



A GRIDIRON NOVEL
★ BOOK THREE ★

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JEN FREDERICK

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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He's the guy no one likes...

Despite winning two national championships, JR “Ace” Anderson was sent packing from his old school after losing the trust of his coach. At Southern U, he has a second chance to prove that his college legacy isn’t endless debauchery and selfishness. But his reputation precedes him, and his teammates offer a chilly welcome in the locker room. The one person who is willing to accept him is the very woman he should stay away from—his new coach’s daughter.

She's the girl everyone loves...

Bryant Johnson’s only goal in life is to make others happy, even at her own expense. One look at her father’s new star quarterback, and she knows that Ace is her next project. With a reputation for being a “jerk whisperer”, Bryant has spent her last three years at college reforming sorry behavior and turning bad boys into the best boyfriends ever. In Ace, though, she’s met with surly resistance and a sizzling attraction she doesn’t expect. Fixing this wounded warrior will be her biggest challenge yet. Not falling for him will be even harder.

Between her big heart and his damaged one, a battle is ensuing. In this game of

love, every defense will crumble.

*To Lea Robinson,
the most beautiful southern belle I have the privilege of knowing.*

I WAS EIGHTEEN WHEN I LOST MY VIRGINITY. IT WAS TO COLTRANE XAVIER McEnney. He and I hadn't been dating long, not really long enough for him to warrant a petal off my rose, as Momma would say.

Sex with him was awkward, but rewarding in its own way. For about ten minutes, I'd forgotten the most painful day of my life, so even though I didn't have an orgasm, it was all good.

It shouldn't surprise me that the boy I'm in bed with is trying ever so hard to wring one from me now. After all, he's an athlete, superbly built with a mind geared toward one goal: winning. In bed, that means making the girl come.

But I picked this boy because he's a jerk, predisposed to not caring about what I want. Or, at least, that was my initial thought. I'm mentally revising my image of him. I've had to do that a lot with JR "call me Ace" Anderson since I first saw him on the practice field four weeks ago.

When the Southern U Renegades' new quarterback first arrived on campus, he was angry, terse, and short-tempered. He barked orders at the offense and look bored when the coaches gave instruction. He rarely socialized with his teammates and when he did, he sat moodily in the corner, refusing the advances of girls and boys alike.

"God, you feel good," Ace breathes against my neck.

But then there was the time he stood up for my sorority sister, Carlene, when

her ex showed up at the bar drunk and belligerent. Before anyone else could react, Ace had the guy collared and out the door before Carlene could summon up a “go to hell.”

That action against her rowdy ex-boyfriend cemented things. I knew he would be the last participant through my program—my senior thesis, so to speak—on how to turn an asshole into the perfect boyfriend.

Going home with a boy is not standard practice for me, though. After Coltrane, I’d given up on sex. It’s too messy, too involved, too...intimate. I don’t like letting people in that deep, pun not intended. But I think that’s why Ace’s guarded eyes spoke so strongly to me.

He’s working up a sweat. I thought for sure he’d spend himself by now, but he’s still going strong, much to the distress of my increasingly sore thighs. He has more stamina than a camel in the desert. I squeeze my inner muscles, ordering myself to concentrate.

He groans, “That’s right,” and his hand slips underneath my ass to lift me tighter against him. The friction halts my train of thought for a moment. The heavy weight of him feels exquisite. And the way his bicep flexes as he braces himself, one-armed, so he can use his free hand to knead and grip my ass is crazy sexy.

I close my eyes and try to focus on the sensations rather than how our energetic activity has pulled the fitted sheet away from the mattress so that the elastic rubs uncomfortably against my shoulders. I shift slightly.

My movement interrupts his rhythm. His head jerks up. “What is it?” he asks. “Am I hurting you?”

Amazing. He’s sensed my discomfort. I give myself an internal high-five. I knew I’d been right about him. He pulls out, his long shaft dragging against my sensitive tissues, taking all that delicious fullness away. I urge him back inside.

“No, not at all.” It’s not as if I think sex is a bad thing. It’s that...this is out of character for me.

I’d gone over to him tonight, intending only to introduce myself, and, somehow, his big hand found its way under my skirt, and his hot mouth

whispered in my ear about how it was time for us to get a car home or everyone was going to know the color of my panties.

“Your pussy is so tight.” He was that graphic in the bar, too, except there he’d said, “How wet can I get you?”

I’ve never had a man speak to me like that before, never had someone want me so intensely. I caved. I walked out of the bar with him, into an Uber, and climbed two flights of stairs, draping myself over his wide, muscled frame like I was some kind of human cloak.

Mentally, I was with him until the clothes came off and the condom came on. It wasn’t the first real glimpse of his massive dick that scared me off; it was the whole plundering thing. Sex isn’t merely an invasion of your body, but of the mind, too. I’d forgotten that, forgotten why Colt and I broke up only a couple weeks after my first time. I don’t like people in my head.

“Bryant.” Ace says my name with some urgency.

My eyes pop open to meet his. He gives me a penetrating stare—one that I meet with intentionally guileless eyes. I respond non-verbally, squeezing his dick in what I hope is an invitation to continue. Just because I can’t come doesn’t mean he should miss out.

“Is there a different position you wanna try?” he asks as he slides forward. His hips shift, searching for that elusive G-spot.

I suppose I could fake it.

I moan.

He stops immediately and the piercing stare becomes suspicious scrutiny. “Did you just fake a moan?”

My mouth falls open in surprise. I didn’t imagine he’d be this perceptive. My daddy said Ace was more ornery than a wild dog caught in a trap. Ty Masters, the team captain, wondered if bringing in this rejected QB was going to tear the team apart instead of carrying them to the promised land of national championships and first-round draft slots. My Alpha Omega sisters at Western State warned us that Ace Anderson was a pussy hound and not a very nice one.

“Bryant,” he prompts. My name sounds strange and almost exotic coming from his mouth. It’s nearly one clipped syllable instead of the two long ones most of the southern boys around me use.

“What?” I ask, not sure if I’d missed a question and wondering if I could pass off my inattention on a lust-induced fugue. I lower my lids to make it look like I’m a little drunk on passion.

“You not a fan of the missionary?” His tone is real dry. I can’t exactly read his expression through my shielded gaze. Is that exasperation on his face?

“No. I like the missionary just fine.”

“You sure? Because it seems like it might not be your favorite, what with the porn star moan and all.”

“That was not a porn star moan,” I huff indignantly. A little panicked at how this night is devolving, I try deflecting, “Are you not enjoying this?”

“I’m enjoying it. It’s you I’m worried about.”

What kind of pussy hound asks these sorts of questions? I shift again, except the discomfort is from Ace’s inspection and not the elastic under my shoulder. “The sheet was bothering me.”

Immediately, he swings into action, somehow pulling me down the bed and smoothing out the sheet at the same time. He’s got the expert touch, I think with a slight smile.

That curve of my lips is enough encouragement for Ace, because he resumes the slow pump of his hips against mine. I close my eyes again and let my hips lift to meet his.

He’s really good at this. Really good. The fact that he’s trying so hard, that he’s so attuned to my needs, confirms my earlier gut feeling. It doesn’t matter that my daddy warned me that circumstances at Ace’s old school made him extra prickly or that some of his new teammates watched him warily at training camp, as if he was hiding something more than a monster cock in his khakis.

The owner of said cock pauses once more and says, “Where are you?” as if

he knows that I'm not fully in the moment.

I shake my head and prod him with my heels. "Right here." I bite my lower lip for good measure and add in another small, not so fake moan. I mean, it does feel good.

"No, no, you're not. I may be an asshole, but I'm not *that* kind of asshole." He rocks his hips against me once more before pulling out.

"What kind of asshole is that exactly?" I frown, watching as he flops down next to me. Did he really just stop in the middle of sex?

"The kind that takes a girl to bed, busts his nut and skates before giving her an orgasm."

This isn't going how I anticipated—at all. "Honey, I was enjoying myself. You bring that bad boy right back where it was."

He dips his head so his mouth is but an inch away from my ear.

"I'm happy to fuck you any way you like, Bryant. You tell me if you want it harder, softer. If you want to be on your knees or bent over the side of the mattress. If you want to be outside, just in case someone wants to catch us, or you want to watch a little porn while we do it. I'm all for any of those things. There's no judgment. All I ask is that you tell me what you need."

My cheeks heat. "I'm not much of a talker."

To my huge surprise, he laughs. "Bryant, I've known you all of about six hours, and I'd say you were anything but quiet. You're not into it and there's not anything more deflating than a girl who isn't interested."

His still-hard dick sort of makes a lie of his statement and I point it out. "You don't look deflated."

"Well, my little brain hasn't caught up with the big one yet, but it'll happen." He looks around. "Pass me the remote?"

A trifle baffled, I pluck the gadget off the nightstand and hand it to him.

"You seen *Stranger Things* yet?" he asks, turning on the television.

"I've been meaning to."

“Me, too. Why don’t we take a breather?” It’s not really a question. “We can revisit this after an episode.”

He flicks expertly through the controls until he pulls up the show. While the synthesized instrumental starts playing, I wait for his next move, because surely he’s not just stopping. But his eyes stay glued to the screen, while mine...well, mine are sorta glued to his cock, which doesn’t deflate at all like he promised.

Eventually, I give up, because even though his cock is still hard, he makes no moves in my direction. I get up, go to the bathroom, and take care of business. The smart thing to do would be to call another Uber and head home, but it’s late and I’m tired. Plus, I’m not prepared to answer a dozen and one questions from my sorority sisters when I get home.

The best course of action is to spend the night here and pretend I slept at my parents’ house. Ace doesn’t seem in a hurry for me to leave. When I return to the bedroom, he’s lying in the exact same position—one hand tucked under his head, the other holding the remote. If not for the missing condom, I would’ve sworn he hadn’t moved an inch.

I climb back into bed, cover myself up, and fall asleep to the sounds of four boys in a basement cursing like sailors.

Ace

The alarm on my phone wakes me. I sit up with a jolt, then roll over to look at the screen. Shit. I have to be at practice in twenty minutes. I must’ve hit snooze one too many times in the morning.

I quickly look around for my clothes and spot them folded in an uncharacteristically neat pile on the seat of my desk chair. Usually I fling my shit around. I pull my Dry-FIT shirt over my head, tug on a pair of compression shorts, and shove my legs into a pair of sweats. My flips are nowhere to be seen.

Then I remember I kicked them off at the door. Horror floods me as I remember the rest of the night. The girl I brought home, the fact that I didn’t get her off, and the worst part? I fell asleep after promising to make it up to

her.

A clank of a pan against a stove jerks me from my trip down nightmare lane. A different kind of fear creeps up my spine. The only kitchen appliance my roommates know how to use is the microwave. From the sounds and smell of it, my failed one-night stand is cooking breakfast and expecting some major post-coital bonding.

At least I remember her name. It's Bryant, as in Bear Bryant, she informed me at the bar. She was a jock chaser—the type of girl that likes to sleep with D1 athletes solely because they're D1 athletes. Before last night, I'd seen her around the practice facility and at the bar where the athletes hang out after a long day of drills.

I have no problem with groupies. I make regular use of them. Athletes and jersey chasers have a symbiotic relationship. If I wasn't wearing the Southern U Renegades on my chest, these ladies wouldn't give me the time of day. And with groupies, I don't have to call them the next day. They know how the game is played.

Last night, Bryant turned her doe eyes in my direction and I figured, why not. I'd been a good boy for all of camp. No girls, head down, trying to fit in with my new team as best as possible. It's not working. The timing with my star wide receiver and roommate, Carter, is still off.

In the huddle, their eyes are full of wariness and suspicion. Doesn't matter how many plays I make during practice, I haven't proven myself on the field and until I do, judgment is still pending. In one week, we play our first game, and if we don't win the opener—I shove that out of my head. No fear. That's the only mindset to have.

People accuse quarterbacks of being arrogant, but you have to be. If you don't believe you're a winner, neither will anyone on your team, and that sort of mentality can poison a whole season. I rotate my shoulder, reminding myself that my golden arm has already gotten me a full-ride scholarship, a national championship, and a boatload of prime pussy.

But the glory days are coming to an end. I run an option offense where my gut plays almost as big of a role as my arm. I know when to run and when to flip a hand-off. These skills serve me well in college, but pro teams want a

pocket passer, so when college is over, I'll be like my old man—hocking medical supplies to nurses and office managers while bragging about my good old days.

I might as well take advantage of all the women who throw themselves my way now. When Bryant came and sat next to me, all curves and welcoming smiles, I sat back and soaked up the attention.

The guys knew her. She was immediately accepted at our table, which confirmed my guess that she was a jock chaser, albeit a well-liked one. The kind who keeps her mouth shut but her legs open.

As the night wore on, all I could think of was one thing—how to get my dick inside her tight pussy. She was with me the whole way. Her hand was squeezing my dick the entire Uber ride from the bar to my apartment, and my fingers were wet from dipping inside of her panties.

Her mouth was eating mine as we stumbled into the apartment. I kissed her creamy thighs and then licked the seam between those thighs until her nails were digging into my scalp. She urged me into the bedroom and had a condom around my dick faster than I could say her strange name.

But ten minutes into it and then fifteen minutes into it, I knew that she was on the verge of faking it. I pulled out. She put up a cursory protest. One thing about these southerners, they smile even as they're cursing you out. But I wasn't about to force myself on anyone. Kicking her out after I failed to make her come didn't feel right, either.

The guys probably like her more than they like me, so booting her out after I'd failed in bed wouldn't generate anything but trouble. Instead, I turned on the television and figured I'd try again.

But I must've fallen asleep first.

Fuck.

And now she's still here.

Double fuck.

I force my feet to move in the direction of the kitchen. This is part of my

purgatory. I was banished from my previous school for fucking around with the coach's daughter, and now I'm going to be branded as the guy who couldn't even get a groupie off.

I walk slowly down the hall.

"You're awake." Bryant's smile is bright enough to match the sun. I focus on a spot over her shoulder.

"You sleep well?" I ask inanely.

"Sure did. Hold on for a minute." She scoops something I can't see from a pan and turns her back.

Her blonde hair is caught in a low pony hanging over one shoulder. Bryant's body is small and round all over—round tits, round ass, round thighs. She's got a perfect, fuckable body.

My blood surges. I want another chance. I'm here. I might as well use the time wisely. I close the distance between us, vaguely registering the two pans on the stove, a few cooking utensils, a discarded bowl.

"I've got this ready for you." She spins around, her tits brushing against my chest. Before I can dip my head to kiss her berry-red lips, she shoves a tinfoil-wrapped thing into my hand.

In the next moment, she's got a palm on my back, urging me out into the hallway. "So I've got class this morning and then a practicum starting at one, but I want to go early to check out a few things. My afternoon's full with some sorority things that you don't want to hear about, so I'm thinking brunch."

"Brunch?" I ask. "I was thinking—"

"Yes, ten thirty, after your morning practice is over," she says as if I hadn't spoken. "At the Steak House. I like that place the best because they serve mango juice and I love mango juice."

"Ten thirty," I repeat like a dumbass. "For brunch." What in the hell is she talking about?

"Yup. Here are your flips, sugar."

She points to the floor. I shove my feet inside the sandals. Before I can voice another objection, the front door is open, and I find myself standing on the other side.

“See you at ten thirty.” She smiles brightly one more time and shuts my own door in my face.

I HEAD TO PRACTICE WONDERING WHAT IN THE HELL JUST HAPPENED. I'M NOT REALLY meeting up for brunch with this chick, right? I mean, she didn't even give me a chance to respond, so if I'm a no-show, she can't really hold it against me.

Right?

Fuck. But if I don't go, it might get back to my new teammates that I stood Bryant up. And, judging by the worshipful way they'd all treated her last night, I don't think they'd like it if they found out I ditched the girl.

Plus, there are two things I'm good at: sex and football, and right now I need to concentrate on the latter.

By the time I reach the Fieldhouse, the Renegades' football facility, I decide that I'll go to brunch, tell her to leave me the hell alone, then go back to studying the playbook. My teammates hate me now, but once I start winning, all that animosity will fade away. Locker rooms have no conflict when you're winning.

The facility reminds me of pictures I once saw of a gentlemen's club in a *GQ* magazine. It's all dark wood and leather with the accents of crimson and gold. It's as state of the art as the facility up in Western State, requiring a key card to get in and featuring more than one security guard walking the polished tiles in the corridors.

I nod at a tall guard wearing a black uniform with a crimson horse insignia

over the chest, and make my way toward the locker room. When I stride in, most of the guys are already inside, changing out of their street clothes and shooting the shit by the leather-padded lockers. Mornings are for weight training, meetings with your position coaches, and, for those unlucky bastards who are banged up, visits to the medical staff.

“You’re late,” a voice says from behind me.

I turn to find Ty Masters looming over me. For a moment, I’m disoriented. Ty is a carbon copy of his brother Knox, who I played with back at Western. The same massive physique, dark hair, and intense green eyes. I’d never be able to tell them apart in a line-up. The only reason I know it’s Ty standing in front of me right now is because Knox is currently kicking off his rookie season in New York for the Cobras.

I fish my phone out of my back pocket and discover that I’m right on time. “It’s six twenty-five,” I answer, a furrow in my brow. “Practice starts at six thirty, no?”

“If you’re not early, then you’re late.”

Right. I’m still not used to the idea that if the schedule says eight, I’m supposed to be here ten minutes to. If you wanted me here ten minutes before the hour, then put it on the fucking schedule. As it is, I have five minutes and that’s plenty of time for me to throw on my weightlifting gear, which consists of gym shorts, a tank, and a pair of tennis shoes.

Ty strides off toward his own locker, high-fiving one player, joking with another. Everyone here looks up to him. If I was smart, I’d spend my days kissing his ass, but that’s not ever going to happen. See, I’ve got something Ty doesn’t.

Like his brother, Ty plays defensive end. He’s definitely good enough to play for the pros, has won a boatload of college awards, but the most prized one of all eludes him—a national championship title. And out of all the yahoos in this room, only one person has won that all-important game. Me. I’ve done it twice.

Which means I’m not bowing and scraping to anyone here. I might not be a first-round draft pick, but I’m a winner. At least for now.

I doubt I'll enter the draft. Even if I did, I probably wouldn't be drafted in the top rounds—there are better college QBs out there than yours truly. Not that I care. Okay. Maybe I do care. A little. I mean, it'd be sick to play football at a professional level, but everyone knows I'm not good enough.

I fucking hate not being good enough.

“Yo, QB,” someone shouts from across the room.

I finish pulling my tank over my head before turning to see who called me. It's Travarius Daly, one of our star cornerbacks. Definitely pro material. Southern churns out NFL-ready players like a little football player factory.

“Yeah?” I call back warily.

“Heard you went home with Bryant last night,” Daly says, wandering over. He flicks an elastic band off his wrist and starts tying his thick mass of dreadlocks into a low ponytail.

“Yeah, I did.”

“And?” He watches me expectantly.

I stiffen. Is he expecting locker room talk? Does he want to know how tight her pussy is? If she gives good head? If I fucked her in the ass? At my old college, I probably would've given him a detailed account of the fucking, but, at my old school, I was a Grade-A asshole. I didn't give a shit about etiquette. Hell, I didn't give a shit about anyone around me. That's why they ran me out.

This year, my senior year, I'm trying to be...better, I guess? I'm still an asshole, and I still don't give a shit about many people, but I'm not falling into old habits. Or, at least, I'm trying not to. Besides, I have no doubt that sharing details about how I plowed Bryant last night would only confirm Ty's low opinion of me. Through his brother, Ty knows all about my past bad behavior.

I settle for, “She's a nice girl.”

Someone hoots. “Nice? Dude, that woman is a goddess.”

I glance over. Carter Kittredge, one of my roommates and the wide receiver

I'm still not clicking with, is the one who made that declaration. The leanly muscled guy joins me and Travarius and rubs his hands together in delight.

"You know what this means, right, T?" he asks our teammate.

"Peach fuckin' pie!" Travarius replies, and the two guys exchange an excited high-five.

"And oatmeal raisin cookies," our star running back, Remy Borland, pipes up. "Holy fuck, those cookies."

"Nah, her homemade donuts are way better than the cookies," someone argues.

And now I'm surrounded by half a dozen players, all of who are raving about the various baked goods Bryant is apparently a whiz at producing. My mind's spinning a little. I mean, yeah, the woman is hot and, yeah, the breakfast sandwich she made was better than anything I'd ever stuffed in my mouth, but she's weird. And cool, too, or at least she seemed cool up until she tried faking an orgasm and then railroaded me into a brunch date.

But the way these guys are going on about her, you'd think she invented the Hail Mary.

"Don't fuck this up for us," a stern voice tells me.

The warning comes from the left tackle, the guy who guards my blind side. Samson, whose huge belly folds over the top of his long athletic shorts, is a monster on the field. He hasn't allowed a sack in five hundred thirty-three snaps. I plan to be extra nice to Samson.

"Yeah," Carter agrees, frowning deeply at me. "I'll lay you the fuck down if you screw this up for the team. We haven't had good treats on the regular since she dated—" He stops.

I frown back. "Since she dated who?" And shit, why am I even continuing this conversation? I made a vow to clean up my act this year, which includes not engaging in locker room talk.

"Tommy Hillard," Travarius fills in. "Slot receiver we had last season. Those two dated her sophomore year?"

Carter nods. “That’s right. Man, it’s been almost three years.” Dude is almost in tears.

I nod, because the name rings a bell. “What happened to that guy? He had good instincts.”

Carter snorts. “On the field, maybe. Off of it? Not so much.”

“He got kicked out for fighting,” Samson explains.

“Her only failure,” someone else remarks with a heavy sigh.

“She didn’t have him an entire term,” Travarius protests.

“Yeah, but he still blew it for us.”

“After that it was engineering students and the goddamned golf team,” Samson grumbles. Then he brightens up. “But Ace is bringing her back. Way to go, man.”

This team is fucked. I suddenly wonder if I shouldn’t have bothered with all the efforts to connect with these guys during training camp.

Travarius pats me on the shoulder. “Don’t fuck this up.”

The other guys reiterate the warning before wandering back to their lockers to finish dressing.

I resist the urge to scratch my head in dismay. Football players gossip about chicks as much as any other dudes, but this whole situation is...weird. They all seem oddly enraptured by Bryant, and equally protective of her. Who exactly is this chick?

She didn’t have him an entire term.

And what the fuck does *that* mean?

“Anderson.”

I look up at the sound of Coach’s voice. The stocky, dark-haired man stands in the doorway, arms crossed and eyes stern.

“My office, two minutes,” he commands. He turns to address the room.

“Enough chatting, assholes. I want to hear the clanging of weights in about two seconds or you’re all running until your chicken legs give out.”

Carter snickers and gives a brisk salute. “Aye aye, cap’n.”

As the other guys finish changing and start filing out of the room, Ty Masters stalks up to me again.

“My brother said you had a reputation at Western for treating women as disposable.”

Equal parts anger and shame jolt through me. Anger, because who the hell is he to say that to me? And shame, because he’s goddamned right. I wasn’t exactly a choirboy before. I fucked my way through Western State without so much as a backward glance. I slept with my coach’s daughter even though I knew it threatened my position on the team. I definitely had more than one drink thrown in my face. I was a player, through and through. Hell, I lost my best friend because of it.

The shame in my gut hardens into a tight knot of guilt. Truth is, I always assumed I’d end up with Lucy Washington. We’d grown up together, and she was the only girl I ever felt comfortable enough around to actually let down my guard. I had a future in mind for us—marriage, kids, all that jazz.

Except I was a selfish ass. I wanted to have my cake and eat it, too. I wanted to party and fuck and be wild in college, get all that shit out of my system, and *then* settle down. And I expected Lucy to wait for me while I did that.

She didn’t wait.

And I...didn’t handle it very well. I lashed out at her. Hurt her. Pretty much severed the bond between us and destroyed the one friendship that always meant so much to me.

I’m an asshole, remember?

“I’m not that guy anymore,” I answer through gritted teeth.

Ty arches a brow. “No?”

“No.”

He ponders that for a moment. Then he shrugs and says, “New team, new slate.”

A small gust of relief washes over me. “You mean that?” I say gruffly.

“Always say what I mean,” is the equally gruff response. He slaps a hand on my arm and adds, “Coach’s waiting for you.”

I watch Ty leave the locker room. He might look exactly like his brother, but he’s way more easygoing and less into being the center of attention. And, from the girls I’ve seen him hanging out with, my guess is that he’s not a virgin like his brother was—holding out for *the one*, which was the biggest load of bullshit that Knox Masters enjoyed shoveling into the locker room. My *one* is football, not a girl.

Shrugging out of my thoughts, I duck into the hall and make my way to Coach Johnson’s office. It’s a huge space with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the practice field. So much natural light streams in that he doesn’t even have to flick on the overhead lights.

“Hey, Coach. You wanted to see me?” I shift awkwardly, because in my experience, a visit to my coach’s office usually means I’ve fucked up.

“Have a seat, JR.”

I lower myself onto one of the plush chairs in front of his huge, mahogany desk. Coach sits down, too, clasping both hands on the desktop.

“How’s it going?” he asks, studying my face. “Anyone giving you trouble?”

I wrinkle my forehead. “You mean the other guys?”

He nods.

“Oh. Ah, no, sir. They’ve been very welcoming.” Well, that’s not entirely true. All through summer camp, they were cordial but guarded. Today’s the first day that none of them looked at me with suspicion, and it bugs me that their sudden warming up had more to do with Bryant and her damned cookies than *me*.

“Good, good to hear.” He’s nodding some more. “Let me know if that changes. I brought you in because these guys need a leader.”

I shift in discomfort again. A leader? I'm not a leader. My plan for this year is just to keep my head down.

"And I had a good feeling about you," he continues.

I can't help but offer a dry look. "Yeah? You sure you don't have amnesia? I mean, you know what happened with my old team."

After winning two national championships for Western State, my coach decided the starting job would be given to some untested and unproven freshman. I was to move to another position—either wide receiver or defensive back. If I didn't, then I was in danger of riding the bench all season long. It was a humiliating comedown, and when I was offered the opportunity to transfer, I jumped at it.

"You made some bad decisions," Coach Johnson agrees. "But the fault wasn't entirely yours. I'm not one to question another coach's methods, but I don't think Coach Lowe correctly handled that situation."

No shit. That bastard was so pissed I hooked up with his daughter, Stella, that he lit a match to my football career and sent it up in flames.

"I'm not as strict when it comes to that," Johnson goes on. He leans back in his chair and changes the subject. "I heard you're meeting Bryant for brunch?"

It's difficult to keep my jaw closed.

Okay. What in the fucking *fuck* is up with this school? I've got teammates high-fiving each other because I hooked up with a jock chaser (which, at any other school, is such a common occurrence that nobody would even bat an eye), and now I've got my coach telling me he knows about my brunch plans? The brunch plans I didn't even agree to?

"Sir?" I say stupidly, because it's all I can think to say.

His brow furrows. "Did I get it wrong? I thought she mentioned she was meeting you at ten thirty?"

Where is an emergency exit when you need one? Well, I guess that'd be the door. Would he ream me out if I just got up and left? I'm tempted, because...

because I don't know what in the hell is happening right now.

"No, it's ten thirty," I find myself replying.

"Ah, I thought so." He gives another nod. "I just wanted you to know that I'm aware of it—"

Of what? Brunch?

"—and that I have no objections."

To *what*? Brunch?

"Oh." I shove a hand through my hair. "Okay."

"I've noticed a change in you through the duration of camp," he says. "You're more mature than the kid I met at the beginning of the summer. But while Bryant can hold her own, I'd be a bad dad if I didn't give you the fatherly warning."

Wait. What?

"I think my daughter'll be good for you, Ace." He smiles. "She knows football and football players. You're going to have to learn to say no, though."

Panic races through me at each word he utters. My brain is only capable of producing a flurry of short, increasingly horrifying thoughts.

His daughter.

"She sometimes has a tendency to steamroll over folks, and, like her momma, she thinks food solves everything. Try not to eat everything she cooks for you."

Bryant is Coach's daughter?

"She keeps thinking that everyone runs like those string beans we call wide receivers. You quarterbacks don't run around as much. We want you to stay around two twenty-five, two thirty. No more. I've told her that, but she doesn't listen to me."

Bryant is Coach's daughter.

I fucked my coach's daughter.

“My office door is always open if you need to talk or unload some baked goods, you hear?”

I feel my head move up and down, but it's hard to pull out of the jumbled tailspin. By the time I manage to recover, there's only one thought left in my tired brain.

Oh Jesus. Not again.

ACE COMES STORMING INTO THE DINER AT TEN-THIRTY. IT'S AMAZING TO ME THAT after summer camp and then four weeks of pre-season, he hasn't learned that my father operates under the ol' if *you're on-time, you're late* proverb, but since he's performed admirably in other ways, I guess he'll figure it out soon enough.

"My date's here so you have to skedaddle now." I wave my hand toward the poor guy who's slumped in the booth seat across me.

"But, Bryant, why won't you give me a chance? I'm a good guy. I don't cheat on girls. I open their doors. I pay for their dinner. I'm a feminist! Like, I believe women have rights!" Kent beats his fist against his chest, knocking a lock of his overly long bangs into his eyes. He looks like a sad puppy, which is probably the only thing that keeps me from introducing his uber-soft cheek to the hard plane of my palm. *Women have rights?* Of course, they do. That's just a given like we need water and tea needs sugar. I shake my head at him as he leans earnestly across the table. "You should give the nice guys a chance. I'll treat you like the queen you are. These jerks that you date aren't good enough for you."

"That's sweet, honey, but I'm doing fine with my dating choices."

He blinks dumbly at me. "Is it because they're needy? Well, I need you, too. I haven't had a date in, like, six months. It's been a long dry spell."

With considerable effort, I manage not to roll my eyes. So much for treating

me like a queen. Lord, save me from the guy who thinks he's a hero because he opens your car door. "I'm not a sex doctor." I wiggle my fingers at him. "Now, seriously, you have got to go."

Ace is nearly upon us, and his nostrils are flaring like he's some bull that's ready to charge. As much as Kent might need a good kick in the teeth, it's best if I handle this.

"Your name is Bryant Johnson," Ace accuses.

My lips part in surprise at the unexpected attack. "It is, indeed."

He starts to say something else when he notices Kent. "Who are you?" Ace barks.

Kent wilts under the glare of Ace Anderson. Six feet, five inches of athletic grace, a chin that could be carved from rock, and blazing green eyes order Kent to move.

While I'm outwardly smiling lightly, inside I'm squirming with glee. Even though Ace is struggling with his emotional response toward me, his instincts tell him that Kent's an opponent. For a competitor like Ace, that means Kent needs to be crushed. It's *such* a good sign. Because a guy who thinks girls can be used and discarded like tissues isn't going to get territorial.

"Kent's leaving."

"This is the guy?" Kent unwisely hisses at me. "The new quarterback your daddy brought in because he was so much trouble at his last school? Bryant, give up on these losers and give the nice guy a chance."

I rise, slipping my hand through Ace's arm, mostly because I want to touch him, but also so I have a handle on him in case he tries to punch Kent's lights out for the insult. "Kent, honey, you're already so close to perfect that you don't need me. Ace, this is Kent Dayton. Kent, this is Ace Anderson. We've just started going out." I smile and look up adoringly at Ace's stern façade.

"We're not—" He breaks off and shakes his head as if there's something caught between his ears. "Look, Bryant, we need to talk."

His glower sends exciting shivers down my spine. "I agree. Kent was leaving,

weren't you, Kent?"

"But what about everything we discussed? What about me?" he whines.

"Go home and write out a list of everything you want in a girl, and then we'll talk."

"You mean you'll consider me?"

"I'll take a look at your list for you," I promise noncommittally. Maybe I can hook him up with someone.

Kent's eyes light up. "All righty, then." He finally slides out of the booth and gives Ace's arm a slap. Ace stares at the spot on his arm and then at Kent, who backs away, peeking around Ace's solid frame to offer one last plug. "I promise you, if you choose me, it'll be awesome."

He backs away, giving us the thumbs up.

Ace scowls at Kent's departing back before whipping around and addressing me again. "What the hell was that all about?"

"Kent was here applying for your position, but I told him it was already full," I answer airily. I contemplate giving him a kiss but decide against it. Instead, I take my seat again and gesture for him to take his.

The moment his butt hits the vinyl, he pins me with an accusatory look. "Why didn't you tell me your dad was Coach Johnson?"

Is that what he's mad about? I figured it was because I didn't wake him up last night so he could have that second chance at rocking my world. Guys are awfully sensitive when it comes to performance in the bedroom. "I thought you knew. I told you what my name was. First and last." An awful thought occurs to me. "Were you drunk last night?" Horrified, I press my fingers against my lips. "Did I take advantage of you?"

"No. Christ." He digs a hand through his leaf-brown hair, his biceps flexing in a lovely, mouthwatering manner. "Your last name is Johnson. Do you know how many Johnsons there are in this country? Like eighty million of them."

I relax and allow my hand to fall back to the table. With a lot more ease, I

regain my smile and say, “Eighty million is a gross exaggeration, but even if that were true, how many of them are named after the winningest SEC coach in the history of football, Bobby Bowden aside?”

“That’s why you’re named Bryant?” he asks incredulously. “After Bear Bryant.”

“None other. Who else would I be named after?” I signal for Milly, the waitress, to let her know we’re ready to order. I need to get some food into this particular bear.

“I don’t know. Maybe it was your family name,” he says.

My hand itches to smooth away the lines of disgruntlement on his face. I’m confident that if Ace gains a more positive outlook on life, he’ll be less of a surly bastard.

“Speaking of names,” I interrupt, “Can I call you something other than Ace? What does JR stand for?”

“It’s my dad’s name and no. Back to your dad—”

“Ace isn’t very loving. It’s so abrupt and short.” I tap a finger against my lips. “Is it Jonathan? Jack? James?” None of those fit him. Maybe he is an Ace.

The creases in his forehead deepen. “Is that why you couldn’t get off last night? Because you don’t like my name?”

Heat floods my face. Ace is so...graphic all the time. I’m going to have to drum that out of him. “That’s not appropriate brunch conversation,” I scold, but when the thunderclouds darken over our heads, I hurriedly assure him. “No, that’s not it at all.”

To my relief, Milly hops over before I’m forced to explain more. “Milly, can I have an egg white frittata with whatever fresh vegetables you have today?”

“Asparagus and tomatoes okay, sugar?”

“That’d be perfect.”

“And your man here?”

“I’m not her—” Milly and I both stare at him. “You know what, whatever.” Ace surrenders in disgust, apparently not willing to embarrass me in front of the waitress.

“He’ll have steak and eggs,” I tell her.

“How does he like that cooked?”

“*He* would like it medium-rare,” Ace interjects loudly. Milly winks at me and takes both the unviewed menus off the table before going back to the kitchen to put the order in. The moment she’s out of earshot, Ace leans forward. “Bryant, you seem like a nice girl. You’re gorgeous, and I definitely want to fuck again, but I don’t do relationships. We are not dating. We’ll never date because I don’t date.”

“You have a reason for that?” I ask, unperturbed by his speechifying. I expected this. He thinks that he needs to be footless and fancy-free until his penis is shriveled like a raisin.

“Yeah, because women fuck up your game. I’ve seen it time and again. Why do you think I had to leave Western State after winning a national championship?”

“Well, it looked like your coach recruited your replacement before you were ready to leave.” The coach of Ace’s old team brought in a young gun and decided to start him over Ace. It surprised everyone in the sports world, including my daddy, who thought it was supremely disrespectful and bad for recruiting.

“Wrong,” Ace snaps. “I slept with the coach’s daughter. Coach got pissed. Kicked me off the team. He wanted to turn me into a tight end or a safety or something other than the quarterback.”

Ace wants me to be offended, both at him and his coach, but everyone knows—including Ace if he really looked deep enough—that he won’t see a down in the NFL as a quarterback. Something else? Absolutely. I can see that helping Ace come to grips with this will be part of the project.

I start right away. “I could see you at safety. Like Scott Frost from Nebraska. He ran that option offense just like you, and he turned out to be a great NFL player.”

“He played five years as safety. Besides, I’m not a safety; I’m a quarterback,” he says flatly.

He needs me so much. “Okay. I don’t make those decisions. While I attend most of the games, I admit I’m merely part of the cheering section.” I suck some water up the straw and watch with amusement as Ace’s eyes fall to my pursed lips. “But in the few practices I’ve caught, it appears you have great field vision, right?”

He nods, almost absently. He’s entertaining a naughty image about my lips being wrapped around something else right now, which allows me to press forward without interruption.

“Your situational awareness is the best in the game. The defense was caught offsides more than once.” At one practice a couple of days ago, the defensive players were slow getting off the field, and Ace hiked the ball. In a real game, that would’ve been an automatic five-yard gain for the offense. Coach Troyer, the defensive coordinator, almost had his head pop off in anger at his squad while Ace smirked in the middle of the field. “Your instincts are spot-on. You sense those defenders closing in on you without even looking at them.”

“Yeah. So?”

I ignore his question. “Plus, you know all about passing routes and would be able to read the quarterback’s eyes as well as his body language to figure out where the ball is going to be even before the receiver does.”

Ace gives himself a tiny shake and drags his attention away from my mouth back to the conversation. “Maybe I do have those skills, but I’m here to play quarterback.”

“Course you are.” I’m planting seeds that won’t give fruit until after the season is over, but if you don’t sow while the field’s ripe, there won’t be a harvest. “You’re going to win a championship for all those men my daddy promised would get a ring before they graduate. I’m just saying that beyond this year, if that’s an option for you, you should look into it.”

Milly’s return prevents him from immediately disagreeing. Perfect timing that I didn’t even have to plan. I give Milly a dazzling smile. Across from

me, I hear a swift inhale of breath when she sets his plate in front of him. “This looks amazing, Milly. Thank you.”

She grins back. “Anything else you two need?”

I shake my head. “No. We’re fine. Eat up, Ace.”

He’s back to frowning. “We’re getting way off track here.”

“Don’t worry, honey. I remember everything you said. You don’t do relationships, and you just want to sleep with me.” I eat a small piece of my frittata.

“Right.” He looks around and lowers his voice. “So we’re not dating, okay? I appreciate the breakfast sandwich, the almost sex last night, but I’m an asshole.”

“I know.”

“I’m—wait, you know?” He sets down his fork with a clatter.

“Yes. I’ve heard all the rumors about you sleeping around too much, you being a bad teammate. All of it.”

“And none of it matters?” he says skeptically.

“Not to me.” I take another bite. “Oh Milly, tell Helena this frittata is to die for.” I raise my voice enough so Milly can hear me across the diner.

She waves her hand in acknowledgment while Ace, already in the hole he dug for himself, tries to shovel dirt over his head. “I intentionally tried to break up my best friend’s relationship because I could see she was falling in love. I wasn’t ready to date her, but I wanted her available for when I was. I took her man out, got him drunk, took incriminating photos of him and showed them to her.”

The self-loathing in his voice almost makes me tear up. “Oh sugar, how long has it been since you talked to her?”

“Lucy? I haven’t since I left Western State.” He’s frowning again. He’s going to have a permanent problem if he keeps that up.

“That long?” I click my tongue against the roof of my mouth. No wonder he

feels awful. That wound's been festering far too long. "That's like months. You gotta call her."

He scowls. "She doesn't want to hear from me."

"Of course she does. You two were best friends?" I ask and wait for his abrupt nod of acknowledgment before repeating, "Of course she does."

"How do you know?"

"Because friends are important in our lives. Just like you're missing her, she's missing you. Not all girl-boy interactions are sexual. It's okay to miss her, but not want to sleep with her."

He rubs a hand over his suddenly weary face. That man has so much pain inside of him, and it has nothing to do with this old girlfriend. I don't know what the root cause of it is, but I'll find out and then he'll be free. I can't wait to tell my sister about him. She'll be so happy I'm doing this.

He sighs. "This isn't going how I thought it would go."

"That's all right. No need to plan. Hey, would you cut me off a piece of your steak?"

"Why didn't you order one?" he asks, but immediately starts sawing off a huge bite for me.

"Because red meat is so fattening, and I only need to look at something for me to gain five pounds."

He holds a meat-laden fork out for me. "Your body is perfect."

"Not too round?" I fish for a tiny compliment. I get a little down about my figure. It's womanly, my momma says. I wish I was more like my sister—model thin.

"I don't think there's such a thing," Ace grunts.

I tip my head toward my plate to hide my look of satisfaction. He's absolutely delightful. Ace demolishes his steak and eggs in the next three minutes while I eat half of my frittata and drink my water. He kindly waits until I'm done before he starts in again.

“So here’s the deal, Bryant. I want to fuck you, but I can’t. I don’t do teammates’ girlfriends, ex-girlfriends, sisters, daughters, mothers. No girls even tangentially related to the football team. Not a team manager or a trainer or an intern. I’ve sworn off all of them, including, and especially, the coach’s daughter. I’m good at two things: sex and football, but I’ve still managed to screw both of them up, so I can only concentrate on the one now. You’re hot as sin, and I’m ashamed I didn’t get you off last night. I had every intention of returning today to make up for it, but now we just can’t. Got it?”

I pick up my purse and slide out of the booth. He watches warily as I saunter over to his side and lean down to give him a kiss.

“No other girls. That’s my only rule.” I press my mouth against his lips, slackened in surprise. He hesitates for about a second before wrapping one of those big hands around my hip and pulling me forward. Given the setting and the time of day, the kiss goes on a smidge too long, but he looks adorably dazed and befuddled when I draw back.

Shoot. I just want to lick him all over. With a smile, I whisper, “Call your friend.”

I REGRET IT THE MOMENT I JAM MY FINGER ON THE *CALL* BUTTON.

Fucking damn it. I blame Bryant Johnson and her southern voodoo magic for this. I've wanted to call Lucy for months and was able to resist temptation, then one frustrating brunch with Bryant and I'm doing what I swore I wouldn't do.

Lucy doesn't want to hear from me. I almost destroyed her relationship. I *did* destroy our friendship. We were on cordial terms before I left Western State and I was happy with that. Well, as happy as you can be after torpedoing the friendship that mattered most to you.

I'll just hang up. Yeah, I'll hang up and if she texts about the missed call, I can blame it on a pocket dial. I quickly move my finger to *end* and—

"Hello?"

Shit.

Like an idiot, I fall mute.

"Hello?" Lucy takes on an irritated tone. I hear a lot of voices in the background but they're too muffled to make out the words. "I know it's you, JR. I have caller ID."

A choked laugh sputters out. I clear my throat and say, "Hey, sorry. I was just, ah, taking a sip of water just as you picked up."

“Oh. Okay.” She obviously doesn’t believe me, and now she sounds more uncomfortable than annoyed. “What’s up? Is everything okay?”

I sink down on the edge of my bed and rub my chin with my free hand. “Yeah, everything’s fine. I, uh...” Damn, this is awkward. “I just wanted to say hi, but I, ah, I didn’t know if it was okay to call you.”

“Oh,” she says again. There’s a rustling noise over the extension. “Hold on a sec, I’m just going to another room.”

My guard shoots up. Is she with Matty right now? I can picture him scowling at the phone, mouthing for her to hang up on the asshole who tried to fuck with their relationship. Matty Iverson is a nice guy, and was always decent to me when I was at Western, but even the nicest of guys have trouble tolerating relationship sabotage.

“Kay, back,” Lucy says, and the background is quiet now. “I’m at Matty’s,” she unknowingly confirms, “and the guys are playing video games with the volume on full blast.”

“How’s he doing? Matty, I mean?” So. Fucking. Awkward. “He’s captain this year, huh?”

“Yep, and not too thrilled about it,” she answers with a laugh. “He doesn’t like the responsibility. And he’s doing well. We’re doing well.”

There’s a slight edge to the *we’re*, as if she’s reminding me that they’re a couple and there’s not a goddamned thing I can do about it.

“Good. I’m glad,” I say thickly. I have to clear my throat again. “You sure it’s cool that I called? I just realized we hadn’t spoken since I left town, and I thought we could catch up.”

“No, I’m...” She sighs softly. “I’m glad you called. I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately.”

In another time and another place, I might’ve offered a cocky remark in response. Something about her thinking about me naked or how all chicks think about me because I’m such a stud. But I’m a bit scared to joke around with Lucy. I don’t know where we stand these days. I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to have the kind of friendship we had before.

“I was checking up on you,” she goes on, sounding sheepish.

“Yeah?” I say in surprise.

“Some light online stalking,” she admits with a laugh. “I read that you’re lighting up the defense in preseason. It sounds like it’s going really well down there.”

“It’s all right.” I shift the phone to my other ear and lie back on my elbows, staring up at the speckled ceiling of my bedroom. I’m sharing a good-sized apartment with Carter and another receiver. Technically, it’s considered a dorm since it’s on campus, but these units are all unofficially reserved for football players. “Honestly, this school is a bit whack.”

She laughs again. Man, I’ve missed that sound. I’ve missed my friend. “How so?”

“Football is crazy down here, even more so than at Western. We’ve got boosters popping into the locker room to chat with the players, like they’re some VIPs who deserve private tours and face-to-faces with. The facilities are amazing, but the people are so damn weird.”

“How so?” she asks again.

I hesitate.

“JR?”

After a second, I let out a breath. “It involves a chick,” I confess. “You cool talking about that?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?” She pauses, and then her voice softens. “We’re still friends, Ace. Don’t get me wrong—you screwed up royally. I might’ve even wanted to punch you in the face at one point—”

Shame spirals through me.

“—but you know I can’t stay mad at you.” I can totally picture the rueful shrug she’s offering me. “We have history. We grew up together. We’re friends.”

She’s so matter-of-fact. That’s what I’ve always appreciated about this girl.

She's one of the few people who's never been afraid to tell it to me like it is.

"So let's hear about this girl," she finishes, her tone teasing.

I heave another breath. "Okay, so I met her at one of the campus bars last night. We chat, flirt, all that jazz. She tells me to take her home. I say yes—obviously."

"Obviously," Lucy says dryly.

I smile to myself. "So we hook up, and it's lit. Well, kind of. She's into it at first but then gets all fucking distracted on me. So I pull out and—"

"TMI!" Lucy objects.

I snicker. "Seriously? This is probably the least graphic I've ever been."

"True. All right. So you *stop*," she rephrases.

"I *stop*," I dutifully repeat with exaggerated politeness, "and we end up watching TV instead. I fall asleep and—"

She interrupts me again. "You fell asleep before kicking her out?! Hold on, let me double-check my caller ID. Are we sure this is Ace Anderson?"

My huge grin nearly cracks my face in half. Bryant was right—I've missed having a friend. A real friend, who truly knows me and doesn't let me get away with shit. "I know, right? It was a first for me. But this is where things get weird. I wake up the next morning, and she informs me that we're dating."

Lucy's howl of laughter slides into my ear. "Oh my gosh. I love it."

"It gets worse," I grumble. "All my teammates saw me leaving the bar with her, and now *they* all think we're dating, too. And so does her father!"

Lucy sounds confused. "How does her father even know? Did she tell him? Oh gosh! Did you *meet* him?"

I swallow hard. "I met him at the beginning of the summer." Another gulp. "He's my coach."

Silence crashes over the line.

“Lucy?”

“Oh, Ace.” Her heavy sigh lasts about ten seconds. “You slept with your coach’s daughter?”

“I had no idea she was his daughter,” I admit darkly. “I didn’t find out until he pulled me into his office and patted me on the shoulder to congratulate me for dating his daughter.”

Silence.

And then more laughter. “Are you serious?” she exclaims.

“As a heart attack.” I sit up and rake a hand through my hair. “What the hell am I supposed to do about this? Bryant’s a cool chick, but I don’t want a relationship. I don’t date during the season.”

“You don’t date, period,” Lucy corrects with a snort.

“Exactly, but what do I do?” I press. “Coach said this thing with Bryant won’t affect my place on the team, but of course it will. And I don’t want a girlfriend. But this chick doesn’t take no for an answer.”

“She sounds nuts.”

“She’s not nuts.” I say immediately, but a part of me agrees with Lucy. Bryant has decided I’m some kind of project for her, and that’s totally insane. But she’s so lovable and sweet and sexy even while being insane that I can’t help but defend her.

“Are you sure she’s not a football groupie? A stalker?”

“She’s not,” I reply, and I’m confident in that answer. All my teammates talk about her like she’s a goddess to be worshipped, not a hot piece of ass that they’ve tapped. By their accounts, it’s been two years since she even looked at a football player. “She’s just...weird. I told you, this school is fucking weird.”

Lucy laughs again. “Well, then I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe just... go with the flow? Let this play out and see what happens?”

That’s her advice? Pander to a woman who may or may not be certifiable?

“How do I always find myself in these situations?” I mumble.

“Because you’re a trouble magnet,” Lucy answers. “I swear, Ace, trouble follows you wherever you go.”

Damn. That’s a depressing thought. She might be right, though.

“Oh shoot, I have to go,” she says suddenly. “I’ve got the bank on the other line. I’m applying to Northwestern and looking into getting a loan for—you know what, I’ll tell you all about it later. Talk tomorrow?”

“Sure,” I say easily, and I’ve barely said goodbye before she disconnects with a hasty “Bye.”

I set the phone on the mattress and fall back on my elbows again. Okay. So that wasn’t too bad. It went well, actually. I didn’t hear any lingering resentment on Lucy’s end, and she didn’t sound angry or disgusted to hear from me. I guess Bryant was right? Maybe Lucy missed me as much as I’ve missed her.

“...go for a run and then grab some burgers?”

I stiffen at the sound of my roommate’s voice. I’m not dumb enough to think that Carter’s talking to me. Coach’s thinking was probably that if he put two of his best offensive weapons into one house, we’d develop some chemistry. We’re decent on field, but off of it, Carter wants nothing to do with me. In his defense, though, that’s sort of the mentality of the whole damn team.

“Yeah, sounds good,” my other roommate answers. Zane Bettman is one of our tight ends, and he and Carter are glued at the hip.

Their footsteps approach my door, and for one pathetic, hopeful second, I wonder if maybe this is the day they invite me to chill with them. They know I don’t have classes today. They know I haven’t had lunch yet. They—

They’re walking away.

I tamp down my disappointment. Yeah. Whatever. Who cares if my teammates don’t want to spend time with me? I don’t need to be their friend. I just need them to do what I fucking say on the field.

I hear the front door open and close. Silence falls over the apartment. I

consider taking a nap. Maybe studying the playbook for a bit. The defensive schemes that the coaches believe our opponent will run on Saturday are almost too simplistic. I should go over them again to make sure I'm not missing anything.

But I do neither of those things. Instead, I find myself thinking about Bryant and every bizarre thing she said over brunch.

I think about how that jackass Ken or Kyle or whatever his name was had tried to apply for *my position*. My position as what? Her unwilling boyfriend?

I think about her insistence that I'd make a great safety. She's wrong, of course.

I think about her one rule—no other girls.

And then I think about her body—"It's not too round?" Christ, she looked so damn cute when she asked that. And what a stupid fucking question. Her body is goddamn spectacular, all curves and valleys and smooth, touchable skin.

My hand slides under the elastic of my sweatpants before I can stop it. My dick is an iron spike, throbbing at the memory of Bryant's fuckable body. After a beat, I tug my sweatpants down and encircle my stiff shaft. I give it a long, slow pump, and a shiver of heat races up my spine.

I want to screw her again. I won't deny it. Can't deny it. I'm so hard that my mouth is dry and my balls are drawn tight. I start stroking off in earnest, squeezing the head of my cock with each upstroke. Pre-come leaks all over my hand. My palm is sticky as it moves rapidly up and down my dick. My breathing quickens.

Damn this girl with her crazy words and her perfect, ripe tits and the hot, tight pussy that clutched me so hard last night and—

I come with a loud groan, grateful that my roommates aren't around to hear it. My climax spills all over my hand and abs, my cock jerking in pleasure.

Damn this girl.

“YOU’D LOVE THIS GUY, GINNY. HE’S SO TORTURED, BUT HE HAS SO MUCH potential. He reminds me a bit of a wounded lion, you know? He’ll lash out when you try to help him, but not because he’s mean or evil. He’s just hurt and scared and doesn’t understand why you’re trying to pull the thorn out of his paw. But if you’re gentle and persistent, you can show him that the thorn doesn’t have to define him. The thorn can be removed and then he’ll feel better. He’ll *be* better. Oh, boy, I’m rambling today, aren’t I?”

I laugh to myself, and I can almost hear Ginny giggling in return. My sister had the most beautiful laugh in the world. Every time I heard it, it was like I was suddenly engulfed by a big yellow sunbeam. Warm and wonderful.

My spirits sink a little. Ginny’s laughter had died, and I couldn’t do anything to bring it back to life.

I stare at my sister’s headstone, my eyes lingering on her name. Virginia Josephine Johnson. So very feminine. Momma called dibs on naming rights with my parents’ firstborn, and since my momma is a paragon of femininity, my sister was given a name suited for a southern belle.

My daddy had naming rights for me. Bryant Johnson. I don’t even have a middle name, because daddy didn’t want to dilute the honor he was bestowing on Bear Bryant—as if Bear would even know.

“I miss you.” *And I’m still mad at you*, I want to say but I keep that part to myself. She’s already gone—no sense in upsetting her up in heaven by

chastising her for deserting me.

It took me a long time to forgive her. She didn't have to end her life. She could've talked to me, leaned on me, let my love heal her wounds. But Ginny was delicate like my momma. Gamma, Momma's mother, said that there just wasn't enough of Ginny to cope with her grief and that I should be grateful for my wide hips because my sturdiness would help keep my broken heart from killing me. Ginny would've rolled her eyes so hard at that statement, she would've had a headache for days.

There are still times when I don't understand why my sister did what she did, but I try and understand. That said, I miss her like crazy. And I honor her memory however I can.

"He doesn't know how to treat a woman right," I say, switching the subject back to Ace. "He's entitled, but that's expected when you're dealing with quarterbacks. They believe the world revolves around them." I smile at my sister. "I'll teach him, though, don't you worry."

The softest of honks comes from behind me. It's more of a squeak than a honk, actually, which tells me that Kayla and Dawn feel bad about interrupting me. I check my phone and realize I've been here longer than the ten minutes I promised. I know my friends think it's morbid that I visit here so often, but they love me so they put up with my crazy. They understand the importance of sisterhood. That's the whole point of sororities. It's not the social events, the parties, or even the inside scoops on tests and papers and whatnot. It's the knowledge that you're never alone when you have a sister.

Besides, it's not like I had much of a choice. My momma was AO and Gamma was, too. My freshman year, I made the mistake of telling Momma I was considering pledging Beta Nu instead, a more progressive sorority, and she literally clutched the pearls at her neck. I think she would have disowned me if I hadn't pledged Alpha Omega.

"I have to go," I tell Ginny. "The girls and I are on our way to a charity bake sale. I made apple tarts—your favorite." A lump rises in my throat. "I'll come see you again next week. I bet I'll have lots of JR updates for you. He hasn't told me what JR stands for yet, but I'm sure I'll get it out of him soon. Bye, sis. Love you."

I blow a kiss at Ginny's headstone and hurry over to Kayla's Mercedes.

"Sorry," I say as I slide into the backseat. "The time got away from me."

"It's all good," Dawn answers, twisting around from the passenger side to look at me. "You tell her about your new project?"

I nod. "Of course."

"Good. So now you can tell *us*," Kayla teases as she starts the car. "You've been too secretive about this one and that needs to change."

I grin. "I haven't been secretive. I just haven't quite figured him out yet."

"It's not hard," Dawn says dryly. "From all accounts, he's a sleaze."

"Yeah, you picked a tough one," Kayla agrees. "I was checking out the AO forum last night and there were a ton of posts about Ace from sisters at our Western State chapter."

I nod again. I looked at those forums, too. I saw a lot of "ASSHOLE! STAY AWAY!" and "This guy fucked me and then never spoke to me again" warnings. But that's the way it is with these guys, and if no one takes the time to teach them the right way to treat a woman, one day in the future they'll crush someone like Ginny who won't be able to recover. So, warnings aside, I'm not giving up on Ace.

And truth be told, I truly didn't sense a lack of respect when I was with him last night. He was attentive to my needs. He was honest about his intentions. There's something redeemable about him. I'm sure of it.

"Either way, I call dibs on him when you're done," Dawn announces, grinning at me in the rearview mirror.

"What about me?" Kayla interjects. "I've dated three duds in a row. If anyone deserves a Bryant reject, it's me."

I lean forward and pat her shoulder. "You'll find the right one."

"No, you should give me the right one," she replies. "And I'll take Ace. It's unfair that Greg Betton went to that Delta girl! All your boys should end up with one of us AOs."

“Now, Kayla, you know I can’t control that. Love goes where it needs to go.” I slide back into my seat.

“Why can’t you put a good word in for me while you’re correcting Ace’s behavior?” she asks.

Dawn flicks Kayla’s arm. “Stop whining—I haven’t had a relationship since sophomore year. So if anyone is more deserving, it’s me.” She twists around to look at me. “I wonder if he’s good in bed. He must be or the sisters up in Western State would never have kept sleeping with him. God, he’s hot.” She fans a hand in front of her face

“Truth. I nearly orgasmed when he grabbed Carlene’s asshole ex by the collar,” Kayla says.

“Right? I mean, he can’t be that bad?” Dawn directs this last question toward me.

I shrug. “I know as much as you do. We’ve all read the same stuff and heard the stories. He’s a dog, and he tends to flit from one woman to another without much regard for her feelings, but we also saw him stand up for a stranger. I’m sure there are other hidden depths to him that need teasing to the surface.” I don’t share that I found him unusually perceptive in the bedroom.

Making love with Ace is an extraordinary departure from my usual set of behaviors, and I haven’t quite worked out what it all means. I’m terribly attracted to him, but my program is a catch and release one, not a catch and keep. Until I can figure out my exact path forward, I’m not sharing those particularly intimate details with my sisters—not even Ginny.

Dawn twists to face the front again and rests her head against the back of the seat. “He’s got the biggest hands. His dick must be enormous.”

Kayla nods. “I swear I saw an outline of it the other night and it was fine. And his lips—I wanted to bite them.”

A twinge of pain zips through my arms and I look down to see that I’ve clenched my fingers together so tightly that I’ve hurt myself. Kayla and Dawn can’t stop rhapsodizing about Ace’s physical features, and for some reason, that really bothers me. I mean, it’s not like I plan to keep Ace, but do

they need to spend so much time talking about his private parts?

“Hey, what’s our charity goal again?” I ask in an attempt to divert their attention.

“Five thousand,” Kayla says immediately.

“It’s an impossible goal,” Dawn moans.

“We should start charging more for pies. They take a lot of time to make, and since it’s for charity I don’t see why we aren’t jacking the prices up.”

“That’s not a bad idea.” Dawn makes a note in her phone. “Maybe we can charge forty a pie and cake and maybe fifteen or twenty for a dozen cookies.”

I let the rest of the conversation about baked-good pricing swirl around me while I try to figure out why in sweet heaven I felt annoyed by my very best girlfriends talking about one of my projects. Because that’s all Ace is to me—a project. An asshole to be made into a gentleman who won’t drive precious girls to take their own lives out of grief.



DADDY HAS A RITUAL. WELL, HE HAS LOTS OF RITUALS. PEOPLE IN SPORTS ARE unusually superstitious. Whether intentionally or whether it was beaten out of him by his own momma, my daddy’s superstitions don’t have anything to do with not washing your socks or your hat or jersey. Instead, he likes to have the same meal before every game—beef roast, cheesy potatoes, and almond green beans. It has to be prepared by Momma, although since Ginny’s death, I’ve been doing most of the preparing while Momma sits at the kitchen table directing traffic. She’s never fully recovered from losing her oldest daughter.

No one really expected her to. The curse of low expectations resulted in her wafting around the house looking like a frail twig. Daddy’s response to Ginny’s death was to feed me. I think he bought into Gamma’s theory that Ginny’s thinness was the reason she couldn’t handle her heartbreak, even though anyone with sense knew it had to do with Thaddeus Larson. That boy grabbed Ginny’s nineteen-year-old heart in his cruel hand and squeezed it until she couldn’t bear the pain one moment longer.

I believe that Southern U's three-year losing streak is due to my daddy's grief. The football season is a long one. It starts officially in September and runs through January, if you're lucky, but the real season is year-round because a college coach's success is only as good as his last recruiting class.

Daddy has to be on the road quite a bit, visiting homes and promising other mommas that he's gonna take good care of their sons. There was a time there, after Ginny died, he felt like he couldn't make that promise. After all, he couldn't protect his own daughter so how could he be trusted to take care of anyone else's child?

Curly James Myers' momma is the one who snapped Daddy out of his funk. She came up to him after last year's heartbreaking loss to Auburn and told him that he couldn't give up on Southern because of what happened to Ginny. That he owed it to all of the other kids in his life to keep on fighting. That was when he made the offer for Ace.

It was a risky, unusual move for Daddy, but one that's going to pay off. I just know it.

"Dinner was delicious, as always. Thank you, ladies." He wipes his mouth with the cloth napkin and lays it carefully next to his knife.

"It's our pleasure," Momma says. "How is the team looking this year?"

"Fantastic. I'm real pleased with this group of men. They're coming together as a team, and I think they're going to do great things. I hope you come and see a few games."

"Perhaps I will," she says.

But we all know she won't.

"I'll be there, Daddy," I chirp, trying to put a smile back on his face.

"I sure hope so," he says and gives me that smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

"Did the charity sale go well?" Momma asks, clearly done with football.

"Yup. We were a little short, though. The goal was five thousand dollars, but Dawn Markowitz dropped ten pies. She had these brand-new Stuart

Weitzman wedges on and rolled her ankle about two steps away from the tent.”

“Ten of them?” Daddy asks with hilarity lurking in his words. Even my mother hides a smile behind her napkin.

I grin back. If my family is happy, I’m happy. “Yeah. It was sort of hilarious, but Dawn felt terrible. I told them you would cover the difference.”

He nods. “You write out the check, Cub, and I’ll sign it.”

Daddy’s called me Cub since I was a baby. Baby Bear. Get it?

“Will we be having any of the new pledges here this fall?” Momma sets her napkin down. Marni, our housekeeper, bustles in the moment the snowy cloth hits the table. She must’ve been watching from the kitchen door.

I scoot back so Marni has easy access to my plate. “Sure, I was thinking a viewing party for the Clemson and Florida matchup on Friday night since we’re going to play the Saturday night game.”

The corners of Momma’s mouth turn down. “Maybe those girls don’t like football like you, Bryant. How about we do a pre-Halloween event? The girls can decorate special trick or treat baskets that we can fill and drop off at the children’s hospital.”

Daddy clears his throat when I don’t immediately agree. Hiding my disappointment, I nod obediently. “That sounds great. I’ll stop and pick up some of those plastic pumpkins this week. I’m sure we’ve got enough other stuff around the house.”

She smiles approvingly, but before I can breathe a sigh of relief, she brings up another concern of hers. “Louise Cottrell called and said you turned down the little sister program for the Sigmas.”

I grimace. “I’m too busy. Besides, I only did it my sophomore year because I was dating Cooper Smythe, so it made sense. Since we’ve both moved on, someone else is better suited for that position.” Being a little sister to a fraternity house is a lot of hard work. Cooper was my second-semester sophomore project, and while he was a tough nut to crack, he ended up in good shape. One of my sorority sisters is currently dating him. She says he’s

the best boyfriend she's ever had. I give myself a mental pat on the back.

"I don't know why you broke up with that nice boy," Momma chides. "His father is the mayor. He could've hooked you up with a nice job at City Hall."

"I suppose."

"If you would just hold on to one of these boys, Bryant. Your sister—"

"She has a new man." Daddy jumps in to save me.

"Oh? Who is it this time?" Momma swings her gorgeous hazel eyes in my direction.

I pin on my brightest smile. "Oh, Momma, you would just love him. He's a northern boy and has that clipped Yankee accent, but he's just gorgeous. Green eyes. Light brown hair. About six feet five." I slide a sly glance toward Daddy. "Well, the program states he's six-five, but I'm thinking he's about an inch shorter."

Daddy smiles benignly. "We don't lie about stuff like that in our program."

I hoot. "Ha. That's a whopper. You listed Travarius Daly as five-eleven and anyone with eyes knows he's not much more than a couple inches taller than me. In fact, when I've got my hair pinned up, he's not much taller than my bun."

"Maybe your hair shouldn't be so high," Daddy suggests with a grin.

I playfully stick my nose in the air. "If I'm not using at least one can of hairspray per dance, I'm not even trying."

We all share a laugh at that, which is a good note to end our meal on. "May I please be excused?"

"Of course, darling." Momma rises from the table at the same time I do.

Daddy brings up the rear. "I hope you know what you're doing?" he murmurs low so my mother doesn't hear him.

"Of course I do."

"Don't break that boy. He's the linchpin to our success this year. My backup

quarterback is so green, he'd give a leprechaun a run for his money."

"Don't worry. By the time I'm done with Ace Anderson, the scouts'll be lining up to draft him," I declare.

“YOU READY FOR THE GAME TOMORROW?”

I look up from the playbook to find Julio Fleming, a six-foot, four-inch wide receiver, standing in front of me, squeezing the gloves in his hands so tight the mesh is going to leave an imprint on his palms. The redshirt freshman is making his first start for the Renegades—just like me.

I set my playbook aside. “Yeah. It’s a good team, but we’re better in every aspect. There’s no way their defensive backs are keeping up with you.”

“Right.” He nods, his chin bobbing up and down, but his eyes aren’t conveying any confidence.

That’s not good. Wide receivers are the divas of a football team. They run on self-confidence and Red Bull. If Julio isn’t walking around the locker room with his shirt off, beating his chest, there’s a problem. I take a quick look around the room and find that no one else seems concerned.

Julio doesn’t move. Instead, he gazes at me with stupid hope in his eyes and waits for me to say something inspirational as if I’m Lou fucking Holtz. I rub my palms against my sweatpants. “Okay, so what’s your favorite route?”

“Batman,” he says immediately.

The Batman route is where Julio and Carter line up on opposite edges of the line of scrimmage. When the ball is snapped, Julio runs straight and to the left corner. With two receivers, the pattern looks like a bat’s wings.

“It’s the fifth play we’re running,” I remind him, pointing to the printout I have taped inside the playbook. Coach Johnson always scripts the first fifteen offensive plays.

“Yeah, I know.” Julio scratches his head. Confidence is contagious in a locker room, but so is uncertainty, which is why whatever is bothering Julio needs to be nipped in the bud.

I get to my feet. “We’re going to murder them. The Lions don’t have a chance against our offense and the defense is going to make them call their mommies in tears. You run like you have rockets in your cleats so there’s no way any d-back keeps up. Doesn’t matter which route you run. If you’re open, I’ll find you.”

I slap my hand on his back, but before I can escape, he says, “You got family coming?”

It’s the hesitant way he says it that strikes a chord of understanding. The kid’s parents are coming, and he’s afraid he’s going to fall on his face in front of them. “No, we can’t swing it. Money, you know?”

“You, too?” He raises his eyebrows.

“Yeah, my old man is always running behind on the cash.” In fact, the old man called me a couple of weeks ago wondering if I could get some booster to pay for his flight here. I reminded him that’d be an NCAA violation and hung up.

“This is my first game my dad is coming to see,” Julio admits.

“He’s going to be really impressed. I bet you score a touchdown on the Batman play.”

“Too bad you’re not going to be with family.”

“It’s all good. I don’t need—”

“Of course he’s got family. The entire Johnson clan is cheering their heads off for you.” Bryant appears beside me like a ghost, carrying a huge plastic container. “All eighty million of them.” She gives me a saucy wink before turning to Julio. “Look at you, Julio. You’re looking gorgeous this fine fall

afternoon. I bet you can't wait to get out on that field tomorrow and show everyone how amazing you are."

Julio's chest inflates like a balloon. He flashes a bright white smile at her. "You know it." He claps his palms together. "Best hands in the conference."

"Conference!" Bryant exclaims. "You're underselling yourself. You've got the best hands in the damn country, equaled only by our very own Carter." She points a finger toward our number one wide receiver, who gives her the thumbs up in return.

Carter calls from across the room. "What you got there, Miss Bryant?"

"It's a little pre-game treat." She shoves the container in my hands. "Ace is going to pass them out. Only one per player, except for you, sugar. You get two." She tugs on my jersey, forcing me to lean down close enough for her to plant one of those too light, too fleeting kisses. The ones that heat my blood but don't give me any satisfaction. "You're going to be so awesome tomorrow, Julio. There's going to be at least one highlight with you dancing in the end zone."

She squeezes my biceps, which sends a charge of electricity through me. Damn, what the fuck is wrong with me? "Ace, these are homemade granola bars. Those processed ones you guys gobble down like they're Tic Tacs have too much sugar. I make these with honey so that they're delicious but nutritious. You like almonds, right?"

"Um, yeah. How do you know?"

"You mentioned it the other night."

I stare at her skeptically.

"At the bar," she adds and smiles again, two little dimples appearing on the sides of her mouth. My dick jumps in response. "I'll see you tomorrow."

The minute she's out of the way, presumably down the hall to see her dad, the guys swarm.

"What'd she bring?"

"Is it cookies?"

“She’s not bringing cookies the day before a game, dumbshit.”

“Homemade granola bars,” Julio announces as if they’re his treat, not mine. The box is ripped from my hands and passed around. By the time it makes its way back to me, I expect it to be empty. Instead, two are left.

Ty Masters grins as I look inside with surprise. “The lady said two were for you. If she found out that we didn’t leave you enough, she’d skin us.”

“You guys really like her.” It’s a statement, not a question.

“What? You don’t?” he asks around a mouth full of granola.

“Girls and football aren’t a real good mix.”

Ty swallows and then shrugs. “Depends on the girl and the guy. There are dudes in here who are married, who have long time girlfriends, and who are single. Just depends. You one of those that can’t juggle both?”

“Course not.” I shove one of the bars into my mouth so I don’t have to keep talking about this idiotic topic.

Carter leans against the locker next to mine. I hadn’t had so much as another guy within two feet of me before Bryant appeared. Now, they’re settling in like we’re going to have story time at the library.

“I’ve been seeing Lea Royce,” Carter announces between bites. “That Olympic distance runner, you know?”

I nod, not because I know this girl, but because I recognize her name. Next to me, Ty grunts because his mouth of full of granola. Someone starts passing around a gallon jug of water.

“Anyway, the girl can go all night. Like her lungs must be the size of the quad. She has no quit. I can’t keep up.”

“You better be staying away tonight,” Ty warns. “We need you tomorrow. Besides, no girls in the hotel.”

The team stays in a hotel the night before a game—both home and away. Coach Johnson says it’s to keep us out of trouble and to make sure we get a good night’s rest, not to mention it’s easier to do a bed check in one hotel

than a dozen different dorms and apartments.

“Don’t worry,” Carter says. “I’m not going to, but I got to have a plan of attack. I need to fucking tire her ass out. Our reputation as elite athletes is on the line here!”

“Glutes, man. All the power thrusting comes from the glutes.” Zane smacks Carter’s ass. “Do a hundred squat bridges and she won’t be able to walk the next day.”

Travarius disagrees. “No way. Abs all the way. You gotta do more curls. If your core is strong, you should be able to fuck all night.”

“Fuck that shit,” Zane protests. “The gluteals move your hips. Your dick is directly influenced by the hips.”

Beside me, Ty’s eyes light up in glee. “No idea what you’re talking about, man. Can’t see it.”

Zane puts his hands on his hips. “The hips, Masters. The glutes are our biggest muscle group. If you’re gonna thrust with any power, your glutes have to be fucking jacked.”

“Still no clue,” Masters declares. A couple of the other guys start to laugh into their hands.

Zane holds a pair of imaginary hips in front of him. “Like this, you assholes.” He pumps his pelvis. “Don’t any of you know how to fuck anymore? Thrust with your hips.”

“What the hell are you doing, Bettman?” roars our offensive coordinator.

Zane immediately stops, pelvis out. Masters collapses on the floor. The rest of the players who’d come over to watch the spectacle of Zane demonstrating his bedroom techniques are screaming their laughter.

He flushes. Smothering my own chuckles, I stand up and, as solemnly as possible, say, “Your booty is the best booty, Zane. I have no doubt your girl is satisfied every morning.”

The tight end gives me a suspicious look and flicks both of his middle fingers up. “You’re all assholes, especially you, Masters. Your ass is flat as a

pancake. You can't even keep your pants up without a belt. I doubt you even last five minutes in the sack."

Ty is still rolling on the floor.

"All right, Princesses. You have five minutes to get out on the field for a walk-through or you'll get curfew thirty minutes early," yells Coach.

"Need some help down there, buddy?" I ask dryly.

Masters shakes his head and drags himself to his feet. He swipes a hand in front of his eyes. "Shit, some guys are too easy." He winks at me, then yells after Zane. "Why don't you let me spot you while you're doing those squat bridges? I want to know more about your power thrusting techniques."

Zane doesn't even turn around as he flips Masters off again.

The locker room quiets down as Bryant appears from the coach's hallway.

"Thanks for the bars, Bryant," Travarius calls out.

A bunch of other guys chime in with their appreciation. Bryant waves a cheery hand at all of them, but she doesn't stop until she reaches me and Ty.

"How's your brother?" she asks Ty.

"Good," he answers. "Your bars were awesome."

"Daddy said that Knox is going to try to see our game against Florida State since he plays Jacksonville the next day."

"That's right." Ty arches an eyebrow in my direction, as if I'm going to completely lose it at the sight of my old teammate.

Yeah, it's not something I'm looking forward to. Knox is best friends with Matty Iverson, Lucy's boyfriend. But I'm not a fragile flower who's going to fall apart at the first hint of conflict. If that were the case, I wouldn't be the fucking starting quarterback of one of the best college teams in the country. "Be good to see an old teammate."

"Won't it, though." Ty's voice is flat, as if he's remembering all the bad blood that drove me from Western State to this locker room.

“It certainly will,” Bryant says. She pats my chest and the uneasiness fades, replaced by an anxiousness of a different nature. “Have a good game tomorrow. I’ll see you after.”

She turns away, trailing her perfectly manicured fingernails across my chest. Goosebumps pop up on my exposed forearms, and I have to exert some willpower to prevent a shudder from breaking out at that light touch.

My loose sweatpants feel too tight. This no-girl thing is killing me. What I need to do is convince her to climb back in bed with me so that we can fuck each other out of our systems. So my body doesn’t immediately react every time she comes within sniffing distance.

Her dad already knows we’re seeing each other, and I’m still the starter for tomorrow’s game. Tomorrow night, after we win, I’m going to borrow a few of Zane’s power-thrusting moves and fuck Bryant senseless.

“You bet your sweet ass, you will,” I mutter.

Bryant’s mouth curves up. “Can’t wait.”

I watch that juicy butt as she walks out, and when I notice Ty watching, too, an involuntarily growl rumbles in my throat. He throws a smirk in my direction before heading to his own locker.

I tear my eyes away to frown at the floor. Did I just growl at my teammate like an animal over a girl I don’t even really want? And what about the way I acted with Kent the other day? I was irritated that he wanted in her pants. Ty eying Bryant, Kent wanting to be her man—none of this should bother me. But it all does. I chalk it up to unfinished business. She’s an itch I need to scratch. I get in bed with her, screw her, repeat my no-relationships speech, and then we’re done. Over. *Finito*.

Bryant stops at the doorway and turns slightly, her voice carrying so that the entire roster of a hundred or so guys can hear her. “Zane’s right, boys. It’s all in the glutes.”

I’m effing doomed.

7

Bryant

LIKE SUPERSTITIONS, PRE-GAME RITUALS ARE AS IMPORTANT AS ANYTHING. THEY don't exist merely because players believe a certain set of events need to happen to secure a win. Instead, it's sort of a mental muscle memory. Practicing the same thing a hundred times a day, a thousand times a week, ensures that the ball is snapped at the exact moment or thrown to the precise spot just as the receiver arrives. Similarly, high-fiving a sign or rubbing the pig's belly or, as is our case, slapping the behind of an iron horse as the team runs down the tunnel, puts our boys in the winning frame of mind.

The day starts out with a team breakfast, followed by a team meeting wherein the captains talk about how the team is like a military unit. They lose together, and they win together. Everything is done together. Secretly, I think if they shit, showered, and shaved together, Daddy'd be for that, too.

After the captains' speeches, the team breaks up into its smaller components. The quarterbacks and skill positions, such as the running backs, wide receivers and tight ends, meet together to go over the scripted first fifteen plays. The defensive squads huddle together to be reminded of their assignments.

Once the meetings wrap up, the players collect in the locker room and are given time to settle their nerves. Most choose to sit in front of their lockers with their Beats headphones and their preferred musical selections blaring in their ears. Some will cruise Twitter or Instagram or Snapchat. The trainer'll come in and make sure everyone's got every pad, sock, cup, and glove that

they need. They gear up. Outside in the stadium, the fans are gathering. The band's marching off the field. The cheerleaders are getting into formation.

About twenty minutes before the opening whistle, Daddy enters the locker room to extol the virtues of perfection. Every college team that wins a championship must strive for perfection. Nothing else is acceptable, because in college, one loss can mean the end of your season. The goal from the spring workouts through summer camps and pre-season scrimmages is to prep the team to win a championship.

Lots of teams schedule a weak opponent for the first game so that their boys can get a taste of the field before the real competition starts. Not Daddy. We start off with a big-name opponent because the Renegades aren't afraid of nobody. That and because winning against only weak teams has prevented more than one team from being deemed worthy of one of the precious four playoff spots. Playing strong non-conference teams can also serve as a hedge against a loss, God forbid, knock-on-wood, throw the salt over the shoulder, should we suffer one.

I stand halfway down the cavernous cement tunnel next to the assistant Athletic Director. Sally's a wiry woman with ash blonde hair that looks gray in certain lights. She adamantly refuses to color her hair, saying that the coaches should know how much they stress her out. Her thin fingers are wrapped around a clipboard that has about five thousand things on it, only ten of which are of any importance.

"We going to win today?" she says. Sally's from Michigan and kinda talks like Ace—abrupt and to the point.

"Course we are."

"You'd say that if we were playing a professional team."

"There's nothing wrong in believing the glass is half full, Sally." I believe in Daddy's team so, yeah, if our boys were running down the tunnel to meet the Tennessee Titans, our local NFL franchise, I'd still tell everyone we were going to win. That's my mental muscle memory.

"There are two scouts here. One from Denver and the other from Dallas." She taps the board impatiently against her chest.

“I know. Daddy told me. I’ve got it all under control.” Alum, boosters, scouts, anyone that needs a little special handling falls under my purview. I keep a file on every visitor that walks through the stadium doors. My dossiers on these scouts are probably better than their notes of our boys.

“Good. Good,” she sighs with relief. Sally’s an assistant AD because she prefers to deal with numbers, papers, and computer screens. People are not her forte. A rumble down the hallway signals that the speech about striving for perfection is ending. She shoots me an apprehensive look. I think athletes might scare her.

“I’ve got everything under control,” I assure her.

“Great.” She gives me a sickly grin. “Call me if you need anything.”

I wave my fingers. “Go on, Miss Sally. Mr. Conrad probably needs you.”

“He does, doesn’t he?” She doesn’t waste another second before scurrying off.

Me? I press my back against the cinder block wall and close my eyes, feeling the thunder of a couple hundred feet bursting out the double doors of the locker room and stomping down the halls.

Ty, Carter, and Travarius link arms at the front. Their teammates line behind them like barely contained animals, pawing at the ground, steam blowing from their nostrils. Ace is directly behind the captains. To his right is the skittish Julio. To his left, our gentle giant Samson. The stream of players seems endless from my viewpoint—a veritable sea of crimson and black.

These are crusaders of a different ilk, conquerors of the turf. The deep beats of the Southern U drumline pound down the tunnel. A wave of sound starts at the front and rolls toward the back, flipping over itself again and again until the space is one giant roar of excitement. My daddy grins at me before sprinting out into the adoring crowd. The team runs by, leaving my heart in my throat and a pair of ears ringing with the team’s anticipatory cries victory.

There’s nothing like opening day. Nothing.

After the last of the staff makes its way onto the field, I follow sedately behind. By the time I get to the field, the band has dispersed and the

cheerleaders are taking their places in front of the student section. Ty and the other captains are at midfield for the coin toss.

My heart does a little flip when I locate Ace standing with his toes close to the white paint marking the sidelines. He looks good in those tight, black pants. Some girls don't like sports, but I figure that if they had a chance to stand this close to so many fine male behinds, they'd become fans real quick.

No one is even within a shoulder pad's distance of him. I noticed when I first came into the locker room yesterday that he was alone as well, struggling to connect with Julio, the one guy who wanted a piece of his time. It's hard to be a loner on a team, particularly one like Daddy's where he subscribes to the theory that you're loyal to your teammate above all else. Like, if you had to choose between saving Daddy and your teammate, Daddy would expect you to save your teammate.

During the pre-season, I noticed Ace holding himself aloof. I attributed to it him being new, but it hasn't changed, not after all these months. That's going to be a problem if it continues.

If he keeps isolating himself from the team, not only will the locker room become colder than a northern wind, but his on-field performance will be dismal. And if he falters on the field, he's going to become one of those self-hating assholes that turns to the only area that he's successful in—ruining women's lives.

Dramatic? Perhaps, but entirely truthful. Each encounter with Ace drives home the universe's message that I need to save him from himself and thereby save my sisters—the girls that are still alive, that is, because I was too late to save the one lying in the Angel's Wings cemetery.

A little ways down the sidelines, one of my marks stands with his head buried in his notepad. I amble his way, swiping a bottle of carbonated mango and apricot juice I had made up for him. "I thought y'all went digital last year, Mr. Khukhrain."

The portly man's head jerks up. A small smile spreads across his face when he sees me. "I hate those tablets, Bryant. And I told you to call me Mo that last time I was here," he chides softly.

“Oh, I know, but I can’t do that. Momma would pinch me purple if she heard me disrespecting one of my elders. Not that you look much older than any of those boys with the pads on. You thirsty?” I thrust the bottle toward him. “No liquor, of course. Just fruit and a little Sprite.”

He takes the plastic container with a happy grin. “You always treat me right down here.”

“So where’s your fancy tablet that I saw you with last year?”

“That thing doesn’t work. It’s made for those twenty and under.”

“Is that what it says on the box?” I tease.

“Yes. No matter what the NFL says, I do better with paper and pen anyway. Besides, if I had a tablet, I’d probably be forced to watch video instead of talking to you. How is everything?”

“Everything’s real good. How’s your daughter? She still playing the piano?” Mo Khukhrain’s daughter enjoys piano, ballet, and softball—in that order.

His eyes light up. “She’s amazing, Bryant. You should see her.”

“You got video?”

With a slight flush on his cheeks, Mo drags his phone out of his back pocket and expertly swipes to a short two-minute clip of his twelve-year-old daughter playing a beautiful and, mercifully short, number. “Don’t tell my boss I know how to use any electronics.”

“This is just between you and me and the turf, Mr. Khukhrain. She sounds amazing. I bet she goes to Juilliard someday.”

“Maybe,” he says, but his chest is puffed out with pride. Stuffing his phone away, he tilts his head toward the field. “Anyone in particular I should be watching?”

“Besides Ty Masters?” Everyone has eyes on Ty, but Dallas didn’t send a scout to the first game of our season to just take Ty’s measure. Mo’s here to find new talent, and, maybe, to see what Ace has to offer.

I don’t lead with Ace, though. I start out with the younger guys. “Julio, our

redshirt freshman wide receiver has hands like glue and feet with jets attached. He's so fast you won't believe your eyes. Carter is one of those rare birds that flies high but is still one of our best locker room leaders."

"And your new quarterback?" Mo asks, taking the bait perfectly. When he thinks back on this conversation, he'll remember bringing Ace up himself.

"Mr. Anderson will surprise you. He's got amazing instincts. He knows where everyone is on the field at all times. His passes are sharp, and his release is quick. You should keep your eye on him all season long."

"He doesn't have much range."

"Not every quarterback in the NFL needs to be able to chuck the leather seventy yards. Ace is smart. He knows how to make the most of what a defense offers. A team only needs a few yards each down to march into the end zone. And all touchdowns are scored with six points, no matter if it's a fifty-yard bomb or a two-yard rush."

Mo jots something in his notebook, hopefully Ace's name. "Your dad is lucky to have you." He tips his bottle up in a mock salute. "And so are these boys."

"I'm lucky to have them. I'll see you at halftime Mr. Khukhrain. Enjoy the game." I pat his arm before moving down to charm the scout from Denver, who, unlike Mr. Khukhrain, drinks a dark IPA during the games.

By halftime, the team's up by four touchdowns. And Ace, despite his coolness with his teammates, is connecting with all his receivers, even the nervous Julio.

I cheer loud and proud and by the third quarter I'm so hoarse I barely have enough voice to brag about the players to Mr. Khukhrain, who's making furious notes on his pad.

Daddy takes Ace out in the fourth quarter. Disappointment spreads across his gorgeous face, but he puts on a headset and pays attention, which wins points with Daddy. Ace is a decent man. I know he is. He just needs a little more confidence in himself so he doesn't have to find it in women.

Renegades 1-0

EVERYONE IS RIDING THE HIGH OF VICTORY AND ADULATION THAT COMES WITH winning our season opener. Me, I'm just relieved. We scored six touchdowns tonight—two running scores, and four through the air, courtesy of me. I wasn't expecting us to win by such a huge margin.

I was worried I might choke out there. Let down my new teammates and my coach. I was afraid that if we lost, the team would write me off, decide I wasn't worth their time, blame me for screwing up their season. Luckily, that didn't happen. Or, at least, nobody's writing me off when it comes to football. In terms of friendship...yeah, I don't think we're on the same page.

"You know what the opposite of *social* is?" Carter wanders over to where I'm sitting. The after party is at the Sigma frat house, which is packed. There are so many people here that it's standing room only. Since I'm the quarterback and therefore a god at this college, I snagged a seat on one of the couches in the corner. I've been nursing a beer here for the past hour.

"Antisocial?" I offer.

"No, the opposite of social is *you*, dude." Carter rolls his eyes. "What the fuck's wrong with you? We're supposed to be celebrating."

I grunt. "I am. This is how I celebrate."

"By hiding in the corner? No wonder Western State was so eager to get rid of

you,” he cracks. “You’re the no-fun police.”

He laughs to himself and wanders off, leaving me bristling. Fuck that. I threw two perfect spirals into that asshole’s hands tonight and he’s talking shit about me? I suck in an angry breath, but I don’t know if I’m actually pissed at Carter, or if I’m pissed at myself for alienating my team again.

So far, Carter’s the only one who’s even approached me. Despite my stellar performance tonight, my teammates didn’t offer more than awkwardly slap my back and say “good game.” Once we got to the party, they all spread out in different directions and forgot about my existence.

The guys are enjoying the hell out of themselves. Travarius and some of the other d-backs are gathered at one side of the room, cheering some freshman on while he does a keg stand. Zane is groping a pretty brunette in a shadowy corner. Her red nails scrape down the back of his T-shirt as he practically dry-humps her in front of everyone. Carter is flexing in front a group of adoring girls who keep trying to squeeze his biceps.

Last year, I would’ve been the one lapping up the attention. I would’ve found a sexy, willing woman and sweet-talked her upstairs, where I would proceed to fuck her brains out. After we were done, she’d take off and I’d give myself an hour or so to recover, and then I’d probably go back to the party and find myself another hot ass to tap. Screwing two chicks in one night was a common occurrence for me.

My dick twitches at the memory. Christ, I wouldn’t mind getting laid tonight. Jerking off to thoughts of Bryant is fun and all, but it doesn’t compare to the feeling of sliding my cock into a tight, warm pussy and—

No other girls. That’s my only rule.

Frustration rises in my chest as Bryant’s soft-spoken warning floats into my head. Seriously. This is fucked. I’m not dating this woman. She’s not my girlfriend. If I want to screw someone else, I can damn well do that.

“Hey, stud,” a silky voice coos. “Someone as gorgeous as you shouldn’t be frowning so hard.”

I look up to find a pretty redhead sauntering over to me. She’s holding a red Solo cup in one hand and a shiny gold purse in the other. Her little black

dress is superglued to her slender frame. She's got small tits, but she makes up for that by not wearing a bra, so I can see her nipples poking against the front of her dress.

Here we go—a chick I can get naked with. Her fuck-me expression reveals she'd do me right here, right now if I so much as crooked my finger at her.

"I mean, we won tonight, didn't we?" she goes on. She grins. "Or did I dream it?"

I manage a half-smile. It feels almost alien on my face. I haven't smiled much since I transferred to Southern U. Well, except with Bryant. She made me smile a lot, even while completely aggravating me. "No, we won," I confirm, trying to shove Bryant out of my head.

"Then there's no reason for you to be frowning," she chirps. "So how 'bout I join you and show you how we celebrate here in the South?"

She's about to lower her fine ass on the cushion beside me when Ty Masters appears out of nowhere. He easily intercepts the redhead's arm.

"Chloe," Masters says gruffly. "Come have a drink with me."

She pouts and thrusts up her cup. "Already got one, Ty."

He holds up his hands. "Well, I don't. C'mon."

I watch, wide-eyed and annoyed, as Masters ushers my potential hookup away. He glances over his shoulder to frown deeply at me.

What in the hell?

Almost immediately, Travarius and Carter are looming over me. "'The fuck was that?" Carter snaps.

I grit my teeth. "What?"

"You were flirting with Chloe Greenleigh," Travarius accuses.

"So?"

"So that's not cool," Carter spits out. "We told you not to fuck this up for us. Bryant wouldn't like it if she knew that you were—"

“That he was what?” an amused voice interrupts. “Having a conversation with another woman?”

Relief washes over me when Bryant sashays to the couch, hips swaying and tits jiggling beneath her V-neck top. She’s wearing a flared green skirt that she arranges primly before planting herself right on my lap.

“Honey, you played like a champ tonight,” she announces before planting those red rosebud lips on mine and kissing me happily. I’m pretty sure my mouth is smeared with her candy-apple lipstick when she finally pulls away. “I darn near cheered myself hoarse, JR.”

As she loops her arms around my neck, I awkwardly rest one hand on her hip and the other around her shoulders. I notice Travarius and Carter have lost their hostile expressions. They’re smiling at Bryant.

“What about me?” Carter asks her. “Did I play like a champ?”

“Of course,” she declares. “And you too, Travarius. I can’t remember the last time our team gelled this well.”

“Me neither,” Travarius admits.

Carter shoots me a grudging look. “Anderson had some damned good footwork out there.”

“Ace?” Bryant prompts.

Well, shit. Was that a compliment? “Thanks,” I say grudgingly.

“Oh sugar, you’re so modest,” Bryant teases, leaning in to kiss my cheek. That one second of contact has my dick going half-mast. I think she feels it, because she wiggles her bottom a bit and winks at me. “You’re allowed to boast about your accomplishments a little. We kicked some serious booty tonight.” She glances at the other guys. “Would you boys do me a favor and track down Earl for me? I need to discuss something with him.”

Carter and Travarius race off as if God himself commanded them. I stifle a sigh, wondering exactly what kind of spell Bryant Johnson has cast over this school. Everyone seems to adore her. My dick certainly does, judging by the way it’s throbbing against my zipper.

The moment they're gone, Bryant brings her lips close to my ear. "Don't play games with Chloe," she whispers. "She's a sweet girl, bless her heart, but she has self-esteem issues. She thinks casual sex will make her feel better, but it always makes her feel worse."

Guilt ripples through me. Damn it. I guess Bryant saw me with the redhead.

Although, why am I feeling guilty? We're not together!

"I wasn't playing games," I answer tightly.

Bryant's big brown eyes probe my face. "You were considering hooking up with her, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was considering it," I say through clenched teeth.

She shakes her head in disappointment. "Oh, Ace. Did you forget the rule?"

I just gape at her.

"Bryant." I force out a calming breath. "Bryant," I repeat. "We're not going out. If I want to hook up with someone else, I can."

She arches a perfectly defined eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Yes, it's so!" I'm frustrated again, even more so because my dick is rock-hard and she doesn't seem to care. She's perched on my lap as if she's a queen on her throne, oblivious to the lust surging through my blood. "I'm not cool with this."

"Not cool with what?"

"This!" I quickly lower my voice when I catch Masters frowning at me from across the room. God forbid I raise my voice at Queen Bryant. "I told you, I don't date during the season. I don't have time for a girlfriend, and even if I did, I don't want to get serious with anyone. I'm not boyfriend material, okay?"

She laughs softly, then leans toward the coffee table to pick up my beer. The neckline of her top sags as she eases forward, providing me with a perfect view of the creamy swell of her cleavage. I swallow a groan. Goddamn this woman.

Sipping my beer, Bryant eyes me over the rim of the bottle. “Tell me why you think you’re not boyfriend material,” she says thoughtfully.

I resist the urge to rip my hair out. This girl drives me fucking nuts. “Because I’m a selfish prick,” I shoot back. “And I’m unfaithful, in case you haven’t figured it out.”

She slants her head. Then she nods, as if she’s made some decision. Which, of course, she doesn’t seem interested in sharing with me. “You’ll be faithful to me,” she says firmly.

I’m close to losing it. Luckily, we’re interrupted by the arrival of Earl Wagner, the team’s star defensive tackle.

“You needed me?” the huge, shaved-head senior asks Bryant.

She shifts on my lap so she can face him. This tiny bit of friction once again threatens to blow the tip of my dick off. “Evening, sweetie,” she says, beaming at Earl. “Are you enjoying the party?”

He nods. Earl’s one of those guys who doesn’t talk if he can help it. Throughout summer camp, I watched him communicate with mostly grunts, nods, headshakes and shrugs.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it.” Her expression becomes serious. “I spoke to Lorraine after the game.”

Earl furrows his bushy brows. I have no idea who Lorraine is. I don’t know a thing about Earl or his life other than that he’s a beast on the field.

“She said your one-year anniversary is next week,” Bryant adds, smiling again. “I just wanted to make sure you’re planning something wonderful to celebrate.”

Earl looks startled. “Uh…”

“Oh, sweetness, *please* tell me you have something planned.”

“Uh…”

Bryant heaves a massive sigh. I find myself fighting a grin when I notice Earl shifting in discomfort at her disappointed expression.

“I’m not good with that lovey shit,” he finally mumbles. “You know that, Bryant.”

“I know, but this is important, big guy. One year is a major milestone in a relationship. Lorraine is such a sweetheart—don’t you think she deserves a romantic gesture?”

The tips of Earl’s ears pinken.

“Tell you what,” Bryant says cheerfully, “I’ll talk to the manager of The Mansion and see if the private dining room is available next week. We’ll do a candlelit dinner, private quartet, the whole shebang.”

Earl shifts again. “Aw, Bryant, you know I can’t afford that.”

“Don’t worry, Timothy owes me one. It won’t cost you a dime. Though you will need a suit—I recommend the navy-blue one you wear when the team travels.”

I choke down another laugh.

“Lorraine will be on cloud nine,” Bryant declares, and from the gratitude in Earl’s eyes, it’s clear that he appreciates the gesture. “I’ll text you all the details when I have them.”

“Thanks, Bryant,” he says gruffly.

“Any time, big guy. Now go find your woman and drop some hints about the big night you have in store for her.”

As Earl lumbers off, I stare at Bryant in bewilderment. “Why?” I find myself blurting out.

She blinks. “Why what?”

“Why do you do this shit? Why are you so fucking nice to every person you meet? Why are you sitting on my lap right now?” I falter. “Why are you so determined to be with me?”

The answer she gives me is as frustrating as everything else she does. “Because.”

A growl flies out. “Jesus, Bryant, you drive me crazy.”

That gets me a melodic laugh. “I know. But you like me, anyway.”

She’s not wrong. I do like her. And my dick...well, he *loves* her. I’m getting hard again, because the sound of her laughter and the sparkle in her eyes are so damn appealing. Plus, she’s climbed back on my lap and wiggling around again. My dick is trying to blast its way out of my pants, and all I can think about is shoving my hand underneath her skirt.

“Uh-oh,” she murmurs, her gaze locking with mine. “You look positively savage right now. Are you thinking naughty thoughts?”

I growl again. “Of course I am.”

“Well, try to set them aside for now, honey.” She pats my shoulder. “Because we’re about to have some company.”

My cock weeps in disappointment as several people join us. Carter, Zane, Samson, and some chicks I don’t know but who Bryant seems very friendly with. Hell, Bryant is friendly with everyone. It’s like she knows every last person at this college, and they all love her and that means they all love *me*, because apparently I’m an extension of Bryant now.

For the next hour, I’m reminded of what it’s like to be popular again. Teammates who were cold to me even after we won tonight are suddenly including me in conversations, and not merely stuff related to the game. Bryant’s mere presence causes their demeanor toward me to change. They crack jokes with me. They talk about plays we should run at our next practice. They invite me to a bachelor party for one of our senior linemen, who I didn’t even know was getting hitched.

“See?” Bryant whispers in my ear at one point. “Look at all the benefits our relationship reaps you. You’re a hit!”

No, *she*’s a hit. She’s funny, sweet, kind. She not only remembers names, but also some important detail about every single person that makes them light up when she mentions it. And the entire time, she stays in my lap, torturing my dick with that sweet, round bottom and making me shiver each time she shifts, accidentally brushing my arm with a side of full, luscious boob.

And although that word—*relationship*—has me close to breaking out in hives, I can’t deny that Bryant is fun to be with. I also can’t deny how much I

want to fuck her again. So maybe I should. Maybe I should just let this play out like Lucy recommended.

The only problem with that is, I'm not entirely convinced that Bryant is actually into me. Sure, she's draped over me right now like a toga, but I get the feeling I'm just a project for her, a guy she wants to...fix, or some shit? I don't need fixing. And if I'm going to keep seeing this girl, I need to be sure all the lap grinding and teasing kisses aren't some pity thing.

So when Bryant says, "I need to use the little girls' room!" and hops off my lap, I waste no time getting up, too.

"I'll walk you," I say.

She lifts a brow.

"I'll guard the door. Make sure nobody barges in on you."

Carter snickers.

Bryant, meanwhile, looks amused. "Most bathroom doors have locks," she informs me as we thread through the crowded main room toward the corridor. The bathroom in the hall has a line a mile-long, so we bypass it and head up the stairs.

"Freddie has a private bath," she says in a conspiratorial whisper, tugging me toward a bedroom at the end of the second floor hallway. "He's the president of this fraternity, and he said I'm allowed to use his bathroom whenever I want."

Of course he did. I have a feeling Bryant gets whatever she wants handed to her on a silver platter.

After we enter the darkened bedroom, she makes a beeline for the bathroom, her flouncy skirt flapping behind her. I wait outside the door, but once I hear the toilet flush and the faucet stop running, I turn the knob and join her in the bathroom.

She squeaks in surprise. "Ace! What are you doing?"

"This," I answer, and then I flick the light switch at the same time my mouth crashes over hers.

The kiss startles her, eliciting a soft gasp that I swallow up by driving the kiss deeper. My tongue slides through her parted lips, my hands planting on her hips. She's kissing me back in no time, moaning against my mouth and rubbing her curvy body against mine like a cat in heat.

"If I date you," I mutter, breaking our mouths apart, "I have a rule, too."

"What is it?" she asks breathlessly.

My vision is adjusting to the darkness, and I can see that her eyes are narrowed. She's breathing hard, her perfect tits heaving beneath her tight top.

"You don't hold back on me," I say roughly. "You don't lie there with your eyes closed while I fuck you and act like you're doing me a favor by letting me drill your pussy." I grasp her chin, tipping her head so she's forced to look at me. "I either turn you on or I don't. And if it's the latter, then I'm not wasting my time here, Bryant."

Her breathing sounds even more labored now. "Ace..."

"Do I turn you on?" I demand, rubbing her jaw with my thumb.

There's a beat of silence. Then she moans. "Yes."

Pure male satisfaction skyrockets through me. I back her into the vanity and shove one thigh between her legs. Then I grind slowly, summoning another throaty moan from her lips. "You lying to me right now, sweetheart?"

"No," she whispers. "I'm not lying."

"You going to be real with me from now on?" I dip my head and lick a hot stripe down the side of her neck. She shivers wildly. "You going to come for me when I tell you to? You going to be there with me—*really* be there, when I'm fucking you so hard and so deep that you won't be able to walk the next day?"

A strangled noise escapes her mouth. "Y-yes."

Grinning in the darkness, I skim my hand down her body and slip it underneath her skirt. Her panties are soaked when I cup her with my palm. "You promise?"

“I promise,” she chokes out.

I nod in approval. “Good. We’re starting right now.” I strip the skimpy panties off of her and let them drop to the tiled floor. “You want us to date? Then come all over my fucking hand, baby. Right now.”

Without delay, I push two fingers into her wet sex, and she cries out so loudly I have to silence her with another kiss. Don’t need President Freddie walking in on us. I didn’t lock the door, and it’s a whole five feet away and my hands are busy. One squeezes and fondles Bryant’s tits over her shirt, the other is finger-fucking her, fast and deep. My thumb tends to her clit as I plunge my fingers inside her.

“I can’t wait to fuck this tight pussy again,” I rumble in her ear. “My dick’s aching for you, baby.”

She moans, rocking hard against my hand.

“That’s it,” I say approvingly. “Fuck my hand, Bryant. Show me how you want my dick.”

My mouth finds her again, my tongue thrusting deep, mimicking the actions of my fingers. She’s so wet, dripping all over my hand. I want to sink to my knees and taste her, lap her up, but her inner muscles are clamped tight around my fingers and from the way she’s trembling, I can tell she’s close. But her eyelids are squeezed shut, her hands balled into fists against my shoulders, which tells me she’s fighting it.

“Don’t,” I command, and her eyes pop open. “You promised.”

“I…” She sounds a bit helpless.

“Let go. Give me what I want.” I pinch her clit and she shudders. Then I add a third finger and she comes.

Her features go slack with pleasure, her lower body rocking hard, her pussy spasming and squeezing the hell out of my fingers. It’s goddamn beautiful, and I almost shoot my wad in my pants like an inexperienced teenager. I manage to fight off the urge to come with her, and I make no move to unzip my pants or grab a condom from my wallet. I’m not going to fuck her tonight. I don’t know when I decided that, but it’s not happening.

Tonight was about Bryant giving herself to me. She wants me to date her? To give her what she wants? Then she needs to be fully on board, because I'm not about to get involved with a woman who holds anything back.

"Oh, sweet Lord," she says weakly, after her body stops shaking. My fingers are still inside her, soaked with her juices. "I..." She trails off.

I slowly ease my hand away and lift it to my mouth. Her lips part as she watches me lick my fingers clean. I hum in satisfaction and then bend down to pick up her discarded panties. "You good to walk or should I carry you back downstairs?" I ask smugly.

"I can walk." She bites her lip, looking slightly stricken. "Are you always so...fierce? In bed, that is?"

I can't help but chuckle. "What's the matter, sweetheart? You changing your mind about us?" My tone is smug again. "And yes, I'm always this fierce, as you call it. When we fuck, it's gonna be intense. Got a problem with that?"

"N-no." She clears her throat. "No. I don't." But she still looks shaken, and for the first time since I met Bryant, I feel on solid footing. Still chuckling, I follow her wobbly frame out of the bathroom.

I CAN STILL FEEL HIM. I CAN STILL FEEL HIS FINGERS, PRESSING AND STROKING AND pulling the orgasm out of me. I can still hear his voice, low and dark, whispering the most filthy, dirty things. My whole mind is full of him. If I take a breath, I swear I can still smell the woodsy scent of his aftershave mingled with a clean sweat. I may never to be able to go into the woods again without my whole body getting goosebumps.

Is it any wonder I grabbed my panties and left the Sigma house before another soul could see my shell-shocked face?

This unnatural response has me worried. Kayla finds me in the kitchen, frowning into my coffee mug.

“What’s wrong, Bryant?” she asks. Her sleepy eyes snap wide. “Did that boy treat you poorly last night? I saw you go upstairs with him.”

“Of course not.” At least not in the way Kayla thinks. I mean, I can hardly say to her that Ace making me come in the bathroom was something bad. That sounds loony. “I’m actually thinking that he might not be the jerk I thought he was. He might not need me.”

Yes, this is my out. He’s smart, emotionally smart, so he’ll work through issues by himself. He doesn’t really need me. I grab another mug and mix Kayla’s cup of coffee. She likes hers half-and-half—half coffee and half Vanilla Delight.

“I don’t know about that. He wouldn’t even talk to anyone until you showed up,” she says as she takes the cup from me. “He sat in his corner and glowered at everyone like he was mad that he was there and he was mad anyone else was having fun. It’s good you don’t sleep with these guys. I can’t imagine getting into bed with him until you thaw him out. He’s as cold as an ice cube.” She pretends to shiver.

I *am* sleeping with him, I almost blurt out, but I curb the impulse at the last second. Ace is only the second man I’ve been with, after losing my virginity to Colt. If Kayla and my sisters knew that I’d been intimate with him, they’d be full of questions—and probably more than a few concerns. Everyone in this sorority knows I don’t have sex with the guys I’m trying to help. Or with anyone else, for that matter. When asked why, I usually answer with an airy “I’m really picky,” but truthfully, I never had the urge to hop into bed with another guy after Colt.

Until Ace. I was attracted to him from the moment I met him. I went home with him without securing any promises he’d call the next day. I’ve been trying to reassure myself that it’s simply some sort of hormonal outbreak, my body craving release after such a long sexual drought, but what happened in the bathroom yesterday makes it hard to keep clinging to that excuse.

He’d given me an orgasm. A toe-curling, body-melting orgasm. *Cold as an ice cube, Kayla?* She couldn’t be more wrong. Ace wasn’t frigid last night. If he’d been any hotter, he’d have had to scoop my ashes up and lay them on the front step of the AO house.

“He’s not that way with me,” I confess.

“Which is why you need to keep working with him.” She gives me a speculative look over the top of her mug. “I’ve never known you to give up on a project before.”

“Well, I can admit when I’m wrong. I just picked wrong this time.” I don’t like how her perceptive eyes are boring holes into my head, so I busy myself with making a new pot of coffee.

Kayla doesn’t let it go, though. “Why do you think picked wrong?”

“I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” asks someone new. In the mirrored cabinet, I see the reflection of Sadie Holcombe, another senior and the current AO president. Behind her is one of the new girls, Chryselle, who’s sweet but a few coins short of a full stack. I wouldn’t have given her an offer from AO, but she’s legacy and legacies get in unless there’s something horrendously wrong, like if she were caught sacrificing babies during rush. I have a mind to set her up with Kent. He’d like parading her doll-like beauty around on his arm, and she’d like being attached to a state senator’s son.

“Whether Bryant’s new pet is the right one for her,” Kayla offers, ignoring my silent plea to drop it.

“That new quarterback?” Sadie asks as she pours herself a cup of coffee. She holds up the pot to Chryselle, who looks puzzled. “Want a cup, honey?”

The new pledge shakes her shiny brown hair. “No, thank you, ma’am.”

Sadie rolls her eyes. “For the umpteenth time, I’m not a ma’am.” She turns to me. “Why do you think this man isn’t right for your program?”

“He’s pretty in tune with himself. Generally, folks who are self-aware either want to be terrible human beings, which makes them sociopaths, or they’ll stumble onto a recovery in their own time.”

“But if they’re true sociopaths, you can’t save them,” Sadie points out. “As for the other type, if they take too long to get their heads out of their behinds, they could hurt a lot of girls in the intervening time.”

Our president’s points are well spoken. There are some people out there who are unsalvageable. I place Ginny’s ex in that category. He was a monster, and even I know better than to try my hand at those types.

He’d played with her emotions, stringing her along, flaunting his other girls in front of her. He’d go out with a girl and if she didn’t put out, he’d call Ginny who’d run right over. Next day, though, he’d pretend like he didn’t even know her.

I know there are men beyond my reach and girls that will end up like Ginny regardless, but I do what I can. I shouldn’t be wasting time on a man like Ace if he’s already on his way to redemption.

“You think about this anymore, and your head is going to start hurting,” Sadie declares.

“She’s right. Trust your instincts,” Kayla agrees.

“My instincts are saying that he’s a waste of my time.”

“I don’t understand what’s going on.” In her shorty nightgown, Chryselle looks more like twelve than eighteen. “What’s Bryant doing?”

I don’t like to say it out loud because it sounds dumb, but Kayla doesn’t have the same reservations. “Every semester or so, Bryant takes on a project. She finds the worst possible guys and turns them into the best men they can be.”

“How’s that work?”

“She spends time with them. Teaches them how to treat women right. She’s like a...” Sadie pauses, “like a jerk whisperer.”

“Like that they should open doors?” Chryselle asks in genuine confusion.

I take pity on her. “I’m not teaching them manners, although if they learn a few, that’s wonderful. I’m trying to get them to view women as equals, deserving of their respect rather than disposable Pez dispensers of sex.”

Her jaw drops. “You teach them how to be good in bed?”

“No, it’s not like that Chryselle,” Sadie admonishes. “Bryant’s not screwing around with these guys.”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” the three of us older girls chorus.

Even as I say it, a prick of guilt stings my tummy. Not because I’m sleeping with Ace, but because I’m keeping it from my sisters. I usually tell them everything. But perhaps it’s better that I keep it to myself, judging by the way Chryselle’s eyes widened at the mere idea of me sleeping around. I get it, though—we live in the South, and the thought of having more than one partner sends some ladies onto the fainting couch. There’s a constant battle between the egalitarian ideal of a woman’s right to sleep with as many guys as she wants and our inner Bible Belts that quake at the talk of multiple partners.

Chryselle looks relieved that my cure has nothing to do with my girl parts. “Well, okay, how is it, then?”

I take a sip of my rapidly cooling coffee before answering. “Everyone has a deep need for affirmation, but on the flip side, we’re afraid of criticism. People act in certain ways because they don’t feel like anyone really understands them and because they don’t want anyone to see their soft underbelly. So I listen to them, and I try to understand what the source of their pain is. Once they see it, most folks make an effort to overcome it. No one wants to be an asshole.”

“That’s your wrong-headed opinion,” Kayla corrects. “Most folks are fine with being assholes.”

“Most people,” I forge ahead ignoring Kayla’s cynical worldview, “are kind and decent. Sometimes it’s buried underneath a mountain of hurt, that’s all. I’m helping to shovel all the dirt away.”

“What happens when you’re done with them?” Chryselle asks. She’s eyeing me as if I’m some weird science project. My explanation probably does sound ridiculous, but it feels right. Like my sister’s death isn’t just a big ol’ waste.

“One of us gets them,” Kayla pipes up. “Bryant’s exes make the best boyfriends. When Bryant’s finished, she figures out who is best suited and couples them up.”

“Oh.” Chryselle clearly likes that idea. “Can I put my name in for Ace?”

“You’ll have to fight Dawn for him,” Kayla teases. “Although after yesterday, she was on the fence about wanting to be with someone who, as she said, must find smiling a mortal offense. Still, he’s hot, and once he’s through the Bryant program, he’ll be as close to perfect as they come.”

“I like football players.” Chryselle’s almost buzzing with excitement now. “When will you be done? Can I have him for our next date party?”

Irritation curdles in my stomach. Can’t these girls wait a gosh darned second? They want to climb into his bed before the sheets are even cold. I dump my coffee out. After putting the mug in the dishwasher, I announce, “I’m going to get ready. Momma’s expecting me.”

“Wait up, Bryant,” Kayla says, hurrying to catch up with me.

I stop right outside the door in time to hear Chryselle say, “Bryant’s a little touched in the head, right? Because her whole project thing is really strange.”

“Of course she’s not.” Sadie’s sharp retort in my defense warms my heart. Then, in a gentler tone, she says, “Bryant’s sister died a few years ago. Some terrible boy broke Ginny’s heart, and since then, Bryant’s tried to find guys like Ginny’s boyfriend and correct their behavior so they don’t hurt anyone else.”

“You can’t stop people from getting hurt,” Chryselle mutters.

“Come on.” Kayla tugs on my arm. She doesn’t want me eavesdropping anymore.

“There are hurts and then there are *hurts*,” I say defensively.

“I know, honey. I think what you do is good and admirable. You kiss the frogs so we don’t have to.”

We make our way up the steep, old stairs of the sorority house to the second floor where all the seniors live.

“Not all the frogs,” I say glumly. “And I’m still not convinced Ace needs me. Maybe I’m wasting my time with him.”

Kayla shrugs as she pushes her bedroom door open. “You just met him. Give it a month or so. If he’s not in bad shape, you can hand him off sooner.”

I force myself not to grimace at the prospect, even though I feel that same nagging annoyance I felt in the car when Dawn was laying claim to him. “You’re right. I’ll know more as I get to know him. No sense rushing things.”

Kayla gives me a little wave as she closes her door. Inside my room, I don’t immediately get dressed. Instead, I sit on the end of my bed and stare at the picture of Ginny’s face smiling back at me from inside the pink and gold picture frame. We’re standing on the field after Daddy just won his third National Championship. Her arms are around me, and her head is resting on my shoulder. It was her senior year of high school and my junior one. We look so happy. She died scarcely a year after that, on Sunday night in the

middle of October, at the start of her sophomore year here at Southern.

I wanted to bury myself with Ginny. Daddy turned into a zombie. Momma couldn't stop crying. I was supposed to attend a special AO event for legacies held at The Sanctuary in South Carolina—a grand place on Kiawah Island. The prospect of spending a week with a bunch of Momma's sorority sisters who would pile on the platitudes was too oppressive to bear. Besides, tears were as infectious as mono after a middle school dance. I holed up in my daddy's office instead.

There I found my own sanctuary. Those big, boisterous boys were uncomfortable around weeping, and, as a girl who'd been raised to extend hospitality in every aspect of her life, I learned to swallow my tears. What saved me was getting involved with their lives. Learning about their families, their struggles with classes, their hopes and dreams and fears and loves helped me focus on something other than my own tragedy, and somehow this team became my home away from home.

I hadn't planned on dating anyone right away, but one day I heard a conversation between Jeremiah Sterling, a brash, loud-mouthed running back, and Curly. Curly was asking Jeremiah about the girl who'd shown up at the door the other night, crying her heart out. Jeremiah declared he didn't much care about her tears because women were nothing more than whipped cream on his sundae of life—without substance and totally unnecessary

I'd marched out of Daddy's office and told him that a woman would change his life. He scoffed. I challenged him to give me until the end of the semester and I'd have him singing a different tune.

In actuality, I only needed a few weeks. Jeremiah confessed that his high school girlfriend had cheated on him with his best friend. His dark view on the opposite sex lightened up considerably after I dragged him to sorority event after sorority event. For Jeremiah, he just needed some loving. Not in the physical form—although I know Tattie Collins-Bell gives him plenty of that these days. No, Jeremiah's heart needed loving more than his penis.

After he fell hard for Tattie, Jeremiah quietly suggested that I take Cooper Smythe in hand and one thing led to another. I've had failures, most recently Tommy. He was more like Ginny's ex than I'd realized. As soon as I

discovered how abusive he could be, I cut things off and reported him to my father, who required the boy seek out counseling before he could continue playing on the team. He didn't, and Daddy cut him.

But for the most part, I'm batting above .500. It's possible Ace belongs in the mistake column. If so, the wisest course of action would be to nip things in the bud before it all devolves into something messy and emotionally difficult.

He doesn't really need me, and I definitely don't need him.

I FIND MYSELF AT THE STEAK HOUSE AT TEN THIRTY. “*BRUNCH TIME*,” YELL THE chalked letters styled in wavy all caps. No wonder Bryant likes it here. Even the diner’s advertisements look like her—happy, curvy, and colorful. I hadn’t seen her since Saturday night. Not since the bathroom where she came all over my hand and then fled like a scared rabbit.

It bothers me. Was she mad she came? Was she mad I touched her? And why do I even care? I don’t have any answers. I don’t even have her number. I could probably ask her dad for it, but Sunday was his day off. Plus, despite him giving some kind of weird blessing over the whole thing, I’m still waiting for the trap to snap shut.

So here I am, wandering around the twenty thousand-person campus on my day off, to make sure she’s all right.

My instincts are spot-on, because Bryant’s sitting in the same booth, fork in one hand, phone in the other.

Milly greets me. “Morning, sugar. Need a table?”

“Nope. Joining Bryant for breakfast.”

Milly winks. “It’s brunch. Same thing you had last time?”

“That’d be great.” As Milly takes off to put my order in, I amble over to Bryant.

“Reading about how great I am?” I say as I slide into the bench opposite of her.

Her head pops up and there it is again—that flash of fear. She covers it quickly enough. “Why, JR, what brings you here this morning?”

“It’s brunch time, isn’t it?” I gesture toward the other tables. “I feel like brunching.”

A cute furrow appears on her forehead, but her southern-bred hospitality that had her handing out juice drinks to one scout from Dallas and a beer to his counterpart from Denver won’t allow her to tell me to get lost—even if it’s what she’d like to do.

“Oh, well, of course.” She tucks her phone away and pastes a pretty, if fake, smile on her face. “Are you still feeling the post-win hangover or have you moved on? Daddy always treats himself to a contraband cigar after a win.”

“Tucking away that first win is great but—” My answer is truncated by Milly’s arrival with my food. I lift my hands as she sets my plate of steak, eggs, and grits on the table. “Thanks, Milly.”

“Anything else, champ?” she chirps.

“Ah, how about we hold off on the champ stuff until January?” No sense in testing fate.

“Gotcha.” Milly makes little guns with her fingers before walking off to help someone at a nearby table.

“But what?” Bryant prods.

“But my time is better spent examining film to see where I can improve rather than celebrating a win that’s already in my rearview mirror. What’s your dad do when he loses?” I take a bite of my steak.

“Mopes in his office for about five minutes and then starts looking at tape for next week. He doesn’t lose often, though.”

“Me either.” My win/loss record in college is stellar. I have six losses against thirty-seven wins, which was why getting replaced at my former college was such a fucking slap in the face. I’d given everything I had to that program,

but one misstep and I was out on my ass.

Which begs the question: What in the hell am I doing sitting here with Bryant? A surge of anger rises. “Why are you doing this? Playing these games with me?”

Hurt flashes across her face, making me feel like a heel. “You came here,” she points out. “You dragged me into the bathroom Saturday night. This isn’t my game.” She wiggles a finger between us.

Her insistence that she’s not playing me is like a red flag in front of my inner bull. “You latched on to me. You came up to me last week with your big brown eyes and couldn’t wait for me to take you home. You should’ve told me you were Coach Johnson’s daughter.”

“Are we back to that again? It’s not my fault you couldn’t put two and two together. You’re a college-educated man. I wasn’t hiding a thing from you,” she snaps back.

“All right, then what about you handing out cookies in the locker room, kissing up to me at the post-game party and then running out of the party last night like it was a haunted house and I was the surprise ghost at the end?”

She flushes. “I was overwhelmed. I don’t do stuff like that.”

“Are you saying I took advantage of you?” A sticky, uncomfortable heat creeps up my neck. No way. She was with me the entire time, panting out little cries of encouragement. Hell, I probably still have the nail marks she left on my arm while holding me in place as she came.

“No,” she hisses, and looks around anxiously. “We shouldn’t be talking about this right here in front of our food and everything.”

Her food? She thinks her food cares about why I touched her pussy? We glower at each other until Milly comes along. “Your food okay?” the waitress asks in concern.

Bryant’s face grows horrified for a second that someone has caught her looking anything but perfectly happy. Then a smooth, practiced mask falls into place. “Yes, Milly. I’m trying to convince Ace here that grits are an essential element of every decent meal.”

Milly's eyes fall to the white mash on my plate that I've avoided eating so far. She gives a soft laugh, completely buying into Bryant's bullshit. "You can lead a horse to water, Bryant, honey." Milly walks away without finishing the old saying.

As soon as Milly's out of earshot, Bryant scoots forward and gestures for me to lean in. I do, but not far enough apparently, because she waves me in farther. Once I'm deemed close enough that I can sniff her flowery scent, she whispers, "I might've pegged you wrong, and I'm thinking that you might not need me anymore."

That alarming sensation on the back of my neck grows sharper. Having any kind of relationship with Bryant is a recipe for disaster, no matter what her dad publicly professes. She's giving me an out, and I should take it. Except when I open my mouth to tell her she's right and that I don't need her, I find myself saying something else entirely. "I only gave you the one orgasm. There's more where that came from."

She blushes furiously, but manages to push out a strangled admission. "I can give those to myself."

The vision of Bryant fingering herself causes me to black out for a moment. When I come to, I realize that I've got only two options: attack or retreat. As a quarterback, there are approximately four seconds that pass between the time the ball is snapped and a defender is in your face, trying to make you part of the turf. It takes me only half that time to decide that retreat is in order. "Alright."

I slide back and resume eating. I need to regroup. I came here to...make sure Bryant was okay. She looks okay, sounds okay, is eating healthy if her nearly empty plate is a sign of anything.

"What do you have going on today?" I ask between bites. Somehow hearing Bryant say that I'm all wrong for her brings everything into focus. We need to fuck again. She needs it, and so do I.

She opens her mouth and then snaps it shut, before scooting against the back of the banquette. "I'm busy. I've got to go to the craft store to buy some supplies for the next date party the AOs are hosting."

“Date night?” I frown at my plate. She was the one who told me her only rule was no other women, but she can go on dates with other guys? That’s fucked up. “What the hell is that?”

“That’s where we set up a social event with a fraternity so that our new pledges and their new pledges can see why joining our houses was such a fantastic idea. My sisers and I will be decorating the event with fake fall leaves, orange and brown carnations, and gold and bronze glitter.”

If she was trying to get rid of me, listing contact with glitter wasn’t going to cut it. “Great. When do we leave?”

“For what?”

“The craft store. I’m sure you know that Monday’s my day off.” I arch a brow, but her face remains impassive. “For some reason I’m no good on Mondays. I used to skip classes all the time back at Western State.” I dig into my wallet and pull out a couple of bills to cover the brunch. “Your dad found out, and my schedule here magically only has classes on Tuesday through Friday. It also helps that since this is my fifth year, I only have three classes this semester and three more next semester before I graduate. One of my classes was basket weaving, but you might already know that.”

A slight hint of pink colors the base of her pretty throat, telling me that my guess was correct. Girl knows my schedule. Hell, she was probably responsible for the no Mondays and the basket weaving. I test that theory. “I would’ve rather had the History of Pornography.”

She sticks her nose in the air. “That’s a silly class, and you don’t need it. Also, the basket weaving exercise is just one of the many things you’ll do in studying Prehistoric Folklore Objects.”

My lips twitch. “Took that class, did you?”

“No, it’s always full,” she replies primly, dapping the napkin at the corners of her mouth. “What kind of basket are you making?”

It’s my turn to frown. “There are different kinds?”

“Of course. Let’s go.” She slaps the napkin on the table and slides out, revealing a tight long skirt that emphasizes her tiny waist and her cuppable

ass. Too round, my eye.

Outside, I take one look at Bryant's tiny convertible and make a beeline to my truck. "I'm driving." I place a hand on her lower back and try not to take offense that she stiffens at my light touch. This chick's a puzzle, and I've got so much on my plate that the last thing I should be doing on my day off is spending it trying to figure her out. Yet, here I am, going to a goddamned craft store.

"You'll want to get on the interstate and take the second exit," she tells me as I maneuver out of the parking lot.

"Since you know everything about me, maybe you should level the playing field," I say as I make the turn onto Halifax, the road that leads to the on-ramp.

"I'm getting a sociology degree. Daddy wants me to work with him as his assistant or something. I had an offer from the AD's office too. An agent's approached me. There's an opening in the Titan's PR department."

"You'd be good there." In the fourth quarter, after Coach took me out to give my backup some playing time, my eyes strayed toward Bryant as she schmoozed the two scouts, a handful of boosters, and other assorted VIPs.

"I don't know."

"What don't you know?"

"I've pretty much lived at Southern for the past ten years." For as long as her dad has been coach down here, I calculate. "I don't really know any other life. Sometimes I think about going other places."

"What other places?"

"I don't know. Other other places. Ugh, can we not talk about me?" She shields one side of her face with the back of her hand. "When did you first know you were a quarterback?"

"That's a boring story." I dangle my hand on the top of the steering wheel as we motor down the freeway. "I grew up loving the game. My dad and I tossed the ball around for as long as I can remember."

“Were you always the quarterback?”

“Nope. I started out as a linebacker but our quarterback broke his ankle and my dad suggested I step in. I never gave the position up after that.”

“That’s always the saddest part about football, isn’t it? That there are so many players but only a few positions.”

I resist the urge to shift uncomfortably in my seat. Is she suggesting that I did the dirty to some peewee football player? “I was ten when that happened.”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t have stepped in. You are obviously a stellar quarterback. What happened to your friend? Did he take your position on the line?”

Now I really want to squirm. “No. He moved to wide receiver.”

“Hmmm,” she says.

I decide a change of subject is in order. “Do you wish you could play? Be the first NCAA female football player?”

She laughs. “No, thanks. I don’t like contact sports.”

“Oh, really? Could’ve sworn differently the other night. Seemed like you couldn’t get enough of the contact. That is, until the end.” I slide a glance in her direction. “Want to tell me what happened back there and why you’re squirrely today?”

“I’m not squirrely,” she protests. “I have a lot of things on my mind. After I get the craft supplies, I’m going back to the house to set up a dinner with the new pledges. Then I have a few chapters to read and notes to make in my outlines. There’re a couple more scouts coming next weekend for the game against Tennessee, and I need to review their files.”

“Great. So are you coming to my place or am I going to yours?” I pull into the craft store parking lot.

“For what?”

I get out of the truck and hustle around to her side.

“For what,” she repeats when I get there.

“For dinner and sex. What else?” I help her down from the seat.

She makes a face. “First, would you please not call it sex? It’s making love ____”

“We don’t love each other,” I point out.

She purses those plush lips of hers, and I want to lean down and take a bite out of her.

“I don’t care if we hate each other, it’s still lovemaking. Second, you’re not allowed to come to the house. I live at the AO house, and no men are allowed.” She sticks her nose up in the air, tugs on her purse straps, and starts stomping for the front door without looking to her right or left.

I hold up my hand to stop an oncoming car and catch up to her. “Ever?”

She halts again, this time in the middle of a car lane. I pull her body out of harm’s way and push her toward the automatic doors. Christ, how has this girl stayed alive when she’s so reckless?

“Western State has sororities. How are you so ignorant about this?”

“What do I care about sorority rules?” Does she really think some stupid house rule would keep me from where I wanted to be? “And how come you can call me ignorant but I can’t call it fucking?”

“Ignorant is a nicer term for dumbass.” She turns with a hair toss and walks toward a sign that says “flowers.”

“Back to the no-men ban. What’s the purpose of that?”

“Because it’s a sorority house,” she says with exaggerated patience, “and therefore available to sisters only, so unless you’re going through a gender transition, you’re not allowed in.” She gives my package a cool appraisal. “Are you?”

I snort. “It’s adorable how you think that your little rules are going to keep me out.” I place my hands on either side of her head and back her right against the shelves, pinning her between a rack of baskets and my ever-hardening body. “What time do you want me to come over?”

“Ace!” she exclaims, squirming against me until her pelvis rocks into my cock. She sucks in a breath and then backs away immediately, repeating her warning. “You are not going to come into my sorority house.”

“Why? Is your dad going to kick me off the team? If he’s not giving me my marching orders for climbing into bed with you, I don’t know why he’d be upset that I broke a sorority house rule. Or is he mad and you two have been lying to me?”

“Of course not! Besides,” she hisses, “he knows nothing about our lovemaking, and it’s going to stay that way, you hear? Fathers do not want to know that kind of information about their daughters.”

I smile coolly down at her. “Then I’ll take my chances.”

“No, I’ll meet you somewhere,” she says with a smidge of desperation. “I’ll come to you.”

I hide a smirk. “Good. I’ll see you at six. Bring the basket weaving shit.”



BRYANT SHOWS UP AT FIVE TO SIX, TRACKING ALONG WITH HER DAD’S INFURIATING tendency to be early. Good thing I anticipated this and already had the food delivered. Carter and Zane were hanging around like vultures, wondering why I hadn’t ordered them any.

Zane’s head lifts in anticipation when she walks in. “Hey, Bryant, how’s it hanging?”

I lift the bag of supplies out of her arms.

“I’m doing great, Zane. How’s Mae? I haven’t seen her around much.”

Mae? Who’s she?

Zane knows. “She’s real busy. She’s gotten four secondary applications including one from Duke, so she has to write these essays in between her regular class assignments.”

“What’s she writing about?” Bryant asks as she hands me her coat.

The minute I set the bag down, Carter starts rifling through it. “Hey, Bryant, you bring us something?”

“Of course. Mae’s essay?” She prompts Zane, who joins our roommate in looking through Bryant’s bag.

“For Duke, she’s working on writing about *Lord of the Rings*. Each of these stupid places have different requirements so she can’t use the same essay for all of them. Hey, is that pie?” he exclaims when Carter finds a big round plastic container at the bottom. I swipe the container out of Carter’s hand, but before I can yell at them for being animals, Bryant gives me a scolding look.

I bite my tongue, because this is the most interaction I’ve had with my roommates outside of the field.

“Ace, can you get me a knife and two plates?”

“Two?” I object. I’m the guy she’s fucking. Surely I get a piece of the pie.

“Two,” she replies firmly.

The other two jackasses exchange smug grins, which makes me want to drive my fist into their faces. Unfortunately, that wouldn’t help much with my roommate problem—one that I didn’t realize Bryant is even aware of.

She sets the pie in the middle of the table. “Mae’s so bright—any of those schools would be lucky to have her. Just like she’s lucky to have you.”

As I’m walking into the kitchen to find utensils for the pie that my roommates don’t deserve, I hear Zane respond. “I’m a damn fine catch.”

So Mae must be his girlfriend. Huh. I wonder why I didn’t know that.

“How’s your momma, Carter? She recovering from that hip surgery alright?” Bryant asks.

Carter’s mom had a hip surgery? I rummage around in the cupboards for four plates. During the summer, when there were fewer students on campus, I had my own dorm room. Once the fall camp started, I was moved into the apartment with Carter and Zane. I’ve lived with them for four weeks.

Fuck, do I know anything about my roommates? Am I supposed to? I went

four years at Western State without delving much into my teammates' lives. Some guys lived for drama, but all I wanted to do was win championships and blow off some steam after a game. I slam the cabinet door shut.

Out in the living room, conversation halts for a moment, then picks up again when Carter answers, "She is. Hospital bills are piling up, but she's getting around okay. Thanks for sending those flowers. She really liked them."

"I'm so glad. Everyone loves flowers," Bryant says. "And hospitals are so sterile. I don't know how anyone stands being in there for longer than ten minutes. You should talk to Daddy if you have problems with those bills. Maybe he can talk to the hospital about a payment plan."

"Maybe," Carter grunts.

When I carry the dishes out, I'm not at all surprised to see Carter and Zane hovering around Bryant like she's the queen and they're her loyal worker bees. If I'm good with the football, I'm nothing compared to how Bryant is with people. They love her and for good reason. She not only listens to them, but remembers every damn thing. She must have a photographic memory lurking behind those pretty brown eyes.

I place the plates on the coffee table along with the forks and a knife. "I ordered dinner," I remind her. The bite in my voice is a little too sharp. All heads swing toward me. Accusation swims in my roommates' eyes while disappointment is clear in hers.

"I'll take my pie to go, Miss Bryant," says Carter stiffly.

"Mine, too," Zane says, darting another annoyed look in my direction.

Silently, Bryant cuts the pie in fourths and places a decadent mound of chocolate pudding and whipped cream on two different plates. The guys snatch up the dessert and disappear.

"I'll get the food," I say sourly.

In the kitchen, I grab the food from the oven where I stuck it so it wouldn't get cold. Bryant follows me.

"Are you upset that I brought a treat over for your roommates? I just thought

it'd be nice."

"No," I say tersely. At this point, I don't remember why I even invited her over. If I want to get laid, there's no shortage of girls around. Although, strangely enough, while I see the other guys getting hit on all the time, the women here have given me a wide berth. Back at Western State, I couldn't walk out of my house without some girl on my jock. Here, it's almost like I'm a leper. A suspicious thought leaps into my mind. Lo mein in one hand and plate in the other, I swivel around to Bryant.

The minute that I spot her face, my irritation drains away. What ulterior motive could she have? I'd practically blackmailed her into coming over here. Of course she was going to bring pie for my roommates. Bryant probably doesn't walk into the Steak House without bringing Milly something, and I'm not referring to a tip. All signs point toward Bryant being generous, kind, and warm-hearted. Why she wants to fuck around with me, I have no clue.

"I'm being a bastard, aren't I?" I grab two more plates out of the cupboard.

She sweeps her golden hair out of her face and considers me. "Well, I wouldn't use that word exactly, but do you have something against your roommates? Carter and Zane are good guys. If it had been other players, I might not have made the French silk pie. Maybe just pumpkin bars or something."

A reluctant grin tugs on the corners of my mouth. "So if you ever serve me pumpkin bars I should know you're pissed at me?"

"Depends?" Her eyes dance in amusement. "Do you like pumpkin bars?"

"Nope. Can't stand the taste of pumpkin anything, and I think the whole pumpkin spice thing has gotten out of control. Coffee should taste like coffee. M&Ms should be peanut or plain. Oreos should be stuffed with the original filling and nothing else."

"Then yes, if I serve you pumpkin bars you'll know I'm mad."

"Noted."

"So what did you get?" She peers over my shoulder. Her tits brush

tantalizingly close to my arm.

“Got a little bit of everything. Wasn't sure which you'd like.” I lean into her, enjoying her closeness. She smells fresh—like lemons or something citrusy. I like it.

“That is very thoughtful of you. I'll take a little of the vegetable fried rice and maybe one dumpling.” She points a finger toward the box with the pork dumplings.

I stick three on her plate, and she doesn't protest when I hand it to her. We carry our plates over to the kitchen table.

“What do you want to drink?” I ask as she takes a seat.

“Just water.”

I grab a beer for myself and pour her glass of water from the filtered pitcher in the fridge. Back at the table, I pull apart her chopsticks and rub them against each other to get rid of any splinters before handing them over.

“Thank you,” she says, positioning the chopsticks in her hand. “Did you call your friend from Western State?”

“Yeah, I did. She was glad to hear from me.”

Bryant refrains from saying *I told you so*. “Tell me about her,” she orders instead.

“Lucy?” I ask. At her nod and between bites of noodles, I explain, “We've been friends for a while. Western State's in our hometown.”

“I didn't know that.” Her lips close around her chopsticks, and I'm struck by how fucking beautiful she is with her sunshine blonde hair, pert nose, and lush lips.

My connection with Lucy is fairly sordid, and as I watch Bryant dig into the second dumpling she's probably told herself she shouldn't have, I don't want to get into it. But the look on her face is so expectant, and I feel like I owe her for being such a dick earlier. “Her mom and my dad had an affair.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widen and her mouth forms a surprised O.

“Yeah, oh.”

She grimaces. “I’m so sorry. No wonder you guys are so close.”

I stir the noodles on my plate for a second before answering. “Yeah, I guess we kind of leaned on each other. She’s been my friend for a long time, and I really wasn’t prepared to lose her. And to a football player, no less.” I shake my head. “She always said they weren’t her type. We had this pact. She wouldn’t date players, and I wouldn’t hit on her roommates.”

“Did you keep your end of the bargain?”

“Yeah.” I start eating.

“Lucy was the one who broke it,” Bryant muses. “I can see how you’d be mad at her.”

I put down my chopsticks. “Why’s that?” I ask it honestly, because I have been pissed off at Lucy for a while, but couldn’t pinpoint why. “She shouldn’t be punished for liking someone.”

“No, but I’m sure it felt like a betrayal. And since your connection was forged on someone else’s betrayal, I can see how that would be troubling.”

I stare at her in astonishment. In a couple sentences, she summed up my discontent. Lucy and I had been friends for so long, but she took Iverson’s side over mine when he tried to convince me that giving up my starting role was perfectly acceptable. It still made me mad, but for my part, I shouldn’t have done what I did. It’s important, for some reason, that Bryant hears me taking responsibility for my shitty behavior. “It doesn’t make what I did right.”

“It doesn’t matter now. You apologized; she accepted. There’s no point in dwelling on the past or borrowing trouble as my gamma would say.”

“Is this where you bust out the *Friday Night Lights* slogan?”

““Clear eyes, full hearts,”” she quotes with a smile. “I suppose that could apply to all sorts of situations. But you weren’t trying to be an asshole.”

I start eating again. Between bites, I say, “I come by it naturally. My dad’s one.” When she doesn’t say anything, I joke, “No words of insight there for

me on this topic?”

She turns her palm up. “No. I don't really know your daddy.”

“He's a jerk. Grade A, top-shelf, selfish douche. I take after him.”

“I doubt that very much,” she protests.

“I have it on good authority,” I tell her, pushing my plate aside.

“Whoever said that to you?”

I shrug. “My mom.”

Mom's been telling me that I was a chip off the old man's block for as long as I can remember. Half of the time she resents me and the other half, she clings too hard. I figure that's how she feels about Dad, too. If she has to vent in my ear from time-to-time, then that's what I'm there for.

But I don't want to dwell on this anymore. There are more interesting things at hand. Bryant came over for a specific reason, and it's not boring stories about my past, basket weaving, or shooting the shit with my roommates.

We're going to fuck.

“You almost done?” I nod toward her plate. “Because we've got some basket weaving to do.”

“Yeah, I shouldn't eat any more.” Reluctantly, she pushes the plate away.

I gaze at the plate and then her face dubiously. “I think you should. You're going to need the extra energy tonight.”

Her jaw drops open. “Ace, you can't say things like that.”

I hook my foot around the base of her chair and pull her across the tile until her legs are snug against mine. Talking about sex with Bryant is a thousand times better than any other topic of conversation. “Actually, I can. I have this theory in life. When I'm sore, I ice myself. When I'm tired, I sleep. When I'm hungry, I eat.” I lean forward so my lips are an inch away from her ear. “And I'm real hungry, Bryant.”

“IS IT SUPPOSED TO BE IN THE SHAPE OF A BIRD?”

Ace tilts his head. “Is that what you see? Because I’m thinking it’s more of a boat shape.”

I giggle. Basket weaving isn’t as easy as we both thought it would be. After the first failed attempt, we ended up watching several YouTube videos but neither of us are getting the hang of it. Hence, his lopsided basket.

“Okay, time to take a break,” he announces. His green eyes smolder at me. “Let’s fuck.”

I don’t know whether to glare at him or moan in approval. I’m still not used to his sexual bluntness. Maybe it’s a northern thing? Down here, boys aren’t as frank, and if they do get racy, it’s usually tempered by their sugar-sweet drawls. Ace isn’t a southern boy, though. He’s raw and blatant and dangerous.

“Oh, sorry,” he mocks when he sees my expression. His lips twitch. “Let’s *make love*.”

I bristle. “Are you making fun of me, JR?”

His humor immediately fades. “Sorry,” he says again, and, this time, there’s a note of sincerity. “I’m just not used to censoring myself.”

“I don’t want you to censor yourself.” I sigh. “But I also don’t want to feel

like I'm just a convenient body for you."

"You're not."

"No?"

He arches a brow. "You're my girlfriend, remember?"

A snort flies out. And despite myself, a tiny thrill shoots through me at that word—*girlfriend*. I know this isn't going to be a real relationship. None of my projects are. But this is the first time my heart has done a flip at hearing that from a man.

"So, c'mon, girlfriend," he says, smiling and patting his lap. "Your man wants to make love."

My man. Oh Lord. My heart is flipping again. Stupid heart. Ace Anderson isn't allowed to make me feel this way. My goal is to make him a better man, not to get all warm and gooey in the face of his dazzling smiles.

Yet, I'm helpless to disobey him. I slide across the bed and climb gingerly onto his lap. Unlike some of my AO sisters, I'm not a hundred-pound twig. I have a love-hate relationship with my curves, and I feel like I'm too heavy to be sitting on him this way. But Ace doesn't seem to mind. One nice thing about his size is that he makes a girl like me feel dainty and delicate. He groans the moment my butt lands on his groin.

His nose rubs my cheek and then it's buried in my neck, breathing me in. "You smell fucking fantastic," he growls.

His lips latch onto the side of my throat. A sharp sting makes me yelp. Oh gosh, he's *biting* me.

Chuckling, he eases back and meets my eyes. "You're not into the rough stuff?"

I don't answer, because I honestly don't know whether I'm into the "rough stuff." One boy and a few fumbled encounters aren't enough to create actual preferences.

"I'm undecided," I admit. "Do that again and let's see what happens."

But instead of going back to my neck, he does something else—he yanks my pale yellow top up to my collarbone, shoves the cups of my matching yellow lace demi-bra down, and takes one nipple into his mouth. He gives it a hard suck, a firm lick, and then his teeth gently dig into the rigid peak.

“Ohhhh,” I cry out. All right, that felt...good.

Ace laughs against my breast. He kisses his way to my other nipple and gives another love bite. I wrap my arms around his broad shoulders and arch toward him, desire pooling between my thighs. I love how solid he feels beneath me. His big hands bracket my waist as his lips and tongue and teeth tease my nipples. His hair tickles the bottom of my chin. And his erection is prominent, bulging inside his pants and pressing against my core. I start grinding over it, because it’s right *there* and I’m aching for it.

Ace groans loudly, releasing my breast with a wet sucking noise. “If you keep doing that, I won’t have patience for foreplay.”

“I don’t need foreplay.” I’m not even lying. My entire body is on fire. One spark and I’m going to explode, and I’d rather that happened when he was inside me. I’ve been craving him ever since the party, and I’ve just decided to accept that. Maybe my desire for Ace is stronger than I’ve ever felt before, but that doesn’t mean he’s special, right? It just means my libido is more demanding these days. It’s probably the moon and tides or something like that. Nothing to do with Ace. Nothing at all.

“Well, I do,” Ace informs me, and the next thing I know, I’m flat on my back and he’s hovering over me. “I need this very, very much.”

“This?”

“*This*.” He deftly tugs my jeans and panties off. “I need this—” He cups my bare sex, “under my tongue.”

I barely have time to blink before his face is buried between my legs. Oh, Lord. Shockwaves of pleasure rock into me when his tongue skillfully circles my clit. He takes it real slow, drawing out each lick, teasing me with soft, barely-there kisses. A sweat breaks out on my forehead and my hips start moving as if they have a mind of their own. I want more. I want his mouth and his fingers and his—

I wail when he lifts his head. “Don’t stop,” I beg.

The grin he gives me is filthy. “I thought you didn’t want foreplay.”

I grumble impatiently. “I said I didn’t *need* it, but now that you’re doing that, it’d be awfully rude of you to stop.”

Ace’s laughter heats my inner thigh. “I love how southern you are. *Awfully rude*,” he mimics, and his drawl is awfully terrible. “Don’t worry, Bryant. I’ll take care of you.”

And, oh gosh, he does. He dips his head again and wraps his lips around my clit, sucking hard enough to turn my field of vision into a sea of white dots. Heat builds low in my belly. Pleasure curls my toes and has my fingernails digging into the sheets, so tight that I actually break a nail. Lord, I’m going to need a manicure after this.

The orgasm starts deep in my core and then sweeps me away in a rush of pure bliss. It’s wonderful and perfect and I never want it to end. Eventually, the pleasure abates and I peek down to see Ace licking his lips.

“My turn,” he mutters.

I expect him to climb up the bed and guide his erection into my mouth, but instead he grabs a condom from the top drawer of the nightstand. He rolls the latex onto his long, erect shaft. His eyes glitter with need as they land on my sex. I’m still glistening from the orgasm and from the new rush of arousal that comes from seeing his lust-soaked expression.

With an athlete’s grace, he rolls onto his back and pulls me on top of him, positioning the broad head of his cock at my entrance. “Sink down,” he orders.

I bite my lip. Girl-on-top isn’t an appealing position to me. It makes my breasts jiggle and my thighs look rounder than they are. But Ace’s eyes are on fire. He wants me so bad, and his need drives all the insecurities out of my head. I want him to feel as good as he just made me feel. So I sink onto him, welcoming the way my body stretches to accommodate his size.

Ace’s eyes roll to the top of his head. “Jesus!”

“Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain,” I instantly chide.

He chokes out a laugh and utters something under his breath that sounds like “gotta love the South” but before I can give him a teasing rebuke, he thrusts upwards and fills me completely and I can’t remember how to talk.

“You’re so tight, Bryant. Fuck, you feel like heaven.”

So does he. He’s long and thick and pulsing inside me, and the position allows him to rub my clit. He makes tiny little circles with his thumb, and I grind harder against him, taking all the pleasure he has to offer. My head starts to get foggy and my breaths come out in shallow pants. I can feel the pleasure building up again and it frightens me a little. I’ve never been ready to come again this fast. I don’t like this helpless feeling that Ace elicits inside me.

“Hey.” A strong hand grasps my chin. “You’re leaving me again.”

I swallow through my arid mouth. “I’m not,” I lie.

He doesn’t believe me, because he simply says, “You promised you wouldn’t hold back.”

He’s right. I did promise that. And truthfully, my apprehension doesn’t stand a chance against my overpowering desire for this man. My hips move faster, and approval lights his green eyes.

“There you go,” he encourages.

Breathless, I ride him until I can’t see straight anymore, until I can no longer support my own weight and fall against the solid wall of his chest. He takes over from there, wrapping his muscular arms around me and thrusting up in hard, deep strokes. His pubic bone presses against my clit with each stroke and then I’m soaring again, gasping and shuddering as a second orgasm rushes through me.

Ace kisses me at that moment, his tongue plunging into my mouth and his husky groan vibrating through me as he surrenders to his own release.

He gets up only to dispose of the condom, then returns to the bed and gathers me close to him. “Damn,” he says hoarsely. “That was amazing.”

“It really was,” I agree. My body is still tingling.

We fall silent for a few minutes, staring up at the ceiling.

“Why do you do that?” he finally asks.

I frown against his shoulder. “Do what?”

“Try to fight from coming.”

Uncomfortable, I attempt to wiggle out of his arms, but he locks me in place by keeping one hand on my waist and the other draped across my front.

“It’s fine. You don’t have to tell me.”

His resigned tone makes me soften. “I...don’t like to feel vulnerable,” I admit.

“Does anybody?”

“I suppose you’re right. But...” I shrug. “You’re at your most vulnerable state when you’re making love. It makes me nervous.”

“Sex is supposed to be fun,” he counters. “It’s about making each other feel good.” His hand slides to my left breast and squeezes softly. I sigh in pleasure. “I make you feel good, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t overthink it,” he advises.

Easier said than done. I want to tell him that he makes me feel *too* good and that’s a problem for me, but even if I were brave enough to voice the confession, I don’t get a chance to say it, because Ace’s phone rings.

“Let me see who that is,” he says. “It could be a team thing.”

Reluctantly, I ease out of his arms so he can lean over the side of the bed to find his phone. He finally fishes it out of his pants and checks the screen. Almost instantly, his sated expression becomes cloudy.

“One sec. I need to take this.”

He doesn’t leave the room, but he does walk toward the desk as he answers

the call. He keeps his back to me, providing me with a view of his sculpted back and tight buttocks. He isn't at all shy with his nudity, whereas I'm discreetly reaching for the sheet to cover myself up.

"Hey," he says gruffly into the phone. He pauses to listen, and I see a stiffness begin to form between his shoulder blades. "What for?" He pauses again. "You said you were short on cash and couldn't make it."

I wonder who he's speaking to. His tone is getting chillier by the second and now his whole back is tense.

"Fine. Okay. I'll call you later to figure out a time."

He hangs up without saying goodbye, which I find a tad rude. No matter who was on the other end of the line, they still deserved a goodbye. But maybe that's my southern manners talking. Momma and Daddy would disown me if I ever hung up the telephone on someone.

"Who was that?" I ask cautiously.

Ace's eyes are shuttered. "My dad."

"Oh." I study his face. "Is everything all right?"

He responds with a grunt, which I don't know whether to take as a yes or no. I'm leaning toward no, because the thundercloud in his expression is now hanging over the bedroom and darkening the sex glow from before.

"What did he want?" I'm pushing, but I think with Ace, pushing is necessary.

"Wants to have drinks," is the terse reply. "He's coming to town for the game."

"And you're...not happy about this?"

This time, I don't get an answer. "C'mon, let's get dressed and tackle that basket again before you have to go," he says without meeting my eyes.

I watch as he gathers his clothes and begins to dress. After a long, thoughtful moment, I slide out of bed and do the same. When he told me about his father's affair and how his mother believes that Ace is a chip of his old man's block, he spoke flippantly, as if he was unaffected by it all.

But it's obvious that Ace's issues run a lot deeper than he's willing to admit.

HIM: *U LEFT YOUR UNDERWEAR HERE.*

Me: *OMG. I did not. Why would you say such a thing? If there's a pair of girl's panties in your drawers, they aren't mine.*

Him: *Really? Because these are yellow like your bra which I had a nice up close personal view of. Plus they have a B stitched on the ass. Nice work, BTW. U do that yourself?*

I squint at the picture. Damn, those are mine. I left in such a rush the other day that I forgot my panties? After we tried our hand at finishing his project, he hauled me back into the bedroom where he expended an excessive amount energy on my body in ways so inventive that I blush at the memory.

After the third round, I'd staggered home dazed and confused, but I could've sworn I jammed my unmentionables into my pocket before fleeing the scene. Granted, I had been distracted when he climbed out of bed and stretched, highlighting his perfect body.

Me: *If you show those to anyone else, Ace, so help me God.*

Him: *Don't worry. These are mine now.*

Me: *Why in the world did you wait until today to tell me?*

It's been nearly a week since that night. Due to his practice and my busy sorority schedule, along with planning things with Momma for a church

event, Ace and I hadn't gotten together again. But we did text and kiss a couple of times in a training room at the practice facility, which would've given him plenty of time to tell me about my panties!

Him: *How come u haven't noticed you're missing a pair? Or do u leave a trail of them everywhere u go?*

Me: *You know very well I'm not that kind of girl!!!!*

He sends me back the shrugging emoji.

I blame post-coital confusion. It's hard to remember my own name when Ace is done with me.

"Bryant, you paying attention?"

I jerk my head up. Guiltily, I stare at my daddy, trying to remember what he'd been talking about. Oh, right, alumni.

"Yes, Daddy. You need me to do some work today?"

"I'm concerned about you, Cub. You seem real distracted lately."

I stare at my hands, away from Daddy's overly perceptive examination. He says that being coach is one part motivator and one part counselor, so the ability to read minds is one of those skills he's perfected over the years. I throw up a flimsy shield and force myself to meet his eyes. Not looking at a person is an automatic sign of guilt. I couldn't get away with anything as a child, and while I've learned a few defense mechanisms, he can mostly read me like a book.

"It's the start of a new season," I say, "and I'm just getting back into the groove of things, you know?"

"I know you try to make everyone around you happy without paying much attention to yourself."

"Daddy, we had a mani/pedi night at the AO house last night. I had plenty of attention. You'll see when the bill comes in." I wave my nails, which are painted crimson red with a black French tip. My pinkie has the AO symbol on it.

He shoots me a disappointed look and shoves an envelope across the desk. “If you’re done bullshitting me, mind taking this over to the Mansion? Bubba Wasserly asked for another field pass.”

I hesitate before sticking the white envelope into my purse. “Sure thing. I’ll take it over right now.”

“Thanks, Cub.” He gets to his feet and meets me over by the door. “I know you don’t like Bubba, but until I catch him doing something wrong, I can’t exactly tell a man whose name is on our practice facility that he and his guests aren’t welcome.”

“His name is the one at the bottom of the list.” Wasserly is one of those donors who gives just enough to get into the VIP events, but not enough to have naming rights to his own building. He bought a brick or five in the last build.

“A name’s a name, and if not for the Wasserlys of this world, we wouldn’t have this posh place.” Daddy’s reproving tone makes me feel bad.

“I know. Sorry. I love you.” I push up on my tiptoes and give his scratchy face a quick kiss. He gives me a big hug in return, letting me know everything’s good between us.

The Mansion is this huge old southern plantation home. At one time, this small Tennessee town was mostly owned by one family. After the War of Northern Aggression, as my Gamma still calls it, the place fell into disrepair, but it was eventually revived when the city fathers convinced the state to build one of its university extensions here. Harper City is just close enough to Nashville to provide most of its residents with all the citified pleasures they need, while still maintaining its quaint small town feel. The large university keeps the whole place bustling.

The main residence was bought by the city back in the ’80s, and then was sold to a developer who turned it into a grand hotel that is now known as the Mansion. Harper City is considered one of the nicest places in the South to visit, and the Mansion is the jewel of the this place, so everyone who’s anyone stays here during the season, including Bubba Wasserly.

Wasserly’s a man with a lot of money, but there’s dirt smudges all over it.

Daddy suspects that Wasserly has given things to some of our players under the table, but it's not anything we have proof of.

We'd like to say that all our players are angels, but the fact is that many of them come from really awful home lives. Football is their path away from a tragic finale that claims so many of their friends and family, and since our players don't get paid, it's not surprising some take the money to help their mommas pay rent or buy food.

Daddy struggles with that all the time, and I know it's unbearable when one of his boys comes begging for help, and Daddy has to turn him away.

Still, it's not legal and if anyone gets caught, the whole program goes down, taking the bright future of those kids with it. It's a balance. Life's always a balance. There are bad people out there. People who'll hurt the ones you love. After Ginny passed, I figured it was my responsibility to inject my own form of balance. Find a guy who laid waste to a lot of girls and try to get him to see the light.

Wasserly's beyond hope. Ace, on the other hand, is salvageable. Hearing him talk casually about how his friend stabbed him in the back, his daddy hurt him, and his momma unthinkingly insults him struck me hard in the stomach.

A soft spot for Ace is developing in my heart. He might be the first one to leave a mark on me, but I can handle it. I know I should back away, gain some space, but I can't deny myself. He's temptation incarnate and works me with more skill than a carny spotting marks at the county fair.

The good thing is that I don't fall in love with men. Or rather, it's more appropriate to say that I love everyone the same. It's the sex, I decide. Sex always complicates stuff. The body convinces you that you have stronger feelings than you really do. I merely need to shift the focus, concentrating on excavating his heart from that thick exoskeleton surrounding it instead of dwelling on my own silly one.

Feeling decidedly better, I whip into the portico in front of the hotel. The valet helps me out of my car. "Thank you, Ferris," I say, reading his nametag.

"My pleasure, miss. Welcome to the Mansion."

The lobby makes me think of what the interior of a museum would look like

if someone lived in it. The white paneled walls are dotted with crystal sconces. From the lobby doors, you can see all the way to the huge east lawn. To the right is a massive staircase big enough to fit sixteen debutantes standing shoulder-to-shoulder. I know the precise number because this is where I had my debutante ball at the age of sixteen. Prissy Shore fell off the stairs because she pre-gamed too much. Her boyfriend and daddy had to carry her out the double doors while her momma ran ahead of them in horrified humiliation. I don't know who I felt worse for—Prissy or her momma.

My own mother still refers to Prissy as “Prissy, bless her heart, Shore.” After high school, Prissy left to go to college up north, somewhere in Chicago or maybe even Michigan. I don't think she's ever coming back.

Ginny lost her virginity during her post-deb party. She later learned, and warned me, that the escorts have bets on who can turn the white dress red. I spread that little tidbit around as far and wide as I can. Somehow one of the organizers heard about it and killed the post-deb party dead.

I wasn't at all sorry about that. I'm still not.

To the left of the lobby and down a couple marble stairs is the Club House. Decorated in mahogany and dark leather, the place looks—and smells—like somebody's den.

From inside the bar, I hear my name called.

“Bryant Johnson, you bring your pretty self over here and give Bubba a kiss hello.”

I slowly turn to my left and raise a hand in greeting. Gritting my teeth behind a pageant-worthy smile, I make my way toward the short, stocky man with the bad toupee. *Go bald*, I want to snap at him. *Or do a comb-over. Do anything but wear that expensive but awful looking animal pelt on the top of your skull.*

I lean in and kiss the air next to his cheek, careful to avoid any contact with that thing on his head, while he grips my upper arms too tight and presses a wet smack on my skin.

“Lord, Bryant, you're getting prettier every time I see you.” Bubba's drawl is so thick I need a paddle to help me wade through it. Bubba's the type of

southerner who exaggerates his roots for effect. I peek around and spy his guest still seated. Northern man, I'd guess. A southerner would've been standing, as Bubba is now.

"Thank you, Mr. Wasserly. You're too kind. You are looking especially fit as well." I slip out of his grasp and hold out the sideline pass. "My daddy said you were needing this for someone."

"Call me, Bubba, darling. You're not taking off," he objects, wrapping a paw around my arm. Good thing I'm wearing a long-sleeve blouse so there's a small barrier between my skin and Bubba's sweaty palm. "You need to have a drink with us." He waves his free hand in the air, hailing a waitress before I can decline.

Stifling a sigh, I take a chair, scooting it close to the table so Bubba isn't overcome with the urge to feel me up under the pretense of adjusting my chair. "I'll take a white wine spritzer," I tell Darla, our waitress. "Heavy on the spritzer."

Darla gives me a knowing look, which tells me that Bubba and his Yankee friend have been boozing it up long enough to be pills. Now that I'm sitting down and closer, the friend looks vaguely familiar. Frantically, I search my memory bank for this man's name. I hate forgetting people. Shoot. I should've taken a look at the pass. It would've had his name on it.

"Bryant Johnson, this is Joe Anderson." It's a testament to my momma's training that my surprise is only conveyed through the widening of my eyes, because my jaw wants to drop open. This is Ace's dad! "Joe, this is one of the treasures of the South, Roby Johnson's daughter."

I lean forward and offer my hand. Mr. Anderson takes it and gives me one of those limp shakes that some men give to women because they think we're too weak for a real one.

"Nice to meet you, sir."

"Call me Joe."

Call me Joe.

I'm named after my dad.

I guess Ace's first name is Joseph. I wonder if I could wrangle out Ace's middle name. I also wonder what Ace's momma looks like, because there's only a little of his daddy in him. The height is there, I suppose, looking at Mr. Anderson covertly under my lashes, but where Ace is sharp angles and smoldering intensity, his father is rounded corners and flushed geniality.

"Your son is a real asset to the team. We're so thrilled to have him be part of the Southern U family. You, too, Mr. Anderson."

"Ace is a chip off the old block," Mr. Anderson declares. "I'm not surprised he's having success here. His old school is a bunch of losers."

I hide a wince. That statement reeks of sour grapes, considering that Ace's old team won two National Championships during a time when Southern won none.

"Well, we believe in Ace. He's amazing. There are definitely hidden depths to him. In all the time I've spent with the team, I don't know that I've seen someone with so much potential. You must be so proud."

I don't know if it was something I said or a facial expression, but something gives away the fact that Ace and I have enjoyed a certain closeness, because Mr. Anderson's face sharpens and his eyes take on a thoroughly speculative look.

"So you're spending a lot of time with Ace? I hope that's not interfering with his production. He needs to focus on the field, making big plays so that scouts get their heads out of their asses and put him on their draft boards."

I fold my hands primly on my lap. "Ace is a fine player. He doesn't need to make big plays to get noticed."

His dad snorts. "That's nicely put bullshit, but anyone who knows football knows that you need a better arm than he's been showing lately." Mr. Anderson shakes his finger. "Since you're there all the time, how does your dad plan to use him? What's the percentage of pass plays versus run plays the offense will run? I don't want Ace doing too many option reads anymore. They don't run that in the pros."

"I can't comment on my daddy's plays." I slide a quick look to Bubba to gauge his reaction, but he's busy ogling a waitress.

“But you are around the team a lot, right? Bubba tells me that you practically live in the practice facility,” Mr. Anderson says. His eyes flick to my chest and back up to my face, telling me exactly the type of things he thinks I'm doing there.

“It's an internship of sorts,” I reply as nicely as possible. This is Ace's dad, an athlete's parent. I'm expected to treat them with respect and kindness, even if it kills me. “I plan to go into public relations after college. Working with the athletic department allows me the opportunity to see real professionals in action.”

“She's underselling herself,” Bubba interjects, his attention back on us. “This girl hosts a mean alumni party. Your attention to detail is unparalleled. I'd try to hire you away, but I think your daddy's going to keep you.”

“I love the team,” I admit, “but I'm interested in looking at other opportunities.”

“Like the Titans?” Bubba says with a twinkle in his eye.

It's no secret I love football and that working PR for a pro team is an ultimate dream. “I may have applied there.”

“Don't want to leave all that easy access to those athletes,” Mr. Anderson guesses. “At least until you can get a ring on your finger.”

Neither Bubba nor I smile at the ugly accusation of being a jock chaser. Even if Bubba thought it were true, and no doubt there are some men who do, he wouldn't call the daughter of a man he respected a whore, no matter how many football players I've supposedly taken to my bed. We like our criticisms to be couched in niceties and bracketed by “Bless her heart” and “I'll pray for her” platitudes.

Bubba would've stood up for me, but I don't give him a chance. I lay a hand on his arm to stay his comments and lean toward Mr. Anderson with a smile laden with so much syrup, I should be crowned the Pancake Queen.

“I think anyone could learn a lot from being around division one football players. It takes a special kind of dedication to get up every morning, even on the weekends, to be at the practice facility before the roosters crow. Those men are required to balance nearly a forty-hour work week of practice,

playbook studying, weight training, skill exercises, while also maintaining a NCAA-mandated GPA. They're impressive students, and I'm sure proud to call several of them my friends. If that's what you're asking, Mr. Anderson."

Bubba laughs a little too heartily. "Hear, hear. That's why I support the Southern U Renegades. It's a good, clean program with a high graduation rate."

Thanks to Momma's good training, I don't roll my eyes at Mr. Wasserly's bald-faced lie. He's one of those who wants to turn this thing upside down, if he can.

"In my opinion, girls and locker rooms don't mesh well," Mr. Anderson can't help but interject.

I ignore him again and address to Bubba instead. "Daddy's built a wonderful program." I tap the envelope. "Here's the sidelines access pass. It's only good until the team goes back into the tunnel, but you'll want to watch the game from your box anyway. It's too hard to keep track of anything on the sidelines." In other words, don't stay with this Yankee jerk or my daddy won't be happy. "I hate to run, but my momma's expecting me."

Bubba slides the envelope into his suit coat and then rises to give me another wet kiss on my cheek. "Give your momma my love and tell your daddy thanks."

"My pleasure, Mr. Wasserly." I nod toward Mr. Anderson, who still hasn't gotten to his feet. "Mr. Anderson, you have a nice day, too."

Ace's dad gives me a very brief nod goodbye. Apparently, we're at odds, which leaves me vaguely unsettled. Even if my heart is dangerously enamored with Ace, I can't jettison him now. After meeting his dad, I feel like Ace's going to need me more than ever.

Ace

The minute I get the text from my dad, I'm in my truck and on the way to the Mansion. It takes thirty-five minutes, ten of which are spent looking for a goddamned place to park because I'm not paying some pimply teen ten bucks to park my truck.

The same pimply teen who gives my shit-kickers, jeans, and Southern sweatshirt a disdainful onceover. I shove my hands in my pockets so I don't flip him off or accidentally smear my fingertips all over the glass and brass inside the fancy hotel.

Inside the lobby, I make a beeline for the bar. If Dad's here, he'll be by the booze. Sure enough, I find him in the middle of the joint, with a glass of whiskey in front of him.

"Ace!" he cries, waving me over. "How's my famous quarterback son?" He thumps me on the back. I wish my sweatshirt had a hood I could hide behind.

"Nice to see you," I mutter, giving him a light embrace in return before taking a seat. I wait for him to bask in whatever glory he seems to have conjured by yelling out my name, but when he does sit down, I hiss, "What are you doing here? I thought you couldn't afford it."

Dad picks up the drink menu and hands it to me. "What are you drinking tonight? Don't worry about the costs. I'm picking it up."

I take a look. Everything on the menu, including Coke, is more than ten bills. I toss the menu back on the table. "No, thanks." This place smells like money. It could be the leather and the cigar smoke, but I think it's from the actual cash and plastic that's lining the pockets of the suited guys sitting in the ultra-plush leather chairs. Neither I nor my old man belong in this sort of place. "How are you swinging this?"

Dad toys with his napkin, refusing to look me in the eye. "Friend put me up."

"Fuck me, Dad." This is an NCAA violation waiting to happen. "I'm outta here." I get up and run smack into a stocky gentleman wearing a suit over a red and gold Southern U sweater.

"Ace Anderson. Nice to meet you, son. Bubba Wasserly. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived. Had to run to the gent's room." Bubba shakes my hand vigorously and then holds out a hand toward the chair I'd vacated. "Sit down. Sit down. Your dad and I were enjoying a drink. He's my guest for tomorrow's game."

I drag a hand over the back of my head and look around. Is this a sting? Since no NCAA investigator jumps up from a nearby table and points an accusing

finger at me, I take a reluctant seat. “Nice to meet you, too, Mr. Wasserly.”

“Call me Bubba,” he says. He raises a hand in the air and flags down a waitress. “What can we get for you to drink?”

“Nothing. I've got a game tomorrow.”

Bubba smiles. “So you do, so you do. My friend and I will take a refill of the bourbon. Why don't you bring Ace a...?” He pauses.

“A water is good,” I supply.

Bubba watches the waitress's departing back for a moment before addressing me again. “Damn shame these places are so stuffy. Back in the day, there used to be men's clubs with real waitresses. Nowadays, these mixed rooms have to have buttoned-up girls lest the PC crowd have kittens because a few titties were showing.” He shakes his head in real dismay that the fancy-pants bar doesn't have stripper poles and pasties-wearing wait staff.

“How is it that you and my dad came to meet, Bubba?”

Bubba folds his hands across his stomach. “I'm on the board of the Children's Hospital here and since your dad is in medical equipment supplies, it seemed like a natural fit for me to look him up when I was in Boston a few weeks ago.”

That seems like a huge fucking stretch, but there's no point in me arguing with either of them. I'll spend a few minutes shooting the breeze and then leave.

“We're all real excited to have a player with real championship experience on the team. Think you'll make a difference?” Bubba asks.

“I hope so.”

“We're expecting big things from you.”

“I expect big things from myself.”

Bubba laughs, slapping the arm of his leather chair. “Damn, I like your confidence. When Coach Johnson signed you up, I wasn't fully on board, but your experience is something the team needs.”

I breathe through my nostrils so I don't say something I regret. I've got actual skills other than having won championships at every level. I'm not just a trophy case.

"It doesn't matter that there are boys behind center that have better arms than Ace; he's got the better brain." Dad turns to Bubba and taps the side of his skull. "He gets that from me. Both heads are fully functional."

Oh, for Christ's sake. "Dad, enough," I snap.

Bubba smiles, all lips, no teeth. "Don't care what size head he's got as long as he uses it the right way. What kind of offensive plays do you plan to run?"

"Yeah, tell us."

An alarm bell dings in the back of my head. They want to know what kinds of plays we're running? That's not cool. Those plays are for the team to know and no one else. "Not my place."

Bubba shoots Dad a look that I can't read.

"I hear Coach Johnson scripts the first fifteen plays. Any idea how many are going to be pass or run?" Dad presses.

"Not my place," I repeat.

Bubba stands up. "I'm going to see what's taking so long with the waitress. You two sit tight."

When Bubba is out of earshot, I lean forward. "Are you betting on this game?"

Dad's face flushes.

"Jesus Christ, Dad. You cannot be serious. You think I'm going to jeopardize my position with my new team by leaking plays to you?"

"It's a small side bet. How many runs versus how many passes. It's not like I'm asking you to throw the game. I'd never do that. It's just a fact. You have knowledge of the facts, and I'm asking you to share them. The bet's not even that big," he complains.

"I don't care if the bet is for a dollar. I'm still not helping you with this."

“No one's going to find out.” His tone becomes cajoling. “I'd never ask this of you if I didn't need the help. Business has been slow. Like I told you, I couldn't swing the trip down here to see your game. You know how much I love watching you play.” *No, you love telling everyone that you're my dad.* “Come on. Seriously. This is piddly shit and doesn't have any impact on the outcome of the game.”

“I could get banned from college ball. It would hurt me in the NFL.” Just talking about it in public like this is making me sweat.

He barks out a laugh. “Son, we both know you're not getting into the pros. You don't have the arm for that, which is why we should take advantage of your situation now. You're not going to have a better opportunity to grow your wealth.”

I stare at him dumbly as a chill creeps over me. “Is that what Bubba's telling you? That gambling can grow your wealth? Come on. Don't fall for that sucker.”

Dad's face grows hard. “It's not a sucker's bet if you tell me the plays.”

I get to my feet just as Bubba arrives at the table, waitress right beside him.

“Leaving so soon?” Bubba smiles and the chill grows colder. “Our drinks just came. Darla's sorry she was taking so long, aren't you?”

“Yessir,” the pretty girl parrots.

“I've got a project due. Nice to meet you, Bubba.” I nod curtly and walk away.

“Wait a second, son. I'll walk out with you. Give me a minute, Bubba.” Dad jumps up and chases after me.

“I'm not telling you the plays,” I grind out when he reaches me in the lobby. “You need to stay away from Bubba. It's only going to spell trouble. You can't afford this lifestyle.”

Dad grabs my arm and pulls me to a stop right before the exit doors. “Forget the plays. You're going to answer something for me, though. What's going on between you and Coach Johnson's daughter? She was here earlier. Bryant?”

I freeze. What does he mean, she was here? “Why? Why do you ask?” When the words come out, I regret it. I should've said something like “Bryant who?” Instead, I stupidly acknowledge what I don't want people outside the team knowing.

Dad smacks a hand against the back of my head. “Fuck me sideways, Ace. Didn't you learn your lesson from the last time?”

I feel my face heat up. “It's not what you think it is.”

He snorts derisively. “If you're fucking her, then it's exactly what I think it is. Fine, you don't want to tell me the plays. You don't want to help me, then at least help yourself and stay out of that girl's shorts. There's plenty other pussy out there that you can plow. I don't care if her legs open easier than an automatic door, you don't shit where you eat. Stay away from that girl.”

Hearing my dad say that crap about Bryant turns my vision red. Bryant's too special of a girl to be infected by my dad's taint. Hell, it's bad enough she's hanging around me.

“How about you stay away,” I spit out. “From my team and from Bryant.”

ACCORDING TO ZANE, BRYANT'S ROOM IS ON THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE ALPHA Omega sorority house. Maybe I would've been suspicious of how readily available that information had been to him, if I didn't know for a fact that Bryant hasn't been involved with any football player since that Tommy kid who got kicked off the team. Besides, this sorority has a strict no-boys-allowed policy.

Which is why I'm hiding in the gardenia bushes like a creeper, scanning the upper windows until I pinpoint Bryant's. Last window on the very left, Zane had said. The house is plantation-style, with pillars around the exterior and a white façade that looks gray in the shadows.

It's ten o'clock. I shouldn't be here. Not because I'll probably go to sorority jail for breaking their ridiculous rules, but because curfew was at nine thirty. The team stays at a hotel the night before a game, even for home games, and everyone else is at the Radisson right now. Me, I'm scaling an ivy-covered lattice, scrambling up to the balcony that spans the entire second floor of the massive house.

Filmy white curtains cover her window, but there's light beyond them. I make out a figure moving around the room. Long hair and a round ass hugged by pink booty shorts. The lust that shoots through me makes me frown. I don't like how easily this girl gets to me, even when I'm supposed to be angry with her.

I tap on the windowpane a little harder than I mean to. The entire frame

rattles, and there's a startled cry from inside. When I see her dash toward the door, I call out, "Bryant. It's me."

The shadowy figure stops. Then there's audible stomping before the curtains are ripped aside.

"Ace?" she hisses through the glass.

I gesture for her to open the window. She does, but very reluctantly.

"What are you doing here?" she whispers once the glass is no longer a barrier.

Rather than answer, I plant a hand on the wooden sill and climb into her room. That gets me a flustered exclamation.

"Ace. You can't be here." Her brown eyes dart to the door. It's closed, and there's no sounds coming from beyond it. "If Sadie finds out, she'll make me vacuum the entire house for the rest of this semester. Do you know how many square feet of carpet there are in this place?"

I don't know who Sadie is, and I don't care. I fold my arms across my chest and meet her frazzled gaze. "Why were you meeting with my dad?"

Bryant's mouth falls open. She recovers quickly. "I wasn't meeting with your dad," she replies stiffly.

"No? Because he says you were at the Mansion earlier and it sounded like you two spoke." Accusation colors my tone.

"I was there," she confirms, and her tone is getting angrier, too. "But not to see your daddy, Ace. I was dropping off a sidelines pass to a booster—Bubba Wasserly. I had no idea he was getting the pass for your father."

That appeases me. Just a bit. "What did he say to you?" I mutter.

"Who? Mr. Wasserly?"

"No, my dad," I answer through clenched teeth.

Bryant edges to the door and stands in front of it, as if she's afraid someone will barge in and she'll need to barricade it with her body. A frown mars her full lips. "He asked me how my dad plans to use you. And he said he doesn't

think you should be doing option reads anymore.”

That son of a bitch. He was hitting up my coach’s daughter for intel about our plays, too? “Fucking hell,” I growl under my breath.

“Don’t curse,” Bryant says immediately, all southern manners, which was goddamned cute when we were fucking, but annoying now.

“I’ll curse if I want to,” I snap.

She flinches. I feel bad, but not bad enough to apologize. Truth is, I’m pissed. At my dad for showing up and running his mouth and risking my place at this college so he can win a few bucks. But also at Bryant, for insinuating herself into my life. And for meeting my dad. I don’t want the two of them in the same room, ever.

“Stay away from my father, Bryant.”

Her eyes widen, then fill with indignation. “You say that as if I intentionally sought him out tonight, which I did not.” She crosses her arms to match my pose, only on her it doesn’t look menacing. It just causes her ample tits to squish together and her cleavage to pour out of her white sleep tank. “You’re out of line right now, JR. You shouldn’t be in my room, and you have no right to accuse me of...” She shakes her head. “I don’t even know what you’re accusing me of!”

Me neither. Some of my anger dims as I take in her pink cheeks and confused expression. But her next words retrigger the spark of hostility.

“Your behavior is undesirable. You’re better than this, JR.”

I gape at her. “Jesus Christ, Bryant! You don’t know what I’m better or worse than. You don’t know shit about me, and you don’t get to judge whether my behavior is ‘desirable’”—I use finger quotes—“or not. From the day I met you, you’ve been treating me like a broken doll you need to fix. Well, I don’t need fixing, baby,” I say mockingly. “I’m Ace fucking Anderson and I can behave any goddamn way I want. I like who I am.”

“Do you?”

Her quiet counter makes me angrier. “Damn right I do. I’m the starting

quarterback of this college, for fuck's sake. I've won two national championships, which is more than any of those assholes have. I can snap my fingers and any number of hot, willing chicks will be on their knees in front of me, begging to suck me off." Bryant flinches. I'm panting, though I don't know if it's from anger or desperation. "I don't need you to try to change me, okay? I don't need your lectures about my behavior. If you really want to put your mouth to good use, then how about you blow me? Otherwise, you can keep your opinions to yourself."

I finish with a defeated breath, almost instantly regretting every single word I just said to her. Bryant is staring at me with an indecipherable expression. I think...I think I see pity there.

Fuck that. Fuck it all. I take a hurried step back to the window.

"Ace," she says softly from behind me.

I hesitate.

"What are you really mad about right now?"

Shame roots me to the spot. Shame and an overwhelming amount of self-loathing. I'm an ass, just like my old man. I shouldn't be in this room with this woman. I feel like I'm dirtying her up simply from breathing the same air as her. If Bryant knew the things I've said to other women, the things I've done, she wouldn't want me. That's how I can rid myself of her. That's how I can sever this compulsion to return to her time and again.

I force myself to meet her brown eyes steadily and open my mouth to deliver a mocking, crude rant—and instead, in hoarse, tormented tones, I say, "My father is an asshole."

Those cow eyes soften. Her beautiful face isn't lined with pity, but something that looks like understanding. She marches over to me and takes my hand, tugging me down on the edge of the bed. Her comforter is a pale lavender color, sweet and pretty as the girl who sleeps under it. Her nearness, the soft comfort of her unspoken acceptance, the decency of her spirit...it all draws out words I prefer to keep masked behind insolence and isolation.

"I love him," I mumble, pinning my gaze to my feet. "I really do. But goddamn it, Bryant, he's disgusting. He cheated on my mom. He blew all our

savings at the racetrack. He acts like I fucking owe him something, as if he's solely responsible for me being good at football." I clench my fists on my knees. "He tried to get me to tell him our scripted plays so he could place bets!"

Bryant sucks in a breath. "I hope you—"

"No, I didn't tell him a thing," I say bitterly. "Do you honestly think I'd do that?"

"No. I don't think that." She covers one of my fists with her small hand and begins prying my fingers apart. "I was going to say, I hope you know you don't owe him anything."

I blink in surprise.

"You don't," she says firmly. "He might be your daddy, Ace, but you don't play football for him. You play for *you*. And just because he's a jerk doesn't mean you have to be one, too, or that you're destined to be one because of some genetic malfunction." She laces her fingers through mine. "And I don't think you like yourself at all, JR. I don't think you *want* all those girls to get on their knees and blow you, because you know they're not doing it because they truly like you, but only because you're the starting quarterback and they're hoping it will elevate their own image."

"That's not true, I love blow jobs," I joke weakly.

Bryant sighs.

"Fine," I admit. "Maybe the jock chasers don't always make me feel good about myself." I shrug. "But sometimes they do. It's nice to feel wanted."

"Yes," she agrees. "It is."

I stare down at our interlaced fingers. "I'm sorry I yelled at you," I say gruffly, the simply stated apology only scratching at the surface of the groveling she's owed.

Bryant peers up at me with those big brown eyes. "I'm sorry I made you feel like a broken doll. I don't think you're broken, Ace. Just a little...dinged."

"Dinged, huh?" I crack a smile. "So, what, you just sand me down, slap some

new paint on me, and I'll be good as new?"

She laughs. "No, you know better. But..." Her voice grows soft again. "I'm not trying to change you. I promise. All I want is to help you become the best version of yourself."

"Why?" I demand, searching her face. "Why the hell do you care so much about me? You don't even know me."

"I know you're in pain." She bites her lip. "I saw it the first moment we met and I wanted to take all that pain away."

I flinch at her perception, but say, "That's not your responsibility."

"I suppose not. But..." She trails off again. "I like to help people, if you haven't already figured that out. It makes me feel good."

It makes a strange sort of sense. Chuckling, I pull her against me, slinging an arm around her. "I've noticed," I say dryly.

Bryant rests her head on my shoulder. Her breath tickles my skin right through the sleeve of my shirt. Her feminine scent wafts into my nostrils and I inhale deeply, wondering why in the hell I'm so drawn to this woman. She's not my type. She's soft and compassionate and far too patient.

"You need to go now," she finally says. "If Sadie finds out—"

"Sweetheart, I don't know who Sadie is," I interject, cupping her chin with both my hands. Bryant's a fireball, but her face is dwarfed by my hands. She thinks her body's too round for me? No way. I love it. I love the feel of her solid frame. I love the swells of her tits, the curves of her hips, the plushness of her ass.

My dick twitches in full agreement.

"She's the president of AO."

"Do I look like I care?" I brush my thumbs against her temples before dropping a hand to slide her ass snug onto my lap.

Bryant rolls her eyes. "Well, you should. She's quite nasty when she's angry, and she's always angry when someone breaks the house rules. Furthermore

—”

I cut in again. “Furthermore? Go on, Professor.”

She gives another exaggerated eye roll. “*Furthermore*, I know for a fact that the team has a Friday night curfew. My daddy will bend you over his knee and spank you silly if he finds out you’re not at the hotel.”

“I’ve already broken curfew regardless,” I point out, licking the spot behind her ear that makes her shiver. “Doesn’t matter if I’m five minutes over it or five hours. So really, there’s no reason why I can’t fuck you before I go.”

“Make love,” she corrects immediately.

Right. Bryant doesn’t approve of F-bombs. How did I wind up dating this girl? “Make love,” I repeat. I arch one eyebrow. “So what do you say?”

“I say no.”

“Seriously?” I can’t hide my disappointment. “Why not?”

“Because I’m menstruating,” she says primly.

I hoot so loudly, she claps her hand over my mouth.

“Ace!” she hisses. “My sisters will hear you!”

I’m shaking with laughter. “Sorry. But you...I mean, who says *menstruating*?”

She starts laughing, too, and I take advantage of her good humor and kiss her. She protests at first, but then her lips mold against mine, parting to allow my tongue to slide through them. I lick at every hot, sweet crevice of her mouth, kissing her until she’s breathless and I’m harder than the pillars outside this house.

“Lie back,” Bryant says as she pries her mouth off of mine.

I raise a brow again. “I thought we weren’t going to fu—make love.”

“We’re not.” She gives my chest a gentle shove until I’m falling backward on my elbows. A teasing glimmer shines in her eyes. “But I can still make sure you leave here in a happy mood. God knows you’ll need it, seeing as how my

daddy is going to run you until your ears bleed for missing curfew.”

I know what she has in mind the moment she undoes my jeans, and yes, I’m instantly happy and so is my cock. When she eases my boxers down, my dick springs up to greet her.

“This is some tattoo,” she comments, running her hand along the stupid emblem I’d gotten when the offer from Western landed on my doorstep. Dad bought a case of beer to celebrate. We drank until we were silly and then we went and got celebratory tattoos at some sketchy place that didn’t care we weren’t sober.

“It was a stupid high school thing,” I say, slightly embarrassed. “My dad and I got lit and decided to commemorate my signing with Western.”

“It’s sexy, sugar. You’re all man.” Smiling, she wraps her delicate fingers around the base, then bends her head and gives a slow, decadent lick, as if she’s savoring one of those sugary concoctions she’s always showing up with.

“Damn, you have no idea how gorgeous you look right now,” I tell her. My view consists of her golden curls tumbling down her back, her eyes closed in concentration, impossibly long eyelashes fluttering against her smooth skin.

“Mmmm.” She makes a hum of acknowledgement, or maybe it’s approval, because I choose that moment to thrust deeper into her welcoming mouth.

I close my eyes as she sucks me deep. It feels a bit wrong to be lying here and accepting the heat of her mouth when five minutes ago I was shouting at her about how I’m Ace fucking Anderson and therefore deserving of all the blow jobs I want. But even though a part of me feels like I’m taking advantage of her generosity and patience, the sensations she’s causing are too amazing and there’s no way I’m stopping her now.

“I want you to know that I’m officially agreeing to this under protest, since I’m the one who was an ass and therefore should be pleasuring you.”

“Noted,” she says with a giggle. “Next time.”

“Damn right.” And the prospect of being in her bed again is more exciting than a hundred other girls on their knees.

She licks a wet trail up my shaft until she reaches the tip and then tongues a circle around the swollen head. She moans, the sound traveling like warm rays of sunshine along my thick length. My hips begin to move and my hands tangle in her hair. It's silky as I thread it between my fingers before fisting it tight.

Bryant startles at the sudden roughness. She peers up at me with big eyes, her sexy lips still wrapped around my cock.

"I'm close," I warn her.

She releases me, laughter dancing across her face. "Already?"

"I was on the edge before I even got here," I admit.

Smiling again, she resumes her gentle assault. She licks and sucks, one hand pumping while the other squeezes my tight sac. It's fucking incredible. The base of my spine heats and tingles. I clench my ass cheeks, trying to last longer, but it's a futile effort. The climax starts in my balls and then boils over. I grunt in pleasure, and Bryant lifts her head and jacks me off while hot jets spill all over my abs.

I'm still gasping for air even as my body settles.

"Do you feel better?" Bryant asks with a barely restrained grin. She reaches for the box on the night table and pulls out two tissues.

"Yeah. And you're right. Your mouth on me is better medicine than anything in the world." Better than anything or anyone else in the world, that's for damn sure.

"Of course I'm right."

As I lie there collecting my breath, she cleans me up with an efficient hand, then plants a kiss on the center of my stomach and pops to her feet.

"There. As clean as a baby's bottom," she chirps.

I start to laugh. "Did you just compare my cum-covered stomach to a baby's ass?"

She jabs a finger in the air. "Language! Bless your heart, JR, but we really

need to clean up your vocabulary.”

“Which word didn’t you like? Ass or cum?”

“Both!” She looks like she’s choking down laughter. “You’re testing my patience, sugar.”

Having regained my motor functions, I rise from the bed, adjust my pants, and zip up. “I should go,” I say reluctantly. “I still need to come up with a way to sneak back into the hotel without your dad or one of the assistant coaches catching me.”

Bryant looks thoughtful. “Not that I am in *any* way condoning your disobedience, but...” She drops her voice to a whisper. “Service elevator.”

I arch a brow.

“That’s what the boys use when they’re trying to avoid detection. Daddy doesn’t have anyone watching the service elevators.”

But he has people watching the regular elevators? Shit. Coach Johnson doesn’t fuck around.

“It’s a fifty-fifty shot, though,” she adds. “Sometimes, even if you get back undetected, Daddy still figures it out. He says he has a sixth sense about that stuff.”

“If he spansks me, will you rub lotion all over my butt afterward to ease the sting?”

Bryant floats over and plants a kiss on my cheek. “Of course.” Then she swats said butt. “Now go. If Sadie—”

“How many times have I got to tell you, baby?” I interrupt with a grin. “I don’t give a rat’s ass about Sadie.”

“Oh, JR. You are incorrigible.” But she’s laughing even as she ushers me back to the window and practically pushes me out of it.

Renegades 3-0

MY PLAY SUCKED. WE WIN, BUT ONLY BECAUSE MY TEAMMATES BAILED ME OUT THE entire game. I fumbled the ball, and Samson recovered it. I threw an interception, and Julio tackled the cornerback and stripped the ball from him. I lost track of the play clock twice in the second quarter, suffering delay of game penalties both times.

I don't know who was more surprised that Coach didn't bench me—me or my teammates.

“I sucked big time,” I announce to the locker room after the game ends. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Ty slaps me on the back. “Don’t sweat it. We all have bad games.”

But he’s the only one who talks to me. The rest of the guys avoid my eyes as if my bad play is contagious. I don’t press anyone with questions about tonight’s plans. I don’t want to spend time with myself, so I don’t blame my team for not volunteering where everyone plans to drink tonight.

Coach Briggs, the quarterback coach, stops by my locker. “Ace, Coach Johnson wants to see you.”

I search Briggs’ wrinkled face for any hint of what is in store for me. “Am I getting benched?”

“No, son.” Briggs shakes his head, his jowled cheeks swinging with the motion. “It’s nothing like that. Like Masters said, everyone has a bad game now and then. You let this game go.”

Easier said than done. “Do I need to go in now or can I shower?”

“Go ahead and shower. I’ll email you the tape of the game.”

Oh joy. I swallow hard and then stand and strip. In the communal shower, Travarius is soaping his underarms while humming Ghost Town DJ’s “My Boo.”

“You do the running man in here, and you’re likely to fall on your ass,” Ty jokes.

Travarius does a little shuffle with his feet, his shower shoes slapping against the tile. “Nah, man, I got perfect balance. Didn’t you see me tiptoe down the sidelines today? I was like a fucking prima ballerina.” He gets on his tiptoes and does a shaky pirouette.

Masters brushes by me, pausing to squirt some soap from the wall dispensers into his hand. “I don’t know about the ballerina shit, but you act like a fucking prima donna.”

“You’re just jealous because I got moves.” Travarius does another shower boogie.

His dance moves shouldn’t be seen outside of the locker room, but I’m not in a position to joke with Travails so I keep my trap shut. The sideline interception he made was one that brought us back into the game after another series of downs that ended in a punt.

“Ones you’re embarrassed to show outside the locker room.” Master smirks.

I jerk my gaze to Ty, wondering if he read my mind. But he’s not looking at me. His eyes are closed and his head is tipped back as he washes the shampoo out of his hair.

The time to make nice with my team isn’t after this dismal near loss. They’re probably all wishing for a different quarterback. I finish showering quickly. Back in the locker room, I hastily throw on my T-shirt, dress pants and shirt.

The suit coat and tie are unnecessary after a home game.

After running a towel through my hair, I walk to Coach Johnson's office.

"Come on in, son."

He's smiling, which makes the lead in my gut lighten a bit.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yup, have a seat." He points to one of the two black leather sofas that face each other in front of the massive wooden desk. Coach's office is large enough to fit the entire team. He's got chairs in front of his desk, two big sofas and a built-in bookcase spanning the length of one wall. The shelves are filled with coaching biographies, a few trophies and a shit-ton of pictures of Bryant, some other blonde, and Coach's wife.

I settle lightly on the edge of the sofa facing the door while Coach takes up a position across from me. He flips open a box on the table between us and tips it toward me. A neat row of cigars is nestled inside a dark red velvet lining. Two are missing. Bryant said her dad liked to smoke one after each win. "Want one?"

"No, thanks."

"My girls don't like that I smoke, so I can't do it at home." He selects one, rolls it between his fingers, then pulls out a cutter and chops the end off. I wait while he lights the thing and takes two puffs. We both watch as a stream of smoke wends into the air between us. "It's a bad habit. You've got a bad habit, too, you know."

I brace myself for an onslaught of criticism. "I know I could've played better."

"It's not your play, son. It's that you don't trust your team. Your receivers had an early case of the dropsies out there, and you stopped looking for your options downfield. The defense figured that out and started rushing you hard. No passing game means no good running game. All that pressure got to your head."

"That's fair." I hadn't realized I was doing it, but damn if he wasn't right.

“I’ll do better next time.”

His lips curve up around the cigar. “That’s your best trait, Ace. You look forward. I like that about you. It’ll serve you well when you’re done here.”

“Is that all?” I try not to sound too hopeful.

“No, it’s not.” Coach takes another long drag as I beat back the disappointment. “While Kittredge and Bettman were busy dropping balls, you were wound tight from the start. I don’t know if we didn’t prep you well enough, whether you have some family issues, or whether you didn’t have a good night because you got in late.”

My poker face isn’t good enough to hide my surprise. He knows about my dad and that I violated curfew? “What gave me away?” I ask. I can’t imagine Bryant would’ve snitched.

“Son, I know everything about this team. A good coach does.” He taps a little ash off into a small glass tray. “I know Bettman wants to propose to his girlfriend but is scared she might say no. I know Travarius can’t keep his fingers from typing out dumb tweets, no matter how many times we remind him that he’s providing locker room fodder for the opposing teams. I know Masters hopes he’s drafted in the top three so he can match his brother.”

Johnson takes another long drag before leveling a stern gaze at me. “I know that your daddy had drinks with Bubba Wasserly, a man who’d sell his son for the Renegades to have a winning season.” He shakes his head over this. “And that you spent a little too much time out and about before game day.”

I can feel the heat creep up my neck. “It won’t happen again. The curfew thing,” I clarify. “As for my dad, I can promise you he won’t be a problem.”

Coach rolls the cigar between his fingers. “You can’t make promises for things outside your control. Your daddy’s not your responsibility. You are your only responsibility. So I’m going to trust that you’ll protect yourself and this team by making the right decisions. As for the curfew, you break that rule again, and I’ll bench you. We clear, son?”

“Clear, sir.” At least we’re not talking about his daughter and what I was doing with her that made me late. I’m not ashamed that I’m sleeping with her, but I would never be comfortable having that be a topic of conversation

between her dad and me.

He sets his cigar down and leans over to offer me his hand. A little surprised, I take it.

“I’m glad to have you on my team, Ace. I hope you know that.”

I shake his hand firmly and get to my feet. “Thank you. I’m happy to be here.”

Back in the locker room, only a couple of trainers and equipment guys are present, cleaning up after everyone. I greet them, say thanks, then grab my gym bag and leave.

I find myself looking for Bryant’s blonde curls, but when I don’t see her anywhere, irritation sets in. Why didn’t she wait for me? I drag my phone from my pocket and call her. She answers rather than letting it go to voicemail, which is probably what I would’ve done.

“Hey, Ace, what’s up?”

“Where are you?” I ask impatiently.

“I’m sorry, sugar. I had to rush home to help my sisters make Rice Krispies treats. A couple of them got last minute invites to the Zetas for date night. These desserts have to be delivered tonight or the folks at the Meals on Wheels will be missing out. I meant to text you.” There’s a pause and she comes back with a breathless, apologetic laugh. “Shoot. It looks like I sent the dang text to Momma. I’m so sorry.”

Of course she’s making snacks for senior citizens. I tuck my phone between my shoulder and my ear while I fumble for my truck keys. “It’s no big deal. I don’t think I’m up for anything tonight.”

“Okay, sugar.”

I throw my gym bag across to the passenger seat before climbing in behind the wheel. “I’m in a bad mood, and I don’t want to take it out on you.”

“I understand.”

I lean my head against the steering wheel. The only thing that’s going to

make me feel good tonight is to lose myself in Bryant's curves. But it'd be wrong. You can't use people to make yourself feel better. She deserves better than that.

"Ace, sugar," she says softly, "after I'm done making all these bars, my hands are going to be so sore from mixing and patting and cutting. It'd be nice if someone were to give me a vigorous hand massage."

A smile cracks across my face for the first time since...well, the last time I saw her. "A vigorous one, huh?"

"Yeah, and if the massage extended to other places on my body, such as my arms, back, legs, and feet, that'd be okay as well."

"Good thing you have a boyfriend who's willing to make these kinds of sacrifices for you." *Boyfriend?* Christ, am I really thinking of myself as her boyfriend now? What has this woman done to me?

"I was just thinking that myself. Also, I'm curious about what's going on with those *Stranger Things* kids. Maybe we could watch a few episodes?"

"I think I could swing that."

"Perfect. I've got to run now. These marshmallows aren't going to melt themselves. I'll call you when I'm done."

"Great."

She hangs up before I can say anything else, which is a good thing. Another minute on the phone with her, and I'd be admitting an uncomfortable truth. I've never loved anything more than football, but the prospect of ending this shitty day with Bryant is more appealing than playing my next game.

Renegades 5-0

I MISS THE NEXT TWO ROAD GAMES BECAUSE OF SORORITY OBLIGATIONS, WHICH displeases my father. He likes having me around on game day to smooth out any of our boosters' ruffled feathers, but although Daddy's word is the end all and be all when it comes to football, Momma's word overrides his in our household. And Momma would have a litter of kittens if I chose football over the sisterhood.

But I fretted over Ace. He sulked all week, and I figured that he needed to nurse his wounds on his own. I did send some baked treats his way, which he thanked me for nicely with a phone call.

"I'm sorry," he'd apologized. "I just really want to focus on winning this week. You're a distraction, and I mean that in the best way possible."

"I get it, sugar. You take care of yourself and call me when you get back, okay?"

"I will. I...I'll miss you," he'd said, sounding adorably awkward at expressing such a sentiment. We'd made plans to get together when he returned from the second away game.

His sweet, fumbling admission powered me through two weekends full of planning and participating in date nights. It was a total pain in the behind, particularly since some of those fraternity boys can be a handful. I swear, it's

like dealing with children.

Truthfully, I'm excited to see Ace tonight, because I could use a dose of his rough, direct ways. Ace doesn't bow at my feet or pour on the affected manners when he's around me. He always says exactly what's on his mind, and I have to admit that's very refreshing.

Well, except when I don't *like* what's on his mind. Case in point—right now.

“You didn't tell me you were dating other guys!”

I roll my eyes at his incensed expression. The boy all but stomped into the AO kitchen after Dawn let him in at the front doors, and now he's scowling at me. To make matters worse, Dawn and a few of my sisters have decided to stand in the doorway and eavesdrop in plain sight.

Rather than answer Ace, I point a finger at the girls. “Go to your rooms, missies. This is a private conversation.”

Kayla decides to be difficult. “It's a communal kitchen,” she says in a singsong voice.

I swallow my aggravation. “Kayla.”

“Oh, fine. We're gone. Have fun fighting.”

“We're not fighting,” Ace and I say in unison.

My sorority sisters' laughter follows them all the way down the hall.

I turn back to Ace. “I'm not dating other people,” I say firmly.

“Bullshit,” he shoots back. “I asked Julio on the bus earlier what these ‘date nights’ were, and he said all you sorority girls pair off with douchey frat guys and drink and party and all that shit!”

A laugh lodges in my throat. Yes, “all that shit” about sums it up. Both parties required a thirty-minute bus ride to the event site. Everyone but me, since I volunteered to be the sober sister, had pre-gamed and bypassed Tipsy Town on their way to Passedoutville.

Two Sigma pledges lost their dinner on the bus ride, which meant that we were not getting our damage deposit returned. During the Zeta Nu dinner,

one of the young fraternity brothers ditched his AO date, which meant consoling that poor child while ensuring the elders in the Zeta Nu house meted out appropriate punishment or we AOs would never do another date night with them again.

“If it helps, my date for Saturday was a lovely gay Sigma brother who spoke about his boyfriend back home the entire time.”

“That does make me feel better,” Ace says grudgingly.

“Wonderful. Now come here and kiss me hello, sugar.”

His hard expression fades and when I beckon with my finger, he eliminates the distance and pulls me into his arms. I melt against his broad chest, which is encased in a tight T-shirt and an open button-down shirt. He looks like heaven. Smells like it, too, I discover when I press my face to his neck and breathe him in. His woodsy scent makes my girlie parts tingle. *Careful, I think, you’re letting him affect you too much.*

I really am, and it’s disconcerting. I found that I missed him, genuinely missed him, these past two weeks. We hardly saw each other because Daddy was riding the boys hard at practice, and then they were away both weekends. We haven’t made love since the night he climbed through my window.

“Fuck,” Ace mutters against my lips. “This *ass*.” He squeezes the ass in question, sending a shiver through me. His hands are so big and masculine. I crave their feel on my body. “I missed this ass, Bryant.”

I laugh softly. “Are you done being jealous over nothing?”

He pulls back and narrows his eyes at me. “I probably should have told you this before, but I don’t like sharing.”

“That’s not what I heard,” a voice chirps from the doorway.

“*Kayla!*” I chide as my sorority sister skips into the kitchen.

She shrugs. “What? The forums are rife with stories of Ace Anderson’s legendary threesomes back at Western State.”

Ace pales a little. “Forums?” he echoes suspiciously.

I glower at Kayla, who's sauntering over to the pantry. I cannot believe she brought up the forums. That's a sorority secret. But she seems completely unrepentant as she pokes her head out of the pantry to address Ace. "Girls talk, hon. That's all I have to say on that."

Anger begins to simmer in my belly. Why did she have to say anything at all? I don't want Ace thinking that the women at his former college are saying nasty things about him. He already had one bad game because his father caused him to lose his concentration. We can't have that happening again.

That's why you're mad? Because you're worried he'll play poorly?

All right, fine. That's not the only reason I'm bothered. I'm sure whatever reputation Ace had at Western State was mostly deserved, but he came here for a fresh start. I don't want him backsliding into hound dog territory because he thinks all the girls at Southern believe he's a sleaze.

"Girls talk," I agree, placing a hand on Ace's biceps. "And the only thing every girl at this college is talking about is how incredibly you've played this season."

Ace relaxes. Slightly. I can tell he's still troubled by what Kayla said, and I shoot a glare at my friend as she pulls out a packet of popcorn. She either doesn't notice or doesn't care. She simply walks to the microwave and pops in the package.

"We're having a Julia Roberts rom com marathon in Chryselle's room," Kayla tells us. "Do you guys want to join us?"

"No, Ace and I have plans," I answer, a tad stiffly. She ignores that, either.

"Okay, well, if you change your mind..." She grabs a big bowl and sets it on the counter. After the microwave beeps, she dumps the popcorn into the bowl, gives us a jaunty wave, and leaves the kitchen.

"I'm sorry about that," I tell Ace. "Kayla was just being..." Needlessly mean? Although I don't know if that was even her intention.

"It's fine." He props a hip against the granite island. "It's not like she was wrong. I've had threesomes."

Something hot and unpleasant coils in my tummy. Is that jealousy? Disapproval? Maybe both.

Ace sees my expression and gives me a half-smile. “What, are you one of those girls who’s going to punish me because I had sex before I met you?”

“No.” I swallow. “I know you were a player.” I swallow again. “But that’s all in the past, right?” I say firmly.

“Right.” He walks back to me and runs one finger along my bare arm. Goose bumps rise in its wake. “So we have plans, huh? Do those plans include us going up to your room and making love like bunnies?”

“He’s learning!” I beam at him. Then I kill the hope in his eyes. “But no, that’s not what we’re doing. Sadie won’t allow you upstairs, but she said it was okay if you came by and helped me with the cake.”

“The cake?”

“Yes. We’re baking a cake.”

Ace stares at me for a moment. “Bryant.”

“Yes?”

“I haven’t had sex in two weeks. My hand is sore.”

I smile at him. “I didn’t say we weren’t going to make love. We can go to your place after we’re done baking.”

His lips twitch. “I see.”

“Is there a problem?” I ask sweetly.

After a beat, he sighs. “Nope. No problem at all.”

“Wonderful. Now grab the flour from the pantry and let’s get started.”



AS PROMISED, I LET ACE WHISK ME OUT OF THE AO HOUSE THE MOMENT THE OVEN dings and the cake is cooling on the counter. He’s so eager to get me out of my clothes that he doesn’t even want to taste the cake. “I’d rather taste you,”

he rasps in my ear, and he keeps one hand firmly planted on my thigh during the entire drive.

When we're alone in his bedroom, he has me naked before I can blink, and we tumble onto his bed, our mouths locked and our hands eager. My need for him seems to be intensifying rather than abating. Every time I see him, I get hotter than a Nashville sidewalk in August. Every time he kisses me, I melt like warm butter in the sun.

I think this project might be getting complicated. I think I like Ace Anderson more than I should. I think a lot of things, but right now, as he slides his pulsing cock inside my body and pumps me into oblivion, I'm not thinking about anything but how good it feels to dig my nails into his back and hold on for the wild ride.

Once we recover from our respective orgasms, Ace ties off the condom and drops it into his trash, then gathers me into his arms and sighs happily. "Shit, I needed that. I wasn't kidding about my hand." He holds it up. "See these new calluses? That's from jacking off, you cruel woman. If I had to wait another second to get you under me, I might've died. What would your daddy say then?"

I grow warm all over. "He'd kill me, for sure, but you've been as busy as me!"

"True," he relents. He tugs on my hair, then absently wraps the curl around his index finger. "You'll be at the game Saturday, right?"

"Of course." I hesitate. "Will your father be there, too?"

His fingers stiffen in my hair. "I hope not," Ace mutters. "And if he is, he'd better not even think of asking me to give up our plays."

Unhappiness douses some of my post-coital bliss. "That was unfair of him to ask," I agree.

"No shit."

"Ace."

"Sorry. No *sugar*." I can't see his face because my cheek is squished against

his right pec, but I can practically hear his smile. One of these days I'll have successfully taught him to speak like a gentleman—at least outside of the bedroom. I find that I don't mind the crude, whispered things he says to me when we're naked.

"Thing about my dad is, he doesn't even think it's wrong to ask that of me," Ace adds, his tone bitter. "Like I said, he acts like I owe him. Like I should live my life for him. You're lucky, Bryant. I've seen the way you and your dad interact. It's obvious he only wants the best for you."

My heart warms, because he's right. Daddy has never tried to browbeat me into taking a path *he* wants. He's always supported my every decision. Momma, too, to a lesser extent, although I know she secretly wishes I was more interested in heading charity committees than going into sports PR.

"Daddy knows better than to bark orders at a southern lady," I joke. "We're a stubborn lot."

"I've noticed." Ace reaches down and tweaks my nipple. It immediately hardens beneath his fingers. It's as if my body is hardwired to respond to his touch. "Do you want to spend the night after the game this weekend? We could sleep in until noon and go out for Sunday brunch." He suddenly shudders. "Oh Jesus. I can't believe those words even came out of my mouth. Sunday brunch. Christ."

"I can't," I answer. "And what did I tell you about taking the Lord's name in vain? Now I'm going to have to stay extra at church to say a couple prayers for you."

"Church? You actually go to church?"

"Every Sunday, rain or shine. My momma would disown me if I didn't." I prop up on my elbow. "So as much as I'd love to have brunch with you, Sundays aren't good for me, sugar."

And this Sunday is especially not good. I drop back on the mattress, my muscles feeling a bit stiff, because I can't believe it slipped my mind, even for a second. I wasn't making excuses when I said I had church, but even if I didn't have to attend the service this weekend, I still wouldn't be able to spend the day with Ace.

The anniversary of Ginny's death is next week. My parents and I have done something to honor her every year since she died. Sunday will be full of folks patting us on the back, saying what a tragedy it was to have lost Ginny. Like we forgot her on a road trip or something. And for at least a few days following it, Momma will revert to the zombie state she fell into right after it happened. Daddy will be frustrated and sad. I'll be struggling to support them both and offer them all the comfort they require.

Actually, it would probably be best if I didn't see Ace during that time. I won't be able to focus on him, and that would be unfair.

"I'll be at the game, though," I remind him, hoping it will alleviate the disappointment I see in his eyes. "And we can spend time together that night, if you want. We can skip the after-party and come right back here." I pat the bed enticingly, and indeed that cheers him up.

"Deal. We'll have our own after-party." He waggles his eyebrows.

I smile in response, but my heart feels heavy. Thinking about what's in store for me this weekend has weighed me down. I try to distract myself by leaning down to kiss Ace. He immediately drives the kiss deeper, and for the moment, my sorrows are forgotten.

Renegades 6-0

“YOU HAD A GOOD GAME TODAY.” BRYANT TRACES A CIRCLE ON MY CHEST.

“Yeah. It was decent.” I try to downplay my pride. The two weeks on the road were tough matches against division opponents, but we gutted out those two wins and then played a cake game today. Coach took me out in the fourth. I didn’t feel a twinge of worry when my backup, McQuarry, launched bomb after bomb. I’d made it through a third of the season with zero losses, only two interceptions and twelve touchdowns. If Coach was going to bench me, he’d have done it after game four. I figure I’m safe.

Bryant doesn't think much of my false modesty. She tugs hard on a few chest hairs. “Just decent, huh?”

I grab her hand and press it flat against my abdomen. “Can't brag too much. The room isn't big enough for my greatness.”

Her boobs jiggle nicely against my arm as she laughs. “It’s too late, sugar. Your ego is already pushing me out of this bed.”

“Is it?” I swing my body over her in one smooth movement, caging her between my arms. “Seems like you’re square in the middle.”

“I guess there’s a little space left.” She holds up her fingers in casual measurement.

She's beautiful. All rosy, a tiny bit sweaty from our fucking—err, making love, as she prefers to call it. Whatever it is, it makes me feel good and makes her look like a goddess. I drop my head and lick the side of her cheek.

“Gross, Ace.” She laughs, pushing me to the side. “That's gross.”

I grin. “You don't seem to mind it when my face is between your legs.” I reach down and smooth my fingers through her trimmed bush to her still swollen pussy.

Her legs scissor closed. “No and no. I'm too sore. You lie down beside me like a nice boy.”

“You prefer it when I'm naughty.” But I do as she asks. I don't want to hurt her. Being mean to Bryant is like kicking a puppy. I may not be a relationship type of guy, but I can't deny that being with her has made it easy on me.

I'm not getting into trouble. I don't have a ton of drama in my life. I thought sleeping around was easier, because no strings means no emotional entanglements. But no matter how many times you tell a girl you aren't interested or how many times she declares to you that it's sex only, feelings can get caught.

For now, letting Bryant take care of everything is nice. I can see why the guys love her. Why everyone loves her. I'm halfway there myself. Hell, maybe we are making love. I brush a hand over the top of her head, enjoying the silky strands tickling my chest, surprised that I'm not freaking out over the depths of my feelings for this woman and how miserable I am when I'm not with her.

“What time will you be done with church?”

She stiffens. “I don't know, but I already told you that Sunday isn't going to work for me.”

Tomorrow we have no practice, and since my friend circle consists of one Bryant Johnson, it's either spend the day with her or sit at home with my dick in my hand.

I gather up a few strands of blonde hair and brush the bunched ends against her nipple. The little bud puckers into a tight peak. I run my tongue along my

lower lip. Church doesn't sound that bad. Or maybe, more accurately, I'm thinking of the worshipping I could do after. "How about I come with you?"

"With me?" she squeaks.

"Why? Do you think I'm such a sinner the place is gonna collapse if I step foot inside?" I say a little tersely. "Whatever. Forget I mentioned it. I've got some shit to do." Clean my room, watch some game film. Catch my old teammate on television. Wonder why my new teammates don't talk to me. That sort of thing.

"More basket weaving?" she teases lightly, clearly relieved I've decided against the church thing.

I try not to let it bother me. "Don't knock my crafting skills. Prof said it was the best one she'd seen all year."

"We're barely two months into the semester."

"That woman has taught this class since the prehistoric era, if I'm judging her age correctly. She knows her baskets."

Bryant laughs a bit too loud and has to clap a hand over her mouth. Regretfully, I sit up.

"I should probably go."

"Yeah, you should." Her lower lip juts out. My dick jumps in response.

"Want to give me a little kiss goodbye?" I point to my crotch.

"Go away, Ace. I need my beauty sleep."

I get up and throw my clothes on. Her eyes wander over my body like a light caress. It feels good here in her bedroom. I wish I didn't have to leave, but I can't get her in trouble. I know it's a risk coming here, but I like that she doesn't turn me away. I pocket my phone and wallet and bend down next to the bed to kiss her neck. "Bye, Bryant."

She snuggles under the covers and watches as I flip open the latches of her second-story window. "If you break your arm, Daddy will kill me."

"Your house has a porch, a balcony, and a ladder-shaped lattice. I think it's

meant to be climbed on.”

“So you say.”

I highly doubt I'm the first one to use this path into the upper floors of the AO house.

Back home, I find the apartment empty. I pour myself a glass of water and check my phone. No unread messages. I flip open Snap and check my roommates' stories. There's a photo of them raising a glass to the camera. Fuckheads went out and didn't tell me. I wonder if Bryant knows where the team is. I'm sure she does.

Is that why she invited me to sneak into the house tonight? So I wouldn't feel bad I was left out? I toss my phone on my bed in disgust. I'm a grown-ass man. At twenty-three, I don't give a shit whether my teammates invite me to their drinking parties. As long as they listen to me in the huddle, whatever happens outside of a game shouldn't matter.

But fuck me if it doesn't.

I don't sleep well, and by the next morning I decide that I'm going to do something about the teammate thing and take a page out of Bryant's book. She cooks for these yahoos all the time. I don't subscribe to that old yarn that a way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I think it's lower down, but these guys slaver over her every time she appears with that Tupperware container.

I can't make donuts or granola bars, but even a fool can make a pancake. I drive to the grocery store and pick up a box of pancake mix, syrup, bacon, eggs, and milk. I'm back before anyone is up.

There's a pro game in London, so I snap the television on with the sound muted and get to mixing up the pancakes. I nuke the bacon between some paper towels, a trick that Matty Iverson taught me back at Western State. I pause before shoving the second batch in. He was a good guy. I don't know why I shit on him.

When the pancakes are all done, my roommates are still not up. I sit down and scarf down half the bacon and four pancakes. Then I sit there like an idiot. The game's boring as hell. Since I have shit all to do, and Bryant's

probably at church, I decide to call my mom.

“Joseph!” she greets me. I roll my eyes. She’s the only one who calls me that.
“How are you?”

“Good. Just sitting here watching football.”

“Of course you are. Honey, this is your last year of college. Don't you think you should be doing things that aren't football related?”

Translation: What the hell are you going to do with your life when you don't have the game?

“It’s my last year. I figured I'd enjoy it.”

“Have you sent out any feelers or resumes? There's always internships at my company.”

My mom works in a brokerage firm, answering phones, filing papers, and fielding telephone calls from unhappy clients for an old guy who leers at her legs and orders her around like a slave. I'd stab myself in the eye with my fork before I'd go and work there.

“I've got a few things on my mind,” I say, but it's a lie. I don't want to think about what happens when my college career is over. Maybe I'll go to grad school. I'll be graduating with a generic communications degree, but I can't see going into journalism, even if it was to cover sports. Writing and communicating have never been high on my skill set. I don't like people, putting pen to paper, or sitting in an office.

There are three types of majors most athletes are herded into—health sciences so you can train professional athletes and be reminded every day of how you weren't good enough, communications for that post-injury career, and management, which is one of those catch-all degrees where you get a degree in absolutely nothing. I chose communications.

Maybe I can smash all three areas of study together where I work as a receptionist at a physical therapy office and manage someone else's calendar. Yeah, I think I need to go to grad school.

“Good. Let me know if you need anything on my end.”

“I will.” I hesitate before asking the next question. I don’t like making my mom feel bad, but it’d be nice if she came down to see a game. I just don’t know if she can swing it. “So, um, homecoming is in three weeks. What do you think?”

“Funny you should ask that. Your father called me last week saying that he thought it’d be nice if we both showed up for the homecoming game. Since you’re a senior, they’ll be honoring you, right?”

“If by honoring, you mean announcing my name, then yes. Are you okay with the flight? You could sleep in my room if you don’t mind my teammates wandering around. Game tickets are no problem.” It sucks I can’t have a part-time job to help my mom out. I get a ton of free gear that I could sell on eBay, but taking even five bucks in exchange for so much as an autograph is a violation that could affect my eligibility and any games we’ve won.

“Strangely enough, your dad says he’ll spring for the flight so the money I’ve been putting away can be used toward a hotel room. I can’t sleep in your bed before a big game.”

Alarm bells ring like crazy inside my head. “How was he able to swing that?”

“He made a big hospital sale, he said. Isn’t that nice?”

I can’t tell if she’s serious or not. The two are starting to talk again after a decade-long cold war—one that began when Dad decided to sleep with the neighbor’s wife and continued after the divorce papers were filed.

“What kind of hospital sale? One in Boston?” I say hopefully.

“You know, honey, I didn’t ask. Why don’t you call him? He says you two haven’t talked for a while. I thought you were making a better effort to get along. He’s so proud of you.”

Is he? I think cynically. Or am I only a tool for him?

“Sure thing, Mom. I’ll call him as soon as we hang up.”

“Wonderful. I love you,” she says brightly. “Take care of yourself.”

“Love you, too.”

As soon as the line buzzes, I dial my old man.

“Ace, my boy! How’s it going? What a game on Saturday! You were a stud out there. I watched the game with some friends back home down at the bar, and we were cheering like crazy. They talked about you on College Game Day on ESPN. Did you catch that?”

Who the fuck cares about that shit? I ignore it and get to the point. “I just got off the phone with Mom.”

“Yeah? What’d she say now?” he asks in a wary voice.

“She says you’re flush with cash. Something about a big sale?” I try to maintain as even a tone as possible, because I’ll look like an ad if it’s an actual commission he’s earned.

“Sure as hell did,” he boasts. “Local hospital down in Nashville is looking to change distributors for all their disposables.”

“Nashville,” I say flatly. “That seems like a far cry from your Northwestern territory.”

He chuckles. “With my son down south, it made a lot of sense for me to pick up new areas. I’m timing my flights down to see your games with business trips. Nice, huh?”

His good humor grates against my nerves. “Yeah, nice.”

“Say, do you know who prints up the media guide?”

“No idea, why?”

“I noticed that the Game Day folks didn’t mention your mom or me. And during the first game, my buddy says he didn’t see me on TV. ABC interviewed that Masters’ kid’s dad.”

“Dad, I have no idea who controls that stuff, but it’s not me.”

“It’s got to be someone in the PR department. What’d you say your girlfriend did?”

“First, I never said.” I rub my forehead. Why’d I call in the first place? It escapes me now. “Second, you told me to stay away from her, remember?”

Third, who cares if you're on TV or not? You wanted to see the game.”

“My friends mentioned it,” Dad protests. “It's not like I care, but anyway, if you get a chance, talk to the PR rep. The media guide doesn't mention what I do for a living. I think that my medical experience might be interesting. What do you think? Should I write something up for them?”

I give in. “Yeah, write something up.”

“I'll email it to you first thing.” There's a rustling sound and then a soft voice calling my dad's name. “Be right there, Lara. I'm talking to my son. Give me five.” He comes back to me. “My neighbor's up for her run. I've been seeing her for a few months. You remember her, right? She's got the good ass, but the ugly face? Doesn't matter when we're running, though. I pace myself behind her and watch her tight ass jiggle all day long. It's not like it matters what she looks like when the lights are out.”

“Have fun, Dad,” I mutter, although I think I'm talking to a dead line.

On the television, I watch the quarterback scramble around before getting crushed by a d-lineman.

“Damn, that looked like it hurt,” says Zane.

I look up to see my roommate standing at the end of the hallway. He's fully kitted out, in sweatpants, hoodie, and sneakers. He even has a hat in his hand.

“Not going to have breakfast, bro?” I ask, trying to act casual.

“Nah, there'll be food where I'm going.” His eyes don't meet mine. A surge of anger courses through me. These assholes want me to throw them the ball all damn day, they want me to leverage my experience into a National Championship win, but they can't stomach spending five minutes with me outside of the fucking locker room?

“Carter going with you?” The two receivers are attached at the hip.

“Ah, yeah, Carter, man,” Zane yells, “we gotta book it.”

My other roommate pops out of his room. “Ready.” He stops abruptly when he sees me at the kitchen table. “Hey, man. You up?”

“It's eleven. What do you think?”

His jaw tightens. “So, we're going over to Masters' place to watch his brother play. You wanna come?”

“Carter,” Zane whines.

I curl my fingers into my fists so I don't give in to the temptation to flick my roommate off. “No, thanks.”

Carter shrugs. “Okay, well, we'll catch you later.”

The two shoot out the door. As it closes, I can hear Zane say to Carter, “Dude, that was uncomfortable. Why'd you invite him?”

“Man was awake. I had to. We both knew he'd say no, anyway.”

There's more chatter as they walk away, but I don't hear it. I spend way too long glaring at the closed door. Finally, I get up, grab the plate of pancakes sitting by the stove and dump the whole lot in the garbage. The ones I ate sit like lead in my stomach.

The smell of bacon, butter, and dough lingers in the kitchen, taunting me. Grabbing my keys, I head out. Once I'm out in the parking lot, though, I don't know where to go. I decide to text Bryant. Sex would be good. It'd get my mind off of things.

Me: Roommates gone. Wanna come over? I've got a condom w ur name on it

I sit there for five minutes waiting for her to answer, but I get nothing because she's doing church things with her perfect family. I toss the phone on the seat and head for the Fieldhouse. The only way I'm going to be able to live with myself is if I sweat out some of my irritation.

It's a short trip from the apartment to the Fieldhouse. I strip down to my briefs and grab a pair of gym shorts and T-shirt from my locker. To my surprise, the weight room isn't empty. Julio is there, lifting, a worried look on his face.

My mind starts connecting dots. At the Mansion, Dad first brought his proposal to the table. When I refused, he didn't fight it. Bryant mentioned he pumped her for information. Julio's been squirrely for the last several weeks.

His family doesn't have much money. His dad has been to every home game. My dad's now flush with cash. I don't like the picture that's forming.

"Hey, man." Julio greets me with a chin nod, both hands wrapped around thirty pound dumbbells.

"Not going over to watch Masters?" I ask.

"Nah, it gets crowded and loud. You can't see the game, anyway. Besides, with it all quiet, it's easier to get a good workout in."

"Good point." I sit down on the leg machine and start doing curls. Covertly, though, I'm watching Julio. He's a good kid with a special set of skills, but he needs his time in college. This is a top tier program, and Southern usually sends at least five to eleven kids into the draft every year. If he gets caught doing piddly shit like giving insider information to douches like my dad, all of his dreams are in the toilet. "How's your family enjoying the games?"

"Great. My dad is loving it, but..." Julio squints uncomfortably. Maybe he felt a twinge in his arms, but I'm guessing it's something sharp in his conscience. "But sometimes he wants more than I can give him."

"Dads are like that."

"Yours, too?" Julio asks in surprise.

"Yeah. My dad called me this morning asking why Masters' dad was on TV during our game the other week but he wasn't. Supposedly one of his co-workers was asking questions." I roll my eyes.

Julio grins as he sets down the weights and takes a water break. "So my pop wants to know why he doesn't have better seats. Some of the parents sit on the fifty instead of the twenty. I told him he'd have to wait until I was a starter. Then he was all, you should be starting anyway and threatened to call Coach."

I wince. "That's not a good plan. I can't see Coach taking that very well."

"No kidding." Julio pushes back up to his feet. "So I guess that means I got to do more in practice to show Coach I belong in the starting position." He shoots me a worried look. "But it's not like I want it if I don't deserve it. You

know? You aren't going to say anything to Carter or Zane, are you?"

"Nah. It's between you and me." Those two can suck their own dicks, for all I care. "If you ever have an issue, come to me. I'm not going to judge or blab it around. Sometimes we get in over our heads and don't know what to do."

Julio nods but doesn't spill any real secrets. I get to work on my curls. I've planted the seed. Hopefully, the kid comes clean before any real mess happens. My phone beeps.

Her: *Can't come over. AO thing tonight. No dates with other boys, though, so don't worry.*

Her: ...

Her: *Do the condoms really have my name on them? Because my name is really unusual. I never find it. Not on keychains or candy bars or anything.*

The condom wrapper didn't have her name on it, but a minute after I get in the apartment door, it will. I type back a response.

Me: *Guess ull have to cm ovr and c*

Her: *I will. Tomorrow night. I can make dinner.*

Me: *How abt pizza after*

Her: *After what? You have to study?*

I snort. *After we have sex*

Her: *Ohhhhhhh! Yes. Okay. ;)*

Me: *Ur adorable*

Her: *:)*

I'M IN A RELATIVELY DECENT MOOD WHEN I ARRIVE AT THE FIELDHOUSE FOR practice the next day. Bryant texted me a neck-down sexy selfie, which I used to jack off. She wasn't naked in the picture, but the lacy underthings she was wearing didn't hide much.

I read somewhere that girls don't want dick pics unless they request them, so I didn't send her one. I did shoot off a couple of dirty texts about how I couldn't wait to see her on Monday night and that she better eat her Wheaties because we were going hardcore.

She replied she had class in the morning, to which I said that she should take an afternoon nap.

All in all, while it wasn't as good as the real thing, rubbing one out while staring at her pics took the edge off. Surprisingly, I haven't died from the lack of regular sex. I got a hell of a lot more tail back at Western State, but I think the sex with Bryant's better quality. I'm not sure why, but I have zero desire to be sticking my dick in any other pussy. I pat myself on the back. I might be failing the whole team thing, but I'm actually making a pretty damn good boyfriend.

The Fieldhouse is already packed when I get there. Coach Johnson's present and all the assistant coaches are fanned out in a line behind him. This isn't good. Coach usually only addresses the entire team on game days. During the week, you meet with your position coach.

Thankfully, I'm not the only one "late." About a dozen players straggle in behind me. Everyone settles into their chairs and looks expectantly at the middle of the room. When Coach talks, no one even breathes heavily.

"Men, we're six games in. We have seven left to play. During the summer and now, through the first third of the season, we've learned something about ourselves. We learned how to win, but that's only the first step. Now we have to learn to finish." Coach holds his hands out wide. "Finishing means we're focused, dedicated, and determined. There is one goal for this team. It's not a perfect season. It's not a playoff win. Mr. Anderson, tell us what our goal is."

"The championship." I was brought here for one reason. The scholarship could've been given to a top-rated high school student. Instead, the money came to me. The weight of the decision hangs like an anchor around my neck.

Coach Johnson nods in my direction. "That's right. Mr. Anderson is the only man in the room who knows how to win that championship. That's why he's here, but one man can't achieve this goal by himself." Coach's tone never changes. It doesn't get higher or lower, only continues in the same, steady pace. "Together, we will achieve this goal, but as we win more games, we're going to draw more interest. There will be more boosters and more reporters and it's important that we show them our best faces. This means we're not going to have any more pictures on social media of us looking drunk and stupid." Masters drops his head. "No idiotic tweets." Travarius looks at the ceiling. "If you party, you do it behind closed doors." Carter and Zane both share a grimace.

Coach doesn't acknowledge these small, non-verbal signs of guilt. "If you're having a problem with your girlfriend, take her out. Give her some attention now that you've got a couple home games. If you're having problems in class, we've got tutors. If you're having problems with cash, come talk to me." I flick my eyes toward Julio, who's busy inspecting his shoes. "There's no problem we can't work through together. Do not pack these problems away, letting them fester until they hurt us when we need you the most. Stay away from too much booze, any drugs, and all boosters."

He finishes by clapping his hands. "All right. Let's have a good practice today. We'll meet on the field in ten."

He spins away and the assistant coaches fall in behind him. When the last coach is gone, Ty yells, “You trying to take endurance drugs to keep up with your runner, Carter?”

“Fuck you, Ty. I wasn’t the one who had a million snaps with those sisters.”

“We were comparing twin features,” he protests. He’s trying to lighten the atmosphere, but the laughter in the room is strained and forced.

Samson, my left tackle, leans over. “You having problems, Ace?”

I jerk back in surprise. “Why are you asking me?”

He shrugs. “We didn’t have this talk before you came along. Plus, you had trouble at your last school.”

I slam my shoes into my locker. “It didn’t have anything to do with booze, drugs or boosters.”

“Girls then?”

I grind my teeth together. Three lockers down from Samson, Ty is watching me. He knows. His twin brother and I were on the same team for four years. I might as well tell the locker room. They’ll either hate me or get over it. Knowing how much they love Bryant, this admission will likely result in them staking me into the turf if I ever cause a loss.

Through gritted teeth, I give an abbreviated summary of my time at Western State. “I slept with the coach’s daughter. He found out and decided he’d start a freshman over me. Now I’m here, their team has lost a game and we have a perfect season. Any questions?”

Every single mouth snaps shut. Ty flips a hat out of his locker and hands it to Carter, who drops a fiver in it. “Nope. No one cares about what’s in the past, right, boys?”

No one disputes him. The hat keeps getting closer to me. I dig out my wallet. I have no clue what I’m donating to, but this is definitely one of those ‘if your buddy is jumping off the side of a bridge, you’re jumping, too’ cases. I throw in a ten just to be an asshole.

I wait for the hat to travel to the end of the locker room before waving down

Masters. "What're we collecting for?"

"You don't know?" His eyebrows draw together in confusion.

"I wouldn't be asking if I did."

He studies me for a minute. "It's for Coach."

I know that's supposed to mean something, but I have no clue what. Finally, Samson takes pity on me.

"You know," he says, "on account of his daughter killing herself three years ago."

I freeze.

"Three years ago on Wednesday," Travarius chimes in. "We always buy Bryant and her momma flowers and chocolate."

"Didn't Bryant tell you?" Ty says. "She visits Ginny's grave like once a week."

"No," I say shortly, rage burning in my gut. "She didn't."

Ty looks away, either out of pity or sympathy or disgust.

I barely make it through practice without tearing someone's head off. Either Ty says something to my teammates or they can tell I'm on edge, because everyone is tiptoeing around me. That's perfectly fine with me. I'm one dropped pass away from losing my shit.

Incredibly, the tension works to the team's benefit. Every player is extra sharp and few mistakes are made. The coaches are beaming when the last whistle blows.

I duck into the shower, slap some soap on my stinky parts, and am out of the locker room before the last straggler drags his ass off the practice field.

Greek Row is on the other side of campus, a fifteen-minute drive due to motherfucking stoplights and motherfucking pedestrians and motherfucking construction. Jesus Mary and Joseph.

I lay on the horn to hurry one tardy student's ass across the street. This

backfires because the student turns, stands there for five seconds, and doesn't start moving until I put the truck into park and start to open my door.

His life is saved when he finally moves.

When I arrive at the AO house, my patience is thinner than a piano wire. I pound a fist on the front door until some blonde opens it with an impatient glare.

"Yes?" she asks.

"I'm here to see Bryant."

The girl takes one look at my stony face and slams the door shut. I probably look like a serial killer, but I don't give a fuck. I open the damned door myself and march inside.

"Oh my God! You can't be in here," yelps a girl from the living room.

There's a bunch of scurrying, chirping, and exclamations, but I pay zero attention to that and head up the stairs. Bryant lives on the second floor and my long legs carry me up the one flight in a flash.

At the landing, however, I'm met with a long, narrow hallway and a dozen doors. I close my eyes to mentally orient myself. Bryant's room is at the end.

"Wait. Wait. You can't be here. This house is for females only." Some girl wearing a unicorn sweatshirt tugs at my arm.

I glance behind me to see the stairs lined with worried faces. As I'm about to be dragged down the stairs, Bryant pops out of her room.

"What's going on here?"

I jerk out of the unicorn girl's grasp and plow forward. Bryant holds out her palm. "Ace! You can't be here. I've told you before—this is a girl's only house." Her eyes dart around.

"You and I have a meeting, remember?" Grimly, I push her back inside her room.

"I was coming over to see you tonight. Didn't you get my text?" Her voice rises, a quavery sound that I'm sure she uses to great effect with other men.

“That was before I found out about your sister.”

Behind me, someone gasps. Bryant’s normally soft, sweet face hardens. I kick the door shut, place my hands on my hips, and say, “Talk.”

“About what?”

She tries to paste on that plastic look, but I’m not having any of it. “Your dad gives a mid-week speech, which he never does. Then, after he leaves, Masters starts passing around a hat to take up a collection. Apparently, the team springs for a big bouquet of flowers and chocolates for you and your mom. Why’d I find out about your sister from my teammates?”

Anger, or maybe it’s pain, flashes across her face. “It’s not important.”

“Really?” I stare at her incredulously. “You visit your sister’s grave once a week. Fuck, I didn’t even know you had a sister, let alone one who’d died recently.”

“She died three years ago. It’s not relevant.”

I’m stunned. Bryant, who remembers everything about everyone, is telling me her sister’s death isn’t important? I’m still fucking traumatized by the fact that my old man cheated on my mom when I was ten. “I don’t buy that for a second.”

Her chin pops up. “You don’t have the right to tell me how I should feel.”

“I’m not telling you how to feel. I’m telling you I’m pissed off. You want me to spill my guts all the time about important shit, but I’m not worth you sharing one goddamned important thing in your life?”

ACE'S ANGRY WORDS HANG IN THE AIR BETWEEN US. HIS CHEEKS ARE FLUSHED, AND he's pacing the cream-colored carpet, and while normally I'd shiver because he looks so gorgeous and primal when he's mad, today I'm too blinded by guilt and uncertainty to notice.

Is he right? Should I have told him about Ginny? In all honesty, I assumed he already knew about it. My sister's death isn't exactly a secret. Everyone on campus who knows my family is aware of what happened three years ago. Granted, Ace is a transfer and wasn't here when it happened, so it is a possibility he might not have heard.

And I didn't volunteer the information.

I'm not worth you sharing one goddamned important thing in your life.

I bite my lip, my mind frozen on that one bleak statement. "That's not true," I finally stammer.

He lifts a dark brow. "No? Then why didn't you tell me about your sister?"

I falter again. I can't say "because it wasn't relevant" again, because that will only make him angrier. And I can't say "because it wasn't important," because it *is* important. Ginny was my big sister. She was a huge, vital part of my life, and her death has stayed with me for three years. I'll never forget her or that moment when Momma and Daddy showed up at the AO house, took me to Momma's sitting room and told me what had happened.

Pressing my lips together, I sink down on the edge of my bed and try to make sense of my muddled thoughts. If Ace were truly my boyfriend, I would have told him about Ginny. But this isn't a real relationship. I just want to help him work through his issues, help him become a better man, show him that he *does* have worth.

But me keeping secrets from him is doing the opposite—it's making him feel *unworthy*. And...well, Ace is the first one of my "projects" whom I actually slept with. I kept an emotional and sexual distance from the other guys I helped because I knew I would be letting them go once the semester ended. I listened. I helped. I tried to ease their burdens, but I closed myself off from them.

I bury my head in my hands, swallowing an anguished moan. Why did I sleep with Ace? Sex always complicates everything. I *know* that, and yet I still gave in to the attraction instead of keeping things light the way I've done in the past.

Ace and I aren't light. We're heavy.

I should have told him about Ginny.

The mattress sags under Ace's weight as he sits beside me. Long fingers slide into my hair, gently tipping my head up. "Bryant," he says gruffly. "You okay?"

Slowly, I meet his eyes. He doesn't look mad anymore, only concerned. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I just...don't like to talk about it. It's difficult for me."

The last traces of hardness leave his face, making his features softer, almost younger. "I'm sorry I yelled at you," he replies, raking one hand through his hair.

"It's okay," I say, and I mean it. Maybe I deserved a good yelling. This whole situation with Ace is starting to confuse me. I supposed I needed this wake-up call to tell me—or warn me?—that I might be getting in too deep.

"I won't force you to talk about it," he adds. "But now that I know today is the anniversary of your sister's death, I just want you to know that I'm truly sorry, Bryant. And I'll be there for you if you need me. Whatever you want, I'm there."

My heart squeezes painfully. “Thank you. My parents and I usually have dinner to honor Ginny. Our housekeeper Marni cooks up Ginny’s favorite meal—candied yams, spiral ham, and almond green beans. And apple pie for dessert.” I give a weak smile. “Ginny had a sweet tooth. I swear, she would have drizzled chocolate syrup on her mashed potatoes if Momma would have let her.”

Ace chuckles. “So is that where your obsession with baking came from? Your sister would tie you to the oven and force you to bake for her?”

“Pretty much.” This time, my smile is big and genuine. “We would bake together, actually. Sisterly bonding and all that.” The humor dims a little. “I think you would’ve liked her. We were different. She was quieter than I am, more gentle, but she had the biggest heart of anybody I’ve ever known. She always gave people a second chance.”

He narrows his eyes thoughtfully.

“What?” I say.

Ace shrugs. “I don’t know. It sounds like you two were more alike than different. Gentle, big heart, unlimited chances for people who might not deserve it...” He trails off knowingly.

I place my hand on his knee and squeeze. “If you’re talking about yourself, then get that thought out of your head, sugar. You deserve a second chance just like everyone else.” A dark thought crosses my mind. “Well, maybe not everyone is deserving,” I concede.

His eyes narrow again. “Who are we talking about?”

I take a breath. I really didn’t plan on getting into the details, but something about Ace’s solid, comforting presence shakes the words loose. “Ginny’s boyfriend,” I admit. “Thad. He didn’t deserve all the time and effort she put into him. All the love she gave him.”

A strong, muscular arm winds around my back. Ace pulls me close so that my chin is resting on his shoulder. He doesn’t push me to keep going, and maybe that’s why I continue. Because he’s not demanding answers. He’s simply there, willing to listen should I want to talk.

“He treated her so poorly, Ace,” I say in dismay. “Like she was a piece of trash. Actually, no. He treated her like she was a dishrag.”

“A dishrag?” Ace frowns.

“Yeah. You know, something that’s just lying around. You can toss it on the counter when you don’t need it and forget about it, but when you have to dry your hands or wipe something down, it’s suddenly the most convenient item in the world. He would ignore her for days, sleep around with other girls, and then he’d call out of the blue and profess his love and tell her how much he wanted to see her.” I grit my teeth. “And she’d go running to him every time. If he needed a date for some fancy fraternity event, suddenly he’s showing up with flowers and asking his ‘best girl’—that’s what he called her—to go with him. And then the next night, he’d be fucking someone else in the hall closet of the frat house.”

Ace’s eyebrows shoot up. “Did you just say fucking?”

Bitterness clogs my throat. “Because that’s what it was. Thad didn’t make love to girls—he fucked them. They were disposable to him, like the condoms he *sometimes* remembered to use.” The sour taste in my mouth turns acidic. I’m furious now. “Ginny had to get tested for STDs after one of those bathroom encounters. He threw himself at her feet and apologized for being so weak and blah blah blah. And she forgave him.”

“Why? Why did she keep going back to him?”

“Because she thought she could change him, I guess. That was Ginny’s problem—she believed that everyone was good, deep down. That even a horrible, insensitive, selfish jerk like Thad Larson had some redeemable qualities about him, and I guess he did. When he wanted, he could turn on the charm like a politician at a picnic. He could be the sweetest, most wonderful boyfriend, bringing flowers, pouring on the compliments, treating Ginny like a queen.”

Ace hesitates for a second. “So what happened between them?”

“He crushed her spirit,” I answer flatly. “He toyed with her emotions. One day he’d be sweet and the next day, he’d pretend like she was the dirt under his heel. He kept hurting her over and over again until she finally broke. I

told you, Ginny was a gentle soul. And she wasn't real good at extremes."

"Extremes?"

"Emotional extremes," I clarify, trying to articulate who my sister was. "She couldn't deal with the really awful stuff, or the really good stuff, if that makes sense. Like, one Christmas, Daddy and Momma got her the pink bike with the yellow basket that she was talking about for a whole year. She was ecstatic, Ace. I'm talking over-the-moon, pure joy, best-day-in-her-entire-life kind of happiness. And instead of jumping on the bike and riding it up and down the street, she spent all of Christmas Day sobbing in her bedroom."

"Why?" he asks slowly.

I trace my finger along his collarbone, sinking deeper into his warm, sturdy frame. "Because she was so happy, and she didn't know what to do with the heightened emotions. It was the same way with other stuff—if she was furious, she'd start smiling and giggling, because for some reason that's how she was able to respond to the anger." I shake my head, and my nose bumps Ace's shoulder. "You know what's ironic?"

"What?" His voice is soft.

"When it came to sorrow, she actually responded accordingly, in a screwed up kind of way." I swallow the lump in my throat. "Thad broke her heart, and she saw it as a literal sign she couldn't go on. She took her life. We had an extra two-car garage. One night when Daddy and Momma were out together, she drove home from college, parked the car and let the engine run."

"Fuck." Ace gathers me closer, his hands gripped tight around my waist. "I'm sorry, Bryant."

"So am I." My voice is muffled against his neck. "It was a sad time for my family, and it still hurts, but we try to look forward, not back. Except for this one day every year where we let ourselves be sad."

And my visits to Ginny's grave. And the fact that I've taken it upon myself to redeem every jerk I can find.

Lord. Maybe I'm not looking forward at all.

The realization is so jarring that I jerk out of Ace's grasp. But I can't let myself think too hard about that right now. Not when his green eyes are probing my face as if he's trying to burrow his way into my head.

"Anyway," I say awkwardly, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. But it wasn't because I was trying to keep it from you. It's just something I don't talk about often."

"I get it. And again, I'm sorry I stormed in here and shouted at you." That piercing gaze softens in apology.

"It's okay. I should've said something." I stroke my hand over his muscled thigh, reveling in its strength. "We okay?"

His chin drops slightly. "Yeah. I guess I felt...left out. All the guys knew about it, and I was out of the loop." This time, it's his tone that's lined with bitterness. "I'm always out of the loop."

It's my turn to study his face. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Forget I said anything."

"JR."

He heaves a sigh. "It's stupid, okay? I'm just being a chick about it."

I smile. "And what are you being a chick about?"

"My teammates don't like me," he blurts out.

"That's not true," I say immediately.

He gives me a knowing look. "You're not in that locker room with me, Bryant. And you're not at practice or on the bus with us." His shoulders sag in defeat. "They don't invite me out with them. They don't really talk to me unless you're around. My roommates go running and don't bother to ask me to join them. I made breakfast for them and they walked right past it."

Sympathy fills my tummy. "Oh, sugar." I reach over and take both his hands in mine. "I'm sorry."

He shrugs again. "Whatever. It's not a big deal. As long as they trust me on the field, I don't give a shit if they want to be my friend."

But he does care. This is hurting him. I raise one hand and use my thumb to smooth out the deep crease in his forehead. Poor man. He's been at Southern since the summer and his teammates still haven't warmed up to him?

Well. We can't have that.

"Anyway," he says flippantly, as if he's not at all upset when we both know he is. "I'm glad you told me about Ginny. I appreciate it."

I nod slowly. "And I appreciate how open you are with me, too. I really mean that."

"Then..." He visibly swallows. "I guess we'll just keep being open with each other?"

"Yes." I swallow, too. "I guess we will."



DINNER IS A SOMBER AFFAIR, AS IT ALWAYS IS THIS TIME OF YEAR. MY PARENTS AND I quietly eat my sister's favorite meal while Marni bustles around the kitchen, serving us and clearing plates away. We don't talk about Ginny or that awful evening when my parents came home. We don't discuss how Daddy took an ax to that garage and now there's a half dozen rose bushes there, or the fact that Ginny's grave currently has more flowers than a hotel lobby. We just eat our dinner and our dessert, then Momma disappears upstairs while Daddy ducks into his study for some cognac and a cigar.

I find him in his big leather armchair, a tumbler in one hand and lit cigar in another. Smoke curls in my direction, making me wrinkle my nose.

"You shouldn't be smoking," I chide.

"I know." Then he takes a big puff and gestures to the small sofa near the fireplace. "Sit down, Cub. Tell me what's on your mind."

I eye him in surprise. "How did you know I had something on my mind?"

"I can read you like a playbook, Bryant." He chuckles. "I always know when something's wrong."

“That’s terrific,” I say dryly. I work hard to mask my emotions when I’m feeling low. After Ginny died, every time I expressed even a hint of unhappiness, Daddy would smother me with comfort while Momma fretted in the corner, staring at me as if she feared I might take my own life, too. Since then, I’ve pasted on a smile even when I haven’t felt like smiling. I’ve laughed when I haven’t felt like laughing. My parents need to know I’m okay at all times, otherwise their fears and worries might devour them and send them back to the dark place we were all in three years ago.

“You’re very easy to read,” he says as I sit down. His tone saddens. “Far easier than your sister was. Maybe if I was better at reading her...”

I tuck my legs under me and clasp my hands in my lap. “I didn’t see it, either, Daddy,” I say softly. “You can’t blame yourself for not knowing what she was planning to do.”

“I know that. In here—” He taps his head. “But not here—” His fist drops to his heart. “I knew she was hurting over that boy, but I never imagined she would actually...” He trails off.

“Me neither,” I whisper.

He takes another puff of his cigar. “I knew you’d come in here after dinner.”

“Did you now?”

Daddy nods. “Your momma doesn’t like talking about Virginia, and so you respect her wishes by staying silent. But I know that hurts you.” He puffs again. “You can always talk about her with me.”

“I know that.” I try to ignore the pain that tightens my throat. “But that’s actually not what I’m troubled about.” I hesitate. Talking about this with my father feels awkward, but as the head coach, he needs to know if there’s any strife within his team. “I was speaking to JR earlier, and he said something that worried me.”

My father frowns. He ashes his cigar in the tray on the end table. “What did he say?”

“Just that he feels like he’s not really a part of the team.” It’s not quite what Ace said, but I’m reading between the lines and paraphrasing. “He doesn’t

think the other boys trust him, and it's making him awfully unhappy."

Daddy is silent for a long moment. He's wearing that thoughtful, knowing look that tells me this has already occurred to him. "I know," he finally admits. "I've been monitoring the situation since summer camp began, hoping to see some camaraderie form between Ace and the others, but it's not happening, is it?"

"No," I agree. Daddy probably thought that winning would solve everything. I ponder the dilemma for a moment, then offer a suggestion. "Are you still in contact with Wayne Devlin?"

Daddy's head jerks toward me. He looks startled at first, but then a slight smile tugs on the corners of his mouth. "I am," he confirms. "And damn, Cub, that's not a bad idea at all."

I smile back. "I do have those every now and then."

"Yes, you do," he says with a chuckle. He leans over and stamps out his cigar in the ashtray. "Well, then. Why don't we give him a call?"

“OKAY, ONE OF YOU ASSHOLES HAS TO KNOW WHERE WE’RE GOING,” CARTER HISSES from the seat in front of me. It’s Monday morning, and we’re on the bus heading to parts unknown. And frankly, Carter isn’t the only one who’s confused.

We all showed up for practice today, only to be informed by Coach Johnson that we’re holding practice “off-site.” I have no idea what that means. This is the first time a coach of mine has ushered the entire team on the bus without telling us where we were going. Although, technically, it’s not the entire team. Most of the underclassmen stayed back at campus with the assistant coaches and were ordered to hit the weight room. Only the seniors and a few of the younger players boarded the bus.

“I bet Ty knows,” Travarius pipes up. He’s sitting across the aisle from me and Julio, and he pokes his seatmate in the ribs. Hard.

Ty pokes back. “I told you—I don’t have a fucking clue. I’m just as in the dark as you guys.” And clearly he doesn’t like it, judging by his slight frown.

At the front of the bus, Coach Johnson is sitting with Coach Briggs. The two men haven’t said much during the one-hour drive, and they don’t seem interested in filling anyone in about our destination.

On a whim, I shoot a quick text to Bryant, hoping she hasn’t gone to class yet.

Me: *Hey. Ur dad kidnapped abt 40 of us. Kno where he's gonna bury the bodies?*

She texts back within seconds.

Her: *Daddy wouldn't hurt a fly.*

Me: *Bull. We're getting murdrd. I kno it.*

Her: *:) stop being melodramatic, sugar. And have fun! Xoxo*

Have fun? Oh shit. I don't like the sound of that.

I hesitate for a second, and then I think, fuck it. These guys might not like me, but I'm not withholding information from them. We'll all suffer together.

I twist around and lean over the back of my seat toward Carter. "I just asked Bryant where we're going and she responded with—have fun."

There's a chorus of groans. "Hoo-boy," Samson moans. "That's a red flag right there."

I'm glad we're all in agreement.

Sure enough, when the bus pulls through a set of huge wooden gates ten minutes later, we know we're done for. The sign over the gates reads: New Horizons Camp.

What in the hell does Coach have in store for us?

"Move your asses, ladies," he booms from the door.

We file off the bus like obedient soldiers. Sneakers land on the dirt courtyard, heads swiveling to warily inspect our surroundings. There's a sprawling log structure ten feet away, lots of grass and trees, and, in the distance, A-frame cabins with rickety wooden porches. It appears to be a wilderness retreat or something, which is even more confusing. We're football players. Where's the turf and goal posts? Where's the equipment?

As we all gather around looking at each other, a stocky man with a shaved head and Aviator sunglasses saunters out of the main building. Coach marches over and the two men exchange hearty back slaps. I can't hear what they're saying, but I have a feeling it's not good.

“Men,” Coach booms as he and the man rejoin us. “This is Dr. Wayne Devlin.”

Doctor?

“Call me Dr. D,” the man tells us. He flips his sunglasses off and rests them atop his shiny head. “For those of you who don’t know me”—*Uh, that would be all of us*—“I’m a psychiatrist turned psychologist turned motivational speaker turned trust guru.”

What. The. Fuck.

I knew Coach had unconventional methods, like when he told me it was A-OK for me to bang his daughter, but he brought us to get our heads shrunk by some hippie? For real?

“I started this place about ten years ago,” Dr. D continues, waving his arm around the space around us, “in order to help aid and promote harmony within group structures.”

“Huh?” Travarius blurts out. Several of the other guys snicker.

“New Horizons is a motivational retreat of sorts,” he explains. “Designed to help individuals achieve growth and trust in all areas of their lives. We offer company retreats, guest speakers, therapy sessions, and—the reason you’re here—team-building activities.”

Holy fuck. This is Bryant’s fault. My gaze swings to Coach, but he’s focused on what the good doctor is saying. But I know it’s true. I opened my big mouth to Bryant and she went and told her dad that I’m at odds with my teammates.

I’m going to kill her.

“We’re going to spend the next few hours encouraging and building teamwork,” Dr. D announces with a broad smile. “Coach Johnson here has voiced some concerns that you boys aren’t gelling. You’re not *trusting*. And where there is no trust, there’s no growth.”

Ty coughs into his hand. That earns him a scowl from Coach.

“If we want to grow, we need to *work*,” Dr. D says passionately. “And if we

want win, we need to *trust*.”

“Dude,” Travarius pipes up, “we *are* winning. Didn’t you hear? We’re six and oh.”

“Daly,” Coach warns. “Shut your yapper.”

“Yes, you’re winning,” the doctor agrees. He raises a brow at Travarius. “You’re winning at football. But are you winning at *life*?”

Clearly Travarius doesn’t know how to respond to that, because he indeed shuts his yapper. Beside him, Ty appears to be fighting uncontrollable waves of laughter.

Dr. D claps his hands together. “All right, let’s get started! Follow me to the trust circle, gentleman.”

Sweet Mary and Moses.

Before anyone can take a step, Coach holds up a hand in warning. “This is serious, you hear me? Therefore, you need to take it seriously. You’re at practice right now, men. You’re not in your pads and you don’t have your helmets on, but you are still at practice. Understood?”

Everyone grunts in assent.

The “trust circle” turns out not to be a circle at all. It’s just an empty, grassy clearing. There’s nowhere to sit, and no visible supplies or anything, although those are probably inside the huge crate that’s sitting on the grass. We’re ordered to stand in a circle, all forty or so of us, while Dr. D drones on for about ten minutes about how there’s no I in teamwork and that to trust is to grow and to grow is to love and a bunch of other motivational bullshit that has me dying to roll my eyes. But I can’t, because Coach and Briggs are watching all of us like hawks to make sure we’re taking it seriously.

“Our first exercise is what I like to call ‘Don’t Be Such a Square!’”

Several snorts ring through the clearing. Coach silences the offenders with a glare.

Dr. D splits us up into four groups of ten. From his magic crate, he produces four long ropes and a bunch of black pieces of fabric that I realize are

blindfolds. Each group is ordered to sit in a circle and put their blindfolds on.

“This is whack,” one of the offensive linemen grumbles from my other side. The moment the blindfold is on, I feel oddly vulnerable. I can’t see a damn thing, and I don’t like it. Bryant is absolutely going to pay for this.

“Whatcha got against blindfolds?” Zane says with a chuckle. “I use them all the time.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “In bed.”

“So you’re saying you blindfold yourself when you spank the salami?” Carter taunts.

“No, asshole. I’m saying Mae likes a little kinky shit with our fucking.”

Luckily, Coach is monitoring one of the other groups, so we don’t get reprimanded for Zane’s filthy language.

“All right,” Dr. D says. “You are now going to feel something in your hands ___”

“Fucking gross!” someone growls. “Swear to God, if you put a dead fish in my hand or some shit, I’m gonna—”

“It’s the rope,” Dr. D interrupts. He sounds frazzled. “Each member of the group will have his hand on the rope. Make sure you maintain a good grip on it. We don’t want it falling out of your hands.”

Something coarse is shoved into my hand. I curl both sets of fingers around it, feeling the fibers scrape my palm.

“Your goal is to leave your circle and form a square with your bodies. Do not let go of the rope—it is the tether that keeps your team operating as one. Once you’re confident that you’ve formed a square, shout it out and we will remove your blindfolds so you can see what you’ve accomplished. Remember—work together. Announce your position to your fellow players. Guide each other into the square you will become.”

I hear a snort of laughter. I’m pretty sure it’s Ty again.

“And...we’re off! Stand up and be a square!”

“I thought it was *don’t* be a square,” Julio mumbles to me. “Isn’t that what he

called this exercise?”

“You know what I call this exercise?” Carter speaks up in a hiss. “A total waste of time.”

Since I can’t see, I try to rely on my ears to help me determine what’s going on. I hear lots of shuffling and rustling from the other groups. Aggravated voices ring in the clearing as the other guys try to turn their circles into squares.

As for our group, nobody is communicating at all. There’s a sharp jolt on the rope and suddenly I’m tugged to the side, nearly losing my footing.

“Wait!” I call. “Everyone just stop.”

Nobody listens. I’m yanked in another direction, while random voices chime out.

“Dude, I’m all tangled up! Why’d you go left?”

“I didn’t go left! I went right!”

“For fuck’s sake!”

“Who’s the corner of the square?”

“I am.”

“There’s four corners to a square, dumbass. There need to be four of us.”

Our team is hopeless.

“Guys!” I shout in a last-ditch effort for some semblance of organization. “Stop. Moving. Let’s talk this through and figure out a game plan.” I’m wrestled to the side again, almost dropping the rope.

“Carter, you there?”

“No, I died.” There’s a snicker. “Of course I’m here. I’ve got one corner.”

“Kay, I’ve got the other one, I think,” Zane calls back. “But there’s someone all tangled up beside me.”

“It’s me, asshole,” comes Samson’s voice. “You spun me around and now the

rope is wrapped around my neck.”

“Whatever, you’re still part of the square. I think we’ve got it, no?”

I don’t think we have it at all. But nobody paid any attention to me when I tried to say something, so I give up and stifle my irritation as Carter shouts that we’re done.

Footsteps approach us, and then Dr. D speaks. “You believe you’ve formed a square?”

“Yup,” Carter says smugly.

“All right, then. Remove your blindfolds.”

I pull the fabric from my eyes and am momentarily blinded by the sun. After I’ve blinked a few times, my vision focuses and I glance around to see what we’ve done.

Carter and Zane are indeed standing on two “corners.” The rest of us are a twisted, not at all orderly mess. The shape we’ve formed most closely resembles a T with the bottom line all squiggly because poor Samson is lying on the grass about two feet away.

I glance over at Coach, who just sighs.



“PRACTICE” ONLY GETS WORSE FROM THERE. FOR THE NEXT TWO HOURS, WE ENDURE a string of team-building exercises that mostly result in failure. It turns out we all suck at communicating.

In our defense, I don’t think Dr. D really thought through some of the exercises. For one of them, he tapes off a small area and then asks us to all try to fit into it. We’re forty football players. We barely fit in the bus, let alone a ten-by-ten-foot square of grass. That particular activity ended with some of our wide outs sitting on the shoulders of our O-linemen. We probably could’ve all fit if Zane didn’t lose his shit because Samson accidentally grabbed his junk.

Blessedly, we only have one more to go, because Dr. D announces this

exercise will be our last.

We're divided into four groups again and given a scenario—our plane crashed on an island. For some fucked up reason, only five of us are allowed to live. The others die. We're given fifteen minutes to reach a unanimous decision about who lives and dies.

“Coach!” Samson calls out in horror. He's in my group again, and so is Carter. “This is horror movie stuff right there! You can't make us do this.”

“Samson dies,” Travarius decides. This time, both he and Ty are also in my group. “He complains too much.”

The guys laugh, including Samson.

Me, I'm tired of failing at these ridiculous exercises, so I decide to take charge again. I pick up the notepad and pen that Dr. D tossed to us, and draw a line down the middle of the page. I label one side of the line “Lives” and the other side “Dies.”

“Okay,” I say in resignation. “Let's think about this. How do we decide the survivors? Is it a matter of who can contribute the most? Age? Skills? Just pick at random?”

“This is fucked,” Ty says bluntly. “Who are we to decide who deserves to live? Let's just put our names in a hat and pull out five.”

Truthfully, I'm in total agreement. And a part of me thinks that that's the answer Dr. D and Coach are probably looking for—that we're supposed to reach the conclusion that we're all equals, we're all deserving, we've all got something to contribute. Therefore, we treat it as a fate sort of thing, because that's what would happen in a real plane crash anyway.

Carter, as usual, has other ideas. I'm starting to actively dislike my roommate.

“Where's the fun in that?” he says with a smirk. “Let's pick the people with the most to offer. I, for one, can fish like a pro.” He nods toward the notepad in my hand. “Put my name down on the left column, Anderson. Carter—fisherman.”

“I can also fish,” Zane says, rolling his eyes. “Guess that means I get to live, too?”

“Nope, there can only be one fisherman,” Carter replies. “Shoulda piped up sooner, bro.”

“I’m good with fire,” someone else offers.

“Bro, you own a Zippo. That doesn’t make you good with fire.”

“Hey, *I own a Zippo*. Which means I’m the only one of you asswipes who can *create* fire. That makes me god of the island.”

“I volunteer to die,” Samson says, and everyone bursts out laughing. He shrugs. “I hate being out in the sun for too long. What am I gonna do on an island?”

“There we go,” Carter says happily, pointing to my notepad again. “Anderson, put Samson on our death list.”

I do, but only because Carter won’t quit looking at me, all expectant like. Nobody seems to notice that neither Masters nor I contribute to this stupid discussion. Ty keeps watching me, though. I can tell he knows I don’t like where this has gone, but he doesn’t call me on it. He just says nothing, patiently listening to Travarius joke about how his Jamaican roots make him an ideal candidate for island life, listening to Carter decide that our running back should die because he has too many allergies, listening to Remy once again insist that his Zippo is a game-changer.

“Five minutes left,” Dr. D tells everyone.

We only have three names on our *Lives* list: Carter, Travarius, and Remy’s Zippo. The others argue about it some more, until finally Ty seems to have had enough. He snatches the pad and pen out of my hand, bends his head, and begins scribbling.

“What are you doing?” Carter demands. “We only have two more to fill in.”

“We’re not killing off our fucking teammates,” Ty growls as he begins to rip the first page into squares and fold them up. Each square has one of our names on it, I realize. He shuffles the folded up papers around in his hand,

drops them on the grass, and then proceeds to pick up five at random.

“Samson, Ace, Zane, Remy, and Carter. Congratulations,” he says flatly. “You all survived the plane crash.”



TY PULLS ME ASIDE BEFORE I CAN BOARD THE BUS. OUR MORNING OF DISASTROUS teambuilding has finally come to an end, and although most of the other guys seem to be in good humor, I feel strangely disheartened about everything. Ty, however, simply looks disappointed.

“You’re his quarterback,” he tells me, his tone firm.

“Who?” I ask in confusion.

“Carter.” He nods toward the bus.

I glance at the door that Carter just sauntered through. Through the tinted window, I can make out Carter sliding into the seat next to Zane.

“Yeah.” I frown. “So?”

“So you’re supposed to lead the offense, Ace. You direct the traffic. You tell those guys what to do. You should’ve spoken up during that last exercise. You wanted to do a random draw—you fucking knew that it was the only way to go, that everyone on this team is equal, no one person is better or more deserving than another.” He shakes his head. “But you let Carter waste all that time talking about who should die. You should’ve shut it down.”

I clench my fists to my sides. “You ever tried to shut that guy up? He does and says what he wants.”

“That’s his prerogative. But you’re still the leader of the offense,” Ty says bluntly. “You’re responsible for making sure these assholes listen to you. I lead this defense, don’t I?”

“Yeah,” I say, my voice gruff.

“You ever see Daly or Walsh or any of the other guys treat me with anything other than respect?”

“No.”

“Exactly. Letting Carter run his mouth like that? That’s on you. Shut it down,” he repeats.

Renegades 7-0

“HIKE.” PADDY SMYTHE, THE CENTER, SMACKS THE BALL INTO MY HANDS. I FLIP IT until the laces are aligned with my fingers. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Zane blocking the defensive end. There’s a corner coming up the center seam to blitz, but Samson picks him up.

I glimpse a flicker of black down the field. Carter is pulling away from the cornerback. I fall back, swing my arm forward, and launch the ball.

A defender brushes by me. I sidestep him without taking my eyes off the ball as it falls perfectly into Carter's hands. He runs for ten more yards before the safety catches him. Three more plays and it's Julio in the corner of the end zone with a tiptoe ballerina catch.

“Nice job, Ace.” Coach gives me a thundering backslap as I come off the field.

On the sidelines, Julio comes up and goes through a complicated handshake with me. I don’t know how I get it right, but I do. The whole night carries on in the same strange, magical fashion. The team building practice had been a spectacular failure, but our play tonight is spectacular, period.

In the next series, I escape three tackles and scramble for a twenty-yard gain. We march down the field decisively, capping the eighty-yard march with a two-yard rush by the running back (and Zippo enthusiast), Remy Borland.

The whole game proceeds like this with one perfect, easy play after another. We shouldn't be winning like this over an in-state rival, but the football gods have kissed my hands. I can't throw an errant pass. No one fumbles the ball. Carter, Zane, and Julio are catching balls like their gloves have magnets.

The defense plays lights out as well. We end up beating our ranked division opponent 48 to 10.

After the game is over, everyone is full of joy. My ears ring with the cheers from our home crowd and the shouts of “good game” from my teammates. So many hands slap my back, I'll probably have bruises tomorrow. The smile on my face stretches from one ear to the other.

Coach walks in, a football tucked under his arm. Ty high-fives him. “Good call on the team-building exercise.”

The room roars with laughter. Everyone's heard of the disaster back at Camp Hopeless, as we've taken to calling it. Somehow, despite that, we played lights out, as if the stupid camp actually worked instead of being an abysmal disaster.

“Y'all got to trust me,” he jokes back. “This all happened just how I drew it up.”

More laughter ensues. Coach waits until it dies down.

“Men, the reason you played so well today has nothing to do with me, or my crazy ass ideas. It has everything to do with the fact that today you decided to trust each other. This is why we have a team. Because not one man can go out and throw the ball, catch it, kick it, tackle on his own. Each and every one of you”—he points the football toward my chest and swings it around the circle of players—“is important and vital to the success of this organization. When you look to your left and to your right, these are men who have shared a unique and special experience with you. No one will be able to understand or relate to this except for these brothers.”

He walks over to Ty and places a hand on our captain's shoulder. “As long as you stand strong with each other through the valleys, you'll be able to celebrate together when you reach the mountaintop. Wins will come and go, just like losses, but these men here will be your brothers forever. Always

remember that. I'm proud of you." He raises his fist in the air. "Go Renegades!"

"Renegades forever!" the room screams back.

Ty takes the ball from Coach and walks it over to me. "Today's game ball goes to none other than our amazing quarterback, Ace. Five touchdowns, three hundred and forty passing yards, one rushing touchdown and no interceptions. Anything to say for yourself?" The last bit is yelled over the hoots of my teammates.

"Yeah, why didn't the defense score tonight?"

Ty grins, and we pound each other on the back. The entire team closes in on us until we're buried under a pile of sweaty jerseys and muscle.

Someone, probably Samson, starts dragging players away until it's just Ty and me on the floor. A trainer throws us each an energy drink. Ty leans back against Borland's locker and pops his open.

"What're you and Bryant doing tonight?" he asks after a swallow.

"Not sure. She's very chill on game days." It's different hearing our names linked together, but I don't mind it at all.

"Yeah, I bet. Having a girlfriend who understands the game has got to be nice." Travarius drags a chair over.

"You got lady problems, Daly?" Ty asks.

"No, but I'm thinking that it's good to hook up with a girl when you're in college, before you get the pros. Because when you're in the pros you don't know if the girl's with you because of the size your wallet or your personality."

"With you, Travarius, it's always going to be a toss-up between the size of your wallet and the size of your dick."

I choke on my Gatorade, but Ty isn't wrong. The cornerback has a dick the size of a baseball bat.

"Hey now. Just because I got a big dick doesn't mean I don't got girl

problems,” Travarius protests. “Some girls don't like the big dick. They talk a big game, but the moment you whip that sucker out of your pants, they're all ‘you're too big.’”

While I hide my snicker behind the back of my hand, Ty somehow manages to keep a straight face while observing, “So you're saying your dick is Papa Bear big, and you’re searching for the right Goldilocks vagina.”

“Pretty much.” Travarius nods eagerly at this ridiculous comparison. “And where else are you going to find as many chicks in one place? Nowhere. This place is like the Disneyland of vaginas.”

I have to look at the floor because I know if I see Ty’s face, I’m going to bust out laughing. Samson is choking on his spit, though. Travarius ignores this and keeps explaining, “We got all the different cultures, all the different body types, all the different personalities in about a four-mile radius. Once we leave here, we’re sunk.” He leans back in his chair and calls to Zane. “Bettman, when are you going to pop the question?”

Zane wanders over, shirtless with his pants unlaced, scratching his chest. “Mae's got her head full of med school applications. She can't concentrate on something else. If I ask her now, she’s going to blurt out some kind of science-y type answer, and I won’t be able to figure out if it’s a yes or a no. I’m waiting until she’s been accepted before I spring this on her. Besides, I don’t have enough cash for the ring. Her momma’s got one that’s so big, it should be a traffic light.”

“You can't wait too long to wife her or someone's going to snap her up,” Samson advises.

Zane scowls. “I don't see you all rushing to drop rings on your girls' fingers. What about you, Ty?”

Ty’s head jerks up from his phone. “What about me?”

“You have a girl that can tell you apart?” I ask. My old teammate, Knox, married his girlfriend within months of meeting her. He maintains that she was cosmic destiny since she could tell him apart from his identical twin, Ty.

“Ty doesn't believe in that shit,” Travarius declares.

Ty's eyes shutter slightly. "My brother has his own ideas. I don't need a girl that can tell us apart. Look at Daly here. He's still my first love, and he couldn't tell my brother from me if we were wearing name tags."

"You both feel the same in the dark," Travarius concedes.

We laugh at this, but I can't help noticing Ty's chuckle is a little forced. Sounds like maybe he does believe in that twin voodoo.

"I want a girl like Bryant," Carter pipes up, taking the heat off of Ty.

My eyes swing toward my roommate in surprise. "Like you want Bryant or you want to girl like Bryant?"

He shrugs. "I'll take Bryant. I figure at some point, she's got to settle down with one of us. She loves football. No way she doesn't end up a player's wife."

There are a lot of nods around the room. My good humor and camaraderie dries up immediately. Do all these fuckers forget that she's dating me?

"Small problem there, buddy." I glare at Carter. "She's currently got a boyfriend." And the thought of any one of these guys laying a hand on her sweet curves have my hands fisting at my side.

"Yeah, but you're not really her boy—" he says, but cuts himself off when I start to push to my feet. "Well, yeah, I want a girl *like* Bryant," he corrects.

Ty kicks me lightly in the calf. "You and Bryant should come to the Bounce House tonight. I think a bunch of us are headed there."

I force myself to loosen up and not ruin the tiny bit of progress I've made, but damn if I don't feel territorial. "Sure, I'll see if she's up for it."

I get to my feet and toss the empty Gatorade in the recycling bin. Fishing out a towel from the bottom of my locker, I finish undressing and then make my way to the showers.

Ty joins me. "Carter isn't ever going to make a move on your girl," he says.

"It'd be a bad idea if he did," I reply, ducking under the tepid water. "We'd need a new wide receiver."

“Maybe you, huh?”

It’s a pointed barb, but in the spirit of fucking team unity, I bite back a sharp retort and instead answer, “Yeah. Even though I could play every position on the field, I stick to the quarterback position because I don’t want to make the rest of the team feel bad about themselves.”

Ty snorts. “Don’t worry about Carter. He’s not that kind of guy. It’s just that most of the time, Bryant’s not serious about her guys. They’re…” he trails off.

I jerk my head out of the spray and glare at my teammate. My mood has gone from amenable to into the shitter in under two seconds. “They’re what?”

Ty’s oblivious to my mounting anger. His eyes are closed as he tips his face toward the water. “They’re not serious, either.”

I finish up hurriedly so I don’t give in to the urge to pound Ty’s face into the tile until he takes back his words. Actually, what do I care about Bryant’s past men? I’m the one in her life now and no one’s taking my place.

When I shut the water off, Ty’s eyes pop open. “Hey, see you at the Bounce House.”

I hesitate before answering. Any other evening and I’d have blown the team off, but we just won a huge conference game after a disastrous team exercise. Skipping out on one of the few invitations that have been thrown my way is stupid as hell. “Yep. See you there.”

He gives me a thumbs up and goes back to his shower. I tie a towel around my waist. Back at my locker, I text Bryant.

Me: *U still here?*

Her: *Yes. With daddy and alum. ::Rolls eyes::*

Me: *Wanna do something tonight*

Her: *Of course.*

I stare at those two words as the tension from the locker room eases out of me. This isn’t temporary for either of us. Bryant wouldn’t be so eager to

spend time with me if all I was to her was work. She enjoys being with me, just as I enjoy being with her.

Me: *The guys said they're hitting up Bounce House. U in?*

Her: *Luv BoHo. Meet you there?*

Me: *I'll pick u up*

Her: *It's only about 8 blocks.*

Me: *I'll pick u up*

Her: *:) KK*

This thing with Bryant started off as frustrating, made a left turn into the hottest sex I've ever had, and is now careening toward an unfamiliar destination, but I'm not getting off the ride.

I WENT TO THE BOUNCE HOUSE THIS SUMMER, RIGHT BEFORE FALL CAMP BEGAN AND practices intensified. Because only summer classes were in session, the place had been relatively empty.

Tonight, there's not a square inch of space that isn't occupied by a body. I can almost feel Bryant's frame deflate as she takes in the crowded space.

"Let's go." I tuck a hand behind her back and try to turn her toward the exit.

"No. No," she objects. "Your teammates are here." She plasters on a fake smile, but I'm used to her now. I can tell the fake from the genuine. Tonight, she's dead-ass tired.

"When did you get to the stadium this morning?"

"Oh, I don't know." She wrinkles her nose. "Ten?"

Christ. I'd picked her up at seven, and she said she'd just gotten home. "I'm tired," I say bluntly. "Let's get something to eat and go back to my place. Since my roommates are here, we'll have the place to ourselves. We can have sex on the kitchen table."

Interest flickers in her eyes and then dies out as an overly excited voice yells out her name.

"Bryant. BRYAAANT!" A brunette Barbie wearing a glittery top and a barely-there mini bounces over to us, her pink lower lip is pushed out in an

exaggerated pout. "I'm so glad you're here! Kent's being mean to me. You've got to talk to him."

"No." I transfer Bryant from one arm to the other, placing a barrier between this overeager puppy and my tired girl.

"Excuse me." Barbie scowls. "I was talking to Bryant." The girl peers around me to try to catch Bryant's eye. "Bryant, did you hear me? Kent's being rude, and I need you to go over and whip him into shape."

Bryant starts to say something, probably "yes," but I talk over both of them. "Nope. I'm hungry, and Bryant's going to sit with me while we eat."

"Well, I never," Skipper Barbie sputters.

"Chryselle, I'll come over later, okay? Let me get Ace settled first," Bryant says.

Over my dead body. Bryant's not dealing with anyone else's problems tonight. The girl frowns petulantly. "Don't take too long. Kent's going to ruin my night."

She stomps off like a five-year-old.

"Sorry about that," Bryant apologizes.

"About what? Barbie acting like a toddler who isn't getting her own way? That's not your fault."

Bryant's lips tremble as she tries to suppress a laugh. "But you're hungry. Let's get you something to eat."

I let her drag me toward the bar, because getting food into Bryant's body is my first objective. My second is getting my fingers, tongue, and cock into her body, but that can wait.

We don't make it but two more feet before a blonde cuts in front of us. "Bryant! I'm so glad you're here. I have a huge, huge favor to ask of you. My chem study is due on Monday, and I need to go to the lab tomorrow, but we've got those pies to make for the hospital charity."

Bryant pats the girl on the arm. "I can make those. Don't you worry."

I intervene again. “No, she won't. Bryant's got a paper due, and she can't make your damn pies.”

“Who are you?” the girl snaps.

“The asshole telling you no.” I physically lift Bryant to the left, grab her hand and muscle my way toward the back of the bar. BoHo has a side patio and that's where I'm headed. I find Julio surrounded by about a half-dozen women and slap a twenty in his hand. “Can you get me a draft—whatever's on tap and, something fruity. Vodka and strawberries or something like.”

Bryant tugs on my arm. “Ace, are you okay? I thought you were hungry.”

Shit, I forgot she hadn't eaten. I yell Julio's name. One benefit of being tall is being able to see over a crowd. He spins around. “One order of hot wings and fries, too.”

He waves the twenty in the air and disappears toward the bar.

“No, I'm not okay,” I tell her and march up to a table. There's an empty chair. “Mind if I take this?” I don't wait for an answer, but pick it up in one hand. I drag it to the corner, where the bar and the patio meet. There's a small gathering there. I give them all a dark look. “I'm going to put the chair down and sit here because I'm tired from the game, got it?”

The students look at me and then at Bryant. “Don't look at her,” I bark out. “Move.”

They move.

I slam the chair on the ground and drag Bryant onto my lap. Whipping out my phone, I throw it in her hands. “Text Julio and let him know where we are.”

Wide-eyed, she does so. As she's typing in, another asshole appears. Kent, if I remember correctly.

“Bryant, Chryselle said you were here. Do you—”

Bryant's whole body expands and contracts as she sighs. She starts to rise. “Sure thing.”

I get up, drop a surprised Bryant into the chair and then face Kent with my arms crossed.

“I-I’ll catch Bryant later,” Kent stammers.

“You do that.”

Another girl turns to watch Kent scurry off before approaching confidently. I glare at her. “Sorry, office is closed. Come back on Monday.”

She narrows her eyes. “I need to speak to Bryant.”

“Negative. In about thirty seconds, Bryant’s tongue is going to be in my mouth.”

“Ace!” Bryant cries.

I ignore her and continue to stare down my nose at the girl.

“Asshole,” she mutters and stomps away.

Bryant’s fingernail pokes me in the back. “Ace, you can’t be saying stuff like that, even if you’re joking.”

“Who says I’m joking?”

A few others look in our direction, but the menace in my face keeps them from physically approaching us. Soon, there’s a little bubble of space between my body and the rest of the bar.

Julio marches through the crowd with Bryant’s food and drink. He stops inside my bubble, takes one look at my frown and backs up a step. “Dude, did you forget that we just won?”

“No.” I reach out for the drink, which I turn and hand to Bryant.

“Is that your favorite word?” she asks bemusedly. “No? That’s all you’ve been saying tonight.”

“Because you seem to have lost track of it in your vocabulary,” I retort.

Julio dumps my beer and the basket of wings into my hands. “I’m going to leave now. I don’t do domestic spats.” He winks at Bryant. “Even with

beautiful girls like you.”

She gives him a little wave. “Have fun tonight, Julio. Don't forget to wrap it up.” She holds up a finger. “Wait, Ace, give him a condom.”

“Goddammit, Bryant. Julio is nineteen. He knows where to get condoms.”

I swear Julio's dark cheeks color. “Yeah, don't need any help there.”

He ducks back into the crowd, trying to hide as only a six-foot, four-inch wide receiver can.

Chuckling, I lean my ass against the wall of the bar, making sure my legs form a barrier, however small, between Bryant and the rest of the crowd. The basket of wings lays uneaten in her lap, but she chugs down the vodka martini.

“Thanks for this,” she sighs. “I didn't realize how badly I needed a drink.” She passes me the basket. “I actually had food in the hospitality tent.”

“Sure you did. Eat one.” I hold up a wing to her lips, and because she doesn't know how to say no, she takes a bite. And then another. And soon, she's gobbled down about half of the basket. Her hunger is sated, but all that damn nibbling and licking around my fingers has my dick raring to go.

The tight state of my jeans doesn't go unnoticed by Bryant. I hand her my beer, which she takes a small sip of while staring at my crotch.

“You looking at my cock isn't going to make it get any smaller.”

She flushes and looks down at the food. “I'm full now, really.”

“Good. Because I'm starved.” I wrap my hand around the back of her neck and tug her face forward toward me. “My turn to eat.”

I kiss her hard, driving my tongue into her mouth, tasting the tang of the barbecue sauce, the sweetness of her spirit. She resists at first, her innate sense of good breeding objecting to this very public display of affection. A mauling really, but I don't give a fuck. If Bryant's one skill is people, my skill is not giving many fucks at all.

Except about her.

Her resistance fades under my persistent attack—persistence being one of my positive traits. I don't ever give up. She softens, opening her mouth wider, and I take advantage of that.

I slide my hand from her neck, down the column of her spine, to tuck under her plush ass. One small hoist and she's up in my arms, pressed tight against me. Her fingers dig into the base of my skull, wanting more of me.

With one hand on either side of her hips, I rub her body up and down mine, wishing I could just flip her skirt up and take her right now. Unfortunately, there are a shit ton of people here and that behavior would mortify Bryant.

I set her down regretfully. Her eyelids are heavy with lust, and her lips are puffy, red, and wet. I groan and take a seat, pulling her ass down to cover my enormous hard-on.

She wiggles her butt, trying to get comfortable. “Ace, we're in public.”

I tip my head back against the tall wrought-iron fence. “I know.”

“You need to relax,” she scolds.

“I can't. All the blood in my body is currently under your ass at this point. It's a fucking miracle I can even form a sentence.”

“Then I'll get up.”

I clamp my hands around her waist. “The hell you will.”

“You're supposed to be getting over your asshole ways.”

“Sometimes being an asshole comes in handy.” I try taking deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth, and order my dick to stand down. It doesn't listen well. New tactic. Distraction. “Tomorrow you go to church and then what? Bake a bazillion pies?” I'm not going to kid myself that I've done anything but buy a little time for Bryant. The minute I let her out of my sight, someone's going to take advantage of her.

She groans, and not in the sexy way. “Yeah, I suppose. I don't want to.”

“Why do you agree to do it?”

“I have a hard time saying no.”

“I’ve noticed.” I open my eyes and take in the crowd. For the most part, everyone's leaving us alone. It's getting late, and everyone's got their own nighttime interests to pursue. I stroke a hand from her knee up under the edge of her skirt. “So after you make pies, then what?”

“Ace.” She pushes at my hand. “We’re in public.”

I pause in my upward quest, my fingers long enough that they rest only a few inches from my favorite bits. “How many guys have you been with?”

“What kind of question is that?” she exclaims.

“How many?” Keeping an eye out for anyone watching, I glide up farther until my fingers are pressed against the damp cotton of her panties. I grin wickedly at her.

“Two. Okay, two!”

Two? That's such a...low number. That’d mean me and the asshole who took her virginity. Her answer surprises me enough that my fingers still. “Then what were you doing with all these guys you dated before me?”

“I dated them.” She looks put out.

“And no sex?” What, were these guys eunuchs? They dated Bryant and none of them wanted to get into her panties? “Are you sure you didn't date a bunch of gay dudes?”

“No, I was not dating a bunch of gay dudes. Not everyone has a”—she searches for the right word—“*libido* like yours.”

“Libido?” Smirking, I drag her panties aside and run the pads of my fingers over the tender, hidden flesh.

“Sex drive, then.” Her arms drop, trying to disguise exactly where my hand is. “Stop. People are looking at us.”

I do a sweep of the patio. “No one is looking at us. Besides, it's dark back here. No one can see a damn thing.”

“Ace,” she begins, but her words are cut off when I push my middle finger inside of her.

“Yes, baby.” I lick her neck.

“D-don’t call me baby,” she stammers.

“All right.” I slip another finger inside of her and thumb her clit. Her breath catches. “No one can see,” I say again. “No one can see a thing.”

She melts against me. I shift her slightly so that her back is to the crowd. Maybe someone can tell I’m finger-fucking her, but not most. It’s crowded. This part of the patio is really dark. I’m not jacking my arm around. I’m merely working my fingers in and out of her slick pussy, feeling for that small patch of flesh inside of her that will set her off. My thumb rubs circles around her clit.

“You feel slick and hot,” I murmur against her throat.

She moans. “This...we shouldn’t be doing this.”

“I’m so fucking hard right now. Can you feel me?” I push lightly against her ass.

“Mmhmm.”

“I wish we were alone right now. I’d swing those legs around and have you ride me. You’d like that, wouldn’t you? I can feel you tightening around my fingers. Is this the naughtiest thing you’ve ever done, sweetheart?”

She buries her face in my shoulder. My fingers drag along her channel until I feel her teeth bite into my neck. Triumphant, I stroke her steadily. “You should slide your fingers right next to mine. You could feel how hot and tight you are. How goddamned fine you are.”

Bryant makes some garbled sound as her sex clamps down in response to my words.

“Come on my hand, B. Come all over my hand.” Her body tenses and then shudders as she starts to come. If anyone were to look at us in that moment, they’d only see the curve of her back supported by one broad palm and a fierce glow of satisfaction on my face as I pull an orgasm out of Bryant.

Trembling, she curls up into my lap. I withdraw from her hot, tight core with great reluctance. I swipe a napkin off the floor and, as discreetly as possible,

wipe my fingers off. She shudders, and I draw her closer to my chest. I feel like I'm getting the hang of this girlfriend shit and it's not half bad.

Not half bad at all.

IN ALL MY YEARS, I'VE NEVER HAD ANYONE TAKE CARE OF ME LIKE ACE DID THE other night. He spent a lot of the time scowling at other people, and while I thought it was rude, his protectiveness was heartwarming.

And then there was the actual touching. My cheeks heat up remembering the outrageous way I allowed Ace to feel me up in the back corner of the patio. That was completely out of character for me. When I'm with Ace, I always feel slightly off-kilter.

"Bryant. Bryant!" I jerk around to see Dawn standing at the bottom of the steps, waving a hand in front of my face. "Sheesh, girl, where did you go?"

I grimace. See, completely unmoored. "Sorry, was just running over a mental checklist of all the things we need for the charity event."

"I'm sure you have it all," she says impatiently. "Let's skedaddle, though, because if we're any later all the good parking spaces will be taken, and we'll have to hoof it like five miles. You remember what happened the last time I wore these wedges." She tilts her foot to the side, showing a mile-long length of leg.

Self-consciously, I wiggle my toes in my white tennies. I have short legs and thick ankles, which means I look the best in flats and strappy sandals and heels, but I planned to play in the charity game, so tennies it is. My stubby leg genetics aren't my sorority sister's fault, though, so I give her the compliment she needs. "But it's worth it. Your legs go on forever."

“I wasn’t going to wear them, but I figured since I’m handling the merch table, there wasn’t any sense in my wearing flats or sneakers. So who all is coming from the football team?”

The team has a bye this weekend, which means no game. During this off week, the players participate in a charity football game put on by the Greek houses in conjunction with the athletics department. It’s a mixed gender flag football game that gets real competitive. The football team sends a few of its ringers over and we split them up, stacking the teams with guys and girls from the other sports like volleyball (those girls can jump) and basketball (height really makes a difference) and baseball (those boys can throw).

“Ty Masters, Carter Kittredge, Zane Bettman, Travarius Daly,” I recite as I grab the two bags of cupcake boxes.

“Ace?” she asks.

Dawn has shown a lot of interest in Ace from the beginning, and ordinarily that shouldn’t bother me, but it does. It’s like a burr in my behind every time she says his name.

“Yes, ma’am,” I tell her and walk hurriedly ahead.

She trots behind me in short, mincing steps. “Is he a leg man? That’s why I wanted to wear these heels. I love that he’s so tall. I was watching the game last week, and I swear he was half a head taller than the rest of the boys on the field. Are QBs always tall?”

“These days, yeah. You were watching the game?” I ask. “I thought you hated football.” In fact, the last time there was a game on in the house, Dawn made a big fuss because she was missing figure skating.

“I don’t mind it,” she lies. “Anyway, he played real well, didn’t he? And they were talking about him possibly being drafted into the pros.”

“Mmhmmm.” I open the car door and shove the cupcakes into the backseat.

Dawn doesn’t even notice my non-responsiveness. She just rambles on about how hot Ace is and how he seems real nice when he comes over and how she can’t wait till I’m finished with him.

I grip the steering wheel tighter.

“Do you think he’s good in bed? I know sometimes the good-looking ones suck in bed. Girls just keep faking their orgasms because they like the look of those boys outside the bedroom.”

I slam on the brakes. The cupcakes go flying.

“Oh my God, Bryant! I think you just ruined four dozen cupcakes!”

We look into the backseat—the boxes are askew. I pull over, and sure enough, it’s a disaster. “Sugar, sugar, sugar, sugar,” I curse.

Dawn moans. “Kayla is going to kill us.”

I close my eyes for a second and wish for a small natural disaster to occur, such as a teeny tiny wind funnel. When nothing comes my way, I pop my eyes open and stare at the multi-colored destruction in front of me. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. I’m going to drop you off and then I’ll run over to the OldeTyme Bakery and buy whatever they have there. I’ll text you, and you can change up the signs and stuff.”

She screws up her face in disgust. “They won’t be homemade. That’s our whole thing. The AO stuff is in demand because we bake everything from scratch.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Fine. Then we go to the charity event without the cupcakes.”

“But then we’ll be short! The other houses will raise more money than us.”

“Then I’ll have my daddy donate to cover the difference.” My voice is perilously shrill.

“It’s not the same!” Dawn stomps her platform-shod foot. “We were humiliated the last time we showed up without these.”

“I can’t help it!” I yell back.

Dawn’s mouth drops open in shock.

I bite my lip. “Sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” An AO girl does not yell at her sister. “Come on, Dawn, standing here isn’t going to solve

anything. Let's get to the field and we'll talk it over with the rest of the AOs, okay?" I plead.

She snuffles a bit, but gets in the car.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make a scene," I apologize as I buckle up.

"It's okay," she mutters, but she stares out the window as she says it.

We end up having to park about four blocks away from Parker's Field, where the annual Foamball Classic is held. Thankfully, Dawn doesn't complain even a little about having to walk that far. We carry the ruined bakery goods over to the AO table that's decorated in crimson, gold and more gold. We don't do anything by half measures. Glitter dust hangs like a cloud around the table.

Kayla rushes over to us and grabs the bags. "Thank God you're here. The Deltas are selling kisses from the girls' and boys' basketball teams! Look!" She jerks her head angrily down the field. I follow her gaze. Two tables down, there's a long line of coeds in front of the pink-and-green Delta table.

I look down at the mess of cupcakes that are now in Kayla's hands and feel ill. "Well, pucker up, Kayla, because our cupcakes are toast."

"What happened?" she gasps as she opens the bags.

"Bryant braked too hard, and all the cupcakes got ruined," Dawn informs everyone. "She thinks we should go and buy cupcakes from the OldeTyme Bakery and sell them here."

Kayla gives me a disapproving look. "We can't sell someone else's baked goods as our own."

"I know. It was just an idea." By the wounded and accusatory expressions on my sisters' faces, you'd think I suggested we serve poop-filled bags and not tasty donuts from the best bakery in town.

"I think—" Dawn starts. "Oh, there's Ace." She flips her bouncy brown curls over her shoulder and hails down Ace like he's a taxicab in the city.

I watch in frustration as she jauntily trots over to him, accidentally or on purpose trips and falls into his arms.

“Guess Dawn’s laying a claim on Ace,” Kayla observes.

“I’m not done with him yet,” I snap.

My friend's eyes widen in surprise. “Since when do you get territorial over your projects?”

“I’m not territorial,” I say, defensiveness oozing out of my pores.

A skeptical eyebrow shoots up. “It’s okay to mark Ace as your man, but be clear about it. The girls won’t make a step toward him if they know you care.”

“I don’t care,” I mumble, but Kayla doesn’t buy it.

Instead, a brilliant grin flashes across her face. “I figured you’d fall for one of your projects. I just didn’t think it’d be this one.”

“You know nothing, Jon Snow.”

Kayla laughs at me. “Why don't we test that out?” Then she pulls me to toward the table and grabs Ace. “Hey, Ace, think you can do a favor for us?”

Ace spins around, scowl on his face, trying to disentangle himself from Dawn. “What?” he asks.

Kayla rolls her eyes. “Do you have to know first? Can’t you just say, *of course, Kayla, anything for you.*”

“No.” He looks me over. “What the hell is wrong? Did something happen?” His scowl deepens. He literally shakes Dawn off and stomps over to me. Crouching down so we're eye level, he runs his gaze over my face.

I pat my cheeks. “What? Do I have a mark on my face?”

“You look upset.” He straightens, hands on his hips, and scans the surroundings. “Whose ass do I need to kick?”

I can’t even tell if he’s serious or joking, but whatever he's doing, he needs to stop. Ace’s unconventional brand of caring is making me feel crazy-good inside. I'm never going to be able to give him over to Dawn if he keeps this act up. Possessiveness isn't something I'm used to. “No one, sugar. Or I guess mine, because I ruined four dozen cupcakes.” I gesture toward our AO table

that's holding our famed baked items, minus 48 perfectly decorated cupcakes.

"Well, I'm not going to kick your ass, but I'll be happy to do other things to it." His big hand sweeps down to cup one cheek.

"Ace," I exclaim with a scandalized look around.

"Oh, right. No PDA unless we're in a dark corner of the patio, right?" He smirks, then gives me another squeeze before releasing me.

I try to keep the disappointed look off my face.

He chuckles darkly. Leaning close, he whispers, "I'm happy to find a private spot here."

"At Parker Field? There's only Porta Potties and I'd rather rut in front of the AO house than get close to you in one of those." I shudder dramatically.

He laughs and hauls me close. Kayla clears her throat loudly before Ace can press his naughty lips against mine.

He sighs and turns to Kayla. "What's your favor?"

"Can we auction you off?"

"No."

"Like for one date? It'd be cool. We'll—"

"No." His fingers dangle over the top of my boob. My skin tingles, and I swear my nipples tighten in anticipation. I try to shimmy away, but he drags me right up against his side again.

"It would only be a meal and—"

"No. Next suggestion?"

Kayla turns to me. "Bryant, how about you—"

"No," Ace interrupts. "Bryant's playing center for us. You guys can figure this mess out."

He literally drags me away to the registration table. "But Ace, those are my

sisters.”

“There are twenty of them. If they can’t figure out how to raise enough money to cover forty-eight cupcakes, then none of them should be allowed to graduate. What team are you playing on?”

“Can I help you?” the volunteer asks.

“Nope.” Ace rifles through the Tyvek jersey tags, plucking out mine and then his.

Mine is in a red acrylic holder and his is black.

“Oh, we’re not on the same team,” I say in disappointment.

He grabs the black badge off the table. “Hey, that’s not your name,” the volunteer objects, but Ace ignores him, switching out my name for that of one Tessa Chapman.

“Ace, I don’t know who that is. We shouldn’t do this. What if she wants to be on the black team?” I tug at his arm.

“You can’t do that,” the volunteer warns.

Ace ignores me. He ignores the volunteer. Instead, he spins me around and pins the badge on the back of my T-shirt. “Tough Tater Tots.”

“Tough Tater Tots?”

“You want me to stop cursing? Then don’t make fun of my made up curse words.”

I clap a hand over my mouth to smother the giggles. “Yessir.”

We meet up with the rest of the team.

A shorter guy, Danny Peters according to his nametag, designates himself as quarterback. “You can’t be QB because it wouldn’t be fair,” he explains to a frowning Ace.

“But I’m better than you,” Ace says flatly.

“This is a charity event. It’s supposed to be for fun,” I remind him.

“It'll be fun when we win.”

Across from us, Travarius Daly waves. “What position you playing, Ace?”

My boyfriend pivots and squints at the cornerback. “What position are you playing?”

“Wide receiver.”

“Corner,” Ace says immediately.

“I guess winning isn't as important now?” I tease gently.

“Are you kidding? I'm going to wipe the floor with Travarius.” He points a finger at our quarterback. “Don't throw any interceptions.” Then he drags me over to the center. “You're going to hike the ball.”

I watch as Ace takes over, pushing people around, positioning them at various places along the line until he's satisfied with the result. Everyone listens to him, and most people seem thrilled to be taking orders.

From the sidelines, Travarius is yelling out various encouragements such as “Red's going to make the Blacks bleed today” and “Masters hasn't caught a ball since the Pee Wee leagues.” Ty Masters, standing in the wideout spot, flicks his teammate off. “Caught one last week, didn't I?”

And he had.

“You can't run fast.”

Ty shoots back, “Fast enough to catch the quarterback.”

As the banter continues between the teams, Ace marches down the line of scrimmage like a general inspecting the troops. I crouch down into the center position. When Ace reaches me, he halts and frowns. “Oh no. This isn't going to work.”

I straighten. “I know how to hike the ball.”

“Nope. No one's hands are getting that close to your sweet ass other than mine, sweetheart.” He grabs my biceps and switches me out with the boy next to me. I think he's a golfer, given his slender build and expensive haircut. “There. Perfect.” Ace gestures for Danny to come forward. “Don't

try to be a hero. Short, quick passes.” He points a long finger across the way at Will Connolly, a basketball player. “Bryant gets hurt and your dick will be in your throat.”

“JR Anderson, would you stop it? This is a friendly game for char-i-ty.” I emphasize every last syllable between gritted teeth.

He shrugs nonchalantly and slaps my butt before saying, “Take care of this. I’m going to need you in one piece later.”

Face flaming, I settle into position and prepare to block Will, who grins madly at me. “Don’t worry, Bryant. I’ll make sure none of your bruises show.”

“Will, the day a basketball player beats me at football is the day my daddy disowns me,” I declare.

Danny calls for the ball and the game is on. Maybe it’s my imagination, but I don’t recall the past three Foamball Classics being so...intense. It’s always been competitive. You can’t pit athletes, regardless of their sport, against each other and not expect a high level of play. But the football players are taking it to another level. Even with the no-tackling rule in place, there’s a lot of bumping and pushing and hands to the face and that’s just between Travarius and Ace. There’s a huge battle happening downfield, and after the first quarter, I take myself out so I can watch.

“Is it me or is Ace incredible at the corner position?” Kayla offers me a smashed cupcake, which I accept gratefully. She’s one of the few AOs that knows much about the game.

“He’s got a good football sense, as my daddy would say. He always seems to know where the ball is. I think he can read the eyes of his opposing player better than anyone else.” I crumple the empty wrapper in my hand. Kayla takes it from me and sticks it into a bag by her side.

“Whatever it is, he’s good. In fact, I’m worried that if Travarius doesn’t catch a ball, he’s going to throw a punch in the end zone,” she jokes. “Although, maybe that’s not so bad. I kinda wish that it was summer and we were playing shirts versus skins and one of them just accidentally tore the shorts off the other.”

I laugh. “Do we throw Jell-O on them as well?”

“No,” she corrects, “oil. Do you remember those pictures on the internet of the Turkish wrestlers? Next year, our charity event should just be these athletes grappling in the middle of a big oil pit.”

Both of us fall silent as we contemplate that delightful scene. “Are we being sexist by objectifying these men?” I ask.

“Yup. Don’t care.”

We share a grin. At halftime, Ace comes over and throws his big body next to mine. “I’m thirsty. What do you have?”

Wordlessly, I hand him a Gatorade, which he drinks in about five gulps. I take way too much pleasure watching his throat muscles work. My eyes drift downward. The sweat has plastered his T-shirt to his skin, showing off those toned pectorals and abs. Lower still, I can see a tiny bit of his happy trail where the shirt hem rides above the low waistband of his shorts.

Beside me, I hear a heavy sigh of appreciation. Kayla’s enjoying the scene, too. I tug down Ace’s shirt to hide that sliver of skin and turn to glare at my friend.

“I was merely appreciating the scenery,” she says angelically.

Ace snorts.

I’d have retorted something rude, but Dawn saves me by gliding up to us. “Ace, now that you’ve played a half, can you come and—”

“No.” He crushes the empty plastic bottle in his hand and whips it about fifteen feet where it falls perfectly within the open trash container. Then he leans forward and plants a hard, hungry kiss against my mouth. “Time for round two.”

And with that, he jogs back onto the field where he starts barking orders again.

“You still have a lot of work to do to turn that boy from a sow’s ear into a silk purse,” Dawn declares and stomps back to the AO table.

“She’s not wrong,” Kayla muses. “Ace is an asshole.”

“But he’s my asshole,” I say, eyes glued to his tight behind.

Kayla smirks. “That sounds pretty territorial.”

“Shut up, Kayla.”

She laughs for a long time after that.

Renegades 12-0

“BRYANT, THIS IS ALAN MACHMAN, COACH OF THE NEW YORK COBRAS.” DADDY extends his hand toward a stern-faced man in his sixties. Coach Machman has the stiff bearing of a military man, the height of a current football player and the gut of a former one. I surmise he spends too much time guzzling soda and eating stadium food.

He shakes my hand with a firm grip, which I appreciate. “Young lady.”

“Nice to meet you, sir.”

My daddy places a hand on my shoulder. “Bryant's my right-hand woman. I wouldn't get anything done around here if it weren't for her.”

“We all need a Bryant in our lives.” Coach gives me a small nod. “How's the team look tonight?”

“We're going to win,” I declare, but soften the boast with a qualification. “But I'd say that if we were down twenty and there were only two minutes left in the game.”

This pulls a grin from the stoic coach.

“That's the right attitude. You've got a lot of good talent on this team.” He directs the last statement to Daddy.

“We do our best to get them NFL ready,” Daddy agrees, surveying the starters who are stretching on the field, warming up for the game.

I wonder who Coach is examining today. Neither he nor Daddy gives anything away as the conversation takes a bland turn to the unseasonably warm late November evening and how Coach Machman loves New York but doesn't appreciate the cold winters.

“Will you be watching from the field or upstairs?” Most scouts like to be on the field, but coaches and owners like the box suites. As for me, I'll take the sidelines any day. Up in those boxes, you're too far away from the action.

“The field, I think, as long as your dad doesn't mind.” He looks to Daddy for approval.

“You're welcome wherever you like. Maybe you can give me some tips.”

“Not likely. I think you have a better record than I do.”

Daddy waves off the compliment. “Not on the same level, Machman, but I'm proud of my boys. They'll show you a good game tonight.”

“Are you here to look at anyone in particular?” It's sort of a rude question, but I can't help but ask it, even if I'm getting the side-eye from my father.

“Well, I'd love to draft Ty, but I'm afraid he's not going to be around by the time our pick is on the clock.”

“Quarterback, then?” I ask brightly. “Because Ace Anderson is really good, isn't he, Daddy? I mean, I swear we haven't had such a talented man behind center in such a long time. He's got great instincts.”

“We have Oliver Graham,” Coach Machman reminds me. “He won us a Super Bowl a couple of years ago. It's too bad Anderson won't think about shifting to a different position.”

“Well, that's because Ace's a quarterback,” I insist. “If he wants to play quarterback, then no one should be forcing him otherwise.”

“Bryant!” Daddy admonishes. “It's not up for you to say what a player's willing to do.” He gives me a sharp glare before turning the charm spigot in Machman's direction. “If you've got some thoughts about Anderson being

draftable, I'd like to talk to you about him, along with a couple other players."

Machman shifts his eyes toward me and then back to Daddy. I clasp my hands anxiously and wait to hear what Coach has to say, but he remains maddeningly close-mouthed.

"Well?" I demand, as if I have the right. "What do you think?"

The silence stretches out awkwardly until Daddy clears his throat.

"Why don't you go check with the official to see if we're on time?" It's not a suggestion; it's a softly worded order. Machman isn't going to talk while I'm there offering inappropriate assessments.

I swallow the lump of embarrassment that has formed in my throat. "Sure. I'll go right now."

Cheeks aflame, I make my way down the field. I pass Knox Masters, former third pick in the draft and current potential defensive rookie of the year. He's watching the warmup routine with intense interest.

I pause to check in on him. "Can I get you anything, Knox?"

He doesn't take his eyes off his brother as he answers. "Nah, I'm good. It feels weird to be on this side of the field."

"Divided loyalties are never fun, but since you're standing on Renegade territory, we'll expect you to cheer for us."

Knox's lips curve up in a wry smile. "Today, I can do that."

"And when our team plays the Western State Warriors in the championship, which team's jersey will you be wearing?" It bugs me how Ace was treated at his former team. They'd pushed him out like he was used trash when he'd been part of two championships.

Knox grimaces. "I'm hoping it all works out in the playoffs, and I'm not forced to make hard decisions."

"Your twin's a Renegade, and the quarterback who helped deliver you two championships are counting on your support. I'm sure you'll do the right

thing.” I give him a thin smile as I leave. Outside of the home tunnel, I grab a student trainer. “See that boy right there?” I point to Knox, whose attention is back on the field.

“Yeah?”

“If he starts cheering for the other side, move him.”

“How're we going to do that?” the student squawks. “He has a pass.”

“After the first quarter, escort him up to the box. We’re not having any bad juju on the sidelines. Not if I have anything to do with it. And most of all, keep him away from Ace.”

Ace doesn't need to hear anything but positive things tonight. These past weeks have flown by, and with each win, I keep waiting for him to lose an ounce of his intensity, but he doesn't. If anything, as we draw closer to the end of the season, Ace becomes hyper-focused.

And each time I think I should draw back, I find new excuses to stick with him. I can't ruin his concentration on the game. The team needs this Ace. He's not ready. He's still short, abrupt, and terse with nearly everyone. Everyone, but me. With me, he's sweet as sugared tea. He showers me with attention. The patience he doesn't have for anyone else comes out in the bedroom, where he'll spend hours kissing me, stroking me, loving me.

His pre-game rituals include sneaking into my bedroom to screw me senseless. He said the sex calms his nerves. I probably need it more than him.

Right now, though, I need a shot of bourbon to calm my nerves, and I know right where to find one. Daddy keeps a big bottle of Kentucky whiskey behind his collection of five signed Bear Bryant biographies.

That's where Daddy finds me when the team comes in from warm-ups.

“Pour me a finger or three,” he orders.

I do as he tells me. “Conference championships are the very devil,” I say. My own jangling nerves require the use of two hands to avoid spilling any of the expensive amber liquid.

Daddy takes the glass from me and drinks it down in two gulps. “Want to tell

me what in thearnation went on there in front of Coach Machman?”

“I don’t know.” I hang my head. “Suffering from foot and mouth disease. I’m anxious to help Ace.”

Daddy places the glass back on the desk and tips my head up. “Ace is a grown man. As much as I love your help around here, these boys have to make their own decisions. You can’t be interfering with someone else’s decisions without their say-so.”

I flush, feeling about two inches high. Had I tried to sabotage Ace’s chances of being placed on someone’s draft board so I could keep him flawed? So he would continue to need me?

Daddy pulls me against his chest. “Bryant, I know you want to save the world, but you can’t. You’re responsible for being the best you possible. Everyone else has to take care of their own house.” We stand there hugging for a minute. He pushes me gently away, brushes the hair out of my eyes. “Now, I got a game to run, and you have a sideline to take care of. Can you do that?”

“Yessir.”

“I’m not mad at you, Bryant. You meant well. Now, go on.” He gives me a little pat, and I leave with my tail tucked metaphorically between my legs.



WE WIN THE GAME, BUT NOT BY MUCH. MIRACULOUSLY, OUR KICKER MAKES A FIFTY-three yarder, his longest of the season, to clinch the W for the Renegades. Every second up until the ball sailed through those goal posts was a nail-biter. Our boys played hard. They took and delivered brutal hits. They were pushed to their physical limits, and there were low times I thought the game would be lost. But in the end, they came out of the battle as the champions, preserving our perfect record.

Afterward, I make the obligatory rounds—chatting with boosters, congratulating parents on how well their sons played, ensuring the scouts get transportation back to their hotels. Once the pleasantries are over, I make my way to the locker rooms. Ace took a scary-looking sack in the fourth, and I

want to make sure he's all right. He hopped right back up after hitting the turf, but from my spot on the sidelines, I didn't miss the pained look in his eyes as he rotated his left shoulder. I know the team trainer and doctor wouldn't have let him keep playing if he was seriously injured, but I still want to be certain.

I'm halfway down the brightly lit corridor when a noise catches my attention. It's a throaty female giggle, coming from one side of the fork in the hall. I frown, because I know Daddy doesn't like random people wandering around the facility unescorted.

I take two steps forward, but stop when I recognize a male voice.

"I don't think your husband would appreciate where your hands have wandered, Mrs. Winters."

Oh Lord. That's Ace's dad!

What is he doing in here? And why is he with Francie Winters? Francie is married to one of our biggest boosters. Declan Winters is the VIP of boosters.

Francie's voice carries down the hallway. "Oh, he wouldn't even notice. My dear husband is too focused on his own wandering hands."

"Is that so?"

"Sadly, yes." She giggles again. "Which is why I decided a very long time ago that Declan isn't the only one allowed to have a little fun."

Ace's dad chuckles, low and sorta dirty.

Ew. Ew ew ew.

I hear a faint rustling and then Francie moans softly. This is not good. This is not good at all.

Spine stiffer than stone, I'm about to stomp forward. Extra loud, so the couple around the corner will be sure to hear me. Perhaps if I break this up now, before it gets out of hand, then nobody—especially Mr. Winters—will be the wiser.

But just as I take a step, the locker room door swings open and Ace appears.

“Bryant!” he says, his handsome face lighting up when he spots me. “You actually waited for me this time.” The last bit is said with a teasing note.

I swallow, my gaze darting down the hall and then back to Ace. “I wanted to see if your shoulder was all right. That hit looked scary.”

“Nah, it was nothing.” He flexes and rotates his arm as if to reassure me further. “Just knocked the wind out of me. Nothing for you to worry about.”

Ace moves closer, his body lean and graceful beneath his dress shirt and trousers. His hair is damp from the shower, and he smells like soap and that woodsy cologne he favors. Normally I would inhale him until I got a contact high, but I’m far too concerned about the hanky-panky session that’s currently happening less than twenty feet away from us. Ace’s opinion of his daddy isn’t real high, and this isn’t going to do anything but feed into Ace’s perception that his parent—and, by extension, Ace—is a bad guy.

I latch my hand onto his biceps before he can bend down to kiss me. “Let’s go back to your place,” I urge. “Celebrate in private.”

His lips curve in a seductive smile. “Love that plan.”

We’re two steps down the hall when Francie moans again. Ace halts, turning to frown at me. “What the hell?” His green eyes shift in the direction of the noises. “Is there someone back there? Your dad will shit a brick if he finds anyone fooling around in here.”

No sooner do the words leave his mouth than the perpetrators round the corner. Luckily, they’re both fully dressed. But their clothing is rumpled and Ace’s daddy has his lips vacuumed to Francie Winters’s slender neck even as they walk down the hall.

“Dad?” Ace demands.

Mr. Anderson’s head snaps up. His eyes widen when he sees his son. I think I glimpse the tiniest flicker of guilt on his face, but it’s soon replaced with delight.

“Ace, my boy!” Mr. Anderson marches over. “You played like a star tonight! Don’t you agree, Mrs. Winters?”

Francie is smoothing out the bottom of her prim yellow dress as she joins us. “You were wonderful,” she agrees. “Bryant, lovely to see you! Have you done something different with your hair?”

My hair looks the same as it always does—bouncy curls that cascade over my shoulders. But it is clear she’s doing whatever she can to take the focus off her smeared makeup and the red splotch on the side of her neck. Disapproval burns in my throat, not because I’m the morality police, but because...well, because marriage is sacred, darn it! I don’t like or understand people who cheat on their spouses. They took vows.

“I got highlights,” I lie.

“I can see that! They look fabulous!”

“I’m glad we ran into you kids,” Mr. Anderson says smoothly. “Mrs. Winters and I just bumped into each other wandering the halls. We’re both lost, if you can believe it.”

I don’t believe it at all. From Ace’s stony expression, he doesn’t, either.

“I was looking for your father,” Ace’s father adds, glancing at me.

“Daddy is giving his post-game interviews,” I reply coolly. I’m astonished by his blatant dishonesty. It seems to come so naturally to him. This is a man who lies. And lies often.

“You shouldn’t be in this area at all,” Ace informs his daddy. His fists are clenched to his side. “It’s restricted.”

“Ah, I didn’t realize that. Well.” Mr. Anderson looks at me again. “Sweetheart, would you let your father know I’m eager to congratulate him on the win tonight?”

“And now that I see where the exit is,” Francie says in an overly cheerful voice. She gestures to the double doors at the end of the corridor. “I’ll be able to finally find my husband.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Mr. Anderson says graciously.

Both Ace and I stare at the older couple as they hurry away. There is a good three feet of distance between their bodies, but they’re not fooling anyone.

The doors swing open and shut, and then silence falls over us.

“I can’t believe him,” Ace bites out.

“Sugar.” I reach for his hand, but he shrugs it away.

“Actually, I *can* believe him,” he says, anger coloring his words. “I just don’t know why I keep letting it surprise me.”

With that, he turns on his heel and marches back into the locker room. I follow him without hesitation. Ace was the last player out tonight because he was consulting with the quarterback coach, but even if the room were full of naked, sweaty, showering boys, I would still be on Ace’s tail. He’s upset, and I don’t want him to be alone.

In the main room, Ace drops onto the bench and shoves both hands through his still-wet hair. He groans out loud. “That woman had a hickey, Bryant.”

“I saw.”

“He gave it to her.” Ace looks over in disgust. “They were fucking around before I got out there, weren’t they?”

“That, I didn’t see. But I heard them,” I admit.

He releases another groan. “He’s supposedly dating a neighbor, so if he’s hooking up with some booster’s wife, he’s cheating.” Ace pauses, shaking his head bitterly. “Hell, he probably never stopped. Once a cheater, always a cheater, right?”

I take his hand and lace my fingers through his. “If it helps, apparently Mrs. Winters is cheating on her husband, too.” Why did I say that? Of course it doesn’t help!

“It doesn’t help at all,” Ace mutters. “I don’t give a fuck what that broad is doing behind her husband’s back. I’m more concerned about what my father is doing.” His face suddenly pales. “Fuck. Isn’t Winters one of the bigger boosters?”

I nod in confirmation.

“Fuck,” he mumbles again, and I don’t chastise him for his language. I don’t

particularly think he needs a lecture when he's so shaken up about his daddy's lecherous behavior.

"It'll be all right," I assure him. "This is the South, remember? As long as the sin is behind closed doors, it's all good."

"My dad just *sinned* right in the open," Ace shoots back. "Anybody could have seen them!" He slams his free hand on the bench, and I flinch at the loud bang.

"Why is he like this?" Ace asks me. My heart gives a painful clench at the helpless note I hear in his voice. "Why doesn't he give a shit about anybody but himself?"

"He..." I struggle to find the right thing to say. What I come up with is completely and utterly lacking. "His priorities are out of whack," I say lamely.

"No kidding." Repulsion drips from Ace's words. "He's a selfish prick. He has no respect for me or my mom. And..." He trails off, and I notice that his face goes a bit pale.

"And what?" I ask quietly.

"I was just like him."

Ace's expression conveys pure horror. His features become taut, his lips trembling slightly before he digs his teeth into the bottom one. He takes a deep breath. "Shit, Bryant, I was exactly like him."

I immediately come to his defense. "That's not true."

"Yeah, it is. I was a creep at Western. I didn't respect women, either. I used them for sex." Self-disgust flashes in his eyes. "This one time, I banged a chick right in front of Lucy. Or, at least, I tried to. Lucy was so grossed out she took off and spent the night with her now boyfriend.

I promised to give her a place to stay, and instead of being a good friend, I decided to get wasted and bring some girl up to my room. Hell, I didn't even ask for that girl's name. I just took her upstairs, fucked her, and walked her to the door. And she *let* me. She even bragged about it the next day, that she got

drilled by the mighty Ace Anderson,” he finishes bitterly.

I suppose I should be disgusted by his behavior, too. Or perhaps be jealous that he slept around so much at his old college. But I just feel sad. Ace had been following in his father’s footsteps before he transferred here. He was on the wrong path, but these past couple of months he’s completely reformed himself. Whether I had a hand in that, I don’t know. What I do know is that the Ace Anderson all those girls spoke about in the online forums isn’t the same Ace Anderson who’s sitting next to me right now.

And I think he knows it, too.

“I’m not going to be like him,” he says fiercely, and suddenly I find a pair of determined green eyes fixed on my face. “I’m promising you that right now, Bryant. I’m not going to lie or cheat or treat you the way he treated my mom, the way he treats all women. I’m...” He lets out another breath. “I’m ashamed of myself for the way I was before.”

“Oh, JR.” I squeeze his hand. “You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“But I am,” he insists. “I wasn’t a good guy. I recognize that. And then I met you and...” Something akin to wonder fills his eyes. “You really have made me better, Bryant. I know I’m still an asshole sometimes, but being with you has been an eye-opening experience. You’re warm and honest and just... good. You’re a good person, Bryant. And you make me want to be a good person, too.”

Something tugs at my tummy. I think it might be...panic?

“I know I put up a fight at the beginning about this whole boyfriend thing, but I stopped fighting it a long time ago,” he admits. “This relationship is the best thing in my life.”

The panic intensifies, so I try to make a joke. “Your perfect season isn’t doing the job for you?”

“The perfect season is icing on the cake, but you’re the cake, which is the tastiest part.” He grins, and I manage a smile in return. Everything he’s saying right now is freaking me out a little. “We’re good together. You’re good for *me*.” He dons a contemplative look. “And I think I might be good for you, too.”

My heart jumps into my throat. Ace's eyes are shining and his fingers have tightened almost painfully in mine, as if he's made an internal decision to never let me go. The other boys I dated never looked at me like this—like I mean the world to them. Like I'm...the best thing in their life.

I tamp down my rising anxiety, working valiantly to keep my smile pasted on. All those etiquette lessons come in handy, because I succeed. Smiling and nodding at Ace's declaration, parting my lips when he leans in to kiss me. I kiss him back, welcome the slick heat of his tongue, but even as desire unfurls in my body, it's accompanied by a rush of fear.

Ace Anderson is close to breaking down my barriers. One more nudge and I'm scared those defenses will come tumbling down. I'm scared I'll let him in completely. I'm...

I'm just scared.

WHOEVER SAID SUCCESS BREEDS CONFIDENCE KNEW WHAT THEY WERE TALKING about. With each successive win, the championship becomes more tangible. Everyone's walking around with swagger, even the ordinarily uptight Julio.

I keep an eye on him, waiting to see if there's any further bad news about his dad. As for my own pop, we've come to an uneasy truce. He doesn't ask me shit about my team, and I maintain some semblance of politeness. I told him if I caught him around any booster, employee of the school or Bryant again, I'd ask the team to ban him.

He still comes, but I don't take any more drinks with him at the Mansion, and I avoid boosters like the plague, even though they are thick on the ground now that we're in the playoffs. Based on past experience, I know how quickly a good mood in the locker room can turn dark.

If this is going to be my last season of football, I want to try to go out on a positive note. I'm never going to be the life of the party, but I'm actively trying not to be Mr. No-Fun or whatever the hell Carter feels compelled to call me.

The only person who doesn't seem to be enjoying the perfect season is Bryant. There're strain lines around her pretty mouth and the light in her eyes has dimmed. When we fuck—err, make love—it's getting harder and harder to pull her out of her mind. She can be right on the cusp of an orgasm only to fall into some mental foxhole.

She says it feels good, and I don't doubt that it does. The problem is that I want it to be great. I'm unsure about my future—whether there's football or grad school or some boring-ass job, but I'm certain about one thing. Bryant's the best thing that's come into my life, and I'm not ready to see her leave.

Maybe my verbal diarrhea about how much of an ass I was before I met her is making her rethink dating me. It was the right thing to do, though. I'd spent a lot of my life doing the wrong thing, so being straight about my past isn't something I'm going to regret.

I cross my legs at the ankles and watch her stir the pot of potatoes on the stove. Carter and Zane don't want her to leave, either. They've gotten used to the Wednesday night dinners with Bryant.

“You're making us cheesy potatoes, right?” Carter asks as he wanders into the kitchen. He's got his shirt off, again. He might not want Bryant, but he sure doesn't mind showing off his guns while she's around.

“You bet I am.” She gives him a smile over her shoulder.

Carter and Zane don't seem to notice that it's not as bright as her other ones.

“Put a shirt on,” I order. “I don't want your chest hair in my applesauce.”

“No can do. The man nips need to be free tonight.” Carter lifts the lids of the pots on the stove, inhaling as the aromas are released.

Bryant bumps him with her hip. “No shirt, no service, sugar. No nudity in my kitchen.”

Carter gives a loud, aggrieved sigh but does Bryant's bidding. I wait until his door closes before smirking. “You didn't say that the other night.” I set down my beer and come up behind her, sliding my hands down over the front of her yoga pants. “In fact, I distinctly remember you trying to rip out my hair by its roots and panting, ‘don't stop, Ace.’”

Her cheeks burn. “I'm telling you to stop right now or there won't be another time you get your head between my legs.”

My response? I reach down between those delicious thighs of hers and apply enough gentle pressure that her knees buckle. “Yeah, I don't believe you,” I

whisper. Unfortunately, I can't take it any further because Zane and Carter appear in the doorway, appropriately dressed and ready for dinner.

“What’re we eating?” Zane asks as I place the dinner plates, forks, and knives on the table.

“Pork chops, applesauce, potatoes,” I reply. “Pork chops are in the oven. Zane, get those out. Carter, get some milk. Babe, what do you want? No grits, thank God.”

“We don’t serve grits with pork chops. We aren’t savages,” Bryant declares, blushing slightly at my use of babe, as if the endearment is somehow the same as me ordering her to fuck me in front of Carter and Zane at the kitchen table. “When will Mae start getting acceptances from med schools?” she asks as we settle at the table, trying to steer the conversation away from my nickname for her to something she’s more comfortable talking about.

“Any day now. Some schools have rolling admissions.” Zane tilts his ass to the side and pulls out his phone. “Can you have a look at her Pinterest account? I'm trying to figure out what ring to buy.”

“I'd love to.” She grabs the phone and starts scrolling through what appear like a thousand photos of dresses, ribbons, and yeah, diamond rings.

“Dude, I think you should wait until you see what your signing bonus is,” Carter advises. “You could buy a real rock then.”

“I don't want to wait.” Zane juts his chin. “She's going to be surrounded by all those asshole doctor wannabes. She needs to have a ring on her finger before she goes. Contracts won't be signed until the fall.”

“So? Once you get drafted, you can get a loan for megabucks.”

Zane frowns. “You know I’m not getting drafted. Besides, I've been saving up.”

Bryant shoves the phone back toward Zane, probably to forestall a fight. “I like this one.”

We all squint at it. Zane's unconvinced. “I dunno, Bryant. These are small. You can see her mom’s ring from space.”

“Her daddy's a surgeon, Zane. Mae doesn't want a rock. She wants you.” Bryant taps her finger on the screen. “This is beautiful, and she's pinned it so you know she likes it.”

“She's pinned other ones, too.”

“I'm saying you should wait,” Carter says. He, too, thinks the ring's too small.

“Dude, there's no chance of me going pro. We've talked about this before,” Zane says.

Bryant whistles and forms a T with her hands. “No talk of draft at the table. What ya'll doing for Christmas? Going home?”

We get all of five days off for Christmas because playoffs start January 1. We need to be back here, practicing.

Carter makes face. “I've got a fucking project due that the prof gave me extra time to complete. I hate those group projects.”

Bryant makes a tscking noise before turning her attention to Zane, who's still looking at his girlfriend's Pinterest account. I feel a tug of sympathy for him. He's looking increasingly desperate to hang on to his girl. The tether between Bryant and me feels more tenuous every day.

“What about you, Ace?”

“I'm not sure,” I admit. “Dad wants me to come to Boston, but I need to see Mom.” I give Bryant a speculative look. Would she come with me? I'd like her to meet my mom.

I warm to the idea, but before I can open my mouth and suggest it, Carter's phone beeps. As he reads the text, all the color drains from his face.

“Dammit.” He stabs his finger onto the screen. Whoever he calls picks up right away. “No. I don't have that information yet. I told you that I'd get it for you when I was good and ready, so stop fucking texting me already,” he snarls into the phone. He hangs up and turns the phone face down.

“Problem?” I ask lightly. But inwardly, I'm connecting a few suspicious dots. After the first game, my dad hadn't pressed me about team decisions again, but he still was flush with cash. I'd thought it was Julio feeding him

information, but had I pegged it all wrong and it was Carter instead?

I set my utensils down by the sides of my plate. What am I supposed to do with this information? I could accuse Carter, but he'd deny it. I have no proof.

A soft touch on my hand grabs my attention.

“Everything all right?” Bryant asks quietly.

It's a question meant for me, but Carter answers it. “It's fine. School shit.” He cuts off a huge piece of pork and shoves it into his mouth. Zane's still staring at his girlfriend's Pinterest account as if he thinks the ring is going to magically appear in front of the screen.

All at once, every phone in the room chimes. We exchange puzzled glances and then read the text.

“Senior meeting. Fieldhouse. ASAP,” Zane reads.

“Mine, too,” Carter says.

My text message reads the very same. An emergency meeting? That can't be good.

“Bryant, everything okay with your family?” The only thing I can imagine that would constitute an immediate emergency is if Coach is sick.

Panic flares in her eyes. She jumps up from the table. “I'm coming with you.”

I grab a set of keys and we all hustle out the door. We take Carter's SUV because my truck only seats three at the most.

We aren't the first ones to arrive at the Fieldhouse. The locker room is already occupied by about twelve seniors.

Coach Nelson, the special teams coach, places his arm across the door, blocking our way inside. “I'm sorry, Bryant. This is a team-only meeting.”

A little furrow appears between her eyebrows. “But...”

He shakes his head. “Your daddy's orders. Why don't you go down the hall and wait in the coaches' lounge?”

Bryant looks forlorn as the door closes in her face.

I walk straight to Ty. “You know what this is about?”

He’s sitting in the metal chair in front of his locker, tossing his phone between his hands. “No clue.”

From the confusion and anxiety on everyone's faces, it appears no one has a clue. The position coaches take their leaving after the arrival of the last two stragglers, Samson and Roberts, the backup left tackle.

Travarius stands on his chair. “I've called all of you together to let you know what to buy me for Christmas. I want a pair of those limited edition Michael Jordan sneakers in the black with the red trim and gold bottoms. I wear a size fourteen for all you jerkwads who can't remember.”

A hail of jockstraps gets thrown in his direction.

“Did you really call this meeting, Daly?” Ty scowls.

“Nah, but you all look like such sad clowns, I figured I'd try to lighten the mood.” He jumps down from his chair. “Probably Coach wanting the seniors to get together to give us a little pep speech about how awesome we are.”

I sneak a look toward Carter who's busy typing furiously on his phone. The tight mass in my stomach tells me Coach didn't call us for a meeting here for funnies.

The doors to the locker room open again and this time it's Coach Johnson. The lines around his eyes are deep and the tight pucker of his lips tells me nothing good is going to be coming out of Coach's mouth. Not any pep speech. Not any awards or commendations. Not even his own Christmas list.

He strides to the middle of the room and clasps his hands behind his back.

“Today I received a call from Miles Baroni. For those of you unfamiliar with Renegades history, Baroni was a halfback who graduated seven years ago. He has since gone on to a successful career as a regulatory official for the state of Nevada.”

A murmur of “what the hell” and “shit, Vegas” sprinkle across the room. My gaze slides toward Carter again. His arms are crossed, a defiant expression on

his face.

Coach continues, “He has noticed a pattern of small dollar bets on a number of side statistics, such as how many pass plays an offense will call versus a run. As you all know, we script the first fifteen plays and so do at least eight other teams in our division. While the bets themselves are small—a few hundred each—the volume is making the numbers guys in Vegas sit up and take notice.”

My mind skips back to Julio. I thought it was him, but, hell, maybe it’s both Julio *and* Carter. But if it’s them, isn’t it just as much my fault for bringing my dad here? Guilt coats my mouth with acid.

“I denied that there was any leak or wrongdoing on our end. Baroni isn’t going to tell anyone, but if this continues he’s not sure that it won’t be noticed by people who have bigger mouths than him.” Coach takes a deep breath and spears each of us with a look of disappointment. “I’m going back to my office. The door will be open for the next twenty-four hours. If you’ve got something to share, then do it now. We get in ahead of this, we’ve still a chance to make the playoffs. If not, we’ve played the last game of the season on Saturday. You’re all seniors here. I ask you, is this the way you want to go out?”

He gives us a short nod and walks out of the locker room, leaving a silent, grim tomb inside. I resist the urge to fidget. Or worse—vomit out all the details of my dad’s endless greed. While I didn’t give him the information, I’m connected to him. And there’s no doubt that the stain of his actions will turn me from accepted teammate to outcast.

I’ve been there once, and it fucking sucks.

Ty gets up and locks the doors. Samson takes up space next to him.

“Anyone have anything to say?”

“I think it’s that Julio kid,” Travarius pipes up. “He’s always talking about how he needs to make the pros to take care of his family, but somehow his old man is at every game.”

I stare at the carpet between my feet. I’ve played for four years. I’ve won two championships. These guys haven’t won even one. Julio’s at the start of his

career; I'm at the end. I can't play in the pros as a quarterback. No matter how bad I want that, my physical skills aren't there. My whole life, I've been a selfish little prick.

I could blame it on the fact that my dad was one or that my mom reminded me on a daily basis that my apple didn't fall far from my dad's tree, but, really, I made the choice to be solitary, aloof, and guarded. I wasn't a good team player in a sport that demands it. I should've been a fucking golfer.

I clear my throat.

"Got something to say, Anderson?" Carter barks. "I saw you with your old man and Bubba Wasserly at the beginning of the season. You were looking cozy."

Every set of eyes swings in my direction. "Fuck you." Carter makes me so goddamned mad. He's been on my ass since I arrived. He makes snide comments about stealing Bryant from me, and now has the gall to accuse me of betraying this team? All ideas of confession are overcome with rage. "What about the phone call you fielded? And borrowing cash from Zane? Sounds like you might have a problem. Is it the horses or going up your nose?"

Carter rushes at me. There's a fist in my face before I can blink. I swing back and feel bone hit bone. He staggers but recovers quickly, driving a shoulder into my gut. We crash to the floor. The wide receiver's fist moves fast, but I've got good reflexes, and I outweigh him by about twenty pounds. We roll over, grappling for leverage.

"It was me!" Zane screams. "I sold out. I needed the money for Mae's ring!"

I pause, a fist in the air.

Carter and I stare at each other in shock. Someone—I think it's Samson—pulls me off and sets me upright.

Zane's face is in his hands. His shoulders are shaking. The locker room is almost never quiet. There's always music playing, guys talking, televisions on. In this moment, there's nothing but dead air.

Carter looks at his roommate with a face full of anger and betrayal, none of

which Zane sees. His eyes are pinned to the floor. His personal shame is keeping his eyes cast downward. I glance toward Ty, waiting for him to reassure Carter that everything's going to be okay, but our team captain's fists are bunched at his side. He wants to kill Zane. Ty believes his championship is swirling down the drain. A quick survey of the room reveals that just about everyone feels the same way.

"I swear, I never affected the outcome of the game," Zane says brokenly.

"I can't even look at you, man," Samson says in disgust. He turns away from Zane, and one by one, the rest of his teammates do the same until Zane's standing in the middle of the room staring at a room full of backs. Except for me. I'm still facing him so I see how the sudden ostracization cuts him like a thousand sharp knives.

I take a deep, painful breath. I know how he feels.

"Carter?" he asks, voice small like a little boy's.

"I got nothing to say to you, man," Carter snaps.

Zane's shoulders hang so low, he looks like he's lost about four inches in height. I don't remember seeing a man look so broken. Sympathy replaces all my anger. Pushing a few guys aside, I make my way to Zane and place a hand under his elbow. "Coach said his door is open. Let's go talk to him."

"I played hard. I never dropped a ball on purpose," Zane babbles. "This was penny ante shit, you know? Stuff wasn't going to change if some gambler knew about it."

I don't have a good response so I remain silent as we walk toward Coach's office. Outside the coach's door, Bryant's sitting on one of the sofas, flipping through a *Sports Illustrated*. Her eyes widen at the sight of Zane. She begins to rise, as if to come over and say something, but I give a terse shake of my head.

She lowers herself while I knock. The door opens immediately. Coach's face is tired but kind as he draws Zane inside and closes the door.

"Zane?" Bryant says in a hushed voice.

I join her at the sofa. “Yeah. He wanted to buy Mae a nice diamond for their engagement.”

Bryant’s expression crumples. I shove her face into my shoulder and hold her while she cries. My throat feels raw. I’d like to bawl, too. It’s tragic, all right. Our season could be over. Zane’s definitely is. I have no idea if that means his relationship with Mae is over as well.

“I thought it was Carter or Julio,” I admit. “Carter thought it was me. My dad asked me for insider information, but I told him to fuck off. Carter saw us—Dad and me and that Wasserly character—and assumed I was the one who’d sold us out.”

“Oh, Ace.” She strokes my chest. “Did you set them straight?”

“Zane did that.” I rest my chin on the top of her head. “What will your dad do to him?”

“I don’t know.”

A few moments later, Ty appears. Soon after, the rest of the seniors, minus Carter, come and camp out in front of Coach’s office.

“You did a stand up thing back there, supporting Zane,” Ty says, reaching out for my hand. “Better than the rest of us. Showed us what a true teammate is like.”

Samson, Travarius, and the others join Ty in thanking me. Bryant watches all of this with wonderment. A half hour later, Zane appears in the doorway. We all get to our feet.

His eyes are red. He wrings his hands as he addresses us. “I’m leaving the team.” He gulps. “I’m sorry for letting you all down.”

No one knows what to say, and in the face of the silence, Zane’s composure breaks. The dude’s on the verge of losing it, and I don’t think he would be able to live with himself if he does. I get up. “Let’s go, Zane.” I wave a hand toward the sofa. “Bryant, let’s take our boy home.”

When we arrive at the apartment, Zane goes straight to his room.

“Do you need anything?” I ask, placing a hand on his door so he can’t close

it.

“Why are you being so nice?” he asks in bewilderment.

“I know what it’s like to feel alone on a team that you thought was your family.”

“I may have ruined the season for you. Don’t you care?”

“Shunning you doesn’t make the problem go away. Besides, I think leaving the team is the biggest punishment there is.”

Zane can’t deny that. I leave him to make peace with himself, and, hopefully, Mae. Bryant has closeted herself in my bedroom. She sits on the desk chair, looking like the saddest angel alive. I crouch down in front of her.

“Zane’s going to be all right. This isn’t the end of the world.”

She sucks in her lips and tears shimmer in her eyes.

“It’s not Zane I’m thinking about,” she admits.

“What then?” I brush some of her hair to the side, tucking it behind her ear.

She gives me a watery smile. “I think we’re done.”

“Done with what?” I ask slowly, not comprehending her.

“Done with us.” She waves a finger between her chest and mine. “You don’t need me anymore.”

I drop my hand to brace myself on the ground so I don’t fall on my ass. I stare at her for one long moment, then say, “The hell I don’t.”

“DID YOU SEE YOUR TEAM BACK THERE? YOU IMPRESSED THE SUGAR OUT OF THEM!” I exclaim, hand over my pounding heart. The drumbeat’s so fierce that it surprises me Ace can’t hear it.

He looks pissed. “What does one have to do with the other?”

I swallow back my tears and summon up a cheery smile. “You’re not alone anymore. Your team is completely behind you. It took a lot of courage to stick up for Zane, and each one of those seniors saw that. You could lose every playoff game, and you’d still be hailed as their brother for the rest of your life.”

“One plus one doesn’t equal twenty-five here. Even if any of this sh-sugar you’re saying is true, that doesn’t have anything to do with us.” He tosses his keys and wallet onto the desk and takes a step toward me, which is far too close for my comfort. There’s only about three feet distance between us, and I know from past experience that the minute he lays hands on me, I’ll be a goner.

I sidle along the edge of the desk, looking for a way to escape. All the while, Ace is frowning and watching me like I’m a curious bug he can’t quite figure out.

“There’s no us,” I try to explain. Panic’s fluttering like crazy in my breastbone.

He laughs at me. He just busts out a chuckle, the furrows in his forehead replaced by laugh lines around his gorgeous eyes.

“What are you laughing about?” I ask angrily.

His chuckles trail off, but he doesn’t stop smiling. “How scared are you right now?”

I wipe my hands on my legs. “I’m not scared. I’m just being honest. Honey, you knew that this was temporary. You were my,” I force the words out, “my project.”

His smile disappears, replaced by a darker, more ominous expression. He advances, and I retreat, but I’ve nowhere to go. My bottom hits the back of his desk, and he still doesn’t stop, not until he’s chest to breast with me. The silk of my red blouse does little to hide my physical response as my nipples poke aggressively against him.

Two large hands slam down on either side of my hips. “If you’re not scared, then prove it.”

“I don’t have to prove anything,” I squawk.

“Yeah, you do. If not to me, then yourself.”

He doesn’t give me time to spout off another lie. His mouth slants over mine, aggressively domineering in that very Ace way. He likes to take control—on and off the field. He plays hard, loves hard. I should’ve been prepared for him, but I wasn’t.

I try to keep a firm grip on the desk, some sort of tether in the real world instead of that magical place his touch always seems to be able to transport me to. But it’s as if he knows that if he overwhelms me with sensation, I can’t resist.

His hands grip my bottom, pulling me up and away from the desk, forcing me to cling to him. Maybe my hips arch toward him, maybe he thrusts against me, but either way our bodies collide. His hot, hard length rubs against my wet, needy core.

I whimper into his mouth, hang tight against his shoulders. Against my will,

my body starts writhing against him. The silk blouse, the lace of my bra, the cotton of my skirt all impediments to what I really want—his skin against mine.

What does another bout of lovemaking hurt? the saucy devil whispers. Let him make you feel good. You can leave after.

The department of good sense tries to rouse itself from a lust-drunk stupor. *You're in too deep, girl. Get out now, while your heart and sanity are intact!*

“You need to stop thinking so hard,” Ace mutters, his mouth wet against mine. He swings me toward the bed, my ballet slippers falling off my feet as his long legs cover the distance in two short strides. “Close your eyes, sweetheart. Let me do all the work tonight.”

“I think I should—”

His large hand comes up to cover my mouth. “Like I said, you think too much.” He bends down, blocking out all the light in the room, filling my field of vision with nothing but his green eyes, cut cheekbones, and reddened lips. “You said you weren’t scared. I’m making you feel good.” He shoves his hand up my skirt to feel the evidence of arousal coating my thighs. “Real good, aren’t I?”

I suck in my lips to keep the moan from slipping out. The devil keeps whispering. *If you're not scared, then this isn't a problem at all.* Two fingers push inside of me, the depth blunted by the fit of my panties.

“You’re so primed right now, I bet I could get you off with just my thumb on your clit.”

Said thumb circles my sensitive bundle of nerves over the useless cotton.

“You think I’m a good guy now, right? That’s why we’re over?” He keeps talking while he taunts me with his fingers, jacking two of them shallowly inside me while thumbing my clit like it’s a guitar string and he’s plucking the slowest song that country music ever invented.

“You *are* a good guy,” I gasp, wondering if I could die from lack of direct flesh-to-flesh contact. My body, so disconnected from my head, squirms under his touch, wanting nothing more than for his fingers to pull away the

sides of my panties and slide all the way inside of me. The ache between my legs is spreading, a slow moving drugged poison that dulls my senses, stifles my wits.

“Then let this good guy make you feel good. What do you think, Bryant? Do you trust me?” he asks, his mouth running over my cheekbones, tracing down the side of my jaw. “Or are you too weak and scared?”

Taunts shouldn’t work, but my eyes flick open to stare back defiantly. “I’m not scared.” I set my jaw. “Do your worst.”

His lips curve and a spike of fear does shoot through me. He shoves off the bed, goes to his closet and returns with a red tie bearing a small gold embroidered horse logo at the bottom center, the one that all the players are given when they sign on to be a Renegade. “Close your eyes.”

I laugh nervously. “Halloween is over.”

“Only treats tonight,” he promises and swings a knee over my legs. Lightly, he straddles me, his heavy erection tenting his sweatpants in a mouth-watering fashion. When he leans forward to place the tie around my eyes, his shaft rubs against my skirt, a maddeningly elusive touch that has me arching off the bed.

The tie goes over my eyes. Then his hands fall to the buttons of my blouse. The silk loosens. The backs of his knuckles brush against my breast. Soon, the two sides of the shirt fall open. Another swift tug and my skirt is gone, leaving me lying on my blouse with my panties and bra providing a thin, ineffective barrier to his gaze.

Even though I can’t see him, I feel his hot stare like a physical touch. “Do you know how fucking beautiful you look?”

I inhale shakily. Not gonna lie. There’s something magical about hearing these words from a man as hot as Ace, but I’m not sure how to respond other than, “Thank you,” which sounds weird and wrong as soon as the two words leave my mouth.

Ace laughs, a dirty, low chuckle. “I love how prissy you are even when your panties are soaked and your tits are nearly busting a hole through your bra. Every inch of your body is this pretty, pretty pink.” His finger starts at the

base of my neck and moves downward in a straight line with each word, stopping at “pink” to skip over to the gusset of my panties. With the tip of his finger, he tugs the damp cotton aside. “Especially here.”

The bed dips as he leans back. Is he staring at me? I hear the rustle of fabric and then the sound of skin rubbing against skin. Is he...touching himself? Suddenly, this darkness isn't as intriguing—not if Ace is rubbing himself while he's staring at me. That's an erotic sight that I want to preserve in my memory bank.

I reach up to tug the tie off.

“Uh uh uh,” he tsks, grabbing my hands. “This is my show. You can blindfold me next time.” He hops off the bed again, the mattress bouncing in response to his movements. I strain to hear him. Drawers open. The small light that I could see from the bottom of the tie flickers off as he douses the lights.

The macho confidence in his voice that there's going to be a next time prompts a mutinous statement. “There's not going to be a next time.”

“Sweetheart. Stop with the dirty talk. You know I love a challenge.” His voice is closer now, the warmth of his body signaling his return. He reaches out and helps me out of my blouse, one arm and then the other. The bra comes off next. Each action is completed by the lightest of touches. Goosebumps pimple where our flesh makes momentary contact.

I feel like I'm in a dream. Because I can't see, my mind starts playing images. Filmy ones, behind a gauzy curtain. Ace kisses my shoulder. His hands skim down my arms. One hand palms a breast. The other pulls my wrists together.

“You trust me, right?”

“Yes.” The admission slips out. It's the truth, but I know if I said no, he'd stop. But I don't say no, and he doesn't stop. He winds a soft strap around my wrists.

“What is it?”

“Bathrobe tie. It's never been used. My mom bought it for me because she didn't want me to have to walk around the dorms nude.”

That draws a sharp laugh from me. I've never met an athlete who wasn't comfortable in his own skin. He sticks two fingers under the knot and lifts my bound wrists up. "Does this hurt?"

"No, but I really don't think it's necessary." I wiggle my wrists around to see if the knot loosens, but it stays put.

"You're not supposed to think, remember?" This time when he joins me on the bed, it's his bare skin against mine. "You're just supposed to feel." The mattress dips when he kneels between my legs. His long fingers grab my panties and drag them down my legs. "I like you blindfolded and tied up. It's sexy as hell, but now I'm going to see how you taste."

I part my legs instinctively. I'm wet and anxious for him, and we've barely done a thing. His mouth lowers, making a slow circuit around my clit, down along the seam of my lower lips. My hands push against the wall behind my head, as I seek more pressure than the light flicks of his tongue that he's currently delivering.

"You're going too slow," I whine.

"I can stop," he threatens, pulling back.

"No, no," I say, panicked. "I won't say another word."

Humor fills his voice. "Nah. Don't make promises you won't keep because in about five minutes, you're going to come so hard that you're not going to be able to hide it, like you hide everything else. I'm going to eat this pretty pussy until you can't think about tomorrow or yesterday, five minutes ago or five years from now. The only thing in your head will be how hard you came all over my tongue."

I don't have time to sort what he means, because in the next breath, he attacks me. I try to brace myself, digging my fingers into the mattress, digging my heels into the bed, but there's no defense against his tongue and his fingers. He knows me, better than I know myself. Where to press hard, where to circle lightly. Where to bite, where to lick.

He drives me up and over the edge. My toes curl, my thighs shake, my hips arch off the mattress as I try to push myself harder against his mouth.

“That’s right,” he growls, “ride my tongue.”

The graphic words, ones I’m too embarrassed to think half the time, let alone hear out loud, do me in.

I try to fight it. I squirm. I struggle. His arm comes up to clamp around my hips.

“Give in. Don’t fight it. I’m not going to let you go. You can trust me.”

My body does, at least. It wins the battle; the sensations are too powerful to deny. The orgasm grabs me by the neck and tosses me onto a giant wave that sweeps me far away from the shore. I swing my bound hands down to land on his hair. I grip the strands in my fists and haul myself back to this world. He’s the only anchor I can find, the only anchor I want.

He shifts again and this time it’s not his tongue between my thighs—it’s his heavy, hard shaft.

He rubs the rubber-coated tip against my swollen entrance and then plunges forward, spearing me in one long thrust. I wail at the delicious intrusion.

“That’s right. Let me hear it,” he demands. My body is not my own. It belongs to him. It responds to him. It is commanded by him.

His hands encircle my hips, pulling me down to meet his upward stabs. I don’t have time to breathe. He gives me not a moment of respite. Instead, he drives me from one peak to another to another. His cock is like a hot spike, branding me.

His mouth finds mine again, his tongue driving into my mouth with the same ferocity as his shaft. My body opens to him, welcomes him, expands to accommodate his length. The orgasms make me tight, and the broad head of his cock seems to know exactly where every excited nerve ending exists inside my sex.

There’s not a part of me that he leaves unravaged.

“You ready to come again?”

I’m not. I’m not. I’m not.

But I do anyway.

The electric shock of the umpteenth orgasm rockets through me. My entire body shakes and trembles from the power of it. Above me, I feel him tense, hear his own bellow of release, feel the hot rush pulse between us.

He pounds into me, relentlessly driving me crazy until his prediction is reality. I know nothing but him, his touch, his smell, his taste. He's taken me out of my skin to some place new, and it is terrifying.

He collapses on me, pressing soft kisses on my neck, but the fear that has dogged me for the last several weeks crashes over me. I'm in over my head. The feelings he draws out are too strong, too overwhelming.

I'd lost myself in him just now. It can't ever happen again.

I shove him off of me and sit up.

"These things need to come off." I pull off the blindfold and wriggle my wrists until the makeshift shackles loosen enough for me to get free. Once my bindings are off, I jump to my feet and scramble around to find my clothes. I can already feel myself crashing, the ache between my legs arrowing straight for my heart.

"This is just sex. You had a ton of meaningless sex. You know how it is," I babble carelessly, not even giving a second's thought to how rude my statements must sound. My entire focus is now on escaping.

He rises, nude as the day he was born, and calmly helps me pick up my clothes—my ruined panties, my discarded bra, my rumpled silk shirt. "I do know how it is. And I know that's not how I feel when I'm with you. Sex with you isn't meaningless, Bryant." He cups my face. "It's not sex; it's making love."

"I can't do this," I say. I throw on my clothes as fast as humanly possible. Pity shines in his eyes as they track my movements. "We're over, Ace. I don't want to keep dating you. I've got other...I'm going to..." I can't even finish a sentence. I grab my pocketbook and flee.

FOOTBALL PLAYERS ARE A DIFFERENT BREED. I'M NOT SAYING WE'RE SUPERIOR TO other people—we're just wired a little bit differently. We're aggressive by nature, because our sport requires sheer physical dominance. We don't give up easily, and we don't let fear send us cowering into a corner. We face it head on, because that's the only way to conquer it.

Bryant might be the daughter of a football coach and one of the strongest women I've ever met, but she's no football player. Last night, her fear was so palpable I could taste it in the air. As I watched her snatch up her clothes in a panic and listened to her babble about how 'it's just sex' and 'we're over,' I was inwardly pleading with her to gather that steely courage I know she possesses and allow herself to face her fear.

But she didn't. Instead, she walked out. I didn't go after her. There would've been no point. She was too shaken up by what happened between us, too afraid of everything she's feeling for me.

I *know* she feels something, and that's not me being cocky or entitled. If anything, I should be the one panicking right now. Before I transferred to Southern U, the notion of some chick falling for me would have made me break out in hives. I didn't want that headache.

Now, the mere thought of Bryant Johnson actually being in love with me makes my pulse race—in a good way. I've come a long, long way since my days at Western State. I'm still an asshole, but I like to think that these days I'm a lovable one. Or that at least one person in particular loves my asshole

self.

What I've learned from my time with Bryant is that while the girl has the biggest heart in the world, she keeps a lot of it locked up. She goes out of her way to help people, but she doesn't let them help *her*. She showers them with affection, but she's reluctant to accept affection in return. Deep down, she's terrified of being vulnerable, of getting hurt. Once upon a time, I probably would've been a man who'd hurt her, but not anymore. Now I'm the one who's going to love her.

But first I have to convince her to let me, and I'm not certain I can do it alone.

"This about Zane?" Ty asks as he lets me in to the apartment he shares with Travarius

I peer past him and am satisfied to find that Samson and Remy, our running back, are also in attendance, lounging on the living room couch. I specifically requested their presence for this meeting, too. I hadn't invited Carter, though I'm sure he wouldn't have come even if I had. He's been in a foul mood ever since Zane left the team and moved out of the apartment.

Carter cursed Zane ever being a Renegade, but I recognized Carter's anger for what it was—hurt. So I did what Bryant would do. I listened to my roommate. I sat with him while he raged out loud and brooded in silence. Carter will come around. Not talking to Zane was killing him.

As for Zane, he'd confessed all to Mae, who quickly forgave him and made room for him in her apartment. He wasn't ever planning on going into the NFL so his future as a pharmacist is still achievable. But we all know he's missing out on something special and that's a bigger punishment than any governing body could hand down against him.

After Zane quit the team, I went to Coach and told him everything. Coach gazed at me with his steady brown eyes, and said I wasn't my dad. And then I was instructed to go watch tape of the Western State Warriors. Case closed. I did what I was told.

"Nah, it's something else," I answer, following him into the living room. I glance at the other guys. "Thanks for coming."

“So if it’s not Zane, then what’s up?” Travarius asks curiously.

“We have a serious problem,” I say in a solemn voice.

Ty settles in the armchair opposite the sofa, eyes narrowing in my direction. “Your dad?” he guesses.

I shake my head. “This problem is huge. Massive.”

Samson looks concerned. “Jesus, Anderson, did you kill someone?” His face pales. “Did you fucking recruit us to help you bury a body?”

I swallow a laugh. “No, asshole. But I’m not joking here—we’ve got an issue.” I sweep my gaze over each of my teammates before saying, “Granola bars.”

They all blink.

“What the fuck?” Ty sputters.

I’m not done. “Donuts.” I give Travarius a pointed look and say, “Peach pie.” To Remy, I taunt, “Oatmeal raisin cookies.”

They finally get it.

“This is about Bryant?” Travarius exclaims. “Geez, bro, why didn’t you say that from the beginning?”

“Because I wanted to remind you of what you’re going to be losing if you don’t help me out.”

Ty frowns at me. “Help you with what? What happened with Bryant?”

“Oh, shit! She dumped him!” Samson’s horrified gaze swings to me. “Did she dump you?”

I nod slowly.

Travarius’ jaw drops. Even Ty looks startled.

“It’s okay,” I assure them, shrugging to convey my complete lack of concern. “It was a self-defense thing.”

Ty shoots to his feet, his face red and livid. “If you fucking laid a *hand* on

her, I'll—"

I silence him with a scowl. "For fuck's sake, Masters! You really think I'd hurt her?" Shaking myself out of the momentary bout of anger, I take a breath and continue. "She was protecting her heart," I clarify, still glaring at Ty. "She's in love with me and it freaked her out, so she ended it."

Relaxing, Ty sinks back onto his chair. "Ah. Okay." Remorse flickers in his eyes. "Sorry. That was a dick thing to insinuate."

"Yeah, it was. But I forgive you—because this just means you have no choice but to come on board."

"Come on board for what?" he asks suspiciously.

On the couch, Travarius looks both curious and delighted. He rubs his hands together eagerly. "We're running an op, aren't we?"

"An op?" Remy pipes up, brow furrowed.

"Yeah, some *Mission: Impossible* shit, right, QB?" Travarius eyes me expectantly. "We're gonna win back your girl, right?"

I grin. "Yup."

His response is immediate. "Count me in, but only if there's ninja stars and zip-lining involved."

"I'll see what I can do," I reply, rolling my eyes. I glance at Remy. "Borland, you in?"

The other guy is quick to nod. "Absolutely. Got to protect my oatmeal raisin cookie supply, don't I?"

Samson, he of the potbelly, surprises us all by saying, "I'd do it even if she didn't bake like a wet fucking dream."

"Wet dreams can bake?" Ty says dryly.

"You know what I mean," Samson protests. "Who cares what kind of treats she brings us—Bryant is a bomb-ass woman. She's part of this team and if she's feeling down, then I want to cheer her up." He glances at me. "You sure she's into you and that this isn't some desperate shit on your part?"

“She’s into me,” I say confidently, because I know it’s true.

Samson shrugs. “All right. Then what’s the plan?”



COACH JOHNSON AND HIS FAMILY LIVE IN A HUGE HOUSE ON THE NORTH END OF town. It reminds me a little of the swanky hotel where my dad stayed, only on a smaller scale. It’s got a four-car garage and a lawn that looks so perfect it might be cut by hand. After Samson stops the van at the curb, the five of us turn toward the house. Lights spill out of the dining room window, and the curtains are open so we have a perfect view of Coach, Coach’s wife, and Bryant at the table. It doesn’t look like they’ve started eating yet. Good.

“You sure about this?” Ty asks from beside me. The van we rented has a driver’s and passenger’s seat, where Samson and Remy sit. The back is fully open, offering a small bench that barely holds me, Ty, and Travarius.

My gaze strays back to the window. Bryant’s blonde hair gleams under the light fixture, and her lips are curved in a gentle smile as she says something to her mom. “Never been surer of anything in my life,” I answer.

On my other side, Travarius shoves his ski mask down over his face and cracks his knuckles. “We got this, bros. Let’s go.”

Ty and I exchange grins before donning our own ski masks. I lean toward the front and tap Samson’s shoulder. “Be ready to gun it when we get in.”

“Yessir.”

Ty slides open the van door. Our shit-kickers land on the curb at the same time Remy hops out of the passenger side. His eyes are shining happily behind the holes in his ski mask. “I’ve always wanted to do this,” he tells us.

I snort. “Yeah? Gooning it up was on your bucket list?”

“Hell yeah.”

I sincerely hope that none of Coach’s neighbors choose this moment to look out their windows, because the chances of them calling the cops would be pretty high. The four of us look like street thugs, with our masks, all-black

clothing—and the rope in Ty’s hand. Someone’ll be dialing 911, all right.

“Let’s make this snappy,” I announce.

We march to the front door, which I open without knocking. I’m not worried about breaking some Southern code of etiquette, because Coach is expecting us. Like I’d ever swarm his home commando-style without asking first. I don’t have a death wish.

“Let me do the talking.” Travarius throws this curveball at me two seconds before we enter the front hall. I barely have time to sputter a protest as he flies into the dining room without a backward glance.

“Fucking hell,” I growl when I hear two high-pitched female shrieks of alarm.

“Give me all the silverware!”

Give me all the silverware? *That’s* his big line?

Fighting back laughter, I fly in after him. I feel only a tiny bit bad when I see Bryant’s wide eyes. If anything, I feel worse at her mother’s horrified expression. I guess Coach didn’t brief his wife about this plan. Shit.

Coach, meanwhile, is sitting at the head of the table, unfolding his napkin and placing it into his lap. His gaze moves toward us for one brief moment before he begins serving himself a healthy helping of meatloaf.

“What is going on here!” Bryant screams. Her wild eyes travel over the four masked men in her dining room. “Daddy!”

“Yes, Cub?”

“We’re being robbed!”

“No,” I correct, swiftly moving toward her chair. “You’re being kidnapped.”

She falters as she recognizes my voice. “JR? Is that you?” The pitch of her voice rises. “Ty? Travarius—I see your dreadlocks! I know it’s you!”

Laughter continues to bubble in my throat. I ignore her confusion and glance at my cohorts. “Rope,” I tell Masters.

“Rope?!” Bryant shrieks.

On the field, my teammates and I move like a well-honed military unit. Here, we do the exact same. I’m whipping Bryant out of her chair and over my shoulder in the blink of an eye, while Travarius and Remy grab her arms and legs to stop her from struggling—which she’s trying to do, hardcore. But Ty has the rope looped around her wrists and ankles before she can even register what’s happening. Her bound wrists smack my back as she yells at her father again.

“Daddy!”

“What is it, Cub?” Coach is calmly scooping potatoes onto his plate.

“Roby!” his wife protests, looking as if she’s about to faint. “What is happening?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with, Marlene. It’s been a long time coming.”

Gotta give the Coach’s wife credit. Despite her daughter’s wild struggling and outraged shouts, Mrs. Johnson simply reaches for her wine glass.

Bryant won’t quit batting at me. “Put me down, JR! Right this instant!” she screeches. “Daddy, they tied me up!”

Her dad smiles wanly. “So they have,” is all he says.

I love my coach. I finally manage to get a better hold on Bryant. It’s easier now that she’s all but hog-tied. Shifting her to my other shoulder, I flash a grin at Coach’s wife and say, “Enjoy your dinner, ma’am.”

She looks startled, but her perfect manners quickly kick in. “Thank you, sugar. You have a good evening now.”

“*Momma!*” Bryant wails in betrayal.

The guys and I are howling with laughter as we race out of the house with a red-faced, still shrieking Bryant.

In the back of the van, I gently set her down, but I don’t untie her. Her expression is murderous, and she makes sure to fix it on every single one of

us. Ignoring the daggers, I smack the back of Samson's seat and say, "Drive."

"This is unacceptable," Bryant shouts as the van speeds away from her house.

"Take me home right now, you horrible delinquents!"

"No can do," I answer cheerfully.

"Ace." She takes a breath, staring at me. "I don't know what the meaning of this is, but I am *not* pleased."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Ace!"

"Yeah, Bryant?"

"I-I—" She's stuttering now. "I broke up with you! We're over!"

"Cold, Bryant," Travarius speaks up with visible disapproval. "Why you got to be like that?"

Her angry gaze swings to him. "Stay out of this, Travarius. My relationship with Ace doesn't concern you. Any of you." Her murderous eyes shift from one guy to the other.

"So you admit we're in a relationship," I say with a broad smile.

"No! We're not! I told you last night—"

"Ty, where's that gag?" I ask.

Ty passes me the rag I made sure to throw in the washing machine before we got here.

Bryant's jaw drops to the floor of the van. Then, with another breath, she speaks in a voice low with warning. "JR Anderson, if you put that thing over my mouth, I will—"

I gag her.

Sometimes you've got to do that to your girlfriend.



BY THE TIME WE REACH OUR DESTINATION, BRYANT APPEARS TO HAVE ADMITTED defeat. Nobody had said a word for the rest of the drive. She'd stopped glaring at us, her shoulders had sagged, and she'd leaned against the wall of the van, looking small and vulnerable as she wrapped her arms around her knees. The sight of her bound wrists had been hard to take, but I kept reminding myself that one, Ty hadn't used tight knots, and two, she'd forgive me for it later.

After Samson stops the van, I turn to Bryant.

"If I untie you and take the gag off, are you going to be a good girl and come inside with me? Or are you going to put up a fight?"

She just scowls at me. I decide to take that as a sign of cooperation, and gesture for Ty and Travarius to set her free. Bryant rubs her wrists the moment the rope is removed, making a big show of trying to regain her circulation.

Ty snickers. "Give it up, Bryant. Those knots were nothing. You could've easily slipped your hands out of them if you'd wanted to."

Her hands drop to her sides. It makes me wonder if she'd known that escape had been within her reach but had chosen to stay put regardless. I think so, because I glimpse a flicker of guilt in her eyes.

At the curb, I slap hands with the guys and thank them for their part in the heist. My teammates take off, leaving me and Bryant standing in front of the Mansion. I had already dropped off my truck here before heading to Bryant's, because I didn't want us to have to ride back in the abduction van.

She's surprisingly silent as I lead her into the Mansion. She opens her mouth only after we walk into the elevator and she sees me press the button for the banquet floor.

"What are we doing down here?" she whispers as the doors ding open.

Without answering, I guide her down the hall toward our destination. Bryant gasps when we step into the private dining room.

"Ace! What did you do?"

Despite her shock and confusion, I don't miss the spark of joy in her brown eyes. I knew she'd appreciate this. The hotel staff created a romantic ambience for us, complete with a table laden with crisp linens and elegant candle sticks, a silver dessert tray laden with a bowl of chocolate-covered strawberries atop it, mood lighting, and soft jazz music playing in the background.

"Ace," she repeats, shaking her head. "How on earth did you do this?" She gasps again. "These private rooms are so expensive! I hope you didn't empty out your savings account to—"

"Didn't cost me a thing," I assure her. When her eyebrows shoot up, I smirk. "The concierge is a Renegades fan, so I called in a favor. You're not the only one with contacts."

She harrumphs.

I take her arm and practically drag her toward one of the plush, upholstered chairs. I pull it out for her, but the stubborn woman refuses to sit.

"Come on, Bryant," I cajole. "You're already here. Why not sit down and have a bite to eat?"

"I was already having a bite to eat," she grumbles, "before you so rudely burst into my dining room."

"This dining room's better," I say smugly. I'm relieved when she finally capitulates and lowers herself onto the chair. Rather than position the chairs across from each other, I asked the staff to put them side by side, and I waste no time dropping into the seat beside her and leaning toward the dessert tray.

"Chocolate-covered strawberry?"

"No."

I roll my eyes. "Suit yourself." I pluck a strawberry from the bowl and pop it into my mouth. "Delicious."

She sighs. "JR."

"Yes?"

“I thought I was very clear last night about where I stand, but I see that I didn’t get through to you.”

Chewing slowly, I lift one eyebrow. “Sure you did.” I chew some more. “It was just sex and now it’s over. I heard you loud and clear.”

Suspicion darkens her eyes. “Then why are we here?” She waves a hand at the elaborate setup. In the candlelight, her brown eyes look like two shining pieces of amber. It’s beautiful.

“Because I disagree with your line of thinking.” I pick up the napkin and wipe the corners of my mouth.

“You don’t need to agree! It’s my decision.”

I offer a little shrug. “All right. So I guess you don’t want us to win the championship?”

Her jaw drops. “What does one have to do with the other?”

“Are you kidding me? You, out of anyone, should know the importance of rituals when it comes to football.”

Bryant blinks in confusion. “I...don’t understand.”

Leaning back in my chair, I fold my arms across my chest. “Since the season started, I’ve done the same thing every night before a game—you.”

Understanding dawns. She gives an awkward laugh. “That’s ridiculous. We haven’t made love before *every* game.”

“No, but we’ve seen each other. And if we didn’t connect in person, then we spoke on the phone. Or you sent me one of those prim and proper pics—you know, the ones that show nothing but are still so fucking hot that I come the second I see them?”

Her cheeks flush. “Ace.”

“What? It’s true.” I shrug again. “I don’t know about you, Bryant, but I want to win this championship.”

Outrage colors her tone. “You know I want you to win!”

“Sure doesn’t seem like it,” I remark, putting on a hurt voice. “Otherwise you wouldn’t be hexing us.”

“I am *not* hexing—”

“You dumped me before the Championship,” I cut in, all the while fighting a huge grin. The distress on her face shouldn’t be hilarious to me, but it kind of is. I know Bryant’s family is incredibly superstitious when it comes to football rituals. Hell, I am, too. I’m not one hundred percent bullshitting her right now, because I *am* a tad afraid to mess with the mojo.

“If we lose, how can we know if it’s because we stunk it up out there, or if it’s because you messed with our rituals?” I shoot her a challenging look.

Her distress deepens. “I wasn’t the reason you were playing so well this season.”

“How do you know? Maybe you were.” My smile once again threatens to surface. “Either way, are you really willing to risk it?”

Bryant falls silent. It lasts for more than a minute, but I patiently wait for her to wrap her gorgeous head around this. Yes, I’m resorting to dirty tricks right now, but drastic times, drastic measures, et cetera et cetera. I want to be with this woman. And I know that deep down she wants to be with me, too. So if I have to play the superstition card right now, then I damn well will. It’ll buy me some time, during which, hopefully, I can convince her in other ways that we belong together.

“If I keep seeing you, it’ll only be until after the championship game.”

My lips twitch wildly. “Seems fair.”

Bryant scowls at me. “But we’re not making love again until you apologize for tying me up and kidnapping me.”

“I’m sorry I tied you up,” I say dutifully.

“And for kidnapping me.”

“Sorry, not apologizing for that part. It was the only way to get you to see me.” Another smirk pops up. “If anything, you should apologize to yourself for being so stubborn.”

With a soft sound of aggravation, Bryant jams her finger in the air. “We’re breaking up for real after the playoffs. You don’t need me anymore, JR. I told you that.”

And I’m choosing not to listen.

Rather than say that out loud, I flash her a wide smile and reach for the dessert tray again. “So how about that chocolate-covered strawberry?”

EACH RENEGADE WIN IS MORE BITTERSWEET THAN THE LAST.

“You alright, Cub? You’re about as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs,” Daddy observes. We’re standing in front of the window in his office that faces the practice field, watching the team do a walk-through before we fly to Miami for the Championship game. Ace is easy to spot in his red jersey declaring him off-limits to any physical contact, not that there should be any today. He looks heart-achingly gorgeous—a standout even amongst these superb athletes.

“Just nervous.” I glance over the Bear Bryant biographies, wondering if ten in the morning is too early for a shot of whiskey. Momma would say yes, but Daddy? He might be okay with it. Sadly, I’m going to need the entire bottle to make me feel better.

He raises both eyebrows. “Since when do you get nervous? Besides, even if we lose this game, I’m proud of this team. They played their hearts out every week, and, more importantly, learned to come together as a team. Not that we’re losing. Your man, Ace, is going to lead us to the win, don’t you think?”

Daddy’s canny eyes see more than he lets on. “You’ve put together a terrific set of men.” I prevaricate.

He reaches out to cup the back of my head, making me feel fragile and young. “Do you remember when I was offered this job? I was working over in Seattle under Coach Brown.”

“I remember. It was rainy all year ’round.”

“I always thought it was bad for Ginny. Your momma said Ginny needed more sunshine and that the cloudy skies were affecting Ginny’s moods something fierce. I didn’t take this job just because it was a great program. I took it because I believed at the time that she’d benefit from the sunshine.”

“She loved it here.” My memories of Ginny are of her laughing as we watched a thousand YouTube videos on how to paint our fingernails and apply eyeliner to achieve the perfect cat eye. She’d spend hours brushing my hair and then hers. We’d swim—or rather, I’d swim—and Ginny would lie on the lounge under a tarp looking so glamorous my teeth would ache.

“She was about the same here as she was in Seattle. It wasn’t the sun or the rain that affected Ginny. Ginny...felt too deeply and had a hard time controlling those feelings. They bottled her up inside until she felt like there was only one way to escape all that noise and commotion in her head. We could’ve lived in Aruba, and we would’ve had the same result.”

I rub my lips together, unsure of how to respond. Daddy hadn’t talked about Ginny like this in—well, never.

“I know that,” I say. Because intellectually, I do understand that Ginny’s mental pain was what drove her to take her own life, but my heart still yearns for her.

“The thing is, Bryant, nothing you could do would’ve changed Ginny’s outcome. You can only affect your path. Right now, I’m worried about you.”

I jerk my head around to stare at him in surprise. “Why’re you worried about me? I’m not like Ginny.”

He gives me sad smile. “No, you’re like her. You’ve got a big, big heart just like her. And like her, you’re a little scared of living.”

My chin juts out in irritation. “I’m not scared of living. Why would you even say anything like that?”

“Because living includes experiencing loss. Ginny hurt you bad, and you want to do everything in your power to prevent suffering that kind of pain again. But by keeping everybody at arm’s distance, using your charm as a

shield, you're never going to really experience the joys of life."

He hauls me against his side. "There's not a day that goes by that I don't miss your sister, but I wouldn't trade those nineteen years with her in exchange for not suffering because she died. The loss makes those times we spent together all the more valuable." He kisses the top of my head and then steps away. "As much as I'd like to string that Thad boy up by his nuts, he's not responsible for Ginny's decision, either. One broken heart didn't end her and it won't be the end of you, either, Bryant. Not you. You're hardier than a kudzu vine. Now, you skedaddle. I gotta practice my half-time speech."

"Really, Daddy, you're comparing me to a cursed weed?"

My father merely laughs. "You know it's true, Cub. You're hardy and strong. Start remembering that."

"Yessir," I sigh and slip out of his office.

His words shake me. I leave the Fieldhouse to go sit in my car. Maybe some girls would be offended that their daddies compared them to one of the most hated weeds in the country, but I got his point. The kudzu grows everywhere. It's unstoppable. Along the roadsides, there are ditches blanketed in the green growth. You couldn't kill it if you wanted to.

A foolish notion creeps into my head and takes over. I drive to the Chi Zeta house to hunt down Greg Betton, whom I dated in the fall of my junior year. He was project number four. Greg was known for two things: his engineering genius and being the type of guy that seduced girls, bedded them, and promptly dumped them.

The irony that Greg was Chi Zeta didn't escape me when I started seeing him. After all, Thaddeus Larson was a Chi Zeta.

After Greg and I parted ways, I introduced him to Everly Fleming. He'd had his eye on her during most of the time that we'd been hanging out, so I coordinated a meet-n-greet. The last I'd heard, they were in love and talking about making post-college plans together. Honestly, though, I hadn't seen Greg in at least a year, but I'm seeking him out now because Greg will know where Thad is. What I'll do with that information—whether I'll go and cuss Thad out or forgive him—I'm not entirely sure. I'll cross that bridge when I

come to it.

I park in the driveway of the Chi Zeta house and walk across the patchy grass, careful to avoid knocking over the stone hawk that serves as their house mascot of sorts. I skirt a mess of red plastic cups and make my way up the stairs. A young freshman opens the door before I can knock. He gives me an insolent onceover before saying, “A little early for smash and dash, isn’t it?”

Smash and dash? This whole house is a cesspool. “Son, were you raised in a barn? What in the world gives you the idea that any girl would want to see your twig and berries?” I push him aside. “Where’s Greg Betton?”

The freshman frowns. He might’ve said something more insulting to me, but Greg appears at the top of the stairs. “Is that you, Bryant Johnson?”

I shoot a dark glare in the direction of the young man before charging up the stairs. “It is.” Good manners dictate that I engage in some meaningless small talk with Greg, but I’m too agitated to do so. “I was wondering if you could help me out.”

Greg smiles at me. “Sure thing. What is it that you need?”

“I just need a phone number—Thad Larson. You keep in touch with him, right?” When he nods, I hurry on. “Do you have it on your phone? You could just send to me.”

“Thad’s over in Nashville, working for some food supply company. Hold on while I go get it.” He turns and ambles down the hall. “We going to win on Monday?” he throws over his shoulder.

“Of course. How’s Everly these days?”

He shrugs, then flicks open his door and gestures for me to enter. It all looks familiar—the double bed, the desk with the brass lamp he bragged came from the Tennessee State House, the fake fur rug. “Everly and I didn’t work out.”

“Oh no,” I exclaim. “What happened?”

“We didn’t mesh,” he replies, digging through his messy desk drawer. How in the world does he keep track of anything in there? “Don’t worry about it.

She's dating some Sigma. Sounds like they're going to get hitched."

"Well, that's good." I frown, though, because Everly and Greg seemed perfect for each other.

Greg laughs. "You look baffled, Bryant. Sometimes, you're wrong about people."

"I know that," I huff.

"Do you?" He holds out a piece of paper with some digits on it. "Because sometimes you believe people are chess pieces to be moved around in a way that suits you. Everly and I were never a good match, but you wanted us to be together so it happened."

"I thought you two were really into each other."

"We were into fucking around. That's about it." He waggles the paper which I take and tuck into my pocket. "Who's the victim this semester?"

"Victim?" I arch an eyebrow.

"Yeah, the poor sap you're pretending to like so that he'll do whatever it is you say to make you happy."

His words are like a cold bucket of ice poured over my head. "Is that how you felt when we were dating?" I exclaim.

Greg laughs again, but it doesn't sound like he finds my words particularly amusing. "Dating? We weren't dating. I was your little semester project. Good thing I only wanted to get into your pants. If my heart had been involved, I'd have been toast."

My jaw drops down. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the fact that you've got a wall stronger than steel around that heart of yours."

We stare at each other—me angry and him amused. Finally, he waves a negligent hand. "It doesn't matter, Bryant. It's all water under the bridge. Need anything else?"

I shut my mouth and give him a brief, terse shake of my head. "Thank you

kindly, Greg.”

“No problem.” He sighs. “I’d stay away from Thad. He’s not a good use of your time. Not only will he expect you to sleep with him, but he doesn’t give a damn about anyone but himself.”

“I know that,” I say and stomp out of the house.

I have steel around my heart? I’m the softest person I know. I love everyone!

I’m in such an agitated state, I don’t pay attention to where I’m driving. I didn’t even realize I had a destination until the big stone pillars of the Angel’s Wings cemetery are smack in front of me.

Ginny must’ve called for me. It’s been weeks since I last visited her, I realize with a jolt. I drive through the archway until I reach the section where my precious sister is laid to rest. It’s a short climb up a hill to her gravesite. The blue-purple petals of the honeysuckle I planted this fall kiss the white marble headstone.

“Hey, Ginny. I’m sorry I haven’t been by lately.” I take off my coat and throw it onto the grass so I have a place to sit down. I draw my jean-clad knees up to my chin and wrap my arms around my ankles. “I’ve been pre-occupied,” I explain. “The season is going really well. We’re undefeated and going into the playoffs. Daddy had a hiccup with the team. One of the players was feeding information about set plays to gamblers. That Bubba Wasserly was in on it. You remember him? All fat fingers and grabby hands.”

In my mind’s eye, Ginny’s pretty face screws up in disgust.

“Ace stood up for his teammate in a way that no one else did. It earned him a lot of respect. He’s turning out to be a real gem. He won’t need me much longer. We made a deal. I’ll stick it out with him until after the Championship. Then I’ll move on.” I clamp a hand over my mouth to stifle a sob, but it’s unnecessary. Out here amongst the gravestones, it’s considered normal to cry, so I let the tears fall, although I tell Ginny, “I don’t know why I’m crying. I mean, I’m sad, but I don’t know the exact reason why. Is it because I’m losing Ace? Both Daddy and Ace think I’m scared, but I’m not.”

The protest sounds hollow. Here, at Ginny’s grave, I find I can’t keep lying. It’s not right. She deserves more from me than platitudes and excuses and

made up reasons for my silliness.

“I just learned that Greg Betton dated me last year because he wanted to sleep with me, and that he didn’t change like I’d thought.” I drop my head to my knees. “Seeing Greg made me realize something. These projects haven’t been about trying to save anyone. I’ve been lying to myself. I was using Greg. I was using all these boys. That’s why I’m so upset.

I’m no better than Thad or Greg. I picked these guys because I knew they were ones I’d never fall for. But I picked wrong with Ace, because I love him. And, Ginny,” I sob, “I’m so damned scared. I’m scared of losing him, and I’m scared of loving him. Tell me what to do.”

I sit there for hours, but she never says a word.

“IS BRYANT UNRAVELING OR IS IT JUST ME?” TY ASKS DURING OUR PRE-GAME stretching routine. I glance over to the sidelines and watch as Bryant runs from one end to the other, dropping her phone, tripping on the plastic sheeting, and running into a cameraman. All things highly uncharacteristic of the normally very put together Bryant Johnson.

And I don’t think it’s the pressure of the National Championship game that’s getting to her.

“No, she’s losing it,” I affirm.

“Did you guys fight again? I thought everything was cool after we kidnapped her.”

I exchange a look with my teammate, and we crack up.

“Because kidnapping girls is normal, right?” he adds.

“It was a form of extreme persuasion,” I quip.

Samson leans over. “You couldn’t close the deal? You got her off, right? I mean, we didn’t kidnap her for you so you could bake cookies together.” His voice lowers. “Should’ve worked your glutes like Zane—” He stops abruptly.

The grins that had stretched across Ty’s face and mine disappear. The price of making the gambling mess go away was excising Zane, who had been such a big part of the team that it feels like we’re missing a body part. Even if

we win tonight—no, *when* we win, I mentally correct—it'll be bittersweet. It's important for all of us that we don't concentrate on that, and if talking about my sorry love life keeps their minds off a distracting and troubling issue, then so be it.

"Bryant's convinced herself that if we win the Championship I'll have been 'fixed'—whatever the hell that means—and won't need her anymore. She'll be free to go on to another quest."

Ty's eyes widen. "And you told her *hell no*, right?"

"Nope," I say cheerfully. Both teammates' jaws drop open. I lay back to stretch my quads. "Guys, she's got to work this out in her head. I can't keep kidnapping her." I believe she's going to find that inner steel at some point.

"Why not?" Samson asks. I think he's only half-joking.

"Did you tell her you were going to announce for the draft as a defensive back? She loves this game," Travarius suggests.

I look around and see half the starters edging into the conversation. *Teammates*, I think inwardly with a grin, *they're both the worst and the very, very best*. That said, I did recruit these guys to help me spirit Bryant away. They're invested in the outcome, so I owe them an answer.

"No. That would only confirm what she's thinking—that her job is done. She needs to see me as a work in progress."

"Well, you're certainly no prize," Ty agrees.

"Admit it, Ty, you want me for yourself."

"Nah, you're too high maintenance. Plus, you can't tell Knox from me."

"What was it that Travarius said?" I snap my fingers. "Oh yeah, you both look the same in the dark."

Ty flips me off.

We both laugh. "Who's your brother cheering for?"

"My ass. Who'd you think?" Ty stands up.

"His old team's on the other side. His wife's brother is playing his last college game," I point out.

Ty shrugs carelessly. "Who cares who cheers for us? It's what we want that matters."

"Truth." Our team is finally a unit, and Ty's absolutely correct. What scouts, analysts, or even the fans may think isn't important. The key component to a winning team is acting as one, and as I look around at my teammates, I know we've achieved that.

The whistle blows, signaling the end of the pre-game warm-ups. I jump to my feet and follow the herd of players back down the tunnel for one last equipment check, assignment review, and pep talk. I feel good. Loose and ready. I walk around, patting Travarius on the ass, high-fiving Julio.

Ahead of me is Carter, who has been unusually quiet tonight. We need our brash, boastful wide receiver in the right frame of mind.

I hurry and catch him just as we're entering the locker room. "You ready?"

"You bet your flat ass. How many TDs you throwing me?" Carter challenges.

"How many you going to catch?"

"Everything you throw me."

I slap the back of his hand with mine. He doesn't respond. I grab his wrist and repeat my initial motion. Zane and Carter always performed a complicated handshake that started out with two quick hits of the backs of their hands against each other, a tickle of their fingers and then a side bump, followed by a bellow of Renegades pride.

After I do it a second time, Carter catches on. When we finish the ritual, his eyes are suspiciously damp. I drag him close. "Zane would've wanted you to kill it tonight."

His breath catches and then he sighs. "I know. I miss that asshole."

"Me, too."

Carter tightens his grip for a second before releasing me. The cocky

expression is back. "Look downfield. I'll be there—open and often."

I leave him and start circling the locker room, sharing with my current teammates every little secret I knew about my old team, unapologetically applying my insider knowledge.

"Don't forget that Jack Campbell is very fast for a tight end. Jam him hard on the line of scrimmage," I inform Travarius.

To the running back, Remy, I say, "Iverson likes to rush on the right side. If he's lined up there, it's likely some stunt to either get him or the safety into the backfield. Cut to his weak side."

"You've told us this a million times," Samson complains when I get to him.

"Great. I'm glad you can count. Here's a million and one. There's only one Masters on the field tonight and that's Ty. That doesn't mean Western doesn't lack for good pass rushers."

Ty holds up the palm of his hand. "I know. Their quarterback has weak footwork and is inexperienced. If we get to him early, he'll likely fold."

I grunt in response and walk back to my locker. The team's chattering lightly to themselves, everyone's in a good mood. The coaching staff has done a great job of preparing us. We believe we will win. You can feel the confidence in the room. My chest fills with pride. I'd come here with one goal and here I am on the cusp of achieving it.

What I didn't realize was how much more I'd gain from transferring here. It wasn't just another championship. It wasn't the revenge component of defeating the team that had rejected me. It's that I found a new family—a team that really embraced me, in large part, because I embraced them.

I owe that to Bryant. If she thinks for a second she's getting away from me, she's more deluded than I ever was. Good thing that I have an endless amount of patience for conquering the impossible.

"Hey Ace, I heard the kidnapping thing didn't work."

My eyes snap to my left to see Carter again. He's all geared up, complete with helmet in hand.

"It's working," I tell him. "The results might be slow in coming in, but the end result will be the same."

"You have a lot of confidence for a guy whose girlfriend wants to dump him," he observes.

I shrug. "Maybe so. I don't think it's misplaced."

"Bryant is really into fixing you up. If you showed her you were still messed up, she'd probably stick around. Like," he pauses, "like if we didn't win this game."

"We're going to win. We're the better team. We have better coaching, better players at nearly every position, more experience. Besides, we're hungrier." There isn't a doubt in my mind. We're winning the game.

"But even good teams make mistakes," he says softly.

My head whips around to meet his. "Carter Kittredge, are you suggesting we throw this game?"

He holds my stare for only a second before dropping his eyes to the ground. "No."

"That pause was damn long."

After another extended moment of silence, Carter lifts a rueful gaze to meet mine. "Look, it's a game, an important one, but it's just a game. It isn't as important as the stuff that takes place off the field. I wouldn't want to lose a girl to win one game."

If I hadn't spent the last several weeks listening to Carter grieve the loss of his friend, this response would have flummoxed me. But in a strange way, I get where he's coming from. He's struggling with his belief that Zane betrayed him and trying to reconcile his love for his friend with his love for the game.

I squeeze his shoulder. "Yup, it's just a game, but it has meaning. To go out there and not play with everything we have disrespects every member of our team, our fans, and ourselves. Plus, you underestimate Bryant. She wouldn't want us to lose. In fact, if she found out that we didn't put everything we had into winning, she would murder all of us."

He nods slowly. "Yeah, you're right."

"Two things, Carter. Whatever Zane did isn't a reflection on you or your friendship. Every man is responsible for his own path. Coach Johnson preaches that, and I know you believe it. Second, after we win this game, I'll have three titles on my shelf. How many college quarterbacks you know who have won three National Championships?"

He can't come up with an answer.

"Exactly." I slap him hard. "What woman can resist that?"

Carter shakes his head, but a smile breaks across his face.

The game goes just as I thought. The Miami night is perfect football weather. There's not a cloud in the sky. Under the lights, every Renegade executes just as the coaches asked. It might've been our preparation, the muscle memory kicking in and instinct taking over, but I attribute part of our perfection to the connection we forged in the locker room. We're one heart tonight.

Western's no slouch, but they don't get off the blocks as quickly as we do. Their freshman quarterback, brilliant all season, starts crumbling in the second half. By the end of the third quarter, we are up by two touchdowns and can taste the sweet tang of victory. Tomorrow the storyline that will dominate sports news will be how I beat the team that got rid of me. And there's no denying that this particular win is glorious, but it's the off-the-field game that is holding the greatest stakes.

My eyes seek out Bryant during one of Western's offensive possessions in the fourth quarter. Her red silk shirt is easy to spot. Face flushed, her hands to her mouth, she follows the action on the field with intense concentration.

I had no idea I'd fall in love here at Southern. I hadn't come looking for it, that's for damn sure. But I don't regret it. All of the acts of my past—both good and bad—led me to her.

Football is a game, but Bryant's my future. And I'll keep fighting for her for as long as it takes. Good thing I know how to win.

Huge cheers drag my attention back to the field in time to see Ty sack the quarterback. The ball spurts loose and Travarius leaps on it. I shove my

helmet back on. Time to put this game to bed so I can move on to the most important challenge of my life.

DESPITE THE FOURTEEN-POINT LEAD, I DON'T TAKE A SOLID BREATH UNTIL THE CLOCK clicks over to four zeros. I'm holding hands with one of the student trainers. Our fingernails dig into each other's palms. When the last whistle blows, we jump up so high, I swear I kiss a cloud. Everyone is kissing and hugging each other. Daddy runs down to the sidelines and grabs me. He swings me into the air, just as he did when I was five.

"We did it!" he shouts.

The moment my feet touch the air, someone else takes hold. I'm hugging everyone, smiling as wide as my lips can stretch, but inside, I'm a mess. The tears in my eyes are passed off as ones of happiness, and some can definitely be assigned to that sunny emotion, but there are others that come from a deep well of confusion. Because now that the Renegades have won, there's no reason, no excuse, for me and Ace to continue to be together.

I land on my feet around the thirty-yard line, and this time, instead of the arms of a burly trainer or a wiry coach, slender, elegant limbs embrace me. The familiar notes of gardenias fill my nose, and I look up in surprise to see my mother.

"What are you doing here?" I exclaim, swiping my tears with the back of my hand.

She bestows a gentle smile. "Watching your father win his first title in five years. Where else would I be?"

Where else would she be? She hasn't been to a game since Ginny died, but one look at her beautiful, happy face, and the sharp words die on my tongue. Tonight's not a night for recriminations, but one of celebration. Daddy will be thrilled she's here.

"Nowhere." I smile back, falling forward for another one of those precious motherly hugs. "Nowhere but here."

She folds me close and we hold each other for a long, joyous time. She releases me, hands sliding from my back, down my arms to encircle my wrists.

"How long have you been here?" I ask, still slightly shocked to see her.

"Since the fourth quarter. I arrived late and watched most of it from up there." She gestures toward one of the luxury suites. "I didn't want to come down on the field and bother anyone."

"It wouldn't have been a bother," I demur, but it might have. Daddy might've gotten distracted by her unexpected presence.

"I would have been a hindrance and not a help. I'm here now, and that's what's important. Your young man looked tremendous tonight," she says, gesturing toward a victorious Ace, who has his helmet off and is standing with a dark-haired boy wearing a Western State jersey. Both appear to be laughing at something a girl with stick-straight blonde hair says.

"He's not my man," I answer almost by rote, but the words taste bitter on my tongue. The blonde is Lucy—his old, dear friend. I recognize her from pictures on his phone. We'd thumbed through his camera roll one night in search of a video he'd taken back at Western of him skateboarding.

"You're hurting my hand, dear," comes the amused reproof of Momma.

I release her hastily. "Sorry, sorry. Ace and I are just friends."

Her knowing gaze follows mine. "Did he mean to carry off another girl and come by our house by accident?"

"It was just a prank." I wave my hand, trying to downplay Ace's gesture.

Momma's not buying it. "That's why your beautiful brown eyes are so green?"

Because you're not at all perturbed by your fine quarterback chatting up a beautiful girl, enjoying her smiles?"

"Are you trying to rile me up, Momma?" I ask, expecting her to deny it.

"Why, yes, I am."

I tear my eyes from Ace to stare in astonishment at my mother.

Mischief dances in her eyes. "You've never been afraid of anything, Bryant, why start now?"

"I'm not af—" I start to protest but then realize that I can't lie to my momma. She'd see right through it, just as she sees through me now.

"Go on then." She gives me a nudge. "Don't stand on the sidelines for three years and miss a bunch of important things." *Like her*, she seems to be saying. "Go and get what you want. If that boy breaks your heart, you'll cry and shout and maybe throw a few things, but then you'll dust yourself off and keep going."

"What if I can't?" I ask, heart in my throat, a tornado of emotions tearing up my tummy.

"You can, baby girl. I know you." She presses a soft hand against my skull, smoothing my hair down. "There isn't any girl with a backbone like yours. You'd never let a boy keep you down. Not you, Bryant Johnson. Besides"—she leans close, her warm, lovely face inches away from mine—"he's not the type to let you go, even if you wanted that. Not that you do. We both know that. According to your daddy, you changed Ace. This win today is partly yours to own. Go over there and celebrate with him."

I shake my head. "I don't think I had much to do with Ace's change. I think he just grew into himself. And I happened to be there at the right time to witness the transformation." And "I really didn't do much of anything. I was there. That's all."

"That's as much as any person needs, sugar."

Is it? Maybe that's all that is necessary. To be *there* for someone. To tell someone that their hurt is real. That they are valuable. That they matter. And

maybe that's a lesson I should take to heart. That living matters, even if it means a little pain now and again.

I guess I'm my own last project. The person needing fixing up wasn't Ace—it's me. And part of my own path forward is not allowing the fear of loss cripple me any longer, because as I stare at the tall, broad-shouldered, caring man throwing back his head laughing, I can't imagine being okay with another woman standing at his side, listening to his woes, and celebrating his victories. That's my job.

There's really only one person in this world who needs Ace, and he's the person who needs me.

"I suppose you're right, Momma."

"I know I am."

We share a smile and then I say, "Well, I've got a claim to lay, so I can't be shooting the breeze with you any longer."

"Wait a moment, sugar," she says. She digs in her purse and pulls out a hotel key card. "I got a room, but I'm going to stay with your father tonight. Apparently, the school put him up in a nice suite. He deserves to have a little private celebration."

"Momma, please don't say another word!" I say in scandalized tones, and I grab the key card and skip off before she can traumatize me any further.

I march down the field, sidle up to Ace and slide my fingers around his biceps. He tenses under my touch, but the look of annoyance quickly transforms to satisfaction when he sees it's me. His expression says *finally!*

I grin back at him and then stick my hand out. "You must be Lucy Washington. I'm Bryant Johnson, Ace's girlfriend."

Lucy shakes my hand. "I know, he was just telling me about you."

I lean my head against Ace's arm. "Was he now?"

"Yeah, he says that you were a big part of his success here. Apparently, you helped him gel with his team."

“Any success Ace has had here is all because of his own efforts. I had nothing to do with it.”

“You can give yourself a little credit,” he drawls, withdrawing his arm from my clasp so he can pull me snug against his side.

We all laugh at that. Lucy introduces me to her boyfriend, but a reporter interrupts. “I’m here from *Sports News Now*. Do you have a few minutes?”

Lucy and her boyfriend take their leave, saying they’ll catch up with us later. Ace gives Lucy a light hug without letting go of me even for a moment and then turns his attention to the reporter.

“Will you be entering the draft?”

Ace nods. “I’m interested. I’d like to go to the combine, compete, and see where the chips fall. I’ll look at any and all offers.”

“Including those not at the quarterback position?”

“Yeah, even those not at the quarterback position.” He gazes down at me, a light in his eyes, and quotes back my own words. “I’ve been told I have a good situational awareness and good instincts. I know all the passing routes, the tricks of the wide receivers and can read a quarterback’s eyes as well as his body language. I’ve learned so much from this game that it’d be a shame if I didn’t try to see what else it had to offer.”

“And what did you learn from the game?” the reporter asks.

Ace falls silent for a minute, his eyes still locked with mine. “The game allowed me an opportunity to grow up and find myself. If I never play another down, it was an amazing ride, but my life’s only getting started.”

The reporter wants to ask another question, but I can tell by the shuttering of Ace’s expression that he’s done for the night. Too many people, too many questions, too many emotions swirling around.

“I think Coach Johnson is free for questions if you want to touch base with him,” I offer, throwing Daddy under the bus.

The reporter scurries away before I say another word.

Ace brushes a lock of hair out of my face. “So you're my girlfriend now?”

“Of course I am. The only girlfriend you're ever going to have, too.”

A smile cracks across his face. “Is that right?”

“Damn straight,” I vow.

His smile broadens. “Good, because kidnapping you is tough work.”

I grab him by the collar of his jersey, pull him down so his face is level with mine, and plant a kiss on his lips that’s so fierce his eyes are glazed over when I draw back.

“Thanks for the woody,” he murmurs.

“You’re welcome.”

Ace laughs, shakes his head, and drapes his arm back around my shoulders. He doesn’t let go, not even through four more interviews, a shower of confetti, and a spray of Gatorade sent in our direction courtesy of Travarius and Ty.

After another half hour of well-wishers and back slaps, Lucy, her boyfriend, Ty, and his brother come over.

“Want to go to—”

“No,” Ace says abruptly.

“But what about—”

“Thanks but no.”

Then he walks off, done with it all.

I sigh. “That was kind of rude, Ace.”

“I said thanks,” he objects. “And even if it was, I don’t care.”

“They’re your friends.”

“Bryant,” he says with exaggerated exasperation. “I'm high on victory and horny as fuck. I figured you'd want to be somewhere private before I throw

you down and have my wicked way with you, but if you don't mind the world seeing our lovemaking, then by all means, let's stick around."

"No. I'm good," I say and start hurrying off the field.

Ace mows through the crowd. He won his game, met his press obligations, said hello to his friends, and now he's interested in having one thing. Me.



IT'S A SHORT UBER TO THE HOTEL, BUT ACE BOLTS FROM THE CAR, DRAGGING ME behind him as if the devil dogs themselves were on our heels.

"What's the hurry?" I ask with a laugh.

"We have the room to ourselves for about thirty minutes," he says over his shoulder while simultaneously jabbing the elevator button. "That's not enough time, but it'll have to do."

I hold up my momma's key between my fingers. "Nope. We have the entire night. This is Momma's, and she's lending it to me."

Relief fills his expression, tempered with a dash of consternation. "So your parents know I'm violating their princess? That seems kinda wrong."

"Trust me, sugar, Momma evened the scale by announcing she would help Daddy celebrate *all* night long."

Ace relaxes with a laugh. "Good to know."

The elevator dings and the doors slide open. We move inside, hands clasped and hearts full. He draws me into his arms, sweeping the hair out of my face and cupping my chin.

"I love you," he says as the elevator cab slowly rises.

"I love you, too." I raise a hand to squeeze his arm. It's warm and strong beneath my palm. The hard planes of his body press against me, and I shiver thinking about the delicious and naughty things our bodies will soon do to each other.

"I wanted to say it before we had sex tonight." His face lowers a scant breath

away.

“I knew you loved me. It’s what made me afraid. That and my love for you.” Although as I look into his green eyes radiating with sincerity and deep emotion, I wonder why I ever felt a twinge of uncertainty.

His thumb works a circle on the apple of my cheek. “How come you’re not afraid anymore?”

“Oh, I still am.” I give him a crooked smile. “But I guess my love for you is more powerful than my fear.”

His forehead touches mine. “Futures are unknowable and uncertainty can be scary as hell. It’s why we’re better together.”

He seals those words with a soft kiss, tender, deep, and loving until the doors open, and we’re forced to separate.

“What if I turn crazy?” I ask as we walk toward room 1209. “What if I grow clingy and follow you around, demanding to read texts on your phone, or wear your underwear on my head?”

“I want you to cling. I want you to follow me around. You’re the only person I text besides my mom. The last one is fucking weird. You’re not to do that.” He unlocks the door and ushers me inside. Kicking the door shut, he lifts me into his arms and carries me the short distance to the bed.

He sets me on my feet and starts to unbutton my shirt. “How many fancy red silky shirts do you own?”

“A dozen,” I say breathlessly. His knuckles brush against the sides of my breasts, and my nipples harden.

“I like them. You look good in red.”

“I know.” Ace isn’t the only one who can be smug sometimes.

He laughs and then stops short, his own breath catching when my shirt falls open. His hands cup my breasts. “You have beautiful tits, sweetheart. After our first round, I’m gonna suck on them for an hour.”

Thank goodness for Ace’s athletic skills, because he’s able to continue

lavishing attention on my bare skin while unzipping my skirt and pulling off my shirt, until I'm clad in nothing but a set of red lace panties and bra.

"You're so hot it hurts to look at you," he says huskily.

I reach down and place my hand over his erection. Squeezing, I say, "Maybe if I kiss it, it will make it better."

He grins. "Maybe."

I sink to my knees. He gathers my hair in his hand, holding it away from my face so he can watch as I lower the zipper of his dress pants and take out his hard, hot length.

The broad head glistens with evidence of Ace's excitement. I lick it off. He groans. I draw him inside, licking what I can while sucking him as deep as possible. Above me, his eyes glitter with dark need that makes every needy body part clench in anticipation.

"Enough," he rasps after only a few long drags of his shaft. His hands are shaking as they pull me to my feet, but steady enough to dispose of my underwear. We tackle his clothes. Or he does, because I get distracted by his bare chest, the planes of his muscles, the jagged lines of the tattoo he hates, the ridges of his abdomen, the delightful trail that arrows from his stomach to the other tattoo that he hates.

On the bed, he takes my hand and slides it through the soft tuft of hair at the apex of my thighs. "I want you to feel what I feel. How good it is. How tight and hot and wet you are."

He pushes inside of me, taking me with him. My fingers are shorter than his. His reach places I can't. This is so dirty, so filthy, so erotic, I can do nothing but stare at him in open-mouthed astonishment. Both of us slide around in me, our fingers gliding over each other, thrusting in and out in a decadent manner. The orgasm is building inside of me.

Abruptly, I withdraw. "I don't want to come without you."

He nods and reaches back for his discarded clothing to grab a condom. I reach out to stop him. "I know you get regular checkups from the team doc. Did you get an intimacy screening?"

The corners of his lips twitch up. “An intimacy screening? Is that Bryant-speak for STI test?”

“Yes.” So sue me. I prefer more genteel language.

He rocks back on his knees, his shaft bobbing between us. He swipes an unsteady hand across the back of his mouth. “Are you saying...”

The rare moments of vulnerability make Ace all the more appealing. “I’m on the pill.”

“You sure?”

“Never more.”

With my assurance in hand, he slips off the bed. “Where’re you going?” I squawk.

He grins. “I need to get you off first, because there’s no doubt in my mind that when I get inside you, I’ll come after two strokes. I don’t want to end this perfect day on a losing note. Think of what that would do to my draft stock.”

“We can’t have that.” I roll my eyes. “Get up here and suck it up, cowboy. We’re coming together or not at all.”

Ace does what I command, err ask, and climbs between my legs. “This is the most difficult thing you’ve ever asked me to do,” he declares in a most offended tone.

Which is why I’m laughing when the wide tip of his shaft pierces me. The laughter is quickly replaced by a moan and a “holy fuck” from Ace.

I don’t even bother to correct him, because there are appropriate times for certain vulgarities and this is one of them. He drives deep, faster and harder. And it’s better, not because he’s bare inside of me, but because I’ve let the last barrier go. This time when the orgasm makes me lose my mind, I ride that glorious wave for as far as it goes, glorying in the wash of exquisite sensation.

Above me, he shudders in his own ecstasy, filling me with a hot wash of release.

Drained, but satisfied, we curl up in each other's arms.

"Christ. I didn't think I could ever feel this good," he says, laying an arm across his forehead.

"Really? Not even after winning the Championship?"

"Nah, because you were the more uncertain outcome. I hadn't trained or practiced for you. I hadn't given a real relationship much thought until you picked me." He lifts his head slightly to peer down at me. "I will always be an asshole, Bryant. I've got my own issues, and I'm not much of a people person. Unlike you, I'm okay with that. The only person I need is you. I get that loving is a risk, but if you're not with me, I think I'll be on an island. I'll grow up and be one of those cranky old men who yell, 'get off my lawn' completely unironically."

An image of old man Ace stumbling around his yard in an ugly bathrobe, waving a lawn chair at young kids, makes me laugh far too hard. "We can't have that." I prop myself up on an elbow. "Daddy says loss makes the victories mean something."

"He's right. You don't know what a high feels like if there's never a low. Although I could live without being sacked," he muses with a quick grin.

I trace my finger over his tattoos. "Are you getting *Renegades* inked on the other side?"

He clamps a hand over mine. "Fuck, no." He pauses. "Why? Do you want me to?" There's dread in his voice, but also acceptance, as if he'd do anything to make me happy.

"I love you, Joseph—" I stop. "What's the R stand for?"

Even in the dim light of the hotel room, I can see the blush that stains his cheeks. "If I tell you, it can't ever be repeated," he warns.

"What is it? You have me intensely curious now."

The arm on his forehead lowers to cover his eyes. "Rmmmmhm," he mumbles.

I lean closer. "What?"

“Romeo,” he says reluctantly. “But if you call me Joseph Romeo, I’ll assume you don’t ever want to have sex again.”

I press my lips against my teeth to keep from bursting out in giggles. Ace’s middle name is Romeo? Life couldn’t be sweeter. “As if you could hold out.” I poke him in the side.

“True.”

“Maybe I should get a tattoo. Like...” I tap my lip with a fingertip, “the name of some Shakespeare hero.”

Ace slides his arm up to stare at me with an accusatory glare. “You’re far more evil than I ever gave you credit for. Besides, you know I don’t like my tats. I’d laser the stupid things off if I could.”

“They need to stay. They mark an important part of your life—a time when you and your daddy were in perfect harmony. The events in our lives are important, even the sad ones. Maybe if I hadn’t lost Ginny, I wouldn’t have ever met you. Or made you notice me.”

“Made me?” He hoots. “I wanted you the minute I laid eyes on you.”

“Well, I might’ve said no.”

“Not to me,” he says smugly.

I swat him. “You’re ruining my moment.”

He captures me, rolling me under his big hard frame. “Yup. I’m Ace-the-asshole, but I’m *your* asshole.”

His eyes seek mine in affirmation, and I give it without hesitation. “Yes, you’re mine. Forever.”

Renegades 14-0

One week later

“Ginny, I have someone I’d like you to meet.” I hold out my hand for Ace. “It’s JR. That hardheaded quarterback I was telling you about. He’s here with me. We’re a couple now.”

Ace lays his hand across the top of the marble headstone. “Nice to meet you, Ginny. I’m taking good care of your baby sister.” He strokes a tender hand along my cheek. “Real good care.”

The wind whistles, and even though I don’t hear Ginny, I know she’s smiling.

NEWSLETTER

DID YOU LOVE THIS STORY? SIGN UP TO READ MORE ABOUT THE SOUTHERN U
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you can't tell from the book, I love football. There aren't many players who can make the transition from quarterback to another position on the football field at the pro level, but there are some. Hines Ward and Julian Edelman were two success stories as was Scott Frost, identified by Bryant, in the story.

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And to all the readers who love books, I salute you!

#GETSACKED

by Jen Frederick

[Available Now](#)

What he wants he gets...

Knox Masters is a quarterback's worst nightmare. Warrior. Champion. And...virgin. Knox knows what he wants--and he gets it. All American Football player? Check. NFL pros scouting him? Check. Now, he's set his sight on two things. The national title. And Ellie Campbell. Sure, she's the sister of his fellow teammate, but that's not going to stop him. Especially not when he's convinced Ellie is the one.

...but he's never met her before.

But Ellie isn't as sure. She's trying to start a new life and she's not interested in a relationship...with anyone. Beside it's not just her cardinal rule of never dating her brother's teammates that keeps her away, but Ellie has a dark secret that would jeopardize everything Knox is pursuing.

Knox has no intention of losing. Ellie has no intention of giving in.

#GETJOCKBLOCKED

by Jen Frederick

[Available Now](#)

She's always played it safe...

College junior Lucy Washington abides by one rule—avoid risk at all costs. She's cautious in every aspect of her life, from her health, to her mock trial team, to the boring guys she dates. When a brash, gorgeous jock walks into the campus coffeeshop and turns his flirt on, Lucy is stunned by the force of attraction. For the first time ever, she's willing to step out of her comfort zone, but can she really trust the guy who's determined to sweep her off her feet?

He's always played around...

Entering his last year of college eligibility, linebacker Matthew "Matty" Iverson has the team captaincy in his sights. And it's his for the taking, if he can convince his quarterback Ace Anderson to give up the starting position. Luckily, Matty already has an edge—the hottie he's lusting over just happens to be Ace's childhood best friend. Getting Lucy on his side and in his bed? Hell yeah. Matty is more than confident he can have both, but when he falls hard for Lucy, it's time for a new game plan: convince the woman of his dreams that she's not sleeping with the enemy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Frederick is the USA Today bestselling author of *Unspoken*, part of the Woodlands series, and *Sacked*, part of the Gridiron series. She is also the co-author of the *New York Times* Bestselling series, [The Royals](#). She lives in the Midwest with a husband who keeps track of life's details while she's writing, a daughter who understands when Mom disappears into her office for hours at a time, and a rambunctious dog who does neither.

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