is?

“I’m waiting, Grey.”

“Good.”

“You don’t want to test me like this.”

“What? Am I about to experience Chase Whitfield’s dark side? Not so perfect after all, huh?”

He’s on top of me in a heartbeat. I can’t even breathe as he presses me to the ground, the morning dew seeping through the back of my shirt. If he gets grass stains on it, I’ll kill him. I love this shirt. But all such thoughts immediately vanish from my mind when he places his hands on the both sides of my head, his breath warm against my lips.

“You’re going to tell me what happened, and you’re going to tell me

now.” He’s being all demanding and shit. I should hate it, but it’s such a turn-on. I’ve never been around a guy who’s so used to getting what he wants. He’s powerful and strong. He could be anywhere with anybody, but he’s here with me.

“My mom got sick a while back and I freaked out. I couldn’t handle it. So I rebelled. Stripping was a way to take my mind off things. It was the escape I needed to survive. My mind was constantly going in circles. I needed some way to turn it off, if only for a couple hours.” Great, now Chase Whitfield of all people is the only one who knows my dirty little secret.

“Why did you stop?” His breath is



uneven. I wonder if he's picturing me onstage. He doesn't like the idea that I took off my clothes for other men, yet he probably can't help imagining me doing it for him. Of course he can't. It's every guy's fantasy.

“Because I wasn't home to watch you play.”

My remark only fuels the fire burning within him. “Don't patronize me.”

He thinks I'm playing with his emotions on purpose or something. But it's the truth. I needed my daily Chase Whitfield fix. It was because of him that I gave it up. Stripping didn't give me the same kind of high I got from seeing him. He's my one true means of escape. He

always has been—until he got hurt.

“I’m not. Stripping wasn’t for me. So I moved on.”

“How long were you there?”

“I don’t know. About two months?”

“Jesus Christ.” His arms start to shake, as he steadies himself above me.

“How often did you do it?”

“Mostly weekends. Friday and Saturday nights when it got busy.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that Noah just happened to pick the name of that club out of thin air?”

“I don’t know. He seemed kind of nervous last night when he approached me. If he frequents the place, he might have remembered seeing me there.”

“Shit, Grey.” He pounds his fist into

the grass before rolling off me. “This is bad. Very bad.”

“Well, you have all these PR gurus at your disposal, right? I’m sure they can spin it somehow. Tell everyone I have a sick mother and I needed the money.” I feel so small as he gets to his feet and glares down at me. He’s definitely using his height to his advantage. If he’s trying to intimidate me, he’s succeeding.

“Does The Blue Room hire cocktail waitresses?”

“It’s not that fancy.”

“Did they pay you under the table?”

“It’s actually run aboveboard. I had to fill out a tax form and everything. I guess they got into some trouble a while back

in a raid and they have to keep things legit if they want to keep their license.”

“So there’s a paper trail connected to you?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Jesus, Grey.” He turns his back to me and runs a hand through his hair in frustration. “I need a minute.”

“But—”

He doesn’t stop. He just keeps walking until he’s back inside my trailer. All right, if he needs some space, I’ll give it to him. I didn’t think he’d take it so hard. He’s a worldly guy, and he’s seen a lot. I can’t believe my disclosure would shock him so much. He doesn’t even know all the details. And if he doesn’t have the balls to ask, then I’m

not going to tell him. Let him think the worst of me.

I'm not some prostitute.

I'm still a virgin.

And I'm more embarrassed about that than anything else.

Chase Whitfield losing his mind over a girl who's never even had sex before? Yeah right. I know more about box scores and division standings than I know about my own body. There's no way someone with my total lack of experience is going to be able to hold on to a guy like Chase. I have no idea what it takes to satisfy a man in the bedroom. He's used to women who know exactly how to make his body respond to them,

and I'm clueless except for the online porn I Googled out of curiosity. What can I say? I hit the books way too much when I could have been getting anatomy lessons in the back seat of some guy's car.

Truth be told, I wasn't the greatest stripper in the history of The Blue Room. I only did it to channel my anger when it felt like my world was spinning out of control. If my mom was going to die, I wanted to live, feel alive, be admired. If I was going to lose her, I wanted something to replace the hurt inside my heart, even if it was the stomach-wrenching terror of stage fright or the exhilaration of losing myself amid the pounding bass and flashing lights.

I usually only performed in group numbers, at the end of the night when the patrons were too drunk to notice my awkwardness. By that time, they'd hoot and holler for just about anything in a skirt, especially younger guys like Noah. I always worried about coming face to face with someone I knew in the audience, and now that period of temporary insanity is coming back to bite me in the ass.

And it's not like I ever got completely nude. I only went topless at the very end of the song before the lights went out, usually to the final notes of "Pour Some Sugar On Me." So there was only a split second where my boobs were visible

before I was hustled offstage and into the dressing room. Is being a stripper something I'm proud of? Not really. Am I glad I did it? Yeah, I think am. And I don't appreciate Chase trying to make me feel ashamed of what I did either. Where does he of all people get off judging me?

I get up and brush myself off. It's time to set the record straight. If my past is an issue for him, he's just going to have to get over it. There's nothing I can do about it now. I wasn't trying to hide it from him, but I wasn't going to lie about it if it came up either. Now that the cat's out of the bag, we need to act like two adults and just deal with it.

As I approach the trailer, I hear him



talking on the phone.

“Noah, I found your number on the card you gave Grey, but I have no clue where I am. Can you track the GPS on my cell?”

What? Is he leaving? I thought I was supposed to drive him to meet up with Noah.

“Yeah, change of plans. I can’t be seen anywhere near her right now. It’s complicated. I’ll fill you in later.”

What a freaking coward. He’s ending it the minute things get tough. He doesn’t have the stomach to pull the trigger and commit to someone. He might seem confident and self-assured in public, but in private he’s completely indecisive,

wavering back and forth. Making these grand gestures and then immediately taking them back. Who does shit like that? I thought he was stable and put together. Turns out he's the reverse—paranoid and extremely unsure of himself.

“All right. I'm gonna hop in the shower, but I should be ready by the time you get here. I didn't think you lived this close.”

Great. Noah lives nearby? Figures. It's not going to give us enough time to fix this.

“Noah, for now, keep this on the down low. You hear me?”

Now he's swearing Noah to silence. What next? Is he going to tie me to a

chair and gag me before he leaves? God forbid his precious reputation gets tarnished because of me.

“Later, man.” He hangs up with a sigh before taking his pile of neatly folded clothes and heading for the bathroom. He’s not even going to come out here and talk to me? He’s just going to blow me off? Well, two can play at that game. Maybe I won’t be around when he’s comes out. Maybe it’s already too late. Marry him, my ass. If he wanted to make me feel bad about myself, well, he succeeded.

I slip into the trailer, quickly tossing on a pair of shorts and stepping into my mud-splattered running shoes. Listening

to the shower turn on, I look longingly at the image of Chase's face on the back of the bathroom door. I knew this was too good to be true. Most things are. I'll probably look back at this time I spent with him as some blip on the radar, a freak occurrence in the everyday stream of life, something spectacular that momentarily blotted out the monotony of the daily grind.

It's like seeing a shooting star. One minute, it's there. The next minute, it's gone. Like a glimpse into another world, a better world, that's snatched away before it's fully realized.

Damn these tears. I swear I'm not going to cry. He's not worth it. He'll move on and forget me and I'll be left

with nothing but these stupid memories. Leave it to me for trying to be honest with him. Look where it got me. Chase will soon be out the door and out of my life. Maybe it's for the best that he found out now before I up and moved to New York. He would've been livid if my stripper past came out after he married me—what a scandalous divorce that would've been.

So I'm going to do what comes naturally—run. I'll leave him before he can leave me. I press my hand against the hole in my screen, debating my next move. If I take off now, it's all over. I won't get a second chance at this. But I'm not going to grovel at his feet,

begging him to forgive me for something I shouldn't have to apologize for. Who am I kidding? It never would've worked out between us. We're just too different.

Yeah, this trailer may be falling apart, but it's home, and it's good enough for me.

Too bad I'm not good enough for him.

# *Chapter Fourteen*

## **Chase**

“I thought I knew her from somewhere. Without her top off, I didn’t recognize her right away. Man, she has a killer rack, and you got to see it up close and personal. You’re the man, dawg.”

Noah raises his fist to bump mine, but I don’t humor him. I want to kick his ass for what he just said. He and probably hundreds of guys like him saw Grey naked, and I didn’t even get a glimpse—me, Chase Whitfield.

“Aren’t you gonna hang around and say goodbye? I kind of wanna see her again.”

If Noah doesn't shut the fuck up, I'm gonna punch him in his big fat face. But knowing my luck, he probably wouldn't even feel it and I'd end up breaking my hand. I have to get the hell out of here before I explode. I *almost* made the biggest mistake of my life. I don't fall for girls, and I almost fell for her. Why not add a bruised heart to my list of injuries? Too bad they can't put me back on the DL for that.

“Get in and drive,” I growl at Noah, and I think he finally realizes he crossed the line. It's about time. I can't believe I opened up to him yesterday. I must be really losing it. The sooner I can get back to New York, the better. I can't



keep letting my guard down like this. I'm too smart to let myself get hurt. I don't let anyone in. It's an approach that's worked for me for so many years. It's helped me stay focused and keep my head in the game, where it needs to be—especially now. If I don't get a hit tonight, I'm going to be taking some serious heat from the Kings' front office, and there's no way I'm giving them an excuse to send me back to Florida.

Despite myself, I can't help my eyes from skimming the edge of the forest, looking for her. This is it. I'll probably never see her again. I swallow the lump forming in my throat. I don't get attached to women. But I feel like a loser for walking out on her. She was good to me

when I didn't deserve it. She gave me a second and a third chance when I balked at my attraction to her. So why did she have to go and screw it all up? Why has she flaunted her body for money? Why couldn't she have taken up kickboxing or yoga to deal with her stress? But something about her having a naughty side makes me want her even more. She looks so innocent, and I gotta admit I'm having a hard time reconciling this image of her as a stripper. It just doesn't jive with the type of person I thought she was. Something's off, but I can't put my finger on it.

“You getting in, boss?” I can't see Noah's eyes through his sunglasses, but I

must be freaking him out, glaring out into the woods like a crazy ax murderer. I gotta get out of here.

“Let’s go, Noah. I’ve had enough of her bullshit.” I slam the car door a little too hard, trying to make myself believe what I’m saying.

Noah pockets his shades. His eyes are trained on the rearview mirror, undoubtedly looking to catch a glimpse of her too. But we’re both driving away disappointed. Her message is clear. She’s done with me. Yeah? Well, I’m done with her too.

“I don’t know if this will make you feel any better, but she didn’t perform all that much. She wasn’t like a star attraction or anything. The only reason

she stuck out in my mind is because she tripped onstage once. I'll never forget it. You don't see shit like that too often." Noah chuckles to himself, but I want to wring his neck for laughing at her. So what if she's clumsy? I've fallen on my face lots of times during a game. It's all about how a person handles the situation that matters, if they're willing to get up back up and try again.

"So why do you hang out in strip clubs? You don't strike me as the type." Noah seemed like a pretty decent guy. I didn't think he frequented those kinds of places.

"I'm not, dude. Relax. I worked there part time as a bouncer for a couple of

weeks. Trust me, they didn't let me see much. I think they hired me on account of my size, thinking I'd intimidate guys and keep the girls safe. But all it took was one beer bottle over the head and I was out for the count. Can you believe it took sixteen stitches to patch me up? After that, being bossed around by my dad seven days a week didn't sound so bad. I tend to get squeamish at the sight of blood, especially my own."

"Noah, you are a son of a bitch."

"So I've been told. Where am I taking you anyway?"

"Is it really all over the news about me going to The Blue Room?"

"Yeah, man. I'm afraid it is. I guess the manager at the Sheraton tipped off

the Kings when you didn't come back. Terry the GM even called me personally to find out where you were. I guess they were going apeshit thinking something happened to you. I assured him that you were with me but were a little too intoxicated to come to the phone. It's the only place I could think of around here that you might not want to leave. As far as excuses go, I thought it was believable that I'd have a hard time dragging you out of a strip club. The guys on security at The Blue Room have my back. I knew they'd have no problem corroborating my story if you hooked them up with some autographed baseballs and shit."

“So how many do I have to sign?” I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Considering that you’re still wearing the clothes you were in last night, I think your hand is going to be getting a workout, and I’m not talking about jerkin’ the gherkin.” He takes his eyes off the road to smirk in my direction.

“Bastard.”

“Yeah, but you gotta admit I covered all your bases. Just act like the self-absorbed jerk everyone thinks you are and everything will be fine.” He looks straight ahead, drumming his fingers against the base of the wheel.

“Fuck. Is that how I come off?”

“C’mon, Chase. No one thinks you’re

a choirboy by any stretch of the imagination. You're a professional athlete, and people pretty much take for granted that you enjoy all the privileges that come along with that—the women, the booze, the drugs.”

“Hey, I'm not into that shit, man.” I glare at his profile.

“You're telling me you don't live the life? Yeah right,” Noah grunts in disbelief.

“Do you think my body could withstand a lifestyle like that? I'm fighting tooth and nail to make it back from this friggin' knee injury. There's no way I'd get myself hooked on any of that stuff. I can barely drag my body out of bed now.” I try to extend my legs under



the dash, but there's nowhere to move in this tiny-ass car.

"But I'm sure you're not sleeping alone. You sure didn't want to go back to that empty hotel room by yourself last night."

"That's different." I fiddle with the strap of the seatbelt and stare out the window.

"How so?"

"Because I wasn't looking to score. I just wanted to get to know her better."

"And you didn't click with her?" Noah asks, glancing over at me.

"No, I did. That's the problem. I liked her too much." I lower my head, unable to meet his gaze.

“Then why’d you bail?”

“Noah, I’m about to get my dick handed to me by these reporters. If I was spotted with Grey last night and someone found a clip of her on YouTube gyrating on a stripper pole, how do you think that’d work out for either of us? It’s one thing for the public to hear about me going to a strip club, but marrying a stripper? Let’s just say, I would no longer be the spokesperson for any company I’m paid to endorse, not to mention the tongue lashing my mother and sister would give me.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Rewind that for a minute.” There’s a look of complete and utter shock on Noah’s face. “Did

you say *marry* her?”

“Forget it,” I respond, mad at myself for telling him all of this. “The offer’s off the table.”

“Dude! You are like an uncrackable safe. No girl out there has *ever* had a chance at nailing your ass to the wall, and you were gonna give it all up for some chick from Stockton? That’s some serious shit right there. Bro, you were a freakin’ runner-up for Sexiest Man Alive this year and you were gonna take yourself off the market for her? Why man, why?”

“There’s just something about her, all right?”

“Then go back to that little trailer in the woods and sweep her off her feet.

You already have millions, right? So what if some CEO in his ivory tower stops you from pedaling his overpriced sneakers? You've got the Kings. You'll always have the Kings. Nothing's going to change that. Joe DiMaggio married Marilyn Monroe and she was basically a glorified stripper." Noah makes his argument sound so convincing, but I just don't know.

"Let's just see how this all plays out with the press. I'm here for at least the next couple of days. I have to let the repercussions from last night simmer down before I even think about introducing Grey into the mix. If she even speaks to me again after what went

down.” I sigh, closing my eyes.

“Oh, she’ll speak to you again. You’re Chase fuckin’ Whitfield.” He bumps my arm lightly with his fist.

“She’s not like that, Noah.”

“Sure she is. Every girl’s like that. I bet she even has your freakin’ poster on her bedroom wall.”

I shift uncomfortably, wishing Noah would shut his mouth.

“She fuckin’ does, doesn’t she? Oh my God, man. I knew it!” He pounds the steering wheel in excitement. “You’re probably like the guy she thinks about when she—”

“Don’t even go there.” I hold up a hand, cutting him off midstream.

“But that’s like every guy’s dream,

bro. And you're, like, living it."

"Funny, it doesn't feel that way." I lean back, wishing he were right.

"Chase, you've so got this, man. All you have to do is go back there with a bouquet of flowers, a box of chocolates, and it's a done deal. As soon as she opens the door and sees you standing there, all contrite and humble, she won't be able to resist."

"I don't do humble."

"But you want this girl, don't you?"

"Yeah." I hesitate.

"Well, you have to do these sorts of things. Girls eat this shit up. I don't make the rules. It's just the code of behavior we're expected to follow when we get

our asses handed to us. I know you've probably never had to beg a woman for anything before, but that's why I'm here to coach you through it. The universe sent me to you in your time of need," Noah says with a big smile on his face.

"Jeez, how did I ever get so lucky?"

"Shut it, dude. Guys like you get all the breaks, but sometimes you need help from guys like me who really have to work at it."

"Maybe I can get Grey to hook you up with her sister. She seems like a little spitfire."

"Thanks, but no thanks. She may be hot, but not after I had to listen to her carry on until the wee hours of the morning. I certainly don't want a piece

of that.”

“Fair enough. But if you think I’m such a selfish bastard, it can’t be all about me. I wanna help you out with something.” Noah’s take on how I’m perceived has me ruffled. I don’t want to come off like that. If I’m going to change the way others see me, I might as well start now.

“Chase, you’re already helping me.”

“How?”

“I’m, like, hanging out with my hero. Things like this just don’t happen to me. I didn’t even go to my prom.”

“What if I asked you to come back to New York with me? You can be my personal assistant or butler or some shit



like that.”

“Really, man?” Noah looks over at me, completely stunned. “Are you serious?”

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” His face lights up in amazement.

“No, I’m totally serious. I need people around who tell it like it is. I’m sick of being told what everybody thinks I want to hear and not what I need to hear.”

“Dude, it is so on,” he exclaims, offering me his hand.

I shake it firmly, sealing the deal. “Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

“But first things first. Since we’re entering the lovely environs of Beaver

Field, where do you want me to drop you off? The media is already swarming around the players' entrance up ahead. Is there another way you can go in? Maybe I can drive onto the field like I did last night and sneak you in through the dugout."

"I'm not sneaking in anywhere. I'm going to have to face them. I have to do this right if eventually I plan on bringing Grey into the picture. That is, if the flowers and chocolate work."

"They will," Noah remarks, jutting his chin at me.

"I'm glad you're so cocky."

"Not cocky. Confident."

"Whatever, brother." I laugh, my hand

already on the door handle.

“Good luck, dude. Don’t let them skin you alive,” Noah responds, anxiously examining the crowd.

“I’ve been around the block a few times. I can handle myself just fine. See you in there?”

“Yeah. Let me park this baby, and if they corner you and you can’t get away, then your trusty manservant will clear a path. You can count on it.” He pats me on the back as I prepare to face the barrage of questions.

“Manservant? I don’t think I like the sound of that.” I grimace over my shoulder at him.

“Get used to it, homey. Because New York City ain’t gonna know which way

is up once I hit town.”

“Is that right?” I ask, a grin spreading across my face.

“Most definitely. You and I are going to tear it up.”

I chuckle under my breath as I open the door and step out. Saying a quick prayer, I’m immediately blasted by a wave of heat. I didn’t notice it so much back at Grey’s trailer. It was a lot cooler on top of the mountain, and Noah had the A/C cranked up in the car. Hitting the turf tonight after it bakes all day in the sun is going to be pleasant—just another one of the many perks of playing at Beaver Field.

But I might as well have parachuted in

from a helicopter because my arrival causes pandemonium to unfurl. Members of the press don't even wait for me to walk over to them. They start shoving microphones in my face as several cameramen block my way forward. What a nightmare. And they don't even know about Grey yet.

“Chase, how do you feel about the call-up?”

“Whit, are you ready to go back to the majors so soon?”

“Why are the Kings in such a hurry to get you back?”

What the hell are they talking about? I'm not going anywhere. I'm here for the remainder of the home stand. When I don't respond, they begin peppering me

with details.

“Terry Bloom just held a press conference in New York stating that you’re playing in tonight’s game in New York.”

“Shouldn’t you be on your way there now?”

“Why are you still in Stockton?”

My head is pounding, and I don’t know if it’s because of the heat or whatever shit Terry’s trying to pull. He’s not happy that it got out that I was apparently at a strip club last night, and he’s reprimanding me by not giving me a heads-up about the early end to my rehab assignment. He could have called. He could have sent me a text. But no, he let

me get blindsided by the media, maneuvering behind my back. He's going to pay for this. Now how am I going to make things right with Grey when I have to fucking get in a car and get my ass back to New York? I can't lose this girl. Yeah, I fucked things up, but I have to let her know I didn't mean it. I was just too childish to admit I was wrong when I had the chance.

Maybe she'll reach out to me. If not, I'm going to have to take some drastic action to get her back. There's no way I'm letting her out of my life. I can't let her slip away, not after experiencing what it was like to feel her skin beneath my fingertips.

She's mine, and the whole world is

going to know it soon enough.



# *Chapter Fifteen*

## **Grey**

“Was that who I think it was?” Jack, my landlord, asks as he rolls up alongside of me in his SUV, the gravel popping beneath his all-terrain tires.

He’s on his way down the mountain and I’m on my way up. He must have been checking out his tree stands or cutting down some brush. No doubt he saw Chase fly out of here like a bat out of hell. There’s no denying it now.

“Yeah, can you believe it?” I respond, feigning enthusiasm.

“Do I even want to know why one of the greatest shortstops of all time was

racings off my property?

“Probably not.”

“Jesus, girl.” Jack removes his scuffed Kings cap, wiping his brow in consternation.

Jack and I always talk about the Kings whenever we see each other. It’s our thing. We discuss stuff like who’s up next in the pitching rotation and where they are in the standings. We relive the jaw-dropping plays when they’re winning and groan over everything from the batting order to the bullpen when they’re losing. When it comes to the Kings, we analyze everything. So how am I ever going to explain to him what Chase was doing here?

“Would you believe he’s my long-lost

cousin?”

“Not a chance.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.”

“Listen, Grey. If you don’t wanna tell me, it’s none of my business. Even though I would have really liked to have gotten his autograph.”

“Man, you too?”

“What? Don’t tell me you didn’t get one off him.”

“Nope, can’t say that I did.”

“Grey, if you give a guy like that the milk without making him buy the cow, how does that benefit you?”

“Shit, Jack. I didn’t sleep with him, if that’s what you’re implying.”

His face reddens in embarrassment

and I'm sort of glad. What? Does everyone jump to the conclusion that Chase bangs every woman he comes in contact with?

“Nah, darling. I didn't mean anything by it. I'm sorry, but you're too smart a girl to let yourself be used like that.”

I sidestep the issue and try to diffuse his curiosity. “I was just hiding him out for a friend when things got a little dicey at Buster's Crab Shack last night. He got swarmed by a bunch of fans and he needed to make a run for it. So I brought him here.”

“Uh huh, so that's why the Kings are claiming he was at a strip club all night. Sounds more like they're covering for his time with you.”

Jack doesn't know anything about my stint at The Blue Room, and I want to keep it that way. He has no clue how close to the truth he really is. I don't know what he'd think of me if he found out I was employed there not too long ago.

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When I wanted to quit The Blue Room, Stanley Larson, the owner, wasn't exactly pleased. He thought he had me locked up for the next several years. I was young. I was new. I was a commodity to be bartered and sold. Sure, I was klutzy, but he detected that I was starting to attract a following. Guys

were waiting for the finale, staying longer and buying more rounds at the bar. He dangled me like bait, making me take center stage for the last number, not letting me hide in the background anymore.

At first, my costume resembled a skimpy bikini, but by the time I left, it was nothing but a thong with two tassel-adorned pasties over my nipples. I couldn't do it anymore, and I refused to go onstage, especially when Stanley started letting the customers get a little too hands-on with me. Security stood back as they slapped my ass and tucked dollar bills into the jeweled strap of my spiked heel. I knew the longer I stayed, the deeper I'd get mired in that

quagmire. I had to get out while I still could.

When I didn't show up for my Friday shift, Stanley called me nonstop, blowing up my phone with threatening voice mails and text messages. The next night he sent a bouncer to my trailer to scare some sense into me, and that's when I purchased a gun. The guy didn't force his way in, but he did shove his fist through my screen door. It was then that I realized what sort of scumbags I was dealing with.

I called Stanley and demanded that he call off the dogs. I was done. I wasn't coming back, and he was just going to have face it. He needed to find someone

else to close the show. I never intended to make a career out of stripping. I was just looking to blow off some steam, but now I was done—for good.

Stanley told me that if I wanted my last paycheck, I'd have to come down and get it in person, so we could say goodbye to each other properly. I knew it was a trap, but with the startup expenses of moving into the trailer, I needed the money. I had to give Jack a month's rent plus a security deposit, and it required way more cash than I had in the bank. With my credit cards maxed out, I knew I was in over my head.

I had just started working at the department store, and I was making a lot less than what I was used to earning at



The Blue Room. What I raked in stripping weekends at the club was about what I was pulling in for a solid month working behind a cash register at the mall. I was probably crazy to give it up, but I didn't want to degrade myself anymore. I was on a slippery slope that probably would have ended in prostitution, porn, or worse. Stanley was known to put his girls on a fast track if they were bringing in a lot of dough. He had his hands in all kinds of shady business endeavors. I should have known there was no such thing as easy money.

When I arrived to pick up my check, it was still daylight out and the club wasn't

open yet. My stomach lurched when I saw Stanley's Harley sitting in the lot. He was there. I tucked a spray bottle of mace in the hip pocket of my jeans and knocked three times on the unmarked door in the side alley. There were used condoms on the ground near the overflowing dumpster, and bits of broken glass from cracked beer bottles littered the sidewalk. I held my breath as the door opened. A big, strapping dude was guarding the entrance, so I ducked under his arm and slipped into the darkened bar area.

But the security guy immediately grabbed my elbow, dragging me toward Stanley's smoke-filled office in the back. I tried to fight him off, but he was

too strong. I knew I was in trouble when I saw Stanley, cigar in hand, with his feet propped up on the desk, waiting for me. My burly escort hurled me into the room, quickly closing the door behind him. I was alone with Stanley as he started stroking his straggly beard, sizing me up.

I wish I could say that what I did next was something I regret, but knowing that it bought me my freedom, I don't feel all that shitty about it. Stanley's request was not one I expected, and I kind of thought he was letting me off the hook. I didn't have to suck his dick or give him a hand job. What he wanted was completely out of left field, but it was something I was

willing to deliver.

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“Well, I guess I won’t have to worry about Chase Whitfield trespassing on my land anymore. He’s supposedly starting tonight in New York.”

Jack’s announcement hits me like a fastball to the head. Chase left Stockton? When did this happen? He wasn’t supposed to get called up this soon. He only played one game with the Beavers. He couldn’t even get a ball out of the infield and they expect him to turn things around overnight? He’s going to come out of the gate looking weak. They need to give him more time to get back up to

speed. The fans won't be patient if his long-awaited return is a dud. The media will eat him alive if his comeback fails. His psyche is so fragile right now. By rushing him back, the Kings might be doing him more harm than good, and they shouldn't need a sports psychologist to tell them that.

“That’s ridiculous.” I try to play it off, but I’m worried about Chase. Things ended badly between us. The last thing I want is to throw off his game. No matter what we said to each other, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I’m one of the contributing factors to him going down in flames. I’ll always be a Chase Whitfield fan, no matter what. I can’t help it.

“Yeah. I thought he might have told you about it.”

“No. I don’t think he knew this was happening.”

“It’s most likely management stirring the pot, getting him back in line. Whit is paying the price for all of Drake’s nonsense.”

And boy, does Drake Schultz have a track record. He’s the highest-paid player in the majors after scoring a record-setting contract from the Kings two years ago. Before that, he’d bounced around from team to team but always yearned to play for the Kings with all their history and tradition...and winning. Problem was, he always played

shortstop, and there was no way the Kings would ever replace Chase at that position. He was their franchise player, the one they built an entire dynasty around. Drake eventually caved, saying he'd move over to third, and the Kings jumped all over him.

What's sad is that Chase and Drake used to get along. They came up as rookies together, albeit on different teams. When they played against each other, they'd stay at each other's apartments, and they hung out together during All-Star games. It was a friendship made in baseball heaven—until things turned ugly. One winter, Drake made an off-hand remark that people only thought Chase was good

because he was on a successful team and that he was riding the coattails of his more experienced teammates.

Despite having the stats to dispute Drake's jealous claim, Chase didn't fight back in the press. Instead, he cut all ties with Drake, viewing him as a traitor. Chase didn't even attend Drake's wedding, where he was supposed to be the best man. The only follow-up comment Chase ever made about their fallout was that he was disappointed that Drake had to make statements like that to the media when he should have told him off the record to his face.

Drake tried several times to apologize, saying that his remarks had



been taken out of context, even though the AP reporter stood by his story, claiming that he had Drake making his bogus statements on tape. The bad blood between the two came to a boil when Drake ended up joining the Kings, making more money than Chase. Some time had passed since their heated exchange, and they both smiled for the cameras during Drake's signing ceremony in New York. But once the season got underway, they kept their distance in the dugout, only bumping fists and tapping helmets when they absolutely had to. They were professionals and knew what type of behavior the Kings expected of them. They didn't let their ongoing feud

interfere with the game, even if they ate in different restaurants on the road and barely acknowledged each other in the locker room.

And Drake let the thrill of playing in a big market corrupt him. New York is the city that never sleeps, and neither did Drake. He rarely made it home to his mansion in the Connecticut suburbs, preferring to live it up in his bachelor pad in Manhattan. His wife soon got tired of his lies, catching him in a full-on orgy when she was nine months pregnant with their second child. Needless to say, she filed for divorce, and Drake went completely off the rails, dating celebrity after celebrity, giving outrageous

interviews, and making a habit of turning up late to the ballpark.

His batting average dipped below three hundred. His home run production tanked. His on-base percentage was pathetic. Fans started to taunt him when he came to the plate, only to have him strike out more often than not. The Kings' front office knew they had made a mistake, but it was too late. They were locked in. Drake signed a multi-year contract whereby he would most likely end his career as a member of the New York Kings. No one was going to pick up his bloated salary with subpar production numbers like that. For better or for worse, the Kings were stuck with him.

And now that Chase's contract is up for renewal at the end of the season, the Kings are probably looking to cut costs. They're afraid that Chase is going to want as much as or more than Drake. So they're out to lower his value any chance they can get. His injury. His absence. His reputation. It's all going to come under the microscope when they open up negotiations. If the Kings think they can shave a million or two off and blame it on his bad behavior in Stockton, they'll do it. Noah's excuse for Chase's whereabouts played right into their hands.

I break out into a cold sweat. Thank God I told Chase the truth before it was

too late. I don't think I could've lived with myself if he'd heralded our engagement and then had to suffer the blowback from it. People aren't allowed to take pictures or record video inside The Blue Room, but it doesn't mean they don't do it anyway. I'm sure there's some sort of evidence out there of me grinding on the catwalk. It's only a matter of time until it surfaces. And God only knows what kind of security footage Stanley has. He could've easily conned Chase for some hush money. It makes my head spin to think just how much I could've cost Chase in terms dollars and cents as well as damaging his clean-cut image. I'm his worst nightmare come true, even if I happened to be the girl he

was willing to marry. I bet he's congratulating himself on his narrow escape.

"You all right, Grey? You seem a little dazed." The rasp of Jack's two-pack-a-day voice brings me back to the here and now. I really wish Jack would stop smoking. Look what it did to my mom.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Still a bit star-struck. That's all. Chase Whitfield was here and just like that he's gone. It's hard to comprehend." Now he'll be back on my TV screen where he belongs, not a part of my actual life, where things get sticky and complicated. "Jack, you can't tell anyone he was here. It has to remain

between us, okay?”

“All right. All right. Your secret’s safe with me, even though you know I’m dying to tell everyone.” Jack is already pulling away as he shouts out the window. “You gonna watch the game tonight?”

“You know it.” I fake my level of excitement, giving him a big smile, like I can’t wait.

“Well, if he ever stops by again, make sure to get his autograph for me.”

“Will do.” I wave halfheartedly as Jack makes his descent down the mountain. I don’t let my shoulders slump until his SUV is completely out of view, holding back my tears until I’m able to stumble back inside my trailer.

Throwing myself on the bed, I give into my grief, curling up in the crevice his body made in my mattress. But the mental image of him lying here is too much to bear. So like an idiot, I get up and rush into the bathroom, only to see the towel he used hanging over the shower rod, and that's when I lose it. I don't want to let him go. Not yet. For one night in the course of his life, he was mine and no one else's. I want to cling to that memory as long as I can while it's still fresh, while there's some piece of him still here with me.

I try to stem my tears. But there's something about knowing he touched his naked body with that bit of fabric that



makes me feel a deep, heartrending ache. I hold onto it as I wander back to my bed. If I close my eyes, it's like I can feel him here with me. Hear his deep voice in my head. Imagine his full lips on mine.

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Shit. I must have fallen asleep.

The sun is already setting, but I don't want to move. My poor, miserable heart is overruling my body, demanding to stay buried under the covers, languishing in my disappointment. If I turn on the TV, it's going to be like none of this ever happened, like he was never here and I imagined the whole thing in my mind.

But I'm too worried about him not to care what's going on. I have to see how's he doing. He must be exhausted, but then again he's probably used to this kind of schedule—waking up in one city and playing in another. I don't think I could ever adjust to all that traveling and then have to excel at such a physical job. I'd be spent after the first week, and he has to play for six months straight with a rare day off in between. But earning millions of dollars has to ease the fatigue somewhat. He can sleep all winter long.

I click the power button on the remote. Of course, the TV is already on the right channel. The game is in the bottom of the

fifth inning, and the Kings are behind five to six. My breath catches when I realize that it's Chase at the plate. I fall back against the pillows when the onscreen graphic says that he struck out twice. Great, I already missed his first two at-bats. And his streak of bad luck continues. He's not the kind of hitter who swings and misses that often. When he gets out, he usually makes contact with the ball, either a pop fly to left or a grounder to second. That's why he's had so many hits in his career because he bats either first or second in the order and he's a pro at getting on base.

I get a little lightheaded when I see his face fill the screen, because now I know what he looks like up close without his

batting helmet on and how his hair fades back against his head. The camera doesn't capture the magnetic pull of his eyes that's impossible to ignore in person. He's all business at the plate, but I wish I could hear him laugh again. He's always so serious on the field. Sure, he knows how to have fun, but it's contained when he's playing. Not like he was when he threw my hoodie over his head and we sped away into the night.

I watch as he whiffs at curveball that breaks below his knees. What the heck is he swinging at that for? It's too low. He knows better than that. He's jumping at the first thing he sees, pressing too much. He needs to wait for what he wants, sit

on a pitch. Not hack at everything the pitcher throws at him.

He fails to connect with the hanging slider that comes next, ending up in the hole with two strikes. This is so unlike him. It's scary. He's falling apart before my very eyes, and there's nothing I can do to stop the bleeding. I can't even freak him out behind the net at home plate because I'm not there. I'm in Stockton, a helpless bystander to his demise.

He would have to be facing the ace of the Boston staff on his first night back in the big leagues. The two teams are embroiled in yet another pennant race, and the games between them usually get heated. They're either pitchers' duels

where the winner squeaks by with a one-run victory or slugfests that end in double-digit scores. These match-ups sell out as soon as the tickets go on sale. They're highly anticipated, garnering raucous crowds and monster ratings. No wonder the Kings wanted Chase back in New York, but seeing him flail in front of Boston pitching isn't making anyone feel good right about now.

"C'mon, Chase. Get a hit! Just a blooper to get you started," I yell at the TV.

It's like he hears me from hundreds of miles away as he tries to lay down a bunt, no doubt desperate to advance the runner on first while trying to scrape and

claw his way on base. But the ball doesn't hit the fat part of the bat and it soars high into the air, an easy out for the catcher, who's waiting behind the backstop as it drops softly into his mitt.

Chase hurls his bat in frustration, muttering to himself as he marches back to the dugout in defeat. The fans ride him a little as he gets closer to the stands. Usually players aren't allowed to leave the dugout during the game. They're expected to sit on the bench no matter what happens on the field. But as Chase passes Drake in the on-deck circle, he chucks his helmet at one of the bat boys and jogs down the steps and through the tunnel into the locker room.

The camera immediately zooms in on

the face of manager, Tony Liotta, but he doesn't bat an eyelash. He's too cool to show his reaction to his star shortstop's uncharacteristic outburst. But the commentators are already speculating how Liotta is going to ream Chase out after the game. Liotta doesn't run a team of crybabies and drama queens. He's old school, expecting his players to suck it up and control their tempers. This display by Chase is so unlike him that Liotta must be reeling inside. He's never had to deal with any problems with Chase, and this is a hell of a time to start.

It doesn't help when, seconds later, Drake blasts a home run into the upper



deck in right, crushing the first pitch he sees. The fans go berserk as the Kings take the lead, but Chase is nowhere to be seen. He doesn't come out of the dugout to congratulate Drake with the rest of the team. He stays hidden in the bowels of the stadium.

Something has to be wrong. He's known for his great sportsmanship. For Chase, the team always comes first. He's said numerous times that he doesn't focus on his personal statistics—all he cares about is winning. But his behavior tonight seems to be demonstrating the exact opposite. Drake is making him look bad by getting the job done. Even if Chase doesn't want to, he should be with his teammates, not sulking by himself at

his locker. Or else it's going to look like he's all talk. Yeah, he's a team player when things are going good, but the minute he has to deal with an injury or a setback, he changes his tune. It was easy for him to play the hero when he was sitting on top of the world, but now it's like he doesn't even want to make the effort if it's not directly benefiting him. If that's the case, it shows a total lack of character, and I thought he was better than that.

Maybe I placed him on a pedestal he didn't deserve to be on, glorifying him in my mind like he's this standup guy, when he's nothing more than an immature brat who needs to grow up. I can't help but

notice the pattern that's forming every time he doesn't get his way or things don't go right. What does he do? He bolts. Too obstinate to deal with his problems head on, he runs away from them, placing a scowl on his handsome face. Yeah, Chase Whitfield might be good at winning, but he's one heck of a sore loser.

Getting up, I stomp angrily into the kitchen for a snack. I can't watch Chase self-destruct before my eyes. It's making me too upset. I can't believe I was so wrong about him. I admit that I'm not the greatest judge of people, but it's hard to accept that I was so off the mark about who he really is. He can't handle any bumps in the road. He wants everything

smooth and predictable, but life isn't like that. I should know.

But it makes me wonder how he's reached such a high level of success with that kind of attitude. It doesn't make sense. Does he surround himself with people who simply coddle and protect him, not letting the outside world infiltrate his bubble of superiority? He is going to be in for quite a shock when all that goes away. He's not going to be able to play for the Kings forever. That day of reckoning that he's so anxious to avoid could be right around the corner, whether he likes it or not. There's no escaping getting older, and then what will he do? If he isn't careful, he'll be

left with absolutely nothing—sad and alone in his penthouse or mansion or wherever he ends up. It almost makes me feel sorry for him.

The announcers' agitated voices draw my attention back to the screen as I scoop some month-old salsa onto a stale tortilla chip. I'm starving, but there's nothing in the fridge. I'll have to stop by the grocery store tomorrow after I cash my check. I spent the money I had left on my big night out at Beaver Field, so for the time being I'll have to settle for this. Grumpily, I wander back near the TV, my ears perking up when I hear the word 'injury.'

"If you're just joining us, folks, it appears Chase Whitfield has reinjured

himself sometime during his last at-bat. He took himself out of the game so that the trainer could attend to him. We're getting word that it looks like he did more damage to his knee and that he's most likely headed back on the DL. The Kings will release more details about his condition after the game."

I back away as if someone were holding a gun to my head. I don't stop until my butt hits the bathroom door, and I slide to the floor. This can't be happening. Not now. Not on his first game back. Shit. I should've known something was wrong. I should've given him the benefit of the doubt. And what did I do? I turned on him. Just because

he didn't want me in his life doesn't mean he's this terrible, rotten person. I can't blame him being upset. He has every right to be.

I roll over onto my back and gaze up at his poster. My eyes caress the contours of his face before being drawn to a series of scribbled lines in the corner. Wait a minute. What's that? I scramble to my feet, running my fingers over the message.

**Grey, I'm sorry about how we left things. If you ever want to talk, call me at Noah's number. I hope you do, but I'll understand if you don't. Either way, I'm signing this poster as a thank you for taking me in. You can sell it. Keep it. Do whatever you want with it.**

## **It's up to you.**

I notice that he signed it above the fold, writing Stockton as well as the year in the swoop of the 'F' in his last name. Having something from the only Minor League stint of his illustrious career is sure to be a collector's item, probably fetching upwards of two thousand dollars. I could have the poster cut in half to get rid of the note he left for me on the bottom and frame it. Chase is well aware that personalized items are worth far less when it comes to selling memorabilia. For the most part, dealers are only after a player's signature, nothing more. Knowing the state of mind Chase was in when he signed this, I'm



touched even more by the thoughtfulness of his gesture. It shows that maybe he really does care about me, although probably not as much as he had before he found out about my past.

I should call and thank him, but it's not a good time. I don't even know if Noah's anywhere near him right now. The sportscasters are saying that they're sending him to the hospital for an MRI. He's dealing with a lot right now. Trainers, coaches, clubhouse workers—everyone must be all up in his face. Sure, he's used to that, but after suffering such a setback, he probably wants to retreat into himself, but he can't. He has to keep up a front while all eyes are on him, but once he's alone he'll probably

collapse under the weight of it all. And no one will be there to pick him up or lift his spirits.

On TV, they're showing a lot of activity in the Kings dugout as Tony Liotta actually leaves his post and strides back through the tunnel. He never leaves his seat during a game, so this thing with Chase must be serious. Staff members are milling about behind the scenes as the camera zooms in to get a closer look. And in that moment, I catch a glimpse of Noah with a forlorn expression on his face.

A plan starts to take root in my mind. So what if I have work tomorrow? Chase needs me, and if Noah's there

with him, the chances of my gaining access just got a whole lot better. Maybe Noah can arrange something so I can thank Chase in person for the autograph. Let him know it's not over. I'm still here if he needs me. I'm willing to work through this if he is.

I can't bear the thought of him grappling with all this pain and frustration without me. I can help him. I know I can. I just have to work up the courage to go to him, even if I fall flat on my face. He could very well send me away or refuse to see me, but I have to make this leap of faith or I'll never forgive myself. I know I can cheer him up and get him back on his feet. Sure, he's been knocked down again, but he's

a champion. He knows what it takes to claw his way to the top. He's a fighter who doesn't back down. He's the guy who wants the ball hit to him when the game is on the line.

I just have to remind him of that.

# *Chapter Sixteen*

## **Chase**

I'm out for the rest of the season.

The news still hasn't sunk in yet. I brood silently as Noah drives us back to my apartment from the hospital. Dr. Brownstein, the orthopedic surgeon who operated on my knee, said that the chances of my ever playing again aren't very good. He didn't count it out entirely, but he explained just how bad the tear in my ligament really is, showing me the results of my MRI. Thankfully, our conversation took place in private without having any representatives from the Kings present.

For the time being, Dr. Brownstein is shielding me, aware of how much is at stake if tonight's game turns out to be the last time I ever took the field at Kings Stadium.

I stifle a moan, and Noah clears his throat, trying to pretend like he didn't hear me. I don't even care about maintaining the whole macho act. If I can't play baseball, my life is essentially over. I have nothing without the game. It defines me. I don't know who I am without it. It's all I've done since I was five years old. I'm not capable of doing anything else, and frankly that scares the shit out of me, because what am I supposed to do with the rest of my life?

Other guys have wives to go home to,

kids to take care of. I only have myself to worry about. Nothing to fill the endless void that now looms in front of me. I always go crazy in the off-season, counting the days until spring training. Now that kind of empty existence is going to be my life and I don't think I can handle it.

“Do I drive right up to the door?” Noah asks, breaking the silence.

Somehow he found his way to the Roosevelt Building without much help from me as I zoned out next to him. I guess it helps that it has one of the most recognizable addresses in the world, located right on Fifth Avenue. I grit my teeth as Luis the doorman comes out to

greet me. I really don't feel like forcing myself to be polite to anyone right now.

"Yeah, go ahead, man. Leave the keys in the ignition and one of the valets will park it in the garage." My voice sounds dead even to my own ears.

"I can find somewhere else to crash if you want to be alone." Noah looks at me hesitantly, unsure of how I'm going to react.

"Don't be an idiot. C'mon up. I might not exactly be the life of the party, but am I ever?" I give him a weak smile before doing my duty and making small talk with Luis.

My limp is more pronounced than ever, and Noah shortens his stride to match mine as we head toward the bank



of elevators. It's late, and there's no one milling around in the lobby, thank God. I just want to sink into bed, curl into a fetal position, and pretend like this day never happened. And maybe when I wake up tomorrow I'll find myself transported back to Grey's trailer with nothing more pressing than covering my eyes against the rays of the morning sun.

Grey. I can't even go there. If I do, I won't be able to hold it together. I was an idiot for what I did to her. She was a stripper. So what? She's not anymore. She could've been here, holding my hand through all of this, but I had to turn up my nose at her. I was holding Grey to some impossible standard, like she

wasn't good enough for me because she didn't meet all of the requirements on some imaginary checklist. This virginal, pristine ideal I've been carrying around with me for far too long. Who was I kidding? Girls like that don't exist anymore.

Yeah, I know all about women's lib, but for some reason, I got caught up in some bullshit fantasy, picturing the qualities I wanted my future wife to have. Talk about stupid. I could have been with the one person who broke through the bullshit that is my life. Instead, I made her feel unworthy, when the truth of the matter is I'm the one who isn't worthy of her.

Before I met Grey, I had a vague

concept of what I thought love was. I viewed it as finding a woman who was willing to devote her life to making me happy, someone who would look out for me, and in return, I'd lavish her with every luxury imaginable. Even if we didn't have a lot in common, if the sex was good and she didn't hassle me too much... That's all I wanted. I had no expectations of anything greater than that—no soul mate connection or some shit like that. As long as the woman I married didn't do anything to stir up the tabloids and kept a low profile living in my shadow, I was fine with committing myself for the long haul.

But now I see just how much I was

selling myself short. When the real thing hit me between the eyes, I was blindsided by it. I've never experienced anything like the force of attraction that pulled me toward Grey. It made me feel helpless, powerless, yet alive at the same time. It's like she snapped me out of a stupor I didn't even know I was in. The haze lifted from my life, and I was able to see clearly for the first time in years. She made me not want to settle for anything less than what she had to offer.

The elevator chimes, and I step blindly forward with Noah at my back. Reaching for my wallet, I swipe my keycard in the slot, granting us access to the penthouse floor. Noah whistles in appreciation as he shifts the duffle bag

on his shoulder.

“When did you have time to pack?” I ask, trying to ignore my haggard reflection in the brass-covered door.

“I didn’t. These are just the clothes I tossed in the back of the car on my way out the door this morning. I thought I’d work out on the machines at Beaver Field while I was hanging around, waiting for you, but that plan sort of fell through.”

“I have a personal gym upstairs, with a sauna and everything. Feel free to use it whenever you want.” I’m not trying to brag, even though it sounds like I am. I’m just so tired that my inner douchebag is on autopilot.

The door opens and Noah sighs in amazement behind me. Sometimes I take what I have for granted. I don't even bother to notice my possessions or be grateful for what I have. It all blends into the background when the problems of my life tend to overshadow everything else. It's not often that I stand back and enjoy all the things I've worked so hard for. It's probably because I don't have anyone here to remind me how extremely fortunate I am. I'm only living for myself.

“Dude, that is one fucking incredible view. You can see the whole city from here. Central Park. The Empire State Building. The Brooklyn Bridge. You

really are the king of New York.”

*Not anymore*, I want to groan, but I let Noah soak it all in and rhapsodize to his heart’s content, his nose pressed up against the glass like a little kid. Maybe I can adopt Noah. Then I won’t be alone. That’s an idea.

“Chaize, iz dat you?”

I cringe inwardly at the sound of that irritating accent. Shit. I didn’t think she’d be here. But then I was supposed to be in Stockton. I thought we’d miss having to spend time together while she was in New York for a photo shoot. But I guess even the best laid plans are doomed to fail.

Noah’s jaw drops to the floor as Irina Portanova waltzes out of my bedroom

wearing nothing but a silk nightie. I can tell he's very familiar with her work as a lingerie model. He probably gets her catalogs mailed to his door. He's completely unhinged as she glares at him and mutters in that contrived blend of French and English she calls a language.

“Chaize, who iz dis man?”

“I'm Noah...Noah Martin, Chase's driver...uh, butler...I mean, manservant.”

“What the fuck iz dis?”

“I met him in Stockton. He's going to be helping me out for a while.” That's about as much of an explanation as she's going to get. She doesn't have the right to question my decisions. She's



practically a member of the staff herself.

“Iz dis some kind of joke? He looks like a chubby baby.”

“Noah, don’t even listen to the shit that comes out of her mouth. I certainly don’t. Feel free to sleep in whatever room you want. I’m gonna crash. See you in the a.m.” Without another word, I limp toward my bedroom. I’m embarrassed that Noah’s standing there watching as Irina follows me back after he just saw me have a fuckin’ meltdown over Grey. But what can I do? This is who I am. This is the real me.

As soon as the bedroom door closes, I start removing my clothes, anxious to crawl into bed and sleep it off. Dr. Brownstein gave me some pain meds,

and if I'm not going to be able to play anymore, I might as well take them. Who cares if I develop an addiction to them now? It's not like it's going to be an issue. I'm already out of the game. The rules and regulations governing the sport no longer apply to me.

I saunter into the adjoining bathroom that's larger than Grey's entire trailer, trying not to feel guilty about the level of extravagance I've grown accustomed to. The maids have the mini fridge in here fully stocked, and I pull out a bottle of sparkling water to chase down my prescription. Popping off the lid, I stare down at the white pills swimming before my eyes. Not taking a minute to think it

over, I toss three into my mouth and take a swig from the bottle. It's done. No going back now. The life I've known is officially over.

I prop my hands against the full-length mirror, unable to escape my reflection. Who is this person with the listless eyes and defeated posture? I don't even recognize him. I don't think many people would. He's a new creation, a failure of my own making. The Chase Whitfield who has nothing to lose except himself. What's the use of holding on when there's nothing to hold on to? No one's going to catch me if I stumble. It's nothing but a freefall from here. Why should I even try to hold it together anymore?

I bash my forehead against the glass, wishing I could just disappear and not have to face the vixen waiting for me on the other side of the door. But I'm not that heartless. I can't kick Irina out in the middle of the night. I'll break it off with her tomorrow, after I call my agent. What's the use of pretending any longer? It's not like I feel any loyalty toward her. We're complete strangers, even though we've shared a bed for the last six months. She means absolutely nothing to me. For what it's worth, I might as well have been living with a plastic blowup doll.

“Chaize, are you all zight?”

And I fucking hate the way she says

my name.

“Uh huh,” I grunt, stepping out of my boxers and tossing them in the laundry bin. I try not to glance down at my knee. If it looks as bad as it feels, I don’t want to know. There’s nothing I can do about it now. It already cost me my precious career.

As I take a piss, I think back on all the milestones—first game, first hit, first home run, first World Series. They all felt great at the time, but they were all pretty insular experiences. Sure, I shared those moments with my teammates, but it’s not like I can cuddle up with one of the guys on a cold winter night and relive them until the wee hours of the morning. And the guys who are left on

the team from those glory years don't even talk about them anymore. They've moved on. They're memories that only exist on DVD now, recorded for all posterity. They're frozen in time in a place I can no longer reach. The future looks bleak if my best days are already behind me. What's there to look forward to? Getting old and watching my body break down before my eyes? Sounds like a blast.

I gotta make a change. I can't go on like this. I shuffle out of the bathroom and see Irina sprawled on my king-sized bed. I yawn, blatantly showing my lack of interest in having sex with her.

“Would you rather I zuck your dick?”

Irina drawls, crawling off the bed and getting naked right along with me.

No, I want the complete opposite actually. I want someone to hold me in her arms, run her fingers through my hair, and tell me everything's going to be okay. Someone I can cling to, who would listen to me. Ease my anxiety. Soothe my fears. Someone I can open up to and lean on for comfort and support at a time like this. But she's not here. She's in Stockton. All I have is this foreign piece of ass gazing at me with a hungry expression. She doesn't want me. She just wants my body. Maybe I'll let her have it. What the hell? Maybe it'll take my mind off my goddamn knee.

Irina is already bending down,

holding onto my thighs, ready to get to work, when there's a knock on my bedroom door.

“What the fuck, Noah? Go away. I told you I'll see you in the morning.”

I'm not used to having houseguests, and I must have forgotten to lock the door. It starts to slowly open, and I get ready to unleash a firestorm on Noah's ass. He's about to get an eyeful with Irina's mouth hovering over my dick, but it serves him right. What else does he think we are doing in here? Playing footsie?

“It's not Noah. It's me.”

And that's when I lose my shit, because I'd know that voice anywhere,



and it's too late to stop this from happening as Grey steps into the room, letting out a horrified gasp.

# *Chapter Seventeen*

## **Grey**

Okay, what did I expect?

That Chase would smother me in kisses and tell me how much he loves me? No, I wasn't counting on it. But to see that tramp ready to wrap her lips around his dick—fuck, I'll never be able to get that image out of my head. It's permanently burned into my brain. I want to pull her motherfucking hair out by the roots and wipe that triumphant expression off her face. Yeah, she might have him now, but he's not the type who stays interested for long. I should know. In Stockton, he was with me cheating on

her.

I take a step back, slamming his bedroom door shut and making a hasty retreat. I hear Chase calling my name on the other side, but I don't want to hear it. Not now. Not after I dropped everything and came all this way just to see him, to find out if he was okay. I probably won't have a job tomorrow, but apparently he can take care of himself just fine without me.

"Grey, I tried to warn you that he wasn't alone, but you wouldn't listen." Noah's excuses tumble out of his mouth, but it's too late now. I got the wake-up call I deserved. Chase will never change—not for me, not for anybody. This is who he is, and I just have to face facts

and accept it. He's not the kind of guy I need in my life. I have to get out now before I get in any deeper. I'm sick of giving him an unlimited amount of second chances. This is it. I'm done.

“You really shouldn't have buzzed me up from the lobby, Noah. I didn't think you were that cruel. Your new employer must be rubbing off on you.” I have about two seconds to get out of here before Chase throws on some clothes and comes after me. I shove Noah, but he's like an immovable barrier blocking the door.

“He didn't know she was here when we came in. All he talked about all day was you.” Noah places a hand on my

shoulder, holding back my assault as I start to pummel him with my fists. “At least hear him out before you go.”

“I don’t have to do anything. He was about to let her—” But I can’t speak as my body shudders, giving in to the powerful range of emotions surging through me. Seeing him naked. Seeing him with her. Seeing how his face went from apathy to elation the moment he saw me. I can’t catch my breath. It’s too much to process.

I collapse against Noah’s chest, and it feels warm and soft as he gingerly pats my back, unsure of what to do.

“Grey, wait! Don’t go!” I hear Chase’s uneven footsteps charging down the hallway. Somehow he’s running,

even though I don't know how. It shouldn't be physically possible, considering how bad his knee is.

"Listen to what he has to say," Noah whispers against my hair. "I don't know what happened in there, but I swear he really does care about you. I've seen it."

"Noah, I need you to take Irina to the airport. Can you do that for me?" Chase usually brooks no opposition when it comes to issuing commands. It's weird to hear him begging Noah to do him a favor.

"Sure, boss. I'll have Luis pull the car around," Noah responds, like it's no big deal.

"Great," Chase says tightly.

I'm afraid to turn around. I know she's probably standing right behind me, next to Chase. I can already smell her heady perfume from here. The squeaky wheels of a suitcase are coming toward me as I step aside so Noah can open the door.

I've never felt such a strong surge of jealousy. I don't know how to handle a force as powerful as this. I want to tackle her to the ground and claw her eyes out for even thinking about taking him in her mouth. He may not be mine, but he sure as hell ain't hers.

Irina strides up to me, her bony frame nearly a foot taller than mine. Even though she towers over most men, she still feels the need to wear heels. I'm

like a little girl next to her. She looks like she took all day to get ready even though she just threw on the beige jumpsuit she slithered into, the zipper lowered to show off her cleavage. She's not an underwear model for nothing. She knows how to work her assets. I mean, who the fuck wears a jumpsuit?

She tosses her gorgeous mane of blond hair over her bronzed shoulder, giving me a pitying look. "Wow, dis iz who you're replacing me with? You've zeally lowered your standards, Chaize."

And that's when I haul back and launch my fist into her perfect sun-kissed face. She totters on her heels, screaming in terror. I can't be responsible for my actions. She provoked me and I lost it.



Blood is dripping from her nose and onto what I'm sure is dry-clean-only material.

“You bitch!” She tries to come at me, but Noah restrains her.

“C'mon, dear. I'll get you cleaned up. We should probably get out of here.” Noah puts his arm around her shoulders, no doubt delighting in the fact that he's comforting a supermodel. Noah's a sweetheart, but let's face it, he's a guy.

“You better zend me my stuff, Chaize. Or you'll be hearing from my lawyer.” She waves her finger at him, dabbing at her nose with the back of her wrist.

I still don't have the courage to turn around and face Chase as Noah escorts

her out the door. He gives me an encouraging wink before leaving me alone with the last person on earth I want to be in the same room with.

“What are you doing here, Grey?”

I didn't think he'd speak to me so harshly, but he seems put out that I'm trespassing where I don't belong. Maybe I was out of line for coming here, but he was hurt and I had to make sure he was all right. Maybe driving through the night to see him wasn't such a good idea. I get that now.

“I don't know.” It's weird talking to him like this, staring at a painting of Kings Stadium that's hanging on the wall. I feel like I'm being interrogated on one of those cop shows where I'm

being observed behind tinted glass.

“You don’t know?” If I had to guess, he probably has his arms crossed, shaking his head at me in disbelief.

“I thought I did when I left Stockton, but now I’m not so sure.” I’m sick of lying to him, sick of trying to hide my feelings. I didn’t come all this way to play it cool. He can hide behind his emotions all he wants. I’m not going to.

He exhales deeply behind me, not saying anything. For a split second, I wonder if he’s shirtless. I love how his muscles ripple across his chest when he sighs. It’s one of those cute little things he does that he’s probably not even aware of.

“I’m glad you barged in.” His hand is on my ponytail as he lets his fingers run through it. My eyes close, and I bite my bottom lip to keep from groaning out loud. When he left this morning, I never thought he’d touch me again. I want to give in to him, let him do whatever he wants to me, but I can’t. I start to move away, but his fingers close around my hair, holding me in place.

“Let me go.” My voice trembles against my will.

“You’re not going anywhere.” His lips are against my ear, and I feel the warmth of his body surrounding me, caging me in, comforting me. On the door in front of us, his shadow merges

with mine and I can't make out where his ends and mine begins.

"You can't tell me what to do." I feel a twinge between my legs as his arm wraps around my waist, pulling me against him.

"Oh, I think I can." He starts kissing my neck, and I lean back into him, resting my head against his chest. It feels so good to be near him, the way my body is responding to him, but emotionally, I'm in turmoil. I can't do this, not after what Irina was about to do to him. That's why he's all over me—because she's the one who got his engine started. Now he's just using me to finish the job. I can't let myself be manipulated like this. It's not right. It's not fair.

“Stop it, Chase.” I break away from him when the evidence of his arousal presses against my backside. He’s trying to solve what’s broken between us with sex. It’s probably how he handles all of his problems with women, seducing them into meeting his demands. Why talk when you could fuck? Because that’s the solution to everything, right?

“Grey, I didn’t mean to—”

“Yes, you did.”

“Would you just look at me, damn it?”

“I don’t think I can stand to look at you right now. You disgust me.”

“Yeah? Well, I disgust myself.”

And that little glimmer of honesty is what finally gets me to whirl around and

face him. What? He's actually admitting his guilt? Maybe he's not such a lost cause after all. I search his turquoise eyes, trying to uncover the truth. Does he possess a conscience or is he only telling me what I want to hear? I just don't know anymore.

“But why were you going to let her —?”

“I don't know, all right?” He doesn't look down or away, but he narrows his eyes at me like I'm causing him pain. “I was feeling like shit and I thought it would help take my mind off things. It wasn't love or lust or any of those things. It was just like popping a couple of painkillers in the bathroom—an escape, a release, when all I really

wanted was you.”

“And you expect me to believe that? You’re weak, Chase. You don’t have the strength to do the right thing because it’s too hard. You don’t want to think. You don’t want to feel. And you know what? Checking out isn’t the answer. Why don’t you get off your lazy, privileged ass and go after what you want instead of settling for whatever’s right in front of you?”

I expect him to lunge at me, push me up against the door, and fuck me senseless. But that’s not how he responds to my provocation. Instead, he seems penitent, like I’ve chastised him with my words. Great, he’s withdrawing



back into himself when I was only attempting to wrestle him out of his shell. When it comes to facing the truth, why does he always resist?

“Because I don’t see how this works between us, Grey. I went through every possible scenario in my head, and it never turns out right. I can’t give all this up for you. It’s who I am. It’s who I’ll always be. And I don’t want you to leave Stockton because you’re safe there, anonymous, out of the spotlight. I’m in such a bad place right now, probably the worst spot I’ve ever been in, and I’m not going to drag you down with me. I’d hate myself for doing that to you. I just wanted to walk away and leave you behind, but I can’t. Because I

can't stop thinking about you.”

In my gut, I know he's telling the truth. He doesn't know what to do, and neither do I. He doesn't trust himself enough to move forward, and I don't trust him enough to stay with me. He can shatter my heart into a million pieces if I push him on this. He's not ready for a serious relationship. Who knows if he ever will be? Maybe someone like him really can't be with an ordinary person. He needs someone who identifies with his world, someone who goes through the same demands and pressures he faces. I'm an outsider looking in, only trying to imagine what his life is like when I truly have no idea. I don't know what hurts

worse, having to change to be with him or losing him for just being myself.

He doesn't say anything more. With a despondent look, he turns around and limps back to his bedroom, leaving me standing in his foyer all alone. Great. Now what am I supposed to do? It's too late to drive back to Stockton.

I kick off my sandals and curl up on his ivory sofa, pulling down a cashmere throw to drape across my body. I intend to be up and on my way before he wakes up. If he's going to shut this thing down between us, there's no chance in hell I'm going to be the one who tries to start it up again.

I gaze out at the twinkling lights of the Manhattan skyline, numb to its beauty. It

was a big mistake coming here. Thinking any of this could ever be mine. I don't belong here. Chase is right. We would never work out in the long run. We're too different, or maybe deep down we're both too terrified to admit just how much we're alike.

Two stubborn, insecure people desperate to push away love.

# *Chapter Eighteen*

## **Chase**

I can't believe I let her sleep out there alone.

In the back of my mind, I imagined what she'd look like in my apartment. But actually seeing her here among my things threw me. It wasn't just a matter of conjecture anymore. It was real. And I didn't handle it well.

I stretch out on my stomach, trying to figure out a plan of attack. Something must have brought her here. Was it the message I left? Did she know I was hurt? It was a pretty bold gesture on her part to drop everything and drive to my

apartment in the middle of the night. She's a lot braver than I am. But I'm the one who has a whole lot more to lose if it all goes wrong.

If I end things with her now, she has a chance to escape back into anonymity. No one needs to know she was here. Irina won't say a word because of the non-disclosure agreement she signed, and Noah can be trusted to keep his mouth shut. She can still walk away unscathed, and I have to make sure that she does. No matter how much I want her to stay. She should get away from me while she still can.

But for a second, I close my eyes and savor the fact that she's somewhere in my apartment. If only for one morning, I

get to wake up and know she's close by. I'd rather have her here in bed with me, but after what went down with Irina last night, that just was not going to happen. But I'll take whatever I can get.

If I leave the safety of my room, I don't want to spook her by going out there. Whenever I approach her, I never know which way the conversation is going to go. Sometimes it's relaxed and easy, and other times we're walking on a precipice ready to fall off the ledge. It's this push and pull that's driving me crazy. We want each other, but we can't have each other. I have to view her strictly as a friend, nothing more. Business as usual. Don't get involved.

But I have to see her.

I slide out my Egyptian cotton sheets and into a pair of gym shorts. I'm not about to parade out there in my underwear, considering the kind of trouble it got me into the last time. I freakin' proposed to her, for chrissake. But she's already seen my tattoos. Why bother putting on a shirt? There's no need to cover up now.

Cautiously, I open my bedroom door. It's just after eight a.m. I don't even know what time Noah came back, if he came back at all. I just hope to God that Grey didn't sneak out. I want to at least say goodbye to her this time.

My feet sink into the plush carpet, not



making a sound. I can't help but grin as I creep up on her. She's out for the count as she erupts into a boisterous round of snoring. Man, is she loud.

I could put the TV on mute and see just how badly I'm being ravaged in the headlines, but I'd rather look at her. It makes my heart ache to see her spread out on my couch. Back in Stockton, I imagined us snuggling together, watching a movie, and eating popcorn. Now that she's actually here, it feels so fleeting, so transient, like a whisper of a dream that will never come true.

I can't sink to my knees and gaze at her like I want to, so I hoist myself onto the window ledge and watch her sleep. Her bangs are sticking up at an odd

angle and one foot is falling off the couch. I don't know how she can feel comfortable in that position. She looks like she's going to tumble onto the floor any second.

My phone buzzes on the end table by her head, and I grab it before it can wake her. It's a text from Noah. Turns out he really didn't make it home last night.

**Hey dude. Don't worry. Irina didn't kidnap me. Her flight got delayed, so we checked into the hotel next to the airport. Separate rooms, of course. I'm going to hang out until her plane takes off, probably around noon. I'll keep you posted if anything changes.**

I quickly type out a message saying

that his plan is fine with me. It'll give Grey and me some time to be alone together. We have a lot we need to say to each other, and having Noah around would make things weird. I kind of like having her all to myself, like we were at her trailer.

There are a shitload of other texts on my phone, but I ignore them all. Everyone wants a quote from me about my condition. I got out of it last night, but I can't dodge the media for long. The Kings are going to expect me to make a statement. Let them craft something and spit it back out there. I mean, what can I say? That I'm pissed? This sucks? I don't think that's what they want to hear. God forbid I speak the truth.

Grey stirs in her sleep, no doubt feeling my eyes on her. I can't stop looking at her. I don't know when I'll get another opportunity. Before she fully wakes up, I take a picture of her with my phone. At least I'll have that. It's like the only picture I have of her. Tangled hair. Mouth parted. Contorted body. But still as sexy as hell...

She blinks, her warm brown eyes zeroing in on me. It's like we're magnetized, the way we're drawn to each other. She doesn't even seem surprised to find me staring down at her, like she knew I'd be out here when she woke up. Instead she seems mad, like she thought she'd be able to make a

quick exit and now she can't.

“Good morning, sunshine,” I tease, giving her a smile. I don't want to fight anymore, and I hope she doesn't either.

“Where's my coffee?” she mutters, tucking her head back under the cashmere throw.

“I can make a Starbucks run.” I don't want to leave her side, but there's no way I'm taking her with me. That'd be like ratcheting things up to DEFCON one.

She gazes at me knowingly with only her face peeking out.

“What?”

“I think I should come. Shake things up a bit.”

“Grey—”

“I’m serious. It’ll take the heat off your knee, give the press something else to talk about.”

As tempting as it sounds, I’m not going to sacrifice her privacy to ease the transition I’m going to have to face. I’m not a baseball player anymore. There’s no getting around it.

“That’s nice of you, Grey, but—”

“But nothing. Tell your sister to meet us there. Say I’m one of her friends. I’ll stay as far away from you as possible. Nobody will suspect a thing.”

“Wait a minute. You want to meet my sister? Why the hell would you want to do that?”

“Because she’s J.J., right?”

For a moment, the world stops spinning. If Noah betrayed my confidence and told her anything about my sister, I'm going to kill him. I didn't want anyone to know about her, especially Grey. It'll give her the wrong idea about me, like I'm a nice guy when I'm not.

"I guessed right, didn't I? Juliette Justine. I never knew her middle name until I saw that engraved picture frame over there." Grey seems proud of herself for figuring out my tattoo. Maybe it was just a lucky guess. I hope so, for Noah's sake, or he's a dead man.

"That doesn't explain why you want to meet her."

“C’mon, Chase. You met my sister. I think it’s time I met yours.”

“Why? It’s not like you need to ask her to be one of your bridesmaids.”

A flicker of hurt flashes across her face, so fast I almost miss it.

We’re getting off track again. She’s always guiding me into places I don’t want to go. I have to retake control of this conversation before it ends with one of us storming out the door.

“But I’ll call J.J. if you want.” I concede to her request and her face lights up.

“You will?”

“Yeah. She usually hates every girl I’m with, so don’t expect her to be nice



to you.”

“Well, my mom didn’t name me Grey for nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“The day I was born, there was this massive storm—”

“Hurricane Grey?”

“Yeah, the one that ravaged practically the entire East Coast, wreaking billions of dollars worth of damage. Perfect namesake, don’t you think?”

“At least your mom has a sense of humor.”

“That or she’s a pretty accurate fortune teller.”

“Your life can’t be all gloom and doom. You seem pretty stable to me.”

“Ah, but looks can be deceiving. You’re Chase Whitfield. You should know.”

Her barb nicks the surface of my heart. She knows what I’m up to, keeping her at arm’s length. It’s impossible to hide anything from her. I don’t even know why I try.

“Why does it feel like we’ve had a million of these little talks when it’s only the second morning we’ve spent together?”

“I don’t know. We’re old souls, I guess.”

“What?”

“Sometimes you can spend years and years with a person and never figure

them out, while a moment with someone else is enough to know what makes them tick. It all comes down to compatibility, I suppose. You can't predict it. You can't fake it. It just happens. You either get somebody or you don't. I don't get many people, but for some strange reason, I get you."

And out of the thousands of people I've met throughout my career, she's the one I automatically clicked with. She's right. There's no explaining it. It just happens. Some hearts beat in sync with each other, and others don't. It's the kind of thing poets and philosophers go on and on about. But until I met Grey, I didn't think that kind of connection actually existed, especially for someone

like me who already has everything I could possibly want. Why would I be lucky enough to meet someone like her on top of it all?

“Sorry, Chase. Did I freak you out? I know you’re trying to keep your distance from me. I don’t want to make things any harder than they have to be, but I would like to spend some more time with you before you send me away. I think we owe it to ourselves, don’t you?” Her eyes are shining up at me, and I momentarily lose all sense of time and place. She makes it all sound so easy, and I want to believe that something like this is possible, that we don’t have to let it die.

But I back away anyway. It's second nature to me. She's reaching out, and I'm holding back. It's going to take a lot of practice to get me to stop reacting like this, but maybe if she's patient enough she can teach me. Because I want to learn.

“Yeah, let's go for coffee. I'm gonna call J.J. You're welcome to freshen up in the guest bathroom if you want. It's right down the hall, first door on the right.” Great. Now I'm getting all formal with her. It's one of my defense mechanisms. Whenever I have random girls spend the night, it's how I retreat into myself if they're still here in the morning. I'm relapsing back into that old

pattern of behavior now, and I hate myself for it. Especially after Grey just put herself out there for me like that.

But she seems to understand where my sudden reticence is coming from, and she doesn't make a big deal about it. She simply nods, smoothing back her hair. Last night, I wanted to take out her ponytail and let her ebony locks flow around her shoulders. I'm itching to touch her now as I open and close my fists. Maybe later, if I can make it through this, it'll be my reward for good behavior.

But for now, I intend to jerk off in the shower instead.

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I'm as nervous as all get out as we wait for J.J. to meet us at my apartment. It's too risky, being seen on the sidewalk alone with Grey. It's better if we leave from here as a group, keeping my sister in between us. Why give anyone reason to speculate? Grey isn't the type of girl the paparazzi is used to seeing me with. If we play it right, it's a good bet they'll just assume she's J.J.'s friend or an assistant of mine—nothing more.

But my sister is a wild card. She grills every girl in my life since she thinks no one's good enough for her big brother. She absolutely hated Irina, so I don't think she'll be too bummed to find out she's been replaced. Well, not

exactly replaced, but I don't know how else to describe my current relationship status with Grey.

As long as we don't have to deal with my mom, we'll be okay. If J.J.'s bad, my mom is fifty times worse. She won't even come to a game if she knows one of my celebrity girlfriends is going to be sitting in the box along with the rest of the players' wives. She thinks they all just want to bask in my limelight. And she's probably right, even if she doesn't want to admit to herself that I'm using them too.

My mom doesn't know anything about my one-night stands and how I cheat on my contracted girlfriends—and I never intend for her to find out. I'm sure she



has a good idea about what goes on, but she'll never call me on it. It's too embarrassing for her to acknowledge. I think she ignores my behavior because I'm not married. Otherwise, I think it'd be a different story. Then she'd be on my case like nobody's business, especially if there were grandkids involved. She'd want me to man up instead of acting like some playboy who can't keep it in his pants.

I didn't realize that Grey had an overnight bag with her last night. She must have changed while I was getting ready. She looks spectacular. A pair of denim cutoffs shows off her legs and a cream-colored top covered in tiny

flowers hugs her curves. Her hair is piled on top of her head in a messy bun, and there are tiny gold hoops in her ears. For not getting much sleep, she looks fresh-faced and ready to go—an intoxicating blend of wholesome sexiness a guy doesn't come across too often. I don't know how she does it. I only wish her hair were down. I like it down. But the view I'm getting of her neck almost makes up for it. There's a little red mark below one ear. I hope I'm the one who put it there after nuzzling her last night. Even if I can't tell the world she's mine, I can still leave my mark on her body.

“Thanks for doing this, Chase. I know you didn't have to.” She runs her hand

up and down my forearm and my dick immediately jerks to life. Shit. I can't have a hard-on in front of my freakin' sister.

“It's cool, Grey. It just sucks being in the media's crosshairs. But having you and J.J. with me, at least I won't have to go it alone.”

“You're not alone,” she replies fiercely, her hand slipping into mine as she gives it a squeeze. “I'll always be on your side. No matter what happens. You got that? I'm your number one fan, remember?”

Just then, the intercom beeps, causing her to let go of my hand, spoiling the moment. Even if she's only sympathizing

with me, I don't care. Knowing I have someone like her in my corner means a lot. Even if she doesn't know I'll probably never play baseball again.

"Mr. Whitfield, your mother and sister are here. Should I buzz them up?"

Holy fuck. What did Luis say?

"What? Your mom's here too? Did you know she was coming?" Grey asks, looking a little unnerved.

"Mr. Whitfield?" Luis's voice crackles over the speaker again, waiting for my reply.

"Yes, Luis. Send them up." I try to bend my knee, but I forget I'm strapped into the new brace Dr. Brownstein gave me. It's become a nervous habit of mine lately to ease the tension, but now I can't

move it at all. I'm trapped just as much as my injured joint. My mother is going to sniff out the truth. There's no stopping her from unraveling Grey's whole story.

"How do you want me to play this?" Grey whispers, her face pale.

"Honestly? I have no fucking clue. She's going to know if I'm lying. I can never pull anything over on her."

"So when you were a kid, she always knew when you were pretending to be sick when you didn't want to go to school?"

"Yeah, something like that." I can't focus right now. I love my mom, but I don't want her up in my business. If she doesn't like Grey, things could get ugly.

I really wanted to sidestep all this bullshit.

“So who am I supposed to be? Your girlfriend?” Grey looks up me searchingly, but I can’t give her the answer she wants to hear. If it were just my sister, I could test the waters, saw how it all plays out, but not with my mother. Definitely not with my mother.

“No, just say the Kings hired you to look after me for a couple of days because they don’t want me up on my feet.”

“But I’m letting you walk three blocks for coffee?”

“They know the Kings are overly cautious with me and that I never listen to what they say. I always end up doing

whatever the hell I want.”

“Is that so?”

“I might have signed my name on the dotted line, but they don’t own me. No one does.”

She looks disappointed in me, her lips forming a straight line. I want to kiss her and make her smile again, but I can’t because they’re already knocking. This whole thing might very well spiral out of control. There are too many moving pieces. I can’t keep my eye on all of them. One slip of the tongue and it’s all over.

Giving Grey a quick nod of encouragement, I swing open the door. For better or worse, Grey Kelleher is

about to meet the Whitfields. Where's my dad when I need him? He always gets along with all my girlfriends. Even though Grey's technically not my girlfriend...

"Oh my lord, look at the size of that brace! What are you doing out of bed? You should be resting." My mom rushes over the threshold, seizing me in a hug so tight I can't move.

"Who's this?" J.J. is eyeing Grey up, ready to pounce.

"I'm his home health aide." Grey beats me to the punch, and that's a big mistake. She should've let me speak first and smooth things over.

"Dressed like that?" J.J. raises an eyebrow in my direction, and all I can



do is shrug while I keep on embracing my mom to prevent her from turning around.

“Dressed like what?” Grey quickly retorts.

“Don’t you have to wear, like, a uniform or something? You don’t look too professional.” J.J. already has her hand on her hip, ready to throw down.

“I got called in unexpectedly.” Grey shifts her weight from foot to foot, lying through her teeth.

“Well, my son does have a reputation with the ladies.” My mom lets go of me, wagging her finger in my face. “This girl is here to do her job. You hear me? So keep your hands to yourself.”

“Yes, Mom.” I’m kind of taken aback that she’s taking Grey’s side.

“Thanks, Mrs. Whitfield.” Grey smiles sweetly at her while laughing at me with her eyes—she’s enjoying this a little too much.

J.J.’s head is tilted to the side as she watches our exchange.

“Call me Linda, dear. I want to be on a first-name basis with whoever’s taking care of my son.” She extends her hand, and Grey shakes it.

“I’m Grey. Pleased to meet you. And your daughter.” Grey releases my mom’s hand and offers it to J.J., who hesitates a minute before taking it.

“J.J.” My sister’s reply is direct and

to the point, still unsure of what to make of Grey. She senses something's up. "So what exactly are you doing for my brother? Do I even want to know?"

"Don't listen to her. It's the hormones talking. She's been a bear ever since she got pregnant." I step in to protect Grey from my sister's wrath. "And Grey's already worked miracles when it comes to my knee. She gave me this great anti-inflammatory ointment that really helped reduce the swelling. I'm already starting to see some improvement."

The look Grey gives me at hearing that her treatment worked makes all of this lying worth the risk. Her happiness over being able to help me radiates outward. Her concern for me is genuine.

It's like she cares about me just as much as my mom and J.J. And it frightens me to think I could care about her just as much as I do about them.

“And you feel good enough to walk all the way down to 47th Street in that thing? You're nuts, bro. The paparazzi are prowling around outside. We're gonna get swarmed. Your face is all over the news. Everyone's saying you're done.” J.J. crosses her arms over her baby bump, her eyes shifting from me to Grey. “Do you think he's done?”

“No, I don't. I still believe in him, and so should you.” The vehemence in Grey's response causes the corner of J.J.'s mouth to turn up.

“You’re not as bad as I thought. Let’s get my brother his shot of caffeine before he throws a hissy fit. We’re already off his rigid schedule by like a half hour.” J.J. ushers us out the door, hitting the down button for the elevator.

“What do you mean?” Grey questions.

“Chase has to do the same thing at the same time every day or he freaks out.” J.J. smirks in my direction.

“I do not,” I protest, not wanting Grey to think I have some kind of obsessive compulsive disorder.

“I’m afraid he does, dear.” My mom drapes her arm over Grey’s shoulders like she’s letting her in on a little secret. “If he doesn’t get his coffee, black, from

Starbucks by nine a.m., all hell breaks loose.”

“I like to stick to a routine. That’s all. It helps me stay grounded when I wake up in a different city every morning. I need some sense of normalcy to keep me sane.” I’ve never made this kind of admission to anyone outside of my immediate family. I glance over at Grey to see how she’s taking it, but she’s playing it cool, looking at her feet as she follows my mom onto the elevator.

“Well, things are about to get crazy the minute we hit the lobby, so get ready,” J.J. mutters, slipping a pair of sunglasses out of her purse.

“Do you ever get used to all this?” Grey asks, a little too eager to hear what

they have to say about being related to someone as famous as me.

“At first, it’s flattering,” my mom admits.

“But it gets old really fast, especially when you’re always being compared to Mr. Perfect over there.” J.J. juts her chin at me before sticking out her tongue.

“Yeah, real mature, J.J.” We bicker all the time, but I can’t help but wonder what Grey must be thinking about all of this.

“Now, now, you two. There are some benefits. It’s not just about the invasion of privacy or putting up with all the gossip. J.J., you wouldn’t be having that baby of yours if it weren’t for your

brother.” My mom fiddles with the gold cross around her neck, trying to look on the bright side.

“Mom, that sounds so wrong.” J.J. laughs. “You make it sound like Chase got me pregnant. Gross.” J.J. looks at Grey, holding up her hand like she’s taking an oath. “I swear this is not an incestuous baby. I did not sleep with my brother. Even if I’m the only woman in New York who hasn’t.”

“Well, that goes for both of us,” Grey chimes in, and my cheeks redden.

“What? He got you pregnant too?” J.J. chides.

“Knock it off, J.J.” There’s nothing worse than having the two of them ride my ass, especially when it comes to



having sex with Grey. What, am I some kind of joke to her now?

But I don't get a chance to find out as we're thrown into a maelstrom of camera flashes. J.J. lowers her sunglasses, tucking our mother's arm under hers and guiding her out of the lobby and into the chaos—leaving me alone with Grey. Damn it. I can't let Grey get shoved around. I have to protect her from these animals. They're ruthless. They'd have no problem knocking her down in order to get to me.

“Hold on to me,” I urge, not wanting J.J. and my mom to get too far ahead of us.

“What?” Grey glances up at me like I

just asked her to jump off a fifty-story building. “That wasn’t the plan. Remember? They’re supposed to think I’m J.J.’s friend.”

“Yeah, well J.J.’s long gone, and we can’t exactly retreat back upstairs. They’ve already taken our picture standing here. It’ll only look more suspicious if we cut and run.” I watch as the photographers scramble over each other to get a better shot of us.

“But our story isn’t going to hold up. The minute they start fact-checking to see who I am, they’re gonna find out the Kings didn’t hire me.” She’s starting to get nervous as everything I strove to protect her from comes crashing down around us.

“J.J. and my mom aren’t gonna say a word to the press. And we’re not either. We’re just gonna walk out that door and keep going until we hit Starbucks. That’s all you have to do. Think you can handle it?” I’m baiting her, because I’m just as scared as she is.

“I’m not that much of a pushover. C’mon, let’s do this thing.”

I follow her out, enjoying the brief interlude we have crammed up against each other in the revolving door, but it ends way too soon as we’re engulfed in a barrage of shouted questions and popping flashbulbs.

“Chase, is your career with the New York Kings over?”

“Hey, Whitfield, who’s that? Your new girlfriend?”

“Is it true that you and Irina Portanova broke up?”

There are a lot more photographers out here than usual, and they’re right on top of us, barely giving us room to move up the block. Out of instinct, I wrap my arm around Grey and try to lead her through the melee surrounding us on every side. It’s never been this bad before. They must smell blood in the water. For the first time in my career, I’m down and out, and they can’t wait to jump all over that. Churning out bad news is what drives the tabloid machine.

Which means Grey is about to become

my most talked about girlfriend ever.

# *Chapter Nineteen*

## **Grey**

Chase is getting our coffee to go since everyone in Starbucks is staring a hole through us, thanks to the photographers camped outside. His mom was only in town to take J.J. to an OB-GYN appointment, so they bailed on us, not wanting to subject the baby to any more excitement than necessary. And I can't say that I blame them. They've been putting up with this for years, and I've about had it after fifteen minutes.

I can't believe the barista is making us wait for our drinks. Doesn't she realize that we want to get the hell out of here as

quickly as possible? But she has that lovey-dovey look in her eyes as she adds a shot of foam to my latte. She's waiting on New York Kings star shortstop Chase Whitfield and she intends to savor every moment of the experience.

It startles me to think that I was that girl just a few days ago, gazing at Chase with the same dopey expression on my face. But now I've suddenly been catapulted into the stratosphere in league with the likes of Irina Portanova. This is way more intense than I imagined. Being with Chase is like amping everything up to a whole other level. What I wear. How I act. What I say. Every facet of my existence is going to put under the

microscope and analyzed by a horde of obsessive fans ready to rip me apart. I should know. I used to be one of them.

“Chase...I mean Chuck?” The barista gives him a dazzling smile as she snaps the lids onto our cups. I don’t know why Chase insists on using an alias. It’s not like he’s fooling anybody. Everyone in here knows exactly who he is. There’s no way we’re blending in. Not now—maybe not ever.

And that freaks me out.

As he hands me my drink, our phones go off simultaneously. The only counter is along the window, where the paparazzi would love to get a shot of us sipping coffee together. Instead, Chase



nods toward the enclosed hallway in the back by the restrooms, and I follow him, trying to balance my coffee while digging my phone out of my purse.

Chase is already talking to someone as I look down and see Erin's name on the screen. Immediately, my hands start to shake, so I put down my cup and sit against the wall. This can't be good.

"Erin, just tell me. Is it Mom?" I force some air into my lungs, trying not to listen to Chase talking a mile a minute above me.

"No, you fool. I'm calling about you. You're all over the internet. Irina had some kind of meltdown at JFK and everyone's blaming it on you."

"You're fucking kidding me."

“No, I’m not. They already found out your name, where you live, where you went to high school.”

“How? They literally just took our picture together.”

“Maybe someone tipped them off. I don’t know. But everyone thinks you’re screwing Chase.”

“But I’m not screwing Chase.”

“Doesn’t matter. You got caught coming out of his apartment and then he took you to Starbucks. That’s all it takes.”

“Shit.”

“Is he, like, using you to show he’s no longer with Irina?”

“No, it’s not like that. His mother and

sister were with us but—”

“Wait, hold up. He introduced you to his family?”

“Yeah, I wanted to meet his sister and —”

“Grey Goose, do you know how major that is? His family is never seen in public with any of his girlfriends. This is huge. No wonder you’re blowing up all over Twitter and Facebook. Man, I wanna see a pic of you with his mom and sis too.”

“Erin, focus. What should I do?”

“Well, does he think you’re his girlfriend now?”

“He said he doesn’t want me to be. That I’d only get hurt. But I think it’s too late now.”

“Yeah, I’d say. You took the walk of shame together whether or not you actually did the deed.”

“But there’s a lot more to it than that. Yesterday, he asked me to marry him then he took it back. Then he got hurt in the game, and I drove out here to check on him. Then he threw Irina out. And then all this happened with the paparazzi. I feel so lost, Erin. And I probably got fired from my job when I didn’t show up this morning. And I don’t have enough money to get my truck out of the parking garage. And I have, like, one bar of juice left on my phone and I forgot my charger.”

“Grey, calm the fuck down. You have

Chase. Let him handle it. He's used to dealing with this shit. So don't go falling apart on me, okay? There's just one thing I have to know. Why did he take back his marriage proposal?"

"You would have to pick up on that in spite of everything else I just told you."

"Girl, the most eligible bachelor in New York freakin' asked you to marry him. Of course I'm going to pick up on that. How in the world did you manage to pull that off? But more importantly, why'd he change his mind? I don't care if he developed a case of cold feet. You should've worked it for all it's worth. You had it in the bag."

I sigh, hesitating a moment. "I revealed something personal about

myself that he didn't particularly like."

"What? That you're a virgin? Guys usually eat that shit up."

"No, I didn't tell him I'm a virgin. It was...something else." I rest my forehead against the wall, wishing I could disappear.

"Like what?"

"I don't want to have this conversation with you right now."

"We damn well are gonna have this conversation right now. What aren't you telling me, Grey?" I hold the phone away from my ear as Erin starts yelling at me.

"Drop it, Erin."

"No, I'm not fucking dropping it. Tell me now, or I'm calling Mom."

“Well, it won’t do any good because she doesn’t know either.”

“Then it’s something really bad.” I hear the trepidation in Erin’s voice.

“I don’t think it is.” I have to get her to calm down.

“What? You took drugs?”

“No.”

“You killed somebody?”

“No.”

“You sold yourself for money.”

“Not exactly.”

“Oh God, Grey. What did you do?” she moans in dismay.

“I stripped at The Blue Room for a couple of months, all right? Happy now?”

“You did not.” Her voice is adamant, like she’s trying to convince herself it’s not true.

“So what if I did?”

“Jesus, Grey... Why?” I cringe, hearing just how disappointed she is in me. “Mom was going through chemo. You were caught up in all that shit with Mark. I didn’t have anyone to turn to.” I close my eyes, hating to have to rationalize my behavior.

“But you didn’t have to do something like that.”

“I know. I wasn’t thinking straight. Don’t worry. When it got a little dicey, I left.”

“You didn’t get hurt, did you?”



“No.” She doesn’t need to know how the hole in my screen door came to be there.

“Well, now I feel like the world’s worst sister for not being there when you needed me.”

“You had enough to deal with.”

“Yeah, but so did you.”

“It’s over now, Erin. So don’t even think about it.” She’s not to blame. So what if at the time I was starving for attention? It’s not her fault I went looking for it in the worst place imaginable.

“Did it all come out when they said that’s where Chase was the night he was here?”

“Yeah.” I grit my teeth, remembering Chase’s reaction.

“And he flipped out?”

“Well, he didn’t want to marry me anymore, so does that answer your question?”

“What a hypocrite. What are you going—?”

But my phone shuts off mid-question, the battery completely drained. Damn it. My lifeline to Stockton is officially severed. I’m alone in this insanity now. I lean against the wall, willing myself to pull it together. But it’s too quiet. Chase isn’t talking anymore. Shit.

I whip around. “How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough.” He’s looking at me with a peculiar expression on his face.

“You shouldn’t have been eavesdropping.” If he heard me say that I’m a virgin, I’m going to die. I turn around and face the wall again, unable to meet his gaze.

“We’ll talk about it later. But for now, we have to go. Noah’s outside waiting in the car.” He reaches out his hand to pull me to my feet, and I let him because I’m too unsteady to get up on my own.

“Isn’t he supposed to be with Irina?” I ask as a new wave of curious bystanders starts to edge closer to where we’re hiding out.

“That’s the problem. She went off on

him at the airport, caused quite a scene. Throwing things at him and everything. He didn't know what to do, so he split, leaving her there to fend for herself."

"So that's what Erin was talking about."

"About what?"

"Apparently it's all over the internet that she broke up with you and I'm your new girlfriend. Everything's been leaked about me—my name, my age, where I live."

"How could it have gotten out so fast?"

"That's what I want to find out. You know it's only a matter of time until they uncover my connection to The Blue Room."

“I won’t let that happen, Grey. I swear.”

“You might not have a choice. We’re playing catch-up now. You might not be able to get ahead of the story.”

“Yeah? Just try and stop me.”

“I don’t care about it ruining my reputation. That’s the last thing on my mind. I just don’t want my mom to have to find out like this. She’s in such a fragile state and the shock of it all might —”

I stop, choking back a sob. I’m so freaking selfish for doing what I did. Taking my clothes off in front of strangers. Running to New York after Chase. I never stopped to consider the

consequences of how it could affect the people that I love.

Quickly pulling me into the empty men's room, Chase locks the door behind us to give us some privacy. We shouldn't be doing this here. We should leave. We're only making things worse for ourselves. But he doesn't seem to care. He's more worried about me.

"Tell me what's wrong with your mom, Grey." The warmth in his voice is the only thing sustaining me right now as it echoes through the tiny space. We should be booking it out the door, but he's staying, concerned about someone who means the world to me.

"She has lung cancer."

Chase's eyes widen, but he doesn't

say anything.

“She’s going through chemo and everything, but the doctors just don’t know. She smoked a pack a day for the last twenty years. It’s pretty bad. She’s so weak right now. I just don’t want to be the one who crushes her spirit, you know?” The tears start flowing and I can’t stop them.

He pulls me to his chest, and I bury my face in his shirt. He feels so safe, like he’ll pick up my troubles and shoulder them for me. I don’t have to bear the burden alone. He’s here for me. I can depend on him to be my strength in my moment of weakness. And I’ve never felt that way about anyone. This is what

love is supposed to feel like, right?

“You could never do that, Grey. Even if your mom finds out, she’ll want to hear your side of the story. She’ll know there had to be a reason behind what you did, and once you have a chance to explain it to her, everything will be okay. I just know it.” He strokes the back of my neck, twirling the tendrils of hair that have fallen out of my bun with his fingers.

“But what if I don’t get to do that? What if she finds out and something bad happens to her before I can get back to Stockton? I mean, look at the way you reacted when you heard about what I did.” I grab his belt loops and hold on tight, afraid that he’s going to pull away



from me again.

“Well, I was an idiot. I wouldn’t react that way now,” he whispers. I feel the warmth of his hands caress my back through the thin material of my shirt as he runs his thumbs back and forth over my bra strap.

“What are you saying?” I take a risk and loosen my hold on him, daring to meet his eyes.

“I’m saying you should give me another chance.” He’s looking at me so tenderly that it only makes me cry harder.

“You’re not going to ask me to marry you again, are you?”

“No, we’ll take it slow. Take our

time.” He kisses my forehead, parting my bangs, causing me to laugh through my tears.

“So you want me to be your girlfriend?”

“Something like that.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then I’ll just have to wear you down.”

“Mmmm...I kind of like the sound of that.”

“So is that a yes?” he asks with a hopeful expression on his face.

Chase wants me to be his girlfriend—his real-life, honest-to-goodness girlfriend. Not some contracted piece of arm candy. Not some meaningless one-night stand. He’s ready to acknowledge

our relationship, out in the open for everyone to see. He's no longer afraid to make it official. Despite my past, despite everything I've told him, he still wants to be with me. My head is spinning as I try to collect myself. "I don't know, Chase."

His lips trace a path down my face, and my heartbeat starts to accelerate. He rubs my nose with his, but I throw back my head, craving more. I feel the warmth of his breath on my lips, but he merely brushes his mouth across mine, teasing me. His hands are buried in my hair, holding me in place, as he untwists it and bobby pins start to ping onto the floor. He moans as the silken strands

tumble onto his face, breathing me in. That does it. His tongue is in my mouth before I can even blink. I smile against his lips at his eagerness, kissing him back feverishly.

I bend my knee, sliding it up the side of his leg. He runs his hands down my body, making me groan as he hitches my leg around his waist and then the other. His knee can't support my weight for long, so he pushes me up against the wall, digging my back into the cold, tiled surface. My nipples are straining against the lace cups of my bra, chafing against his chest as I move with him, crossing my ankles behind his back.

His hands feel hot against my skin as he starts inching my shirt up. This is it.

There's no going back now. This is really happening.

Until Chase almost drops me when someone starts banging on the door.

“I don't care if you're Chase fuckin' Whitfield screwing some girl in the bathroom. I gotta take a piss. So open the goddamn door.”

Shit. Only in New York...

# *Chapter Twenty*

## **Chase**

“Where to, boss?” Noah is awfully chipper for someone who just had a world-famous supermodel go nuclear on his ass.

The photographers are thumping their lenses against the windows as Grey and I huddle in the back seat after making a mad dash from the sidewalk. The situation is definitely escalating. The police have arrived, trying to break up the crowd that seems to be growing by the minute. It doesn't take long for word to spread about my whereabouts on social media. Once I'm spotted, my

location is retweeted and hashtagged from one fan to the next. Those who live and work in the city tend to make quite a game out of it. One blogger even named her site “Let’s chase Chase!” like stalking me is some kind of sick scavenger hunt.

“I was on the phone with my agent when you called. I hung up on him when I saw it was you, but he said that the Kings have been trying to get in touch with me all morning. So I better check in with them and see what they want.” I scroll through my list of contacts, thumbing down to Terry’s number.

“You want me to head uptown until you figure out where we’re going? Because we can’t stay here.” Noah’s

eyes meet mine through the rearview mirror, and I nod, realizing how fast I'm losing a handle on the situation. Noah hits the gas and pulls away from the curb with a flourish as Grey and I are thrown against the backseat. One thing about Noah—he's a man of action.

“What do you think the Kings want?” Grey asks, hastily fastening her seatbelt as Noah merges into traffic and battles the never-ending stream of taxicabs.

“Nothing good, I'm sure,” I mutter, holding my breath while hitting the call button.

“Do you think it has something to do with me?” Grey's eyes are troubled, begging me to tell her the truth.



I decide to be up front with her as the phone starts to ring. “It could be.”

“Shit.” She turns away, clutching her stomach like she’s going to be sick.

“Don’t worry. We’ll handle it together.” I slip my hand into hers. Whatever the Kings have to say, it’s not going to change how I feel about her.

“Chase, is that you, buddy?” Great. Terry’s being all friendly and casual, no doubt trying to butter me up for some reason. He’s not using his authoritative GM voice with me. Not yet anyway.

“Yeah, it’s me. Steve said you wanted to talk?” I grip the headrest of Noah’s seat as he brakes suddenly to avoid a guy swerving in the bike lane.

“There’s a lot we need to discuss. Maybe it’d be better if we did it in person. Do you think you could come up to the stadium? Dr. Brownstein is here with me now.”

Fuck. Terry knows. It was only a matter of time, but I didn’t think he’d start grilling Brownstein so soon. The doc probably couldn’t hold out when faced with having to answer to the big shots who pay my medical bills. Screw patient confidentiality—he must’ve cracked under the pressure. But I can’t fault the guy too much. At least he bought me a few hours to come up with a strategy.

“I don’t see why not.” I’m evasive in

order to feel Terry out.

“Great. And while you’re here, it’d probably be good if we discussed how we’re going to handle the stripper situation.” Terry slid that right in there. Sure, he’s jockeying for position, but the move was almost too smooth. Like he was letting me off the hook before revealing the real reason he was reaching out to me. Has he known this whole time about Grey? Were his little spies following me around in Stockton? God only knows what he’d sink to when it comes to gaining the upper hand. There aren’t going to be any contract talks at the end of the season anyway. Didn’t Dr. Brownstein tell him? I’m done.

“What stripper situation?” I play dumb. Maybe he’s just talking about The Blue Room rumor. But I can’t help clenching my jaw when Grey’s head whips around in alarm.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about, Chase. C’mon, she’s with you now, isn’t she?” Terry sounds so smug. I want to beat his face in. And I’m not usually a violent guy.

“And how do you know that?” My eyes shoot to the back of Noah’s head. Has he been playing me all along?

“Chase, I’ve been receiving emails about you all morning. You’ve got to get a handle on the women in your life. This is unacceptable and you know it. We

pride ourselves on running a professional organization. But a supermodel throwing a tantrum in the airport? Getting caught with a stripper the morning after? Like I said, I don't want to hash this out over the phone. We'll talk more when you get here."

Terry's on the warpath. He's had his fill cleaning up Drake's messes and now he thinks he's going to have to deal with my shit too. And what kills me is that I've always been so careful about keeping my private life private, and within a matter of hours, I've become the poster boy for bad behavior. I was afraid something like this was going to happen, and now it has.

"All right, I'm heading uptown.

Depending on traffic, I'll be there within the hour." I massage my temple, in the hope of staving off the massive headache I feel coming on.

"See you then," Terry says crisply before ending the call. Ever the businessman. I can picture him straightening his tie as he tells the managing partners that I'm on my way.

I could very well be walking into a bloodbath. I shouldn't enter the fray alone. I should at least have Steve with me, but there isn't time. I need the muscle of the team's PR department to help me diffuse this story about Grey. Her mom can't find out. Not until I can get her back to Stockton so she can tell

her herself.

Grey's knee is bouncing up and down like she's tapping out a distress call in Morse code. She needs to relax. I've got this. I've gone through many crisis management sessions before. A lot of girls over the years have tried to blackmail me for money, saying I fathered their illegitimate child or that I'm a freak in the bedroom. They've all been handled and dealt with appropriately. Sure, Grey's story seems to be springing more leaks than the Titanic, but if we can track down the source, maybe we can shut the person up. All it takes is a little persuasion, and the Kings have the money and the influence to do it. They don't want their

bottom line damaged, and I'm the face of the team. They're not going to let me take the fall because, let's face it, they can't.

"It's out there then?" Grey asks, fidgeting with one of her earrings.

I place my hand on her knee to get her to stop shaking. "I'm afraid so."

"How?"

"That's what I have to find out."

"Videos, pictures?"

"I don't know."

"Oh God." She rests her hand on top of mine.

"Shhh..." I flick my eyes toward Noah, warning her not to say too much.

"You think...?" she whispers, the idea



of his betrayal taking hold.

“I’m not sure.”

But if Noah is the source, God help him. I’m going to tear him limb from limb for hurting Grey like this. If an image or a video of her topless goes viral, there will be little I can do to stop it. Shit like that lives forever on the internet. It’ll be like trying to stop the rain from falling when it comes to removing it completely. If we shut down one site, another one will pop up in its place. The key is containing it before it’s released—if such damning proof of Grey’s time at The Blue Room even exists. We’re jumping to conclusions because we don’t know what’s out there. But if some prick does come forward

looking to extort me, the Kings will be all over him. And I'll have no qualms about throwing Noah to the wolves if it turns out to be him.

We're already driving under the subway tracks that lead to Kings Stadium. I gotta act fast. Maybe Grey can aid her own cause. I pull out my phone and quickly type a message, showing it to Grey.

**Find out what you can. Grill him a little. Don't let him out of your sight.**

She nods in understanding as Noah parks before the entrance designated for the front office staff.

"Is this where you want me to drop you off, dude?" Noah asks, turning down

the hip hop station he was listening to.

“Perfect. For not being all that familiar with the city, you sure know your way around New York.”

“GPS, man. Stuff of legend.”

“Grey’s gonna wait with you in the car while I go inside. I don’t know how long I’m gonna be. Just sit tight until I get back, all right?”

“You got it, boss.”

“Take care of my girl, Noah.”

“Of course, dude.”

Noah seems so sincere that I want to believe him, but I’m just not sure. He’s the only viable link between the Kings, Grey, and The Blue Room. It’s too much of a coincidence for him to be simply an innocent party in all of this.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” I pull Grey into me, kissing her on the top of her head, allowing myself a minute to run my hands through her hair and compose myself before entering the lion’s den. I won’t fail her. I can’t.

“Give’em hell.” She strokes the side of my face, gazing into my eyes, believing that I have the power to make everything right again.

I just hope I still do.

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Terry’s secretary greets me as soon as I step off the elevator. “Mr. Whitfield, they’re expecting you.”

“Thanks, Rhonda. Full house?” She’s

always had my back in the past, ever since I was eighteen. I don't expect her to stop now.

"They're all in there. Even Arnold." She drums her manicured nails on a stack of manila folders, sitting on her desk.

"Great." I haven't seen the principal owner of the Kings in months. After he suffered a stroke at his house in the Hamptons last summer, he's kept a low profile since his speech is garbled and he's partially paralyzed on one side, confining him to a wheelchair. He was my biggest advocate when I was coming up through the farm system, refusing to trade me away because he believed in my potential. He's a tough old bird, but

he saw how hard I was willing to work and rightly predicted the successful future I was going to have with his team. Nobody loves the Kings more than Arnold Heimlich—no one.

“How’s your knee? It doesn’t look like you’re walking too well on it.” So far, Rhonda’s the only member of the Kings organization who has inquired after my health today. It’s nice to know that someone still cares, that I haven’t been completely written off.

“I’m not gonna lie. It’s sore.”

“Well, you take care of yourself because my whole family’s coming to a game in September and we’re all expecting you to be there.”

“No pressure or anything.”

“Honey, if the team keeps playing the way it is now, we’re gonna need you in the lineup. It’s going to come down to the wire with Boston. If we don’t make the playoffs. Heads will roll.”

*Yeah, mine included,* I think. But I don’t tell her that. I used to thrive under the weight of so much expectation. The Kings are supposed to win it all, every year, without fail. I was a born competitor, ready to devour the opposing teams one by one as we raced our way to the playoffs. But since my rookie year, it’s gotten a little bit harder with each passing season. Guys are getting older. Some have retired. Others

are about to. That core unit we had for so long is slowly breaking down. The free agents and Minor League prospects just aren't performing at the level everyone's accustomed to. No team can go on winning forever. Whether management wants to admit it or not, we're already in the rebuilding years. If I have to walk away, I'll be taking a lot of the magic of that success with me. It all seemed to start when I joined the team, and I'd hate to have it end now just because I'm being forced to walk away. New York fans deserve more.

“Well, no one could ever replace you, Rhonda. You're one of a kind.” I give her a wink as she hits the intercom button.



“Mr. Bloom, Mr. Whitfield is here to see you.”

“Good, Rhonda. Send him in.”

“Good luck, sweetheart,” she says, well aware of the gravity of the situation I’m about to face.

“Thanks, Rhonda. I’m gonna need it.” I take a deep breath as she gives me a sad smile. She knows it’s the beginning of the end. She’s just too polite to say it.

Yanking open the heavy double doors, I step over the Kings logo emblazoned on the doormat, ready to meet my fate. This is happening a lot sooner than I anticipated, but maybe it’s better to know where I stand. I tossed and turned all night, speculating over my future. At

least now I might have some answers, even if I won't particularly like what I'm about to hear.

Terry jumps to his feet the minute I enter the room. "There he is."

There's only one empty seat at the top of the conference table—next to Arnold who's at the head, his personal nurse at his side. Despite my intention to play it cool, I halt when I see Arnold. He's a shell of the man he used to be. He was always a big guy with broad shoulders and an intimidating presence, but now he's nothing more than skin and bones with a line of drool running down his chin that his nurse is dabbing at with a cloth. The shock of seeing him like this floors me. I wasn't expecting his

condition to have deteriorated so rapidly. The Kings have really kept it hidden.

“Aaaay-se,” he drawls, beckoning me forward with his good hand.

I smile at him as I make my approach. It hurts to see one of my biggest supporters in such bad shape. But he’s still here fighting for me, so I take it as a good sign. He didn’t have to come, but he’s here. He’s not going to let Terry ace me out of the picture. He’s going to have a say in the matter, even if it’s the last order of business he conducts with the team.

“Mr. Heimlich, I didn’t expect you to be here. It’s good to see you, sir.” I

know enough not to kneel down beside him. He wouldn't want any attention drawn to the fact that he's in a wheelchair. He'd run me over with it first. He's a very prideful man. Maybe that's why we get along so well.

It's hard for him to talk, so he just extends his hand and I take it. It feels bony and cold in my grip, like shaking hands with a chain-link fence. He must see how much his condition is affecting me because he holds on to me, his gnarled fingers surprisingly strong.

Even Terry seems shaken up over our exchange, momentarily stunned into silence as he watches us. This has to be hard for him too. It's the end of an era. The team he put together for his boss is

disbanding, never again to be what it once was. All of the phone calls and meetings have all boiled down to this—their star shortstop being shown the door.

Terry retakes his seat, shuffling through the paperwork in front of him, unable to meet my eye. “Dr. Brownstein, would you like to get things started?”

I walk over to the vacant chair next to him and recline against its leather surface—nothing but the best for the Kings. I glance quickly around the table to see who’s here. Two of Arnold’s sons, who are junior partners; Liam, the team’s trainer; and Tony, my manager, round out the lot. The firing squad is

fully loaded and prepared to take aim. All that's left is pinning my back against the wall and pulling the trigger.

"There's been a new development since I saw you last." Dr. Brownstein shoots me an encouraging look from across the table. "I went over your MRI with a colleague of mine over at St. Luke's this morning. He's of the opinion that, if the Kings shut you down completely for the remainder of the season, there's a chance that you might be healthy enough to play next year."

That certainly isn't what I expected him to say.

"There's no question the ligament is badly damaged. There's nothing we can do surgically to correct it, but resting

your knee might be just the solution we're looking for. But it's going to require keeping your weight off it. You'll have to get around on crutches or use a wheelchair for the next six months." Dr. Brownstein grimaces, unsure if I'll be willing to comply with his request.

"So I'll basically be off my feet until January?" My mind shifts into overdrive, pondering my options. "And there's no guarantee this will work?"

"No, there's not. You could very well be giving up your mobility for nothing. At the end of it, your knee could be just as damaged as it was before. But we will monitor your progress and keep a

close eye on you.”

“But, Chase, this is huge.” Terry jumps in. “You could be playing again by the time spring training rolls around.”

“I’d ease him into it gradually,” Dr. Brownstein pipes up. “Start with some strength training down in Florida. The muscles are going to atrophy a bit from not being used. We’re going to have to work from the ground up, and even with a full recovery, you might not be able to perform at the same level you’re accustomed to on the field.”

“If we can get back even seventy-five percent of the Chase Whitfield I know, that’s like getting a hundred percent out of most guys,” Tony Liotta grumbles as Arnold’s sons furiously scribble down



notes.

“But what about my contract?” It’s the elephant in the room. I might as well bring it up. “I might not still be with the Kings come spring training.”

“Are you planning on testing the free agency market? Seeing what other teams have to offer?” Terry doesn’t like the sound of that. I can tell.

I was planning on shopping around to drive up my value. My agent thought it’d be a good idea. Make the Kings realize what they’d be missing. Shake them up a bit. I’ve never played with any other organization and I don’t really want to. I’ve been with the Kings since I graduated high school. It’s where I

belong. It's where I want to stay. And if they're willing to take this big of a chance on me, they deserve my loyalty. Why mess around when I already know what I want? And until five minutes ago, I thought my career was over. Getting this opportunity is a miracle. Something I never expected to happen when I walked in here.

“You know my heart is with the Kings, Terry. It always has been. It always will be. I don't want to go anywhere else.” I look at Arnold as I speak, watching his mouth curl up on the one side.

“Then you think we can call Steve and work out a deal?” Terry glances up at me hopefully, clicking his pen in midair.

“Yeah. If he finds the terms to be agreeable, I don’t see why not.” He’s going to be mad at me for caving, but it’s what I want. He’s only doing what I’m asking him to do.

“Excellent.” Terry stands and slaps me on the back, shaking my hand firmly. “It’s great to have you back, Chase.”

“Funny. It seems like I never left.”

At that, the entire table erupts into laughter, the tension visibly easing its way out of the room.

“I’ll consult with Dr. Brownstein and get you set up with a regimen, Chase. All the dos and don’ts,” Liam shouts from the far side of the table.

“So you’re serious about keeping me

stationary, huh?” I stand up as Dr. Brownstein hustles over to congratulate me.

“I’m sure it won’t be hard for you to find someone to be at your beck and call.” Tony gives me a playful shove before giving me a quick hug. “Good to have you back, kid. Even if you can’t help me kick Boston’s ass until next year.”

“Don’t worry. You and the guys will pull it out. It’s not over yet.” I give him all of the enthusiasm I can muster. It sucks not being able to participate, but Tony has a difficult job and it kills me that my absence is just making it harder.

“On that note, Chase, Mr. Heimlich and I still have some business we need

to discuss with you. So if everyone would clear the room, we can get started.” Terry sounds like he has a bug up his ass. It has to be about Grey. What else could it be?

As the room begins to empty, even Arnold’s nurse gets up and leaves. Shit. This can’t be good.

“I talked to Mr. Heimlich privately about this matter before you arrived. The last few hours have been a bit of a whirlwind, and we’re still trying to sort it out. But we were sent an anonymous email last night that I think you should take a look at.” Terry slides his finger over his iPad, pulling up something I probably don’t want to see.

It's a video. My stomach drops. I lean in closer to get a better look. Shadowed figures are writhing in the darkness, the guitar riffs of Def Leppard wailing in the background. It's hard to make out what's going on until intermittent flashes from the strobe lights illuminate the scene. The quality of the video is grainy, but it's showing the catwalk of a strip club, most likely The Blue Room.

I watch silently as the clip cruises by the two-minute mark. So far I haven't seen anyone who remotely resembles Grey. If someone thinks they can blackmail me with this shoddy evidence, they're nuts. It could be any strip club in America for all I know. The girls are

onstage look nothing like Grey. But then the speed of the video slows down significantly and a spotlight is aimed dead center.

Grey totters slowly toward the crowd in a pair of heels and not much else.

There's no denying that it's her. Her alabaster skin looks translucent under the lights, her ebony hair blending into the darkness that surrounds her. The jerk operating the spotlight isn't even focusing on her face. She's lit up from the neck down, wearing nothing but a flesh-colored bikini.

Seeing the men below paw at her ankles makes my blood boil. She carefully steps over their outstretched hands, not caring to bend down to pick

up the dollar bills they're tossing her way. She stands at the end, gazing blankly out into the raucous crowd. The expression on her face is vacant, like she's not even there, like she's inhabiting someone else's body.

Slowly, she swings herself around the stripper pole at the bottom, careful not to trip over her feet. The men hoot and holler even louder as she gets into the act. The other girls are nowhere in sight, and she has the audience's full attention. The song over the loudspeakers is blaring the words "...sticky sweet..." and as if in a trance, she's prompted to start touching herself between her legs before raising her hand to her lips and



licking her finger provocatively.

I blush hotly knowing that Terry and Arnold have already seen this. I want to knock the shit out of Terry for having it stored on his iPad for future use. They're both respectively looking away as I watch it, but it's too late. They've seen the girl I'm into gyrating in front of a gang of lewd, ravenous men. I don't want this to be the first time I see Grey naked, but I'm afraid it's going to be.

I grit my teeth and keep watching. She twirls around the pole, dipping her head, her hair flying through the air. The big finale is coming. I can feel it. The music is amping up to its conclusion, the lights on the side of the stage blinking in time with the beat. Grey lets go of the pole

and strides forward dramatically. There's a wild gleam in her usually soulful brown eyes as she reaches back to unhook her top. With one tug, it falls away from her body, revealing her heaving breasts for all the world to see.

The men go absolutely insane when the lights go out. The clip ends, but my heart is racing. I hate myself for being turned on by what I just witnessed. And it only makes me think of the reaction every hot-blooded male is going to have after watching this.

I shove the iPad away from me, sliding it back across the table. "Who sent this?"

"I notified our lawyer the minute it

came in. He's had his tech team working on it all night. Apparently, it originated from an IP address in Stockton."

"Well, sorry if I'm not impressed since The Blue Room is located in Stockton."

"Hold on. There's more to it than that. Our attorney checked with the police to see if there was any criminal activity associated with that particular IP address."

"And was there?"

"That's the kicker. We put pressure on them and they got the hosting company to reveal the name on the account. Apparently, it belongs to the owners of Buster's Crab Shack. Ever hear of it?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid so. I ate there while

I was in Stockton. My driver recommended it.”

“Well, their little deviant son is about to get mommy and daddy in a whole lot of trouble.”

“What do you mean?”

“He had security cameras set up on every light pole in their parking lot. Then he got his friends to bring the girls they picked up at the local bars and clubs there. He supplied them with the roofies. They got the girls naked in their cars, doing God knows what, and he got it all on video. He then uploaded it onto the net, making a hefty profit off some pay-per-view porn site he set up.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“But we have to squash this now, especially if you were seen there.”

“How did he get that footage of Grey?”

“Possibly took it himself. He seems the type.”

My head is pounding at the revelation. There's only one person who could've tipped Keith off. Noah. It had to be Noah. And I just left Grey sitting out there alone with him. I have to get to her. Now.

Springing up from the table, I start limping as fast as I can toward the door. My knee is paining me with every step I take, but I keep going. I have to get Grey away from him before something else

happens.

“Where do you think you’re going? We’re not done here,” Terry calls out angrily.

Arnold’s eyes follow me, commanding me to stay without uttering a sound. I know that look. Even though half his face is paralyzed, he means business. This is his team and he’s not going to let me fuck it up, especially after he just went out on a limb to save my ass.

“The guy who leaked the video is in town, and I have a pretty good idea where he is. Wouldn’t it be the best use of my time to go and nab him instead of sitting around talking about it?”

“You know where this asshole is?”

“Yeah.”

“Then bring him to me. I’ll take care of it.”

“But for now, as far as you know, no one else outside the organization has seen that video?”

“The tech team was able to determine that the upload source came directly from a cell phone. The date and time stamp confirm it. From what they can gather, it’s the original file. It hasn’t been distributed yet. But if the person makes good on their threat, it’s set to go live by five o’clock.”

“Have you reached out to them? What do they want?”

“Money, of course.”

“How much?”

“They’re talking at least six figures. Maybe more if we want all the copies.”

“Shit.”

“You want my advice?”

“You want me to distance myself from this girl, right?”

“Normally, that’d be the plan of attack, but there’s more. Another clip came in this morning, this one of you getting into her truck in the parking lot of Buster’s Crab Shack. It shows that you two have a history. One sighting we can spin and deny, but her driving you around in Stockton is like the smoking gun. They have you, plain and simple.”

“I don’t care about me. I just don’t



want her to get hurt.”

“Well, you better care because Chase Whitfield dating a Stockton stripper isn’t going to go over well.”

“You’re blowing this way out of proportion, Terry. You’re acting like we made a sex tape or something. She took off her top—big deal. Half the actresses I dated do the same thing for millions of dollars. What’s the difference?”

“Don’t be so naïve, Chase. Do you need me to spell it out for you? This girl is a nobody. She has no clout, no prestige to back her up. She’s nothing but a small-town con artist looking to move up in the world. You’re one of the most famous people in New York. Heck, the entire country. No one’s going to

want to see you with someone like her.”

“I don’t care what they want. I’m not giving her up, Terry.”

Arnold groans, feebly raising his hand.

“What is it, Mr. Heimlich?” Terry crouches down beside him when Arnold grabs him by the collar.

He says something I can’t understand, but apparently Terry is able to decipher the message.

“He wants me to stay out of your personal affairs,” he says tersely, straightening up and smoothing out the creases in his pants.

I nod at Arnold, thanking him for his consideration, but all he does is stare

stonily back at me.

“The only way this is going to work is if you act like you’re in it for keeps. Have her take care of you during your recovery. Show how devoted she is to you. Never be seen in public with another woman at your side. Play the part of the man who reformed the stripper, even if you get sick of her by the end of the week.” Terry is admonishing me like his love life is such an open and shut case. He’s already on his second marriage after he decided to marry his mistress. He’s not exactly a guy who should be preaching about family values.

“I assure you. I’m not going to get sick of her.”

“Good.”

“Am I free to recover wherever I see fit? You’re not going to make stay in New York, are you?”

“As long as you do what you’re told and report for your regular checkups, I don’t care where you go.”

“Because I intend on dropping off the radar for a little while.”

“Sounds great to me. The less you’re seen in public right now, the better. I don’t want the image of you hobbling around locked in the public’s mind. Season ticket holders aren’t going to be too anxious to renew their packages if they think your career is over.”

“I’m glad you think I have that much

sway over them.”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t know how valuable you are to this team.”

“I just like to hear you say it.”

“Now get out of here if you think you can stop this from blowing up.”

I try not to wince as I hurry over to where Arnold is sitting, the brace digging into my leg. He looks up at me expectantly as I rest my hand on his shoulder.

“Thank you, Mr. Heimlich, for everything.”

His eyes pierce mine, but he doesn’t respond.

“I’ll report back as soon as I know more,” I say to Terry, and he waves his hand at me, already immersed in his

Blackberry.

Out of instinct, I linger outside to hear what they're going to say. Rhonda's busy, talking on the phone. Her back is turned, so she doesn't even notice me. I press my ear to the door, leaving it open a crack. The minute they think I've vacated the premises, Terry starts talking.

"Your ploy worked, boss."

"Humph."

"Last night, Dr. Brownstein knew there was a chance that Chase might make a full recovery, but his scare tactics worked. Chase played right into our hands, not even asking for more money."

Those greedy bastards... They had my own doctor lie to me to get what they wanted.

Arnold's as helpless as a venomous python. What an old shrewd.

It's not like I need the money, but knowing the backhanded maneuvers they just employed to get me to resign with the team sickens me. They preyed upon my weakness and used it to their advantage, looking out for their own self-interest. Yeah, I didn't sign anything yet, but if I have my agent try and fight them, they won't help me keep this video of Grey under wraps. Hell, they might even release it themselves, effectively silencing my demand for more money.

It'd be so easy for them to turn the tide of public opinion against me. I'd be playing right into their hands.

That makes me even more reluctant to tell them about Noah. God knows how they'd twist his involvement to fit their version of the truth. I should handle him on my own, not let them get any more involved in my personal life than they already are. They've just proven they can't be trusted.

I've got to look out for myself and for Grey.



# *Chapter Twenty-One*

## **Grey**

“Tell me, Noah. How do you know your way around New York so well?”

It unsettles me that Chase is feeling uncertain about Noah. Being a member of a team for so long, Chase lives and dies by a code of loyalty and brotherhood. If Noah betrayed him somehow, Chase is going to want revenge, and he won't stop until he gets it. If that happens, there will be nothing I can do to stop him from destroying Noah.

“I drive people into the city all the time for my dad, usually to a Broadway

show or a basketball game at Madison Square Garden. Sometimes I take businessmen to a convention at the Javits Center or drive someone to a doctor's appointment at Sloan-Kettering."

"So you know the city like the back of your hand?"

"I wouldn't go that far, but I know enough to get around."

"You must have flipped out when you heard you were going to be driving Chase around Stockton."

"Yeah. When the Kings called my dad, I nearly shit a brick."

"I'm surprised your dad didn't want to drive him around himself."

"No way. He knows Chase is my boy. He wouldn't go dashing my hopes like

that.”

“How did you end up coming back to New York with Chase?” I prod him gently, hoping he’ll open up to me.

“It was a last-minute thing. The Kings wanted him back right away, so Chase made me an offer to come and work for him. Be his go-to guy. I guess I make him laugh. He doesn’t seem to have a lot of people in his life he can let loose with.”

“So he talks to you about stuff?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Does he ever say anything about me?” I gulp nervously, afraid of what he’s going to say.

“All the time. The boy can’t shut up about you.”

“So I’m assuming you’re aware of the connection you and I share.” I hold my breath, waiting for him to respond.

He rubs his eyes before staring vacantly out the windshield. “You mean...The Blue Room?”

“Uh huh.” I squirm uncomfortably even though Noah keeps looking straight ahead.

“We sort of put two and two together. I worked security there for a while, but relax, I didn’t see much. They always had me stationed at the door.”

“You were a bouncer then. Were your friends constantly hitting you up? You must have been letting people sneak in all the time.” I guide him along, subtly

pumping him for information.

“On occasion, but not too often. Stanley doesn’t put up with that kind of shit.”

“Did you get caught?”

“Yeah. One time my buddy Keith got nabbed. I think you saw him that night at Buster’s Crab Shack. His parents own the place.” The corner of my mouth turns up when I recall how I nearly ran Keith over with my truck when he started cussing me out in the parking lot.

“What did Stanley do to him?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest. He took him in the back and I guess chewed him out, threatening to press charges. I thought I’d be the one taking the heat, but neither of them ever said a word to me

about it.” Noah shakes his head, disconcerted.

“So you quit? You weren’t fired?”

“Yeah, I had enough. It just wasn’t my scene.”

“Not many guys would say that.” I appreciate his honesty. It helps me put more stock into what he’s saying.

“I know. I’m the resident oddball.”

If he’s going to be up front about everything, then he deserves the same from me. “No, you’re not. I should have never stepped foot in that place either.”

“So why did you?”

I pause for a second, debating how much I want to tell Noah. Chase doesn’t seem to trust him anymore. But he seems

like an okay guy to me, like he wouldn't hold it over my head or anything. It appears he hates The Blue Room just as much as I do.

“My mom was sick, and it was my stupid way of coping.”

“Is she okay now?” he asks, his eyes finding mine in the rearview mirror.

“Not exactly.” I place my elbows on my knees, clasping my hands, hoping to ward off the queasy feeling that grips my stomach every time I talk about my mother.

“What's wrong with her?”

“Lung cancer.” I sigh, training my eyes on the flags fluttering across the top of Kings Stadium.

“Shit.”

“Yeah, it’s not good.”

“You and Chase have a lot in common then,” Noah remarks, attempting to console me.

Okay, now I’m confused. “How’s that?”

“Well, after all he went through with his sister and all.”

“What do you mean?” My heart drops as I try to process what he’s telling me.

“Oh fuck, I thought you knew. He warned me not to say anything about it.”

“Noah, I don’t care what he said. You’re damn well going to tell me.” I grab the headrest on the passenger’s side, scooting myself up closer to Noah.

He glances at me ruefully over his



shoulder. “But don’t act like you heard it from me, okay? Nobody knows outside of his family. He’ll kill me if thinks I can’t keep my mouth shut.”

“I’m not going to lie to him, Noah, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Not lie. Just don’t let on like you know about his sister until he tells you himself.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Of course he will. I’m assuming you told him about your mom?” Noah looks at me for confirmation. I nod, and he continues, “Then he’ll probably want to do all he can to help her.”

I don’t hold back. I ask the question that’s burning on my lips. “Jesus, Noah. Did J.J. have cancer?”

“Yeah, but she’s in remission now. Chase even paid for her fertility treatments. That’s how she was able to get pregnant.”

“Jesus. And he never said anything the whole time.” I sit back in shock.

“It doesn’t mean he wasn’t going to. There’s been a lot going on, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“But I met J.J. and his mom today and he never even mentioned anything.” I shake my head, trying to make sense of it all.

“The only reason he told me was because I saw his tattoo. I think I caught him in a weak moment and he just started talking about it.” Noah rolls down the

window to get some air.

“Now I feel like such an asshole, going on and on about myself when he went through the same thing and handled it so much better than I did,” I groan, burying my face in my hands.

“That’s not true. Everyone handles stuff like that differently. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“But, Noah, he has the whole world watching his every move and he didn’t crack the entire time J.J. was fighting for her life. And little ol’ me had to turn to stripping as a way out. Real mature.” I clutch my arms to my chest, my cheeks burning with shame.

“Maybe he didn’t act out because he knew everyone was watching him. It

kept him in check, even though he probably wanted to.”

“Thanks, Noah, but there’s no point talking my way out of this one. I screwed up. I couldn’t behave like an adult when things got tough and now Chase may have to pay the price for it.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Noah asks, alarmed.

I might as well tell him. If Chase is right and he’s in on it, then he already knows anyway. “The Kings know I stripped at The Blue Room. That’s why we’re here. That’s why they called him in.”

“How?”

“Erin told me our little coffee break at

Starbucks is all over the internet. Apparently someone must have tipped the Kings off about my previous employment.”

Noah shifts around to look me in the eye. “Shit. Chase doesn’t think it was me, does he?”

“I hate to say it, Noah, but you’re the most likely candidate. I mean, who else could it be?”

“I know exactly who it could be,” he says with conviction.

Noah abruptly gets out of the car, leaving the keys in the ignition.

“Hey, where the hell are you going?” I yell out the window as he breaks into a run.

“To straighten this out while there’s

still time!” he cries over his shoulder, not breaking his stride.

Fuck. He’s leaving me alone to ponder that cryptic remark in silence. Well, not silence exactly as the screeching brakes of a train rumble overhead. Noah barrels up the steps to the platform, hopping clumsily over the turnstile and dashing onto the subway just before the doors start to close. The attendant at the gate starts to chase him, but it’s too late. The train’s already pulling out of the station. Noah’s holding on to a handrail as the attendant shakes his fist at him through the window. People on the platform start to clap, happy that Noah nabbed a free ride. I

guess everyone likes to shove it to people in authority. I just didn't think Noah had it in him. And hell, I didn't think he was capable of moving that fast. Is he that afraid of facing Chase?

Whatever it is, I need to find out why he bolted, and soon.

# *Chapter Twenty-Two*

## **Chase**

“I can’t believe Noah just up and left you there.”

I shift into park and leave the car idling in front of the Roosevelt for Luis’s assistant. After exiting Kings Stadium and finding Grey alone in the driver’s seat, I was livid. I wanted to hunt Noah down and demand some answers, but considering we have no freakin’ clue where he went, Grey convinced me to go back to my place in order to regroup.

Grey didn’t want to turn the car over to me at first, insisting that she was quite



capable of navigating through the streets of New York. But I put my foot down. No way am I ever going to be caught sitting in the passenger's seat while my woman carts me around like a child. That's one demand I'll never give in to. As long as I can stand, I can drive. I still cringe when I think about how I huddled in the front seat of her truck that night in Stockton. That's the first and last time she'll be driving me anywhere.

Luckily, the press has given up their siege on my apartment building. The cops must have scared them away. The Kings don't fool around when it comes to security. They practically have the NYPD in their pocket. Whatever protection I need, I get, no questions

asked. That's why I never hired a bodyguard. Why bother when I have an entire police force at my disposal?

"I have a feeling Noah went back to Stockton," Grey whispers as we hurry through the lobby.

"How? By bus?" I ask as soon as the elevator doors close.

"Probably. Or else he's having someone pick him up him."

"Keith doesn't have the guts to come here. This is my turf. I have home-field advantage. I could have the cops run his license plate number and he wouldn't make it past any bridge or tunnel."

"You have that much power, huh?" Grey watches me as I slide me keycard

through the slot before entering the penthouse suite.

“And you’re lucky I do.”

She quirks an eyebrow at me before following me through the door.

I didn’t tell her about the video. I just made up some lame excuse that someone got a hold of her tax records and that’s how the Kings found out. But I can’t get what I saw out of my mind. And now, having her in the flesh right in front of me, I just want to rip off her damn clothes. Feel those supple breasts fill my hands and swirl my tongue around her nipples until I can’t see straight.

But she doesn’t seem in the mood to have sex with me right now, even if all I can think about is getting her naked. I

know it's wrong, but I want a copy of that video. I want it for my own viewing pleasure. I'd never seen anything so fucking hot in my entire life. I can't believe the owner of the club just let her walk away. She had that room full of men eating out of her hand, and that was only one night. There's nothing more arousing than a good girl trying to act bad since the type of girls who strip and shoot porn aren't exactly delicate. They usually have a rough, hard-edged look to them—pouches of saggy cellulite, garish makeup, cheap spray tans. It's why most guys focus on the tits and pussy and nothing else. The rest of the package can be pretty repulsive.

But seeing Grey up on that stage... It's no wonder those pricks in the audience fucking lost it. What guy wouldn't? She wasn't just a source of titillation. She was the real deal, an A-list beauty slumming it in some rathole of a dive. They must have been counting their lucky stars that they'd wandered in on her performance. They thought they were in for the same old shit. But boy, were they surprised.

It made me want to be there too. I can't stop my imagination from going wild. Seeing her eyes fixed on me as she shimmies around that pole, taunting the other men with what they can't have. Watching her touch herself while she

looks directly at me. Ogling her as she removes her top before throwing it at me. And when she wants to leave the stage, she'll wrap her legs around my waist as I carry her out the door and into the back seat of my car. Shit. I'm as hard as a rock just sifting through all the different scenarios running through my head.

I didn't think I could have such a fevered desire for her body. I watch her as she sits on the couch and removes her sandals, completely unaware of my thoughts. I'd like nothing more than to go over there and ravish her. Even with all the shit that's going on around us, I don't care. I want her. I want her bad. And I'm going to have her. Tonight.

“You shouldn’t be on your feet. After today, I’m in charge of that body of yours.”

Her words have more of an effect on me than she realizes. I never give up control. I’m always the boss. I listen to no one. But I think I’d enjoy letting her do whatever she wants to my body.

“What are you doing standing over there? Come sit by me. I don’t bite.”

*Oh, but I wish you would.* I prowl over to her, determined to get what I want. Hampered by my limp, I unfasten the Velcro on my brace, freeing myself and tossing it aside. Nothing’s going to keep me from taking her. Nothing.

She sees the fire in my eyes and

immediately knows what I'm after. For a moment, she looks scared, but I don't know why. I intend to make her feel good, better than she's ever felt before. I'm going to pleasure her with my hands, my fingers, my lips, and my tongue before slamming myself inside of her.

I hunker down on the far end of the couch. I need her to do something for me before we begin. I need it so bad it hurts.

“Strip for me.”

Her eyes widen. “What?”

“Get up. Stand in the middle of the room. And strip for me.”

“Chase, I don't—”

“Grey, I need this. Understand?”

Comprehension flickers in her eyes as she slowly nods. She knows I want what



all of those other men have already had. I want her to grind and shake it for me—me and only me. She looks away, realizing that she might not have a choice in the matter.

“What are you waiting for?” I stretch my arm across the back of the couch, sinking deeper into the cushion.

Her shoulders rise and fall. Why is she so nervous? I’m used to having girls suck me off on this couch. What can I say? It’s the only way I know how to be sexy, how to get in the mood. I’m not good at romance and flowers and all that bullshit. This is all I know.

“Please don’t ask me to do this.” She crosses her arms in front of her chest

like she's fortifying herself against me.

"Why not? You had no trouble doing it in front of a bunch of strangers." All I want to do is fool around with her, indulge in a little foreplay.

"Why are you acting like this?" She seems confused as she hugs her arms even closer to her body.

"I don't know why you feel so uncomfortable with me all of a sudden. I just wanna have some fun." I raise my leg, extending it along the length of the couch.

"Having to strip for you isn't my idea of fun." Her anger resurfaces as she glances at me over her shoulder. I'm startled by the tears that are flooding her eyes. Shit. I didn't mean to upset her...

Too late now. I suck at dealing with all this emotional crap. I'll never understand women.

“Sorry. I was under the impression that you'd want to please me.”

“As your love slave? I don't think so.”

“You're driving me fucking crazy, you know that?”

“Why? Because I won't give you what you want?”

“Don't twist this around on me.”

“I'm not that kind of girl. Not anymore.”

I bite my tongue. She is that kind of girl. I saw it. The fact that she keeps on denying it is making me see red.

“Stop objectifying me like that. That’s not the way I want you to look at me.” She runs her fingers through her hair, pushing it back from her face like she’s disappointed in me. Man, this could be so good if she’d just let it happen. Why is she fighting me every step of the way?

“Grey, I thought it’d be fucking hot for you to take your clothes off for me, put on a little show. You’re making way too big a deal out of this.”

“Is that what you’re used to? Having girls do whatever the hell you want?”

“I know what I like. What’s wrong with that?”

“Because I don’t want our first time to be like this, okay?”

So she was thinking about sleeping with me. I knew it. I've been waiting for this to happen since that night in Stockton when she left me alone in her bed. She keeps holding herself back from me, afraid to go too far. But I'm sick of waiting. I don't think I can take much more if she insists on dragging this out.

“Grey, we'll try as many variations as you want, I promise. I just thought this would be a good idea to get us started in the right direction.”

“But—”

“But what? I haven't gone without sex for this long since...I can't remember when. I just want to be with you, Grey.

Why is that so hard to understand?"

"It's not that simple." She lowers her head, hiding her face from me like she's embarrassed about something.

"Then why are you making it so complicated when it doesn't have to be? You're into me. I'm into you. Let's just do this."

I clumsily drag my leg off the couch and get to my feet. She starts to back away from me as I approach. For fuck's sake, she's even trembling a little.

"Grey, why are you so scared of me?"

"I'm not," she whispers, walking backward until she's up against the bank of windows.

"Something's going on with you, and I want you to tell me what it is."

“I don’t want to be dominated, all right? I’m not some plaything you can amuse yourself with.” She glares at me, her eyes filled with indignation.

I run my hands over my head, not quite sure what to say. “It’s just my style. I don’t mean anything by it.”

“Yeah well, it’s not working for me.” She curls into herself, hugging her knees against her chest.

“I’m not the kind of guy who does it tender and gentle. I like it rough. I like it hard. I like it dirty.”

She sighs, pressing her cheek against the glass.

“Would you rather that I lie to you?” I ask, exasperated.

She shakes her head but doesn't say anything.

“You know I have an appetite for women. I always have. Is it a weakness? Yeah. But I need you to meet me halfway on this.”

Her eyes burn into mine, a mixture of longing and fear.

“Grey, you might even like it if you gave it a chance. It's not like you're so innocent or anything.”

She lowers her eyes at my last remark. “You'd be surprised.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You were fine just kissing me on that rock outside my trailer.”

“That was different,” I groan,



kneading the back of my neck with my hand to drive out the tension.

“How?” she demands, her eyes searching mine, insisting on an explanation.

“Because I didn’t know you were a stripper then. After that, things changed. I can’t look at you the same way.”

“I don’t sleep around, Chase, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“Yeah, but you’re not exactly a virgin either,” I goad her, my voice tinged with regret.

Again, she pauses, skimming her finger absently over the glass.

It seems like she’s pondering my words, but I don’t know why. “So you’d be okay with respecting my boundaries

if I were a virgin?”

“Well, I’d kind of have to, wouldn’t I?” I shouldn’t be getting sarcastic with her, but I can’t help it.

“So you’d be fine with taking things slow if I were inexperienced, but since I was a stripper you expect me to participate in these kind of sex games?” she asks, finally raising her eyes to mine.

“It’s only to keep things interesting. I tend to get bored easily. I’m not a vanilla type of guy.” I shrug. What’s the big deal?

She knits her brow, like somehow I’m baffling her. “So what is it about virgins then? Why are they the exception to the rule?”

I'm indignant that she'd even have to ask that. "Jesus, Grey. I'd take my time. I wouldn't rush it."

"Have you ever been with a virgin before?" Her voice quivers a bit as she looks out at the nighttime lights of the city.

"Hell no. To be honest, I've never had the opportunity. The majority of the women I hook up with are pretty knowledgeable."

"And a virgin wouldn't bore you?"

"No, quite the opposite actually."

Her head whips around. "Why?"

"She'd be mine and mine alone."

There's a flicker of understanding in those brown eyes I can't get enough of.

Maybe I'm finally getting through to her. "Is that why you asked me to marry you back in Stockton? Because you thought I was a virgin?"

"Partly."

"Do you still want to marry a virgin?" The weight of expectation is heavy in the air.

I pause, not wanting to let her down. "I'm not going to answer that."

"You just want something not many people have. You think you're entitled to something special like that. Like you deserve it or something just because you're Chase Whitfield and Chase Whitfield deserves the best."

She's got me. She's right. I never thought of it that way before, but she's

right. I do have an exaggerated sense of entitlement. But what's wrong with that? I don't like to share what's mine. Never have. Never will. And I'm not going to apologize for it.

"You're damn right I deserve the best," I admit without hesitation.

"Too bad you can't see what's right in front of your face."

She shifts onto her knees, pulling herself up off the floor. Fuck. Where's she going? I didn't want to talk about virgins. She's the one who turned this into a whole big thing.

"I'm going to bed. I'll see you in the morning."

"Grey, c'mon—"

But she doesn't stop. Swinging her sandals in one hand, she doesn't even look at me before proceeding down the hallway and locking herself in one of my spare rooms.

Shit. I really screwed this up.

And what kills me is that I should be celebrating right now. I have a real shot at getting my job back. The Kings are safeguarding Grey's reputation. We were going to spend the night together. So why did things have to take such a weird turn?

I head into the kitchen and open the freezer, staring at a multitude of gourmet meals that were prepared by my personal chef. I grab the container neatly

labeled 'lemon encrusted chicken' and pop it into the microwave. Shit. Grey must be starving, but I'm too afraid to knock on her door and ask her to join me. I have to figure out what this is all about first. There has to be a reason why she started acting so strange.

I uncap a bottle of beer and take a long swig. *Let me think back.* After she flipped out about the stripping thing, how did we get on the topic of virgins? It was the last thing I was thinking about. But why would she harp on something like that? Was she just trying to change the subject so she wouldn't have to strip for me? Well, if that was her plan, it worked. Mission accomplished, and I have the blue balls to prove it.

I shove a forkful of chicken into my mouth, but it's too hot. Cursing under my breath, I gulp down the rest of my ice-cold beer, but my tongue is already burned. Man, I can't enjoy anything today, can I?

And that's when the most preposterous notion of all floats through my mind. No, she can't be...can she?

*Holy fuck, I am such an idiot.*

Holding on to the edge of the countertop, I mentally kick myself for being so blind. All the signs were there. The answer was right in front of me the whole time. She was just too self-conscious to tell me.

But it explains so much—why she got



so shy around me, why she didn't make a move on me that night in her trailer, why she always gives me a hard time about sleeping around. And I was too dumb to see it. So what did I do? I made her feel even worse by turning her into something she's not. I was too concerned about my selfish needs that I didn't even stop and consider hers.

Well, I'm going to change all that. Tonight, I'm going to give Grey Kelleher the night of her life—the right way—slow and steady.

# *Chapter Twenty-Three*

## **Grey**

I'm half asleep when I hear the door to the adjoining bathroom creak open.

Shit. That one only locks on the inside.

I'm flat on my stomach, too tired to move. It has to be late, so what's he doing in here? The possibilities make my heart beat faster.

The bed sinks beneath his weight as he crawls in next to me. He's being awfully brazen. We just had an epic fight and he thinks he can smooth everything over with sex? I'm tired of him using that as a means to an end. For me, it

represents so much more than that.

I shiver when I feel him run his hand up my back. I know how vulnerable I am to his touch. I can't deny that I like what he's doing to me. This is what I wanted from him before. He has the ability to go deeper. I've seen it. Sex can be meaningful—if he'd just let it be.

Like any girl, I want to feel adored, have him exalt in my body. I've always wanted my first time to be something special, something I'd always remember. Chase is the one I want to be with, but I want to do it right. No one has ever made me feel the way he does. I've fantasized about being with him for so long. He's just scared of how strong these feelings are between us. He

doesn't know how to handle them. What he doesn't realize is that I'm just as afraid as he is. He's used to turning inward and shutting people out. He had the courage to go the extra mile. That's why he had Noah come after me the night we met. That's why he wrote that heartfelt apology on my poster. That's why he put his career on the line to save my reputation. I just need to make him see how much more he's capable of giving.

His hand travels down to my hip, causing me to bend my knee in response. Now he knows I'm awake, and his hold on my waist tightens as he gently flips me onto my back. It's like a déjà vu

moment as he stares down at me through the moonlight. Only this time he's not asleep in my trailer. He's wide awake and caressing my body.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he whispers ever so softly as his thumb traces circles against my skin.

"Because I thought..." Man, it's so hard to get the words out. He knows, and I don't know if I should be relieved or terrified.

"Thought...?" he encourages, his fingers lightly skimming the waistband of my lacy boyshorts.

"You'd think I was some kind of freak." I curl up on my side. All I can see is the outline of his abs through the darkness. I concentrate on his tattoos,

afraid of what he's going to say, so I keep talking. "You're experienced. I get that. I didn't think I would be able to hold your interest for long. And then when you started thinking I was the complete opposite, I let you believe it so I could be what you wanted. But considering the way things went down tonight, that plan obviously failed when I couldn't deliver."

"Grey, look at me." The pleading note in his voice just about melts my heart. I've never heard him speak this way to me before—like his happiness depends on it.

I tilt my head, my hair brushing his arm as he props himself on his elbow to

gaze down at me. His breathing is heavy, and I've never seen him this emotional before. He's letting me see a side of him I didn't know was there. I'd only hoped it was.

“You're absolutely perfect. Do you hear me?” His thumb is strumming across my cheekbone as I lose myself in his eyes. “I don't ever want to hear you call yourself a freak again. I'm the freak. I'm the one who's not good enough for you.”

“Chase, you're good enough for me. You're the one I've always wanted.” The truth rolls easily off my tongue. Things I would've been too embarrassed to say a few hours ago, I feel comfortable sharing with him now. If

he's letting go and giving in to this, then so am I. I'm ready to go there with him. "Not many girls get their dream come true. I'm the lucky one."

"I'm so nervous." He exhales heavily, a crease forming between his eyebrows.

"You're nervous?" I ask, reaching up to stroke his face. "How is that even possible?"

"Because I want to do this right. I don't want to let you down. What if—?" He's getting himself all worked up over nothing.

"Shhh..." I sit up in bed to settle this once and for all. "Having you make love to me? It can only be perfect."

"Grey, I'm so sorry about what I said



earlier.” His eyes are brimming with sorrow as he scoots up, taking the blanket with him to cover his torso. “I’ve been indulging in a toxic lifestyle. I always thought girls were just using me, so I wanted to use them too. I gave up on finding someone like you. And continuing to live like that would’ve destroyed me if I’d let it. I don’t want to turn you into something you’re not. I want you just the way you are.”

“I’m not saying I won’t try to give you what you need, but I’m not there yet. I just need you to be patient with me. Sometimes I get overwhelmed and only see you as Chase Whitfield. I need more moments like this where I just see Chase.”

“I’ll work at not hiding my true feelings when I’m with you. I promise. I want you to see the real me. I don’t want you to see me as anyone else. I just want to be myself around you.”

“But what if I’m not enough?”

He looks guilty for a minute, like he’s trying to shed some unpleasant thought. “I got confused before. I got all wrapped up in what doesn’t matter. I’ve only ever been able to express myself physically. I never ventured into anything beyond that. I didn’t want to get emotionally involved. I was all about concentrating on the game and using women as an escape. But when I got injured, I started looking at things differently and what

was going to happen to me when I couldn't play anymore. For the first time in my life, I was terrified. Sure, I succeeded on the field, but I was a failure when it came to dealing with my personal life. But you know what? I needed a wake-up call like that. It's what led me to you."

He bends over and kisses my forehead, his lips lingering against my skin. The warmth of his body seeps through my Chase Whitfield t-shirt. I don't want to talk anymore. I want to do so much more.

I run my hands down his chest and he flinches under my fingertips.

"Wait. There's something I have to tell you first." He rests his forehead

against mine for a minute before drawing back. “At Kings Stadium today, I saw a video of you stripping at The Blue Room.”

I gasp audibly, my cheeks instantly turning red. My first instinct is to panic, but he grabs a hold of my wrist, keeping me in bed next to him.

“Don’t worry. The Kings are taking care of it. It will never see the light of day. I can assure you of that. I hate that anyone else had to see it, but every single copy will be destroyed. You have my word that I’ll make sure it happens. I don’t want anyone else ever seeing you like that except for me.”

His eyes darken as he pulls me onto

his lap. I can feel him beneath the folds of the blanket. He entered by bed completely naked. Realizing that, I can't stop my knees from squeezing his waist as I wrap my legs around him. I should be mortified that senior members of the Kings' staff saw that video, but all I can think about is Chase's reaction to it.

“Grey, after I watched it, I went out of mind. It was all I could think about. You have no idea how incredibly hot you are, and that turns me on even more. I was like a wild man when I got you back here, desperate to have you reenact what I had just seen, but this time doing it just for me, only for me. I wanted to be inside that video. I'm afraid I didn't handle it very well.”

I brace myself against his lean, athletic body, my hands on his biceps. Ready myself for what's about to happen. I'm not afraid anymore. I'm more than ready.

“I’m sorry the first time you got to see me naked was on video. I can only imagine how difficult that must have been for you. Having to rely on visuals without being able to touch...or taste... what you were looking at.”

I lean back, tugging my Chase Whitfield shirt over my head and tossing it aside.

He moans from deep in the back of his throat, shifting himself beneath me. He gazes at me like I’ve just given him the

best Christmas present in the world before becoming enthralled with my breasts that are jiggling in front of him. He cups them with both hands, kneading them with his fingers. I'm not prepared for how quickly just his touch pushes me to the brink, and I fall back onto the bed, spreading my legs and letting him do whatever he wants to me. His tongue replaces his hands, and it doesn't take much to get me off.

My vision blurs, and I'm transported out of my body, floating in a cloud of bliss above it, as my heart beats in double time. I close my eyes and allow myself to slip into this feeling of complete relaxation. There's not an ounce of tension left in body. He

relieved it all. I'm vaguely aware of him chuckling above me as I come back to earth.

“Now that was fucking incredible to watch,” he says, his voice husky. “And if all it took was massaging your breasts and playing with your nipples, just wait until you see what else I have in store for you. That was only the beginning.” He captures my lips, kissing me passionately as he presses my body into the mattress, no longer hovering over me as he covers my petite frame with his long, hard body. Coming up for air, he pushes my hair away from my face and smiles down at me. “Get ready. I intend to give you a night you’ll never forget.”



# *Chapter Twenty-Four*

## **Chase**

Today is the official start of my invalid status, but I can't get over how adorable Grey looks while gingerly walking around the penthouse, packing for our trip back to Stockton.

It's probably not the best day in the world for her to be taking a road trip. I can't help my mouth from turning up, knowing that I'm the reason, remembering how she took me in, opening herself up to me, and how good it felt to be inside her.

As far as first times go, it was way better than the practice run I was

anticipating. She was ready for me from the word go. I thought I was going to have to hold back a little, but she kept urging me on, coaxing me to give her all that I had—and then some. Let's just say I didn't get much sleep. I'm not even going to hassle her for the keys to her truck. I'm spent. I can barely keep my eyes open. For once in my life, I'll be a willing passenger. She can drive me wherever the hell she wants.

Grey's shorts have the word 'cute' embroidered across the backside. But I really like them because they're super short. I grip the handle of the crutches Luis just brought up from the lobby as she bends over, giving me a plunging view of her cleavage through her skimpy

white tank. She's never dressed this provocatively around me before, and I wish we were staying in all day. I've already noticed how men eye her up. And I don't want anyone getting a glimpse of the legs that encircled my hips last night or the swell between her breasts where I buried my face as she called out my name.

Watching her go about the ordinary tasks of folding her clothes and zipping her bags, I can't help but feel possessive of her. It's like there's this imaginary cord connecting me to her, and it's only going to get stronger the more times we're intimate with each other. Last night, I took great care to memorize

every inch of her body—every dip, every crevice, every spot that elicited a reaction from her—and I can't wait to do it again.

“We'd better get going,” she says, hustling by me as I give her a quick swat on the butt. “Hey, keep your hands to yourself, mister.”

“Try and stop me.” I lean in and give her a kiss, but she pulls away with her hands on her hips.

She looks down at the two bags I have ready to go. “Is that all you're bringing with you?”

“I travel half the year. I know how to pack light.”

“So you're not planning on staying long?”

And there's the question I don't want to face.

"Honestly? I don't know yet."

Her disappointment is evident, especially after last night. But I'm still a little spooked by this whole commitment thing. It's better to ease into it. Her trailer is claustrophobically tiny, and I'm a guy who needs his space. I have to be careful that I don't get so caught up in the moment that it ruins everything down the road.

"I know it's not what you're used to." She's trying to be brave. It's killing me to have to be like this, but it's better if I play it safe for now.

"It's just that I'm going to have to

come back and see Dr. Brownstein on a regular basis, check in with the Kings trainer, shit like that.”

“I get it. I never expected you to leave New York permanently.” But the uncertainty in her tone doesn’t match the words that are getting lodged in her throat.

“Grey, even in the off season, I’m in New York practically every other week anyway. There’s always stuff going on. It’s just how my life is. I’m never in one place for too long.”

“Are you going to want me to go back and forth with you?”

“It’s up to you.”

“Because if I still have my job, I won’t be able to get that much time off.”

What is she talking about? She can't go back and work in the mall. Not now. Whether she realizes it or not, her new profession is being Chase Whitfield's girlfriend. She's not a regular, everyday person anymore. She's with me now, and there's a certain image she's going to have to maintain. Waiting on the general public isn't going to cut it.

"Grey, you don't need to worry about having a job anymore."

Her eyes flash with anger. "Says who?"

"Says me."

"So now you're dictating what I can do? Do you think I'm just going to stand back and let you run my life?" She juts

out her hip, schooling me on what it means to be a supportive boyfriend.

“Not your entire life, but things are different now. You have to see that.”

“I’m not going to be dependent on you if that’s what you mean.” She tosses her hair over her shoulder, driving me wild even though we’re in the middle of a serious discussion.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I want you to be able to pursue your own interests. Do what you want.”

“Just as long as it coincides with what you want.” She purses her lips, tilting her head to the side.

“Grey, you can’t return to some minimum wage job just to prove a point. You know how that’d make me look?



Like a complete asshole.”

“Well, maybe it isn’t about you,” she says saucily.

“C’mon, be reasonable. You know who I am. You know what’s expected of me, of you, of both of us,” I plead with her, needing her to understand where I’m coming from.

“So you just want me to shut my mouth and play the part? Is that it?”

“No, I want to help you find a better job, one I won’t get crucified for in the tabloids. You don’t have to make this harder than it has to be.”

“And you’re just going to wave your magic wand and set me up in some new position?” She sounds put out when

anyone else would be jumping up and down at the suggestion.

“Why are you being so difficult? I’m just trying to make this work.” That’s what couples do, isn’t it? Help each other out?

“But why am I the one who has to change while you keep on doing what you’ve been doing?”

Her stubbornness is coming through loud and clear. We’re both headstrong, and we’ll probably always be butting heads, but we’re going to have to learn to compromise in order to make this work. If this is our first official test, then we need to be able to give and take right from the start.

And it’s up to me to call her on things,

like when she's not exactly telling the whole truth. "Grey, I'm on crutches. I'm out for the season. Not exactly business as usual."

Determined to sulk, she props herself against the end of the couch. We knew this wasn't going to be easy, especially in the beginning. We're both control freaks, used to getting our way. But she's going to have to give up a lot more than I am, and I have to recognize that. I can't take advantage of her.

"Grey, you know I'm going to need someone to take care of me for the next six months. I feel guilty that I'm the one who's going to be dependent on you until January. I hate being knocked off my

feet, unable to play. It's a transition for me too. Just knowing you're going to be there for me is the only thing getting me through it."

"But I'm not a nurse, Chase. I'm not even qualified to help you."

"We'll figure it out. Just give me these next six months and then we'll take it from there, okay?"

She knows I'm trying my best to appease her as she walks over to me and nestles herself against my body. Even though everything's up in the air, there's one thing I'm certain of—I can't be without her.

"Don't hug me back," she cautions as I start to let go of my crutches. "Keep your weight off your knee."

Yeah, she's definitely going to take her caretaker duties seriously.

"But what are we going to do about Noah?" She tugs on the front of my shirt.

"Did you try calling him again?"

"Yeah. He's not picking up. It keeps going straight to voicemail."

"I called the office number on the business card he gave me. His dad picked up and said he heard from him yesterday and that he was supposedly coming back to Stockton."

"Do you believe him?"

"I don't know, Chase. I don't think the man would lie, especially when it comes to the Kings. That's a big contract he was awarded. I don't think he'd want to

endanger his business relationship with them, do you?"

"It's just weird the way Noah ran off like that. I mean, if he's innocent, why didn't he stay and hash it out with us, whatever it is?"

"I just don't think he's capable of hurting you."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he sounded really sincere when he told me about J.J."

Shit. I didn't want Grey to find out like that. I had every intention of sharing what I went through with J.J., but there was never a good time. I held back because she's going through so much with her mom right now. That's all I need is to flaunt one more reason why

my life is so much better than hers. My sister survived a cancer diagnosis and Grey's mom is most likely going to die. It's not fair. It's not right. But I don't want it to become a constant reminder of just how different our situations are. I could afford the best care for J.J., but what if it's too late to do anything for her mom?

“Noah shouldn't have said anything.”

“He didn't mean to. It just slipped out. He thought I already knew.”

Her implication is clear. She's mad that I didn't tell her. But I don't want to get into it with her right now. We have to go.

“I'm just not used to talking about it

with people. No one outside my family knows the amount of suffering that J.J. went through. With Noah, I don't know. It was just one of those moments when I needed to talk to someone. I had to get it out. I was sick of keeping everything bottled up inside. But I never thought he'd betray my confidence like that."

"He didn't, Chase. As far as I know, he only told me."

"And you really think he had nothing to do with that video?"

"I seriously doubt it. I'd be shocked if he was involved."

"Keith is his friend, and he did bring me to his restaurant. It could've been a set-up from day one."

"But Noah's nothing like Keith."



“It doesn’t mean Keith didn’t talk him into it. Maybe he has something on Noah.”

“We gotta get back to Stockton, Chase.”

“Yeah. The sooner, the better.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

### **Grey**

“What the fuck is he doing here?”

Chase is ready to bolt out of my truck the minute he spies Noah sitting on the stoop of my trailer, waiting for us.

But I can't have them getting into it. We have to straighten this out like civilized adults. Noah looks so apologetic that my heart immediately goes out to him. He's like a big teddy bear, and I don't have it in me to be wary of him. Sure, there's a lot on the line, but it seems like he's here to warn us about something, not start a fight.

“Don't move a muscle. You hear

me?" I nudge Chase with my elbow, willing him to comply. When we stop, I need him to sit tight and wait for me to get his crutches out of the back. "If you ever want to play baseball again, listen to your doctor and don't go charging Noah like some lunatic."

"But, Grey, how'd he even know we'd be here? This can't be good, and you know it." Chase grips the door handle as I navigate through the minefield of ruts in the dirt road.

"That could be my fault. I sort of told his dad we were coming back today."

"What? Why?"

"To draw Noah out." I drive into the clearing, crossing my fingers as I shift into park. "It worked, didn't it? Let's

just see what he has to say and take it from there. Terry texted you that the cops busted Keith today, so maybe it'll all just blow over."

Despite whatever news awaits us, it feels good to be home. I missed my trailer. After an intense couple of days in New York, it's a relief to see the lush canopy of trees welcoming me home. The tranquil atmosphere I've grown accustomed to is already starting to soothe my jangled nerves. I get out and take a deep breath of the fresh mountain air. In the rush and tumult of the city, I felt confused and overwhelmed. It was too loud, too crowded, too frantic. Really, it was all just too much. But

here, I feel comfortable. I know who I am and that I'm strong enough to deal with whatever Noah has to tell us.

Noah jumps to his feet and rushes over. He glances quickly at Chase before he hurriedly shifts his eyes to me. I can just imagine the look Chase must've given him. He can be pretty intimidating when he wants to be, and his protective instincts are on high alert, defending me against any perceived threat.

"How is he?" Noah whispers, joining me at the back of the truck before reaching over my head for the crutches.

"Not good," I mutter, ducking out of the way. "You have a lot of explaining to do, Noah."

“I know, and I will. I just have to take you somewhere first—without Chase.”

There’s no time to talk. Chase is already antsy. If he suspects Noah’s up to something, he’s going to get out of the truck and confront us with or without his crutches. My head is spinning with all the possible reasons why Noah wants to get me away from Chase, and none of them are good.

“Let me handle it,” I urge as the passenger door flies open and Chase swings his legs out. “Go help him. Maybe he’ll consider it a peace offering.”

Noah nods, taking a deep breath. “Hey, boss,” he says, greeting Chase

like everything's normal and he didn't leave us hanging outside Kings Stadium. He goes to hand Chase his crutches, but Chase is too fast for him, yanking Noah's shirt, pulling him close until they're nose to nose.

"Did you know Keith sent that video? Did you?" Chase shakes Noah until his teeth rattle.

"No, I swear."

"Then why did you hightail it back to Stockton without even a word?"

"When Grey started telling me that the Kings were in there grilling you because somebody leaked her connection to The Blue Room, I knew it had to be Keith. Once I found out, I didn't want to waste any time nailing his sorry ass to the wall.

I know how he is. He's obsessed with fame. His family's restaurant is like a fucking shrine to celebrities. All his life he's wanted to be in the spotlight, feel like the big man on campus. Having the chance to be the dude who took Chase Whitfield down? I knew it was too good for him to pass up. He couldn't resist bragging about how he pulled one over on the almighty Kings."

But something doesn't sound right about Noah's story. Keith doesn't seem like he's that smart. Unless someone else was involved too...

"But I signed a freakin' menu for that asshole. Why would he want to screw me over like that?"



“Remember that brunette he was trying to hook you up with? Well, apparently she got really insulted when you didn’t take her up on her offer. I guess she gave Keith’s girlfriend quite an earful when she wouldn’t shut up about it. So naturally, Keith’s girl wanted some type of vengeance for her friend and Keith delivered in order to keep his woman happy.”

That sounds farfetched even to my ears, but Chase appears to be buying it.

“Yeah, women can be brutal, man.”

“Why? Has something like that happened to you before?” I ask Chase pointedly, unable to resist.

“Not exactly. Not to this extent. But

some women just can't handle rejection. The Kings have helped me out of many a scrape. These whackos just never targeted one of my girlfriends before."

Noah shoots me a look. He wants me to be quiet. I'm ruining his cover story. I just can't believe Chase was blackmailed like this before. It's like he's walking around with a target on his back, waiting for the next deranged fan to make up some wild accusation. That has to be a stressful way to go through life.

"Noah, can you help get Chase inside? The ground is kind of uneven and he's still getting used to his crutches."

"I don't need any help. I can manage just fine on my own."

As if to prove his point, Chase lowers himself out of the truck and onto his good leg. He rockets forward on his crutches, not even waiting for us to catch up.

“Noah, take your car and wait for me at the bottom of the mountain. Make up some excuse and get out of here.”

He pats me on the back, knowing this can't be easy for me. I hope he's not leading me into a trap, but if I can put an end to the mess I created, it'll be worth it.

“Chase, I gotta run. I have to pick up a client for my dad. I just wanted drop by and tell you face to face that it wasn't me. I'm on your side, bro.”

“The Kings will make Keith pay. You can count on it. That boy’s gonna be sorry he ever laid eyes on me,” Chase seethes over his shoulder.

“You better believe it,” Noah chimes in, carrying our bags into the trailer.

“Thanks, Noah, for everything.” I smile up at him like nothing’s going on.

“We’ll all have to hang out sometime since the butler gig is on hold until further notice. You gonna be in Stockton for a while?” Noah has his hand on the screen door, anxious to depart.

“I’ll be in and out,” Chase answers, still acting a little cool toward Noah, no doubt taking his frustration with Keith out on him.

“Call me, all right?” Noah gives us a wave before heading out to his car, pretending like he’s not going to see me in the next few minutes or so.

“Don’t count on it,” Chase mutters, slumping into the faded armchair in the corner.

“C’mon, Chase. It’s not his fault.” I stand at the door, watching Noah leave.

“Yeah, well he’s the one who took me to that damn restaurant in the first place. If it wasn’t for him, I never would’ve met Keith.”

“Or me.”

“Well, if you put it like that...”

“You’re awfully grumpy. Are you okay?”

“The undersides of my arms are killing me from these crutches.”

“Hold on. Let me get your painkillers out of your bag.”

“Nah, you don’t have to.”

“Don’t be silly. I want to.”

I say a little prayer as I grab the bottle out of the front zipper compartment and walk into the kitchen. I look behind me and see that Chase already has his eyes closed. Quietly, I root through the bottles of pills I have stored in the medicine cabinet, shoving my hand all the way to the back. When I was moving into the trailer, I stepped on a rusty nail, and the emergency room doc who removed it gave me something to help me relax.

Finding what I'm looking for, I slide two tablets onto my hand and fill a glass of water from the tap.

Walking back out, I see that Chase is on the verge of falling asleep. Nudging him awake, I urge, "Here. Take these. They'll help you feel better until you get used to your crutches."

Chase doesn't even look at what I give him, tossing them into his mouth before reaching for the water. He drains the glass before handing it back to me.

"Just take it easy for a while. I'll start to unpack."

"I think I'm going to...like having you as my nurse...after all."

"Just don't ask me to wear some uniform."

“Now that...would be...sexy.”

“In your dreams.”

“But seriously...Grey? It feels so good...to be back here with you.”

I hate myself for what I'm doing to him, but it can't be helped. I walk over to where he's sitting and kiss his forehead. His eyes are closed again, the sleeping pills I gave him not taking long to kick in. One probably would've been enough. He's out like a light. They'll be no waking him until morning.

I hurriedly sling my purse over my shoulder and grab my keys. Stepping onto the stoop, I glance back at Chase before locking the door. He's totally unaware of what I'm about to do. But at



least he'll be safe here until I get back.

I have a feeling that, wherever Noah's taking me, I'm about to enter the danger zone.

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Shit. I should have known this is where we'd end up.

It's all coming full circle now as Noah pulls up alongside The Blue Room. It's time to pay for my sins. No one escapes this place unscathed, not when Stanley Larson's involved.

"I'm sorry you got dragged into this, Noah. You were out. Stanley shouldn't be bothering you." I feel nothing but sympathy for the big guy after he gave

me the lowdown on the way here. I knew this all couldn't have stemmed from Keith. He had to have a backer. No one takes on an organization like the Kings without some leverage. Keith would never be able to pull off a scam of this magnitude.

“No one's ever really out, are they?” Noah stares at me glumly. “Not in this shady, fucked-up world.”

“As far as I'm concerned, you're done. And I'm going to make Stanley understand that.”

“No one tells Stanley what to do.”

“You'd be surprised. He's always had a soft spot for me.”

“Yeah, because he wants to get in your pants.”

“Do you think I’m stupid for facing him alone?”

“If you’re not back in twenty minutes, I’m going in after you.”

“They’ll never let you through the door.”

“Then I’ll break it down. I won’t let anyone hurt you, Grey. Chase would kill me. And right now, I’m more afraid of him than I am of Stanley.”

“If this all goes sideways, I don’t think Chase is going to be too happy with me either.”

“He’s still pissed at me, isn’t he?”

“He’ll get over it. He’s just been burned so many times before. He lives in a different world than we do, Noah. The

rules aren't the same. I'm just glad he has us now. He needs people he can depend on, who will look out for him."

"Well, that's why we're here, isn't it?"

"It's the only reason we're here," I sigh, double-checking the battery life on my phone, making sure it's fully charged after plugging it into Noah's cigarette lighter on the way here. "I might as well get this over with."

"Be careful, Grey." Noah envelops me in a hug so tight I can barely breathe.

"I'll be fine. Just watch your back until I come out, okay? Stanley's henchmen are probably lurking around somewhere."

I leave the safety of Noah's car and

step into the alleyway. There's a bunch of motorcycles lined up in a row outside, so Stanley's definitely not alone in there. He probably thinks I'm going to come in guns blazing. Man, is he going to be surprised that I didn't bring any reinforcements. I intend to deal with him one on one.

I pound my fist on the graffiti-covered door and jump back when it opens right away. Great, my cover's already blown. They know that Noah's my only source of backup if things go wrong, and they could silence him easily. Having worked with Noah, most of them are well aware of what a softie he is.

I recognize the guy behind the door.

It's Brent, the head of Stanley's security team. He served as a sniper in Iraq, but not for the government. He made big bucks working for a private defense contractor, reaping the financial benefits of protecting company higher-ups while soldiers fought and died all around him. Needless to say, I never cared for the dude, but now my fate depends on him.

"Hey, Brent. Is Stanley around? I kinda need to talk to him in private." I bat my eyelashes at him, but to little effect. I forgot. He's into blondes.

"Well, if it isn't the lady we've all been waiting for." Stanley salutes me by coming out of his office and raising a tumbler of whiskey in my direction. "Come in, little lady. We have a lot to

discuss.”

Brent raises his arm, pointing me in Stanley’s direction, but not before I notice the gun sticking out of his waistband. My knees start to tremble, but somehow I make it down the hallway past the glow of neon beer signs illuminating the wall. The place reeks of cigarette smoke mixed with a damp earthiness of mildew and sweat. So many women have toiled in this rathole only to be cheated and exploited. No wonder the off-hours atmosphere has the same oppressed vibe as a prison ward.

I never thought I’d be back here, but here I am. Why did I sell my soul and make a deal with the devil? Oh yeah, to

escape this meat market. Too bad I thought I was actually free of it. There's one more sacrifice that I'm required to make. How could I forget?

“You took your time getting here. How long did you expect me to wait?” Stanley lights a cigar, puffing on it for all it's worth.

“I came as soon as I could.” I'm not looking forward to this conversation. I hope he doesn't demand too many details.

“Well, pull up a chair. Sit down. Relax. Let me get you something to drink.” He starts to walk over to his liquor cabinet, but I stop him.

“Even though it'd probably be easier to get through this a little buzzed, I think



I'll stay sober." I hold up my hand to ward him off before lowering myself into a chair with lining that looks like it's been sliced open with a knife. I don't even want to think about why.

"Suit yourself. Mind if I get comfortable before you get started?" He tosses his cigar in a crystal ashtray, leering at me over his desk.

"Do what you have to do." I hold my breath as he uncinches his belt and lowers his fly, letting his pants fall around his ankles.

"There that's better. I want to feel free and loose for this." He scratches himself and I turn away, hating myself for what I'm about to do. "Are you ready,

sweetheart?”

Fighting back tears, I lean forward and open my mouth.

# *Chapter Twenty-Six*

## **Chase**

I sputter awake at the hoot of an owl.

It sounds so close that for a minute I think I'm going to find its talons digging into my arm. I don't think I'll ever get used to the wildlife surrounding Grey's place. I'm too much of a city boy now.

I can't believe I fell asleep in this chair. I feel so groggy. Grey must already be in bed. What time is it anyway? I blink, peering through the darkness. It seems too quiet in here. Shouldn't I be able to hear Grey breathing or something? I know she usually sleeps with her mouth open. I

remember how last night she lulled me to sleep, her breath ruffling the hair on my chest.

I reach for my crutches, hoisting myself up. As I get closer to the bed, I can't help thinking, *She's not that small*. There should be some bump or rise in the blanket. Why is it so flat? I can't quite comprehend the fact that she might not be in it. That it's empty.

Fuck.

“Grey?” Maybe she's in the bathroom. I clamber through the strewn luggage that's cluttering the floor, hating how my goofy grin is mocking me on the poster taped on the back of the door. But she's not in there either.

I take a quick glance outside. Her

truck is still here. Now I'm really starting to panic. Did she go for a walk? Is she out in the woods somewhere, hurt and alone? How am I going to get to her on these damn crutches?

But then a set of headlights floods the trailer, and I squint against the incessant glare. I must look like an idiot hunched over in front of the window. Whoever it is, I'm no match for them in this state.

“Chase? Is that you in there?”

Why do I recognize that voice? It's like I've heard it before somewhere.

“Chaaaaaaase!”

Oh crap.

“Chase, come out here. I need your help!”

That night at Beaver Field comes rushing back, hearing that piercing scream above the crowd that threw my concentration off at the plate and in the field. The error. The strikeouts. Damn, this girl doesn't know when to quit.

But right now I only have one thought pulsating through my mind.

Barging outside, I hobble over to where she's parked with the engine running. She's taken aback by the crazed look on my face. But I have to know.

“Erin, where's Grey?”

“She got herself into a little bit of a jam.” She cowers behind the wheel like she's afraid I'm going to hit her or something. “I'm supposed to drive you

over to The Blue Room.”

“Is that where she is?” I demand, maybe a little too forcefully.

“Uh huh,” Erin responds meekly.

Yeah, she’s definitely not as brave without the alcohol. It’s like she can’t believe I’m actually talking to her after how badly she behaved the last time we saw each other. Yeah, I’m coming off like a jerk, but it’s just because I’m worried about Grey. But it seems like every time I’m around Erin I’m upset or fly into some kind of rage. And right now I need her, so I better calm the fuck down. She’s my one and only link to Grey.

“Take me to her, Erin. Please.” She bends over to open the door for me, and

I do a balancing act with the crutches until I flop into the passenger's seat, kicking them aside.

"Aren't you bringing them with you?" she asks, bewildered.

"I'm not walking into a strip club on crutches. Just go."

"All right. It's your knee, not mine."

I slam the door and she proceeds down the road, pressing her body up against the wheel.

"Why are you driving like that?"

"Because I can't see. I never come up here at night. It's too dark. I only came because Noah said it was an emergency."

"Wait a minute. Grey wasn't the one



who called you?”

“No, Noah freaked when she never came out and—”

“Erin, hold up. Tell me everything you know. From the beginning.”

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Noah is outside pacing when we arrive.

He’s skulking in the shadows beneath the flickering marquee when he should’ve manned up and stormed the barricade. God knows what those assholes are doing to Grey in there.

“I tried, man. I tried!” he cries when I get out of Erin’s car and slam him up against the brick wall. “They won’t let me in. They’re waiting for you.”

“But in the meantime, they could’ve...” I can’t even think about it, let alone say it.

“Stanley’s not stupid enough to hurt Grey. He knows what the repercussions would be,” Noah gasps as guys exiting the club keep walking and don’t get involved. Seeing people getting roughed up back here must be a common occurrence. They don’t even pick their heads up long enough to recognize me.

“I can’t believe Grey would get involved with a bunch of thugs like this,” Erin moans, scoping out the seedy atmosphere. “What was she thinking?”

“She made a mistake, but now it’s up to us to get her out of it.” I release Noah

and back away. I need to go in there with a clear head. I won't be any good to Grey if I lose my temper. I'll play right into their hands.

"What did Stanley want from her, Noah?" Erin questions him.

"She only said that she promised him something for letting her quit. They made some kind of deal. She wasn't able to give it to him then, but now she could."

Noah's words are like a kick to the stomach. There are only two things a man like that would be after—money or sex. Was Grey just scamming me the whole time? Did Stanley concoct this big, elaborate scheme to have Grey coerce the Kings for money? He's well aware of how alluring Grey can be. Did

he send her to Beaver Field to entice me? Ensnare me in some kinky trap then try to score a hefty payoff from the Kings? The public is very familiar with the tactics they've used to hush up Drake's antics with prostitutes and strippers. Knowing that I was coming to Stockton, maybe Stanley couldn't resist the opportunity to hit me up in his own backyard.

And the other possibility? I don't even want to go there. The timing is too disheartening. To even think about her sleeping with another man makes me want to puke all over this godforsaken alley. Did Stanley want to sleep with her before she left, but she put him off

because she was a virgin? Was he afraid that she'd left town and he'd missed his chance to have his way with her? Did he make Noah drag her here the minute she got back? And now he's summoning me here to gloat that he one-upped Chase Whitfield. Rub it in my face that she's not just mine anymore. He took care of ruining that for me.

I gotta get in there.

Shoving Noah and Erin aside, I'm not surprised when the back door flies open, granting me access. They've probably been watching us the whole time through some hidden camera feed, awaiting my arrival. I hear the footfalls of Noah and Erin running to catch up, but they're too late as the heavy metal door slams shut

behind me.

Man, is it loud in here. Music is blaring. Men are yelling. It's pretty dark and my eyes take a second to adjust. But some commando-type guy wrestles me into a choke hold, dragging me down a back hallway before I even notice he's behind me. All I can see is the camouflage pattern on his shirt as he roughly escorts me through the club. Nobody comes to my assistance. All eyes are obviously glued to the stage as men whistle and catcall whoever's performing. I just hope to God it's not Grey.

We reach the end of the hallway and I'm roughly thrown into a side room.

Losing my balance as my knee gives out beneath me, I topple to the floor.

“Chase!”

It's Grey. She sounds panic-stricken. But she's momentarily blocked from view as my assailant steps on the back of my neck, forcing my head against the floor.

“Enough, Brent. C'mon, that's a future Hall of Famer right there. Show some respect.”

Sobs are racking Grey's body as she gasps for breath. “Please stop...please. Don't hurt him.” It's pitiful to hear her beg these assholes for anything, much less my safety.

Brent nestles the thick track of his boot against my jaw, digging it in for

good measure before letting up. He's chuckling to himself, enjoying what he's doing to me just a little too much. He's someone who likes to inflict bodily harm on other people, ensuring his footprint remains on the back of my neck for the next couple of days.

"I'll be out here if you need me, boss."

I sit up as he exits the room, wanting to rip his motherfucking head off, but I know when I'm outmatched. That guy is capable of doing some serious damage, and I'm not about to let him beat me bloody. I need to conserve my energy, fight the battles I can win.

"Stop crying, sweetheart. This is only



a little business meeting we're conducting here. Nothing to get so upset about."

For the first time, I get a good look at my surroundings. Grey is standing next to an overweight, balding man with a cigar wedged between his lips. She's trembling since his arm is holding her back from coming to my aid. How dare he place his hands on her! I scramble to try to get to my feet, but my knee gives out on me again.

"Doesn't look like you'll be playing any time soon, does it?" he taunts me, not making any sort of move to help me up.

"Fuck you."

"Now is that wise to go insulting me

when I have your pretty little girlfriend at my disposal?”

“Don’t you—”

“What? Lay a finger on her? What are you going to do? Sic your lawyer on me?” He laughs, flicking the ashes from his cigar. “I’m afraid my associates already heard from the Kings’ lawyer, and I gotta say, he’s not very nice.”

“Chase, don’t listen to him. Get yourself—” Grey stops talking midstream as Stanley slaps her hard across the face.

Enraged, I hold on to the edge of the desk and haul myself up, determined to wring his flabby neck.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I

have cameras set up in every corner of this room. Do you really want the world to see you slugging a defenseless old man over some whore?"

"She's not a whore."

"Oh yeah, that's right. She's your whore."

I lunge at him again, unable to stop myself.

"Chase, don't!" Grey screams. "He's not worth it."

"Listen to her, Chase." My fist is an inch away from his face and he doesn't even blink. "Like I said we have business to discuss."

"Dream on, asshole. I'm not giving you anything."

"Well, that's a poor attitude to open

up negotiations with, wouldn't you say? Especially since I didn't fuck your girlfriend six ways from Sunday."

I want to deck him for that comment alone, but I restrain myself. He's pushing all my buttons, jerking my chain for kicks. If I touch him, his bodyguard will come rushing in on me, and I'll be no use to Grey after he gets through with me.

"See? That's better. You do have some degree of self-control after all. And here I thought you were just a roid-raging addict."

"Just get on with it."

"All right, fine. Let's lay it all out on the table, shall we? Your visit to Stockton interrupted a very lucrative

stream of income I had going on, and until you tell me how you're going to compensate me for that loss of revenue, Grey stays here."

"Buddy, I don't even know what the hell you're talking about."

"That's funny because the Kings sure didn't have too much trouble shutting it down."

"What are you talking about? Keith?"

"Ding, ding, ding—the dumb jock does have a brain in that thick skull of his after all."

"He was in league with you?"

"Son, I've been in the business of selling pussy for a helluva long time. Do you think I'd let a little prick like that set up shop in my territory without getting a

cut of the profits? C'mon, smarten up."

"But that doesn't explain what you want from Grey."

"Ah, so Noah filled you in on our little arrangement, did he?"

Grey whimpers quietly, turning ever so slightly away from me. What doesn't she want me to know? Is what she agreed to do really that bad? I take a step toward her and Stanley sticks out his leg to stop me.

"Nuh uh. No contact until this is settled. You need some motivation to cooperate."

"What did you do to her?"

"Nothing. We just talked...about quite a momentous occasion that just occurred

in her life.”

This can't be happening.

“With a body like that, I can't believe it took that long.”

Can a person really be this depraved?

“And let me tell you, Chase. I enjoyed hearing every last detail. Grey has a way with words. She really knows how to paint a picture.”

I'm going to kill him.

“I had to, Chase. I didn't have a choice. He's already sent someone after me once. God knows what else he would've done. How far he would've taken things. I couldn't play around with your life. I couldn't take that risk.”

But I don't even hear her. I'm in a daze. The single most glorious moment

of my existence has now been sullied and degraded. Thoughts Grey hasn't even shared with me are now fodder for this sleazeball to ponder. It's such a violation. Tainting Grey in my eyes, making her part of the betrayal.

“You see, I'm a connoisseur of such stories. They're like diamonds—precious, rare, unique, no two ever alike. But these tender morsels are best enjoyed as close to the actual event as possible when it's all still fresh in their mind. Some men spend a fortune to perform the act. And sure, I could've put Grey on the market, sold her to the highest bidder in exchange for her freedom. I have plenty of contacts who



would've jumped at the offer. But I'm not like that. I'm more of a romantic at heart. I only like to hear about it. It lends so much to the imagination."

Stanley appears enraptured as he spins his tale, like he's doing humanity a service by exploiting the most private of moments a man and a woman can share.

"And here I thought Grey would fall for the charms of a local blue-collar guy or some pathetic pencil pusher. Never in a million years did I think she would snag the biggest fish in the sea. When I first saw the photo of the two of you in that Starbucks yesterday, I nearly blew a gasket. The Stockton newspaper reported that you had dined at Buster's Crab Shack while you were here, so it

didn't take Keith long to go through his footage and find more evidence of you two getting it on."

I turn my back, unable to stomach listening to anymore of this.

"Now don't go getting all hot under the collar. Grey's story will never travel farther than this room. I'm quite possessive of my little treasures. They're meant for no one's enjoyment but my own. I like to go back and listen to them on occasion, perfect my Q&A technique for future use."

I flip back around. "So you made a recording of her?"

"Of course I did. Son, I'm getting old. My memory ain't what it used to be."

“So how do I know you won’t threaten to release it in the future should you run a little short on funds? I’m just supposed to take your word for it?”

“I’m afraid so. I might run an unsavory type of empire, but my business practices are aboveboard. I’d never cheat a client, especially one as powerful as you. I’m shrewd, but I’m not a fool. I collect what’s owed to me, nothing more.”

“Well shouldn’t it be Keith’s responsibility to make amends for cutting off your pipeline of reality porn? He’s the one who got greedy, blackmailing the Kings.”

“Your logic is sound, young Jedi,” he

laughs heartily. “But you can’t blame me for going for broke. It’s not too often that I have someone like you grace my establishment. I had to see if you’d let me bleed you dry, but you’re smarter than I gave you credit for. I thought seeing Grey in tears would make you lose your head, and you’d give me anything I asked for. But you figured out my game, and I have to respect you for that. The two of you are free to go.”

He removes his hold on Grey, and when she comes rushing at me, I can’t resist wrapping my arms around her. She’s been through quite an ordeal, and while I don’t like what she’s done, I care about her too much to refuse her any comfort now, especially when she’s

been subjected to the inclinations of this monster.

I turn her toward the door, shielding her from view as I glare at Stanley over my shoulder, daring him to say another word. Grey grips me tightly as we walk by a snickering Brent, who is lounging in the hallway, ready for round two. I stroke her hair to calm her down. The ruckus out front has reached a fever pitch as multiple girls strut their stuff on stage to the same Def Leppard track that Grey used to perform to. She clings to me as I lead her away from these painful memories once and for all.

The bouncer holds the door open for us, shaking his head over his boss's

appetite for perversity. “I’m sorry, man. Grey’s a sweet girl. I wish she never got mixed up with the likes of him.”

“You and me both.”

“Take good care of her, Whit. She’s one of the good ones.”

Grey’s too distraught to acknowledge him, so I simply tip my head as I guide her back outside into the muggy evening air.

Noah and Erin are huddled under a streetlight, but when they see us come out, they waste no time rushing over.

“What the heck happened? Are you okay?” Erin dislodges Grey’s iron grip on my body and pulls her close.

“Man, what happened to your neck?” Noah winces, stepping up next to me to

get a better look. "It looks like someone ran you over with a tire."

"I'll live," I mutter, more worried about how quiet Grey is than some stupid bruise that'll eventually fade.

"Did he hit you up for some major cash?" Noah asks, assuming the worst.

"Nah. He was after something a lot more valuable. And he got it."

"He didn't make you promise to turn over your firstborn or some crazy shit like that, did he?"

I watch Erin take Grey over to her car, and ease her into the front seat.

"No, but who knew some crime boss in Stockton could be such an expert in psychological torture?"

“Fuck. Is she gonna be okay?” Noah’s eyes search mine for some kind of confirmation.

I let out the breath I didn’t even know I was holding. “I don’t know, man. I hope so.”

“What about you?” He looks at me with concern.

“I’ll survive,” I mutter, scratching the back of my head.

“That doesn’t sound too encouraging.”

“I think I’m just in shock.” I feel some of the tension drain out of my body, but I’m still on edge.

“Jesus, what did he do to you guys?”

“I’d rather not say. Noah, just forget it ever happened, for my sake and for



hers.” I rest my hand on his shoulder, imploring him to let it go.

“Are you gonna ride with Erin back to Grey’s trailer or do you want me to drive you over?”

I’d really like some time away from Grey right now, but that’s not possible. I have nowhere else to go, and I don’t want to tip anyone off that I’m back in Stockton. I don’t want to recreate the media frenzy we left behind in New York. We both need some quiet time to come down from all of this.

“Noah, I know you were in a tight spot, but going behind my back like that and bringing her here without telling me? Not cool, bro.”

“Chase, you don’t know Stanley like I

do.” Noah grabs my arm, determined to explain his side of things. “He’s relentless. No one just walks away from him. I didn’t want to turn Grey over to him like that, but Stanley threatened my dad’s business. He said he has a friend who works in the DMV and he would’ve rung us up on all these bogus violations. Shut us down for good. I knew he wouldn’t hurt Grey. I just assumed he was after a big payday.”

“And you were okay with that?” I stare him down, not wanting to hear his excuses.

“Of course not. I never thought he’d get away with it. Who does he think he is, taking on the New York Kings? He’s

insane.” Noah shakes his head, unnerved by how far his old boss was willing to go.

“But why didn’t you come to me first? I could’ve helped you out and prevented all of this.” He was a fool to think he could handle something of this magnitude on his own.

“Chase, Stanley doesn’t forget a slight. If you and Grey took off for New York, the Martin family name would still be on his blacklist. You wouldn’t be able to protect me forever. He’s a patient man. He bides his time until he’s able to strike. I had a chance to wipe the slate clean. So I had to take it.”

“When did Stockton become the fuckin’ Wild West?”

“Small-town life ain’t so quaint after all. Your big-city drug lords and mob bosses have nothing on us.”

“I guess not.”

“Listen, man. I’m gonna bail. I gotta get up early and bring back the Prius that’s parked in your garage, but I’m serious about getting together once this all dies down. I consider you a friend, Chase Whitfield, and I promise to make it up to you.”

“Noah, just don’t take my girl to any more strip clubs, you hear me?” His heart was in the right place, even if things got all bungled up.

“Not on my life.”

“And if you run into any problems,

just tell Luis to call me.”

“Will do. Take care of Grey, dude. She’s gonna need you. Now more than ever.” He glances over at her, drawing my attention back to where it needs to be.

I wave to Noah as he gets behind the wheel, afraid to go over to Erin and Grey. They’re whispering frantically between themselves, like they don’t want me to hear what they’re saying. And frankly, I don’t think I could handle listening to a play-by-play of Grey’s interrogation by Stanley. That’s one conversation I’d rather not be a part of.

“Are you ready, Chase?” Erin calls out, shooting me a sympathetic smile.

Yeah, she knows. And I feel even

more emasculated by her pity. I couldn't protect Grey from having to reveal something so personal to a pervert like that. It makes me feel like less of a man. Like I failed her somehow, and she failed me. Stripped me of my manhood, laid my secrets bare.

I cram my body into the back seat of Erin's car, shoving a child's car seat aside, my knee groaning in protest.

But the pain is all I have to concentrate on because none of us say a word the whole way back to Grey's trailer. That's when I know things must be royally screwed up, because for Erin to go that long without talking has to be some kind of record.

# *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

## **Grey**

I knew I was going to have to tell Stanley about my first time. But having to betray Chase like that? It makes me hate Stanley even more. Chase didn't have to find out about our deal. I could've lied, covered it up. But standing there, watching it break his heart, I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive myself for that.

Regret. Shame. Guilt. It all melds together in one crippling blow of self-loathing. I refuse to open my eyes. I know he can't stand to look at me right now, even though we're scrunched

together in my tiny bed.

We just collapsed against each other last night, not even bothering to take off our clothes. I could never ask him to sleep on the floor, not after he was so banged up and sore. And I knew he'd never let me sleep in the chair when I was in such a state. So we called a temporary truce and snuggled up together, pretending like nothing happened.

But now, in the harsh light of day, that tender alliance is about to crumble. He has every right to feel betrayed. I mean, he's held himself aloof for so long, not wanting to get attached to anyone. And what do I do? I throw his trust right back in his face, making a mockery of him.



That night we spent together in New York, what transpired between us, was pure magic better than I ever believed possible. I felt so connected to him, like we forging a bond on a level I never knew existed. We were united as much as two people possibly could be. Until I shattered the spell, bringing us both tumbling back to earth.

What if Chase can't forgive me? Guys have their pride when it comes to these things, and he's always said that he is headstrong, unwilling to budge. Now, every time he looks at me, is it going to remind him of what I did? Maybe we'll never be able to achieve that level of intimacy again. I probably ruined

everything.

But he's touching me now. His thumb is moving across my hipbone. I don't know if he's awake or asleep. It could just be a reflex. But he did hold me in his arms when we were leaving The Blue Room. He didn't push me away when I threw myself at him. Maybe it was just to irritate Stanley and not for my benefit.

Chase was so careful about protecting me from the harm his attraction was bound to cause. He didn't want to turn it into some kind of spectacle. So this must be killing him inside, knowing what I did. How I disregarded all of his concerns and did exactly what he was trying to avoid. Cheapening our union.

Turning it into something tawdry. Talking about it to someone like Stanley like it meant nothing.

When it meant the world to me—and it always will.

I can't put the burden of making this right on him. I need to be the one to speak first. I'm in the wrong here. I'm the one who screwed up, not him. I never thought Chase would be the one when I made that deal with Stanley. Not in a million years did I believe it would come down to him, or I never would have agreed to it.

But I couldn't let Stanley damage Chase's reputation. He could've leaked Keith's video of me. The Kings had no

clue that he was the ringleader behind the operation. Stanley was willing to let Keith take the fall while he stayed hidden behind the scenes. But as long as Stanley felt like I owed him something, he was a threat. He could release that video of me performing very easily without getting caught. I couldn't let that happen. I had to do something, even if it cost me my relationship with Chase. At least I got to spend one incredible night with him.

“Are you up?” I whisper, holding my breath.

“Uh huh,” he groans, stretching out next to me.

I take courage in the fact that he still wants to be physically close to me as he

drapes his denim-covered leg over the two of mine. My heart starts to pound. That's his bad knee. Maybe it's just hurting him and that's why he's squirming around. I doubt it's because he still wants to be with me. Not after last night.

“We need to talk.” I shiver as he yawns against my ear, ruffling the hair at the base of my neck.

“So talk.” He doesn't issue the command like a threat or an ultimatum, more like a request.

It's freaking me out not being able to look at him, but he clearly doesn't want me to turn around since his leg is holding me firmly in place.

“I’m sorry it had to happen like that. That’s not how I intended things to go down. I had a plan for dealing with Stanley, and I was optimistic when he told me that business was booming after the rumor circulated that you had visited The Blue Room. People always want to hang out where celebrities are spotted. Act like they’re cooler than they really are. Pretend like they’re living it up when they’re just in the same rundown dive.”

Chase doesn’t interrupt. He lets me keep talking.

“I thought he wanted proof that you had been there. Lure you in so he could take a still photo from his security

camera or something, put it on his wall. Follow Keith's playbook. But he wasn't about to let me out of the bargain we struck."

I shove my clasped hands farther beneath the pillow, wishing I could hide from what I have to say next.

"No amount of money was going to dissuade him. He didn't care if he had the opportunity to bleed you for millions. He knew if he went after the dollar signs, he wouldn't get me to open up. It's like he wanted to keep it private or else it wouldn't mean as much to him. He's a collector, and the more valuable and rare something is, the more he wants it. Not many girls lose their virginity to a celebrity. I was destined to be the crown

jewel of his perverted collection.”

I stare blankly at the wall. The birds are chirping outside. The baseball clock is ticking above the door. The refrigerator is humming in the kitchen. But Chase remains silently curled up next to me.

“Rest assured, Stanley will never share that recording with anyone. He has a self-destruct option on his files should anything ever happen to him. He’s the only one with the password, and if he doesn’t log on to the server within a certain time frame, everything gets erased. He explained it all to me when we made the deal. He even gave me a signed contract with the details in



writing. He'd rather die than let anyone see them. He's possessive, not to mention thorough."

Testing Chase, I try to slide my leg out from under his, but he shifts more of his weight onto me, holding me down. I take that as a sign that I should keep going. He wants to hear more.

"Stanley said that he's obsessed with virginity stories because he grew up in a brothel. His mother was a prostitute. He never knew his dad. He was thirteen when he had sex for the first time. For him, it was never about love. It was a transaction—something to be bought and sold. But somewhere deep inside his soul, he longs for innocence and romance. He's enthralled by it, worships

it even. When I came to work for him, he saw right through me. He knew what I was. I didn't have to tell him. He knew he held my golden ticket in his hands. I wasn't going to be a stripper forever. I wasn't the type to make a career out of it. He had me pegged from day one. He knew I'd want to leave, and when I did, he intended to cash in his trump card."

I reach back and rest my hand on top of Chase's.

"It's over now. After I told him what he wanted to hear, I didn't want to get you involved, but when I started to resist, he dragged you into it. He kept me there, knowing that Noah would call you to come rescue me. And you did. You

saved me last night, Chase. Stanley wouldn't have let you or the Kings buy him off. There were no other options. I just hope that with time you might be able to forgive me."

I slip my fingers through his, and he lets me, squeezing them in return.

"I want to go see your mom today."

With one frantic motion, I'm able to buck him off.

"You want to do what?" I gaze at him wildly, scooting against the wall at the far corner of the bed.

"I want you to introduce me to your mother. And your father if he's around." His eyelids are half closed as he looks at me drowsily, not the least bit excited that I just knocked him flat on his back.

“Because I think they might have the wrong impression of me, and I want to fix that.”

“You’re worried about what they think of you while the whole world is out there calling me a gold-digging whore? I think you need to look at things in the right perspective. They’re going to want to kill me, not you. They love you. They always have. You’re, like, my mom’s favorite player, and my dad respects you. And he doesn’t respect any guys your age. I’m serious. If they could handpick someone for me, it’d be you—and not because you’re rich and famous. For how weird it sounds, they genuinely like you. You don’t have to win them

over. They're already on your side."

"I still want to do things the right way. I want to meet them. Take the honorable route. I don't think I've met any girl's parents since I picked up my date for the prom. I want to do things right."

"Too bad we already slept together."

"Ha, ha. Very funny."

Chase sits up, positioning himself alongside me. I try not to blush as I slide into him. His arm immediately goes around my shoulders, drawing me close.

"Chase, why are you being so good about this? I didn't think you'd ever want to speak to me again after last night."

"I didn't."

"So what changed your mind?"

“I’m sick of trying to control whatever this is between us. You’re like a force of nature, Grey, throwing me in different directions, keeping me off balance. But at the same time, you make me feel things I’ve never felt before. Being with you has completely upended my life, but in the best way possible.”

“I don’t want to fight anymore.” I snuggle up against him, glad that he’s being honest with me.

“I don’t either. Do I like the things you told Stanley? No. Do I like the fact that he recorded them? Hell no. So I guess what I need to know is—did you tell him the truth?”

I answer after a moment’s hesitation,

afraid of his response. “Yes.”

“Then if it ever comes out, I have nothing to fear and neither do you. If you expressed even the smallest iota of what I experienced with you that night in my penthouse, then there’s nothing I take back or regret. Do I wish that remained private between the two of us? Absolutely. But I know the world we’re entering into. There’s not going to be much we’ll be able to keep to ourselves. And if I weren’t so high profile, you wouldn’t have to worry about your mom finding out about your time at The Blue Room.”

“So we’re even?”

“Pretty much. I’d be a dick if I blamed you for what happened with Stanley but

didn't take responsibility for making things right with your mom."

"And you're really going to do that for me after all that went down?"

"Grey, we're in this together. I don't know how much clearer I can make it. That stuff with Stanley is over, forgotten. He has no claim on you anymore. You belong to me now."

His body collapses onto mine as his lips find my shoulder. Struggling to find a position that doesn't cause him pain, he quickly grabs my pillow and shoves it under his knee. But he's determined to do this as his teeth grab my shirt, guiding it down. I moan as his tongue finds my collarbone.



All I've wanted since we left New York was to continue what we started, and after last night's fiasco, I was afraid I'd put it all in jeopardy. That I would never again get to nibble on his bottom lip or feel his ribs expand and contract beneath my fingers. It's almost too good to be true that things are actually going to work out, that we're back on track and moving in the right direction.

I never thought I'd wake up this morning to find him wanting to make love to me in my own bed. I wasn't even sure he'd still be here when I got up. I gasp when his nose touches that delicate place behind my right ear. He remembered. It's thrilling that he already

knows those special places on my body that turn me on.

I shift and he moves with me, the bed creaking and groaning beneath us. I've never tried anything like this on it before as it rocks shakily back and forth. It's mortifying, but Chase doesn't seem to be aware of it. If he is, he's dutifully ignoring it, concentrating on the task at hand.

We help each other remove whatever articles of clothing we have left on our bodies. I think I hear the seam of my shirt rip, but at this point I couldn't care less. He's doing things to me that are making me lose consciousness. I raise my arms above my head to grab on to something, anything. His head dips

below my waist and I can't reach him. Crying out, I writhe against the sheets unable to keep still.

And then I'm gone, blasted into the stratosphere, his name torn from my lips.

He's back on top of me in an instant, his grunts filling the room. The bed feels like it's on some kind of vibrator mode as it rocks underneath us. Finally, he lets out a strangled cry, dropping onto my chest as the bed frame issues a gigantic crack before caving in.

"Did we just break the bed?" I ask, my eyes flying open.

"I think so." He pants, still trying to catch his breath. "Don't worry. I'll buy you a new one, a better one. Because

that was fucking worth it.”

“You better believe it. Best make-up sex ever.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

I smile. At this point, I don’t care if we end up on the floor, against the wall, or wherever he wants to take me.

I’m game.

# *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

## **Chase**

“Hey, Dad, you remember Chase, right?”

Grey’s father is holding open the door to her childhood home with a flummoxed expression on his face. He doesn’t know whether to shake my hand or throttle me, his conflicting emotions waging war beneath the surface. Grey gives him a kiss on his neatly trimmed beard, and he raises an eyebrow at my crutches as I hurtle in after her.

I can’t blame the guy for being confused. He just found out that I’m dating his daughter after it was blasted across the internet. Even though there’s

no tangible proof, it's well known throughout Stockton that I frequented The Blue Room during my stay here. Seeing Grey's dad putting the pieces of the puzzle together in his mind doesn't make for a pretty picture. It's clear that he doesn't think I'm good enough for his little girl.

"Where's Mom?" Grey asks, that lilt of panic evident in her voice whenever she mentions her mother.

"She's not feeling well today," Grey's dad says, clearing his throat while glaring at me like I'm the sole reason for his wife's distress.

"Can we see her? Is she still in bed?" Grey barges right by him, heading down the hallway, dragging me along with her.

“Mr. Kelleher, if you don’t think it’s a good idea—” I start to protest.

“Nonsense. Seeing you will do her good. Lift her spirits. Right, Dad?”

But Mr. Kelleher is noncommittal in his assessment. “She’s been through a lot in the last few days, Grey. As have you.”

“That’s why I have to see her, Dad. I need to explain—”

A feeble voice issues from the last bedroom on the left. “Grey, is that you?”

“Yeah, Mom. It’s me. I have someone special here to see you. Is it all right if I come in?”

It looks like Grey’s parents’ home was most likely constructed in the 1970s based on its retro style. Everything is all

on one floor—the bedrooms, the living room, the kitchen. But the hallway is extremely tight. We're in a single-file line, and on crutches there's not much room to maneuver. I'm wedged between Grey and her father, feeling a little ill at ease.

I'm not comfortable around cancer patients. I remember taking J.J. for a chemo treatment once. I hated seeing the sunken eyes and shrunken frames of the people sitting around us. It was like their impending death was hanging on their bodies like a shroud. I didn't want my sister to join their ranks. She was young, vibrant, healthy. There was no way I was going to let her end up like that. I did everything in my power to keep her



with me.

Grey breezes into the room, leaving me behind. I'm too afraid to follow her in. I think it's best that I wait until she calls. She might need a few minutes alone with her mom to straighten things out. I shift awkwardly on my foot, thinking desperately of something to say to Grey's dad, but he beats me to it.

“So you're out for the season, huh?”

Not exactly the topic I want to talk about, but it'll do. I hear the soft whisperings between Grey and her mother, and I strain to make out what they're saying as I answer him back.

“Yeah, I'm afraid so.”

“Well, there goes the division.

They'll never get it together without you."

The first rule in baseball is that it's a team sport. Forget that for one moment and a player will live to rue the day. Never get caught up in individual accomplishments. Check the ego at the door—at least in public.

"I don't know. I think the Kings still have a good shot at making the playoffs."

"Yeah? I don't think so."

Wow, Grey's dad is actually sticking it to me big time.

"I wouldn't count my teammates out just yet. I have faith in them."

"Well, I'm glad you do, but I bet Terry Bloom's ripping out what little hair he has left. The Kings are past the

trade deadline. They have no one decent to fill in for you. They're going to have to keep throwing that rookie shortstop out there that they called up from the Beavers, and he stunk while he was here. No way he's going to turn it around up there. He couldn't even hit .250 in the Minors."

I know the guy he's talking about, Brooks Davison. He was never supposed to play in New York this season. He still needs more time to develop as a player. The Kings undoubtedly rushed him through the system because they don't have anyone else. Grey's dad knows his stuff.

"You go to a lot of Beavers games?" I

ask, trying to change the subject.

“Not really. Can’t leave Nancy alone at night in case she needs me. I follow the box scores in the paper though.”

Grey’s dad is definitely old school, but I like it.

“What do you do for a living, Mr. Kelleher?”

“I used to be a mailman. I had enough years in so I was able to take an early retirement when Nancy got sick. But I miss talking to the people on my route about the Kings or at least the Beavers. You’d be surprised how it’s a common thread connecting everyone around here.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. When it was announced that

you were going to play in Stockton, it was like the Second Coming.”

“So you used to go to Kings Stadium every year, huh?” I ask, desperate to get the focus off me.

“Uh huh. Grey and Erin certainly screamed their heads off whenever you came up to bat. I think one year they even made a poster and got on the big screen.”

Now that’s an interesting tidbit I’ll have to tease Grey about.

“But can I ask, what are you doing here, son? What’s this all about? Something to take your mind off things while you’re recovering?”

It’s like he switched from lobbying

softballs to beaming me between the eyes. It's not like I didn't expect this to come up, but I thought he'd handle it with a little more finesse. Grey's dad may be a straight shooter—but man, is he direct.

“No, sir. It's a lot more serious than that.”

“You've known each other less than a week. How serious can it be?”

“I know it's probably hard to—”

“Listen, son. I've followed your whole career, okay? I don't get all starry eyed over players like my daughters do. I don't read the tabloids or the gossip columns or anything like that, but I think it's safe to say you're not the settling-down type. Never have, never will be.

And Grey's not like that. She only knows how to love with her whole heart and nothing less, especially when it comes to you. If you're just killing time with her, I suggest you think long and hard about what your intentions are because her heart won't mend as quickly as that knee of yours."

"Sir, I—"

"Don't tell me what you think I want to hear, Chase. Tell the truth. You have more media savvy than I'll ever have, but when it comes to my daughter, I need you to level with me. Don't sell me a line of goods. You're really going to play house in her trailer for the rest of the summer? What then? You're going to

bring her to Florida with you? She's just supposed to follow you around wherever you go? What kind of life is that for her?"

I want to respond with, *Better than the one she has now*, but I don't.

"And what if she can't handle being in the public eye like you can? What if it breaks her spirit?"

"She's a lot stronger than you give her credit for. She's handled herself remarkably well for someone not used to being in the spotlight."

"But that's all she's ever going to be—some small-town girl who hit the jackpot by dating you. I want so much more for her than that. Being with you would define her. There'll be no getting



out of your shadow. And if you get tired of her, she'll have to live with that rejection for the rest of her life. People around here will never let her forget it."

"If we're being honest, I'm more afraid she'll leave me."

"Why do say that?"

"Because she might get sick of having the paparazzi hound her every move. She might end up resenting me for losing her freedom. But I can't let her go. She wants to give it a try, and so do I."

"Grey's my daughter, and I love her to death, but what is it about her that has you willing to jump through all these extra hoops when you don't have to? You could pair up with another celebrity

who is used to the attention. No one would think twice about it. But singling her out? It just doesn't make sense. What do the two of you even have in common?"

I pause for a second, determined to find the right words to explain exactly what I'm feeling in my heart. I'm not the greatest when it comes to expressing my emotions, and I don't want to screw this up. I can't screw this up.

"Grey just sees me, sir. It's like to her I'm still that guy I was before all of this happened to me. From the first time she looked at me, I couldn't hide from her. She's not after all the perks—she's just interested in me. She's someone worth taking a chance on because she's in it for

all the right reasons. Even if I never played again and left it all behind, she'd be okay with that. Or if I miraculously have the best year of my career next season, she'd be fine with that too. The scrutiny is probably going to be more intense than ever, but I know she can handle it, either way."

"And you?"

"I'm not going to lie. It'll be a blow if I don't heal and I can't return to the Kings. And if I do make it back and play at a subpar level, it's going to be tough. I probably won't be a joy to be around."

"And you expect Grey to be there to pick up the pieces?"

"Of course not. I'm a big boy. I've

been doing this a long time. It's all I know. But maybe she can show me a different side of life, something better. Help me make the transition with dignity. Earning her love would be something worth striving for. It'd make me want to get up and face the day, regardless if I were still a Major League baseball player or not."

"You've thought a lot about this, haven't you?"

"Let's just say I've had a lot of time on my hands to think about the future. More time than I ever had before, and I realized I have some pretty gaping holes in my life, ones I need to fill. I can't keep on living just for myself or my life is going to be pretty empty when all this

baseball stuff comes to an end. I can't play forever."

"And how does Grey feel about all of this?"

"I think she's willing to give it a go. But she made it perfectly clear that she doesn't want to be dependent on me for anything."

"That's a nice sentiment, but we both know it's hogwash."

"As far as money's concerned, she doesn't have to worry. I can promise you that."

"It's not the money I'm worried about. We're simple people, Chase. We don't have an extravagant lifestyle."

"Then what is it?"

“She might make you happy. But is what you have to offer really what’s best for her?”

“Wait a minute—”

“No, hear me out. What if you can’t protect her from all this? What if—?”

“I’m already protecting her, sir. I would never let anyone harm her.”

“And what if old girlfriends start coming out of the woodwork? Or some woman claims you fathered her son? You’re a known playboy, Chase. Undoubtedly, you have some skeletons rattling in your closet. You can’t run from your past.”

Little does he know, I’ve already dodged it multiple times.

“Yeah, things like that are going to happen, and if situations like that arise, they’ll be dealt with. You don’t have to be concerned about Grey.”

“Son, what you’re telling me isn’t too encouraging.”

“Mr. Kelleher, I don’t have any illegitimate children running around out there if that’s what you’re implying.”

“As far as you know.”

I clench my jaw. He’s not going to give in on this. His mind is already made up. He thinks I’m some kind of jackass trying to snatch his beloved daughter away from him. But Grey’s not that innocent. Not by a long shot. And I like her that way.

“Chase, c’mon in. Mom is having a fit that Dad is hogging you all to himself.” Grey’s voice filters out to the hallway, easing the tension somewhat.

“Just don’t rush into anything, all right? Take it slow. See how it goes,” Grey’s dad urges, giving me a hearty pat on the back.

“That’s the plan, sir.” I mutter, moving forward. “Nothing in life is definite. You know that. I know that. Grey knows that. But even if life doesn’t offer us any guarantees, we still have to hope for the best.”

The corners of his eyes crinkle up as he gives me a knowing smile. This can’t be easy on him, what with his wife



skirting the brink of death. I know what it's like to get that close to losing someone. It makes me want to savor each and every moment I have with Grey.

“There he is. Mom, can you believe Chase Whitfield is in your house?” Grey bubbles with excitement, compensating for the frail condition of the woman lying in the bed.

I'm floored by how emaciated Grey's mother is. I knew she was bad, but not this bad. My heart aches in my chest when I realize just how much Grey has been dealing with. I feel like a jerk for stealing her away, monopolizing her time, when she should have been spending every moment with her mother.

“My husband wasn’t giving you too hard of a time out there I hope. He can be an ogre when it comes to his girls.” Her voice is a bit raspy, but it sounds so much like Grey’s that I have to blink to make sure I’m not hearing things.

“And especially after what happened with Erin and Mark, he’s ratcheted up to hyperdrive. So beware.” Grey rolls her eyes.

Grey told me briefly about the fallout from her sister’s marriage, but I can tell it’s still a sore subject within the family. Grey said that her parents felt guilty for not picking up on Mark’s true character while he was dating Erin. They blamed themselves for not looking out for their

eldest daughter, allowing themselves to be blinded by Mark's charm. He turned out to be a different man altogether when he didn't have an audience watching his every move. Behind closed doors, he was quite a brute. Erin was lucky to get out alive, and according to Grey, she still has a restraining order on her ex, even though he has visitation rights to the kids. Grey's dad facilitates the exchange so that Mark doesn't have any contact with Erin. The court says that he has to hand over his grandchildren to the man who beat his daughter, but he doesn't have to like it.

No wonder he gave me the third degree. I'm like his worst nightmare come true. Someone who has more

money, power, and influence than he'll ever have. If something goes wrong, he sees his daughter as being at my mercy. He won't be able to save her, and that has to needle him somewhat. I'll just have to go out of my way to keep reassuring him. There's no way I'd ever take advantage of Grey. I'd never lay a finger on her. I'd never deliberately hurt her. I'm not like that.

But I guess I can see where he's coming from now. If something does go wrong between us, I'd have a distinct advantage—a publicity juggernaut, a team of lawyers, a hefty bank account. It wouldn't be a fair fight, more like a slam dunk in my favor. Wow. Grey's father is

already looking that far down the road, picturing heated child custody disputes...for kids that don't even exist.

I swallow, trying to collect my thoughts.

“Yeah, he spooked you, didn't he? Damn it, Richie. I apologize for my husband, Chase. He gets a little high-handed when I'm not there to keep him in check.”

Grey looks away at her mom's words, no doubt thinking of the day when her mom really won't be there to scold her father.

“No, it's fine, Mrs. Kelleher, really.”

“My goodness, you're even better looking in person.”

“Mom!”

“What? Can’t I admire a handsome man when I see one?”

“Not out loud.”

“I still think you should have been named Sexiest Man Alive instead of the scrawny judge on that singing competition. A man who weighs less than most women? What’s sexy about that?”

“Oh God, Mom.”

“Chase, look at you, all nice and developed. Now that’s what I call a bicep. Come over here. Let me see for myself just how strong you are.”

Grey’s face is beet red, but I’m getting a kick out of her mother. Now I can see where Grey gets her feistiness from.

“Go ahead, Mrs. Kelleher. Be my guest.”

I move up to the side of the bed on my crutches and she reaches up to give my arm a good squeeze.

“Solid as a rock.”

“Too bad I can’t say the same for my knee.”

“Too bad I can’t say the same for my whole body.”

I immediately feel like I just stuck my foot in my mouth, comparing my trivial health problem to hers.

“I didn’t mean—”

“Of course not. Don’t even pay attention to me. But did you ever have one of those days when you’d do

anything to feel normal again? Even just for a day?"

"Lately, I'm afraid I have, ma'am."

"Then you know where I'm coming from then. We can complain to each other all we want about our aches and pains."

"Sounds good to me."

"Well, not to me," Grey says. "Mom, Chase came here to cheer you up, not so the two of you could sit here and commiserate together."

"But he is cheering me up, dear."

"I am?" I ask, somewhat surprised.

"Sure. I'm getting a contact high just being around you. No wonder my daughter's so crazy about you."

"Is it that obvious?" Grey asks,



playfully swatting my arm as I step away from her mom's bedside.

"You were on the Jumbotron at Kings Stadium, screaming my name. It's kind of dead giveaway." I wink at Mrs. Kelleher out of the corner of my eye.

"You're never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"Nope. I don't think so."

Grey's mom stares off into space, a vacant expression on her face.

"Maybe we should go. You're getting tired, Mom. I don't want to wear you out."

"But promise you'll come again soon. Chase, I have so much to tell you about Grey. So many stories. Like the time she

cut her own hair or when she nearly drown when we were at the beach. You're going to have your hands full keeping up with her, but you'll have lots of fun too. No one lives life to the fullest like Grey does. She's my fearless girl."

Her mom's eyes start to close, and Grey struggles to blink back her tears. Lowering her head, she turns away from me for a moment as she strokes her mom's hand with her thumb before tucking it beneath the blanket.

"Are you ready?" she asks, trying to maintain her composure. If she doesn't want to cry here, that's fine. But she's going to have to let it out when we're alone. It's too much to deal with. I don't want her holding it all in because she

thinks I'm uncomfortable dealing with emotion. I want her to feel whatever she wants to feel in front of me—no judgment, no blame.

“Yeah, if you are. I'm so glad I got to meet you, Mrs. Kelleher.” I glance down but it appears she's already fallen asleep. Grey snuffles and I clear my throat, trying to lighten the mood. “You two resemble each other so much. It's scary.”

“Really? Everyone thinks Erin's the one who takes after her. They always compare me to Dad. I guess it's because we always walk around all summer with terrible sunburns. It's not easy being whiter than white.”

Grey leans forward to give her mom a kiss on the forehead. I can see how much it's hurting her to see her mother like this. Shriveling down, until there's nothing left. It's amazing how bright her mom's spirit still burns in a body that's wasting away.

I pat Mrs. Kelleher's feet beneath the layer of blankets. It's another hot one outside, but her lips are blue like she can't get warm enough. I remember J.J. feeling cold all of the time after her chemo treatments. She would be cuddled up on the couch in wool sweaters while everyone else was poolside at my Florida mansion. Those days still hang like a dark cloud in my memory, never to

be forgotten.

I don't want it to be the same way for Grey. I'll have to talk to her dad about what I can do to make his wife as comfortable as possible. Have J.J.'s doctor examine her medical records. Find out if there's any chance she could still beat this. Grey told me that they were running into problems with her insurance coverage. Maybe I can open up some doors before it's too late.

I hear the thundering footsteps and jubilant laughter before I see the two little boys who jump out at us, blocking our path.

"I told you it's him."

"Wow, it really is."

"He's sick too just like Grandma. See

his crutches?”

“But he doesn’t have a cast. Where am I supposed to sign my name?”

“What would he want your autograph for? You still hit off a tee.”

“So?”

“So, he’s Chase Whitfield. He hits them into the upper deck of Kings Stadium.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I still don’t hit off a tee.”

My response floors them. They look up at me startled.

“You do?”

“Yeah. All the time usually during batting practice or in between innings beneath the stadium. It’s how I work on

my swing with the hitting coach. Make sure I'm not pulling off the ball or stepping into a pitch too soon."

"See, Randy? Hitting off a tee is cool."

"I never said it wasn't, Jacob."

"Chase, meet my nephews," Grey says, interrupting their banter.

"Erin's boys?"

"How can you tell?"

At that, I have to laugh as they both look at us like we've lost our minds.

Mr. Kelleher's voice comes booming out of the kitchen. "Keep it down in there, you two. Your grandmother's trying to sleep."

"You wanna go out back and give us some pointers?"

“Randy, I don’t think Chase is up for that right now,” Grey reprimands them.

“Nah, I don’t mind. Lead the way, guys.” I hop along behind them as Jacob holds the door open for me.

“You coming, Dad?” Grey asks. “It’s not too often that you have an All-Star shortstop playing Wiffle ball in your backyard. What will the neighbors say?” She chuckles before helping Randy round up the equipment.

Through the window, I see her father put down his newspaper and get up from the kitchen table. This impromptu hitting session seems to have attracted his attention. Good. I hope it’ll give them all a little levity.



For the next hour, I instruct the boys on how to keep their shoulders back and extend their arms. I even use my crutch to whack a couple up against the fence. Grey is getting a workout, dodging back and forth to scoop up the balls that are being hit all over the yard. But she doesn't seem to mind. In fact, she and the boys look like they're having the time of their lives, reminding me that the game I play for a living is supposed to be fun. It's just been so long since I actually felt that way about it.

“Hey, you ruffians! Time for lunch!”

Randy and Jacob drop their bats the moment they see their mom getting out of the car, carrying a box of pizza. I guess

even a member of the Kings can't compete with food. But I'm surprised to see who Erin's with. It's that quiet guy from the restroom at Buster's Crab Shack. The one who hugged Grey.

I glance at Grey as she notices him too. She gives him a big wave, smiling over at him from across the yard.

"Hi, Brody. Good to see you."

"Yeah, you too, Grey."

He lets his eyes linger on her a little too long for my liking. I stagger forward, blocking his view of her. He does a double take when he sees that it's me.

"Jesus, Chase...Chase Whitfield... How you doing, man?"

"Couldn't be better."

He takes in my haggard appearance. I

should have sat in the lawn chair like Grey had instructed, but I stayed on my feet while I was putting the boys through their paces. I kept my weight off my knee as much as possible, but that doesn't mean it's not bothering me now. It was stupid. I should have listened to her. Now I look weak compared to this guy.

I glance over at Grey as she bends down to retrieve one of the balls. That's why I couldn't be better. I'm the one in her life, enjoying what he can only dream about.

"It's not a pissing contest, Whitfield, all right? Sorry to burst your bubble, but Brody's already taken. He's with me. Got it?"

I smirk at Erin as she laces her arm through Brody's and saunters into the kitchen to greet her dad, the boys already clamoring at the table for some pizza.

"What was that all about? I thought you and Erin were getting along now." Grey tosses everything into a bin in the garage before joining me.

"We are."

"Then why did she think you were hitting on Brody?"

For a minute I think she's serious, before I see that tell tale glimmer in her eye.

"I knew it. All of those stories about you and Drake Schultz must be true. You were just using me this whole time so

you could find your way back to Brody. Admit it. You were after him all along, weren't you?"

"You're gonna pay for that, Kelleher."

Letting my crutches clamor to the ground, I lift her off her feet. But my knee gives out and she begins to slide out of my arms. Desperate to hold on to her, my hands fumble down her body until I'm groping her backside. It's a compromising position to be in, especially in full view of the kitchen window.

"Fall," she whispers against my lips.

"What?"

"Just fall." She nudges my good knee with her foot and we tumble onto the grass.

She has a plaid shirt knotted at the waist and I'm itching to untie it. But I already know what we're doing isn't going to go much farther than this. The boys can come out at any minute, and I already see a neighbor's head craning over the other side of the fence to get a better look. I thought I lived in a fishbowl. Guess nothing beats middle-class suburbia.

I kiss her frantically, passionately, dying for more, but coming up empty when she sits back on my stomach, her legs straddling me.

"Grey, we're not going to stay much longer, right?"

"Nope," she answers with a wink.

“I like your family and all, but—”

“I know.” She smiles, tracing her fingers across my cheek.

“I still have to get you a new bed.”

“We’ll make due.”

“Grey?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you tell your mom about The Blue Room?”

She shakes her head, unable to meet my eyes. “I chickened out. I couldn’t do it.”

“You did the right thing.”

“I did?” she asks, playing with my shirt.

“Yeah. She doesn’t need to know.”

After witnessing the condition of her

mom firsthand, I know Grey made the right decision. She's perceptive enough to realize that unburdening her guilt might ease her guilty conscience, but it wouldn't help her mom any. Grey would never hurt someone she cares about like that. She's too good a person to only think of herself.

“Thank you for saying that.” Her eyes are conveying so much. I just want to wrap her in my arms and never let her go.

“I'll always be on your side.” I gently stroke her wrist, marveling at her beauty both inside and out.

“And you know I've always been your number one fan.” She giggles, causing her body to move against mine.



“But Grey? I don’t think I’m going to make it through lunch.” My heart beats rapidly as she runs her hands down my chest.

“Then let’s get out of here.”

“There’s just one problem.”

“What?”

“I don’t think I can get up. I’m going to need you to help me.”

“Oh no, Chase. Your knee—”

I put my fingers to her lips.

“I promise to be a good boy from now on. And follow all of your instructions to the letter.”

“Well, in that case, I might have something special in store for you tonight.”

“Go on.” My hands are at her waist as I take a deep breath, anticipating what she’s going to say.

“How about I drag my mattress into the back of my truck, drive it deep into the woods, and make love to you under the stars until the sun comes up?”

Shifting onto my good knee, I don’t waste another minute contemplating her suggestion, making a valiant attempt to scramble to my feet.

“Wait! Let me get your crutches.”

“I don’t want to wait. I’ve waited long enough for you, Grey. I want to enjoy every single moment we have together.”

“I’m all for that.” She kisses me

again, as she tosses my arm across her shoulders, ready to sustain me.

# *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

**Grey**

*February, seven months later*

Well, today's the day—Chase's first spring training game of the season.

I'm sitting in the area designated for the players' wives even though technically I'm just a girlfriend. I wanted to sit by myself in some random seat away from the field, but Chase didn't want to cause any waves on his first day back. And if someone spotted me sitting alone, I'd be swarmed.

When we came down to Florida at the beginning of January, the media

followed us everywhere. When we went out to dinner. When we went to the grocery store. When we went to the movies. We were able to live our lives pretty much undetected in Stockton. I knew the ins and outs of that familiar environment. And Jack had installed a security gate at the bottom of the mountain, so no one could drive up our road.

Noah helped too in driving Chase back and forth to Beaver Field to use their workout equipment. He'd go in when the team was on the road or when they had a day off. But once their season ended in August, he had free rein to stop by whenever he wanted. Since the Kings never released a statement about where

Chase was rehabbing, they never confirmed that he was back in Stockton. His whereabouts became something of an urban myth, as mysterious sightings were reported all over town. No one ever got a clear shot of him. He was always getting in and out of cars or wearing a hood, or it was too rainy or too dark to tell if it was really him or not.

Adding to the confusion, Chase was never seen on crutches and he was never seen with me. He was always by himself, walking without a limp. This had many Chase fans calling foul. There was no way it could be him. Why would he stay in Stockton when he could go

anywhere in the world? Stockton would be the most obvious choice since it was my hometown, but what girl in her right mind would choose to stay when she could jet off somewhere exotic with her millionaire boyfriend?

My thoughts exactly... I thought like a true Stockton girl, and the ruse worked perfectly. Hiding in plain sight was the best thing we could have done. It's not like we went out much anyway. Chase didn't like to flaunt his status as a member of the walking wounded. He was still sensitive to having his picture taken while in a wheelchair, even if it was the faster option to avoid the crowds. So he hired a decoy and sent him around Stockton pretending to be

him. Firmly cementing in the public's mind the image of him up and about like everything was fine.

Plus, we were too worried about my mom. Chase arranged an appointment with J.J.'s oncologist, but by then she was too weak to travel, so Chase got him to come to her. The world-renowned physician arrived at my parents' modest home after Chase got the Kings to lend him their private jet to fly him in. But after examining my mother, he left shaking his head, not leaving us with much hope.

I think Chase took it worse than I did. I had already accepted my mom's fate somewhere deep inside my heart, but



Chase still thought he was capable of fixing every problem, no matter the odds. And that's what I love about him. It's not an ego trip. He just wants to use every means at his disposal to help someone in need. If we'd only met sooner, he said, maybe he would've been able to save her.

But I didn't want him shouldering that kind of burden. J.J. was a different case. She was young. She wasn't a smoker. Her cancer was detected early, and it was a type with more survivable odds. Even I knew my mother was too far gone. There would be no miracle this time.

She passed away the Sunday after Thanksgiving. She didn't want to go into

the hospital, even though they could've made her more comfortable. She wanted to die at home in her own bed, and she did. Chase and I, along with Erin and my dad, took turns watching her around the clock in those final weeks. We didn't even cook a turkey, even though it was my mom's favorite meal of the year. She wasn't able to keep anything down at that point and no one felt much like celebrating. We were all so emotionally drained, not wanting to let her go but knowing that having her hang on wasn't doing her any good either.

We kept the viewing and the funeral private, open only to the immediate family and a few close friends. Chase

stood next to me in the receiving line, but no one called attention to the fact that he was there. I expected, after being seen together, it to get out that he was in Stockton, but no one breathed a word about it. They respected my family's privacy during a very difficult time, keeping our secret under wraps from any prying eyes.

When the bereavement notice hit the local paper, it was picked up by some of the news outlets in New York. The Kings sent a security detail to my parents' house, preventing the few photographers who tried to get a picture from gaining access. They even set up a temporary fence around the entire house, complete with a wraparound tarp to

block us from view.

Erin and my dad took care of each other, and I had Chase to take care of me. I was a wreck in the weeks that followed. I still am. Losing a mother is a loss a person never gets over. It's impossible to mourn and move on. That pang in my heart will be there for the rest of my life, at some moments sharper than others. She won't be there at any of the major milestones I expect to happen in my life. And when I think thoughts like that, that's when I really lose it, and there's no consoling me.

But sometimes I feel her spirit hovering around me, like today.

She was well aware that I'm no good

in these types of social situations. It's more a venue where Erin would thrive, talking about her kids, comparing notes with the other moms in the group. But I don't have an automatic in with these women. I can tell by the way they're sizing me up that they think I'm just the latest flavor of the month for Chase and I won't be around long. Why bother making friends with me when they'll have to start all over again when a new girl comes along?

Little do they know, I'm not going anywhere. I'm here to stay.

But once the game starts, I don't really care that they're purposely snubbing me. I get too involved in the action. I've never had such a great seat at a game

before. Even though I'm nervous for Chase, I kind of forget about the flutterings in my stomach for a while. He just looks so normal out there. It's where I'm used to seeing him, where I got to know him...before I knew him, if that makes sense.

“C'mon, Landry. One more strike. Get this guy.”

I'm talking to myself and I don't even realize it. It must be a habit I picked up from watching the games alone in my trailer. I'm so used to talking out loud to my dad that I never stopped, believing he could hear me somehow.

“Pedro, don't you dare call for the curve. I don't care what the bench is

telling you. Have Landry blow some heat by him.”

But Pedro doesn't listen, because Landry loops a hanging curve over the plate and the batter sits back on his heel and waits. But he doesn't get enough of it, getting jammed inside. He hits a dribbler toward the infield, but Chase is on it. The runner on first is charging, but Chase takes his time, making the catch before gliding over to the bag and throwing the ball to Scott Harper at first, completing the double play to get out of the inning.

But the runner is a rookie from Cleveland with a chance to take out Chase Whitfield and make a name for himself. He's not going to give up the

opportunity. Turning on the jets, he slides into second, spikes first, causing Chase to have to jump over him to avoid being knocked off his feet.

The crowd issues a collective gasp, and my heart stops beating.

All of that hard work, months and months of hitting the gym, enduring physical therapy, staying off his feet, traveling to New York for doctor's appointments, undergoing countless tests, applying my grandmother's ointment to his knee every night—please God, don't let it all be for nothing.

Chase stumbles a bit, staggering to regain his balance. He's strengthened the



muscles in his legs through intensive conditioning. They shouldn't be giving him any trouble. They should withstand his weight. But if he twisted his knee, that's another story. If he injured it again, there's no telling what could happen.

My eyes are glued on his knee as he walks around the base, trying to shake it off. The trainer comes running onto the field, and so does Tony Liotta. This can't be good. They're obviously worried. I hope they're just being overprotective and didn't see something from the bench. But Chase doesn't appear to be limping. The trainer is making him bend his knee, getting him to work out any tension.

The other Kings players converge around Chase in a huddle, blocking him from view. Even though the game isn't being televised, there are still a lot of media around covering Chase's return. His teammates don't know what's going on, but if Chase is hurt, they're not going to let the cameramen get a good shot of him.

But their camaraderie is preventing me from knowing what's going on. I clutch the leather strap of my purse, frozen in a position halfway between sitting and standing. How could that stupid kid take such a cheap shot at one of the most respected players in the game? What the hell is wrong with him?

It's just an exhibition game. It doesn't count in the standings. There's no reason he has to play dirty like that. I hope Cleveland's manager gives him a good tongue lashing in the locker room after this. That's not the way to play the game.

Tony Liotta starts ushering the Kings players off the field even though they're reluctant to leave Chase out there. The umpires are striding over to break it up. They have to continue on with the game. Chase is due up to hit second. They need to know if Tony's going to pull him or if he's still going to bat.

I can tell Tony's stalling for time. He's a veteran manager and a former player. He knows the umpires are calling the shots, but he's not going to

rush his star shortstop off the field until he's ready. As Chase starts to walk back toward the dugout, the crowd begins to cheer. No one wants to see him taken out of the game, but it'd probably be the prudent thing to do, taking the necessary precautions instead of risking reinjury.

But the applause grows louder when Chase grabs his bat and heads immediately into the on-deck circle. I know he's a fierce competitor, but I hope he didn't talk Tony out of anything. He needs to take it easy. It's only February, and they have one hundred and sixty-two games to go. He needs to pace himself if he's going to make it through the regular season.

Ever since the Kings got booted out of the first round of the playoffs, Chase went on a tear, pushing his body to the limit. I know he blamed himself for not being there to help his team advance. But Drake had a lousy series and basically contributed nothing offensively. If anyone let the team down, it was Drake, not Chase. But Chase doesn't see it that way. He took full responsibility for the early end to the Kings season, vowing to get healthy and win it all again this year.

There's no one more driven or determined than Chase when he feels like he has something to prove. And even though he was off his feet, he did everything possible to keep the rest of

his body in shape. He even brought weights from the Beavers workout facility back to the trailer with him, lifting to strengthen his upper body while I was usually in bed reading a book. In fact, he became a bit fanatical about it.

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One afternoon in October, I came back from visiting my mom and couldn't find Chase anywhere. I called his phone, but he wasn't picking up. I knew he wouldn't have blown me off, considering what fragile condition my mom was in. So I knew something was up.

It was an unseasonably mild day for

that time of year, with temperatures reaching into the seventies. We had some rain the night before and the ground around the trailer was still muddy. So I was able to see his solitary footprint with its accompanying crutch marks heading into the woods.

Following his trail, I had no idea why he had decided to go for a walk in such a dense part of the forest. The path was covered with rain-soaked leaves, and he could have easily fallen. Yeah, it was a nice day and maybe he needed some air, but did he have to go so far away from the trailer and not leave a note to tell me where he was going? It was a little reckless, and his total disregard made me angry. I had enough going on with my

mom. I didn't need him to end up in the hospital too.

As I drew closer to the perimeter of the lake, I heard a splash. I shut my eyes and counted to ten. *Don't tell me he is stupid enough to try and swim in that freezing cold water?* Sure, the day was warm, but the nights had been cold. There's no way the water temperature was anywhere close to hospitable. He'd have hypothermia by the time he came out. Or worse, he'd cramp up and drown out there.

I hurried forward, pushing the scattered limbs out of my way, unable to see through the trees. And there he was, swimming laps in that frigid water, using



it as his own personal swimming pool.

“Chase Whitfield, you get out of there this instant!” I yelled, but he didn’t hear me with his head half submerged.

His shirt and jeans were neatly folded on top of his sneakers, giving me a flashback to the night he’d first slept over. Even then, he had put himself in my hands, allowed me to take care of him. But I was still livid with him for doing this.

I tapped my foot, waiting for him to resurface closer to shore. When he caught sight of me, he made a sprint toward the finish line, lengthening his stroke. No doubt he was trying to impress me—and it worked. Seeing his broad shoulders cut across the surface of

the water had me a little weak in the knees, but I still intended to give him a piece of mind.

Looking around for his crutches, I saw them leaning against a nearby tree. Grabbing them, I hustled over to the water's edge as Chase strode toward me dripping wet, a huge smile on his face even though he was shivering.

“Grey, did you see—?”

“What kind of idiotic stunt was that, huh?”

He hadn't even brought a towel, so I had nothing to dry him off with. His smile faltered when he realized how upset I was. He accepted the crutches from my outstretched hands, and I was

distracted by the way the sunlight was glistening off the droplets of water clinging to his chest.

*Damn it. Why does he always have to look so freakin' hot?*

“I just thought I’d try it. No harm done.” He looked up at me sheepishly, raking his hand through his hair.

“That water is way too cold. You could’ve gone into cardiac arrest out there.” I had my hand on my hip, forcing myself to glare at him.

“Hell yeah, it was cold, but invigorating. I was talking to Dr. Brownstein before and he thought aquatic therapy would be beneficial, but all the indoor pools around Stockton aren’t exactly private so—”

“You thought you’d take matters into your own hands, like you always do. Chase, you could probably rent the entire pool at the YMCA by the hour if you wanted to. You don’t have to swim out here and scare me half to death.”

“Yeah, but then the chances of people finding out I’m here go way up. I didn’t want to go through all the hassle.”

“And if you ended up in the emergency room with blue extremities, that wouldn’t cause any waves?”

“I wouldn’t say all my extremities are blue. Some temporary shrinkage perhaps, but not blue.”

“You think this is funny?”

“No. I think you’re stressed. I thought

I'd get back before you got home. Then you wouldn't have to know about my little experiment."

"Even better. Now you're sneaking around behind my back. What's next? You gonna head down to The Blue Room the next time I'm not around? I'm sure Stanley would be thrilled to see you."

His eyes darkened, turning from a sunny Caribbean blue to the stormy depths of the north Atlantic. He tossed his crutches aside, grabbing my upper arms, his hands soaking through the sleeves of my shirt.

"Don't go there. You hear me?"

"And why not? It's going to happen eventually, right? It's only a matter of

time.”

“I’m not going to cheat on you.”

“Well, you’re already starting to hide things from me. What’s next? Some bimbo on the side?”

“Why are you so insecure when it comes to me, huh? I don’t get it. We’ve been together three months already and I never once gave you any reason to doubt me.”

“Because you’re not known for being in long-term relationships. This must have been the longest you’ve ever gone without screwing things up. You have to be getting bored with me by now. Just admit it and save us both some grief.”

“Oh yeah, I just left the whole of

civilization to camp up here with you because I felt like getting away from it all.”

“Well, it seems like you’re bound and determined to get back now that you’re starting to feel better. You’ll even jump into an icy lake to speed your recovery.”

“That’s not what this is about. Yeah, I’m feeling encouraged about how things are going with my rehab and, more importantly, with you. I didn’t think I’d be able to do this. I didn’t think I had it in me. I thought I’d fold. But that all changed after that night in New York, Grey, and you know it.”

He let go of me and took a step back like he was offended that I dared to question his fidelity to me. And he was

right—I did know it. I felt it too. I just wasn't thinking straight with all that was going on. If he pulled away from me now, I thought I'd crumble into nothing. I was blowing everything out of proportion.

“Chase, I—”

“Grey, don't. Just don't. I know you're always going to have some sliver of doubt about me. Can I really be trusted? Will I remain faithful? And you can question me all you want. I probably deserve it. But I don't know what it's going to take to convince you that you're it for me. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not looking at, thinking of, or fantasizing about anyone else.”



I felt like an idiot. He was all excited about the progress he'd been making, and I had to go and throw a damper on it. I should have been lifting his spirits, encouraging him, instead of falling prey to my own self-doubt. He was a lot stronger than I'd given him credit for, both inside and out.

“You’re already doing a good job, Chase. I’m the one who needs to work harder.” I smiled when he opened up his arms to me. Not even caring that he was going to get me all wet, I fell into his embrace, feeling him rest his cheek on top of my head.

“I’m glad we had this time to ourselves. I think it helped us set up a

good foundation. We had a chance to get to know each other outside of the spotlight because it's only going to get crazier from this point forward. I know we still have a lot of issues we need to work on. But I'll always cherish this time we spent together."

"Really?"

"You think I'm bored? Grey, you're constantly surprising me, keeping me on my toes. Usually in the off season, when I can't play, I'm all alone going out of my mind. This is the first time since I joined the Kings that I'm going to be sorry to have to get back to the grind. I wouldn't mind staying up on this mountain with you forever."

"I guess I did teach you how to cook."

“I do make a killer lasagna if I do say so myself.”

“You learned from the best.”

“And I thought I was the ultimate movie buff, but I think you’ve seen even more than I have.”

“I can’t tell you what a relief it was finding out your tastes go beyond *Transformers* and *X-Men*.”

“And I love reading in bed with you.”

“I think you’ve read every book in my trailer.”

“What can I say? I’m a speed reader.”

“More like a nerd.”

“I thought I was a jock?”

“You’re turning out to be an interesting mix.”

“I’m glad you’re making me a more well-rounded individual.”

“In all the right areas.”

He leaned down, pulling me into him. I was flush against his chest as I stood on my toes to reach his lips. He was shaking as he kissed me, unable to stop trembling as my fingertips glided over the goose bumps on his arms.

Reluctantly, I broke away, staring into his eyes. “You’re freezing. Time to get you back.”

“How about we take a nice, long shower together?”

“Oh, baby, I can’t wait to warm you up.”

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The Kings are trying to give their stars as many at-bats as possible in spring training so Drake is batting leadoff.

He looks terrible at the plate, swinging at pitches in the dirt. The Kings pride themselves in taking pitches, working the count, but Drake is just up there hacking away. After coming out of last year's Division Series batting .070, I thought he'd be looking to make amends for his dismal performance, but apparently not.

With the count in the pitcher's favor, Drake just stands there and takes strike three with his bat on his shoulder. He shakes his head at the umpire before walking away, and the crowd starts to

boo. He cranes his neck to look at the scoreboard, pretending like he doesn't hear them. Too bad the Kings couldn't dump his ass, but no one's going to pick up his inflated salary. They're stuck with him for the foreseeable future. But I couldn't care less about Drake's theatrics as Chase gets in the batter's box.

“Now batting, shortstop, number three, Chaaaaaaaaaaase Whitfield!”

The people in the stands get to their feet to welcome Chase back. The fans really missed him, and they're letting him know that they're behind him. They want him to succeed and come back strong. If anyone can turn things around for the Kings, it's him.

Chase goes through the familiar motions, pulling up his sleeve, touching the plate with his bat, rubbing his eyes. But I know the fans' warm reception has to be affecting him. He's the heart and soul of this team, and while it's a lot of pressure, it's what he thrives on. It's who he is. When the going gets tough and the game is on the line, he's the one who wants to be out there. He's not afraid of a challenge.

He lifts his bat over his shoulder and everyone holds their breath. The pitcher, probably all fired up at having to face him, throws a letter-high fastball, brushing Chase off the plate. He stumbles backward to get out of the way,

and the crowd goes ballistic. What the heck is it with this Cleveland team today? Are they out to get him or something? But I can see that the brushback has only made Chase more determined as he sets his jaw and steps back in.

I'm on the very edge of my seat, leaning over the shoulder of the person in front of me. I'd throw myself in front of any pitch if it would stop him from getting hurt. And if this asshole does it again, security will have to restrain me from running out there and beating the crap out of him myself.

The pitcher steps onto the rubber, ready to throw. He winds up, and delivers. And Chase must have known



what pitch he was looking for because he connects with another fastball, breaking his bat. The ball hits the gap between the center fielder and the right fielder and rolls all the way to the wall.

Chase is out of the box in a flash, picking up speed as he tears around first and heads for second. The right fielder muffs the ball, but I still expect the Kings to hold Chase to a double, not wanting to tax his knee. But Chase must have ignored the call from the bench, turning on the speed and hustling toward third. It's going to be close, since the right fielder has a good arm. The ball is rocketing toward third, but the Cleveland team must get their signals

crossed, because the shortstop leaps up and cuts it off instead of letting it fly toward third.

Cups of Gatorade are hurled out of the Cleveland dugout, no doubt in frustration over the botched play. They could've had Chase at third, but he's in with a triple. He slid headfirst, thinking it'd be close, and his uniform is filthy. He tries brushing himself off, but it's no use. The grounds crew hosed off the base paths before the game, and now he's covered in mud.

But the crowd doesn't care. They're going nuts, jumping up and down, slapping each other five. And I can finally release a sigh of relief. He ran the bases under a pressure situation

without any sign of a limp. He's not known for having tremendous speed, but I think he was running even better than before his injury. The extra strength and conditioning treatments must have worked wonders to get his legs moving like that. I'm so proud of him right now. I can't take it.

I watch him chat with the third base coach, a hint of a smile on his face. Chase never gloats in public. He doesn't rub it in the opposing team's face. He has too much sportsmanship for that. But if anyone deserves to feel a sense of accomplishment, it's him. He made a resounding first step back onto the big stage. Let the baseball analysts have a

field day with that clip after they doubted him all winter long, saying he'd never be the player he once was. He's still got it.

Chase eventually scores the first run of the game when Scott Harper issues a sacrifice fly to center, and Chase jogs home only to be mobbed by his teammates. Fist bumps, ass slaps, and helmet thumps descend upon him as he ambles over to the cooler in the dugout, filling a paper cup and taking a long slug before tossing it under the bench. No doubt about it, it has to feel good.

I savor this moment of victory with him, grinning from ear to ear. The woman sitting on my left casts a sideways glance in my direction as the

other wives congratulate me. They know what a big deal this is for the team. If Chase is healthy, it takes some of the pressure off their husbands. Chase is the kind of player they can depend on to come through in the clutch. If he plays well, he sparks the rest of them to up their game. They look to Chase to take the lead. They follow his example. They're not going to be inspired by the way Drake handles himself, that's for damn sure.

The woman nudges my shoulder once I retake my seat. "You really know your stuff, don't you?"

"Excuse me?" She better not be making some kind of dig at me, or I'm

going to let her have it. No one's gonna ruin this moment for me. No one.

“You’re knowledgeable about baseball. I feel like I’m sitting next to Andy up in the broadcast booth. At home, he never shuts up, so I’m glad they’re paying him to talk when he comes here.”

“Wait...you’re Andy Rader’s wife?”

“Gayle Tyson-Rader, guilty as charged.”

“Pleased to meet you, Gayle. Your husband is, like, my favorite play-by-play guy of all time.”

“Don’t tell him that. It’ll just give him a bigger head than he already does.”

“But he’s the best in the business. I’ve listened to him for years.”

“Yeah, if you’re a fan of the Kings, it’s pretty much a given that you’re a fan of Andy. He’s like the team’s unofficial mascot.”

“That’s cool that you sit with the players’ wives.”

“They’re a tough nut to crack, but don’t give up on them just yet. I’m a former reporter myself, so they didn’t exactly roll out the welcome wagon when Andy and I first got married. They thought I was spying on them, fishing for dirt to give to Andy. But after a season or so went by and they realized none of the secrets they blabbed ended up being said on the air, they started to open up to me.”

“Like what kind of secrets?”

“Which guys always seem to have a case of jock itch. Which ones don’t know how to match up their clothes when they’re on the road. Which players urinate in the shower. All the juicy details.”

“I guess we tend to forget they’re human just like everybody else.”

“Exactly. The women who read my blog feel the same way.”

“Your blog?”

“Yeah, ever hear of TheQueenOfDiamonds.com?”

“That’s you?”

“Anonymously, of course. Don’t go blowing my cover.”



“And the Kings let you get away with it?”

“I think they have an inkling that it’s me, but it’s a well-trafficked site. I get hundreds of thousands of pageviews a day. There aren’t many baseball sites out there for women. And the Kings’ front office is well aware that women are responsible for making a lot of the big financial decisions in most households. When they ran an ad on my site promoting season ticket deals with a special promo code, sales from my blog topped every other venue. That’s when I knew I had carte blanche to do whatever I wanted—within reason. I never bash any of the players or reveal any tidbits

of personal information that they'd rather keep private. I'm not Perez Hilton."

"Thanks for never doing a post about me by the way."

"Well, I was looking at playing more of the long game with you."

"Waiting to see if Chase dumped me first?"

"Something like that."

"Surprised that I'm still around?"

"Not surprised, intrigued. Based on sitting here and listening to your running monologue, I was struck with an idea."

"Sorry, I don't give interviews." I scoot away from her, hoping I didn't already say too much.

"That's not what I was thinking, darling. I was more interested in asking

you to come work for me.”

“You’re kidding? And do what?”  
Didn’t she do her research? Doesn’t she know I used to work at the mall?

“Write a column. Share your insights on the game. Look at it from a woman’s perspective.”

“I’m not much of a writer.”

“You don’t have to write if you don’t want to. You can do video segments from your phone or laptop.”

“I don’t think Chase would go for that.” In fact, he’d go ballistic, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“He wants to keep you all to himself, does he?” she asks, her tone insinuating.

“Well, it’s not like you’re putting

yourself out there either. The public doesn't know you're The Queen of Diamonds.”

“Point taken. I was just getting a vision of how the site would blow up if you were on board, but we can still keep your identity under wraps if that makes the idea a little more palatable for you. I'll just say you're the significant other of one of the Kings and leave it at that. And if you're uncomfortable with the writing bit at first, I can help you find your voice. If it catches on, I could probably offer you around \$50K to start.”

My mouth drops open in shock. “\$50,000?”

“I know it doesn't sound like much to

cover an entire season but—”

“Are you kidding? I’ve never made that much in my life.”

“I like you, honey.” Gayle leans closer, never breaking eye contact. “Otherwise I wouldn’t say this. But you shouldn’t go telling me things like that. You should try to work me for more.”

“But—”

“No buts about it. You’re not in Stockton anymore, sweetheart.” Gayle sits back and extends her hands. “You’re in the big leagues now, and New York is the biggest sports market there is. Millions of people follow the Kings around the world. Where they’re concerned, never set your sights too low.

Always aim high. Remember that.”

“And you really think your readers will care about what I have to say?”

“Care? They’re going to eat it up. I’ve been looking to open the site up to guest columnists, and you’re just the type of person I’m eager to connect with. You’re an insider who’s up on the game, and you fit the demographic I target—that all-important eighteen-to-thirty-four age bracket that’s addicted to social media. I have no doubt that my readers are going to respond to your fresh take on things.”

“I never knew there were so many female fans out there.”

“Well, some of them are all about the eye candy, but there’s a devoted

following who take it seriously. They watch every game religiously. They're up on the box scores and division standings. They're looking for someone like them to give it to them straight. Plus it's a great conversation starter with men. A lot of them are out there on the dating scene, and sometimes it helps kick things into high gear if they're able to talk about the Kings on the first date. Hell, I'm an old married woman, but I still chat with my father about the Kings. It's the only thing we're able to talk about."

I chuckle, nodding my head in agreement. "I can relate to that."

"See? I knew we weren't that

different, you and I.” Gayle playfully bumps my arm. “So what do you say? You want to give it a try? I’ll have my lawyer draw up a contract and send it over. I want to do everything legit, so there are no surprises or hard feelings. If it really takes off, we can always renegotiate. I don’t want to scam you out of any of the profits if you increase my audience substantially. We’ll play it by ear and see how it goes. See what types of stories readers respond to and we’ll tweak it from there.”

“That sounds more than fair.”

“And just between us girls, it’s none of my business what happens between you and Chase, but it never hurts to put some money away for yourself. Stand on



your own two feet. You know what I'm saying?" Gayle lowers her voice before continuing. "My first husband left me high and dry without a penny to my name. It took me a long time to fight my way back from that. It's not good to put all your eggs in one basket."

"Trust me. I'm not that type," I assure her, meeting her eyes. "It's just that a lot has happened over the past few months. I was busy helping Chase get back on his feet and dealing with some family issues, but I'm ready to get back out there and start earning a living again."

"I know it sounds crazy. You're probably living in the lap of luxury right now, being Chase Whitfield's girlfriend,

but it never hurts to have your own bank account. Even if it's only to preserve your self-respect and nothing more."

"I love Chase. We're pretty serious about each other. But I don't think we're going to get married any time soon, not with him traveling all the time and having so many commitments in terms of his endorsements and all that."

If Gayle only knew he'd proposed to me back in July, she'd have a heart attack. But I'm glad everything worked out the way it did. Chase has come so far over these last few months. He's at a better place in his life where he doesn't have to take such drastic measures to get me to stick around. He's grown more comfortable in his skin, owning who he

is and publicly acknowledging just how much our relationship means to him. He's no longer playing a role. Finally, he feels free enough to just be himself.

“Well, stockpile it away for a rainy day. Or if the two of you do end up walking down the aisle, you can always donate it to charity. That always makes me feel good. Between the two of us, Andy and I make enough—not in the Chase Whitfield range by any means—but we like giving back and investing in new start-ups, giving someone else a chance to make a name for themselves.”

“That’s pretty awesome.”

“The Kings are like family. Dysfunctional? Absolutely. They’re like

the mafia. Don't ever cross them. But if you're loyal? They'll pay you back a hundredfold. Look at Chase. He came up through the farm system. Had no desire to play for another team. I like how he agreed to a one-year \$15 million contract extension with a player option to renew at the end of the season. That was smart because no one knows how his knee is going to hold up. Despite the antics of Arnold Heimlich and Terry Bloom, his heart is with the Kings and always will be. And when he hangs up his cleats, they'll retire his number and his name will live on forever as one of the all-time greats who ever played the game. They don't just make you a star. They make you immortal. And it doesn't

get any better than that.”

“I think I’m going to like working for you, Gayle.”

“Honey, I can’t wait to get started.”

# *Chapter Thirty*

## **Chase**

*October, eight months later*

Game seven of the World Series—it all comes down to this.

I blow on my hand to keep my fingers warm. My knee feels a little stiff, but I can't complain. It held up throughout the entire season as we dominated the AL East, leading the division wire to wire. We never dropped out of first place, finishing twenty games over five hundred.

Needless to say, everyone wanted to play the role of spoiler and knock us out

of the postseason. But we intimidated them into submission, sweeping the Division Series by trouncing Cleveland and sending Boston packing by taking five out of seven in the ALCS. Now, Atlanta, who we beat two years ago, came out looking to put us in our place, fighting hard and forcing a game seven.

If not for Drake's botched play in game four, we could have shut them down for good. But the runner scored from third in the eighth inning, giving them new life. They responded, taking the next two at home as a lot of our guys battled a case of food poisoning, weakening our roster. The rumor mill is claiming that it was deliberate, saying that Atlanta's catering staff was trying to

take us out of the equation, but I don't think they're that desperate. They want to beat us fair and square, so as not to throw their bragging rights into question.

We're holding on to a one-run lead as we enter the top of the ninth inning. Kings Stadium is rocking, louder than I've ever heard it. The fans are foaming at the mouth for this championship, and they will not be denied. They know what it felt like to be sent home early last year, and they're not having it. They've been there for us all season long. There's no way we can let them down now. Not when we're so close we can taste it.

I glance to my left and see Scott



pounding his glove, ready to go. Pedro is behind the plate, ready to call what will hopefully result in the final outs of the series. Bruce Gillette, our closer, is coming out of the bullpen to a standing ovation. I can't even hear myself think. The roar is deafening.

But Bruce is a silent assassin. He never gets rattled—even in the most pressure-packed situation imaginable with everything on the line. The fielders playing behind him? We're the ones who are nervous. One bobble is all it would take. Losing the ball in the lights. Not breaking early enough. Diving too late. No one wants to be the one to blow it.

I've played through a lot of similar situations with these guys, and I trust

them to get the job done. We have four World Series rings to prove it. We know what it takes to win. If anyone should be feeling the pressure, it should be the Atlanta hitters. Bruce's ERA in the postseason is under one. Good luck getting a hit off him, fellas. And forget scoring on him. There's no way they're getting anyone on base, much less driving them in.

As Bruce tosses a few warm-up pitches, I allow myself a split second to glance up at the fourth luxury box from the right and catch a glimpse of Grey's red scarf billowing in the breeze. She said she was going to wear it so I could pick her out of the crowd crammed into

the box reserved for players' families. I know my mom and dad are up there, along with J.J. and the baby. Everyone wanted a ticket to this game, and it looks like they're all standing shoulder to shoulder out on the balcony.

I wanted to get Grey's dad and Erin and the boys up there too, but there wasn't enough room. Instead, they're seated somewhere along the third-base line. My family is pretty used to all of the hype that comes with big games like this, but it was a treat getting to see Mr. Kelleher's eyes light up when he arrived at the stadium tonight. I haven't seen him look that happy since before his wife died, and I'm glad that I'm able to experience this World Series with him. I

hope we're able to pull off a victory so he can soak it all in.

I don't even want to get started thinking about Grey. I'll lose it, and I have to stay focused right now.

First pitch is drilled to second, but Kyle Roberts is positioned perfectly. The ball is hit right at him. All he has to do is lift his glove to nab the out. One away.

I raise a finger in the air to indicate the number of outs to the outfielders. It's not like they need any reminders, but I'm not breaking with tradition now. I scuff the dirt at my feet as Bruce tosses the rosin bag onto the rubber, getting ready to reset. The fans in the bleachers are

stomping their feet, creating a drum-like rhythm that's fueling the crowd, giving it even more energy.

Atlanta's power hitter, Carlos Lopez, is up next. He could tie the game with one swing. He's a dangerous threat with that short porch in right that lefties salivate over. Bruce better keep the ball out of his wheelhouse. If he makes even the slightest mistake, Carlos is going to be all over it.

As the at-bat drags on, Carlos works the count full as Bruce nips the corners. To stay alive, Carlos fouls off the next five pitches in a row. The crowd is getting antsy, clapping in unison, urging Bruce to pull the plug and ring him up. Pedro is getting frustrated behind the

plate. Every pitch he calls, Carlos manages to get a piece of. They're moving the ball around, cutting inside then painting the outside corner. They know if they go up the ladder he'll lay off the high fastball and they'll end up walking him.

This time, they decide to go low and away and he bites at it. But he can't connect. He swings so hard he nearly falls over. Cursing, he tosses his bat as his teammates give him room to enter the dugout. He's a hothead. He doesn't handle defeat well, especially of this magnitude. Striking out in a key situation like this has to hurt. That out will probably haunt him for the rest of his life

if Atlanta doesn't end up winning this game. Even though his career numbers are worthy of the Hall of Fame, a lot of baseball writers factor in success in the postseason when it comes to casting their votes. And that image of him swinging and missing is going to stay in their minds for years to come.

But Carlos did his job in tiring Bruce out. That at-bat was a battle. He didn't go down easily. And the next guy up, Hideki Sato, is going to give it everything he's got. He doesn't have the pop in his bat like Carlos does, but he's patient. He doesn't swing at anything out of the strike zone. He's got the best eye in baseball, and it's the reason he's won the National League batting title three

years in a row.

As Bruce starts his delivery, it's like my senses go numb. I don't feel the brisk October air. I don't hear the crowd. I see nothing but the 45 on the back of Bruce's jersey before the ball is careening right at me. My brain is clicking through all of the possibilities. It's going to be over my head. I have to at least knock it down. Prevent it from going into the outfield. But I don't know how much spring my knee's going to give me and if I'll be able to reach it. One. Two. Three. Up.

I take off from the ground and I'm airborne, extending my arm as far as it will go. I feel the blood rushing in my ears, the weight of everyone's eyes upon



me. I can't let Atlanta claw their way back into this game. We need to shut them down. Now is the time to end this series and bring it home.

Stretching with everything I've got, I feel the ball smack into the webbing of my glove as I sail back down to earth, holding on to it for all I'm worth. My grip on it seems precarious. When my feet hit the dirt, it may bounce out with the impact.

I close my eyes amid the dizzying barrage of flashbulbs going off in the stands as I tumble to the ground. My knee doesn't hold me and I go down, somehow keeping my glove aloft. The freshly manicured grass rises up to meet me as I collide with it. If I can't hold on

to this ball, I'm going to be the one closest to it. I'll have to get back on my feet and keep the runner from advancing. I just don't know how bad my knee is or if I'll be able to stand up.

The next few seconds go by in slow motion, as if I'm caught in a freeze frame. Like I weigh nothing more than a snowflake falling lazily to earth. I'm jarred back into reality when my tailbone connects with the cold, hard ground. I brace myself with my free arm, trying to regain my balance. But my equilibrium is thrown off, and for a second I don't know where I am on the field as I get the wind knocked out of me. But in my head I'm issuing a silent

*mantra. Keep your arm up. Hold on to the ball. Cushion the blow. Hang on. Hang on. Hang on to the goddamn ball.*

I know I always boast to reporters that when it comes down to the final out of the World Series, I want the ball hit to me. I want to walk that razor-thin line that separates glory from infamy. I don't want to depend on anyone else. I want to decide the fate of my team and come through victorious. I want to be the kind of warrior Mr. Heimlich always boasts about. I am the Kings, and the Kings are me. In moments like this, we're one and the same. I want to rise to the occasion and claim my place among the pantheon of baseball gods. Even if it wrests every last expendable effort out of my body to

do it—I'll give whatever it takes to reach that level of greatness.

The back of my head smacks the ground as my glove hits my chest. Everything veers out of focus. If the ball is still in there, the out counts. Based on the reaction of the crowd, it seems like nobody's sure what happened yet. I dare to pick up my head and see Kyle standing above me, pointing at my glove. An umpire must have called a timeout because one of them is hustling over.

I don't move a muscle. I keep as still as I can. He bends down and lifts up my hand. I can't even feel my fingers anymore. I don't know if I'm holding on to the last out or nothing but air. I'm sure

the TV announcers are showing the instant replay and already know the answer. If the ball fell out, Kyle would have seen it, right? I must still have it if they're not sure where it is.

An anxious buzz runs through the stands. Everyone was seconds away from bursting into full-blown party mode, and this unexpected turn of events has put a crimp in their plans. They're waiting with bated breath, ready to erupt—either in exultation or agony. There's no telling which way this will go.

The umpire is Paul Hannigan, a seasoned member of the crew. He's been around a long time and has seen a lot, but probably nothing like this. No matter how many times the game is

played, there's always the possibility of something new happening.

He looks down at me, whispering just loud enough for me to hear him, "It's there, kid. Great play."

He lifts up my glove as the other umpires converge around us. The call goes out, proclaiming it an official out, and the crowd erupts into a tidal wave of joy. I'm already sprawled on my back as my teammates start jumping on top of me. Shit. I'm going to end up at the bottom of this pyramid of bodies. Pedro was swarmed the last time we won and he said that he was so sore he couldn't move for days afterward. But any pain I endure will be worth it.

We won.

Haphazardly, but we won.

I wanted to be remembered with the greats, huh? That fall-down play that brought me to my knees is destined to live on the highlight reels for years to come. The sight of me falling flat on my ass is sure to outlive me. And if one more person hurls their body onto the pile, they're going to have to carry me off the field.

And I don't even want to think about my knee.

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In the locker room, the rest of the team is celebrating and the champagne is

flowing. The clubhouse staff has covered everyone's locker with plastic, and reporters are protecting their expensive camera equipment to keep it from getting wet. All of my teammates are already donning the official World Series Championship shirts and hats. I always wondered what happened to the version that Major League Baseball makes up for the losing side. I'm sure they must be valuable collectors' items, denoting the winning team that never was.

But I'm not with my team, basking in the glory.

I'm in the trainer's room with Liam as he works out the logistics of bringing an ambulance around to pick me up for an



MRI. My knee is red and swollen again, and it can't support my weight. In the melee that ensued out on the field, Liam and his assistant hauled me out of there.

“When I saw your knee give out, I thought it was on account of the cold and your joints were stiffening up. But when you ended up in the middle of that human sandwich out there? Jesus, Chase. Couldn't they jump on somebody else?” Liam shakes his head, assessing the damage.

“It was in the heat of the moment. They didn't know what they were doing. It wasn't on purpose. It's been so long since my knee acted up I think half of them even forgot about it.”

“But, Chase, we brought you all the way back from the brink, only to see you go down like this. It’s not right. You still had a few good years left in you. Now? I just don’t know.” Liam hangs his head, rubbing the back of his neck.

I don’t even care that we just won it all. I clench my jaw, fighting back tears. I just want Grey.

“All right, the ambulance is here,” Liam says, glancing at the text he just received. “They had to send another one over because they need the ones stationed around the field for crowd control, in case anyone gets hurt. That’s what took so long. It’s a madhouse out there. They’re going to take you out

without the siren. We don't want anyone to know you're in there."

"Do you think I can wait for Grey? I know she's probably trying to fight her way back here as we speak, but there are so many people. She probably got stuck somewhere coming down from the luxury box."

"Do you know where she is exactly?"

"My phone is in my locker. I haven't had a chance to check it."

"I'd rather send you on ahead and have her catch up with you later. Once the reporters find out you're in here, they're going to want to talk to you. Security is already stretched to the limit. I don't know how much longer I'm going to be able to hold them off. There's only

one cop stationed outside the door.”

“Mr. Heimlich was here tonight, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah. First time he’s been back since his stroke.”

“Is there any way you can reach Terry? I’m sure he’s with him.”

“Hold on. Let me see what I can do,” Liam sighs, scrolling through his phone. “This really sucks, Chase. You should be out there celebrating with everyone else instead of hiding out back here. You won the damn game for them.”

“Nah, it was a team effort, Liam. I’m just the one who made an ass out of himself.”

“What are you talking about? That’s

going to be remembered as one of the most heroic plays in sports history. People are already talking about you like you're some kind of legend. The phoenix that rose from the ashes to reclaim the title."

That makes me smile as he gets through to Terry. I wasn't expecting that kind of positive spin on it. Maybe it didn't look as bad as I thought.

I'm not surprised Liam had no problem getting Terry on the line. That man never stops. He never shifts out of business mode. He'll probably start formulating his plan of attack for next season first thing tomorrow morning. He's not one to rest on his laurels. I guess the job demands it. The Kings

never settle for second best. They're always looking ahead to the future, and now I might not be a part of it. I could already be a relic of the past.

“Hold on, Terry. Chase? They don't know where Grey is, but Heimlich's on it. I'm just going to step outside for a minute and discuss my findings with Terry. I'll be right back. Sit tight.”

“Don't want to talk in front of me, Liam? Think it'll be too upsetting for my delicate little ears?”

“You don't need to hear this shit repeated over and over. You should be happy right now.”

“Tell Tony to save me a case of champagne. I'm gonna need it.”

Liam shoots me a wry grin before exiting the room.

There's a lot of commotion outside the door. The press must have gotten wind of me being in here. Liam's assistant, Wendell, looks freaked. He's a young kid right out of college. This is all new to him.

"Don't worry, man. If they get in, they get in. I'm going to have to face them eventually. I can't hide away forever." I prop my elbows behind me, bracing myself for the bombardment.

But then I hear a voice I'd know anywhere.

"You gotta let me in there, sir. I have to see him, and I'm not taking no for an

answer.”

Grey.

She’s here. She somehow made her way to me. Heimlich couldn’t even track her down in his own stadium. That girl of mine is amazing.

“Hey, Wendell. Go let her in. Sounds like the cop is giving her a hard time. Let’s go easy on him, huh? Before she throttles him.”

Wendell flashes me a grin as he sticks his head out into the fray.

“It’s okay, officer. She’s allowed.”

“You’re damn right I’m allowed.”

Grey shoves her way past the cop, looking flushed and beautiful. Her eyes are open wide and tendrils of hair are falling out of her ponytail, framing her



face. Her laptop bag is slung over one arm. She was probably tweeting live during the game for Gayle. Her online persona, The Lady in Waiting, was an instant smash. She even traveled to some of the away games with me during the season to report for the site—undercover of course. Her posts get more hits than some of the regular beat writers for the *Post* and the *Daily News*. If they only knew it was her.

“Oh my God, Chase. Are you okay?” She’s at my side in an instant, caressing my cheek with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get to you. I was afraid they already took you somewhere, but then I saw Liam out

there and I knew you must still be here. They wouldn't send you anywhere without him."

I tilt up her chin and capture her lips with mine. I don't want to talk. I just want her to kiss me.

Wendell, obviously uncomfortable by our display of affection, discreetly slips out of the room to give us some privacy. I hear the ruckus outside before he closes the door, but I barely notice it. I'm too caught up in Grey to pay attention to anything else.

"Don't change the subject." Grey pulls away, her lips swollen from what I was doing to them. "How's your knee?"

"C'mon, I wanna celebrate a little. Can't you indulge me?" I tease, nuzzling

her neck.

“Not until you tell me what’s going on.” She pushes back on my shoulders, dragging my lips away from her. “How could those morons jump all over you like that?”

“They got caught up in the moment. You can’t blame them. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. C’mon, Grey. You weren’t a little excited when you saw that we won?”

She bends down to examine my knee, running her fingertips over the surface. I still have the pants to my uniform on with one of the legs cuffed up. Liam wanted to cut away the fabric to relieve the circulation, but I wouldn’t let him.

I'm not going to have a chance to get anywhere near my locker, and if they're going to transport me, at least I can roll it down until we get to the hospital.

“Was I happy that you won? Yes. Was I happy that you were totally hidden from view? No.” She takes my lower leg in her hands, gently moving my knee. She's been to enough therapy sessions with me to know the drill. “On a scale of one to ten, how bad does it hurt?”

Her brown eyes are penetrating mine. She'll know if I'm trying to make light of it. “It feels like it did after my first game in Stockton. Achy, tight, inflamed.”

Grey exhales loudly, lowering her head so I can't read her expression. “What went wrong before they tackled

you?”

“The cold, mainly. It locked up. I was trying to keep it warm between innings by going inside the clubhouse, but I had to hit in the bottom of the eighth and then I was on the base for the next three outs since no one was able to drive me in. I didn’t have a chance after that. I had to grab my glove and get right back out there. So that’s what did it.”

“It just sucks. It held up through the entire season, and then you took all of the necessary precautions during the playoffs, even going back on your crutches between games. And to have your teammates take you out—” She swallows a sob, the months of worry

caving in on her.

“It was never a hundred percent to begin with. You know that. I worked with what I had.”

“And did a damn good job. Batting .312, 65 RBIs, 15 homers—you came back stronger than ever.”

“And I’ll do it again if I have to.”

“But you heard what Dr. Brownstein said. He somehow patched you together barring another catastrophe. Your knee can only take so much—”

“Let’s just see what the MRI says before we jump to conclusions, all right?”

I don’t mean to snap at her, but I’ve already run through everything she’s saying in my mind. I know this could be

it. I could have played my last game at Kings Stadium. I thought I was at this point once before, but this could really be it now. And it terrifies me. Nothing beats going out on top, but I wanted to go out on my terms, not hobble out the door.

Liam comes rushing back in with Wendell. “Chase, we gotta move you now. Do you want to swing your arms around us or do you want to use the wheelchair? It’s up to you.”

“Are we still mobbed with reporters out there?” I ask, listening to the noise outside the door.

“Yeah. I’m afraid there’s even more now. The press conference with Tony just wrapped up so they’ll be heading

for the clubhouse. You're the sound bite everyone wants. Viewers are probably going nuts, wanting to see that you're all right."

"You might want to diffuse the situation," Grey says, looking at me. "You don't want a stampede following you to the hospital. Everyone's going to want a piece of you."

"Honestly, I feel like waiting them out. I'll sit here all night if I have to." I cross my arms in front of my chest and Grey rolls her eyes.

"That wouldn't be wise. Right, Liam?" Grey prompts.

"I wouldn't recommend it, no. The sooner you get looked at, the better," Liam concurs as they both stare a hole



through me. “I’m not a doctor. And if Terry realizes you’re still here, he’s gonna ream me out for it.”

“See, Chase? Do you wanna get Liam in trouble? Stop being so stubborn,” Grey implores, motioning to Wendell. “Bring the wheelchair around. He won’t get jostled as much and it’ll protect him somewhat.”

Wendell does as instructed, and Liam helps me climb off the table. The next time I enter this clubhouse, I might be just a washed-up ballplayer and no longer an active member of the team. Tony won’t be penciling my name in the number two spot on his lineup card. I don’t want to see it slip away. I can’t let

it go. Baseball has been my whole life. I have a better idea of who I am with Grey at my side, but it scares the crap out of me all the same. I'm not as one dimensional as I used to be. But first and foremost, I still consider myself a baseball player. I never thought I'd have to grapple with losing it all so soon. I thought I'd bought myself more time.

I was one out away from having it all before fate laughed in my face.

# *Epilogue*

## **Grey**

After we received the MRI results that had effectively ended his playing career, Chase took the news hard. The following winter was rough. He was despondent and moody a lot of the time, but I knew it would pass. He was in denial, but I knew as soon as he accepted what had happened to him that he'd be able to move on, start anew.

I was determined to cheer Chase up and get him to stop thinking about no longer being a player anymore. We retreated to my trailer, and since there's nothing much to do in Stockton, we

stayed in bed most of the time. One thing led to another, trying new positions to compensate for his knee injury, and lo and behold, I ended up pregnant. It came as somewhat of a shock because we hadn't even been trying. It just sort of happened.

And the results of the pregnancy stick I held sure brought Chase out his funk.

We had known we'd get married someday, but we had decided not to rush into anything. However, the news of an impending child kind of moved things along. There was no way that Chase's mom was going to let her grandchild be born out of wedlock. She launched into wedding preparations immediately. If J.J. could get married and start a family,

then so could Chase as far as she was concerned.

But neither of us wanted anything big and elaborate. My dad was still mourning my mom and Erin was starting something new with Brody. The glare of the media spotlight had somewhat dimmed, but any whisper of a wedding surely would have stirred things up again. Chase was fine with getting married in Stockton and keeping the setting small and intimate.

We decided on inviting only our closest friends and family to our mountaintop ceremony. Jack agreed to clear more of the land so we could set up tables, chairs, and even a portable

dance floor. We got the priest from my church to do the honors, and on a glorious day in June when I was six months pregnant, I became, for better or for worse, Mrs. Chase Whitfield.

I was bulging out of my dress under the white, billowy tent, but I didn't care. I was really and truly happy. Randy and Jacob, dressed in matching tuxes, helped walk J.J.'s infant son, Jordan, down the aisle carrying the satin pillow containing our rings. And even though my dad tearfully gave me away above the rock where Chase and I first kissed, I still missed my mom more than words could express.

As the summer sun glistened against the crystals on my veil, I fought back

tears because I had always imagined having her here with me on my wedding day. I deeply felt the lack of her presence. It was a void that no one was able to fill, even as my dashing groom stared at me in adoration as we exchanged our vows. It was still a bittersweet moment for me because the love I felt in my heart for Chase was tempered by the absence of my mother. I guess it was one of those times in life where, as an adult, a person realizes important days like this are never perfect, but it's best to celebrate the good in them and not dwell too much on the bad.

And Gayle wouldn't let me stay down

for long. She made me chuckle at every opportunity, reminding me of the many mishaps that had gone into the creation of my gown. Gayle had offered to help take me for fittings since Erin was too busy with the kids. It hadn't been an easy job since every time I'd visited the exclusive boutique in Manhattan that Chase's mom recommended they'd had to keep letting out the seams. But Gayle had reminded me they had the privilege of dressing Chase Whitfield's wife on her big day. She'd let them know that the exclusive wedding portrait would be featured on [TheQueenOfDiamonds.com](http://TheQueenOfDiamonds.com) and they would receive full editorial credit for the design, and that kind of silenced their grumblings over my



expanding stomach.

Once the season got underway, reality began to seep in. Chase realized that he wasn't going to play every day, and he didn't fight it as much. I got him to watch some games on TV. He still kept in touch with Pedro and Scott on a regular basis, and Bruce and Kyle reached out every so often. They let him know what was going on behind the scenes and how guys were holding up.

One afternoon during the All-Star break, Andy and Gayle invited us out for lunch. We were in New York at the time, visiting J.J., so we accepted. My column was still appearing on TheQueenOfDiamonds.com, although not

as frequently. I had taken a step back to help Chase stay occupied with all of the downtime he had on his hands. I didn't want him to dwell too much on the past and what could've been.

After lubricating Chase with a scotch on the rocks, Andy proceeded to tell him about how the network was looking for a color commentator, someone who was able to do games mostly on the weekends when viewership was high. The fans were clamoring to see him. They missed turning on their TVs and seeing number three at short.

Chase was reluctant, spouting off a million and one excuses. But after a long talk with Gayle, I knew this would be a good first step for him. He needed to get

back out there. No matter if he was able to play or not, he'd always be a member of the Kings. Gayle even conducted an online poll on her site and a whopping ninety-six percent of fans still named him as their favorite all-time player. That seemed to convince him.

He was cagey in the booth, not wanting to reveal too many details about his personal life. Andy bunted some easy questions at him, but he clammed up, and dead time on air is something no one's tuning in to hear. Once Andy got him talking about the game, he seemed to loosen up, but it was an awkward fit. He never really got into the groove of it.

But Brooks Davison, the player

who'd replaced him from Triple A, caught his attention. He started keeping track of his stats, what pitches he could hit, and which ones he was having trouble with. He watched him in the field and how his defense was improving. He had good hands going to his left, and he hung in there on the tough plays. Scott and Kyle were impressed with him, but Chase wouldn't approach him directly. He didn't think Brooks would appreciate any constructive criticism coming from him, seeing as how he had been revered at that position and all. He didn't want to put any more pressure on him.

Chase commuted back and forth to what was now 'our' penthouse in New

York to complete his stint in the broadcasting booth. I traveled with him up until the end of August, when I'd become as big as house. The dog days of summer caused my ankles to swell and just made carrying around thirty extra pounds that much harder. At that point, Chase had to put up with me being cranky and miserable, so I think he rather enjoyed his excursions into the city to catch up with his teammates. He always had one of them stay over when he was in town. Not that I didn't trust him or think that he'd get into any trouble, but he was still adjusting to life after baseball, and being in the city brought it all rushing back. I didn't want

him to be alone if I couldn't be there to help him through it.

After the season ended and the Kings failed to repeat as champs after falling victim to Boston in the ALCS, Tony Liotta made a phone call to Terry Bloom. He missed Chase's leadership in the clubhouse, how he motivated the guys and got them to stay focused during a long and arduous season. He didn't realize how much he had depended on his shortstop to keep things running smoothly until he wasn't there anymore. He was the first one to admit that he had taken him for granted. He wanted Terry to find some way to entice him back to the team.

And on Christmas morning, Terry

called offering Chase the position of first base coach. And it was the first time since he had reinjured his knee that I think he regained his footing. He'll get to suit up in his number three jersey again and take the field. Sure, he won't be able to play, but he'll be right in the thick of things again.

But what I think excited him the most was the chance to mentor Brooks Davison. He can teach him everything he learned, share his wisdom with this young player who rose through the ranks of the organization, just like he did. Last season, he didn't think it was his place to give him any pointers, but now he is going to badger the heck out of the poor

kid. But thankfully, the two of them got along extremely well. Once Chase opened up, Brooks took everything in like a sponge, relishing the one-on-one instruction from a future Hall of Famer.

Pitchers and catchers are reporting for spring training in a couple of days, and Chase wants to be there before they arrive. My mind is in a tizzy. *Where did I put those socks?* I was up all night with little Nan, so she better cooperate so I can get her father all set for his first outing as the Kings' new first base coach.

I'm running around the house, trying to find something for Chase to wear. But looking at the teething baby on my hip, I can't help but take a moment to



remember the day she entered the world. It makes me smile to know just how far we've all come.

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On the Sunday in September when Nan was born, I was over my dad's house for a family dinner Erin had prepared. Chase had them promise to keep an eye on me while he was gone since I was so close to my due date. He hadn't wanted to leave my side, but I'd talked him into it because the Kings were going to honor Kevin Spalding, the left fielder he'd won the World Series with his rookie year and I knew he wouldn't want to miss it. He hadn't seen him in years, and

I figured it'd be a good way for the two of them to catch up.

But Nan had other plans. She was going to make her arrival difficult on her father. My water broke when I was helping Erin wash dishes at the sink. The boys were playing outside with Brody, and he said he'd put them to bed, hoping to bring them by the next day to see their new cousin. My dad drove Erin and me to the hospital as she frantically called Chase.

The game was over but he was stuck in traffic on his way back. Noah was driving him, of course, and Erin gave him an earful, telling him to ride on the side of the road if he had to. This baby wasn't being born without her father

present.

My contractions were pretty far apart when we got there, and a nurse at the emergency entrance quickly wheeled me into the first available room in the maternity ward. She knew who I was. Everyone in Stockton knew who I was, damn it. But just this once I didn't feel bad about taking advantage of the special treatment.

Chase kept calling Erin with updates on his expected arrival time, but Noah was only inching him closer. They still were about two hours away. I thought I was going to be in labor all night, so I didn't panic. First-time deliveries are usually long and drawn out. At least that

was what the OB-GYN on call had told me, and Erin seemed to confirm it, since it had taken Randy sixteen hours to enter the world.

But then Nan decided to pick up the pace, and the contractions started coming fast and strong. I'd never felt such excruciating pain in my entire life. It was like I was being ripped open from the inside out. Having a baby wasn't anything like how it's portrayed on TV and in the movies—it fucking hurts.

After that, I didn't know how much time passed or where Chase was. I was fully absorbed in my breathing and trying to find a comfortable position when every time I moved it felt like my lower back was on fire. Erin tried her best,

dabbing my face with a wet washcloth and feeding ice chips into my mouth, but I was inconsolable. I didn't have my regular doctor. I didn't have my mother. I didn't have my husband. All I wanted was Chase, but he wasn't there.

I was just about fully dilated when the nurse brought the doctor back into the room, urging me to push. This was it, and Chase was going to miss it. I couldn't stop our daughter. She wanted out. Straining with everything I had, I felt beads of sweat drip down the back of my hospital gown. I thought the blood vessels in my forehead were going to burst from the exertion. The doctor cheered me on from behind his face

mask. Yeah, what do men know? There was no way in hell I was doing that again. It was like I was being split in two.

And just when I was ready to give up, Chase raced into the room, out of breath, his sneakers squeaking across the floor. Since on camera he was only seen above the waist, he had on jeans and Nikes accompanied by a white button-down shirt and suit jacket. It was a weird mishmash, like he just stepped out of an episode of a 1980s sitcom. His tie was hanging loosely around his neck, so he must have been fidgeting with it in the car. Even so, I wanted to strangle him with it for putting me in this predicament.

When he got a good look at what was going on in front of him, he turned as white as a ghost, probably shocked by what was going on between my legs. *Good. Serves him right, I thought. Let him see what he's been missing.* Childbirth isn't pretty. He had a hand in this too. I wouldn't have been in this position if it weren't for him.

“How nice of you to join us, Mr. Whitfield,” the doctor remarked casually. “Did the Kings win?”

“Yeah, five to three,” Chase responded automatically.

“Excellent. Okay, Grey. I'm going to need you to push again for me,” the doctor urged. “The head's about to

crown.”

I have to admit that I didn't handle my daughter's entrance into the world very well. A string of profanities flew out of my mouth at the doctor's request. I cussed him out and then I started in on Chase. If I remember correctly, he shrank into the corner as I called him every name in the book. Erin tried to quiet me, but I wasn't having any of it. I took everything out on him—my pain, my fear, my disappointment.

The doctor had the nerve to laugh, like the intensity of my reaction was nothing new to him. Like he'd seen it all before. Instead, he kept telling me to push and be a brave girl. I wanted to kick him in the teeth, but I couldn't feel my legs.



With one last-ditch effort, I clenched my jaw and felt Nan slide out of me. Within seconds, she started crying, and the nurse and Erin began to cheer. Chase was too afraid to approach the bed, so Erin had to drag him over to cut the cord. It was only when they placed Nan in my arms that I began to simmer down.

“I’m so sorry, Grey. I shouldn’t have —”

“Chase, enough. You’re here now. That’s all that matters. Just don’t think we’re naming her after one of the Kings. Kyla isn’t happening.”

“I know we promised not to think of a name for her until we saw her, but I think we should name her after your mother.”

The look Chase gave me in that moment is one I will never forget. It was tender and sweet, full of longing and hope. His heart understood what was most important to mine. It was such a telling gesture, letting me know without a shadow of doubt just how much he loves me.

“Nan it is then,” I said, reaching for his hand as he sat on the bed with us, drinking in every detail of our new baby girl.

“She’s got quite the grip on her,” he laughed when she wrapped her tiny hand around his finger. “She’s going to have a wicked curveball when she gets older.”

“So you’re making her a pitcher

already?”

“A starting pitcher, the ace of the staff. She definitely has an Olympic gold medal with the U.S. softball team in her future.”

“Nuh uh. Save the expectations of living up to your name for the son I’m planning on giving you.”

“I thought you said you were going to castrate me so I couldn’t fucking do this to you again.”

“That was said in the agony of labor. I’m better now.”

“Glad to hear it. You had me worried there.”

“After seeing the beautiful little person we made, of course I want to try it again. Isn’t she gorgeous? I’m so glad

she has your eyes. I hoped she would.”

“Don’t most babies have blue eyes when they’re born? I kind of wanted her to have your brown ones. I’m kind of partial to them myself.”

“Be serious. Why would you want my dull old brown eyes for her? And don’t you dare go calling yours plain old blue. They’re way beyond that,” I told him. “When you first looked at me behind that net at Beaver Field, I thought my heart was going to stop because they were so unbelievably breathtaking.”

“You never told me that before.”

“Well, I’m telling you now. Did you hear that, Nan? Your father has the most spectacular eyes I’ve ever seen, and

yours are going to be just like them.”

“If we’re talking about first impressions, then I have to say the kindness in your eyes is what got me.”

“Ha! I knew you wouldn’t say it was because you thought I was ridiculously hot.”

“That too. That’s a given. But no one ever looked at me like you did. The fire in your eyes was undeniable. Like you saw through all the bullshit and just saw me. And even without all that, you still liked what you saw.”

“Wow. That’s like...the most touching thing you ever said to me.”

“It’s true.”

I smiled at him, his words penetrating the deepest regions of my heart. They’re

words I'll carry with me for the rest of life. Tugging on his tie, I pulled him closer.

“I'm so glad you sent Noah after me.”

“Well, I'm glad you wandered into Buster's Crab Shack after I got you kicked out of Beaver Field.”

“And you thought you had game?”

He chuckled as his lips met mine, but we were quickly interrupted by the baby cooing in my arms.

“C'mon, Nan. Cut your father some slack. He's gotten better.”

“Yeah, Nan. Thanks to your mom over here.”

“What do you think, Nan? Should we keep him?”

“Well, you better. Because I’m not going anywhere.”

“Looks like we’re stuck with him. But I guess he’s not that bad. I mean, he was almost named Sexiest Man Alive. That has to count for something.”

“Grey?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks...for giving me this life.”

“I’ve only been in love with you since I was sixteen. So I think we’re pretty much even.”

“I thought my knee injury was the worst thing that ever happened to me, but you know what?”

“What?”

“It’s what brought me to you...and

now I can only look at it as a blessing, not the curse I thought it was.”

“Chase Whitfield’s all grown up.”

“Yeah, it only took me thirty plus years.”

“I think we’re meant to find the people who are supposed to help us through our darkest moments. And after my mom died, I don’t know what I would’ve done without you, Chase. I was spiraling down to a deep, dark place, and you pulled me out of it. God knows where I would’ve ended up if not for you.”

“We’re pretty good together.”

“Whoever thought I’d turn New York’s most eligible bachelor into such a doting family **man**?”



“Only you, Grey. Only you.”

# About the Author

Collette West grew up as somewhat of a jock-nerd hybrid. Entering the world three weeks premature, her dad nearly missed her birth because he had seats behind the dugout for a sold-out, highly-anticipated match-up between two of baseball's biggest rivals. Not to be outdone, her book-loving mom taught her how to read by the time she was three. A love of the game coupled with an appreciation for the written word were instilled in Collette's impressionable brain from a young age. No wonder her characters believe in the philosophy: sports + romance = a little slice of

heaven.

Splitting her time between the Pocono Mountains and Manhattan, Collette indulges her inner fangirl by going to as many games as she can from hockey to baseball and downloading every sports romance novel in existence onto her iPad. When she's not clicking away on her laptop, she enjoys walking her dog in Central Park, satisfying her caffeine craving at the Starbucks on Broadway and keeping an eye out for Mr. Right. But above all, she loves dishing with her readers.

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