

BE MINE

Jackson Boys, Book 2



JEN FREDERICK



Chapter One

LAINY



At the age of twenty, I'd made enough mistakes for a lifetime. One of those mistakes is currently losing his head fifteen feet away from me.

"You've got to be kidding me! I'm already saddled with some third-round rookie this year. I don't have time for this shit." Chip Peters' voice bleeds through the closed den door. Despite his gobs of money earned from his NFL contract, he'd only sprung for a duplex for his mom, and a cheap one at that. I'm two rooms away and can hear their entire conversation through the thin walls. I try to shut out their voices and re-apply myself to my task at hand. The tile floor in this bathroom isn't going to clean itself.

"It's not going to take but two jerks of a cow's tail," his mom responds. "There's got to be something up at that big stadium that Lainey can do. Mr. Marvola said she was a very hard worker. My floors have never been cleaner."

Chip makes a disgusted sound. "Even the janitors at the Mustang stadium have at least a high school degree. That Valdez chick dropped out at seventeen."

That Valdez chick. It's a good thing that I stopped caring what Chip Peters thought of me years ago or my body would be burning with shame. Instead, it's anger and self-directed disgust at ever thinking that he was a decent person. I blow out a frustrated breath and scrub harder, pretending that the hard ceramic beneath my knees is really Chip's face. It's a decent motivator.

"Well, that's because she got pregnant. Besides, I think she has her GED. I'm sure if you said something, the team would hire her on. You're the quarterback, for goodness sake."

"Mom, you've got to stop doing charity for people who are a waste of your time. Valdez is probably going to snort up any money she makes anyway. Why do you even care? You're rich now. You don't have to pretend to care about your trashy neighbors."

We are not trashy, Chip. I slap the rag into the bucket and wring it out. *We're poor. There's a difference between trashy and poor. Like Chip's actual garbage and he's worth millions.*

"Now, Chip, the Valdezes helped me out when I was young and raising you by myself. It's only right that I help them now if I can. Guadalupe Valdez has a touch of dementia and really needs full-time care from her daughter. Having Lainey and the baby around is causing a lot of problems for that family—" Mrs. Peters' voice lowers enough that I can't make out what she says, but I can make a good guess because Mrs. Peters is the first person that my momma goes to when she has a complaint about me.

Granted, in my twenty years, I've given Momma a lot of ammunition. It's a miracle she still lets me in the front door of the house, so when she criticizes me, which is about every time she opens her mouth, I grin and bear it. It's not like I have a real defense. I got knocked up at age seventeen, refused to name the baby daddy, and dropped out of high school to support myself and my kid.

Since I don't have any education and zero experience, manual labor is all I can do, and in this small town the only work I've been able to scrounge up is cleaning houses, but it's not enough to keep Cassidy in

formula and diapers. Daycare is almost as scarce as work. I need to move to a bigger city.

When Chip got traded from Seattle to Dallas, Momma couldn't stop talking about how it'd be a real good thing if I got a job in the city.

Just for once, do as you're told, Momma said. Her voice was so tired. I don't have time to worry about you and that kid of yours.

Mrs. Peters seized on this and the two cooked up a plan to get Chip to help out. I knew he wouldn't help. If he saw me lying in in the middle of the road, he'd accelerate and then back up and drive over my bones again.

He hates me. He hates Cassidy. He wishes I would just disappear. Hauling me to Dallas with him is about the last thing on this green earth that he wants to do.

"Maybe the little shit should have thought of that before she got knocked up," Chip says.

"Maybe you should've kept your dick to yourself," I mutter under my breath. I dump the dirty water down the toilet and grab my cleaning supplies. He's lucky I don't spill the whole story to his mother, but he knows my lips are sealed tight. I don't want anyone to know that story. Just thinking about it myself makes me sick.

"What's done is done," Mrs. Peters says with a sigh. Her nasally voice is easy to hear as I creep down the hall toward the back door. "The cow is out. The barn door is open. Mrs. Valdez can't handle that baby and her mom all by herself. Besides, Lainey's twenty now. She needs to learn to be independent. And, maybe in Dallas, she can find a man who will take both of them on. Lainey's a pretty girl."

"Jesus, Mom, no man is that desperate."

"Chip..." she chastises.

There's a beat of silence and my feet get stuck to the ground, waiting for Chip's reply. If he's capable of loving anyone, it's his mother. My stomach swirls in anxiety. It's not that I don't want to move to Dallas.

That actually sounds awesome. There is more opportunity there. More daycare options. More jobs. Better opportunities for Cass. But I don't want anything to do with Chip. Just being in the same house as him is making my skin crawl.

"Fine. I'll find her a job in Dallas, but that's all I'm going to do. I'm not her fucking guardian. If she fucks up the job I find her, she's on her own."

A door slams, startling me into gear. I scurry down the stairs, but the footsteps behind me grow louder. I suck in my breath and move faster, praying that the person behind me is Mrs. Peters.

But it's not to be. When I reach the back door, a large hand comes out to slam against the frame. I jump and then curse myself for showing any response to Chip.

"I'm leaving at eleven on Friday. If you're not here at that time, I'll leave without you."

I can't find my voice. I can barely bring myself to look at him, so, with my head lowered, I nod.

Not facing him is a mistake because Chip likes to see me terrified. He reaches out, grabs my jaw and forces me to look at him. His face is twisted into a cruel mask. "You're so fucking lucky my mom has a soft heart. If it were up to me—"

"You'd let me rot," I interrupt. With a jerk of my head, I wrench out of his grip. "Don't worry. Once we get to Dallas, you won't have to see me again."

"I guess we'll see about that, won't we?" The smile that spreads across his face sends a spike of terror down my spine.

THREE DAYS LATER, I FIND MYSELF IN SOME RUNDOWN INDUSTRIAL park on the west side of the city. Chip's face is red, Cassidy's wailing in

the back seat, and I'm about to be eaten alive with the anxiety of it all. It's only a two-hour drive to Dallas, but every minute felt like an hour.

Cassidy's teething and she fussed the whole trip. Chip yelled at her to shut the fuck up, which made Cass cry only harder. The more she cried, the louder he shouted. My headache's bigger than this state.

"Where are we?" I ask, reaching around to unbuckle Cass from her car seat. She lurches toward the door and bangs her tiny hands against the window, wanting out desperately.

"I got a meeting. Stay here,," Chip snaps and hops out of the car.

"What do you mean, you have a meeting? You can't leave us in the car. It's a hundred and two degrees." I scramble after him, pulling Cassidy into my arms. She squirms, wanting to run around after the to Dallas, but this rundown bar and its cracked, asphalt parking lot doesn't look safe for her.

"Momma, let go," Cassidy whines. "Down. Down!"

"Just a minute." I juggle her again. "Look, Chip, I appreciate your help, but—"

"Down! Down!" Cass yells.

Chip throws her a glare hot enough to turn us both to ash. "I've listened to your fucking brat cry for three hours. I have a meeting inside and you're not invited."

"It was only two hours," I argue. "And it's one o'clock. Cass is tired."

"Do I look like someone who cares?" He turns on his heel and walks into the building. I turn around to get back into the truck, but I find it's locked. My throat aches from swallowing all the things I want to yell at his stupid head. It's July, for God's sake, and there's no shade here. Cass is going to get heat stroke.

"Momma, me hurt," cries Cass as she pushes her little hands against my arm.

“Sorry.” I loosen my grip and set her on her feet. “Come on, baby, we have to go inside for a minute. Can you promise to be quiet?”

“Hungry! Hungry!” she yells.

My anxiety climbs into my throat and threatens to choke me. I dig into my purse and pull out a plastic baggie filled with apple sauce. I can’t afford the snack pack varieties. “Here, baby.” I cut off the corner and hand her the bag. “Eat it slow, okay?”

She nods, but I know it’s going to be gone in a nanosecond. I grab her hand again, but she moves at the same time. The plastic baggie pops and applesauce squirts into the air, splashing Cass in the face and me on my blue T-shirt. Cass immediately starts wailing. I drop to my knees and scramble to get a wash cloth out of my purse, only in my haste I knock the damn thing over. Diapers, formula, teething rings and clothes scatter onto the dusty parking lot.

Cassidy spies her favorite stuffed animal and lunges for him. I try to stop her, but my foot slips on some pebbles. I fall. She falls. More wails fill the air.

I feel myself losing the thin thread of self-control. What was I thinking, coming to Dallas by myself? Did I really believe I could raise Cass on my own? But what choice do I have? Momma couldn’t have been happier to see me leave. She was practically pushing me out the door this morning. But here I am in this huge city with no job, a short-term rental, and the only person I know would prefer to step on my neck than help me to my feet.. I can’t do this. Defeat swamps me. Two feet away, Cassidy cries even harder.

The sound of her unhappiness ratchets up my own distress. My stomach twists into five kinds of knots and there’s a lump in my throat the size of a boulder. If I open my mouth, I worry I’m going to start crying and never stop.

Buck up, sister. You asked for this, I remind myself. Chip would’ve paid for the abortion, but you refused. Pick yourself up off the ground, comfort your beautiful child and keep moving forward.

I take three deep breaths, swipe a hand across my eyes, and begin gathering my scattered things. As I'm picking up the wipes and the formula, a few pebbles skitter next to my knee. Shade appears out of nowhere and when I look up to see whether a sudden storm's coming, I see a large figure bend down to my level.

"Here," a deep voice says. In his hand, Cass's diapers are dwarfed. Long fingers curl around the white cotton. The skin around the knuckles are slightly abraded, as if he struck them against something. These are a *man's* hands—big, strong and capable. For a moment, because I'm tired and feeling weak, I imagine those hands around my waist. I imagine those hands sliding up under my T-shirt and finding my breasts. My nipples tighten and my boobs grow heavy. Somewhere down south of my waistband, muscles twitch to life that I thought had died from disuse and disinterest.

After Chip, I swore off men. I haven't had so much as a glass of water with a man since I learned I was pregnant, so maybe that's the reason that I nearly fall over at the sight of the male crouched down beside me. He's so beautiful—dark hair, blue eyes, and shoulders broad enough that they look like they could carry the whole world and not ever get tired. Maybe it's his looks or maybe it's his silent act of kindness in picking up all the shit I spilled that is responsible for my sudden lack of breath.

"Can I?" He points to Cass with one of the faded washrags I've tucked in my purse.

I nod like a dumb kid meeting her idol for the first time, not even caring that the washrags are literal rags—threadbare and dotted with holes. He doesn't seem to notice or care about the condition of the cloths either. He plucks one from my purse and pats it across Cass's wet cheeks. She, like me, has been stunned into silence.

"There you go." He taps her awkwardly on the head, as if he's never been around a baby before.

A gummy smile breaks across my baby's face. "Dada." She waves her hands in the air.

The single word breaks my spell, and I surge to my feet, sweeping her up in my arms. My whole body turns red with embarrassment, but I force myself to turn toward my good Samaritan. “Thanks for your help.”

“No problem,” he grins, seemingly unbothered by my child calling him Daddy. “She’s a doll. Is your mom inside?” He tips his head toward the front door of the bar.

At first, I don’t know what he’s saying but then I realize he thinks Cass is my sister. After enduring nearly three years of judgmental stares, you’d think I’d be all out of cares to give, but, nope. My cheeks burn with more embarrassment. “No, she’s mine.”

“Oh, ah, okay,” he stammers in surprise. “You...work here? I mean, I haven’t seen you before.” He shakes his head. “That sounds like I live at this bar, which I don’t.” He clears his throat and then sticks out his hand. “Nick Jackson.”

Cass leans over and throws out her arms. “Dada.”

Is there a color more red than red? Because that’s what shade I am now.

“Cass, you know he’s not,” I say more sharp than I mean too.

Her lower lip quivers again.

“It’s okay,” Nick winks.

I feel that cheeky gesture all the way down to my toes and it draws a smile from both me and my kid.

“What the hell is going on out here?” booms Chip’s voice.

I close my eyes in mortification. If the universe could allow me to start this day over, that would be great.

“Oh, hey, Chip. I was just coming in. Has the coach arrived?”

“No. Who are these two?”

I open my mouth but snap it shut at Chip’s glare. I didn’t graduate

from high school, but I can put a simple puzzle together. My ex doesn't want me to acknowledge him in front of this Nick Jackson person who, from the size and shape of him, must be a fellow pro player. Of course, I'm attracted to Nick.

"I don't know. I just found them here. We haven't completed the introductions." He smiles again and a dimple forms.

My world shifts on its axis. I could pour water in those dimples and swim a backstroke—they're that deep. I clutch Cass tighter to my chest, as if reminding myself what happened the last time I let my ovaries get the better of me.

"Don't bother. Come on inside," Chip orders.

A light furrow appears on Nick's forehead, as if Chip's behavior puzzles him. The asshole doesn't act like this around his team, I guess.

"I'm going to stick around out here for a minute," Nick says.

"Your funeral, Rook," Chip says. "But don't forget the talk you were given last week about camp pussy. It's diseased and dangerous."

Nick winces while I fantasize about stuffing Chip's mouth with one of Cass's dirty diapers.

"He's not talking about you," Nick assures me.

"I bet," I reply with a tight smile. "Thanks for your help, but I—"

As if sensing I'm about to take her away from her new best friend, Cass pushes herself out of my arms.

"Cass!" I cry in surprise, but she doesn't fall. Instead, those capable hands sweep up and catch her easily. Cass squeals in happiness—a sound so pure that I can't keep my smile from breaking across my face.

"She's adorable," he says, and for a moment, I don't know if he's talking about me or Cass. It's got to be Cass. "You from Dallas?" he asks.

"No. I just got here. Today." I know I'm coming off like a dunderhead, but I can't seem to form complete sentences.

“Me, too. Well, not today, but a few days ago. Training camp started up, but you probably already know that.”

“Nick, we need to go inside,” Chip says impatiently.

“I can’t leave these two out here alone. Are you waiting for someone?” He holds Cass up as if he is trying to figure out who she looks like.

Chip gives me another death glare. I pretend not to see him and instead focus on the door of the building. As I stare at the entrance, I see a familiar sign, and a thought occurs to me. Before I can evaluate whether it’s a good move, my mouth starts moving. “No. I’m looking for a job. I saw a help wanted sign.” I point to the small black-lettered poster taped on the side of the building next to the door.

“Sweet. Stacks needs new staff. Why don’t you let me take care of your little girl while you fill out an application? Hey, sweetheart, what’s your name?”

“She’s too young to answer,” says Chip.

We all look at him in surprise.

Nick recovers first. “Oh right. I don’t have any kids. Do you, Chip?”

“Yeah, do you, Chip?” I parrot recklessly.

His eyes spark fire in my direction. “No. I don’t have any and I don’t want any. Neither do you, Rookie. Kids sap all your energy. The only way you’ll be any good is if you keep your eye on the ball.”

Rookie...this must be the player Chip was complaining about earlier. The one he said he’d have to babysit. This man looks capable of carrying a whole stadium by himself. Cass agrees. She coos and pokes her fingers into Nick’s dimples.

He laughs again, easy and free, unaware of Chip’s mounting temper. I should be more cautious, but instead, I seize the moment. “It’s Cassidy, and if you don’t mind, I will go in and apply.”

“Sure. Cass and I will play out here. Do you like to play football, Cass?” He lifts her high. Another happy squeal sounds out.

I hurry inside with Chip hot on my tail.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he hisses behind me.

“Applying for a job.” My voice is surprisingly even.

“You need to leave. Now.”

“I need a job.” I wrench open the door.

“Not here.”

Cloaked with false bravery and the belief that Chip’s not going to do anything while others watch, I enter the bar, semi-blind as my eyes adjust to the dimly lit interior. When I can finally see clearly, I gain instant understanding. Half the bar is full of NFL players. I recognize them. Anyone who lives in Texas would. This must be a Mustang bar.

Suddenly, I know that this is the only job I’ll be safe at. Chip wants to pretend like we don’t know each other. Like Cass isn’t his kid, and he’ll be afraid to do anything to me in front of people he knows. In another workplace, another bar, he’d be free to harass me or get me fired. But not here.

With that knowledge, I march up to the counter. “I’m here for the waitressing job.”

The bartender blinks. “What’s your qualifications?”

“I’ll work whatever hours you want and do whatever you tell me.”

He presses his lips together, nods a few times, and shrugs. “Sure. We can try it out.” He reaches behind him and tosses me an apron. “Start now.”

“Now?” I squeak.

Over my shoulder, I hear Chip laugh. He thinks I’m screwed.

“There a problem?” the bartender asks. “You said you’d work the hours I told you to work.”

“Give her a day, man,” says a burly man at the counter.

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“Leroy, you were just complaining about how the service here is so slow that the rookies will be veterans by the time you get your food.”

The big man shrugs. “Another day isn’t gonna kill me. Go on and come back tomorrow, girl.”

I look toward the bartender, who sighs. “Fine. Come back tomorrow.”

I nearly collapse with relief. “Yes. I will. No problem. What time?”

“We open at eleven.”

“I’ll be here.”

“By ten.”

“By ten,” I confirm. Then I turn and sprint for the door before he can change his mind. At the exit, Chip catches up to me.

“You breathe one word about how you think Cassidy is my kid and I’ll ruin you,” he whispers.

He might be serious. I plaster on a fake smile for the benefit of the curious eyes staring at us.

“Don’t worry. The last thing I want to do is to be associated with you.” I pull open the door and run toward my child. This is dangerous, but I feel like it’s the best solution for me. It’s not as if I have a ton of choices. I have to earn money. I have to protect my baby. This seems the right way forward, at least for now.

“Did you get the job?” Nick asks. He’s sitting on the asphalt, drawing on the surface with a piece of chalk. There are little x’s and o’s. “Like I said, I don’t have kids, so I didn’t know what to do. I was teaching her plays,” he says, slightly embarrassed.

My toes curl at his charm. “She appears to like it.”

He reaches out and ruffles Cassidy’s dark curls. “So she does.”

“I did get the job. Thank you for watching her. Can I pay you something?”

“Nah, just make sure when you pour my beer, I don’t have much foam. That stuff gives me a headache.”

“No foam.” I’d scrape every last white speck off with a toothpick if I had to.

With a lazy grace, he jumps to his feet. “I hope to see you again, Cass.”

“Bye ’ick!” She waves both hands.

He waves both of his large, long-fingered hands back at her. Before he leaves, he sticks his palm in my direction. “I never did catch your name.”

“Lainey. Lainey Valdez,” I croak out. His hand is warm, calloused, and so inviting. I want to lay my head against his big chest and feel that hand on the back of my head—along with other places.

“Nice to meet you, Lainey Valdez.” He tips an imaginary hat in my direction. “I’ll see you around.”

He lets me go. In my imagination, his release is slow. His fingers drag along mine and my long-dead girl parts stir. What would it be like to have this man touch me? What would it feel like to have my hand clasped in his? What would it feel like to be able to lean on him when I’m tired, rest against his broad shoulders when I’m feeling down? My breath quickens. My hand trembles. I sway...

“Mommy?”

Cass’s voice jerks me out of my half-baked fantasy.

“Yup, baby. Let’s go.” Earth to Lainey. You’ve got a truckload of things to do starting with finding a place to sleep tonight. I reach down and pick my girl up and slide her onto my hip. I give Nick a brief, curt nod. “Thanks for all your help. I’ll be going now.”

Without waiting for another response, I force myself to turn away.

“Like ’ick. Like ’ick,” Cass sings to herself.

Me too. I wonder what’s more dangerous—liking Nick or being so close

to Chip. As I walk down the sidewalk, away from the bar, the heat of Chip's stare burns through my back. I danced close to the flame once and burned myself all the way through. It doesn't matter how handsome that Nick Jackson is or how charming he is. My life has no room for a man.

"Cass, baby, it's you and me. Okay?"

"No 'ick?" she pouts.

"No Nick."

I brace myself for an outburst, but nothing comes. My baby is worn out.

"Okay," she says and tucks her face into the crook of my neck. "Love you, Mommy."

"I love you, too, baby girl. I love you so much."

I hug her close and keep walking. It's going to be okay, just the two of us.

Chapter Two

LAINY



It's a miracle, but the tiny efficiency that I had scouted out in the two days before I left home was only two buses away from Stacks. I get my key from the manager, along with a list of all the things I can't do in the apartment including keep a pet, smoke, or light a fire. The place is tiny and there are bars on the window, but it's clean and comes furnished with a sofa, side table, lamp and a bed. There are two wooden stools tucked under a small kitchen island.

Cassidy barely lifts her head from my shoulder as I maneuver inside the apartment. I carry her into the room and lay her on the bed. On the floor next to her, I dump out my bag. Along with the diapers, formula, bibs, and plastic baggies full of apple sauce and cereal, a shower of dust and pebbles fall out. The image of Nick Jackson crouching next to me, his longer, capable fingers plucking Cassidy's little picture books and teething toys off the ground and slowly wiping them clean, flits through my head.

The tenderness with which he acted, the care he took, the kindness makes my throat tight. Someday, I'm going to find someone like that—someone who will love and treasure Cass and me. It's not going to be today. It's not going to be a pro football player who has bags of money

and lots of women knocking down his door, but someday, that can be mine.

There's nothing wrong with me having that dream, but for now, I have to face reality. I'm a twenty-year-old mom with only five hundred dollars to my name. The rent for the apartment is paid for only the first month, and the cost of Cassidy's daycare is twice what the rent is. I'm going to have to earn a crap ton of tips at Stacks or find another job.

A wave of exhaustion sweeps over me. I set my bag on the floor and crawl into bed next to Cassidy. Her cheeks are flushed and her little baby lips are pursed into a tiny cupid's bow. I drop a kiss against them and snuggle up. I don't really need a man. I'm okay as long as I have Cass.

I should've taken more money from my savings account, but Momma felt she deserved it for letting me stay in the house for the last two years. It didn't seem right to argue with her. I doubt I would've survived my teen pregnancy if I hadn't had a roof over my head. I'm not mad at Momma for kicking me out. I'm just scared is all. I'm here in the big city and I don't know anyone but Chip and, for Cass's safety and mine, it's better that we act like we don't know anyone.

I heave a sad sigh. I need to get the rest of our stuff out of Chip's car. The idea is depressing. No doubt, he'll make me do something humiliating, particularly after what happened today at the bar. Maybe I was wrong about getting a job where I'd have to see him on a regular basis. In the heat of the moment, it seemed like the right thing to do. I'm not so certain anymore. Still, it's a job and I can work it until another one comes along.

I want to sleep for a month, but I need our stuff. I roll upright and grab my phone.

Can we meet? You have my stuff.

There's no immediate answer and no indication he's even read the message. I wouldn't put it past him to block me. Fine. I'll take this

opportunity to sleep. I need it. Cass will wake up in a couple of hours and I'll need my energy.

It's nearly dinner time when I feel Cass stir. I hold my hand to her forehead. It's cool. I exhale in relief and push myself off the bed. A quick glance at the phone reveals no messages. None from Momma wondering if I made it okay and none from Chip. In my suitcase is a whole package of diapers. That's what I really want. Those things are expensive. It'll be so nice when Cass is potty trained and I can redirect the money from diapers into other things.

I lay out the cereal and apple sauce I had in my bag. She can snack on the cereal as we go to the grocery store. I wake her up, use one of the two extra diapers I had in my bag, and then wash her face.

"We're going to get some food," I tell her. "You hungry?"

She bobs her sweet little head eagerly, nearly tipping herself over. God, I love the peanut so much. It doesn't matter than Momma kicked me out or that I had to suffer Chip's presence. I feel good about this move to Dallas. Like I told Cass before, it's just her and me now.

I hand her the baggie full of cereal. "Snack on this for now and we'll get you some good stuff. What're you hungry for?"

"Apple sauce."

"You're going to turn into an apple yourself if you keep eating that. Do you want peas or carrots?"

Cass makes a face. "Apple sauce."

"This is why you don't get any veto power until you're twenty, girl." I tweak her nose and pick her up. I settle her against my hip and drop the bag over my shoulder. "Hang on, baby girl. We're going for a walk."

There's a small grocery mart about eight blocks away from the apartment. I pick up milk and eggs, some frozen veggies, which are more expensive than I can afford, bread, bananas and peanut butter. For myself, I throw some mac and cheese and ramen in my cart. The small

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basket of food comes out to forty dollars. It's too much, but what am I going to do? Not feed Cass?

"You sad, Mommy?" Cass pokes my cheek.

I fake a smile and hand over the cash. "Nope."

"Can I have cheese sandich?"

The cheese was three dollars and would've made five sandwiches. The peanut butter will last me a week. "I thought we agreed you liked peanut butter the best?" I tell her as the clerk bags our food.

"No. I like cheese now."

"Can we have cheese next week and peanut butter this week?"

Cass pushes her lower lip out and scrunches her brow as she thinks hard about this choice.

The clerk gives me a sympathetic smile before handing me the single bag of groceries. I should be happy that the food isn't heavy because it'd be hard to carry more with Cass, but my insides twist tight as I think of how many nights Cass' belly won't be completely full until I can earn more.

"Okay," Cass agrees.

I'd forgotten what we were talking about. "Okay what, baby?"

"Okay. I'll eat peanut butter." Her little hands come up and push a piece of cereal against my lips. "You eat this. Your tummy's growling."

I hadn't realized. I eat the cereal obediently. "Thank you for watching out for me."

"It's you and me, Mommy," Cass coos before she feeds me another piece.

I hug her tight. Isn't that the truth.

I DROP CASS OFF AT THE DAYCARE AND TRY NOT TO CRY AT THE check I write out for the week. I'll need to earn twice that in tips to keep the roof over our heads. Since the waitressing job at Stacks is all I've got, I'm going to make it work regardless of what Chip says.

I'm wearing the same clothes I had on yesterday because the asshole hasn't texted me back. I'm able to get most of the apple sauce stain out, but the shirt isn't fully dry. I pluck it away from my breasts and wish that my boobs weren't quite so big.

When I arrive at Stacks, the place isn't even open. After pounding on the front door a few futile minutes, I inspect the rest of the building. There's a back door, but that's locked, too. Over by the dumpster is a scraggly tree providing about two feet of shade. I hoof it over to the gravel, ignore the smell of rotten food and the buzz of the flies and pull out my phone.

A quick internet search pulls up Stacks. I hit dial, but the phone rings and rings. Since there's nothing I can do but wait, I decide to search for jobs. There are plenty out there, but they are all low paying. Minimum wage isn't enough for me to support Cass on. I could work two jobs, but that would mean I'd barely be able to see my baby. Plus, is there childcare out there at night that doesn't cost two arms and a leg?

I don't find anything that fits, but I fill out a bunch of applications anyway. By the time I've worked my way through five of them, a dark blue pickup peels into the lot. I stand up, brush the dirt off my jean-clad ass, and go to greet the driver, who turns out to be the bartender who hired me yesterday.

"Who're you?" The older man squints.

I thrust out my hand. "Elaina Valdez. You hired me yesterday."

He ignores my hand and scratches his chin as he stares at my chest. "You sure you got the right place? This is a bar and not a strip club."

The urge to cover my chest with my arm is hard to ignore. "I'm at the right place. You said to show up at ten, and here I am, ready for work."

He shrugs a little, takes another long look at my boobs, and then drags his ass to the back door. “You’d make a lot more money shaking your tits down the street at the Beach House. I hear those girls make a couple grand a night.”

“No thanks.” I could go a whole lifetime without some random seeing my naked chest again.

“Your funeral. I guess you’re here to mount a Mustang, eh?” He chuckles at his own crude joke.

“I just want to make a living. I have a kid.”

My new boss swings around. “You? A kid? You’re barely a kid yourself!”

Then why’d you suggest I go down the street and take off my clothes for money, asshole. “I’m older than I look.” Chip told me I looked like I was a twenty-five-year-old hooker. That was after I informed him that I was pregnant. Before, when he was plying me with booze at the age of sixteen, he said I looked sweet and young—like someone who needed protection from the big bad world.

The boss raises his eyebrows. “If you say so. I’m Simon Cronett. I own this dump. I’ll pay you the minimum. You can keep your tips.” His eyes fall to my chest again. “You’ll get some nice ones if you show off your titties a little more. No sex with the boys on the grounds. I don’t want to get busted for some kind of prostitution shit.”

“I’m here to wait tables. Nothing else.”

Cronett doesn’t look like he’s convinced. “We’ll see. Also, I don’t give a fuck that you’ve got a kid. While you’re here, you’re one hundred percent mine. Not get your ass inside and start cleaning up. The boys will be here in a few hours.” He slaps me hard on my ass. I jump in surprise. When I give him a death glare, he only smirks. “What you gonna do? Quit?”

Yeah, I do want to quit. Not even a half hour in this guy’s presence and I feel like I’m going to have to take a shower for a week to get the dirt off. But I can’t quit and he knows it.

Chapter Three

NICK



The end of practice can't arrive soon enough. I want to get over to Stacks to see if the girl is there. I spent all last night thinking about her and cursing myself for not getting her phone number, but the owner of the bar is a friend of the team. If she's applying for a job there, he should have it. As soon as the last whistle blows, I hustle to the showers. It's a quick rinse and dry and then off to my locker to change.

"Got somewhere to go, Rook?" Chip calls from his locker three stalls down as I'm pulling on my pants.

"He's got that sweet honey at home. I'd be in a hurry to leave if I were him, too," someone else jokes.

"Nah, Charlotte's my friend."

"I got friends like those. Those are the best kind." Chip waggles his eyebrows like a kid who just got into his first frat and not a five-year vet who's pushing thirty.

I don't bother to explain any further. No one believed me in college and it looks like none of the pros are buying that line either. They'll figure it out once I start seeing someone else.

Around the locker room, the conversation regarding the game, the new prospects, our first game, flows around me. I'm not thinking about football. My thoughts are stuck on the hot brunette with the unending curves kneeling on the pavement at the dump one lot over. I haven't ever hooked up with a mom before. I guess that makes me a rookie in more ways than one.

Reaching into my locker, I tug my shirt over my head, sling my pack across my body and grab my phone. Charlie picks up on the second ring.

"Want to go to a bar with me?"

"It's five o'clock."

"Right. Perfect bar time. They serve food there and everything."

"I hate bar food."

"Charlie."

"Is this about a woman?" she guesses.

"Not exactly." But I can't lie to her.

She groans. "You just got here."

"I know, but there's this girl. No, woman." Neither sound right. She's a mother but there's a sweet innocence about her that made me think she was young—younger than me, at least.

"I don't even want to know. Go by yourself."

"She's...skittish." There was a wariness in her eyes. She'll be more comfortable around Charlie. Besides, Charlie's new to town and could use a friend.

"Then leave her alone."

"I can't."

"Really?" I hear a rustle. "I've never heard you say that about a woman." I've piqued her interest. "Give me five minutes. Where is it?"

I give her the address. "It's a dump," I warn. "And, the food's probably bad. It smelled rank there yesterday."

"I love how you're giving me the real details after I've agreed to come."

I shrug even though she can't see it. "You'd find out the truth soon enough. Besides, it's easier for all of us this way. You'd want me to recite every single detail when I got home."

"This is true," she agrees. "Hang up so I can get ready. I want to look good for your girl."

"She's not my girl."

"Yet."

"True."

We both know that there's not a girl alive that can say no to me.

"MAYBE WE SHOULD LEAVE," CHARLIE WHISPERS IN MY EAR.

I didn't have to press the owner for the new waitress's phone number. She was rushing around when Charlie and I arrived. An hour and a half later, she's barely taken a moment to breathe between filling pitchers, delivering food, wiping down tables while the only other waitress in the place is flirting with a table of players. Someone across the room shouts for a refill. I shoot a glare at the lazy waitress, but she's too busy shaking her tatas in front of a couple of my teammates.

I push back my chair to go and grab the unhelpful staff, but Charlotte drags me down.

"Don't," she whispers.

"Why not?"

"Because you'll embarrass her."

"I'm trying to help her out."

“Would you want Lainey to come into your workplace and yell at your teammates?”

That image makes me wince. Reluctantly, I drop back into my seat. “What can we do?”

“For Lainey? I think we just need to come here a lot. We’ll order lots of stuff and leave big tips. Not obscene ones that will make her feel bad, but like twenty-five or thirty percent. Encourage your teammates to do the same.”

I nod slowly. “That’s a good plan. Occasionally, I can throw in a big tip.”

“Like after a game?” Charlie drums her fingers on the table while she plots. “That makes sense,” she concludes. “We can chalk it up to superstitions.”

“I don’t have superstitions.”

“You do now.”

“And then I’ll ask her out.”

“No.”

I shoot a frown at Charlie. “Why not?”

“Let’s review what you told me about her. You met her yesterday when she showed up at Stacks with her child. Her bag was full of kid stuff and her washrags had holes in them. You played with her child while she went in to fill out an application. After that, you watched her walk to the bus stop.”

“Yeah? So what about it?” I take another sip of my beer and surreptitiously watch Lainey as she rushes to pour yet another beer. A bell from the kitchen rings. My girl hops to and grabs the food, which she delivers while it’s still hot. She does all of this with a smile on her face. I hope to hell she’s getting tipped well. I wonder if it’d be obvious if I went around and laid a twenty on every table.

“Are you ready to be someone’s dad?”

I nearly spit out my beer at Charlie's words. "What in the hell did you just ask?"

Charlie purses her lips together. "Exactly. This is a mom. She's not a groupie. She's not a social media hookup. She's not an easy lay. She's obviously working this job to support her kid. Don't go after her unless you want to be in a serious relationship."

I wait for Charlie to laugh and say she's kidding, but she sits there with her arms folded across her chest and a serious expression on her face. My smile dies off as her words settle in.

"I'm a rookie, Charlie. The only serious relationship I'm going to be in this year is with my team."

"I know that. I'm here to make sure that you don't have any distractions, right? And Lainey and her child are a big distraction, if you treat them right. And if you don't treat them right, then you're not any better than the waitress over in the corner who isn't doing her share of the work. It isn't fair."

My dick says fuck fairness. "Have you thought that maybe she needs to have something in her life that isn't serious? I can show her a good time. Give her some nice gifts. Take her kid out. She probably doesn't want a commitment. It's a new age, Charlie. Women can have sex just for the sake of sex."

"Then go after those women, Nick. Lainey isn't that type of girl. At least, not right now she isn't."

"How do you know? You haven't even met her."

"She's tired, Nick. Look at her face. I mean, really look at her. Not just her beautiful body or her gorgeous features, but look at the exhaustion that's in her eyes. She wants to go home. She doesn't want to have to deal with a rich playboy whose only concern is whether he'll get his hands on a small leather ball."

Using my beer as cover, I do as Charlie orders and examine Lainey's face. The bright smile on her lips is strained at the corners. Faint lines

crease her forehead. Her shoulders hang low as if the entire continent is resting on them. I think back to yesterday and the tears that clung to her eyes as we put the scattered belongings back into her bag.

It was her vulnerability that called to me, but it's that same delicateness that means I need to stay away. Charlie's words sting, but only because she's right. I'm not ready for a serious relationship. I need to focus on my career. That takes one hundred percent of my attention. Being a family man? It doesn't fit into the picture I've in my mind.

With a deep exhale, I get to my feet and toss a large bill on the table. Charlie is about to object, but I put a hand over hers. "Let me at least do this."

Because I can't do anything more.