



Catherine
Lane

Romancing
the *Kicker*



CHAPTER 1

PARKER SHERBOURNE WOKE UP IN a strange bed with two pillows pressed into her upper back. For a second, she didn't know where she was. She took in the plush mattress, the freshly cut flowers on the bedside table, and finally, the Eiffel Tower framed in the huge picture window. The monument's golden lights threw a romantic glow into the luxury hotel room.

Of course.

She knew exactly where she was.

Sin City—the Las Vegas Strip. Over five thousand miles away from the real city of lights, the tower across the street was only half the size of the original in Paris. Parker sighed deeply. This one shone silly and fake, like a teenager who had raided her mother's closet for more grown-up clothes.

Today, she would try out as a point-after-touchdown kicker for the High Rollers—the NFL expansion team that had landed in Las Vegas when the deal from California had fallen apart. Then she would be the outsider. Did a woman, even if she could kick the stuffing out of any ball, really have a chance at the most macho sport on the planet? This whole thing was a publicity stunt at best and a fool's errand at worst. No one in the game was ready for a woman—and an out lesbian at that—to suit up in the NFL...no one but her.

Parker scooted over to the bedside table and fumbled for her phone and the time—almost three in the morning. The pillows at her back traveled with her.

Wait. They weren't pillows.

Rolling over, Parker fell into breasts so perky and full that a girl could get lost in them. Tanya, her shiny new agent with Gridiron Sports Management. She had jumped on Parker when the Rollers had started sniffing around. Not literally, of course...until last night.

Parker bit her lip. She could have sworn that Tanya had gotten up to leave after their bump-and-run activities, but the nipple resting on her cheek clearly said otherwise.

Tanya stirred, and the nipple slipped closer to her mouth. Parker resisted the urge to wrap her lips around it...again. Sex with Tanya had been fun, but Parker had only asked Tanya in for one reason: to unwind. She always played better on the field when something, or usually *someone*, had drained her nervous energy the night before.

Parker slid a hand under Tanya's shapely behind and tried to ease her to the other side of the bed without waking her up. She needed her sleep, and she always slept best with no one crowding her.

Just as she maneuvered Tanya far enough away, Tanya's eyes fluttered open. A hungry smile lit up her face. "Hi, there."

"Hi, yourself." Parker pushed the words out. The last thing she wanted was to talk.

"You made the touchdown last night." Tanya scooted back and up, raising her mouth to Parker's. "Don't you want to try for the point after?" Apparently, talking was the last thing Tanya wanted as well.

“Look.” Parker slid back to the edge of the bed. “That’s very tempting. It really is. But I need to get some more sleep. You know, be ready for today and all.”

Tanya’s gaze clouded over. Instantly, she was the very picture of professionalism. “Don’t worry. I don’t U-Haul.” She grabbed the sheet and pulled it up over her nakedness.

“No, it’s not that. I really enjoyed last night.” Truth be told, she already missed the sight of those perfect breasts. “But—”

Tanya ran a hand through her short hair and eased from the bed with the sheet still wrapped around her. “You’re right. We shouldn’t muddy the waters until we find out if there’s actually something to wade into. Let’s see what happens today.” She found her clothes on the floor and turned her back as she started to throw them on. “Then we can figure out if this is something.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Parker wasn’t sure about the metaphor. But she got the tone. Tanya had leaped through Parker’s door earlier only because she was certain tomorrow would be a total bust. She was way too smart and polished to sleep with a client, and after a failed tryout, Gridiron wouldn’t even field a phone call from Parker. Tanya was playing the odds and just getting some while she could.

Parker ran a hand through her long hair, sweeping it behind her shoulders. Shit. She had thought she was in control, the one writing the story of their night. She jumped out of the bed and strutted across the room without bothering to reach for her clothes. Years in the gym and on one field or another had toned her body to absolute perfection, and she knew it. She’d give Tanya one last look at exactly what she was betting against.

The energy in the room stilled, and Tanya stopped rustling with her clothes.

Parker could almost feel the heat from her gaze, like Supergirl's X-ray vision, moving up and down her body. She would take the small victory.

Parker walked to the front door and pulled it open. The hall outside was empty at this late hour, thank God. She just wanted to make a point, not provide a free peep show to anyone in the hallway.

"What time's the car to the stadium?" Parker swung to face Tanya in a full reveal.

Tanya stared for a moment and then closed her mouth with a soft pop. "Noon. I'll meet you in the lobby at noon. By those jack-o'-lanterns made of..."

"Chrysanthemums."

"Yeah, the Halloween exhibit." After bending down to grab her purse, she headed out but paused before she stepped over the threshold and raised her hand to Parker's cheek. "Of course, you know that just trying out for an NFL team is a very big deal, even if you never play. To be the first at anything is a great honor. You'll open the door. Play this right, and you'll make contacts. We'll both make some money, and maybe we can do all this again when—"

Parker caught the hand and pulled it off her cheek. "Hey, I thought you were supposed to be on my side."

"This is being on your side." Tanya's brow furrowed. "You know the likelihood of this crazy stunt working out is pretty slim."

Parker's hackles rose. "Don't count me out yet. I could be the one to walk through that door. I may just surprise you."

"Oh, you've surprised me already." She ran a glance up and down Parker's body one last time. "Get that sleep."

Parker closed the door behind her and flipped the privacy lock with a hard snap. The room was still awash with the lights of a city that never slept. Crossing to the mirrored picture window, Parker looked out on perhaps the finest view of the Strip. The Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe straight ahead, the glorious dancing fountains of the Bellagio to the left, and the brilliant neon of fantasies and dreams as far as the eye could see.

She yanked the blackout curtain across the window, and the room sank into darkness. A view for suckers. The bright colors and all the bling gave people false hope. There were far too many people in this city standing alone in hotel rooms in the middle of the night with broken dreams. Behind all the glitz, Vegas was a brittle place. She had never liked it much.

The Sherbourne Hotel, of course, was the one exception. She had to hand it to her father. He sure knew how to choose a location. He got five stars for that and, in fact, for the entire hotel. Dozens of guidebooks had called him a genius for the way he had created such intimacy in a property with over two thousand rooms. The hotel rose like an island of elegance in a sea of extravagance.

Parker sighed. She wished for the umpteenth time that he would work as hard on their relationship. Lately, she would give him one star, if that. When she was a kid and there was a football game on TV, they would grab a couple of Dr. Peppers and chill out in the media room. But she couldn't remember the last time that happened. She had learned the hard way people never hung around when you wanted them to. It was better to kick them out before they walked away and chase your dreams alone—and that's what she would do at the tryout later.

Not far away in Paradise Valley—a neighborhood off the Strip with no glitzy neon or shrunken French monuments—Carly Bartlet was also wide-awake. She tossed and turned in her twin bed, twisting the blankets up under her chin and then pushing them back down.

“Can’t sleep?” Her grandmother’s soft Southern drawl drifted over from her side of the room.

“Oh goodness. Did I wake you?” Carly raised her head and peered into the semi-darkness. A lone streetlamp outside their bedroom window cast a sickly yellow light into the room. She could barely see her grandmother’s pale figure.

Minnie Lee sat in her own twin bed propped up against several pillows. “No. Not at all. When you’re my age, you chase sleep at night. Not the other way around.”

“Seventy-three is not that old.” Carly pulled herself up as well. “And if sleeping badly is the criteria for age, tonight I must be a hundred and twelve.”

“You’re just nervous, sweetheart.”

“It’s more than that.” She bit her lip as the panic rose like bile in her stomach. “I’m afraid that I won’t be able to make this work.”

“That’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard. Who was hired by UNLV the second she graduated?”

“Yeah, but this is the pros, and you didn’t see the Rollers’ head athletic trainer when Mrs. Fisher brought him into her office and announced I was his newest assistant. Buck was so mad, steam would’ve come out of his ears if he were a cartoon character.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. And if it is, you just show him what you’re made of, and then he’ll blow a different tune.”

“Maybe.” Her shoulders dropped as her grandmother’s unwavering confidence washed over her. In a way, she didn’t blame Buck Johnson. When Marina Fisher had inherited the High Rollers after her husband’s death, she had gone on record as saying she would find a way to change the league.

Carly had signed the contract before she had a chance to sit down with Buck and lay out her philosophy and expectations of medical care on the sports field. Knots tightened in her stomach. How was she supposed to navigate treatment with the players when she didn’t even have the head athletic trainer on her side?

“You might as well get up if you’re just going to sit over there and fret.” Her grandmother broke into her thoughts.

Carly looked at the clock on her bedside table. Three forty-eight. She wanted to be at the stadium by five thirty, a half hour before the training room opened. It was almost time to get up anyway. “Okay. Do you think I’ll wake up Teddy if I take a shower?”

“That boy could sleep through one of his zombie apocalypses.”

Laughing, Carly threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. “Tonight, when I get home, we should talk about me moving out into the main room, though. I don’t want to wake either of you up if I come in late or get up early. Who knows what my hours are going to be?”

“I’d rather talk about how your first day went.” Her grandmother snuggled back into the pillows.

“Thanks, Grandma.” She slipped from the room.

What Carly really wanted to talk about, however, was her grandmother dropping a few shifts at the diner or maybe looking for an affordable used car. She shook her head to clear her mind. She shouldn't get ahead of herself. To get the bigger paycheck that could change their lives, she actually had to keep the job.

After getting out of the shower, she swiped a towel across the steamed-up mirror and caught a glimpse of herself. *Who am I to think I can do this?*

The pretty, light-brown face staring back at her held no answers. She looked younger than her twenty-six years. Maybe she would one day be grateful for that genetic gift from the father she had never met, but right now, it was a liability. No one at the Rollers was going to take her seriously. They would treat her like an intern, for sure. The knots in her stomach tightened. She pulled her loose waves up into a high ponytail. No, that was even worse; now she looked like a teenager.

She yanked the hair band out and nodded at her reflection in the mirror. "You can do this."

Her grandmother waited for her in the main room of the tiny apartment. She sat on a barstool at the breakfast bar, wrapped up in a thick bathrobe. October mornings in the Valley were still mild, but Minnie Lee, thin as a rail, was always cold. And thanks to the cost, they almost never ran the heat until December.

"Wish me luck." Carly grabbed her backpack and a new, quilted Rollers jacket off the sofa.

"Exactly." Minnie Lee pointed to the vintage cake carrier beside her. "You didn't think that I'd let you go off to your dream job without Sweet Luck, did you?"

Carly's heart melted. The cake tin was almost as old as her grandmother, and with its faded red roses and broken hinges, it had certainly seen better days. But ever since her grandmother had arrived in Vegas from Alabama, this cake tin had appeared at all the big moments in their lives. A family tradition. Sweet Luck. Her grandmother meant it literally.

"I told you. You're not going to need it." Minnie Lee's eyes crinkled with a smile. "But it doesn't hurt to hedge your bets, does it?"

Carly shook her head and grinned back. "Thanks." She flipped the latch at the bottom of the tin and raised it to reveal a serving of her grandmother's famous banana pudding: fresh bananas smothered in vanilla pudding with butter cookies on top.

"Is that Sweet Luck?" Her half brother stood in the hallway, barely awake. His dark hair was tousled, and his warm eyes still sleepy. "I could use some Sweet Luck." And when they both looked at him, he added, "Seriously, I have an important science lab today."

Laughing, Carly held out the fork. "You finish it, then. I got to go anyway."

"Score." Teddy held out his clenched palm for a fist bump. "You too, Grandma."

When her grandmother added her fist to the mix, Carly marveled at the different colors of their knuckles—white, tan, and a darker brown. They didn't look like family, and that was why their grandmother always worked so hard to make them feel like one.

Teddy pulled his fist back, wiggling his fingers in some move he had probably picked up at school, and slid onto the barstool to attack the pudding.

Carly kissed her grandmother on the cheek and gave her brother a quick side hug.

“See you later, sis,” he said.

“Goodbye, sweetheart.” Minnie Lee raised her hand.

“Oh! Wait!” Teddy dropped his fork on the plate. “Did you hear? There’s a new way to put players’ muscles back together when they hurt them.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. With super gluteus.” Teddy glanced back and forth between them. “Get it? Super glu...teus.”

Minnie Lee laughed.

Carly groaned and rolled her eyes. “Seriously?”

“There’s a lot more where that came from.”

“Then I’m super gluteously happy I’m going to work.”

On the way out, she caught their reflection in the mirror of the coatrack by the door. They sat at the bar, the smiles from the joke still playing at their lips.

Laughter and love. They had plenty of that.

* * *

Two buses, fifty strip malls, and a three-minute walk later, Carly stood at the staff entrance to the High Rollers’ stadium. The domed structure with its clear roof and silver and black exterior looked as if a sleek alien spaceship had touched down on the south end of the Strip. The curtain-like side windows were closed this early on a Tuesday morning, but come game day, they’d retract to create a gorgeous open-air entrance that framed the Las Vegas Strip and was the envy of the entire league.

Never in her whole life did she think she’d be standing outside a two-billion-dollar stadium and actually belong there. Carly had fought hard for everything that had come her

way, and at times disappointment had rung more loudly than success. But there was no denying it. Her gambles had paid off. She was a High Roller.

The guard at the door put down his ratty coffee cup and held up his hand to stop Carly. “The girlfriend entrance is through the Welcome Center.” He pointed to the massive glass-and-steel structure to his left.

“Oh no. Sorry. I’m the new assistant AT...um...athletic trainer.” Carly tried to infuse her voice with an authority she didn’t feel while she dug around in her backpack to find her stadium ID. Her fingers curled around plastic, and she held the badge out to him. “See?”

“Nice try. That’s a bus pass.”

“Oh. Sorry. They’re both sort of silver.”

Her stomach churned as she pulled the real ID out. She couldn’t even get in the front door without a snafu. What made her think she could pull off the rest of the day?

She glanced at the front of the real badge before she showed him. The picture of her under the Rollers logo was a good one. Her hair was behaving, and the complementary shades of golden brown of her hair, eyes, and skin looked as if they had been coordinated by a stylist. No wonder the guard had thought her a groupie. All her life she had looked more like arm candy than the knowledgeable professional.

The guard took the ID and carefully looked back and forth between the picture and her. “All right, Carolina Lee—”

“Carly. The Car of Carolina with Lee added on. Just Carly.”

“You should go by Carolina Lee. There’s heft to it.” He returned the badge to her. “Have a good first day.”

“Thank you.” She took a step but then swiveled back with her arm outstretched. “You know, I really do belong here.”

“It’s not me you have to convince.” He clasped her hand in a solid shake and then pointed to the steel door on the side of the building.

Carly walked into the rarified air of the training complex that butted up against the stadium. She was inside a giant glass football. The steel trusses supporting the glass looked like the stitching on a ball. No expense had been spared when the center had been built. The press had instantly dubbed it the Gamblers’ Den, and the name had stuck.

She wound her way through the labyrinth of treatment, rehabilitation, and recovery rooms and past a ten-thousand-square-foot weight room, a cafeteria, and the hallowed locker room. Every door had a Rollers logo—a silver skull with two neon-green dice for eyes.

The head trainer’s office was at the end of a hallway with no natural light.

Even this early in the morning, Buck was already hunched at his desk, shuffling through paperwork with one hand and holding an oversized iPad with the other. He was such a big man that the desk looked as if it had been made for a child.

Carly knocked on the open door.

Buck glanced up, his burly shoulders tensing. “Well, you’re here early. I’ll say that for you.” His voice sounded resigned, but she wasn’t fooled.

“I know how busy it can be even on the players’ day off.”

Buck grunted his assent. “Look, let’s get one thing straight, right away. Marina strong-armed me into hiring you. I’ve got a hundred resumes in this desk drawer that are more qualified. But she’s got this crazy idea about staffing the organization with more women. And she wants a local female. You’ve apparently

got both the anatomy and the UNLV pedigree. So, I am stuck with you.”

“I understand.” Carly rolled her neck. She had been here before with men who thought women did not belong in the training rooms of male sports teams. Actually, she had been here a lot in other ways too. People had looked at her gender, the color of her skin, as well as the fact that she came from a low-income household, and they promptly decided that she was not quite enough like them to be embraced. “I get it,” she said again, hoping to put Buck at ease.

“I’m not sure you do. We’re fully staffed, and even though we’re in the middle of this miserable season, my trainers are a well-oiled machine. I can’t afford anyone to muck with my system. You’ll start as a glorified intern, maybe not even glorified, and we’ll see how long you last.”

Carly knew what that meant, too. She would spend long hours in the stockroom and make gallons of Gatorade from powder until it tasted as if it came straight from the bottle. Fair enough. All she was asking for was a chance. The irony was, if Marina wanted a rabble rouser, she had chosen badly. She wasn’t here to make waves or stand up for women’s rights or whatever the hell Marina required. “Thank you for this opportunity. I’ll make the most of it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” His eyes narrowed as he stared at her. “What exactly is your game here?”

“Huh?” Carly’s brow furrowed. “To help the players and learn as much as I—”

“Why did you leave the UNLV training room? From all accounts, you had a good thing going there and a job that might actually last beyond this season.”

She ran a hand through her hair. The real truth—creating a less stressful life for her grandmother—wasn't what he wanted to hear. The lesser truth might work, though. "It's the NFL. Every trainer dreams about going pro, and I—"

"You married? Got kids?"

"No." Carly was pretty sure that she knew where he was going with all this. "I can assure you I'm a work-centered employee. The Rollers will be my top priority—"

"That's not it." Buck slapped the top of his desk with an open palm, not hard, but the sound reverberated loudly in the tight space. "I expect all my trainers to be completely aboveboard."

"Excuse me?" She rocked back on her heels.

"And, in your case, that means absolutely no fraternizing with the players. Is that clear?"

She sighed deeply. He had taken, what, two minutes to get here? Why did most men think she had become a trainer to land a rich husband? Why could no one believe that she actually enjoyed smoothing out aches and pains and putting athletes back on the field better than ever? Sometimes she even felt medicine was in her DNA.

Buck was clearly waiting for her answer. When none came, his mouth puffed up as if that cartoon steam actually was swirling inside. "You think I'm kidding?"

Carly shook her head. She couldn't ever imagine the hulking man in front of her making a joke. She should just tell him that dating a male player would never be a possibility. But coming out to her boss on the first day probably wasn't the best idea. She hadn't even come out to her family.

"I don't like drama. Especially right now." Buck continued as if he hadn't heard her. Clearly, he was only interested in

his own agenda, whatever it was. “These players are inventing excuses for the way they’re playing. Shit. You’re just going to be another distraction.” He blew out a puff of breath. No steam, but air whistled in the room. “Go to HR if you want. Claim sexual harassment if that’s how you want to play this meeting, but the plain fact is you’re way too pretty for this job. They’ll come in the room for all the wrong reasons. Honestly, I don’t know what Marina was thinking bringing you into the organization.”

Carly swallowed hard. Not this nonsense again. People always seized on her looks, focusing on her golden eyes or her wavy hair instead of her skills as an athletic trainer. News alert: the way she looked had nothing to do with her ability to do her job—and do it very well. “You’ll find that I’m a professional, Buck. I’m here to work hard. Nothing more.”

“Look, if I get even one whiff of you and a player crossing the line, you’re flat-out fired. And Marina and her cockamamie ideas won’t be able to save you. You’re here for only one purpose. To support the players on the field, and that’s it.”

“I understand.” She reverted back to her go-to line.

“Good.” He picked up the paperwork. “Allen’s in the hydrotherapy room. Report to him, and he’ll tell you what to do.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. I wouldn’t wish the rest of this miserable season on anyone. Lose your quarterback and everything goes to shit. Like it or not, you’re part of the Rollovers, as the press has so kindly dubbed us.” He focused fully on the iPad. In the one second it took him to pull up the electronic health records of the injured players, he had clearly forgotten she ever existed.

Well, that was better than being in his crosshairs. If she kept her head down and did her job well, maybe she could last all the way to January—with a lot of luck maybe even into the off-season, and Teddy and her grandmother could have breakfast on a bar that wasn't falling apart.

* * *

Parker's eyes popped open a full minute before her cell phone alarm chimed. Even as a child, she could wake up exactly when she wanted. Her father had called it a parlor trick. She announced that as a true athlete, she could control her body, even down to her circadian rhythms. Her father had laughed. But that was far better than her mother's response. She, as usual, was off *meditating* alone or worse yet, at the center, and had never weighed in one way or the other.

Parker stretched like a cat rising from a nap, first rolling out her head and then her behind. She slid toward the bedside table and dialed room service. "I would like egg whites, scrambled, with spinach and onions. Turkey bacon and whole wheat toast, unbuttered, on the side."

"Anything to drink?" the man at the other end asked, his voice tired and bored.

"Please. Coffee and a large, fresh orange juice. That's room 1623."

"Okay. That will be thirty minutes." Clicking on a keyboard filled the silence as he was probably punching in the room number on a computer.

Parker sighed as she waited for what always came next.

"Ms. Sherbourne?" The man's voice quickened. "Oh my God, I'm sorry. I didn't realize... We can get it to you sooner, of course, if you—"

“No, no. Thirty is perfect. Thank you.” She hung up so the man could stop falling all over himself.

The knock came fifteen minutes later. He had pushed the order anyway. They always did when they realized who she was. She opened the door, expecting to see someone in the deep blue of the hotel uniform and a pushcart with a shiny bell-shaped cover. “Excellent. I’m starving...” Parker froze.

“A little late for breakfast, isn’t it?” Her father filled the frame of the doorway. For such a tall man, he stood casually, his lips curved in a laconic smile. “Late night?”

“Dad, how’d you find me?” The urge to shut the door nearly overwhelmed her. “The reservation was through the Rollers.”

“It *is* my hotel, you know. May I come in?”

Parker backed up, and her father took possession of the room. Energy flowed off his six-foot-five frame, rushing off into all four corners. He glanced around but made no move to take her in his arms or kiss her hello.

“I thought you were in France,” Parker said softly, not knowing whether to make the move herself.

“I will be, but I had a meeting in Vegas, and so do you, I hear.” He pulled at a wilting flower in a nearby vase and crumpled it in his hand.

“Come to wish me luck?” She looked at her father sideways as he dropped the flower into the trash. She tried to tamp down the wisps of hope rising in her chest. “It’s not a wasted trip. You’ve always liked football.”

“True. But I’m not so sure you and the NFL are a good match.”

Of course, he’s not here to support me. Their conversation had gone south even faster than it usually did. She rocked back on

her heels, waiting for his agenda, whatever it was, to bubble to the surface.

“What happened to soccer and the Fire?” he finally asked. “I thought you were making a home up there.”

“Nothing. It’s the off-season in Portland. I wouldn’t be there anyway.”

“So, you’re going back?”

Parker looked down. Just a simple question, but he always made her feel like a teenager explaining why she had missed curfew. “Maybe. I don’t know. I wanted to take a stab at something different before I decide for sure.”

Her father pointed to the plush couch in a corner. “May I sit?”

Parker nodded, and her stress level rose as his behind hit the cushions.

On the couch, her father ran his hand through hair as blond and thick as hers. “I’m wondering if coming down here and trying out for the Rollers is just another one of these leaps you make when you get so restless and wound up, you can’t think straight.”

And here they were. The complete opposite of supporting her. “I don’t do that. Besides, I love football, even more than soccer.”

“Funny, when you joined the Fire, you told us that soccer was your life.”

“I’m a better kicker than a goalie,” Parker said, fully aware that she now actually sounded, as well as felt, like that teenager.

“That’s not the point. We both know you can kick for the Rollers if you really want to. The point is: Are you ready to embrace the responsibility that comes with this job?”

“I’m going to do something that no woman has ever done before.”

“Exactly. The first woman in the NFL? It’s going to come with a lot of baggage.”

“I’m pretty strong.” Parker crossed her arms and met her father’s stare.

“I wasn’t going to tell you this, but Marina Fisher is one hell of a businesswoman. When the NFL lifted the ban on events in casinos, she contacted me about a partnership with the Rollers a while back. And I said no.”

Parker yanked on the end of her ponytail. “And you think this is her way of getting to you?”

“Don’t fidget, honey.”

Parker dropped her ponytail as if it had erupted in flames. She opened her mouth and closed it just as quickly. On any field her voice called out commands, but here with her father, it was barely audible.

“Honestly, I don’t know what Marina is up to. She’s booked the hotel for an event later this week. But whatever her game plan is, I certainly don’t want her toying with you.”

“I’m a big girl, Dad.” Parker rocked up on her toes to prove it. Fully extended, she was well over six feet herself. “I can take care of myself.”

“Yes. And that’s also what I came here to talk about.”

“There’s more?” A chill ran down her back.

He sighed and ran a hand down the tight crease in his pants. “I think I’ve been enabling you to jump from one thing to the next. It’s time for you to stick around and truly finish what you start. Your mother and I have talked—”

“Really?”

“Well, I talked and she listened. Look, it doesn’t matter. We both agree that it’s time you found out what is truly important to you.”

“And?”

“And we’re cutting off your allowance.”

The words pierced her like tiny daggers. Parker let the sharp edges settle before she answered, “You can’t be serious.”

“This hurts me more than it hurts you; believe me.”

She didn’t.

“You should have enough to last you for a while. And we think if we take away your cushion, you’ll be forced to find out what really matters to you. Maybe it’s this caper with the Rollers. Maybe it’s soccer and the Fire. Or maybe it’s something else completely.”

“For how long?”

“Until you come up with a solid plan for your future.”

“I’m not going to work for you like Jem does. If that’s what you’re after.” Her fingernails dug into her palms. Had that been his goal all along?

“Nothing would make me happier than if you would join me in a business venture. You do have a business degree, after all.” He waved his hand around the room. “But if hotels aren’t your passion, I can live with that. I just want you to find—”

“Okay, Dad.” Parker moved to the door. She didn’t have it in her to listen to another lecture. “You’ve made your point loud and clear. Thank you for coming. If you don’t mind, I’ve got a tryout to prepare for.”

“True, but all I’m asking you to do is examine your motives.” Her father rose from the couch and with two long strides, finally took her in his arms.

Parker stiffened. Was he hugging or suffocating her? Who could tell?

“I know all this seems harsh,” he said. “But it’s for the best. It really is.”

Clutched to his chest, Parker bit her lip so hard she tasted blood. Maybe he believed his own rhetoric, but this was her life. She wasn’t fourteen, and he wasn’t choosing her classes at Calmont Prep anymore.

She wriggled out of his hold and swung the door open.

A bellboy with a curled fist raised his hand to knock. When he saw them both crowded by the doorway, he took in a quick breath. “Mr. Sherbourne?” His eyes went wide. “I’m...I’m just delivering breakfast.”

Her father squeezed around her to straighten first the boy’s name tag and then his collar. “Harold, we always need to look our best at the Sherbourne.” He nodded once to make his point, and without a backward glance at either of them, he strode down the hallway.

“Shit,” Harold said under his breath. He clapped his hand across his mouth as he looked at Parker. “God, I’m sorry, Ms. Sherbourne.”

“Don’t worry.” Parker patted his arm and pulled the cart in herself. “He never sticks around to see the damage he causes.”

Harold let out a long sigh.

“Believe me, I’m right there with you.”

Not for the first time, she shut the door on her father.

CHAPTER 2

CARLY PULLED OUT THE LAST drawer in the long line of taping tables in the training room and forced her eyes to focus. She had been restocking all morning, and the colored pre-wrap and tape in the drawer swam in her vision as if she were looking through a giant kaleidoscope. A better analogy would be an abstract oil painting. For Carly, rolling tape on an injured athlete was an art form; finding the delicate balance between comfort and support, sending an injured athlete onto the field with the confidence that he could make the game-changing play. Even the ripping noise when she pulled tape off the roll was music to her ears.

Standing there, with tape in her hand, she wondered if she would ever get a chance to show her skill. Players were superstitious, usually going back to the same taper again and again. Even if they weren't, they usually didn't want a female athletic trainer. Something about small fingers and weak hands. She dropped several silver PowerFlex rolls into empty spaces in the drawer. There. Done.

What next? Sanitizing the hydrotherapy pool? That's what she would suggest if she were trying to get an unwanted hire to quit. *No matter, I'll beat them at their own game.*

“Hey, Allen?” She crossed to the doorway of her colleague’s windowed office at the back of the facility.

Allen raised his head. He had such a baby face Carly wondered if he had grown a beard to look older.

“I’m done,” she said. “I could take a stab at cleaning the whirlpools, unless you had something else in mind.”

“That would be great.” He gave her a real smile and lifted a *football is my life* mug as a thanks. “They’re on today’s schedule.”

Carly smiled back. Allen seemed like a good guy. He had looked her straight in the eyes and given her a firm handshake when she had introduced herself that morning. What’s more, he had been professional, cordial even, as he had shown her around the Rollers’ kingdom.

“Okay. Point me in the direction of the—”

“Allen!” A man wearing a yellow security shirt stuck his head through the training room front door. “That kicker’s here. You coming?”

“You bet.” Allen jumped up, exited his office, and then turned to Carly in the main room. “We’ve got a new kicker trying out. You want to come watch before you tackle the whirlpools?”

Carly nodded. “Sure.”

“Then come on. This should be especially interesting since—”

Allen backed right into Buck, who was waiting for them outside in the hallway. Allen ricocheted around. “Oh, sorry, Buck.”

Buck stood like a mountain in the middle of the hall, his hands knotted up into tight balls at his side. “The travesty continues.” He didn’t give Carly a glance.

“Now wait a second.” Allen gave all his attention to their boss. “Let’s give Marina a chance. She may have something up her sleeve. And I don’t see how things can get much worse this season.” He patted Buck on the back before they moved around the corner and out of Carly’s earshot.

Carly smiled. With his sunny nature, Allen seemed like the pony that a racing track kept with the thoroughbred to calm its nerves.

She didn’t need to hear the rest of the conversation to know that Buck was grumbling about something. It *was* odd that the Rollers were scouting a new kicker this far into the season. The kicker already on the roster wasn’t a superstar, but he was decent; actually, the special teams were regularly outperforming the other units. Buck might actually have something to gripe about this time.

Carly watched the men disappear. She was still invited, right? Allen hadn’t looked back after the initial invitation, but neither of them had told her not to come. She trotted after them.

Stepping onto the field from the players’ entrance, even with the stadium empty, sent chills down Carly’s spine. No expense had been spared, from the natural warm-weather Bermuda grass on the ground to the silver and green banners flapping in the breeze at the very top. An eighty-foot jumbotron towered over the far end, and yet the stadium was still intimate. The seats rolled almost down to the field, putting the first-row fans so close they could practically touch the players as they moved around the field. The hulking bodies, the blazing speed, the hurtling passes, and the loud thuds and grunts—the stadium brought the game to the fans in full HD.

A small group of people stood on the sideline near the end zone. Other people from the organization—players, coaches, the security guard who had grabbed Allen—dotted the stadium on and off the field.

Carly swiveled to take them all in. Why would so many people show up to see a kicker try out? A lot of people considered kickers and punters an inferior subspecies of football players. She wasn't one of them, of course. She had respect for any athlete, but something unusual must be going on here.

Allen and Buck, with Carly on their heels, stopped twenty yards out, giving the group at the end zone its privacy. Three players dressed in helmets and full pads trotted out to the field. Carly recognized the center and the holder by the numbers on their practice uniforms, but the third player, face shrouded under the helmet, remained a mystery.

Carly sucked in a breath. The way the kicker moved was... was... She searched for a word.

Exquisite.

Her mouth went dry. There was absolutely no extraneous or wasted motion. The player's feet struck the ground in a straight line, and by extension, his body appeared to float effortlessly across the field. He personified grace and agility. Goose bumps ran up her arms. What the hell? This was a guy!

She quickly averted her gaze. Had Buck noticed? She hadn't been on the job for a full day, and already she was proving him right. She stole a glance at the head trainer.

Luckily, he had eyes only for the field, and the way he rocked back on his heels told Carly he did not approve of what he was watching.

She swallowed hard, willed herself not to react, and returned her gaze to the field. He was just another athlete. Her line of

work was creating smooth movement. She was just reacting to him as a five-star example, right?

* * *

Adrenaline coursed through Parker's body. Now that she was finally active and moving, everything felt right. Her father's visit to her hotel room had been distressing. The car ride over from the hotel had been awkward, to say the least. Tanya, at first, had tried to make small talk, but the memory of rolling around in twisted sheets loomed too large between them. In the end, her agent had pulled out her cell phone even before they cleared the hotel's long driveway.

Jogging onto the field with the soft grass under her cleats and her helmet fitting snugly on her head, she was in her element for the first time in a while. The rhythm of movement had always called to her. Had filled the empty places in her heart. There was something primal in physical activity that stilled her mind and opened up pathways to her soul. She was moving, and it didn't matter that almost everyone on the sideline was against her. Or that other people in her life had walked away.

This contest was only about her and a ball and if she could send it through the uprights. She rarely lost this kind of battle.

She quickly assessed the conditions on the unfamiliar field. The playing surface was dry; her plant foot would stick. No wind, thank God. The air temperature was a little cooler than she would've preferred, but it wouldn't affect her length.

The long snapper set up, and the holder dropped to one knee, waiting for the ball.

Parker pulled a breath deep into her lungs and let muscle memory of the kick she had perfected in high school take over.

She dropped three paces behind the ball and two to the left. Centering her body weight over her hips, she bounced lightly on the balls of her feet. She was ready.

She would have to trust that she would get a good snap and that the holder would align the ball correctly. Kicking a point after was an exercise in true faith. Everyone started moving at the same time, praying that the others were in sync.

These men were professionals, right? They'd do their job.

"Ready. Ready," the snapper called out, and the holder stretched out his hand to receive the ball.

Here goes nothing.

As she had done a thousand times before, Parker strode toward the ball in a diagonal line. First, the jab step, then the drive step, and then finally, a solid plant by the ball with her left foot. The ball, which had arrived right on time, was leaning, laces out, slightly into the holder. She squared her torso and met the sweet spot on the football with the top of her foot.

BAM!

Her speed and consistency were textbook-perfect; the ball sailed smack right through the center of the uprights.

"Again!" Hill, the special teams coach, smoothed a hand over his receding hairline and waved her back without giving her even a second to celebrate.

When she made that one too, he called for a dozen more, all from different angles on the field.

"Back to the twenty."

Parker moved back five yards and sent the ball through the uprights—not quite as high, but her aim was still true. The coach kept pushing her back, way past the distance she would ever have to cover after a touchdown, but the coach must have

wanted to see where the end of her leg was. She finally missed at the thirty-yard line.

A shrill whistle echoed through the stadium, and the players in front of her leaped up. Hekeia, the long snapper from Hawaii, probably resentful that he had been called in on his day off, stomped off the turf, but the holder, Veris, a five-year, five-team veteran, turned to Parker with an outstretched hand.

“I thought the Internet had it wrong.”

“Had what wrong?” Parker lifted her hand slowly to meet his. She might be sliding into a trap.

“Your excellent percentage in college. But no, you got game.”

Parker took his hand gratefully and held it for a beat. “That was basically a publicity stunt as well. My father donated a lot of money to the school. They had to play me.”

“Then it was a win-win for everyone. You can kick.” He raised a hand in farewell. “Maybe we’ll see you around, Parker Sherbourne. I’ll happily play on the right side of history with you.”

“Thanks.” She watched his back as he trotted off the field. *I still have to make the team.* Her mind whirled. How was she going to play this? As if she were already a High Roller? As if she didn’t care? As if Marina needed her more than she wanted to kick? No, she should come at it honestly. She loved football, and she wanted this job. Actually, for the first time in her life, she needed this job—both for the paycheck and to prove her father wrong.

She spun to the group on the sidelines. Every type of reaction possible greeted her. The scowl on Hill’s face deeply creased his forehead. Marina, in her elegant suit, clapped her hands softly and nodded repeatedly. A man to whom she had

not been introduced stared at her with an open mouth. Tanya's face, however, was the most interesting. Her lips slid into an easy smile, and her eyes popped wide, pushed up and out, no doubt, by the dollar signs she saw.

Parker shuddered. Strangely with everything they had done the night before, right now was the first time their relationship felt a little dirty.

Marina separated herself from the group and bobbed her head to the left to avoid the helmet as she met Parker with a friendly hug. "Well done, young lady," she whispered as she held Parker as close as she could with all the padding. A familiar floral smell swirled around them. What were the odds? Marina wore the same expensive perfume as Parker's mother.

"Thank you, Mrs. Fisher. I—"

The words caught in Parker's throat as if all the air had been squeezed from her body.

Over Marina's shoulder, she spotted another spectator. A shapely woman, curvy but not at all soft, stood on the sidelines. Silky, brown waves framed an angelic face. Parker had grown up in the land of sculptured movie stars, but this woman's beauty was artless and fresh and spoke of cool breezes on sunny days. She dug her cleats into the field to prevent herself from floating over.

"None of this Mrs. Fisher business." Marina released Parker from the hug.

Parker forced herself to take a breath and refocus on the woman in front of her.

"Don't make me feel any older than I am. Call me Marina."

"Oh. Okay." Parker barely found her voice again. Her gaze drifted back to the sidelines.

Wait a sec. The woman was staring at her too—although not in the way Parker would have liked. She was looking at her with all sorts of questions, as if her favorite food had mysteriously gone bad. Heat crept up her neck and across her cheeks.

Marina peered into the helmet. “Oh, no need to be embarrassed, dear. I’m old. That’s a fact. I just don’t like to be reminded of it.”

“It’s not that...” Parker wrenched her gaze from the woman and fumbled with the chin strap on her helmet. “I... I...” She glanced back. Who was she? A girlfriend? A reporter?

Shit, she had to get her libido in check. She couldn’t fuck this up. She slid around Marina to literally put her back to temptation. “I... I’m the right one for this job.” Her voice gained strength since she was now looking only at Marina. “I’ve been kicking field goals since I was ten in the Pop Warner youth leagues.” She grabbed her helmet by the face mask and slid it off her head so she could give her full attention to, if luck would have it, her future employer.

Freed from the helmet, her hair tumbled down her back. She shook her head to get some air under it. She had totally forgotten how sweaty the helmets were.

* * *

“She’s female?” Carly blurted out and then clamped a hand over her mouth.

No, that was a bad assumption. Long, blonde hair meant nothing these days. It was so shiny and lovely, and the sun was hitting it just right as it spread out over his or her back. The tiniest tingle fluttered beneath Carly’s stomach.

“Oh, that’s right. I didn’t get a chance to tell you.” Allen laughed. “You thought we’d race out here for any kicker?”

Carly blew out a long breath. Of course, she could see it now: the curve at the kicker's hips. The uniform had been just baggy enough to reinforce all of Carly's prejudices about what gender the kicker had been. Her bad.

"You're not the only experiment on this team." Allen nodded at her.

As usual, Carly said nothing and let the situation play out around her. Frankly, she didn't know how to react. Sure, she felt a little stupid that she had made the assumption that the kicker was male. Especially since the flutters in her stomach had been telling her the truth from the beginning. Guys had never made her quiver like this. She pressed a palm to her chest. She still liked women.

Out on the field, the kicker couldn't keep still. She bounced on her toes and waved one arm as she talked to Marina. In anyone else, the constant movement would have been annoying, but for her, it seemed right. Motion was this woman's language, and the call came loud and clear: she was very comfortable with herself and her place in the world.

Must be nice.

"Come on," Buck said, breaking the spell. "Show's over. Back to work." He turned and lumbered down the field.

"You have to admit, boss, she was pretty good." Allen followed closely on his heels.

"For a sideshow, maybe." Buck glanced back at Carly. "I'm beginning to feel that's all there is lately. Put a big top on the stadium, and it could be *Circus, Circus.*"

Allen chuckled. "Sure going to be an interesting rest of the season."

Buck only grunted in response as he led the way into the players' tunnel.

Carly followed and forced down the desire to turn around and take another look at the kicker.

She barely remembered sanitizing the whirlpools. Muscle memory from her previous job with the Runnin' Rebels took over as she scrubbed the stainless steel with the chemicals. She tried to pay attention. She didn't want to make a stupid mistake on the first day of a new job, but the image of long, blonde hair, shimmering in the sun and tumbling down a Rollers uniform, kept popping into her mind. No matter how many times she tried to push it away, it played in her head like a Hollywood blockbuster in slow motion, complete with dramatic music.

On a bathroom break, Carly leaned against the cool tiled wall and made sure she was connected to the stadium Wi-Fi—she, Minnie Lee, and Teddy shared the lowest data plan imaginable—and typed *female + kicker + High Rollers* into Google on her phone.

What am I doing?

The blue line was only halfway across the search bar when she tapped the phone back to the home screen. Even if Buck hadn't banned any off-the-field activities, thinking about this woman was the very definition of idiotic—it was unlikely they would ever cross paths again. This had to be a stunt. There were no women in the NFL. Besides, a relationship, or even a friendship with anyone, at the moment was counterproductive to her long-term goals. There would be plenty of time for a life later, when her career and bank account were solid. She slipped the phone back into her pocket and, with the single-minded focus that had gotten her to the NFL in the first place, banished the kicker from her mind.

Long after the sun had set, she slid her key into the door of her family's apartment to find her grandmother sitting where

Carly had left her that morning—on the same stool, in the same bathrobe. Her legs were even crossed at the ankles just as before. If Carly hadn't known better, she would have guessed that Minnie Lee had only gotten up to get the out-of-date *People* magazine that she was leafing through.

In reality, Minnie Lee had had the fullest day of any of them, starting with banana pudding for two and a long shift at the diner and ending with a healthful meal and homework help for Teddy. But for a moment, Carly stood at the door, smiling at the only real mother she had ever known, and imagined a day when Minnie Lee could laze around, reading about current Hollywood celebrities and European royalty.

"Oh, sweetheart. You're home!" Minnie Lee dropped the magazine on the counter with a plop. "Tell me all about your day. Did you like it?"

"It's going to be good, I think. I hope." She walked over and kissed her grandmother on the temple. "Buck Johnson didn't give me the warmest welcome. No surprise there. But his assistant seems okay with me being around, and tomorrow the players show up and I'll get a real feel for the job."

"See, I told you."

"It's only the first day. A hundred things could still go wrong." The kicker bouncing lightly on her toes slipped into her mind. Son of a gun, she had lost her focus. Carly pushed her right back out again.

"It's just as easy to be positive about things, you know? Try it." Minnie Lee rolled stiffly out of her chair and moved to the fridge. "You hungry?"

"No. I ate at the stadium. Oh my goodness, Grandma, they've got this unbelievable cafeteria. Well, actually, it's more like an upscale buffet. A lot like that casino where we splurged

when I got the UNLV job. The place with a million choices. Remember?”

“Of course.”

“You know, we should do that again. Celebrate somewhere if I last the week.”

“You will. This cafeteria of yours. How are the desserts?” Minnie Lee wrapped her bathrobe around her. The cool desert air seeped in through the thin walls of the apartment.

“Don’t worry. Not even close to yours. Even on your worst day.”

“I beg your pardon.” Minnie Lee tipped her head at Carly. “I don’t have a worst day.”

Carly laughed and met her grandmother’s gaze. “It looks like I’m going to get all my meals for free when I’m working.”

“Really?”

Carly nodded. They were probably both thinking the same thing. The weekly food bill would be a little less. The extra money would quickly get eaten up by other expenses—they both knew that—but maybe if a few more of these freebies dropped into their laps...

Carly pushed that thought out as well. She didn’t want to jinx their future. There was a dangerous line between being relentlessly positive, as her grandmother called it, and living in a fantasy world.

“Hey?” She glanced at the empty spot in front of the TV. “Where’s Teddy?”

“In his room.” Her grandmother inclined her head to the back of the apartment. “He said he had a lot of homework, but I think it’s something else. I tried to get whatever it was out of him at dinner but got nowhere. There’s something, though. He passed on another helping of the banana pudding.”

“That’s not good.”

“I know. Too tired to take a shot?”

“Never.” Carly grabbed her backpack off the sofa, made her way to Teddy’s room, and knocked softly on the door. “Can I come in?”

“I have homework.” The muffled reply came through the closed door.

“Can you take a break? I have something for you.” Carly slid a Rollers baseball cap out of the front pocket of her backpack and opened the door.

Teddy sat at his desk with an open math book, plotting out the problems on graph paper. He glanced at her. “What’s up?”

“For you.” She held the hat out and was about to drop it playfully on his head but set it on the desk at the last moment.

He fingered the skeleton’s eyes. “Thanks.”

“It’s a special edition. Only players have silver on the brim.”

“Cool.”

One-word responses. No bad jokes. Her grandmother was right. Something was definitely wrong.

“How was school today?” Carly sat on Teddy’s single bed, smoothing down the frayed edge of the Batman comforter that he had outgrown ages ago.

“Fine.”

“And your science lab? How’d that go?”

Teddy rotated his wrist until the joint popped. Had she really gotten lucky on the first guess? He only cracked his wrist when he was nervous about something.

“Fine.” But this time he didn’t sound so fine.

Carly bit her lip. She would have to move slowly. “Did you get to finish?”

She remembered Mrs. Shantley, the honors IPS teacher, all too well—already ancient and stuck in her ways when Carly had attended Cannon Junior High. Teddy said the labs had gotten even harder. No one could finish them in one period.

“No.”

“Does she still let you come in at lunch?”

“Yeah, but...”

Carly waited.

Teddy dropped his head.

“But what?” she asked gently.

After a moment, he met her gaze. “My lab partner’s a jerk.”

Right. He probably wanted Teddy to do all the work. She had certainly been in that position. She could run with this. “What do you mean jerk?”

“He doesn’t know anything.” Anger crept into Teddy’s voice.

“Okay.” She didn’t want to scare him off. “What did he say or do that pissed you off so much?”

Teddy turned around but kept his head down. “He told me that...” He paused and opened his mouth, but no words came out.

This was more than an unfinished lab. “What did he say, sweet pea?” Carly used her grandmother’s pet name for him. Minnie Lee always voiced it with such love, and Teddy clearly needed some.

“First he said I was lazy.” The words finally tumbled out in a rush.

“Lazy? You?” Carly couldn’t hold back the surprise in her voice. No one was more industrious than Teddy. He had straight As in science thanks to an inward focus that CEOs of Fortune 500 companies would envy.

“Yeah, that’s what he said. Loud and clear for everyone to hear.” Teddy squeezed his hand into a fist. “He’s an asshole.” He glanced up, guilt flashing in his eyes. Their grandmother had a strict no-swearing policy.

Carly met his gaze and let the asshole part go. “Why? Why would he say that you’re lazy?”

“Well, no one likes working with Justin. He gets Cs on his tests, and when Mrs. Shantley paired us up, he said he didn’t want to work with me.”

“Because?”

“He said that my father was probably a stupid janitor or cook or both and that I was a dumb Mexican too, and he didn’t want to end up doing all the work.” Once he began, the words tumbled out, and his eyes flooded with tears. He bit his upper lip in an obvious attempt to fight them back.

Her stomach clenched. She longed to reach out and take Teddy in her arms. To tell him that everything was going to be okay. But she knew from her own experience that it wasn’t. For her, the name-calling had started in middle school too with the viciousness of twelve-year-old girls. It had only stopped when she started managing the high school football team and became one of the football pack.

“Did Mrs. Shantley hear him? What did she say?” She tried to keep her voice calm.

“She just told us to stop arguing and get back to work.”

“She didn’t ask what you were arguing about?”

“No. She only talks. She never listens.”

Carly nodded. She remembered how Mrs. Shantley ran her class. She never moved out from behind her desk and rarely interacted with the kids. “You’re right. Justin is a complete asshole.”

Teddy's eyes widened.

"Don't tell Grandma." Carly widened her eyes as well.

His lips curved up just a bit.

"So, what do you think about what he said?" she asked.

"Well, it's not true. I work really hard. And I get As on all my tests. I'm not lazy."

"I know. And probably everyone, including Justin, knows that too. So, I'm thinking maybe this is not about you. If he gets Cs, he's probably worried that a straight-A student won't want to partner up with him, and if he attacks you first, then maybe he won't have to feel bad about himself."

Teddy dropped the pencil and clutched his hand shut. "That doesn't make it right."

"No, it doesn't, but it says more about Justin than it does about you. Does this make any sense?"

Teddy took a deep breath and nodded.

"What about the other part?" Carly started up again. "What about him calling you a dumb Mexican?"

"That made me really mad." Teddy opened his hand. Little red marks from his nails rose angrily on his palms. "I don't even know if I am Mexican. I mean, I look a lot like Oscar, and his family's from Puerto Rico. How can I tell Justin off if I don't even know who I am?"

Carly sighed and reached out for Teddy's hand. "I don't know. Honestly, T, I haven't figured out how to deal with it myself."

"You haven't?"

"No. I wonder who my father might be all the time. I wonder where this crazy eye color comes from or this hair." She tugged on thick waves that were just shy of curls. "Neither you nor Grandma has this."

“I wish at least we had the same dad.”

“Me too.” Carly moved in and rubbed his palm with her thumb to smooth out the angry half-moons in the center.

“Do you think our mother will ever come back? She could give us answers.”

“Maybe, but I wouldn’t get your hopes up. Truly, I don’t know.” What she did know was that they were both better off if their mother didn’t return. From the little Carly remembered about their mom, she was big trouble. Teddy, on the other hand, had no memory of her whatsoever. Sitting there, Carly couldn’t decide which reality was worse.

They stared at each other in silence for a beat as their personal truths swirled around them.

Finally, Carly squeezed Teddy’s hand and released it. “So, you go in tomorrow and get the lab done whether Justin’s there or not, and if he is and starts up again, tell him that you’re already done. That he can finish the lab on his own. Just threaten to walk out. That’s what he’s really scared of. That you’ll dump him, and he won’t be able to finish it.”

“You think?”

“I do, but can you talk to Mrs. Shantley if that doesn’t work?” Carly asked, although she already knew the answer.

“Not really. She doesn’t listen to us.”

“Okay. We’ll figure out a plan B later if we need one.”

Teddy nodded, his eyes clear.

Carly smiled. And if plan B didn’t work, they’d find plan C and D and make their way down the alphabet if they had to. They were in this together. “I bet if we go out and ask Grandma nicely, there might be a little more of that banana pudding for both of us.”

“But what about my math?”

“You can finish it later.”

“Okay.” Teddy jumped up, his mood seemingly rebounding. “A person can’t turn down dessert when it comes his way, right, sis?”

“Those are words to live by if I ever heard any. Come on.”

“Hey, you know why it takes longer in baseball to run from second base to third than it does to run from first to second base?” Teddy’s brown eyes already sparkled with the answer.

Humor. That had always been Teddy’s coping mechanism.

“No. Why?” Carly played along.

“Because there is a short stop between second and third.”

“Ha.” Carly punched him gently on the shoulder. “Good one.”

Teddy smiled. His teeth, never straightened, slanted here and there and only added to his silly grin.

Carly opened the door to find two plates had already been set on the breakfast bar. Each had a dollop of banana pudding and a full serving of their grandmother’s love.

* * *

“Here you go, ladies. Drinks for two.” The waitress dropped two flower-shaped coasters onto the table. *Tulip*, the name of the Sherbourne’s most exclusive cocktail bar, ran across the center in a light purple squiggle.

“Excellent.” Tanya rose halfway out of her chair to inspect the signature cocktail before the waitress set it down. “Heavenly Tulip?”

“Yes. Made by our best mixologist.” The waitress pointed to the red Angostura Bitters shaped like a tulip floating in clouds of frothy egg white. “And for you, miss, mineral water bottled at the height of springtime.”

“Really?” Parker asked.

The waitress leaned in, her long, dark hair almost brushing Parker’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t know. My boss makes me say that.”

Parker shuddered. Which boss? At the end of that line of bosses was, of course, her father. Had he personally written that script? She wouldn’t put it past him.

The waitress slid the bubbling water across the table to Parker. “May I get you anything else?” She straightened to show off her curves in the tight uniform. Two pink tulip petals rose from her lace skirt to push up her breasts.

Was she flirting or just angling for a bigger tip? If Parker was being honest, the view was nice in either scenario.

“I’ll let you know.” Parker smiled at the waitress to keep the door open. She wasn’t sure she was really interested, but some habits died hard.

“Sure. I’m April, if you need anything else.”

Parker studied the waitress as she walked away.

“Are you going to let every cute behind distract you?” Tanya peered at her over the rim of the overpriced cocktail. “Or are you ready to get to business?”

Parker shrugged. “You got the contract?”

“I got a copy, yes.” She pulled a document from an expensive leather work bag by her side and handed it to Parker. “There are one or two addendums that I would like to include, but basically, it’s boilerplate, and if you like what you see, Marina would like to hold a conference and have you sign in front of the press.”

“I can do that.” She flipped the coaster off the table and caught it one-handed.

“Good. Right after another tryout tomorrow.” Tanya held up her hand as Parker opened her mouth to protest. “I know. I know. This one is public, for the media.”

“Seriously?” Parker’s eyebrows pulled together.

“You do know that a PAT specialist isn’t a real position, right?” Tanya’s tone turned patronizing.

“Of course. But it could be, if I play well.”

“No. It never will be. If you’re interested in playing well and often, you should head back to the Fire. Maybe win another championship as the number-one goalie. I might even be able to represent you. Gridiron’s looking to expand.”

Parker shook her head. “Been there, done that. I need something new.”

Tanya met her gaze. Her eyes narrowed, and for a second she wore the exact same expression as her father had that morning. “Marina wanted you to be especially aware of the fourth paragraph.”

Parker picked up the contract and scanned the page.

“This one? The one that says *a player will cooperate with the media and will participate upon request in reasonable activities to promote the club and the league?*”

“Yes, and note the part about publicity rights and you granting the Rollers the authority to use your likeness and name and basically every known fact about you for their own purposes.”

“Okay. I signed something like that with the Fire.”

“I’m sure you did. But there, Parker, they wanted you as a player as I’ve said. Here, with the Rollers, it’s more about what you can do for them off the field. The first woman in the NFL and all that.”

Parker sighed deeply.

“Don’t worry. You’ll get on the field sooner rather than later, if that makes you feel any better. Fisher won’t have anything to publicize if you sit on the sidelines for the rest of the season. But let’s be really clear on this. You’re not there to take the team to the Super Bowl or anything.”

Parker eyed her agent. Tanya was only ten or so years older than her own twenty-seven years, and yet she was treating her as if she were a child coming in off the playground from a game of kickball. She flipped the coaster higher and again caught it with ease. “Yes, I get it.”

“Good. Because...” Tanya jabbed the contract with a short, manicured fingernail. “I won’t let you sign unless we can immediately enter into a group license with the NFL Players Association for profit sharing on official merchandise and the okay to go out and get individual endorsement deals with whoever we want. We could really clean up in that last area. I hear Under Armour is looking for a female spokesperson. There’s just one question. Do you really think you can put the ball through the uprights in a live game?”

“I know I can.” Parker bristled at Tanya’s question.

“Well then, we might all make a pretty penny before this stunt plays out. We should celebrate.” Tanya raised her nearly empty glass for a toast and smiled hungrily at Parker.

Again, Parker shivered. Take off all their clothes, exchange the cocktail table for a bed, and this was exactly how Tanya had looked at her last night. Parker blew out a breath and raised her drink. She should be dancing in the end zone. Why then did the clinking glasses sound like tiny alarm bells?

* * *

Tanya moved the festivities around the lake to Harvest. The Sherbourne's steak house, of course, had a celebrity chef's name emblazoned above the door. When the maître d' told them that they would have to wait two hours for a table, Tanya threw Parker's last name out, and they were ushered past an elderly couple, all gussied up, and seated immediately.

"Don't do that." Parker slid into the big booth right on the edge of the huge lake in the center of the hotel's complex.

"Why not?"

"Because it's not right." She rolled her shoulders back into the soft seat. "We took this table away from that couple. What if they are celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary and they wanted something special?"

"If they've survived fifty years, they'll get through this minor disappointment too."

Every time a Sherbourne employee heard Parker's last name, they went all bootlicker on her. Nothing she could say ever made any difference. Her father's shadow loomed too large. Instead, she called over the maître d' and leaned in so no one else, especially Tanya, could hear. "Please charge that couple's meal to my family's account. And add a bottle of nice champagne to whatever they order."

"What did you do?" Tanya asked as she scanned the menu.

"Nothing. Just made sure they had a good table too."

Tanya glanced around the luxurious room of red brocade and sparkling crystal chandeliers. "Every table's a winner. This place rocks. Your dad—"

Parker held up her hand. "Yeah, I know. You don't have to say it."

But apparently, there were plenty of things that Tanya felt she did need to say. She talked nonstop over dinner, drawing up

at least a dozen different plans of attack for the next few months. Nike, Gatorade, Red Bull, even Avon were all sniffing around with endorsement deals, and according to Tanya, a simple kick through the uprights could bring in a ton of money. It was all business until, after dinner, the elevator doors slid open on the sixteenth floor. Tanya eyed Parker up and down.

“Right now, I kind of wish there wasn’t a potential contract burning a hole in my briefcase.” Tanya moved out into the hall. “Then we could play another sort of game.” She ran a hand down Parker’s chest, lingering for a heartbeat between her breasts.

The heat of lust swirled in the hallway, and despite the quiet unrest that had plagued Parker all day, she remembered the magic Tanya’s tongue had created the night before. It could again if she just stopped talking.

Tanya’s phone rang. A huge iPhone was in her hand lightning-fast. “Oh, fuck, it’s my boss.” Her words cut through the desire like a knife.

She turned her back on Parker. “Hello?... Tonight?... Yes, I’ll write it up and get it to you before your commute in the morning... No, you’re not interrupting anything.”

Tanya ended the call. “Something’s come up.” She reached up to kiss Parker fully on the mouth. “The car will pick us up at noon.”

She was leaving? One second ago, Parker hadn’t been sure Tanya’s annoying personality was worth an orgasm or two. She still wasn’t sure, but she wanted to be the one to make that call. Not Tanya.

Surprising even herself, Parker reached out for Tanya’s arm and pulled her back around. “You’re not up for a rematch?”

“I’ve got to play a different game tonight.” Tanya’s fingers were already on the phone, pulling up whatever her boss wanted. “Sleep tight.”

Parker winced. Tanya’s was the second backside she had seen in less than twelve hours.

Once Tanya had disappeared into her room, Parker reached for her own cell. “Dad cut me off,” she blurted out the minute her brother picked up.

Silence.

In the background, his teenage son pounded on a big bass drum, one of many overindulgent birthday gifts through the years.

“Oh my God, Jem. You knew?” She tapped her foot on the dark carpet of the hallway.

“Dad might have mentioned something in passing before he left for Paris.”

“And you couldn’t pick up a phone to warn me?” She jammed her key card into the door lock. It flashed red.

“He made me promise that I wouldn’t. Parker, he said you—”

“I know what he said. I was there.” She took a deep breath and slid the key into the lock—this time slowly. The lights went green, and she slipped into her room. The perfume of fresh flowers greeted her. “Can I ask a favor?”

“What?” The hesitation in his voice boomed louder than his son’s bass drum.

“You know I’m in Vegas, trying out for the Rollers. I’ll probably sign a contract with them tomorrow. But who knows how long it’ll last. I was wondering if you could lend me the family suite here while I ride it out. Seems silly to get my own place for what could be only a few weeks.”

This time the silence lasted far longer.

“You don’t have to tell Dad.” She was fully aware that she sounded as if she were a teenager sneaking out of the house and asking her goodie-two-shoes brother to cover for her.

“He’ll find out, Parker. He always does. And then it’s on me as well.”

“Yeah, but by that time this whole dog-and-pony show will be over. And if it isn’t, I’ll have time and money to find a long-term rental or an apartment or something.”

“Parker, I—”

“You’re the only one I can really count on.”

Jem’s sigh was almost loud enough to travel the three hundred miles from Malibu without a series of cell towers.

“Okay.” He drew the word out into its full two syllables. “I’ll place the call right now. Starting tomorrow?”

“Thanks, oh and Jem?”

“There’s more?”

“Not really. There’s going to be a bill from Harvest. Let me know how much it is, and I’ll Square Cash it to you.”

“You don’t want Dad to comp that too?”

“Nope. That one’s on me.”

He hung up without further comment.

Parker dropped her cell on the bedside table and studied her reflection in the mirror over the chest of drawers. A faint worry line rode across the middle of her forehead. Her brother had been her go-to guy when they had been kids. Now there were as many pauses as words in their phone calls. She ran a finger across the wrinkle, trying to smooth it back into her forehead.

That’s why she had always gravitated to sports. Her body and not her mind was in action. Tomorrow, she’d be the one

to walk away from Tanya, her father, and even Jem to kick a bunch of balls through the goalposts. She stretched out her skin between her thumb and forefinger. The wrinkle disappeared. Sports were far safer than people.

And yet the thought popped into her head like a rainbow on a rainy day.

I have to find out who that woman on the field was.

* * *

I have to stop thinking about that woman on the field.

Carly forced herself to lie still as a statue. Her grandmother snored softly across the room, and the last thing Carly wanted was to wake her up. Why she wasn't sound asleep as well was a complete mystery. She had been so tired earlier, she had almost dropped headfirst into her banana pudding, and her grandmother had convinced her to climb into her own bed rather than make up the couch in the living room.

Now her mind raced with a thousand worries. Her only chance was to unpack the day, unravel her problems until they seemed manageable. Teddy's dilemma loomed large. He had mentioned his father, or lack of one, at least three times in as many weeks. Not for the first time, Carly wished her mother had left some information about Teddy's father—or hers—before she had taken off all those years ago. It would really help Teddy if he knew a little bit more about who he was.

Her mind slipped over to Teddy's school problems. She could go talk to Mrs. Shantley. The old biddy might actually think Teddy and that little creep were arguing over who got to pour the base into the acid. But she could hardly ask for an afternoon off from work practically before she had started. She imagined standing before Buck, explaining that her brother

needed her. He would pull ten of those resumes from his drawer and throw them on the desk. Besides, it was better if Teddy learned to fight his own battles. This wouldn't be the last of them.

And then there was the Rollers. She had survived the first day pretty well—without the players. Tomorrow could be a whole new ball game.

The kicker slipped back into Carly's mind. She had popped up during the banana pudding, when she brushed her teeth, and now. Surely, she wasn't the reason sleep evaded her. Okay, the woman moved around the field like a finely tuned sports car with a deep, sensual rumble. But they hadn't even exchanged a hello.

With a little luck, she would never see the kicker again, and this problem would fade of its own accord. There would be plenty of time for thoughts like these once she proved herself to Buck and moved her family into a nice, new life. Then she could relax, find someone special, and finally broach the subject of her sexuality with her family.

Besides, it wasn't as if the kicker knew she even existed.

CHAPTER 3

“TOLD YOU THE NEW AT was fine as hell,” said a man with a deep voice as he entered the training room.

“Yeah, you said she was fine, but not a dime piece.” The second voice was even lower.

“Her eyes are gold, like a lion.”

“Man, quit playing.”

“Just look at her.”

Her back to the door, Carly froze with the first *fine*. This had to be some sort of record. Fewer than twenty-four hours on the job, and the players were already talking about her as if she wasn't even there.

The morning's team meeting had just ended, which could not have been fun for anyone. The Rollers had lost on Sunday, 28–6, to the Cougars, a team with a losing record almost as bad as theirs, and the head coach's yelling had reached the training room. But a lousy meeting was no excuse. Carly had met this kind of harassment at UNLV. It was everywhere. There, however, she had a head AT who didn't put up with any unprofessional behavior. Here, who knew?

She turned to face them and instantly recognized the stocky man whose chiseled muscles filled out a Rollers sweat-wicking T-shirt. J.J. Ocean, the future Hall of Famer who was riding

out the end of his career with the Rollers. He was chasing an eighth straight year with one thousand rushing yards and was the only one who had benefited when the Rollers' quarterback went down early in the season. Since then, the team's strategy had turned to the running game.

She approached J.J. with an outstretched hand. "Carly Bartlet. I just started yesterday."

"Nice to meet you, Carly." He took her hand, raised it to his lips, and looked at her as if she had just won the lottery.

Carly tamped down the urge to jerk her hand back. Instead, she tried to slide it out of his grasp as soon as the kiss ended. J.J. held tight before he finally let go.

She hid her hand behind her back and rubbed it against her shirt. "Nice to meet you, too," Carly said although he hadn't introduced himself. "Can I help you? Do you have an injury?"

J.J. looked her up and down, cocking his head and glancing at his friend, whom Carly didn't recognize.

"I think I pulled something. I felt a tweak during the game right about here." J.J. slowly rubbed the inside of his thigh near the pubic bone. "Didn't think much of it. But I woke up today, and it was as sore as my girlfriend on a Monday morning. I think it needs some attention."

J.J.'s companion snickered and raised his eyebrows at Carly, leaving no doubt in her mind that the treatment they were seeking had nothing to do with a football injury.

She rubbed the back of her neck to give herself a minute to think. Crap, she was in a real pickle. Ogling her across a training room was one thing, but thanks to the girlfriend comment and probably a fake groin injury, they had opened the door to a hostile work environment with her very first patient.

She couldn't let J.J. Ocean silence her, but she also had to fit into the male athletic culture where proving you could take it was key. It was a fine line, and Carly's toes were bruised from walking it for so long even in her short career. Carly took in a deep breath, shook out the hand that J.J. had kissed, and opened her mouth. "I...um...I..."

"No need to say anything. Let's just get to the treatment."

"Seriously, J.J.?" Allen ambled over from the other side of the room. "If you really have a groin pull, come here. I'll slap some ice packs on you myself and give you a rubdown on the back table. If you don't, get out of my training room and stop wasting my trainer's time."

J.J. laughed and raised both palms toward Allen. "I'm good. I'm good."

"Then take off." He glanced at the schedule posted on the whiteboard. "The O-line walk-through is starting."

"I'm cool on her. I'll be coming round." J.J. dug an elbow into his friend's ribs as they backed out of the room.

Carly stared at the empty doorway and kept her head up. She didn't want to look at Allen.

"Hey." He forced the point.

Carly closed her eyes for a few beats of her heart and then pivoted.

Allen's eyes were soft; he looked at her almost as a father would. "Sorry about those boneheads."

"It's okay." Allen had meant well; he didn't know that his interference had only made it worse. She was now fair game if J.J. came back when he wasn't there to stop him.

"Don't worry. I got your back." He clearly thought the problem was over.

“Thanks.” Carly forced a smile to her lips. It died the instant Allen swung around to a young cornerback with a grade-two ankle sprain.

Maybe, in hindsight, Allen had done her a real favor. She had been making a mess of the conversation and for sure wasn't going to call J.J. out. If Allen hadn't come over, she would probably still be standing there, stammering or, worse, rubbing J.J.'s groin. Allen, however, couldn't fight her battles for the rest of the season. And she couldn't complain to Buck—that would pretty much be ringing her own death knell. *What am I going to do?*

“Hey, Allen.” The young cornerback swiped a screen on his phone while Allen pulled out the pads to an EMS machine. “Did you know we're trying out a girl kicker?”

Carly's ears perked up. She would've welcomed any diversion to pull her away from the J.J. dilemma. She glanced at the whiteboard. There was nothing on the schedule.

“Another one?” Allen smoothed out the pads on the cornerback's ankle.

“No. The same one as yesterday. Today's tryout is public. Parker Sherbourne, right? It's all over Pro Football Weekly. Says here she plays professional soccer, played football in high school and college, and, oh, she does well with the ladies.” He swung around his phone to show them pictures of Parker with several hot women—looking into a blonde's eyes, dropping a kiss on a redhead's lips.

A whooshing sensation rolled through Carly's head, and she looked away. *She's gay?* The pictures said yes. And they also said that she was a player on and off the field.

“Holy shit, did you know she's the daughter of Keaton Sherbourne? Why is she doing this? She must have money

coming out of her ass—” He glanced at Carly. A flush crept over his cheeks. “I mean her behind... I...I mean, no one would want to be a kicker if they could do anything else.”

“Who knows why anyone does anything?” Allen flattened down a pad that hadn’t adhered to the cornerback’s skin.

“When? Does it say when she’ll be trying out?” Carly surprised herself by drifting over.

The cornerback ran a finger across his cell. “Doesn’t say. But you could find out. I mean we’re at the place where it is happening.”

Allen glanced at her, his eyebrows forming a V-shape.

“Whatever. I’m not that interested.” Jesus, she was making Buck’s point for him. She was the most unprofessional employee in the room. Carly turned back to her work and wrapped herself in all the resolutions from the night before to not think about the kicker.

But her skin tingled as if someone had just run a finger down her spine. Parker. Parker Sherbourne. The name rolled silently off her tongue.

The kicker was back.

* * *

Once again Marina, Hill, and Tanya stood on the sidelines of the Rollers’ field. Not the main one, but a smaller practice field that butted up against the stadium. A small John Deere tractor had pulled portable goalposts to the far end and was parked at an angle to pull them right out again when Parker was done.

The press snapped pictures as Parker trotted out onto the field in full pads and a Rollers practice jersey. The fake turf of this field felt like a slab of moon rock under her cleats. Like

most professionals, she preferred natural grass, but it wouldn't put her off her game. The tryout, this time staged for the press, marched along with almost soldier-like efficiency. Hidden behind mirrored sunglasses, Hill barked out orders, and Parker, like the highly trained athlete she was, hopped to.

A shrill whistle cut through the air, and the spectacle was over. Marina, all smiles, rushed out to Parker with a Rollers jersey, her name and number already emblazoned in big green letters on the back.

A thrill of excitement ran through Parker when she saw number eight, her number in high school. Wow. Marina had gone to a lot of trouble to make her feel at home.

Only as the extravaganza wound down did Parker scan the field. She scoured the crowd, looking for wavy hair and the face of an angel.

Damn, not here. She must be a girlfriend after all.

After the tryout, they hustled her straight into the press room and plunked her down at a table. She picked up the black and green pen and scrawled her name on the contract. And just like that, Parker Sherbourne became the first female player in the NFL.

Afterward, the questions from the press came at her fast and furious. "Hey, Sherbourne, are you for real?" She threw the answers back in quick volleys. "You saw me kick out there. What do you think?" A snicker in the back made her hackles rise. "Look, most NFL pros have won the genetic lottery. They're strong, agile, incredibly athletic. Kickers are different. They're not born; they're built. If they really commit, listen to their coaches, and practice hard, a lot of people could become good kickers. I've kicked since I was ten. I've perfected my form. I

may not have the length, but I've got the accuracy. And I never get rattled." The snickers stopped. "I'm absolutely for real."

"How does it feel to be the first woman playing in the NFL?" another reporter shouted.

"I can't tell you quite yet." She glanced at Hill, off to the side. He had declined to sit at the table with her, and his face read like stone behind the mirrored sunglasses he hadn't taken off. "I certainly hope to get on the field during a game. But I'll tell you this. Gender doesn't play football. Athletes do."

A third reporter flung his hand into the air. "What do you think about the Rollers' chances for the rest of the season?"

"The Rollers are so much more than their win-loss record. I can't tell you how excited I am to be part of this incredible organization. Marina Fisher is a true visionary, and I couldn't be prouder that she believes in me."

Perfect. Professional. No drama. Let her father put that in his pipe and smoke it.

When the press and the Rollers' front office filed out—Hill left without one word of encouragement or any word at all—she finally stood up. A band of tightness squeezed the back of her thigh. She had kicked more field goals in the last two days than she had in years, and her hamstring cried out in protest.

"What's the matter?" Tanya eyed her critically.

"Nothing." Boy, she was observant. Parker filed that tidbit away. "I'm just a little stiff. To be expected."

"You should see a trainer before you head back to the hotel." Her brows drew together in concern.

Not for me. It's her bottom line she's worried about. Parker put some weight on her leg. Just tight, not strained. "It's not that bad."

“Go see the trainer. We need to be seen celebrating this momentous event tonight, and you can’t be hobbling around.”

“Seriously, I’m okay.”

“Why risk it? We can’t jeopardize this before it’s even begun,” Tanya said as if it had already been decided. “I’ve called in a few photographers to Tulip at eight. Don’t worry. We’ve worked together before. They won’t be obtrusive, and you’ll get the kind of publicity that’ll do us good.”

“Do I have a choice in this?”

“No. And can you wear something a little more feminine? Like a dress or a frilly top or something?”

“I didn’t bring anything like that with me.”

“Okay. I’ll get something sent up to your room.”

“Tanya, I need to be completely myself when I’m not in front of the press or proving myself to the team.”

“I know you’re out and proud with the Fire, and believe me, no one is happier about that than I am.” That hungry smile again. “But let’s not lead with your sexuality tonight. We’re looking for personal endorsements from men and women.”

Parker pursed her lips. “The way I dress has nothing to do with my sexuality.”

“Well, it has plenty to do with commercial promotion and cash in both our pockets.”

The wake-up call came loud and clear. Since her dad had cut her off, she needed to think about these things as well. “Fine. Just send something up. But not too girly.”

“Gotcha. Call the hotel and give me access to your room. And I’ll send the car back. It’ll be waiting for you at the main exit.” She strode from the room, her phone already out, probably reeling in the next client.

Parker wandered the halls, looking for the training room around every corner. A wrong turn brought her to the players' lounge, where most of the starting defense sat in huge movie theater chairs, clutching Xbox controllers and screaming at a large flat-screen TV. Guns blazing, soldiers in WWI uniforms ran around virtual-reality France. Another turn led her into an indoor practice field that stretched out over an acre and was far more beautiful than anything at the Fire stadium.

The sign for the training room popped up all of a sudden. She paused outside the door. Did she really want to announce herself as the rookie who needed treatment after only two tryouts?

All that walking had loosened up her hamstring, and the ice in her hotel room was just as cold as the ice inside. Maybe she should get a taxi and head back to the Sherbourne.

"They don't bite." A massive, square-shouldered man had materialized in the hall beside her. "You're the new kicker, right?" His soft voice did not match his bulk, and his brown eyes were kind and fringed with long, dark lashes.

Parker introduced herself with a smile.

"Denarius Brown. Right defensive end. Come on in. I'll show you around."

Shrugging, Parker let herself be led into the room. The training room was bright and active. Two men rode stationary bikes in the center. Other players rested on custom treatment tables surrounded by state-of-the-art equipment. Rock music circled down from speakers in the ceiling and signaled a whole new monetary universe compared to women's sports.

"Allen. This is Parker Sherbourne, the new kicker."

Everyone in the room froze at the announcement. Sure, they were all professionals, as she had said at the press conference,

but no one was really happy about her being there. First, she was a woman, and second, she had taken a roster spot away from one of their own. Parker didn't know which one was worse in their eyes.

Either way, they stared at her as if she had turned up naked at a church social. A little nudity had never bothered her, so she smiled at the trainer with the baby face who was on his way over.

"You need treatment, or you just taking a tour?" he asked.

She dropped a hand to the back of her thigh. "My hamstring's a little sore." Guess she was staying after all.

"Then you're in the right place." He glanced at the open door that led to the storeroom and called out, "Carly."

Parker followed his gaze, waiting for this Carly—what kind of nickname was that for a male trainer?

* * *

Carly dropped the drink cooler Allen had sent her in to retrieve. What now? A Gatorade emergency? Maybe the ice bags weren't quite full enough?

She stuck her head out the door and found Allen standing in the middle of the room, blocking her view of the people he was chatting with.

She tried to wipe her growing frustration from her face before she spoke. "Yeah? How can I help?"

"You got a customer," he called.

Right, another player with a fake injury high up on the thigh?

He stepped to one side to reveal—

Holy moly.

Carly's heart flip-flopped. Parker Sherbourne—that was her name, right?—stood not fifteen feet away from her. This

close and in light pads, she looked like an Amazon. Energy, almost electric in origin, swirled around her. The buzz tugged at her from all the way across the room.

“Hi.” Parker raised a hand. Her gaze met Carly’s and held on, her hazel eyes smoldering with intensity.

Denarius cocked his head and glanced back and forth between them. “You two know each other?”

“No.” Parker shook her head. “Parker Sherbourne. Just dropping in for a little treatment.”

“Carly Bartlet.” The space between them crackled with a static charge. “What’s...what’s troubling you?”

“My hamstring. It’s not that bad.” Before anyone could reply, Parker quickly added, “Maybe a quick exam. You can never be too careful. Right?”

“Right.” Carly swallowed hard. “Come on. Let’s check you out.” She moved to a free table, slid the backrest down, and tapped the padded bench.

Like an Olympic gymnast, Parker hopped up and flipped over on her stomach with such agility that Carly almost went weak at the knees. There was no wasted energy or fumbling gestures. Carly, who was trained to study movement, marveled how efficient Parker’s body was...and, as she could see, so firm and tight as she twisted on the table.

Lying flat, Parker shook her right thigh. “What’s the prognosis? Am I going to make it?”

Carly filled her lungs and dropped her hand onto Parker’s leg. A blue spark jumped between them. Carly jerked her hand up.

“Whoa,” Parker said. “What was that?”

“Static electricity?” Carly glanced at her hand. There was nothing there now. “Sorry.”

Parker wriggled on the table. “No. It’s all good. I just wasn’t expecting it.”

Neither was I.

“Should we try this again?” Swallowing, Carly gingerly placed one finger on the back of Parker’s knee. Thank goodness. Nothing this time. With a long, slow stroke, she slid her right hand up the ropey muscle of the hamstring. *You’ve got to be kidding me.*

Of course, her skin was soft and warm and made for touching. She pushed all the way up to the top of the thigh. Tightness was there, but nothing to be too concerned about. An ice bath, rest, and light compression, and she should be good to go.

Just like any other client.

Carly dug in slightly with her thumb on her second pass, and a warm electric current jumped to meet her touch. For the first time in her career, she was all too aware if she drifted just a little, her hands would be all over Parker’s shapely behind. She pulled away from the table as if she had been stung, shaking out her hands as she moved back.

“You’re right.” Her voice was breathless. “Not too bad at all. Let’s get you into the ice pool.”

Rapidly putting space between them, she led the way into the hydrotherapy room, separated from the treatment room by a glass wall. The six-by-ten cold plunge sat in between two other dips: a hot whirlpool and another, larger tub with an underwater treadmill. An injured running back sidestepped in the second one. Water frothed around his waist as he gritted his teeth in obvious pain.

Carly glanced at the screen on the wall, where an underwater camera recorded his movements. “You okay, Stephon?”

“Fuck, no. This shit hurts.”

“Take shorter steps. It’ll hurt less and put you back on the field faster.”

The player made the adjustment. “Yeah. That’s better.”

The short conversation centered her. “You know the drill?” Carly turned back to Parker and pointed to the cold plunge. “To your waist for fifteen minutes.”

“Yep. Sadly, I’ve been here before.” Parker slipped off her sneakers and socks, made a neat pile on the tile, and dropped her Rollers practice shorts and jersey on top.

Carly tried to focus on the growing pile to give her some privacy. With each piece of clothing, however, her gaze darted back to Parker’s body to see the slow reveal. “You want gloves or a hat?” she asked when Parker had completed undressing.

“No, I’m good.” She gave Carly a lopsided grin.

Parker stood at the entrance to the pool in tight compression shorts that cupped her shapely behind. She reached out with one foot to test the water. Her legs were smooth, with long, lean muscles, and clearly created for stretching.

Stop! She’s a client.

Frowning, Parker gingerly dropped one foot into the pool. “Son of a mother trucker, this is cold.”

Despite herself, Carly smiled at Parker’s choice of swear words. Refreshing, since in her line of work, four-letter words were king.

“Okay. Here goes nothing.” Parker shrugged off her top and tossed it onto the nearby pile. The Nike swoosh on her black sports bra matched the compression shorts, and her state of undress revealed a flat stomach complete with a six-pack and the soft curve of each breast.

Carly barely had time to appreciate the view before Parker slipped into the pool to her waist.

“This can’t be above freezing.” Parker held her arms above her head so they didn’t touch the water and swiveled to face Carly.

“Forty-seven degrees.” Carly choked the words out. Standing in the near-freezing water, Parker’s body tightened. Especially her breasts. They rounded into perfect half spheres, and the nipples swiftly hardened underneath the bra. Carly jerked her head away, but again her gaze drifted back almost of its own accord. Parker’s body, especially with her hands still above her head, was one long, delicious line. Carly dropped a hand below her navel. Something began to twist in her stomach.

This wasn’t like her. She never ogled women. Usually, she had to get to know someone really, really well before she got physical. Two times, if anyone was counting.

“Remind me why I’m doing this?” Parker danced around in the water.

Carly forced her gaze up to Parker’s eyes. Were they sparkling? With what? The cold? Something else?

“Immersion in water this cold causes the blood vessels in your hamstring to constrict. When you get out, the blood shoots into your muscles and speeds up repair.”

“Promise?” Parker gave her a lopsided grin.

“Promise.” The huskiness in her reply surprised her, as if she were committing to more than medical treatment.

I’ve got to get out of here. She stumbled back until her hand was on the handle of the glass door. “Fifteen minutes. The clock’s over there.” She waved to a digital wall clock beneath yet another Rollers logo. “Come find me when you’re done. I’ll get you a compression sleeve for later.”

Without waiting for a response, she opened the glass door to the training room. Tom Petty's drawl dropped out of the speakers in the ceiling. He was singing about good girls and bad boys and free falls that never ended.

Yep, Tom. That's how it works. The door closed behind her with a soft whoosh and put an end to whatever possibilities were swirling in the waters of the plunge pool.

* * *

I'm losing my touch.

Parker had done everything she could think of to keep Carly in the room. She had stripped down to almost nothing; she had blurted out the cutest expletive she had heard her nephew say, and she had faced her when her body had reacted to the cold. That last one alone should have sealed the deal. Her face was pleasant enough, nothing special, especially now that she had seen Carly's, but her body had never, ever let her down.

While her gaydar was still pinging all over the place, maybe it was wrong. Maybe only she had felt that zing of excitement when Carly had walked out of the storage room and Parker had seen those gorgeous eyes. Were they gold or brown? Shit, she would take a five-yard penalty on every kick to be able to stare into their depths and figure the color out.

Beyond the glass wall, Carly moved around the training room. Allen called her over, handed her a chart, saying something that brought a shy smile to her lips and eased the tension in her face. Even a room away, Parker marveled at the transformation. How her normally serious expression softened, making her even more stunning.

I can do that. Talk to her like that. She could totally be my next diversion.

Warmth flooded her core. Fantasizing about a night with Carly was certainly one way to stay warm in water only a polar bear could enjoy.

The clock finally measured out fifteen minutes, and Parker quickly slid out. Her teeth chattered as she grabbed a couple of towels and dried off as best she could. After pulling her shorts and shirt off the pile, she headed to the nearest bathroom to change. When she returned, a black compression brace was neatly draped over her shoes. She looked for Carly in the hydrotherapy room and beyond the glass doors but couldn't find her anywhere. She must have snuck in and left the brace while Parker had been gone.

Damn. Her first real miss of the day.

* * *

“Did anything exciting happen at work today?” Minnie Lee stood behind the breakfast bar, stirring honey into a cup of mint tea. The honey, which dripped out of a plastic straw, had been *liberated*, as Minnie Lee liked to call it, from the diner. In truth, she only took things they were about to throw out, but Carly knew it made her feel daring to imply otherwise.

“No. Nothing.” Carly shook her head. Home was a safe space. She had left J.J., the kicker, and everything else outside the door when she came in.

Minnie raised her eyebrows and slid the cup of tea to Carly, who swooped it up gratefully. “Well, actually, I met some of the players.”

“Who?” Splayed out on the couch, Teddy peered at her over a paperback with a decomposing zombie on the cover.

“Denarius Brown, for one.”

“Seriously?” Teddy’s eyes widened, and he dropped his graphic novel on the coffee table.

“Yes. And I think I’ll be able to get you to a game at some point soon, and you can meet him if you’d like.”

“That would be awesome.”

Teddy, clearly, was in a better mood, so she decided to risk the question she had wanted to ask the moment she had walked in. “How’s the lab going?”

“Good. Almost done.”

“What about...?” She turned and with her back to Minnie Lee silently mouthed the word *a-hole* at him and added out loud, “Justin?”

Teddy bit his lip so he wouldn’t laugh. “I did what you said. Told him that we could do the procedures at lunch and then we could each do the math at home by ourselves. That way he wouldn’t have to do my work.”

“And he said?” Minnie asked, pouring herself a cup of tea.

Carly handed her the half-used honey stick from the counter.

“Grandma, you should have seen his face. He was so mad his eyes kind of bulged out. He told me that I should give him the math so he could check my work. I told him I was good and walked away. Sweet Luck totally came through. It just took a while.”

“Oh, Teddy. I’m really proud of you.” Carly smiled at her little brother. If only she could handle J.J. half as well.

“You know.” Teddy got up from the couch. “I think I’ll finish so I can turn it in during class tomorrow, and he won’t be able to get his hands on it.”

“He might just learn his lesson. And if he does,” Carly hurriedly added, “and he apologizes or isn’t rude to you anymore, you have to be gracious.”

“I do?”

“Theodore.” Minnie Lee shook her head. “Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

Teddy trudged the rest of the way to his room. He rarely had the upper hand in anything, and Carly knew in his mind they were asking him to give away what little power he had. “Hey, what was the lab about anyway?” she asked.

“Static electricity and conductivity. Did you know that when two materials or objects have different charges, electricity can build between them?” Excitement took hold, and he didn’t wait for an answer. “And when you place them next to each other, electrons that would normally repel each other can jump from one to the other to create a more perfect current. It’s like an electron dance.”

“Really? I don’t remember that lab.”

“Well, it’s pretty cool. It’s not just rubbing a balloon and watching your hair stand up. It’s all about movement and attraction. It can even happen with people.”

Carly almost choked on her tea.

Her brother gave one final nod and disappeared into his room.

“What’s that all about?” Minnie Lee eyed her carefully.

“What?”

“That look on your face.”

Carly shrugged. “There’s no look on my face.”

“You’ll tell me when you’re ready.” Minnie Lee wrapped her fingers around her mug. “Well, I’m glad that lab problem resolved itself as well as it did.”

“Me too, but the other thing I didn’t tell you about last night was that Teddy was asking about our mother and his father.”

Minnie Lee sighed. “That’s not the first time.”

“I know. It’s come up more than once lately. What are we going to tell him?”

“The truth. Teddy’s a bright boy. He’ll be able to spot an evasion a mile away.”

“Yeah, but can you imagine what it’ll do to him if we tell him our mother just dropped him off on your doorstep, with barely a word, when he was three days old? Just a ‘here you go’ and ‘his name is Theodore’?”

Minnie Lee reached out to take Carly’s hand in hers. “Maybe we can soften the blow with a cup of cocoa and tell him that she couldn’t even take care of herself, and she loved him enough to make sure that he was in a good place.”

“That’s a better spin on it.” Carly bit the inside of her cheek. “Grandma, why do you think she never came back?”

Minnie Lee looked down at her tea for a long time before she finally answered. “Because she doesn’t know where we are.”

Carly’s forehead furrowed. “Of course, she does. You left a forwarding address at our last apartment.” She stared at her grandmother across the bar when she didn’t respond. “I saw you do it.”

Minnie Lee shook her head. “It was a fake address.”

Carly wasn’t sure that she had heard her right. “You gave them a fake address?”

Her grandmother nodded.

Carly’s mouth dropped open. She had willfully separated her and Teddy from their mother? It made no sense. A great

pressure descended on her as if she were sinking to the bottom of the ocean.

“Breathe, sweetheart. Breathe.”

Carly took a raspy breath. “Why?” Her voice was shaky. “Why would you do that?”

“Well...” Minnie Lee released Carly’s hand and let out a deep breath herself. “Harsh truth? I was being selfish.” She pursed her lips and nodded several times before she continued. “I was sixty when your mother showed up with Teddy. I had already turned my life upside down for you. Don’t get me wrong. I love you and Teddy more than I ever thought possible. You make my life complete, and I wouldn’t change anything, not one thing, but...” Her voice dropped to barely a whisper. “I just didn’t have it in me to raise a third grandchild.”

The silence spread out between them, almost pushing them apart.

Finally, Minnie Lee looked up and met Carly’s gaze. Her blue eyes, so like those of Carly’s mother, swirled with pain and regret...and something else that Carly couldn’t pinpoint.

Resilience.

Don’t judge me, they said.

How could she not? Her mother might have come back if she had known where to find them. Sometimes, all people had to do was get a lucky break or grow up a little bit to realize that past decisions were wrong. Her grandmother had robbed her mother and Teddy—and her—of a second chance. A lump formed in Carly’s throat. She couldn’t even look at Minnie Lee.

Instead, she glanced around the tiny, broken apartment—the cracked sink, the ratty couch from Goodwill, the cabinets that looked as if they were made out of plywood. It was a dump. The three of them were just making ends meet in this place.

Her grandmother was still working at an age when most had been retired for years. And she was doing that for Teddy and her, not for herself. And she had been doing it with a positive mindset that had continued to shine no matter what life threw at her.

Minnie Lee rarely talked about her life in Alabama before she had come to Las Vegas to rescue Carly when her mother had abandoned her at six. But when she did, Carly gathered her days had been full of friends and laughter. Las Vegas had only been filled with hardship—two kids and no money.

The truth hit Carly hard. Her grandmother had sacrificed everything for them. She had always known that in the abstract, of course, but she had accepted it with a naiveté and the selfishness of a child. There was a limit. And Minnie Lee had to protect herself.

She bobbed back to the top of the ocean.

“I get it.” Carly finally turned her gaze to her grandmother.

“You do?” Minnie Lee’s shoulders dropped half a foot, and she sagged against the breakfast bar.

“Yeah, I do.” Carly slipped around the counter to embrace her. “My mother made mistakes and expected you to clean them up. She had no intention of helping at all. She never came back between leaving me and bringing Teddy, did she?”

Minnie Lee shook her head.

“She clearly knew where we lived. Good heavens, I probably would have run too.”

They clung to each other, saying nothing, although the fact that she would never see her mother again banged up against her skull and a dull ache spread through her body. Finally, Minnie Lee pushed Carly away and rocked back and forth on her heels, giving her the once-over.

“Now, what’re you going to wear to that party thing, on Friday?” Minnie Lee tried to infuse a brightness she clearly didn’t feel into a new topic.

“I don’t know.” Carly rubbed her hands over her face, suddenly exhausted. The Rollers’ party-slash-command appearance tomorrow was yet another stress on her plate. Any more and she might break into hives. “Oh, I liberated some of the peach cobbler from the cafeteria today. Taste it, and you’ll see it’s got nothing on yours.”

“Ha. I knew it.” Minnie Lee grinned and then swiveled to get a fork while Carly pulled out of her backpack the neatly wrapped cobbler that her new friend in the cafeteria had given her.

* * *

Parker glared at the two identical blouses draped over the sofa in the Sherbourne family suite—two tops, different sizes, same huge flowers. Flowers? Seriously? She would be a walking advertisement for her father’s hotel if she showed up to Tanya’s photo op in this blouse. Coincidence or was Tanya just that good? Parker flipped the absurdly expensive price tag over. Yep, *Springtime*. Her father’s high-end clothing store downstairs. Of course, Tanya knew that Parker was worth a lot more to Gridiron Sports with her father’s businesses behind her.

Parker stood in the center room of the two-bedroom family suite near the top of the main tower. The hotel reserved the very top for the real high rollers and big spenders. Nonetheless, no expense had been spared. The huge living room, full of plush furniture, and a small game room opened up to a wrap-around balcony complete with a Jacuzzi, a fire pit, and an outdoor wet bar. The view, though, was the main attraction. Las Vegas in

all its neon glory spread out in both directions, and when it got too much, a swipe on the hotel's smartphone sent curtains down over the floor-to-ceiling windows. On either side of the great room, two master bedroom suites flowed off the living room—each with four hundred square feet, huge flat-screen TVs, and walk-in closets. Even the ensuite spa bathrooms had views of the Strip from the soaker tubs.

The panorama and the luxury were lost on Parker. She knew the suite like the back of her hand. She and Jem had spent a lot of time here when they had been kids. They used to call their trips here *camping* since they had to share a room. Her father had used the hotel as a hub for some of his biggest deals—he said Las Vegas put people in a spending mood—and he had brought Jem and Parker along to give their mother a break.

“A break from what?” she had asked Jem once when their father had left them alone for a meeting. Even then, she had seen a trip to the hotel as more punishment than fun.

“I don't know,” he answered.

“From us, you think?”

“No.” Jem sounded unsure, though. “Maybe from too much yoga or meditation.”

“You need breaks from those things?” she had asked. Even at a young age, she knew something was up. “I think those are the breaks.”

“Guess not.” Jem had shrugged, and a pained look had slipped across her face.

Her phone quacked and brought her back. Her nephew had changed her email notification setting the last time she visited their Malibu estate, and she had never bothered to change it back.

Tanya's text read, *Where are you? LATE.*

B right there, Parker typed. She tossed the phone to the couch and grabbed the larger of the tops. Oh my God. It had frilly sleeves. She was definitely going to have to send for her own clothes now that it looked as if she would be here for a while.

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ROMANCING THE KICKER

BY CATHERINE LANE

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