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ANA HUANG

PIATKUS

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CHAPTER 1

NOAH



WARNING SIGN #1: MY BEDROOM LIGHT WAS ON.

Warning sign #2: I didn't hear Evie's voice.

Warning sign #3: The smell of roses perfuming the hall as I approached my room, my jaw tight.

After a full day of training, all I wanted was to take a hot shower, catch up with Evie, and pass out. Unfortunately, that was no longer an option.

A small part of me hoped I was wrong, but when I pushed open the door, I was greeted by my worst nightmare—the sight of a gorgeous woman in my bed.

For fuck's sake. *Not again*.

At least she was sitting on the edge of the bed rather than sprawled across the mattress. But still, seeing her there—seeing *anyone* other than my family in my private space—made my muscles bunch with renewed tension.

Hazel immediately straightened, her face lighting up. "You're home! How was training?"

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I ignored her question and swept my gaze across the room. No flowers, but there was a rose-scented candle burning on the nightstand. No music or lingerie either, thank God. Hazel was fully dressed in jeans and a sweater, but that didn't excuse her presence.

"Where's Evie?" I finally met her eyes. They were wide and guileless, and filled with a tiny spark of hope that made my head hurt.

"In her room, doing her homework. I—"

"Then why are you in *my* room?"

Hazel's smile wavered. "You've had a long week, and you've been so stressed about the World Cup coming up. I thought you..." She trailed off when I continued to stare at her, my expression stony. "I thought you'd like some company. Someone to talk to. You never have people over, and—"

"You thought wrong. Our contract states you are never to enter my bedroom except in cases of extreme emergency, and this is not an emergency. It is, however, highly inappropriate."

Hazel flushed red all over. Her smile was completely gone now, and she looked close to tears.

I felt a stab of guilt before I pushed it aside. Yes, I was being a giant asshole, but past experience had taught me that anything short of dickish behavior wouldn't cut it. People got so caught up in their dreams of dating a professional athlete that they overlooked all sorts of signs.

Sometimes, I wondered if life would've been better if I'd stayed in Michigan and taken over my father's hardware store. It would've paid a fraction of what the Premier League did, but at least I wouldn't have to worry about finding a proper nanny for my daughter—one who was actually interested in taking care of *her* instead of me.

"I'm sorry," Hazel said. "I really didn't think...Evie said it'd be okay if I came in here."

My headache intensified. *Dammit, Evie.*

I'd deal with her sneakiness later. Right now, I had more important tasks at hand, like getting Hazel out of the house as soon as possible.

"I appreciate all you've done for Evie over the past few weeks, but this is where our contract ends. I'll call the agency first thing Monday morning."

Hazel's jaw dropped. She shot up from the bed, her cheeks turning an even deeper shade of crimson. "You're *firing* me? Over one tiny infraction?"

"It's not a tiny infraction, and the fact you think it is proves why this isn't a good fit." I reached for my wallet and pulled out two fifty-pound notes. "Consider this your severance pay. Please make sure to collect all your belongings before you leave. You will no longer be able to access this property once you walk past the gate."

After a stunned beat, she snapped her mouth shut and stormed toward the door. "Everyone at the agency was right. You are *such* a dick! No wonder you can't keep a nanny. There's no one on earth who can live up to your stupid"—she snatched the money out of my hand—"unreasonable"—she yanked the door open—"expectations!"

Her footsteps clattered down the stairs. A minute later, the front door slammed, and the house was quiet once more.

I checked the security camera app on my phone to make sure she was truly gone before I sank onto the bed and rubbed a hand over my face. The adrenaline rush from confronting her dissipated, leaving me hollow and exhausted.

It was mid-March, and Hazel had been my *third* nanny since the new year. The staffing agency had been accommodating at first, but even money had its limits. They'd warned me that she was the last candidate they could send before they'd no longer be able to help me, and I'd already tried my luck with every other reputable agency in town.

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Basically, I was fucked.

It shouldn't be this hard to find a reliable caretaker for an eleven-year-old girl in London. But Evie's long-time nanny Tabitha retired two years ago, and it'd been a revolving door of disasters ever since. The replacement candidates either couldn't connect with Evie, only wanted the job for its proximity to fame (aka me), or—worst of all—overstepped my boundaries by trying to turn a professional arrangement into something personal.

The ironic part was, none of the women wanted *me*. They wanted Noah Wilson, the top goalkeeper for the Blackcastle Football Club. They wanted the athlete who'd made waves as the only American in the Premier League when he moved to the UK a decade ago, and who would take center stage for the US at this year's World Cup. My single dad status and commitment to staying out of the press only increased my desirability in their eyes.

But if they knew Noah the man, and not Noah the footballer, they'd hate me. I loathed being famous. I didn't like the press, and I rarely went out. I was too cautious to have fun when I did, and I was too closed off to connect with anyone I didn't already know.

Underneath the accomplishments and headlines, I was a huge fucking mess, but no one had ever gotten close enough to figure that out. It was both a blessing and a curse.

My bedroom door creaked open again. I lifted my head just in time to see a small face peek around the wooden frame.

"Daddy? Is everything okay?" Evie asked. She was still dressed in her school clothes, and her eyes scanned the room with open curiosity.

I forced my shoulders to relax. "Everything's fine, sweetheart. I'm sorry for disturbing you." I patted the seat next to me. She immediately barreled into the room and climbed onto the bed, her weight a reassuring presence by my side.

I smiled despite my earlier frustration. Evie had reached the age where she was starting to hang out with her friends more than her family, so I didn't take our nightly catch-up sessions for granted.

"Are you done with your homework?" I asked.

"Almost. I only have a worksheet left for maths." Although Evie was technically American, she'd grown up in the UK and spoke like a Brit, hence the "maths" instead of "math." She bit her lip. "I heard you and Hazel arguing. Is she coming back?"

"No, she's not." I leveled her with a stern stare. "But you already knew that when you told her she could come into my room."

Evie shifted. "I didn't say that *exactly*..."

"But you implied it."

She looked down, her cheeks pink with guilt.

I softened. It was hard to be mad at her when I was the reason she had to deal with countless nannies in the first place. "In the future, if you don't like your nanny, you can just tell me," I said. "You don't need to engineer other reasons for me to fire them."

"I didn't dislike her. She was okay. But she was constantly talking about you on the phone with her friends, and I disliked *that*." Evie picked at the hem of her skirt. "Besides, you already fired Julie and Maddy because I didn't like them. I didn't want to be the problem again."

A lump formed in my throat. She may be eleven, but she was more mature and observant than people twice her age. It often felt like she was parenting me instead of the other way around.

"You are *never* the problem," I said. "It doesn't matter how many candidates we have to see. If you're not comfortable with them, let me know. We'll find the right person eventually."

"Will that be before or after I go off to uni?" She squealed when I ruffled her hair in mock retaliation. "Dad! Stop! My hair!"

I laughed, but she had a point—about the timeline, not the hair.

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She was turning twelve this year. Soon, she wouldn't need a nanny anymore.

I tried not to think about it, or about the milestones I'd already missed because I'd been busy building my career.

"Tell me about your day," I said, switching subjects. "What'd you learn in school?"

For the next twenty minutes, Evie caught me up on her day and all the relevant gossip. It was her best friend Briana's birthday next month. Her family was organizing a trip to Brighton to celebrate, and Evie had been begging me to let her go.

"Alright, it's getting late, and you still have to finish your homework," I said once she finished. "We'll discuss Brighton later."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

I kept my smile intact until Evie left the room. She didn't know we were out of staffing agency options for a nanny, which meant I had to take drastic measures.

I didn't want to do it, but I had no choice.

I pulled out my phone and went to the one place I usually tried to avoid at all costs: the Blackcastle group chat.

I need your help

CHAPTER 2

CARINA



"I KNOW, I KNOW! I'M LATE!" I YELLED AS I RUSHED through the kitchen. "Don't tell Lloyd!"

I didn't wait for anyone to respond before I burst through the swinging doors and into the dining room. "Dining room" was too elevated a term for the sticky floors and cracked leather stools and booths lining Lloyd's Pub (named after the owner—very original), but it was technically correct. And I was, technically—

"Five minutes late *again*."

Speak of the devil.

I closed my eyes briefly before I took a deep breath, pasted on a bright smile, and spun around to face the owner in question. "Yes, I'm sorry. But—"

"What did I tell you about being on time? We're running a business here." Lloyd shook his head. His mustache quivered with disapproval. "This is your second offense in the past month. I'm starting to think you don't want to work here."

Well, working for you isn't anyone's idea of a dream job, I almost

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said, but I kept my mouth shut. Although I had a steady daytime gig as an executive assistant at the Royal Academy of Ballet, I needed the extra cash from waitressing. I'd cycled through many side gigs over the years, and I was tired of constantly being on the job hunt. Lloyd sucked, but the money was decent, and the pub was within walking distance of my flat.

I could tough it out for two more months. That was how long I'd need before I had enough money for a trip to Antarctica. Then, I could quit and never think about Lloyd or his walrus mustache again.

"Of course I want to work here," I lied. *Keep smiling*. "But there was a plumbing issue at my flat, and—"

"I'm not interested in excuses. Just make sure you're not late again, or don't bother coming back."

I bit my tongue and nodded.

Two more months. You only have to deal with him for two more months.

He wouldn't have been sympathetic to my story anyway. After I left the ballet academy, I'd dropped by my flat to change and had been confronted with a spontaneously exploding toilet. (Seriously. The building had constant plumbing problems). Luckily, one of my roommates had come home mid-disaster, and I'd passed the problem over to her before running here.

Yeah, Lloyd definitely wouldn't have cared. I could've been in the hospital, and he'd have berated me for not using an ambulance to clear the roads to work.

Thankfully, he moved on to micromanaging the bartenders, and I was quickly swept up in the dinner rush. Lloyd's was especially popular with football fans, a large group of whom were yelling at the current match on the telly.

I went on autopilot as I wove in and out of the tables, taking

orders and trying not to spill anything due to the fans' enthusiasm. There were lots of gesticulating arms and sudden movements.

Bits and pieces of their conversations made their way into my ears.

"I reckon England could take the whole thing this year," a man in a Blackcastle shirt said, referring to the World Cup. "Donovan's in his prime, and we have the strongest team in decades."

"We'll see. France…"

"…only have Dubois and Guillory…"

"That's if Guillory can play…got injured…"

"The US only has Wilson, and goalkeepers rarely get on the scoresheet…"

I stumbled and nearly spilled a beer on the last speaker. I apologized profusely to the irate customer, but my mind had latched on to something he said and refused to let go.

Wilson. As in Noah Wilson.

A memory flashed through my brain, quick as lightning but hot enough to make my skin warm.

Dark room. Rough hands. Rougher voice.

A moment that remained etched in my mind over a year later.

"You look pretty when you blush." An unwelcome drawl drew my attention to a nearby customer. He grinned, the smile more lecherous than friendly. "Whatcha thinking about, doll?"

I brushed the memory aside and slid back into work mode with a practiced smile. "Your drink," I said. He wasn't the first or last leering customer I'd have to deal with. "What can I get for you?"

He looked disappointed that I hadn't taken his bait, but he and his friends placed their orders without further comment.

However, right as I turned to walk away, I felt a hand grab my ass.

I froze. My skin flushed hot again, this time for an entirely different reason.

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The other female servers had warned me this might happen when I started this job. Handsy customers were sadly expected when you mixed men, alcohol, and sports, and my co-workers had advised me not to escalate. *Just roll with it*, they'd said. *It's safer that way.*

That was what I'd *planned* to do. I was already on thin ice, and I couldn't lose this job. Not when I was so close to my goal.

But then the guy who'd leered at me earlier laughed and said, "I think she wants me to grab her ass again."

One of his friends made a lewd comment. The whole table burst into laughter, and something inside me snapped.

I spun around. "Don't fucking touch me."

The table went quiet.

Surprise crossed the guy's face before he rolled his eyes and scoffed. "It's a compliment, honey. Lighten up."

"It is not a compliment. It's sexual harassment." It was my voice coming out of my mouth, but it was like someone else had taken over my body. I didn't do stuff like this. I hated confrontation, and my parents had raised me to avoid making a scene in public at all costs. But it'd been a long day, and between the plumbing disaster, Lloyd's lack of empathy, and these assholes, I was done. "Apologize."

The guy glanced at his friends, who looked away or pretended to be fascinated by their drinks. They weren't laughing anymore, but they weren't holding their friend accountable either.

He faced me again, a smirk on his lips. "Apologize…or what?"

One of his friends had a full pint of beer. Heavy glass, easy reach.

My heart beat faster.

Don't do it. You only have two months left.

But that stupid, smug smile tipped me over the edge.

So I did it.

And that was my last night working at Lloyd's Pub.

"I can't believe he *fired* you!" Brooklyn trembled with visible indignation. "That has to be a violation of employment law or something. We need to call a lawyer. We need—"

"It's fine. Really." I took a sip of my piña colada and grimaced. *This is what I get for ordering a tropical cocktail at a pub.* "It's not worth the hassle for a shitty job. I'll just find another gig. I've done it before."

As expected, Lloyd had not taken kindly to me dumping beer over a customer's head and kneeing them in the balls. The guy had originally wanted to press charges, but enough people had witnessed him grabbing my ass first. He'd backed down, but Lloyd had fired me on the spot *and* docked my wages for the night.

I could fight him for the money, but it wasn't worth the legal fees. I was mostly glad to be done.

"On a brighter note, here's to standing up for yourself and kicking assholes in the balls." Scarlett raised her glass. "I'm proud of you. I only wish we could've been there to see his face."

I laughed as Brooklyn and I clinked our glasses against hers. "It was pretty great. 10/10, worth it."

It was Saturday, the night after my firing, and my friends and I were gathered at the Angry Boar to commiserate as well as to celebrate Blackcastle's win over its opponent earlier that afternoon.

Brooklyn was dating Vincent DuBois, the team captain, and her father was none other than Blackcastle's legendary coach, Frank Armstrong. Vincent was Scarlett's brother, and she *also* happened to be engaged to Asher Donovan, the team's star striker and one of the most famous footballers on the planet.

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So even though I wasn't a huge football fan, I always showed up to Blackcastle events. For me, it was a bonding thing, not a sports thing.

"Do you have any side gigs in mind?" Scarlett asked.

"Not really." Tutoring, pet sitting, barista-ing (was that a word?)—I'd done it all. Some gigs were more enjoyable than others, but no matter what it was, something always happened that left me out of a job. Once, the family I was pet sitting for became late-in-life hippies and packed up their house to join a commune.

Seriously.

"Maybe I can look for another barista job," I mused. "The latte art was fun, and—"

"No!" Scarlett and Brooklyn shouted at the same time.

I startled.

"I mean, uh, there are better options out there," Scarlett said. "Don't worry. We'll figure something out."

I gave her a grateful smile.

Scarlett and I had been friends for years. She'd been an up-and-coming prima ballerina until a car accident derailed her professional dance career. She was now a teacher at the Royal Ballet Academy, which was where we'd met and bonded over our mutual love for puzzles and trashy reality shows.

Brooklyn was originally from California, but she'd moved to London a few years ago to intern with Blackcastle's nutrition team. She and Scarlett met outside a nightclub, before either of them knew the other's connection to the team. Scarlett saved her from an attempted mugging, they became friends, *we* became friends, and the rest was history.

They'd been my rock throughout this entire journey. I couldn't hold down a second job to save my life, but at least I had a great support system.

"What's with the long faces?" Vincent asked, walking over with

fresh drinks in hand. He slid into the seat next to Brooklyn while I stood so Asher could squeeze in between me and Scarlett. "What'd we miss? I thought we were supposed to be celebrating! We beat fucking Chelsea!"

"We are, but..." Brooklyn filled the guys in on my short, sad saga.

"Oh, shit." Asher gave me a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry, Carina. That's awful."

"It's okay. These things happen."

It wasn't really okay, but complaining about it wouldn't help. I allowed myself twenty-four hours to wallow in self-pity over any given situation. After that, I needed to get my ass into gear and move on.

"Do you *need* a second job?" Vincent asked. "You're close to your goal, right? Can your salary from RAB take care of the rest?"

I shook my head. "Most of that goes toward rent, food, and transportation. If I relied on just one salary, I'd have to wait at least another year before I hit my goal. And that's *if* I stop going out and subsist solely on instant ramen for the next twelve months."

Of all the childhood dreams to have, I'd chosen the most absurdly expensive one: visiting Antarctica so I could see its penguins in person. I'd been obsessed with Antarctic penguins since I watched a documentary about them as a kid.

Unfortunately, living in London was equally expensive, which was why I'd had to supplement my income with a second job. RAB paid for my life; my side gigs paid for my dream.

A thoughtful expression crossed Asher's face. "I have an idea. But you have to be open-minded."

Okay. Intriguing.

Before I could ask what it was, Vincent looked past me with a giant grin. "Oh, shit," he said. "Are my eyes deceiving me? Has the great keeper himself deigned to grace us with his presence?"

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"Funny." The deep, rumbly voice behind me rolled over my skin and down my spine. "Don't make me regret coming out."

The voice was now next to me.

My arms pebbled with goose bumps as a shadow fell over the table. Broad shoulders, chiseled lines.

Unmistakable even in shadow form.

I took another sip of my terrible piña colada while my friends greeted him. Soon, I was the only person left who hadn't acknowledged his presence, so I finally steeled myself, set my drink aside, and looked up, straight into the implacable green eyes of Noah Wilson.

CHAPTER 3

NOAH



THIS WAS A MISTAKE.

I'd known it would be the moment I left the house and made the impulsive decision to meet up with the rest of the team at the Angry Boar.

It was Saturday night, and Evie was at a sleepover party at Briana's house. I was still keyed up after saving five goals during today's match—the other team's attack had been relentless—and I'd thought having company would do me some good. Plus, the guys had promised to help me find a proper nanny when I texted them a few days ago. Maybe they had updates or new solutions for me.

But I should've known *she* would be here. She always was.

"Hi." Carina gave me a tentative smile.

I couldn't have smiled back if I'd wanted to; my whole body had locked up. I responded with a short nod instead.

Since I couldn't leave now without raising suspicions, I took a reluctant seat next to her. It was the only open spot at the table, which was fine, but the six of us were squeezed so tightly into the booth that it was impossible to move without my leg touching hers.