

Chapter One

The tension permeating the air felt a lot like being pressed into the turf by a three-hundred-pound lineman. *Heavy*. It was a sensation Milwaukee Growlers' quarterback Trey Van Horn didn't care for on--*or off*--the gridiron.

To avoid the combative stares of the other two occupants of the room, he shifted his gaze down to his hands. His money makers, so to speak. The body part most fans considered Trey's greatest asset.

Sure, there were a slew of women out there who might be inclined to make a case that another part of his anatomy was equally talented. Just not the woman currently trashing him in *Vanity Fair*. The asshole trolls on social media who were piling on didn't help matters. Hence this little trip to the principal's office.

"Do you realize your pithy comments have potentially alienated half the fans of this team?" the Growlers' owner remarked.

Trey tried not to cringe at her disappointed tone. Mrs. Ciaciura inherited the team from her late father, Norm Clarkson, a decade ago. Since then, she'd risen to become one of the most respected owners in the league. She was gracious and fair-minded when it mattered, and a bulldog

when the situation warranted one. Trey considered her to be not only his boss, but a friend.

For the past eight years, he'd used his brain, his feet, and his money makers to lead the team to the playoffs every season. She, in turn, treated him like the son she and her husband never had. Up until now, apparently.

"Now, hold on just a second," Collin Slater, Trey's agent, chimed in. *Make that "acting" agent.*

Trey's long-time business representative, Marty Slater, recently suffered a mild heart attack. One that had his wife forcing him to take a sabbatical or face a divorce. Likely calculating how much the single life would cost him, Marty succumbed to her demands, leaving his clients in the hands of his overly ambitious son, Collin.

Trey and Collin were once teammates on their prep school football team. Collin believed that made them each other's emergency contact. It didn't. But since Trey's contract with the Growlers was set for the next three years, he didn't see any harm in letting Marty's son handle what little needed to be managed while his agent recovered.

Although, he could have navigated this unexpected performance review just fine without a wingman.

"That's not fair of you to accuse my client," Collin whined. "Trey didn't—"

Mrs. C raised her voice to drown him out. Trey would have laughed, but he could feel her angry gaze boring into him, and she didn't seem to be in a joking mood.

"Women make up nearly fifty percent of the league's fan base. I don't care how high your passing rating is. When you say something stupid like 'marriage is a trap,' you risk offending them. Most women—most *people*, for that matter—don't consider marriage to be 'an exercise in torture,' Trey."

"No one can prove he actually said that," Collin argued. "It's her word against his."

The weight of the older woman's gaze had Trey reluctantly looking up to meet her troubled grey eyes. They both knew he had said exactly what was printed in the magazine. The problem was, she still thought he didn't mean it.

"Have you ever been in love, Trey?"

Collin just about lost his shit at her question.

"What the hell? If a man asked a woman that, he'd be publicly eviscerated." Collin shot to his feet. All five-foot-eight of him. "This is getting out of hand. What we have here is a simple case of a jilted lover spouting off some nonsense so she can remain in the social media spotlight. That's all." He rocked forward on his heels, seemingly trying to

appear more forceful. "As we speak, we are putting together a slander case against her. The Growlers don't have to get their hands dirty. Let us do our job, and this ridiculous story will be in the rearview mirror by week's end." He moved toward the door of the owner's suite. "I'm sure you've got more important things to do today. We'll leave you to it."

Mrs. C arched an eyebrow at Trey.

He sighed heavily. "I'll meet you outside, Collin."

His pseudo-agent didn't like that one bit. "Unless it involves football, I think we should consider the matter settled."

Out of the corner of his eye, Trey could see the team owner digging her painted fingernails into the arms of her chair. "Please wait for me outside, Collin," he repeated.

If Collin didn't appreciate being dismissed before, he was downright livid about it now, judging from the flush that was crawling up his neck. But Trey held all the cards in their relationship. And Collin knew it. With an abrupt nod to Mrs. Ciaciura, he yanked open the door.

"I'll be right outside if you need me."

It was on the tip of Trey's tongue to say he wouldn't need him. Except he still wasn't out of the frying pan with his boss. Hopefully, things wouldn't get so testy that he'd actually have to call Collin in for backup.

When the door closed a bit more firmly than was necessary, Mrs. C made a sound that was half laugh, half sigh.

“Well, that was fun.” She rose from her chair and went to refill her coffee cup.

Trey groaned as he shifted in his seat. “Is that what you’d call it?”

She laughed. “He’s an entitled brat with short man’s issues. He needs to be taken down a peg. As I’m sure you’re aware, Marty also represents Alek Bergeron, the goalie for the Mayhem. They’re locked in some intense contract arbitration right now. I was just toying with Collin. I want him to go into tomorrow’s negotiations all riled up. My little brother has it much too easy, only having to deal with the contracts of twenty or so hockey players.”

He should have known. Norm Clarkson’s assets, including a brewery and three professional sports teams, had been divided between his four children. Naturally, the brewery went to the oldest son. The baby of the family, a love child half his sister’s age, was gifted the town’s hockey franchise at the tender age of twenty-four. Norm’s other daughter was the proud owner of the Timbers, Milwaukee’s baseball team. The good-natured rivalry among the siblings was legendary in the sports world.

Mrs. C gestured at the coffee pot before realizing her mistake. “That’s right. According to your ‘jilted lover,’ you no longer put caffeine in

your body. Or anything else worth eating.” Making a face at the kale smoothie in Trey’s hand, she returned to the table and gingerly sat down beside him. “Please tell me there is at least honey or something more decadent than leaves in that sludge.”

He took a long pull from the straw before answering. “My diet isn’t as ridiculous as she made it out to be. I’ve always done my best to eat healthy. But if I want to play ten more seasons, I need to tighten things up a little, that’s all.”

“Mmm. I wish I had your ability to simply flip a switch in my brain and completely change up my eating habits.”

He sighed in frustration. His former girlfriend hadn’t minced words when she described Trey’s commitment to football as “obsessive” and “robot-like.” Of course the social media trolls had wasted no time creating memes and posts depicting him as a machine with no social graces or feelings whatsoever.

So what if Trey played the game with single-minded intensity? How was it anyone’s business if he became a hermit during the season so he could focus all his energy on football? That was how games were won. Wasn’t that what he was getting paid to do? Wasn’t that what fans wanted?

“What I put in my body directly correlates to my performance.”

She mumbled something that sounded a lot like “Too bad not everyone gives your performance high marks” while blowing on her coffee.

Trey snapped to attention. “I’ve put my ass on the line for this team for eight seasons now. This is the first I’ve heard any complaints.”

“Relax,” she said with a sly grin. “No one’s complaining about your performance *on* the field, Trey.”

She sobered up then.

“Look. Your private life is just that. Private. But, having grown up in the limelight, you of all people, should know how fickle the world we live in can be. How they want to cheer you on and tear you down at the same time. I’m speaking as a friend here, not the woman who signs your paycheck when I say you can’t approach every aspect of your life as if you’re a machine. It’s not healthy. You’re a living, breathing organism. I need to know that you realize there’s more to life than football. In the end, it’s just a game.”

Trey snorted. “You pay me millions to play ‘just a game.’ To win every one of those ‘games’ so you can make the millions you need to pay me and a crap ton more. I’m not going to half-ass it because I’m too busy looking for a soulmate to—” he made air quotes “—complete me.”

She studied him over the rim of her coffee cup. “You never answered my question.”

“Which one was that?” He knew damn well which question he hadn’t answered. The same one he wasn’t ever going to answer.

“Have you ever been in love?”

He exercised that machine-like control he was now famous for, keeping his face and body from reacting, in order to hide the truth from her. Because, in what felt like a past life, he thought he had been in love once. She’d been innocent, yet whip smart, challenging him at every turn. Generous and creative, she was everything his twenty-year-old heart had been yearning for his entire life.

Until she wasn’t.

Instead, she’d been a mirage. Another woman after him solely for his legacy. Like mother, like daughter. He was lucky to get out when he did.

Ever since, Trey kept his heart locked up tight. The more he micro-managed every aspect of his life, the better he felt. The better he performed on the field. No longer was he at the mercy of his parents using him as a pawn in their game of one-upmanship for the tabloids. He controlled his agenda. And he damn well liked it that way.

Not that he was averse to women and what they offered. He gave as good as he got in the bedroom—with the exception of his heart. The Van Horn men didn’t do commitment. Up until now, the women he’d been with understood that. He’d just have to be more careful in the future.

Of course, he couldn't tell any of this to the woman sitting before him. She was happily married to her husband of over forty years, with three daughters blissfully married themselves. Mrs. Ciaciura believed in the bullshit premise that was happy ever after.

Trey knew it for the lie it was.

His teammates may fall under its spell, but he never would. Not when it meant giving up the rigorous control he'd carefully cultivated. Not when it opened him up to having his heart sliced in half. *Been there. Done that.* Wisely, he kept his thoughts to himself.

The charged silence stretched until she huffed an irritated sounding sigh. "Suit yourself." She held up her hand. "Your love life is your business. But that doesn't mean I can't chastise you about your public image. Hopefully the little whelp is right about something for once, and this will die down long before we get to training camp next month."

"I'm not going to dignify the story with a statement, if that's what you want."

"No. Of course not. I may be nosy, but I'd never ask that of you. Besides, actions speak louder than words."

A trickle of unease scraped down his spine. "Don't tell me you want me to marry one of your granddaughters," he joked.

She laughed. "Don't toy with the emotions of the seven-year-old. She still sleeps in your jersey every night. The thirteen-year-old?" Mrs. C shook her head. "Who the hell knows what she'd do. She's giving her mother fits with her mood swings. I wouldn't wish her on my worst enemy right now." She settled back in her chair. "No, Trey, I have something much less dramatic in mind."

The tension building at his temples eased, but only slightly. "Hit me."

"The gala."

Seriously?

Was that all she wanted from him? He was a regular contributor of auction items and funds to the annual event benefitting Milwaukee's Children's Hospital. It was the one night during the season when he allowed himself to socialize with anyone other than his teammates. There was no question he wouldn't be a part of it again this year.

"Let me know what you need donated and it's yours."

"You're always more than generous with your donations every year," she said. "If only you weren't so closed-mouthed and anonymous about it. Fans here in Milwaukee should see the real you. The guy your teammates follow into battle every week. Not the cold machine the media is making you out to be. I want people to see that there really is a heart beating beneath your shoulder pads."

Her tone was a bit cagey. Trey suddenly had the feeling she'd been toying with him all along. That the confrontation about his so called "pithy remarks" was simply a smokescreen to get him to agree to whatever the hell she wanted from him. He was instantly on alert.

"I'm not sure where you're headed with this." *And I don't like it*, he nearly added.

She jumped to her feet and scurried behind her desk.

Not a good sign.

"Let me cut to the chase then. You're chairing the gala on behalf of the Growlers this year."

"Excuse me? What?" He practically catapulted from his seat, following her across the room. "You've got to be kidding me? I don't have time for that. In case you forgot, I'm going to be busy preparing for, *and winning*, football games. You know. That thing you *hired* me to do."

"And you are the best quarterback in the league. Lucky for you, the role as chairman is mostly proforma. The team has a committee that works exclusively on the preparations. They've been working on it since January." She shuffled some papers on her desk. "In addition, we hire a wonderful outside PR guru from the Westwood Agency to do the rest. We've been partnering with her for the past six years and she is brilliant." She waved

her hand as if to brush his concerns away. “They’ll need you for a few publicity events in the fall, but nothing you can’t handle on your off days.”

What the actual fuck?

“Don’t you usually task one of the retired players with the . . . honor?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, knowing full well he didn’t consider it an honor at all. Instead, he saw her request—*make that order*—as an unnecessary interruption to the season. Trey had a strict rule about endorsement work of any kind after the first day of training camp. As in, he didn’t do any. Period. That way, he could keep his mind laser-focused on the game. Those off days she was so cavalierly giving away were for breaking down film. Nothing else. That’s the strategy that made him a winner.

“I’m changing it up this year,” she announced. “My siblings have decided to trot out their superstars, so I will, too. My brother and sister will certainly not be showing me up.”

Trey had spent all of his life wishing for a sibling or two. Suddenly he was rethinking that wish.

“Am I allowed to point out that the gala takes place in the middle of the football season, whereas baseball is over and hockey will have barely

started? It makes more sense for them to trot out their so-called superstars. The guests won't care who's listed as the chairs."

"Actually, this year the event is scheduled for mid-October. You'll still have two-thirds of your season to be a football hermit. But this event will go on with this city's biggest sports star at the helm. Even if it's in name only."

He opened his mouth to say something—anything—but she was right. Football was king in Milwaukee. In the entire state of Wisconsin. The Growlers were one of the original teams in the league. And Trey was the two-time league MVP who captained them. There wasn't an athlete in the city with as much shine on his or her star.

At any other moment he would be proud of that fact. Right now, however, the label felt like a yoke. The smile she gave him forestalled any additional discussion on the matter.

Check and mate. The bulldog has spoken.

One of the receptionists poked her head in the door. "Excuse me, Mrs. Ciacuira. Your ten-thirty is here."

"Perfect timing. I need to introduce her to Trey as they'll both be working on the gala together. Show her in."

Collin squeezed in behind the receptionist.

"Dude," he murmured. "You need to let me handle this."

“It’s handled. At least at this end. But there aren’t going to be any lawsuits for slander, you hear me? That’s not how I want to play this. I’d rather—”

A melodic laugh rang out across the room. Its sound was lighthearted and genuine. And one Trey never expected to hear again in his lifetime.

“Trey?” Collin was trying to get his attention.

Too late. Some unknown force was already pulling Trey toward the door to see who was standing in front of Mrs. C. He was surprised he could move at all, given how heavy his limbs suddenly felt. Not only that, but his rapid heartbeat was almost deafening to his ears.

It couldn’t be her. She was in California, chasing after her dream of becoming a filmmaker. Her eye for photography had been keen for an untrained eighteen-year-old.

Besides, Mrs. C said she’d been working with this woman for the past six years. There’s no way they had both been in the same city together for that long. Trey would have known she was close by. He once had a sixth sense about her.

“Ah, here she is,” Mrs. C was saying as she moved to the side to allow the other woman to enter.

The room tilted slightly when his gaze collided with an equally distressed pair of blue eyes. Eyes that he’d fallen into ten years earlier. One

iris was still darker than the other. He wondered if anyone else besides him had ever noticed. Her lopsided mouth was pulled tight in a grim line and her nostrils flared ever so slightly when her gaze landed on him.

Gone was the carefree gangly girl with the dreamer's smile. She'd been replaced by an adult version, wearing uptight clothes and a fierce glare. Even her wild and wavy strawberry-blonde locks had been tamed into submission.

Yet, parts of his body were already barking at him to take her in his arms and pick up where they'd left off all those years ago.

The very idea pissed him off.

Mrs. C was still chattering. "Trey Van Horn, allow me to introduce you to the Westwood agency's secret weapon—"

"London Headley," he finished for her.

London's chin inched up.

"You two know each other?" The older woman shifted her gaze from Trey to London and slowly back again. "That's fortunate."

Her tone didn't match the words.

The silence grew awkward and Mrs. C's smile dimmed. She sidled up closer to Trey.

"Please tell me you don't *know her*, know her," she practically hissed at him.

London bristled.

For crying out loud.

“No,” he reassured his boss. Fortunately, he’d discovered the truth of her identity before he’d made that colossal mistake. “Not a chance.”

That had London pursing her lips and narrowing her eyes to near slits. *Too bad.* He crossed his arms in front of his chest, tucking his fingers into his armpits before dropping his bombshell.

“London is my little sister.”

“Holy shit,” Collin murmured from somewhere behind him.

“Pardon me?” Not much flustered Mrs. C, but she was well on her way to being chuffed.

Next to her, London let out a delicate snort and rolled her eyes.

“*Was.* Past tense. And only for a hot minute, a long time ago,” she explained. “My mother quickly saw the error of her ways.” She directed that last shot at Trey.

Bullshit. But he wasn’t keen on airing his father’s dirty laundry in front of his boss, not to mention Collin—a guy who made a living trading secrets.

“How is . . .” *Shit.* What was the woman’s name? In his defense, his father didn’t make it easy for him, marrying four women after leaving Trey’s mom. Trey made it a habit not to get too invested in any of them.

They didn't stick around long. London's mother held the title for quickest trip through the revolving door of stepmothers, lasting barely five months.

Not that Trey's mother was much better. She'd racked up three husbands since her highly publicized divorce. Needless to say, his views on marriage were shaped by real life experience.

"How is your mom?" he asked. They had an audience after all. Best to appear polite.

London arched an eyebrow at him smugly. It was obvious to her he couldn't remember her mom's name. It irked him that he felt a smidge of guilt.

"Landed on her feet, I assume?" he shot at her.

Her mouth curled up in a wicked grin. "She did. In fact, she traded up. She married a prince."

A guffaw escaped his lips before he could stop it.

Sensing the blood in the water, Mrs. C stepped between them. "Well, then. I guess we can do away with the get-to-know-you chitchat." She pierced Trey with a glare. "That saves us a lot of time since QB One here needs to be downstairs for OTAs with his teammates. I'll have the community relations department forward you the information regarding the first committee meeting when it's finalized, Trey."

"Looking forward to it," he lied.

Mrs. C was shooin' him and Collin out the door. There was no room for London to move and his arm accidentally brushed against her bare shoulder. He felt it all the way in his groin. She sucked in a strangled breath. A gentleman would have apologized. But if she was expecting an apology from him, she'd be waiting until hell froze over.